



Article

Pics, Dicks, Tits, and Tats: negotiating ethics working with images of bodies in social media research

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Abstract

With the rise of camera-enabled cellphones and social media platforms that focus on vernacular images (e.g. Instagram™ and Snapchat™), researchers and institutional ethics boards increasingly seek guidelines for research using digital images of bodies shared on social media. This article presents the findings of in-depth interviews with 16 researchers who have received institutional ethics approval to study images of bodies shared on social media platforms. The interviews explored the researchers' (a) processes of selecting their methodologies, (b) experiences getting institutional ethics approval, and (c) personal research ethics that emerged through their research programs. The findings indicate that researchers and review boards generally lack resources. Researchers often adhered to contextual integrity, were protective while not patronizing, and adopted a feminist materialist ethics of care, which included consideration of the manifold human and nonhuman forces at play in the lifespan of images in digital research. Researchers also practiced strategies like ongoing consent, "ethics-on-the-go," ethical visual fabrication, and conscious omission.

Keywords

Digital ethics, feminist new materialism, posthumanism, qualitative methods, social media, visual methods

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Introduction

The rise of mobile phones through the 1990s and 2000s, the launch of the first front facing in 2010, and then the mass growth of visual-heavy social media platforms like Snapchat™ and Instagram™ from 2010 onward mark parts of the technological apparatus that has contributed significantly to the rise in the everyday and habitual vernacular sharing of images of the body on social media platforms. Theorists have become particularly interested in studying the various forms, uses and meanings, regulations, and discourses around socially mediated images of the body like, for instance, selfies (Senft and Baym, 2015; Lasén, 2009; Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz, 2015; Warfield, 2016), micro-celebrity and influencer images (Abidin, 2016), live coming (Senft, 2008), sexting and intimate images (Albury, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018), coming out videos (Raun, 2016), online porn (Paasonen, 2011; Van der Nagel and Frith, 2015), hook-up apps (Duguay, 2016), dick pics (Tziallas, 2015), and fitspo (Lupton, 2017) among many other practices.

Concurrent to research on the socially mediated body, scholars like Charles Ess (2015), Annette Markham (2017; 2015), Markham and Buchanan (2018b), Heider and Massanari (2012), and Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017) have examined, written and published, and proposed informed decision-making blueprints (e.g. AoIR Guidelines for Internet Research 2.0) by which Internet researchers may go about conducting more ethical research in emerging, evolving, and networked spaces (Markham and Buchanan (2018a).

Although significant catalogs of literature have been produced in recent years in both terrains of research on the socially mediated body and digital ethics broadly, little work has been published on the specific digital ethics quandaries of researching images of the body shared on social media. Bodies shared on social media call to some of the overarching debates broadly within discussions of online privacy. In one camp, user agreements and social media platforms, motivated by capital and sociality, often compel online data to be defined as *public* in order to promote circulation and data inquiry. In another camp, practices within communities of Internet researchers, motivated by fierce ethics of care, push for online data to be thought of as bodily, affectively, and materially connected to the image makers (Zimmer, 2010; Zimmer and Proferes, 2013). Debates in and across these camps often involve “even determining when a project constitutes human research” (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018: 2). And so research involving digital images of bodies is particularly unique because these images are a fusion, at once, of data and bodies. Digital images of bodies also implicitly confront some core and complex areas of digital research ethics like the ethics of care between researcher and participant, issues around identifiability and confidentiality, topics related to intimacy and identity, and determinants of publicness and private-ness within social media platforms and cultures. Although this article interviewed only researchers studying digital images of bodies, we believe the findings can more broadly be applied to anyone using visual data in qualitative digital research.

This article aims to provide researchers new to data like digital visual images of bodies and phenomena like selfies, sexting, celebrity images, and online porn, a summary of the ethical attitudes, experiences, concerns, and strategies that published researchers have experienced in conducting empirical studies on images of the body shared on social

media. This article is also useful for scholars in countries that require formal approval from institutional research ethics boards (IRBs) or research ethics boards (REBs) where national protocols or policies exist to guide empirical research involving human subjects. This article is not a comprehensive summary of all quandaries researchers may face. The article also includes advice for new researchers and REB members that more broadly relate to forms of qualitative inquiry beyond visual images of bodies to relate to visual data broadly. Our hope is that this article may provide a useful entry point for scholars new to the field or REB members wondering how to handle such applications.

This article is the result of 16 interviews with internationally situated scholars who have studied, in a variety of ways, images of the body shared on social media. The research project aims to explore how researchers chose their methodological approach, what their experience attaining institutional ethics approval was, and then, importantly, after ethics approval was awarded, what ethical attitudes, strategies, and practices emerged when dealing with the dilemmas in their research programs post-ethics board approval. Some of our participants were in countries that had formalized REBs and some were in countries that did not have such protocols. Either way, all the researchers adhered to common ethical attitudes and tactics that we enumerate and discuss in the findings section of the article.

