

Fandom and the Ethics of World-Making: Methods Appendix

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Before setting out on this project, I wanted to make sure I was conducting ethical research. In addition to drafting a proposal and gaining approval from my university's Institutional Review Board, I also sought out permission from the BobaBoard community itself about conducting research, and I negotiated limits and ethical principles to follow with my research.¹ In the planning stages, I got in touch with the founder and owner of BobaBoard, who goes by the pseudonym Ms. Boba, and asked her about the possibility of conducting research on the site. Her reply was cautious but curious, and she asked me if we could meet online to discuss the issue. At our meeting, after I elaborated on my project and my ethical principles (such as maintaining confidentiality for research participants), we negotiated further ethical steps. She said that she was on board, but she wanted to ask the broader community about the research. Furthermore, she proposed that she create a special researcher identity for me to use on the site and for me to ask the community for feedback on any publication that resulted from this research, to which I agreed.

In effect, the researcher identity de-anonymized me to the BobaBoard community. As described in the main body of the paper, BobaBoard is a platform that is built on top of a core anonymity system: users are assigned a randomized “identity” in each thread they post in, but this identity does not follow users throughout the site, so users are anonymous throughout the site. However, there are specialized “fixed” identities in the system that designated users can choose to use: for example, Ms. Boba uses a “Webmistress” identity when posting about official website business. Both Ms. Boba and I agreed that it would be more ethical in my research for

¹ This research was conducted under UMBC IRB protocol #575.

me *not* to be anonymous on the site—that is, for me to be identifiable as a researcher. Thus, after I joined, she created a special “researcher” identity for me to use.² This meant that the users of BobaBoard were completely anonymous to me, but I was not anonymous to them—this dynamic ensured that people were aware and informed of my presence as a researcher. It also meant I did not have access to users’ real identities. This was a central part of my ethical positioning and negotiations in the field.

After our meeting, she made a post on BobaBoard, introducing my project and asking if the users were okay with me conducting research. The response from the community was positive, so she provided me with the invitation to register on the site. After working out a few more points about ethics with Ms. Boba and the community, I made a post introducing myself, which further ensured that the community was informed about me, my research, and my intentions. BobaBoard is a private, invite-only platform, and gaining permission from both Ms. Boba, a gatekeeper for the community (quite literally in this case, because of the invitations) and the broader community made sure that everybody was on the same page. I gained informed consent from my interview participants (described later), but this was a little like gaining informed consent from the community at large.³ After all this preparatory work, I was ready to begin my ethnography.

To conduct my research on BobaBoard, I used ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviewing. Importantly, this was digital ethnography, which demands approaching the online “in its own terms” (Boellstorff 2012, 40): in practice, this meant

² I later asked if I could post about some things anonymously on the site if I did not use people’s responses in my research, which she agreed to.

³ One thing to note about ethics and the userbase is that users under the age of 18 are not allowed on the platform, which is made clear on BobaBoard’s publicly-facing webpage (“BobaBoard” n.d.). BobaBoard is also invite-only at the moment, meaning that new users are vetted. Thus, although users are anonymous, there was little risk of including data from minors in my research.

recognizing that my observations and experiences from BobaBoard were specific to digital modes of experience and furthermore specific to the platform of BobaBoard itself.⁴ In addition to thinking through the digital, my approach to participant observation, or being “self-reflexive even while trying to see and experience the world as another,” is informed by the anthropologist Patrick W. Galbraith, who writes of the “need to share imagination and movement” with one’s informants (Galbraith 2021, 266, 264). Parts of my project bear major similarities to Galbraith’s; like him, I encountered “perverse imaginary sex, violence and crime” (Galbraith 2021, 266), and like him, I shared that imagination and perversion with my informants.

This was made easier by my existing alliances, identifications, and background: like the members of BobaBoard, I am a fan, and I share with them sexual attractions and fantasies related to my own fandoms. I share many values with the BobaBoard community and was interested in joining whether or not I did research there; in this sense, because of my positionality, my experience of BobaBoard might be considered in part an autoethnography, which has a long tradition in fan studies (Hills 2021). At the same time, many of the fan cultures that BobaBoard emerges from are from fandoms that are historically associated with the platforms Tumblr and LiveJournal/Dreamwidth, and with slash as an object of fandom. This is a generalization, and as BobaBoard’s users have reminded me, there is much variation among the userbase; BobaBoard’s community is not a monolith. Still, these contexts are not as familiar to me, as I have historically spent time in different kinds of fan spaces, so there was still much for me to learn about the cultures and contexts of BobaBoard.⁵ Whether autoethnographic or not, while I used BobaBoard,

⁴ Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff’s advice about approaching digital contexts in their own terms resonates with platform studies, which investigates the specificities of different platforms and how they affect how people can use and experience them (Alberto 2021). While I did not have space in this paper to fully utilize the methodological framework described by Maria Alberto, I was informed by this framework and the field of platform studies, and I took special note of features, bugs, and other context-specific observations in my fieldnotes.

⁵ One example of this is an interview where my interviewee was talking about “kinkmemes”—which, from the name, I had assumed referred to memes about kink. However, it soon became clear that in the context of

I wrote down jottings, or brief notes about what I was doing and what I saw, and I took screenshots to document what I saw. I later expanded my jottings into my full fieldnotes.

In addition to participant observation, I also conducted two interviews via video calls. I gained verbal informed consent for both interviews, and I recorded audio for later transcription. Participant confidentiality was an important part of my research ethics, so I used pseudonyms for both interviewees.⁶ The first interview was a 40-minute informational interview focused on information about BobaBoard itself. The second interview was a four-hour person-centered interview, in which I switched between informational modes and person-centered modes in order to learn about my interviewee's personal experiences with fandom, how he understands those experiences, and how those relate to his broader worldview (Levy and Hollan 2015). The next stage after I transcribed the interviews was coding and preliminary analysis, where I looked through my fieldnotes and transcriptions for different themes that emerged, adjusting my list of codes (themes) as I went through the data (Pelto 2013). In the process of doing this, I discovered emergent themes and used these to construct my preliminary analysis. After this first pass at analysis, I found that I wanted more information on the community's perspectives on anonymity, so I made a post on BobaBoard asking what people think about anonymity. This was the final piece of the puzzle for me to better understand and analyze the issues at play on BobaBoard, and I continued to revise my analysis in an iterative process.

I also sought feedback from the BobaBoard community about my analysis at a few points in the research process. This was something Ms. Boba suggested that I agreed to at the beginning, but I was also inspired by examples of existing collaborative research where

LiveJournal or Dreamwidth (and BobaBoard), "kinkmeme" meant something completely different from what I thought it did, and I had to ask my interviewee to explain the concept to me.

⁶ Albeit I used an existing pseudonym for Ms. Boba, as I was interviewing her in her role *as* the creator of the platform.

participants are able to comment on drafts (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 184–85). Before arriving at the current draft, I shared the results from my research in several forms, including presentations and a previous draft, and I shared drafts of my presentations and writing with the community, creating an opportunity for the users of BobaBoard to provide feedback. This, too, was part of my research ethics: I wanted to make sure that I was accurately representing the community⁷ and make sure they would not be adversely affected by anything I shared about the community. However, I found that the process of feedback was also useful: users corrected me on a few errors, suggested a few other adjustments, and thoughtfully continued to explore issues that my analysis touches on. For this, and for their general cooperation with and support for the research, I am very grateful.

⁷ Though as Boellsdorff et al. point out, the notion of a single “accurate” or authoritative interpretation is itself problematic (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 184). Nevertheless, I found the perspectives of BobaBoard’s users insightful.

Works Cited

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