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Research Ethics in digital and social media marketing research

Sarah Quinton and Nina Reynolds

Introduction

Social media is increasingly a primary means by which consumers find out about the world (Appel et al, 2020) and this offers huge opportunities for researchers. Research about social media marketing adds value to consumers, organisations, and society by increasing understanding of this important communication ecosystem. Research through social media is valuable as it engages consumers as participants in a context they are familiar with and comfortable in. As Li et al (2021) suggest, social media can act as a valuable source of new ideas, customer behaviour, sentiment analysis and market research. Social media data is now a strategic resource that affects marketing activity (Gnizy, 2019). However, creating value also comes with responsibilities and requires 'good practice' in terms of ethics, both in the practice of digital marketing but also in the research of and in digital and social media marketing. Those researched, those who commission research, the users of the research and the wider society may all be impacted by digital and social media research in marketing.

This chapter includes indicative discussion of the research ethics issues that researchers may need to understand when undertaking social media research for marketing. Our focus lies in research ethics issues which are exacerbated by the digital/social media environment as well as those which are specific to the dynamic and evolving digital/social media ecosystem. We take as fundamental the core idea that the ends should not be used to justify the means; that is, how something is achieved matters. This belief goes beyond just considering the legal/regulatory framework within which research is conducted to a position where the researcher shows respect for all research partners (Fuchs, 2017). Our own position as researchers is that participants or actors must be considered as centrally important in any research related decision. Participant-centred research in the digital and post-digital era needs to move beyond a set of processes and towards a contextually based tether for researchers.

This chapter provides insight based on our own extensive experience as researchers, supervisors of research, project leads, and institutional representatives, alongside the work of key scholars. The value lies not in providing an exhaustive checklist of points to address, as any such checklist would soon be out of date in the dynamic social media environment. Rather this chapter contributes by identifying key discussions taking place around social media marketing research ethics, and pinpointing pertinent ethics arguments that will support research design choices. By encouraging a thoughtful approach to social media marketing research ethics, we aim to provide researchers in this

space with the tools to address this dynamic, and as such ethically demanding, research environment.

The chapter is broken into the following sections; current research ethics challenges amplified by the social media environment, emergent ethics challenges linked to new technologies and their use, the relationships between research ethics and the actors involved in research, and the governance of research ethics at the macro, meso and micro level. These discussions lead to a set of recommendations for good practice and core questions across three identified themes for researchers involved in social media research in marketing.

Amplified research ethics challenges

The dynamic nature of social media platforms and their use (Appel et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020), leads us to the position that "each research situation is unique and it is not possible simply to apply a standard template in order to guarantee ethical practice" (Williams et al., 2018, p30). Thus, contextual ethics based on context-specific decisions rather than a checklist of dos and don'ts or a rigid set of rules becomes necessary (Beninger, 2017).

As contextual ethics require context-specific decisions, and ethical judgements, both 'harm' and 'privacy' need to be considered in the context of social media and digital marketing research. Harm can be physical, emotional, psychological and or social. Harm may be related to the participant in the research, to the researcher, or more broadly, to other stakeholders such as participants' 'friends' or broad cultural groups (e.g., ethnic groups). Harm could be considered in relation to the potential to expose a participant's views beyond their social media community (e.g., exposing participant to criminal or civil liability, Moreno et al., 2013). For example, using a direct quote that can be searched for online, or using composite data that allows the participant to be retrospectively identified. Harm could also be considered in relation to subjecting the researcher to backlash if their research exposes views or activities that online communities might prefer to remain hidden (e.g., investigating Men's Rights Activism). More broadly, harm might be relevant to populations/society, through sampling being restricted to online groups alone (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017), or not considering the completeness of the data such as the un-transparent use of Artificial Intelligence (Williams et al., 2018). Privacy in the research context is clearly linked to ethical research practices related to confidentiality and anonymity. Privacy has a role in society, and, particularly in relation to social media use. Privacy can be viewed from an economic (e.g., value of personal information to organisations) and or a psychological (e.g., trust, embarrassment) perspective (Martin and Murphy, 2017). Privacy as a right is not consistently encoded in law, thus ethics has a critical role to play when considering privacy in research.

