Ethical considerations and challenges for using digital ethnography to research vulnerable populations

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ABSTRACT

The social technologies of the web permit new techniques of research to emerge, often with novel ethical challenges. One such technique is digital ethnography. While there is a robust literature associated with digital approaches to ethnography, there is a lack of development in how digital ethnography can be used when researching vulnerable populations. This article seeks to clarify these methodological considerations, addressing the role of the researcher, data representation, and the ethical considerations necessary to research vulnerable consumers. We consider the various roles that digital ethnography can play in understanding emerging forms of social order in vulnerable consumer contexts, in generating social knowledge that is nuanced, participative, holistic, and practically orientated. We highlight a selection of the core issues concerning the use, practice and dissemination of digital ethnographic research available to social researchers, and how the incorporation of such methods can invigorate research on vulnerable consumers with new methodological innovations.

1. Introduction

Marketing requires customer insight to understand, predict, and change behaviours, and ultimately to perform its function of facilitating exchange and delivering value for multiple stakeholders. Technological advancements can help deliver this insight, and have helped create an array of research opportunities that no longer rely on consumers self-reporting their motivations and behaviours, through techniques such as neuromarketing (Spence, 2019), the predictive and behavioural analytical opportunities of 'big data' (Sivarajah, Kamal, Irani, & Weerakkody, 2017; Wang & Hajli, 2017), and the relatively easy access researchers now have to geographically dispersed and hard to reach consumers on the world wide web (Hewson, Vogel, & Laurent, 2016). Digital developments and opportunities to gather data through new technologies raise a number of ethical challenges related to issues such as privacy and security (Piaguet, 2014). The commercial exploitation of data raises questions of ownership, protection, and transparency, which are beginning to be addressed. Discussion of the risks that may emerge from digital research techniques, that delve deeply into the private sphere and personal experience of consumers (Peñaloza, 1995), such as a digital ethnography or 'netnography', is an evolving, dynamic field of interest for scholars from a variety of disciplines (Lefever, Dal, &

Matthiasdottir, 2007; Martin, 2015).

The ethical concerns of technological developments in data capture are brought sharply into focus when vulnerable consumers are considered. Machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence tools may pose particular risks for vulnerable consumers due to the lack of an ethical decision-making framework. The digital arena is developing at a fast pace, and there is still a dearth of regulation in many areas, with the depth of data we reveal and unwittingly share with companies often remaining unknown. One notable exception has been the European Union's general data protection regulation (GDPR), which has been implemented in the EU and EEA since 2018, and consists of regulations which aim to protect the data, rights, and privacy of individual citizens. GDPR principles, such as those of 'data minimization' and the 'right to be forgotten' potentially sit uncomfortably with the practices of ethnographers, who collect large repositories of data that sit in a liminal state of being that is both in the public domain, as well as contained within secure data storage systems within universities (Politou, Alepis, & Patsakis, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to invigorate the digital research of vulnerable populations with ethical concerns that sensitise researchers to the potential issues digital ethnography poses. The significance of the paper, and its contribution to this special issue, is to take stock of key

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developments and perspectives regarding ethical protocols in digital research, highlighting particular dimensions and debates for researchers who are interested in conducting ethnographic fieldwork at the digital interface (Bengry-Howell, Wiles, Nind, & Crow, 2011; Coleman, 2009; Costello, McDermott, & Wallace, 2017). The field of digital research is vast, but our focus is particularly on how social researchers can ethically research and represent vulnerable populations by improving the use and quality of digital ethnographic approaches. These issues include reconceptualising online field sites, and the ethical considerations that are particular to using digital ethnography to research vulnerable populations. While there is a growing body of literature that studies vulnerable consumers (Garrett & Toumanoff, 2010; Hamilton, Dunnett, & Piacentini, 2015; Jafari, Dunnett, Hamilton, & Downey, 2013; Morgan, Schuler, & Stoltman, 1995), fewer scholars are drawing attention to the risks faced by vulnerable populations, who rely upon social media to gain access to resources. We offer a timely methodological and theoretical synthesis of how digital ethnography can make key contributions to researching vulnerable populations that advocates data protection, privacy, and ethics.

