



Nicole Margheim

## Experiments in Informed Consent on a Fandom Discord Server

### ABSTRACT

Informed consent is a guiding principle of qualitative internet research, even as for many projects it appears 'manifestly impracticable' to gain from enough subjects (cf. franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020; MacKinnon 2022; Proferes/Jones/Gilbert/Fiesler/Zimmer 2021). Without informed consent, research risks violating subjects' feelings of privacy (cf. Koebler 2025). This paper details an experiment in qualitative methodology for studying online communities that attempts to put informed consent into practice for larger groups of participants, specifically tested in a fandom Discord server, and compares it to other methodological case studies.

As Discord is increasingly where fandom sociality happens, ethically gaining access to these semi-private online spaces is important for fan studies (cf. Wagenaar 2024). I conducted research in an invite-only server dedicated to writing *Supernatural* fan fiction, made up of 125 members. Before beginning, I gained informed consent from the administration team, with whom I then discussed strategies for gaining informed consent from the rest of the server. We jointly ran a question-and-answer period before running a poll on whether my project should move forward. During and after the project, I gave participants opportunities to talk back to my research and conclusions, extending the informed consent period through the project and allowing them to disagree with me.

There are projects for which this methodology would be impractical or useless, such as if there is no stable population in the community or if the size is so great that tracking who has consented is impossible. However, I argue that this method is still relevant to the larger discussion of ethics in fan studies. If you are doing research on an online community, I argue that the most ethical model is one that foregrounds consent through research.

### KEYWORDS

qualitative methods, informed consent, ethnography, fan studies, Discord, Reddit, Tumblr

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### Introduction

On April 26th, 2026, I began to see posts expressing outrage about academic research ethics bubbling up on Bluesky, Twitter, and Reddit. Upon investigation, I stumbled upon the source of the discussion: a Reddit post in which the moderator team for a subreddit called r/changemyview had posted a warning to their members, explaining that “an unauthorized experiment” (Koebler 2025) performed without moderator or user consent had been conducted on their subreddit. For several months, unnamed researchers from the University of Zurich had directed an AI bot to make over 1,700 comments in order to “study how AI could be used to change views” (AutoModerator 2025) before alerting the moderating team to their research. As a result of being alerted, the moderators filed a complaint with the IRB Ethics Committee at the University of Zurich and made a public post in which they argued for the study not to be published in any form, saying:

Allowing publication would dramatically encourage further intrusion by researchers, contributing to increased community vulnerability to future non-consensual human subjects experimentation. Researchers should have a disincentive to violating communities in this way. (AutoModerator 2025)

In addition to critiques of the study’s methodology and pointing out how AI-generated content is a violation of their subreddit’s community guidelines, the moderating team focused on the “non-consensual” (ibid.) nature of the research. Not only had the Zurich researchers not reached out to the moderators for permission, but in using the AI bot to comment on users’ posts, the moderators argued the researchers were “targeting” the subreddit users “in personal ways that they did not sign up for” (ibid.). In short, the researchers appeared to have performed human subject research without informed consent from participants.

The resulting conversation on social media prompted a deeper examination of my own method for obtaining informed consent from online communities. In 2024, I conducted a virtual ethnography (cf. Boellstorff 2015; Hine 2015) of a Discord server created as a community space for *Supernatural* (2005-2020) fan fiction writers, which I am pseudonymously calling The Lagoon, with the aim of studying their writing processes. There were about 125 members, both active and nonactive, throughout the duration of my fieldwork. They were all pseudonymous, largely located in Europe and North America, and therefore English-speaking, even if it was a second or third language. Engaging in continuous informed consent practices with members of the server proved to be one of the more interesting aspects of the research process, and was something that defined my method from the beginning all the way through to sharing my research with my participants.



