

## ***Shock and Offence Online: The Role of Emotion in Participant Absent Research***

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** - This chapter considers the implications of online participant absent research, that is where the researcher has no interaction with the author, on researcher emotion. Drawing on a study of data extracts 'mined' from the Internet without interaction with the author, lessons for practice are identified. It is argued that researchers should reflexively consider the ways in which passive data collection techniques may impact the researcher prior to undertaking research, in order to ensure that researchers are adequately supported.

**Methodology/approach** –The data described in this example were constructed around a single case study where a woman had been asked to leave a sports shop in the UK because she was breastfeeding. Not allowing breastfeeding within a business is illegal in the UK, and resulted in a protest. The study involved analysis of user-generated data from an online news site and Twitter in relation to this case.

**Findings** - Drawing on field notes and conversations with colleagues, I argue that in order to successfully manage my emotional response to the data, it was necessary to distance myself during analysis.

**Originality/value** – Whilst the role of emotion is often considered as part of ethnographic practice in studies utilising face-to-face data collection, it is underexplored in the online domain. This chapter presents, through a detailed example, a reflective account of the emotion work required in one such study. Strategies to reflexively manage emotion for those undertaking participant absent research, which are applicable to both online and off-line situations, are highlighted.

**Key words:** reflexivity; emotion; emotion work; documents; documentary analysis; online research; internet research;

## **Introduction**

In recent decades, a move has been made from qualitative research being largely conducted through face-to-face methods, to an expansion of methodologies which omit the participant. This includes the adoption of non-participatory visual methods (Rose, 2012), a slowly growing increase in the use of documents as data (Atkinson and Coffey, 2010) and, most recently, analysis of pre-existing online content (Grant and Hoyle, 2017). Researchers investigating motherhood have adopted these non-participatory methods to contribute towards a comprehensive understanding of contemporary motherhood. This includes research examining the way in which mothers organise the sharing of their excess breastmilk through (online) Facebook milk banks (Perrin et al., 2014). Documentary analysis principles have also been used to understand how mothers are perceived in society using

data found in news articles and user generated online dictionaries (Tyler, 2008). As such, I was interested in adopting these methods in order to understand public breastfeeding from the perspective of the (potential) observer, through the use of comments posted to an online news site and Twitter, a topic which has been under-researched (see Grant, 2015 for more details).

Research on the focus and content of reader-generated comments had been minimal at the time of research (2014). It had been found that reader comments on one bilingual news site, Al Jazeera, tended to be concentrated on stories focusing on the Middle East region, and particularly on news items about politics and conflict, although this may have been related to the way in which the site was organised (Abdul-Mageed, 2008). Researchers had also examined the content of online news site comments to study attitudes towards immigration in Canada (Krishnamurti, 2013) and murder in the USA (Hlavach and Freivogel, 2011).

Alongside this, American researchers have used this method to understand public knowledge of what constitutes domestic violence (Brossoie et al., 2012). However, a significant quantity of research, over 100 peer reviewed papers, has since been undertaken using this method, including in relation to stigmatising pregnant women's health behaviours (Carroll and Freeman, 2016), and overt expressions of racism and their justifications (Faulkner and Bliuc, 2016).

Attention has also been paid to the particular language used within comments. At its most basic level, a study in South Korea highlighted that the use of swearing increased approval and attention paid to comments (Kwon and Cho, 2017). Alongside this, online news comments are often offensive and abusive, and have the potential to cause real-world harm

(Hlavach and Freivogel, 2011). For example, authors of racist comments used strategies to make their behaviour appear acceptable and in keeping with a shared moral code (Faulkner and Bliuc, 2016). Moreover, misinformation and stigmatisation, which may lead readers to undertaking unhelpful behaviours was found in online news comments regarding smoking (Carroll and Freeman, 2016; Luberto et al., 2016). Accordingly, it has been reported that many online news sites in the USA had chosen to disable the comment function or retain control by strictly moderating content (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). The emotional work required for researchers using such comments as data has not yet been explored.

