Iterative Netnography and Occurrence for Rapid Research: A Case Study of TikTok

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As social media becomes more visual, personalized, and algorithmically curated, new methods are needed to understand how content occurs to different communities. Existing API-based and text-centric methods obscure the lived, contextual experience of users — especially in environments like short-form video feeds. This paper presents "iterative netnography," an immersive, team-based methodology developed during a rapid response research project on election rumors in the lead-up to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election. Building on Kozinets's netnography, this approach introduces systematic, iterative workflows to study visual algorithmically recommended content in real time and across diverse community archetypes. This paper details the protocol and development of such archetypes, discusses best practices, the types of insights it affords, and contrasts these with API-based methods using a sociotechnical stack framework. It introduces "occurrence:" a sensitizing concept for qualitative social media research, emphasizing the value of studying content as it occurs to users in real-time, dynamic, and high-stakes contexts. Finally, it advocates for collaborative, sustainable, and community-driven cyberinfrastructures to support such work—ensuring that social media research remains resilient amid increasing platform restrictions and sociopolitical pressures.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Ethnographic studies**; **HCI design and evaluation methods**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Netnography, Ethnographic work, TikTok, Internet research methods

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1 Introduction

During the historic 2024 U.S. presidential election, our and other research teams across the nation continued a multi-year effort to study online rumors, or unverified claims, about election integrity. After Donald Trump's 2020 loss to Joe Biden, Trump, allied influencer, and self-described election integrity organizations promoted a narrative that the election had been stolen [130]. In the years that followed, these actors invested in political, legal, and social media infrastructure to amplify this claim, encourage public discourse around it, and challenge future electoral outcomes [163, 168].

Meanwhile, the social media landscape transformed. Elon Musk acquired Twitter (now X) in 2022, slashing Trust and Safety operations and using the platform to further his political agenda, including open support for Trump [77, 107]. In parallel, TikTok — a short form video app owned by a Chinese company — grew rapidly, surpassing X in users and

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engagement [125]. Political groups increasingly invested in operations on TikTok to push messaging through creators and amplification accounts [64, 99]. Simultaneously, U.S. government efforts to ban or force the sale of TikTok framed the platform as a national security threat or vehicle for political radicalization, sparking visible politicization among creators [90, 132].

Unlike prior election monitoring work, which focused primarily on text-based platforms like X, TikTok demanded a new research approach. Our 2024 study aimed to monitor and analyze rumors that echoed or evolved from 2020 tropes and tactics [160], across multiple platforms. This was conducted as "rapid response research," borrowing from crisis informatics and the social study of rumors [48, 120, 122, 151] to collect, analyze, and publicly disseminate findings in near real-time — often within a week — far faster than traditional academic publishing cycles.

From July through December 2024, we monitored election discourse across platforms like X, Telegram (an alternative tech platform), and TikTok. Our keyword-based monitoring protocols from prior years' elections worked well on text-driven sites, but they were ineffective on TikTok. Video content on TikTok is encountered through highly personalized algorithmic feeds (Tiktok's "For You" Page [154]), not trending hashtags and topics. Political messaging often appears subtly in audiovisual content ([39]) on TikTok — including aesthetic, humor, and subcultural references — obscuring it from text-based queries.

To adapt, we developed an iterative "netnographic" (inspired by Kozinets [83]) protocol for our team to collaboratively monitor TikTok in real time. Rather than searching for keywords, we focused on surfacing salient content within communities likely to produce or be targeted by election rumor content. Understanding the importance of time as a variable, we aimed to simulate how and when content might actually occur to users within those communities over the course of the election season. This required building "archetypal feeds" tailored to the communities we wanted to study, seeding the accounts with creators identified from previous research and engaging with content relevant to those communities that was served. We developed collaborative, iterative workflows to help our research team discover, interpret, and document emerging rumors and narratives on a weekly basis. Weekly video collections and memos produced by the team supported real-time analysis, helped contextualize rumors in broader cultural discourses, and constructed larger datasets representing each archetypal feed over time.

Our methodology allowed us to discover emergent election rumors, monitoring where and how they spread both in TikTok and across other platforms. It does not attempt to reverse-engineer TikTok's algorithm, nor does it claim to capture the full diversity of in-app experiences. The rumors, not the communities themselves, were the object of study. As such, the archetypal feeds were not perfect proxies for the communities that informed them. Rather, we offer a real-time, operationalizable research approach — an innovation on traditional netnography — designed to study algorithmically recommended content (not necessarily served in keyword querying) as it occurs during unfolding, high-stakes events of public import (i.e. elections, hurricanes, conflict, etc). Our approach is especially suited to the distinct challenges of short-form video (SFV) and visually mediated, algorithmic environments, but provides important insights for studying algorithmically curated feeds writ large.

Throughout the work, we address two key research questions:

- How might we establish systematic, iterative methodological workflows for qualitatively studying discourse in visual, algorithmically mediated feeds over time, in real-time, and in a collaborative research team?
- How can these methods support collaborative and communal data collection about what, when, and how discourses, rumors, and aesthetic cues occur to archetypal communities of interest during high uncertainty news events, such as elections?

In answering these questions, we contribute:

- A workflow and best practices for conducting team-based netnographic methods in algorithmically mediated (particularly SFV) environments to capture emergent rumors, narratives, and tropes;
- A framework for building rich empirical datasets, insights, and cyberinfrastructures from iterative, observational monitoring of real-time events;
- "Occurrence" — a sensitizing concept for understanding what, how, when, and to whom content is experienced within algorithmically curated digital spaces, particularly those that are not text-centric.

Though our broader research objectives were not to conduct an ethnography of a specific community, generally understood as the immersive study of a culture, we adopt ethnographic research methods to inform our broader protocol which focused on emergent rumors. Our methods support collaborative inquiry and shared data infrastructure at a time when social media research faces increasing constraints from platform, political, and institutional pressures [117, 149]. We hope this publication serves as a pragmatic guide for academic and practitioner research teams studying SFV and other algorithmically mediated environments.

This paper proceeds as follows: §2 offers background on our case study and broader project. §3 connects our work to relevant approaches to studying multimedia digital environments. §4 introduces and documents our methodological framework, adapting Kozinets's netnography [83]. §5 details ethical considerations and researcher positionality. §6 compares insights and data from our method to API-based approaches using Qiwei et al.'s sociotechnical stack [134]. §7 details "occurrence" as a sensitizing concept for social media research and extends Ribes and Lee's work on sociotechnical cyberinfrastructures [93, 139]. §8 ends with implications, limitations, and directions for future work.

2 Context of Case Study, Sketch of Method, and Broader Team

This paper outlines the methodological workflow of a "TikTok Netnography Team" studying online, cross-partisan election discourse in the five months leading up to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election (July–December 2024). The team consisted of eight members: five undergraduate researchers, a PhD student, a research scientist, and a research manager — the latter two hold doctorates.

This work was part of a larger election rumor rapid research initiative at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public [169], staffed by full-time communications support and involving 21 researchers. Undergraduate researchers worked in two-hour "discovery" shifts, gathering, documenting and contextualizing rumor data across social media platforms. Their findings were then reviewed by graduate-led "analysis" teams, who decided which rumors to elevate in rapid blog posts or to share with journalists and election officials.

The researchers working on the TikTok Netnography Team created archetypal feeds based upon different communities across political and cultural spectrums that had proven to be relevant to election rumoring as both targets and vectors in previous elections (see §4.2 for community selection). They used these archetypal feeds as probes to immerse themselves in content, saving relevant media, as well as content that was out of scope for our study of election integrity rumors but socially salient, and contextualizing its significance and timeliness in a weekly memo. The team met weekly to refine methods and share findings discovered across different archetypal feeds, compiling internal memos and video collections. Memos were used to inform the broader research team as they wrote real-time analysis supplied to relevant public stakeholders, as well as post facto academic research (including this paper). Researchers also contributed to data collections with their archetypal feeds in Junkipedia, a civil society social media monitoring tool [2]. In many ways this netnographic team acted as a first-round discovery probe and synthesis layer of emergent narratives, aesthetics, and

trends that could be used for further analyses by other teams and different methods. This publication does not deeply analyze the collected data or the overall project, it focuses on the netnographic methods used, but includes illustrative empirical examples in §4 and §6.

3 Related Work

Our TikTok Netnography Team's objective was to study what, when, how and where SFV content occurred to communities of relevant import in a high stakes unfolding event. To do so, we used ethnographically informed methods, adopted from netnography and trace ethnography. Incorporating learnings from other approaches to studying algorithmically mediated and multimodal digital spaces, we translated these ethnographic methods into our rapid response framework towards developing "thick" [55] qualitative insights. Though we do not claim to be conducting an ethnography, understood as the immersive study of a culture [86], methods used in ethnography were operationalized and deployed.

