Episode 43: Dr. Adriane Brown

**KL:** Katie Linder

**AB:** Adriane Brown

**KL:** You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode forty-three.

*[intro music]*

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Adriane Brown, Assistant Professor and Director of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her research focuses on contemporary American youth, examining the ways that youth develop gendered, racial, and sexual subjectivities in different spaces—both physical and virtual. Her work on teenage girls’ digital subjectivities has appeared in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* and in *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies* (third edition). She is currently working on a book manuscript that examines the salience of gender and race in high school policy debate. Adriane particularly enjoys incorporating digital media into her research, whether as a primary site of data collection—such as Taylor Swift fan forums—or as a means of engaging in traditional research practices—such as using instant messenger to conduct interviews with research subjects. Adriane teaches courses on a wide range of topics, including youth studies, popular culture, feminist theory, and masculinities, in addition to core introductory courses in the field of gender, sexuality, and women's studies. She also serves as director of the Anne Pedersen Women's Resource Center at Augsburg College. Outside of work, Adriane enjoys hiking, traveling, and eating with her wife, Jess, and their son, Sam.

Thanks for joining me, Adriane.

**AB:** Thank you for having me, Katie!

**KL:** So, I should mention, just for full disclosure to our listeners, that you and I know each because we were in the same grad program, and we met when we were graduate students, and this is actually how I know that I wanted to have you on the show, because I remember as a graduate student you going through some really interesting experiences [both laugh] related to your research, and particularly with the IRB [**AB:** “Yes.”], which we’re going to talk about a little bit later. So, I was thinking about who could I have on this show, and I thought of this experience that you had had. But let’s start by talking a little bit about your research on digital environments in girlhood. I’m wondering if we could just begin by hearing from you about some of the research questions that are guiding the research that you’re going in digital environments.

**AB:** So, my research has sort of a dual focus on youth and on digital environments, so in terms of youth, I’m really interested in pushing back against this focus on this concept of agency, this idea that if we give you a place to speak—so if we give them their own website, if we give them access to those kinds of tools—then they will empower themselves, and they will do all of these cool, progressive things. So, I was sort of interested in seeing how much that held up in the case of different digital environments, as well as sort of what digital environments enable more generally. So, in terms of the way that youth write about themselves, the way that they interact in communities, and the kind of different tools that they use to describe themselves, their passions—so, how do they use photos, graphics, emojis, text, all of these different things.

**KL:** Okay, so that’s fascinating. [laughs] I want to unpack that a little bit more. [AB laughs] But one of the things that I’m kind of curious about: Because there’s so many digital sites now that you can be engaged in—and I feel like every day there’s one more, and I don’t understand them. Most recently, we had this Pokémon Go phenomenon, which I do not understand. But there’s Snapchat, and there’s all these other kinds of things. How are you deciding to structure your research in terms of these sites? How are you choosing the digital places or the digital environments where the research is taking place, or kind of narrowing down the data that you’re trying to collect?

**AB:** Yeah, it’s such a huge question. So, there are two projects that I’ll talk about at different points here. One is the project that you mentioned earlier that I was working on that was my dissertation project, and the other one is the project that I’m actually working on a manuscript for now. So, the first one is my project on girlhood in digital environments, so for that one, I was really interested in looking at the ways that girls who belong to some kind of what I’ll refer to as a stigmatized population (and I’ll explain why I use that term in a minute), and so, how are they using different sites to represent themselves in particular ways? So, I started looking at queer girls’ Myspace pages, so that’s one of the three stigmatized populations I looked at. I also looked at the ways that girls who identified as bulimic represented themselves in bulimia communities, and then I also looked at Taylor Swift fan forums. So, I think the first two are a little bit more self-evident in terms of the way that they are stigmatized, the way that they face marginalization. But I also discovered that Taylor Swift fans often saw themselves as stigmatized [**KL:** “Hmm.”] because of how much they loved Taylor Swift.

**KL:** Hmm. [AB laughs] That is new information to me. Interesting. So, when you’re thinking about—maybe—well, let me just put out there that despite the fact that I do research on distance education, the idea of doing research in digital environments kind of intimidates me, because there’s just so much there, and it seems pretty subjective in terms of how you’re engaging with that data and how you might be coding it, and all those kinds of things. Like, it seems like it could get very complicated very fast. So I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about components that you found to be different or things that you found to be helpful to know if you’re starting to engage in research in these digital environments, that might set it apart from other kinds of more traditional research that folks might be used to.

