Research Ethics Board (REB) Guidelines for Social Media

These guidelines are intended to:

1. Provide researchers with standardized information and guidance related to the use of social media platforms for research.
2. Promote and facilitate best ethical practices when using social media in research

Doing research-related activities that involve social media has become more common among researchers. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, X, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, etc., provide researchers with new methods and opportunities to recruit participants, collect and analyze data, and disseminate results. When using social media platforms for research, ethical considerations are crucial for informed consent, privacy, data security, and transparency, and researchers need to be aware of the platform's terms and user settings.

Researchers should also be aware that there are limitations to using social media. You must consider that not all participants may be comfortable using social media or even have access to these platforms. While prioritizing participant privacy, informed consent, and potential risks, you must also consider data integrity and the possibility of reaching a representative sample of individuals. With social media data, it may be difficult to verify data, and users may lie about their age, location, job, or other characteristics.

Some practical considerations:

Sample representation: Recognize that social media users may not be representative of the broader population and consider the potential for selection bias.

False identities: Individuals may falsify their eligibility in order to receive compensation for participating in a study. Researchers may also suspect that some responses are generated by a malicious element such as a bot.

Access and Digital Divide: Acknowledge that not everyone has access to social media or the internet and consider the implications for your research sample. People are choosing to limit or stop using social media. This may limit researchers in reaching potential participants for recruitment and data collection with the potential for biases in studies relying on these platforms.

Social Media Platform Policies: Be aware of the policies, terms and conditions, and guidelines of the social media platforms you intend to use for research.

Social Media Data – There are challenges with ensuring the quality, validity and reliability of social media data. It can be noisy, incomplete, biased, or manipulated and may not reflect the actual views or experiences of the users. Data verification is limited.

Alternative Research Methods: Consider whether social media is the most appropriate method for your research question and whether alternative methods for recruitment or data collection might be more suitable. There are methodological challenges for social media research so researchers should adopt appropriate strategies. The REB recommends that researchers consider alternative methods to ensure that individuals are not excluded from a study and have other ways to access the study results.

Social Media Competencies

Researchers who plan to do research activities using social media platforms should demonstrate to the REB that they are aware of and understand the considerations for using social media.

Researchers need to be aware of the following:

- Privacy issues
- Relevant user settings
- Privacy settings
- Terms of service on the social media platform and their effects on the privacy, confidentiality, and rights of potential research participants and participants

Recruitment of Participants Using Social Media

Recruiting participants for research using social media platforms must be done following the core principles of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2 – 2022).

- Respect for Persons
- Concern for Welfare
- Justice

Just as other non-social media recruitment documents such as email scripts, printed posters, in-person scripts etc., require REB review and approval, so do social media recruitment tools.

This includes but is not limited to:

- Posts on X (tweets)
- Instagram posters/pictures
- Facebook advertisements, posts, videos, and messages

Social media posts for recruitment must be described clearly and accurately so that potential research participants are not misled. Researchers should describe in their REB application all the details regarding the use of social media as a recruitment tool and how the methods will be used.

When using X or similar applications, the following should be provided:

- Information about the X account from which the recruitment notices will originate.
- The 280-character post; and

- Information about the landing page individuals will be taken to if they click on the URL link to the post.

Where Facebook or a similar application is used, the following should be provided:

- The recruitment notices/advertisement.
- Information about the pages /groups where the notice will be posted;
- Information about whether the pages/groups are open or closed; and
- Information about the account from which the ad is posted.

Researchers should be particularly sensitive to the needs and vulnerabilities of certain groups, such as children or individuals with specific conditions.

Respecting the Privacy and Confidentiality of Research Participants

Ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of research participants typically involves allowing potential research participants to access information about a study and participate in it without disclosing such details to individuals outside of the research team.

To this end, social media platforms should be examined to understand any suggested limits in participant privacy and confidentiality. Privacy and confidentiality must be protected unless participants consent to waive such protections. It is also important to understand that as the risk(s) of participation in research increase, privacy and confidentiality become critical requirements.

Facebook

Facebook has four types of privacy settings for events:

- **Private**: Visible only to the people who are invited, who can see the event description, photos, posts, and videos. You can choose to allow guests to invite their friends. If this is set to "yes", this would be considered snowball sampling and would need to be clearly mentioned and detailed in the recruitment section of the REB application form.
- **Public**: Visible to anyone on or off Facebook
- **Friends**: Visible only to your friends on Facebook.
- **Groups**: The group privacy setting determines who can see the event
  - Public Group
  - Private Group

The REB advises researchers not to communicate directly with participants through Facebook, and Facebook users should not be able to post on the event's feed. Rather, potential participants should be encouraged to contact the research team directly outside of the particular social media platform.

To protect the privacy of individuals, you can invite Facebook users to an event, however, the "Show guest list" option would need to be turned off so that other guests cannot see who else was invited.

