

IRB Guidance on Social Media Research (8/27/2020)

Researchers are increasingly using social media and other online platforms to recruit and interact with their research participants. The Cal Poly Humboldt IRB has therefore developed supplemental guidelines for human subjects protections for social media-based studies.

1. General guidance

- The IRB applies the same standards to reviewing traditional and social media-based research.
- Be sure to understand and follow the online platform's terms of service (TOS) and end user license agreements (EULA).
- Consider providing guidance for the appropriate use of the chat function in Zoom focus groups.

2. Public versus private data on social media

- Some online information about people is public and can be used by researchers without permission, but some is considered private and requires permission to use in research.
- In most cases when access to information on social media requires logins, membership in online groups, or 'friending' specific individuals, that information is private and requires permission to use for research.
- When in doubt about whether to consider data public or private, investigators are encouraged to consult with the IRB about the specific circumstances.

3. Recruiting participants on social media

- Recruitment should not involve fabrication of online identities or other deceptions.
- Recruitment should not involve members of research team 'lurking' or 'creeping' social media sites in ways that site users are unaware of.
- When recruiting participants from special interest sub-groups on social media sites, obtain permission from group moderators where appropriate.
- Clearly identify recruiting ads as being part of a research study. When possible, for example on Facebook, set up a study-specific page and do not post ads directly on personal pages.
- Provide screen shots or web links showing the exact recruitment ads (images and language).
- Describe any social media tools used to target specific participant characteristics (e.g., demographics, religion, keywords).
- Explain what happens once a participant clicks your ad, including identifying new websites the ad link opens.