

# Transitioning (on the) Internet: Shifting Challenges and Contradictions of Ethics of Studying Online Gender Transition Narratives

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.1.05>

## Keywords:

Ethics; FAIR;  
Poland; Social  
Media; Transgender;  
Vulnerable  
Community

**Abstract:** The use of social media in qualitative research has become extremely popular. YouTube, in particular, has attracted attention from scholars working on (self-)representation of minority groups, including the transgender community (e.g., Dame 2013; Horak 2014). Most academic disciplines, however, have been slow in responding to the increasingly challenging nature of social media in terms of their ethics and methodologies. For example, there is a common misconception that any publicly available YouTube videos can be freely used for research. Many studies openly reference the YouTube channels they discuss (Wotanis and McMillan 2014) or anonymize data, but do not seek informed consent from creators (Raun 2020). What is more, researchers rarely reflect on how their work could impact the communities under study or the way creators use social media (Leonelli et al. 2021). At the same time, researchers wishing to protect vulnerable communities may find themselves falling short of FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and re-usable) research principles required by funders. In this contribution, I discuss these and other challenges using, as a case study, my project, which investigates gender transition narratives on Polish social media. I wish to show that there is no one-fits-all approach to the ethics of social media studies—as the very nature of social media is in constant flux—and call for attentiveness and reflexivity as an inextricable component of qualitative social media research methodology.

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The use of social media in qualitative social research is definitely here to stay. A plethora of data easy to access, collect, and process offers a whole new world of possibilities that would have been considered science fiction only twenty years ago.

As Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media sites, platforms, and applications are weaving themselves into the fabric of many people's lives (Tagg et al. 2016; Williams, Burnap, and Sloan 2017a), it is becoming increasingly important and relevant for social studies to shine a light on online behaviors and practices. At the same time, there is (still) a difference between offline and online realities, and we should take care not to expect the results of such studies to apply to, and contribute to our understanding of, social life in general (also because of the existence of a digital divide—the overrepresentation of Western/global North perspectives on the internet). This is the approach taken in my project, as well as by most authors whose works are discussed in this article—we make it clear that we study *online* discourses, behaviors, and communities, and we find it worthwhile because we believe that there is something qualitatively new and different about digital technologies and the things they make possible.

Social media, however, can also be used to “mine” or “grab” large quantities of information on people's opinions, attitudes, offline behaviors, and so on. This applies especially to Twitter, which is commonly used to gather data *en masse*, to study, for example, political movements, terrorism, responses to climate change (boyd and Crawford 2012), or the impact of air pollution on health and wellbeing (Leonelli et

al. 2021). While this understanding of “using social media in research” pertains to quantitative studies and will thus not be considered here, it is important to emphasize that most publications on ethics in social media research—some of them exclusively—focus on mining online data rather than studying the online environment in its own right, qualitatively. There is a good reason for it—the practice of mining online data for research is definitely associated with considerable problems, risks, and challenges, not only related to ethics. “Critical questions for big data” include the issues of defining knowledge and its limits, claims to objectivity, accuracy, and representativeness, or the value of information devoid of context (boyd and Crawford 2012).

The question of ethics is, of course, also a central one. This is exemplified by such scandals as the 2006 Facebook friendship study, in which students' data, pulled without consent, could be de-anonymized (boyd and Crawford 2012:671-672) or the collection of thousands of transgender YouTubers' videos used to train facial recognition software (Vincent 2017). Practices such as those described by Williams and co-authors, whereby “papers were being published in reputable journals with tweets quoted verbatim, with unacceptable and ineffective methods of anonymization, and without informed consent from users” (Williams et al. 2017b), are becoming more and more objectionable, concerning both qualitative and quantitative research.

Ethical issues are compounded by the fact that large amounts of social media data are, of course, not only mined by researchers but also by businesses for commercial purposes. What is more, some social media platforms—most notably Twitter—have monetized access to their users' data, adding a financial dimension to the equation.

While the literature on the challenges of using social media data is constantly growing, and the effort to come up with solutions is tangible, there is no consensus regarding what an approach to social media research that would be both ethically and methodologically sound could look like. As a result, even within one institution, legal stipulations and ethical requirements are sometimes incongruent, and ethical and methodological principles sometimes contradict each other, as the present article intends to show. By the way, the abovementioned prioritization of the quantitative perspective and the fact that the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches is often not spelled out may be adding to the confusion.

With this article, I would like to refocus the debate on the ethics of social media research in two contrasting directions. First, I would like to zoom in on vulnerable communities, especially from the perspective of a researcher who does not belong to the community in question. The other direction is to zoom out to include broader methodological issues since focusing on ethics only could conceal important conflicts between ethical and methodological research principles. What is more, by focusing exclusively on qualitative research, I hope to address this gap in the literature.

The arguments in this article are based on my experience doing research on gender and sexuality discourses on Polish social media. As my current project involves online gender transition narratives, the transgender community will be given particular attention. To provide more context, the discussion in this article will be grounded in a review of the available literature on the use of social media by women and the LGBTQ+ community, with a special focus on the transgender community, published in the

last twenty years and methodologically similar to my research. Table 1 appended to this article summarizes the relevant information on these publications.

The increasing recognition of ethics is not, of course, limited to social media studies. For example, for a discussion on ethics in qualitative migration research, see Justyna Bell, Agnieszka Trąbka, and Paula Pustulka (2020).

## **Zooming In on Vulnerable Communities**

### **Defining a Vulnerable Community**

Social media appear to be “inherently democratizing, enabling anyone with access to participate, liberated from traditional biases associated with gender, age, race, social class, (dis)ability, and physical attractiveness” (Herring et al. 2004:1). Facebook and Twitter can accommodate Donald Trump, the British royal family, the Black Lives Matter movement, and dissident groups in undemocratic states. Importantly, the present section is concerned with social media users considered vulnerable. Different ethical issues will pertain to police officers and police violence victims’ Twitter accounts (Schneider 2018). This may bring more confusion into an already complex situation involving legal and ethical principles that may contradict each other.

