

Hockin-Boyers, H., Pope, S., & Jamie, K. (2020). #gainingweightiscool: The Use of Transformation Photos on Instagram among Female Weightlifters in Recovery from Eating Disorders. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (accepted but not yet published).



Chapter 5

ETHICAL SOCIOLOGY

Ethical practice is at the heart of sociological research. As researchers, we strive to collect good quality data which represents participants' perspectives accurately and fairly while not causing any harm to participants or ourselves. Chapter 5 gives an overview of some of the key ethical principles and practices in sociology but one area which can be overlooked when thinking about ethical research practice is online methods. As the internet has become increasingly ubiquitous in our everyday lives, we've also seen an increase in sociological research taking place online. This doesn't just mean recruiting participants online through social media, adverts or forums but methods where research data is collected from, and through, online platforms. One such example is netnography which was used by Hester Hockin-Boyers and colleagues (2020) to collect data about how women who use weightlifting as a mode of recovery from eating disorders engage with Instagram as part of their recovery process.

As you might guess from the name netnography is an adaptation of traditional ethnographic research methods for the online world. As Chapter 4 outlines, ethnography is a method whereby researchers observe people in their natural, everyday cultural contexts to get a sense of how people construct and understand their own social worlds. Netnography does a similar thing – it aims to capture naturalised interactions in the online world by collecting data such as Tik Tok videos, photos and captions posted to Instagram and Facebook, comments, likes, product reviews, and forum conversations. In doing so, researchers can observe the ways that people communicate with each other, talk about certain aspects of the social world, and construct their own place within it. In fact, the concept of netnography was first developed in the mid-1990s by Robert Kozinets as during his ethnographic research with a Star Trek fan club which was increasingly holding conversations online. As he puts it, he was 'drawn into the world of online communications by in-person communication during [his] ethnography. [He] upped [his] internet game, and started moving online' (Kozinets 2015: 57).

Like Kozinets, Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) used netnography to look a specific online phenomenon and community – the use of 'transformation photos' on Instagram by women using weightlifting as a tool of recovery from eating disorders. According to their article, transformation photos are 'are two images (from different time points) set alongside one another to represent the changing of bodies in look,

shape or size' and are common within online fitness and eating disorder recovery communities to trace body and mental health changes over time. To explore this community, Hockin-Boyers et al. gathered data from Instagram by screenshotting 'images and the associated 'likes', captions, and comments (including the hashtags) below posts and Instagram 'stories' (page 15).

Through this data, Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) conclude that visual representations of female weightlifters' bodies were perceived as positive by those in recovery from eating disorders. In particular, muscular female bodies represented a 'third alternative to the perceived fat vs thin dichotomy' (page 20) and the accompanying hashtags such as #gainingweightiscool or #ditchthescale created a supportive community of people in recovery from various eating disorders. While this, and the discourses of an 'upward trajectory ... journeys of growth, survivorship and self-actualisation' (page 25) in transformation photos, seem very positive, Hockin-Boyers et al. note that such positivity has been questioned, particularly by body positivity activists who argue that 'after' photos still promote a specific version of female beauty which is rooted in a slim body.

While netnography allows researchers to gather significant quantities of diverse data (i.e. not just text data but also videos, photos, and emojis), the method has also been critiqued for lacking the depth of engagement that we usually see with traditional ethnography. In-person ethnography involves researchers becoming deeply embedded within particular communities which enables them to provide 'thick description' of not just what happens or what is said, but to also a wider context for these events and conversations, as well as interpretations which are continually refined (see Geertz 1973). While Kozniets (2010) argues that netnographers should aim for this kind of thick description through deep emersion in online cultures, Lesse Costello et al. (2017) note that some netnographers 'focus on data that is easy to collect and analyze, while minimizing their own engagement with the members of the online communities they are studying' (page 4). In this sense, Costello and colleagues question whether this kind of surface-level engagement with online data is more reminiscent of archival research than traditional ethnography.

Netnography also raises ethical concerns, particularly around consent and anonymity. Firstly, let's think about consent. Material posted publicly to social media (or elsewhere on the web such as in blogs or on YouTube channels) is classed as public information which means that researchers are legally able to collect this material, analyse it, and publish it without ever asking the person who posted the material for their permission. While adjusting privacy settings goes some way to addressing this, posting publicly is important for some groups such as the women in Hockin-Boyers' (2020) article. For these women, communities of support around eating disorder recovery are built through shared hashtags, photographs, and stories; the success of these communities relies on material being publicly available. But, Kozniets et al. (2014) argue that publishing or citing publicly available posts from the internet can have unforeseen consequences for the person who originally posted it, their family, or their community. Imagine, for example, that you posted something publicly to Instagram which was later used by a researcher in a best-selling book as

evidence of young people's lack of understanding of politics. Technically the researcher would have done nothing wrong as you posted the information publicly, but it would still be hurtful, you might still feel used, and the material might even be used against you by future employers.

To get around this issue, Kozinets (2010) suggests that researchers might anonymise the names or handles of posters so that the content is not explicitly linked with a particular person. But, there are issues with this. First, anonymising the material/data does not preclude people from finding out who posted it; by typing the content into Google, a reader could quite easily track down the original poster. The second issue, which is one that Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) grapple with in their article, is that for some people it is important *not* to be anonymised but to receive full reference and credit for social media posts. In their article, Hockin-Boyers et al. describe contacting posters for permission to use Instagram captions and giving posters the option to have their usernames excluded noting that 'without exception, women opted for their usernames to be included' (page 17). They go on to suggest that 'the women we contacted were keen for us to acknowledge them in our research. Therefore, to obscure their account or image would be to go against how they themselves wanted their content to be represented' (page 17-18). In this case, anonymising participants' names would have been the *unethical* thing to do which goes against orthodox research ethics approaches.

These issues demonstrate the ways that netnography and online research methods more generally are complicating traditional research ethics. While in-person ethnography has historically drawn clear boundaries between private research which required informed consent (for example, doing participant observation in a school like in David Hargreaves' classical 1967 work) and research done in public spaces which did not (see Symes (2007) research on school students' behaviours on public transport). But data collected from online is 'hybrid' of public and private information (Kozinets et al. 2014: 268) which 'qualitative ethics have yet to fully catch up with' (Hockin-Boyers et al. 2020: 31).

QUESTIONS:

1. Is it ethical to use publicly available material from social media for research?
2. Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) suggest that qualitative research ethics is lagging behind innovations in online research. How could ethical frameworks catch up with the way we increasingly live our lives online?
3. Costello et al. (2017) are critical of researchers who do not deeply embed within online communities and just take easily available public posts for analysis. But, might we argue that it's also unethical to embed within an online just for the purpose of social research?
4. How different are netnographic and traditional ethnographic methods?

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