The aim of this article is not to enumerate a systematic algorithm for decision-making. Rather, the aim of this article is to (a) summarize a series of common experiences which reveal gaps in knowledge on the part of researchers, REBs, and digital research ethics scholarship, (b) provide a series of common ethical questions and situations faced by researchers using these sorts of images at this moment in time, and (c) provide some of the creative practices and strategies implemented by researchers who held a strong obligation to participant protection and care. I will proceed with a literature review that briefly maps some of the core ideological tensions in digital data use in digital research. This summary is purposefully brief in order to paint a frame on which we may map the complex comments of our interview subjects, which we explore in the “Findings” section. The “Implications and conclusions” section provides (a) advice for institutional ethics boards, (b) future researchers studying images of bodies online and (c) recommendations for future scholarly inquiry on this topic.

Literature review

In the following, we map some of the core and conflicting ideological tensions between seeing data online as data, and disconnected from users versus those that see data shared online as continuously affectively and materially connected to offline bodies.

Charles Ess (2015) explains how discussions around digital ethics remained largely theoretical until the 1980s when, with the real integration of household technologies like the desktop computer, ethical discussions were compelled to adopt a degree of pragmatism and practicality. This pragmatism and practicality were the philosophical underpinnings that informed the early drafts of the Association of Internet Researcher’s Guidelines for Ethical decision-making (2002; 2010). The early drafts of this document, which remain the most important and referenced sources for digital research ethics in Internet Studies, involved 2 years of discussions and consultation with

researchers—predominantly from the humanities and social sciences—doing work “on the ground” via in-depth ethnographies, interviews, and observational research in online spaces (Ess, 2015). Any sort of ethical universalism was immediately rejected for attention to nuance, situated narratives, and granular ethical complexities. Given the bottom-up approach and information gathered from globally located scholars studying an equally globally reaching series of case studies, the early drafts of the Association of Internet Research guidelines were rooted in non-absolutism, non-automatism, and attention to contextual specifics and native ethical practices of the digital communities and phenomena under study (Ess, 2015).

Two core ethical approaches practiced widely in Internet studies emphasize relationality, emotional care, friendship, and respect, alongside respect for community cohesion and thus the importance of contextual particulars: (a) feminist ethics of care and (b) contextual integrity. Along with Ubuntu, Confucian, and Virtue ethics, Charles Ess (2015: 197) marks feminist ethics of care as a key ethical framework in digital ethics. This approach to ethics appears in the AoIR guidelines through statements such as, “The greater the vulnerability of the community/participant, the greater obligation of the researcher to protect that community/participant” (Markham and Buchanan, 2018a: 5). Feminist ethics of care places an importance on webs of interdependent relationships where ethics “appear to be felt as much as they may be rationally sorted out in a kind of calculus” (Ess, 2015: 234). Contextual integrity, coined by Helen Nissenbaum (2009), resonates with the early AoIR guidelines’ attention to the grainy sociotechnical specifics of online contexts that determine what is ethical in their situated contexts. Helen Nissenbaum elaborates the framework of contextual integrity as a means to assess the “contexts, informational norms, actors, attributes, and transmission principles people expect to hold over the flow of their information” (p. 136). Citing relational theorists like Talcott Parsons, Erving Goffman, Max Weber, and Pierre Bourdieu (Nissenbaum 2009: 130), Nissenbaum details these aforementioned factors that must be considered to assess the “breach of a context norm” or a breach of “contextual integrity” (p. 2). Contextual integrity thus provides a framework for ethical rigor in digital research programs. The AoIR Guidelines, which cite Nissenbaum’s work directly (Markham and Buchanan, 2018a: 7), clearly call to the importance of contextual integrity in statements like, “rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context” (Markham and Buchanan, 2018b: 4).

As Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda note, “Privacy is inherently social-relational and sociotechnical in the context of Internet based research” (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017: xxvii). The situated specifics of these socio-relational and socio-technical assemblages must be considered in order to understand the differences in approaches to ethics that emerge at different scopes and scales of Internet research. For instance, some of the practices surrounding privacy and transparency in the realm of “big data research” differ greatly from the ethics rooted in the AoIR guidelines. Big data research involves studies of data shared online, methodologically gathered in voluminous and exhaustive ways, and analyzed through complex algorithmic tools where the researchers are much less interested in the close-up granular interactions or the nuances of the individual themselves but rather the at-a-distance shape, movements, flows, and changes in data (Kitchin,

2014). Social media user agreements often state that data shared on these platforms is public and the platform affordances encourage sharing, resharing, reblogging, and reposting, which compels a transparency to the data shared online. Researchers using big data sets are often encouraged within the policy requirements of some granting agencies, like the National Institute for Health, to make their data public at the end of their analyses (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). Given that many “research institutes with more financial power or with strong personal connections to social media companies have more options to obtain interesting and suitable data” (Weller and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017: 116), the movement to open access data repositories is touted as a sort of liberatory activity. Researchers are seen to be “robin-hooding” when the data sets are made public because data “access [is] seen as highly unequal and social media researchers also [feel] a special responsibility to share data with social media users” (Weller and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017: 121).