A central and recurrent theme in social media research is social media users' expectations of privacy. In the offline environment, for example, two people talking in a park would have a reasonable expectation of privacy even though the conversation was, technically, taking place in a public place. As people share ideas within a social context, social media data has 'contextual integrity' associated with their specific context (Lin et al., 2020, p4). The 'contextual integrity' of social media data is bound to a group, purpose and space, so using data for other purposes may violate the social media user's expectations of how the data should be used. An additional phenomenon that should be considered, especially when looking at non-public figures, is the disinhibiting effect of online interactions (Williams et al., 2018). This disinhibiting effect can lead to social media posts and

comments containing a greater level of disclosure with more sensitive information than would be found offline. In turn, this then will impact on people's perceptions of how private that information is.

The boundaries of the contextual integrity of social media data and the reasonable expectation of privacy will differ across platforms and may be linked to an individual platform's purpose (e.g., Twitter versus Facebook, or social versus health app information), characteristics (e.g., the need to log in to see content), terms of use polices, and or technical settings (e.g., options for users to restrict access) as suggested by Moreno et al., (2013). The nature of social media sites and the online environment means that privacy also needs to be considered over time. Most individuals may consider that their online activity will disappear over time into a mass of data, such that finding specific data again is almost impossible. Individuals might understand that their historic social media posts technically remain 'public', but it does not follow that they absolve their right to be asked whether that personal data can be used (Williams et al., 2018). Nevertheless, if data is considered public, then its use is akin to extracting information from a newspaper (Fuchs, 2017) and consent may not be needed. If however, data is considered private, then the participant's consent may be needed to use that data. While social media users may recognise *"that gaining consent may be impractical … this was not viewed as a justification not to ask permission"* (Williams et al., 2018, p45).

Consent is another challenge in social media research. Researchers need to consider first whether consent is needed, and second, how and when to gain that consent. Deciding whether consent is needed depends on whether data is public or private, as well as the level of sensitivity (to participants) of the content (Quinton and Reynolds, 2018b). Consent might not be needed, for example, for participants posting to platforms such as Wikipedia, Twitter or LinkedIn, and or for the public-facing accounts of politicians, celebrities, and influencers. However, medical information discussed on a support group's online forum is likely to be more sensitive, and as such more likely to require consent for the research to use, than social media user's views on brands of washing detergent in a Twitter feed. Determining privacy is generally harder than determining the level of sensitivity of the data content. Nevertheless, when there is a reasonably expectation of privacy – which includes consideration of the sensitivity of the topic – or there is direct interaction with the social media user as a research participant (or both), then consent is needed.

Once the researcher recognises that consent is needed, it is necessary to consider how and when to gain that consent. Consent may be needed for different things at different stages of the research project. These stages might include; the start of the data collection process, or when collecting multi-modal social media data such as images, co-created content or text, or each time findings are reported in different ways such as for conferences, research blogs, or academic papers. Indeed staged consent may be particularly useful when participants do not know in advance what content they will be consenting to , such as co-created participatory or indeed visual image based social media research.

At each stage of the research there is a necessity to tread a careful line between protecting the research participant by ensuring anonymity and recognising the autonomy of the research participant to choose whether they need, or even desire, anonymity (Warfield et al., 2019). Some social media users, such as influencers, may desire visibility and want their authorship to be

recognised (Williams et al., 2018). Participants, even those a researcher considers vulnerable, may wish to have their voices heard and recognised. With these participants, de-identifying their content may itself cause 'harm' as the researcher is disempowering them. . Others may wish to remain anonymous, so researchers may need inform participants how constructed examples can be developed that will ensure anonymity though removing the ability to attribute data to an individual participant. Researchers should also consider how they report data when consent cannot be obtained and for example, how images or voices might be depersonalised to avoid identification of participants (Williams et al., 2018).

An additional challenge is the inter-relatedness of different accounts, data from one person's account contains opinions, images and potential geo-demographic details of others. As such, careful consideration needs to be given to whether the consent of those others is needed. The idea of linked consent – that consent from A does not translate to data of A's friends – may set boundaries on what the researcher can and cannot process when considering their research data (Sloan and Quan-Hasse, 2017).