Legal stipulations apply to all social media studies. But considering legal frameworks is complicated due to the lack of clarity about which country’s laws should apply to specific projects. Should it be the country where the project is based (in my case, the UK), where the social media platform in question is based (US, in most cases), or where the social media users whose accounts are studied are based? In the

UK, researchers are advised to rely on *public task/interest* as the legal basis to process publicly available data for research purposes (UKRI n.d.). This position is supported by several research funders and regulatory bodies, including the Medical Research Council (MRC) and Health Research Authority (HRA). What is more, if the social media data are anonymized, it is no longer subject to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and can therefore be used lawfully for research purposes.

My current project focuses on YouTube videos, which are subject to US legal provisions, such as the USA Patriot Act. YouTube's terms and conditions also need to be consulted. The section on *fair use* allows re-using YouTube material for "commentary, criticism, research, teaching,"<sup>1</sup> and similar purposes.

Since the social media users in my project are Polish, live in Poland, and upload their videos from Poland, the Polish interpretation of *fair dealing* should also be consulted. Poland has implemented the Illustration for teaching or scientific research (Art. 5.3(a) InfoSoc) exception in Article 27 and Article 100 of the Copyright and Related Rights Act.<sup>2</sup> None of these resources, however, mention vulnerable research participants, whether individual or collective.

Many ethical guidelines I have consulted emphasize that these legal frameworks were not developed with social media in mind and that *legal* does not automatically mean *ethical*. My university's guidelines, for example, recommend considering:

- whether the information is truly public, that is, is it available to anyone on the internet or is it password-protected or shared in a group with gated access,
- whether the information used for research purposes is sensitive, that is, can it increase the risk of harm or distress to anyone,
- whether the information is truly anonymous, that is, can direct quotations lead to the identification of an individual.<sup>3</sup>

In a guide developed specifically for social media research ethics, Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace (n.d.) include, among others, the following questions. They cover the same issues as the recommendations above, with one additional question concerned with *vulnerability*:

- Can the social media user reasonably expect to be observed by strangers?
- Are the research participants vulnerable?
- Is the subject matter sensitive?
- Will the social media user be anonymized in published outputs?

Finally, we have found a source that singles out vulnerable participants as in need of a special approach. But what is meant by *vulnerable* exactly? My university's guidelines define vulnerable adults as experiencing or being "at risk of abuse or neglect," having "needs for care and support," and being "un-

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/9783148?hl=en#zippy=%2Cthe-purpose-and-character-of-the-use-including-whether-such-use-is-of-commercial-nature-or-is-for-nonprofit-educational-purposes>. Retrieved November 23, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://copyrightexceptions.eu/#info53a>. Retrieved November 23, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) recommendations, personal communication.

able to protect himself or herself against the abuse or neglect or the risk of it.” Examples include people “with learning disabilities, mental health problems, older people and disabled people.”<sup>4</sup> Under this definition, the LGBTQ+ community as a whole would not be classified as vulnerable, although particular individuals under the umbrella might be. What is more, according to UK law, sex life and sexual orientation are special category data, but gender identity is not. On the other hand, gender reassignment is a protected characteristic, according to the Equality Act 2010.<sup>5</sup> Confusion remains.

Different people will have different opinions on this, but, for me, a community is vulnerable if it is marginalized or at risk of discrimination in social life, both online and offline. Such a community may engage in practices that are not widely known and consider social media a safe space to talk about them (Mitra and Gajjala 2008; Miller 2017). The increased visibility that comes with research may threaten this.

The LGBTQ+ community in Poland is, unfortunately, a case in point. Currently, Poland is officially the worst country in the EU for the LGBTQ+ community to live in—at 13%, it has scored the lowest in the 2022 Rainbow Europe ranking.<sup>6</sup> To contextualize this result, Europe’s overall score is 38%, and EU overall score is 48%. While the situation of LGBTQ+ people has never been good, it has worsened considerably since the community became a target of

a hate campaign embarked on by some politicians and representatives of the Catholic Church. In March 2019, local governments across south-eastern Poland started passing declarations in condemnation of what they called “LGBT ideology,” which became known as declarations of LGBT-free zones (Janiszewski 2021). In July of the same year, Catholic archbishop Jędraszewski called LGBTQ+ people “the rainbow plague” (*tęczowa zaraza*), in parallel to the “red plague” (i.e., Communism). The LGBTQ+ community had probably never been so visible before, even if many politicians who voted for the declarations (and probably many ordinary Polish citizens) were not able to explain the acronym when asked to do so by journalists. As a result, the public acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality, which had been growing steadily for years before, fell again in 2019 (Świder and Winiewski 2021:9). This shows the possibility of a negative impact of increased visibility.

The Polish transgender community may be considered an example of a group that uses the internet (especially YouTube) as a safe space and whose practices are relatively unknown in wider society. In many ways, transmen in Poland can benefit from a general lack of knowledge about trans issues. For example, their chest scars (the effect of mastectomy) do not automatically “out” them in public spaces such as swimming pools—many people are not aware of where they come from and assume they are an effect of an accident. Another example is visiting public restrooms, which many trans YouTubers on English-speaking channels report to be a serious problem. Transwomen especially sometimes experience feeling unwelcome in women’s restrooms, where they are perceived as a threat, and uncomfortable about going to men’s restrooms, for the obvious and valid reason that they are not men.

<sup>4</sup> Cardiff University’s Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk: Guidance Note 1. Full Definitions and Relevant Legislation are available at: <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/safeguarding>. Retrieved November 23, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>. Retrieved November 23, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See: Rainbow Map Europe 2022 (<https://www.rainbow-europe.org/>). Retrieved November 23, 2023.

In contrast, one of the Polish trans YouTubers once admitted (in 2018) that visiting public restrooms is not an issue for him simply because the low visibility of the transgender community means that few people in the country can actually recognize (and be offended by) a transgender person entering a public restroom.

