

## **Tell Before You Ask: Informed Consent in Survey Research**

Ayla is a high school student conducting a survey for her AP Environmental Science class. She wants to get a sense of the types of eco-friendly choices that her peers make. She creates an online survey with questions about participants' recycling habits, meat consumption, and buying/spending habits. The form asks for the students' email addresses to ask follow-up questions if answers are unclear, before it asks questions about their habits. Ayla does not provide any information regarding where the data will go or for what exactly it will be used, other than mentioning that the survey is for an AP Environmental Science project. The form is sent out to approximately 200 students in her grade, and their names and responses are collected. Using her data, Ayla writes a lengthy report summarizing the habits of students at her high school and publishes it in the online school newspaper, where it becomes available to anyone on the Internet.

Some students are uncomfortable with the fact that their eco-friendly habits, or lack thereof, are now on display for the world to see on an online platform. They argue that Ayla's survey was conducted unethically because it did not follow the principle of informed consent. These students claim that Ayla should have included information in the survey regarding for what the data would be used, how it would be analyzed, and where it would be published. Because they didn't have a full understanding of what would happen to their answers after the survey was published, they feel betrayed by Ayla, and are worried that other students who saw them take the survey may judge them for their habits. They want Ayla to take her report down and conduct the survey again with background information and a statement requiring their informed consent.

Ayla argues that although she recorded emails in the initial survey, the data she published maintained the respondents' anonymity. She claims that there is no need for her to include a statement of informed consent in something as simple as a small survey within her high school. Because her work does not have any major implications in environmental science, and because her report does not name specific people, she argues that requiring her to take it down is much too drastic a measure on behalf of the students. Ayla believes that the fact that the students voluntarily completed her survey was an indication that they consented to it. In her opinion, she took the measures necessary to keep the students' responses anonymous and their data secure. She does not think that she has done anything wrong and refuses to take her report down.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Since the students participated voluntarily and their responses were kept anonymous, was Ayla wrong to publish her survey results in the school newspaper?
2. Is publishing in the school newspaper different from publishing elsewhere?
3. Is Ayla obliged to share her plans for future distribution of results, for example, in possible publishing opportunities that might arise after she graduates from high school?