Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research

The fourth edition of the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research of the British Psychological Society* (2018, p. 3) defines *Internet-mediated Research* (IMR) as "any research involving the remote acquisition of data from or about human participants using the internet and its associated technologies"[1]. This remote acquisition of data excludes every kind of direct personal interaction and it may involve quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. Its design normally aims to identify research participants from different backgrounds. It is aware that these participants may live in those contexts where their online responses might be subjected to various legal systems governing informed consent, data protection and safeguarding. They are also bound by the rules, privileges and obligations of online service providers and platforms. For example, Hope researchers and their IMR-participants are subject to the *General Data Protection Regulation*[2], the *Misuse of Computers Act*[3], any other legal requirements in the UK, and Hope's Research Ethics Policy[4]. Each social media platform has their rules and regulations. Therefore, IMR researchers at Hope take full responsibility for what their research project and research processes either contains or does not contain.

The necessity of obtaining the Informed Consent from eligible online research participants poses a great challenge. This consent should be clear, authentic, reliable and convincing. Hope researchers using IMR should prepare an Information Document about their research project. It should enable the potential, online research participants to make a considered decision. It should point out that the participants are completely free to participate in or to withdraw from the research at any time until they would finally press the 'Submit'-button. It should state how Hope researchers will anonymise and protect their data and when they would safely destroy them. During the entire research, Hope researchers are responsible for the safety of themselves and their research participants. Therefore, they remain respectful, kind, honest and professional to themselves and their online research participants. They should remain alert to what they post online; it should not damage their reputation either immediately or later. Therefore, they should keep their personal views separate from their professional research engagement. The following principles will help the users of IMR at Hope to maximise the effectiveness of this research method.

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[1] "BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition (2018), *British Educational Research Association*, available online at https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (accessed on 11 December 2019)

[2] *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) operates since 25 May 2018. It is available online https://gdpr-info.eu/. Information Commissioner's Office has provided a detailed *Guide to the General Data Protection Regulation*, which is also available online at https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/ (accessed on 11 December 2019).

[3] "*The Misuse of Computers Act 1990*", *legislation.gov.uk: delivered by The National Archives*, available online at https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/18/contents, (accessed on 11 December 2019)

[4] "Research Ethics Policy: Approved by the Senate and University Council (17 June 2015)", *Liverpool Hope University*, p. 9, available online at https://www.hope.ac.uk/media/studywithus/research/documents/Research%20Ethics%20Policy.pdf, (accessed on 11 December 2019).

Principle 1: Respect the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities

1 A: Distinction between the Public and the Private: If there is any ambiguity about whether the data is found in the public or private domain, researchers should consider the extent to which disclosed observation may lead to risk or potential harm for the participants. If a website (e.g. social media sites, YouTube and the like) publishes copyrighted material, the researchers must obtain from the owner of the copyright necessary permission for the data. Usually, the 'Contact us' button would provide the details and process of getting in touch with the owner of the copyright.

1 B: Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the data: Users of IMR must apply the same standards of anonymity and confidentiality to online participants, as they would do for face-to-face interactions. This digital research happens in the absence of visible, audible or tangible contacts between the researcher and their online participants. Hence, this type of research method poses methodological and ethical risks such as the inability to ensure the authenticity, confidentiality and anonymity of shared informed. To minimize this and other possible risks, the users of IMR should set up for their research specific discussion forums. Then, they should ask their online participants either to use a name that would not readily identify them or to give to themselves a four-digit unique identification number. As soon as the researchers have completed their research, they should remove their discussion forum completely from the Internet. Even this removal might not always guarantee total anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants. Yet, it will minimise the risk of losing them completely. If the researchers use publically accessible website (e.g. a blog or a social media), the risk of losing anonymity and confidentiality is far greater; for example, a verbatim text, quoted from the writing of a participant and placed in a search engine, might readily identify the participant.

1 C: Obtaining details of age and informed consent: researchers can use any of the University-approved online survey platforms (e.g. Online surveys https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/, which Hope currently requires). The researchers must make sure that the first page of their online survey clearly outlines the nature, process, importance of their research and its possible (psychological) impact on the participants. The survey should have designated boxes and buttons for the a) age of Participants, b) the consent by parents or legal guardians for participants below the age of 18 years, and c) their agreement that their participation in this online research is informed and voluntary, and they can withdraw from it at any time. If they would decide to withdraw from the research, then they should get in touch with the researcher and email to her/him the uniquely identifiable number, which the online survey would have automatically generated. On receiving this number, the researcher will delete all details associated with the withdrawing participant.

