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Research using Social Media; Users' Views



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Executive summary

There is a lot of debate amongst academics and researchers about the opportunities and challenges of online and social media research. Social media websites offer rich, naturally-occurring data and researchers are using such websites to support their work, such as scraping data from online discussions, mining data from archives, recruiting participants, and interviewing online. Like all research, online and social media research is wrought with ethical dilemmas.

Often what are missing from the conversation are the views of users. How do they curate their digital lives? What do they understand about how their information is used and shared on the internet? What do users think about their information being used by researchers and in online and social media research?

This report presents the findings of exploratory qualitative research conducted by NatCen Social Research to provide detailed insight into how social media users feel about their posts being used in research and their understanding of this type of research. These views reveal lessons that researchers and practitioners could apply in their research design, recruitment, collecting or generating of data, and reporting of results. We offer recommendations about how to approach ethical issues in social media research; drawing on the views of the very people we seek to research- the users. The research used two qualitative data collection methods:

- Four focus groups
- Two paired and two depth interviews

We draw out the key messages next, followed by a summary of recommendations for practitioners and researchers working in the field of online and social media research.

Key Messages

Viewing and sharing information

- Participants used a **range of social media** and other websites, and reported creating, sharing and observing content.
- **Reasons for use** of social media websites included social, leisure and professional.
- **Frequency of use** ranged from those who did not use social media to those utilising sites several times a day, and the four influencing factors dictating amount spent on social media included:
 - **Familiarity with the platform**- The more familiar with a platform, the more one used it.
 - **Peer activity**- Relevance of a platform to an individual's needs or interests, including whether friends and family frequented a particular platform.
 - **Device mobility**- Ease of access, like with smartphones or tablets, resulted in greater use of a site.
 - **Information required**- The more burdensome the sign up or registration for a new platform, the less likely a participant was to use it regularly.

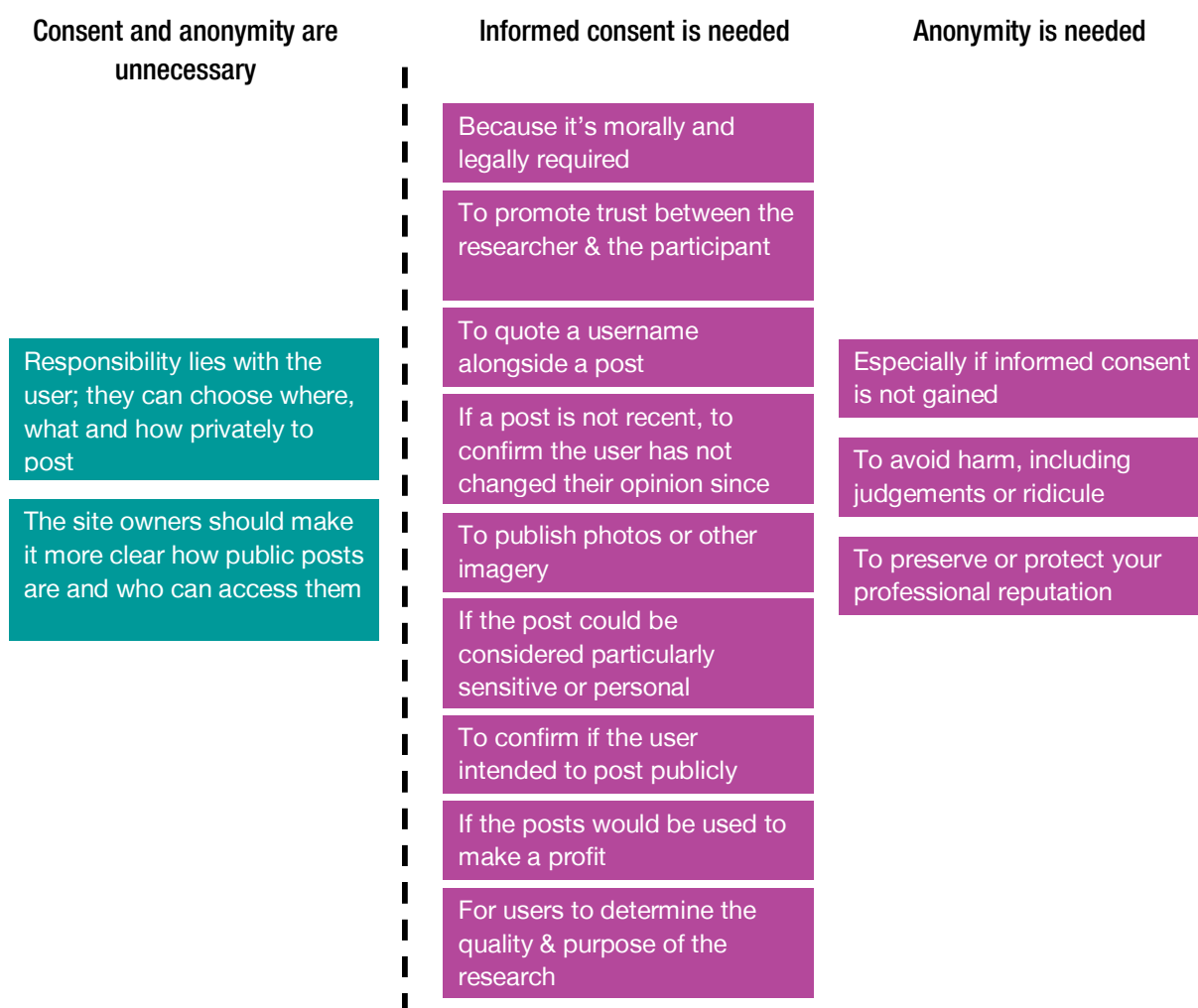
- The extent to which participants were aware of and understood social media varied, and depended on their **sources of information**. Sources included terms and conditions of websites, friends and family, and online sources such as specialist forums and search engines.
- Three factors acted as barriers to participants reporting being informed about social media:
 - **Difficulty staying up to date** with dense and frequently evolving terms and conditions
 - Social media regulated by a country's laws that may differ from the users' country of residence. While **social media was 'geographically boundless'** there are influential national or local considerations.
 - **Lack of confidence about the regulation** of the use of content shared on social media
- A number of **strategies for managing online risks** inherent in social media were discussed and included restricting content shared and adjusting privacy settings.

Views of research using social media

- Participant's views about research using social media fell into three categories: **scepticism, acceptance and ambiguity**. Views varied greatly depending on the research context, and on a participant's knowledge and awareness of social media sites.
- Participant's expressed concern about the quality of social media research and we group these concerns under the research principles of **validity and representativeness**.
- Concerns related to validity and representativeness included
 - **People behave differently online and offline** and so online research could not reflect the 'real world'
 - **Exaggerated views** were a result of the anonymity the internet afforded and therefore research findings using views from online sources would lead to inaccurate conclusions about something or someone.
 - **Impulsive comments** posted online may result in researchers using a view that does not accurately reflect someone's 'normal' viewpoint but instead only something they held for a moment in time
 - **Inaccurate profiles** taken without further context would lead to inaccurate information and findings.

Ethics

- The ethical principles of **consent, anonymity and avoiding undue harm** were applied to the issues participants raised about conducting research online.
- **Reasons for and against** observing informed consent and anonymity are summarised in the following figure:



- Four factors of the **research context** influenced participants views and expectations of informed consent and anonymity
 - **Mode and content of the post**, including written content, photos and the sensitivity of the content
 - Social media **website being used**
 - The **expectations the user had** when posting, and;
 - The **nature of the research**, including the organisation the researcher was affiliated with and the research purpose

Suggestions for improving research practices

Drawing on the suggestions participants discussed, we summarise suggestions for improving research practices in the table below. We do not include sampling or analysing of data as this was not mentioned by any participant. These suggestions are not rules or even appropriate in all situations, but rather ideas to consider in the design of an ethically rigorous online and social media research study.

Table 1 Suggestions for improving research practices: from sampling to reporting		
Research Stage	Aim	Activity
Recruitment	To appear legitimate, accommodate different user types and be transparent in your purpose and aims in order to ethically recruit participants to online and social media research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the preferred mode of communication once a participant is recruited • Approach possible participants over the platform being using in the research (rather than email) • Be transparent in recruitment materials. Consider including your affiliation, web link to verify your idea (like biography on organisational website), aims • Explicitly state the security and privacy terms in recruitment materials of the platform the research will involve • Explain where you got a participants contact details (i.e. Searched Facebook for public profiles) • Include link to company webpage; examples of previous work; transparent about research aims
Collecting or generating data	To improve representativeness of findings, and to understand the privacy risks of platform used in a study in order to uphold protection and trust of participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising differing views on what is legally permitted to be collected and what some may consider their intellectual property • Take time to consider the openness of a platform you are using and whether steps can be taken to gain trust of users (i.e. if a closed chatroom consider introducing yourself and state your research purposes and ask participants to opt into your research) • Acknowledge the different ways users engage online-create, share and observe- and how your data may include a specific view or type of user.
Reporting results	To protect the identity and reputation of participants, maintain their trust in the value of the research and contribute to the progression of the field by being open and honest in reporting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing the traceability of a tweet or post and taking responsible steps to inform the user and to protect their identity, if desired. Options include paraphrasing instead of verbatim or using quote but no handle/user name. • Where reasonable, seek informed consent to use verbatim quotes, images or video such as through direct tweets, private messaging or email. • Acknowledging limitations of the representativeness and validity of your findings • Explicitly stating the platform used (i.e. From Facebook rather than generally saying social media)

1 Introduction

Ethics should be at the heart of all social research. However, there is limited guidance on how to interpret and apply well established ethical principles when using newly developing methods such as online and social media research. This study attempts to address this gap by exploring views on the ethics of using social media platforms as a source of data. A combination of focus groups and in-depth interviews were carried out with 34 participants to understand how people use social media; what they think about social media being used as a source of research data; and the perceived benefits and harms of using social media in research. This research will be of particular interest to researchers using social media data and ethics committees asked to approve such research.

1.1 Background to the research

Social media refers to websites and applications “*that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking*” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). With an estimated 82 per cent of UK adults aged 16 and over using the internet and 53 per cent of them using social media websites (Ofcom, 2013) an increasing amount of information about individuals is becoming both publically and readily available on the internet. This presents new opportunities for researchers. We can identify and recruit participants for studies and it can be used as a data collection method.