This section's literature review reflects our own team's evolution in thinking when building our methodology. We first review "rapid response" and grounded approaches to social media research (3.1), and how many of these approaches have been largely text-based — which did not support our research goals when monitoring SFV. We then examine how researchers have studied multimedia digital spaces (3.2), including a turn towards immersive methods. We then summarize netnographic and ethnographically-informed methods in digital spaces, drawing from trace ethnography and netnography's uses in CSCW (3.3). From this, we elucidate the emergent need for netnographic, grounded methodologies for studying platforms like TikTok during rapid research projects of high-stakes events and document literature on making and evaluating such a methodological contribution in social computing research (3.4).

3.1 "Rapid" research of social media

"Rapid response research" is real-time research conducted during unfolding events, with roots in crisis informatics, medical research, and sociology [29, 48, 122, 128, 151, 176]. Codified by the National Science Foundation, it emphasizes the urgency of real-time data collection and analysis in high-stakes situations [113].

Crisis informatics, a field pioneered by Palen and colleagues, brought rapid response research to CSCW by understanding how people make sense of and distribute information collectively during crises, often in real time or "rapidly" by combining computational and qualitative analyses to interpret high stakes nuances [120–122, 129]. Such approaches have been applied to unfolding news events, such as information operations around elections and protests by Starbird et al — focusing on the formal and informal work that communities undertake online to make sense of and act on during high stakes events [159, 161].

In this family of work, principles from grounded theory (GT) and collaborative research teams are often used [130, 159, 164]. Iterative sampling and interpretation of data without applying a hypothesis, especially given the event is still unfolding [120], is employed to allow findings to emerge from the data [30, 61]. We seek to borrow from iterative, "grounded" practices [30], incorporating ongoing, iterative memoing, data collection, and analysis in our framework, emerging from a case study on a high-stakes, unfolding election.

However, rapid response research, like much social media research, has typically focused on textual media [100, 124, 130]. Our project sought to apply and yield real time insights from TikTok, a visual platform. Efforts like ours are motivated in part by the rise of short form video content and calls from the broader field to prioritize visual study [70, 124, 184], due to visuals' high engagement on platforms [26, 42] and memorability, trustworthiness, and affect on the human psyche [7, 49, 182]. But several questions remain regarding how to rigorously study the visual and auditory (such as "viral sounds") as well as how they are experienced during an ongoing event. Such content is not as

easily monitored by keywords, and often subtle and evolving aesthetics may obscure salient messages [39]. Studies have translated visual data to textual representations to make it more tenable for scaled analysis (i.e. transcripts of TikToks, summaries from VLMs of image collections) [76], but at potential risk of missing important visual information that shapes real time sensemaking [152]. Recent methodological work on visual social data underscores that such translations can strip the epistemic properties that make visual content meaningful in the first place [98]. This gap motivated our approach to maintain the visual nature of our data via immersive methods researchers have used to study algorithmically mediated and ephemeral multimedia spaces.

3.2 Researching algorithmically mediated and ephemeral multimedia spaces

Studying multimedia digital spaces, spanning from algorithmic feeds to ephemeral content (that often exist within these feeds) has proven to be a difficult but important research challenge across social media and other digital communities (i.e. games) scholarship. Scholars have approached this challenge with diverse methods: user interviews, mixed methods studies, walkthroughs, and netnographic approaches [97, 119, 154, 157, 184].

One prominent method for examining algorithmic feeds involves sock puppet audits, where synthetic accounts scroll and often scrape recommended content [12, 24, 46]. Ibrahim et al, in their study of TikTok during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election, researchers deployed 323 VPN-located sock puppet accounts seeded with partisan content [76]. This resulted in thousands of transcripts, machine-labeled for partisanship, derived from recommended videos to the sock puppets — quantifying partisan distribution of recommendations [76]. This study, along with others combining algorithmic audits and API-based collection [46, 127], demonstrates how large-scale designs can yield insights and datasets regarding platform dynamics. However, these studies can, as boyd and Crawford argue [25], decontexutalize data from its social context — often rendering invisible the texture of and social process behind content. In the case of multimedia content, where layers of visual cues and in-group symbols often embed meanings [39, 184], these methods' textual transformation also strips away important information.

To recontextualize data researchers use a range of qualitative and mixed methods approaches. These studies engage users directly through interviews that explore folk theories of the algorithm and perceptions and experiences of content and its curation [41, 59, 97, 102, 153, 154]. In some cases, researchers use visual elicitation to prompt reflection in interviews [59, 97]. Although these methods re-contextualize multimodal data, they are usually retrospective, relying on human memory of encountering content. Thus, missing out on documenting the temporal situatedness that users experience content within.

Many computational methods seek to contend with this dimension of time in digital spaces, but to further limitations. Sock puppets, while scalable and able to capture real-time data, have been critiqued for lacking the authenticity of human browsing [24]. Meanwhile, API pulls, while able to gather a larger range of data than methods like interviews, are also retrospective, miss live or deleted content, and are dependent on keyword queries. Many researchers try to further contextualize data from these queries by qualitatively coding small samples, "zooming in" for richer insights [100, 130, 157, 159, 161]. But none of these methods fully capture the lived, personalized, and real-time experience of scrolling a constantly evolving feed.

To get closer to this lived experience, researchers have used immersive, ethnographically informed methods to study how in-group signals and meanings are formed via both ephemeral (i.e. Instagram stories or Snapchats) [11, 82, 106] and posted content [8, 62]. Relevant to our rapid response setting, game studies researchers have examined ephemeral and real-time content, particularly through the lens of live-streaming as situated and interactive performances at a communal level [95]. More broadly, game studies have employed ethnographic methods to study dynamics of gamers

playing and worldbuilding together and how their interactions with content and each other, form communities and digital "third places", raising implications towards studying other digital communities via immersive methods over extended time periods [44, 45, 141].

Despite this adaptation of immersive ethnographic methods in digital spaces, challenges still persist. For instance, it remains unclear how to operationalize immersive research for rapid response settings and how these methods can support data collection for both rapid and post-hoc mixed methods analysis. Our work seeks to bridge lessons from this aforementioned literature towards applying real-time ethnographically-informed methods to rapid response research. We discuss our particular inspirations for this ethnographic translation next.

3.3 Bringing collaborative ethnography and cyberinfrastructure to digital spaces

Ethnography, the systematic study of human cultures through observation in their own settings, has a long history of adoption and use in CSCW, particularly in answering questions that necessitate immersion into a digital or physical space [22, 135, 138]. Ethnographies and ethnographic methods offer insights into how people interact with technology and each other [73, 147], be it workplaces or online communities [108, 178]. As CSCW has evolved, so too has its use of ethnography, expanding into fully digital spaces and raising new ethical and methodological concerns [71], including observer effects [144] and discomfort within online communities being studied [63, 142]. These shifts have sparked debates about how ethnography is conceptualized and deployed within CSCW, from its limitations of understanding collaborative work to translational issues from social science to CSCW audiences [150]. Yet the field continues to utilize it, adapting frameworks like actor-network theory to account for dynamic interactions across human and nonhuman actors, time, and physical and digital space [89, 138].

In our case study, we seek to leverage the immersive, "thick" qualitative analysis that ethnographic methods render To this end, we engage with a broader literature umbrella of "digital ethnography": a methodology focused on incorporating and translating ethnographic methods for digital spaces [62, 174]. The growing employment of "digital ethnographies" by researchers in CSCW and HCI (e.g. [58, 92, 178]), communications (e.g. [146]), media studies (e.g. [8]), and more has also spurred debates regarding how "ethnographic" digital ethnographies are [38, 53]. We do not seek to resolve this debate in this paper, nor do we claim to do an ethnography, but rather to document our translation of ethnographic methods to an operationalizable, immersive study of TikTok discourse.

We explicitly build upon two ethnographically informed methods commonly seen in CSCW: trace ethnography as defined by Geiger and Ribes [58] and netnography as defined by Kozinets [83].

Trace ethnography studies user-generated artifacts produced through human and nonhuman interactions and behaviors [58]. Geiger and Ribes introduced the method in their case study of Wikipedia editors' collaborative work in fighting vandalism of their pages ("vandal fighting") in 2010 to the CSCW community [57]. These "traces" can be observed asynchronously, in different social worlds and through an actor-network theory lens [89]. By following traces, researchers can understand sociotechnical interactions and collaborative work across porous communities over time, revealing not just an account of what occurred but how human and nonhuman actors worked together. In doing so, they invoke Beaulieu's ideas of emphasizing co-presence (by deeply observing traces) over co-location (real-time observation of users) [16, 58]. We prioritize this approach in our study by focusing on experiencing content over observing and interacting with users. We also draw particularly from the "trace" aspect of trace ethnography, although we do not focus on the actor-network schema, rather forming interpretations from the real-time observation of social trace data (in our case, SFV content).

Netnography is a qualitative, real-time observational method that adapts ethnographic methods to bounded online environments. It is credited to Robert Kozinets, a marketing researcher [84]. Emerging from 1990s research of online forums like Usenet, netnography involves observing digital communities in situ while also engaging them through interviews and surveys [83]. Kozinets formalized this approach by providing clear steps for researchers, updating the method over time to reflect emergent platforms and changing norms online (we use his 2019 third edition). These clear steps, or "moves," served as a foundational structure for our methodology in §4. Unlike trace ethnography, netnography centers on the embedded and real-time observation of online venues, and we focus on this aspect along with its operationalizability in our method.

