

ESSAY

The Digital Turn in Business Anthropology

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Abstract

This essay examines the emerging “digital turn” in business anthropology, a phenomenon propelled by the increasing prevalence and influence of digital technologies. Despite the significant underrepresentation of digital anthropology in current literature within the *Journal of Business Anthropology*, its relevance to the traditionally focused areas of organizational culture, marketing, consumer research, advertising, and user experience is irrefutable, given the rapid digitalization of the business landscape. By exploring evidence of the “digital turn” and the potential for digital anthropology to overtake design anthropology as a dominant paradigm, this essay advocates for integrating digital anthropology into the professional discourses and research practices of business anthropologists. It highlights the capacity of digital anthropology to equip practitioners with the necessary tools and perspectives to navigate and respond effectively to the ever-evolving digital landscape. Furthermore, the essay delves into the potential of emerging digital technologies, such as AI, to revolutionize anthropological research and practice. Simultaneously, it underscores the entrepreneurial opportunities available to founder anthropologists, specifically by productizing anthropological knowledge and methods. However, practitioners must also acknowledge and address significant challenges

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such as the rapid pace of digital transformation, privacy and ethical considerations, and the risk of introducing machine bias into the research process. In conclusion, the essay posits that the emerging “digital turn” in business anthropology offers substantial opportunities that will shape the discipline in the coming years, warranting its inclusion by practitioners and academics alike.

Keywords

Digital anthropology, Business anthropology, Artificial intelligence, Digital turn, Design anthropology, Artificial intelligence, Automated digital ethnography.

Introduction

Business anthropology has broadly been defined as the application of anthropological theories and methods to the business context, with a historical focus on organizational culture, consumer research, marketing, advertising, and design (Jordan 2013, 2019; Ferraro and Briody 2017; Artz 2021; Morais and Malefyt 2010). Over the last decade, user experience (UX) has also emerged as an important area of interest within the discipline, leading to increased discussions on design anthropology in publications such as the *Journal of Business Anthropology (JBA)* (DiCarlo 2018; Forlano and Smith 2018; Gregory 2018; Miller and Hitch 2018). However, despite the growing relevance of digital technologies to business, digital anthropology has been notably underexplored by business anthropologists. This observation is exemplified in the *JBA* itself. An analysis of articles spanning a decade from 2012 to 2022 reveals a complete absence of terms such as “digital anthropology” and “digital methods” and less than ten mentions for each of the terms “data science” and “artificial intelligence.”

This apparent gap in the literature, potentially attributable to innocuous academic demarcations, warrants reconsideration. The increasing digitalization of business practices, consumer culture, and anthropology itself calls for a more comprehensive approach that incorporates digital anthropology theories and methods into business anthropology to assist in understanding and shaping emerging digital futures. The rationale for this is two-fold. First, business anthropologists are increasingly studying and working with emerging digital technologies (Artz 2023b; Koycheva 2023; Hillier 2023; Lanzeni et al. 2023; Pink 2022). Second, and of perhaps greater significance, emerging digital technologies – specifically artificial intelligence (AI) – represent one of the most substantial disruptions and opportunities to business, as well as anthropological research (Accenture 2023; Artz 2023c; Munk, Olesen, and Jacomy 2022).

In light of these trends, business anthropology is currently at a point of inflection, experiencing a “digital turn” propelled by the increasing importance of digital technologies and, specifically, AI’s transformative and disruptive potential (Artz 2023d). This digital turn will necessitate the incorporation of digital anthropology into the professional discourses of the business anthropology community and, more importantly, into the research and practical applications of the field. By incorporating digital anthropology theories and methods into our practice, business anthropologists can better understand and respond to the complex challenges and opportunities that digital technologies present in today’s rapidly evolving business landscape.

Evidence of the Digital Turn in Business Anthropology

Historically, anthropology has experienced meta-paradigm shifts or “turns.” These shifts, each in response to broader societal and intellectual currents, have successively reframed the discipline’s theoretical and methodological focus. For instance, the ethnographic turn underscored the importance of immersive fieldwork, the interpretive turn brought symbolic meanings into sharp focus, and the postmodern turn precipitated a critical reassessment of the discipline’s methods and assumptions.

