

Guidelines for Social Media Research

These Guidelines have been prepared by the Human Research Ethics Committee to help researchers prepare an Ethics application for research projects that involve the collection of data that is already available on the internet and where participant interaction is not required. This includes collecting data from social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, internet discussion forums and groups etc. These guidelines should be used in conjunction with Section 3 of the [National Statement \(updated 2018\)](#).

Public and Private Websites

Researchers must be aware of the differences between private and public websites. A private website is only available to internal personnel and/or registered users. Data from private websites cannot be collected without the explicit permission of the data providers and/or owners. Public websites, on the other hand, are accessible to anyone without the requirement of registering a user account. However, this may not mean that all such accessible data can be collected without permission.

Things to consider:

- **Terms & Conditions and Privacy policies**
 - Have you read the website's terms and conditions as well as the privacy policies?
 - Are you allowed to collect the data without the explicit approval of the website users and/or owners?
 - Did the website owners advise their users that data may be shared with or collected by third parties?
- **Low Risk v. Above Low Risk**
 - Is the research considered low or above low risk?
 - Are there any vulnerable participant groups?
- **Consent**
 - Did the website users and/or owners provide permission for the data to be used in research projects?
- **Privacy & Confidentiality**
 - Is the data identifiable?
 - Have website users and/or owners been informed about the data collection?
 - Is the data publicly visible or is access to the data restricted?
 - Are website users aware that their data is publicly visible?
 - Is the data private and confidential?
 - How can you ensure that you do not inadvertently expose any identities?
- **Data Collection**
 - Will you collect data from individuals or in aggregate?
 - What data collection tools and methods will be used?
 - Can the data be collected anonymously?
- **Data Access & Storage**
 - Where will the collected data be stored and who will have access to it?
 - Will you share the dataset with other researchers?