Our approach to digital ethnography and consumer vulnerability in this paper is largely a conceptual one. In the following section, we review extant theory on consumer vulnerability and sensitise the reader to key debates within the field, while incorporating narratives from our own research experiences. We then take those arguments into the applied context of digital marketing where we highlight the special considerations researchers must address when researching vulnerable populations, alongside practical recommendations for researchers in this field.

2. Consumer vulnerability

Consumer vulnerability is concerned with the potential risks and social consequences populations or individuals face in different consumption contexts (Baker, Gentry, & Rittenburg, 2005). Within this literature, there are historical debates surrounding the concept of vulnerability, its scope, and its application (Hill, 1995), but most explorations find a loss of personal control is a primary element that constitutes consumer vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005). There is also some agreement that risks and benefits should be appropriately balanced whilst researching vulnerable populations. The proposed strategy for subjects' recruitment should be fair, and voluntary, and informed consent should be sought from each potential subject (Coleman, 2009).

A key tenet for those researching vulnerable populations is to ensure participants are empowered in their own representations, and given agency in their interactions with researchers. An inherent challenge in maintaining this relationship in a digital age is that data representation may have unintended outcomes beyond the control of individual researchers and their participants. For example, the identification of textual data in a research output can mean that specific individuals can be traced. Visual data representations can pinpoint specific geographical areas. Researching vulnerable populations requires that special attention is paid to the design of the studies, and to the collection and dissemination of data. Protection of rights, wellbeing, safety, privacy and confidentiality are all crucial elements that must be prioritized while studying and researching vulnerable communities. Shivayogi (2013) emphasizes that ethical infringements to data collection and dissemination, especially within socially sensitive settings associated with stigma or mental illness, could bring these vulnerable individuals into disrepute, endangering them within their social fabric, where they are already disadvantaged.

Vulnerability can either be perceived as a situational, short-run phenomenon, or a more enduring, even permanent state (Mansfield & Pinto, 2008). We concur with Baker et al. (2005) proposition that vulnerability is best understood through lived experience and constructed through immersed participatory approaches. The ethics of

marketing to vulnerable populations in ways that are seen to take advantage of their vulnerability has been argued by some to be morally wrong (Brenkert, 1998; Sher, 2011). Others have questioned this assertion, proposing that whilst vulnerable populations are potentially less capable of resisting manipulative or misleading marketing techniques, the ethical problem is with the techniques themselves rather than the fact that they are directed towards vulnerable groups (Palmer & Hedberg, 2013). Whilst this is an interesting debate, our interest in discussing socially sensitive research projects, in which participants could be defined as 'vulnerable', is that we consider such populations to be particularly insightful for illuminating some of the key ethical concerns that emerge with the use of digital ethnography.

Advice for digital ethnographers in terms of the ethical dilemmas of researching and marketing to vulnerable populations online is scarce. With a few notable exceptions (Belk, 2007; Kozinets, 2015; Sparks, Collins, & Kearns, 2016) much of the work concerning the conduct of ethnographic research online provides no particular reference to vulnerable or disadvantaged consumers or populations. There are exceptions, for instance the European Commission has guidelines for researchers dealing with sensitive political issues, or conducting research in countries with repressive governments (EC, 2018: 17). Whilst there are broader guides to the ethics of internet research (AOIR, 2012; Salmons, 2015), ethical standards for studying vulnerable populations ethnographically online are generally lacking. Thus providing a concise review of some of the key areas of consideration and debate for the audience of this special issue is a core motivation for this paper.