In conducting research using participant absent methods, the researcher is, by necessity, distanced from the producer of the data. Thus the emotional burden may vary compared to more traditional qualitative research techniques, as a result of the varying levels of embodiment (Coffey, 1999). For example, Blix and Wettergren defined 'emotional work' as "a necessary skill required in the building of successful rapport with the research subjects in qualitative research" in their study of the Swedish judiciary (2015: 689). However, emotion work is still required when there are no research subjects present. Some attempts to understand this have been reported in the literature in online research (see for example: Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Sixsmith and Murray, 2001; Hudson and Bruckman, 2004; McKee and Porter, 2009). However the emotional issues of research using user generated comments from online news sites in order to understand society has not yet been explored in the literature.

### **Emotion work in participant-present qualitative research**

The practice of undertaking qualitative research with participants present requires the researcher to familiarise themselves with the unusual, to display empathy to the circumstances of others' lives (Atkinson et al., 2003), and to be exposed to a range of emotions from their disclosures (Denzin, 1994). In recent years, these practices, and the accompanying emotional response in the researcher, have been reported through confessional literature (Coffey, 1999). The concept of reflexivity being essential to understanding research is often related to research as an embodied, participatory experience (Coffey, 1999; Ezzy, 2010).

A wide range of researcher present qualitative research studies have been reported where participants articulated offensive beliefs, or had undertaken crimes which were highly emotive. Outputs from these projects provide examples of the way in which highly emotive data is constructed and framed by participants, sometimes with the active intent of having an effect on researchers (Burr, 2003). For example, in her work on convicted sex offenders, Hudson explores the way in which identities of sex offenders were constructed, including 'total denial' of any offending identity, and participants making references to her own sexuality and their sexual thoughts about her during data collection (Hudson, 2013: 178). Alongside this, in Blee's interview study with members of the racist group Ku Klux Klan (KKK)<sup>1</sup> she was intimidated by participants during interviews, but reported that several years later, she still received written threats from participants (Blee, 1998). Both Hudson and Blee noted that they experienced considerable fear following their research. Hudson notes that: 'being a researcher does not provide you with any immunity from the intensely emotional issues that arise from research of this kind.' (Hudson, 2013: 7).

In addition to the effects on the researcher, research on morally challenging topics with interviewees who hold unpalatable views, has to be conducted differently to qualitative research which has a central focus on empathy, trust and rapport which may compromise validity (Blee, 1998). However, in Hudson's (2013) research, participants' use of multiple identities which were constructed according to audience, for example, prison therapist or the researcher, is discussed. Alongside these issues, qualitative researchers have acknowledged that ethnographic research in dangerous or challenging contexts can result in a loss of researcher control because of the naturalistic nature of data collection, and this can result in researcher anxiety (Nilan, 2002).

Within qualitative research on the role of pregnancy and motherhood, the role of researcher emotion has been described in terms of embodiment and emotional labour. In her feminist research on women's experiences of in vitro fertilisation (IVF), Carroll (2012) notes that discussion of hope for children; miscarriage and divorce were included in women's accounts, as a necessary context to their IVF treatment. However, during their disclosures, she described portraying emotional responses that did not reflect her true emotional response, because of her aim to maintain a 'professional' role in the conversation. Alongside the emotion work performed in interviews, reflective field notes highlighted that participants' fertility issues affected the researcher's biological, social and emotional identity, even though she was not currently experiencing infertility (Carroll, 2012). The effects of conducting emotion work have also been reported in research on disability and sex where the researcher self-identified as disabled (Liddiard, 2013). Thus emotion work has been found to affect those who share characteristics with the population under study as well as those who do not.

An empirical study was undertaken with qualitative researchers to understand the emotional experience of undertaking interviews on a variety of subjects (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2009). The study identified that researchers undertook significant emotion work in their roles, particularly if the research subject was sensitive. It was reported that when interviewees were sad, interviewers often felt sad during or after data collection, and sometimes cried during and following research interviews or following the completion of data collection. Other responses to emotionally challenging data collection reported in the research included physiological changes, including exhaustion and having a raised heart rate. Thus qualitative researchers in these studies agreed with Coffey's (1999) assertion that face-to-face qualitative research is an embodied experience, and this may result in researchers considering the potential for similarities in their own lives.