What these two positions and approaches to the use of data in online research have yielded is a discursive and ethical divide over when and where data ought to be thought of as bits and bytes, and when data ought to be thought of as affectively connected to fleshy bodies. Michael Henderson summarizes the issue as, “whether we should treat the online texts (Records of online activities such as posts to forums, YouTube videos) as data from human subjects with responding ethical concerns of consenting privacy, or [as] open for public consumption” (Henderson, 2013: 547). This definitional duality has even been scripted into policy that frames the ethics of empirical work at universities, as Seko and Lewis (2017) note. In Canada, the TCPS-2 is the joint policy of Canada’s three federal research agencies¹ that details the guidelines and protocols on ethical research conduct at Canadian universities for research involving human subjects. The TCPS-2 is enforced by individual university REBs or IRBs that comprise a committee of academics, community members, and sometimes students. The document is regularly updated and increasingly addresses issues around digital and online research. Seko and Lewis note that according to the TCPS-2, certain modes of online data do require ethics approval, but some are exempt from REB ethics approval because it was determined that the publishers of that data “already relinquish their privacy as a consequence of their participation” (Seko and Lewis, 2017: 56). Michael Zimmer and Katharina Kinder-Kurlanda agree that “across the research community (...) there is disagreement over basic research ethics questions and policies such as what constitutes public content and at what stage computational research becomes human subjects research” (Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017: xxi).

The themes outlined above in terms of an ethics of care and contextual integrity versus visibility, openness, and sharing permeate the data we collected in our interviews with 16 scholars studying images of bodies shared on social media. Images of bodies as “data” pose a particular set of problems, since they are readily identifiable and often shared in confidence and based on the socio-cultural practices that emerge over time within social media platform cultures. In essence, they are both data and bodies, and this duality offers particular and specific considerations for this type of research. In the following section, we analyze these themes and tensions by presenting the major collective experiences of the researchers we interviewed, who examine how images of bodies are deployed on social media. We begin by discussing the general lack of resources

of studying images of bodies online. We then describe the ideological and attitudinal leanings of the cohort of researchers we interviewed. We finally present a series of the creative strategies adopted by this cohort to deal with some of the sticky ethical issues that came up in their research programs. Although there are many parallels with digital ethics broadly, we focus on particular practices we felt interesting for researchers specifically studying digital images of bodies.

Methods

The principal investigator conducted all 16 interviews with the scholars for this project. The scholars we interviewed ranged from graduate-level researchers, to early career scholars, to established university researchers. Scholars were located in five different countries in North America, Europe, and Australia. In writing up the results, we chose not to specify the exact countries nor the researchers' university affiliation(s), given the relatively small cohort of scholars who have researched and published in this area and the likelihood of identifiability. Inspired by the practices of the participants we interviewed for this research project, the authors of this article also "consciously omitted" certain bits of data from the direct quotes we share in the findings section since, for instance, naming the platforms or specific phenomena or participant cohorts of inquiry would likely provide enough information to identify participants to readers.

The authors devised an interview guide to explore three central research questions:

1. *What were the processes by which you chose your research methodology to study your phenomenon of study?*
2. *What were your experiences getting ethics approval from your IRBs?*
3. *What were the ethical dilemmas that came up after institutional approval and how did you manage, negotiate, and strategize for dealing with these issues?*

The aim of this research project was to summarize the experiences and strategies used by scholars in research involving images of bodies shared on social media in order to inform future scholars working in this area and to provide IRBs with some tools when handling the increasing number of these types of applications, especially by graduate students. Again, the resultant data shared here, focuses specifically on research programs that involve digital images of bodies shared online.

The principal investigator received ethics approval to conduct this research in May of 2017. Participants were recruited on social media through October 2017, by direct contact, and by snowball method at the recommendation of some of the participants initially contacted. A recruitment poster was distributed on the Association of Internet Researcher's Facebook Group² and on the Selfies Researcher Facebook page³—a network hub for scholars studying images of bodies/faces on social media. We noticed that the poster was also forwarded to some people's personal pages. After a literature review for this article, the principal investigator and the research assistants also directly contacted some scholars who, based on recent publications, fit the participant recruitment criteria.

The principal investigator conducted 1–2-hour semi-structured interviews from June 2017 to February 2018 via Skype with each of the scholars. The interviews were

screen-recorded using Quicktime. Three research assistants transcribed the interviews from the video data from January to March 2018. Using content analysis techniques (Gee, 2014), the research assistants created initial nodes for each interview using NVIVO. The principal investigator and the three research assistants came together to manually do further coding in which we developed overarching themes and subthemes.

The findings are divided into three sections: (a) researcher experiences with REBs, (b) research attitudes and approaches to working with images of bodies, and (c) specific strategies working with images of bodies.

Findings

Researcher experiences with REBs

Lack of resources. All the participants⁴ we interviewed confessed to the lack of resources available to both write the ethics application for their institution and negotiate the ethical dilemmas that presented themselves throughout their research program. One of the researchers described the process as “just running blind.” The lack of resources fell into several categories: (a) lack of resources for ethics review boards to feel prepared to handle these sorts of applications, (b) lack of continuing support for researchers from ethics review boards post-approval, (c) lack of resources within the discipline, and (d) lack of supervisor preparedness if the participants were graduate students. Participants said that generally REBs were under-prepared to handle applications involving images of bodies on social media. One participant said, “I feel like there’s just a general lack of knowledge about digital research and the different methods, (...) and also like [the REB’s] understandings of privacy and what’s private and what’s public and how that manifests in online contexts.” This finding follows the work of Buchannan and Ess (2009) that found, from a survey of 334 US REBs, that more than half felt they were not well-equipped to handle applications related to digital research.

