

# Consumers' concerns with how they are researched online

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**TITLE: CONSUMERS' CONCERNS WITH HOW THEY ARE RESEARCHED ONLINE**

SHORT TITLE: CONSUMERS' CONCERNS

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# **CONSUMERS' CONCERNS WITH HOW THEY ARE RESEARCHED ONLINE**

## **Abstract**

Increased consumer usage of the internet has highlighted a number of problematic online marketing practices, including the use of online platforms to research consumers without full consumer awareness. Despite current debates regarding online research ethics from a marketing perspective, scant research has been published on consumers' concerns with how they are researched online, which is a knowledge gap this paper seeks to address through qualitative research with UK consumers. This is an important yet neglected topic, given that consumer voices have been under-represented in the online research ethics debate over the years. The paper makes a significant theoretical contribution as it extends the ethics of care and responsibility to an online context, which can frame ongoing online research ethics discussions where problematic power asymmetries may exist between researchers and consumers.

## **Keywords**

Online research ethics; marketing ethics; qualitative research; consumer research; social media.

## **CONSUMERS' CONCERNS WITH HOW THEY ARE RESEARCHED ONLINE**

### **Introduction**

Technological developments and increased consumer usage of the internet have brought to the fore a number of problematic online marketing practices (Bowie and Jamal 2006; Laczniaak and Murphy 2006; De George 2000; Nill and Schibrowsky 2007), and this is an emergent topic in marketing ethics. Websites and social media such as WordPress, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are now extensively used by businesses to promote brands (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Current statistical data suggests that digital advertising spend has continued to grow (Sweeney 2015; eMarketer 2014; eMarketer 2016), and internet platforms including social media are now used extensively to collect consumer data and insights. Indeed, such a view of “online spaces as vast tracts of untapped data” (Morrow et al. 2015, p. 526) is problematic in that it can raise concerns among consumer researchers, research ethics review committees, as well as consumers.

Online research is inherently broad and diverse. For example, many quantitative methods of online data collection have been used in recent years, from quantitative online surveys, to tracking technologies such as cookies (Palmer, 2005; Laczniaak & Murphy, 2006), to more advanced forms of data mining and marketing dataveillance (Ashworth & Free, 2006), which enable instantaneous collection and aggregation of large quantities of online consumer data (Ashworth & Free, 2006). Indeed, such behavioural analytics data collection is an essential element of online spaces. However, qualitative online methodologies that rely on online media participation and/or observation such as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), or netnography (Kozinets, 2002; 2006, 2009; 2010), for example, have also become popular among consumer

researchers (Cova & Pace, 2006; Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011), and present problematic ethical issues in the research process.

Thus, this paper focuses on the epistemological ethical assumptions of discrete online research and seeks to speak to consumer researchers engaged in qualitative online research. The research presented here was motivated by the paucity of online research ethics papers representing the voice of research participants, as such papers are usually typified by qualitative researchers' post-hoc reflexivity accounts of their research processes. The impetus for the research also evolved as a result of the practical yet relatively narrow focus of institutional online research ethics guidelines (e.g. the MRS Guidelines for Online Research and institutional guidelines), which seem to lack the flexibility required for online consumer research (Morrow et al. 2015).

This research aims to explore consumers' concerns with how they are researched in online spaces. By online spaces we mean "virtual yet still material extensions of our everyday lives that shape our research subjectivities" (Morrow et al. 2015, p.526), and which also shape and are shaped by the social and economic structures that traverse social relations; what Morrow et al. (2015) discuss as virtual-material dynamics. The main exploratory research questions addressed in this paper are: (1) What are consumers' perceptions of how they are being researched online? (2) Do they have any ethical concerns in relation to such research practices? (3) And do such ethical concerns impact their willingness to take part in online consumer research?

At this point I acknowledge my own positionality in the context of this paper. I am an on-and-off-line qualitative consumer researcher with a background in marketing and advertising,

who has also been involved in institutional research ethics roles and committees over the past five years. Such a (supposedly privileged) background has undoubtedly shaped my ontological, epistemological and ethical views as a critical researcher. I am also acutely aware that dualisms such as ‘consumers’ versus ‘marketeers’ or ‘producers’ have been questioned extensively, particularly in critical literature addressing online prosumers and co-creators (Humphreys and Grayson 2008; Ritzer 2014), for example. Nevertheless, throughout the paper I try and highlight blurry subjectivities and power issues connected to such terminology when relevant to key points made regarding research ethics.

This paper makes a significant theoretical contribution to an important yet neglected topic in research ethics, given that consumer voices have been under-represented in the online research ethics debate over the past years. The paper contributes to theory through an extension of the ethics of care and responsibility to online qualitative research, which is useful for framing current and ongoing online research ethics debates where problematic power asymmetries may exist between marketers and consumers. The paper begins by providing an overview of relevant literature on the most widely discussed ethical issues in online consumer research, and the ethical theory used to frame the research presented here. This is then followed by an explanation of the interpretivist methodology employed to collect qualitative consumer data in the UK, as well as a discussion of the primary research findings and conclusions.