### **Emotional work in documentary research and other participant-absent methods**

Scott states that "a document in its most general sense is a written text...", and notes the format of documents has changed over time from hieroglyphs and other markings on walls, to written word being marked on parchments, to printed materials (Scott, 1990: 12). As such, documents in contemporary society could include electronic material. Compared to emotion work in participant present studies, there may be variability due to differing levels of embodiment (Coffey, 1999). However, emotion work is still required when there are no research subjects present.

In the literature on documentary research and using pre-existing online data, the emotional implications of conducting such research are rarely considered. As such, the literature

implies that using documents in research is emotionally comfortable. However, research on suicide (Fincham et al., 2007), murder (Seal, 2012) and disability (Grant, 2011) have highlighted the emotional work of analysing reports from the coroner's court, criminal justice system and health service, and the accompanying emotional responses in researchers. For example, in Fincham et al. (2007), it is suggested that, as in face-to-face research, researchers can be unprepared for shocking insights presented to them, in this instance, photographs from the scene of death falling out of a new case file. This burden was also felt to be cumulative during periods of exposure to case files, as researchers reported that they felt able to empathise with the unbearable distress of victims. In this instance, researchers reported intrusive thoughts and a need to share the distressing details with other researchers working with the data and others. These issues have also been highlighted in secondary analysis of qualitative data detailing children's experiences of abuse (Jackson et al., 2013) and adults' reports of trauma and abuse (Grant, 2011).

## **The study**

The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of how public breastfeeding was understood by those viewing it. Analysis of existing research has shown that social media is able to successfully predict a range of phenomena, including voting behaviour and the spread of infectious disease (Sloan et al., 2013), and thus online user generated content can reflect real world views (Van Dijk, 2001). Therefore, reader comments from the UK's most popular online news site, Mail Online (Media Week, 2014), in relation to one high profile case of public breastfeeding were used as data.

Mail Online is a subsidiary of the Daily Mail, a middle-market UK daily newspaper with a right of centre editorial stance. The majority of Daily Mail articles are repeated on Mail Online, which is accessible free of charge and funded by advertising. The online news item from which the comments were taken related to the case of a breastfeeding mother being asked to leave a UK business, and also described cases in which other breastfeeding mothers had had their rights, as outlined in the UK Equality Act 2010, breached (Newton, 2014). Data were collected from the online news site using the NCapture for NVivo tool for 24 hours following publication of the article, the rationale for this was the likely concentration of the majority of posts within the period when the article was new and highly prominent on the news site (Tsagkias et al., 2010). 884 comments had been posted in this time, and initial familiarisation of the data showed a high level of consistency from the majority of the posters.

Data were imported into NVivo 10 for coding. I adopted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, which assumes that discourses found within text or speech are reflective of attitudes found elsewhere in society (Van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Within this theoretical framework, data were subjected to discourse analysis as applied to more traditional documents (Gill, 2006). Field notes were written periodically during the analysis process, largely containing analytical memoranda and reflexive content (Sanjek, 1990).

Unlike my experience of having to self-consciously write field notes during opportune moments and safe encounters in participant present research (Grant, 2013), I was free to update my notes as I explored, collected and analysed the data.

The data collected was largely focused on the (un)acceptability of the nurturing (non-sexual) female breast in public space. This discussion of female bodies was used as a vehicle to discuss acceptable female and mothering behaviours and, by association, the role of men and women as sexual beings and sexual predators (Grant, 2015, 2016). Thus, whilst the data collection did not require me (a female researcher) to be embodied, the research was very focused on bodies, sexuality, place and safety. The chair of the Cardiff University School of Medicine ethics committee stated that, as all data were already in the public domain, the research did not require ethical review.