Researchers are increasingly able to understand more about social media users based on the demographic information they post to social media websites and then recruit them for research purposes. More people are accessing social media and revealing information such as their age, gender and occupation, making social media websites an effective recruitment tool. Social platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn have been found to be an effective method to recruit individuals (Lohse, 2013; Brooks and Churchill, 2010) and offer a way to construct “snowball” samples for exploratory work (Bhutta, 2012).

Online data collection takes two main forms: conducting ‘traditional’ methods online and using ‘naturally occurring’ online data. Firstly, traditional methods such as interviews and group discussions can be conducted online. For example, a researcher can host a group discussion in a chat room about experiences of being excluded from school in the UK. This is proving to be a popular approach for researchers, in part, because it removes the need for a physical venue and transportation costs, and enables geographically spread individuals to participate in the same discussion. Gathering people from different regions, and even different countries, to participate in online discussions makes it possible to explore international and cross-cultural perspectives more easily (Woodfield et al, 2013). Using online platforms can also provide anonymity for participants. This is an appealing feature for some researchers as anonymity may increase participation as well as encourage a more open and honest discussion.

Secondly, social media is also a rich source of ‘naturally occurring’ data. Researchers can use textual, photographic and video data created and shared on social media to answer research questions. Over recent years researchers have been able to collate vast quantities of information from social network websites known as data mining. Data mining involves “*examining large sets of pre-existing data to produce new information*” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Mining publically shared information on social media websites can be used by companies and organisations to help better understand trends and attitudes as well as to help predict future behaviours. The use of data mining of tweets to better understand complex social issues has been growing in popularity

amongst researchers. This is of particular value in crisis situations such as the 2011 riots in England. Researchers conducted an analysis of a database of more than 2.5 million riot-related tweets to explore the role of social media in the riots (The Guardian et al, 2011). The corpus of Twitter data complemented depth interviews used to provide a rich understanding of who was involved and what their motivations were.

The potential opportunities and advantages social media platforms offer for research are clear. However, they also raise a number of methodological and ethical challenges. There are potential limitations to inferring meanings from the data that researchers wish to use and ensuring that information is not taken out of context. With the option of preserving anonymity online presents the new challenge for researchers to obtain sufficient demographic information to know their sample.

The use of social media websites in research also generates discussion around the ethical dilemmas of such methods. Researchers have an obligation to act ethically online yet existing guidance lacks the flexibility necessary for the quickly evolving online landscape. Guidelines are based on traditional methods and, while supportive, they become difficult to apply as social media websites change, develop and grow.

We carried out a literature review of research using social media websites and existing ethical guidance to better understand these ethical issues. The review revealed ethical as well as practical and methodological challenges of conducting research using social media websites, and helped to refine our research aims.

1.2 Literature and background

There is a wide degree of consensus about what ethical research involves, at least at the level of abstract principles (Webster, Lewis and Brown 2013). These principles relate to: obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and minimising risk of harm to participants and researchers. The principles are briefly introduced below.

1.2.1 Informed consent

Gaining informed consent is a vital part of the early stages of research and must be negotiated and secured throughout the process. Ethical guidelines state that participants should understand the purpose of the research, what taking part will involve and how the data will be used. Participants require this information to make an informed decision about participation (GSR, 2006; MRS, 2012, ESRC, 2012). Questions have been raised about whether consent is required for all types of online research, or whether there are exceptions.

There appear to be two schools of thought on informed consent. One position is that data posted in open spaces without password or membership restrictions would usually be considered to be in the public domain. This means it can be used for research purposes without the need for informed consent from individual (see for example Thelwall, 2010; ESOMAR; 2009). The need to gain informed consent becomes relevant when data is obtained from closed websites requiring login details. This is challenged by the MRS discussion paper on online data collection and privacy (2012). The subject remains contentious amongst social media researchers and views change depending on the topic, website, and sample population one is working with.

Regardless of the stance an individual takes on informed consent, obtaining it from individuals can in practice be very difficult. Social media research does not typically offer the opportunity to verbally reiterate what participants are consenting to; researchers can be less confident that all the key pieces of information have been relayed and

understood. Further, researchers cannot verify a participant's identity to assess their capacity to consent. Researchers cannot be certain the participant is of age, for example (Bull et al, 2010). It may be necessary to conduct procedures offline, like with parents or guardians of underage children (British Psychological Society, 2013).

1.2.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Conducting online and social media research presents three key challenges related to confidentiality and anonymity: possibility of breaking confidentiality when reporting findings; participants may not want to be anonymous; and safe data collection and storage may depend on platform security.

Existing ethical guidelines express that researchers should ensure no one knows who has said what in a report (i.e. anonymity) and that participant information should be securely stored and shared (i.e. confidentiality) (GSR, 2006; MRS, 2012; ESRC, 2012). However, in online research the risks of not upholding confidentiality are greater as a researcher has less control than offline research to protect data (British Psychological Society, 2013). There is a permanent record of any information that is posted (Roberts, 2012), and direct quotations from participants can be traced back to the original source (BPS, 2007) through search engines like Google. In this case, anonymity cannot be protected. This is related to the issue of copyright. For example, in the attempt of anonymising participant data researchers may exclude the participants name, however some users may feel that they should be given credit for their information being used (Roberts, 2012; Lui, 2010; Barrett & Lenton, 2010).

Communicating with potential participants over email can undermine attempts to uphold the confidentiality of participant information. Email or communication through private messaging like on Twitter or Facebook is potentially less secure than other ways of transferring information (British Psychological Society, 2013). Face to face or telephone contact avoids leaving a digital paper trail of sensitive and identifiable information.

Where researchers are using specific platforms to conduct interviews and focus groups, the security of the website needs to be considered. IP addresses can be traced which means participants can be identified (Benfield and Szlemko, 2006). Researchers can take steps to minimize information security risks, such as review a platform's security and privacy terms, and the ability of website user's of a specific site to copy and remove information to a different website.

1.2.3 Harm and risk to participants and researchers

Researchers have an obligation to avoid causing physical, emotional or psychological harm to participants. Research should also be conducted in a way to minimise undue harm to the research team.

Appropriate support for participants needs to be in place following a research interaction, just as it would in face to face settings. Discussions of sensitive or emotional topics have the potential to put participants at emotional or psychological harm. In interactions on social media websites, participants can more easily exit the conversation without participating in a debrief session typical of traditional methods.

The research team may also face risks. Researchers may receive verbal abuse and be exposed to distressing information. Although this can occur in more traditional methods, social media researchers may be more vulnerable to these risks as participants may be more likely to be open and honest online as their anonymity can be preserved.

1.3 Research aims

The existing literature provides a helpful starting point for thinking about how ethical principles should be applied to online and social media research. However, literature on ethics is often written from the perspective of the researcher and the views of research participants and general public are all too often missing from the debate.

Our research aimed to understand what social media users think constitutes ‘good’ ethical practice in online and social media research. In conducting this study the intention was to bring the views of potential research participants to the fore and to stimulate and encourage discussion about how we safeguard participants’ interests in the day-to-day conduct of studies.

The specific aims of the research were to:

1. Provide qualitative insight into the different ways users of social media view the use of their information in social media research
2. Describe the types of uses and the reasons for using social media websites.
3. Identify what users see as the perceived benefits and harms of using social media for research
4. Explore the ethical considerations from a user’s perspectives for researchers using social media research

1.4 Methodology, recruitment and sample

A summary of the methods used is included below. More information and discussion is included in Appendix A.

1.4.1 Methods

The research used two qualitative data collection methods:

- Four focus groups
- Two paired and two depth interviews

Focus groups and interviews were conducted using a topic guide covering themes such as general use of social media; views on research using social media; and key messages to researchers using social media in their research. Focus groups and interviews were digitally recorded and the data organised thematically and analysed using the *Framework* approach.

Vignettes

The topics explored were acknowledged to be difficult to explain to participants who may not be familiar with social media or the terminology used. Many of the topics covered also required participants to think hypothetically so it was decided to use vignettes to illustrate key points and stimulate discussion. (See Appendix B for vignette examples).

1.4.2 Recruitment

The intended recruitment approach was to draw the sample of participants from those who had taken part in the British Social Attitudes 29 (BSA 29) survey and who had agreed to be re-contacted. This was because we knew about participant’s use of the

internet from the survey. However, challenges securing participants for face to face data collection led us to use an external recruitment agency to supplement this sample (see Appendix A for details of the achieved sample).

1.4.3 Sample

In total, 34 people took part in the study. This was split across four focus groups, two paired and two one-on-one depth interviews (See Appendix A for the composition of focus groups and interviews).

Qualitative studies do not aspire to generate a proportionately representative sample. Instead, the aim is to ensure range and diversity of coverage across key sampling criteria. In light of this, the sample was purposively selected to ensure the views of low, medium and high users of social media were included. Information about how frequently social media was used by individuals was gathered during the recruitment process using structured questions. Low, medium and high users were defined as:

Low users: did not use social media websites, or used them once a week or less

Medium users: those who used websites from twice a week up to once a day

High users: those who used social media websites several times a day.

We also monitored the diversity of the sample in relation to a number of characteristics such as including: age, gender, ethnicity, and use of a variety of social media platforms for different purposes. Individuals who did not use the internet were excluded from the study.

1.5 Reading this report

This research offers insights into a broad range of views from users of social media about the use of social media, and using social media in research. The strength of the report is that it provides in-depth understanding of users' experiences and their views about social media and research. The methods used are of particular value when researching unexplored issues, such as views on the ethics of research using data from social media. The flexible and open nature of qualitative methods enables researchers to be responsive to participants, to tailor the structure and content of discussions as necessary and to explore unanticipated issues relevant to the research questions.

The report organises views around key ethical and research principles, in an effort to move beyond description and make the findings useful to the research community. However, as a qualitative study we cannot say how prevalent the different views expressed are.

A potential limitation of the sample is that participants were recruited from a limited number of geographic locations for practical purposes. However, it is questionable whether geographic location per se would have an explicit bearing on the findings as views on the ethics of social media research do not appear to be bound by geography. It is also important to acknowledge that while the research was conducted in an open and responsive way, the overarching purpose of the study was set by the research team. In other words, the focus on ethics and on particular research scenarios was driven by the research team rather than being raised spontaneously by participants.

There is a distinction made throughout the report between types of research using social media. As noted previously, social media can both be used to conduct research and as a source of data. This is not well understood by the public and so the type of research is

not explored in any detail. However, where relevant to views on ethical issues, the type of research participants are referring to is noted.

