Ethics in Netnography: Exploring Privacy in Public Spaces

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Abstract

Ethical decisions play an important role in each step of research design and methodology. In social science research, the boundaries determining ethical decision making can get blurry due to the highly contextualized nature of human-centered research. Netnography, a methodology similar to ethnography but conducted through the internet, is the source of ongoing ethical debate in academic communities. In this study, we investigate online community members' beliefs and perceptions around the nontrivial, contestable, and interrelated issues of informed consent and privacy. To advance the conversation around ethics in netnography, we include the voice of members of different online communities by administering a survey to understand their beliefs and opinions around perceived privacy and informed consent in online communities. Our survey results demonstrate the contradictory results that, while online community members do not believe their posts to be completely private, they still believe in the necessity of researchers obtaining informed consent in most contexts.

Keywords: ethics, netnography, perceived privacy, informed consent

1. Introduction

1.1 Netnography

In the 1990s, Robert Kozinets extended the idea of ethnography as a research method to a new method called netnography(2002). Ethnography is a research method that originated in the early 1900s and is conducted through participant observation where researchers fully immerse themselves in the lived experience of the subjects of their research. This typically involves spending an extended period of time with the research participants and observing the formal and informal events and interactions that make up their lives (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Netnography extends ethnography to being conducted through the internet. Kozinets pioneered the methodology of netnography in the field of consumer research, but like

ethnography, it has been adapted and used in a variety of social science disciplines since its inception (R. V. Kozinets, 2010). Netnography has expanded to a broader research method that gathers and combines data from different technologically mediated sources. For the purpose of this paper, we are going to specifically discuss netnography and its application in the study of online communities.

The rise and continued growth of the Internet has facilitated the emergence of online communities. Online communities offer participants a variety of opportunities for connection, from small groups focused on discussion of niche topics to large communities connected through social media (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Online communities represent an opportunity for groups of people to connect with one another regardless of physical location, and they also represent a new opportunity for community research (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Netnography enables researchers to observe online communities with greater ease of access and less obtrusiveness to the communities than traditional ethnography (R. V. Kozinets, 2002). Kozinets pioneered the methodology of netnography in the field of consumer research, but like ethnography, it has been adapted and used in a variety of social science disciplines since its inception (R. V. Kozinets, 2010).

1.2 Ethics

We will introduce ethics, their importance, and discuss throughout the following sections how ethical considerations apply to netnography. Ethics refers to doing good and avoiding harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). As a part of ethical research practice, researchers are mandated to obtain IRB approval for research involving human participants. While the IRB protects human subjects and supports valuable research, obtaining IRB approval is not always sufficient for excellence in research ethics (Morris & Morris, 2016).

The ethical considerations of researchers must consist of more than just the avoidance of harm, also including a balance of risk, efficacy, justice, and respect (Rhodes, 2010) and the promotion of integrity, quality, and transparency (*Economic and Social Research Council Annual Report and Accounts for*

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2009 to 2010, 2010). As new research methods are introduced, each starts an important conversation around different ethical considerations (Hesse et al., 2019). The relative inexperience of IRBs with netnography studies highlights the responsibility on the part of the researcher (Zimmer, 2020).

When introducing netnography, Kozinets was careful to include ethical considerations and guidelines for any researchers wishing to use this method in the future. The two key issues that Kozinets identified around ethics in netnography are (1) whether an online forum is considered a public or private space and (2) how informed consent is determined in these online forums (2002). In the next section, we delve further into each of these two issues and trace how various researchers have interpreted them over the years.