Like anthropology at large, business anthropology has navigated its own series of “turns” regarding its focus, orientation, and methodologies. While scholars may delineate these “turns” differently, I will, for this essay, use the three commonly cited areas of focus found in definitions of business anthropology: organizational culture, marketing and consumer research, and design (Jordan 2013; Ferraro and Briody 2017). Corresponding to these turns, business anthropology has also transitioned from more distant observational approaches to an increased use of participatory methods.

However, it is crucial to perceive these shifts not as discrete, isolated changes but as elements in a cumulative layering of influence and evolution. This perspective acknowledges that while one area may be the center of the discipline’s popular imagination at any given time, the enduring influence of previous “turns” continues to pervade, shaping the texture and trajectory of business anthropology. Arguably though, in the most recent design phase, the literature of design anthropology has proven to capture the popular imagination of many within the context of business anthropology (Jordan 2019; Miller 2018, 2020; Artz 2018).

With its distinct style of knowing, design anthropology positions itself uniquely within the contemporary landscape (Otto and Smith 2013). Its deliberate interventional stance and appreciation for co-creation and participatory methods offer a fresh perspective and approach to addressing design challenges (Gunn, Otto, and Smith 2013; Gunn and

Donovan 2016; Clarke 2017; Smith et al. 2016). From the design of products and services to organizational culture, marketing, and consumer research, design anthropology's influence has permeated all facets of business anthropology in recent years.

Likewise, the approach of design anthropology has undeniably played an instrumental role in shaping the design of digital technologies, go-to-marketing strategies, and the organizational adoption of these innovations. Nevertheless, the dynamic landscape of anthropology in business reveals signs of a pending shift. This imminent transformation is driven by both radical changes within business practices and researchers' acknowledgment that a new approach may be necessary to keep pace with these developments. Early indicators hint at the dawn of a new era in which digital anthropology may be poised to overtake design anthropology as a dominant paradigm within business anthropology discourse and practice.

The rationale for this is two-fold. First, business anthropologists are increasingly studying and working with emerging digital technologies such as generative AI, large language models (LLMs), knowledge graphs, robotics, data science, and recommendation engines (Artz 2022, 2023; Koycheva 2023; Hillier 2023; Paff 2021; Seaver 2023). The exploration of digital technologies is not a recent development in anthropology. Renowned anthropologists such as Genevieve Bell, Melissa Cefkin, Dawn Nafus, Tracey Lovejoy, Ken Anderson, and others have been engaged in tech-related work with emerging technologies for many years. However, the importance of the digital has surged alongside the escalating significance of software as a critical differentiator and the consequent dramatic rise of UX over the past decade. This trend persists, even amid what could arguably be described as the most substantial period of layoffs in the history of UX. Despite these layoffs, a LinkedIn search for the query "Anthropology" and "UX" yields approximately 2,900 people results, affirming the ongoing relevance and impact of this field.

Second, and of perhaps greater significance, emerging digital technologies – specifically AI – represent one of the most substantial disruptions and opportunities to business and anthropological research. The palpable enthusiasm surrounding these technologies within the business sector is epitomized in a recent survey conducted by Accenture. The survey, which incorporated responses from 4,777 global executives, revealed that an overwhelming 96% of the executives expressed that they were either "very" or "extremely" inspired by the new capabilities offered by AI foundation models. Furthermore, 97% agree that AI foundation models will enable connections across data types, revolutionizing where and how AI is used (Accenture 2023).

From an anthropological viewpoint, it seems inevitable that we are on the precipice of a significant disruption within the research

landscape. As organizations seek to control costs by further reducing workforce sizes with the aid of AI, there may be an increasing demand for smaller teams to accomplish more with less. Consequently, even if research is conducted to a standard deemed merely “good enough” compared to its pre-AI standard, the disruption to research in business may be significant. Moreover, as I recently discussed in my *Anthropology News* article, “Ten Predictions for AI and the Future of Anthropology” (2023), I see a future for research that, while drastically different, also offers immense opportunities for researchers.

As we speak, many researchers across the globe are working on early iterations of anthropology-specific AI techniques and tools (Cotton and Darragh 2022; American Anthropological Association 2023; Munk, Olesen, and Jacomy 2022). Within this context, I envision a not-too-distant future that involves Automated Digital Ethnography (ADE), AI-enabled multimodal analysis, discipline-specific fine-tuned large language models (LLMs), and anthropological knowledge graphs. These advancements can potentially revolutionize the discipline, leading to entrepreneurial opportunities grounded in an Anthropology-as-a-Service (AaaS) business model (Artz 2023a, 2023c).

