

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Ethical decisions will follow you throughout the process of conducting your netnography, presenting it, and perhaps even afterwards. Chapter 6 will carefully detail the need for and bases of ethical research standards in online ethnography. It will then discuss the consent gap, an important concept in which to ground your qualitative social media research practice. Following this, it will present an integrated flowchart to guide data collection and presentation procedures. The flowchart will help ensure that you understand how to make your practices comply with the current ethical standards governing online and ethnographic research. This chapter is not the end of the discussion about research ethics procedures in netnography, but the explanation of its presence throughout the range of netnographic research practices. It offers a general overview of research ethics that will set the groundwork for the inclusion of more detailed procedural treatments in later chapters on data collection and presentation.

ORIENTING TO ETHICS IN NETNOGRAPHY



Figure 6.1 Tom Bukowski, Second Life researcher; found on <http://hplusmagazine.com/2011/02/21/tom-boellstorff-on-being-virtual/>

In his award-winning book, Tom Boellstorff (2008) relates the ethnographic result of more than two years of fieldwork in Second Life, during which he 'lived among' and observed its residents in ways that are described as the same as the ways that anthropologists have traditionally done. As we can see from the picture in Figure 6.1, Boellstorff's ethnographic experience was a type of altered embodiment; he used a detailed, tattooed, bespectacled, stylish, and embodied virtual presence, an avatar named 'Tom Bukowski', and ethnographically investigated a number of sensitive issues in virtual sociality, including topics of sexuality, gender, race, finances, conflict, and antisocial behavior. In the interactions occurring during his online ethnography, Boellstorff/Bukowski was visible, as he is in the picture, as a social presence. However, he had to discover ways to ensure that the people he was interacting with in the virtual world were aware of his status as an online researcher and consented to being a part of his study.

During netnographic research, we are often not nearly as visible as Boellstorff was during his virtual world engagements. However, our research has the same capacity to be invasive. By observing and writing up that research, we open up the potential to expose, outrage, ridicule, and offend. Once we begin interacting with others online,

we can mislead, misquote, and misrepresent. Online fieldwork is an opportunity to be a goodwill ambassador or an ignorant exploiter. With its mix of participation and observation, its sometimes uncomfortable emotional and relational closeness, and its traditions of distanced description and cultural revelation, traditional ethnographic inquiry has a long history of ethical issues in which almost every aspect of the research process has been problematized. Simply because the ethnographic researcher is physically present in social gatherings does not mean that disclosure has been full, fair, and accurate. Data gathering in ethnography has the potential to be intrusive, for example, by taking photographs and video recordings or by collecting artifacts that community members may not wish to subject to public or scientific scrutiny. Many of ethnography's ethical concerns arise from the manner in which cultures, communities, and the individuals who compose them are represented in scientific works. As Parker (2007: 2248) notes, ethical concepts such as respect, recognition, and dignity are often invoked in relation to ethnographic portrayals, and researchers' customary concept of 'negotiating' these concerns with research participants is obtuse and requires further ethical inquiry.

When we add the scale and anonymity of online experience and data to ethnography's particular thorny bramble bush, these already-difficult ethical issues become even more formidable. Online research works with the massive amounts of personal data that are inadvertently and often without their producers' volition or permission being created by people's interactions with various online platforms using their cell phones, laptops, desktops, tablets, set-top boxes, wearables, and other computing devices. These public digital signals are of great interest not only to academic researchers across the sciences, but also to technology companies such as Google and Facebook whose business models are based on advertising, and to government agencies who find in this wave of data major opportunities to enact public policies for the common good, including using them for public surveillance in the name of security. In recent years, with travesties such as the Cambridge Analytica abuse of Facebook data and social media users' goodwill, social media research and its ethical conundrums have been cast into the limelight. Data security, privacy, and confidentiality have become important matters of public concern, subject to important new legislation in the European Union.

Figure 6.2 reveals that netnography's key concerns lie squarely in between the complex ethical issues of traditional ethnography and those of social media research. At the current time, there are enough general resources available about online research ethics that we can construct a view of a specific one for netnography. Significant amounts of new research and literature have emerged in the past decade to enlighten our perspective on what constitutes ethical online research and ethical online versions of ethnography, including netnography. Although a perfect consensus on these matters will probably never exist, we currently have clear guidelines that allow netnographic research to proceed. How should you navigate research ethics questions in netnography? What concrete actions should you take? How should you represent those

decisions to governing bodies? These are questions that we now have the ability to answer clearly. This chapter is therefore intended to provide you with one of the most comprehensive treatments of ethics in online ethnography available anywhere. To begin building our understanding of this sensitive topic in an empathic and personal way, try to complete the exercise in Box 6.1, which asks you to introspect about your own public social media profile, and how you would feel about other researchers using it in their investigations.

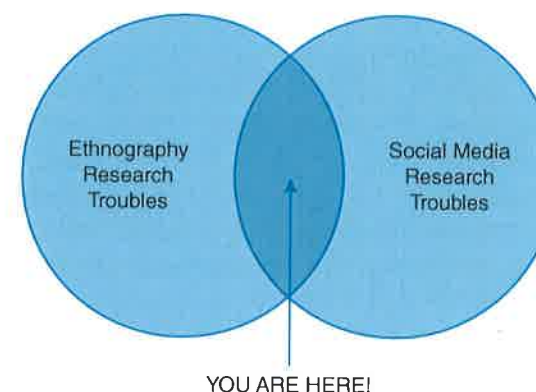


Figure 6.2 Orienting to ethics in netnography

INTROSPECTING ABOUT ONLINE ETHICS

6.1

Go online and then have a look at some of your public profiles, comments, and posts on social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. How might a researcher use your publicly-posted information in a research study? What kind of research study do you think your public profile and posts might inform?

Write out the title of the research study. Then, give it a very personal title (Your Name): Portrait of a (Description), or (Your Name): Social Media (Description).

How would you feel about seeing your name and your posts or comments used in this way? What if your name was not attached to the research, but your personal information (age, gender, interests, perhaps political affiliation or sexual orientation) was included, alongside direct quotes from your posts and comments? Would this be acceptable to you, or would it violate your trust? Can you explain your response? What issues does it raise? How does it feel to be the subject of a detailed examination of your social media traces?

