



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

Navigating Digital Borders: Seto Community in the Virtual Territory of the VK Social Network

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the digital geography of the virtual Seto community in the VK social network (also known as VKontakte), focusing on how dispersed Seto people in Russia and Estonia use digital spaces to communicate, as well as express, preserve, and promote their cultural identity. By applying a multi-sited ethnographic methodology, the research involves both online explorations and offline semi-structured interviews, with fieldwork conducted in the Pechory District. Using the network and territory approaches to digital ethnography, the study highlights how the VK serves as a digital territory where Setos, divided by distances and physical borders, connect, share cultural practices, and foster a sense of community. Special attention is given to the Seto traditions of *leelo* polyphonic singing and festive costumes, both of which serve as vital markers of ethnic identity in this digital landscape. Through content analysis of Seto personal profiles and public pages, the research reveals how social networks help maintain connections and how digital geographies are constantly shaped and reshaped by cultural exchanges. This study underscores the adaptability of online spaces in sustaining fragmented ethnic communities across physical distances.

KEYWORDS

digital ethnography, Seto community, virtual community, VK, VKontakte, social network, cyberspace, Indigenous peoples of Russia

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Introduction

In 2005, a book called *Narod Setu: Mezhdru Rossiei i Estoniei* [Setu People: Between Russia and Estonia] was released (Alekseev & Manakov, 2005). The growing reader interest led to an additional print run of the book, and continued until the book was posted on the Internet, where it caused a wide resonance and mass discussion. According to Andrei Manakov, a researcher of Setos and one of the authors of the book, its publication along with widespread discussion and reposting prompted the recognition of Setos as an independent people (Manakov, 2018, p. 141). Thus, the Internet implicitly played a significant role in the spread of public interest towards Setos (Manakov, 2018, p. 140).

The historical territory of the Seto people, Setomaa, is situated in the borderlands of Russia and Estonia. The traditional center of the territory is the town of Pechory. Nowadays, small-numbered Seto people historically reside in three territories, namely, Pechory District of the Pskov Oblast, in the village of Haidak of the Krasnoyarsk Krai in Siberia (hereafter referred to as Siberian Setos), and in Estonia. According to the research group from Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences, dispersed ethnic minorities are able to compensate for the lack of real territorial proximity and communication through the Web. This way, essentially, the Internet replaces one of ethnicity's core foundations: territorial unity (Golovnev et al., 2018, p. 106).

The study aims to find out the ways the Internet connects Seto people living in three main locations, separated by a border, in one case, and a long distance, in the other.

Following Christine Hine, who points out that cyberspace should not be seen as a space divorced from any connections to “real life” and face-to-face interaction (Hine, 2000, p. 64), the current study included work in both cyberspace and the physical field.

The data concerning online representation and communication of the Setos was studied. The research focused on VK social network (also known as VKontakte),¹ the

¹ VK (short for its original name VKontakte) is a Russian online social media and social networking service. <https://vk.com> VK™ is a trademark of VK.com Ltd.

most popular social networking service in Russia, which is used extensively by the Seto respondents. In the framework of the online research, eight profile pages were analyzed. Four of these pages belong to the Setos living in the Pechory District, two belong to the Setos living in Krasnoyarsk Krai and two belong to the Setos living in Estonia. All of them are actively involved to varying degrees in Seto cultural practices, including museum work, performances and organization of folk concerts, master classes, etc. These people can all be seen as activists of Seto culture, albeit to different degrees.

In terms of the offline part of the research, two expeditions to Pechory District (in May and August 2024) were undertaken to conduct interviews with representatives of the Seto people and to visit museums themed on the Seto culture. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted, three of which were with local Seto representatives, one was with the head of a museum in Pechory that has Seto collections and collaborates with a Seto vocal ensemble, and one more was with the creator of a private Seto museum who has lived in a Seto village for many years.

