Carnegie School of Sport. Research Ethics Committee

A Guide to Social Media Research

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1. **Preamble/Background**

The rapid growth of social media is generating important ethical questions for researchers. Data generated by users and made available on these platforms is a rich source of data for researchers. Research, via social media, takes place across a range of different Internet/online settings, including Facebook and twitter, YouTube, TicTok (and other video sharing sites), Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook messenger, WeChat (and other online messaging services), image sharing platforms such as Pinterest and Flickr, online dating services (such as tinder and grindr), social networking sites (such as LinkedIn), and a wide range of other message boards and forums. The two main types of social media data are user-generated content (UGC) and researcher-generated data (RGD).

> • **User-generated content** typically refers to data such as content created ('posted') by users. This might include tweets, forum comments, blog posts, videos; and/or data that records users' engagement with content and other users (e.g. likes, shares, retweets, followers, friends, etc).

> • **Researcher-generated data** typically involves a researcher using a social media platform and typically using a standard research methods/instrument such as questionnaires and/or focus groups, to access large groups of participants.

Due to the evolving nature of social media platforms and the growing variety of different platforms and activity, it is not possible to provide a fixed, all-encompassing set of instructions/rules regarding the ethical use of research that involves social media. Research by [The University of Aberdeen and ESRC](#) has shown that researchers, HEIs, academic journals and funding bodies do not have consistent guidelines, or even a common approach, towards the ethical use of social media data. However, there is growing literature on the ethics of online research with various organisations publishing guidelines designed to inform the behaviour of researchers engaged in social media data.

Arguably, at the time of writing this guide, the most useful guide has been provided by Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace (2016) (note: this was an ESCR funded study).

Other useful guides include:

- BERA (2011) *Ethical issues in online research* https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-issues-in-online-research
- BPS (2017) *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20%282017%29.pdf
- BSA (nd) *Ethics Guidelines and Collated Resources for Digital Research. Statement of Ethical Practice Annexe.* https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24309/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice_annexe.pdf
- ESRC (nd) *Internet-mediated research*. https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/internet-mediated-research/
- European Commission. *Ethics in Social Science and Humanities* (2018) https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/h2020_ethics-soc-science-humanities_en.pdf#page8
- Social Media Research Group / Social Science in Government (UK) (2016) *Using social media for social research: An introduction.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524750/GSR_Social_Media_Research_Guidance_-_Using_social_media_for_social_research.pdf
- Lancaster University (nd). *Guidelines for the responsible use of Social Media data in research.* https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/social-media-research-ethics/guidelines-for-the-responsible-use-of-social-media-data-in-research/
- University of Sheffield Research Ethics Policy Note no.14. (nd). *Research involving Social media data*. https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.670954!/file/Research-Ethics-Policy-Note-14.pdf.
- UK Research Integrity Office (2016). *Good practice in research: Internet-mediated research.* https://ukrio.org/wp-content/uploads/UKRIO-Guidance-Note-Internet-Mediated-Research-v1.0.pdf
- Wolverhampton University (nd). *Research Involving Social Media*. https://www.wlv.ac.uk/research/research-policies-procedures--guidelines/ethics-guidance/research-involving-social-media/

The following guidance is based upon a review of the above documents.

2. Key issues
- What constitutes 'public' and 'private' in social media research?
- What constitutes 'informed consent' in social media research?
- Anonymity and social media research.

It is important to note that all research involving social media data must secure University ethical approval *before* any data are collected and/or analysed.

There is an on-going debate over whether social media posts should be classified as public or private. Research conducted by IPSOS MORI (2015) (cited here) found that the public in general are uncomfortable with researchers' use of social media (see also Golder et al, 2017; Williams, et al, 2017). Potential data posted on social media platforms that are intentionally public is often understood as being 'in the public domain'; however, each potential source and platform should be critically examined. It might be that content is publicly available or that access is restricted to specific individuals or members of a (closed) group. Whether posts are perceived as being 'in the public domain' or private is important because it relates to whether informed consent should be sought from those posting the material.

A person posting a tweet using a #hashtag is likely to consider their posts in the 'public' domain. By contrast, users of a private online group might reasonably expect their posts are only visible to a restricted number of people and therefore are not 'public'. Similarly, those involved in a public discussion forum, but on a topic with limited general interest, may reasonably anticipate their posts will be viewed by a small number of people – therefore they might not perceive them to be 'in the public domain'.

The BPA (2013) have noted that whether a post should be treated as 'public' or 'private' will largely depend upon the specific online content and the likely perception of the person posting the material.

Research that involves observation of public space is generally accepted as not needing consent. This is because it is often not practical, feasible and/or necessary to secure the consent of all that may be observed. In terms of observation and data collection of online public spaces, providing appropriate anonymisation has been considered, it may be that standard consent is not required.