The Need for Ethical Standards in Netnography

Excellent resources have been available for over two decades to help online ethnographic researchers navigate the ethical standards of their work. Yet many authors, reviewers, and editors of peer-reviewed journals seem to be ignorant or dismissive of these important resources. Costello et al. (2017: 5) looked at how other researchers had adapted the established 'netnography process', and found that a number of research studies omitted the 'ethical standards' portion. They found confusion about whether the ethical guidelines were 'inappropriately rigorous' to use as 'general guidelines' for what some researchers considered a form of 'content analysis'. They concluded that 'this logic [equating content analysis with ethnography] may explain why practitioners of passive netnography, who research nonrestricted communication within online communities, rarely discuss the applicability of Kozinets' ethical guidelines to their research'.

Tuikka and colleagues (2017) investigated 52 online ethnographies that were published in peer-reviewed journals relevant to the IS field and described their ethical practices. Although Tuikka et al. (2017: 3) found that the studies 'use research methods which resemble netnography', the authors of these research studies describe them with a variety of different names, including online ethnography, virtual ethnography, cyber-ethnography, and digital ethnography. A significant number did not name the type of research they were doing at all. Most surprising of all was the finding that the standards of ethical research practice they followed were highly variable. Tuikka et al. describe a number of journal articles that exhibited questionable ethical practices, such as violating norms of confidentiality or including direct quotes of a sensitive nature that could be traced back to original sources. Extrapolating from the study, the variety of methodological approach names may be connected to the variety of, and use of, questionable ethical research practices.

Tuikka et al.'s conclusion paints a rather dire portrait of the ethical awareness of peer-reviewed and published netnographies:

This review has led us to find out that not many researchers seem to be all that interested in – at least disclosing their – ethical practices relating to netnography. Most (38 papers) do not seem to concern themselves with the topic at all, and we are left with only 16 papers in which the ethicality of the research is deemed of such importance that it is worth mentioning. (2017: 9)

A full 70% of the published online ethnographies examined did not offer any disclosure of their ethical practices! The authors resolved that 'The field of IS research is clearly in need of ethical guidelines which do not rely only on traditional ethnography inspired ethical guidelines, as the environment, especially when conducting the research on the internet typically does not seem to coincide with the kinds of closed environments often studied in traditional ethnography.'

Unfortunately, research that positions itself as an 'online ethnography' has no pre-existing standards or procedures, other than a general orientation towards cultural understanding gained through some form of participant-observation, qualitative data gathering, and interpretive analysis. 'Online ethnography' is a generic term for a general category that fails to provide a methodological framework, and particular to our purposes, *does not explain what ethical research procedures were followed in the research*. As Tuikka et al. (2017) note above, this procedural information is especially crucial in regard to matters of research ethics. With only 30% of studies mentioning their adherence to good ethical research practices, there is a major information deficit to overcome. This is a problem not only for researchers to address, but also for institutional review boards, journal reviewers, and editors. Each of these institutional players must become educated about acceptable current standards and practices. As legislation tightens, these are not simply internal matters of university business, but may also become legal concerns that expose the institution and perhaps the individual to liability for harm. By using the guidelines provided in this chapter, and by clearly citing work that illustrates and explains the ethical standards to which it complies, you not only elevate your work above that of the 70% who did not mention it, you also handle those ethical concerns appropriately and meet a higher standard.

Although this level of ethical reporting laxity seems to have been accepted by journals and reviewers in the past, it may not (and should not) continue into the future. To be ready, you might start to think about some of the important ethical questions you would need to answer when conducting and reporting findings from a netnography. The best way to understand research ethics is to understand their true nature and their origins in moral philosophies and the disgraceful history of unethical medical experimentation. To gain this understanding, you can find a summary listing some of the most important questions to consider in Box 6.2.

RELEVANT ETHICAL QUESTIONS IN NETNOGRAPHY

6.2

Conducting a netnography that is both ethical and effective is important. With Human Subjects Research reviews, Institutional Review Boards, and complex legislation like the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ethics in netnography is dynamic and complex. Some of the ethical concerns that are relevant to netnographic inquiry include:

- Are online social interactions private or public?
- What roles do corporations like Facebook, Google, and Twitter play in our research? Do they have a say in what we are ethically or legally permitted to do with the data from their platforms?
- How do we gain the informed consent of people in online environments?

(Continued)

- How do we deal with information published on corporate news sites or websites, general blogs, blogs by famous people, and other online forums?
- Should we use conversations that we participate in or 'overhear' during group chats?
- Are there different ethical rules for different types and sites of online media?
- Do age and vulnerability matter online? In media in which identity is difficult to verify, how can we be sure about the age or vulnerability of research participants?
- Do international boundaries influence the way a netnographer collects data and publishes research? Do new international rules like the EU's GDPR legislation apply to netnographies conducted outside this geographical area?

These are vital questions. The answers will help you formulate guidelines for your research to keep it ethical while maintaining its accuracy and rigour. In this chapter, we will offer answers to these questions and formulate research tactics based on the latest information. However, these matters are constantly changing. Thus, you should also stay current with the latest readings on research ethics that can affect your netnography. The information and guidelines in this chapter are an excellent place to start.

Moral Roots I: Deontological Ethics

Morality is a choice of right behavior over wrong. Moral reasoning is how we come to make those choices rationally. Ethics is both the brand of knowledge that studies moral principles and those moral principles themselves. Ethics as a scientific field wraps a humanist, procedural, and calculative frame onto human behaviors. Religious teachings tell us which are right behaviors and which are wrong: those teachings tend to be deontological in their focus – they speak of absolutes, of sacred acts and objects that must never be profaned, of behaviors which are always wrong. Some examples are sacrilegiously desanctifying a holy word by taking the Lord's name in vain, failing to honor the Sabbath day, and the inability or unwillingness to love thy neighbor as thyself such as a true Christian would do. Deontologies are also ontologies, they create realities – and split them: de-ontologies. Right principle, right thinking, right action is cleaved from wrong. From a cultural perspective, we can see that deontologies are not moral absolutes, but the beliefs of certain groups, certain peoples, at certain times. They are intimately related to cultures, their customs, histories, and traditions, including research cultures.

Deontological ethical procedures prescribe the morality of an action to be right or wrong based on whether it adheres to or violates a prescribed set of rules: 'You Shall

Have No Other Gods Before Me'. This, the Judeo-Christian first commandment, is not contingent. There is no 'unless' clause which follows. No 'under these conditions you can worship human money or power, status or celebrity instead of worshipping me' section, with footnotes. The deontological view is about duty – following the rules, not calculating ways around them: 'You Shall Not Commit Adultery'. Period, full stop.