This research follows the multi-sited ethnography methodology developed by George Marcus (1995). It includes explorations both in the offline and online spaces. Instead of focusing on a single, bounded field site as in traditional ethnography, multi-sited ethnography emphasizes the interconnectedness of multiple sites. In the current research, both of the ethnographic fields, virtual and physical, got interconnected from the beginning. Online explorations in the VK provided much information about self-representations, virtual ties, and cultural activities of Setos, while face-to-face meetings and semi-structured interviews with Seto representatives helped to contextualize these practices. The paper contributes to digital ethnography by exploring how the Seto people use the VK to maintain cultural connections across geographical and national borders.

Network Approach and Territory Approach to the Internet

In Web-related studies, there are two major approaches to the Internet, the network approach and the territory approach, that are often viewed as opposing each other. In digital ethnography, the network approach focuses on understanding the relationships and interactions among individuals, groups, and entities within digital spaces. This approach emphasizes how social connections, online communities, and communication patterns shape cultural practices and identities. Researchers examine how these networks function, how information flows, and how cultural meanings are constructed through interactions across various digital platforms. For instance, Christine Hine (2000) argues that the object of digital ethnography “is a topic and not a location” (p. 67). From her point of view, research should focus on flow and connections rather than location and boundaries as an organizing principle (Hine, 2000, p. 64). Hine argues that “by focusing on sites, locales and places, we may be missing out on other ways of understanding culture, based on connection, difference, heterogeneity and incoherence” (Hine, 2000, p. 61).

The territory approach considers the specific contexts and environments where digital interactions take place. This approach recognizes that digital spaces are often

ties to physical locations, cultural contexts, and historical backgrounds. Researchers explore how online behaviors and practices are influenced by the sociopolitical and cultural territories in which users operate, paying attention to the implications of place, space, and locality on digital experiences. Also, they study digital territories that are formed in cyberspace itself, which “exhibit all three characteristics of territory: they depend on a delineation of inside and outside, their boundaries are communicated, and there are attempts at control” (Lambach, 2019, p. 488). However, unlike traditional notions of “territorial state” or “territorial jurisdiction”, territories in cyberspace are non-exclusive, overlapping, and intersecting constructs. Their forms and characteristics are constantly undergoing revision (Lambach, 2019, p. 488).

Hine, while overall criticizing location-based research, points out that “one of the key dimensions of spatiality on the WWW is that of territory” (Hine, 2000, p. 105). The web developers she interviewed saw their sites as their own territory, and as territories, they had size, boundaries, and constraints (Hine, 2000, pp. 105–106). According to Lambach, though network and territory approaches can be in tension, they can also be compatible, even mutually constitutive. Therefore, the researcher advises against assigning ontological priority to either (Lambach, 2019, p. 483).

Both approaches, with their merits and specifics, are applied in this study. The network approach is used to identify connections between online actors and analyze flows of information, while territory approach is used to define correspondences between locations and virtual cultures, as well as describe digital geographies of the cyberterritories.

The progressive fragmentation and territorialization of the Internet are increasingly recognized as a significant area of academic inquiry. As Daniel Lambach points out in his research, “there is an undisputable sense of *fin de siècle* about the Internet, as if it were about to break apart into loosely coupled subnetworks, ending the era of the ‘open web’” (Lambach, 2019, p. 482). However, Lambach does not consider territory and borders as static and immutable structures and argues that they should be viewed as fluid, adaptable practices (Lambach, 2019, p. 483).

Lambach considers cyberspace as a dynamic and evolving domain, which encompasses a “social space” (Lambach, 2019, p. 484), that is a space that emerges from social interactions based on relations of social distance and proximity among Internet users (Bourdieu, 1989). Given the complexity of cyberspace, Lambach suggests to speak of “cyberspace” as an umbrella term covering a set of cyberterritories that are in a variety of ways connected to the “real world” (Lambach, 2019, p. 494).

VK Social Networking Service as a Digital Territory

The VK functions as a distinct digital territory, with defined structures, boundaries, and connections linking virtual communities to the physical world. The VK’s vast digital landscape comprises smaller cyberspaces, such as individualized digital islands of personalized profile pages and public territories of group pages representing communities and organizations. In this research, VK profile pages are treated as private territories, and all personal information is anonymized.