2.1. The continuum of vulnerability

Every internet user can experience online vulnerability, whether they would be deemed a 'vulnerable' individual or not. Our daily online practices potentially make us vulnerable, with privacy risks posed by sharing not only personal information but the generation of any information that distinguishes one person from another, such as usage, or sharing data that ties a device ID to a person, which could be used for "re-identifying anonymous data" (Politou et al., 2018: 3). These unconscious online practices might expose users to a variety of online vulnerabilities such as data misuse, identity theft, online harassment, and exposure to inappropriate content (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Online vulnerability has been defined as an individual's capacity to experience detriments to their psychological, reputational, or physical wellbeing, as a result of the experiences that they may encounter whilst engaging in online activities (Buglass, Binder, Betts, & Underwood, 2017). Researchers have proposed that the way users behave online, for example on social media sites, can lead to negative consequences that derive from "psychological needs deficits relating to social control, social connectivity, and belonging derived from perceived feelings of social ostracism" (Buglass et al., 2017: 249). Reflecting on the discussion of vulnerability, a defining feature was seen to be a lack of personal control, which may be heightened or exacerbated in online contexts through psychological traits such as fear of missing out (hereafter, FOMO), and induce harmful behaviours and a decrease in wellbeing.

Online vulnerability is complex. There are also psychological and social benefits to engaging online, in terms of social connectivity, self-esteem, and support (Burke & Kraut, 2016). However, consumers' behaviours online that result from, for instance, social monitoring, social comparison and FOMO, can lead to excessive use of social media platforms and self-disclosure, which makes them vulnerable to the types of abuse, data misuse, and deception that are commonly reported in the media. Another layer of vulnerability emerges when individuals are themselves vulnerable. Teenagers, for example, comprise a vulnerable group which has been researched extensively. Livingstone and Haddon (2009) overview 400 studies across Europe and reveal five in ten teenagers have given away personal information, four in ten have witnessed online pornography, three in ten have seen violent content, two in ten have been victim to bullying, and one in ten has met

someone first encountered online. With the increased availability of smartphones and high-speed connectivity, it is likely these figures are higher today.

Similar risks of harm could be considered with other groups online, such as the bereaved, repressed, abused, depressed, and stigmatized, who may use digital self-presentation and social interaction as a coping mechanism for self-transformation, but experience vulnerability and disempowerment (Baker et al., 2005). Therefore, we propose that online vulnerability should be considered as a continuum, in which the blurring of online/offline lives can increase the potential negative consequences, and the scalability of potential risk and harm. This broader understanding of online vulnerability and how vulnerability could be aggravated online means it is important to consider how more general advice about the ethics of digital research should be reconsidered or enhanced in light of online vulnerability.

3. Digital ethnographic considerations

3.1. Defining the field

On the surface, the notion of the field or a field site implies a bounded spatial aesthetic that is often geographically specific, readily observable, culturally distinct, and is regularly viewed as a vessel containing the attributes of a singular cultural group (Burrell, 2009; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). This clearly defined and somewhat romanticised characterisation is often attributed to early anthropologists that travelled to far-away lands and 'discovered' other cultures. The characterisation of a field site as a demarcated space was reinforced by structural anthropologists, who rendered observable cultural phenomena into hierarchical relationships, dichotomies and the classification of systems (Ortner, 1994). The notion of a field site as a bounded structural category for analysis, which dominated much of the early work on data collection practices, still permeates ethnographic thinking today through the reinforcement of distinctions between offline and online behaviour (Boellstorff, 2008).

The articulation of a field site as a social construction through the use of participant observation and researcher analysis is an important insight to understanding a digital world, where research participants live in both online and offline domains, and often do not draw distinctions between the two. The emergence of digital worlds has pushed ethnographers to reconceptualise spatial considerations and what constitutes a field site. While it is not uncommon for ethnographers to identify a singular online community through their web presence (Marchi, Giachetti, & de Gennaro, 2011; Muniz & Schau, 2005), the blurring and fragmentation of online and offline behaviour, coupled with research participants' presence in multiple dimensions and on various platforms, highlights the continued "erosion of spatially bounded social worlds" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992: 11). It requires ethnographers to more clearly articulate what constitutes a field site.

