

RESEARCH ETHICS CASE STUDIES

1. TWITTER, DATA COLLECTION & INFORMED CONSENT

Editor: Jodie Pennacchia

Annotated with references to: BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.).
<https://www.bera.ac.uk/ethical-guidelines-2018>

About this series

BERA's Research Ethics Case Studies series presents illustrative case studies designed to complement BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition (2018) by giving concrete examples of how those guidelines can be applied during the research process.

For a full account of ethical best-practice as recommended by BERA we suggest that researchers refer to our *Ethical Guidelines*, which these case studies are intended to illustrate without themselves offering guidance or recommendations.

Annotations in the right-hand margin of this document indicate where, among the numbered paragraphs of BERA's *Ethical Guidelines*, readers can find our full advice on the issues raised (hyperlinks to the relevant passages are included).

Background

Nitika is a doctoral student undertaking research with the aim of better understanding the effects of changes to university student support provision. Specifically, she wants to understand student perceptions of a new centralised student support hub on the campus of the university where she is enrolled, and their views on how this new service affects both their academic studies and their wider health and wellbeing.

Nitika has gained ethical approval to survey and interview students at her university. She has designed an online survey, to be accessed through the university portal. This survey includes a call-back question which allows respondents to leave their contact details so that Nikita can contact a sample for follow-up interviews, in which she intends to

explore their experiences in greater detail.

Hoping to increase the response rate, Nitika shares a link to the survey via Twitter. She targets relevant Twitter networks and stakeholders, such as the university's students' union, by including their handles in tweets and retweets, to ensure that the link is as widely seen and shared as possible.

The ethical dilemma

A fellow student alerts Nitika to the fact that one of her tweets promoting her survey has provoked a wider discussion on Twitter. Nitika investigates, and finds that her original tweet promoting the survey has been retweeted repeatedly, and that most of these retweets have included '#campuslife' – a hashtag that Nitika knows is dominated by student discussion and commentary about university experiences. This retweet has attracted its own thread of discussion and debate about the university's student support provision and related issues.

Nitika notices that some of the points and opinions raised in that discussion on Twitter have not featured in the survey responses she has received so far, or in the interviews she has conducted. Many of the points raised on Twitter are more critical of the university, and/or detail students' experiences of mental health difficulties. Some Twitter comments make direct links between perceptions of an increasingly pressurised academic environment within the university, difficulties in accessing timely, face-to-face support through the new student support hub, and a rise in the incidence and severity of mental health difficulties.

Nitika undertook this study in order to better understand, and ultimately improve, student experiences and wellbeing, both within her university and across the sector more widely. She is concerned that unless she finds a way to access and include the views expressed on Twitter, and represent and analyse them in her research, she will not achieve this aim as fully as she otherwise might have.

Nitika notes that all comments have been posted on Twitter and are therefore in the public domain. However, she is uneasy about using these tweets as data. Her online survey has gone through an ethical review process, and it includes a clear and prominent statement about consent that is shown to all students as soon as they click through to the survey. This statement sets out the purpose of the study, explains that they have the right to withdraw at any time, and provides contact details for that purpose. Respondents are actively opting in to the survey and subsequent interviews.

An analysis of Twitter discussions does not form part of Nitika's original research design, so she does not have ethical approval from her university to pursue this. Furthermore, Nitika is concerned that in using the tweets as data she would not be adhering to the ethical principle of informed consent: students would not be aware that their tweets were being used, and would therefore not have the opportunity to give or withdraw their voluntary informed consent (31).

Nitika has a number of other concerns. Although the students' tweets are in the public domain, they may not have expected that their comments would be used in research (12). Students may feel able to speak more candidly in this domain than in surveys or interviews. For example, some may consider their Twitter personas distinct from their 'real' selves to a degree, and therefore feel able to be more forthright than they would otherwise be, despite the fact that they remain responsible for and potentially traceable through that account (4).

Nitika has been a student at the university for several years, and in her experience the presumed users of and audience for the #campuslife hashtag is other students. The tweets are therefore situated as part of a particular community, with a presumed audience that is unlikely to include, for example, university staff. However, if Nitika were to use these tweets as data this would increase the likelihood of their being read by university staff (34; 46). Finally, Nitika is uneasy about using her dual position as a student and researcher to access and use data that she would otherwise have been unaware of: for

BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (4th edition), paragraph 31:

'Researchers should recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and participants should be informed of this right. Researchers should always provide their own contact details to participants' for this purpose.'

Paragraph 12 reflects on 'whether those in online communities perceive their data to be either public or private'.

Paragraph 4:

'It is important to remember that digital information is generated by individuals. Researchers should not assume that the name given and/or identity presented by participants in online fora or media is a "real" name: it might be an avatar... behind which will be one or more human creators responsible for it, who could therefore be regarded as participants and who may be traceable.'

Paragraph 34 discusses the researcher's responsibility 'think through their duty of care in order to recognise potential risks, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort that may arise.'

Paragraph 46 reflects on the fact that '[a]nonymity is much harder to guarantee in digital contexts. The policies of some social media sites which require identification at signup may exacerbate this. Researchers need to be aware that participants' understandings of their level of privacy in a particular online space may be inaccurate.'

example, she is only aware of these tweets in the first place because she was alerted to them by a fellow student.

Course of action

Despite her concerns, Nitika does want to make some use of the data from Twitter: she feels that it reveals students' authentic views and experiences, and illustrates important gaps in student support and perceptions of the impact of a pressurised academic environment (37). She decides to use Twitter as an additional method for recruiting interview participants, which she believes will benefit her study by including in her sample more people with less positive experiences. Nitika uses Twitter's 'direct message' function to contact individuals whose tweets raised issues that were not yet represented in her survey and interview responses, and made reference to the university where she is enrolled (13). She provides participants with further information about the study and asks if they would be willing to participate in an online or face-to-face interview, complete the survey, or both.

