

**Title: Ethi(cs)quette of (re)searching *with e-friends*  
clicking towards a social media-driven research agenda**

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**Abstract**

Social media increasingly shapes our professional and personal lives, leveraging its size, potential for ubiquity and real time communication. Ranked the most popular social media platform by the number of subscribers, Facebook is increasingly gaining momentum as a research tool, mostly used to conduct surveys, adverts and observation-driven research. However, Facebook's potential for supporting consented qualitative research remains largely unexplored and deemed sometimes ethically questionable in the midst of ongoing debates around data protection rules and the ambiguity surrounding e-friendship meaning.

This paper is based on an interpretative phenomenological PhD study, between 2017-2020, aiming to deepen our understanding of London-based Romanian migrant entrepreneurs experiences of social inclusion through entrepreneurship.

This paper contributes to the literature on research methodology reflective practice of enabling ethical research, by outlining ethical implications of sampling via Facebook and when researching *with e-friends* as Facebook friends. It offers context bound insights as guidance to researchers incorporating social media in their qualitative research. Therefore, the significance of this ethical research practice is discussed in terms of privacy, confidentiality and informed consent as a cross point between GDPR regulatory framework, as universal research ethical framework, Facebook data privacy settings and the researcher's reflective approach to mitigate ethical challenges experienced when recruiting Facebook e-friends.

Keywords: qualitative methodology, Facebook, ethics, e-friends, privacy, informed consent, confidentiality

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## Introduction

The use of social media in research is recommended for its time and cost efficiencies (Akard et al., 2015; Fenner et al., 2014; Gelinis et al., 2017) and as a viable source of recruiting hard-to-reach participants (Gorman et al. 2014; Ling et al. 2018; Waring et al., 2018; Whitaker et al., 2017). However, these advantages come with its own ethical questions. Amongst the ethical issues associated with the use of Facebook in general include the blurred distinction between public and private data (Chiauzzi and Wicks, 2019), the lack of specific ethical guidelines (Ess, 2015; Kamp et al., 2019; Warfield et al, 2019) and the misconception that friends and e-friends are synonymous in a traditional, Aristotelian way (Fileborn, 2016). It is the traditional, the Aristotelian friendship, portrayed as deep intimacy-based friendship, which seems to defer from e-friendship (Kaliarnta, 2016), allowing Facebook e-friends to shape a new generation friends, which includes friends of friends, acquaintances and even strangers (Fileborn, 2016).

The literature on methodological significance of social media is still in its infancy (Gelinis et al., 2017), affected by short-termism and obsolescence, due to challenges associated with the dynamics of its everchanging ubiquity and evolution (Arigo et al., 2018) as well as by the questioned and questionable transferability of ethics from traditional research methods to new technology-driven research (Kamp et al., 2019).

Adding to these methodological complexities, two highly mediatised ethical controversies, surrounding the OKCupid, online dating site and the release of 70,000 users' data by a researcher, who argued for data being public (Zimmer, 2018) and Cambridge Analytica, when over 50 million unconsented Facebook accounts were used during the 2016 US election (Rosenberg et al., 2018), the debate around social media-driven ethical research and the protection of human subjects has been prioritised by a handful of scholars (Bathia-Lin et al, 2019; Fileborn, 2016; Kamp et al., 2019). However, the debate remains heavily anchored in the past, addressing retrospectively widespread neglect through inadequate informed consent, and confidentiality, anonymity and transparency in reporting (Taylor and Pagliari, 2017).

This blurriness expands beyond the social media platforms, into regional regulations, which seems to suffer from a similar universalism of one-size-fits all approach. Therefore, the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) encompasses universal ethical rules, left to contextual interpretation. As the established research practice these are implemented at university level through an online application to the University Ethics Committee. (Hand, 2018). However, this practice is deemed limited and limiting in meeting the required ethical research standards for social media, as argued by some scholars (Ess, 2015). Consequently, in order to address these limitations, broadly driven by lack of a bespoke ethical framework, social media-driven researchers practise sometimes “ongoing consent, ethics-on-the-go and conscious omission” (Warfield et al, 2019: 2068).

Although a handful of scholars (Ess, 2015; Markham, 2017; Markham and Buchanan, 2018a; Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017) have published broad blueprints to address the acknowledged gap for a more context-situated ethical framework for research using social media (Markham and Buchanan, 2018b), there is still a long way to go until a well-articulated framework, bringing together social media and ethical research is achieved (Arigo et al., 2018; Fileborn, 2016; Gelinis et al., 2017).

This reflective paper is based on an interpretative phenomenological PhD study conducted under the auspices of the University. This study is focused on London-based migrant entrepreneurs and their experiences of social inclusion through entrepreneurship. It aims to provide context-bound insights as guidance to researchers incorporating social media in their qualitative research.