While spatial considerations are important, defining digital fields in consumer vulnerability research adds additional layers of complexity. One key challenge is how we demarcate consumer vulnerability in digital spaces as field sites. As researchers, are we approaching vulnerability as a macro category of observation, where all consumers within our unit of analysis are categorised as vulnerable? Alternatively, do we only consider participants as vulnerable when they actually experience vulnerability? We can certainly turn to scholarship to help us understand typologies of vulnerability (Baker et al., 2005; Commuri & Ekici, 2008; Schultz & Holbrook, 2009). However, what this scholarship does not adequately address is the potential hidden nature to how participants may experience vulnerability in digital spaces. For example, when social media data is being collected and monitored, by researchers or governmental institutions, but not actioned upon, are consumers vulnerable?

What compounds matters is the type of consumer group researchers are interested in studying. Some vulnerable communities are more

willing to be transparent and accept public transparency in areas of support where non-judgement is encouraged (see Parkinson, Schuster, Mulcahy, & Taiminen, 2017 work on *WeightWatchers*), whereas sites of political activism require much longer periods of activity, disclosure and transparency in order to develop field relations and trust (see Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). With these considerations in mind, we turn our attention to the challenges associated with the role of the fieldworker, the ethical implications of covert approaches, and the potential violation of trust.

3.2. Covert approaches

Some see the advantage of covert research as having the ability to observe web interaction in a type of "undisturbed natural state" (Hine, 2008: 262) that is free from researcher influences and biases. The issue that covert approaches raises is the notion of 'lurking' (Hine, 2000) whereby a researcher invisibly mines the web for data without interaction, or acts as a participant without researcher transparency. While there are obvious ethical issues associated with this approach raised within our ethical considerations section, our focus here is on how covert approaches impact upon digital ethnographic knowledge production.

Previous scholarship dedicated to digital ethnographic approaches reveals a high proportion of scholars who have historically utilised covert methods over more overt approaches (Murthy, 2008). In fact, many of the early pioneers of digital ethnographic methods saw the unobtrusive nature of digital technologies as "faster, simpler, and less expensive" (Kozinets, 2002: 61) than more traditional ethnographic approaches. Knowledge production in this frame effectively privileges the role of the researcher as able to access cultural meaning production without having to enact a subject position (Beaulieu, 2004).

Many of these early characterisations of field relations were not a conscious attempt to appropriate data without participants' consent, but were more reflective of what many scholars saw as the disruptive research capabilities of the web. The underlying epistemological undercurrent to this stream of research was that many online communities acted as a spatially demarcated, bounded entities, which enabled participants to transcend physical boundaries and enact the embodiment of their digital self. The reinforcement of digital platforms as "a *sui generis* social arena" (Robinson & Schulz, 2011: 182) led covert ethnographers to often research marginalised groups, ranging from male users of prostitution (Sharp & Earle, 2003) to pro-anorexic supporters (Brotsky & Giles, 2007).

We align ourselves with previous scholarship that highlights how participatory approaches to digital research are critical for member crosschecks and meaning verification (Hine, 2000). This position is reinforced by a more recent movement away from researchers privileging the distinctiveness of online communities as having unique social forms of practice that are particular to a single community (Kozinets, 2010; Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014). Despite the limitations of covert approaches, digital ethnographers might consider incorporating covert approaches for a brief period during the early stages of an ethnographic experience to help them familiarise themselves with the digital presence of particular communities, forms of practice, language, and the symbolic resources that participants draw from. In this form of research practice, non-participant data collection can serve as an orienting device (Hine, 2008), which can enable ethnographers to test the waters before immersing themselves into a field setting. Digital ethnographers should explore the nuances of how consent protocols are used in online studies (Jong, 2019; Kozinets, 2015), which may require a reordering of the consent process and its communication. We now turn our attention to a more detailed and nuanced discussion of the unique challenges scholars face in conducting digital ethnographic work, making specific reference to fieldwork with vulnerable groups.