The remainder of the report is dedicated to sharing the findings of the study.

- **Chapter 2** introduces how participant's view and share information online.
- **Chapter 3** reveals the general views about using social media for research and a discussion on quality of social media research.
- **Chapter 4** discusses the ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and avoiding harm as it relates to user views of social media research. The chapter also unpacks the contextual factors influenced by research which impact on what user's think about research using social media.
- The report **concludes** with a summary of key findings, discussion of the policy implications, and suggestions for improvement of practices amongst researchers using social media in their research.

2 Viewing and sharing information online

This chapter describes the online behaviour of participants. It illustrates participants' awareness and understanding of information online, including their sources of information, their understanding of the risks inherent in social media use and their strategies for managing this risk.

2.1 Online behaviours

The online behaviour discussed included what platforms people used, for what purpose, how they engaged with content online, and how often. These behaviours varied widely and in some cases depended on one another, with behaviours motivating or reinforcing others. For example, platform type depended on intended purpose of use which in turn influenced amount of time spent using the platform. This is discussed throughout the section.

2.1.1 Platforms and purpose of use

Participants used a range of social media websites and other websites, including:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- You Tube
- Yahoo! Answers
- MySpace
- Instagram

Additionally, participants reported creating, sharing and observing content on forums, news articles and other sources of information. Participants' described a diverse range of reasons for using social media included social, leisure and business purposes. Specific sites, such as Facebook, were used for more than one purpose, though this did not always correspond with the intended purpose of the site. This reveals the many ways individuals adapted social media platforms for their unique needs and interests. These purposes are discussed next.

Social

Social media platforms were viewed as a useful means of communicating with friends and family. It was seen as an inexpensive and effective tool for people who are geographically dispersed to keep in touch with one another. Participants enjoyed speaking and writing to friends and family. Social media allowed people not in direct contact to feel close to friends and family. This could be done by reading 'posts' or photos shared by family and friends. Other participants were less enthusiastic about this aspect of social media as they felt it was making people 'lazy'. For example, people no longer picked up a phone to stay connected, or planned face to face outings with those living nearby. Instead, social media was felt to promote a culture of passive interaction defined by 'likes', 'retweets' and detached 'shares'. As a counter to this, another view was that social media helped facilitate rather than replace this in-person contact.

Leisure

Use of social media was also seen as a leisure activity. These included ‘following’ celebrities on Twitter, listening to music, watching films and videos and playing virtual games. Hobbies and specialist interests were also pursued on social media, through the ability to connect with people with similar interests, to share problems, and to get advice instantly was seen as a benefit of being part of a virtual community. On other occasions, social media was used to simply to ‘pass the time’.

Professional

All social networks discussed (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc) were used for professional purposes to some extent. Users talked about the professional benefits of social media websites, such as networking with other professionals, looking up business associates in advance of meetings, and learning how to advance their career. LinkedIn was often cited in this context, with one participant explaining how he used it to link up with other people in the ‘professional realm’.

More specifically, social media was used by participants to promote and publicise services or raise awareness of issues of concern to them professionally. A participant working in the charitable sector would use blog posts to stay up to date on bullying and homophobia in schools and to start discussions with specific people. The platform MySpace was also mentioned in a professional context by a participant that explained using the website to maintain the fan-base for their band.

2.1.2 Types of engagement with online content

Participants engaged with online content in a number of ways closely related to the type of platform they used and the purpose they used it for. These types of engagement saw users fall into three distinct but overlapping roles: creators, sharers and observers. These are summarised below.

‘Creators’ post original content on platforms such as discussion forums and Twitter. This includes text, videos and images. Participants, for example, talked about using YouTube to share examples of work in applying theatrical makeup, and Facebook and Twitter to promote their band. Within the ‘creator’ group there were individuals who shared their own content, but did not spend considerable time engaging with content posted by other social media users.

‘Sharers’ re-tweet, share or forward content posted by others. This was done by ‘commenting’ on a blog post, photo or video uploaded by another user. For example, a user working in the health and nutrition field described sharing with Twitter followers information on what they should and should not eat, and warning against drinking and driving.

‘Observers’ read and view content on social media and other sites but tend not to pass on this information, like sharers, or contribute their perspectives through new content, like creators. For example, they may read blogs and tweets and view photos and videos but did not interact with the content or other users.

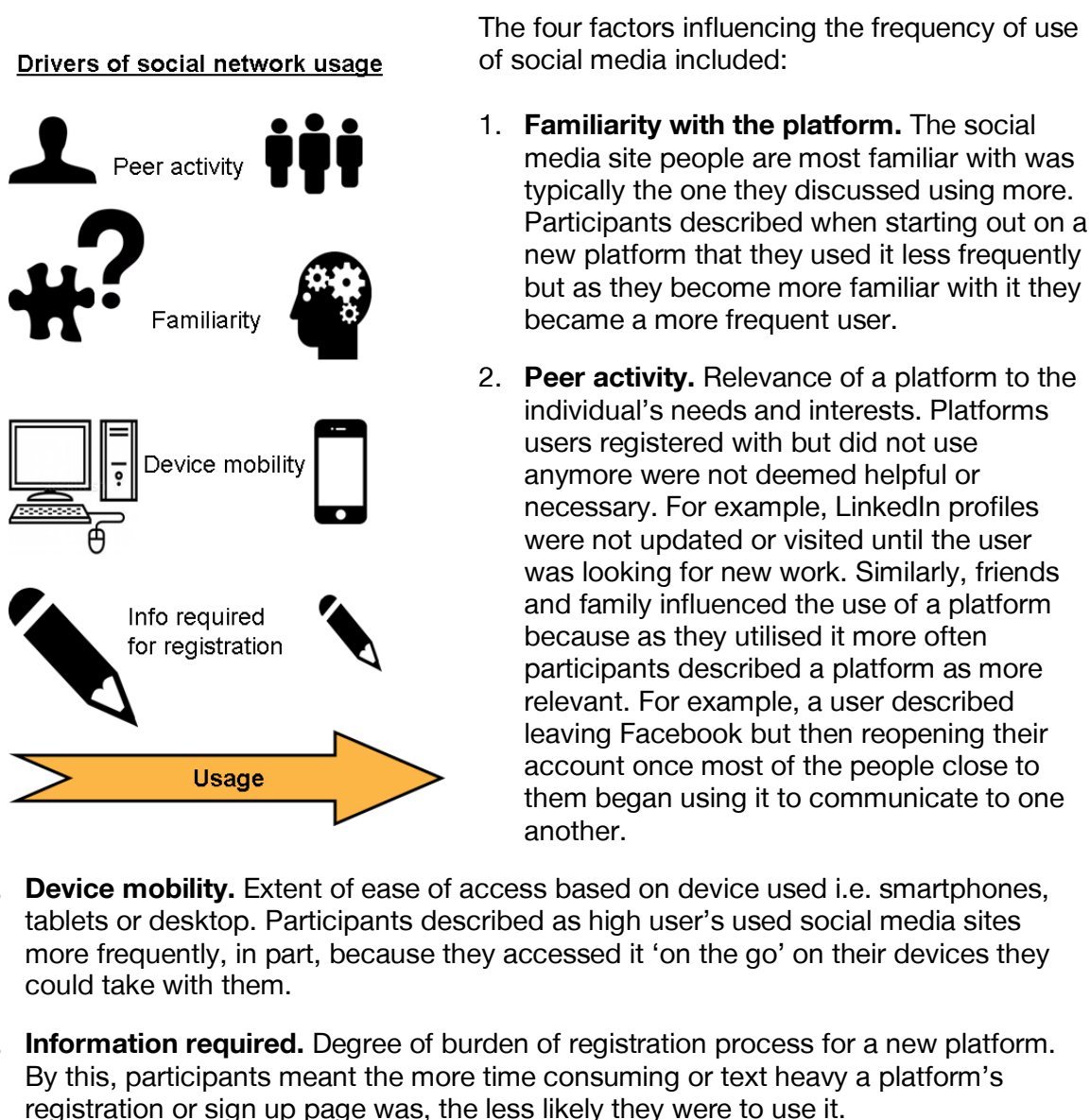
The three categories of social media user are not mutually exclusive. Participants described different contexts and scenarios where an individual can take on all of these roles when using different platforms. Individuals may also move between groups over time. For example, as someone becomes more experienced and familiar with a platform they may start to post original content and share content posted by others. One participant described using Facebook increasingly to share content after spending time

getting used to the platform design. The reverse is also true. Individuals may moderate their behaviour over time due to concerns about how the information they share may be used by others.

2.1.4 Frequency of use

The extent to which participants used social media varied significantly. At one end of the spectrum were people who did not use social media websites, or used them once a week. At the other end, participants described being on social media websites several times a day. The difference in amount of time spent on social media websites was due to four factors, summarised in Figure 1 and described in more detail below.

Figure 1 Frequency of use, by four influencing factors.



2.2 Awareness and understanding of information online

Having now discussed the behaviour of participants online, we will now explore what participants understood about their information online, and why they do what they do. Social media platforms are widely accessible yet the consequences of that openness are not clearly understood. Participants described their sources of information for better understanding the sites they use and how their information is used online. These included terms and conditions of sites, friends and family, and online sources such as search engines and specialist forums. The inherent risks associated with the openness and accessibility of social media was also explored; issues with maintaining personal privacy and with protecting one's reputation and identity. Participant's then shared the approaches they employed to mitigate these risks.

2.2.1 Sources of information

The extent to which participants were aware of and understood social media varied, and depended on their sources of information. These included terms and conditions of websites, friends and family, and online sources such as specialist forums and search engines or other media. Three factors acted as barriers to participants feeling well informed about social media: difficulty staying up to date with terms and conditions; social media is not geographically bound; and lack of confidence about the regulation of the use of content shared on social media.

Terms and conditions were described as a source of information. However, participant's reported difficulty in staying up to date with 'constantly changing' terms and conditions of websites such as Twitter and Facebook. The frequency of websites updating, and the density of content, of terms and conditions was viewed as a barrier to participant's understanding how the site they use works. In fact, people admitted to not reading the terms but instead accepting them in order to progress with using the platform. Views also included user's remaining unsure if their privacy settings were still sufficient for their needs, or whether others can access their posts on Facebook, for example, after terms and conditions had changed.

Participants also saw the value of friends and family as sources of information on social media developments. Specific advice from family members and more general word of mouth was what participants sometimes depended on to stay informed of developments of social media platforms.