On the other hand, the latest report on the situation of LGBTQ+ people in Poland mentions that 57% of the study's trans respondents avoid going to public restrooms despite needing to (Mulak 2021:324). This could be a result of the fact that the visibility of the trans community in Poland has increased due to the hate campaign against LGBTQ+ people described above, and, in particular, after the arrest of the non-binary activist Margot Szutowicz in August 2020 (Hume 2020).

The discussion above shows how dynamic the situation of the LGBTQ+ people in Poland is. Thus, they should be considered vulnerable not only because increasing their visibility can have adverse consequences but also because their socio-political context is so unstable and its future difficult to predict. A social media research study violating (even if unwittingly) an individual's privacy can be extremely distressing and even dangerous if personal data are breached or if sharing sensitive information leads to stigmatization. But, if that individual belongs to a vulnerable community, the whole group may be worse off as a result.

Most publications on my review list do not refer to women<sup>7</sup> or members of the LGBTQ+ community as

<sup>7</sup> Three studies on women on social media (Marwick 2013; Wotanis and McMillan 2014; Spallaccia 2020) are included in the review because they are particularly good at pointing out that bullying, discrimination, and stigmatization do not cease online. The internet is not a utopian democratic space it was once

vulnerable. One exception is Alexander Dhoest and Łukasz Szulc (2016), who studied the use of social media by gay men with migration backgrounds in Belgium. With “**such a vulnerable group**, for whom confidentiality is so important, gaining and respecting trust were key issues throughout the research process” (Dhoest and Szulc 2016:4 [emphasis added]). It is not clear, however, whether they use the term *vulnerable* based on any legal definition or their judgment.

Others, even if they do use the term *vulnerability*, do not necessarily connect it to a need for a special approach to ethics.<sup>8</sup> Let us have a look at two examples of studies on trans vlogs. In the first one, Avery Dame (2013:48 quoting Valentine 2007:217 [emphasis added]) recognizes “the risk of using discourse as a form of violence against **vulnerable populations**” while still providing online identifiers (OIs) of vloggers under study without making it clear if informed consent was obtained or not (see the following subsections). In a similar vein, in a study that does not mention ethics at all and does provide links to videos through which research participants

thought to be (Turner 2006). For example, Wotanis and McMillan (2014:914) write that “‘sexist and often abusive comments’ are a part of YouTube culture”; Marwick (2013 citing Herring 2004) agrees that the online environment is “hostile to women” and that cyberbullying targets women, sexual minorities, and people of color disproportionately. What is even more worrying, cyberbullying can affect offline lives in significant ways: “[Cyber gender harassment] discourages [women] from writing and earning a living online. It interferes with their professional lives. It raises their vulnerability to offline sexual violence. It brands them as incompetent workers and inferior sexual objects. The harassment causes considerable emotional distress. Some women have committed suicide” (Citron 2009:375 as cited in Wotanis and McMillan 2014:915). While the same can probably be said about the LGBTQ+ community—that it is not immune from bullying and discrimination online—the internet has usually been presented by researchers as a safe space, at least against the “offline” background—it offers “a relatively safe way to explore their sexuality in a homophobic national or cultural context” (Dhoest and Szulc 2016:7).

<sup>8</sup> The exceptions here are King (2017), Miller (2017), and Raun (2020).

can be easily identified, Laura Horak (2014:582 [emphasis added]) explains that “these videos have broken open the mainstream media’s stranglehold on trans representation and provided many otherwise **vulnerable subjects** the opportunity to shape themselves and their world”.

The use of the word *otherwise* here is puzzling. Does it mean that a trans person ceases to be vulnerable when they start posting videos online? Does the decision to start posting YouTube content make you a public person, an activist? Is it what Tobias Raun (2020:34-35) has in mind when he writes that

you agree that millions of people are allowed to watch and discuss your vlog, including researchers. When you sign up for a YouTube account, you agree to be “solely responsible for your own Content and the consequences of submitting and publishing your Content on the Service”?

As we will see in the following subsections, these authors clearly do not think that transgender, or more generally LGBTQ+, populations are not at risk in the “real world.” The problem is, rather, that the internet is considered to be a safe space for them (see footnote 8) and also, possibly, that social media content is considered in the light of general legal and ethical guidelines, which, as we have seen, are not perfect, age very quickly, and do not consult and reflect the voices and needs of marginalized groups.

### Contextualizing the Community

In all my publications concerned with gender and sexuality discourses and the LGBTQ+ community, I always include a section on the socio-political situation of the group in the given country (Poland and/or other Central-Eastern European states). Sometimes,

I feel uncomfortable doing this because I anticipate accusations of typecasting the LGBTQ+ community as poor, passive victims of “uncivilized” post-socialist states with their unenlightened, bigoted populations. This may reinforce the stereotypical division between the modern, progressive, sexually liberated West and the conservative, traditional, and sexually repressed East (Kulpa and Mizelińska 2016; Wiedlack et al. 2020). I still do it, though, because I realize that not all readers are familiar with this part of the world, so the information helps them contextualize my study better, but also simply draws their attention to a struggle they may not be aware of.

This is, thus, something I am sensitive to, and I discover with surprise that not all authors do it. Some write about social media practices of gay, lesbian, or transgender people without mentioning their marginalized status in society at all. Maybe it is because they believe that online practices are de-localized and de-territorialized to the extent that belonging to or residing in a particular nation-state does not matter anymore (Enguix and Ardévol 2012)? Maybe they have gone through reflections similar to mine and do not want to typecast the group as helpless minority victims of a bigoted, homophobic, and transphobic majority? Or maybe they assume everyone knows that the community is discriminated against, or can Google it if they do not?

The problem with this is that LGBTQ+ internet studies have a clear bias toward the US or the English-speaking world. Łukasz Szulc (2014) has noticed that US-based studies usually have general titles, such as “Computer Cross-Dressing,” “Lesbians Who Are Married to Men,” or “Gay Men’s Use of Online Pictures in Fat-Affirming Groups,” which suggest a universal/universalizing perspective. At the same time, studies based in other places, for ex-

ample, Poland, Malaysia, or Japan (i.e., Szulc's "Domesticating the Nation Online: Banal Nationalism on LGBTQ Websites in Poland and Turkey" [2016]), tend to include the place name in the title, implying that they talk about particular and local rather than general and universal issues.

