

GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN RESEARCH PROJECTS: ETHICS APPLICATIONS

This guidance is written for researchers and PGR students applying for ethics approval who intend to use social media platforms and/or collect data from them. Rather than offering a comprehensive guide to using social media in research more broadly, this document provides specific instructions on how to prepare ethics applications at the University of Roehampton. Based on the current ethics application process—which usually includes a subject-specific reviewer and three key ‘units’ (Health & Safety, Data Protection, and Contracts teams)—the guidance is divided into four sections, each addressing key ethical considerations relevant to these teams.

1. Ethical Research and Informed Consent

Where possible, explicit consent for collecting and using human participant data from social media should always be sought—ideally by contacting the data owner or a moderator of the online groups/platforms. The methods for obtaining and recording consent, along with any relevant participant-facing documents, must be clearly presented in the ethics application.

Consent must be sought individually in the following situations (please note this is not exhaustive):

- Data from semi-public or private online groups where users are in a protected category or the topic is sensitive (e.g. groups related to racial, religious, gender, or sexual minorities).
- Data from private messages or other forms of direct communications with users on messaging and social media platforms (e.g. Snapchat, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Instagram).
- Data or content from users or content creators considered to be part of at-risk or vulnerable populations (please refer to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 on the definition of vulnerable populations:
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/47/section/59/enacted>).
- Any content taken from private social media platforms that has subsequently been made public without the individuals' consent.

In all other cases, applicants should identify and reflect on the relevant ethical implications in the context of their project and the target participant group. Subject-specific reviewers should pay close attention to ensure that all ethical issues are fully considered and addressed.

Below are some examples of considerations for applicants:

- Use of public photo-sharing or video content containing identifiable third parties.
- Anonymised data from social media that could potentially lead to de-anonymisation or online harassment.
- Data collected from private or semi-private forums or groups that require membership or payment for access.
- How participants can withdraw from the project after consenting—or when prior consent was not obtained. What constitutes data withdrawal on social media (e.g. deletion of a post)?

Again, please note that this list is not exhaustive. It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that potential ethical implications specific to their project are carefully considered and addressed as much as possible.

2. Health and Safety Considerations

As part of the current ethics review process, approval is required from the Health & Safety team. Applicants must consider potential risks to BOTH themselves and their participants on social media:

- All health and safety risks should be identified and described in the mandatory risk assessment form.
- Even when working remotely with online data, applicants should consider physical and emotional risks that may arise from the research topic or online interactions for both the researcher and the participants.
- If lone working is involved— If working with vulnerable or underage participants (e.g. interviews via direct messaging or video calls on social media platforms)—researchers should obtain insurance confirmation from the University's Insurance team.
- The usual risk associated for focus groups, homeworking, interviewing online and DSE should be considered.
- An 'Online questionnaires and interviews risk assessment template' is available on the Staff Portal under the health and safety tile (<https://roehamptonprod.sharepoint.com/sites/portal/information/healthandsafety/Pages/forms-and-checklists.aspx>).

From a safeguarding perspective:

- Researchers are strongly encouraged to create purpose-built social media accounts specifically for research-related communication, rather than using personal or standard institutional accounts.

- It would be helpful for researchers to know how to escalate concerns should any risk to self or others be communicated from a participant, though generally dialogues through social media are not encouraged. Concerns can be shared to our Student Safeguarding inbox (safeguarding@roehampton.ac.uk).
- Researchers are also advised to provide participants with links to appropriate support services, especially where the research touches on potentially distressing or triggering topics. In all cases, researchers must be prepared to pause or terminate engagement if there are any indications of potential harm or emotional distress arising from participation.

3. Data Storage and Protection

Using and collecting personal data on social media still need to comply with the University's Data Protection and Storage Guidance for Researchers

(<https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/globalassets/documents/corporate-information/policies/data-protection-guidance-for-researchers-v1.1-august-2018.pdf>)

The University's policy of data retention (<https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/corporate-information/information-compliance/records-management/>) also applies to all personal data collected from social media sites.

When completing the ethics application form:

- In Section 6.1, clearly state how and what data from social media will be collected and processed, and whether the data will be anonymised and/or pseudonymised.
- Sections 6.6 and 6.7, please avoid research data sharing and transferring on social media apps/platforms. All external data sharing with collaborators/third parties should be done via SharePoint Sites. To create a SharePoint site for data sharing, please raise a ticket through [the Service Desk](#) using your ethics reference number once you have received ethics approval.
- A Data Sharing Agreement is required when sharing personal data with external collaborators. Please contact the Contracts team at researchcontracts@roehampton.ac.uk to arrange this. For the definition of 'personal data', please refer to Section 7: 'Defining Personal Data' in the [University's Data Protection and Storage Guidance for Researchers](#).
- Depending on the nature and origin of the data, you may need to submit a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA). The University's Data Protection Officer would be able to provide guidance.

4. Legal and contractual considerations

The applicant must familiarise themselves with the specific Terms and Conditions and other legislative documents associated with the social media platforms/apps they propose to use. It

would be helpful to mention these documents in the ethics application and highlight any potential legal concerns arising from the research. These legal concerns can include issues related to disclaimers, violations of terms of service, copyright and intellectual property, defamation and reputational harm, and the protection of children and vulnerable users. Please contact the Contracts team at researchcontracts@roehampton.ac.uk for specific questions.

For some non-public/semi-private online platforms or certain social media companies, the owner/moderator/users might wish to control or limit access to data and assert certain control or ensure confidentiality. For formal negotiations with platforms or social media companies, or for drafting confidentiality agreements or collaborative documents, please contact the University's Contracts team researchcontracts@roehampton.ac.uk.

It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure all the required legal and contractual documents are in place before starting data collection. In these cases, the other party that you negotiate the documents with should be listed as collaborators or third parties (depending on the role they play in data collection and your research design), and relevant information and documents should be listed in section 1b or 1c of the ethics application form accordingly.