### **Consumers and online research ethics**

There has been increased interest in the potential ethical issues involved in research generally (Hammersley and Traianou 2011), and online consumer research more specifically.

Some scholars assert that people's lives are no longer completely private or anonymous (Zwick and Dholakia 2004), while others suggest that consumers have "willingly giv[en] up the naïve awareness that they are not being watched" (Fitchett and Lim 2008, 138). These issues have given rise to performative consumers (Fitchett and Lim 2008), who render researchers' attempts to investigate what consumers really do rather than what they say they do (Robson 1993) ineffective, as consumers know they are being watched, and will perform for – and potentially subvert – research data collection accordingly (Fitchett and Lim 2008). Fitchett and Lim (2008) suggest that this has ethical implications not only for consumers' identities and their attempts to redefine what is public and private, but also for the epistemological value of what can be known through such online research.

Palmer (2005) argues that online marketing and research have raised ethical questions related to technique, as technological advancements have changed consumer-business relationships and previously fixed concepts of privacy and property. Likewise, De George (2000) suggests that concepts of information usage, information ownership, informed consent, and privacy have been significantly transformed in recent years, given that they are no longer clear cut or easy to define. De George (2000) also argues that business ethicists have lagged behind in their attempts to anticipate potential ethical issues – and the impacts of such issues on consumers – given that it is difficult to assign ethical responsibility to information technology and computers, which are socially construed as amoral. Indeed, as discussed in Whiteman (2012), some forms of online research enquiry destabilise static notions of ethical research conduct, and at times ethical research practices developed offline can be problematic in online contexts. These

arguments, thus, justify further exploration of what may constitute ethical online consumer research.

It has been argued that the main ethical issues in online consumer research involve researcher and consumer confusion in relation to social media membership terms and conditions (Whiteman 2012), anonymity and confidentiality problems (Fitchett and Lim 2008), control over participants' personal information and privacy (Ashworth and Free 2006; Laczniak and Murphy 2006; Palmer 2005; Román and Cuestas 2008; Stanaland et al. 2011), and uncertainty regarding researchers' and participants' online identities (Whiteman 2012; Fitchett and Lim 2008). Other ethical concerns comprise issues linked to whether research objectives require analyses of textual discourses rather than real information about real people (Whiteman 2012), whether to credit research participants for their online posts (Whiteman 2012), deception such as covert observations through lurking or data collection without overt informed consent, uncertainty about the durability of digital consumer content, as well as ambiguity regarding what is public, private and potentially semi-public content (Whiteman 2012).

Indeed, Lomborg's (2013) discussion of the distance principle and perceived privacy resonate with Whiteman's (2012) points about content privacy. Lomborg (2013) suggests that the notion of experiential distance may be essential in assessing online research ethics in that it refers to the perceived distance between the data a researcher wishes to collect and analyse, and the individuals whose online activities generated such data (Lomborg 2013). For example, data may be perceived by consumers as more personal and therefore more sensitive if researchers use a qualitative sample of blog posts that are close to a blogger's lived experiences, than if researchers use an automated dataset with millions of data entries with the aim of analysing web



traffic patterns without individual or social contexts (Lomborg 2013). Additionally, Lomborg (2013, 23) argues that researchers need to negotiate perceptions of privacy in that perceived privacy entails the “the expectations that internet users may hold concerning the privacy of their online activities, their control over personal information, and their protection from harm”. Therefore, although some data may be considered public by researchers and indeed be on public online platforms, participants may view their content as private or simply have concerns about how their posts will be used (Lomborg 2013). This calls for contextual integrity (Nissenbaum 2010, *cited in* Lomborg 2013), as the researcher is simply not experientially close enough to participants to decide whether or not participants’ online content should be considered public or private (Lomborg 2013). Given the fluidity of such issues in online spaces, it is important to explore the extent to which a flexible ethical theory can enable consumer researchers to engage in ethical online research.

### **The role for a 2.0 ethical theory of care and political responsibility**

The concerns highlighted above raise the question of whether the traditional ethical theories that buttress institutional research ethics guidelines and thinking can still help consumer researchers in their online research practices. Hair and Clark (2007) draw on consequentialist and deontological theories to assess a few of such ethical challenges; the use of such theories is in fact prominent within the marketing discipline, probably due to their prescriptive, normative orientations. However, there are other theories which can be used to guide the context-specific, ethical thinking needed in online consumer research.