Online sources of information were also discussed as sources used by participants. These included search engines, like Google or Bing, and specialist chatrooms or forums. For example, a participant searched about privacy terms of the social networking app WhatsApp on her mother's behalf.

Social media platforms were described to be 'boundless' meaning they cross country lines and can be regulated by a country's laws that may differ from the users country of residence. There was a view that this made it particularly difficult for users to know the rules and regulations of any particular website. This was closely linked to the third barrier to understanding: the regulation of information shared on websites or lack thereof. There was uncertainty about how the law differs across countries where social media is accessed. Participants explored the possibility of differences across borders, such as what social media sites can store on users from different countries, and how far reaching 'cookies' are. One participant summed this up succinctly, "*Websites are judged by different countries and different laws in different countries, so it's not a universal law. It's*

based upon the law of that country and how it's perceived [by its users]'. (Male, aged 61+, low user)

2.2.2 Awareness of issues inherent in social media

The range of sources of information participants described helped them to understand and be aware of issues inherent in social media. The characteristics of social media described by participants included it being nearly entirely public and the difficulty of permanently deleting information. These two characteristics related to three key concerns participants had about using social media, including their ability to maintain their privacy online; protecting their reputation and identity of themselves, friends and family; and ensuring safety online.

We discuss each of the concerns below as they relate to the characteristics of social media discussed by participants.

Information is widely accessible

The fact that information is widely accessible and public is most commonly described as a benefit of social media, yet this was also raised as a concern by participants. Users explained how easy it was to find profiles of people and for companies to use information online for commercial purposes like marketing. This made participants feel a loss of control when information, including their personal details, can be so readily available and out to a use for which it was not intended. Participants discussed how other users, such as Facebook friends, can pass on their information without their knowledge or even having an account. For example, someone on Facebook can tag you in a photo posted without your knowledge and that can be passed to the friends of the person who posted, and so on.

The public nature of social media platforms and their content was also problematic for participants because it raises the issue of data ownership. Participants' understanding of who owns content on social media sites and who can use it varied. The distinction between legal and moral ownership was raised by participants. One view was that the platform owns all data on the site and so can do with your content as it wants, using it in advertising campaigns or selling it to third parties. Another view was that people have a moral obligation to be responsible with content online and that the author of the content has a moral ownership of it. This difference in views of data ownership, and the lack of understanding about which interpretation is legally correct, caused concern amongst participants as they worried what this means for the information they have put on social media sites.

Difficult to delete

The second concern expressed by participants was the difficulty permanently deleting content online. Awareness and understanding of cookies varied and resulted in confusion about the type and quantity of content websites keep of people, through the use of cookies.

The view that content is easily copied and shared by others online, greatly extending the content's shelf-life and reach, prompted the worry about the ability to delete content. This is because you cannot know the reach of your content or be able to trace all the possible places it appears. For example, one participant used a pseudonym for a Facebook account because of his profession in education to avoid students and colleagues having access to his personal life. When he accidentally uploaded an inappropriate profile photo he immediately *'scrubbed the whole thing, just actually wiped*

out the Facebook account.' As he put it, 'I couldn't think of any other way of dealing with that profile picture because as far as I was concerned, it was gonna always be there somewhere... but I felt confident it was resolved.' (Male, aged 61+, high user)

Other than immediate concerns of the difficulty to delete content, participants shared stories they heard about others in which career prospects were damaged by something online from their past. More generally, the view was held that young people in particular *'get carried away with themselves when they are writing [on social media platforms]'*. In this case young people were perceived to *'pour their heart out'* and then *'once it is on there, to try and get rid of it, it's too late or it's too hard.'* (Male, aged 61+, high user)

2.2.3 Strategies for managing online risks

Participants used a number of strategies to mitigate the potential risks associated with sharing information on social media websites. These included restricting the type of content shared online and adjusting privacy settings. The strategies described were from personal experience as well as second-hand accounts of others they know. Where a strategy was not relevant to both, we distinguish whether it was a first or second-hand example.

Restricting content shared

All participants discussed the way they managed the type and content of information they shared online, though not to the same degree. Restricting the type and content of information shared online was one strategy discussed to manage the risks of avoiding undue intrusion, reputational concerns and safety. Participants shared examples where they chose not to post textual information such as their phone number, email, address, location or real names on social media websites. For example, one participant limited sharing of content through Facebook to the private messaging functions in his effort to prevent commercial interest in his profile. This was less of an issue for other participants who would share such things as their location on Twitter. In these cases, users believed *'checking in'* on Twitter or Facebook kept them connected to their friends who could track where they are, and had become habit, *'something you just did'*.

Limiting the type of information shared also included information that might *'shed you in a bad light'*, or are deemed reputationally damaging. Participants talked about sharing *'silly'* news and using *'daft'* or *'vulgar'* language in their posts or in their friends posts. Some worried about the possibility of these causing humiliation, or judgement from *'nosey'* people and so described occasions when they went back to delete this, or reconsidered publishing such content. Parents described how they monitor their children for safety purposes and to protect them from possible reputational damages.

'My daughter uses [Facebook locations] all the time, she's obsessed with it and she's telling everybody where she is all the time, and I say, 'You shouldn't be doing that.'' (Male, aged 26-49, low user)

Participant's perspectives also varied in how they shared content deemed to be exceptionally sensitive, such as photos depicting people. The concerning view was that anyone could look at these and easily identify people and places. Strategies around this concern included not posting any photos to social media platforms to sharing only group photos rather than self-portraits or *'selfies'*. The sensitivity of picture data was also discussed by a user who experienced fraud when a stranger took their picture to create a false Facebook profile. In contrast, there was also the view that it did not matter who saw the picture, with participants choosing to post all pictures these to their platforms.

Adjusting privacy settings

Customising privacy settings to restrict who can access various types of information on Facebook was also a common strategy. Some were unaware of how to adjust settings or what different settings allowed yet still mentioned this as a good approach to managing content online. Those who discussed actively adjusting their privacy settings varied in the extent to which they restricted access from friends, friends of friends, and the public. In one example, the user had ensured all Facebook content was blocked, including pictures, posts and comments on other users 'walls'. Applying basic settings, such as setting up an account so only those on their friends list can see photos and posts was described by other participants.

While participants viewed privacy settings as a useful strategy to manage their content on Facebook, there was a view that platforms change quickly and one cannot stay up to date with what their settings now mean. Also, participants were conscious that it is easy for friends to share your information or tag you in a picture. In this case, it is your friend's privacy settings that are or are not protecting you and it is easy for their contacts to get a hold of and/or share your information.

2.3 Chapter summary

User's online behaviours and awareness and understanding of social media varied widely. Platforms used and the purposes these were used for was closely related to the ways in which users engaged with social media, from creating content to simply observing content online. It is no surprise then, with this variation in types of engagement that the frequency of use varied. Awareness of issues presented by social media revealed views both positive, with accounts about the opportunities and potential for connecting across time and space, to apprehensive, with discussions of the potential for risk and criminality online. A number of strategies for managing such online risks were reported, including restricting the type and content of information shared, and adjusting privacy settings.

Chapter 3 now introduces and explores initial views of using social media in research.

3 Views of research using social media

This chapter begins by exploring user's first impressions of research using social media. It discusses the main views held, including scepticism, acceptance and ambiguity, and the factors influencing each view. The chapter concludes with a discussion about quality of social media research, looking specifically at validity and representativeness.

3.1 Awareness of research using social media

Research using social media is a relatively new phenomenon, meaning very few people in our sample had come across it. We were keen to understand what participants understood by the term and their general impression of this kind of research. This section describes the range of awareness of social media research amongst participants and explains their general impressions, ranging from acceptance to concern.

Initial discussions quickly revealed confusion about what the term 'research using social media' meant. The extent of understanding existed along a continuum. At one end, those with little understanding struggled to understand what this type of research would look like, and how it would be different to 'traditional' social research. There was also difficulty distinguishing social research from market research, which participants found it easier to relate to. At the other end of the continuum, participants had a better understanding of the term due to having some professional connection with social media and/or research or being high users of social media who had come across online research.

3.2 General views of social media research

Participants' feelings about research using social media fell into three categories: scepticism, acceptance and ambiguity. Views were closely related to a participant's knowledge and awareness of social media websites and how their information could be used for research. Views also varied greatly depending on the research context, which we managed to simulate by using vignettes. The different aspects of 'research context' and how they influenced users' acceptance of the ethics of research using social media will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.2.1 Scepticism

Scepticism about social media research was expressed and found to be related to uncertainty about the validity of data compared to traditional methods. Users also had concerns about the lack of transparency online, particularly in relation to the research agency conducting the research and the purpose of the research.

Traditional trumps social media research

The validity of data from social media research was questioned when compared to traditional research methods. Those expressing skepticism about research using social media felt unsure and confused about how researchers would use social media posts and why this would be more beneficial than traditional face to face methods. It was felt that breaking with more traditional, proven methods, such as interviews and focus groups would lead to limitations as a result of the lack of face-to-face interaction.

'There's something to be said about having that physical contact with somebody when you're looking at somebody and they're talking to you and you can gauge

some sort of rapport. Then, that's the difference between a physical connection and a virtual connection.' (Male, aged 36-49, High user)

The view that face-to-face research is superior highlights the general public's lack of understanding of the value of social media research. For users to participate in social media research they first need to understand how it differs from traditional methods and why this may be of value to research.

Lack of transparency

Participants were also concerned about the lack of transparency associated with the 'online world'. Concerns around transparency manifested themselves in two ways: illegitimacy of research agency, and transparency of the research purpose.

Firstly, this was described in relation to a research agency potentially using their information in a way they had not intended or to support a cause they did not agree with. Participants felt that there was a particular risk of this happening given that what people post online is often lacking context.

'The idea that something I say might be taken out of context to drive an agenda, especially if it had been done without my knowledge that would concern me.'
(Male, aged 26-35, Medium)

The inability of users to confirm 'who they're dealing with' made them hesitant in participating in online research and worry about the possible uses of their information if they did participate

Concern over agency legitimacy was compounded by lack of knowledge of how researchers were governed, or what rules or guidelines they were bound by when working online. These skeptical users wondered whether an 'ethical code of practice' existed and, if so what it included. For example, participants were keen to know whether there were rules about the type and amount of information researchers could access online. It was felt that even if an 'ethical code' did exist there were concerns over who had created it, and whose interests they had at heart.