A further area of ethical complexity that is amplified by the evolution of digital and social media technologies is the tension between segmentation and micro-targeting. Researchers may wish to consider at what level of data aggregation the combination of individual digital footprints ceases to be personalised information. For example, in political marketing, how politicians' market themselves on social media, the structure of their influences, and the effectiveness of different approaches are examples of questions that social media marketing researchers may seek to explore. Consumers' responses to political campaigns can and are recorded at an individual level, but micro-targeting as a result of those responses might not be considered reasonable and ethical. For example, is it ethical to undertake research that will allow a personalised marketing message based on responses to a marketing campaign from a specific political party? As such, social media marketing researchers will need to carefully assess the risks, both and their participants and to themselves, when exploring the use of social media to influence both individuals and groups.

Emerging ethics challenges

Emerging challenges arise from both the rapid, ongoing, technological development s in the digital environment as well as the burgeoning extensions of existing digital/social media capabilities that are only just beginning to infiltrate mainstream adoption.

Looking into the future, an underlying challenge for researchers is the recognition of the power imbalance between social media users/social media researchers and social media platforms. These power imbalances are particularly problematic in an environment where there is "unreflective exploitation of consumers' information" (Lacsniak and Murphy, 2019, p405), and increasingly restricted access to social media data. Social media users do not have high levels of trust in social media platforms, and this lack of trust can extend to researchers who are too closely associated with the platforms (Halavais, 2019). Another area of tension and power imbalances is the knowledge that social media platforms are a both a commercial space, and also a social space. Undertaking social media research leads to the question of how consumers were viewing the space when engaging with the platform. Avoiding the tension between commercial and social may, in the future, lead to some consumers taking more control of their own environments – essentially decentralising the web (Halavais, 2019). This change in choice of platforms would have implications for researchers. Those

engaging with the commercial platform might have lower expectations of privacy, but also might have specific characteristics which may make them, as social media users, less representative for some research topics. In contrast, as social media users have more trust in academic/not-for-profit research (Williams et al., 2017), those who choose to leave main-stream social media platforms, such as from Facebook to Tor, or from WhatsApp to Signal, might be more open to academic research in a collaborative environment, with participants having greater potential to co-create research.

Individuals' use of social media is frequently across multiple platforms and will increasingly include an omni-social presence (Appel et al., 2020). As such, researchers need to consider the implications for representativeness and consumer authenticity, and inclusivity, if just one platform is used in a study. However, there might be situations where a single platform is the most appropriate vehicle for data collection, such as the use of LinkedIn for certain business focused studies.   In addition, if participants are linked across multiple social media platforms how can such data be collected ethically? Social media users also consider some research practices as more acceptable than others. For example, social media is recognised as a cost-effective tool for reaching dispersed and/or underrepresented groups. Nevertheless, recruiting and retaining participants through social media is more acceptable than the practice of tracing lapsed research participants through their social media activity (Hooke et al., 2020). Researchers are also concerned about their and their institutions' vulnerability to legal challenges from platform owners over the use of data obtained when this is in violation of the terms of use of those platforms. The lack of consumers' trust in social media platforms, as well as the potential for platforms to legally challenge the use of 'their' data, has promoted consideration of how direct partnerships between social media users and researchers might be developed (Halavais, 2019). If co-creation of research becomes more prevalent, social media marketing researchers would need to become more accountable to their research participants. The practices of research would need to become more open to public scrutiny and, as such, researchers would have to be able to fully justify not only the authenticity of their findings but also the ethics of their actions.

The use of technology such as algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) on and by social media platforms (Appel et al., 2020) is also an emerging area of unease for social media research ethics. As and when social media researchers gain the skills/collaborations needed to use AI/algorithms as academic research tools, the ethics of each application of AI will need to be examined. Just as the ethics of social media platforms using algorithms to infer things about their users can be questioned (Williams et al., 2018), researchers must be careful to consider whether it is ethical to infer things about participants that those consumers might want to keep private. For example, researchers would need to consider what harm (social, economic, psychological, financial) might be caused, if social connections are inferred by linking geo-spatial (GPS) data from multiple social media user's accounts.

In addition, with the prevalence of non-human entities engaged in social media likely to increase, the ethical implications for social media researchers of these entities will need to be deliberated (Quinton and Reynolds, 2021). For example, if Bots are producers of social media content, should researchers seek permission of Bots/AI to use that data, or the permission of the coder of that Bot/AI? If Bots/AI are research 'actors', then how do researchers recognise and or protect the identity of the Bot/AI? Discussion regarding non-human entities on social media, and whether ideas

associated with agency such as rights and responsibilities apply to those entities, already exists (see Lugosi and Quinton, 2018; Quinton and Reynolds, 2021). Overall, if the research affords agency to non-human entities, then researchers will have to consider how ethical concepts of harm, and consent can or cannot be applied to them.