Both of these methodologies are frequently cited in CSCW work and are compatible with Lee et al's notions of cyberinfrastructure, the increased computational infrastructure behind scientific discovery. Lee further conceptualizes cyberinfrastructure as a sociotechnical system enabled by digital and human infrastructure [93]. In our case, the human infrastructure is a team of researchers observing what, when and how social media content occurs to them. In their 2010 follow-up, Ribes and Lee call for the CSCW community to approach cyberinfrastructure as deeply sociotechnical, urging attention to long-term, sustainable, and socially embedded visions of infrastructure, rather than short-term, narrowly technical solutions [139]. They articulate seven analytic themes for understanding and engaging with such infrastructures, which we draw on in §7.2.

We seek to contribute to these literatures, rising to the challenge of methodological innovation to empower CSCW research in digital spaces — particularly those studying unfolding events of public import. Specifically, we develop a methodology on the foundation of Kozinet's netnography procedures in a case study of TikTok during a high-stakes election that iterates on both the process and artifacts of the method, engaging with trace ethnography and cyberinfrastructure. Our aim is to systematize netnographic approaches to studying short-form video (SFV); enabling collaborative, immersive, and iterative research during critical events and building a foundation for future work.

3.4 Methodological innovations in social computing

In outlining methodological contributions in HCI, Wobbrock and Kientz emphasize such work should "create new knowledge" and inform best practices, evaluated by the "utility, reproducibility, reliability, and validity of the new method or method enhancement." [183]. Our grounded, iterative research method produced two kinds of data — media collections and research memos — from five different archetypal feeds to generate knowledge in an empirical case study. Each of these feeds could have been its own case study, but our method, particularly the production of research memos focused on narratives and rumors across communities and not the communities themselves per se, allows us to create comparative insights across feeds, demonstrating reproducibility and transferability.

In our evaluation, we draw from qualitative research validity. Transferability and reproducibility, as aforementioned, are key evaluative criteria of qualitative research, as opposed to the generalizable and representative claims of quantitative work [35, 54, 66, 155]. The transferability of our methodology is attained via its operationalization, allowing for application across different contexts and platforms. Our documented, operationalized protocols and memos provide transparency via documenting our data and collection of it, common in validating ethnographic methods [9, 140, 172].

Memoing, a core qualitative research activity, is used for both synthesizing and documenting findings over time and as a space for researchers to practice reflexivity [21, 81, 136]. We unpack our reflexive practices in detail in §5, but memoing allowed us to contend with the "human research instrument" [56], a requirement for rigorous qualitative research [35, 66, 81]. Memoing also assisted with triangulation, checking data across multiple sources, times, and feeds to enhance validity [68, 166]. This triangulation also occurred with memos themselves, providing another form of data

to analyze about how content occurs to the researcher at a given time, lending itself to greater reproducibility, utility, and reliability because the researcher may compare how archetypal content occurs to them across time and feeds.

Our method could be adapted to include other platforms in the same study, with memos as reproducible pieces of documentation to analyze. Additionally, our memoing occurred across a team, with weekly reviews to coordinate and standardize memos, making them legible and transferable to other researchers. This extends a notion of cyber and human infrastructure of scientific work in CSCW research [93, 139] which we further unpack in §7.

Lastly, we draw upon the grounded nature of our method. Memoing and iteration are cornerstone to our methodology and grounded theory [30, 61] and we combine them in both empirical insights and theoretical contributions [30], offering "thick" descriptions of the content [55], but also how it contextually occurs to the researcher. This idea of *occurrence* — or how and when content is served to a researcher, and in what context — is one we propose as a sensitizing concept in our §7, building off Blumer's sensitizing concepts as theoretical tools and guiding directions [23], used in grounded theory since its conception to guide the researcher to theoretical saturation and evaluating their analyses [30, 61].

We steep this evaluation of our method in literature: replicability, repeated use, and generation of new knowledge ([183]), attributes of qualitative research validation (namely transferability, reflexivity, transparency, and triangulation) [35, 66, 68, 81, 166, 172], and the thick descriptions [55] and sensitizing concepts [23] it provides to guide and evaluate future work. Doing so, we contribute to the ever growing literature of qualitative CSCSW methodologies. Importantly, we seek not to contribute a new ethnographic methodology, but rather a novel workflow for rigorous qualitative research that operationalizes and translates ethnographic, immersive methods to the study of how multimedia content occurs in differing digital, multimodal online spaces for real-time and collaborative analysis.

4 Methodological Development and Deployment

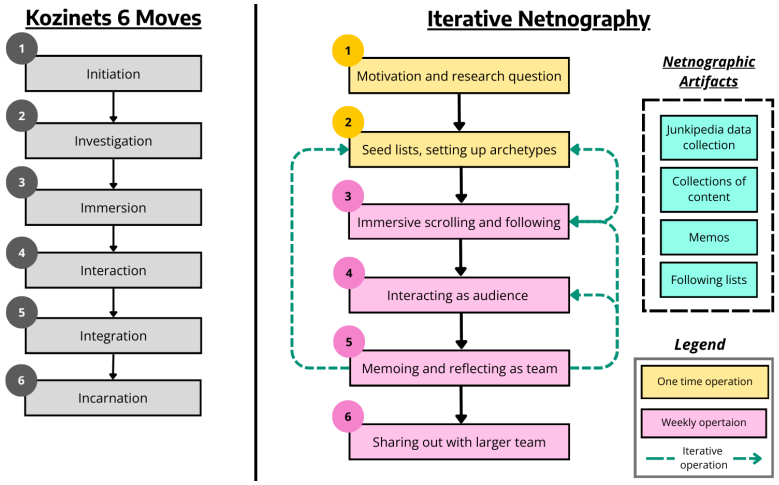

Fig. 1. Showing our workflow (right) mapped to Kozinets's 6 moves of netnography (left). On the right, we utilize green arrows and light teal boxes to denote where we depart from Kozinets. We show our iterative, grounded process to innovate on this method and our data collection and expansion project to extend this method to enable other work.

To capture the ephemeral and changing nature of short form video (SFV) content served by TikTok's algorithm, we approach our netnography from an iterative, grounded perspective via an operationalized, team workflow. We anchor

on Kozinets's definition and six procedural "moves" of netnography [83] and build upon this foundation, particularly by adding iterative feedback loops at each stage and creating new interpretative, netnographic artifacts (see Figure 1).

Our method begins with Kozinets's first three moves of netnography: initiation of the study (4.1), scoping and developing entry points (which we call "archetypal feeds") for observation (4.2), and immersing ourselves in the platform to gather data (4.3). This leads to developing and iterating upon interaction rules (4.4), and reflecting upon collected data via memoing individually and as a group as a form of interpretation (4.5). Our method departs from and builds upon Kozinets's sixth move of "incarnation" by sharing findings with the broader research community as well as building larger communal datasets for future work (4.6).

Although our method was developed in the context of TikTok, it is transferable to other SFV platforms, and, more broadly, other "infinite scroll", algorithmically curated platforms.

4.1 Initiation: Motivation and inquiry of a study

Kozinets defines "initiation" as the step where a project's direction is determined and the project commences. In doing so, the study is "bounded" with clear inclusion and exclusion criteria around what and when an internet phenomenon or community is being investigated. Subsequently, a study is "motivated" with a research question suitable for immersive qualitative research. Finally, a study must also consider institutional requirements, ethics, and planning.

Consistent with Kozinets's "initiation" step, our study was bounded by the timeline of the 2024 elections. Our research question was: What election rumors may appear to different communities of interest on TikTok in real-time? Thus, we sought to immerse ourselves into politically and socially relevant content to investigate rumors via archetypal feeds based on these communities. This allowed us to observe how narratives arose across different feeds in real-time instead of topical querying.

In this stage, our institutional planning involved setting up a research team and acquiring hardware (a set of iPhones) upon which the undergrad researchers would conduct the netnography. Our planning stage centered on ethical and security concerns. Although the project was approved by our university IRB, this approval alone did not cover the range of our ethical and safety concerns [43, 50, 74, 177]; in §5, we describe additional measures we implemented to address our concerns.

4.2 Investigation: Setting up timelines and community archetypes

The "investigation" phase of Kozinets's netnography is identified as the project's "siting" [83] by identifying a digital space's exact scope and boundaries that the researchers will (and will not) observe during the netnography. Our investigation stage focused on bounding the scope of content and timeline of immersion, identifying archetypes of socially and politically relevant communities to the election, and designing archetypal feeds. These archetypal feeds were developed as an observational probe for audio-visual discourse, not meant as a community proxy.

We began our netnography after political party conventions in July 2024 and ended at election certification in December 2024 [5]. Via immersive scrolling, our study observed election rumor content as it occurred in archetypal feeds. This immersive scrolling replaced keyword monitoring and searching, which did not yield authentic user experiences of election content and did not take into account aesthetic cues. Recognizing the semi-porous and algorithmic nature of online spaces, we understood most creators are not explicitly political at all times, rather embedded in broader cultural and social contexts. This means election content, the object of our study, would be intertwined with non-political content in assemblages tailored for and occurring within partisan and nonpartisan communities. Thus, we avoided relying on direct searches of election keywords that could bias the algorithm away from salient archetypal feed content.

