Abstract
Using the example of research conducted in the body modification community, this paper considers some of the methodological issues of researching online communities, especially when those communities are marginalized or non-dominant. Drawing on texts that address ethical ethnographies of subcultures, I focus on boundaries between insiders and outsiders, issues of recruitment, and measures of validity.

Keywords
Ethnography, subcultures, online communities, methodology

ACM Classification Keywords

General Terms
Human factors.

Introduction
In this paper, I discuss my experiences conducting research on information practices in the body modification community. Methodologically, I took an ethnographic approach, combining in-depth individual interviews with participant observation. In particular, I was studying how this group manages information practices related to extreme body modification (EBM), such as ear pointing, tongue splitting and subdermal implants of silicone or magnets. Because these procedures are typically rare, quasi-legal and

---

1 The legal status of these procedures varies from state to state and country to country. In the United States, the main legal obstacle for heavier procedures is that they are often painful enough that injected anesthesia is desirable. Although topical anesthesia may be administered without a license, injections may not [1]. Piercers who opt to administer under-the-skin anesthesia thus run the risk of prosecution for practicing
permanent, the politics of sharing information are more sensitive than for more mainstream practices, such as body piercing or tattoos. Thus this study involves “sensitive” research, which Li [6] defined as “the study of secretive, stigmatized, or deviant human activity and behaviour involving vulnerable research subjects” (p. 102). Although I find it somewhat troubling to set up an overly simplistic characterization of body modification as deviant, I would argue that secrecy and stigma are very much at work in the information practices of this community. Reflecting on her own experiences with covert and overt ethnographic research on a sensitive community (women gamblers), Li argued that to conduct such work ethically requires careful consideration of the most appropriate approach for conducting ethnographic work prior to actually entering the field. She also advocated flexibility in adapting research strategy during the project itself, and to avoid “fixed positions” in the field (p. 111). Flexibility for Li referred to taking different approaches in the field in terms of how she presented herself as a researcher, at what point (or whether) she presented herself to participants as a researcher.

In this paper, I work through the idea of flexibility and sensitive research, less in terms of when to present oneself as a research and more in terms of how, not so much about infiltrating a community and more in terms of navigating one’s own evolving sense of belonging and not belonging. I am particularly interested in how these issues play out when it comes to recruiting participants and obtaining measure of validity for

analysis and interpretation, and the affordances and challenges of doing these things online.

**Communities and Subcultural Capital**

To situate my claims to the group I am studying, I would describe my relationship with the body modification community - such as it is - as tangential. The term “community” is itself problematic, first because it is subject to romanticizing [5], and also because it is a somewhat fuzzy term. As one participant, Gwen2, stated, “I think [the term community] has its uses, but I also feel like it can get overstated sometimes. I’m not necessarily going to have a lot in common with someone else who has tattoos. Besides a mutual fondness for tattoos. But I think there is a bit of a sense of community within smaller social spheres. A group who participate[sic] in a discussion on one message board or part of the Internet might have a greater sense of community." Gwen’s comments here point to the dangers of wrapping a decisive boundary of inclusion around a group based solely on something like shared outward appearance. For Gwen, regular posting to a body modification-related message board (she herself was a frequent user of LiveJournal) can foster a greater sense of affinity than physically encountering someone who shares a modified appearance. This is perhaps counter-intuitive. One might think that particularly with heavy modifications (readily visible modifications, that is), which can render someone instantly stigmatized in mainstream society [9], a sense of

2 Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of participants. Most participants chose their own pseudonyms, but in cases where they opted not to select one for themselves, I have provided names that loosely correspond to their demographics.
solidarity would emerge to bind people together (and indeed, some participants did mention this kind of instant cohesion via shared marginalization). It is also possible, however, to develop a sense of community through sustained online interaction\(^3\) even if that interaction doesn’t include physical proof of shared modifications. Despite its fuzziness, I use the term community, partly because this fuzziness allows me to craft my own understanding of how to define the people I’m studying, but also because this was the preferred term among my participants. My definition for the body modification community is a group of people for whom modifications play a significant role in their social lives.