Over- or under-protective boards. Our research participants stated that they felt REBs seemed to be either overly protective or under-protective when it came to applications involving images of bodies shared on social media. Researchers described overly protective boards as being over-concerned with issues of consent and privacy. Equally, several researchers felt that their REBs were “under-cautious” saying that their REBs had automatically exempted their research from REB approval, because online photos were considered data and not human subject research. This was particularly the case for people who proposed research using methods like content analyses or discourse analyses of images. One participant, using content analysis on Instagram, said their REB was willing to approve the project without a requirement of consent of the image owner because the images were publicly available. When the researcher later contacted the REB to ask if they could contact one participant whose images the REB had already given approval to use, because the researcher felt the images were particularly intimate, the REB said the researcher would have to submit a new application with an informed consent form because the project now involved human participants. This reflects the complexity of knowing when online data ought to be considered data or connected to fleshy bodies.

Some universities that had larger centers of digital research and scholarship had specific protocols in place or ethics advisors who could answer questions, but this was a rare institutional privilege in our interviews. Previous research like the work of Seko and Lewis (2017) found similar findings; that Canadian REBs tended to “err on the side of caution” (p. 138) or overestimate the degree of risk in an application. This sometimes took the form of “scope creep” where REBs would make recommendations researchers felt were beyond the duties of the REBs. In their discussion of novel participatory visual methods, Gubrium and Harper (2013) refer to “methodological myopia” when it comes to new forms of human subject research where REBs are very familiar with certain methods and new methods are met with confusion and excessive caution.

Researchers also said that there was a lack of continuing support after the institutional ethics approval was granted and that more issues came up after the REB approval and in the field than they planned for at the stage of REB approval. Several scholars said that apart from the AoIR ethics guidelines, there are no consolidated resources for handling digital research ethics involving images of bodies online and that having such a book would be like “a holy grail.”

Protocol assemblages. Faced with a lack of resources, researchers often sought formal and informal advice from a variety of sources—what we are calling a *protocol assemblage*—in order to negotiate ethical dilemmas. Participants said they consulted other scholars in the field, local policies, and laws in regard to privacy, platform use agreements, and other agencies that may be directly or indirectly affiliated with the research (e.g. school boards, health authorities, and social media platform group facilitators). Some researchers we interviewed cold-called scholars whose work they had read in their literature review to ask for advice and strategies on ethical quandaries. One research we interviewed said they had received a “magic folder” from a colleague who also studied images of bodies online, with various ethics protocols they had collected through their research. The idea of consulting multiple resources and protocols for one’s ethical deliberations is rooted in the AoIR guidelines which states, “Ethical decision-making should consult as many people and resources as possible in the process” (Markham and Buchanan, 2018a: 5). In their article reviewing their experiences working with youth, photography, and social media use in community-based participatory methods, Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper also argue that researchers drew on multiple research ethics protocols (Gubrium et al., 2016: 381). Contacting other scholars to work through ethical dilemmas is not a new practice but the number and variety of formal, informal, novel, and evolving resources that researchers drew on is what differs in this type of research from traditional offline qualitative methods.

Research attitudes and approaches to working with images of bodies

Feminist materialist ethics of care. As mentioned, feminist ethics of care is one of the foundational ethical frameworks practiced in Internet research (Ess, 2015), wherein researchers pay particular attention to relationality, mutual care, reciprocity, and respect between participant and researcher. Researchers often established close and long-time intimate relationships of care with their research subjects and as a result, the longer the

relationship, the more sensitive researchers were to their subjects' data (Weller and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017: 122).

Inspired by the recent publications of feminist new materialist scholars at the intersections of social media and new technology (Luka et al., 2017), we found that an emergent "Feminist materialist ethics of care" was practiced by many of the participants studying images of the body on social media. Whereas a feminist ethics of care attends to the welfare of the material offline body of the research subject, a feminist materialist ethics of care attends to the digital *bodily assemblage*, which may include an array of human and non-human entities alike: the material body, the digital *data double* (Haggerty et al., 2000), the data traces left online, as well as the manner in which platform affordances may act to shape digital subjectivities, and make more or less visible a research subject despite the subject's best efforts to control their own privacy. Following the work of Henderson et al. (2013), the researchers we interviewed often think about "the agency of technology" in determining what becomes public and private in online spaces because "accessibility of data by researcher does not necessarily mean the data were intended or perceived as public" (Henderson et al., 2013: 550). For instance, one of our researchers said, "How can I balance the very intimate and personal nature of their lives with my research? (...) Because on one hand I feel like people on social media—fans specifically—might have a public Instagram but not think that anyone is looking, maybe the only people searching for those hashtags will be people like them, people already a part of that community and not considering the larger public that have access to it. I feel like you have to be really careful with the way you handle that." Here again, we see the contextual integrity or situated data in conflict with platform user agreements and motivations. Some people use specific and personally developed algorithms of decision-making around images in different contexts. One researcher said, "I've learned to ask: is the body necessary in making my point? Is the body data? If it isn't then I don't need to show it and I don't. If it is, then I ask, can I mask it or modify it? If yes then I do that. If not, then I take particular care. I make sure the participant is okay with me using it. And I check in every time I publish it in anything from article to conference presentation."