This process is time-consuming. Many people ignore Nitika, and some reply saying that they would rather she ignored their comments as they were just part of casual discussions between friends. However, some people agree to participate in interviews and/or complete the survey, and their participation gives Nitika opportunities to further explore a handful of the more critical comments that she was interested in. Ultimately, she feels that this results in stronger arguments in her thesis.

Paragraph 37:

'The rights of individuals should be balanced against any potential social benefits of the research, and the researcher's right to conduct research in the service of public understanding.'

See also [paragraph 6](#).

Paragraph 13 discusses the importance of giving due consideration to the most appropriate ways to make contact with online communities.

Alternative courses of action

The approach Nitika took was not entirely successful: it was time-consuming, and she was ultimately denied permission to use some of the comments as data. She is frustrated by the fact that she knows about these comments and the views and experiences they express, and that they

highlight important shortcomings in university student support services, but she is not able to discuss them in her thesis.

One alternative course of action would have been for Nitika to simply consider the comments to be publicly available, and to use them (having anonymised them appropriately [40]) without seeking further permission. She could have justified this course of action on the basis that the comments provided a more rounded picture of the student support environment in the university, and that the potential benefits of doing so in order to highlight significant issues in student wellbeing may have outweighed any risks involved.

However, those risks would have included the possibility of people recognising their own tweets, or of others deciphering the identity of their authors, despite names and other identifying details being changed. This could have resulted in unwitting disclosures of individuals' mental health difficulties, or of their responsibility for negative comments about the university, that could have been picked up by university staff. Such disclosures could have been injurious to students, and/or led to complaints from them. Furthermore, Nitika would have had to defend her choices in her doctoral viva, which may have been problematic.

Paragraph 40:

'The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers should recognise the entitlement of both institutions and individual participants to privacy, and should accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity.'

Conclusions

Using social media to raise awareness of a study can result in offshoot discussions and debates that may shed important light on the research topic. However, when these fall outside the remit of a researcher's data collection method and/or research design this can pose new ethical challenges, and raise related concerns with research methodology and aims.

While tweets are in the public domain, they are not necessarily viewed as such by those who author them. Some hashtags are indicative of an assumed community or audience, and people may think it unlikely that their comments will be viewed by people outside of this community – or they may

simply not have given this issue much consideration.

Even if authors of tweets are cognisant of the fact that they are in the public domain, it does not necessarily follow that they would permit their tweets to be used for research purposes, or that they would voice these same views as part of a research study.

Navigating unexpected events in research can be time-consuming, and can leave the researcher dealing with feelings of dissatisfaction if, for instance, they are unable to use data that directly concerns their aims and objectives for their research project.

Questions

1. What is the status of the tweets in the research context outlined above? Are they in the public domain, or does their sensitive nature and/or their 'belonging' to an assumed 'community' within Twitter affect the way they should be seen?
2. Did Nitika strike the right balance between concerns for the rights and wellbeing of the students involved in Twitter discussions and the wider aims and possible benefits of her research?
3. Was it appropriate for Nitika to contact people using the Twitter's direct message function? Does contacting people in this way raise any ethical issues, and should Nitika have sought additional ethical approval for this aspect of her study?
4. Are the views expressed in the Twitter thread necessarily any more or less 'authentic' than those included in the survey responses? Is Nitika right to take 'authenticity' into account as part of her ethical decision-making about whether and how to use the tweets as data?
5. Should Nitika have found a different way to use the information in the tweets, even where she was not given permission to do so by their authors, in cases in which doing so may have been in the best interests of the wider student population? If so, how might she have incorporated these tweets into her study?

Further reading

- Association of Internet Researchers website, which includes information and guides on ethical issues in internet research. <https://aoir.org/ethics/>
- Lin, Y-R., Margolin, D., Keegan, B., Baronchelli, A. & Lazer, D. (2013, July). #Bigbirds Never Die: Understanding Social Dynamics of Emergent Hashtags. Proceedings of the Seventh International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (pp. 370–379).
- Murthy, D. (2017). 33: The Ontology of Tweets: Mixed-Method Approaches to the Study of Twitter. In Sloan, L. & Quan-Haase, A. (Eds). *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (559–572). London: SAGE.
- Roberts, S., Snee, H., Hine, C., Morey, Y., Watson, H. (Eds.) (2016). *Digital Methods for Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy [SEP] (2016, Aug 24). 4.5 Big Data Considerations., In *Internet Research Ethics*. (Original work published 22 June, 2012; updated 2016). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-internet-research/>
- University of Sheffield (no date). *Research Involving Social Media Data* (Research Ethics Policy Note no. 14). https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.670954!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-14.pdf
- Zimmer, M. & Proferes, N. J. (2014). A topology of Twitter research: disciplines, methods, and ethics. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, 66(3): 250–261.

Citation

If referring to or quoting from this document in your own writing, our preferred citation (in APA style) is as follows.

Pennacchia, J. (Ed.) (2019). *BERA Research Ethics Case Studies: 1. Twitter, data collection & informed consent*. London: British Educational Research Association. Retrieved from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/twitter-data-collection-informed-consent>

Annotated with references to: BERA (2018). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (4th ed.). <https://www.bera.ac.uk/ethical-guidelines-2018>

Permission to share

This document is published under a creative commons licence:

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/>

For commercial use, please contact publications@bera.ac.uk.