The Setos are divided both virtually and physically. Russian Seto, like most Russians, actively use the social network VK, while Estonian Seto mainly use Facebook². This information is also confirmed by the materials of specially conducted semi-structured interviews. However, the boundaries in cyberspace tend to be more or less permeable (Lambach, 2019, p. 499). Users show considerable autonomy and ingenuity in adapting their private territories to changing circumstances; their territories are not static but dynamic, even mobile (Lambach, 2019, p. 494). There are Estonians and Estonian Seto on VK, just as there are Russians and Russian Seto on Facebook.

According to a young Seto respondent from Pechory District, she has a Facebook account, though she does not use Facebook much:

With some [of the Setos] we communicate through Facebook. But I have never liked Facebook, so I visit it once a month, I read all the messages that are there, I ask questions once a month, respectively, then I check answers to them. (Participant 1; Trans. by Ksenya Maretina—K. M.)

Otherwise, she is mostly active in the VK, and now uses Telegram³ for communication too.

The VK is used not only for connection and communication, but also for finding and following information. Other respondent from Pechory District, when asked how she connects with Siberian Setos, remarked that she visits profile pages of her Siberian Seto friends to see the news of the Seto life and activities in Siberia.

The profile pages of Russian Setos can be seen as private digital islands that serve as individualized spaces where they express their identity through personal details, posts, images, videos, soundtracks, etc. As danah boyd points out, though profiles are not unique to social network sites, they are central to them (boyd, 2011, p. 43). All the profile pages have typical structure, or digital geography, but they can be personalized through privacy settings and the varied content.

Profile Picture

Malcolm Parks argues that among all online settings the profile photograph represents one of the most basic forms of personal expression (Parks, 2011, p. 113). Indeed, the profile picture creates the first impression of the profile and therefore of the user. The profile pictures of Setos actively engaged in cultural practices most often depict them in traditional Seto festive costumes, symbolizing their ethnic and cultural identity.

Wall Posts

Access to the personal spaces of the profiles is controlled through privacy settings. As boyd points out, “profiles both represent the individual and serve as the locus of

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³ Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Group Inc., its operational center is based in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

interaction. Because of the inherent social—and often public or semi-public—nature of profiles, participants actively and consciously craft their profiles to be seen by others” (boyd, 2011, p. 43). Due to the highly segmented nature of the VK cyberfield, gaining access for a digital ethnographer is not always possible. Therefore, only accounts opened in accordance with the privacy settings of their owners were selected for analysis.

The content analysis of textual, photographic, and video materials was carried out on the basis of analyzing the content of eight personal pages of the Seto in VK. The key elements of material and non-material Seto culture were identified.

Most of the posts analyzed turned to be visual. The visual content is diverse, including photos, event posters, screenshots, and videos. The posts may or may not include text. The Seto-related posts may feature information about festivals, words of gratitude and congratulations to relatives, fellow Seto representatives, participants, organizers. Some of the people and organizations mentioned are presented with links to their corresponding VK pages. Some users add hashtags at the end of their posts.

Some of the researchers point out that “new technologies blur the boundaries between interpersonal and mass communication events and/or the roles that communicators take on using new systems” (Walther et al., 2011, p. 17). According to O’Sullivan (2005), wall posts can be viewed as “masspersonal communications.” In a social network, a large portion of participants act as lurkers, that is users, who read the posts but do not take active part in communication. Their behavior resembles that of passive viewers or audience members than that of active participants in a community (Parks, 2011, p. 119). This is consistent with the perspective that social networks function as a form of theatre (Mathias, 2007), where only some users are really active, while most people observe more and participate less.