Ethical dissemination. A feminist materialist ethics of care also attends to the longer term narrative-affective-lifespan of the research subject data or data double. Researchers care for the research subject and their data at the moment of data collection through and past the affective implications of sharing and distribution the data in its various forms of formal publication (e.g. books, articles, and conference presentations). One participant said, "I always worry that [subjects] will consent to something, you know they'll consent to giving their images, they'll consent to the interview, but a lot of people don't tend to know a lot about what happens to research afterwards, a lot of people outside of academia." While research subjects seemed to be less concerned with the dissemination of their images, the researchers we interviewed often were plagued by indecision. The concerns of researchers are valid as shown by Zimmer and Proferes (2013) and Fiesler and Proferes (2018) who note, "users are often unaware of how the content they create flows within a larger informational ecosystem that Twitter supports" (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018: 6). Several questioned whether they, as researchers, were comfortable sharing the images despite having consent to do so. This again points to the materialist ethics of care

researchers hold for the online fleshy research subject and the endless socio-technical tendrils of data the subjects leave online.

Contextual integrity. All the researchers we interviewed practiced some sort of adherence to the principles of contextual integrity, whether they were overtly aware of the theory or not. Researchers said they juggled thinking about the manifold contexts in which data are disclosed throughout their research program: online, offline, platform specific, medium specific, or within a given platform (e.g. messaging on FB is different from FB posts). Following Matzner and Ochs (2017), privacy on social media platforms cannot be assessed in the same way that it has historically since subjectivity is not a matter of a retreat into solitude and isolation, or by self-referential inwardness. Rather subjectivity, in social media spaces is constituted through “other referential expressiveness” (Matzner and Ochs, 2017: 43). One of our scholars said, “In terms of Facebook, I felt it was quite complicated, because the privacy settings on Facebook are quite messy. On Twitter everything is really public, I think it’s quite obvious it’s public because people are getting retweeted and liked by people they don’t know *all the time*.” The same participant offered another comment on the situated and contextual specifics of sharing on Facebook: “Whereas on Facebook, maybe most people’s posts are only liked by people they actually know even though they’re public.” In opposition to Matzner and Ochs’ classic definitions of privacy as solitude, here we see a definition of privacy much more in line with Nissenbaum’s contextual integrity. Several of Nissenbaum’s factors for determining contextual integrity come into play in defining the diverse senses of privacy in different social media spaces like *actors* (friends versus people they don’t know) and *norms* (retweeting vs liking) (Nissenbaum, 2009).

Scholars generally took great efforts to consider all the socio-technical factors and forces that might come into play in maintaining the contextual integrity for a given set of research participants. Some scholars had different consent forms for different platforms. Some scholars had longer conversations with their research subjects about the limitations of confidentiality on different platforms. Aligning again with the principles of the AoIR guidelines we found our researchers upheld the idea that “rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context” (AoIR guidelines, 2012). This also supports the work of Fiesler and Proferes (2018) who found that Twitter users’ felt that their approval of their data being used in university research was dependent, not on binary concepts of “public” versus “private” audiences, but rather on an array of different audiences and contexts to which they originally distribute and imagine their Twitter posts will reach. Notions of consent, according to our researchers, should acknowledge the diversity of publics that exist on different platforms, at different times or longer periods of time.

Protection versus patronizing. Another key theme that emerged and can be situated between a feminist materialist ethics of care and contextual integrity is the balance of protecting participants while not patronizing them. While a Feminist ethics of care maintains that a researcher should hold a strong degree of protection, privacy, and respect for the participants, if the participant desires visibility then the researcher must negotiate whether

adhering to the standards of privacy and protection based on a Feminist ethics of care means that they may be inadvertently suppressing the participants' desires or needs.

Feminist ethics of care abounds as an ethical framework in Internet studies. And we suggest that lessons from visual methods and digital visual participatory methods, may help address some of the issues and complexities around the topic of "visibility" in social media research. Digital visual participatory methods, emerging from roots in visual ethnography, often consider visibility from an intersectionally critical standpoint. As Gubrium and Harper (2013) state, "Confidentiality and pseudonyms are important however we ponder what happens to that footing when participants are given pseudonyms and their names are deleted (...) what does this say about the ability of the participants to reclaim an authorial role in knowledge production?" (p. 50). Gubrium and Harper (2013) suggest that in some cases a dogmatic adherence to confidentiality may in fact contribute to a model that sees participants as always vulnerable and in need of protection by researchers rather than providing participants with agency and potentially social capital (p. 51). This is particularly important to consider when the participant cohort is intersectionally marginalized and thus already outside visibility in some way. Similar to working with young people who may have different "competencies, perceptions and frameworks of reference" to our own, researchers must remember that different does not equate deficient (Henderson et al., 2013: 554). One researcher we interviewed said, "Most of my [social media platform research subjects] chose pseudonyms and then for those who did not who said 'oh I don't care, you don't have to use a pseudonym' I gave them a pseudonym because I feel like it is this more sensitive space, right? Another illustrated the fine balance between protection and privacy: 'All information is really searchable and findable these days, doesn't mean that we should safeguard knowledge and not put it out there. Like I said, it does not mean we should undermine our participants agency, especially if they want to be advocates, if they want their images and their words out there, so it's a very fine balance.' Apart from advocates, another researcher cited the importance of visibility for those who profit from being visible on social media: 'If I hide the identity of my participants, I'm restricting their ability to make a profit and earn a livelihood so if they want to be identified, I identify them.' Echoing the tenets of contextual integrity, Maryam Kia-Keating et al. (2017) argue that researchers would do better to understand how their participants themselves 'interpreted and described privacy rather than err on the side of anonymity'" (p. 380).

