

## Ethical Issues for Qualitative Research in the Digital Age

Arceli Rosario<sup>1</sup>, Pavel Zubkov<sup>2</sup>, David Lumowa<sup>3</sup>, Gracel Ann Saban<sup>4</sup>, Jasmin Tuapin<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adventist University of the Philippines, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. ahrosario@aup.edu.ph

<sup>2</sup>Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. zubkovp@aiaas.edu

<sup>3</sup>Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. dlumowa@aiaas.edu

<sup>4</sup>Adventist University of the Philippines, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. gssaban@aup.edu.ph

<sup>5</sup>Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines. jtuapin@aiaas.edu

**Abstract.** In this digital age, researchers have options other than traditional data collection methods. Data collection through online modalities, which brings advantages such as sample diversity, cost and time reduction, and wide geographical reach, has become an alternative. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, human interactions became limited; in-person conversations and on-site presence were impossible in some areas. Hence, researchers opted for Internet-mediated research activities. Even after the pandemic, conducting research online will continue to be an attractive modality.

Ethical issues, though, have been raised in online data collection methods. Among those ethical issues are ownership of online data, unauthorized usage of online data, and anonymity and confidentiality in virtual and visual research. It is important, therefore, that ethical guidelines be observed in online data collection. In this paper, we propose several strategies to mitigate ethical issues. These strategies include securing informed consent, which is considered the cornerstone of research ethics, from the participants after they have been thoroughly and adequately advised regarding the research processes; determining whether the online space is public or private and implementing corresponding measures and adjustments; ensuring the confidentiality of the data by proper storage, management, and reporting; securing the anonymity of the participants through de-identification; and being honest and transparent by disclosing their identity as researchers to the participants. In addition, researchers will need to be guided by ethics review boards and a reference group with whom they can consult when they encounter ethical moments during their data collection.

**Case Studies.** Although the same basic ethical rules of traditional research, such as anonymity and confidentiality; managing risks and reducing harms; protecting, managing, and reporting data, can still be applied to Internet research, there are also unique ethical challenges associated with virtual platforms (Trull, Helle, & Griffin, 2021). Some of them are researchers' identity, data proliferation, or online identity management (Fileborn, 2016; Whiteman, 2012; Aldridge, Medina & Ralph, 2010). It is necessary to reassess and critically evaluate the ethical norms and practices applicable to online research (McInroy, 2016). Some case studies will be discussed such as accessing online course data; consequences of sharing data; and ethical, cultural, and religious boundaries of online photography.

**Ethical Guidelines for Online Data Collection Methods.** Dealing with ethical issues is a challenge for most, if not, all researchers. Several authors have identified ethical issues that researchers must consider in conducting qualitative research through online modalities. In this presentation, we will discuss informed consent; public or private space; anonymity and confidentiality; honesty and transparency; data security; and vulnerability, risks, and benefits.



**Informed consent.** How can researchers obtain informed consent for data that is readily available online such as posts on Facebook and other social media apps? Felzmann (2013) suggests the following strategies. First, researchers can inform the group that they are conducting a research on a certain topic and that the information contributed by the group members are relevant to their research purposes. Second, they just use the data without informing or seeking permission from those concerned. Third, they contact group members whose posts they will use and ask permission. The first approach may result in unfavorable reactions from group members. The second approach is obviously unethical because it violates the principle of informed consent. The third approach is ethical although tedious.

**Public and private space.** It is difficult, however, to determine whether an online space is public or private. The following guidelines (Eysenbach & Till, 2001) may guide researchers to identify private groups: (a) A registration is required to be part of the group. (b) The group has made a statement that their group is exclusive. (c) The group does not seek public visibility.

**Confidentiality and anonymity.** According to Felzmann, researchers observe confidentiality when: (a) During the the data collection, only the participant/s and the researcher/s are present. (b) Researchers do not discuss about our data when non-team members are present. (c) Researchers should not share the data to any person. (d) Data is stored and managed with strict compliance to data security.

Anonymity, on one hand, refers to guarding the identity of research participants (Felzmann, 2013). Unless agreed by the participants and the researchers at the start of the study, participants' identity should be kept hidden. In online research, Markham (2012) suggests fabrication, that is, to present composite data (Burlles & Bally, 2018) or general findings (Warrell & Jacobsen, 2014).

**Honesty and transparency.** Firstly, honesty and transparency involve revealing to the participants what online data the researchers are harvesting and for what purpose (Clark et al., 2015). Secondly, the researchers should reveal their identity as researchers, especially when they are part of a group or when they join the group for research purposes (Clark et al., 2015; Felzman, 2013). Thirdly, after the data is collected, the participants should check the data for accuracy (Clark et al., 2015). On another note, participants must also exercise honesty and transparency. In online focus group discussions, in spite of its public nature (Sim & Waterfield, 2019; Tolich & Anito, in press), the researchers and the participants must be assured that they are in a "private" space, free from the presence of other people (Salmons, 2015).