Other predictions which will create further ethical complications for researchers in social media include an increased sensory richness on social media through the use of augmented reality (AR) (Appel et al., 2020). Social media marketing researchers using AR research environments will need to consider the ethics of how to design those environments. Questions will need to be asked concerning the impact of participants knowing the environment is not really 'real' on their choices and behaviours. The use of AR in research might be considered as synonymous to an experiment, so research might consider that the consequences for participants of their actions in that environment may be ignored/minimised as it is not 'real'. Taking seriously the ethical issues associated with AR, and other aspects of the increased sensory richness predicted for social media, should help us to avoid events akin to the Stanford Prison experiments (Zimbardo, 1971). by future generations of researchers.

The influence of the Internet of Things (IoT) and the increasing ability to superimpose, integrate and join data from connected entities will also impact on research ethics questions and should be raised by all stakeholders in research in marketing (Hoffman and Novak, 2018; Nguyen and Simkin, 2017). The role of IoT in relation to consumers' digital footprints may result in data being available that the consumer is unaware of generating. This could lead to multiple ethics challenges such as a lack of transparency, to both social media users and researchers, concerning 'conversations' between things may lead to issues of representativeness. This issue is indicative of the emerging challenges facing researchers as sources of data become more numerous but also more opaque, with potential greater reliance by researchers on the ethical good practice being programmed in. This reliance may well be naïve. For example, location based advertising to mobile devices – understanding how the information held and communicated by social media impacts on location based sales promotions is a topic that could interest marketing researchers but many researchers may rely on the ethical good practice of coders to place boundaries on the types of data that could be extracted from such interactions.

Big data, generated through digital and social media platforms, is increasingly used in predictive modelling, trend analysis and decision making for policy at national and international level (Vassakis, Petrakis, and Kopanakis, 2018). On a practical level, the vast volume of digital data now being stored globally and the energy required to house such data storage facilities has created a substantial environmental and ethical issue for society. At a technological level the enduring nature of digital content means that deletion of content by an individual or an organisation does not remove that material entirely, despite the 'right to be forgotten' (GDPR Act, 2018, Article 17), also known as the 'right of erasure'. Aligned to this, researchers should be encouraged to collect the minimum data required to answer a research question (GDPR Act 2018, principle C). As researchers we may exhibit a tendency to over collect 'interesting' data, and the proliferation of available data is a vast and appealing pool but this tendency needs to be checked, particularly in relation to any type of data that may lead to unintended, jigsaw, identification. At the closure of the research project, although research projects generally outline deletion of data, in reality the digital traces will remain, and could be accessed by governments, organised crime or commercial organisations if desired.

Research ethics and actors in research

A complex ecosystem exists of actors involved in or impacted by the ethics of digital and social media research. There are those actors who are preeminent, such as the participants and their data or indeed the digital traces of their data, along with the researcher conducting a study and the 'body' which has given ethical approval of the study. There are also other actors which may be just below the horizon but which need careful consideration. This section discusses the multiple actors, ranging from the obvious to those hidden from sight and their interrelationship with research ethics. A lack of not only recognition, but also understanding of the various actors in any given research project may have ethical consequences for the research undertaken. The privilege of creating value from data, which is a core aim of research, comes with responsibilities which should not be underestimated. The relative ease, through the use of digital technologies, with which social media data *may* be accessed, collected and analysed (Woodfield, 2018) can create a laissez-faire attitude towards good research ethics practice. This attitude can result in an assumption being made that another actor will take the ethical responsibility or enact good practice on our behalf.

Those researched

Increasingly it may not always be relevant to talk about 'participants' as much research is conducted without the knowledge of those people who created the content. For example, the data amassed by social media firms which is then used for research purposes, such as dwell time on specific platforms, or mobile related data (Conick, 2016). The direct reach of communication possible to an individual via a mobile also results in the direct collection of data from an individual through that vehicle. A more apt term for the actors who are or have been researched is 'those researched', as much of the new research landscape involves the passive collection of data from both human and non-human agents, such as avatars and chat bots. A further area complicated by social media is the lack of established boundaries between the individual actor and other actors and third parties (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2017). The networked nature of social media and the creation, curation and sharing of data, and the use of such data for research creates challenges for ethics principles such as informed consent, and data ownership. Researchers may need to make allowances for these porous boundaries.