However, feeds were certainly biased towards electoral content. To understand how different communities experienced election discourse, we primed five feeds once having defined five archetypal communities: RedTok, BlueTok, SpanishTok, NewsTok, and ManTok.

Given our electoral focus, we began with US partisan archetypes of "RedTok" and "BlueTok". These were grounded in existing literature [79] and shaped the development of the other three. In these subsequent archetypes, we were particularly interested in not explicitly political communities that had previously instigated or were targeted by election rumoring due to their social and political relevance: Spanish speakers, news-seekers, and individuals watching so-called "manosphere" content.

SpanishTok was developed as an archetype to attain insights into the Hispanic community and discourse, given they are an increasingly important voting block [112] which has been a target of disinformation online [33, 175]. The Hispanic community is also believed to comprise an exceptionally large block of US TikTok users [10], spending an above average time on the app and also using social media (and TikTok) as a frequent news source [65, 94].

But many Americans get news on social media (particularly TikTok) and view news consumption as entertainment [94, 114]. To capture this online news-seeking community, we created NewsTok, including legacy outlets, newer media brands, and news influencers [75] to determine what news-seeker may consume during the election.

Lastly, given the elevated political and electoral importance ascribed to male conservative influencers [88], particularly in the manosphere [14], we developed "ManTok" to monitor this discourse. This archetype's creation was further motivated by understanding how content targetted young men, a key TikTok demographic [20] and voting block [111].

These archetypes were set up as research accounts and not linked to real names or faces. Usernames reflected the archetype, and profile images came from public internet sources (e.g., relevant memes) in order to appear authentic though we were not directly interacting with community members (see §4.4). We detail ethical and safety considerations around disclosure and account management in §5.

4.2.1 Seeding the archetypes. An imperative step in our process was creating a starter seed list of accounts for each archetype, ensuring initial content for real-time data collection and broader exposure. This seeding cast a targeted net for these immersive probes, rather than building a simulation of a user's following feed.

We used a peer-reviewed partisan-aligned list [79] from a study of election disinformation repeat spreaders from X to seed BlueTok and RedTok accounts. Additionally, we followed creators who participated in Biden's 2024 creator summit [6] (for BlueTok) and Trump's 2019 White House Social Media Summit [143]. This resulted in 25 total seeded accounts for BlueTok, but comparatively less for RedTok. To further supplement RedTok, we added accounts from CredoIQ's trending creator rankings [1] and a list of conservative TikTok accounts recommended by Turning Point USA [3]. This resulted in a total of 26 total seeded accounts for RedTok.

We were unable to attain a unified seed list of manosphere creators. Therefore, to seed ManTok, we performed a literature review of peer reviewed and journalistic pieces that identified 39 influencers across 10 publications [28, 32, 36, 40, 47, 72, 101, 118, 123, 156], garnering 28 TikTok seed accounts. We focused on English-speaking, American manosphere influencers, though we acknowledge this is a multinational and multilingual digital phenomenon.

NewsTok was developed from two account seed lists: news and journalism accounts the list used for Red and BlueTok [79] and the Allsides media bias list. Allsides, a media literacy nonprofit, includes major news channels across the American political spectrum [4]. All outlets on this list with a TikTok account, no matter the size, were followed by NewsTok. This resulted in 69 total seeded accounts. It is worth noting we observed left-leaning news organizations'

(ex. The Atlantic) accounts were more likely to have a TikTok account than those on the right (ex. One America News Network). Thus, initial NewsTok feed may have leaned left.

There was less peer reviewed work on relevant Spanish language seedlists for US political discourse. Therefore, we created a purposive list of politically relevant hashtags and collected the top 150 US registered Spanish language accounts posting with these hashtags. We manually screened these accounts to confirm they were Spanish language content and contained a political aspect, resulting in a seedlist of 18 accounts for SpanishTok.

4.3 Immersion: Iterating on observational sessions

Immersion is the core of netnography, defined by Kozinets as the process of "experiencing, observing, reflecting, and recording" [83]. For us, the immersion process occurred on lab-owned iPhones (4.3.1) via weekly observational scrolling (4.3.2). By reviewing each researchers' weekly immersive experience and iterating as needed, we collected the most relevant content and its creators, storing content in weekly "collections"and recording lists of accounts followed for the broader research community in a collective database (4.3.3).

Kozinets does not address if iteration of immersive protocols should occur, but we intentionally adjusted our observational protocols across archetypes when the archetypal feed was pulling away from salient content. Though we present our methods linearly, these iterations occurred throughout the work.

4.3.1 Observational devices used for scrolling. Each archetype was stored on a dedicated research phone managed by the same research assistant throughout the study. These "clean" phones had no personal data, ensuring algorithmic recommendations remained unbiased by researchers' digital footprints, which did not necessarily represent the archetypes. Additionally, we found during our study that disabling location services helped align content with what was roughly expected of the archetype.

4.3.2 Scrolling and observational protocols. For each archetype, the researcher scrolled approximately 4 hours a week. This timing was informed by shift schedules, where students worked collectively with other members of the research team. We specifically scrolled on observing the "For You Page" based on its popularity [154]. .

As they scrolled and watched content, researchers "liked" relevant election-related content and peripheral cultural content (i.e. jokes, current events, content from popular influencers). Along with "liking" content, the goal of immersion was to snowball sample new accounts to follow that were served to each archetype in the feed, growing our sample and exposure to relevant content. We also followed authentic (not obviously spam), public, and relevant accounts that followed us. These observational protocols were applied across all archetypes, but some required specific tuning when snowball sampling and algorithmic recommendations fell short or strayed from our scope.

These tuning behaviors, such as looking up keywords or using platform features, were inspired by prior CSCW work on "taming" algorithms [154]. Indeed, this taming was not meant to simulate a user or community, but to guide our observational probes (the archetypal feeds) to a breadth of content that might occur to users within the archetypal communities of interest.

We found that BlueTok and ManTok algorithms did not necessitate extensive tuning behavior, and naturally supplied relevant content recommendations. It is worth noting although location services were turned off, TikTok still recommended hyper-local content relevant to our city and university on all devices, which skewed very liberal given our location. For RedTok and ManTok, students used the "not interested" feature to try and minimize these recommendations to observe a broader electoral discourse. Additionally, on RedTok we iteratively added trending conservative accounts from CredoIQ each week, to continuously tune for salient content.

SpanishTok's algorithm naturally offered many news accounts to snowball sample, but similarly we chose to fine-tune and add swing state Spanish language news stations. When the content skewed to spam and more locally recommended content, the research assistant studying SpanishTok queried the seed hashtags once a week such as "elecciones2024" to maintain an archetype of political interest alongside other cultural trends. SpanishTok provided both Pro-Trump and Pro-Harris content throughout our study, aligned with our scope of monitoring cross-partisan content.

We struggled keeping NewsTok cross-partisan and nationally-focused, which we noted may have also leaned left from its initial seedlist. Therefore, we utilized weekly additions of news accounts from CredoIQ's trending creators list, including C-Span and newsfluencers [75]. In early October, to further correct for local recommendations, we followed up to three local news stations from each swing state. This mainly consisted of network-affiliated accounts like Fox 2 Detroit or ABC 15 Arizona. Furthermore, to simulate news-seeking behavior, the researcher studying NewsTok took top headlines from Google News and searched them in TikTok, engaging with and documenting related content and following relevant accounts.

4.3.3 Documenting video collections and accounts followed. Given the central object of our study was salient electoral and cultural content, our methodology makes great effort to systematically collect and document this content for analysis. We created weekly video "collections," a feature on the TikTok app that allows users to compile a group of saved videos that can be shared with others via a link. Each week, videos relevant to rumors about election integrity, would be "saved" on the TikTok app to a weekly "collection" (i.e. "RedTok - 10/31", as in Figure 2). Videos not about election processes and procedures but very salient, viral, or popular to the archetype (i.e. a viral meme on BlueTok mocking conservative singers) were saved to another collection called "Out of Scope" in order to tune the FYP. All collections were kept private, as to not reveal these as potential research accounts, a nondisclosure decision we discuss further in §5.

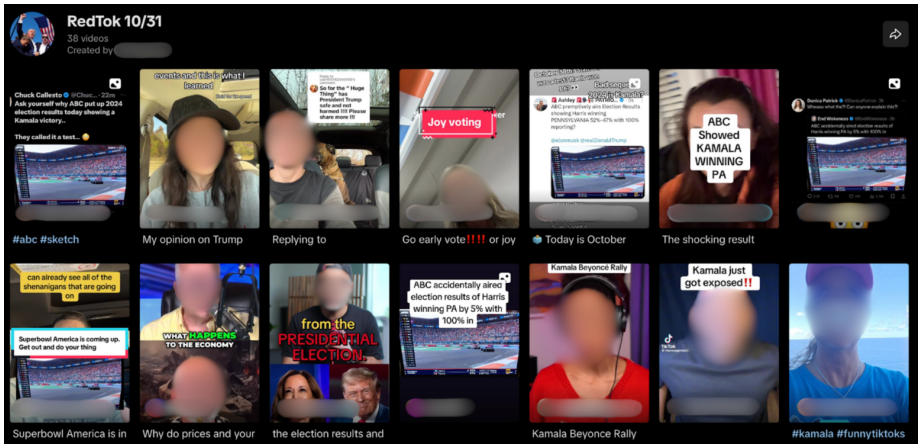

Fig. 2. An example of a weekly collection of RedTok. Names and faces of non-public figures blurred for publication purposes.

