Name that Community? Critical Reflections on the Ethics about Disseminating Research into Online Fetish Communities

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethics of analysing extant online data from a sex-positive perspective. The author presents a case study of a research project exploring the sexual practices of an online community who did not want to be identified. On analysis of the data, it was found that members of the community could be identified, and that using a pseudonym for the community would not have provided sufficient anonymisation. The paper takes a multidisciplinary approach to exploring some of the ethical challenges of online research and argues for the need to consider ethical implication at every stage of the research process.

Keywords: ethics, online research, academic publishing, research dissemination

Name that Community? Critical Reflections on the Ethics about Disseminating Research into Online Fetish Communities

With the growing development of social media, multiple communities based around sexual practices are gathering in online spaces. In particular, there has been a growing interest in how online kink/fetish communities gather in online spaces (see, e.g., Colosi & Lister, 2019; Sundén et al., 2021). Some websites such as *Fetlife* and *Recon* are specifically dedicated to enabling people to connect with others based around these sexual practices. These websites are often behind a password-protected landing page, meaning that, in order to access such data, one must become a member of the forum. Given that almost all members of the forums are members of the community, it is highly implied to other users of the website that by signing up, one also indexes their membership of the community. Many ethical guidelines are in agreement that accessing such password-protected data requires considerably more ethical considerations, such as consent from the owners of the website/group and the producers of the data under analysis (see Townsend & Wallace, 2016; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). However, there are other social networking websites such as *Reddit*, *Twitter*, and *Tik Tok* which still contain fetish-related content, but which are accessible by any member of the public. (This is not too dissimilar to the issues related to data collection discussed in Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011.)

At this point, a distinction should be made in how I use the term 'online data'. Online data can be either gathered through online means (e.g., surveys hosted on websites such as Qualtrics or interviews conducted online such as on Teams) or extant data (e.g., data which has been posted to online forums such as *Reddit*, *Twitter*, and *TikTok* discussed previously). It is the latter of these forms of online data that this paper deals with. Two of the distinguishing features between data collected in-person and using extant online data are that of how anonymity is operationalised in the context of research and questions about who the intended

recipients of the data are (see British Psychology Society, 2021; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). In other words, when collecting data through interviews (either online or face-to-face), participants (a) might be seen or have their voices heard and so may feel as though they could be identified by at least the researcher and (b) will be asked about specific topics to answer questions the research may have. This is not necessarily the case with extant online data, where content may be published without anyone knowing the identity of who posted it (other than the poster), and it may not be possible to ask follow-up questions based on the data posted.

As touched upon in the previous paragraph, one of the issues with online data may be who the data producer believes they are talking to. One way to conceptualise such intended audiences is through applying Bell's (1984) audience design framework to the data. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1964) and the notion of who is/is not a ratified participant, Bell argues that audiences of spoken language can be categorised based on three criteria from the perspective of the speaker (see also Dynel, 2011). First, those who are known (i.e., whether an addressee is known to be part of a speech context). Second, those who are ratified (i.e., those who the speaker acknowledges are present in the speech context). And finally, those who are addressed (i.e., those who are directly spoken to). Using these categories, Bell argues that audiences can shift and become fluid, depending on how the speaker ratifies them. Bell further broke members of audiences down to have one of four roles:

1. Addressees – these are listeners who are known, ratified, and addressed

2. Auditor – these are listeners who are not directly addressed, but are known and ratified

3. Overhearer – these are non-ratified listeners of whom the speaker is aware and

4. Eavesdropper – these are non-ratified listeners of whom the speaker is unaware

In a research context, when interviewing participants, researchers are addressees – they are known, ratified, and addressed by participants. This is particularly well documented in previous work into fetish communities, as investigated through interview-based methods (e.g., see Wignall, 2017). Sometimes, researchers might be auditors (i.e., participants who sign up know that their data may be disseminated and read by other academics – as is the case with secondary analysis of data, e.g., the analysis provided and discussed by Long-Sutehall et al., 2010). However, in research which explores extant online data (e.g., content analysis of online fora), researchers become either overhearers or eavesdroppers – that is to say, usually researchers are not-ratified and data producers are usually unaware that they will have their data looked at by such people (though, see Coimbra-Gomes & Motschenbacher, 2019).