One of such perspectives is Edwards and Mauthner's (2002; Doucet and Mauthner 2002) ethics of care and responsibility, whose principles are intrinsically connected with feminist research. While mainly used in the context of offline research, the epistemological assumptions of the ethics of care and responsibility can be adapted to online contexts as a way of *thinking from caring*, and as an addition to the deontological and consequentialist ways of addressing online research ethics. According to Edwards and Mauthner (2002) and Doucet and Mauthner (2002), *thinking from caring* means focusing on care and responsibility instead of abstract ethical rules about rights, duties or outcomes. Focus is placed on the dialogical and relational interdependence between the researcher and participants, as well as their contextual and situational responsibilities to one another (Hammersley and Traianou 2011). This includes reciprocity and reflexivity through acknowledging, rather than eliding, the researcher's and participants' values, feelings, and emotions, as well as the power issues in researcher-participant relationships.

As Morrow et al. (2015) suggest, the application of feminist ethical practices such as reciprocity and reflexivity to online research can shed light on issues of politics and visibility (whose politics and whose voices are being made visible online, and who is being spoken for), issues of researcher positionality (the various on and offline - visual and material - experiences and roles that shape our relationships with, and understandings of, online participants), as well as issues of subjectivity and power (the decisions we make about research participants' subjectivities when attempting to comply with ethical research guidelines - e.g., whether their discourses 'are just being observed' or whether they are considered authors and co-creators - without their involvement).

The notion of a fluid, porously bounded interdependence between researcher, participants, and all stakeholders involved in the research process is important for the adoption of an online-resonant, feminist ethics of care and responsibility in that all parties (including computers) are interconnected globally, through the borderlessness of the internet. Interdependence also calls for an understanding of responsibility as political, in line with Young's (2004; 2006; Owen 2010) and Morrow et al.'s (2015) works, where issues of responsibility are addressed in relation to structural conditions and socio-economic processes, such as those intrinsic to online consumer research, alongside the disciplinary knowledge and techniques (Foucault 1988; Shankar et al. 2006) it generates. According to these authors, we all share responsibility for the harms caused through research, both close and at a distance, given the virtual-material dynamics (Morrow et al. 2015) of the transnational structural processes that shape and are shaped by online spaces. The feminist ethics of care and responsibility as outlined in Edwards and Mauthner (2002) can be considered a value-laden relativist approach to research ethics. Nevertheless, as put by Birch et al. (2002), researchers must develop contextualised reasoning in their research practice rather than just adhere to abstract rules and research guidelines, particularly in online qualitative consumer research.

What I am arguing is that the feminist principles of care and responsibility must be part of the epistemological ethical assumptions of online research. Indeed, Whiteman (2012) and others suggest that an overview of key texts on the ethics of internet research, internet research methods, work on specific research environments such as social media, and specialist codes of practice suggest a move away from general ethical research principles to contextualised, reflexive (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Alvesson et al. 2008), inductive (Lomborg 2013), flexible

and also political (Young 2004) moral decision-making in online research. Therefore, *thinking from caring* in online consumer research entails sensitising consumer researchers to specific online research environments and the virtual-material dynamics of such spaces (Morrow et al. 2015). It also entails being transparent about subjectivities and respecting participants' expectations and needs in relation to ethical research issues and concerns. By *thinking from caring* fluid and relational representational decisions such as naming researched websites and usernames, including verbatim text found on social media, and acknowledging participants' authorship can be considered ethical if such decisions are in line with the nature of a specific online space, and what research participants expect with regards to the virtual-material dynamics of particular online spaces.

Despite such academic discussions regarding online qualitative research ethics, to date scant research has explored consumers' concerns with online research practices. Therefore, this paper addresses a knowledge gap in that it aims to explore consumers' concerns with how they are researched online, including consumers' perceptions of how they are being researched in online spaces, associated ethical concerns and whether this might have an impact on their willingness to take part in online research. Research methods are discussed next.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts an interpretivist approach in that it considers the subjective meanings of social action (Bryman and Bell 2011). Given that a qualitative topic such as online research ethics could be difficult for participants to discuss on their own, focus groups were considered more appropriate than in-depth interviews for this research. Indeed, focus groups are particularly

useful where interaction among participants can develop additional insights, where public versus private beliefs must be probed, and where diversity and negotiation of such participant beliefs may be relevant (Bazeley 2013). Focus groups are also flexible and enable researchers to delve into the drivers of consumer attitudes and behaviours (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Miles and Huberman 1994). Four qualitative focus groups were carried out with 28 young professionals, aged 18 and over, who are social media users. This small number of focus groups is consistent with prescribed approaches to in-depth qualitative inquiry (Sen and Crowley 2013; Crouch and McKenzie 2006; Guest et al. 2006).