Deontological ethical systems of moral reasoning do not need to be religious. They might hold sway at a social or civic level. For instance, multiple peoples have held that committing genocide or polluting a major waterway is always wrong, regardless of the reasons. Murdering an entire religion, or an entire ethnic group, is a despicable thought and an almost unthinkable objective, one which can never, ever be justified.

We see the deontological approach in the principles-based views of research ethics, including online research ethics. For example, Morris (2016) follows this approach to provide five of the most commonly accepted guiding principles of ethical research, which follow:

- *Autonomy*: the research participant should be as aware as possible of the purpose of the research; participants should be free to agree or decline to take part in the research, or to withdraw at any time without coercion, threat, or penalty.
- *Beneficence*: the research should be beneficial, rigorously designed and conducted, and have positive effects.
- *Non-maleficence*: the researcher must make diligent efforts to avoid possible harm to participants and mitigate any unavoidable harm through precautionary measures.
- *Confidentiality*: participants' personal data must be kept private from everyone except those with a strict need to know.
- *Integrity*: the researcher must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest and conduct every aspect of the research using applicable and legitimate standards of research integrity.

These five 'principles' seem on the surface to be deontological. Autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, confidentiality, and integrity all suggest that the researcher has a clear sense that some actions are moral, and others are not.

Deontological ethics can also apply to online ethnography and its ethical practices. For example, Kantanen and Manninen (2016: 91–2) find that 'Several authors are unequivocal about identity deception, such as Kozinets (2010): "Netnographers should never, under any circumstances, engage in identity deception" (p. 147).' A deontological, or rule-bound, approach to online ethnography might hold that being deceptive about who you are or why you are communicating with someone on social

media is a clear violation of research ethics, regardless of the reasons why such an action is being performed.

There are still many open questions, however, regarding whether violating someone's privacy, or going against their personal wishes about what to do with their online data, is unequivocally and always absolutely wrong. As we will see in the section following, research related to the consent gap makes it very clear that a significant number of people – very likely a majority – would prefer that researchers should not use their social media data and information in their investigations. This would suggest some moral absolutes about people's privacy when they interact online might be in effect. And in a very neoliberal sense, as more of the public become aware of and exercise more control over their own data through adjusting their (often rather hidden and complicated) privacy settings, people do take charge of their own privacy and make absolute choices which we must honor. Are these changes enough? Deontological ethics are not really our concern here, although they might become important and worth debating soon (see Box 6.3). The major concern of anyone practicing netnography today in academia is consequentialist ethics, the root and foundation of our university and legal system.

3 DEBATING DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS

Ethics is a matter of beliefs. Can you think of any moral absolutes which are beyond question? What would they be? Are there no conditions under which your moral absolutes can be questioned? Are there any contingencies under which it is acceptable or even appropriate that your moral rule could be bent or broken? Please discuss with a classmate or colleague. Then report back to the class or to an ethics group (you will find more on the founding and conduct of ethics groups later in this chapter).

Moral Roots II: Consequentialist Ethics

We have seen how deontological ethics are about moral absolutes: 'Thou Shalt Not Steal'. Consequentialist ethics are far more contingent. Unlike deontological ethics, which hold that actions such as stealing can be right or wrong in themselves, consequentialist ethics judge the morality of an action based upon estimates and arguments about likely consequences. Rooted in the notion that the end justifies the means, a consequentialist view of ethics might say that stealing is okay, if it is to save someone who would otherwise die, or even yourself if you are starving. The same level of argumentation can be applied to conclude that some genocides or major pollution events are ethical if they can be shown to result in some greater good (e.g., a more healthy

gene pool, major economic benefits for the area, jobs, jobs, jobs). As a more realistic example, we generally consider killing people to be wrong (which is a deontological view). However, we might conclude that it is moral to proactively go out and kill terrorists because we will save many more lives by doing so. That sense that you are saving many people by sacrificing a far fewer number is the very essence of Mill's utilitarianism, itself an excellent instance of the application of consequentialist moral thinking.

As you will see in this chapter, contemporary research ethics are based on a consequentialist view of moral reasoning. Researchers are expected to be able to estimate the harms and benefits of particular research actions, such as exposing sensitive topics, and then to act in a manner that reflects the greater good. We can see how informed consent, which is one of the foundations of ethical research practice, may seem to be a deontological principle. In other words, we might assume that individuals who post on social media must provide informed consent before we can use their data. As the research in the next section related to the consent gap makes very clear, a significant number of people – very likely a majority – would prefer that researchers did not use their social media data and information in their investigations. However, the informed consent rules that we enact are actually based upon the moral reasoning of consequentialist ethics. The duty to gather informed consent can be violated when there is a strong enough reason, such as public safety or information about an important matter. The same sorts of consequentialist arguments are routinely used to justify the use of deception in scientific experiments.

However, we know from history that simply because a consequentialist moral code is used, widespread, and convenient, this does not actually make it just. Further complicating matters, there are national and regional differences in ethics codes and regulations, and even principles. Kantanen and Manninen (2016: 91) suggest that 'in the U.S., a utilitarian stance may prevail, meaning that benefits to society are weighed against potential risks; whereas in Central and Northern Europe, a deontological or communitarian stance that does not compromise confidentiality and anonymity may be taken'. Deontological codes also tend to be associated more with religions that consider certain actions intolerably profane, and others ineffably sacred. Deontological religious legal codes such as chopping someone's hand off for stealing may not seem moral to many other ethical codes, or to consequentialist bargains such as making the punishment fit the crime.

The history of social media demonstrates how the vital and vibrant, meaningful and communal actions of people using online communications over the last fifty years have been increasingly colonized, profaned, and exploited by corporate and governmental interests and their armies of capital and labor. Consequentialist thinking applied to data-security issues may have been applied to move ethical standards such as informed consent and access to privacy settings such that they favor economic growth in the data sales sector alongside managerial convenience. As of 2019, matters regarding data ownership, public values on privacy, and data security are most

definitely not settled. At some point in the future, the populist desire of the public for more control over their personal information may come to play a much greater role in the way social media data is treated by institutional actors, including social science researchers.