However, these emerging trends are not the only indicators of change. Using digital methods, we can analyze the business anthropology landscape to get a sense of the changes. For example, a semantic text analysis of 58 hours of interview transcripts from my *Anthropology in Business* and *Anthro to UX* podcasts reveals that both digital and design are quite present and central to the text, though digital is a more significant node (see Figure 1).

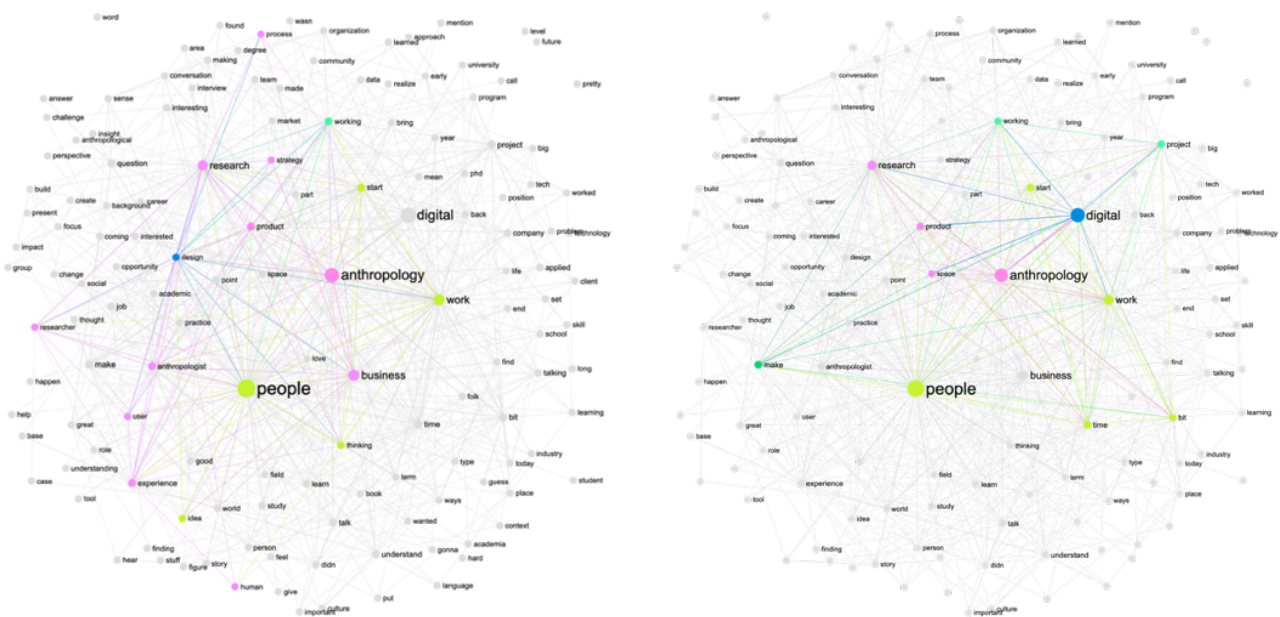


Figure 1: Semantic text analysis of *Anthropology in Business* and *Anthro to UX* podcasts transcripts.

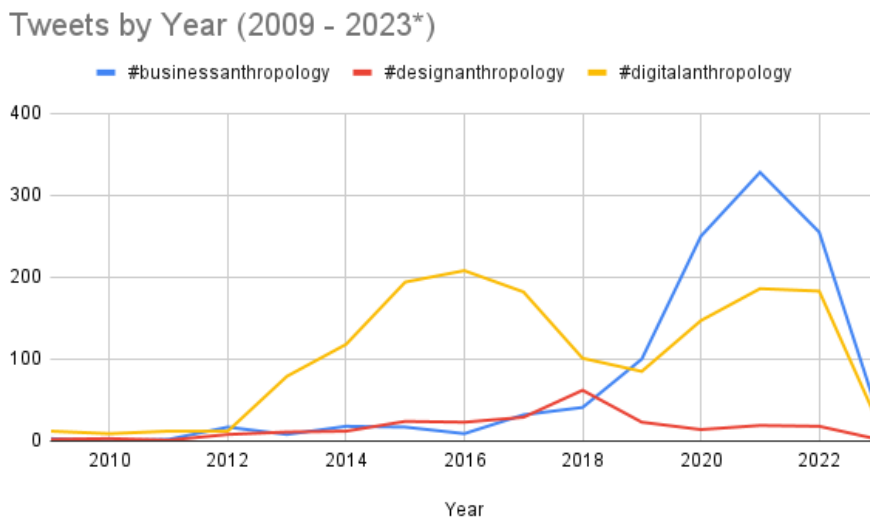


Figure 2: Tweets from 2009 through March 11, 2023.