4. Challenges and ethical considerations for conducting digital ethnography with vulnerable consumers

While research ethics are a core component to all social research, digital ethnography poses an additional set of unique challenges that must be addressed while researching vulnerable populations. A key starting-point is considering the research object itself: are we re-searching individuals or documents? Individuals tend to be protected by ethical procedures whereas documents are not, leading some researchers to conclude that if human subjects are removed from the frame when interrogating web-based objects, ethical considerations such as informed consent are not normally necessary (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). Mosca (2014) argues that when considering the internet as a source of information, documents, comments posts, and tweets on blogs, websites, and social media platforms can be accessed in order to collect information on the participants' history, actions, behaviours, and other characteristics.

Another perspective is that digital, and other modes of mediated ethnography, challenge existing conventions of ethics and create tensions between ethnographic practices, suggesting a need for a new, mindful way of 'doing ethics' in digital contexts (Markham, 2003). Our perspective aligns with the latter, and in the following section we address core ethical concerns which are related to a researcher's fieldwork identity and protecting a participant's anonymity, both of which have significant consequences for the epistemic practice of the ethnographer, and for debates around information privacy. Our aim here is to sensitise researchers to some of the ethical challenges associated with digital research on vulnerable individuals.

4.1. Role of the researcher: transparency, self-reflexivity, and sensitising

Our concern with the role of the digital ethnographer is from three ethical perspectives: researcher transparency, self-reflexivity, and sensitising. In terms of transparency, the researcher may disclose his or her presence, inform participants about the research, and consistently and overtly interact with informants (Murthy, 2008). Yet even in cases where the ethnographer is virtually present, the speed and the volume of postings within a thread of conversation can quickly cause the role of the researcher to recede into the background. Unless researchers actively manage their research presence, they run the risk of falling into a covert research role in order to collect data, a subject position that exemplifies 'lurking'. Lurking on the web refers, as mentioned, to the epistemic position of a researcher who passively watches web interaction unfold without interacting in the setting. While this subject position also occurs in offline participant observation, the web affords a higher degree of invisibility (Ebo, 1998; Malthaner, 2014) than the physical world and often creates a perception of privacy, as participants are often only cognisant of the people with whom they are actively interacting (Barnes, 2004).

There is no prescription that details how digital ethnographers can actively declare their research interests to the participants that they are studying, although various ways of dealing with this issue in the digital realm have been suggested (Costello et al., 2017; Yeow, Johnson, & Faraj, 2006). Kozinets (2015), for instance, discusses the complexities around researcher transparency, and proposes strategies that can be used to mitigate the risks of lurking in digital spaces, including strategies for dealing with vulnerable groups. While on the surface this may seem like a straightforward proposition, it is not. If the ethnographer does interact, they become organising elements of these online spaces, co-constructing the informant with whom they are interacting, contributing to the development of their identity, and creating the field in which the study occurs (Markham, 2003). This co-construction of space immerses both the researcher and the research participants in guiding the topic of conversation and the nature of the dialogue. If digital ethnographers are too strict in adhering to researcher transparency, it disrupts the flow of interaction, and impedes their ability "to

understand the medium" (Bruckman, 2002: 218). If ethnographers are too passive in declaring their research position, they run the risk of unethically exploiting their participants.

A fieldwork encounter that highlighted this tension was doctoral research exploring politically motivated social movements in Palestine (Nazzal, 2017). The study highlighted the tensions that exist between online and offline behaviour and the difficulty in separating these behaviours. Participants were sometimes recruited through active *Facebook* groups, and it was soon discovered that there was a cross-over between online and offline realms. In fact, the movement itself was somewhat facilitated through social media sites, as expressed by a core activist and organiser below:

> We were witnessing a new revolutionary youth spirit in our oppressed Arab world. On TVs we were watching Tunisian and Egyptian youths demonstrating and asking for their own rights, it was moving and inspiring […]. We started by mobilising our close networks, and then created a Facebook page to announce the demonstration. On that evening, I was threatened over the phone from the Palestinian police to delete the event because it was obvious that I was the admin […]. Any quick search on the internet can show up my name.