2. Literature Background

2.1 History of Ethics in Netnography

Kozinets refers to the crucial issues of privacy and informed consent in netnography as "nontrivial, contestable, and interrelated" (2002, p. 65). We will quickly explore each of these three descriptors. Because privacy and informed consent are at the heart of any ethics-related question, they are far from trivial. Due to the vital importance of these issues, in an ideal world, they would provide black and white rules with no room for debate in how to interpret and apply them. The reason they are contestable, however, is because with these relatively new (and constantly evolving) online communities, interpreting privacy and informed consent in these cyberspaces has become a gray area. In their systemic review of studies investigating attitudes towards social media research ethics, Golder et al. highlight the lack of consensus on specific ethical imperatives (Golder et al., 2017). Additionally, the concepts of privacy and informed consent are interrelated and must be considered in conjunction with one another. One cannot fully examine the necessity of informed consent without determining the public vs. private nature of the space. Much debate has spun out of these key points of privacy and informed consent.

In his 2002 article introducing the concept of netnography, Kozinets expresses concern about the potential for researchers to do harm in using this research method incorrectly. He acknowledges that there is always a potential for psychological harm to the members of the online communities being studied, depending on the level of personal identification included in the reported results (King, 1996). Because of this, he addresses the issues of privacy and informed consent by providing ethical recommendations for researchers to follow when conducting netnography: (1) the researcher should fully disclose his or her identity and intentions, (2) the researcher should ensure confidentiality and anonymity to participants, (3) the researcher should seek and incorporate feedback from online community members on research findings, and (4) the researcher should take a cautious position on the issue of if the online community should be treated as public or private (R. V. Kozinets, 2002).

Kozinets' recommendations are not without challenge. In their 2005 article discussing netnography related to sensitive research topics, Langer and Beckman argue that online communities without restricted access fall into the category of a public space. They contend that, due to the public nature of online discourse, research on these public communities should follow the well-established ethical content analysis guidelines (Langer & Beckman, 2005). Langer and Beckman argue that the ethical guidelines proposed by Kozinets are far too rigorous and can negate the benefit of unobtrusiveness offered by netnography by requiring a researcher to obtain consent even from groups whose information is otherwise available to the public (2005).

Continuing the conversation, Kozinets responds to the "relaxing" of ethical guidelines proposed by Langer and Beckman. Kozinets emphasizes the necessity for researchers to stay aware of the constant change of the internet and online communities and to continuously consider how their approach to conducting research should be updated accordingly (2007). Kozinets acknowledges that many see his originally proposed ethical guidelines as too strict, but upholds his original convictions. He revisits the importance of informed consent, arguing that it is not right for participant quotes and information to be published in a study they may have no idea they even participated in (R. V. Kozinets, 2007).

Since this exchange between Kozinets and Beckman and Langer, there have been many other researchers who have used netnography and entered the ethical debate around this research method. We will highlight a few of these examples next. Nind et al. discuss three recent methodological innovations, including netnography, and how ethical considerations are a part of these innovations (2013). They explore the potential tension between research ethics and methodological innovation, but contend that the two forces can work together, both focusing on reflexivity amongst changes (Nind et al., 2013). In a special journal issue focusing on Critical Data Studies (Iliadis & Russo, 2016), Metcalf and Crawford urge the research community to remember the human subjects

behind their data and to think critically about the potential unintended consequences of combining publicly available data with other data sources (2016). Stainton and Iordanova share their experience when conducting research using online travel blogs (2017). They realized through this experience that there were no specific ethical guidelines relating to their research methodology required by their review boards, and they argue that generic ethical principles should not be the entirety of how new and unique methodologies are evaluated (Stainton & Iordanova, 2017). Zimmer examined a case study of researchers gathering a large amount of students' data from Facebook and other university sources. These researchers believed that this data collection without informed consent was ethical because its guaranteed anonymity, but the good faith efforts of the researchers to protect the anonymity of the data were quickly debunked and the source of the data was identified (Zimmer, 2020). Zimmer shares that he was not trying to condemn these researchers for their research methods, but to highlight the complexity of data privacy and anonymity when dealing with people's online activity and data. Newman et. al highlighted the ethical considerations for qualitative research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic (2021). On top of the already fuzzy ethical guidelines for certain methods of qualitative research such as netnography, they explore integrating these methods with a new cultural phenomenon such as a pandemic, emphasizing the need for iterative and reflexive consideration from researchers (Newman et al., 2021). They echo the significant considerations of informed consent and privacy in their analysis of ethical guidelines in this context-specific situation, which continue to be key points in any ethical reflections on research methodologies. Hair et al. (2023) outline the philosophical and methodological guidelines for ethical netnography. They explore where these guidelines are grounded in moral or philosophical frameworks, and they recognize how these guidelines can impact the choices that researchers make when engaging in netnography research (Hair et al., 2023).