4 IDENTIFYING CONSEQUENTIALIST AND DEONTOLOGICAL THINKING

Which of the following seven statements are consequentialist, and which are deontological? Mark each one with a C or a D.

C/D

1. Deceiving research participants is sometimes necessary for a study to work. ☐
2. Informed consent forms must always be used when interviewing participants. ☐
3. Data should always be kept in a locked box, where only the researcher and her team have the key. ☐
4. Some embarrassment of community members may follow the public exposure of these crazy events that happened on their web forum; however, we can gain a lot of knowledge from them. ☐
5. Ensure that no minors under the age of 16 are included in your research. ☐
6. Naturalistic interactions should always be open, honest, and truthful. ☐
7. Having a complete set of permissions is not always possible, but that need not stop you from doing netnographic research. ☐

Answers: 1C, 2D, 3D, 4C, 5D, 6D, 7C

THE CONSENT GAP IN SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

Over the years, it has become apparent to me that there is a serious problem with social media research that uses publicly available data, such as netnography. I call this problem *the consent gap*. It goes like this. In written and presented work that uses social media data, academics often insist that, when people post things on public

facing web applications like Instagram or Twitter, they already know that what they are posting is public. They usually say something like, 'It's [insert year here], of course people know that the Internet is public!' Sometimes, they will compare quoting online data to quoting from a letter to the editor in a newspaper. As Zimmer (2010) notes in his examination of a careless research handling of Facebook data, many researchers simply assume that social media data is 'already public'. I would estimate that at least 90% of all social media researchers believe that the following statement is true: because almost everyone knows that social media is public, there is little need to ask social media posters' permission to use their posts.

In short, the consent gap is the difference between the ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online. It may be true at this point in history that most people do know that their online postings and information can be read in that form by members of the general public. However, the fact that people know that their postings are public does not automatically lead to the conclusion that they are also granting their automatic unspoken consent for academics and other types of researchers to use this data in any way they please. As well, we really don't know what *most* people means. If 51% of them know, that is quite different from if this was 95% of them. And it still leaves wide open the very important ethical question of consent.

The History and Present of Major Platform User Consent

In fact, research on the matters shows that the public have a long history of being displeased with this use of their data. LeBesco (2004) reported that, in a single month, eight researchers tried to gain access to a particular online community site, and all but one was rejected by the group. Bakardjieva (2005) voiced her frustration with recruiting respondents through announcements on online newsgroups, a tactic she later abandoned. In a summary, Johns et al. (2003: 159) stated that 'many list owners and newsgroup members deeply resent the presence of researchers and journalists in their groups'. And in an article pithily titled 'Go Away', Hudson and Bruckman (2004) related that people in chatrooms reacted with hostility when they were aware of being studied by researchers, and that when those people were given the opportunity to become part of the research, only four out of 766 potential participants chose to do so. Granted, this was 2004, and ancient history in terms of social media time. But it is difficult to ignore that the research opt-in rate they found was only one half of 1%! The other early studies confirm the suspicion and even outright hostility of social media users in the Age of Virtual Community.

Fortunately, we now have more recent data to examine. In an extraordinarily detailed and helpful review of 17 studies that examined the ethical concerns of social media users, Golder et al. (2017) found a range of different views expressed. Despite the variegation, their findings clearly show that social media users expected privacy in

their ostensibly personal and private communications. Three studies were most salient. Although there is some variance in technique and result, in all of these studies, large percentages of social media users expressed concerns about using their social media posts as research data. The study in which participants were most forgiving was conducted among adolescent student Facebook users in a university setting using a face-to-face interview method. In that study, Moreno et al. (2012: 5) revealed that 29% said they had a neutral attitude towards the practice of being recruited using their public Facebook profile, 9% were 'uneasy', and 6% were 'concerned'. Thus, in a situation with potentially stronger demand effects, the researchers still found 44% of the students expressing various degrees of concern over the research use of their social media data.

Other studies among more general samples revealed even higher proportions of concern. In an online survey of 554 people, Williams (2015: 10) found that 46% of respondents were 'slightly concerned' with the idea of university researchers using their social media information for research purposes, 11% were 'quite concerned' and 5% were 'very concerned'. That is 62% expressing varying levels of concern. The percentage of 'very concerned' responses rose to 22% when the researcher was described as 'commercial' (p. 12) and 24% when the researcher was described as 'government' (p. 11). A full 55% agreed that they 'expected to be asked for informed consent' if their social media data was included in an academic publication (p. 13). Similarly, in their survey of 268 Twitter users, Fiedler and Proferes (2018) found that 67% expressed some degree of discomfort with the idea that their post was used in a research study without them being informed at all (with 35% saying it made them feel 'very uncomfortable').

Platform Users Think in Contingent, Consequentialist Ways as Well

In comprehensive and wide-ranging secondary and primary research, Evans et al. (2015: 5) found clear evidence 'that public perceptions of how their data should be used do not align with the [then-current, pre-GDPR] regulatory and legal frameworks'. From on 'an online quantitative survey of 1,250 adults aged 16–75 in the UK asking about people's attitudes towards possible uses of their social media data', the researchers found that only 38% of the people surveyed thought that 'sharing social media data with third parties for the purposes of research currently happened under the terms and conditions they sign up to on social media sites' (p. 6). Furthermore, a full 60% of the survey respondents believed that their social media data should not be shared for research purposes.

There is a rather startling alignment between the three studies indicating that large numbers of social media users are apprehensive about the idea of their social media data being used for research purposes. In all of them, between about 40% and 60% express various levels of concern and unease with this notion. (For a study showing the same sort of consent gap in mobile phone users and their data, see Martin and

Shilton, 2016.) As these findings already indicate, there are many contingencies and complexities involved in the situation.

Golder et al. (2017) found in their overview of 17 studies that social media users are more amenable to their traces being used in research if they are being put towards a good cause, and if the benefits outweighed the risks. Users were generally aware of those risks too, listing these as being identifiable in the research, being subject to ridicule, and taking verbal quotes out of context. They thought that vulnerable populations such as children, teenagers, people with mental health issues, those talking about sensitive topics, and the deceased all needed extra levels of protection. They favored university researchers over the research of students, government, or industry. But they also expressed a level of apathy, a feeling that they could not do much to affect the outcome of the social media research process.

