
Chapter XV

Studying Adolescents Online: A Consideration of Ethical Issues

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ABSTRACT

Despite the enormous potential of the Internet as a research tool and environment, implementing youth research in online environments raises significant ethical issues. This chapter addresses two quandaries that surfaced in the author's own research on adolescent home page authors. First, the necessity and feasibility of obtaining parental consent in online youth research is considered. Second, the chapter discusses the ethical responsibilities of Internet researchers who encounter distressing disclosure authored by youth online. The chapter aims to illustrate the contexts in which such ethical issues may arise and to provide suggestions for Internet researchers who focus on adolescent populations.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, adolescents have increasingly embraced the Internet as a forum to express themselves, communicate with peers, meet new friends and find information. Indeed, recent surveys show that almost three-quarters of children between

the ages of 12 and 17 go online (Pew Internet Project, 2001). In light of this rising number, researchers have begun to recognize the potential of the Internet as a tool to learn more about youth populations who have historically been difficult to investigate, as well as to shed light on how youth are using the Internet in their everyday lives. Because Internet researchers are able to overcome many geographic, time and physical barriers that traditionally restricted youth research, the potential content and scope of their inquiries is greatly expanded.

Despite the enormous potential of the Internet as a research tool and environment, it is important to recognize that conducting youth research in online environments raises significant ethical issues that differ somewhat from those raised in offline settings. Indeed, the very aspects of the Internet (e.g., its potential for anonymity and lack of authority) that make it an appealing place for kids to interact are also those aspects that introduce unique ethical quandaries for researchers. In this chapter, I will address two such quandaries that surfaced in my own research on adolescent home page authors (Stern, 1999, 2002a, 2002b). The first issue considered is the necessity and feasibility of obtaining parental consent in online youth research. The second discussion explores the ethical responsibilities of Internet researchers who encounter distressing disclosure authored by youth online. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the type of situations in which such dilemmas may arise and to provide some suggestions for Internet researchers as they attempt to ethically navigate their online inquiries about youth.

STUDYING HUMAN COMMUNICATION ON THE INTERNET

Despite the recent surge in Internet studies, the scholarly community remains at odds regarding the answer to a pivotal question guiding ethical decision making in online research: Does Internet research constitute human subjects research? Distinguishing whether certain research involves “human subjects” is important because human-subjects research is governed by specific laws and guidelines in American research institutions and universities. These laws and guidelines aim to protect research participants’ rights. Traditionally, when deliberating this distinction, the United States Department of Health and Human services suggests researchers ask themselves (a) if there is some kind of interaction or intervention with a living person that would not be occurring, except for the research project at hand, or (b) if identifiable private data/information will be obtained for this research in a form associable with the individual (Office for Protection from Research Risks, 2000). Should either of these situations arise, a researcher’s project would be categorized as human-subjects research.

While these demarcations seemed sufficient in years past, they are somewhat inadequate for Internet researchers, whose “virtual” data collection is more amorphously defined than typical offline research. Admittedly, for those who interact in some way with people in the online context explicitly because of their research endeavor (e.g., in interviews or surveys), the project clearly constitutes human subject research, just as it would in a real-life setting. But for those who study the communications of Internet users, yet who do not actually interact with any living person, the issue is less clear cut

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