# Ethics in Research with Social Media: Guidance for Researchers

## Background

The number of researchers using social media in their research has increased greatly over recent years, and this brings a number of ethical challenges. This document aims to highlight some of the main ethical issues associated with social media research and provide suggestions for how these may be handled.

## Scope

The term “social media” refers to any social online data other than email, and includes social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), as well as blogging sites, discussion forums and chat rooms (Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Social media platforms can be used for research either actively, with the researcher using social media to recruit or interact with participants, or passively, where the researcher collects pre-existing social media data, including the practice of “scraping”.

The range of social media platforms being used, their varying terms of use, and the variety of research being conducted means that it is not possible to produce definitive, all-encompassing guidelines; instead, this guidance should be viewed as a starting point for researchers who plan to undertake research with social media. Suggested further reading is provided at the end of this document.

Guidance relating to *governance* issues in relation to social media has been published [elsewhere](https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/research-innovation-office/research-data/Pages/rdm-quick-links.aspx). Researchers should be cognisant of their legal and professional obligations while consulting this guidance.

## Key ethical issues in social media research

This section outlines some of the main ethical issues associated with social media research, with points for researchers to consider to help them navigate each issue.

**Before undertaking any research using social media platforms, researchers should familiarise themselves with the terms and conditions of the platform(s) they will be using. These will include information for social media users but may also provide guidance for third parties wishing to use social media data. A clear understanding of the terms and conditions will help researchers identify which of the following ethical issues may affect their research.**

### Public/private distinction

Even though social media data may be easily accessible, it does not necessarily follow that researchers can use these data any way they choose, nor does it mean that there are no ethical issues to consider. The private vs. public distinction is therefore surprisingly complex.

The nature of the source of the data plays a role here; for example, a distinction can be made between posts on Twitter including hashtags (to make the posts easily accessible to others), versus a closed Facebook group which has an administrator overseeing group membership. Whether the social media user regards their contribution as private or public is also relevant; for instance, an open discussion board for people affected by eating disorders may nevertheless be seen as a safe private space by users. This is further complicated by the fact that many participants may be engage with platforms regarded as public (e.g., open discussion board), while in a private location (i.e., their home or place of work), or that posts that were once public can become private (or vice versa).

Another issue related to the public vs. private distinction is on copyright and republication of data: ownership of social media data often rests with the social media platform.

**Points for researchers to consider**

**The perspective of the social media user:**

* Are they likely to regard their contribution as public or private?
* Are they a public figure (e.g., politician, sportsperson, celebrity) or public institution who aims to reach a wide audience with their social media posts?
* Would they expect their social media activity to be observed by strangers? Would they find a researcher accessing their social media data intrusive, invasive or unwelcome?
* To what extent would using their data lead to potentially damaging effects for them?

**The nature of the source of the data:**

* Is the data source a closed forum or group? Does it require a password? Is access controlled by an administrator/gatekeeper? If so, researchers should contact the administrator for guidance on how best to proceed.
* Is the data source an open forum/platform? Is the data source intended to reach a large audience (e.g., through the use of hashtags, the creator is a public figure or institution)?

### Informed consent

Informed consent is a key ethical principle but obtaining informed consent can be difficult in social media research, particularly for large-scale Big Data studies in which it may be impractical or impossible to get informed consent from thousands of “participants”.

Researchers cannot assume that agreeing to a social media platform’s terms and conditions is the same as giving informed consent for research. This is exacerbated by the fact that many social media users do not read terms and conditions carefully in the first place. In a similar way, social media users are unlikely to read lengthy participant information sheets, so there is a risk of participants consenting to take part in research without being fully informed (British Psychological Society, 2021).

Another aspect of informed consent is the right to withdraw consent. However, if a social media user is unaware of how their data are being used, how can they withdraw from the research, and how will the researcher know? For example, a social media user may decide to delete their account or their posts at a later date, but the researcher may not be aware of this.

**Points for researchers to consider**

* Will social media data be published verbatim? Could this have negative effects for participants? If so, it is good practice to obtain consent from each participant.
* How will participants feel if they find out their social media data have been used? What are the repercussions of this?
* To what extent is the data public or private (see above)?
* If consent is required, how best can this be facilitated? How can you ensure that participants will read the participant information fully? How practical is it to ask consent from every participant? One possible solution may be to ask for consent at the dissemination phase of the study (e.g., participants whose quotes are going to be published are asked for explicit consent). Researchers should highlight the risk of identification to participants.
* How can participants withdraw from the study? How will researchers know if a participant has deleted a social media post? The BPS (2021) recommends that if data were considered to be public at the time of extraction and analysis, then subsequent withdrawal is not usually needed unless the data includes something illegal or which violates terms of use.
* Researchers intending to use Twitter for research purposes will find the article by Williams et al. (2017) to be very useful. A copy of the decision flow chart for publication of Twitter data can be found in Appendix 1.

