

Research Using Data Collection on Social Media and Online Communities¹

Using Social Media for Research Purposes

The use of social media has become increasingly common both for recruiting research participants and for collecting research data. Some examples of social media include X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, but there are many others. These online communities can be a useful resource for researchers, and generally research activities conducted online should be considered like any other human participant research.

The following guidance addresses the basics of what a researcher should know when collecting data from online communities (see general recruitment guidelines for considerations related to recruitment through social media). Additional resources and reference materials are also included.

Does Research Examining Online Activity Require Institutional Review Board (IRB) Review?

Maybe!

In general, public posts in public spaces (see definition below) such as unrestricted online communities, public forums², etc. where the researcher is not interacting with the person who posted, and where the disclosure of the data would not place the person at risk, would not be considered human subject research.

Investigators utilizing private online forums or communities to conduct their research will need IRB approval.

What Qualifies as a Public Space?

A “public space” is one in which most participants have a reasonable expectation that anyone can read, cite, reproduce, link, collect, and share their contributions, statements and media. The term “public space” refers to areas of a website where there is an expectation, determined by privacy settings and/or terms of use, that data will be publicly accessible. Research using such public posts from online communities would be analogous to public observation in off-line communities (i.e., in the public square) and, therefore, would not require IRB review.

¹ This document is based on [Using Social Media for Research Purposes](#) (University of Maine), with our appreciation.

² Public posts would be those that do not require a log-in or an account to access the information and/or where individual has not set visibility to private.

Examples of public online communities include: publicly available profile pages of social media sites and services, public blogs, comment areas on news websites and other forums; “publicly available” typically means available at no charge to anybody with a computer, that do not require to create an account or to sign in, in order to view this information.

How Can Researchers Ensure They are Working in a Public Space?

If accessing an online community or its information requires registering, being a member of the group, or “friending” a specific person or group, then that information is private and would require IRB review. Generally, “private spaces” have stricter requirements on who may join and access information, and therefore, users may have a valid expectation of privacy in those spaces.

Examples of private online communities: private forums, communities, chatrooms, instant messaging systems, and forums/groups where an administrator or moderator controls admission and where content cannot be accessed or viewed by the general public; most instances where registration and/or payment is required to join or participate.

When in doubt as to whether IRB review is needed, researchers should contact [Chapman's IRB](#) so that it can make a formal determination if its review and oversight is required based upon the specific facts and circumstances of the research plan.

What Are Researcher Responsibilities When Using Social Media for Research?

Ethics, compliance and confidentiality!

Ethics

Researchers should determine whether IRB approval is needed for their research and obtain that approval as necessary. When in doubt, the researcher should [contact the IRB](#) for assistance.

Compliance

Researchers must review the terms of use and privacy policies for the online sites they want to use. Researchers should understand and be familiar with the online community's terms of service and end user license agreements for the site. Compliance with site requirements is mandatory, and these terms and conditions may restrict what researchers can do.

Social networking sites cannot be used to administer surveys and gathering data for any Chapman IRB-approved human subjects research study. Instead, researchers should collect data using websites such as Qualtrics, that were designed with the expressed purpose of gathering electronic research data and have adequate protections for human subjects' confidentiality and anonymity.

With IRB approval, researchers may advertise their study on social media by posting a link to surveys hosted on such dedicated platforms, or pay any site following the site's rules (e.g., flyer function on Facebook) to distribute on social media with IRB approval. See more about recruitment using social media in the general recruitment guidelines document.

Confidentiality

The IRB suggests removing as much identifying information as possible, as soon as possible, when collecting online data to protect the privacy of the individuals. The IRB recommends that individuals not be individually identified and that the information about individuals not be combined in such a manner that the identity of the group or its individuals could be readily ascertained.

Collecting data over the internet can increase potential risks to confidentiality because of third party sites, the risk of third party interception when transmitting data across a network and the impossibility of ensuring that data is completely destroyed once the work is complete. Participants should be informed of these potential risks in the informed consent document.³

It is common practice in social networking sites to use pseudonyms (sometimes referred to as avatars or personas). Personas should be treated like human subjects; it is not appropriate to identify the real person behind an online persona.

Researchers must take special care to treat online identities (personas or avatars) and their corresponding character names just like real ones. People care about the reputation of their personas and these aliases can usually be traced back to real world names.⁴

Can A Researcher Use Social Media to Recruit Participants?

Yes, with IRB approval. Participant recruitment must always be consistent with Chapman's guidelines, [Recruitment of Research Participants](#).

³ [Use of Social Networking Sites or Mobile Devices for Human Participant Research](#), Cornell University

⁴ [Internet and Social Media Research](#), University of Arizona

Additional Resources:

- Chapman University's Guidance Entitled [Recruitment of Research Participants](#)
- [College of Charleston: Guidance on Research Using Social Networking Sites \(PDF\)](#)
- [Secretary's Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections \(SACHRP\): Considerations \(SACHRP\) Considerations and Recommendations Concerning Internet Research and Human Subjects Research Regulations, with Revisions \(PDF\)](#)
- [University of Massachusetts Amherst: Social Media Research Guidance](#)
- [Guidance for Recruitment of Human Subjects for Research \(uky.edu\)](#)
- [Considerations for Participant Protections When Conducting Internet Research \(Columbia University\)](#)
- [Ethics Regulation in Social Computing Research: Examining the Role of Institutional Review Boards](#), Vitak, Proferes & Ashktorab, PRIM&R Journal, Volume 12, Issue 5, August 2017