This paper adds to the literature on the ethics of sampling using Facebook, by reporting on context bound challenges when recruiting 13 research participants between 19<sup>th</sup> November 2018 and 9<sup>th</sup> December 2018. Consequently, the researchers argue that researching using social media raises specific ethical problems, which require reflective, case-by-case and ongoing reflective ethical practice by researchers. Additionally, it contributes to the literature calling for empirical evidence and benchmarks to align in a cohesive manner (Khatri et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2014). Therefore, it brings forward practice-driven ethical implications of researching *with* e-friends in today's Facebook society, where transferability of meaning between a traditional Aristotelian friend and the Facebook e-friend should be deemed inappropriate (Kaliarnta, 2016). It is important to understand that Facebook's marketing default "friends" label broadly defines any social interaction amongst its users, who could be family, friends, friends of friends, acquaintances and even strangers (Fileborn, 2016).

This paper employs the following structure: section one presents an overview of the literature on social media-driven research; section two clarifies the researcher's approach to the practice of researching *with* e-friends recruited via Facebook; section three introduces the significance of GDPR and University Ethics Committees in informing and guiding ethical research and it addresses in its subsections the context-bound ethical challenges of privacy, confidentiality and informed consent, as experienced when recruiting participants via Facebook; section four concludes by bringing forward the contribution to knowledge and recommendations for future research; section five presents the ethics framework and approval which is embedded in this study.

## **E-sampling via Facebook**

The transition from traditional research to Facebook is at its beginnings and challenging. This new trend expands beyond the online social interaction, increasingly becoming an integral part of our social and professional lives. As hallmarks of Web 2.0 digital revolution (Kamp et al., 2019), social media, including the top ranked platform of Facebook, represents computer-assisted, online communication platforms, where e-friends, followers and otherwise labelled users create, share content and interact (Carr and Hayes, 2015; Henderson et al., 2010), thus creating and maintaining online relationships (Schauer, 2015).

Social media has come a long way from being a passive online message board to being praised by its increasing number of subscribers for its interactive and collaborative potential. Consequently, researchers also increasingly engaging with social media, leveraging its potential for data collection and sampling (McRobert et al., 2018).

Embedding time and cost efficiencies, with some researchers reporting that sample recruitment via Facebook is 2.5 times faster than traditional research methods (Kyrouz et al., 2016), social

media stands to become a holy grail for new generations of globalised researchers (Hokke et al., 2018) who participate in these e-societies, including Facebook (Simanovsky, 2019).

Facebook, as the top social media platform offers the possibility, even if only theoretically, of being a click away from making new e-friends amongst the over 2 billion potential Facebook subscribers (Facebook, 2019) and an average of 338 of your e-friends (McClain, 2017) for each of these subscribers. It becomes equally a research opportunity and an ethical challenge (Kamp et al., 2019).

However, the literature binding social media and research remains skewed, limited to a handful of social science (Kosinski et al., 2015) and medical scholars (Arigo et al., 2018; Kamp et al., 2019; Ling et al., 2018) who are pushing forward this research agenda. This narrow approach is in favour of surveys (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Valdez, 2014) and adverts (Carter-Harris et al., 2016; Pötzschke and Braun, 2017) rather than as a recruitment opportunity for qualitative interviewing. This literature seems to describe a professional shyness, as a result of complex ambiguity surrounding ethical guidelines which seem to contradict the core “do-no-harm” principle of qualitative research practice. By definition, qualitative research requires negotiating an ethical and trustful researcher-researched relationship, which enables access and a deeper understanding of participants’ worlds. Entrusted with participants’ stories, the qualitative researcher has moral and ethical responsibility for protecting the research participants’ identities and confidentiality (Reich, 2015).

Faced with time consuming challenges to recruit hard-to-reach research participants using multiple sampling techniques, the researcher reflectively assessed Facebook potential. The increased interest from the research participants in befriending her on Facebook was the main motivation and driver for considering Facebook as a source for sampling. This brought her to the realization that for these community of migrant entrepreneurs Facebook plays multiple key roles, in providing them with business support and in offering a sense of community for them as migrants in the host country (Bagwell, 2015).

Equipped with a broad understanding of GDPR regulation with regard to researching with human subjects, “Implied data protection by design and default” (GDPR, Chapter II, Article 25, 2018; Annex 5) and the approval of the University Ethics Committee, as compliant as any other well informed PhD researcher, she designed the e-snowball technique in order to access and sample 13 of the study’s research participants for qualitative interviews. Therefore, the researcher starting by asking the research participants interviewed and her new e-friends and gatekeeper for their consent to use their networks for sampling. These networks of “befriended” research participants were used to identify new potential research participants based on inclusion criteria (Chitac and Knowles, 2019).

The initial screening for these potential research participants was conducted using the self-reported Facebook profile and a brief screening of their postings, as means to confirm their suitability for this study. then reaches out to inform and invite them to participate in the study by using Messenger messages.