### Anonymity

Anonymity is another key ethical principle and social media research presents a number of challenges on this front. Removing names or usernames is not sufficient to ensure anonymity: it may still be possible to identify a participant by piecing together other available personal data, and a simple internet search using the verbatim post will soon reveal the original creator’s username. Social media platforms include a range of types of data, including text, images, audio and video, some of which are easier to anonymise than others. Further, anonymisation may be very difficult in some circumstances: the terms of usage of some social media platforms request that posts are republished verbatim, with attribution being given to the social media user.

Where and how researchers will share data is another factor. For example, republishing a tweet in a publication or presentation will increase the chance of the social media user being identified; sharing data sets with collaborators or via data repositories could allow others to identify participants.

**Points for researchers to consider**

* What are the social media platform’s policies on publication and sharing of data, including copyright?
* If there is a risk of harm to participants from republishing their data verbatim (thus leading to identification)? If so, researchers could seek consent from participants warning them of the possibility that their posts could lead to identification. Alternatively, researchers could paraphrase data; however, this raises questions around authenticity of data and may not meet the platform’s terms and conditions.
* Will publishing the name or URL of a website or discussion form compromise anonymity?
* Will other information in the social media data (e.g., image, sound, distinctive hashtags) compromise anonymity?
* Will data sets be shared with others? If the data are not sensitive or individuals cannot be identified, then sharing may be possible.

### Risk of harm

One of the benefits of social media research is that it lends itself to investigating potentially sensitive topics and recruiting difficult to access groups, many of whom will be vulnerable and/or part of minority groups. However, this introduces a number of ethical issues: generally speaking, the more vulnerable the participants, the greater the researcher’s responsibility to protect them from potential harm.

While risk of physical harm is usually low with social media research, there are a number of potential ethical issues related to mental and psychological harm. Many of these are related to issues discussed previously; for example, the risk of harm is increased if participants do not read the participant information properly prior to giving consent, or if their anonymity is breached through the publication of their social media posts.

Verifying identity can be difficult in social media research and it is possible that participants are not who they say they are (e.g., children posing as adults online, or vice versa). Researchers should therefore try to minimise the chance of vulnerable groups taking part in their research, particularly if the topic is of a sensitive or adult nature.

Aftercare of participants may be particularly important if the research topic is likely to cause upset, or if participants may react negatively if they find out their social media content has been used. If something in the social media data is of serious concern (e.g., participants reveal a serious threat to their wellbeing), researchers should consider their duty of care and other legal and professional obligations.

Risk of harm does not only apply to participants, but also to the researcher. For instance, using social media to post recruitment adverts for a study on a divisive political issue may lead to online abuse or “trolling” of the researcher. Researchers may also be affected adversely by engaging with social media posts on sensitive or upsetting topics.

**Points for researchers to consider**

* What steps can be taken to minimise children or vulnerable adults from taking part? How can identities be verified? If the topic is particularly sensitive or adult in nature, then can an alternative method of data collection be used instead?
* Are participants likely to be adversely affected if you use and/or publish their social media data?
* How would you deal with a situation where participants reveal information which suggests their well-being is at risk or which reveals illegal behaviours? What are your professional and legal obligations?
* Are the data being collected on a potentially sensitive topic (e.g., political views, sexual behaviour, mental health, criminal activity)? If so, how will you deal with information of concern?
* If the research is on a potentially controversial or divisive topic, how will you ensure your own safety online? Researchers should try to keep personal and professional social media profiles as separate as possible, for example by amending privacy settings, keeping communication professional, and not accepting friend requests from participants. Researchers should avoid giving private contact details when interacting with participants.
* If the social media data could have a negative impact on you as a researcher, what can be done to minimise this?

## Summary

The ethical issues associated with social media research should not be underestimated. This document is merely a starting point, and researchers intending to conduct social media research must familiarise themselves with the terms of use of the platform(s) they intend to use, as well as more extensive guidance on ethics in social media research (see Further Reading).

Townsend and Wallace (2016) helpfully summarise some of the key questions researchers should keep in mind when conducting social media research:

* **Have you consulted the terms and conditions of the specific platform?**
* **Have you consulted the relevant, disciplinary, funding, legal or institutional guidelines?**
* **Can the social media user reasonably expect to be observed by strangers?**
* **Are the research participants vulnerable (i.e., children or vulnerable adults)?**
* **Is the subject matter sensitive?**
* **Will the social media user be anonymised in published outputs?**
* **Can you publish or share the dataset?**

## Further reading

British Psychological Society (2021). Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research. Available from: <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research.pdf>

Franske, A. S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, Charles, & the Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. Available at: <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>

Jones, C. (2011). *Ethical issues in online research*. British Educational Research Association on-line resource. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-issues-in-online-research>

Townsend, L., & Wallace, C. (2016). *Social media research: A guide to ethics*. Available at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf>

UK Research Integrity Office (2016). *Good practice in research: Internet-mediated research*. Available at: <https://ukrio.org/wp-content/uploads/UKRIO-Guidance-Note-Internet-Mediated-Research-v1.0.pdf>

Williams, M. L., Burnap, P., & Sloan, L. (2017). Towards an ethical framework for publishing Twitter data in social research: Taking into account users' views, online context and algorithmic estimation. *Sociology*, *51*(6), 1149–1168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517708140>

## Appendix 1

Decision flow chart for Twitter communications (Williams et al., 2017)