The users, whose pages were analyzed for the current research, have from several dozens up to fifteen hundred friends in their accounts. It is clear that the wall posts (and reposts) featuring photos, videos, screenshots, posters, texts about the upcoming or occurred Seto-related events (e.g., festivals, concerts, exhibitions) or dedicated to the elements of the Seto culture (e.g., posts about traditional Seto crafts and folklore), serve as information sources for the people that are part of their friend list. At the same time, these posts can act as sources of interaction and communication, as some of the users react to these posts by liking, reposting, commenting, or starting private messaging with the user, etc. For instance, there was a post on the profile page of a Siberian Seto, reading:

The costume of a Seto woman necessarily includes wide satin ribbons with a pattern. The more ribbons, the richer she is. We make them all ourselves now. Before, they were gifted to us. Now we gift them ourselves. Thankfully, we have the necessary ribbons, enough different stamps and paint. Ribbons really decorate an outfit. (Participant 2; Trans. by K. M.)

The post was followed by three comments. One user posted a happy sticker as a comment, another expressed their desire to have a ribbon like this (complimented

by an emoji), and the third asked about the patterns that should be there on the ribbon and its length. To their question, they received a detailed reply featuring ribbon specifics, followed by an invitation for all who are interested to come to the library to choose a pattern and color for the ribbon. The post was supplemented by the photo of the Seto ribbons.

Among all the photos that can be found on the profile pages of the Setos, most iconic and widespread are the photos of the Setos in their traditional festive costumes. Seven of the eight profile pages that were studied for the current research belong to the women. And it is the female Seto costume that is most featured among the photos on their walls. It can be a photo of the profile page owner alone, among fellow Setos, and photos from various Seto events.

Seto women's festive costume is unique and easily recognizable. As Alexei Novozhilov notes, while the Seto women's everyday clothing did not differ from Russian, it is in the women's festive costume where the most striking differences are found (Novozhilov, 2009, pp. 105–106).

On the walls, many photos of the Seto vocal ensembles wearing traditional festive costumes can be found. It can be argued that these photos demonstrate not only the Seto costume as an element of the Seto material culture. These photos also imply the Seto singing tradition, which is a very old and important element of the Seto intangible culture. This hypothesis is supported by the comments below the photos of the Seto vocal ensembles. In the comments, users express their fascination and admiration about the performance or congratulate and praise the performers for preserving the Seto culture and traditions. It is argued that in these cases under the culture and traditions, first and foremost the *leelo* singing tradition is implied, complemented by wearing of the traditional Seto costumes as material markers of the Seto culture. The songs are performed in the Seto language, which is always an important marker of identity, though it is little used now. That's why singing tradition becomes even more precious, as it requires the use of the Seto language.

Rachel Winter and Anna Lavis (2020) propose “active listening” and “adaptive listening” to explore the polyphonic and heterogeneous nature of social media, arguing that listening is key to representing online spaces in all their cultural diversity and emotional complexity. The practice of listening affirms the importance of holistic data collection, whereby the social media message is not taken out of its surrounding context. The mode of ethnographic interaction, which the authors call “active listening,” is conceptualized as an engagement with the context of an online expression. Active listening is thus seen as a way of making sense of the polyphony of voices. One of the ways in which active listening takes context into account is by tracking the comments underneath a publication that reinforce or disrupt its semantic structure (Winter & Lavis, 2020).

In the case above, the comments following the photo of the Seto vocal ensemble are analyzed together with the photo, to bring out all the contexts of this visual online expression. Comments represent an important part of the interaction in the space of the social network sites that cannot be overlooked. They reflect connections with

other users and more personally directed, but still public, communication between them (Parks, 2011, p. 114).

It was found out that these photos are perceived first and foremost as representative of the oral tradition of the *leelo* singing, which is itself seen as a precious part of the Seto intangible culture that requires maintaining and preservation. It is argued that the Seto festive costumes, a key symbol of Seto identity, serve as material markers of intangible cultural traditions in these photos.