I have a number of modifications, including piercings, tattoos, stretched ears and scarifications. I’ve also engaged in suspensions and flesh pulls, attended tattoo and scarification conventions and been featured on tattoo blogs. Although my modifications have had a profound impact on my relationships to my body and I undoubtedly treasure certain stories I am able to tell about myself because of them, these modifications did not substantively alter - although they did enrich and diversify - my social life. In fact, the closest friendships I’ve made solely through modification (mostly by hanging out in tattoo shops and participating in online communities) were with people who were unanimously critical of the modified community. In this critique, modified folks were shallow, overly socially exclusive and dependent on an economy of scene points. These are critiques with which I often agree. One of the bigger disappointments I’ve had as an adult in search of a community in which to belong has been the realization that although modified folk might defy mainstream norms of beauty, they can still be racist, sexist and homophobic.

I was aware that my modifications would likely enable me to code switch between academic outsider\(^4\) and subcultural insider. I was also aware that my modifications (as well as my shaved-head-pink-bangs hairdo) would signal alterity. But how much would this matter, given Gwen’s thoughts about community as shared interaction, in the context of me not actually liking a lot of aspects of the community all that much? And even with my critiques, surely one can see oneself as belonging to a community while also having criticisms of it. Indeed, I believe that this critical stance was useful in avoiding an overly romantic or idealized view of people I was studying. At the same time, I knew that in order to conduct research, to recruit participants and gain their trust, I would have to perform (which isn’t to say this performance was untrue, but it is to say that it was deliberate) a certain relationship to the body modification community that

\(^3\) Interestingly, cultural geographer Doreen Massey has a similar construction for defining space not in terms of history or demographics but in terms of social interactions. A sustained engagement with her arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, but it does suggest an intriguing framework for researching online communities as “spaces” of interaction.

\(^4\) I was particularly worried that the anti-authoritarian and anti-corporate strands of punk rock ideology (with which there is substantial sympathy in the body modification community) would be a problem in the context of my affiliation with Microsoft. Although this was likely mitigated to some extent by my shared affiliation with a large public university (and my aforementioned modifications) I was nonetheless surprised by the fact that none of the people I contacted seemed troubled by the connection to a huge corporate entity. In fact, for a number of participants, the response was some variation of “Good for you – you punked the system!”
would not entirely reflect my views. Managing this divide of presenting myself as someone who belonged while also being critical of (and occasionally troubled by) the community formed a key ethical tension for me as a researcher.

In the rest of this paper, I relate two incidents that I think are instructive for working through issues of navigating insider/outside boundaries in online ethnographic work, particularly in terms of flexibility. First, I discuss issues of recruitment using online resources. Then I address attempts to obtain member checks or feedback from participants about my findings [2]. In both cases, my objective is to work through issues of belonging and methodological flexibility in studying online communities.

(Un)twisting the frame: When best efforts at recruitment go awry

It is perhaps important to state that recruitment was my biggest worry going into this project. I was concerned that my personal network would be inadequate for locating a sufficient number of people with extreme procedures I wanted to investigate. I had back up plans for how I would proceed should my attempts at recruitment fail (conducting discourse analysis of blog posts about EBM or undertaking an auto-ethnography of attempting to find practitioners who performed EBM) but on some level I believed that doing this project well hinged on thick descriptions of lived experiences with non-normative, subversive, risky practices. As Thornton [12] has argued, "ethnography is a qualitative method that is best suited to emphasizing the diverse and the particular. The mainstream, by contrast, is an abstraction that assumes a look of generality and a quantitative sweep" (p. 107. See also [11] and [6]). For Thornton, alterity demands inquiry that is granular, in depth and holistic, precisely because its non-dominance by definition makes it unfamiliar. My recruitment strategy for this ethnography of a marginalized group hinged on the online community, in particular an online community for modified people, which I will refer to as MeScene. I joined MeScene in 2004, shortly after moving to New York City for graduate school. Joining MeScene requires submitting a photograph or written account of one’s modifications, a measure intended to keep "plainskins" and "normies" (as non-modified folk are sometimes derogatorily called) from rubbernecking online. In comparison to a site like Facebook (which MeScene predates by nearly a decade) Me Scene is small, with approximately 10,000 users. At the same time, it seemed incredible to me when I joined in 2004 that there were so many people with so much extreme work. (This experience was echoed by several of the participants in my study.) I made a few friends quickly on the site, and would say that my involvement peaked in about 2006. In addition to blogging and posting on message boards, I attended conventions and meetups hosted by MeScene or MeScene members in the United States and Canada. By the time I started my PhD program three years later, I was logging on rarely, and only updating my blog perhaps once a month. I used the site mostly to stay in touch with people I already knew, rather than attempting to meet new folk, and most of the close friends I’d made on MeScene had left or deleted their profiles.