The purposive sample (Patton 1990; Kuzel 1999) was drawn from a pool of professional staff employed by a UK university (table 1). and that we speak of a group of well-educated research participants. This of course brings into question whose voices are being heard and whose are being excluded, which is another issue raised by Morrow et al. (2015). Nevertheless, given that research ethics discussions usually rely on researchers' reflexive perspectives only, the voices represented here offer fresh (even if well educated) perspectives on research ethics.

Research shows that incentives increase participation rates (Sethuraman et al. 2005; Goetz et al. 1984), so each focus group participant received a book voucher worth £30. Each group lasted approximately one hour and the discussion followed a semi-structured discussion guide, with topics that focused on internet and social media usage, perceptions and attitudes toward how consumers are being researched online, and whether participants had any online research concerns.

Table 1: Participants' profiles

Focus Group Number	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Employment	Income
FG 1	Sarah	Female	28	Postgraduate	Full-time	£31-35K/Year
	Alice	Female	18	Undergraduate	Self-employed	Up to £5K/year
	Noah	Male	30	Postgraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Linda	Female	22	Undergraduate	Part-time	£11-15K/Year
	Jim	Male	40	Undergraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Charlene	Female	38	Postgraduate	Full-time	£26-30K/Year
	Shaun	Male	45	Not disclosed	Full-time	£26-30K/Year
FG 2	Helen	Female	31	Undergraduate	Full-time	£11-15K/Year
	Ruth	Female	21	Undergraduate	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Kathy	Female	26	Postgraduate	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Abby	Female	21	Postgraduate	Full-time	£11-15K/Year
	Mike	Male	39	Not disclosed	Full-time	£36K+/Year
	Colin	Male	39	Undergraduate	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Uri	Male	46	Postgraduate	Full-time	£31-35/Year
FG 3	Carrie	Female	27	Undergraduate	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Laura	Female	26	Not disclosed	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Tina	Female	24	Undergraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Emily	Female	28	Not disclosed	Full-time	£26-30K/Year
	Drew	Male	27	Not disclosed	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Lynn	Female	56	Undergraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Irene	Female	30	Postgraduate	Full-time	£11-15K/Year
FG 4	Simone	Female	28	Postgraduate	Part-time	£6-10k/Year
	Peter	Male	28	Undergraduate	Full-time	£26-30K/Year
	Rachael	Female	33	Undergraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Danielle	Female	25	Undergraduate	Full-time	£16-20K/Year
	Fiona	Female	25	Postgraduate	Part-time	£6-10k/Year
	Luke	Male	28	Undergraduate	Full-time	£21-25K/Year
	Albert	Male	39	Undergraduate	Full-time	£26-30K/Year

All focus groups' discussions were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data analysis followed the principles of template analysis (Crabtree and Miller 1999; King 1998), where a few broad concepts derived from the literature are used to build the initial coding frame. Transcripts were coded line by line using QSR NVivo 9, which generated a number of loose codes. Through an iterative analytical process, codes and categories were adapted and rearranged continuously and key themes emerged from this analytical process (Crabtree and Miller 1999; King 1998; King and Horrocks 2010).

### **Thematic findings**

The research findings presented below are organised according to four main analytical themes: e-privacy performativity; fluidly caring about anonymity and consent; paradoxical consumer vulnerability; as well as flexible notions of co-responsibility and willingness to be researched. Together these consumer-based themes support the theoretical affordances for this paper's online research ethics arguments.

#### *E-privacy performativity*

Participants were experienced internet and social media users. They recalled having seen calls for research participation through website pop-ups when shopping online, and through emails requesting participants for online surveys. Most participants were aware of the various ways in which they are researched online and suspected they are constantly tracked through dataveillance technologies (Ashworth and Free 2006; Palmer 2005). Participants are happy to be 'just part of the statistics', but do not like the idea of being observed qualitatively, through

lurking, which resonates with Lomborg's (2013) distance principle in assessing the ethics of online content usage for research purposes:

*"I don't mind [research] at all, as long as it's anonymous and not sending my name out to anyone. If they want to collect my usage, crack on. If it's a demographic sort of way, if it's 'he's a male of a certain age and he likes this kind of thing, so we'll target him'. If it's a human being sat there, looking at me [online], I'd want to know about that, but if it's an automated statistical view, that's fine, crack on"* (Mike/FG2).

The quote above illustrates that participants perceive online qualitative methodologies that rely on 'unobtrusive observation' particularly problematic, and resonates with the issues of subjectivity and power highlighted by Morrow et al. (2015), regarding the decisions we make as researchers about whether to just observe or take on a more participatory role in online research. Thus, thinking from caring (Edwards and Mauthner 2002) is needed when negotiating research relationships with qualitative research participants in online spaces. Paradoxically, however, consumers' fluid online identities, which are never fully private (Zwick and Dholakia 2004), and their inclination for performativity (Fitchett and Lim 2008) or 'staging' (Morrow et al. 2015), help them manage their privacy:

*"You are a particular person online, but that's not the person you really are! So even if they've got all that information about you, how accurate is that? I'm not entirely sure, really. (...) It's not a particularly fair representation of that person"* (Luke/FG4).