A few guiding themes remain prominent throughout the various examples of articles exploring netnography. First, Kozinets' initial nontrivial, contestable, and interrelated issues of privacy and informed consent remain at the forefront of all ethical discussions to follow. Another consistent theme throughout these articles was the need for researchers to engage in thoughtful, iterative, and reflexive consideration of the ethical guidelines used in their research, over and above what might be required by review boards such as the IRB. This self-regulation on the part of researchers is imperative for building public trust (Metcalf & Crawford, 2016). Some even go so far as to refer to the IRB as a "helpful secondary check" for researchers (Hair et al., 2023, p. 18). And finally, the fact that there are still articles being written on this topic today with a wide range of opinions and arguments highlights the fact that this is not a resolved issue. Many researchers in this area still view ethical guidelines outlining netnography research as a gray area (Golder et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2023) in which to proceed with caution using the best tools available to them, but not all researchers agree on what these proceedings entail.

To potentially further complicate matters, there is the concept of data subjectivity to consider (Metcalf & Crawford, 2016). As evidenced in the examples referenced above, there are a wide variety of situations in which netnography has been used, ranging from online forums discussing coffee to travel blogs to online forums discussing experiences with cosmetic surgery. Data subjectivity suggests that there can be a difference in including a direct quote of someone sharing the reasons they love a good cup of coffee vs. a direct quote sharing their personal struggles with shame around a recent cosmetic surgery.

So, if we use the argument that "it's all subjective", wouldn't that then just get researchers off the hook for applying ethical principles to their research methodologies? Certainly not. But it does provide the framework for allowing researchers to thoughtfully examine their methodology within the context of their particular research question and study. One way to engage in this careful consideration is to invite opinions from other relevant parties. As discussed, researchers have contributed to both sides of the conversation. Another group to consider is the people being studied in these online communities. Previous studies have investigated the nature of public opinion in regard to social media research (Golder et al., 2017), and in this study we will add to that limited but growing area of knowledge with opinions based specifically in the context of online communities. We will include the need for and value of the opinions of online community participants in our discussion of privacy and informed consent in the following sections.

3. Privacy in the Context of Online Communities

3.1 Privacy in Online Communities

The interesting question about privacy that we will explore is how privacy is defined in an online community (2002). Three widely referenced and relevant definitions of privacy are legal privacy,

technological privacy, and perceived privacy. The legal concept of privacy refers to who has the legal right to obtain and release confidential information. If a post in an online community is available to the general public, a researcher accessing that post does not violate the poster's privacy in a legal sense (Lehavot et al., 2012). Technological privacy is like legal privacy in that in involves clear guidelines for what is and is not private. If an online forum or social media profile can be accessed without a password or some other form of technological barrier, there is no technological privacy in place (Stainton & Iordanova, 2017). The third type of privacy, which is of the most importance to the discussion in this article, is the concept of perceived privacy. In the context of online communities, this perceived privacy refers to the expectation that information shared with others in the context of an online community will remain private to others within that community (Lehavot et al., 2012).