Nevertheless, in undertaking this project I hoped that the ability of other MeScene members to see my profile (and consequently, documentations of my modifications as well as my seven-year history on the site) would
facilitate the process of finding people to interview. To borrow another construct from Thornton’s work, my MeScene profile displayed signifiers of subcultural capital that I hoped would help gain the trust and willing participation of other community members. Subcultural capital refers to the means by which alternative cultures regulate and construct themselves qua cultures. Having modifications, being a long-time MeScene member, displaying links to other MeScene members – all of these behaviors signaled an accumulation of subcultural capital that demonstrated my subcultural membership to others in the body modification community.

Despite all this, my initial attempt to recruit participants for my study on EBM through MeScene failed utterly. I had e-mailed an administrator of the MeScene news blog, which unlike the majority of MeScene is publicly accessible, and asked to post my recruiting announcement. I’d vetted the text of the announcement with several friends from the community – I wanted to make sure it neither sounded too academic nor too informal. Receiving no response from the administrator after a few days, I started to worry. The MeScene blog gets more traffic than any other single body modification site on the web – I knew it was my best chance at getting a diverse interview pool. After interviewing my friend Sean for the project, I mentioned the difficulty of getting my announcement posted. Sean was a long-time scene member with a lot of credibility in the community, and I’d known him for years. He told me to message him with the announcement. Within 24 hours of sending him the text, it was on the blog and I had dozens of people contacting me from all over the globe. Sean then went a step further and commented on the announcement, saying that he had already been interviewed by me and could confirm that I had a lot respect for the community. More than any other facet of this project, I was aware that my longstanding friendship with a community insider (who possessed lots of subcultural capital) is what allowed me to conduct this project. Had Sean not intervened, I’m not sure I would have been able to locate the number of participants I needed to conduct this study.

At the same time, although I was thrilled to see my recruiting announcement on a high-traffic site geared towards body modification enthusiasts, instantly yielding offers for interviews, I was troubled by certain elements of how the announcement was framed. The blog post title included the phrase “one of our own” (referring to me) and went on to describe me as a community member who needed help from others in the community. The text of my announcement was specifically contrasted to typical requests for interviews send to MeScene blog editors. As opposed to outsiders who treated modifications as signs of psychological deviance, I was an insider who clearly respected and – in both senses of the word – got modifications. I began to worry that the people who were responding to my request for participants were doing so with a specific idea of who I was (an uncontested believer in the community) and how I felt about modification. Almost half of the people who responded to my announcement offered to forego the honorarium I was providing. Although admittedly speaking from the limited experience of a junior scholar, I had never

---

5 To protect confidentiality of the site, I cannot provide the actual text of the announcement, although doing so would likely be useful in illustrating my dilemma.
before had so many volunteers refusing compensation. Some referenced an interest in speaking with me because they were glad to help out on a project that was so “nonjudgemental” and “portrayed body modification in a positive light.” A couple even referenced the comment from Sean as a deciding factor in contacting me. This was all before I had any individual communication with potential participants. From one angle, recruitment was going swimmingly – I had people from all over the world willing to talk to me about fairly sensitive experiences, many of them for free, meaning I could stretch my interview budget to do more interviews. From another angle, I felt I'd lost control of my recruiting announcement, and that it was framing me as an avowed insider and my stance on the community as decidedly uncritical. By extension, I was worried that my participants would feel obligated to present an overly sympathetic or uncritical view of the community.