The methodologies of the two research projects are very different, even though both are ultimately qualitative human subject research. Further, Discord is a very different platform from Reddit, with different levels of expected privacy, so direct comparison of the two projects is not very useful. Instead, I want to use both my experience and the Reddit research as starting points to examine the current state of informed consent methods in internet research, specifically fan studies. The expectations around when informed consent is necessary are ambiguous enough that researchers from different disciplines often talk past one another. One such case happened to me when submitting a paper proposal for a conference based on the same project I detailed above. I received peer review feedback on an internet studies conference paper proposal, outright declaring it was impossible that I received informed consent from all my participants and encouraging me to discuss the repercussions of that lack of consent in my paper. Upon receiving this feedback, I was at first frustrated—I was only allotted so many words for my proposal, after all, and prioritized discussing my findings over confirming informed consent. Then, I was confused. Coming from my own disciplinary background in anthropology, and having gone through institutional ethics approval for the project, I was initially surprised that someone could possibly assume qualitative fieldwork like mine could have been approved without informed consent procedures. I felt that there was some dissonance happening between my expectations for informed consent and the field of internet studies, notably worsened by my lack of explicit focus on my method in the proposal. This dissonance led me to ask a more important question: How were my methods interacting with the larger state of ethics of informed consent in internet research?

This is the question I aim to explore here. Drawing on a mixture of ethical considerations from anthropology, sociology, internet studies, and fan studies, I will be using my own experience navigating obtaining informed consent from a pseudonymous online community to highlight some possible ways of applying informed consent guidelines in those spaces. Furthermore, I want to discuss the practicalities of consent being not only an ongoing process, but one dependent on your relationships with your participants and the larger fandom. In order to avoid stretching my own method's relevance too thin, I am narrowing my discussion to fan studies research that deals with recognizable, even if anonymized or pseudonymized, individuals through qualitative analysis, which therefore exists in the gray area of needing informed consent from participants. Projects that use 'Big Data' have their own standards for ethical conduct and protecting the data they collect (cf. franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020; Stenger 2021).

## Informed Consent

As Discord becomes more prominent as a fandom platform (cf. Kennedy 2022; Wagenaar 2024), attention to how to obtain informed consent in private and semi-private online spaces is increasingly essential. Discord, originally created as a supplemental site for video gaming, is a voice and instant messaging platform in which users can create servers dedicated to a certain purpose or topic, such as a group of friends wanting to play a video game together or a fan wanting a place to host a fan fiction writing challenge. Those servers are made up of 'channels,' or smaller rooms with purposes such as voice chatting, venting about one's life, or specific fandom discussion. Moderation is left up to the users, which gives significant flexibility to volunteer moderators and server administrators how to design and run their servers, including setting privacy norms. Many servers are private and require a link from a current member to join. Others are semi-private, with their joining link publicly posted, and still others are public and searchable on Discord's interface. Each kind of server has its own assumptions about privacy

and presents different methodological hurdles to gaining informed consent. Wagenaar (2024) notes in her ethnography of a fandom server, fans “add [Discord] to the network of platforms they already use as a space where there is a higher level of privacy control.” For many of my participants, the relative privacy of Discord is what made it an attractive platform, which means that the process of informed consent is all the more important.

Informed consent in the context of qualitative research entails three elements: informing research subjects of the goals and methods of, and their role in the research, ensuring they are not coerced into involvement, and making them aware that they can withdraw their data at any point (cf. Robson/Robson 2018). Since its gradual adoption into disciplinary ethical codes and guidelines across the social sciences throughout the second half of the 20th century, informed consent as a principle has “come to be seen as virtually interchangeable” (Bell 2014, 3) with the concept of ethical research itself. While many disciplinary guidelines define informed consent as “dynamic, continuous and reflexive,” and not “necessarily” implying “a particular written or signed form” (American Anthropological Association 2012, 5), the dominant method of making informed consent institutionally legible to ethics boards is having research participants sign an official form that the researcher keeps, informing them of all necessary details of the research project and their potential involvement.

The question of when informed consent is required for fan studies research on digital platforms and/or online communities is complex, contentious, and contingent. The Reddit experiment highlights something internet scholars from across disciplines have noted for years: the standards of consent and what counts as a violation of consent vary widely between academic and internet spaces (cf. Freund/Fielding 2013, 332). Privacy in fandom spaces is specifically fraught due to the stigmatized nature of many aspects of fan culture, from queer shipping to writing self-insert fan fiction. As such, fans continually create normative strategies for protecting their privacy in offline and online spaces (cf. Busse/Hellekson 2012; Dym/Fiesler 2018; Wagenaar 2024). These strategies at times conflict directly with academic standards of consent. For instance, using pseudonyms is a common tactic used to separate fandom identity from one’s legal or social identity. When faced with an informed consent form, several of my participants were confused whether I was asking for their ‘real’ names or if their Discord handles would do, revealing how oddly academic forms interacted with fandom norms.