Before starting any research study that intends to use social media data, the researcher should familiarise themselves with the 'Terms and Conditions' of the social media platform (for example see Twitter's T&C). The researcher will need to check that what they are proposing to do is allowed by the site. Social media platforms will regularly change their 'Terms and Conditions' (see also 'community guidelines'), making it necessary for the researcher to check they are aware of the current requirements.

Social media data are normally defined as *personally identifiable data* under the General Data Protection Regulation. Social media research, as with other research, requires the researcher to consider how the data will be stored, shared and archived. Potentially identifiable social media data are subject to general LBU ethics requirements, including data management guidelines, and GDPR. Researchers should also familiarise themselves with any potential issues relating to Intellectual Property, such as any copyright on posts and/or images that they might want to reproduce.

The onus is on the researcher to anonymise their data and it is not sufficient to simple 'anonymise' content posted online. As it is often possible to identify a source or directly quoted material (for example an individual post can often be found via a simple internet search), therefore paraphrasing is recommended. If a researcher wants to report direct quotations, they should paraphrase any directly quoted material in such a way that retains the original meaning. This is especially important for 'sensitive' research. it might be necessary to replace identifying information (e.g. usernames) at the earliest opportunity and/or use image editing software (e.g. Adobe Photoshop) to redact any identifying information and images.

The identity of individuals posting material online should be protected; however, disclosure of identity is sometimes necessary (for example, online material posted by public officials or by those representing an organisation).

Researchers need to carefully consider collecting/using social media data posted by those who might be viewed as 'vulnerable'. It is possible that, despite age restrictions adopted by some social media organisations/platforms, children (under 16) may be using these platforms and not fully understand the consequences of their online activity.

Additional ethical consideration should be given to data collection that might reasonably be viewed as 'sensitive' or potentially harmful; examples include posts on mental health, financial problems, or drug misuse. There might be a situation when the researcher encounters content that is illegal. In such cases researcher should seek advice from their local Research Ethics lead who, if necessary, will report their concerns to xxxx.

3. **Checklist**

This checklist is intended to help the researcher follow 'best practice' when engaging in online/social media research.

1. The researcher must check the 'Terms and Conditions' of the relevant social media platform.
2. The researcher must check with the appropriate gatekeepers (e.g. group administrators, forum moderators) to find out if there are any requirements or preferences regarding access to the site and/or using data held on the site. It is important the researcher has the relevant 'permissions' and should not enter a 'private' online group without the knowledge and/or consent of the relevant gatekeeper/moderators and/or users as this would be viewed as covert research and/or deception.
3. The researcher should separate their personal and professional social media activities. Research using online platforms should be viewed as a professional (not personal) activity. Thus, it might be necessary to check privacy settings so as to avoid

sharing personal information with participants and/or not accept 'friend' requests from participants.

4. The researcher should not publicly post details of their home addresses, private phone numbers, or personal email, nor require this of research participants.
5. The researcher should ensure all data collected are used solely for the purposes of answering the research question and/or identified in a participant information sheet (if appropriate).
6. The researcher should consider how they will ensure any data collected (such as posts on social media sites/forums) can be anonymised and pseudonymised (this can be done by paraphrasing verbatim quotes).
7. The researcher should ensure that no images relating to participants are uploaded without the voluntary, informed consent of the person featured. Note: Where traditional voluntary, informed consent is not required, the researcher should consider how participants might be made aware of how their data are being used.
8. The researcher should, at all times, conduct themselves in line with the highest academic standards of ethically responsible research.

Given the rapid change in online platforms and activity, there are many 'grey' areas in social media research. A researcher should contact their Local Research Ethics Coordinator if they need advice on a specific research project. If the proposed research is innovative or is focused on a 'sensitive' topic, it might be that guidance is needed from the School's Research Ethics Committee (even though it might not be initially identified as a stage 3 application). All those seeking to engage in social media research will need institutional ethical approval for their research prior to any mining of the data. Ethical decisions that concern risk to participants, consent and privacy should address not only existing principles on how data mined/harvested from social media sites are collected but also how this data are being used, processed and disseminated.

4. Further Reading

Arigo, D., Pagoto, S., Carter-Harris, L., Lillie, S. E., & Nebeker, C. (2018). Using social media for health research: Methodological and ethical considerations for recruitment and intervention delivery. *Digital Health*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207618771757

Cleland, J., Dixon, K. and Kilvington, D. (2020) *Online Research Methods in Sport Studies.* Routledge.

Golder, S., Ahmed, S,. Norman, G. and Booth, A. (2017) Attitudes Toward the Ethics of Research Using Social Media: A Systematic Review. *J Med Internet Res* 2017;19(6):e195. https://www.jmir.org/2017/6/e195/

Taylor, J., & Pagliari, C. (2018). Mining social media data: How are research sponsors and researchers addressing the ethical challenges? *Research Ethics*, 14(2), 1–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747016117738559

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

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