According to UNESCO, for the Seto community, both living in Russia and Estonia, the tradition of *leelo* remains “a cornerstone of contemporary identity” (UNESCO, 2009). In 2009, UNESCO inscribed *leelo* on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Apart from the multitude of photos, many videos representing elements of the material and intangible culture of Setos can be found in the VK, both in the profile pages of the Seto users and in the public pages, especially of the museums of the Pskov Oblast that have Seto collections. Most of the videos show a group of Setos performing *leelo* songs. It can be assumed that the polyphonic nature of this singing tradition is one of the reasons which makes it a fundamental pillar of the Seto identity, as it always requires a group of Setos to perform a song. Thus, it automatically fosters a sense of community and helps develop interpersonal connections between the Setos.

Videos can serve not only as a means of transmitting cultural elements, but also as a means of communication between dispersed Seto communities. One post from 2021 on the page of a Siberian Seto is dedicated to the video greeting from the king of the Estonian part of Setomaa Rein Järvelill to Siberian Setos, on occasion of the 120th anniversary of the village of Haidak. The post features the translation into Russian of the text of the greeting and remarks of the profile owner. The text is followed by four videos of the Estonian Setos, featuring congratulations from the Seto king, and three videos of the singing Estonian Setos. In the end of the post there is a link to YouTube⁴ where the video greeting is uploaded.

The account owner remarks: “I just want to add one thing—let’s cherish and love our Small Motherland! We have stood for so many years and will still stand” (Trans. by K. M.).

The text of the greeting follows:

Dear Seto! Brothers and sisters in Siberia, in Haidak! I am very sorry that I could not come to you. But 120 years ago, your great-grandfathers reached those places. They were very strong and brave men and women who travelled to such a far distance, to unknown lands, to build their home there. And, as it turned out, very successfully! I would like to remind you that in 2022 the decade of Indigenous languages will begin. I want you in Siberia to preserve your native language. I know that many of you there still know your native Seto language well! Pass the skill on to your children and grandchildren. Now, on Janov Day, I want to wish you all good things, good health and a beautiful holiday! We are experiencing a heat

⁴ YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

wave of 32–35 degrees Celsius, which is unusual and hard for us. We don't wish you that. We wish you love and health! A big hello to everyone from Setomaa!!!! (Participant 3; Trans. by K. M.)

It can be concluded that videos play an important role in the online interactions of Setos. First, they can demonstrate important elements of the material and intangible culture of Setos, that is the traditional costumes and polyphonic *leelo* singing, as well as the Seto language. Then, as in the case above, videos can be used to transmit greetings and congratulations from one distanced Seto community to another. This way, they serve as a means of communication.

Another historically essential element of the Seto culture and identity is the Orthodox Christianity that is traditionally followed by the Setos in contrast with other Finno-Ugric peoples. Among eight analyzed profile pages, in three of them more or less regular mentions of Orthodox festivals and rituals, as well as photos of the religious symbols and celebrations were found. Their owners, who live in Pechory District, Krasnoyarsk Krai, and Estonia, belong to the older generation.

Hashtags

At the end of the posts some of the users employ a variety of hashtags. Nowadays, the hashtag is not only a means of disseminating information on social media, but also a way of broadcasting identity (Belorussova et al., 2020, p. 35).

Seto-related hashtags can be in Russian and in Seto language, often used simultaneously in both languages. The Seto language is close to the Estonian language. It is noteworthy that the Seto language does not have a script of its own. Therefore, for the Seto language the Latin script is used, though it cannot convey the pronunciation correctly. According to a Seto respondent, “We wish to have a script that would correspond to our oral language if the scholars would develop [it]. But as of now, we have to make use of the Latin script” (Participant 4; Trans. by K. M.).

Thematically, the Seto hashtags can be divided into those concerning Seto identity directly (e.g., #seto #setomaa #сето #сетомая), featuring names of the Seto vocal ensembles (e.g., #Tsirgukõõ #Птенцы), indicating locations where Seto cultural activities are performed (e.g., #сигово #печоры #печорская_лингвистическая_гимназия #плг #petseri_lingvistiline_gümnaasium) and the names of Seto-related events (e.g., #неделя_культуры_сето). These four types encompass almost all Seto-related hashtags in the VK. Hashtags are only used by some of the Seto users. They are also utilized by the museum pages, especially, by the page of the Museum Reserve Izborsk. For the reactions to the posts from other users, most wall posts have many likes, fewer reposts, and much fewer comments.