**Data security.** Among popular threats to data security are various tracking technologies, contiguity and traceability, a loss or a proliferation of data (Mumford et al., 2021; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012). The following guidelines may be used to improve data security in mediated settings (Aldridge et al., 2010; Gupta, 2017; Trull et al., 2021): (a) All tracking information and web-signed consent forms will be stored in a secure server separate from study data. (b) Electronic data, including all forms and storages of data, will be password-protected. (c) Data is stored separately from participants' identifying information and linked only to a unique subject identification number. (d) Data is anonymized at the early stage of the study. (e) All non-anonymized data should deleted as soon as possible. (f) The encryption software is used to create 'encrypted space' on computers and storage media. (g) Data is stored centrally rather than locally; the number of data copies is minimized.



**Vulnerability, risks, and benefits.** Prevention of harm to participants is generally considered to be the main rationale for the requirement of research ethics review. Internet research raises several concerns regarding vulnerability and harm, but also regarding potential benefit that other forms of research might not be able to achieve (Banister, 2007). Apart from physical harm, there may also be wider harms such as psychological, social, or a reputational damage (Hennell, Limmer, & Piacentini, 2019). If the study involves illegal activities, additional ethical measures need to be taken. The researcher may need to include in the informed consent form the possible outcomes of the study including an inquiry about illegal activities, the probability of the confidentiality breach, and the subpoena of data if requested by the legal entity (Trull et al., 2021).

**Keywords:** online data collection, ethical issues, ethical guidelines, informed consent, confidentiality

**Necessary resources:** laptop, internet connection

### Organization of the Panel Discussion

**Brief context:** The adverse impact of a pandemic on human interaction has prompted a significant shift from sharing a common physical space to alternative online modalities. As the in-person gatherings were reduced in compliance with safety measures, the use of cyberspace for social and professional networking has remarkably increased. With this new development, internet-mediated research has become a promising ground to explore the web-based data with the use of various digital methods and platforms (Fatanti et al., 2022; Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022). The new opportunities for the online research unpack “the complexities and possibilities of researching digital environments” which raises new ethical issues and dilemmas related to it (Marlowe & Allen, 2022).

### Objectives:

- (a) To give examples of case studies on ethical issues in conducting online qualitative research.
- (b) To discuss ethical issues and present strategies on how to address each of them.

#### 1- Dynamics / Strategy:

- a. Presentation: Panel Discussion – There are five presenters. One of the panel members, Gracel Saban, will introduce the panelists.
- b. Theoretical Exposition of the theme  
Moderator of the Panel: Arceli Rosario  
Pavel Zubkov – Introduction, Case Studies – 20 minutes  
Gracel Saban – Informed Consent – 10 minutes  
Arceli Rosario – Public and Private Space, Confidentiality and Anonymity – 15 minutes  
Jasmin Tuapin – Honesty and Transparency – 10 minutes  
David Lumowa – Data Security; Vulnerability, Risks, and Benefits – 15 minutes
- c. Application in other contexts  
The content of this presentation may also be applied in other settings, specifically in regions where online data collection is a good option.
- d. Discussion



To be moderated by Arceli Rosario - 20 minutes

- 2- Application of the proposal in reality/practical examples:
  - (a) Researchers to be aware of ethical issues in online qualitative research
  - (b) Researchers to be equipped with strategies to address those ethical issues
- 3- Expected results:

After participating in the panel discussion, the participants will be equipped to deal with the online qualitative research ethical problems that they may face.

## References

- Aldridge, J., Medina, J., & Ralph, R. (2010) The problem of proliferation: guidelines for improving the security of qualitative data in a digital age. In *Research Ethics Review*, 6(1), 3–9.
- Amdur, A., & Bankert, E. A. (2011). *Institutional review board: Member handbook* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.
- Banister, S. (2007). Ethical issues and qualitative methods in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: How can digital technologies be embraced in the research community? *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research*, 1, 1-10.
- Beaulieu, A., & Estalella, A. (2012). Rethinking research ethics for mediated settings. In *Information Communication in Society*, 15(1), 23-42. Doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2010.535838
- Beddall-Hill, N. L., Jabbar, A., Al Shehri, S. (2011). Social mobile devices as tools for qualitative research in education: iPhones and iPads in ethnography, interviewing, and design-based research. *Journal of the Research Center for Educational Technology (RCET)*, 7(1), 67-89.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA; SAGE.
- Burles, M. C., & Bally, J. M. G. (2018). Thical, practical, and methodological considerations for unobstrusive qualitative research about personal narratives shared on the Internet. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17, 1-9.
- Clark, K., Duckham, M., Guillemin, M., Hunter, A., McVernon, J., O’Keefe, C., Pitkin, C., Praver, S., Sinnott, R., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2015). *Guidelines for the ethical use of digital data in human research*. The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Convery, I., & Cox, D. (2012). A review of research ethics in internet-based research. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 6(1), 50-57.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Deakin, H., & Wakefield, K. (2014). Skype interviewing: Reflections of two PhD researchers. *Qualitative Research*, 14(5), 603-616. doi: 10.1177/1468794113488126



- Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives. Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3-29. doi: 10.1177/1077800406294947
- Ethical dilemmas using social media in qualitative social research: A case study of online participant observation. In *Sociological Research Online* 00 (0), 1-17  
ps://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419888933
- Eysenbach, G., & Till, J. E. (2001). Ethical issues in qualitative research on internet communities. *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, 323(7321), 1003-1005. doi: 10.1136/bmj.323.7321.1103
- Fatanti, M.N., Prabawangi, R. P., Ananda, K. S., Fatah R. Z., and Dahnil E. A. (2022). Going online to seek answers: Best practices for online research during COVID-19 pandemic. In *Exploring New Horizons and Challenges for Social Studies in a New Normal* by Idris, Purnomo A., Sismat M. A. H., Isma'il Z., and Sringernyuang, L. (Eds), pp. 110-115. Leiden, The Netherlands: CRC Press
- Felzmann, H. (2013). Ethical issues in Internet research: International good practice and Irish research ethics documents. In C. Fowley, C. English, & S. Thouësny (Eds.), *Internet Research, Theory, and Practice: Perspectives from Ireland* (pp. 11-32). Dublin: © Research-publishing.net
- Fileborn, B. (2016). Participant recruitment in an online era: A reflection on ethics and identity. *Research Ethics*, 12(2), 97–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016115604150>
- Fritz, R. L., & Vandermause, R. (2018). Data collection via in-depth email interviewing: Lessons from the field. *Methods*, 28(10), 1640-1649.
- Gilmore, R. O., Xu, M., and Adolph, K. E. (2021). Data sharing. In S. Panicker and B. Stanley (Eds.). *Handbook of Research Ethics in Psychological Science*, pp. 83-97. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Glassmeyer, D. M., & Dibbs, R. (2012). Researching from a distance: using live web conferencing to mediate data collection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(3), 292-302.
- Goodyear, V. A. (2017). Social media, apps and wearable technologies: navigating ethical dilemmas and procedures. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 9(3), 285-302. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2017.1303790>
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and “ethically important moments” in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, 261-280. doi: 10.1177/1077800403262360
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2015). Emotions, narratives, and ethical mindfulness. *Acad. Med.*, 90, 726-731.
- Guillemin, M., & Heggen, K. (2009). Rapport and respect: Negotiating ethical relations between research and participant. *Med Health Care and Philos*, 12, 291-299. doi: 10.1007/s11019-008-9165-8



- Gupta, S. (2017). Ethical issues in designing internet-based research: Recommendations for good practice. *Journal of Research Practice*, 13(2), Article D1. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/576/476>
- Harper, D. (2005). What's new visually? In N. K. Denzin, and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.), pp. 747-762. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hennell, K., Limmer, M., & Piacentini, M. (2020). Ethical Dilemmas Using Social Media in Qualitative Social Research: A Case Study of Online Participant Observation. *Sociological Research Online*, 25(3), 473–489. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780419888933>
- Hesse, A., Glenna, L., Hinrichs, C., Chiles, R., & Sachs, C. (2019). Qualitative research ethics in the big data era. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63(5), 560-583. doi: 10.1177/0002764218805806 [journals.sagepub.com/home/abs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/abs)
- James, N., & Busher, H. (2006). Credibility, authenticity and voice: dilemmas in online interviewing. *Qualitative Research*, 6(3). 403-420.
- James, N., & Busher, H. (2012). Internet interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium, J. A. Holstein, A. B. Marvasti, K. D. McKinney (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, pp. 177-191. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Keen, S., Lomeli-Rodriguez, M., & Joffe, H. (2022). From Challenge to Opportunity: Virtual Qualitative Research During COVID-19 and Beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221105075>
- Lahman, M. K. E. (2018). *Ethics in social science research: Becoming culturally responsive*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Latkovikj, M. T., & Popovska, M. B. (2020). Online research about online research: Advantages and disadvantages. *E-methodology*, 6, 44-56.
- Margolis, E., & Zunjarwad, R. (2018). Visual research. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (5th ed.), pp. 1039-1089. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). Ethical decision-making and Internet research (version 2.0) recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee. Retrieved from <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>
- McInroy, L. B. (2016). Pitfalls, potentials, and ethics of online survey research: LGBTQ and other marginalized and hard-to-access youths. In *National Association of Social Workers*. doi: 10.1093/swr/svw005
- Miguel, J., Caballe, S., and Xhafa, F. (2017). *Intelligent data analysis for e-Learning: Enhancing security and trustworthiness in online learning systems*. London, UK: Elsevier