This quote underlines the importance of anonymity and protection. It also expresses the connectivity between online and offline spaces in the participants' lives, as well as the importance of being able access social media to mobilise political organisation. It demonstrates that the challenges of building trust with participants, as political activists can become targets of the police, and they become guarded about digital-social interactions that do not facilitate conditions of mutual confidence.

An additional challenge to collecting digital research data in this context was the inability of the researcher to adequately express their own involvement in the research, whilst retaining a reflexive distance to it, a problem that has also been articulated by other netnographic researchers (Weijo et al., 2014). Even though the researcher was previously involved in the political movement, there were different factions to the political movement that were not always in agreement nor transparent online. The researcher in this context had to introduce them self formally offline, and provide links to their university and their institutional email account to avoid suspicion.

To reconcile this position, reflexivity was constantly needed to avoid the risk of 'going native', and maintaining a critical distance from the participants and their stories presented a constant challenge (Orgad, 2005). Researcher 'self-reflexivity' towards their relation to the research object is another key ethical consideration. A call for self-re-flexivity is a call to acknowledge the way in which the researcher's knowledge about the world influences research claims, and to acknowledge what the researcher brings with them in terms of personal and social biases to the object of inquiry (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Employing reflexivity as a 'sensitising device' empowers the researchers' decision making with regard to the field study, what is considered to be meaningful data, and how ethically to represent the lived experiences of the studied subjects (Maclean, Harvey, & Stringfellow, 2017).

4.2. Data collection: anonymity, privacy and protection

An underlying tenet to all social research is to protect the identities of research participants when they ask a researcher to do so. For social scientists, the publicly available data from social media platforms constitutes a tantalising field site for researching important theoretical domains such as the dynamics of relationships, identity, self-esteem, political engagement, and collective action. As mentioned, some researchers propose that using publicly available electronic documents, even if accessing personal information, does not constitute a violation of privacy, as it is not a 'normatively' private context where individuals can reasonably expect others to protect their privacy (von Benzon,

2019; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). Yet this perspective does not adequately reflect the increasing importance of privacy concerns, and the ethnographer's ethical imperative to inform and protect his or her research subjects.

This is especially pertinent to researchers who investigate vulnerable populations. For example, in ongoing ethnographic research by the first author involving Parkinson's disease, some early onset participants frequented Parkinson's support forums to help them cope with their initial diagnosis. In some cases this was done before they had told extended family members, friends and co-workers. We found that they included their name and photo on these sites, which could be traced using internet search engines. While these participants had voluntarily chosen the way in which they wanted to represent themselves, internet users often interact in digital spaces without considering the technical and storage capabilities of internet technologies (García-Peñalvo, Colomo-Palacios, & Lytras, 2012), which potentially puts them at risk. Even in cases of informed consent, ethnographers must take special precautions in anonymising and protecting the participants in a study.

Another example relates to the ethical concerns experienced by one of the authors (Nazzal, 2017) in their Palestinian fieldwork, where moral, political, professional, and social obligations were often at play. As previously mentioned, the web affords a higher degree of visibility (Ebo, 1998), which might facilitate the tracking of the participants' online identities and relationships. In Palestine, a country which has experienced considerable political turbulence and civic unrest in recent years, the dangers of inadvertently exposing the identities of activists is readily apparent, given the political context is volatile and political criticism is not permitted. In this regard, Malthaner (2014: 186) comments that:

In the context of authoritarian regimes and violent conflicts, these consequences can be severe, either because participants may be identified as members of armed groups, oppositional movements, or as dissident intellectuals… Consequently, the protection of participants' identity, precise locations of research, etc., must be given highest priority.

In this study, close attention was paid to protecting the identities of the activists who could be put at risk from the exposure of the research data and findings. Respecting confidentiality involved protecting the data and keeping it secure from the public domain, which helped safeguard the subjects from potential harm, from the secret police and government.