Researchers should be aware of the possible dangers and limitations of IMR. It is not easy to conclusively check and verify either the age of the participants or the consent given by parents or legal guardians for participants below 18 years of age. To minimise this limitation, the online surveys must ask the participants to declare their age. They can do so by selecting one of the two buttons and boxes: 1) Less than 18 years or 2) 18 years and above. If the participant declares that she/he is less than 18 years of age, she/he should upload evidence of consent (e.g. a scanned copy with the name, address, date and signature) from either parents or their legal guardian. Secondly, if she/he cannot provide this evidence, the survey should close by itself. Even these careful measures cannot fully guarantee both the authenticity and reliability of the participants' age or the consent given by their parents or legal guardians.

Principle 2: Scientific integrity

IMR typically offers lower levels of experimental control to the researcher than those during face-to-face studies. For example, when online participants download the research instruments on their side, the

researchers cannot monitor their use. However, when they submit their opinions online, the researchers have to ensure and follow on their end the scientific values such as rigor, veracity and validity.

Principle 3: Social responsibility

Researchers should respect their research participants and guarantee their wellbeing. They should be aware that some research participants may consider the researchers as intruders into their private spaces; hence, they may not welcome them. These private spaces, for example, may include sites, where parents discuss difficulties in childrearing or people share personal information about eating disorders. Particularly, the research participants may not care so much about any intervention *per se*, but they might be afraid of potential harm, which lack of proper anonymity and confidentiality of their personal data might cause.

Principle 4: Maximising benefits and minimising harm

In England, the *Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines* (GCaFG) serve as a legal basis to assess the mental capacity and maturity of children under 16 to give informed consent for medical treatment without the knowledge and agreement of their parents. These guidelines mandate the caregivers "to keep the child's best interests at the heart of any decision, and the child or young person should be involved in the decision-making process as far as possible"[5].

Additionally, it is important to note that research with children needs the same consideration that would be given to research with vulnerable adults. The *Children's Online Privacy Protection Act* (COPRA) "imposes certain requirements on operators of websites or online services directed to children under 13 years of age, and on operators of other websites or online services that have actual knowledge that they are collecting personal information online from a child under 13 years of age"[6]. Users of IMR can profitably benefit from consulting the provisions of this Act.

In addition, the users of IMR must note the stipulation of Hope's *Research Ethics Policy*, which expressly requires for the sake of "consistency and as a precautionary measure" (p. 9) positive parental authorisation for online divulgence of information by children aged under eighteen years. In this regard, Hope's policy is stricter than the related policies of other institutions and it is binding on users of IMR. If their research would engage with participants under the age of 18, they should implement the safeguard measures mentioned above in Section 1 C, the guidelines stated in the GCaFG, the COPRA and any other legal documents. This measure effectively means that without obtaining the informed consent from either their parents or their legal guardians, the users of IMR should not proceed with their research involving participants below the age of 18.

Users of IMR should be aware of the potential discomfort which their computer interface design might cause. For instance, typically 10% of most male populations show non-standard colour vision, and thus have difficulty reading certain visual displays. Therefore, users of IMR must design their interface in such a way that it neither excludes nor disadvantages their participant(s).

Users of IMR should ensure high level of encrypted security both in recruiting and corresponding with their participants via either emails, Google Docs or Forms, or WhatsApp or in any other digital

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[5] "Nigel's surgery 8: Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines", *CareQuality Commission: The independent regular of health and social care in England*, available online at https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/gps/nigels-surgery-8-gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines (accessed on 11 December 2019)

[6] "Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule [2013]", *Federal Trade Commission: Protecting America's Consumers*, available online at https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/rules/rulemaking-regulatory-reform-proceedings/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule, (accessed on 11 December 2019).

communication or storage systems. They should guard against any form of inadvertent disclosure on the internet. The researchers are solely and fully responsible for the academic, financial and legal consequences of such a disclosure.

Users of IMR must be aware of any potential risk to their own safety, especially, but not exclusively, when they recruit a purposive sample of participants via a discussion forum and meet them in any public places such as churches, community centres, libraries, schools and the like. They should exercise caution at all times and in all places. It is necessary for them to obtain assistance from professional gatekeepers, who are attached to the public places such as churches, community centres, libraries, schools and the like. Additional information on Research Ethics Guidelines at Hope are available online at https://www.hope.ac.uk/research/researchethics/.

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"BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition (2018, [especially Guidelines 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 32, 46 and 68])", *British Educational Research Association*, available online at https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (accessed on 11 December 2019)

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"Nigel's surgery 8: Gillick competency and Fraser guidelines", *CareQuality Commission: The independent regular of health and social care in England*, available online at https://www.cqc.org.uk/guidance-providers/gps/nigels-surgery-8-gillick-competency-fraser-guidelines (accessed on 11 December 2019)

"Research ethics approval procedures", Sheffield Hallam University, available online at https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/quality/ethics-and-integrity/ethics-approval-procedures (accessed on 11 December 2019).

"Research Ethics Policy: Approved by the Senate and University Council (17 June 2015)", Liverpool Hope University, available online at https://www.hope.ac.uk/media/studywithus/research/documents/Research%20Ethics%20Policy.pdf (accessed on 11 December 2019)

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