### **Whose side was I on?**

In undertaking this research, I reflected extensively on my own views towards infant feeding (Becker, 1966) and my belief in the superiority of breastmilk over formula feeding. These beliefs were based on my understanding of the academic literature, and a period of time in which I evaluated a breastfeeding support service (Grant et al., 2013) and undertook focus groups with mothers about health information on behalf of the UK National Health Service, rather than a personal experience of motherhood. Research has shown that in the UK, babies who are formula fed are more likely to have stomach upsets, poorer cognitive development and behavioural problems; they also lack the immunity of their breastfed peers (Renfrew et al., 2012). Additionally, there are financial implications, the cost of formula feeding a baby prior to weaning at 4-6 months can amount to hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds (or dollars) and this money might be better used elsewhere in families who are struggling with the cost of a new child (Hamilton, 2012).

Nevertheless, I understand that breastfeeding can be physically and emotionally challenging for women who want to breastfeed; and not all mothers want to initiate or continue breastfeeding (Woods et al., 2013). I appreciate that both breastfeeding and formula feeding can be feminist choices, suited to women's individual circumstances (Shaw and Bartlett, 2010), and acknowledge that there is a strong pressure to breastfeed in the UK, which may result in difficult emotional responses for women who are unable or unwilling to breastfeed (Dowling & Brown, 2013). I also believe that the protection that women are awarded to breastfeed in public without harassment in the UK Equality Act 2010 is right and proper, and should be promoted and enforced. In contrast, I strongly believe that infant formula companies, in high, mid and low income countries, exploit women's fears regarding breastfeeding and regularly breach the World Health Organization's code of ethics on marketing infant formula in order to make a profit (Heinig, 2006) and that this is unacceptable.

More widely, I hold feminist beliefs; women are not inferior to men, nor should they be treated as such. I find the scrutiny that women's bodies come under, particularly in relation to breastfeeding (Dowling and Brown, 2013), uncomfortable and unnecessary, and I believe that bodies, male or female, can be both sexual and non-sexual, although this is not currently reflected in western culture (Grant, 2016). I am appalled by the level of normalised minor (and less minor) sexual assaults in everyday life (Phipps and Smith, 2012), and I have contributed my own experiences to the everyday sexism project<sup>2</sup>. To conclude, my position on infant feeding is made up of conflicting and competing discourses, drawn from both the academic literature and personal experience. To more concisely answer

Becker's (1966) question, within this research, I was on the side of mothers, regardless of their infant feeding method.

### **Shock, offence and emotion work: analysing online comments**

During the familiarisation process and the initial period of coding, I regularly read out extracts that were particularly offensive to another colleague who I shared an office with, and would discuss the research with other qualitative researchers. Initially I found the comments incredibly distasteful and shocking. When discussing the data with colleagues, family and friends I ranted; I had to share the awful things I had read, to somehow dilute them by having other people agree that they were both offensive and not 'normal', as has occurred in other studies (Fincham et al., 2007).

For instance, on the first day of analysis I found the following comment particularly disagreeable. This comment was the 6<sup>th</sup> of over 800 comments in the data collected. In this comment, the poster states that breastfeeding women are 'arrogant', public breastfeeding is 'distasteful' and that mothers should spend time expressing their milk in advance to enable bottle feeding in public so that the poster would not have 'to see it':

*I am getting sick and tired of reading about these breast feeding mothers and wish they would just go away. I don't want to see it in public and find it very distasteful especially when they do it in a place where people eat. How arrogant of them to impose this on people. What about expressing it earlier and giving them a bottle when out and about?*

A second comment from early in the analysis period suggested that women who breastfed in public were 'perform(ing)' and may be inviting an audience (of more than one) to 'watch' women feeding their infants:

*"It's the most natural thing in the world."===== Then presumably you wouldn't object if we all gathered around to watch you perform this "natural" function??*

When reading and coding this comment, I was aware that my heart rate was elevated, and my face flushed. As a woman who has often received unwanted sexual attention from men, I found this statement threatening; the author appeared to be justifying aggressive behaviour with reference to the victim's behaviour, as is common in discourse on rape and other sexual assaults (Cowley, 2014). In the middle of a conversation with a colleague about this post and others sharing a similar victim blaming discourse, we were interrupted by another colleague who commented 'You look really angry! Are you OK?'