As data collection continued, it became apparent that the government and police had invested in creating social media propaganda to denounce the political activists as 'outsider groups who carry a foreign agenda'. One female activist explained how social media was used to denounce the movement:

A journalist recorded these moments when we [referring mostly to female activists] were fighting and swearing, and the journalist fabricated the video as if we are swearing at the police and it went viral on social media […] under the name 'shame on these girls' and 'bitches of Ramallah'. The majority of public opinion was against us, swearing at us and being 'ashamed' how Palestinian girls could be that 'rude' […]. We were threatened by the police and some thugs to get arrested and beaten any moment of time if we were seen in the streets […] we [herself and another female activist] stayed at home for around ten days.

The ongoing struggle with the participants' confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity was ever present due to the significant risk of harm associated with political dissent in authoritarian countries like Palestine. This also draws attention of the importance of data triangulation, and the potential for researchers to collect netnographic data that misrepresents vulnerable groups. While some scholars advocate data fabrication to protect informants' identities (Markham, 2012), we advocate that with some vulnerable groups it is important to verify social media data through private social media channels and offline interactions.

Researchers may need to create a composite dialogue through paraphrasing the participants' quotations, paying careful attention to changing details of the data, and the social media platform, to assure participants' confidentiality and privacy. Bringing activists under the spotlight and disclosing the dynamics of activism might expose participants to surveillance, repression, and personal threats. Therefore, providing limited, or even untruthful data must be considered.

Projects which have used social media platforms such as *Facebook* for data collection (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008) have followed rigorous strategies to protect the identity of subjects, but have been exposed for their shortcomings. Zimmer (2010) notes, for example, how the use of pseudonyms does not go far enough in anonymising research participants if they can still be re-identified in relation to unique factors such as physical, economic, cultural, or social identity. The increasing sophistication of web search engines and the availability of databases that capture and archive the history of web-pages over time mean that ethnographic texts can be traced back to quotes in the public forums in which they were posted. Additionally, if field researchers are identified by broader constituencies as researching a vulnerable group, it has the potential to draw attention to research participants as interactions unfold in real time. Anonymisation not only refers to those studied, but also to how the researcher is represented to those outside of vulnerable populations.

Another issue that presents an enormous challenge for researchers are data protection and privacy regulations that now exist at national (in the UK, DPA 2018), supranational (GDPR) and international (IDPL) levels. Protocols and guidelines have been developed to help researcher's understand and comply with new legislation such as the GDPR (EC, 2018; UKRI, 2018) but this issue is undoubtedly challenging. Politou et al. (2018), for instance, discuss the implications of the 'right to be forgotten' and to withdraw consent, which is particularly challenging in digital systems which, unlike pen and paper systems, remember everything. This right means that individuals can request to be for their data to be erased by all data controllers. Whilst this may sound relatively simple, data may have been shared with colleagues and co-authors, saved in multiple locations, and potentially anonymised, meaning that tracing it and ensuring its deletion is potentially problematic.

The practice of digital ethnography requires a subtle interpretation of traditional ethical concerns of privacy and consent, and Markham (2003: 55) notes that it is vital to sustain "non-centralized, non-canonized, and non-standardized approaches" to new communication technologies and cultural phenomena that "enact reflexive adaptation to the context" (2003: 62). In other words, rather than following the prescriptions of institutional review boards or traditional ethnographic axioms, the digital ethnographer must grapple with novel ethical questions and dilemmas, and adapt to determine an appropriate 'mindful' pathway.

