

# Threads, Tweets and TikToks: the ethics and challenges of online qualitative research.

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# Threads, Tweets and TikToks: The ethics and challenges of online qualitative research

David S. Smith, Andrew Meechan



The ethics of online research

# The ethics of online research

## Why social media is useful

- Niche communities/group identities (Hwang & Foote, 2021)
- Openness about sensitive topics: e.g., mental health (Lal et al., 2016)
- Disinhibited discourses/self-disclosure (Sit et al., 2022)
- Large, diverse samples (Vicente, 2023)



## Popular social media websites

- Instagram: 1.4-2.4b monthly users – photo sharing
- Twitter/X: 528.3m monthly users – posts/followers
- TikTok: 901m monthly users, 1.1m creators – videos
- Reddit: 430m monthly users, 138,000 communities
- Facebook: 3b monthly users, 1.8b Facebook groups

# The ethics of online research

**Ethical issues (Gupta, 2017; Sloan & Quan-Hasse, 2022; Townsend & Wallace, 2016;)**

Privacy in public forums:

- Password: protection assumed
- Hashtags/forum: public conversation?
- Ts&Cs: can be accessed by third parties
  - Users, advertisers or researchers?
  - Expectation of privacy?

Informed consent:

- Unaware of participation
- Deleting post: right to withdraw?

Anonymity:

- Quoting content?
- Digital identities – individuals

Risk of harm

- Age and vulnerability?
- Embarrassment, reputational damage

**Ethnography or autoethnography?**



# The ethics of online research



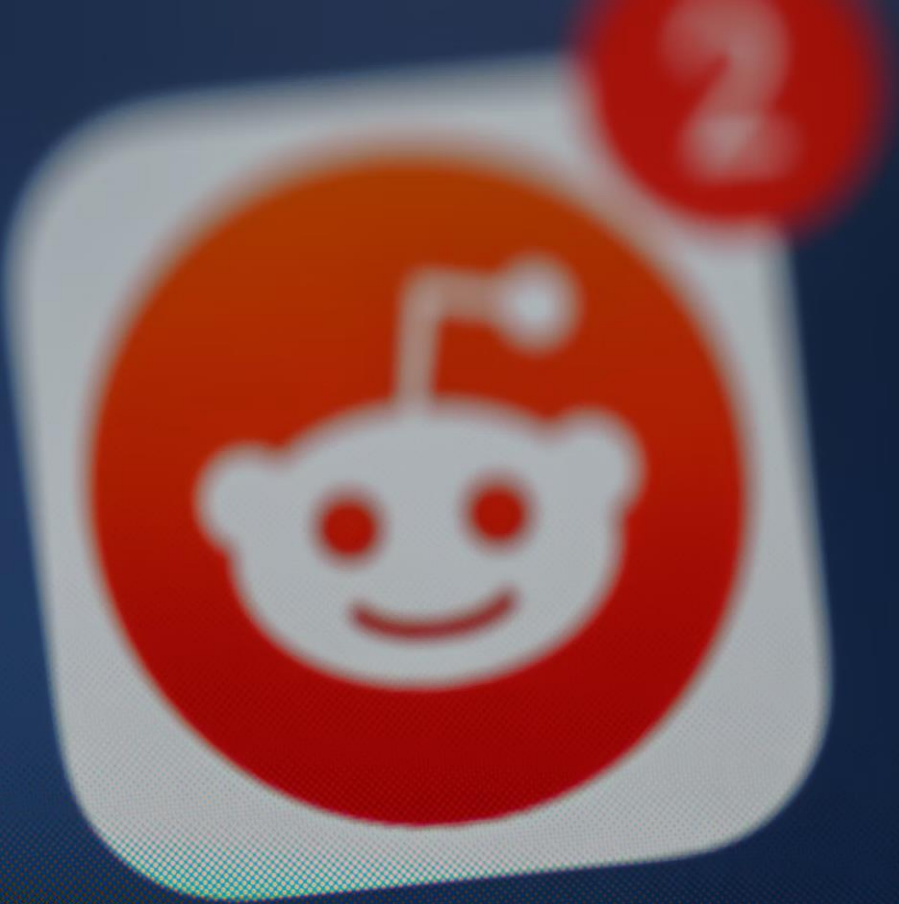
## Ethics guidelines for internet- mediated research



### BPS ethics (2021)

#### Principles

1. Respect autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals/communities
  - Withdrawal: ensure data is still posted
  - Patterns of activity/responses: identifiable?
2. Scientific integrity despite reduced control
  - Ensure relevance of sample: other ways?
3. Social responsibility
  - Might research harm social groups?
  - Avoid drawing unwanted attention to group
4. Maximising benefits/minimising harm:
  - Researcher/participant wellbeing?
  - Do risks undermine benefit of research?
  - Group backlash? Pseudonyms



Reddit



Reddit and Twitter/X

# Smith et al., (2022)

## The ultimate test of self-discipline?

- Viral challenge: abstain from pornography to “reboot” brains
- Manosphere? (Prause, 2023; Smith, 2023; Smith 2024)
- How have they handled lockdown? (general increase)



## Method

- 1.1 million members (r/NoFap)
- Python: related search term
- 524 posts/164 threads March-November 2020 (final, 513/159): split
- Coded: valence, key themes, gender implications, metaphor, alternatives

## Considerations

- Usernames deleted: anonymity
- Reddit: optional security measures – public?
- Posts removed: posters stated they were <18
- Unwanted attention? Global challenge covered in press
- All quotes paraphrased: Search term not cited

Public site: consent to republish?