Other comments which I found offensive at this time claimed to be pro-breastfeeding, but provided lengthy descriptions of the type of routine breastfeeding practices they found unacceptable, largely focusing on the visibility of breasts. Alongside this, the poster suggests that the legal protection afforded to women by the UK Equality Act 2010 should be void 'IF...members of staff object' to breastfeeding on their premises:

*Breast-feed all you wish in public, but you flaming well do not have the right to throw it wherever you feel to because it is in the public domain. Shop owners, vendors, managers, have policies, their policies, shaped in the way they wish to convey their businesses and business etiquette. The law should not intervene nor legislate for it on the premises IF the concerned members of staff object.*

At this time, I wrote large sections with lots of exclamation marks in my field notes; my writing took on the passionate tone seen in some of the pro-breastfeeding posts woven among the many offensive anti-breastfeeding posts. For example, on day 1 when I was familiarising myself with the data, I wrote:

I can't believe some of these comments – v offensive!... How often do you actually get squirted with breastmilk or flashed when someone breastfeeds in public?!!! Loads of misogyny – how many women are actually flashers compared to men! Also, ideas that women are putting themselves in danger by BF because men might not be able to resist touching or staring at them! Completely absurd! (Field notes, 30/04/14)

At this time, I found it compelling to analyse the data; I took few breaks and worked late into the night. The more offensive comments, distasteful language about women's bodies, and suggestion that women who breastfed in public were inviting sexual assault, returned to my mind frequently. I found myself feeling tired and drained by the quantity of sexist and misogynistic posts, particularly in light of the presence of sexual breasts which accompanied the news item and comments:

Today it seems as though almost every poster wants the mums to be 'discrete' and 'cover up'. I did a search (of the data) and the word 'discrete' (or discretely, discretion etc.) is used 51 times – the vast majority of them are negative. I can't believe they're saying these things with a strip of photos and headlines down the

right hand side of the page with loads of pictures of (sometimes very) young women in bikinis and low cut tops. (Field notes, 03/05/14)

About a week later, having grown to understand the discourses in the data, which were largely repetitive, I had undertaken about half of the initial coding. I spoke to a colleague about the potential structure for an empirical paper over lunch in a detached manner. One draft headings was 'exhibitionism and flashing' which can be illustrated by the following comment:

*I'm a mother! Notice me! Look at my breasts... (I'm pretending I'm just getting them out to breast feed but really I just want you to notice me!) Get A room idiots. Have a bit of sophistication #yuck*

Another salient theme was 'breastfeeding akin to urination/defecation':

*All these people saying "its natural" make me cross. So is defecating, but you wouldn't want to see people do that in shops would you? it is gross. Put them away love.*

The third focused on 'women's behaviour', and suggested public breastfeeding had a negative impact on their children:

*Like dogs on street corners. Poor children.*

These comments were not isolated cases; my coding highlighted 132 cases of 'exhibitionism', 99 cases that considered public breastfeeding as akin to another bodily

function (urination, defecation, sexual intercourse, masturbation), and 56 reports of women endangering their child's wellbeing. Alongside this, sexist language was very common; women who breastfeed in public were referred to as:

'silly', 'disgusting', 'the mumsnet<sup>3</sup> brigade'.