When it comes to conducting research, there are many audiences to keep in mind. First and foremost, researchers should consider the impact of their research on the participants in their research study (Haynes, 2006). Additionally, the researcher should consider the opinion of the IRB, their fellow academics, and even the general population (Halse & Honey, 2005). The interesting conundrum regarding privacy here is that each of these audiences may not have the same understanding of perceived privacy in a netnographic study of online communities. While not all research is conducted for and written to the general population, researchers must consider the impact that their work will have on this wider audience and should work to build and earn the social trust of the public (Metcalf & Crawford, 2016). Examples of research gone wrong, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving data misuse and mass manipulation (Hinds et al., 2020) or the study involving Harvard students in which the researchers falsely believed their data had been properly de-identified (Zimmer, 2020) lead to detrimental effects to the public perception of the groups conducting the research, as well as the results of the research itself. We identified the perception of participants as it relates to privacy and informed consent as an important factor to consider that is lacking in the current literature (Golder et al., 2017). In the following sections, we will examine Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM) (Petronio, 2002) and discuss how it supports the theory of Privacy Boundary Management (Chang et al., 2018). Because each individual participating in an online community could have their own privacy boundaries, it is important to explore this idea to understand where those individual boundaries fall. After we explore these concepts, we will share the methodology used to measure the perceptions of privacy individuals bring to these online communities and the role that perception plays in the debated issues of privacy and informed consent.

3.2 Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM)

In today's world of the Internet, there are countless opportunities for individuals to join online communities, all with varying levels of regulation, community activity, and openness (Plant, 2004). In these communities, individuals can decide how much information they post and share with other members of the community. Within an online community, there are benefits to both maintaining privacy and sharing information, depending on the individual and the context. Privacy is important for individuals to feel they are maintaining ownership of information about themselves (Petronio, 2002), but sharing information allows for benefits such as social connection and validation of perspectives (Johnson & Ridener, 1974). As each individual makes the decision of what and how much information to share, he or she is performing a mental calculus to decide whether or not to disclose private information (Dinev & Hart, 2006; Petronio, 2002). CPM provides a way to explore this tension between the desire for privacy and the desire to disclose information to others. CPM explains how individuals develop the rule management system they employ when deciding whether or not to reveal private information (Petronio, 2002).

CPM uses a boundary metaphor to illustrate the demarcation between private and public spaces. This boundary line is not static, allowing for the influence of differences in content and context. The fluid nature of online privacy (Metcalf & Crawford, 2016) highlights the need for a flexible boundary line in the context of online communities. In online communities, an individual's original intent in posting may help form different boundaries around what information is public or private. Based on where information shared falls in relation to the boundary for that individual, he or she will have different expectations for how it is treated. CPM highlights the important issue of control of information. Once information is shared with others, they are now considered co-owners of that information, and consequently, should agree on the public vs. private boundary lines. In an online community, once a person has shared a post, all viewers of the post then become co-owners of the information shared in that post. Along this line of thinking, a netnographer would become a co-owner of the information they observe in posts in online communities. The determination of who maintains

primary control of that information and how it falls within individual and group privacy boundaries is key to this entire conversation around ethics. For these reasons, CPM is a relevant and applicable theory to add to the conversation around perceived privacy in online communities.

CPM provides three rule management processes: 1) privacy rule foundations, 2) boundary coordination operations, and 3) boundary turbulence. We will next discuss what each of these looks like in the context of online communities. First, individuals create privacy rule foundations, illustrated by the previously discussed boundary lines between public and private information. In this study, we explore these privacy rules that individuals have created as a foundation for their beliefs in the public vs. private debate of online communities. This individual perception of privacy drives individuals' beliefs and feelings towards how information is shared outside of online communities, such as in the research report of a netnographer. Second, there is the need for boundary coordination operations. The need to coordinate boundaries with others and ensure everyone involved is on the same page is a core focus of the ethics piece of this article. Individuals each have their personal boundaries, but this becomes a collective boundary when the information is shared with others. This collective boundary between netnographers and online community members in netnography is under investigation. Individuals want others to behave in a way that matches their privacy expectations for this now co-owned information (Petronio & Hernandez, 2019). Third, boundary turbulence can be expected. When boundary coordination is not successful or not all individuals comply with this coordination, this causes turbulence among the participants. The ethical debate amongst netnographers is an indicator of this boundary turbulence.