'There might be an ethical code but again, who decides where that line is... what do we look into and, whether we pry and whether we don't pry?' (Male, aged 61+, High User)

Secondly, users had concerns about the research purpose and particularly worried about not being aware of this before they became involved/ took part. There were concerns that findings would be used to defend or promote something that had not been explicitly explained at the outset or that certainly was not in their mind when they posted their data. It is for this reason that some participants were happy for researchers to use a verbatim quote however felt that *'if it actually involves taking your comments and interpreting it, then it's a very different thing'* (Male, 26-35, High User). It is the interpretation element, and the possibility for distorting the context in which something was said, and thus the meaning intended, that made participant's have reservations.

Participants also discussed the audience of the research, for example for commercial or academic use. This highlights an interesting question; how can social research agencies that plan to use social media in their work prove to users that they are legitimate? This is explored further in Section 4.2.4.

3.2.2 Acceptance

An alternative view of research using social media was acceptance of the method. Participants holding this view discussed the value of its methodological approach and the benefits it may have to society. Accepting views were also expressed by those users who ‘self-regulated’ online. These participants only posted online what they were happy for others to access, and therefore accepted that researchers may take/use their information and were comfortable with this.

Firstly, it was recognised that the data collection methods used in online research could be beneficial when trying to analyse and understand broad social trends. Participants felt that using large amounts of data would mitigate the effect of spurious information or extreme views and would therefore be useful for analysis. It was felt that this could make the research accurate.

‘You can sift through and get rid of the extremities and take the core of it. So I imagine it's quite accurate; that's what I'm trying to get at’ (Male, aged 50-60, High user)

Research using social media was also seen as valuable by participants as it was felt to avoid bias inherent in having to answer questions in the presence of others, such as in a survey:

‘I think it's very good for gathering opinions about things, particularly social trends. In a way that traditional surveying doesn't necessarily grasp, because people, even if they try and answer something honestly, their answer will be influenced by the fact that they are answering something they know someone else is going to read.’ (Male, aged 26-35, Medium)

This ties in strongly with the idea that for some more personal/private subjects, people are more likely to be open and honest online. Users believed this made social media research valuable. This is explored further in section 3.3.

Secondly, participants were also accepting of being included in research using their social media information if it was for ‘social benefit’. This was particularly the case if the research was about something the participant deemed important, for example if its findings helped to improve public services or raise awareness about an important social issue, such as domestic violence.

‘It could well be of benefit to the, you know, the people who deal with these kind of things that, good information about domestic violence. And if there's no risk to the individuals [whose information is being used] then it's probably a good thing’ (Male, age 61+, High User).

Some, but not all, participants who accepted social media research saw value in more commercial purposes, such as market or for-profit. This is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Thirdly, acceptance of social media research stemmed from participants belief that users should take personal responsibility for what they post on social media websites. Due to regulating their own online behaviour, these participants did not see any issues with researchers taking data and using it for analysis. Participants extended this view to others and felt that it was the user’s fault if something was taken that they did not want published.

‘So, I'm not one of those people who just say anything because they think it's the internet. Um, because I sort of keep in mind that there are audiences outside your

intended one who may read whatever you say later on and, yes I wouldn't say anything online I wouldn't say in person' (Male, 26-35, Medium User)

It is important to recognise that although this point indicates acceptance of research using social media it also sheds light on the fact that many people severely limit what they say/post online. The consequences of this on researchers achieving valid and representative data are discussed in Section 3.3.

3.2.3 Ambivalence

The final view on social media research can be described as ambivalent, with users having no feelings towards research using social media. This was because participants felt they could do little to stop it happening. Participants worried about 'Big Brother' culture and saw the use of social media data (whether ethically or unethically) as inevitable. This fatalistic view was expressed by a user, *'It ends with all of us being monitored every time we do anything, and, you know, that's not a nice place to end up, and that is where we're going'* (Male, aged 26-35, Medium user)¹

It was accepted that having your information taken was *'just part and parcel of it, that's what happens when you put stuff on the internet'* (Female, 18-25, High user). The expression of neither concern nor acceptance was because user's felt, whatever their view, it would not be listened to.

3.3 Quality of research using social media

In discussing general views on research using social media, concerns were raised about how valuable this type of research is. There were many discussions surrounding the 'quality' of research using social media and this section looks at how this relates to validity and representativeness. Firstly we define what we mean by the terms and then explore the issues raised by participants. In some cases the issues raised will be applicable to both validity and representativeness and we state where this occurs.

The discussion around quality was not actively sought after or included in our topic guide but instead emerged naturally during the focus groups. This is important as it gives weight to the argument that researchers need to do more to convince the public of the value of research using social media; it is vital that researchers consider this as they continue to develop online research methods.

3.3.1 Criteria for quality in research

Validity is one of the key measures of research quality and generally means that a participant has understood the question in the way the researcher intended and that researchers are interpreting answers as intended by the participant. Traditional surveys and qualitative methods have years of experience and evidence of what does and does not work, such as generic rules and specific testing/question types. Conversely, research using social media is still developing such methodological thinking.

Representativeness is a second 'quality control measure' in research design. It is similar yet distinct from validity. The representativeness of a study means the research includes

¹ The data was collected between May-June 2013, around the time that Edward Snowden, former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employee in America, disclosed confidential documents to the media about global surveillance by the National Security Agency (NSA). This topical incident may have influenced participant views.

your intended study population, captures the range and diversity of views, and is clear about who you exclude from your study and why.

Anonymity is afforded online

The view was held that the anonymity of the online world encouraged open and honest opinions and discussions. This meant some users deemed information from online sources as valid. As one participant put it, *'You will get very honest opinions about things through that kind of [online] research'* (Males, aged 26-35, Medium user). Discussing or sharing information about sensitive issues was thought to be a particular example of when people may be more honest about their views online. Participants felt the internet gave them anonymity which they could use to protect themselves when talking about domestic abuse, for example. Those who used forums to discuss domestic abuse were thought to give honest views about problems affecting them. It was argued these 'vulnerable' people should be given credibility for taking the time to discuss their situation.

The anonymity of the online world was also seen as beneficial to those who do not have 'conventional or 'politically correct' views. It was felt that people with different views may be more open, without the fear of being frowned upon or ridiculed:

'There might be some use in that kind of research because what you're getting is people's true deep down prejudices, whereas in, in the public format, or down the pub or out on the street I am careful. Not me personally, but, you know, Joe Public'' (Male, aged 36-49, Medium User)

This is an aspect of online research that overlaps between both the principles of validity and representativeness. While the opportunity to be honest about 'non-conventional' views relates to validity of data, the possibility of capturing imbalanced views relates to representativeness, discussed in the next section.

It was felt that researchers may only have access to one-sided information online. It was discussed that with certain subjects, such as the Paralympics, it was unacceptable to have a 'negative' view. The resulting concern was that research using social media would only yield politically correct and socially desirable information. The way the information is collected online could be promoting such an imbalance. This is a question of the validity of such information. Similarly, the research may only be sampling the people with that particular view; an issue with representativeness.

People behave differently online and offline

Participants questioned the value of social media research using posts as data because it could never truly reflect the 'real world' as people behave differently off and online. Participants dismissed research using social media due to their own personal experiences of behaving differently off/online. Other participants gave second hand evidence of others who they knew acted differently online. The concern regarding people behaving differently on and offline manifested into three issues that were believed to undermine the credibility and value of a piece of online and social media research: exaggerated views, impulsive comments and inaccurate profiles.

This existence of online personas is an aspect of social media research that falls under both validity and representativeness; Validity, because you do not necessarily know what information you are getting, and representativeness because you cannot be certain of who is participating in your research.

Exaggerated views

As well as those who felt the internet afforded users anonymity and therefore honesty and openness, others felt it also offered a space in which people could be outspoken, lie and exaggerate. Participants spoke about younger people whom they knew who behaved online in ways to appear more desirable to their peers and friends.

'For Facebook I think people just make up stuff and people just sort of tend to lie and exaggerate because they know that everybody else is watching them, and they sort of want to big themselves up' (Female, aged 18-25, Medium User)

Concern was expressed that if researchers used this exaggerated information it would lead to inaccurate conclusions about someone or something. There were concerns that an inaccurate portrayal could lead to ridicule or harm someone's reputation. Although participants raised this concern, it was mainly spoken about in the abstract or when referring to 'other people'. *'If you make a remark and, someone quoted it and put your Twitter name, someone else could think, 'Oh my God.', 'this girl just said this' and then go on and then that's when you start getting abuse.'*

Impulsive comments

Impulsive comments were also thought to be an issue for those with the view that the representativeness of a study, and thus its quality, is at risk because of the difference between online and offline personas. Participants expressed concern that sometimes people post things 'in the heat of the moment' or 'in a rush' which are impulsive and don't accurately reflect views they would express 'offline'. This could lead to researchers using an opinion which was only held for a moment in time, and therefore did not accurately reflect someone's 'normal' viewpoint. Of course, the same can be said for data captured from an interview, or a survey, and yet participants felt this was an issue particularly problematic in research using social media.²

Inaccurate Profiles

The third manifestation of the online persona was that the 'online persona' lacked context and was only a small glimpse into the lives of users. Those with this view spoke from personal experience and expressed concern that their social media 'profiles' were not an accurate reflection of themselves. Taking this information without further context would lead to inaccurate information, data and findings. One high user explained how her profile does not reflect her life in its entirety. She said *'I wouldn't say that my social networking is a true picture of myself, but it's a very specific part of my life'* (Female, aged 18-25, High user).

Only the loudest voices heard

Social media research was understood to have the ability to 'reach out' to many people, however the extent to whether this was a value or weakness varied. It was felt there was an imbalance of views online because only louder voices are heard.

The view was held that social media platforms allowed quick access to vast amounts of people and information. This was viewed as an indication of the potential quality of social media research because the large sample could provide new insight into social issues, trends or developments.

² Literature about online and offline personas questions the dichotomy of these personas and instead suggests identities flow continuously online, just as they do between different kinds of real life situations. In reality, the differences in behavior are blurred (Kendall, 1999).

An alternative view, however, was that social media research is of questionable value because of who it captures in the research. In addition to worries that research would be confounded by fake or spoof social media accounts, there was the view that not all perspectives are captured online. This view challenges the perceived benefits of vast quantities of information and people online, because the information only reflects certain types of people and perspectives: the views of those who do not use social media are not captured.