Calls for these women to modify their infant feeding behaviour ('Put them away love' and many others) were so common that one day, I wrote in my field notes that it felt as though every comment received this code:

I had no idea that 'calls to action' (Gill, 2006) would be so common. Again, mostly women are asked to cover their bodies. The idea that women are consciously 'flashing' is absurd, but seems to be quite widely reported – not sure why they think women would get any (sexual) gratification... (Field notes 04/05/14)

A few days later, however, I had become immune to the negative power of these messages. I was able to report the awful details without feeling the original emotional connection. My colleague asked 'doesn't it make you angry?' At this point, I realised that I had moved beyond anger, shock and outrage to feeling fortunate for the excellent quality of my data. The repulsive statements, I knew, made my paper stronger and more likely to be published. However, my work has an overarching aim to contribute towards making society fairer and healthier, and thus this strong paper, which would form part of a body of work which, in the long-term might help to improve breastfeeding rates, would be created from material which would be likely to have a negative effect on breastfeeding intentions among anyone who

read them. On my return to the office, I thought about the discussion and my feelings about the data:

I'm shocked by how quickly I've become used to the offensive language and terminology. I still notice it, as I code, but I'm distanced from it (anesthetised by the research?). I wonder if this is... how people coped in Jonathan (Scourfield)'s work on suicide? I am still so much more angry when coding marketing materials (from infant formula companies), but I can ignore the offensive tones here. Perhaps the differential power balance – infant formula companies pose as providing health promotion advice but profit from reluctance among mothers to breastfeed publicly, but these individuals don't gain anything from this... (Field notes, 06/05/14)

Following this discussion, I began to formulate the idea for this chapter, whilst continuing to analyse the data at a more leisurely pace. I forced myself to regularly reflect on my emotional state during this process, and acknowledged that I had become distant from the true negativity in the data. This was also reported by some of the respondents in (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2009), although these respondents facilitated their detachment or withdrawal from the sensitive topic by attempting to facilitate good rapport through an objective, neutral interviewer position.

Despite my more detached emotional position, I struggled to accept some of the language and assumptions that women were inviting men to 'stand around and stare at them' whilst they breastfed on a bench in a shop. It made me concerned that women who were breastfeeding in public were vulnerable to sexual assault, as well as negative comments reported in mothers' experiences (Dowling and Brown, 2013). Moreover, in a larger sense,

these posters, some of whom reported that they were women, believed that women were to blame when men attacked them. I was obviously already aware that this view existed and was broadly accepted by western society (Cowley, 2014) but to be so closely exposed to a large volume of hateful comments was unusual. I also found it difficult to understand why so many of the posters made negative comments about women's bodies, particularly breasts. Alongside this, many comments suggested that the women were lazy, scroungers, poor mothers and generally inconsiderate. I found this hard to reconcile with my image of motherhood as one of intense activity and unrelenting workload (Stearns, 2010).

### **Implications for practice and concluding thoughts**

The research reported highlighted the importance of recognising the emotion work and ethical challenges of using pre-existing online content as data. This was also found in interviews with researchers conducting participant-present qualitative research (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2009). The emotion work undertaken in participant-absent research was also highlighted (Seal, 2012). This can be described from an emotional journey of anger via emotional distance to a reflexive position of distaste. Recording this journey in field notes was beneficial emotionally to the researcher, and also in the analytical process (Sanjek, 1990).

When undertaking documentary analysis on emotive subjects, it is suggested that the emotional needs of the researcher are considered from the outset, and once the researcher has familiarised themselves with the data. Researchers should schedule regular

opportunities to debrief with supervisors or colleagues. Alongside this, the use of fieldnotes to reflect on how the emotion work affects the analysis and potential findings should be considered (Coffey, 2009). In reporting the findings of participant absent research on offensive topics, it is essential that such reflexivity is included as a valid part of analysis. However, it may be that reviewers ask for this content to be removed, as in my experience of publishing from this study .

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Ku Klux Klan (also known as KKK) is a name adopted by small unconnected right wing white supremacist ‘Christian’ groups in the USA since the 1940s. It had previously been used since the 1860s in national campaigns against African Americans.

<sup>2</sup>The everyday sexism project (<https://everydaysexism.com/>) is an online collection of experiences of people who have experienced sexism, offensive comments and sexual assaults.

<sup>3</sup>Mumsnet ([www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com)) was the UK’s largest online website for parents at the time of the research. The website contains discussion boards for peer-to-peer parenting advice and space for members to blog their parenting experiences.

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Reviewers - once the draft is finalised, I will combine these references (from Mendeley) with the endnote bibliography below.

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