We logged followed accounts weekly in a Google Sheet, tracking account names, profile links, and date followed. These were copied to Junkipedia [2], for broader data sampling, discussed in §4.6. Additionally, we logged content in a searchable wiki-style database accessible to the broader research team, which included screenshots, links to the videos, thematic tags, and descriptions of the videos.

4.4 Interaction: Setting boundaries with an algorithm

Kozinets defines the next "move" of netnography as "interaction," distinguishing it from immersion by eliciting participant-generated data through messages, surveys, interviews, and other methods [83]. This step allows community members who are being observed to clarify and contextualize researcher observations.

In recent versions of his schema [85], Kozinets suggests not every netnographic project needs this step, particularly as online spaces have evolved from peer-to-peer networks where each user creates content, to platforms where the majority of content is made by a minority of accounts, while most users are consuming content as an audience, making direct interaction less relevant to some studies.

In our netnography, researchers acted as audience members, mimicking common behaviors of choosing to watch, like, and save certain videos made by relevant creators. We leverage the content recommended from this behavior to understand how it occurs in ongoing election discourse bounded in archetypal feeds. Our research question, focused on analyzing this content and not users' relationships to it and one another, did not merit conducting interviews, surveys, or other direct interactions with other users. Safety considerations also influenced this decision, discussed in §5.

4.5 Interpretation: Collective memo-writing

To "interpret" the data collected — Kozinets's next "move" — researchers wrote weekly bullet-point memos summarizing key themes, popular narratives, recurring creators, and aesthetic cues (e.g., viral sounds or memes) in their video collections. Communal memoing, a staple in qualitative research [136], helped us procedurally develop "thick" descriptions over time of our observations [55] and account for our own biases as a reflexive practice [15, 21, 81].

Researchers met weekly to discuss memos to encourage reflection, reflexivity, and collaboration. The research leads (a PhD student and research manager) ran these meetings, helping to refine and clarify TikTok memos and lead the discussion. A research scientist observing cross-platform teams sat in on these meetings to collate a larger cross-platform weekly memo for public consumption.

Given the rapid response nature of our work, we focused on documenting content via weekly memos, offering light analysis via contextualizing salient content — its discursive tactics, its creator, when it occurred — in the broader election rumor ecosystem. We did not systematically code content, as our efforts focused on weekly discovery and first-level synthesis (see §2). In the future, memos and data collections could be followed by other qualitative analyses, such as qualitative coding or applying critical discourse analysis to a selection of content.

4.6 Incarnation: Sharing to the research community and public

Netnographic "incarnation" focuses on communicating findings, with Kozinets offering examples ranging from external academic reports to verbal presentations with stakeholders [83]. Our netnography was incarnated in three ways: 1) weekly TikTok memos collated for internal sharing with our larger research team, 2) datasets shared with a larger research community, and 3) rapid research outputs to the public and data sharing with journalists and election officials. Readers may see §2 for details as to how our incarnations fit into the larger rapid response research project.

Our team extended "incarnation" to also encompass the creation of datasets for the broader research community. Each week, we logged newly followed accounts for each archetype into Junkipedia, a data collection platform used by researchers and practitioners such as journalists and civil rights groups. This process archived and enabled Junkipedia forward collection of content from these accounts, allowing us and others to analyze a large swath of content, simulating

a “following feed” of our archetypes. Although this data does not capture future algorithmic recommendations, it supports larger-scale research and provides new seed lists for future netnographic studies.

5 Reflexivity, Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

Living in a country while studying its election, we could not detach from our research context. Nor did we seek to, opting to see this lived experience as lived expertise. But to help account for our biases, we incorporated reflexivity practices via memoing, group meetings, and reflective autoethnographic prompts [15, 21, 81, 96], while acknowledging that our personal beliefs influenced data collection and interpretation. Our team’s varied lived experiences and personal political beliefs were not always reflected in all study archetypes, particularly ManTok and RedTok accounts which were least politically aligned with the postures of the majority of our research team.

ManTok was run by an undergraduate, GenZ male research assistant, who had a better cultural understanding of this content than his peers. In a similar vein, HispanicTok was run by a research assistant of Hispanic descent. RedTok memoing was often honed by the research manager, who had specific expertise in the subject matter. These measures are not fully exhaustive, but demonstrate the use of contextual knowledge and lived experience in qualitative methods. These practices allow us to account for our positionalities and biases and how they shaped our work — resulting in rigorously triangulated findings [68, 166].

Our university’s IRB approved this study, though we recognized the ethical complexity such designations overlook [43, 51, 74, 109, 177]. Rather than applying traditional "contextual integrity" guidelines that exclude fringe content [51, 87, 115, 126], we purposefully designed immersive engagement to capture real-time election experiences (including freshly posted, not highly viewed public content), although we avoided over-indexing on conspiratorial content. We mitigated privacy risks to creators by securely storing data, using memos to summarize trends rather than highlighting individual creators, anonymizing screenshots through blurring and cropping [145], and sharing account lists only through Junkipedia’s restricted researcher community rather than public repositories.

We maintained ethical distance by avoiding direct interactions (i.e. messaging, commenting), not disclosing our accounts, not following private accounts, limiting content reproduction, and keeping video collections private to prevent spotlighting creators. These decisions balanced protecting the privacy of fellow netizens and protecting ourselves, especially given documented harassment of election researchers [116].

This ethical distancing shaped our netnography. Kozinets and others have observed that many digital spaces are no longer peer-to-peer, but rather algorithmically recommended content made by a minority of accounts for the majority’s viewing (or “lurking”) [85, 92] and apply this approach in studies using netnographic methods. We take this approach, but it comes with tradeoffs. Interacting with users has the potential to greatly enrich data (albeit entering new complexities of research ethics). However, such benefits did not outweigh risks. More importantly, interactions did not serve our core research questions or rapid response constraints, as real-time data collection and analysis is less conducive to human subjects research. Our study was focused on discovering, observing, and making sense of election rumor content and discourse served to archetypal communities of interest. We did not seek to study the communities themselves.

Lastly, the mentally taxing nature of this work which combined election anxiety [110] with exposure to potentially distressing content (i.e. anti-transgender, misogynistic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric) required developing embedded care practices [18, 170]. Researchers received training to recognize burnout and disorientation from a mental health professional who remained available throughout the study. Additional safeguards included allowing account switches, having research leads scroll when needed, distributing scrolling sessions across multiple days, conducting in-person

shifts with supervisor presence, and scheduling content exposure during daytime hours rather than evenings [137]. Weekly meetings included wellbeing check-ins, with the PhD student lead providing individual meetings, particularly for the student managing ManTok given documented risks of manospheric content exposure, such as disorientation and mental distress [13].

6 Iterative Netnography on the Sociotechnical Stack

Any methodological contribution must consider and evaluate what type of research it enables, its undercutting epistemological commitments, and how it differs from other methods [17]. We use the sociotechnical stack, an analytical framework to evaluate how technical components interact with the social world [134], to demonstrate different data and insights our method provides across the "stack.". We ground this stack analysis and examples in our case study, but methods are transferable to other platforms.

We compare what is rendered (in)visible to the researcher in our method versus API-based social media research. We do not present this comparison to suggest our methodology is "better" than API-based social media research. Instead, we aim to show the kinds of research questions each approach is best suited to address, and where they may be used in tandem and to complement one another. We summarize this comparison in Table 1 and below we outline research considerations for each stack layer.

Table 1. Comparison of Iterative Netnography and API-Based Social Media Research

Stack Layer	Iterative Netnography	API-Based Social Media Research
User Interface	Researchers engage directly with interface via archetypal feeds. Data is shaped by interface interactions and algorithmic personalization.	Researchers do not interact with the interface; work is done server-side. No personalization or exposure to the platform.
Application	Platform shapes what is seen and collected by researchers. In turn, researcher behaviors provide data to platform.	Access mediated by API limitations (rate limits, data fields, historical availability). Limited ability to study platform features.
Algorithms	Algorithmic curation is core to the method. Researchers study and manipulate algorithmic exposure and interaction.	Algorithms are hidden and treated as black boxes. Influence may be inferred post hoc via trends or metadata.
Networks	Networks are experienced as overlapping content over time. Retroactive following networks can be pieced together post hoc.	Networks can be built via API data, but siloed to different retroactive pulls and not across personalized algorithms.
Storage & OS	Video data collected and stored manually with memos. Junkipedia expands storage via following lists and forward content collections.	Large volumes of structured data (i.e. JSONs) stored in databases or cloud servers. Storage optimized for scale, not interpretability.
Hardware	Research phones are carefully set up and used by researchers; hardware (and its settings and location) becomes part of the fieldsite.	No direct interaction with hardware. Tools like servers or scraping machines are instrumental but not part of fieldwork.