We can also look to publishing and social media for signals. On Google Scholar, queries for “digital anthropology,” “design anthropology,” and “business anthropology” return about 4,320, 4,150, and 3,700 results, respectively. Similarly, analyzing Twitter data from 2009 through March 11, 2023, reveals 1,550 tweets for #digitalanthropology, 1,112 tweets for #businessanthropology, and 251 tweets for #designanthropology. A temporal analysis of the tweet data indicates that while #designanthropology peaked in 2018, #digitalanthropology and #businessanthropology have recently gained popularity (see Figure 2).

However, it is important to note that podcasts, job postings, and social media data, while informative, does not offer a complete perspective and might disproportionately represent digital anthropology, particularly given the digital proficiency of its practitioners. Nevertheless, when all of these trends and data points are collectively evaluated, they signal a digital turn in which digital anthropology could justifiably assume a more significant position within the discourse and practice of business anthropology.

Digital Anthropology and Its Relevance to Business Anthropology

Digital anthropology broadly explores the intersection between humans and technology in the digital era. It studies how people interact with and use digital technology and how it is informed by and shapes culture, online and offline (Geismar and Knox 2021; Cotton and Darragh 2022; Artz 2023e). As a discipline, it has evolved considerably as technology and online communities have continued to grow and transform, leading to new opportunities and areas for exploration.

As digital technologies have continually changed, the discipline has, too, experienced significant growth and areas of scholarship. The

field's dynamism is captured in Daniel Miller's (2018) diverse conceptualization of digital anthropology, which includes studying groups and worlds influenced by digital technologies, their societal impact, and their effects on anthropological methodology and our understanding of human nature.

Examples of digital anthropology scholarship include explorations of online communities (Wilson and Peterson 2002; Boellstorff 2008), digital media (Coleman 2010), domestic life, mobile phones, social media, politics, blockchain, and labor (Horst and Miller 2012; Geismar and Knox 2021). The impact of digital anthropology on our methods is also notably demonstrated in publications on digital ethnography and netnography, ethno-mining, social network analysis, text mining and natural language processing, machine learning, computer vision, participatory data design, and computational anthropology (Pink et al. 2015; Kozinets 2009; Gluesing, Riopelle, and Danowski 2014; Jemielniak 2020; Munk and Winthereik 2022; Munk 2022; Munk, Olesen, and Jacomy 2022; Anderson et al. 2009; Jensen et al. 2021).

Building on these digital anthropology research streams, the relevance and application to the business context become clear. First, studying digital communities, behaviors, and interactions provides valuable insights into customer behaviors, market trends, and emerging cultural phenomena in the digital sphere. For example, understanding the dynamics of online communities can inform strategies for online marketing, customer engagement, and brand building in the digital environment. Similarly, examining digital media can inform business practices related to applied semiotics and marketing within a digital context. Furthermore, understanding digital behavior is critical to UX and product development, with immense ramifications for the future competitiveness of organizations as they struggle to remain relevant in a business landscape increasingly dominated by software.

Second, the impact of digital anthropology on anthropological methods can significantly enhance the research capabilities of business anthropologists. Techniques such as digital ethnography enable the in-depth study of digital consumer cultures, generating rich, contextual data about online behaviors. Social network analysis, text mining, and machine learning can further enable the analysis of large-scale online interactions and discourse, helping businesses spot emerging trends, discern sentiment, and map social networks at an unimaginable scale. Furthermore, natural language processing and computer vision can automate and enhance the analysis of multimodal data, including images, video, and audio. When taken together, digital methods enable businesses to conduct research at a previously unattainable scale, effectively bridging the gap between analog and digital materialities and online and offline realities.

Therefore, by combining digital insights with those derived from more traditional anthropological methods, businesses and researchers are afforded new opportunities to make informed decisions within contemporary organizational research norms and practices, which often include shorter timelines, smaller budgets, and less opportunity for global multi-sited studies.

However, organizations that employ business anthropologists are just some of the potential benefactors. Anthropologists who are aspiring entrepreneurs are also afforded new opportunities that are equally enticing and potentially more revolutionary.

