

Research Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research

Internet-mediated research is defined as "any research involving the remote acquisition of data from or about human participants using the internet and its associated technologies" (British Psychological Society, 2013). This may involve a range of methodologies. Participants may come from a range of countries with different legal systems so care is required (e.g. see guidelines on research with North American participants).

Particular Ethical Issues:

1. The **distinction between public and private spaces**

In face-to-face research studies, participant observation can only occur without specific permission from the individual being observed if it is occurring in a public space, i.e. somewhere where you might expect to be observed. Opinions differ about whether posts to online spaces are public or private. Legally, the copyright for personal webpages remains with the author or the hosting company. This is also true of other material such as that on social network sites so multiple permissions may be necessary.

Good practice guidelines:

- i. If possible seek advice/ permission to access from group moderator or site host. As a minimum be able to demonstrate that attempts have been made.
- ii. If there is some uncertainty whether it is a public domain, researchers should consider the nature of the material and whether disclosure would potentially be damaging for participants and if consent is really required, bearing in mind the requirement to protect research participants which is paramount.
- iii. **Online questionnaires** are required to supply information about the study before participants undertake it (information sheet equivalent) and how consent is to be obtained. It can be stipulated in anonymous questionnaires that withdrawal is not possible and at the very least, the questionnaire should stipulate that pressing the submit button will be taken as providing informed consent. However, it is considered good practice to include a tick box to obtain informed consent in the questionnaire for participants to complete. Participants need to be told that if they elect to withdraw from the research they simply log off the site and their data will not be kept and that withdrawal after submission is not possible with data collected anonymously.
- iv. **Qualitative Studies** using data collected from online sources. While all research participants must be informed about how data will be stored and their anonymity protected this presents particular issues in qualitative studies. For example by using search engines, individuals can take quotes from published journal articles, conference presentations and locate the discussion forum archives they came from and this may make it possible to identify individuals. Researchers need to assess whether this exposes the research participants to additional threats to their privacy or potential harm. Risks must always be weighed against benefits.

- v. Researchers must pay particular attention to the **anonymisation of qualitative data** obtained from online sources. Paraphrasing of verbatim quotes is often recommended for example. This is even more crucial if consent for the use of the data has not been obtained from the individual. While it is unlikely that individuals would ever know that their online posts had been used as research data, should they discover it, they have legal rights under the Data Protection Act if the data can be linked to them personally via search engines for example. They can ask for their personal data to be withdrawn.
- vi. **Issues relating to data quality** due to the lower levels of control that are possible compared to those in face-to-face studies. With internet studies, it can be difficult to be certain who has accessed studies, the conditions under which the data was provided, and how they felt about doing it. Sometimes in experimental manipulations, differences in software or hardware may affect the data collected. Where precision in measurement is required, such as in perceptual studies, care must be taken to assure that appropriate levels of control are possible or the resulting data may be invalid.
- vii. Researchers need to be aware of their **social responsibility** when undertaking research so that their actions as researchers do not negatively impact on others. This may require thinking about the outcomes of the research and any consequences it may have for others. For example, a researcher deciding to join a special interest group without disclosing that they are a researcher may impact negatively on the current group dynamics and once the research is published, it could affect future group membership as the group will no longer be seen as a 'confidential' space. There have been examples of this with eating disorders and other specialist support groups.

Balancing the benefits of the research against the risks is always essential. In studies deemed to have a level of ethical risk such as those on sensitive topics and/or using vulnerable populations, the decision may be that an internet-mediated study is not appropriate.

The Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research produced by the British Psychological Society (2013) were consulted in producing this guidance. These are available at:

<http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf206-guidelines-for-internet-mediated-research.pdf>