For many internet users, as exemplified by the subreddit moderators’ post, much academic research is looked at as inherently suspicious and violating (cf. Larsen 2021). While the friction around naming conventions on my informed consent forms did not end up causing disruptions to my fieldwork, this was not a foregone outcome. If a participant had been particularly vulnerable to identity exposure for any reason, such confusion could cause them to drop out of the research project out of caution. Additionally, like the Reddit study mentioned above, fan studies have had their own share of research received poorly by fans. In one instance, a fan fiction author added a note to their fic describing how they became aware that their work had been used for a close reading in a PhD thesis, stating that “for the record, I am amused by that non-consensual use of *Slick*” (Jay Tryfanstone 2012). Their use of “non-consensual” echoes the language used by the subreddit moderator, even as the PhD thesis in question followed academic norms of citation. This again shows that academic ethics can often butt up against fandom’s own sense of ethics, especially when it comes to fan fiction.

For academics, particularly in fan studies, the lines between data collection and human subject research can be blurry, such as when studying the textual or artistic artifacts of online communities



crosses the line into studying the community itself. When studying user-generated posts or content, “the use of publicly available data from social media platforms often does not meet the threshold criteria of ‘research involving human subjects’ according to many IRBs” (Proferes/Jones/Gilbert/Fiesler/Zimmer 2021), meaning informed consent is not required. The situation changes when there is some interaction between users and researchers, but the gray area remains. While the Reddit case is more clearly a violation of research ethics, there are many cases in which not only is the need for informed consent unclear, but the methods for obtaining informed consent seem insurmountable.

As fan studies exists in a nexus of media studies, cultural studies, and the social sciences, with methods running the gamut from digital humanities to textual analysis to ethnography, it is “tricky to pin down” (Evans/Stasi 2014, 8) methodologically. Being between disciplines and methodologies has serious implications for any discussions of methodological ethics for the field and makes the process of determining when informed consent or even IRB approval is necessary more difficult, especially when working cross-discipline (cf. Sveningsson 2008). For instance, Katherine Larsen (2021) discusses how, initially, the concept of gaining IRB approval and utilizing official informed consent methods for her work of interviewing fans, participating in and observing fan conventions, and analyzing fan fiction was “completely foreign” (85), as her disciplinary experience in English departments had not prepared her for navigating what was actually human subject research. Whereas gaining physical entry to a fieldsite is a standard necessity for traditional, offline anthropological fieldwork, the lines become much murkier when the researcher already feels at home in the fieldsite. The same is true when the fieldsite is online and easily entered, especially when the researcher has a familiarity with the platform (cf. Hills 2012).

These confusions and ambiguities are why further attention on methodology is needed in fan studies, so that the ethical considerations from different disciplines are made available to scholars engaging with new methods. Additionally, “if we ignore methodology [...] then at some point we stop being able to see far or wide enough [...] which raises concerns of single-sightedness and forecloses possibilities for the future of knowledge” (Evans/Stasi 2014, 7). Attention to methods and the informed consent practices embedded within them broaden the knowledge of available research designs to scholars, ultimately allowing for greater methodological diversity within fan studies.

Beyond its cross-disciplinary nature, fan studies must also contend with the intricate, often fraught ethical demands of internet-based research. There is a wide variety of internet spaces, each with their own unique challenges to obtaining informed consent, making it “impossible to set up any one fixed rule that can be applied to all Internet research” (Sveningsson 2008, 3492). The Association of Internet Researchers’ (AoIR) ethics guidelines acknowledges that informed consent is “manifestly impracticable” (franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020, 10) to obtain in certain circumstances, especially Big Data projects.