Reposts

Many reposts concern upcoming events such as exhibitions and festivals. Reposts are made from museums that have Seto collections or arrange Seto-related exhibitions; festival organizers; newspapers and government organizations featuring Seto-related material; reposts from other persons, etc.

VK Social Networking Service as a Network

In the framework of the network approach, the VK can be visualized as a network, in which the nodes represent profile pages and public pages, and edges represent links between these pages.

By nature, networks are decentralized constructs that are characterized by self-organization, emergence, and distributed activity. Social networks among Internet users are based on voluntary associations across horizontal linkages. In the network analyses, the focus is on the centrality and connectivity of nodes, on externalities within the network, on relations and flows between nodes (Lambach, 2019, pp. 484–485).

Networks can be considered as online communities, either close or loose, depending on the specifics of the flows and connections between the virtual actors that constitute the community. The other way round, online communities can be viewed in terms of networks of personal relationships (Rheingold, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Howard Rheingold speculates that the popularity of online communities can be considered as a “response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 62). According to boyd, “social network sites are publics both because of the ways in which they connect people en masse and because of the space they provide for interactions and information” (boyd, 2011, p. 43). As is a case with “community”, “public” is a term with multiple meanings (boyd, 2011, p. 40), that can be considered as a group of people who share “a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest” (Livingstone, 2005, p. 9), or it can be considered as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006).

By organizing and maintaining virtual communities people preserve and even develop connections despite living far away, or having moved to another village, city, or country. According to a Seto respondent, who heads a Seto vocal school ensemble,

After graduating some of the children go to other cities to study in university. They live in many places now, Pskov, Krasnoyarsk, and many others. We stay in touch, and to all the new places they bring the Seto culture with them too and in a way they become its ambassadors. (Participant 5; Trans. by K. M.)

Nowadays scholars have moved away from conceptualizing community as a geographic entity to conceptualizing it in psychological terms or as quality of sociality (Amit, 2002). In this sense, community is viewed as a culture, a set of ideas and interpersonal sentiments rather than as a physical place (Anderson, 1991; Bender, 1978; Calhoun, 1980).

An essential test of the authenticity of any community, including virtual communities, is the ability to engage in collective action (Jones, 1995). The group thinks of itself as a community and the members identify with the community (Bell & Newby, 1974; Willson, 2006). Communities are also created through the ritualized sharing of information (Carey, 1989; Jones, 1995). To be sustained, a community must engage in such information-sharing rituals on a regular basis (Parks, 2011, p. 108).

Public Pages

Representatives of many peoples of Russia create public pages in the VK as groups where they could connect, communicate, and express their ethnicity and culture. These VK groups are considered and studied by many researchers as virtual communities (Belorussova, 2022, 2024; Mamontova, 2014; Pishleger, 2022; Tkachuk, 2021). However, in the VK there are currently no such active public page that would act as a Seto online community.

Instead, there is a multitude of public pages that periodically or occasionally post information about the Setos. Among them are government museum pages, such as public pages of the Museum Reserve Izborsk, Museum of the history of the town Pechory, Pskov Museum Reserve, that post regularly the Seto-related content, including information about material and intangible culture of Setos, posters of the upcoming exhibitions, etc.

Most active in this regard and most popular among the Setos is the Museum Reserve Izborsk⁵ public page. Its popularity among Setos can be (at least, among Setos which profile pages were selected for the current research) traced by regular reposts from the museum public page to their pages. The one and only official museum of the Setos in Russia, Manor Museum of the Seto people in the village of Sigovo, is a part of the Museum Reserve Izborsk. Much of the content posted by the Museum Reserve Izborsk concerns the Seto material culture, their festivals and traditions. It is at the field next to the Manor Museum of the Seto people in the village of Sigovo where the most well-known Seto festival “Setomaa. Family meetings” is celebrated every year. The holiday is traditionally held on the 28th of August, the feast day of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God. The festival is popular with tourists and is extensively covered on the museum VK page wall, including photos, videos, and sometimes live streams of the festival.