**AB:** Yeah, so I think that’s a really important question, and certainly it’s really different. I’ve done research in digital environments, and then my current project is almost entirely offline. So, there are huge differences. One really big challenge of doing research in digital environments was setting up interview times. Like, I would set up an interview with someone and discover that people saw online interviews as more casual interactions, and so I frequently had people just not show up, and then they would send me an instant message later on and ask if they could reschedule for right then. [**KL:** “Mmm.”] I got to a point where I was actually carrying my laptop around with me everywhere so that if someone messaged me, I could do an interview, so there were times when I was out to dinner with friends, and I had my laptop out doing an interview [**KL:** “Wow.”], because that was when someone could do it. Whereas people face-to-face, at least, those interviews that I’ve done, I haven’t had that happen. People see that as a commitment, that you have to drive somewhere or walk somewhere to get there. So, I think that’s a big thing. Response rate is also really, really low for interview solicitations. I’ve had great response rates with face-to-face interviews, but with people whom I have never met in face-to-face interactions, I discovered for my girlhood project, I think that my response rate was something like 5%. [**KL:** “Mm-hmm.”] So, I was sending hundreds of requests just to get a handful of interviews. So, I think that’s important to know, because we all are used to junk mail, we’re used to spam, we’re used to people sending us requests all the time, and we ignore them, so I think that’s important to remember. There are some really great things, though. One of them is doing instant messenger interviews—means that it’s self-transcribing, so—

**KL:** That’s amazing.

**AB:** It’s incredible, right? If you’ve never done transcriptions, it takes, usually, about five times or more as long to transcribe something as it did to actually do it, so it’s a huge time-saver. Access to subjects across the country or across the world. And it’s really inexpensive. So, I have had to put together a lot of grant money and put my own money into my current project in order to do fieldwork, but my dissertation research didn’t cost anything, because I just used tools that were available online.

**KL:** So, let’s talk a little bit about the current project that you’re working on. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**AB:** Yeah! Yeah, so, I am working on a book manuscript on gender and race in high school policy debate, and so the online component of that is—it was supposed to be entirely face-to-face, but then there were a couple of things that I ended up doing online data collection for. One is that there were two Facebook groups that a couple of my interview subjects were posting in really regularly, and so they gave me permission to get their comments from there because it summarized an issue that we were talking about that was about trans inclusion—transgender inclusion—in debate, particularly in spaces that were designated for women. And so there were a couple of trans students in my population who talked about that a lot in groups, so they said I could just copy their comments there. The other one was debate rounds can be livestreamed, and so there were a couple of instances where I collected comments from the livestreams of those.

**KL:** Hmm. That’s so interesting. Like, I think one of the cool things about digital research is that it opens up these spaces that maybe you just wouldn’t have had access to before, and in part that has to do with issues of privacy, so I’m kind of curious to hear a little bit more about, like, how did you engage your research subjects in conversations about having access to these materials?

**AB:** Yeah. That’s sort of a complicated question, and it really depends. There are a lot of fuzzy issues around the ethics of collecting data from public sites. So, generally it seems like if it’s a public site, a lot of people will say that it mirrors ethnography in public places, where you’re not necessarily—if you’re observing public behavior, then it’s not necessarily the same kind of privacy concerns that you would have in private spaces. But there are a number of Internet communities that are closed—you might have to register, you might have to do that—and in those kinds of cases, you certainly need to specifically engage your subjects, and really I was—because I was posting messages onto forums to solicit interview subjects, I also found that I needed to contact the moderators of those sites [**KL:** “Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.”]. So I sort of laugh now, but I didn’t really think about it then, that because the population I was looking for was 14- to 18-year-old girls, that posting something on a forum saying that I was looking to contact 14- to 18-year-old girls for a research study sent up a lot of red flags.

**KL:** Sure.

[both laugh]

**AB:** For really understandable reasons. But I just didn’t think about it, so I would contact moderators. I made sure that my official university website was up and had a photo of me and that I also sent correspondence to go to my university email so that they could verify that I was who I said I was.

**KL:** Mm-hmm. That’s such an important point.

So, we’re going to take a brief break. When we come back, we’re going to hear a little bit more from Adriane about some of the specifics of the IRB protocols with the work that she’s doing in girlhood and online.

*[music]*

# Segment 2:

**KL:** So, Adriane, as we kind of chatted about a little in the last segment, you’re working with a population of girls who are under the age of 18, in terms of who you’re looking at to gather data from, and you’re also working with populations—one specifically that you mentioned is girls who identified as bulimic—so I can imagine that protecting these subjects was clearly of importance to you, and let’s talk about IRB, because it sounds like this project could get kind of complicated with that. So, the first thing I would just ask is, what were the kinds of things that you encountered when you were starting to kind of work toward IRB approval for this project?