However, what happens when members of the community (a) do not anticipate that there will be eavesdroppers and (b) do not want to be found/researched? How do we, as researchers, respect the wishes of these kinds of sex-based communities of practice, while simultaneously still doing research within ethical frameworks? In addition, how do we take a sex-positive approach to such data? This paper starts with a case study of how members of one fetish community use public-facing social media platform as a springboard to a discussion of what can be reported on in an ethical way within research reports. Throughout, I draw on ethical guidelines from psychology, linguistics, media studies, and internet research. I argue that careful consideration of multiple members from different communities is required before such research is conducted.

The Case Study

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of studies which explore how communities construct their identities on public-facing forums such as Reddit (see Proferes et al., 2021). This kind of research has not come without ethical challenges, and

indeed, as Proferes et al. (2021) note, a number of studies have been criticized for their decisions to share personal information from online forums. The researchers also go on to explore how the analysis of various data sets from online fora might cause ethical challenges – paying particular attention to the website *Reddit*, where a number of published papers chose not only to analyse small communities, but also publish the usernames of members within those communities.

In 2020, I embarked on a linguistic study of data from a fetish community across two different social media platforms: *Reddit* and *Twitter*. Studies building large corpora from these websites are not uncommon in linguistics (see for example Baker & McEnery, 2015; Collins, 2019; see also Proferes et al., 2021 for a meta-analysis using corpus methods examining articles which use Reddit data). In accordance with the British Psychological Society's guidelines for Internet-mediated research, using such data was acceptable because it is publicly available. Consent would not have to have been sought from the users as the data were in a publicly available forum (see Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). In addition, collecting data from over 200 users would mean that gathering informed consent from each user would be unfeasible. This approach is not isolated to just psychology, but also an accepted approach within other ethical guidelines (see for example, guidelines published by the Association for Internet Researchers, discussed in franzke et al., 2020). Indeed, both *Reddit* and *Twitter* actively encourage third-party collection of tweets and associated metadata by making their APIs open and accessible to users, companies, and developers. These APIs only collect information that the company deems 'public' (see Reddit, 2021; Twitter, 2021)

Although the study introduced above and touched upon in subsequent sections was abandoned, I complied with common ethical standards in the initial stages of the study (e.g., applying for ethical approval from my host institution, only collecting data from publicly available Twitter profiles, and using appropriate web scraping scripts that were approved by

Reddit, etc.). During the data collection stage, it soon became apparent that a small number of users were not comfortable sharing information about themselves. Many members of this community would not include their location in their profile, note that their profile was a 'throwaway' account, or cover their face with stickers in pictures. In addition, some members of the community were more explicit about wanting to remain anonymous and would place in their bios descriptions such as "no face pictures due to my work" (N.b., this is a fictious example). It was clear that the majority of the community wanted to remain anonymous online (approximately 90% of users in a sample of about 200 did not show any form of uncovered face picture or had stated that they wanted to remain anonymous; only about 10% made an explicit note to say they were not comfortable sharing face pictures). As a community, the data creators were sex-positive – often sharing images or videos of themselves having sex, pictures of themselves naked, or posting about having sex. However, the community was cautious of outsiders commenting on such content, possibly because they had previously faced backlash for their fetishes. In itself this brings to the fore important ethical considerations: if a community wants to remain anonymous, should we as researchers be naming them? Although researchers might be sex-positive and be ready to embrace the sexual practices of this community, others may be less willing to do so (e.g., employers, friends, family).

The data demonstrated that members of the community also clearly had an awareness of addressees and auditors (tagging people in posts, asking for likes), as well as potential overhearers (e.g., hoping to make connections with people in the community they may not have met yet). However, members of this community also considered the potential for a small number of eavesdroppers – e.g., people who might either target them with sex-negative harassment or who they might have a personal connection with and not want to compromise that relationship with. However, it also appeared as though they may not have considered the

potential greater number of eavesdroppers – such as academic researchers and the people to whom they might disseminate their data.