There are mitigating factors to the framing issue I've just described. First, MeScene was not my only means of recruitment. I used snowball sampling to extend my personal network of friends and acquaintances in the body modification community but outside of MeScene. I also hung out in tattoo shops and piercing parlors to locate people to interview. These alternate methods of locating participants meant that not all of my participants would be aware of the MeScene recruiting announcement. Second, even if the announcement itself had been colored by an overly rosy description of my project, my interactions with people who responded to the recruiting post could still remedy any mischaracterizations. I screened potential participants for diversity across race, gender, age, modifications and geographic location, but I also tried to find people with differing views on modification. In the back-and-forth of setting up an interview (explaining the project, gaining consent, scheduling) I had opportunities to complicate any simplistic characterizations of my project or my position within the community. In that sense, I'm wary of seeming as if I'm making too much of a recruiting announcement, specifically when it was in many ways favorable to my project.

Nevertheless, to me the experience raises several questions. Is there something I could have done to maintain more control over the content of my recruiting announcement? Should I have contacted the moderator and asked for a more neutral presentation of my work? Should I have asked Sean to remove his public endorsement? Should I have posted a comment myself on the recruiting announcement, explaining in a more nuanced way my stance on body modification? On ethnography? On paying participants? When Internet scholars (and social media scholars particularly) raise the issue of context collapse [7], it is usually in the sense that a piece of content intended for one segment of one's social circle is transmitted (either directly or indirectly) to everyone, irrespective of the varying degrees of intimacy across a landscape of friends, family and acquaintances. In the scenario I have just outlined, there was a kind of context collapse between researcher and researched. I relied on strong ties to get the recruiting announcement up, but once it was online, I lost control of the message among people with whom I had increasingly weak ties, and I felt less in control of the presentation of my identity within the body modification community. In Li's terms, the framing of my recruiting announcement had limited my flexibility in how I positioned myself within the community.
**Member Checks and the Quest for Validation**

If I had worried from the outset about recruiting, member checks were something that initially caused me very little concern. It is sometimes assumed that qualitative methods in general (and ethnographic work in particular) have no means of verifying analysis. Although it’s true that ethnographers do not have p values to measure significance or factor analysis to model relationships, there are numerous established tools for ensuring validity in qualitative work. Some of these tools take place in recruiting (such as using a very deliberate selection process for obtaining heterogeneous viewpoints[^6]), during the interview itself (opting to record interviews rather than just taking notes), in coding strategies (following an established method for identifying themes in the interview materials) and during the write-up (providing the text of the interview guide, for example). Yet another measure of validity in qualitative research involves asking members of a group being studied for feedback on findings, also called member checks [Cresswell, p. 217].

Even before I started interviews, I had planned to use member checks in this project. Because of my personal involvement in body modification, I was concerned that I would be overly partial to my pre-existing assumptions about the community. This was partially addressed by getting regular feedback from other ethnographers about my project as it was progressing. But it was also important to me that others from within the community had a chance to comment on my interpretations.

---

[^6]: Of course, there are occasions when a more homogenous sample is desirable, as when attempting to gather in-depth research on a narrowed topic.
experience of suspending and tend to have fun doing it. I mention this because I credit my suspension with being able to conduct member checks. Because I was familiar with suspensions, because I wasn’t freaking out, because I was very clearly having fun, when I came down, there was a sea change among the folks at the campout in terms of how they interacted with me. People asked whether I’d suspended before and when, if I were on MeScene and if I’d been to a campout before. Conversation was suddenly much easier and it became possible to explain my project and ask for feedback. Member checks, it turns out, are much more easily obtained when people perceive you as a member.