Specific practices and strategies

Ethics on the go. Given the changing nature of social media, researchers who study images of bodies shared on social media tend to adopt a problem-solving and creative attitude to research ethics that we call "ethics on the go." This creative maverick approach describes how scholars take into account the ethics protocol assemblages mentioned earlier, to make complex decisions about situated research ethics but are also open to unexpected changes that might happen along the research agenda. One researcher we interviewed said exhaustedly, "Of course your ethics changes over time!" This was particularly important when it came to knowledge dissemination, as another researcher said, "Depending on the context you tailor-make your presentation (...) knowing the ethics

processes and positions that the different places have.” Speaking particularly about presenting at conferences, participants would add or remove photos of bodies on presentation slides dependent on the context. For instance, some participants would remove photos of their research subjects from conference presentations if the conference had blanket media release agreement that allowed the conference organizers to share publicly any photos from the conference presentations. One participant said that they found some people would show images at conference just because “it makes for a nice presentation to have images, but because my slides have bodies I have to be careful. Ya, if I had all these slides with dicks I’d have a huge audience, but it’s not about me. It’s about respecting my participants.”

Another way to think about ethics on the go is by anticipating and making peace with the inevitable messiness of work in new domains, with new technologies, and sometimes, new methods. John Law (2004) describes the importance of messiness in research in order to assure that knowledge derived from the research process remains somewhat elusive as meaning in the real world is too. Luka, Millette, and Wallace suggest that messiness is a quality of a feminist material ethics and to take pleasure in uncertainty (Luka et al., 2017: 28). This also means that researchers can avoid what many REBs suffer from, which is “front-end bias” or attention to the ethics at the start of the research while presuming the ethics protocol approved by the REB will remain unchanged through the research program (Seko and Lewis, 2017).

Ongoing consent. According to all the participants we interviewed, a strategy practiced to manage the requirement of ethics on the go was ongoing consent. Some national and disciplinary-specific guidelines name “ongoing consent” as a core principle (e.g. chapter 2 of the TCPS-2 in Canada, and the AoIR ethics guidelines). In practice, however, the focus of REBs is on written consent. According to most of our researchers, the signed paper is only the *start* of the consent process. Consent is sought throughout the research program and especially when researchers plan for dissemination of data and visuals collected as data in the research. Verbal consent, and consent via text, messaging, and email, were easy to obtain and crucial for many researchers. One researcher said, “I followed up with a book chapter that was going to contain two images from two of my [research subjects], so I sent them follow-up emails and I gave them the actual chapter with the embedded images and so I said *great news! This is going to be published, I just want to double check, triple check, that you're okay with me using this image of yourself.*” Another scholar said, “I think I would go back and double check with [research subjects] and then if they say *no, please don't use that.* Then we have - I would absolutely I have to go with that.” The quote follows with the work of Seko and Lewis (2017), who state that an approach to ethics as an ongoing process “may benefit researchers and reviewers to think through the whole research process and make a sound ethical assessment on an ongoing basis” (p. 378). Henderson et al. (2013) take the responsibility further and argue that, when working with children and images, research must not only see consent as ongoing and not one-off, but also ethically they encourage researchers to consult with young people at all stages of research suggesting that children should be involved in the design from data collection, analysis, and recording of the research.

Some researchers had numerous consent forms too, acknowledging the specifics of working with visuals as well as the particularities of working across different social media platforms. This follows the advice of Gubrium and Harper (2013), who say research should consider where and when it may be important to use a consent to participate, a consent to release for a conference, consent to publish, a media release form, a single consent form with multiple check boxes with different dissemination options, and so on. Attention to platform specifics could work to counter the “offline bias” built into ethics review processes that lacks acknowledgment of the situated platform-specific ethics of working on social media for research (e.g. user agreement, platform affordances, changes in privacy settings, platform cultural practices, and platform vernaculars).