Apathy is a frightening emotion, because it is the lack of enough commitment to feel a solid emotion. We might relate this sense of apathy to these people's general sense that their rights to their own information and privacy are being violated, but that they are also becoming inured to this new reality. If this is the case, then the consent gap is a powerful concept that we may need to measure more precisely (e.g., by measuring and comparing online researcher attitudes to the same social media publics they research). The consent gap might help us appreciate the way that consequentialist ethical formations are favored over deontological ones in contemporary research ethics formulations. Changes in the consent gap might signal crises in the legitimacy of research or science institutionally, or a problem with the moral codes of researchers. All of these important elements of the consent gap should probably be monitored – as a way for scientists to keep their finger on the pulse of the many social realities expressed through social media, and thus through netnography.

The Consent Gap in Netnography

As the deontological and consequentialist arguments of the prior sections suggest, the consent gap is an important concept that I believe should ground ethical practice in netnography. From the beginning, I have emphasized people's general wariness towards the use of their information: 'The consumers who originally created the data do not necessarily intend or welcome the data's use in research representations' (Kozinets, 2002a: 65). That statement seems to be just as true today as when I wrote it almost twenty years ago. The simple fact that many of the people posting on social media expect their data to be kept private is not, of course, the determinative factor in netnographic research ethics. As this chapter will explain, under the current ethical research system governing academic research, there are many other considerations that are weighted into ethical decisions and protocols, such as the potential for public benefit, and the advancement of social and scientific knowledge.

Despite all of the above, I believe that the discrepancies between the public opinion of the consent gap and our research practice will come back to haunt us. The more

misaligned our assumptions are about permission and consent from those of the people whose conversations, comments, and posts we appropriate in order to study, the more due we are for some kind of regulatory or legislative correction. That is why I try to keep the consent gap in mind when making ethical discussions in my netnographic research projects. I try to err on the side of consideration by building in extra information for social media users, and extra opportunities to gather their permission and consent wherever possible. I try to think like the person whose data I am interpreting. I try to use my empathic organ, activating the mirror neurons in my head and heart. As you encounter ethical decisions in your own research, I recommend that you also keep the implications of the consent gap in mind.

AN ETHICAL PROCESS FOR DATA COLLECTION IN NETNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Is Netnography Human Subjects Research?

In most institutions, ethics reviews are triggered based upon whether the research is considered human subjects research, or not. Much of the debate about Internet research ethics is concerned with whether we should treat computer-mediated interactions as if they took place in either a public or a private space. This spatial metaphor is commonly applied to the Internet and seems, in fact, to be a fundamental human cognition (Munt, 2001). According to the Protection of Human Subjects, US Code of Federal Regulations Title 45, Part 46 (2009), which governs Institutional Review Boards in the United States, the following definition pertains:

Human subjects research is research in which there is an intervention or interaction with another person for the purpose of gathering information, or in which information is recorded by a researcher in such a way that a person can be identified through it directly or indirectly. (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2009)

The complexity of both the online environment and the method is such that netnography should be treated as if it were human subjects research and should be sent out for ethical reviews as if it were. Here is the reasoning. Although social interactions as they have been captured in social media archives, such as historical Twitter feed or comments on YouTube videos that stretch back for years, do not constitute human subjects research per se, they would become human subjects research, according to Title 45, Part 46's (2009) definition, the moment that a real person could be identified through it 'directly or indirectly'. The modality of the online medium, in which people can use search engines to query verbatim from public data and thus track down

people's identities, creates a more demanding environment than one in which the text used derived from private archival or interview documents whose access could be controlled by the researcher. Furthermore, many netnographic research projects will expand into interaction with online participants. Netnographers do this once they make a comment, like a post, direct message or email someone they met through the research, request or conduct an interview, or through a variety of online communications that are very simple to enact (e.g., just a mouse click, or a few typed words and a smartphone's return key push), but which have major implications when considered in light of the question of human subjects research.

After considering the question, Kantanen and Manninen (2016: 90) also conclude, as I do, that most netnography is human subjects research. In a very helpful exploration of online ethnography's 'hazy ethical boundaries', the authors describe in some detail their netnographic research project on a LinkedIn group devoted to higher education, and the various steps they took to ensure that it was conducted in an ethical manner. These ethical procedures, which took them the inordinately long period of eighteen months to complete, included the following practices, among others:

- applying to their university's Committee on Research Ethics for an ethics review;
- seeking moderator approval for studying the LinkedIn group;
- seeking approval from the LinkedIn group's own Institutional Review Board (which is very unusual);
- discussing their study's informed consent procedures with forum founders, administrators, and group moderators;
- using a 'light disguise' (Bruckman, 2002) cloaking procedure to disguise poster names and identifiers (see Chapter 14 of this book for details).

In summary, if we are doing any interviewing or online interaction (e.g., asking someone some questions in a chat), the inquiry is immediately human subjects research. Posting and then replying to comments on the posts? This is human subjects research. Even making a comment or liking a comment or post conceivably moves your research from being passive and observational to being interactive. Working only with archives of past comments – this is a gray area. It is made less gray by the fact that data from those archives might be used, even indirectly, to identify the people who posted the comments. Another key consideration is impact. Published and publicized research can have an impact upon individual persons, online groups, and upon society. The published or publicized research itself then becomes a source of interaction with people, not simply the researcher conducting the research.

Because we might be contacting and conversing with individual persons in netnographic research, we need to utilize the human subjects moral reasoning framework,

and pay even closer attention to whether the population is vulnerable, the data is confidential or sensitive, or whether the research reveals potentially personally identifiable information – and then take appropriate steps. The remainder of this chapter will present and explain a framework of the appropriate steps to take in order to effectively handle the ethical challenges of netnography as a form of human subjects research.

An Ethics Process for Netnography

Ethics need to follow your research project from the beginning right through to the very end. Not only do ethical concerns follow you around as you gather data from public sites and contact and interview people, they are also ever-present, involving the presentation of your data and even the way that you disclose and interpret things about the people who have posted the online comments you are citing.

In the last chapter you learned about the six stages of netnography: initiation of the project, investigation of the online sites, immersion in the data sites, interaction with conversants, integration of the analysis and interpretation of the results, and incarnation of the research presentation. Initiation and incarnation are the beginning and ending of the process, and integration works with the data. But investigation, immersion, and interaction create the dataset in a netnography, through archival downloading, immersion journal noting, and computer-mediated communications, respectively. There are three distinct kinds of netnographic data-collection procedure: (1) archival search and save, (2) the capture of your own personal notes, observations, and screen captures, and (3) direct communications with people either on a public and screen captures, and (3) direct communications with people either on a public platform or through a more private medium like direct messaging or email. These three categories of data – which I call investigative, immersive, and interactive – shape the exact ethical procedures that you would follow if you were utilizing the flowchart in Figure 6.3.