Furthermore, for qualitative research, the process of attempting to obtain informed consent from participants itself can be not only fraught, but dangerous. In 2019, Renee Ann Drouin attempted to conduct an online survey of fans of the animated show *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016-2018), a survey that included informed consent. Only a few days after launching the survey, she began receiving harassment and death threats to her online profiles and offline place of work. In her explanation of her experience, she points out that it was her very attempt to start with informed consent that left her vulnerable to such treatment, as her professional information was able to be broadcast quickly across fan spaces by bad actors (cf. Drouin 2021). As a result, she continues on to advocate for a greater

emphasis on “lurking” (ibid., 69) as a method in internet research. Lurking, being a method based on passively observing online spaces without interacting with any users, is a method that is plainly without informed consent. Beyond lurking there is covert research, that is, research that, for whatever reason, is exempted from informed consent, such as in cases where the risks to the researcher or the outcomes of the project would outweigh the harms from the lack of informed consent. The Reddit study mentioned at the beginning of this paper was likely an attempt at covert research, as the objectives of the study, examining AI and persuasion, were deemed more important than the consent of the Reddit users. While the Reddit study is at one extreme, there are certainly defenses of covert research, such as in cases of research on high-risk populations, e.g., forums dedicated to harassment or bigoted politics, that can be both dangerous to the researcher and methodologically fraught (cf. Pande 2021). Drouin’s experiences with violent harassment certainly give credence to the benefits of these forms of consent-less methods.

One interpretation of Drouin’s experience of violent harassment is that informed consent, as represented by the forms or official processes conceived by IRB review boards, is simply not enough. Individual fans consenting to take a survey does not mean that the wider fandom, as ‘fractured’ as it may be, will respond positively or even neutrally to the research being conducted ‘in their territory,’ so to speak (cf. Vist/Popova/Largent 2021, 29). Rather than formulating consent as something individual persons alone have the autonomy to give, ethical protocols need to also incorporate “relational conceptions of selfhood, in which our sense of identity is largely constituted by multiple relationships, spanning from the family through larger communities” (franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020, 6). Under relational selfhood, the decision to consent to research made by one person in a social space, such as a Discord server, subreddit, or Tumblr fandom, has implications for others who use that space. One example would be with fan fiction, as discussed by Ruth Deller (2018): “consent is not necessarily just about the creators of works, as there may be consequences for the other members of the fan community” (20). When one author gives consent for their work to be analyzed and therefore disseminated into a brand new, academic audience, they are also exposing many of the norms, trends, and relationalities crystallized in their creation or bringing attention to a previously insular space. Therefore, the individual’s decision to consent to research impacts the social fabric of the social spaces they reside in. When knowledge of the research then spreads through the online community, whether as a finished product or in early stages like in Drouin’s case, other people in the fandom who did not or could not participate may feel violated or betrayed as a result of not being included in the consent process (cf. Drouin 2021).

In the face of the complexities around the self and group identity in fan spaces, it is almost no wonder that individualized informed consent does not always mean a more ethical research project. This is not a critique unique to internet research, either. Anthropologists in particular have written extensively on the limitations of informed consent and even institutional review boards when dealing with true ethical quandaries (cf. Annas 2006; Bell 2014). Rather than on the concept of informed consent, these critiques place greater emphasis on mutual benefit and the relationality between the researcher and the community or population. Likewise, in their discussion of informed consent, AoIR gives practical advice and calls for “recognition that online fora and our engagements within them are intrinsically relational: informed consent may need to be sought not only from individuals, but also ‘from communities and online system administrators’” (franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020, 8). In other words, the relationship the researcher has with the wider community and their competing interests is what truly defines consent, rather than how many signed consent forms or checked survey boxes a researcher obtains.





This is not to say that general community approval is needed, possible, or responsible in all or most cases. For instance, many internet spaces do not have stable populations, or moderator or administrator teams, troubling the (already troubled) category of “community.” What would constitute consulting the broader community in Drouin’s case? Her research was conducted on Tumblr, which is not a cohesive fandom space with central hubs and moderators. Furthermore, research that is not approved by the larger community does not necessarily mean that research has no value; if a community does not want research into their pervasive racism, for instance, a researcher should not be intimidated out of pursuing that line of analysis (cf. Pande 2021). However, even as there are cases in which the standards of relational or communal informed consent are not possible, further attention to more holistic versions of informed consent can only enrich the methodological landscape of fan studies. Not only does relational or communal consent broaden the possibilities out from signed consent forms and survey yes-or-no questions, but it also raises awareness of the ethical risks associated with individualized informed consent in online spaces.