Meaning/metaphors intact (Butler et al., 2018)





# Smith et al., (in review)

## Interviews with former incels

### Involuntary celibates

- Beta identity: perceived social/biological inferiority
- Members: Socioeconomically inhibited/underprivileged (Costello et al., 2022)  
Psychological diagnoses: > gen pop (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2022)  
Racially diverse: 55% white (Blake & Brooks, 2023)

### Research questions:

- What draws young men to incel communities? Were their emotional needs met by incel communities? Why/how do they leave their communities?

### Participants

- 9 members of ex-incel support groups (50-150 mins)
- Ads placed – 2 Reddit sites for former incels – 48 hours

### Considerations

- Conducted by male
- Options: webcam or email
- Options: cameras off and email questions
- Option: continent vs country - anonymity
- Present/prior forums redacted - anonymity

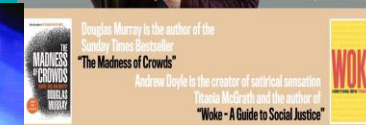
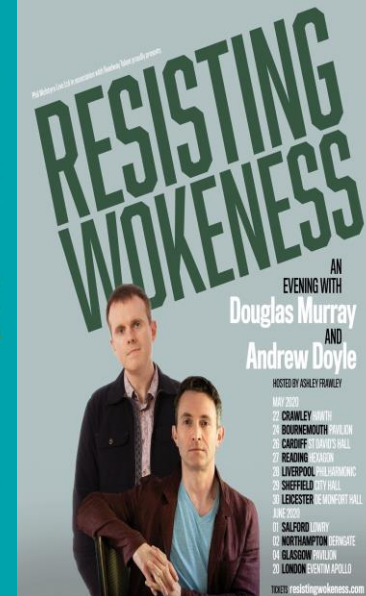
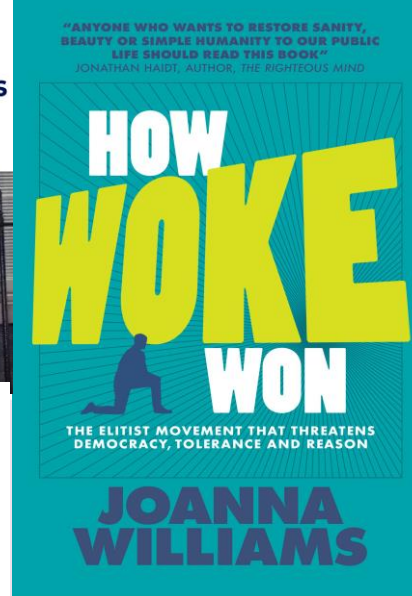


### Esther McVey to lead 'anti woke agenda' in major role as Sunak appoints her 'Common Sense Tzar'



NEWS | UK

### Suella Braverman blames 'Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati' for disruptive protests



TV > News TV

### PC REX Sir David Attenborough's BBC1 dinosaur show presents softer 'woke' version of the T-Rex

Rod McPhee

23:35, 13 Apr 2022 | Updated: 23:35, 13 Apr 2022



## The war on "woke"

Shows, books, films, news channels – academia?

"One of the biggest threats to modern civilisation" (Elon Musk, 2022)

YouGov (2021) 12% UK identify as woke; 60% do not know what it means

Centre for Policy Studies (2021): third most concerning belief, > homophobia

How is it produced (press), reproduced (social media) sustained (general public)

# Smith et al., (2023)

## Land of woke and glory?

### Method

- Press: items using “woke” - May 2022
- Social media: Twitter sample - May 2022
- Survey: open/closed questions – June/July 2022

### Triangulation

- Holistic/credible (Ayoub et al., 2014; Nowell et al., 2017)
- Less generalised, e.g., SM younger/more educated (Mellon and Prosser, 2017)
- Reciprocal: News makes discussions on SM, SM discussions make news

### Twitter/X sample

- Python + two modules: Snsrape: collects; Pandas: exports to Excel
- Randomised samples PW: approx. 50,000 – first relevant 300: 1200 total

### Complications

- Privacy: Usernames deleted
- Paraphrased: Meaning/metaphor
- Change: Musk (Benton et al., 2022)
- No geotags: Only filtering via postcode  
International – do not see local – can’t control visitors/abroad





TikTok

# TikTok

## What is it?

- Short video sharing
- E-Commerce
- Live streaming
- News updates
- Games

## Who uses it?

- Young people, but demographics are changing (Aslam, 2022)
- Daily use: approx. 100 minutes per day (Shephard, 2024)
- National demographics (Howarth, 2024)
- Gender Demographics (Shepherd, 2024)

## How does it work?

- Adapts content based on user behaviour
- External factors seem to play a role

## Recording data:

- Obscure specifics
- Images and videos (Video to finding the street took 2 hours)
- Let the user have some control, directly or indirectly



# TikTok

## Ethical Considerations.

### The Researcher

- Unpredictable.
  - Not clear on the kind of content that will be shown
  - TikTok's demographic assumptions change in real time
- Unpleasant.
  - Highly emotional content
  - Directly addressing the viewer

### Repeatability

- Unreliable
  - Sometimes it just behaves differently
  - Inconsistency across different mobile devices

### Privacy

- Popularity
- Other public presence
- How do you determine private space on the internet?



The Printing Press

### Why it's important?

It's a new media

It's very popular

It's a cultural Petri dish





Questions?

# Threads, Tweets and TikToks: The Ethics and Challenges of Online Qualitative Research

David Smith and Andrew Meechan (*both RGU*)

Slides 1 through 11

[No notes]

Slide 12

Use:

- Daily use for active users is around 100 minutes per day. (<https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>)

National Demographics:

- Penetration in the US is around 50%, Saudi Arabia is almost 90%. Most high penetration countries in Asia (<https://explodingtopics.com/blog/tiktok-demographics>)

Gender:

- Fairly even split (<https://thesocialshepherd.com/blog/tiktok-statistics>)

Slides 13 through 14

[No notes]