Applying the Ethics Process Flowchart

The figure's flowchart will guide your general decision making in netnography, and each general step in the ethics procedure is overviewed in an upcoming table. Following the figure's directions carefully will help you answer the important ethical questions raised in Box 6.1. Some of the aspects of these decisions will not make complete sense until you have completed working your way through this book. However, this chapter is provided at the outset of your investigation because of the importance of keeping these matters in mind throughout the process. Using a flowchart such as this one is never a linear or simple process because every netnography is different. There will undoubtedly be ad hoc decisions that will be required in the course of doing your netnographic research. But as much as possible you will want to anticipate and prepare for the issues you can handle in advance, and try to be ready for the ones that you cannot. Gaining familiarity with and consulting a flowchart

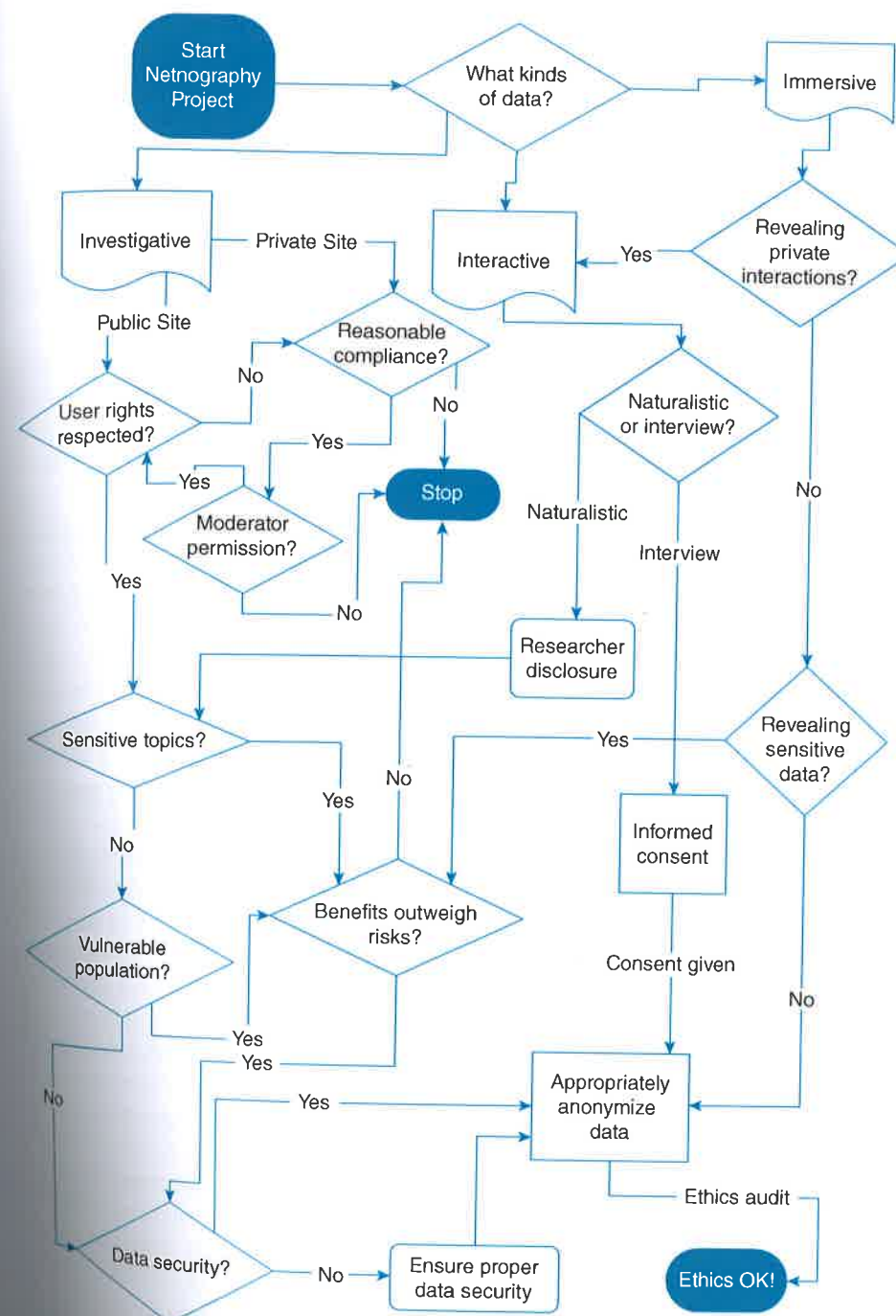


Figure 6.3 A research ethics process flowchart for netnography

such as this one allows ethical questions to be dealt with, whenever possible, in a proactive and deliberate manner. Indeed, the review processes for academic research at many institutions around the world promote an anticipatory perspective.

INITIAL ETHICAL STEPS IN YOUR NETNOGRAPHY

Using your research question as an initial guide, work your way through Figure 6.3: A research ethics process flowchart for netnography. What ethical issues can you anticipate from this flowchart? Which ones are probably not going to be relevant to your project? Write down and keep track of these initial impressions. As we progress through this book, you will likely often find yourself returning to this flowchart in order to help you structure and understand the procedural decisions you must make in the course of your netnography, and their likely ethical consequences.

Ethics in the Process of Netnography

The doing part of research ethics happens in context, as part of the enacting of research practices. That is how they will be presented throughout the remainder of this book. An ethical stance alters data collection most of all, but it also transforms sampling choices (and therefore analysis) as well as changing the way that data is presented. Therefore, the various elements of the ethics flowchart depicted in Figure 6.3 are worked into the remainder of the text as part of their respective procedures.

Once you begin your netnographic project, you will start collecting data. There are three distinct kinds of netnographic data-collection procedure, which will be covered in depth in the next four chapters of this book. The first is investigative, which involves archival search and saving or storing the results. The second is interactive, which involves direct communications, such as commenting conversationally in a thread or sending a direct message. The third is immersive, and involves the researcher's creation of personal notes that include such things as observations, budding ideas, and screen captures. In practice, all three kinds of data collection often intermingle. Some researchers will only collect investigative data, conducting what has been called the 'observational netnography' (e.g., Brown et al., 2003) without apparent immersion journal notes or interview data. Many will combine data collection from archives with some interviews and online interaction, thus using investigative and interactive data-collection procedures. Some might only reflect upon their online experiences in detailed fieldnotes and data captures, as Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) did with their Second Life netnography.