Among the publications included in my literature review, only two mention a specific nation-state in the title— Brian King's "Querying Heteronormativity among Transnational Pasifika Teenagers in New Zealand: An Oceanic Approach to Language and Masculinity" (2017) and Rahul Mitra and Radhika Gajjala's "Queer Blogging in Indian Digital Diasporas: A Dialogic Encounter" (2008). Interestingly, these two also devote the most space to discussing the socio-political contexts of their case studies. King informs us about Pasifika peoples and masculinities in New Zealand, while Mitra and Gajjala embed their study in a postcolonial, racist, homophobic, hetero-normative context and familiarize us with the history of the Indian gay movement from a diasporic rather than—or in addition to—a national perspective. Admittedly, Tobias Raun (2020) also provides an extensive discussion of the socio-political situation of the trans community, but his contribution is a Ph.D. thesis with a completely different affordance of space.

All the other publications have general titles that do not point to any specific location (e.g., "'I'm Your Hero? Like Me?': The Role of 'Expert' in the Trans Male Vlog" [Dame 2013] or "Archiving the Wonders of Testosterone via YouTube" [Raun 2015]). Out of these:

- some locate their studies in places that would be considered the "West," for example, the US (Alexander 2002; Raun 2020), the UK (Jenzen

2017), Belgium (Dhoest and Szulc 2016), or Germany, among others (Heinz 2012);

- others do not mention the location at all, but it is clear that they are concerned with social media in the English language (e.g., Sundén 2002; Miller 2017; Miller 2019; Martino, Omercajic, and Cumming-Potvin 2021). English is, thus, construed as the unmarked, universal language of social media that does not require an explanation, while other languages are presumably marked and need to be explicitly named and explained.

While some of these publications with general titles provide a bit of context, this tends to be very cursory and unspecific, listing nominalizations (*homophobia*, *transphobia*, *prejudice*, *risk of violence*, physical and psychological *abuse*, and *discrimination* [Miller 2017:3], *bullying* [Jenzen 2017:1627], and *stigmatization* [O'Neill 2014]) or using academic terms such as *marginalized* and *subaltern* (Martino, Omercajic, and Cumming-Potvin 2021:4), for example: "transpeople continue to be disproportionately affected by *discrimination*, *violence*, *suicide* and other forms of *self-harm*, *unemployment*, *underemployment*, *substance abuse*, *HIV status*, and *access to medical services*" (Heinz 2012:339 [emphasis added]); "mainstream representations of trans people are often *distancing* and *objectifying*, treating trans people as freaks or curiosities" (Horak 2014:575 [emphasis added]).

For another example, Tobias Raun (2015:703 [emphasis added]) writes that "body-altering procedures are laid out for visual consumption and inspiration, which potentially challenges the *pathologization* and *stigmatization* of trans." The use of nominalizations (in italics) suggests that these phenomena are generally known and do not require any explanation, but



someone not familiar with the transgender community at all may struggle to understand how and why it is pathologized and stigmatized. In turn, Jordan Miller (2019:816) writes that “Trans people who do not adhere to transnormativity are often negatively impacted in the form of social estrangement, religious condemnation, violent hate crimes and street harassment, police violence, loss of familial and community support, and institutionalized discrimination in healthcare facilities, prisons, housing, and the workplace,” as if suggesting that trans people who do adhere to transnormativity do not experience these things.

Many studies on the LGBTQ+, and especially transgender, groups on social media tell the story of empowerment, celebration of identity, and community-building, which is why they may be reluctant to cast the “real-world” situations of these groups in a negative light. I believe, however, that without contextualization, these studies fail to paint the full picture and may even lack social relevance, offering an exercise in social media analysis and not much more. To quote Łukasz Szulc (2014:292) again:

To ignore the context of one’s research means to follow utopian imaginations of the Internet as a deterritorialized cyberspace, which only obscures rather than explains the social role of the Internet. To take the context of one’s research for granted means failing to address one’s non-U.S. colleagues, who may be unfamiliar with the context, as well as working against the commitment to internationalize media studies.

Another concern that Szulc hints at here is that if many of the US-based studies do not problematize the socio-political situations of their LGBTQ+ populations, while the ones located somewhere else do, it suggests that the “West” represents the univer-

sal, objective point of reference, while the “Rest” is particular, local, subjective, partial, and unable to make universalizing claims. It also reinforces the stereotype that the “West” is a place where equality has already been achieved that “others” lag and should look up to (consider Mizielińska and Kulpa 2013). As a side note, I made the title of this article appear “universal” exactly for this reason. I believe we can all learn from each other’s stories—not only the “East” from the “West,” but also the other way round (see also the subsection on Positionality).

### **Informed Consent, Anonymization, Direct References**

Having discussed the questions of vulnerability and contextualization of the studied group, let us return to the issue of social media research ethics. As mentioned in the introductory section, it is becoming less and less acceptable to use social media data in research without taking ethics into account. More and more researchers are finding it problematic to rely on the assumption that if the data are public, they may be freely used for research purposes (Williams et al. 2017a; 2017b). This assumption has probably lingered on since the times of “Web 1.0,” when the internet was populated with pseudonyms and avatars rather than real names and profile photos prevalent on social media platforms of “Web 2.0.” When I started researching gender and sexuality discourses on the internet back in 2015, focusing on the “departing” (Kopytoff 2011) medium of blogs, most of the gay, lesbian, and transsexual authors I followed blogged anonymously. Possibly as a consequence of that, ethical clearance for that study was unproblematic. Two parallel developments—one in the LGBTQ+ world, the other in the online world—have been underway since then.