As Luke argues, online consumer identities, interactions and privacy are managed through healthy scepticism and performativity, which echoes the uncertainty regarding participants' online identities highlighted in the literature (Whiteman 2012; Fitchett and Lim



2008). This quote also resonates with Morrow et al.'s (2015) views on the importance of reflecting on researcher positionality and power, as we go about negotiating the visual-material dynamics that shape and are shaped by our relationships with, and understandings of, online participants. Nevertheless, participants claimed to self-censor what they disclose online and treat online content mostly as either public or semi-public, even where some kind of social media subscription or membership is required (Whiteman 2012):

*“I do think it’s worrying... I’m on social media; I do write things on Facebook so others can see that. But other things I do, I don’t let people see. But then I suppose you can find out more than I think you can. I see kind of both sides, I’d never put anything on there... Even though my Facebook is completely private I’m still wary about what I put on there” (Helen/FG2).*

*“They should make it more explicit, I think you kind of forget. You go on to whatever, do your thing, you’re not really thinking ‘well someone’s going to use it’. Because that does put you off. You think, no, actually, I don’t want you to be able to research my content” (Rachael/FG4).*

The quotes above demonstrate the need to sensitise researchers to consider consumers’ concerns and their flexible perceptions of e-privacy in specific online contexts, particularly where information and content may be seen as semi-private (Lomborg 2013). Ongoing negotiations in terms of researcher access and subjectivities may be required, and issues of politics and visibility (Morrow et al. 2015) come to the fore. The discussion above also raises further issues regarding consumer perceptions of anonymity and informed consent online.

### *Fluidly caring about anonymity and consent*

Most participants held a sense of perceived control over their online content, so anonymity and confidentiality were not always considered an issue (Fitchett and Lim 2008). For instance, participants wanted to be credited, by researchers, for the content they create on certain social media (Whiteman 2012). Examples include blogs, as they are viewed as a type of creative, but public, online publishing activity:

*“If it was about my work or some kind of creative thing, then I’d actively want it attributed to me as it’s like... It’s kind of credit to what you’ve done. But if it were, for example, like this focus group or online discussions. I’m just telling you things that are my own opinion and there’s no value other than a person’s opinion. And I don’t think it’d be any good to say, oh and this was what you said, because in 10 years’ time I’ll think, oh what a stupid thing I said and everyone knows it” (Linda/FG1).*

Linda’s quote highlights the need to make transparent, collaborative and responsible decisions about research participants’ subjectivities (Morrow et al. 2015). It also emphasises the need for researchers to act with care and responsibility in co-negotiating dialogical, interdependent relationships with participants (Hammersley and Traianou 2011; Edwards and Mauthner 2002). Indeed, participants openly stated that as long as they are informed of how their content and data will be used, they may even approve of disclosing their real names (as opposed to online pseudonyms) for research purposes, in cases where content is creative.

Also, as seen in the above quote, traceability of personal attitudes to individual research participants is still undesirable, given that personal online content usually remains available online for an unlimited period of time. Participants are also openly against covert, online

qualitative data collection methods and any form of deception by researchers, when the focus of research is on personal beliefs and attitudes:

*“I would rather be asked every time, for the simple reason that if the information is there people can take it” (Jim/FG1).*

Thus, Jim suggests that informed consent is still desirable in online spaces, as participants want to be informed of how their content and data will be used. This is a particularly relevant point for researchers whose positionality assumes that “gathering data from online spaces” can be seen as a “neutral, disembodied process”; one detached from the interconnectedness between virtual and material practice (Morrow et al. 2015). Participants acknowledge a lack of proficiency in managing their online privacy settings, which can make some of their content unintentionally public and usable for discrete online research. They also acknowledge the complexity of terms and conditions of various online social media where such content may be made available (Whiteman 2012), which in turn means that they seldom read such platforms’ disclaimers:

*“I don’t have time to read through the terms and conditions. I simply accept them and go ahead” (Irene/Group3).*

Lack of time and implicit trust play a key role in participants’ decisions to ignore such terms and conditions and hence the implications such terms may have regarding how their online content might be used and observed for qualitative research purposes. Participants also acknowledge that they do not always read the terms and conditions of the surveys they complete online, which makes them somewhat vulnerable to providing uninformed consent to the use of their social media content. This issue, too, highlights the need for researchers to ‘think from

caring' by focusing on feminist principles of care and responsibility (Young 2004; 2006; Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Doucet and Mauthner 2002), and by reflecting on the fluid, virtual-material dynamics that characterise the porously bounded interdependence between researchers and participants (Morrow et al. 2015).