Also, there is a number of other VK public pages, such as governmental cultural centres, local libraries and newspapers that post information about the upcoming or occurred Seto events (for instance, folk concerts, master classes, or festivals) and are reposted by the Setos on their profile pages. These informational posts tie digital spaces to physical locations by indicating a specific address where this cultural event will take (or have taken) place.

Seto VK Network as a Virtual Community

It is argued that by the links, subscriptions and reposts, comments and likes, the abovementioned Seto private pages and public pages with Seto-related material are interconnected into a diffuse virtual network.

Researchers who study online communities have suggested that distributed network structures can take the place of public commons (e.g., Sohn, 2008). That is, interlinked private networks, such as those found on social network sites, may take the place of a public forum. Indeed, rates of participation may actually be higher in these

⁵ <https://mdolina.ru/en>

more diffuse networks than in the shared public areas of online communities. For instance, in the VK there is a public page Setomaa that, according to the description, “is dedicated to the culture of the Indigenous population of Setomaa” (Trans. by K. M.). Currently, there are more than 600 subscribers in the group. Seemingly, it is a group representing a Seto community online. However, there were only six posts since 2020 and the public page has been inactive since then.

Meanwhile, constant activity can be observed in the diffuse network represented by the Seto private pages and public pages that share related material. A special space in this network is certainly occupied, again, by the page of the Museum Reserve Izbork, as it is most consistently and often reposted by the Setos. It is noteworthy, that in the village of Haidak in Siberia there is a private Seto museum, that is “under tutelage” of the local rural library, but it does not have a VK page and information about it on the Internet is sparse. However, mentions of the museum and its activities can be traced on the profile pages of the Setos living in the village of Haidak. For example, one such post on the profile page a local Seto informs:

February, 21st is the International Day of the Tour Guide. Since the library in the village of Haidak is the caregiver of the Museum of Siberian Setos, the duty of a tour guide is also our concern. And not only that. For tourists we will hold a master class on making hay by hand (as in the old days and in the Soviet years in the village). We will also teach them the Seto dances. We will sing national songs for our guests. So, a tour guide should be able to do a lot of things (Participant 6; Trans. by K. M.).

A series of posts with photos by the same Seto, dated August and September of 2023, recounts the journey of a group of the Siberian Setos to Setomaa, to meet the Setos of the Pechory District and participate in the annual festival. On the pages of the Pechory Setos the posts featuring the visit of the Siberian Setos to Pechory, as well as details of a similar journey to Haidak of the Pechory Setos, can be found. Undoubtedly, these real-life visits are important, though rare, occasions for the Russian Seto community. Otherwise, they maintain connection through the web, including by the means of the VK network. The interactions between Setos can be followed through their reposts from each other’s pages, comments under each other’s posts, and links to each other’s profiles, embedded in the posts.

A Pechory Seto respondent confirms that despite being separated from other Seto communities by distance and by border, they stay in touch by the means of the Internet:

We are moving in any case, we try to stay connected with each other, communicate with each other, in order to simply understand where we are going. It is still very important to synchronize ... Well, social networks are still out there, aren’t they? (Participant 7; Trans. by K. M.)

Pechory Setos interact with Setos living in Siberia and in Estonia, share news, practice Seto language, congratulate each other on important occasions, and together do research about their culture. For example, recently my Seto respondent after a folk performance with her group

received a small complaint, quite fair, about why don't you have Easter songs. Here I thought about it, because I had never heard any Seto Easter songs in my life. I mean, I texted everyone right away, I was like, so, guys, do we have any sorts of Easter songs? Half the people said it's the first time they heard about it in the first place, and the other half said that there's something there, we have to look. (Participant 5; Trans. by K. M.)