Following, again, a feminist materialist ethics of care, our researchers saw digital photos shared online as connected to a bodily assemblage of digital subjectivities that are ongoing and temporally evolving. As such, participants may be less inclined to “revisit” old selves for many reasons, especially, as we, found, young people, older people, and certain marginalized groups like LGBTQI2S+.⁵ One scholar said “[in] my role in my line of work, working with LGBTQ people I’ve actually had participants who do change how they identify (...) and I’ve also had participants that transitioned”; this is why, according to participants, it is important to remain in contact with participants and follow them over time to keep up-to-date with changes in pronouns, self-identity, and self-representation. We can think of this as being attentive to the lifespan of the image. If images are seen as part of a bodily assemblage and digital subjectivities evolve over time, then ethics is contextually situated and, importantly, temporally situated. Researchers paid attention to whether an image that was used in research had been taken down online and used this as an indicator that perhaps the participant would not want further dissemination of the photo. A researcher said, “It’s one thing if you’re using an image and the person hasn’t taken it down and it’s up and it’s public and you double check before you use it in your presentation. But it’s another if someone has taken it down, then you know can assume that’s the will of the person to not have that out there anymore. So it’s tricky. It’s so tricky.” In line with a feminist materialist ethics of care, both of these quotes reinforce the importance of thinking of images not as static two-dimensional (2D) images disconnected from the fleshy bodies of the image makers, but rather they are data—affectively connected to image makers. Researchers need to consider the life span of images, the way digital subjectivities evolve over time, the way networked affect may change over time and in relation to shared data like photos, especially those displaying bodies. Contextual integrity can be expanded to include a sort of “temporal integrity,” which included consideration of the temporally situated meaning of the image at the moment of image sharing alongside the way meaning and feeling are made and remade over time and as digital subjectivities evolve and images flow online. Ongoing consent then respects the evolving feelings, relationships to, and meanings of the images to the image maker over the life span of the image as it is enfolded into the research assemblage and circulated and recirculated in online and offline spaces.

Another theme within consent that is particular to social media platforms is the potential for inadvertent coercion. Since social media platforms operate to a large degree on the flow of social capital (e.g. likes, retweeting, and reblogging), the pressure for research subjects to share their photos may, according to Kia-Keating et al. (2017), “unintentionally pressure

other participants to engage in self disclosures to social media posts and a broader and unmonitored web environment” (p. 380). What this means is that researchers shouldn’t just default to the idea that if an image is shared on a social media platform it is shared freely and consensually. There is an assemblage of non-visible forces (flows of social and cultural capital) that come into play in disclosing and sharing images online and researchers need to dig into the complex factors that figure into the online disclosure of visuals.

Ethical fabrication. Most researchers who chose to use identifiable or possibly identifiable images of bodies in their research practiced various forms of *ethical fabrication*. Annette Markham (2012), who coined the term in fabrication as Ethical Practice, defined ethical fabrication as involving “creative, bricolage-style transfiguration[s] of original data into composite accounts or representational interactions” (p. 334). Ethical fabrication moves beyond a positivist framework that sees pure data as existing untarnished in the world, and instead suggests that, in a post-positivist vein, the researcher is *always* involved in interpretation and thus altering data. According to Markham, “all data are narrowed, altered, and abstracted through various filters before they are analyzed.” (p. 341). Ethical fabrication does not involve falsifying data, rather it works at the level of representation of data for circulation on information streams that no longer afford the privacy that historical modes of academic data sharing did. It is a means of altering the form of disseminated data in order to protect the identifiability of a researcher’s participants. Hand in hand with an adherence to quality data reporting, researchers increasingly, in digital research, must also balance the right of individuals to control of their own data, for instance, what the European Commission (2017) calls “the right to be forgotten” when situated participant data is enshrined in publications that are now easily and boundlessly circulated online.

Our researchers practiced various forms of ethical fabrication. The most common practice was *ethical visual fabrication* (Tiidenberg, 2014, 2015) or altering images of bodies with filters and then running them through Google image search to see if the search engine could locate the original image. Making a copy from the original image also strips the image of meta-data that could reveal location of image taken or other tacit identifiable markers, which Henderson et al. (2013) argue is particularly important when working with images of children and young people. One of our researchers blurred out a participant’s very unique and identifiable tattoo. Another researcher said they “frankensteined” photos by cropping out the heads of research subjects. One researcher instructed people to creatively play with big sunglasses, hats, and scarves. One scholar said that cropping bodies, cutting out heads, changing colors of clothing, and altering photos is a common practice to retain the privacy of participants. But it is purely to describe and support what was found in the interviews. Similar to strategies listed in Markham’s original article (2011), several of our researchers sometimes also altered verbal posts that accompanied images of bodies, blurred words, or changed words so that sequences of words or sentences could not be found through search engines.

This said, and returning to the power dynamics at play when a researcher alters a research subject’s identity online, this process of ethical fabrication was not done without considering the moral implications of the process itself. For instance, one researcher said, “One of the things I’ve been doing is I’ve been altering the images. But then I think too by altering the image, I’m altering their body in a way. It’s this weird place.” As a solution to negotiating the protection-patronizing dilemma, some researchers took time

with participants to explain the importance of altering images and taught the participants to alter the photos—a sort of auto visual fabrication—so that it was the research subjects themselves creating a visual version of their own digital subjectivity for sharing in research publications. Researchers often had conversations with participants about their own ethical dilemmas revealing their concerns and working with research subjects to collaboratively find solutions. This aligns with what some of our researchers mentioned as a call for a more dialogic modality of research ethics. It also harkens to practices already at play in digital visual methods, like photo voice, that often involve researchers spending a significant amount of time with research subjects to discuss the ethical implications of photo taking for data collection (Gubrium and Harper, 2013). For instance, Gubrium and Harper say that in their own digital visual methods practices, and “prior to receiving the cameras, [research subjects] signed a written agreement that they would obtain consent of all individuals represented in the photographs, (...) would not invade an individual’s personal space, [and would not] disclose embarrassing facts without permission” (p. 378). Furthermore, if participants wanted to visually record acts that were illegal or questionable they were encouraged to depict them via metaphor or in a visually creative fashion. Some of our researchers also actively chose to ask subjects for images of “themselves” instead of “their bodies,” which permits a broader and creative range of visual self-representations beyond the cis-centric (Salamon, 2010) and anthropocentric (Braidotti, 2013) focus on the material body as the house of subjectivity.