These categories of data – investigative, interactive, and immersive – shape the exact ethical procedures you need to follow depending on which of the three you are

collecting at the time. However, the ethics guidelines in the flowchart are intended to be used additively. Even if the netnography is mainly investigative with only a small amount of interaction, the ethical routines for investigative as well as interactive data collection would need to be followed. They would be followed as data is collected and afterwards, when it must be interpreted. Later on, you will prepare that data for presentation. In the incarnation movement of a netnography, data is anonymized in an appropriate manner, and then an overarching ethics audit can be conducted.

Table 6.1 is presented to enable an overview and greater understanding of the separate elements of the netnography ethics flowchart depicted in Figure 6.3. Table 6.1 provides the name of the research ethics concept, its definition, some brief summary guidance regarding its application in netnography, and then a page reference to guide you to the section in this book where the ethical principle is explained in context as part of the netnography research process. As you encounter the research operation in the text and learn about how to enact it, you will also learn the appropriate ethical procedure to perform at that stage.

Combining Figure 6.3 and Table 6.1 will provide a structure to methodically guide you through each of these data-collection procedures. Before implementing any of them, you may wish to consult with the more detailed developments in the text at the pages indicated in the fourth column of Table 6.1. In the following sections, I will make some more general comments about the importance of following good ethical research practices in netnography.

ETHICS, EMPATHY, AND MORALITY

As well as invoking the humanism often found in contemporary social science, I have also drawn on a few religious metaphors and examples in this chapter in order to ground research ethics in a sense of heightened significance. To approach research ethics in a Buddhist way means remaining reflective throughout all the stages of our investigation, seeing our research work as an extension of our attempt to live a moral life. It means that we approach all things we do in the world, including and especially our careers, carefully and with rules to guide us so that we avoid causing through it the suffering of the other living beings with whom we interact. Throughout all religions, it seems that moral guidance of a deontological variety is necessary in order to avoid causing ostensibly 'necessary' (i.e., consequentialist, and usually inflicted on others) pain and suffering.

These deontological ethics continue to guide my approach to online ethnography, although the current research milieu favors – or perhaps more accurately *requires* – a more consequentialist position based on economic-style trade-offs between the projected harmful costs to individuals and benefits to society. The guidelines I offer in this chapter are certainly not the only approach to online ethnographic research ethics. In fact, it is useful for readers to be exposed to other opinions and to make informed choices of their own.

Table 6.1 Research ethics concepts applied to netnography

Research Ethics Concept	Definition	Guidance to Application in Netnography	
		Public sites present public data that has been shared under conditions that do not require special ethical procedures for netnographic study	Private sites require extra levels of ethical procedure for netnographic study, potentially including reasonable compliance with platform policies, researcher disclosure, and moderator permission
Public site	Online platform or web application that has open access to the public, does not require registration or password login, and is usually indexed by and accessible using common search engines such as Google		197–199
Private site	Online platform or web application that requires some kind of registration or password login, and is not indexed by and accessible using common search engines such as Google		198–199, 219
User rights	All platform and web application users have legal and ethical rights regarding research and research use of data, which are constantly changing and differ according to national law and academic custom	Netnographers should stay responsibly informed about general user rights as well as the specific rights accorded to platforms and web applications used in the research project	198–201
Reasonable compliance	Specific procedures negotiated with authorities in charge of the data on private platforms	When using private sites, netnographers must negotiate the procedures that constitute reasonable compliance with the site's policies prior to engaging in study	198–201
Moderator permission	Permission to study a private data site, granted by an authority or official of the data site	When using private sites, netnographers must gain moderator permission in writing prior to engaging in the study	232, 303–304
Sensitive topics	Discussion topics, texts, images, or other data that reveal personally sensitive information such as stigmatized behaviors, images of the body, illegal acts, and sexual behaviors	The use of netnographic data that depict sensitive topics must be justified by an initial assessment of benefits versus risks, and then handled in special ways, including providing extra levels of data security and anonymizing the data and site	

Research Ethics Concept	Definition	Guidance to Application in Netnography	For more detailed information, see page(s) in text
Vulnerable population	Populations who are unable to give full consent, such as children, teenagers, people with mental health issues, and the deceased	The use of netnographic data from vulnerable populations must be justified by an initial assessment of benefits versus risks, and then handled in special ways, including gathering an extra level of informed consent, providing extra levels of data security, and anonymizing the data and site	232–233, 303–304
Data security	The steps taken to ensure that only appropriate individuals involved in the research project have access to its sensitive or confidential data	Depending upon the sensitivity of the data and the need to protect participant and informant identities, data-security operations can include password protection, encryption, and sensitive data storage on a dedicated external hard-drive which is kept in a locked location	235–236
Benefits	An assessment, performed by the researcher, of the potential benefits to participants, science, and society accruing from conduct and completion of the research project	Benefits assessment in netnography is a consequentialist ethics-based procedure that often attempts to describe the public benefits from a greater understanding of online behaviors, specific groups, and their particulars	234–235
Risks	An assessment, performed by the researcher, of the potential risks, mostly to participants, perhaps to the research platform, and sometimes to future researchers, accruing from conduct and completion of the research project	Risk assessment in netnography is a consequentialist ethics-based procedure that should attempt to understand, value, and describe potential personal and datasite disclosure and its impact on particular people and specific groups	234–235
Researcher disclosure	The public disclosure of the identity and presence of a researcher studying a particular online site, usually accompanied by a general description of the purpose and possible value of the research	Researcher disclosure is necessary when interacting in any way with other persons online (e.g., liking a comment, replying, posting); disclosure often occurs through a post combined with sending people to a more detailed profile or separate web-page	199–201

(Continued)

Table 6.1 (Continued)