On one hand, those researched are unlikely to be well informed or even aware of current data protection regulations. This ongoing information asymmetry (Kannan and Li, 2017), alongside the power imbalances inherent in social media (Halavais, 2019), requires protective measures be enacted to 'safeguard' those researched. On the other hand, the use of 'protective measures' by those other than the researched facilitates their continued dependency on another actor to oversee any involvement in research. Better education within society for individuals to understand the value of their data (Neff, 2020) and how and when it could contribute to research could be a long-term goal. In the shorter term, social media and digital researchers in marketing need to broaden their scope of 'who' may count as an actor in research and, aligned to this, consider carefully whether their inclusion is meaningful and relevant not only to the aims of the study but also to the actor themselves. Greater transparency as to who/which actors are involved in any research project will enhance trust from those researched. For example, currently very few studies acknowledge that some of the gathered data may stem from a non-human actor, which may have learnt its responses and cues from machine learning.

Furthermore, the scale of data that is now being collected creates a greater distance between those researched and the researcher (Halford, 2018; Markham, 2018), and it may be argued that 'humanness' is in danger of being lost (Chandler and Fuchs, 2019). This humanness is important in terms of research ethics as it assists in linking those who are the object of research with those who are conducting the research. The diminution of 'humanness' may result in less accountability and less sense of responsibility for those researched. To elaborate, it is hard to feel responsible for large scale data generated by unknown actors. To counteract the diminution of humanness, co-creation and greater emphasis on participatory research could be employed, whereby participants are actively included through stages of the research process.

We would suggest that those researched must always remain the focal point, and that more should be done to exhibit transparency in data collection and use. As researchers we should remind ourselves of the 'humanness' or 'actorness' from which the data originated. A benefit of social media is that it gives a voice to multiple previously 'silent' groups, such as young carers or older consumers; as well as raising the wider public's awareness of issues such as micro-plastics in household products. However, despite the empowering nature of social media in giving some groups a voice, there is still a substantial under and over representation of certain segments in society.

The researcher and the institution

Separating the researcher from those researched in terms of social media research ethics is challenging. As researchers interested in the social media and digital environments we need to remind ourselves of our own ontological perspectives and consider our own personal ethics' positions as we design and conduct our research. Any professional bodies to which we may belong and any institution for which we work will have codes of conduct which either infer or explicitly state how we should conduct research that is rigorous and ethical. The challenge lies in how any of the more general discipline specific, and or institution specific research ethics guidance, can be applied to social media research. As noted by Crawford et al. (2019, p13) '*Researchers and HREC members share concerns for online research, particularly regarding participant privacy, confidentiality, vulnerability, and safety, consent in the online space, and the lack of consistent guidance*.' While universities and research institutions use Internal Review Boards (IRB) or Research Ethics Committee (REC) panels to review and approve research projects, an ongoing issue is that many of the panel members on such boards may not have experience in online/digital or social media research owing to its evolving nature and recency as both a research topic and a set of research tools (Hokke et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2013; Warfield et al., 2019). This lack of expertise may result in either inappropriate questions being asked about the project or highly relevant questions not being asked at all. For example, often erring understandably on the side of caution, there can be a tendency to overlook the value in empowering peripheral groups such as disabled consumers through being able to voice and capture their shopping experiences on social media with the desire to protect and anonymise data, thus removing the right to be 'heard'. Ethics board questions here tend to focus on 'protecting the perceived vulnerable' rather than championing inclusivity or respecting the participants' wishes in research.

Researchers may wish to consider their project type. For example, whether social media data is being sought specifically for a project and thus primary data or whether the data as social media content is already in existence and as such secondary data (Quinton and Reynolds, 2018a). One of the challenges in using secondary data stemming from social media content is the multi layered

complexity in discerning whether informed consent was necessary and if so, was it obtained, at what point and by whom? Much social media content used for research has been 'scraped' through data collection software with little or no awareness from the actors who contributed that content.

Funders and commissioners

Research funders may have specific codes of conduct in relation to projects funded by them, and non-adherence may result in penalties. The Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) as a major funder of research in the social sciences in the UK, for example, signposts the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) and The European Science Foundation's European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity as tools for guidance for grant holders to use. However, despite the rapid rise in volume of research that either uses social media within research methodologies or research which is bound up in the phenomena of social media itself, there is currently a lack of ethical guidance specifically addressing social media research.

