

# WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media platforms have a number of advantages which make them attractive data sources for researchers.

## Less resource-intensive.

Extensive conversational data can be obtained more quickly than from interviews, because there is no time or cost associated with scheduling, space, or transcription [1, 2].



Social media discussions are usually archived, enabling access to current and past discussions [2].

In the case of food blogs, practitioners and researchers are able to see how people document their diets, which may be a more accurate record than the standard dietary recall survey which is subject to unreliable human memory [3].

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## Unobtrusive observations.



Social media discussion analysis uniquely provides an unobtrusive process of observing people's naturally occurring discussions in a context that has not been created or altered by the researcher [1].

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## Flexibility.



For both those collecting social media discussion data for analysis and the participants engaging in the discussions, participation does not require travel and is less time-consuming than meeting with others in-person.

Because these discussions allow social media users to participate regardless of time and location, more people are able to participate, which can result in geographically diverse groups.

## Control.

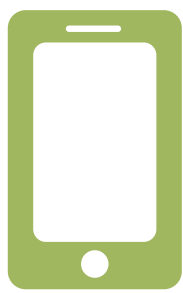


Participants can discuss topics that are important to them, at a pace they are comfortable with, and respond only when they choose to share information and advice [4].

These characteristics may explain why research has found that social media discussion participants, in comparison to focus group participants, can be less inhibited and less affected by group thinking [5].

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## Clarity.



Because they are writing in a public arena, participants may explain themselves more clearly than in in-person discussions [2].

Social media discussions allow participants to quote others' messages, which can further improve clarity.

Being able to refer to previous postings in the discussion can enable participants to understand information better compared to focus group discussions [5].

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## Community.



Certain social media - we note discussion forums and blog communities - can provide a sense of supportive community that often encourages participants to reveal more information than through traditional methods [2, 6].

The mutual support and empathy of participants in health discussion forums were reported to be central factors in continued participation [6, 7].

# SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH CAUTIONS

We encourage interested researchers and practitioners to be aware of certain features of social media.

## **Anonymity.**

For some social media data, mainly comments on online news articles and discussion forums, a main concern is the anonymity of the participants who create the data and the reliability of their reported behaviors and attitudes [8].



Online communities comprise people who might never meet outside the virtual world and who are largely unaccountable for the information they share [1].

Falsification of data is not solely a social media issue. Ethnographic researchers use techniques such as prolonged length of engagement with participants, persistent observation, and researcher introspection to overcome the potential that the data they collect could be a false representation of people or social phenomena. Such safeguards can also be applied in online research [1] and better enable the researcher to trust the online discussions [1, 9].

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## **Lack of demographic data.**

A key limitation with social media data is the inability to verify participants' demographic information.



Whereas social media users are subject to overrepresentation of certain demographic groups [10, 11], the self-selecting nature of participating in more traditional research can similarly limit the even representation of diverse demographics.

## Ethical considerations.

The ethics of social media research is rapidly evolving, making it critical for researchers to read current ethics in social media research literature.



We recommend the up-to-date resources available through the Association of Internet Researchers (<https://aoir.org/>) who advocate for a “case-based” perspective rather than a prescription of procedures [12].

We highlight a few considerations below.

First, while there are different types of social media platforms to choose from, certain platforms have more concerns than others.



The definitions of public and private are complex and dynamic. Dietetic researchers and practitioners need to consider difficult questions about how to determine social media users’ understandings of public and private.

Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, for example, being primarily visual, pose particular ethical challenges about reproducing participants’ personal photographs in publications and public presentations [13], as users may accidentally reveal more information than intended through the image’s background or the combination of visual and textual elements [14].



Second, we emphasize considering ethics throughout the entire process of data collection, analysis, and dissemination [12].

For example, during data collection, we recommend researchers consider two questions put forth by McDermott, Roen, and Piela [15] during data collection:



- “What are the participants’ likely expectations of privacy?”
- “To what extent might our observations potentially harm participants?”

By studying the narrative rather than the individuals and aggregating data in geographical spaces the relevance of the analysis can be maintained while also preserving user anonymity [16].

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