3.3 Privacy Boundary Management

The Privacy Boundary Management model proposed by Chang et al. draws on CPM and highlights initial privacy boundary management among three stages: 1) boundary identification, 2) boundary rule formation, and 3) boundary decision (2018). They introduced privacy boundary management in the context of online banking, and we will demonstrate how this model can be adapted for and contribute to our discussion of netnography in online communities. In the boundary identification stage within online communities, individuals determine where the boundaries within that online community fall with public vs. private information. Because any information shared in an online

community involves creating co-owners of that information, they must identify the coordinated boundaries with the other members of the online community. Once these boundaries are identified, individuals move to the boundary rule formation stage. In this phase, individuals can compare the boundaries they perceive in this online community with their need or desire to share information. They perform a risk-control assessment to determine how much control they will have over the information they share, as well as the risks associated with sharing that information (Chang et al., 2018). Once an individual conducts this risk-control assessment, an individual's boundary rule is formed. After an individual has identified the boundaries of the online community and formed their boundary rules, they move into the boundary decision phase. In the boundary decision phase, individuals reach a self-assessed state of perceived privacy based on the boundary rule they formed. This state of perceived privacy in online communities is precisely what we want to investigate and measure in this article.

A key theme that arose through this investigation into privacy is that, when it comes to personal privacy, there is no universally agreed upon definition or set of rules. Because of this, we must investigate further where privacy lines fall for individuals. Our next step is to empirically measure this level of perceived privacy by examining the opinions of participants in online communities. *RQ1*: What levels of perceived privacy do participants in publicly accessible online communities experience?

4. Informed Consent in the Context of Online Communities

The second issue that Kozinets identified as key to guiding ethics in netnography is informed consent. The ongoing debate around informed consent in netnographic research amongst researchers is interrelated with the ongoing debate around public vs. private spaces on the internet. There is a legal approach to informed consent focusing on the liability of researchers, as well as a moral approach to informed consent focusing more on the autonomous choices of research participants (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986). Netnographical research ethics move past the legal approach and into the moral approach, assuming that if the practice is illegal, there is no further room for debate. The moral and ethical question for researchers to ask here is "just because I can, should I?" There are many historical examples of unethical research involving human subjects, one of the most prominent being the inhumane medical research performed on prisoners in Nazi concentration camps in World War II, which led to the development of the Nuremberg

Code. The Nuremberg Code is a foundational element used by IRBs to determine if research on human subjects is ethical, and the first item in the Nuremberg Code is that "the voluntary consent of a human subject is absolutely essential" (Shuster, 1997).

Informed consent is required for any research being conducted on human subjects, but many researchers have argued that netnographical research should not be treated as research on human subjects due to the public nature of the online postings (Gupta, 2009; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Vo Thanh & Kirova, 2018). Kozinets highlights this consent gap between the expectations of informed consent between researchers and the individuals in these online communities as a powerful concept in need of further exploration (R. Kozinets, 2019). Therefore, the debate here is not around if the well-established guidelines of informed consent should be withheld on this type of human subject research, but whether this methodology constitutes as human subject research at all. The root determinant of that debate is whether these online communities are deemed as a public or private space on the internet, which we have shown is not an easily answered question. In our investigation, we will measure online community members' perceptions of the public vs. private nature of various types of online communities and how this impacts their view on the necessity of informed consent based on different online community contexts. We focus heavily on the participant's opinion in both key issues, because their opinion, and therefore the public perception, of the ethics of the research conducted is rooted in these perceptions. Of course, ethical guidelines shouldn't be governed solely by public perception, but this is a valid data point to consider when making ethical and methodological decisions. *RQ2*: What beliefs regarding the necessity of informed consent do members of online communities hold?

A common analogy used in academia when determining the need for informed consent is that of a public park. The argument is that if a researcher could sit on a bench in a public park and observe a behavior, he doesn't need to gain informed consent from the person engaging in that behavior to include it in his research. Some researchers view a public online community as the public park in this analogy, however Buchanan and Zimmer disagree in their published internet research ethics (2021). They correctly state that public vs. private conceptual distinctions are much more complex for online spaces than face-to-face situations. Online spaces reveal much more information typically over a greater period of time than would be obtained from face-to-face observations, which questions the "public" nature of a public online community. Regardless of which side of

this debate a researcher is on, the core premise behind it is that observations made in public places don't require the informed consent of participants, while those made in private places do. The consent gap highlighted by Kozinets (2019) raises the question of if the participants in online communities share this same basic premise of the necessity of informed consent being based on the public or private nature of the context of the observations. *RQ3*: Do the participants in online communities believe that their right to informed consent is dependent upon the public or private nature of the online community?