With regard to the former, discourse has continued to shift away from the binary opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality to a diversity of orientations and identities with straight, gay, and lesbian as just three out of a plethora of equally valid options. We have also moved away from talking about transsexuality as a diagnosis toward the transgender umbrella of identities and gender dysphoria as the diagnosis (BBC 2019). Concerning the latter, almost all anonymous blogs I used to follow have been taken down, and the discussion on gender and sexuality has moved to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, with creators showing their faces and some of their names becoming brands. While some still use pseudonyms, the fact that these pseudonyms can be connected to their faces and offline identities means that their anonymizing function has become obsolete.

As my research has followed the online content creators in this shift, obtaining ethical clearance for studying this content has also become less straightforward. A combination of the legal principle of public task/fair dealing and anonymization of personal data may not be enough in qualitative social media research, where content may need to be quoted verbatim. Informed consent is, thus, something that needs to be considered, especially with regard to YouTube, which involves visual images of individuals.

Still, only four publications in my literature review mention obtaining informed consent; all of them use data anonymization (or pseudonymization) at the same time, for example:

At the start, we obtained informed consent and ascertained anonymity; after the initial analysis of the interviews, the participants received a general report

including their quotes, to which they could comment. All were satisfied with the way their data were treated and the degree of anonymity. In this article, their names are replaced by other names which are commonly used in their country of origin. [Dhoest and Szulc 2016:4]

All four have been published relatively recently (after 2016). What is more, out of these, three (Dhoest and Szulc 2016; Jenzen 2017; King 2017) are based on interviews or ethnographic work with LGBTQ+ producers and/or consumers of social media, rather than the analysis of social media content itself. Here, the ethical approach might have been conditioned by methodology—obtaining informed consent before conducting interviews/ethnographic work is a matter of course. The only publication I could find that relies on informed consent to study trans users' social media is Jordan Miller's (2019:817-818)—but note that this study combines an analysis of YouTube content with, again, interviews:

Prior to each interview, I e-mailed participants the consent form, as well as a crisis-resource list in the unlikely occurrence of a negative interview experience...Five of six participants consented to the usage of any images or audio from the interviews or their public YouTube content in any presentations and publications deriving from this study. All six consented to any content of their YouTube channel and interview data being included in written form.

Informed consent is also mentioned by Tobias Raun (2020:42 [emphasis added]), but for a different reason—to explain why it has not been obtained for his study on transmen on YouTube:

I consulted different ethical guidelines...and most of them agree that it is consistent with ethical re-

sponsibility...**not to pursue informed consent** if the material “is open and available for everyone, that everyone with an Internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration” (Sveningsson Elm 2009:75). I also consulted the review board in Denmark, the Danish Data Protection Agency, and according to their guidelines **I did not have to obtain informed consent**, but I needed to anonymize the vloggers when publishing my material.

Note that all the sources that Raun mentions above were published before 2010, which means that they might not have been written with the social media we have today in mind.

Two further publications (Sundén 2002<sup>9</sup> and Martino et al. 2021) assigned pseudonyms to research participants. The most common approach, though, is to provide direct references—weblinks to the blogs/videos under study and/or OIs of social media creators without making any reference to ethics.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Laura Horak (2014) mentions OIs of the “most popular trans YouTubers,” and a list of videos used is attached after the bibliography. Granted, providing links to online content seems to have ceased around 2015, but this may have less to do with ethics than with the instability of web addresses that can be easily changed or removed. Using OIs, in contrast, can be ascertained across the entire timespan considered—2002-2021—and thus does not “belong to the past” even though,

<sup>9</sup> Sundén (2002) studied interaction in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). Names of characters in the article are changed, but no information concerning ethics or informed consent is provided. It should probably be assumed that the study was conducted clandestinely.

<sup>10</sup> To be fair, this does not automatically mean no ethical clearance was sought or informed consent was obtained. It should be common practice to provide information on ethics in publications to avoid any confusion or misunderstandings.

as mentioned before, online identifiers should be considered personal data and handled with much more consideration. Publications providing verbatim quotes of *textual* social media content should be included in this group because by copy-pasting the content into an internet browser it is possible to identify the site and thus the individual poster. Transcribed quotes of YouTube audio content do not have this function; but YouTube videos can be found if verbatim quotes of titles, descriptions, or comments to the video are included.

Why is this a problem? To illustrate, in her aptly titled book *It's a Man's World (Wide Web)*, Beatrice Spallaccia (2020) looks at examples of hate speech targeting women online. She analyzes in detail case studies of several women in the US, Italy, and Australia who have been the target of trolling, cyberbullying, and harassment, including sexual violence and death threats, providing profuse examples—and she uses real names of the affected women. She does not explain at all whether these women were informed and/or asked for consent; we only know that one of them was additionally interviewed. Spallaccia does not include any description of her approach to ethics, and she only uses the word to refer to online behavior and gaming journalism. It is clear that her intention is to expose and condemn misogynistic cyberbullying, trolling, and hate speech practices; but is using the victims' real names the ethical way of going about it?

According to a popular argument, if social media users want to protect their privacy, they go for “gated access areas of websites or websites requiring memberships since such sites are created to offer a safe, private communication space” (Heinz 2012:328). Contrary to that, the work of Matthew Williams and colleagues (2017b) emphasizes that

users' conceptions of what is public and private is blurred in online communications...The disinhibiting effect of computer-mediated communication means Internet users, while acknowledging the environment as a (semi-)public space, often use it to engage in what could be considered private talk...Online information is often intended only for a specific (imagined) public made up of peers, a support network or specific community, not necessarily the Internet public at large, and certainly not for publics beyond the Internet.

Highly emotional and intimate details of the lives of women in Spallaccia's (2020) study will be accessible in university libraries for decades after we forget all about Twitter and move on to the next thing. These cyberbullying stories may appear dominant and central now, but the affected women have the right to forget them, move on, and wish to be remembered for something completely different. Many of the reviewed studies, especially those focusing on the use of social media by the LGBTQ+ community, position bloggers and vloggers as experts, heroes, activists, role models, as if it were their obligation and responsibility to represent the community and educate everyone else: "Transgender youth may be particularly in need of media depictions and mediated role models" (Miller 2017:3). While such portrayals are undoubtedly valid, they appear to be imposed on the social media creators, to be outside their control. Do they all really want to be the face of a movement?