An imbalance of views was also believed to exist online, with only the loudest voices being heard. There was a reoccurring concern that only people with a strong online presence, for example those who posted content more frequently and those posting the same views, would have the opportunity to be heard.

'I would wonder whether I should be posting more just to have my voice heard, and whether by not posting it means that other voices are heard and I'm not'
(Female, aged 26-35, Low user)

The impact of this is an over- and under-representation of certain groups which compromises the study's integrity. It was recognised by participants that this knowledge would not necessarily lead to them posting more, but instead just make them *'wonder whether the statistics had any value,'* (Female, aged 26-35, Low user). Those who were not as active on social media sites would not have their opinion heard, leading to concerns that information collected online would not be very representative of the population the research seeks to understand. For example, in online polls about political policies, only those with an active interest would take part. This was thought to lead to skewed results that are then mistakenly applied to the whole population.

3.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter moved from users' views and behaviours about social media generally (as discussed in chapter 2) to explore initial impressions of online and social media research. Participants fell into three categories of views about research using social media platforms: scepticism, acceptance and ambivalence. Discussions around this subject also raised a number of questions and concerns which we have explored through the lens of research quality indicators, validity and representativeness. Chapter 4 further explores views specifically related to the ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and preventing undue harm.

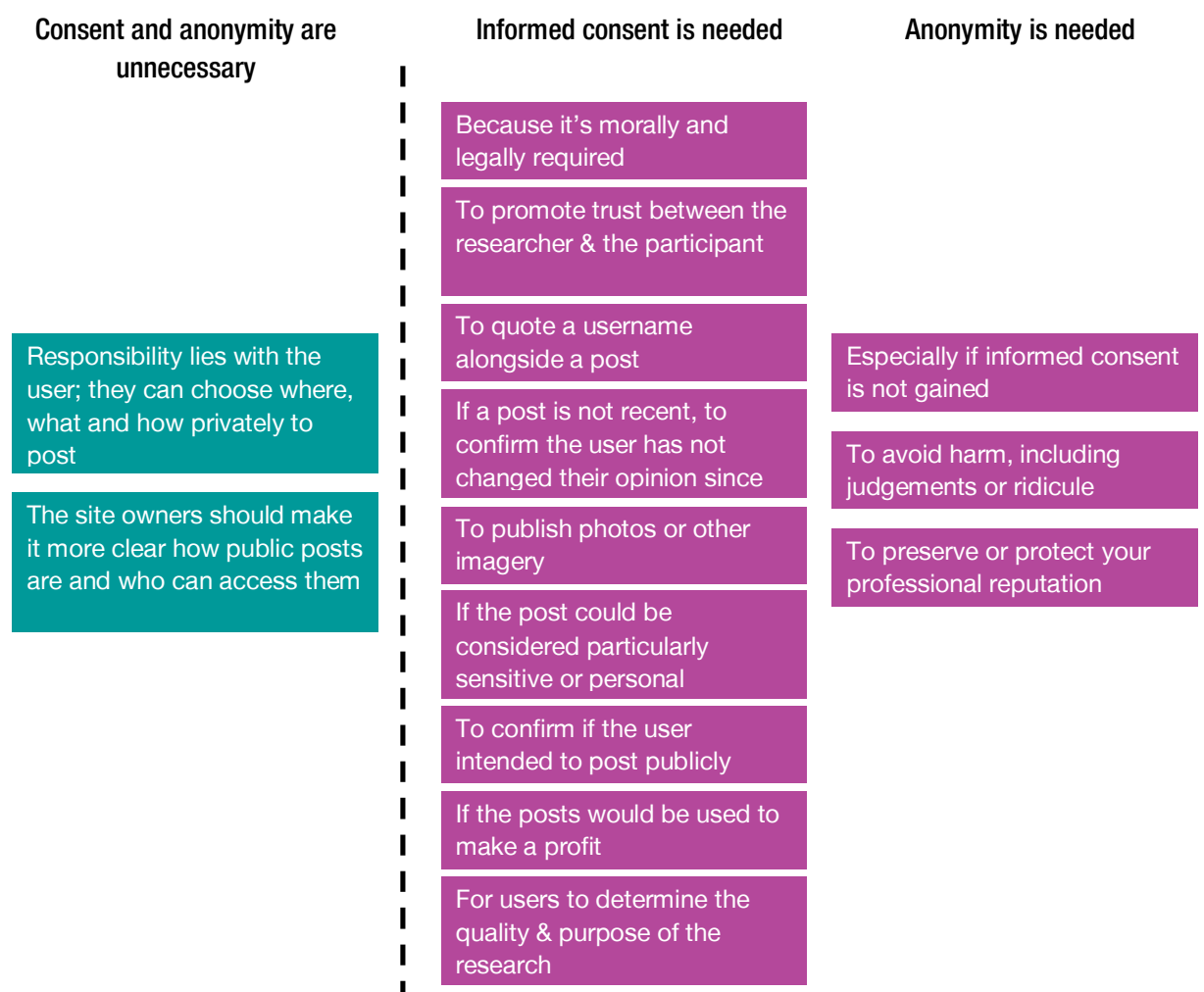
4 Ethics

This chapter explores participant views about the use of social media in research as they map onto three core ethical principles: informed consent, anonymity and undue harm. The factors which made it especially important for researchers to gain consent or promise anonymity are then discussed. These included the content of the post; the social media website being used; the intention the user had when posting and the nature of the research.

4.1 Consent, anonymity and avoiding undue harm

If a research project is to be deemed ethical, researchers must gain informed consent (in most instances), anonymity must be ensured and undue harm to participants avoided. These are core research ethics principles that we wanted to explore with participants. We avoided using these terms directly in the discussions; yet the underlying issues they represent were raised spontaneously by participants, so in this chapter we have applied these ethical concepts to what people have said. This enables us to locate our findings in the wider context of debates about research ethics. Figure 2 summarises the range of reasons for and against observing informed consent and anonymity. These reasons are then unpacked in the subsequent chapter sections.

Figure 2 Reasons for and against observing informed consent and anonymity



4.1.1 Informed consent

Participants expressed a range of views about the extent to which researchers should seek informed consent when observing how people interact in social media or when collecting posts made on social media sites. The two main views were that consent is unnecessary and, on the other hand, that it should be sought by a researcher. Participants who did not think consent needed to be gained believed this because ‘there is no such thing as privacy online’, and by posting content you automatically consent to its wider use. In contrast, users who believed consent should always be sought said so for two reasons; common courtesy and the ‘intellectual property’ rights of users. These two views are discussed in more detail below.

The view that no online space is truly private was expressed by participants who felt that gaining informed consent was unnecessary. This was because users of social media can choose what to share online and utilise privacy settings if they want to restrict a researcher’s access to their information.

‘...if people are putting [Tweets] on the internet for everybody to see, with no privacy settings, why would you need to ask?’ (Female, aged 18-25, medium user)

It was thought that by posting information online, you automatically surrender your right to ownership and imply consent for the material you generate to be used by others. Users should know that *‘if you put the data up there, expect it to be trawled through’* (Male, aged 34, medium user) and that *‘anybody could be logged in, listening, watching, stealing.’* (Male, aged 26-35, medium user)

The reasons given by those supporting the alternative view; that researchers should seek consent to use information obtained online, were varied. Gaining consent to use another’s words or imagery was seen as part of common decency. Consent should not solely be obtained to ensure good ethical practice but rather because *‘In reality you wouldn’t dream of doing something or stepping on somebody’s toes without having to ask permission first of all anyway, would you?’* (Male, aged 36-49, high user).

There was also a belief that users are the intellectual property owners of content they post to social media websites. Not to gain consent *‘would be like hacking’* (female, aged 45, medium user) and therefore viewed as an illegal practice. It was believed researchers should treat the posts in line with copyright laws because *‘... They’ve got no right to take that...because even though it is on a public site, if your name’s underneath surely you own what you’ve said?’* (Male, aged 26-35, low user)

Despite the belief that researchers have a legal and moral obligation to gain permission before using online content from social media websites, it was not thought to happen currently, and would not in the future. Users’ inability to trust researchers to seek consent was captured in the view that *‘you couldn’t know who you’re dealing with’* online. Participants felt there was no tangible evidence that researchers could provide to reassure them. Given these viewpoints, it is important that researchers do seek informed consent to allay such suspicions and concerns.

Impracticalities of gaining consent

Despite the view that researchers should ask permission before using content from social media websites, the impracticalities of obtaining consent were recognised by participants. It was acknowledged that a researcher who had ‘scraped’ a large number of Tweets (by using legal software) would find it hard if not impossible to contact all the users:

'I don't think they had the time and the money to go through every single person and say "Oh, excuse me, can I use a quote of what you said?"' (Female, aged 18-25, medium user)

Those participants who wanted consent to be gained, did not think the logistical burdens of doing so were a justification for not seeking permission. However, suggestions about how to contact numerous Twitter users, for example, were not discussed.

4.1.2 Anonymity

Anonymity for participants meant not having their name, or username, used in any research outputs alongside any content they posted online. There were two reasons expressed for why anonymity should be upheld: to avoid judgement from others and to prevent reputational risk. For participants who disagreed with the need for anonymity, the reason was similar to those who did not think informed consent was needed, i.e. It is up to the user to manage their identity when online. There was also a view that some responsibility should fall on social media website owners to educate users about the potential risks of sharing content online.

The view that *'it's absolutely fine for [researchers] to take anything that you've posted as long as they don't give your name'* (Female, aged 50-60, high user) illustrates the importance some users put on protecting anonymity. Participants expressed concern about having their name or username published by a researcher alongside one of their posts because it could put them at risk of judgement or ridicule:

'I think if they gave your Twitter name...people can make a judgment about you based on what you've said...someone else could think, 'Oh my God'...and then that's when you start getting abuse' (Female, aged 18-25, medium user)

Risks to reputation were another reason raised by advocates of anonymity. Individuals with responsibility for potentially vulnerable or impressionable individuals were concerned that their professional reputation could be compromised if they were quoted next to something they had said that was then taken out of context. A school teacher and a health professional were among those who expressed this view. Similarly, participants using social media as part of their professional communications envisaged possible risks on their careers.

The opposing view, that researchers do not need to provide anonymity, was also expressed. The reason was similar as that given for why gaining consent is unnecessary: that it is the responsibility of the user. One participant explained that you *'can always be anonymous if you want to be'* (male, aged 26-35, medium user). It was believed, for example, that a user could protect their identity by using a username unrelated to their real name.