As delineated elsewhere in this chapter there is a variety of approaches taken to the governance of research ethics for social media research. Many of us as researchers are bound by institutional and regulatory governance in terms of data privacy, informed consent etc. These regulatory frameworks can and do create challenges in the operational aspects of some research projects. For example, the tension between gaining informed consent and the passive collection of social media data through scraping content. There is not an established set of rules for such studies, but contextuality is a key consideration here. We suggest that, following Quinton and Reynolds' (2018a) reflections, the sensitivity of the subject and the level of vulnerability of the participants be key determinants of whether informed consent is necessary.

Society and other audiences

The relationship between the audience and reader of the research, and research ethics, may be variable. Variable as some readers such as academics may be experts and actively search for signs of robust ethical processes whilst many other audiences, the public or academics from other disciplines, are likely to accept the output of the research at face value and 'trust' that the research was conducted in an ethical manner. This implicit trust of the reader to the researcher should be treated with respect. Increasing the transparency of the research process by making explicit ethics processes followed, and any challenges faced, will help enlighten non expert audiences and, in the longer-term help foreground ethics in social media research.

The relationship between society and social media research ethics and the impact ethically robust or poor research can have on the wider society warrants consideration. The 'wider society' may seem rather abstract to many researchers, who wonder how their studies could have far reaching effects. Considering the multiple actors involved in social media and digital marketing research helps the researcher to consider the ethical challenges from multiple perspectives.

When assessing the value of any digital/social media research project, understanding the benefits of that research may help justify why the research should be undertaken even when potentially problematic ethical challenges are encountered.

Macro, meso, and micro research ethics governance

Social media researchers will at some point in their research be confronted by the issue of governance in relation to ethics, whether it be self-governance and exhibiting good ethics practice,

or compliance with institutional policies or indeed compliance with national or supranational regulations regarding social media research. Despite formative policies such as the ESOMAR policy published in 2011, and updated in 2015 and the more recent Association of Internet Research guidelines which are currently in their third edition (AoiR, 2019), there remains no 'standard' research ethics framework for social media research. Owing to the lack of consistent guidance researchers should consider looking across and beyond subject areas, professional disciplines, regulatory bodies and national laws to establish good, robust research ethics practices that are likely to endure. The issues surrounding governance can be outlined at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Macro

At the macro level, whilst there is recognition of the inadequacies of current policies and guidelines (Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2017; Taylor and Pagliari, 2018), to date there has been limited national and supranational legislation regarding digital/social media data, participants and stakeholders. The challenge remains from whom or where should guidelines and or laws derive? Privacy self-regulation is more positively received in the USA (Martin and Murphy, 2017) than in other countries such as Europe which has a stronger mandate for legislated regulation, as evidenced by the introduction and general compliance with the GDPR 2018. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research published by the Australian Government (2018) is fairly typical of country-based guidance in that it does not contain a specific section relating to internet mediated research, digital research or social media research.

A partial exception to the legislative lacuna is the GDPR Act 2018 which although focusing on data, covers pertinent aspects of social media data in terms of purpose of data collection, storage, sharing and disposal of that data. In the US the only similar data foregrounded legislation that has been passed is in California as the Consumer Privacy Rights Act (CCPA, 2018). This State act gives consumers' greater rights over businesses sharing and selling their personal information, and limits businesses' use of 'sensitive personal information,' including precise geolocation. However, this legislation applies to larger firms only (those with revenue of more than $25m per year) and offers an opt-out rather than the GDPR opt-in. It should be noted that the selling of data includes data used for research purposes.

Meso

At the meso level, research-led institutions such as universities, and commercial organisations frequently rely on their own policies and guidelines, such as IRB or REC regulations or a professional body's more generalist guidelines. Academic research is governed by IRB and ethics committees, whose members may not be made up of experts in the new possibilities and the increased responsibilities of digital/social media research. So either important ethics questions are not asked, the wrong questions are asked, or the emphasis is on the wrong area of a project which is submitted to them. This does not enhance research ethics learning for the research community and may impact of the efficacy of the research project as well as limit scholarship which could enhance knowledge for the future.