It was with this context in mind that I began my own research on Discord fandom. In contrast to Drouin’s more diffuse research population, my fieldsite was bounded. Other than the r/changemyview subreddit, The Lagoon Discord server was semi-private, meaning that it was open only to those who had been given a link by an administrator (‘admin,’ from here forward). Furthermore, the server’s population was relatively stable in comparison to larger, public Discord servers. All of these factors made my approach to relational informed consent much more straightforward. Despite the many ways that my method for obtaining informed consent will not match the needs of every fan studies project, I still think that it is worthwhile to discuss as another voice in the discipline-wide conversation about research ethics and methodology in fan studies.

## Methodology

I knew of the *Supernatural* fan fiction server, which I am pseudonymously calling The Lagoon, long before I began my research project. As a longstanding “lurker” (Drouin 2021) in the *Supernatural* fandom myself, I was loosely aware that a Tumblr user I followed was a member of the server. When my research goals became more developed, I found the contact information of the admins on their Tumblr homepage. I reached out to one of the admins through Tumblr direct messages, intentionally taking a tone congruent with conversational styles on the platform in order to demonstrate my ‘aca-fan positioning’ (cf. Jenkins; Hills 2012; Raw 2020) and make my message less jarring. I gave my pitch, briefly outlining my broad aims for the research and what it would look like:

i would love to talk to you about your use of discord and to see if you’d be interested in taking part in the project! [...] i would absolutely love to be in the server myself to see what’s what! part of my project actually is to spend time in a server and see how people actually use it, and if you and the rest of the mod team thinks that you’d be interested in the project i would love to join. here’s how i pictured that part of my project going—I’d join the server and make a post explaining my project and asking for consent from everyone to take part. I’d watch how people use the server, specifically how they use it to help their writing process [...] I would also ask people if they’d like to be interviewed. During this time, I’d also participate in the server to really experience it, if that’s okay

The ask, I felt, was steep. Who would want a stranger lurking around, listening in on their conversations and piping up every now and again to ask stupid questions? That is a gross misrepresentation of participant-observation, of course, but when one is nervous about starting a project, one's presence often feels like an imposition. The admin I spoke to was incredibly enthusiastic, agreeing to an interview and inviting me to a group chat on Discord with the rest of the admins, who then grilled me for information while also being supportive of the project. I laid out a much more detailed plan for what the project would look like, what data I was expecting to gather, and what research questions I was hoping to explore. I sent along my official informed consent forms and received signed forms back, so far in line with the aforementioned AoIR recommendation for getting consent from online gatekeepers.

The admins and I went on to discuss how I would handle obtaining informed consent from the rest of the server. One problem was the number of total members--125 informed consent forms would not be feasible to manage. Another problem was the nature of the ethnographic method, which would entail my observation of all postings within the server, thereby making consent fundamentally a matter for the entire server rather than individual members, a very clear case for the application of relational or communal informed consent. This step in the consent process, transitioning from admin consent to full community consent, was more ad hoc than my approach to the admins, as I could not find many resources for how to navigate the steps after the initial gatekeepers. Evans and Stasi (2014) point to the lack of methodological resources in fan studies as something that presents a barrier for emerging scholars in the field, one that can only be addressed through "orienting people" through "open dialogue about methodology [...] especially [...] in the digital context" (6). Even without an academic roadmap, the process of working with some of my participants on the research design created a more participatory, collaborative project.

Ultimately, the admins and I decided that the admins would create a new channel on the server, which would be the only channel I would have access to initially. Within Discord, channels function like smaller, topic-based chat rooms in a larger forum. In that channel, the admins would briefly introduce me as a researcher before I posted my explanation of my research questions, methods, and goals. I also explained that consenting to this project did not mean consenting to all their previous posting in the server being used as data. At this stage, I would also post my informed consent form as a downloadable file to the channel, which included more details such as my ethics approval confirmation and institutional contact information. After that, we would hold a question-and-answer session in the channel to hear any questions or concerns from server members about the research, which would then be followed by a poll hosted in Discord to see if I had a plurality of support to research their community. I informed the admins that I would prefer not to go forward with the project, if there were significant concerns raised in the discussion or if there was some notable percentage of 'no' votes in the poll. The amount of dissent needed before the project was scrapped was ambiguous, for I felt that the severity of dissent or discomfort was more important than simply counting 'no' votes. However, the lack of a firm idea of how much refusal constituted 'too much' was a significant weakness, as it left open the possibility that I would misjudge the situation and push through with a research project that too many server members did not feel comfortable with. In the end, the survey was unanimously in favor of my project moving forward, so this was not a hindrance to informed consent in this case, but this step would certainly need further refinement in any future research using this method.

