

Social Media in Human Research

The term social media research encompasses any form of research that uses information or data derived from social media sources. Research in this environment can be classified into two types: using social media as a research tool (such as the use of surveys on social media platforms) and research on the activity and content of social media itself.

Is social media research, human research?

Social media research refers to research undertaken on social or professional networking platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and LinkedIn where the aim of the site is for the public is to build communities or networks and/or comment on local/national/world events rather than to be a platform for digital data like ABS Statistics.

Previously, the ethical understanding was that information on the internet was public and hence researchers did not require ethics approval to conduct research with public information. The [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2023](#) (National Statement) states that 'although data or information may be publicly available, this does not mean that the individuals with whom this data or information is associated have necessarily granted permission for its use in research'. Consideration should be given to the principles contained in the National Statement for the use of secondary data as outlined at 3.1.50 through 3.1.53.

What are some important ethical considerations with social media research?

A key difference between social media research and traditional research is that platforms provide a single source for both the recruitment of participants and data collection, which can be further differentiated between research about social media trends and using social media to investigate a topic.

The accessibility of this data requires additional consideration of ethical principles and how they apply to a given research project. Whether using social media to recruit participants and/or for data collection, the principles of merit and integrity, justice, beneficence, and respect as outlined in the National Statement apply equally to social media research as to any other human research. Consideration should be given to the level of risk, issues around confidentiality and privacy, the recruitment of participants, informed consent and data ownership, custodianship and management. Researchers undertaking social media research should also refer to the [La Trobe University Research Human Ethics Procedure](#), along with the principle of 'Accountability' under the [Australia Code for Responsible Conduct of Research](#) that outline the need to consider and comply with relevant legislation, policies and guidelines in undertaking research.

Level of Risk

Researchers are responsible for assessing the risk level of their proposed research activity and to determine whether the anticipated benefits of the research outweigh the risks associated with it. For social media research, additional considerations may include:

- The sensitivity of the research data being collected and the ability of the researcher to link data that may be potentially harmful.
- The potential participants and whether the targeted participants are a vulnerable group as outlined in the National Statement and how this will be determined in an online environment.
- The potential for psychological risk and how this will be determined.
- Protocols for participants to withdraw their participation from the research. This is particularly important in an online environment where the 'data' may still be accessible even if the participant decides to withdraw participation.
- Potential for legal risk, including compliance with the terms and conditions of the social media platforms as well as the rules of community groups or pages within the platforms. Both the terms and conditions of the platform and rules within specific groups can change without notice, which may also impact the potential legal risk.

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Confidentiality and Privacy

There is a greater risk in social media research that participants will be identifiable potentially across multiple platforms, even if their name or user account details are removed from research outputs. This is due to the searchable nature of online content and the ability to link data across different platforms.

Additional considerations for researchers may include:

- What data is being extracted from social media platforms and whether any identifiable information such as direct quotes, handles, and account names will be used in the outputs.
- Whether participants can be identified across different platforms and potentially linked data across platforms.
- Whether the researchers use a dedicated research account on social media platforms to protect their own privacy.
- Whether there is a potential risk of breaching participant privacy with data that was collected unintentionally.

Recruitment

Social media can make recruitment of participants easier than traditional methods of recruitment but also brings more potential risks. Recruitment protocols may consider the following:

- How the researchers will determine the age of the participants as most social media platforms allow minors to open accounts without publicly disclosing their age as well as the capability of minors to create accounts and lie about their age as there is no verification of user accounts in terms of age.
- How will researchers inform potential participants of their research? Respectful conduct in social media research entails being transparent about the research being undertaken rather than 'lurking'.
- Will participants feel any pressure or coercion to participate, real or perceived, if recruitment posts are circulated within a specific online community group or in personal messages of individuals within an online community?
- How will participants withdraw their participation, and hence their data, from the research if they no longer wish to participate?

Additional confounding factors to the research such as monitoring software and whether they present further legal or socioeconomic risks. With employment monitoring, for example, will employers be able to track inappropriate use of social media and does this pose a potential employment risk to participants.

Voluntary and informed consent

Voluntary and informed consent flows from the principle of respect for human beings and includes respect for their capacity to make their own decisions, such as to participate, or not to participate, in research. Participants must be appropriately informed of the research before consenting to participate. In an online environment, consent can be difficult to obtain or impractical so consideration needs to be given to how consent will be obtained, if it will be obtained or if a waiver of consent is warranted. Chapter 2.3 of the National Statement provides details about when a waiver of consent can be considered. Some considerations include:

- whether signing and returning a consent form is the most appropriate method of obtaining consent;
- the protocol for how the researcher will determine capacity to give consent and verify participant age or inclusion criteria.
- How consent will be recorded; and
- how participants can withdraw their consent.

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Data Management

The [La Trobe Research Data Management Procedure](#) outlines the responsibilities of researchers with respect to research data management in accordance with [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research \(2018\)](#). Researchers have a responsibility to retain clear, accurate and complete records of all research including research data and primary materials to a sufficient standard that allows for verification and/or reproduction of research by others. For social media research, considerations include:

- Where will data be stored if data collection is within a platform, particularly as most platforms have the capability of controlling and/or deleting content?
- How will informed consent be recorded and retained for the retention period?
- What data will be collected to ensure that clear, accurate and complete records are retained that will enable research to be verified or replicated?
- How will data be shared amongst the research team?

Key things to remember when completing the application:

- ⇒ Social media data is not necessarily 'public' data and consideration should be given to the intention of the user.
- ⇒ Social media presents a single source for both recruitment and data collection but can also mean that unintentional data is collected.
- ⇒ Research methods for data collection on social media are varied as is the type of data collected.
- ⇒ The principles outlined in the National Statement of merit and integrity, beneficence, justice, and respect apply equally to social media research as to any other human research.
- ⇒ Data collected within platforms, including consent, should not be stored exclusively on the platform and consideration should be given to a data management plan as per La Trobe policy.
- ⇒ Researchers should consider relevant or applicable privacy principles and laws, as well consult any terms or conditions of use for social media platforms.

Acknowledgements:

Toso, F (2022) What is social media in research, RMIT University, Melbourne.

Further information

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@latrobe.edu.au. An Ethics and Biosafety Advisor will assist you and may connect you to one of the HREC or LEAP members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.