This is especially relevant in the case of transgender YouTubers. Many of them address their videos specifically to the transgender community. Research using their images and OIs can inadvertently "out" them as trans to their employers, colleagues, teachers, landlords, et cetera, possibly contrary to their wishes of being out as trans online but "stealth"

offline. For many LGBTQ+ people, this distinction between being out online and passing as straight/cis offline is a life-saving necessity (Dhoest and Szulc 2016; Miller 2017; Raun 2020).

### **Positionality**

Ever since I started doing qualitative research on gender and sexuality discourses on social media, including blogs and YouTube, I have been inspired by how people build their gendered and sexual selves out of (multi-)linguistic resources available to them in often creative, innovative, and completely surprising ways. Having studied homophobic and transphobic discourses of Polish mainstream media (Chojnicka 2015a), I felt that the narratives I found on what I then considered "alternative" media could help raise awareness of how language contributes to social inequalities and how it facilitates change at the same time. For example, by applying Critical Discourse Analysis to study LGBTQ+ blogs, I developed a typology of strategies challenging mainstream cis/hetero-normative discursive frames (Chojnicka 2015b).

Ever since I started doing this work, I have also been constantly doubting and second-guessing myself. Does the community indeed perceive my work as beneficial—or is my research completely invisible or, even worse, perceived as extractivist? As a Polish researcher who received postdoctoral funding in Germany and the UK, do I have the right to speak about the struggles of a community I left behind? As a cis person, should I study gender transition narratives in the first place, and can I avoid speaking over transgender people if I do? Is it morally acceptable to build my academic career in this field, or am I taking space away from more vulnerable and less privileged researchers?

These and similar questions are concerned with our positionality as researchers in relation to our subjects or research participants: “the call for self-reflection and understanding positionality has increased in its frequency. To think through positionality, a critical ethnographer must understand how privilege, power, and biases shape ethnographic fieldwork and representations, as well as the structures of domination and oppression that engulf the subjects we work with (Madison 2005)” (Henson 2020:325). Some authors of the publications in my literature review take up these questions, acknowledging “the researcher’s disruptive possibility” and suggesting “self-conscious and reflexive inquiry” (Dame 2013:48). Brian King (2017:445) situates his ethnicity in the transnational New Zealand-Oceanic context and invites researchers, after Milani (2014), to position themselves “at the margins” to “enable reflection concerning our contributions to knowledge.”

Very interesting is Rahul Mitra and Radhika Gajjala’s (2008) method of interspersing their performative blogging with their analysis of “third-party” blogs, blurring the lines between subject and object of study. By doing this, they show that researchers are not god-like omniscient minds endowed with a “gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988) but embodied and situated human beings who can be studied like everyone else. Considering one’s own positionality is especially pertinent to research on transgender communities online, whereby defining one’s own (relationship to) gender identity is a common practice (e.g., Dame 2013; Raun 2020; Martino et al. 2021). Outside social media research, an insightful perspective on the positionality of migrant researchers studying migrant communities they are part of is provided by Paula Pustulka, Justyna Struzik, and Magdalena Ślusarczyk (2015) and Justyna Bell and colleagues (2020).

Tobias Raun (2020) devotes by far the most space to issues of the researcher’s positionality, which is perhaps expected in the context of a Ph.D. thesis with a completely different space allowance in comparison to a journal article. He describes how, by creating a YouTube channel “Trans Researcher,” he positioned himself as an “insider” because he “felt it essential to make explicit [his] researcher persona to the community, but also to have a personal and/or political stake in the community agenda in order to maintain both personal and research credibility” (Raun 2020:45-46).

Raun has also, like me, experienced people challenging his legitimacy to research the trans community. Being trans himself, he is sometimes perceived as “too personally involved and too politically invested” and so not “objective” and “critical” enough (Raun 2020:46). As a cis person, I have been deemed unable to really understand the experience of being trans and thus unable to do research about it (admittedly by fellow researchers and not by members of the trans community, who usually welcome academic interest in their issues, particularly in Poland).

This insider versus outsider debate is never trivial, especially in the case of relatively disadvantaged communities, whereby the “outsider” researcher hails from a more privileged social group, introducing the dimension of power into the picture. But, it must be kept in mind that producing knowledge from a marginalized perspective does not automatically make it critical of the dominant perspective (hence, female agents of patriarchy! [*agentki patriarchy*] as labeled by Polish feminists), just as hailing from a dominant social group does not mean one cannot be critical of it (Jørgensen 2010:327). Tying the situatedness of knowledge to the researcher’s identity may be reductive and, frankly, evokes the es-

sentialism that gender, trans, and queer studies are supposed to oppose. Thus, I agree with Marianne Jørgensen (2010:327; cf. Harding's standpoint theory 1998; 2006) that "we need continuously to critically examine the legitimacy of the knowledge we produce, whether from a marginalised position or not, in asking ourselves, and in debating with others, how our position affects the knowledge we produce, and how we through active positioning can develop the perspectives that best suit our critical purposes." Researchers need to be aware of and careful about their research questions fixing particular social phenomena as problems in need of explanation. After all, we do not see academic papers about the linguistic practices of straight people or constructing cisness on YouTube, just as we do not ask straight people when they realized they were straight or how their families reacted to it. The fact that this appears nonsensical to us implies that being straight and cis is so default, normal, and obvious that it raises no questions and requires no explanation, while being LGBTQ+ deviates from this norm, is problematic, and needs to be understood, investigated, and explained. This connects to the point made earlier about contextualizing our research subjects, with the East or the global South cast as deviating from the norm and in need of explanation while the West/global North represents the place where the "gaze from nowhere" actually comes from.

It is in this context that I appreciate Bryce Henson's (2020:325) formulation—"overdeveloped world"—which suggests that it is the West/global North that should be perceived as deviant rather than the places that we are used to calling "underdeveloped." To be really critical is to question normalcy.