**AB:** Yeah. So, the IRB process—this project was my very first project to go through the IRB process, so I really had no idea what to expect—

**KL:** Oh, I bet that was really fun.

**AB:** [laugh] Right. So I didn’t really understand at the time just how much I was asking. So, what I was asking for was to talk to minors online without parental consent and to not have to have documentation of consent, and I was asking for those things both logistically (because it’s difficult to get parental consent online, and you can’t really legally document consent through online mechanisms), but also because of safety and privacy reasons for the teenagers. So, while the Taylor Swift fans were probably pretty open with their parents about that, the lesbian and queer girls, as well as the bulimic girls, were probably not. Several of my interview subjects were not open with their parents about that, so it was about their own safety and privacy. So, that was a really big challenge. So I submitted my IRB application with all of those, with explanations of why I shouldn’t have to do those, and the IRB asked me to revise my application. They sent it back with a bunch of questions, and a lot of those questions were really centered around doing research on bulimic girls. So, that one, they were concerned, because of course these are girls who are engaging in self-harming behavior, they’re talking about it in online environments, and I have no therapeutic or clinical training to be able to figure out what’s happening in those situations. So, they were understandably concerned in ways that I just didn’t anticipate going into it. So, I actually ended up having to go before the full IRB and meet with them to talk about what my research was. We had to come back—my dissertation advisor was fantastic, and she helped through the whole process—but we ended up finding someone who specialized in eating disorders at one of the recovery clinics in Columbus, OH, which is where we went to grad school, and he was super helpful, and he gave me different guidelines, and one of the things that he said was that I should not interview anyone who was at that point actively engaging in self-harming bulimic behaviors. So, that doesn’t mean that people wouldn’t lie and say that they weren’t, but that that was what I was supposed to say, was that—to make sure that I was doing my due diligence in saying, “I can’t interview you if you’re engaging in this, and here are some hotline numbers, here are some websites, here are some email addresses.” So, I also had a list of resources for anyone, whether or not they were active at that moment.

**KL:** So, maybe to back up for our listeners, because we jumped straight into IRB without [both laugh] —there may be folks who are listening who are like, “What’s the IRB?” So, just a quick description. So, the IRB is something that many institutions have to protect human subjects, when you are doing research on human subjects. And there are several levels of review, and the kind of highest level of review is to go to the whole board, which is to have the whole board of the IRB at your institution review your project, which is what Adriane has just described. But there’s also a couple different levels of review, and they involve different components and different levels of risk to human subjects. And so in this case, Adriane, it sounds like was some real concerns about the level of risk to the subjects that you were working with. Were there certain components of your IRB application that needed more attention than others because of that concern? I mean, you talked a little bit about consent, but was it consent in maybe other components, or can you talk a little bit about that?

**AB:** Umm, I mean, it was mostly about—so, the other thing that I think is important for me to mention that I had no idea about until I came to my current institution, that every institution’s IRB application is different [**KL:** “Oh, yes.”], there is no universal IRB application. So, Ohio State’s IRB application just had a portion of it where you could say that you wanted to opt out of particular things, so I could click the box that said “I can’t get parental consent,” and so the description of why I didn’t need to get parental consent had to be really specific. So, a thing that I didn’t anticipate, and it seems so obvious now, was that the people who would be reviewing my application were, of course, outside of my field, because the IRB is composed of people from across the institution, but that because I was doing research on minors, several of them were looking at my application from the perspective of parents, not as researchers. So, I had one person who kept saying to me, “I’m a parent, I’m a dad, and I don’t want to think about my teenage girl doing these things.” And so I had to think about how to craft my answers to sort of get around those things—that I’m used to approaching things from the perspective of a researcher, and I had to put myself in the position of a parent who was thinking about his daughter doing a research study without his knowledge or consent [**KL:** “Mmm.”] and why I would want to be able to do that. So, a lot of the work of my application was focused around justifying why I didn’t need to do these very standard things. Parental consent is super standard. You just have to get parental consent to do research with minors. A lot of it was, as you point out, specifically because I was doing research on girls with eating disorders, that there was a lot of concern. Like, I’ve since done—the project that I’m wrapping up now, I did research with minors, and that actually didn’t even have to go through full review, because I wasn’t asking any questions that were deemed to be risky. [**KL:** “Mm-hmm.”] So, that actually got expedited review.