- Morrison, D., Lichtenwald, K. & Tang, R. (2019). Extending the online focus group method using web-based conferencing to explore older adults online learning. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 1-15. doi: 10.1080/1743727X.2019.1594183
- Mumford, M. D., Higgs, C., and Gujar, Y. (2021). Ethics in coercive environments. In S. Panicker and B. Stanley (Eds.). *Handbook of Research Ethics in Psychological Science*, pp. 113-123. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Newman, P. A., Guta, A., & Black, T. (2021). Ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations: Navigating the virtual field. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1-12.
- Palys, T., & Atchison, C. (2012). Qualitative research in the digital era: Obstacles and opportunities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4), 352-367.
- Roberts, L. (2015). Ethical issues in conducting qualitative research in online communities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(3), 314-325.
- Rosario, A., & Obo-Rayos, E. (2019). The portrait of a superwoman: Finding compatibility and balance between motherhood and graduate school. *International Forum*, 22(2), 5-23. Retrieved from <https://internationalforum.aiias.edu/images/vol22no02 /1ARosarioERayos.pdf>
- Rosario, A., Wa-Mbaleka, S., & Zubkov, P. (in press). Data collection methods through online modalities. In S. Wa-Mbaleka & A. Rosario (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in the Asian Context*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Salmons, J. (2015). *Qualitative online interviews: Strategies, design, and skills* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63-75.
- Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage
- Sim, J., & Waterfield, J. (2019). Focus group methodology: Some ethical challenges. *Quality & Quantity*, 53, 3003-3022.
- Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. (2016). Online focus groups. *Journal of Advertising*. doi: 10.1080/00913367.2016.1252288
- Sugiura, L., Wiles, R., & Pope, C. (2017). Ethical challenges in online research: Public/private perceptions. In *Research Ethics*, 13(3-4), 184-199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016116650720>
- Tolich, M., & Tumilty, E. (2021). *Finding your ethical research self*. London, UK: Routledge.





- Trull, T. J., Helle, A. C., and Griffin, S. A. (2021). Research using the Internet and mobile technologies. In S. Panicker and B. Stanley (Eds.), *Handbook of Research Ethics in Psychological Science*, pp. 177-190. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24, 369-387. doi: 10.1177/10901981970240309
- Warrell, J.G., & Jacobsen, M. (2014). Internet research ethics and the policy gap for ethical practice in online research settings. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 44(1), 22-37. <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/109274>
- Weller, K., & Kinder-Kurlanda, K. (2017). To share or not to share? Ethical challenges in sharing social media-based research data. In M. Zimmer and K. Kinder-Kurlanda (Eds.), *Internet Research Ethics for the Social Age: New Challenges, Cases, and Contexts*, pp.115-129. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Whiteman N. (2012). *Undoing ethics: Rethinking practice in online research*. New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media.

### Biographical Notes

**Arceli Rosario**, PhD, is the president of the Adventist University of the Philippines. She served as a high school principal, vice president for academic affairs, and college president. She has taught courses and conducted training in research, educational administration, and language teaching; published studies in leadership and teaching; and is a co-editor of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in the Asian Context*. She was one of the founders of the Asian Qualitative Research Association and is the incumbent president of the Adventist Human-Subject Research Association in the Southern Asia-Pacific Division.

**Pavel Zubkov**, PhD, is an assistant professor of the Applied Theology Department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines. He teaches applied theology research and writing and serves as a seminary methodologist. He comes from a quantitative orientation but has extended his interest to qualitative research. He is a co-editor of *Qualitative Research for Practical Theology* and contributed several chapters in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. He is the incumbent president of the Asian Qualitative Research Association.

**David Lumowa**, PhD, is a faculty of the Business Department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines. While he comes from a quantitative research orientation, he has promoted qualitative research through his involvement with the Asian Qualitative Research Association as the chief financial officer. He is a trainer in qualitative research, specifically in analysing data using qualitative data analysis software. He wrote a chapter in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

**Gracel Ann Saban**, PhD, is the vice president for academics of the Adventist University of the Philippines. Her profound zeal for and growing exposure to qualitative research has empowered her to delve into various qualitative research endeavors such as her active membership and service as a former executive secretary in the Asian Qualitative Research Association and regular *participation* in





the World Conference on Qualitative Research. She fervently desires to make her teaching and research activities a means of sharing the love and hope of Jesus Christ with the community of expert learners.

**Jasmin Tuapin**, PhD, is a faculty of the Business Department of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies. She is also the executive secretary of the Asian Qualitative Research Association. Although coming from a quantitative research background, she has embraced qualitative research with passion.

