

DRAFT BREB GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter can be used for two distinct research purposes: as a data source and as a recruitment tool. The following guidelines have been developed for researchers planning to do studies using social networking sites.

USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS A DATA SOURCE

RESEARCH EXEMPT FROM REB REVIEW

If you are using **publicly available** information from a social networking site (i.e., information that you do not need a social networking account or password to access) and no other non-public source to obtain your data, this research is exempt from review under Article 2.2 of the Tri Council Policy Statement, which states that “exemption from REB review is based on the information being accessible in the public domain, and that the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy.” However, such information may be subject to copyright and/or intellectual property rights protections or dissemination restrictions imposed by the owners of the site. It is up to individual researchers to familiarize themselves with these requirements.

RESEARCH REQUIRING REVIEW

All other research using social networking sites as a data source requires REB review, even if the data you wish to draw on in your study is publicly available to **members** of the social networking site (i.e. accessible using your login and password). As the application section of Article 2.2 of the TCPS states “There are publicly accessible digital sites where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy”. In such cases, researchers shall submit their proposal for REB review”. Although this information is publicly accessible to members, many users of such sites do have an expectation of privacy regarding the content they post – an expectation encouraged by the informality of this medium and evolving privacy settings, where users are not always fully in control of the information revealed on their profiles if they adhere to default privacy settings.

The information provided below pertains to factors you should consider if you are submitting an application for REB review.

Information on Informed Consent

Unless your research fits the exemption (i.e. you are using exclusively publicly available information that is accessible without a login and password), informed consent is generally required from those you wish to study and you will need to develop a plan of how to obtain approval. The way informed consent is obtained will depend on the type of data you are collecting and how widely accessible the information is. For example, if you are studying posts to a particular profile or group you may be required to get permission from the owner of the profile or group and/or all of the individuals who have posted on it.

However, exceptions to the requirement for informed consent are possible. According to Article 10.3 of the TCPS, “in research involving observation in natural environments or virtual settings where people have a reasonable or limited expectation of privacy, the researcher shall explain the need for an exception to the general requirement for consent. The REB may approve research without requiring that the researcher obtain consent from individuals being observed on the basis of the justification provided by the researcher and appropriate privacy protection”.

In considering whether a waiver of informed consent is appropriate, several factors will be taken into consideration aside from the importance of the waiver to the study design:

I. Expectations about privacy

The number of users of a profile influences how 'public' the space is perceived to be. Posts on the profile of someone with 10 friends can logically be seen as more 'private' than posts on the profile of someone with 500 friends. Posts on Facebook groups or fan pages may be seen as more public still and some of these are clearly intended to be public forums.

II. Type of data being collected

Some research questions may entail a focus on the *content* of communication on social networking sites, while other research focuses on the *form* of communication. For research focusing on the content of communication, researchers should consider whether the content of a subject's communication might be harmful to them if it were known beyond the confines of the venue being studied. By contrast, if the form of communication is under study – for instance the linguistic form and context of particular words – this shift of focus away from content may reduce the risk to the participant. In either case, if the content is relatively trivial, doesn't address sensitive topics, etc., then clearly the risk to the participant is low.

III. Identifiability of data sources

The identifiability of specific data sources you are focusing on in your study also determine the sorts of consents that may or may not be required. For example, a study examining the posted relationship status on male vs. female Facebook profiles involves data that is less intrinsically identifiable than a study using the posts on a Facebook group for cancer survivors as a primary data source.

IV. Level of Intrusiveness

The degree of intrusiveness of the research being conducted should also be considered. Passive analysis of postings is less intrusive than active involvement in communications.

V. Web-site User agreement

If the web-site in question has a user agreement that imposes restrictions on the collection and use of data for research, **it is the responsibility of the researcher to adhere to the user agreement and to advise the REB concerning any relevant restrictions.**

The type of consent you seek will therefore depend on the nature of your study and the social network's terms and conditions.

USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL

If you are planning on using social networking sites as a recruitment tool, your research needs to be reviewed by an REB. There are a variety of different ways that researchers can go about recruiting research participants via social networking sites, each with different ethical implications. Some preliminary guidelines regarding the ethical acceptability of recruiting research participants through social networking sites are provided below.

1. Placing a study advertisement on via ‘create an ad’ or classified functions

This form of recruitment can be seen as equivalent to placing a study advertisement in a newspaper, online classifieds section, Craigslist, etc. and presents no ethical concerns.

2. Creating a page for your study to advertise your study and attract potential participants

Some researchers are increasingly finding social networking sites like Facebook to be a useful medium for disseminating information about their studies and attracting potential participants. If you are planning to create a study page to recruit participants, it must be clearly identified as such (preferably in the title of the page as well as the description of it). It is important to be aware that creating such study pages may potentially raise privacy issues in so far as study participants (or potential participants) who post to the page will be publicly associated with the study. Thus, information should be clearly stated in the description section of the study page/profile: i.e., that if people choose to post to the page, or “like” the page, or “follow” it (e.g. on Twitter), they will be publicly identified with the study.

If you will be analyzing posts to the page (i.e. you are using social networking sites as both a recruitment tool and data source) you must have processes in place to ensure that people posting on the page are aware that posts will be used as a data source and have provided their informed consent for you to do so.

3. Posting a study advertisement on an existing Facebook/MySpace group page

Facebook and MySpace have thousands of special interest groups. For example, one study of Facebook found that it contained 757 health-related groups with 290 962 individual users/members (Farmer et al. 2009). These groups are therefore an attractive source of participant recruitment, especially for researchers conducting studies related to the focus of the special interest group. Posting study advertisements on group pages¹ is a relatively common practice (as is posting advertisements of all descriptions), although there is some debate about the ethics of this. Many have argued that posting a study advertisement on a group is equivalent to posting it on the bulletin board of an organization (e.g. community centre, hospital notice board, etc.) and should follow the usual practices required for such notices. However, others have argued that the analogy is inaccurate as researchers may actually know quite a bit about group members if their personal profile is accessible to ‘everyone’ on the social networking site (Walton 2009). Researchers are able to make a case to the REB for posting a study recruitment advertisement on an existing social group page, but should consider the sensitivity of the topic around which it has formed, the size of the group (if known), how open the group is (whether posts are available only to group members or whether they are publicly available, etc.).

¹ This generally requires that the poster have an account on the social networking site. This might either be a personal account or one created specifically for the study.

4. Approaching individuals to take part in studies based on their publicly available information (e.g. membership in groups, information listed in their personal profile)

This is the most controversial of the recruitment strategies discussed and the most hotly debated. As Fisher et al. (2010: 603) note, “where much personal data are readily available on social sites, what methods are reasonable for screening participants? Is it possible that use of publicly available personal data in sourcing and recruiting participants is inappropriate?” The information publicly available on social networking sites means that researchers can use these sites to identify, screen and essentially ‘hand pick’ participants for their studies. However, users may not realize just how public the information they post on social networking sites actually is. How ethical is it, therefore, to approach people to participate in research studies on the basis of this information?

At present, it is clear that a direct approach is relatively common; however, no real consensus has been reached about the ethical acceptability of this. It is difficult to come up with straightforward guidelines here because different networking sites have different norms about both privacy and disclosure. Therefore, in some contexts users are likely to be aware of how public their information is, but in other contexts they may be less cognizant of this. A direct approach has not been ruled out by the REB in principle. A variety of factors will need to be considered, including the nature of the social networking site where recruitment will occur, how prospective participants were selected (e.g. via membership in a group or information on their personal profile), how prospective participants will be approached, etc.

Is permission from the social networking site required?

The emerging consensus here appears to be ‘no’, for two primary reasons. First, social networking sites like Facebook make it clear that they do not ‘own’ the content of individual pages. Second, commentators have pointed out that requiring consent from the social network site as an organization is akin to contacting individual telephone companies for permission to perform a random digit dial survey (Moreno et al. 2008). As stated above, however, if the social networking site has a user agreement, researchers must adhere to its requirements.

Further Reading

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