### *Paradoxical consumer vulnerability*

Despite participants' perceived control over personal content, a few consumers felt a contradictory vulnerability. Their concerns related mostly to lurking and use of their online identities and content by 'unannounced' audiences outside their immediate control:

*"Even if you take yourself off [of social media], as [Rachael] was saying, people can still put pictures up on there. Then that'll make them public and friends or whoever can still see that information and you have no control over that" (Peter/FG4).*

Peter's quote above confirms Morrow et al.'s (2015) uneasiness about lurking on publicly available content for discourse analysis purposes, and emphasises that reflexivity and negotiation is still needed in such contexts. Also, participants thought that young people disclose too much on social media without necessarily thinking about the immediate or future consequences of their content sharing behaviour online:

*"You only have to be 13 to have a Facebook account and I'm sure there aren't many 13 year-olds that are particularly self-conscious about guarding their information or worrying about who they're sending an email to. (...) Earlier we were talking about knowing this stuff is going to be there forever. I don't think they necessarily have that conscious awareness" (Noah/FG1).*

Thus, participants show concern with the vulnerability of teenagers and young adults, but they also mentioned children and older people as potentially vulnerable internet user groups. Additionally, participants demonstrated an implicit trust in the goodwill of friends, researchers, firms and the government, and believed that the internet is well policed and regulated, which can make them vulnerable. However, one well-informed participant discussed weak Internet regulation, and argued that cross-border regulations and ethical research frameworks may be difficult to enforce online:

*“It’s kind of like... It’s the Wild West, isn’t it? I’m not some leftist Anarchist, but there’s no real, proper, ultimate regulation of the internet. Until there’s something like that, anything goes. People can do what they want, sell and research what they want. If they’re shut down, they’ll start up again” (Peter/FG4).*

Therefore, as seen through Peter’s quote above, despite participants’ general belief in an invisible online policing force and some degree of perceived control over their online content, participants were concerned with the consequences of how and the extent to which their online content might be observed through lurking. They were also aware of the intrinsic politics and structural processes that shape and are shaped by online spaces (Young 2004; 2006; Morrow et al. 2015):

*“I don’t like the idea of a person looking at everything I’ve done and observing my online movements, but unless I try and start a political party I don’t know what [I can do]” (Fiona/FG4).*

The vulnerability concerns articulated by Fiona beg the question of who is responsible for responsible online research conduct.

*Flexible notions of co-responsibility and willingness to be researched*

At first there was an overwhelming perception that responsibility for how consumers' online content is used in research lies with consumers, despite the acknowledged vulnerabilities discussed above:

*"You're willing to put something out there; you know it could be used, so you shouldn't be surprised" (Collective response/FG3).*

Some participants believed they can protect themselves against how their online content may be used for research purposes, while acknowledging their own irresponsibility for not knowing enough about this issue. Other participants suggested responsibility may be constantly (and involuntarily) pushed toward consumers, particularly where individual agency may be limited (e.g., in the case of lurking) and issues of fairness may arise:

*"They basically say you have signed away any rights when using this site. They leave you alone while using the site in some kind of wilderness should anything happen. For them it's your fault, as you clicked or ticked the 'accept' box" (Noah/FG1).*

Noah's quote above shows participants' concerns with online platform usage rights and responsibilities in relation to content production and lurking, and a few participants also discussed the interconnectedness between the responsibilities of firms and governments in protecting online consumer content from undesired lurking:

*"I think it's twofold. Obviously there is certain content that you're producing that might be used against you. So I'd expect the government or an agency to monitor online research" (Lynn/FG3).*

Lynn's quote above acknowledges the interdependence between researchers, participants and other stakeholders through the virtual-material dynamics of online spaces (Morrow et al. 2015). If researchers are to follow a 2.0 ethics of care and responsibility that respects and cares for online consumers, the concept of political responsibility (Young 2004, 2006; Owen 2010) seems to offer, alongside feminist principles of care, a way of acting as ethical online consumer researchers.

Finally, despite all the issues discussed above, participants' intentions to take part in online research had little reported relationship with their ethical concerns and notions of responsibility. Instead, other factors acted as the main motivators for sharing content and attitudes online:

*"I participate in research on Talula and I think there's a company called GFK media - They're asking you for information and I'm willing to give it as there's a reward at the end. So there's an incentive" (Alice/FG1).*

Indeed, participants' main considerations included the time needed to participate in online research, as well as the amount and type of participation required: if the information needed is considered too personal or sensitive, they are less willing to take part. Participants argued that if the research is for a brand or company they like, they are more inclined to take part in online research, and perceptions of researcher or firm credibility and authenticity played an essential role in their decision to participate. Incentives are essential, as participants usually consider whether they will receive something in return for their efforts. Therefore, it seems that participants' concerns are removed from their decision-making criteria when it comes to actively considering whether or not to take part in online consumer research.