This way they communicate on different topics, related to the Seto culture. Meanwhile, the Setos living in one place mostly communicate face-to-face, many people of the older generation do not use social networks at all. As a Seto respondent shares,

there are quite few of us, that is, even if we are talking about the Siberian Seto, we mostly communicate in person, and we have a lot of older people. The elderly Seto, of course, do not surf social networks. (Participant 8; Trans. by K. M.)

To get in touch, they call each other by phone or meet in person. Although only few people among the Seto community are actively involved into the popularization of their culture. For them, personal connections between each other are of great importance.

Definitions of community typically specify that members exhibit attachments to one another and to their community more generally (Kanter, 1972; Willson, 2006). Communities are in their essence defined as shared, close, and intimate (Jensen, 1990, p. 71). These emotional bonds need not be experienced toward every member of the community, though it is generally assumed that the majority of members have personal attachments to at least some other members (Parks, 2011, p. 109).

danah boyd considers social network sites as a type of networked publics, that the researcher sees simultaneously as the space constructed through networked technologies and an imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. Networked publics help people to connect and allow them to gather for social, cultural, and other purposes (boyd, 2011).

Technology structures introduce new possibilities for interaction and distinct affordances that shape how people engage with these environments, allowing them to share visual material, post information, comment on each other's posts, and repost each other, etc. Basically, it is the architecture, or digital geography, of networked publics that differentiates them from the more traditional notions of publics. As a consequence, new dynamics emerge that shape participation and interaction of people with information and each other.

Conclusion

In the current research, methodologically the approach of multi-sited ethnography was followed. In its framework, the cyberspace of the VK social network was explored, and two expeditions were organized into the physical field. Territory and network approach to the Internet were both successively used. As the current study has proven, together, these approaches provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital culture is produced and experienced, considering both the social networks that connect individuals and the territorial contexts that shape their interactions. Territoriality is communicated also through the public pages of the museum pages, local government organizations, folk festival organizers, etc. They spread information about Seto-related events in the VK that helps to maintain the expression and promotion of the Seto culture.

Connectedness of Setos living in Pechory District, Krasnoyarsk Krai, and Estonia can be traced through the VK social network. The VK emerges as an important platform for Seto individuals to express their cultural identity, primarily through the sharing of visual content, such as photos and videos of traditional costumes, festivals, and the polyphonic *leelo* singing. These posts not only act as markers of Seto ethnicity but also serve as a means of reinforcing the sense of community among Setos spread across different regions. The network of connections formed by personal profile pages and institutional public pages, such as those of museums and cultural organizations, fosters a virtual community that transcends physical borders and distances.

Despite the lack of a unified public page solely dedicated to the Seto community, the interlinked personal pages and public reposts create a diffuse yet effective network that supports cultural exchange and personal interaction. This research highlights the importance of digital spaces like VK in enabling ethnic minorities to retain a collective identity in the absence of geographic proximity.

The analysis also suggests that while traditional offline practices such as Orthodox Christianity play a significant role in Seto culture, they are less prominently represented in the digital sphere, potentially due to generational shifts, Soviet heritage, and subduedness of the religious topic in the VK digital space. There is no doubt that this important topic deserves further attention and study by the researchers. Meanwhile, the traditional Seto festive costume and polyphonic *leelo* singing stand out as some of the key elements of Seto culture and historical heritage both in online and offline spaces, transmitted both through photos and videos.

Nowadays, the cultural practices of the Setos are closely interconnected with the processes of the museification of the Seto culture and the festival activities. Overall, the research confirms the assertion by Alexei Novozhilov that “traditional Seto culture is increasingly preserved in the Pskov–Pechory region as a folklore and museum phenomenon” (Novozhilov, 2009, p. 108).

Ultimately, this study affirms that the Seto virtual community on VK functions as an important cultural hub, where identity, tradition, and social bonds are actively maintained and adapted to the digital age. The Seto people's ability to leverage social media for cultural preservation showcases the evolving nature of ethnic identity in the digital era, where physical distance is mitigated by the creation of fluid, adaptable cyberterritories.

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