My cis perspective on trans studies can complement the knowledge generated by trans scholars. I believe

that each researcher, from their unique vantage point, reveals a little patch in the great mosaic called trans studies, and only by looking at all these patches together can we arrive at a full picture of the field. It is still vital, however, that we all remain critical of our assumptions, ideologies, and blind spots and open to (even if critical) feedback from others.

## Zooming Out on Methodology

It should be clear by now that in my approach to studying social media outputs of vulnerable communities, I prioritize ethical over all other types of considerations. In this second section, I would like to discuss the methodological repercussions of such an approach by focusing on FAIR research principles and methods of disseminating data.

### FAIR Research Principles

FAIR stands for findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability. More and more researchers, scientists, and policymakers agree that data "used for research purposes, including those extracted from social media, should be...easily *Findable*; *Accessible* to as many as possible, in ways that are user-friendly and machine-readable; *Interoperable* to foster links with other data; and *Reusable*, i.e., easy to repurpose" (Leonelli et al. 2021:1). Accordingly, research institutions and funding bodies are increasingly requiring the application of FAIR data principles in the projects they host and/or fund.

While the development of the FAIR research principles was a huge step forward in making data more open and accessible, the FAIR framework might not be appropriate for all research disciplines and projects. For example, Sabina Leonelli and colleagues (2021:2) point out that in health-related social media

research, it “is not enough to guarantee that data collection, processing, and use are fair to those affected by these processes.” They argue for making data “fair as well as FAIR,” which requires “the implementation of processes of accountability, integrity, and justice as integral to the whole research process” (Leonelli et al. 2021:11). What is more, as discussed at length in the previous section, it is a misconception that the public nature of social media means that data extracted from social media can be used for research without any restrictions.

Acting according to FAIR principles, in the case of my research, would mean sharing links to, and/or content of, social media contributions of Polish transgender individuals. This would directly contradict the requirement to anonymize data discussed in the previous section. Even if social media content were anonymized and then shared, original posts could be easily found by copy-pasting a fragment of text into any internet browser (a fragment of a blog post, or a title, description, or comment in the case of YouTube videos). This forces me to actively contradict the requirements of my grant funder.

A way out of this dilemma could be to obtain informed consent from creators specifically to share their data (rather than just using them for one’s research). The problem with this is that social media users unfamiliar with how academia works may not be fully aware of what this entails, even if they think and tell the researcher that they do (e.g., Tagg et al. [2016] talk about situations where research participants trust “the researcher to do no harm in ways which...often lead to their having to make decisions that extend or contradict the consent granted by participants”). It is also not clear what happens if they want to withdraw informed consent after their content has already been placed in a data re-

pository. Is there a way to guarantee that it has not been downloaded and shared further by another researcher?

To be fair, while I rely on informed consent in my current project, I also recognize potential problems that come with it. First of all, anonymization, if done really well, may protect research participants’ personal data better than the informed consent route, for the simple reason that the procedure requires collecting names, surnames, contact information, and signatures and creates the need to provide a secure environment for this information. In other words, informed consent actually creates the need to collect and handle personal data in projects that would otherwise not handle them. Obtaining informed consent may also be problematic for transgender persons who have not legally changed their names yet. Is a document signed with their preferred name valid? If not, and the “deadname” must be used, this will figure in project documentation for a long period, depending on the institutional requirements for storing project data.

On the other hand, if I do not give other researchers any chance to verify my primary data, can my work be considered valid? Presumably, the goal of FAIR is not only to make research data more accessible to a wider cohort but also to make knowledge generated by academics more reliable. Granted, frameworks like FAIR seem to have been developed for, and are more suited to, “hard” sciences and quantitative studies. Creating large, expensive datasets and then using them for a study or two does seem like a waste of taxpayers’ money. However, such a scenario can hardly be extended to a qualitative study in language and/or discourse-oriented studies, where material is often collected with very specific research questions and methodologies in mind.

In-depth qualitative projects in the humanities and social sciences are also highly individualized, relying on the researcher's interpretation of the material rather than constituting an attempt to find out an "objective truth" about it, and are rarely repeated or verified by others.

Unwittingly or not, hard sciences are believed to be the "science proper," and provide models for data frameworks that are supposed to apply to all academic disciplines. Arts, humanities, and social studies often struggle to be recognized as "scientific" and are endowed with less prestige and bargaining power. Academics arguing against the FAIR principles may be judged as lazy (too lazy to devise a data management plan) in the best case and as suspicious (if they do not want to share data, maybe they do something dubious with them?) in the worst case. They may, thus, feel bullied to comply against their conviction that ethics should take precedence over data openness.

### Notes on Data Dissemination

An important concern in working with social media data is the question of whether the data can truly be anonymized. Anonymization normally involves removing any data that can lead to a person being identified, for example, names, OIs, references to places of residence, schools, workplaces, employers' names, groups, or organizations the person is a member of, among others. However, with textual social media such as blogs, Facebook posts, or Tweets, the matter is more complicated. If a quote is disseminated verbatim, that is, word for word, its original online location can be easily found using a search engine such as Google. Copy-pasting a continuous sequence of words from the quote may lead the reader to the website where it was taken

from. While certain privacy settings on blogging platforms, Facebook, and (to a lesser extent) Twitter can prevent this from happening, most blogs and public Facebook posts are discoverable by search engines. This means that no direct quotes can ever be disseminated if the priority is to keep the sources anonymous—which, of course, is in blatant opposition to the FAIR principles. Basically, it makes the piece of research unverifiable.

Quoting utterances from YouTube videos is less problematic in this sense, as they do not exist as text in the online space and are thus not discoverable. One still needs to be careful, though, when quoting video titles, descriptions, and comments from viewers, as this information can also lead to the YouTube page and thus the video in question.

Because I study Polish social media and disseminate my findings in English, in my previous work on gender transition narratives (Chojnicka 2020), I have resorted to using my English translations of the Polish posts only (without revealing the original) to avoid this problem. While this practice may be acceptable in the case of discourse analysis, it may be insufficient in more linguistically oriented studies, where the exact form in which the original utterance was made is of vital importance. Also, what if I want to write an article in Polish for the Polish audience? Using English translations as examples becomes unviable. The same applies, of course, to all research where the language of the material under study is the same as the language of dissemination of results.