## **Discussion and implications**

The findings above highlight that participants were aware of the ways in which they may be researched online, and destabilised and layered privacy notions were to the fore. This reinforces the need for qualitative researchers to consider online research ethics in flexible ways. It also highlights the need to consider Lomborg's (2013) distance and perceived privacy principles in assessing the ethical issues involved in online content usage for research purposes. This is particularly applicable to semi-public content and information (Whiteman 2012), such as what can be found on social media, which researchers may find tempting to use through lurking without co-negotiating access in a more involved manner. Such practices can create consumer distrust in the online researcher or sponsoring firm. Sensitivity to context and consumers' concerns is essential, and so is the continuous negotiation of informed consent and non-deception. In this way, feminist principles of care and responsibility must be part of the epistemological ethical assumptions of online qualitative researchers.

Acknowledgement of consumer authorship (mostly of creative social media content) may well be expected by consumers, which outdates assumptions that all research participants want anonymity and confidentiality in all online contexts (Whiteman 2012). However, anonymity is still required for projects where the aim is to investigate personal attitudes and opinions that are deemed too close to participants (Lomborg 2013), and that may change over time. Additionally, of concern to online researchers is the fluidity of online identities and content as types of consumer performativity (Lim and Fitchett 2008; Zwick and Dholakia 2004), which may be an issue if researchers fail to acknowledge and reflect on issues of visibility, researcher positionality,



subjectivity and power, as well as the virtual-material dynamics of online spaces (Morrow et al. 2015). Furthermore, consumer researchers must try and consider consumers' vulnerabilities including not fully understanding how social media terms and conditions really work, not always being in control of how their online content is used, vulnerable groups generally, consumers' wishful beliefs in a well-policed and well-regulated internet, and the fact that their content remains publicly available online over time. Concerns regarding shared, flexible responsibility for personal content online are also highlighted. However, such concerns seem to have no impact on participants' willingness to take part in online research. The taxonomy presented in Figure 1 summarises consumers' main concerns with online research.

Figure 1: A taxonomy of consumers' concerns with online research

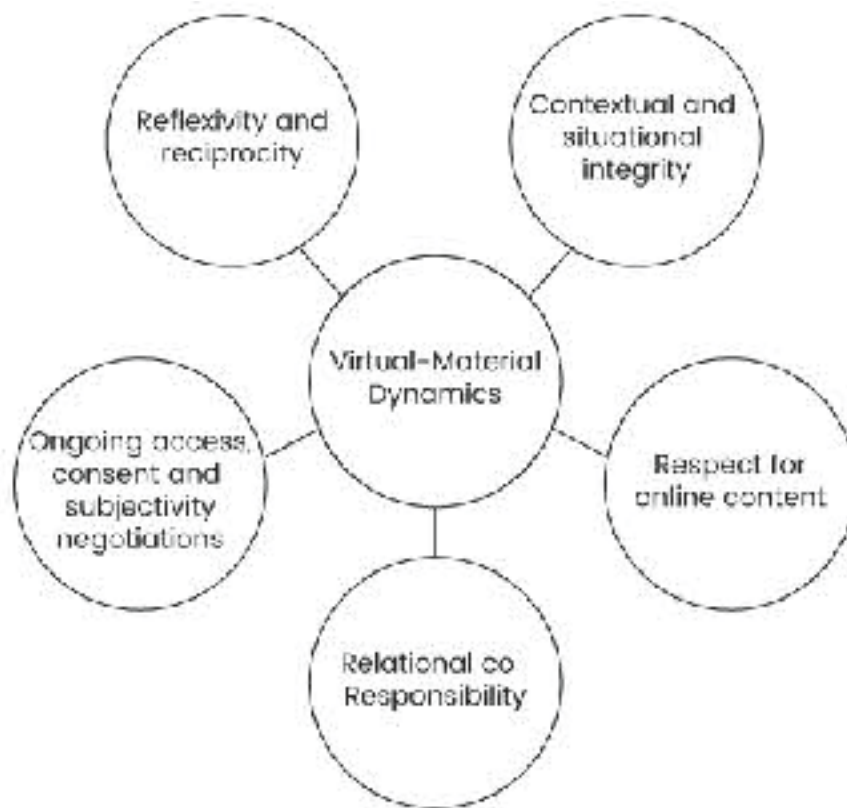
<p><b><i>E-privacy performativity</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distance principle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Flexible perceptions of public, private and semi-private content;</li> <li>◦ Online qualitative observations as too close and personal.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Management of online identities and performativity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Co-constructed consumer and researcher content.</li> <li>◦ Issues of politics and visibility;</li> <li>◦ Issues of subjectivity and the virtual-material dynamics.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b><i>Paradoxical consumer vulnerability</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited digital literacy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Not knowing how online T&amp;Cs really work and the impact this may have in terms of research;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Limited control over lurking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Lurking by unintended audiences (including qualitative researchers);</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Vulnerable internet user groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Teenagers, young adults, children and older people.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Implicit trust in regulatory powers, yet: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Limited actual regulation online;</li> <li>◦ Cross-border regulations and ethical frameworks may be difficult to enforce;</li> <li>◦ Future offline consequences of how and the extent to which online consumer content may be researched;</li> <li>◦ Consumer content permanently available on social media.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Fluidly caring about anonymity and consent</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anonymity and confidentiality dependent on context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Want credit for creative content online;</li> <li>◦ But personal attitudes and opinions still considered sensitive.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Informed consent still required: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Covert qualitative data collection methods and lurking seen as an issue;</li> <li>◦ Want to be informed of how content will be used;</li> <li>◦ Content may be publicly available unintentionally;</li> <li>◦ Need for ongoing co-negotiation of access and informed consent.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b><i>Flexible notions of co-responsibility and willingness to be researched</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility for consumers' online content: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Consumers believe they are responsible, despite vulnerabilities;</li> <li>◦ Acknowledge own irresponsibility for not knowing enough about various online T&amp;Cs;</li> <li>◦ Responsibility as often pushed toward consumers even where individual agency may be limited;</li> <li>◦ Researchers and governments also seen as responsible.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Intentions to take part in online research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ No relationship between willingness to take part and ethical concerns;</li> <li>◦ Main considerations include time needed to participate, extent of participation required, brand sponsoring the online research, perception of researcher or firm authenticity, and participation incentives.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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Given such consumer concerns, a 2.0 feminist ethics of care and political responsibility seems particularly appropriate to frame online researchers' ethical thinking throughout the online research process, particularly where qualitative methods of online data collection may be employed. The ethics of care (Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Doucet and Mauthner 2002) can be extended by using Young's (2004) work on political responsibility. By drawing on O'Neill's (1985; 1996) work, Young (2004, 371) suggests that "an agent's moral obligation extends to all those whom the agent assumes in conducting his or her activity" and because "our actions are conditioned by and contribute to institutions that affect distant others, and their actions contribute to the operation of institutions that affect us, (...) we have made practical moral commitments to them by virtue of our actions".