An exploration of the data quickly revealed that I was able to pin-point the location of some of these users to within suburbs of major cities, and in one case even pinpoint the user's exact location of work. Importantly, when I returned to the data, I discovered that this specific user did not feel comfortable sharing pictures of their face because they were worried about potential backlash from sex-negative work colleagues discovering their fetishes and seeing pictures of the user having sex. This was just a single case, though deeper analysis might have revealed several more – and, if the community were named in disseminated work, other researchers, journalists, or members of the public might have been able to misuse this information to the detriment of the data producers (see Proferes et al., 2021). To return to a point made previously, while, as a sex-positive researcher, this kind of data is not distressing or "strange", it must be acknowledged that not all members of the general public are sex-positive (the same is also true for some academics). Given that this community felt understandably worried about sex-negative people whom they knew seeing their posts, I would argue that one of more sex-positive acts we researchers can do is to prevent this worry from becoming a reality. As such, disseminating the name of this community and potentially endangering their professions would not only be problematic from a sex-positivity perspective, but would likely run against most researchers' definitions of what is considered 'ethical' research. In other words, to link to Bell's notion of audience design from earlier, it must be remembered that not all eavesdroppers are the same and all will have different ideologies towards particular topics.

At this point, I want to turn to a comment I received on an earlier presentation of this work. While discussing ethics which relate to sex and sexuality, one researcher recommended that one way to circumvent these issues might be to remove any language which might

identify the community and that the community should be anonymized. However, this also comes with several challenges for those interested in (critical) discourse analysis, which focuses on the language used by individuals. One such example of the challenge this presents to those interested in how power is negotiated in sexual-based interactions comes from the most frequently used words and keyword lists (i.e., lists of what words the community used statistically more frequently than words in a comparable dataset, such as on Twitter more broadly). The community I investigated were so heavily tied to specified titles and roles that the language they used immediately revealed the broader community. Similarly, linguistic examples from the community could not be changed in a way that retained the exact lexical and grammatical features without the same data being able to be found via a Google search. To that end, while anonymization and reducing the number of examples presented in the dissemination of findings might be useful, it is often not practical to do in a way which continues to protect communities being researched.

Discussion: Rethinking Ethical Considerations

Under several ethical guidelines, using these data would be considered low-risk as long as the usernames of the people were anonymized (see, for example, British Psychological Society, 2021; franzke et al., 2020). However, drawing attention to a community where several members do not want attention from members outside of the community in itself is problematic. As researchers, we are therefore faced with a dilemma: do we report on the community and draw attention to it, do we heavily anonymise the data to a point where it might make researching specific communities harder, or do we just not research it all together? As noted earlier, one potential way might be to anonymize the community, such as using a pseudonym or broadly referring to it as 'a fetish community' (as done in this paper). However, doing this might mean that important elements of that community's social structure are removed. For example, in some communities, specific terms

are used depending on the sexual role people fulfil, and this might also have to be removed if it could otherwise identify the community. Such a role might be important for the construction of gender and sexuality or might denote in-group markers. For linguistic analysis, this also presents problems as changing the lexico-grammatical structure changes the meaning associated with such constructions.

However, although anonymizing communities or changing phrases is a potential method of circumnavigating such ethical issues, researchers should also consider the replicability of their studies. Anonymizing the community means that those researching that specific community might struggle to make connections to their own research, while anonymizing any language or visual data might mean that analytical points or systematic frameworks are less obvious in how they are applied to the data. An issue of transparency also emerges with regards to evidencing that such data collection and analysis has been thoroughly and methodically conducted. This is why being an auditor within a poster's imagined community is useful because it is expected that such data will be shared.

A different but nonetheless challenging consideration is the degree to which we incorporate certain members of the community. In the case study noted above, only about 10% made a note to say they were actively against showing their face. However, a closer analysis of the data revealed that the majority of profiles (approximately 90%) did not show a face picture. There are therefore questions about ethics with regards to what is (not) said and the implicature of such actions. It could be the case that 70% of the users did not feel comfortable showing their face but did not mention this in their user-bios (while the other 20% might not have minded but did not post their face without realizing they were doing this). It could also be the case that Tweeters had used 'stock' posts at some point in their posting history, but web-scraping software might not have captured this (assuming limits are set on number of posts scraped – e.g., some web scrapers may only collect the first 20 posts

per profile). While many researchers will agree that warnings, such as "Warning to all

institutions and researchers - You do not have my permission to use any of my data in any

form or forum"[1] are an instant deterrent, what should a researcher do if they scrape a user's

data but do not find such a warning until it is later brought to their attention? In addition, a

number of data producers might not be aware that their data could even be used in such a way

(see Fiesler & Proferes, 2018) and as such might not know to include such sentences. Such

challenges speak to the need to continue to be reflexive in our research, in order to best

protect the communities that we are examining.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is also worth noting the positionality of

sex-positive researchers within their exploration of these kinds of communities. Researchers

who are part of these communities may also be privy to additional information and concepts

that inform their decisions. For example, if I were already a member of the community I

explored, I would have known not to disseminate the findings, due to a number of members

not wanting their information shared.