The informed consent process overall was met with a high level of engagement from the server members, with one admin noting that more people voted in the poll than she knew were still active on





the server (many fewer than the total 125 members posted with any frequency). The question-and-answer session was robust as well, even if most of the potential concerns were brought up by myself in order to ensure they were not ignored by the server. When I asked if any members would want to be interviewed, I received far more offers than I had time to schedule. The degree to which members of The Lagoon entered into dialogue with me about how they felt about the research process gave me confidence that I was, in fact, communicating the details of the project and their roles and rights in it. While I did not collect signed consent forms from every single active server member, my process was designed to create a dialogic relationship between myself and the community in the server, one that was based on the entire group consenting to take part in the project.

In a way, internet communities typify the need for continual informed consent practices, since new people are able to continually join an online space (cf. Sveningsson 2008). In order to ensure consent from the entire community at any given time, I reached out privately to every new member who joined during the fieldwork period to explain the project and present them with the consent form. I additionally provided the official consent form in my researcher profile, which made the file available to any person who clicked on my username at any point in the fieldwork period. The presence of my dedicated research channel, the inclusion of the word ‘researcher’ in my displayed username, and periodic group discussions provided additional reminders to server members that research was in progress. The perpetual reminder that research is taking place may appear obtrusive, especially when contrasting some researchers’ fear of disrupting “the natural flow of the environment” (ibid., 3485) with their presence. The visibility of the researcher was intentional, however, as part of informed consent is the participant not forgetting that they are being researched and revealing information they would not want recorded or behaving in ways they would not want observed. In this way, the constant visibility of my research project within The Lagoon was an extension of informed consent as well.

Notably, much of my method is embedded within the affordances of Discord as a platform, such as using the admins’ group chat, the admins restricting my access, the creation of a research-specific channel and server role, and my ability to tailor my profile as a researcher to include my consent form. Affordances are defined as properties of an environment or technology that “make possible—and, in some cases, are used to encourage—certain types of practices, even if they do not determine what practices will unfold” (boyd 2014, 10). Server roles and channels are called out specifically by Wagenaar (2024) as key Discord affordances that enable “server communities to create boundaries” in such a way as to facilitate highly individualized privacy functionality. Beyond what occurred in my fieldwork, a Lagoon member could mute my research channel or even block me to prevent me from interacting with them, which would provide a technological version of withdrawing consent.

There are ways in which this method did not perfectly reflect informed consent as a principle. The largest flaw was that I could not track which users had voted in the Discord poll, as only the total number of yes and no votes was visible. This made it impossible to cross-reference members who participated in social activity on the server to members who voted in favor of the research. Furthermore, the poll was explicitly about allowing me to conduct the research and was not in itself a declaration equivalent to a signed consent form. Instead, the explanation post and question-and-answer session took the place of signing a form, but there was no point in that process in which I asked members to textually confirm that they individually consented to have their activity on the server observed. Instead, the consent was gleaned from the combination of the poll, the amount of members active in the discussion, and

the enthusiastic response. The conversation and relationship-building were present in my method, but it lacked a step for explicit confirmation from individual server members. In this way, my method for obtaining informed consent emphasized relational or communal consent over individual consent.

