

Research data and social media – some general principles

Social media is increasingly used in research. It can be perceived as risk free, but social media isn't simply a vast collection of interesting data: it is a set of places, communities and gathering points for people. Most of the people participating aren't there with any intention of providing data for research.

This doesn't mean that social media shouldn't be used in research. There are many ways in which social media can be a useful tool for research, or an interesting topic for research. Social media is an important part of modern life.

Although it exists in the virtual space most of the laws, rules, ethical principles and commonsense that apply in everyday life apply to social media too.

Because social media is groupings of people then research using it is likely to be research that requires ethical approval.

The ethics of social media research is a maturing area. Here we offer some general principles to help guide those considering the use of social media for their research.

1. Consider whether social media is the best place to collect your data

Consider whether social media is the right place to carry out your research. Can you identify real benefits from using social media that you won't have access to elsewhere? Social media data shouldn't be used simply because it's convenient.

Social media users don't reflect the entire population so research using social media data only could introduce unwanted bias into your sample. On social media people can present themselves as someone other than who they are – and some interactions on social media may be bots or algorithms and not people at all.

2. The internet isn't a public place

There is a tendency to consider that anything on social media is public. Research shows that users often don't consider themselves to be in a public place when they participate in social media, in particular when the group is discussing a minority interest topic where the participants' anticipation may be that the group is only used by a small number of likeminded people.

Look for signs that the group may not consider itself to be having a public discussion. A group that requires registration, a password, or has moderator access it perhaps more likely to consider itself to be operating in a private space.

Consider the topic of discussion. Greater care should be taken where discussion centres around sensitive topics such as mental health, drug taking, sexual abuse.

3. Balancing the risks

Be aware of the risks to participants that your research might pose, especially if you are not openly declaring your interest, or are not seeking informed consent, or where people are expressing opinions or experiences that they may not expect to be shared or made public. Wherever possible you should anonymise your findings.

Consider the impact of your research on young people or vulnerable adults. Even where a social media platform bans participation by those under 13 it is not likely to have robust controls in place to absolutely prevent any children from taking part.

You should also have regard to any potential that your activity may have to damage the reputation of the University. If people feel that University of Essex researchers cannot be trusted that will have a real impact on the ability of Essex researchers to recruit participants, and that will not just affect the users of social media.

No activity is risk free, but as with any research the important thing is that you identify and acknowledge the risks, and do as much as you can to mitigate those risks. Where the risks are higher than the benefits it may not be ethical to proceed.

4. Consent

If you are asking for consent from participants then consider the extent to which it's possible for them to exercise their right to have data withdrawn. If you're using social media to interview individuals that might be easy, but if their data is a set of points within a very large data set it may not be possible. This should be made clear in your participant information.

5. Always read the small print

Social media platforms all have terms and conditions of use and may have policies on what material may be posted. Terms and conditions may require you to sign up with your own name, to use or not use data in particular ways. You should respect these terms as providers may be able to take legal action against you if they believe you have breached them.

You should also be aware that terms can change with little or no notice, so ensure you check for changes that could affect your research. Providers may consider that you are agreeing to their terms simply by virtue of the fact that you are interacting with their platform.

6. Watch out for deleted posts

From time to time individuals may remove or delete material they have posted. Even where the material had been posted in a way that made it clear it was intended to be public, removal of that material should be taken as a withdrawal of consent for that to be used. Check that material isn't withdrawn during the course of your research.

7. Protect yourself

Engaging in activity on social media is not risk free. Consider what would happen if you were identified as a researcher, or if people object to comments you make.

If you are participating in discussions, think about whether the account you are using can be traced back to other social media accounts that identify who you are, where you work or live, and details about your family. Consider adjusting the privacy settings of your own social media accounts to protect your personal information.

Make sure you have a plan for dealing with the impact of receiving high levels of abuse and threats. Identify in advance where you will seek help and support from, if you need it.

8. Ethical approval

Ethical approval is likely to be required for most research that uses social media data, since social media is groupings of people and use of personal data is a matter for ethical approval. Approval may

be granted by ethics officers, at sub-committees, or at Ethics Committee, depending on the level of risk involved, and how novel the use of social media is.

9. Help us learn

Use of social media in research is growing and changing as social media grows and changes. Ethical opinion will also change as we come across more case studies. Help us develop a robust and realistic approach by discussing novel uses with us. Contact the REO research governance team through reo-governance@essex.ac.uk or discuss with your faculty ethics officer.

9. Further reading

[ESRC Social Media Research: a guide to ethics](#)

[University of Sheffield. Research Ethics Policy note no 14: research involving social media data](#)

[UKRIO. Good practice in research: Internet-mediated research](#)

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