**KL:** Hmm. So, I’m curious to know, for people who are maybe facing down the IRB right now, they have complicated projects or they’re thinking about complicated projects that might involve these kinds of issues, what recommendations do you have for them, to kind of work through this process? And I think that your perspective is kind of unique, because you were doing this for the first time, and so you kind of learned a lot as you went along. But for folks that maybe don’t want to recreate the wheel or want to learn from your experience, what are some things that you might recommend to them?

**AB:** I think.... To definitely keep in mind that people—it’s not even just if you’re a social scientist that other social scientists outside of your field are looking at it, but people really literally from across the entire institution, people who have absolutely no familiarity with the kind of research you’re doing, will be looking at this, because the purpose is not really to see if your research design is sound, but it’s—as you’re talking about—it’s about avoiding risk, it’s about avoiding harm to research subjects, and so you have to look at it from that perspective. So, for me, I think that the fast tips that I have are to be as detailed as possible in your application. So, if you think that you are over-explaining things, you’re probably not. So, to make sure that you avoid jargon, that you are speaking in language that anyone across the college could understand and could anticipate the kinds of questions that you’ll be asking. And also to really think (and, potentially at least, in my mind, I feel like I’m overthinking), what could someone possibly construe as risk? And so, to anticipate those questions so that you can, on your first run through, say, “Okay, these are the things that could possibly go wrong.” So, in my debate project, I’m asking about people’s experiences in high school debate, so you think, well, that’s no- to low-risk, and it was, but I still identified potential risks that someone might discuss—an incident that was stressful or painful for them from a debate round—and that I had an explanation of how I would respond and how I would minimize that risk. So, even in those kinds of little things, I think that’s helpful, and it also demonstrates to the IRB that you’re not being cavalier about your project, that you are first and foremost concerned about your research subjects.

**KL:** That’s such an excellent point. For folks that are new to the IRB, or even folk that are experienced with the IRB, we’ll make sure to link to the regulations in the show notes so you can take a look. These are things that are out there. People can read them, you can come to understand the IRB very well by reading through what’s out there.

So, we’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’re hear more from Adriane. Back in a moment.

*[music]*

# Segment 3:

**KL:** So, Adriane, as I mentioned earlier in the episode, you and I went through the same graduate program together in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Ohio State, that’s our graduate work, and I wanted to talk with you a little bit about just what it means to you to be a feminist researcher. Clearly your topics are very related to women and gender studies, and you’re studying race, sexuality, and gender, but in a broader way, what does it mean to you to be a feminist researcher?

**AB:** Yeah, I think that’s a really important question. So, to me, feminist research is unique in that it’s specifically focused around question of social justice. So, that could be the kinds of things that we choose to study, so that’s certainly a lot of what compels my focus on youth, that youth have been a marginalized population, it’s a population that literally doesn’t have legal rights—minors aren’t persons, they’re generally treated under the law as the population *[sic]* of their parents, and so, I’m really interested, as a feminist researcher, in thinking about what the implications of that are for the way that we treat youth and the way that youth are situated in research. So, for me, feminist research is about that, so it’s partly about the topics that we choose to study, but it’s also certainly also about the way that we do research. So, in thinking about—it’s not just about thinking, “How do I do the least harm to my subjects?”, but it’s also thinking about how my research benefits my subjects or how my research could be potentially negatively taken and twisted in ways that I don’t anticipate. So, I mentioned earlier that I did research in my dissertation on three different types of websites, and I’ve published out of two of those, and I’ve actually hesitated publishing out of the bulimia chapter because I’m a little bit concerned about how it would be taken up, so a lot of what my research uncovered there was people talking really openly about their practices, their bulimic practices, about the way that they binge and purge, and also at multiple points about the ways that they find pleasure in engaging in binging and purging behaviors. And so I think that’s really important, that we are able to talk about those things and to acknowledge that, that that is an experience that people have, but I also don’t want anyone to think that I’m trying to valorize disordered eating behaviors. [**KL:** “Mm-hmm.”] So, I haven’t ruled out publishing it, but I’ve held onto it for so long because I just can’t figure out exactly what I want to do with it in a way that’s beneficial to people. So, it’s an interesting intellectual argument to me, but for me, being a feminist researcher is the thing that makes me hold onto it, instead of sending it out because I like intellectually what it might say.