4.3. Data representation: risk, harm, and vulnerability

While conducting netnographic research, the researcher needs to think about data representation. Firstly, digital ethnographers should evaluate what is considered meaningful data, what is to be excluded, and how data can be filtered into appropriate categories for interpretation and analysis. A digital ethnographer must pay attention to the analytical lens through which s/he examines the visual, verbal, and interactive data presented online. Reflexivity on the data collected, and the way it is presented, should be one of the major ethical considerations as the researcher filters data based on critical reflection and ethical research standards. The way in which virtual ethnographers record, (re)construct, represent and convey (sub)cultural identities and actions have significant ramifications for how such groups and individuals are understood and responded to by a variety of academic and lay audiences (Banks, 2014). There needs to be sensitivity from the

researcher to the fact that "every choice we make about how to represent the self, the participants, and the cultural context under study contributes to how these are understood, framed, and responded to by readers, future students, policy makers, and the like" (Markham, 2005: 811).

The intricacies of data representation are highlighted by data collected in Palestine, where the researcher discovered that conditions of online surveillance and punitive action had worsened. The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media reported in 2018 that Israeli forces arrested more than 300 Palestinians from the West Bank in 2017 because of social media posts. Widespread digital rights violations by the Fateh-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the *de facto* government of Hamas in the Gaza Strip were also reported (Human Rights Watch Report, 2018). New laws and legislation were introduced by the Palestinian state to reinforce control and surveillance over social media accounts. The researcher found evidence of 'digital occupation', and the mass surveillance of Palestinian social media accounts. In this context, attention was drawn towards vulnerable groups, and predictive policing technologies were implemented, through which thousands of Palestinian social media accounts were scanned and analysed, with individuals identified as potential suspects for a future 'attacks against Israeli targets' (Hashtag Palestine, 2017 Report). This 2017 Report cited an official press release by an Israeli cyber unit which confirmed that *Facebook* accepted 85 percent of the Israeli government requests to delete content and the accounts of Palestinians in the year 2017, effectively stripping these vulnerable consumers of the following they had generated.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In our research, it became apparent that navigating online fields, and making decisions about vulnerability and harm were highly complex, contextual, and fluid. Social media has become a key medium for vulnerable consumers in linking them into a broader community and empowering them with a voice. At the same time, when digital ethnographers remove data from their embedded social state on the web, they might draw unwitting attention to social interactions that have the potential to marginalise people or sanction them. While the internet can provide digital empowerment for both vulnerable consumers and digital ethnographers, the threat of surveillance and associated risks pose unique challenges.

The importance of this paper is to shed light on how ethnographic research can draw attention to the practices, language, and actions of our participants. In some cases, this can give consumers a voice that often goes under-represented. In other cases, it can draw unwarranted attention to those that are the most vulnerable.

Our aim has not been to create prescriptive advice as to how digital ethnographers should practice ethnography, but to interrogate the steps associated with conducting an ethnography, and highlight important reflexive, ethical, and representational issues in our work. When researching vulnerable consumers and representing them, digital ethnographers must be aware of 'the gaze'. The gaze is an objectified social position, which privileges a researcher's interpretation and representation that is embedded in power and control (Poole, 1997).

Digital ethnographic data collection poses unique challenges to social researchers due to the fact that social interaction is computer mediated. We have argued that this can lead to serious concerns amongst consumer researchers, where the consequences of representation cannot always be anticipated. The importance of understanding this through a vulnerable consumer lens is that the researcher sensitivity required to manage social relations in this area of study can impact broader digital ethnographic practice. By sensitising researchers to issues surrounding field selection, the role of the researcher, and data representation, we hope to draw attention to the ethical concerns associated with its practice.

We propose that our paper constitutes a 'taking stock' of ethical

issues in digital research, in particular ethnography, in order to crystallize thinking around contradictory yet ultimately inextricable issues pertaining to vulnerability, empowerment, and surveillance. We propose that this constitutes an important contribution to a special issue which explores new and emergent technologies of marketing. We therefore draw attention to the need for ethical protocols, signalling existing perspectives with a particular eye on vulnerable consumers and advocating safeguards that need to be put into place. The diversity of scholarship in this journal, and the special issue subject matter, makes it highly appropriate for readers who may be unfamiliar with digital research and the ethical issues entailed, to consider these issues alongside other special issue articles that highlight the rapidly evolving landscape of technology and marketing.

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