Marketing research agencies may cite guidelines such as ESOMAR as an ethics framework, however, any reliance on pre-digital general guidelines, or even early versions of digital and social media research guidelines may result in well-intentioned but increasingly irrelevant support. For example, a project involving the use of social media images could not rely on the ESOMAR 2011 or 2015 ethics

guidelines as these guidelines do not contain guidance on the use of social media images, but refers researchers back to local regulations or industry codes that might exist in the focal context/country. The British Psychological Society 2017 guidance for internet mediated research (BPS, 2017) applies the main themes of privacy and consent to the general context of internet research and highlights the role of the researcher and their responsibility to the wider society in exhibiting good practice in their research but pays scant attention to social media in research. In many ways this is not surprising as the increasing number of platforms, the multi-modalities of possible data and different approaches adopted by researchers, make a 'one size fits all' set of rules unrealistic.

Commercial organisations such as marketing research agencies and data firms have largely left the responsibility to either professional industry bodies to act as guides (see for example, the CIM, or the AMA) or various national governments' legislative powers, such as the introduction of The GDPR Act 2018 in the UK. However, the passing over of responsibility to an 'external body' or even in the case of REC and IRB committees, an internal panel, may mean that those directly involved with a social media research project feel no personal ethics responsibility for the research.

Micro

At the micro level, individual research ethics self-governance results in individual and personal sets of ethics practices. Collectively these are likely to be at best patchy and at worst negligent when considered against good practice (Samuel et al., 2018). Individual researchers may be well intentioned but lack the expertise or the experience to foresee ethics (or indeed legal) challenges likely to arise in social media research, and as a result may struggle to manage those challenges appropriately. The exponential increase in technologies available for and involved in research, and the speed of adoption of these technologies by society, also exacerbates the need for dynamic ethics guidance to assist individual researchers. Furthermore, as digital/social media research increases, it crosses discipline boundaries. What is considered ethical research practice in one subject may be considered differently in another, for example, the difference between Anthropology and Marketing. Thus, discipline specific ethics norms are not sufficient, and whilst there may be some ethics insight to be gained and transferred from one discipline to another, there needs to robust ethics principles and practices which can be enacted irrespective of discipline.

At present there exists an overreliance on macro level national and supranational regulation rather than accountability and responsibility at the meso (industry, subject area) and micro (individual) level. As both self-governance and legislated governance appears to have limited success, Professor Gina Neff from the Oxford Internet Institute (Neff, 2020) amongst others, calls for greater awareness and more education in society of the value of data and the need for society as a whole to treat such material with greater respect, transparency and integrity. Steimer (2018) suggests that Marketers may see themselves as middle-men who do not wish to enter the fray of ethical quagmire of data collection and use. Nevertheless, the onus should be shifted away from the consumer, and the over emphasis of their responsibility to understand social media platforms terms of use, and move the responsibility towards the 'experts' and the organisations, industries etc. The emergent social media territory requires professionals and organisations to think about what they should and should not do, in terms of research using data. The power imbalances that currently exist mean these issues may need legislative intervention to address them, though these will not be without their problems (see, for example, the Australian government's attempts to force search engines such as Google to pay for news content).

Good practice recommendations

Pursuant to our earlier discussions in this chapter, recommendations for good practice in research ethics include:

- Complying with institutional/national legislation creatively to enact sound research ethics.
- Looking beyond subject norms for good practice, researchers may also look to some industry good practice and vice versa.
- Being more pro-active as researchers and more engaged with robust ethics practice rather than relying on other actors, this can in part be achieved by:
  - Asking ourselves the core questions outlined in the next section.
  - Reflecting on our own responsibilities and looking more closely at the provenance and authenticity of the social media data used.
- Recognising the context within which the material originated, especially as the volume and variety of platforms proliferates.
- Considering ongoing and staged consent in an environment where many research projects are multi-modal and also multi-staged.
- Reinforcing practices that advocate for the collection of the minimum amount of data necessary to fulfil the research design
- Weighing up the value of inclusion, and agency for participants versus the potential for over-protection and thus removal of 'voice', for each research project.
- Engaging with greater use of participatory and or co-created research to improve transparency throughout the stages of any research project and the inclusion of more diverse voices as participants.
- Advocating for the consideration of participant/actor centred research.