It was thought that researchers could also 'do away with' anonymity because it was not their responsibility but that of social media website owners. Website owners should make it clearer to their customers how accessible their posts are. The user could then make an informed decision about what and where to post. Discussed at this point were the terms and conditions that social media websites present to new users. Our participants acknowledged that the accessibility of posts to 'third parties', which researchers were considered to be, is probably explained in the 'small print'. However, it was believed that terms and conditions are too long and that most people 'can't be bothered' to sift through them. As such, we suggest social media website owners or hosts should take on some of the responsibility of informing users about privacy by shortening terms and conditions.

The importance of proper referencing - of the social media websites used by researchers- was also discussed by our participants. However, including a 'handle' or the online username in a reference was perceived to be problematic because it can make a person traceable online. Researchers will need to find a way to balance the opposing needs for anonymity and acknowledgment of their sources. This is tricky because mentioning that a quote is from Twitter, for example, does not ensure that the user remains anonymous. Even if their Twitter handle is not given, typing the text of a Tweet into an online search engine can lead straight to the user's profile.

4.1.3 Avoiding undue harm

The third ethical principle relevant to participants was about ensuring social media website users are not put at risk in the research context and that they are not caused harm that could be avoided. Participants were wary about how they could be sure of what researchers were saying, and how difficult it would be online to decide if they were even 'legitimate' researchers; such as those working for an 'accredited firm'.

Closely related to anonymity as discussed above, participants felt that being identifiable in research could lead to unsolicited attention online and, more seriously, 'abuse'. This might be from people they knew, or from organisations that could 'exploit' them. For others it meant use by the police or courts, for purposes of prosecution.

4.2 Research context

After exploring what participants understood by the three ethical principles of research, we unpacked the elements of the research context which influenced their views and expectations of informed consent and anonymity.

Traditional reasons for gaining informed consent include building trust between the researcher and the participant; so the participant understands what their involvement will entail and; what the research is about and how it will be used. Similarly, in traditional research, anonymity is often sought to protect the identity of the participant and encourage more open and honest discussion. In our group discussions, we used real and hypothetical examples of how researchers could use social media websites (in the form of vignettes). This allowed us to gain nuanced views about the reasons our participants gave for wanting informed consent and anonymity, which were specific to research using social media. Participants mentioned a range of factors which made it particularly important for researchers to gain consent or promise anonymity. These factors, listed below, are described in detail in the following sections.

- Mode and content of the posts;
- Social media website being used;
- The expectations the user had when posting, and;
- The nature of the research

4.2.1 Mode and content of the posts

The content of social media posts was an important consideration for users when discussing the necessity of anonymity. Format was viewed in two ways: as written forms (Tweets, or forum posts) and as visual media (photos, or video). Participants who actively 'self-regulated' when they were online did not think researchers needed to gain consent and this held true whatever the type and content of the post. Alternatively, other users

felt that the format of post and the content would dictate whether a researcher should gain consent.

Written content

One view was that researchers should ask to use any written content posted by users to social media websites. This would especially be the case if the researcher intended to include the username with the written content. A different, less feasible, view was that the researcher did not need to ask for consent to use Tweets, so long as they were sure the Tweet was an accurate representation of the users' views. However, it was not mentioned how a researcher might verify what is or is not an accurate representation of what a user thinks.

Photos

Users were more concerned about researchers accessing and using photos than for written content because 'if you write something, anybody could've written it, whereas with your picture they know it's you' (female, aged 18-25, high user). Due to the user –or their friends and family –being identifiable from photos, the participants were keen to claim ownership of images. The interplay between being identifiable and ownership meant they were more concerned about their photos being used in research without consent, compared to written content like a Tweet or a status update.

'...permission should be, you should ask if that's okay, if a photo could be used or whatever, rather than just go on the internet and then all of a sudden you see a photo of you...' (Female, aged 26-49, medium user)

A different view was that you give up your right to ownership the minute you post a photo on a social media website. This is because most social media websites, like Facebook, allow you to save another's photo by right clicking on the image. Researchers therefore have as much right as anyone to obtain photos and do not need to ask for consent.

Additionally, participants queried what rights users have over a photo which features them but which had been posted by someone else –would a third party need their permission to use it? This remained unresolved in the discussions.

Sensitivity of content

Participants also explained that the sensitivity of the content was important for researchers to consider when deciding whether to seek consent and uphold anonymity. Users thought that if something posted to a social media website was particularly sensitive or personal, then informed consent should be gained by the researcher.

'... I think it's about sensitivity. I mean, if it was just talking about, I don't know, something mundane then that's fine, but if it's private, I'd definitely want to be asked [for permission from the researcher].' (Female, aged 26-35, high user)

It is often difficult to determine what is sensitive; everyone will have a different interpretation of this. 'Mundane' or 'generic' content was thought to be excluded from this expectation. For example, tweets about the London Olympic Games were not considered sensitive. Another example was attitudes about bottle versus breastfeeding, which we probed about when discussing Vignette 2 (see Appendix B). Viewpoints about this topic were not considered to be sensitive or personal either.

However, if the topic of a Tweet ‘goes down a little bit deeper’ (Female, aged 50-60, low user) in that it has a ‘sexual, political or religious’ focus, then it was felt that the researcher would need to ask permission to use it. Irrespective of the sensitivity of a post, some users did not think that the researcher should be barred completely from using the material, only that they should take the necessary steps to uphold the ethical principles of research, such as ensuring the participants’ anonymity.

4.2.2 Type of site

The type of social media website was another factor that influenced whether our participants thought consent definitely needed to be gained by a researcher, or could just be assumed. Social media websites with a fun, social purpose were viewed differently from websites with a professional aim. As one participant put it, there is a ‘...*difference between professional networking via the internet and social networking. They are two different things. LinkedIn is not a social network in the same way*’ (Male, aged 26-35, medium user)

The difference is based on how personal the information that is usually posted to the two sites and links to the section above about sensitive content. Websites with a social purpose contain much more ‘personal’ content, whereas content posted to ‘professional’ sites like LinkedIn is less so. In light of this, participants thought that it would be acceptable for researchers to access the latter without gaining consent because the risks associated with being identifiable through personal information are less likely (see the section on ‘Avoiding undue harm’ above).

Spotlight on consent...Twitter vs. Facebook

Two social media websites, Twitter and Facebook, dominated discussions about whether the type of platform influenced whether informed consent was necessary. Where the user had made Facebook posts publicly, there was less concern about these being used by researchers. However, others considered Facebook to be private and ‘enclosed’, regardless of their privacy settings, so were much more concerned about the idea of their posts being used in research.

Use of Tweets by researchers generated less concern. This was partly due to Twitter being understood as inherently public. Users of Twitter, and high users of social media, felt that Twitter has easier privacy settings to use and understand, in comparison to Facebook. As such, users were more prepared for their Tweets to be used without the researcher gaining consent.

4.2.3 User expectations

Whether a researcher needed to gain consent to use social media posts was also influenced by user expectations. If a user intended for their post to be widely accessible or public (for example on Twitter or LinkedIn where profiles tend to be open to a very wide potential audience), then there was a view that a researcher would not necessarily need to gain consent to use it. This is because the user, by posting publicly online, implies that they are surrendering ownership. Participants acknowledged that this view assumed Twitter or LinkedIn users understood the openness and accessibility of the platform, which may not be the case.

An alternative view was that users did not want something published by researchers if they had not meant it to be public in the first place or it was posted for a different purpose. This would include a Facebook status where the user’s profile was limited to

friends and ‘friends-of-friends’. As the below quote illustrates, the intention for a post was felt to be more important than the site from which a researcher took it:

‘I’d only be concerned if it was something that I had assumed to be private... Otherwise where it comes from isn’t so much of a concern... And if I discovered then that this previously private thing had made it into their research, I would be concerned’ (Male, aged 26-35, medium user)

For researchers, this means that no matter how open or public a site is considered to be, the user’s expectation about how the post should be used is what should be considered at the recruitment stage.

4.2.4 Nature of the research

The nature of the research in question also affected participant’s views on research ethics. Use of social media website posts by researchers was seen as affected by the affiliation of the researcher and the purpose of the research. What these features mean for researchers needing to gain informed consent and afford anonymity is subject of the next two sections.

Researcher affiliation

The type of organisation or company that the research was affiliated with, such as charitable or commercial, influenced whether or not participants viewed research to be of ‘good quality’. There was no mention of government or a comparison between government and non-government in the discussions. Instead, not-for-profit and commercial organisations were explored. Research being conducted by a not-for-profit organisation, rather than for ‘commercial’ reasons, was preferred for two reasons. Participants who preferred not-for-profit researchers to commercial organisations did so because the former were felt to be more ‘productive’, more ‘ethical’ and ‘not exploitative’. Not-for-profit researchers were generally understood by the participants to be an ‘academic’ or university.

The second reason not-for-profit researchers were preferred is because participants did not like to think of their social media posts being used to generate a profit for others. It was acknowledged, however, that while it is not ‘a good thing’ for researchers to ‘make money’ from social media posts, it is already happening and ‘we’re way down the line now, it is way too far down to stop’ (Male, aged 26-49, medium user). This view held that if researchers did want to make money from social media posts and other information then ‘you have a right to be informed’ (Male, aged 26-35, medium user).

Not all of the participants were concerned about the affiliation of the researcher. The reason for this related to the recurring view that once you post publicly on a social media website, you waive your right to ownership. One user outlined this viewpoint about social media by saying, *‘If you’ve written on it and you know that it’s open, every single person in the whole world has that if they want to...and it doesn’t really matter [who the researcher is]’* (Female, aged 18-25, high user).

Other users were unaware of the differences between not-for-profit and commercial researchers or did not care about the distinction. As such they had little to say about how researcher affiliation might influence their desire to agree to informed consent.

Research purpose

Although concern about the affiliation of the researcher was not widespread, the concern about the ‘purpose’ of the research was. The research purpose had a bearing on whether participants wanted to be informed about their social media posts being used in research. Participants expressed worry about their posts being used to ‘drive an agenda’ they would not have agreed to if the researcher had asked them.

Using social media content to ‘drive an agenda’ was seen differently from research offering a social benefit:

‘I think if you're putting information up on the internet for people to see it, why does it matter if researchers use it? If they're using it for a good reason?’