5. Method

5.1 Scale Development

The two main areas that we empirically measured were individuals' perceptions of privacy and their beliefs regarding their right to informed consent. To measure the beliefs around privacy of the participants in online communities, we adapted validated measurement items from the literature, drawing heavily from the work of Chang et al.'s privacy boundary management model (2018). *Perceived privacy* was measured using three Likert scale questions adapted from Dinev et al. (2013). We used the three items to compute a highly reliable mean index (M = 3.00; SD = 1.19; α = 0.92). *Perceived privacy control* was measured using four Likert scale questions adapted from Xu et. al (2011). We used the four items to compute a highly reliable mean index (M = 2.51; SD = 1.27; α = 0.88). *Perceived privacy risk* was measured using four Likert scale questions adapted from Dinev and Hart (2006) and Malhotra et al. (2004). We used the four items to compute a highly reliable mean index (M = 3.72; SD = 1.02; α = 0.82). *Privacy concern* was measured using four Likert scale questions adapted from Xu et al. (2011). We used the four items to compute a highly reliable mean index (M = 3.80; SD = 1.06; α = 0.94). *Trust* was measured using two Likert scale questions adapted from Pavlou (2003) and Wu et al. (2012). We used the two items to compute a highly reliable mean index (M = 2.82; SD = 1.08; α = 0.92). We asked all these privacy-related questions in the context of a public online community. In the existing literature, this public online community context is the main source of disagreement among researchers in the public vs. private debate of the internet.

To measure informed consent, we developed scale items based on the core components of informed consent initially argued between Kozinets and Langer and Beckman (R. V. Kozinets, 2002; Langer &

Beckman, 2005), which have continued to spark debate in the years since. Specifically, we asked participants if they believed researchers should receive their consent before using their posts as online community members in a variety of different contexts with different stipulations. We measured if participants in online communities believed researchers should receive their consent before paraphrasing quotes from their posts or directly quoting their posts, both in a situation where their identities were kept anonymous and if they were personally identified. We asked these questions in the context of both public and private versions of social media groups and online forums to determine if participants' opinions on informed consent changed based on the context of the posts and the technological privacy of the online community. While our study is focused on public online communities, we included questions related to the private versions of these online communities for the purpose of comparison.

5.2 Survey Administration

To collect a diverse sample of data from online community participants, we issued this survey on Prolific, an online survey data collection tool initiated by researchers at Cambridge and Oxford. Prolific is considered an equal alternative to the comparable Amazon Mechanical Turk (Peer et al., 2017) and has been used as the survey data collection tool in various studies published in highly regarded peer-reviewed journals (You et al., 2022; Zalmanson et al., 2022). For this survey, respondents were paid and were included in the data set if they met the inclusion criteria of being 19+ years old, an online community member participant, and residing in the United States. After applying the appropriate exclusion criteria, there were 218 survey respondents. Of these 218 respondents, the majority were in the age groups of 21-39 (63%), the majority were female (58%), and the majority had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (58%). We asked survey respondents about their online activity habits, and 73% reported spending at least 2 hours online on a typical day. Additionally, most respondents (56%) reported that they spend at least 1 hour on social media or another online community on a typical day.

6. Results

6.1 Perceived Privacy

To investigate RQ1 and measure the respondents' perception of privacy in the context of publicly accessible online communities, we examined their mean responses for each measure, indicated by a 1-5

Likert scale question, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree". Table 1 shows the validated measures, a high-level definition of the measure, and the mean response of participants for each measure.