Given the power asymmetries in these obligations, "those institutionally and materially-situated to be able to do more to affect the conditions of vulnerability have greater obligations" (Young, 2004, 371). In this way, because we are in technologically and institutionally stronger positions than the cross-border online consumers that may agree to act as our research participants, we have moral obligations of justice towards them (Miller 2007; Young 2004). What is needed is a sense of political responsibility, a kind of collective responsibility derived from a sense of belonging to a broader online group through the virtual-material dynamics of online spaces (Morrow et al. 2015) that shape and are shaped by the relational economic and social structures in which people act and impact one another; a sense of responsibility not just for the harms done, but for the actions that agents have not done themselves; that is, the actions taken on excluded individuals' behalves by cross-borders online researchers, firms, governments as well as participants themselves (Young 2004). This 2.0 ethics

of care and responsibility in fact resonates with Morrow et al.'s (2015) feminist ethical principles of reciprocity and reflexivity in online research that can and should shed light on issues of politics and visibility, matters of researcher positionality, as well as issues of subjectivity and power. This frame for thinking about online consumer research ethics is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Frame for a 2.0 ethics of care and political responsibility for online consumer research



By following a 2.0 ethics of care and political responsibility perspective, researchers and participants can share the responsibility for research practices and the structural issues that traverse online research processes and practice.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examines consumers' concerns with how they are researched online. Despite current academic and practitioner-led debates regarding online research ethics, to date scant research has been published on consumers' perspectives regarding this topic. This study's interpretive findings contribute to the extant relevant literature by presenting a taxonomy of consumers' concerns with online qualitative research, which reinforces the need for feminist epistemological principles of reciprocity, reflexivity, contextual and flexible ethical reasoning in online research practice. This research also contributes to theory in that it extends the ethical theory of care and responsibility and updates its relevance to research in online spaces by drawing on Young's (2004; 2006) and Morrow et al.'s (2015) work, and by presenting a 2.0 ethics of care and political responsibility framework for online consumer research.

Despite the acceptable sample size, this study's limitations include a small number of focus groups. Thus, future research can contribute a larger number of groups, different methodological approaches and/or additional profiles of research participants (e.g., older consumers) whose voices have been excluded and 'spoken for' (Morrow et al., 2015) in this paper. This, in turn, will enable ongoing and ever-evolving conversations and understandings of research ethics in online spaces.

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