



EDITORIAL

Ethnic Identities in Virtual Space

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Over the past quarter century, the cyber world has become a powerful transformative force that is increasingly permeating every facet of human life. Humanity, be it willingly or not, is adopting a new and previously unknown mode of existence, radically reshaping both the universe and humanity itself. However, the implications of this young phenomenon remain largely obscure. Cyberspace offers distinct advantages over the physical world, fostering the promptness of implementation of research projects, including those related to the issues of identity and ethnicity.

Research into the phenomenon of digital identity began in the 1980s with the proliferation of computers, the Internet, computer games, and various communication tools such as instant messaging and email services. Initially, researchers focused on exploring the potential benefits of the digital environment for humanity, both in terms of present-day and future scenarios. By the late 1990s, the analysis of network interactions had evolved into an independent area of academic inquiry. In 1998, Mark Poster introduced the concept of “virtual ethnicity” in the context of “the interplay of real and virtual elements in the construction of ethnic groups” (Poster, 1998).

The articles in this thematic issue of *Changing Societies & Personalities* explore the diversity of ethnic identities within virtual environments, employing new (or updated) methods of field ethnography and analytical ethnology in light of contemporary challenges and re-evaluation of current events. Cyberspace is an integral part of modern life, existing alongside and sometimes even replacing reality. It is becoming an essential, if not the principal, element in sustaining and shaping new forms of cyberethnicity. The recent global pandemic has revealed the significance of virtuality, particularly for ethnic and religious communities, which have found their unique ways to manifest identity. On the one hand, virtual identity appears to be an innovation that is affecting and altering the identity of ethnic groups. On the other hand, the use of modern technology to

represent ethnicity is a logical continuation of the constructivist concept of “imagined communities.” In this sense, cyberethnicity functions as a tradition. One of the key tasks is to determine the balance between tradition and innovation in the projection of virtual identity (Golovnev et al., 2021).

The already intricate system of identities is being dynamically multiplied in web projections. Cyberspace not only reflects the offline picture of ethnicity and religiosity, but also generates a new cyberidentity whose potential cannot be fully grasped yet. However, the tools of cyberethnography make its study possible. The Internet offers boundless opportunities for cyberspace development, from massive databases of scientific data to dynamic interactivity, creating new motives, tasks, contexts, and object–subject communication fields with their digital natives—bloggers, hackers, network groups, and other cyber communities.

Virtual communication via social networking services is a powerful tool for overcoming geographical remoteness, which is particularly important for dispersed ethnic groups. At present, new practices and technologies of virtual communication among ethnic communities and the formation of cyberethnicities is attracting an increased interest of ethnographers and anthropologists. Ethnographic research is not limited to working with a computer or a gadget; rather, it implies physical observation of how virtual life is embedded in everyday reality. Whenever possible, the authors study actual (offline) and virtual (online) ethnicity in their interconnection and disconnection through the experiences of particular individuals and communities. Field research involves a combination of conventional methods of participant observation and interviewing and the approbation of cyberethnography techniques, such as Internet communication, tests, and content analyses of online discourse for a comparative study of real and virtual manifestations of ethnicity.

This thematic issue is mainly devoted to the ethnicity of Indigenous peoples. The article by Svetlana Yu. Belorussova, Ksenya A. Maretina, and Elizaveta A. Komova analyzes a methodology for conducting cyberfield research among ethnic groups of Russia. Elena Nava Morales explores Rocksí broadcasting, Ksenya A. Maretina addresses the virtual ethnicity of the Seto people, and Tamara G. Ayba investigates the digitalization of the Abaza identity. These thematic perspectives are highly relevant, because Indigenous communities have their plans and visions for digital technology. Ethnic groups implement new opportunities through digital tools and networks, including ethnoprojects that can significantly update ethnocultural resources and trends. In the recent past, ideological concepts of states were aimed at suppressing the expression of ethnicity (the “melting pot” theory in the United States and *Homo Sovieticus* in the USSR).