6.1 User interface shapes a netnography

Iterative netnography researchers experience the interface, making space for incorporating walkthrough methods to understand the platform (as in [184]). Meanwhile, API-based research renders interface invisible, using an "application programming interface" over a user interface.

The interface shapes and enables data collection in iterative netnography, becoming part of observational probes. Drawing from media studies, the interface mediates content, impacting its interpretation and the experience of the spectator [103, 105]. Future feed content is influenced by researcher interface interactions during observation and data collection. Researchers can observe and theorize about this influence in real time based on how recommendations shift (or don't) with interface interactions. Through iteration, researchers may use the interface to tweak the data collection, such as using curational features like TikTok's "Show less like this", and "liking" salient content to influence algorithmic recommendations. These interaction protocols can be deployed across a research team, enabling researchers to experiment with interactions, engage in autoethnography, diary studies, and other reflexive data collections involving the interface.

6.2 Applications and researchers have a two way relationship

At the application level, iterative netnography enables researchers to observe how platform design and governance impact what users see in real time, unlike API-based research, which retroactively collects data shaped by these forces without contextualizing or documenting them.

For example, during our case study, TikTok labeled certain content as potential misinformation as part of their election integrity efforts [167]. Many platforms have similar warnings for unfolding, high-stakes events [104] and if content is AI-generated [31]. These warnings were observed in real time, but may not be visible in API data.

The application and netnographic researchers enter into a deeply entwined, two-way relationship. The application receives data in the form of engagement signals from the researchers interacting with salient content. For example, in TikTok and platforms with similar content saving features, researchers signal to the algorithm they are interested in content they put into "collections". The platform, in turn, provides content. This two-way information flow renders platform dynamics visible if and when they change by way of researcher interactions.

API-based research does not achieve this reciprocal platform relationship. By its nature, API research does not interact with the actual application, only with data endpoints. However, this allows API-based research to gather a bigger picture of the platform by measuring and mapping platform activity in network breadth and historical lookbacks, which netnography cannot.

6.3 Algorithms serve as a curator and antagonist

Iterative netnography renders the algorithm tangible and visible — enlisting it both as curator and occasional antagonist. API-based research does not experience the algorithm's curation, instead querying via hashtags, keywords, or time.

6.3.1 Algorithmic timing. The algorithm on TikTok, and other platforms, does not purely chronologically recommend content. This renders a unique experience of *when* a user encounters content as opposed to when it was posted. We often encountered content posted months before we saw it. Although methods like sockpuppets could explore this temporal phenomenon, API-based research cannot capture such timelines or the user experience of time; only real-time work can produce the authentic temporal distributions we observed and visualized in Figure3.

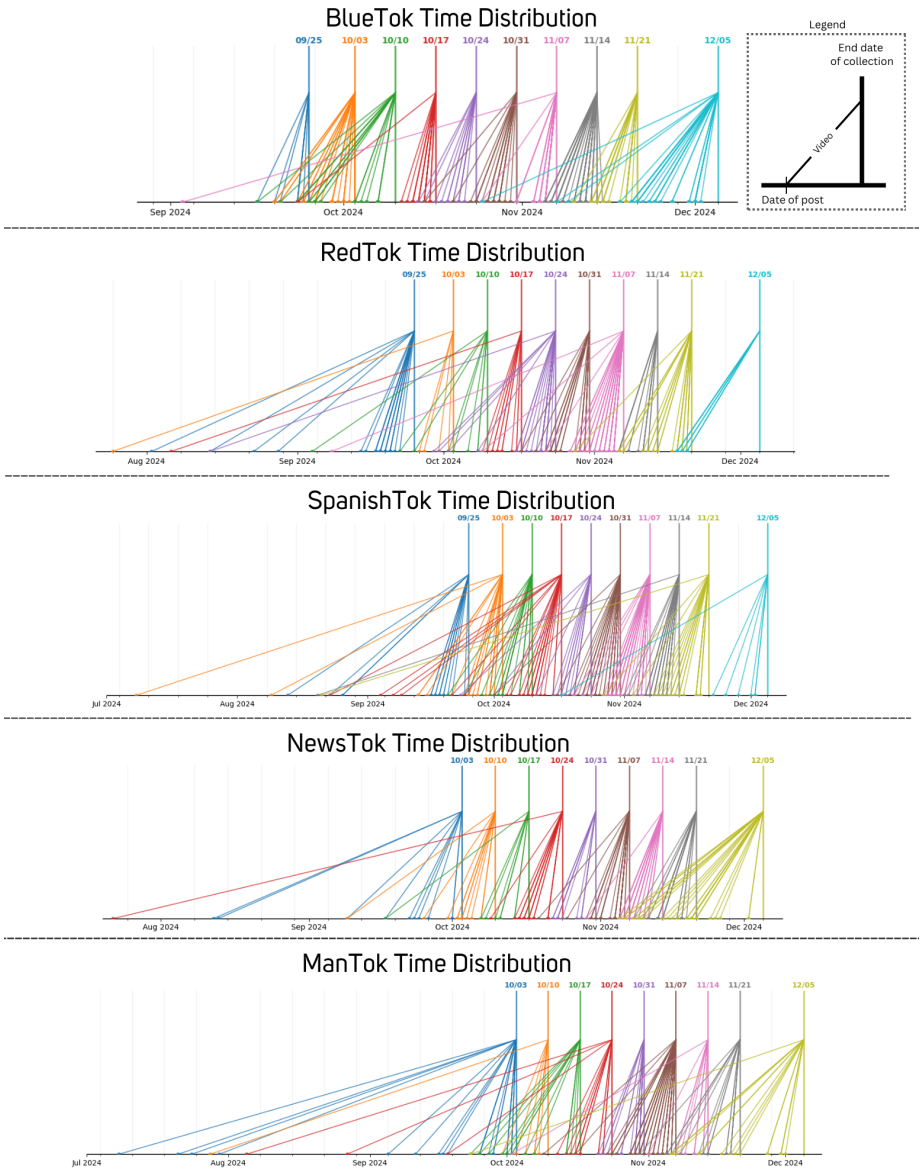

Fig. 3. Data visualizations showing content for each collection where. Vertical lines are the end of weekly collection window. Diagonal lines, representing content, start at the end of collection and touch the x axis of when the content was posted, showing the asynchronous viewing experience. Diagonal lines may represent multiple videos.

This experience of algorithmically mediated time explicitly inspired and, in our case study, showed the value of our sensitizing concept of occurrence, which we describe in §7.

6.3.2 Algorithmic taming . In some of our archetypal feeds, we explicitly tried to "tame" the algorithm [153] when it became antagonistic by straying from our study scope. This taming remains a challenge of netnographic research — and

one that API-based research does not require. But algorithmic impacts (tamed or not) are also macro-level. API-based methods, via large amounts of data, may provide insights into macro effects of the algorithm that immersive methods cannot. Such insights may be needed for some inquiries, such as auditing the bias in algorithmic curation (such as in [157]).

6.4 Networks have nuance but not scale in iterative netnography

API-based research can make layered networked structures visible from large amounts of data — quantifying how information moves between users and their relationships to one another. Meanwhile, iterative netnography unveils the semi-porousness of how content occurs across different user feeds. Iterative netnography can also enable small scale quantification of network overlaps, by leveraging Junkipedia data from the following lists of archetypal feeds.

In our case study, the creators followed by our archetypal feeds did not overlap. Table 2 shows the sparse amount of overlap between feeds, whilst Table 3 shows how archetypal feeds varied in both the number of accounts they followed as well as the relative following sizes of these accounts.

Tok 1	Tok 2	Overlap Count
Red	News	13
Blue	News	10
Man	Red	5
Red	Blue	5
Blue	Spanish	5
Red	Spanish	3
Man	News	1
Man	Blue	0
Man	Spanish	0
Spanish	News	0

Table 2. Overlap counts between our archetypes

Tok	Red	Blue	Man	Spanish	News
Following	659	480	55	298	96
Initial Seed	26	11	28	18	69
Followers	171	67	7	20	17
Descriptive statistics for the accounts each archetype followed					
Avg Followers	298,229	478,036	149,928	624,427	462,277
Median	31,150	40,180	22,695	47,711	39,815
Min Max Range	2 - 20,977,613	0 - 12,453,837	17 - 2,542,329	63 - 17,739,570	4 - 12,291,762

Table 3. Following sizes of accounts followed by our personas

However, the same content *did* get served across the different archetypal accounts. We experienced and systematically documented overlap of content and symbols across our study, such as the exact same wrestling match clips and endorsements occurring across RedTok, ManTok, NewsTok, and SpanishTok; but by different creators. To this end, iterative netnography renders visible an experience of networks' content, connected via overlapping symbols, aesthetics, and discourses that occur across different community boundaries.