**KL:** Yeah, I mean there definitely seems to be a tension there between thinking about the contribution that it could make to the field and to the discipline and advancing knowledge—which is something I think many researchers, if not all researchers, are interested in doing—but also that perhaps more personal component of just thinking about what does it mean and how could it be taken up, as you said, in ways that maybe are not what you intend or that could have a negative effect, either on girls or other populations, depending on how that gets taken up. I’m wondering if you can—just because you have such unique research in terms of thinking about digital environments, and you’re pulling from a lot of different areas, both for your previous work and the work you’re currently doing now on debate—can you talk a little bit about interdisciplinarity and how that has kind of impacted your research? Are there certain disciplines you’re drawing from? How are they working together? Do you see that as part of our work as a feminist researcher?

**AB:** Yeah, yeah, so I really love interdisciplinary work. It’s actually one of the big things that drew me to women’s, gender, and sexuality studies as a field, was that I could sort of think about gender in all of these different contexts and, within the span of a single topic or project, I could focus on that one issue that came up in lots of different ways. One way in which I found it really useful to engage in interdisciplinary work was with a subject in the Taylor Swift fan forums portion of my work. So, this subject had a graphic that I found really super interesting. So, this picture of Taylor Swift making a heart sign with one of her hands that Taylor had put with a picture of Selena Gomez making the other half of the heart, and my interview subject had put a picture of herself making the other half of the heart so she and Taylor Swift were making heart hands together. And I looked at her posts, and I found it super interesting. She self-identified as a lesbian on this site, she had this “LGBT Swiftie” icon on there, and so she would post a ton on this site, but then when I talked to her in my interview, I discovered that she had faced a lot of harassment because of her graphics, that she had at one point posted a comment on someone else’s questions, someone asked, “Which picture of Taylor Swift is better?”, and my subject said, “Oh, this one, because her lips are more kissable,” and the moderator removed it because it was flagged as obscene. So, there were all of these things where she was very clearly experiencing a lot of discrimination on the sites, a lot of sort of pushback, but she still found her presence on these sites to be super important to her and described herself as a huge Taylor Swift fan and that she’s really identified with Taylor, even though Taylor’s songs are all about boys.

**KL:** Yeah. Well, I mean, I think this example gives—it’s a really good one to think about how identity is really complicated [laughs], obviously, very complex, and I’m wondering, as you worked through this project and as you kind of work through your future projects, how are you dealing with the complexity of what you’re finding? Do you have strategies for kind of wading through that and kind of coming to some sense of the results of what might be coming out of that data?

**AB:** Yeah, so I—complexity is actually the thing that I look for. I’m really interested in conflicting narratives. So, in my girlhood project, I was really interested in the ways that girls talked about, in interviews and on forum posts and on their own websites, about how they loved the Internet because it gave them the ability to be their real selves, [**KL:** “Hmm, interesting.”] to express who they really were, but the content analysis that I did, and also the analysis of interview transcripts that I did, really revealed that they were talking about themselves and constituting themselves in ways that were really not super in line with their own identity group. So, there were girls on Myspace who were using these graphics that had said “True Love Waits” on them, and so I don’t know if listeners are familiar with True Love Waits, but this was a really common campaign—I don’t think it’s so much a thing now—but that was about sexual purity, and particularly in conservative Christian denominations, and so I found it fascinating that there were these lesbian and queer girls who were using this graphic that’s very much about excluding non-heterosexual populations, but that they found it meaningful [**KL:** “Hmm.”], that for them, it was a way for them to give meaning to their own relationships and that it was a way to sort of identify. And so for me, that’s a really interesting finding, like, how are they using the tools that are out there—so there were also—they would use pictures of little children, boys and girls kissing, and things like that—and so I saw these kinds of things as a way to make lesbian and queer relationships legible to heterosexual audiences. Like, these are things that you understand as innocent love, and my love can be innocent too. And so I found those kinds of things super interesting. There’s also, for me, sort of this central conflict in my debate project, that there is sort of a contradiction between—people will say that debate is this really super feminist, super anti-racist community, but that my interviews definitely revealed that that’s in conflict with the prevalence of sexism, racism, and sexual harassment in debate rounds and in the community. So, for me, I think that your question about conflict is really sort of at the central—or complexity is sort of at the center of my work.

**KL:** Well, Adriane, I find your work fascinating. We will definitely be linking to the outcomes of articles and things that you’ve published about this research for folks who may want to follow up. I want to thank you so much for taking time to come on this show and share a little bit about your work with us.

**AB:** Thanks for inviting me!

**KL:** And thanks so much to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of *Research in Action*. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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