(Female, aged 18-25, medium user)

For our participants, research for a ‘good reason’ meant a study that had some social benefit. For example, research aimed at providing more knowledge about a particular social issue such as domestic violence would be of social benefit particularly if it were to improve support for victims. Research for a good purpose could also include research ‘genuinely used to try and improve our services’; services in this instance being public transport or customer service provision.

In discussions around the vignette about domestic violence (See Appendix B), the potential benefit to society of using online content to understand the experience of abuse, was felt to outweigh the risk to the user who shared that information. Researchers should ask, *‘what's the risk of actually having that information and the fact that it could well be of benefit to the people who deal with these kinds of things [domestic violence]? And if there's no risk to the individuals then it's probably a good thing [to use].’*

(Male, aged 61+, high user)

4.3 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has explored participant views about the ethical principles of informed consent and anonymity, and to a lesser degree, avoiding undue harm. There are a range of views as to whether or not these principles should be upheld in research that uses social media, and we illustrated why participants held these different views. Traditional reasons for gaining informed consent and anonymity were discussed, as were the elements of the research context that are unique to the online sphere. This included the content of the information posted, the website used, the expectations of the user, and the nature of the research.

While there is variation in views, it is clear from what our participants told us that these principles should be explored by researchers well in advance of beginning their work and throughout their study. Assumptions should not be made by researchers about what is and what is not right since users’ views vary dramatically. The report concludes in the next chapter, with a summary of key findings, discussion of the policy implications, and suggestions for improvement of practices amongst researchers using social media in their research.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the views and experiences of a qualitative sample of the general public to better understand what they think constitutes 'good' ethical practice in online and social media research. The value of this research lies in its ability to shed light on a previously underrepresented group in the field of social media research: the user.

5.1 Research implications

There is a lot of hype about the value and potential of social media as a huge source of immediate information with the ability to solve 'big' questions. However, practitioners, researchers and grant funding bodies need to understand the limits and the ethical parameters of such activities in order to make realistic, reliable and appropriate decisions about designing studies or supporting proposed research. Our research contributes to the ongoing dialogue amongst researchers about developing flexible ethical principles and actions that can help researchers and other practitioners who want to use social media in their work.

In Chapter 1 we explored the current debates about the ethics of online and social media research. Questions have been raised about whether consent is required for all types of online research, or whether there are exceptions. Not all of our participants felt informed consent was essential in all situations. However, some people held the view that regardless of platform, whether it is open or private, or type of post, consent should be sought. Given this, researchers may want to consider taking reasonable steps to contact users. The practical challenges associated with securing informed consent were discussed and participants made a number of suggestions to overcome this, like mass tweeting to the people whose content you used, or Facebook messaging or emailing, or posting a blurb on the forum you drew contacts from. In these cases not all users may be aware but at least reasonable steps would have been taken to uphold consent.

In our literature review we saw concerns raised about insecure communication. Our participants did not raise this as a concern but a possible compromise could be to make the initial contact over a digital platform, request a telephone number and then call to brief the individual, or provide a researcher's contact details and invite the participant to get in touch.

A prominent theme was the varied knowledge and understanding of social media, and online and social media research, amongst participants. The lack of understanding about the extent and power of their digital footprint is an important learning point for researchers; do not assume knowledge amongst potential participants and consider the expectations of potential participants and how this effects your research design. For example, a suggestion from participants for addressing the issue of anonymity in Tweets was to paraphrase or remove the handle. However, Twitter's terms and conditions bars researchers from doing just that.

The range of inherent risks in social media described by our participants mirrors the academic debates around avoiding undue harm to participants. By being transparent about your affiliation, research aims and plans for research outputs, you can reassure participants of the credibility of your research. Considering appropriate support early on can also be beneficial, like providing links or contact details for users to learn more about the research area or available support. Such steps may also contribute to making online and social media research more attractive to possible participants or to readers of

research. Although not sought after, our participants were vocal in their criticism of the quality and credibility of research in this field. Knowing this, researchers may consider how to better articulate the nature, value and rigour of their research. Similarly, the criticisms voiced by participants suggest a triangulation approach may add value to research designs. Mixed method studies which capture vast amounts of relevant information and coupled with approaches that offer depth and clarification amongst participants may address some of the concerns discussed.

Our literature review and research findings suggest there is no need to develop new, specific guidelines on ethical practice. The basics of ethical practice apply in this research however the implications of these principles in practice do vary. Researchers need flexible guidance that can be adapted to changing platforms and the different styles of data collection, such as the *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research* (BPS, 2013). Careful consideration of how and when to apply guidelines and principles to the quickly evolving online platforms will help practitioners and researchers to better deliver robust research. For this to happen in a nascent research field, researchers may need collaborative and supportive guidance rather than rigid, inflexible guidelines.

Participants raised the importance of researchers being transparent in their work, in recruiting participants and in the aims and intended outputs of their work. The need for transparency extends to the wider field of this kind of research. Online and social media research is a relatively new field and there are plenty of lessons to be learned and built upon. In order for learning to occur, researchers should be open and honest in discussing the limitations and challenges of the methodology used. By building up a robust knowledge base of different types of approaches implemented across evolving platforms, the field will be better equipped to design robust research.

5.2 Suggestions for improving research practices

Drawing on our findings, we summarise suggestions for improving research practices in the table below. We do not include the design or analysis of data stages as these were not relevant to the concerns mentioned by any participant. These suggestions are not rules or even appropriate in all situations, but rather ideas to consider in the design of an ethically rigorous online and social media research study.

Table 2 Suggestions for improving research practices: from sampling to reporting

Research Stage	Aim	Activity
Sampling and recruitment	To appear legitimate, accommodate different user types and be transparent in your purpose and aims in order to ethically recruit participants to online and social media research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the preferred mode of communication once a participant is recruited • Approach possible participants over the platform being using in the research (rather than email) • Be transparent in recruitment materials. Consider including your affiliation, web link to verify your idea (like biography on organisational website), aims • Explicitly state the security and privacy terms in recruitment materials of the platform the research will involve • Explain where you got a participants contact details (i.e. Searched Facebook for public profiles) • Include link to company webpage; examples of previous work; transparent about research aims
Collecting or generating data	To improve representativeness of findings, and to understand the privacy risks of platform used in a study in order to uphold protection and trust of participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising differing views on what is legally permitted to be collected and what some may consider their intellectual property • Take time to consider the openness of a platform you are using and whether steps can be taken to gain trust of users (i.e. if a closed chatroom consider introducing yourself and state your research purposes and ask participants to opt into your research) • Acknowledge the different ways users engage online-create, share and observe- and how your data may include a very specific view or type of user.
Reporting results	To protect the identity and reputation of participants, maintain their trust in the value of the research and contribute to the progression of the field by being open and honest in reporting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing the traceability of a tweet or post and taking responsible steps to inform the user and to protect their identity, if desired. Options include paraphrasing instead of verbatim or using quote but no handle/user name. • Where reasonable, seek informed consent to use verbatim quotes, images or video such as through direct tweets, private messaging or email. • Acknowledging limitations of the representativeness and validity of your findings • Explicitly stating the platform used (i.e. From Facebook rather than generally saying social media)

5.3 What next?

Online and social media research may be growing in popularity within research circles but it remains a little known methodology amongst the general public. The public is a major source of research samples and so more work needs to be done to better articulate the rationale for using social media in research.

It is unclear whether the views we heard are a result of a specific platform or a result of the nature of the content, or a fluid combination of both. We need more research into the day-to-day behaviours of social media users to tease this out further.

A better understanding of the views on access and research use of data created by a persons participation in social media, in the UK and internationally, has the potential to improve how we recruit participants, support the strengthening of guidance on upholding ethical principles of research and the reputation of this field of research.

It was beyond the scope of this research to distinguish between and explore views specifically on quantitative and qualitative approaches to online and social media research. However, at the level of ethical principals it shouldn't matter whether qualitative or quantitative approaches are used as principles just get applied differently. Further research may consider whether, and if so, how, methods such as virtual ethnography or online observations coupled with interviews address the ethical issues raised by our participants. Similarly, research may explore the implications of user views particularly for quantitative researchers using larger-scale data collection methods.

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Appendix A. Achieved sample

Initially we drew our sample from the British Social Attitudes Survey 29 because it had the advantage of identifying a pool of potential participants who used the internet and accessed social media websites. However, to ensure sufficient diversity in the sample we employed an external recruitment agency to source participant.

Table 2 summarises the number of participants, the primary criteria and the mode in which they took part. The table is broken down by user type (whether participants were low, medium or high users of social media), gender and age. Ethnicity was also monitored for. In total 34 participants took part in an interview, paired interview or focus group.

Table 3 Achieved sample by primary criteria and fieldwork type

		Interview N=2	Paired Interview N=2	Focus Group N=4	Total
User Type	Low	0	0	10	10
	Medium	1	2	9	12
	High	1	2	9	12
Gender	Male	1	2	15	18
	Female	1	2	13	16
Age	18-25	1	0	6	7
	26-35	0	3	5	8
	36-49	1	1	6	8
	50-60	0	0	5	5
	61+	0	0	6	6

Appendix B. Vignettes

Vignette 1

A researcher is interested in understanding what people thought about the London Olympic Games. They use a legal software programme to download messages (or 'Tweets') from Twitter. They look at the written content of Tweets and any photos or links posted, which are about the Olympics. The researcher shares the findings of their study on the internet. What do you think about this?

Vignette 2

A researcher is interested in parents' reasons for breastfeeding or bottle feeding their new baby. The researcher visits discussion forums for parents to gather information for their study. The researcher only looks at discussion threads which can be seen by anyone (not restricted to members) and they do not join the discussion. What do you think about this?

Vignette 3

A researcher wants to use LinkedIn* to look at how people describe themselves when looking for work. The researcher thinks how people describe themselves on LinkedIn could be very different to what they say on Facebook and Twitter, so also search for them on these sites. What do you think about this?

Vignette 4

- A researcher joins a Facebook group and posts on the wall, asking people to take part in research.
- A researcher posts a Tweet (which can be seen by everyone whether they have a Twitter username or not), asking people to take part in research.

What do you think about these two ways for a researcher to contact people?

Vignette 5

A researcher is interested in understanding the help people with eating disorders receive from online discussion forums. The researcher visits an online discussion forum for adults with eating disorders. The researcher looks at the questions and responses posted by people using the forum and uses this information to carry out their research. What do you think?