Core questions to ask

The dynamic socio-technical evolving landscape of social media make it unfeasible to take a black and white approach to whether a specific research practice is an ethical practice *per se*. Instead, social media marketing researchers need to work in the grey, determining whether a specific research practice is ethical within a context. Below we offer questions researchers may want to explore to enable them to consider the ethical issues related to a research study. These questions should not be considered in isolation from each other, or without considering the context of the research (e.g., country, institution). The questions are grouped in three overlapping categories outlined in the preceding discussion (contextual transparency, humanness and empowerment versus privacy) and enfold the questions raised in the AoIR guidelines.

Contextual Transparency

- What are the potential benefits of this study which necessitate the inclusion of digital and or social media data?
- Has the context of the study been made explicit?
- What is the provenance of the data being used, has it been/will it be collected by myself or others who have applied robust research ethics, or has it been collected by third parties, whose processes I do not have access to?
- Have I been transparent in communication regarding the purpose of the study and the use of digital/social media data, including its retention, reuse and deletion?

- To what extent am I using passively collected data, and what might be the implications for participants of the use of this data?
- Has it been made explicit how the findings are being represented?

Humanness
- Does the use of aggregated or big data dehumanise the phenomenon that is being researched?
- Are the non-human actors in the study, whether as direct data contributors or indirectly as part of the social media network being considered?
- If non-human actors are included in the study, then how are those non-human actors treated? If non-human actors are not included, then how are those non-human actors excluded from the study?
- How are the rights and autonomy of human and non-human actors being observed?

Empowerment versus privacy
- Have I considered the rights of the participants to be heard versus whether sufficient care has been given to maintain confidentiality and privacy?
- What are the 'reasonable expectations' of content providers (and their interwoven communities) related to privacy in this research context?
- How do I respect the expectations of/desire for privacy at different stages of the research project?
- What actions can I take to identify (e.g., via an active social media presence) content producers so that I can gain consent if it is needed?
- Who (e.g., social media platform/group moderator, data creator, account holder or others) might consent be needed from?
- What is the potential for harm (physical, psychological, economic, social) to all the research stakeholders, such as those researched, content creators, online communities, researcher funders, institutions and society more broadly?

And finally

This chapter has illustrated how those researched, those who commission research, the users of the research, and the wider society may all be impacted by digital and social media research. The value of research in social media and digital aspects of marketing is only just being realised, but these important and developing insights come with substantial responsibilities to undertake and adhere to robust ethical research. The diversity of platforms, the multi-modality of data types and the range of research projects now being undertaken requires a contextual approach to ethics whilst retaining the central positionality of care to the participant/actor. Ethical consideration in research should extend beyond a set of processes or compliance with a set of imposed requirements. As a community of researchers we should aim to instil a set of ethical anchor points for our research in this dynamic, fascinating and complex ecosystem. A focus on contextual transparency, the need to consider the humanness and non-humanness of data, and a requirement to balance empowerment and privacy provides these useful ethical anchor points.

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Dr Sarah Quinton is the Chair of Research Ethics for Oxford Brookes University, UK. and the Research Area Lead for Marketing. Her research interests focus on the interaction of consumers, and business with digital technologies. Her work tends towards the interdisciplinary and includes exploring novel digitally informed methods. Sarah's research has appeared in *Industrial Marketing Management, International Journal of Management Reviews, Psychology and Marketing*, and the *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* . In 2018 Sarah and Nina co-authored *Understanding Research in the Digital Age* (Sage) to assist other researchers. Previous projects include; the sharing of photos online as a way to enhance older people's wellbeing, the digitalisation of European SMEs and the use of LinkedIn by the wine industry. Sarah's breadth of digital research and multiple PhD supervisions inform her digital and social media research ethics expertise. She continues to be fascinated by digital as a phenomenon and a method in social science research.

Professor Nina Reynolds is a marketing academic in the School of Business at the University of Wollongong, Australia, and an active member of the University's Ally Network. Her research interests focus on digital research methods, and consumption as it relates to individual and/or social well-being. Nina's current research in marketing/consumption behaviours includes theorising self-gifting consumer behaviour, consolidating the research on people of diverse gender and/or sexual identities, and exploring the impact of mobile location-based services. She is also involved in cross-disciplinary collaborations related to the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence and tackling behaviours related to Antimicrobial Resistance. Nina's work with Sarah on research methods and research ethics has appeared in book chapters and as a book. In addition, Nina has published in several journals including the Journal of International Business, Journal of Business Research, European Journal of Marketing, BMC Public Health, and the International Journal of Market Resea