However, ethnicity has not disappeared or “melted down,” but has rather acquired new forms of expression and vectors of development, including the Internet environment. Moreover, cyberethnicity is gradually gaining the potential of an independent phenomenon, adequate to the present-day and future realities, including current events, such as wars and revolutions, among others. At the same time, cyberspace has an advantage over physical reality in terms of the promptness of projects, including ethnic identity. Studies conducted in previous years have

confirmed that smaller communities and diasporas show the most significant Internet activity (Belorussova, 2022; Golovnev et al., 2021). For these communities, cyber interaction compensates for the deficit of real-life activities. Indeed, the Internet replaces one of the foundations of ethnicity, that is the unity of territory. At the same time, the virtual world is gradually becoming a repository of ethnocultural heritage and a forum for inter-ethnic dialogue for all peoples. A desire to express and present one's own culture (language, traditions, history) in the Internet environment causes a kind of ethnic Renaissance (with elements of competition), contributing to the global spread of the fashion for "ethno."

Indigenous/terrestrial/autochthonous peoples, living, as a rule, on the geographical periphery, are often referred to as "small" or "small-numbered." Although this identification may be accurate in some sense, it fails to give any adequate representation. Today, Indigenous minorities are no longer considered conservative, traditional communities; their ethnicity is not solely linked with their ancestral culture. The ethnic resource of Indigenous minorities consists in their high environmental, material, social, and spiritual technologies, rather than in their "primordially." The authors believe that the problems of Indigenous peoples need to be addressed in their full complexity, considering multiple aspects and factors in the context of global processes and contemporary trends.

This thematic issue sets out to investigate the impact that cyber technologies have on the life of Indigenous peoples. How does cyberreality merge with reality, and how does cyberethnicity become an integral part of modern ethnicity? How do the behavior and activity patterns change, and how does the local merge with the global? How are new authorities born and mental boundaries crumbling? Our analysis of the contradictory phenomenon of virtual ethnicity is, in essence, an attempt to understand whether virtual ethnicity is a simulacrum or ethnic Renaissance. Of particular interest is the combination of tradition and innovation in ethnoprojects, including virtual ones. There is a growing number of examples and situations where tradition bearers assess innovation as fake, and in this sense, the direction, conventionally referred to as "ethno-fakelogy," is acquiring significance.

This thematic issue includes five articles. In the ARTICLE *Cyberfield: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, Svetlana Yu. Belorussova, Ksenya A. Maretina, and Elizaveta A. Komova report that the study of digital identity began in the late 1980s with the spread of computers, the Internet, computer games, and various online communication tools. In more than 35 years, scholars have produced numerous valuable papers on digital anthropology and ethnography. Nevertheless, given the high speed of contemporary changes, researchers need to constantly update their techniques, to keep up with the emerging new ways of communication. The authors continue the research discourse regarding the methodology of cyberfield work, with its specifics and complexities. Special attention is drawn to the study of ethnicity online. Today, the virtual environment is offering a wide range of research opportunities, including application of qualitative and quantitative methods, conduction of surveys, and compilation of databases. Web analysis simplifies work in physical space, saving labor and financial resources. At the same time, the study of virtuality in recent years

seems to have attached a new meaning to the concept of real interaction. It turns out that the “digital” and “physical” worlds are difficult to separate—it is their combination that enables full-fledged ethnographic research with its specifics, details, and contexts.

