



University of
Southern
Queensland

Frequently Asked Questions: **Social Media Research and Ethics Approval**

Social media research presents interesting ethical challenges in terms of internet and data privacy. Here are some frequently asked questions associated with social media research:

1. **When is social media used in research?**

Social media can be used either as a source of data or as a means of recruiting participants.

2. **Do I need ethics approval for social media research at UniSQ?**

Yes. All research using social media as a source of data must be submitted to the UniSQ Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for review and approval. When using social media to recruit participants, this needs to be detailed in your response to questions about your recruitment processes.

3. **Why is ethics approval required if the social media data is freely available online?**

Different social media platforms have different policies about who these posts belong to, as well as policies about whether and how content from those sites can be used for research purposes. This means that while the posts might appear to be public, there might be specific conditions about treating those posts as public *data*. Furthermore, some social media subgroups (such as Facebook groups or subreddits) may have their own policies about research and researchers. Most importantly, we need to consider the rights of the users, their privacy and anonymity, and their right to informed consent. The ethics review process helps us to identify and work through these elements.

4. **What are the ethical considerations and risks involved in social media research?**

Ethical considerations and risks may include:

- **Privacy** - Even if social media users use identities (e.g. handles, usernames) that aren't their real names, readers may infer their identities based on context, relationships, or events described. Furthermore, many social media users, particularly those in closed groups, may not consider their posts to be part of public conversations. This can:
 - Violate others' privacy
 - Cause reputational harm
 - Lead to unintended emotional consequences
 - Result in doxxing
 - Breach reasonable expectation of privacy
 - Breach site terms and conditions about privacy and fair use
 - Once published, quoted posts are public and permanent, removing the poster's right to delete their social media posts
- **Power Dynamics and Social Risk** – Social risk needs to be considered when advertising research or conducting within your own social and professional circles, including on social media:
 - There may be unequal power relationships
 - People may feel coerced or unable to say no
 - You may be able to recognise their contributions
- **Informed consent** – Participants in any research have the right to informed consent about how their words and data are used by researchers:
 - Posting on social media platform does not mean that the user has necessarily consented to their posts being used in research.

5. **How can I ensure that my use of social media in research is ethical?**

Reflect carefully on how you intend to use social media in your research, considering the various risks and mitigation strategies.

- **Using social media for recruitment**
 - State your recruitment strategies and specific social media sites in your application.
 - Seek permissions from relevant gatekeepers where applicable (e.g. moderators or group administrators).
 - Consider social risk and mitigation strategies.
- **Using social media as a data source**
 - Make sure you understand the platform's terms and conditions regarding privacy, consent, reuse of data, and use of data by researchers. Include a copy of this in your ethics application.
 - Reflect carefully on users' reasonable expectation of privacy when posting in closed groups or sites that require login to access posts. Use of hashtags may indicate a willingness to participate in public conversations, but consent and privacy concerns must still be considered.
 - Consider how methods that use aggregate data might reduce risk of (re)identifiability.
 - If you wish to quote posts directly, consider creating a PIS and consent form to approach the author directly for consent, including options regarding identifiability.
 - Use accounts associated with public figures or organisations.

6. Does social media constitute a Participant Group or an Existing Dataset?

This will depend on your research design. If you are using social media for recruitment purposes, the details of this recruitment method should be included in the recruitment section of the relevant Participant Group. If you are using social media as a data collection method (e.g. getting people to post in response to prompts on Reddit), this will be considered a participant group. If you are using existing social media posts as a data source, this will constitute an Existing Dataset Group. If unsure, please consult with the Ethics Office.

7. How does the 'social media ban' affect research with young people?

In December 2025, the Australian Government implemented a restriction on access to social media by young people under the age of 16. Accordingly, it is not recommended that age-restricted social media platforms are used in recruitment strategies for research involving under 16s and there are further risks to u16 participants and the research team to consider for research that uses social media data. For more information about which platforms are and are not age-restricted, please refer to the [eSafety Commissioner's website](#).

8. Are there any resources I can use to assist with thinking about social media research and ethics?

The best resource is the Association of Internet Researcher's [Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0](#) (2019).

9. What happens if I don't get ethics approval before starting my research?

Ethics approval cannot be granted retrospectively. Without ethics approval, your research may be ineligible for publication or presentation, and you may be in breach of UniSQ's research integrity policies.

10. What if my course or supervisor says I don't need ethics approval?

All researchers, including students, must comply with UniSQ's ethics requirements which are guided by the [National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2025\)](#). If in doubt, contact the Ethics Office for clarification before proceeding.

11. Are there any exceptions to this requirement?

Exceptions are rare and assessed on a case-by-case basis. You must still submit an application to the HREC to determine whether your project qualifies for exemption. Research must not commence until an official exemption has been granted by the UniSQ HREC.

12. Where can I get help with my ethics application?

You can contact the [UniSQ Ethics Office](#) directly or drop into one of our weekly [HRE drop-in sessions](#). Additional resources and templates are available on the [Human Research Ethics webpage](#).