Instead of thinking about this issue in terms of an obstacle, however, it is possible to use it as a challenge to come up with creative and innovative ways of representing research findings. For example, with regard to Twitter data,



[i]n cases where consent is not provided to direct quote without anonymisation, Markham (2012) advocates a bricolage-style reconfiguration of original data that represents the intended meaning of interactions. This can include creating composite accounts and posts by selecting representative elements from the data and composing a new original that is not traceable back to an identifiable individual or interaction. Such a reconstruction is accomplished via close attention to context, to avoid the loss or change of meaning...While this may be suitable for general thematic analysis, it may not satisfy the needs of more fine-grained approaches, such as those undertaken by interactionist scholars. [Williams et al. 2017a:1162]

In my work, which focuses on gender transition narratives that are to a large extent multilingual (which range from Polish gender and sexuality-related terms that are borrowings or calques from English to engaging in code-switching/translanguaging), I am to develop innovative dissemination strategies that reflect these multilingual and translanguaging practices. This will allow me to protect my sources while remaining as faithful to them as possible, at the same time hopefully giving the target audience a better idea of what such texts are like and also engaging in the deconstruction of “proper academic writing” in English as the language of global knowledge production (as mentioned before). It is a challenge I am working on (and through) at present.

## Conclusions

I realize that this article probably raises more questions than it provides answers. My goal was not to offer ready-made solutions to the issues mentioned but to encourage researchers to think and reflect on the ethics of qualitative social media studies and

how they interact and possibly interfere with established methodologies.

While it may be legal to study and reproduce publicly available data, it is not necessarily ethical. Anonymization of data is an absolute minimum, increasingly expected by ethics committees, and I would not be surprised if legal frameworks were moved in that direction in the near future. Asking social media creators for informed consent to use their content for research is a matter of human decency. This may not be possible in the case of large quantitative case studies, but they have the advantage of being able to present data in aggregated form, while in qualitative research, it is more common to quote social media content verbatim.

It should also be emphasized that, in some cases, informed consent may not be enough. Once social media content is used for research and disseminated, its creator has even less control over what happens to it and who can access it. It is, thus, the researcher’s responsibility to anticipate the possibility of misuse of research findings and find a way to mitigate that risk even after obtaining informed consent. The more vulnerable or sensitive the research participants/subjects are, the more care and thought must go into this.

Probably most social media creators do not post with researchers in mind and that is perfectly reasonable. We are frequently reminded of how nothing really disappears online, how you cannot really remove anything from the internet once it has been uploaded (e.g., Ot 2022). This usually brings up a sense of dread in us, but is research not very similar? People post thousands of statements, photos, videos, and other content online throughout their lives. Sometimes they post happy, sometimes they

post sad, disappointed, outraged, depressed. While they grow, mature, and change, their older posts stay the same. It is quite random which of these posts, if any, will ever be “immortalized” in a research paper and taken to represent them in some way, even if they no longer are the people they were when they posted them.

All this holds true for any social media user, but even more so for a member of a vulnerable community. Additionally to all the other difficulties defining a vulnerable community discussed in this article, whether or not someone should be considered vulnerable can also change. A YouTuber who posted for years as a man suddenly comes out as trans and starts posting as a woman. Should we treat her posts

before and after coming out differently? If she had permitted us to study her posts before coming out, would this permission still apply? It should always be the researcher’s responsibility to think about all these issues and try to anticipate possible problems before they occur. In five, ten, or twenty years, we will probably have developed a completely different ethics of social media research—but our papers from today will remain the same forever.

## Acknowledgments

This research has been funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) under Horizon 2020. Project reference: 882747 — TRANSLation — H2020-MSCA-IF-2019, Cardiff University.

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## Citation

Chojnicka, Joanna. 2024. "Transitioning (on the) Internet: Shifting Challenges and Contradictions of Ethics of Studying Online Gender Transition Narratives." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(1):60-80. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.1.05>

## Appendix

TABLE 1	vulnerability mentioned?	location mentioned?	situation problematized?	direct quotes/ links/ OIs given?	pseudonymization/anonymization?	informed consent mentioned?
Alexander 2002	no	US	no; discusses online queer politics but no connection to the 'real world'	yes	no	no
Sundén 2002	no	no	no	yes	yes	no
Mitra & Gajjala 2008	no	South Asian/ Indian diasporas	postcolonial/racist/homophobic/hetero-normative context; history of Indian gay movement	yes	no	no
Heinz 2012	no	Germany, US, Canada, Austria	yes, but globally (unspecific)	yes	no, but gated access excluded	no
Dame 2013	yes	US, Canada	no	yes	unknown*	no
Marwick 2013				yes	no	no
Horak 2014	yes	no	no, only concerning mainstream representations of trans people	yes	no	no
O'Neill 2014	no	no	mentions previous works on bullying and stigmatization of trans youth in the UK	OIs of 'celebrity' YouTubers	no	no
Wotanis & McMillan 2014				yes	no	no
Raun 2015	no	no	no	yes	no	no
Dhoest & Szulc 2016	yes	Belgium	yes	does not apply	yes	yes
Jenzen 2017	no	UK	yes, but in very general terms	no	yes (FG) / no (YT)	yes
King 2017	yes	New Zealand	yes, very extensive	does not apply	yes	yes
Miller 2017	yes	no	very general (transphobia)	yes	no	no
Miller 2019	no	no	only in terms of transnormativity	yes (YT only)	yes	yes
Raun 2020	yes	US	yes	yes (YT only)	yes	yes, but not obtained
Spallaccia 2020				yes	no	no
Martino et al. 2021	no	no	no	yes (YT only)	yes	no

\* Uses "subjects' names," but it is unclear whether they are real OIs or pseudonyms.

Source: *Self-elaboration*.