

## ETHICAL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

As with all research and analysis projects, there are ethical and quality assurance (QA) considerations when carrying out social media research (SMR). However, with SMR, many of these ethical and QA issues are intertwined, and cannot be attributed as either one or the other. Ethical and QA considerations are often seen as barriers to projects, but utilised properly they should just be another way of shaping the project to maximise its usefulness to society.

The table below classifies some of the more frequently encountered ethical and QA issues in SMR into three areas and links them to the five GSR ethical principles: sound application of methods, avoiding personal/social harm, informed consent, enabling participation, and non-disclosure of identity. The definitions of the three areas and of each of the ethical/QA issues within them are featured on the next page. There are also examples of how each of the issues could manifest itself in a project.

		Sound Application of Methods	Avoiding Personal/Social Harm	Informed Consent	Enabling Participation	Non-Disclosure of Identity
<b>Online Behaviour</b>	(1) Unintentional capture of irrelevant posts	●				●
	(2) Capture of data from bots/hijacked accounts	●				
	(3) Performative behaviour on social media – ‘peacocking’	●				
	(4) Observer effect – knowing data is used for research	●		●		
	(5) Vulnerable users – child, elderly, people new to social media		●	●	●	
<b>Social Media Research Design</b>	(6) The representativeness of social media	●				
	(7) Presenting reliability considerations	●				
	(8) Accessing social media	●	●	●	●	
	(9) Maintaining anonymity during segmentation	●	●	●		●
	(10) Collecting data through ‘active’ SMR, not just passive observation	●	●	●	●	
<b>Data Storage, Access and Presentation</b>	(11) Deleting stored material/Users deleting their own material	●	●	●		
	(12) Users’ expectations on data use versus what is allowable in Ts&Cs		●	●		
	(13) Linking social media datasets with other datasets		●	●		●
	(14) Use of public figures’/organisations’ data		●	●		●
	(15) Changes in data: Ts & Cs, structures, and standards	●	●	●		
	(16) Visual media which identifies sensitive/personal information		●	●		●
	(17) Sharing data for effective QA/peer review	●				
	(18) Displaying/quoting material/data		●	●		●
	(19) Gaining proportionate insight through analysis of user data		●	●		●

## DEFINITIONS

### Areas:

1. **Online behaviour:** The behaviour on social media of all relevant stakeholders to the research, including participants, the wider population of interest, and the researcher themselves. This behaviour could impact the research design, process and final results in a variety of ways.
2. **Social media research design:** As with any other research or analysis, we must make sure that social media research is robust and complies with correct ethical standards. When designing and planning the research, the considerations in this section should be used to shape the project.
3. **Data storage, access and presentation:** How researchers using social media utilise the data once it has been obtained, including approaches to storing and accessing it, and communicating it to a wider population.

### Issues:

1. **Unintentional capture of irrelevant posts:** Picking up social media material which does not aid the research that is being carried out, intentionally or otherwise.
2. **Capture of data from bots/hijacked accounts:** Picking up material from automated accounts or from accounts where the individual owner is not posting.
3. **Performative behaviour on social media – ‘peacocking’:** When a user composes their social media post or adjusts their online behaviour to better engage those observing the post or to alter others’ perceptions of them.
4. **Observer effect – knowing data is used for research:** When a user alters their social media post or behaviour, knowing that the data will be used for research.
5. **Vulnerable users – children, elderly, vulnerable adults and people new to social media:** Social characteristics which lead to certain demographic user groups being more exposed to online negative behaviour than other social media users.
6. **The representativeness of social media:** Understanding whether the observed social media sample and its characteristics represent the wider population, be that online or offline.
7. **Presenting reliability considerations:** Understanding and effectively communicating the opportunities/limitations of social media research to customers of the research.
8. **Accessing social media:** Accounting for research subjects’ access/lack of access to social media.
9. **Maintaining anonymity during segmentation:** If individual segments of participants are very small or unique, reporting (even anonymous) results could disclose data on participants.
10. **Conducting "active" SMR to collect data, not just passive observation:** If the researcher engaged directly with participants to gather research, ethical issues may emerge.
11. **Deleting stored material/Users deleting their own material:** Deciding when stored data can be deleted and whether posts which are subsequently deleted by the user can still be utilised.
12. **Users’ expectations on data use versus what is allowable in Terms & Conditions:** Ascertaining the level to which a user understands what their data could be used for.
13. **Linking social media datasets with other datasets:** The level to which social media users would be happy for data to be linked up to allow more complex analysis.
14. **Use of public figures’/organisations’ data:** Deciding whether widely accessed (public figures’/organisations’) posts should be treated in the same way as members of the public’ for research purposes.
15. **Changes in data: Ts & Cs, structures, and standards:** Being aware of developments in social media platforms’ Ts & Cs and data structures and standards which affect the way data can be used.

16. **Visual media which identifies sensitive/personal information:** Handling visual media to stop sensitive/personal information in the media data being improperly accessed.
17. **Sharing data for effective QA/peer review:** Balancing ethical considerations of sharing data with the requirement to have robust reviews of analysis/research.
18. **Displaying/quoting material/data:** Having rationale for the display/quoting of social media material.
19. **Gaining proportionate insight through analysis of user data:** Gaining an unintended insight into an subjects' life because of the quantity of personal data available on social media data.