A subtheme of ethical fabrication we found we termed *conscious omission*. This process involved the strategic selection of data points in the reporting of data and may be visual or textual. For instance, in writing up results some researchers omitted, in quoting interviews, the specific social media subgroup or names of followers participants mention in an interview, because these could be used to identify participants.

Limitations

We recognize that the audiences of researchers interviewed for this research project were exclusively located in North American, European, and Australian contexts. That said, the geographic regions of their own respective research covered North, Central, and South America, East Asia, several countries in east and west Europe, Australia, and Southeast Asia. Consequently, the data presented here address experiences with ethics boards in three broad regions using several specific examples, and the situated ethical practices of researchers spanned a wide range of physical geographies, social media platforms, and online and offline networks and cultures.

The cohort of people interviewed for this project was relatively small ($n=16$), but we see this series of in-depth interviews as complementary to the more frequent survey work used to study digital research ethics decision-making.

Implications and conclusions

Advice for REBs/IRBs/BREBs

Our scholars suggested several recommendations for institutional researcher ethics boards in handling applications involving images of bodies online. Our researchers

encouraged a more dialogic approach to Internet studies applications broadly. This aligns with Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017) who suggest, “ethical review boards must move beyond purely normative approaches and embrace more procedural approaches to ethical decision-making” (p.xxvii). Often, institutional review boards lack the funding and time to train board members vis-a-vis new and emerging methods in the field of Internet studies, and so inviting scholars pursuing this type of research to come to meetings and present to the board on their proposed methods has many benefits: the REB process becomes more relational, and the application and review process becomes humanized, which can work against the perennial discourse that the ethics review process is blind and insensitive. It also permits an opportunity for professional development on the part of the review boards on one hand, while permitting the applicant to answer and concerns from the board and possibly expedite the application process. Several scholars said that all REBs should make more available digital ethics resources on their respective institutional websites.

Importantly, although some REBs adhered to the user or platform agreements of a given social media platform in terms of determining whether data was *public*, all our participants said that this was problematic. All the scholars recommend that REBs adhere to the ethical practices of the communities under study above the legal definitions of the platform, which are typically set up with an eye to the profit that can come from visibility and sharing. This is backed up by the work of Zimmer and Proferes (2013) and Dylan Wittkower (2016), who argue that social media platforms rhetorically present themselves to the public as serving certain purposes (sociality, connection, friend-connecting, real time news), but then tacitly proclaim other motives that are often in opposition to this public rhetoric (profiting and collecting data for commercial, research, and product development purposes). In the wake of Facebook data leakages and “research,” and OK cupid data dumps, the scholars we interviewed argued that not only researchers but also REBs should hold a duty of care in Internet research ethics.

Advice for current or new researchers

Several of the researchers said that the time and labor required in the realm of visual Internet research is something that new researchers should consider before undertaking this sort of work. One researcher we interviewed said that if a researcher new to the area of visuals shared online does not feel comfortable facing continued ethical dilemmas through a research program, then perhaps this type of research is not for them. The importance of having a strong devotion to care (ethics of care) while also maintaining an adherence to evolving and creative modes of protection (ethical visual fabrication, ethics on the go, and ongoing consent) are central for new scholars using these forms of data.

Most researchers emphasized the importance of close relationships with their participants and open lines of communication for the duration of the research program and beyond. In short, and harkening to the feminist materialist ethics of care, when researchers become involved with handling the digital bodies of participants, researchers studying images of bodies shared on social media often commit to long-term care of their participants, which requires constant communication and discussion.

Final thoughts: theorizing the ethics of images of bodies in social media research

Similar to recent work in digital ethics broadly, the results of this research study point to the importance of considering the complex specifics of doing research in online spaces. It was repeatedly mentioned that images of bodies are significantly different from 2D analog photos. Our research participants referred to images of bodies as networked bodily assemblages connected to emotion, fleshy offline bodies, and evolving digital subjectivities that stretch across different platforms. Because of this, we believe there is much potential work to be done here that thinks through the complexities of protecting the networked body or the affective data double while also protecting the material offline bodies of participants. Using images of bodies shared on social media in research is, of all the forms of data shared online, some of its most intimate forms. Foundationally, images of bodies are at once bodies and data and so this marks the fulcrum of debates raised earlier in the article: how do we treat data when the data are at once data and a body? This mode of care is at once spatial and temporal in nature. It requires attention to contextual integrity and contextual specifics. It also requires attention to the temporal existence of data online. Working with images of bodies online requires a series of creative strategies and an approach to ethics that considers both the contextual situatedness of digital images alongside images as markers of temporally situated and continually evolving digital subjectivities.

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1. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).
2. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/aoirlist/?ref=bookmarks>
3. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/664091916962292/>
4. For clarity, we use the term “participants” to refer to the scholars we interviewed. When the scholars refer to research subjects of their own individual research projects, we refer to them as “subjects.”
5. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, queer, two-spirit, and +, which represents other diverse identities not included in the former list of identity groups.

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