The ARTICLE *Social Media, Cultural Values, and Digital Citizenship: A Study of Iranian Digital Natives* by Sara Tabatabaei, Bella A. Bulgarova, Galina N. Trofimova, and Victor V. Barabash examines the influence of social media engagement on cultural values among Iranian digital natives. A quantitative survey was conducted with 384 participants using a random online sampling method. The theoretical framework is based on Goffman's dramaturgical model theory and Rogers' diffusion theory. The findings reveal a significant negative correlation between the frequency of social media usage and adherence to cultural values, indicating that excessive use of social media may erode national cultural values and promote individualistic tendencies. Conversely, engagement with content that aligns with Iranian cultural values positively correlates with adherence to these values, underscoring the potential for social media to strengthen cultural values and preserve cultural heritage. This study highlights that social media engagement can have both positive and negative effects on cultural values, depending on the nature of such engagement. When used thoughtfully, social media can aid in the preservation and dissemination of cultural values. However, it also poses risks, including cyber vandalism and the degradation of cultural values. In conclusion, fostering media literacy for responsible digital citizenship is crucial for leveraging the potential of social media in preserving and promoting cultural values. This approach can help create a healthier, culturally aware digital environment that protects cultural heritage.

Elena Nava Morales, in her ARTICLE *The Fiesta and the Cerro: Rocksí Broadcasting on Social Media From Xaamkējxp*, presents the case of a young woman, Rocksí, who works with social media and has a strong influence in her region. She lives in Xaamkējxp, Oaxaca, in the southwest state of Mexico. Her work shows both the religious costumes and the politics of the communities through live transmissions on her Facebook¹ and YouTube² profiles. In 2024, she has transmitted several celebrations in Xaamkējxp related to religious celebrations because she was invited to help a family that had a *comisionados de festejo cargo*. Rocksí filmed various activities illustrating the importance of ethnic religious practices in the community and the strength and vitality of the religious and political cargos. In the text, the author delves deeper into the topic through ethnographic description.

The ARTICLE *Navigating Digital Borders: Seto Community in the Virtual Territory of the VK Social Network* by Ksenya A. Maretina examines the digital geography of the virtual Seto community in the VK social network (also known as VKontakte),³ focusing on how dispersed Seto people in Russia and Estonia use digital spaces to communicate, as well as express, preserve, and promote their cultural

¹ Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Facebook в России признана экстремистской организацией и заблокирована.

² YouTube™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

³ 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.

identity. By applying a multi-sited ethnographic methodology, the research involves both online explorations and offline semi-structured interviews 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 the 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.

Tamara G. Ayba in her ARTICLE *Abkhaz and Abaza Communities in Cyberspace* investigates strategies implemented by two related peoples, Abkhazians and Abazins (Abazas), to preserve ethnic culture, using virtual space as a tool to sustain traditional practices. Most of these two related peoples reside outside their historical homeland, which makes the study of virtual communications among the Abaza people, both in Russia and abroad, highly relevant. The Abkhazians and Abazas living abroad demonstrate their unity with historical homeland and their involvement with traditions through photo and video recordings of traditional holiday celebrations shared online. Online sharing serves as an indication of being an integral part of their people despite being remote geographically. For the Abazins, a small Indigenous people settled in Russia, photo and video recordings of reconstructed rituals are important for the popularization and revival of traditional culture. The author carried out a content analysis of ethno-characteristic, linguistic, local, and extra-territorial communities in social networking sites, such as VK, Odnoklassniki⁴, Telegram⁵, Instagram⁶, and Facebook⁷. This study outlines the main trends that have developed in cyberspace for the Abkhazians and Abazas representatives seeking to preserve their traditional culture. In addition, the interaction between classical Islam and traditional beliefs, which are integral parts of ethnic cultures of these two peoples, is discussed.

The articles in this thematic issue demonstrate a high adaptability of ethnic communities to the realities of modern life. On the one hand, they actively participate in digital processes; on the other, the real world remains a true pillar of their identity. In this regard, traditional values act not as archaic but as time-tested systems adaptive to modern technological changes. We hope that this thematic issue sheds light on new perspectives of ethnic identity and new research methods for their comprehensive analysis.

⁴ Odnoklassniki is a Russian social network owned by VK. <https://ok.ru>

⁵ Telegram™ is a trademark of Telegram Group Inc., its operational center is based in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates.

⁶ Instagram™ is a trademark of Instagram Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Instagram полностью заблокирована в России как экстремистская организация.

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