Entrepreneurial Opportunities for Founder Anthropologists

The evolving digital landscape in business anthropology presents many entrepreneurial opportunities for anthropologists aspiring to venture into the digital domain. This transformation paves the way for a paradigm shift from the traditional model of a services-based research consultancy to an approach centered on productizing anthropology and engendering a new wave of digital-first organizations.

Anthropologists who seek to establish themselves as founders in the entrepreneurial space could harness their proficiency in business anthropology and their understanding of digital technologies to create a new generation of products. These products, underpinned by anthropologically informed AI models, could potentially lead to the machine interpretation of culture by spearheading the development of Automated Digital Ethnography (ADE), AI-enabled multimodal analysis, discipline-specific fine-tuned large language models (LLMs), and anthropological knowledge graphs (Artz 2023a, 2023c).

Automated Digital Ethnography (ADE) and AI-enabled multimodal analysis could provide the cornerstone of innovative solutions designed to assist businesses in collecting and analyzing data to develop a comprehensive understanding of their digital consumer base. These services could afford researchers real-time insights into online consumer behavior, the shifting dynamics of digital communities, and the emergence of digital cultures, thereby facilitating more insightful and protectable strategic positions.

Similarly, discipline-specific fine-tuned large language models (LLMs) and anthropological knowledge graphs could provide the foundation for innovative products that automate and enhance the interpretation of digital data and generate insights and recommendations based on the interpretation. Consider, for instance, developing a product that can make sense of social media discourse from an anthropological perspective, delivering real-time insights into consumer sentiments and trends, which can inform responsive and effective business strategies.

Moreover, I envision these tools and techniques as initial steps toward actualizing a longer-term vision: Anthropology-as-a-Service (AaaS). This business model would bring together all of these technologies into a unified software platform that could monitor shifts in consumer behavior, detect emerging patterns and trends, and provide actionable recommendations for marketing, product development, or customer service enhancements, thereby offering companies a competitive edge in the rapidly evolving digital marketplace.

Companies built on top of an AaaS model would help to democratize access to anthropological insights and recommendations, potentially catalyzing a radical transformation in how businesses make sense of and engage with consumers.

Challenges and Considerations

While promising, integrating digital anthropology into the business anthropology context has challenges and considerations. Firstly, the rapid pace of digital transformation means that digital landscapes are constantly shifting. Thus, applying the theories and methods of digital anthropology to the business context will need to be continually revisited, as is arguably the case with most disciplines.

Privacy and ethical considerations are another significant challenge. As digital anthropologists delve into online communities and utilize data-driven methodologies, they often face dilemmas regarding data privacy, informed consent, and the potential misuse of information. Navigating these ethical considerations requires a deep understanding of data protection laws, cyber ethics, and the cultural norms of digital communities.

Furthermore, the heightened dependency on AI and automated methodologies present a risk of introducing machine bias into the research process. The underlying reason lies in the training mechanism of deep learning AI models, such as LLMs. These models are trained on existing data, and, consequently, any inherent biases in this data can inadvertently impact the AI's insights, leading to biased outcomes. This underlines the importance for business anthropologists operating within digital areas to comprehend the limitations of technologies like deep learning and machine learning and to tactically implement technologies, such as knowledge graphs, as a countermeasure to potential biases.

Conclusion

The emerging digital turn in business anthropology presents opportunities and challenges poised to shape our discipline in the coming years. To ensure we step up to the challenge and capitalize on the

opportunities, practitioners should look to incorporate the theories and methods of digital anthropology into business anthropology. By integrating digital anthropology into the discourse and practice of business anthropology, we stand to substantially enhance our ability to collect and interpret data on a scale previously unimaginable, offering us the means to generate richer insights and more informed recommendations.

Furthermore, the digital turn in business anthropology opens up a new frontier of entrepreneurial opportunities. Aspiring anthropologist entrepreneurs can leverage these tools and methodologies to create innovative products and services that bridge the gap between anthropology and technology, ultimately fostering businesses that can effectively respond to and shape the digital landscapes of tomorrow.

Nevertheless, incorporating digital anthropology into business anthropology presents challenges, which is why we should strive to bring the discourse into journals like the *JBA* and other academic and professional communities. Fostering ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing across disciplines and sectors will ensure a balanced, inclusive approach as we navigate the complexities of the future digital landscape.

The digital turn in business anthropology is here. Will you embrace it?

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