

---

## **Chapter V**

# **Blurring the Boundaries: Ethical Considerations for Online Research Using Synchronous CMC Forums**

Danielle Lawson  
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

## **ABSTRACT**

*As use of the Internet has grown, so too has the amount of research concerning various aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC). In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research projects dealing with Internet-based, synchronous chat programs. Although timely, this increased research interest in synchronous chat media is problematic due to potential ethical dilemmas regarding data gathering and research publication. This paper examines the ethical problems related to subject identity, privacy and "chat copyright" in synchronous online research. Additionally, it addresses possible strategies for minimizing ethical conflict, while maintaining research integrity.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last two decades, as use of the Internet for business as well as artistic and social expression has grown, so too has the amount of research focussing on various aspects of the burgeoning Internet culture. Researchers from many social science fields,

such as education (Tu & Corry, 2001; Beller, 1998; Chester & Gwynne, 1998), psychology (Nosek, Mahzarin, & Greenwald, 2002; Wallace, 1999; Turkle, 1995), communication (Rafaeli, Sudweeks, Konstan, & Mabry, 1998; Riva & Galimberti, 1998; Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994) and gender studies (Witmer & Katzman, 1997; Herring, 1996a; Saviki, Lingenfelter, & Kelly, 1996; Allen, 1995; We, 1993), have gravitated toward the Internet as a research medium and source of data. An extensive amount of Internet research has examined asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) forums, such as news groups and e-mail lists, where additions to conversations are not instantaneously posted to other members, rather they can take anywhere from several minutes to several days (Rafaeli et al., 1998; Saviki et al., 1996; Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kerr & Hiltz, 1982). However, in recent years researchers have begun to take an interest in synchronous, “real-time” chat environments such as Multi-User Domains<sup>1</sup> (MUDs) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), where conversational texts are posted to others in the forum almost instantaneously (Cherny, 1999; Paolillo, 1999; Hentschel, 1998; Rodino, 1997; Reid, 1991).

Despite the increasing numbers of researchers utilizing synchronous CMC programs as a research medium, to date very little has been written specifically concerning the ethical issues facing “synchronous CMC” (SCMC) researchers. The ethical issues SCMC researchers are faced with are similar to those presented to asynchronous CMC and face-to-face (FTF) researchers: whether to gain informed consent and how to handle the issue of copyright while protecting participant anonymity. However, Reid (1996) suggests that SCMC research is more ethically complex than asynchronous CMC research.

This chapter will broadly discuss the ethical issues of informed consent and copyright as they relate to both asynchronous and synchronous media, while discussing SCMC’s specific concerns, including: personal identity creation and maintenance in SCMC, when and why consent for research is needed and the question of whether SCMC chat should be treated as casual speech or written text for the purposes of copyright. It will also discuss several strategies for reducing ethical conflict while retaining research integrity.

## **WHO ARE YOU?—THE NATURE OF IDENTITY IN SCMC**

*“When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass” (Turtle, 1995, p. 117).*

Identity as a term has many different meanings depending upon the academic field and theoretical perspective from which one is working. Although it has been acknowledged that a user’s psychological identity (both for their “real” persona and their online persona) does play a part in the creation and maintenance of online identity (Wallace, 1999; Turtle, 1995), the present chapter is concerned with “identity” as the online presence/persona a user creates specifically for a SCMC forum.

19 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/blurring-boundaries-ethical-considerations-online/28294](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/blurring-boundaries-ethical-considerations-online/28294)

## Related Content

---

### Modeling Uncertainty with Interval Valued Fuzzy Numbers: Case Study in Risk Assessment

Palash Dutta (2018). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 1-17).

[www.irma-international.org/article/modeling-uncertainty-with-interval-valued-fuzzy-numbers/204600](http://www.irma-international.org/article/modeling-uncertainty-with-interval-valued-fuzzy-numbers/204600)

### Integrating User Stories in the Design of Augmented Reality Application

Carlos Ankoraand Aju D. (2022). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 1-19).

[www.irma-international.org/article/integrating-user-stories-in-the-design-of-augmented-reality-application/304809](http://www.irma-international.org/article/integrating-user-stories-in-the-design-of-augmented-reality-application/304809)

### The Influence of the Application of Agile Practices in Software Quality Based on ISO/IEC 25010 Standard

Gloria Arcos-Medinaand David Mauricio (2020). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 27-53).

[www.irma-international.org/article/the-influence-of-the-application-of-agile-practices-in-software-quality-based-on-isoiec-25010-standard/252827](http://www.irma-international.org/article/the-influence-of-the-application-of-agile-practices-in-software-quality-based-on-isoiec-25010-standard/252827)

### A Psychological Perspective on Mobile Learning

Melody M. Terrasand Judith Ramsay (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition* (pp. 6398-6411).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-psychological-perspective-on-mobile-learning/184336](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-psychological-perspective-on-mobile-learning/184336)

### Improving the Integration of Distributed Applications

José Carlos Martins Delgado (2021). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fifth Edition* (pp. 217-232).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/improving-the-integration-of-distributed-applications/260188](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/improving-the-integration-of-distributed-applications/260188)