Research Ethics Concept	Definition	Guidance to Application in Netnography	For more detailed information, see page(s) in text
Informed consent	The granting of knowledgeable permission to be researched by those who are being researched, the acceptance of the terms of the research engagement by someone who is fully apprized by the researcher about those terms	Permission is usually not necessary when dealing with publicly available data; informed consent is essential whenever there will be direct personal interaction between researcher and participant, as with an interview or in situ engagement	268–275
Anonymizing data	Providing pseudonymous new names for people who are cited in research so that their identity is not exposed and cannot be determined from the data by a reasonably motivated individual	Quoted public online data can easily be backtraced from a netnography using a search engine; additional safeguards may be required to change the name of online sites, as well as altering data so that it is no longer traceable to original quotes	396–403
Uncloaked data	No changes made to the presented identity of social media posters, other research participants, and the precise contents of their traces	Where risks are minimal or the quoted information is from a public figure, the online pseudonym or the real name of the poster or participant is revealed in the research representation and their data is presented intact and unchanged	398–399
Cloaked data	Reasonable safeguards taken to conceal the presented identity of social media posters, other research participants, and the precise contents of their traces	Where risks are low to moderate (a situation that will cover the vast majority of cases), the social media site of the traces is mentioned, but actual names, pseudonyms, identifiers, and verbatim are altered to prevent identification	399–400
Highly cloaked data	Strong efforts made to conceal the presented identity of social media posters, other research participants, and the precise contents of their traces	Where risks are high, social media site, actual names, and pseudonyms are all altered before being presented, verbatim quotes are either changed or not used, and fabrication strategies may be employed	399–403

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY IN NETNOGRAPHY FOR ETHICS

Regarding a more general principle of qualitative inquiry, a netnography should try to sensitively reflect a concern for the perspective of those it seeks to understand. I have always recommended taking the ethical high road in research even if that means, in the early years, taking positions on research procedures that might seem overly restrictive by today's standards (or, as recent GDPR rules, and the public sentiment of the consent gap indicate, perhaps not). It is important to follow the ethical guidelines of netnography rigorously, and not to pick and choose particular references where you might find them convenient. Calling your work a netnography and citing methodological guides to netnography such as this book means that you believe this is the correct stance to take as well.

In the past, some authors have published work that recommended revisiting netnography's allegedly over-restrictive ethical guidelines. One article, which I will not spotlight with a mention, has been very influential, even though it inaccurately casts netnography as a form of covert content analysis, and negates the researchers' need to pay special consideration to sensitive research topics, vulnerable populations, and data-security concerns. My stance on the matter is this. The guidelines in this book are up-to-date and relevant. The moral concerns behind them are timeless. I emphatically believe that there are no conditions under which it is acceptable to disregard the concerns of sensitive populations, or to publish things that mock, name, and shame the people you are ostensibly trying to understand (as that article-which-shall-remain-unnamed unfortunately does). Doing so in the name of netnographic research damages netnography and it also harms social media research in general. It creates future problems for all researchers who will come after you.

Thus, I must make a request. If you want to follow guidelines that revisit netnography's ethical rules and empathic stance on the study of sensitive research topics, then please *do not call your work a netnography*. Because netnography is defined by its adherence to general and agreed-upon procedures, a netnography revisited in this manner is *definitely not a netnography*. It is something else entirely.

Ethical procedures are at the very heart of what a netnography is and what it does. When you think about online ethnography, or traditional ethnography, and ethics, I would prefer that you think first and foremost of empathy. Perhaps empathy, putting ourselves in the shoes of the other, seeking to glimpse in some detail, emotionally, and with genuinely heartfelt compassion what it might be like to sense what they sense, to think what they think, to travel their path, perhaps this is the true essence of contextual inquiry. I believe that its ability to help us peek in a structured way behind life's intersubjective barriers and gain a phenomenological insight into the human worlds of other living beings may be the main reason we do qualitative research.

When we deal with any group of people, but perhaps particularly when we are seeking to understand sensitive topics or vulnerable populations, we want to expend

extra effort to envision the perspectives of the human beings who stand behind the various posts and comments we will collect and hoard as data. We want to try to see across the consent gap to those who mistrust us, our cryptic language, and our hidden motives. We want to ensure as much as we possibly can that we are not doing things that might bring harm or embarrassment to them, and disgrace upon ourselves, our work, and our institutions. We want to handle their identities with the utmost of concern, never carelessly. We must try to always respect their rights and use good practices of data security. When we speak to them or interact with them, we need to disclose ourselves, and gain their informed consent about the project they are contributing towards, and where it will go. We have a moral, legal, and ethical obligation to treat the persons behind the data with dignity and to handle their data with respect. Keeping accuracy and truth always in mind, we also want to publish and present works that beneficently portray our participants in as positive and pseudonymous a light as possible.

Beyond and throughout all of this, we should seek empathy in the conduct of our research, empathy in our interpretations, and empathy in the presentation of our research results. Empathy is ultimately what powers a good netnography. As we will learn in this book's closing chapters, what separates netnographies from other forms of social media research is the outcome of empathy. Following ethical research practices thus is not just good hygiene, not merely some time-consuming bureaucratic procedure that must be dutifully followed. It is an assurance and set of structured ways to encourage us to think about the others whose worlds our research intersects and affects. Ethical practice, in itself, can also be a methodology. Rigorously following research ethics procedures then becomes a very deliberate way to initiate, systematize, and maintain a practice of empathy throughout the entire netnographic research project.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Ethical decisions are central to netnography. In this chapter, you learned the fundamental principles behind research ethics, and in particular how netnography follows standards that are adjusted for the current realities of both ethnographic and online research. The chapter discussed the fact that one study found approximately 70% of recent online ethnographies published did not offer any ethical guidelines or standards. Then, the chapter presented the two main moral philosophy stances: deontological and consequentialist. It applied these moral stances to the question of online ethnography ethics. It also related the consent gap in which as many as 60% of the public does

not want their social media data to be used in any research investigation. The chapter then presented an integrated flowchart to guide data collection and presentation procedures. Following the flowchart presented in Figure 6.3 will ensure that your practices comply with many of the current ethical standards governing online and ethnographic research. Finally, the chapter reflected on the underlying morality of research ethics and the need for human empathy. In all, the chapter offered a general overview of this ethically attuned data collection and presentation process that sets the stage for the more detailed treatment of these topics in the chapters which follow.

KEY READINGS

- Golder, Su, Shahd Ahmed, Gill Norman, and Andrew Booth (2017) 'Attitudes toward the ethics of research using social media: A systematic review', *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 19(6). Available at: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5478799/ (last accessed 30 April 2019).
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