Analysis vs. Dissemination

One of the main issues faced by the case study noted here was that of dissemination.

While data can be ethically gathered and ethically analyzed, ethics must be considered at

each step of the research process. In line with a range of fields, I would argue that the

research process also includes both publication and dissemination (e.g., see Downes, Breeze

& Griffin, 2013; Regmi, 2011). This is also somewhat inline with the notions of

"ethnographic refusal", whereby both researchers and participants choose what to make

publicly available, or not (see Zahara, 2016). This latter notion of refusing to make data

publicly available, however, might also be somewhat challenging for progressing the state of

knowledge. In other words, some researchers may need access to such knowledge and

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[1] N.b., this is a fictious example, based on seeing similar warnings on different platforms.

practical guidance rooted within that research. Within the context of sex research, one possible way we can continue to research communities like this might be to limit our readership to researchers who we know are sex-positive. This includes, for example, sex-positive reading groups; conferences where sex-positivity is enshrined in attendee agreements, and academic journals specifically read by sex-positive researchers. This last method of dissemination still carries some risk of communities being identified (especially with the growing nature of open-access journals), but the likelihood of sex-negative readers finding such journal articles is likely to be much lower.

Another way in which sex-positive researchers can protect broader communities is to use smaller samples for interviews (e.g., Wignall, 2017). While these interviews can reveal important information about group dynamics which might be comparable to the data found in online contexts, such research is less likely to encourage others to Google-search examples. While these kinds of papers might still draw attention to communities who do not want to be found, they are likely to contain identifying information than analyzing publicly available data. However, these interviews do also utilise participants who view researchers as either addressees or auditors. Indeed, this also brings forward questions about how researchers might make our analysis of such data more well known to move from being eavesdroppers towards auditors or overhearers.

Finally, as academic researchers, we must remember that we benefit from researching potentially vulnerable communities. While these benefits may not always be short-term monetary benefits, such research can lead to promotions, tenure, and/or other acknowledgements for our research. As such, we have a duty to protect the communities who afford us such benefits and ensure that no harm is brought to them through miscommunication or allowing them to become the victims of online harassment. Part of this protection also comes in the form of being selective with non-academic dissemination work.

Articles in far-right newspapers might lead to the identification of such communities from people with historically sex-negative stances. As such, all forms of publication, including non-academic pieces, Tweets, and blog posts, should continue to be scrutinized for the degrees to which they identify possibly vulnerable communities.

The decision making process behind whether or not we publish research, quotes, data, and similar information is complex: although our work might be in line with many best practice models, there may still be cases where dissemination can do more harm than good. In this instance, I let a thorough exploration of the data inform my decision, but it might be the case that participants in other's data are more willing to have light shone on their community. Ultimately, researchers must weight up potential risks to communities, the desires of the community, and their own positionality on certain topics before such decisions can be made.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated some of the tensions between sex-positive academic research and ethical considerations for investigating online fetish communities who are wary of receiving sex-negative backlash. Although this paper presented a single case study, it is hoped that such an example provides the starting point for a deeper and more nuanced discussion about how sex-positive researchers can further protect these communities when disseminating findings. I propose that, sometimes, one of the most sex-positive acts a researcher can do is to allow a community the privacy to continue to flourish, away from the eyes of (possibly) sex-negative unintended audiences.

Although this paper has not addressed the issue directly, the ethical challenges raised within the above case study also raise more questions, such as "are there topics we shouldn't explore as researchers?" and "Do we have the potential to harm communities by investigating them?". Given the limitations of space, I have only alluded to the potential harms that might

occur if communities like this were uncovered by sex-negative people. However, additional work might want to address such questions with a greater range of data.

As a final point, I would like to reiterate that ethical considerations are often not clear-cut and our positive approach to sex should inform all decisions made in this kind of research. To that end, I would argue in line with the new recommendations on good practice provided by the British Association of Applied Linguistics (2021) in this kind of research, i.e., that ethical considerations should be taken on a case-by-case basis. This case-by-case basis should consider what potential harms might come to a community at each stage of research, be that in reviewing previous literature, collecting data, analyzing data, dissemination of data, and any public engagement. Such considerations must extend both to the community and, importantly, to the researcher too.

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