To test for any statistically significant differences between different demographic groups (age, gender, and education level), we ran analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses for each of these measures. The results show that the only demographic group that significantly deviated around any of these five measures was the relationship between age group and privacy concern (p = 0.023). Respondents in the 50-59 age group had the lowest levels of privacy concern (M = 3.54), and respondents in the 60+ age group had the highest levels of privacy concern (M = 4.3).

6.2 Informed Consent Beliefs

To investigate RQ2 and measure the respondents' beliefs of the necessity of informed consent in various online community contexts, we examined their mean responses for each measure, indicated by a 1-5 Likert scale question, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree". For each context (public social media group, private social media group, public online forum, and private online forum), participants were asked the same questions about the extent to which they agreed with the statement that a researcher should obtain their consent before browsing their posts, paraphrasing their posts anonymously, paraphrasing their posts with personal identifiers, using direct quotes anonymously, or using direct quotes with personal identifiers. Figure 1 shows the mean response of participants in each context.

To test for any statistically significant differences between different demographic groups (age, gender, and education level), we ran analysis of variance (ANOVA) analyses for each of the questions measuring informed consent beliefs. The results show very few significant deviations between these groups, but there were findings to note around the education level of respondents. There were significant deviations between level of education (specifically respondents who have obtained a professional degree) and the questions asking about the necessity of informed consent when a researcher is browsing a public social media group (p = 0.004), browsing a public forum (p = 0.005), and paraphrasing quotes from a public forum while keeping the author's identity anonymous (p = 0.043). Respondents with a professional degree believed it to be far less necessary than other respondents to obtain informed consent in these contexts. Referencing back to the previous discussion around legal, technological, and perceived privacy, it

makes sense that respondents with a legal background would defer to the definition of legal privacy when considering their beliefs around informed consent in these situations.

6.3 Relationship Between Privacy and Informed Consent Beliefs

To investigate RQ3, we must examine the results of the privacy and informed consent sections of the survey together. The results of our survey demonstrate that online community members believe in the necessity of informed consent in most online contexts. As we would expect, respondents tend to believe informed consent to be most necessary when directly quoting posts and including personal identifiers, and respondents tend to believe informed consent to be least necessary when browsing public online forums for their potential use in a research project. However, respondents still agreed more than disagreed with the need for informed consent in this context of browsing posts on public online forums (M = 3.18).

When asked about various dimensions of privacy in a publicly accessible online community, respondents noted a high level of privacy concern and perceived privacy risk, as well as a low level of trust and perceived privacy control. The average response to perceived privacy was neutral, with a variety of responses indicating agreement, disagreement, or neither agreement or disagreement with the idea that they perceived their online communities as private. These responses indicate a low level of trust and a fair amount of skepticism towards privacy in online communities, which aligns more with the view of online communities as a public place. Following the "public park" argument, this would indicate a lack of need for informed consent. However, respondents shared that they believed there is a need for informed consent. This view seems to contradict the traditional logic in the public vs. private space argument and should be carefully noted by researchers as a potential explanation for the consent gap in netnography.

Table 1. Measure definitions and mean responses

| Measure	Definition	Mean Response
Perceived Privacy	Extent to which the respondent experiences privacy in a publicly accessible online community	3.00
Perceived Privacy Control	Extent to which the respondent is in control of their level of privacy in a publicly accessible online community	2.51
Perceived Privacy Risk	Extent to which the respondent perceives the risk of their information being used or shared in unanticipated ways	3.72
Privacy Concern	Extent to which the respondent is concerned about their information being used or shared in unanticipated ways	3.8
Trust	Extent to which the respondent trusts the online community with their information	2.82
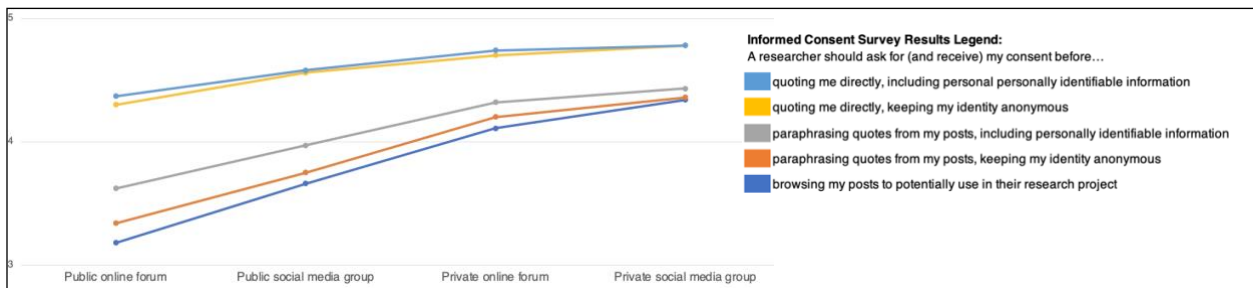
Figure 1. Level of agreement with the necessity of informed consent