I am not advising researchers to suspend from hooks in order to conduct member checks. There is a very problematic implication here that researchers who study marginalized or risky behavior should feel obligated to endanger themselves as some kind of test of trustworthiness. This is problematic firstly for possible legal and health ramifications, but also because it is somewhat reductive, in that it suggests that the only thing required for membership in a marginalized community is the replication of marginalized behavior. Being in the modified community, by my definition, is not about how many modifications one has undergone per se, but about what those modifications mean in one’s social life. Despite the above qualifiers, in this particular experience attempting to conduct member checks, I had insufficient subcultural capital for the kind of substantive dialogue that I’d wanted, until I actually engaged publicly in the behavior I was studying. There were almost certainly other ways that I could have signaled to people at the camp out that I wasn’t a lame interloper crashing their party or some rube trying to paint them as freaks. Furthermore, member checks are often conducted with people who have already participated in the project. I have, in fact, asked a couple of the people I interviewed to look over a summary of my findings, and in the course of interviews I had already demonstrated my respect for the community. But I also wanted feedback from modified folk who had no prior knowledge of what I was doing, and the camp out provided a very efficient way of obtaining those viewpoints. In turn, suspension provided a very efficient way of engendering the kind of acceptance and trust that are necessary to conduct member checks.

Some Concluding Remarks on Online Ethnographies
Woven throughout both of these accounts are questions about boundaries between researcher and researched. These are hardly new questions. Social scientists, particularly those studying their own communities, have long struggled with how to manage boundaries between research and participation, objectivity and bias, contextualizing and apologizing. I am grateful for rigorous training in methodology coursework that prepared me for dealing with a number of these concerns as they arose in the project. But there were some things that I hadn’t anticipated. I hadn’t anticipated the extent to which a recruiting announcement could take on a life of its own online, and neither had I anticipated how necessary offline interaction would be to win over people from my own online community.

Jancovich [4] has argued that academics who research their own subcultural communities have a tendency to
essentialize the groups they study, rather than seeing the clusters and cliques contained within. Thus flexibility is not solely a matter of presenting oneself to the community, but of determining how to operate as a researcher within different layers of a network of participants. I had to be flexible when my recruiting announcement took on a particular framing, adjusting how I presented my relationship to the community as I moved from announcement to screening to scheduling to conducting an interview. I also had to be flexible in conducting member checks, being able to recognize when I could get feedback from people and when I could not, and when I could rely on a personal network of friends and when (and how) I had to win over people I didn’t know. This project required flexibility in terms of avoiding fixed sites of inquiry, but also in documenting my own constantly evolving conceptions of what the community meant to me, and noting the different layers of community membership within the group I was studying. This was vital in helping me figure out how best to navigate those different layers, both ethically and critically.

There is also something to be said about assumptions of online communities as objects of study. Specifically, there are two mildly contradictory claims about community that I can draw out from reflecting on this project. First, although I was studying a community whose practices are deeply and glaringly tied to the body, online interaction sometimes trumped offline interaction. Seeing someone on the street with similar modifications may not afford the same opportunities of generating subcultural capital as an online message board. Deeply personal connections can be made online as people exchange information about practitioners, procedures and aftercare, even when people have never met in real life. Following Rybas and Gajjala [10], I do not mean to imply that online interactions are somehow disembodied or purely abstract. But I do think it’s interesting to note that even for a community bound together by highly subversive bodily practices, some of the most important connections between community members take place online. I alternately conducted interviews face to face, over the phone and via Skype, and I also recruited people in person as well as via an online announcement. I am often struck by how quickly an interview with a total stranger can yield very detailed and personal information, but with this project it was particularly jarring (as well as gratifying) to have people open up to me about researching procedures to modify their bodies, especially when we hadn’t met face to face. My point isn’t just that intimacy can form online (which should be obvious) but that even as someone who recognizes the validity of online intimacy, I underestimated how important and vibrant this intimacy can be, the way it can be established even for relationships based to a large extent on the body.

Second, even when communities have a strong online presence, there may be limits to online interactions in terms of generating a sense of belonging. Seven years of participating on MeScene was insufficient for creating a sense of belonging when the community gathered offline. Only real time participation conveyed my community membership. This demonstrates the danger of conflating online and offline components of any given community, however intertwined the two might seem to be. It also suggests that studies of online communities stand to benefit from including offline interaction, without which this project would have lacked richness and measures of validity.
Acknowledgements
This project was supported by a summer internship at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, MA. I am grateful to the Social Media Collective at Microsoft Research for their feedback during this project. I am also deeply indebted to the people who graciously and vibrantly shared their experiences (and their communities) with me.

Example citations