Junkipedia data made from our following lists could quantify networks further. It is worth noting Junkipedia's collection of data, reliant on communal snowball sampling, is not complete. Thus, these quantifications may not be statistically representative of an entire network and fit to answer all research questions. Researchers seeking to quantify and understand larger scale, quantitative, and representative claims around networks would be better served with an API-based approach whilst our method provides nuance to the experience of networked content.

6.5 Storage & OS is manual and communal in iterative netnography

In storage and OS, iterative netnography and API-based approaches vary based on their device (phone vs cloud computing), with iterative netnography adding another layer of manual work to data storage. In our case study, manually collected videos were also uploaded to a secure Google Drive. Following lists (4.3.3) were manually updated and added to Junkipedia weekly. This triggered additions to the Junkipedia database to forward collected content from listed accounts and maintain the following lists of each archetype. Additionally, content involving election rumors was logged in a wiki-style, searchable database that the broader research team used to monitor and analyze emergent rumors. When logging this content, researchers could tag, screenshot, describe, and categorize content with a high degree of nuance.

In doing so, the storage of this work is more interpretable than API-based research, rendering visible relationships between content and accounts manually maintained in our database (Google Drive) and Junkipedia. This storage is naturally communal: our team shared access and data on Junkipedia was made available to enable inquiries of other researchers. API-based research grants this communal affordance, as several API-based studies release labeled and curated datasets — one of which we used in our case study [79]. Additionally, API-based research may provide more scalability and storage than our methods. But in iterative netnography this communal and human curation of storing data is embedded into the methodology.

6.6 Hardware is integral and personal in netnography

Hardware (in our case, research phones) becomes part of the fieldsite in iterative netnography, serving as a tool for data collection and a means of embodying the browsing experience. It houses and enacts archetypal feeds researchers use to observe and document salient study content. This is entirely different from API-driven methods, which bypass hardware to collect data directly from servers. The close, embodied use of devices enables not only netnographic insights, such as our observations about hyperlocal recommendations despite location services being off, but also (auto)phenomenological insights into how algorithms are experienced by human researchers [69, 78, 133]. In the case of netnography, this opens up potential insights and reflections on researchers' varied scrolling experiences, whether two researchers side-by-side in the same room or asynchronously scrolling at home.

6.7 A need for methodological innovations and evaluations

This exercise illustrated the types of inquiries enabled by our iterative netnographic "small" data methodology compared to "big data" approaches of API-based research [25, 120, 177].

By using the sociotechnical stack, we demonstrate how iterative netnography renders visible how content occurs in archetypal feeds in real time, which API-based research does not. However, iterative netnography does not grant the macro-level observations of API-based research. It also does not permit the deep understanding of the prolonged lived experience of a digital culture the way that traditional ethnographies do.

We hope this evaluation may help guide researchers in choosing methods appropriate for their investigations, and spark the innovative instincts of CSCW researchers in driving new methodological approaches.

7 Discussion: Occurrence and Sociotechnical CyberInfrastructures

In this section, we examine how our methodology enables insights into what, how, and when content occurs to different communities and the research infrastructure implications of this.

In §7.1, we offer and define *occurrence* as a sensitizing concept that builds on and extends existing literature by offering deeply contextual, situated knowledge derived from immersive social media research. But studying occurrence necessitates a human infrastructure (as per Lee et al's definitions [93]), with human researcher(s) manually experiencing content as it occurs and collecting it based on an inquiry. In §7.2, we describe how iterative netnography contributes to Ribes and Lee's sociotechnical understandings of human and cyber infrastructures to generate scientific knowledge [139] amidst changing research and sociopolitical climates [149].

7.1 Occurence

We define **occurrence** as how, when, and in what context particular content occurs — or appears as legible and noticeable — to a human user. Occurrence is a highly situated and active way of seeing (a la Berger [19]) and experiencing content. We offer occurrence as a sensitizing concept for qualitative social media research, particularly in visually mediated spaces. We borrow from Blumer's definition of sensitizing concept [23], a theoretical tool to guide research, without necessarily being a fully prescriptive or quantifiable metric.

7.1.1 Occurrence is contextual. Occurrence makes space for the serendipity integral to the consumption modality of "infinite scroll" mediating a "flow" of content via algorithmic timing and order [27, 60, 173]. Through this, users encounter not only "viral" content but also less-viewed, "fresh" material that is highly variable and sometimes unpredictable. For instance, we did not expect the same wrestling match content to occur across multiple archetypal feeds at roughly the same time. Similarly, we were struck by the amount of astrological, occult, religious, and conspiratorial content was served without seeding anything related to those subjects, and how such content crossed all feeds.

In periods of uncertainty and unfolding events, this serendipity bestows an inscrutable almost auspicious power to the algorithm, which some researchers have likened to "divination" [37, 91]. How and when content "occurs" in a crisis or uncertain unfolding news event offers insight into the competing forces trying to make sense of the moment. Frameworks of sensemaking during times of ambiguity via emergent data, based on Klein et al's data-frame theory of sensemaking [80], have been applied to studies that use trace data to show how online audiences participate via posting and engaging with online content as part of a "collective sensemaking" efforts to document and narrate uncertain events as they unfold [131, 162]. Occurrence is therefore a useful concept to understand the unique power of what, when, and how content appears to users in moments where their informational needs are high and where they are more uniquely vulnerable to alternative epistemic frames and explanations of reality [130, 131, 158].

The algorithmic affordance of serendipity on platforms like TikTok makes it difficult to map if, how, and when particular content is shown to a given user and what it may introduce to their understanding of an unfolding event. This is important to note because even if particular content is yielded in an API-based query, it doesn't mean it was served to a user. Nor does it account for how political or salient content about unfolding events of import (like elections) is interspersed within seemingly unrelated lifestyle content, jokes, and pop culture references, all mediated by different effects, sounds, filters, and trends of a platform.

Iterative netnography purposefully explores this deeply textured assemblage of content (in our case, political commentary) within broader cultural contexts. This layered integration of stylistic, technological, and political codes across content is akin to Fiske's semiotic notion of mediation, where ideological codes emerge from more subtle social and technological ones [52]. We embrace this assemblage of experiencing short form video in its entirety — rendering the whole visible while also focusing on the most salient content to our research scope. This contextualization is important in sitting with media as it occurs to users to produce deep insights and an embodied experience for the researcher. Furthermore, as occurrence was developed in this audio-video setting, we build upon Lutz et al's notion of "visual integrity" [98], derived from still image analysis, which focuses on maintaining visual modality and broader context of visual social data instead of relying on textual translations. Visual integrity centers the properties of visual social data while occurrence documents the encounter of such content, but both focus on the situated action of *looking*.

7.1.2 Occurrence is active and situated. Occurrence also speaks to how content occurs to a researcher, not just the imagined user in an archetypal community. Researchers seeing and experiencing content as it occurs to them is not a neutral or detached observation. As noted by Berger: "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves." [19]. This "seeing" of content is deeply situated within the context (the feed, algorithm, time, etc.) it is rendered in, and actively shaped by where, how, and when the researcher encounters it. In iterative netnography, the physical act of scrolling, liking, and saving salient content is an embodied, active practice of media consumption by the researcher, resulting in more content rendered for analysis [34].

This situatedness of occurrence and the act of seeing content occur aligns with Suchman's situated action model, which argues that human actions are not fully planned but continuously improvised within the situations they occur [165]. In iterative netnographies, the researcher is not performing a straightforward, pre-fixed task but rather performing a situated action of seeing and deciding what content to attend to based on their position within the dynamic sociotechnical stack. This improvisation is part of and informs the researcher's active, situated sensemaking of content and how to proceed in their observational workflow [80, 179–181].

Knowledge and insights derived from these actions and sensemaking are also situated. As per Haraway's situated knowledge: all knowledge, including interpretations from occurring content, is produced by the researcher's position within the system [67], along with contextual factors like how and when the system sees them, as per Berger's active notion of seeing [19].

The situated and contextual nature of occurrence makes for deep, real-time insights across different discursive spaces. This is particularly important during unfolding events in visually mediated environments with layered, mediated content, but is not made readily possible by API-based research.

7.1.3 API-based research removes context and situatedness. API-based research and similar approaches do not afford occurrence. By utilizing keyword or temporally bounded searches, API research decontextualizes content yielded to a typical user consuming algorithmically recommended media in a feed. Additionally, many API-based methods and datasets transform visual content to textual representations or examine connections between users or engagement instead of the content itself. This removes the situated seeing and knowledge of layered, multimodal content. Or, as boyd and Crawford argue, such "big data" approaches remove the social from social data via decontextualization [25]. We demonstrate this decontextualization in §6. But we also acknowledge that API-based research methods are necessary for inquiries of macro-level effects and dynamics. We therefore encourage mixed methods work that centers occurrence to help contextualize and add nuance to larger scale, quantitative findings.