7. Conclusion

Since its inception, netnography has generated ongoing conversation regarding the ethical standards and considerations of researchers. Some, like Kozinets, have fallen on the more conservative side of the discussion, calling for more strenuous ethical

guidelines, while others have argued for a less restrictive approach to these guidelines. However, throughout this debate amongst researchers, there has not been an empirical study conducted to measure the beliefs of privacy alongside beliefs around informed consent of the participants of these online communities. While the opinions of these online community members should not be the sole guiding

force in shaping the ethical guidelines of netnography, their voice should be included in the conversation. "Every aspect of dealing with the 'who' of our study – the people involved – is an ethical decision" (Leavy, 2022, p. 25). In this study, we investigated online community members' beliefs and perceptions around the nontrivial, contestable, and interrelated issues of informed consent and privacy. While the academic community agrees that informed consent is necessary for information obtained from people in a private space, the important and interrelated question is whether online communities are considered a public or a private space.

In investigating respondents' beliefs around privacy in online communities, we focused on publicly accessible online communities. These publicly accessible communities tend to be the context of the debate around the public vs. private space designation. We measured different characteristics of privacy as explored by the Privacy Boundary Management Model (Chang et al., 2018) in order to uncover the different privacy rules and boundaries these individuals have created. Respondents seemed to have a healthy skepticism of their levels of privacy within these online communities. These results suggest that members of publicly accessible online communities do not view them as a private space, but also do not view them as an entirely public space.

We acknowledge that there is much more to learn from the participants in online communities as it relates to netnography that was not covered in this study. An interesting potential area of research would be an investigation of why individuals continue to participate in online communities if they are experiencing high levels of privacy concerns and low levels of trust with these communities. A netnographical study of various online communities could investigate the perceived value that the community provides participants and how they determine the benefits of this value to be more important than the risks of participating. Our discussion of CPM offers a potential explanation for this value determination, but this question would benefit from further empirical investigation.

This study contributes to the ongoing discussion of ethics in netnography by including the voice of online community members. We did not attempt to answer the question of if certain netnographic study designs were legal or would be approved by an IRB; instead, we investigated how the public may perceive such a study. Researchers should be aware of this perception among online community members when making methodological and research design decisions throughout their netnographic research studies. We echo the call from so many (Golder et al., 2017; R.

Kozinets, 2019; Zimmer, 2020) that researchers must thoughtfully engage with ethical decision making in the individual contexts of each study. The information gathered in netnography is more than just mere data points, but it represents the life and experience of actual human beings. The results of our survey remind researchers of the humanity of their research subjects as people who can hold seemingly contradictory beliefs of privacy and informed consent.

Like the public park analogy, participants in public online communities are aware that they are not in a purely private space. However, just as a public parkgoer might feel uncomfortable with someone sitting on a bench nearby and closely recording their words and actions, our findings suggest participants in online communities are also not comfortable with this type of unannounced observation. In reference to public observation, IRB guidance compels researchers to consider participants' expectations of privacy even in public places. Building upon this guidance with our findings, we suggest netnographers must consider and respect a participant's perception of privacy in an online community.

8. References

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