Protecting the Privacy and Confidentiality of Researchers

The use of personal social media accounts for conducting online recruitment poses unique challenges.

Personal social media accounts tend to include private details about individuals (such as addresses, places of work, religious and political affiliations/ideologies, etc.) as well as details about third parties (such as friends, family members, colleagues, acquaintances, etc.).

Using a personal social media account for research purposes is problematic because such accounts typically not only share personal information about the researcher but also share details about the researcher's friends, family, and colleagues, who may not want such details revealed to potential research participants. Thus, out of respect for those individuals who may indirectly feature in the researcher's social media account, personal social media accounts are discouraged from being used in research-related activities.

The REB encourages researchers to develop a research-specific Facebook profile, group or other social media profiles.

Avoid using your personal Facebook account; create a separate account for your research.

If you are a part of a research group or lab, create a separate Facebook account for your research group.

Recommended Settings for Facebook Events

If you use Facebook Events to invite people to participate in your research study, we suggest you use the following settings for your event to ensure the integrity and security of the Facebook Event

1. Set Event Options -> Show guest list = Off
2. Set Event Options -> Only admins can post in event = On
3. Set Event Options -> Posts must be approved by a host or co-host = On

Collecting and Analyzing Social Media Data

One of the major misconceptions many researchers have when conducting social media research is that just because social media data (e.g., Instagram posts, Facebook pictures, tweets, etc.) exists on a seemingly "public" social media platform, that researchers are free to use such data as they wish, for their research purposes. This is not necessarily correct.

There are two things that researchers should do when conducting and analyzing social media data:

i)   Respect the privacy restrictions, user settings, and legal requirements of the particular social media platform they intend to use; and

ii) Take seriously potential risks associated with collecting and analyzing social media data.

Respecting Privacy Restrictions, User Settings, and Legal Requirements

Researchers collecting and analyzing social media data must familiarize themselves with and abide by the privacy restrictions, user settings, and legal requirements of the social media platforms they intend to use. These policies vary across different social media platforms and evolve over time.

According to Facebook's Terms and Services, individuals own the rights to the information that they have produced and posted on Facebook. This includes pictures, comments, notes, videos, etc. In cases where researchers wish to collect and analyze social media data that does not belong to them, they must obtain consent from the owner before using the data for research-related purposes. Individuals who share data on Facebook have an intellectual property right over their data, and respecting the rights of research participants must involve receiving their consent before using their data for research. Even if data is publicly available, researchers still need to obtain consent from the owner to use it for research.

You should review and understand the terms and services of the social media platform you plan to use for research.

Potential Risks Related to Research Involving Social Media Data

Individuals conducting research-related activities involving social media data must be aware of the potential risks associated with such activities. Even in cases where social media is widely shared, there may be significant risks to research participants. For example, it is not uncommon for individuals to upload and share information on social media platforms that

i)   does not belong to them,

ii)   that they have no right to share, and

iii)   may cause significant harm.

For instance, individuals may create and operate a fake social media account that in no way represents the actual user or create and operate a social media account with the intent of bullying, harassing, or exploiting others. Unfortunately, such social media accounts exist, and researchers need to be aware of the risky nature of social media data.

Participants (and bots) falsifying their identity

Social media recruitment and online participation options increase the likelihood of falsification. Individuals may falsify their eligibility in order to receive compensation for participating in a study. Some responses to online surveys may be generated by a malicious element such as a bot. This can compromise data integrity. Additional measures should be taken to create secure online surveys.

- Bots can be difficult to identify, but several anomalies may help, such as unknown email address domains, repeated or patterned survey responses, and unusual time to complete the survey.
- Avoid sharing survey links on publicly accessible platforms (such as social media)
- Limit the number of responses a single participant can submit as well as the time to complete the survey.

- If survey access is shared via email, configure the survey link to only allow invited participants to access and ensure the link is set to expire after a specified amount of time

Some ethical mitigation steps

1. In social media recruitment ads
   a. If applicable, do not advertise how compensation will be offered or include that compensation will be in the form of **Canadian** gift cards.
   b. Indicate the use of video will be required to confirm the identity of participants
2. In consent forms
   a. Where video will be used to confirm participants' identity, indicate that only those who are able to use the specified technology will be able to participate. Be clear in the consent form how a participant's identity will be verified, e.g., by asking to see (without recording) their driver's license or other identification or just through informal facial recognition.
   b. Where the current residence of the participant is an inclusion criterion, state that the gift card /remuneration will be mailed to participants and ask for their mailing address. (This may be stored separately from participant responses to ensure confidentiality if required)
   c. Use Canadian gift cards or vouchers and specify the source of compensation in the consent form.
   d. If a participant has to be disqualified, the researcher may still need to provide compensation depending on what was stated in the REB application and the consent information.

Researchers should ensure that research team members understand that participants may falsify their identities and know what to do if they think this is the case.

Constraints placed on participants to qualify for a research study must be disclosed in advance, usually through recruitment and consenting steps.