We believe the sensitizing concept of occurrence can strengthen social media research. We hope it paves the way for valuable insight into user experiences of real time events, honoring our method's origins in rapid response and crisis informatics research, while remaining complementary to API-based methods. As the internet becomes more multimodal, and tools like VLMs are not yet complete and appropriate replacements for human visual research [98, 152], the question of how to systematically study content as it occurs to humans will become more pressing. Thus, methods that value occurrence and are strengthened by collaboration and operationalizability like iterative netnography stand to play an important role in the future of social media research.

7.2 Collaborative cyberinfrastructure research towards resilient internet research

The backbone of CSCW is "Computer-Supported Cooperative Work." This encompasses the collaborative work of scientific endeavors, including within CSCW.

Theme	Ribes and Lee's Definition	Our instantiation
1. Relationality	CI is shaped by relationships—between people, systems, organizations, and practices.	Research team, archetypal personas, and algorithm compose feed together; relational work (memoing, reflection, manual collection of data) is foregrounded. Researchers can develop personal, reflexive relationships with archetypes and content.
2. Heterogeneity	CI systems are composed of diverse elements: people, platforms, tools, data types, and practices.	Combines devices, researcher behavior and protocols, video artifacts, memos, and following lists. Highly multimodal and interpretive.
3. Sustainability	CI must be maintainable over time, through evolving tools, standards, and human practices.	Weekly protocols, team dynamics and practices of care, and reflexivity enable longitudinal insights. Hosting data in multiple places, mindful of changing political and technological realities.
4. Standardization	Common formats, protocols, and categories that enable interoperability and scalability.	Loosely structured through shared protocols (e.g., seed lists, memo structures); allows for interpretive nuance.
5. Scaling / Extensibility	Infrastructure must support growth across users, content, use cases, or research questions.	Scales via team-based replication, cross-archetype comparison, and progressive content layering.
6. Delegation	Tasks are distributed across humans and machines—what work is done by whom?	Research manager and shift-leader directs research in real-time. Interpretation delegated to researchers; collection partially automated; platform curates feed.
7. "Always already social"	Infrastructure is never purely technical—it is built, maintained, and understood through social processes.	Deeply embedded in researcher behavior, reflection, platform dynamics, and sociocultural framing of content. Situated knowledge of occurrence aligns with a notion of human infrastructure being non-objective.

Table 4. Comparison of CI themes between Ribes and Lee and iterative netnography

Lee and colleagues argue cyberinfrastructure — the information technology systems that enable scientific discovery — is enabled by collaborative human infrastructure behind it [93], which Ribes and Lee later as a deeply sociotechnical

phenomenon of relational systems and human labor that constitute scientific work [139]. Building on this, Geiger and Ribes focused on making invisible coordination of actors visible via following their traces in their methodology of trace ethnography [58], illustrating how ethnographic methodologies can reveal human and cyberinfrastructures. In a similar vein, we envision iterative netnography as an instantiation of human infrastructure [93] and as an innovation in collaborative work for social computing research.

Iterative netnography is emblematic of Ribes and Lee's sociotechnical cyberinfrastructure [139]. Through our continuous building and adjusting of different human (researchers' observations) and cyber infrastructures (following lists, Junkipedia collections), we embody the sociotechnical tradition of cyberinfrastructure (CI) and collaborative work. Above (Table 4) we outline how iterative netnography aligns with Ribes and Lee's seven themes of sociotechnical cyberinfrastructure.

Iterative netnography embodies all seven themes, but we explicitly focus on how its collaborative nature makes it scalable, sustainable, and "always already social". We see these themes as particularly important for building a resilient sociotechnical cyber and human infrastructure for internet research going forward.

7.2.1 Iterative netnography is sustainable and scalable. Ribes and Lee argue cyberinfrastructure must be sustainable over time, especially as human practices, research tools, and standards evolve [139].

In social media research, this evolution has come from recent political and platform attacks. In early 2025, Trump administration executive resulted in mass eliminations of NSF grants containing the word "misinformation" [148]. Such attacks, not limited to misinformation studies, threaten the future of internet research. Additionally, platforms have increasingly restricted data access by pricing out many researchers from API access, removing previously available tools, obscuring data access, and imposing rigid licensing terms that stifle independent inquiry [117, 149].

As data access may wax and wane, researchers and civic practitioners must be "scrappier" and adopt methods and collaborative data sharing independent of platform-controlled APIs [149]. Our incorporation of Junkipedia following lists from our archetypal feeds is an example of such a contribution.

Junkipedia is intentionally building an academic, journalistic, and advocacy community committed to studying social media even when threatened by platforms and governments [2, 149]. We call for CSCW scholars and institutions to recognize and support such efforts as legitimate and needed forms of cyberinfrastructure and for internet researchers to act as human infrastructure to empower such efforts.

This call speaks to the scalability of iterative netnography. Lee and Ribes define scalability as infrastructure to support growth across use cases and researchers. Iterative netnography is strengthened by collaboration, naturally allowing it to scale within a research study. It is also operationalizable and transferable to different teams and contexts, and we hope our documentation of its "moves" (see §4) aids in this operationalizability for future researchers.

7.2.2 Iterative netnography is "always already social". Many research methods are informed by the web of human situatedness, positionality, and social interactions within an inquiry and actions of studying it. In iterative netnography, the use of a collaborative research team is central. This allows for reflexivity, diversity of thought, and practices of care, adding depth to situated knowledge that this methodology produces. Furthermore, iterative netnography renders visible how content occurs to a human observer in the context of a feed. We argue this embodies Ribes and Lee's theme of cyberinfrastructure being "always already social" [139]. Through embracing and maintaining the social ties and processes of our research team, we were able to deeply embed ourselves within our archetypal feeds and gather deep, textured insights which inform the iterative netnographic methodology for future studies and researchers.

8 Implications for Researchers, Limitations, and Future Work

8.1 Limitations

Although our methodology can be transferred to other case studies, it has biases and limitations based on its origins. Additionally, iterative netnography necessitates human labor and multiple research devices, which may be difficult to acquire for some teams. Our case study benefitted from having access to grants to hire paid undergraduate research assistants to staff a teamed iterative netnography. We hope to see more of these opportunities or departments enabling undergraduates to partake in research as part of core degree coursework, allowing such work to continue without depending on large grants and in lines with previous work regarding participatory research classwork [171].

There are also safety risks, such as disorientation and mental distress, when undertaking immersive research in some contexts [13]. It is necessary that researchers consider potential risks within their studies and proactively incorporate measures such as practices of care for themselves and their team and develop protocols for reporting and handling exposure to particularly difficult content (such as threats, violence, etc).

8.2 Implications for researchers and future work

We join and support calls for increased platform data transparency for researchers to be able to study internet phenomenon [149]. As data access is increasingly constrained for researchers, our work offers implications for internet research being conducted independent of data supplied by platforms.

We provide needed guidance for conducting such independent investigations. In particular, our methodology allows for immersive, scalable qualitative research of real time phenomena via socioctechnical infrastructures. Additionally, via our Junkipedia collections, we provide tenable examples of researcher-led cyberinfrastructure of social media data for quantitative studies independent of social media platforms.

We further hope and encourage researchers to use *occurrence* as a theoretical principle in future work. Although our methodology is meant for multimodal, infinite scroll platforms (i.e. TikTok, RedNote, Instagram, YouTube), and explicitly prioritizes this experience, we hope researchers of textual data may adopt occurrence as a useful sensitizing concept. We additionally see occurrence as a rich space of future theoretical work, particularly with respect to media studies and communications theories, as we have begun to do here.

We explicitly invite researchers to innovate upon our methodology in future work and apply it to future case studies. This may mean incorporating further machine analysis and technical infrastructure into this framework, using deep qualitative insights to contextualize quantitative ones. Our methodology is intentionally designed to support collaborative cyberinfrastructure — enabling computational analysis of larger datasets, improving methods like sock puppet audits, and fostering researcher innovation. We hope other researchers join our call in paving the way for more collaborative and methodologically innovative internet research.

9 Conclusion

This paper contributes 1) the methodology of iterative netnography, a novel workflow for studying visually centric, algorithmically curated spaces and 2) occurrence as a sensitizing concept for social media research to the CSCW community. Our contribution was developed in a case study of TikTok during the US 2024 Presidential Election, across five archetypal feeds of socially and politically relevant communities. We extend literature that has translated ethnographically informed, immersive methods to the study of digital spaces. We illustrated the types of insights made possible from iterative netnography compared to established API-based research across a sociotechnical stack to

guide researchers in appropriate methodological design. In doing so, we present iterative netnography as a sustainable, scalable, and deeply situated human and cyberinfrastructure for studying internet phenomena. Lastly, we positioned occurrence as a novel sensitizing concept for future internet research.

We hope this work empowers and motivates researchers to value sitting with and studying internet content as it occurs to the user through immersive methods. We believe by doing so, researchers can embrace the serendipity of content as it emerges and occurs in real time. We call for researchers to innovate and collaborate across the community on new methods and data sharing efforts independent of the platforms and systems of power that internet research can (and should) investigate. In doing so, we hope that iterative netnography and methodological innovations like it can foster a sustainable, scalable, and "always already social" cyberinfrastructure of internet research that will be resilient against attacks and sociopolitical forces for years to come.

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