Additionally, my own positionality as an aca-fan—and specifically a fan of *Supernatural*—was not formally stated at the opening stages of the project and instead was something that came out slowly to different participants over the course of fieldwork. Failing to do so from the beginning set up the conditions for confusion and uncertainty regarding the researcher/participant relationship, as was made apparent to me in several of my interviews in which participants were hesitant to share certain elements of their fannish activity until I clarified that I was myself a fan. The privileging of the ‘academic’ identity over the ‘fan’ identity is a recurrent dilemma in fan studies, if particularly so in the early days of the field. Doing so “risks ‘othering’ the fan” (Evans/Stasi 2014, 12) as an object of study, rather than a participant or ‘interlocutor’ (cf. Said 1989). When at risk of being othered, fans rightly experience “concern about the possibility of being studied from the ‘outside’” (Evans/Stasi 2014, 11). If my goal in the consent process was to set up healthy relationality between myself and the members of the server, a greater degree of vulnerability regarding my own positionality would have been beneficial.

That process of consent did not end at entry into the server, however. While the period of official forms was over, I found that the dialogue and disagreement I encountered throughout the research process were informative of my concept of informed consent. While the ability to withdraw data from the research is a pillar of informed consent, the ability to talk back to the research as a fully empowered voice is not. The relationship between the researcher and participant fundamentally “reflect[s] uneven relations of power and knowledge” (franzke/Bechmann/Zimmer/Ess 2020, 70), a dynamic that necessarily privileges the academic voice over the fannish voice. During the period of fieldwork, my participants talked back to my research only indirectly through group discussions I led or interviews I conducted. After I had finished my writing and offered to send the final product to any server member who wanted to read it, I was able to experience a different kind of dialogue with my participants. Two server members ran their own podcast about the *Supernatural* fandom and invited me on their show to discuss my research project and findings. Near the end of the conversation, one of the hosts gently pushed back against my primary thesis. We talked back and forth about it, and ultimately finished the podcast interview with that disagreement still standing. It was an incredibly generative conversation—one that I wished I had been able to incorporate into my writing instead of leaving until the project was completed.

Informed consent is a dialogic process that continues throughout the entirety of a research project, one based on relationality between the researcher and the participant. Ultimately, the goal is to provide safeguards for the participant in the context of the power differential between them and the researcher. To that end, I argue that creating opportunities for participants to talk back to the researcher, to challenge them and interact directly with the production of research, is one more step toward addressing the imbalance of power inherent to research, one that does not only occur after the period of writing and publishing is done. Participatory research methods are already gaining popularity in the social sciences, but more experimentation with incorporating participation into different stages of research methodology is still needed (cf. Bayre/Harper/Alfonso 2016; Larsen 2021).



## Conclusion

To return now to the case of the AI persuasion study on the r/changemyview subreddit, as well as Drouin's short-lived survey on Tumblr, I do not mean to suggest that my method would have worked for these projects. There are a few possibilities for transferring aspects of the method across platforms, particularly in gaining admin/moderator consent for Reddit and in utilizing a more communal definition of informed consent in order to recognize potential risks on Tumblr. More research is needed to fully explore these possibilities. The specific affordances of Discord also present innovative ways of navigating informed consent, which are relevant to all researchers working on or with the platform. Some of these affordances, such as muting and blocking, which were less important to my method, could be more useful to researchers working with larger or more public servers than The Lagoon where constant communication with participants may be unmanageable.

As I have referenced a few times, my method of obtaining and continually navigating informed consent is not a prescription for all qualitative fan studies research. There are many cases in which applying my method would be unfeasible or unsafe for the researcher. At most, I wish to add to the conversation around what ethical methodology, especially ethnographic methodology, can look like in fan studies (cf. Freund/Fielding 2013; Popova 2020). Thinking back to the reviewer who assumed I had not gotten informed consent from my participants, it is important for fan studies, and internet studies more generally, to have a greater understanding of different methods of navigating the difficulties of informed consent in a variety of online spaces. To that end, much more work is needed to expand discussion of informed consent strategies onto other platforms, methodologies, and disciplines.

While informed consent is undoubtedly highly complex, especially in internet research and fan studies, researchers need to continue to be mindful of ways that it can be integrated even more fully into research methods. Given the high degree of power imbalance inherent to human subject research, informed consent represents one of the most powerful tools in protecting the interests, rights, and safety of participants. The researcher's safety must be guarded as well, but it is possible that with the correct consent method, both the participant and the researcher can be protected through the establishment of an environment of trust and mutual respect. At the very least, that is something to strive for, as fan studies continue to mature in their methodological and ethical conversations.

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