Once the researcher shortlisted the potential research participants, she contacted them in private, via Messenger, using a standardised message. The scope of these message was to brief them on the research scope, her identity as a researcher, the interest of collaborating and as means to open a line of communication which they control.

Once the potential research participants contacted the researcher for clarifications or for collaboration, additional research documentation, including participant's information form and consent forms have been provided via email before scheduling the face-to-face interviews. After participating in interviews, these research participants became passive gatekeepers, consenting to open up their networks to e-friend researcher, who continued the snowball sampling via Facebook (Chitac and Knowles, 2019).

In the context of these study, sampling via Facebook has proven to be a critical sampling tool. Firstly, because the traditional sampling techniques became very challenging from a time perspective and due to busy gatekeepers.

Therefore, the researcher used Facebook for sampling 13 out of a total of 49 research participants included in this study, by using e-snowball, alongside other traditional sampling techniques, particularly to overcome gatekeepers' dependency and sampling limitations that traditional sampling techniques had reached. By using Facebook as a research sampling source, the researcher experienced increased time and resource efficiencies, comparable to the experiences of other scholars (Akard et al. 2015; Fenner et al., 2014; Gelinias et al., 2017; Lane, Armin and Gordon, 2015).

Despite the research opportunities experienced by using Facebook, the researcher experienced plenty of technical and ethical challenges to be addressed before its full untapped potential can be properly explored (Franz et al., 2019).

Some of the technical issues associated with Facebook highlighted by other professionals was the credibility of self-reported profiles (Kosinski et al., 2015). However, with control points in place, such as the company website to check for these entrepreneurs' active business accounts and a screening of entrepreneurial related posts helped the researcher correctly identified potential research participants. There is increasing evidence showing that Facebook profiles are in majority trustworthy accounts (Back et al., 2010; Kosinski et al. 2013). This is also corroborated by the experience of this researcher.

Additionally, there is the risk of selection bias, which is similar or slightly decreased compared to the traditional snowball recruitment strategy (Frandsen et al., 2015; Topolovec-Vranic and Natarajan , 2016) thanks to the Facebook population closely mirroring the offline society (Ofcom, 2016), and to its increasing number of users, with over 44 million users in the UK (Statista, 2020). Although, this does not mean that this is true for this community of migrant entrepreneurs, Facebook proved to open up a more accessible community of potential research participants, providing a cost effective and relatively high-quality alternative (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Kosinski et al., 2015), making this study possible.

Aligned with previous empirical evidence, the researcher acknowledged that women were more responsive on Facebook than through any other sampling technique used (Ofcom, 2015). In the context of this study this was the way to ensure that these women migrant entrepreneurs were properly represented.

Keeping with the narrow scope of this reflective paper, regarding the ethics of using Facebook in sampling e-friends in an interpretative PhD study, the researcher details on the ethical challenges and reflects on how the current Institutional and GDPR guidelines are limiting and

limited in providing the proper guidelines for social media driven research. This next section of the paper details these two main challenges, using situated examples from this PhD study.

Firstly, it addresses the ethics of researching with e-friends, by following the evolution of this term and its connotation in the new e-society. Secondly, it uses situated examples to address the potential ethical challenges that a qualitative researcher could face and how to overcome them in order to ensure an ethical research practice.

### **Researching *with* e-friends: from hard-to reach to Facebook e-friends**

Qualitative research is based on researcher-researched social interaction, balancing power relations upon which trust is built. In practice, it seems that the researcher is performing an active balancing act between being friendly and becoming just friends, reflectively managing the bias of researching friends, whilst aiming for that personal, authentic story (Brush et al., 2010). At the heart of the debate around researching friends, enactments of Aristotelian friendship, embedding utility, virtue and pleasure are often charged with ethical risks of crossing boundaries (Douglas and Carless 2012; Kiliarnta, 2016). However, although social media seems to diffuse the intensity of emotions associated with traditional friendships, researchers are still confronted by technical, ethical dilemmas built around informed consent, transparency and confidentiality (Soo-Jin Lee, 2017).

All the participants in the study were initially unknown to researcher, even though they all shared a common cultural and language background, which proved critical in overcoming the access barriers to what proved to be a hard-to-reach community.

The reflective researcher argues that e-friends, who were recruited for this study are just e-friends rather than close friends. Consequently, in this study, “researching *with* e-friends”, as opposed to “about”, aligns with phenomenological aim of this study of deepening understanding and interpreting the meaning of participants’ lived experiences (Sprague, 2016; Vershinina et al., 2019).

For researchers, addressing the differences and similarities between online friends and offline friends means settling ethical debates and implications that reach beyond the capitalisation of the term.

A simple, statistical view of Facebook e-friends reveals that the Facebook user has an average of 338 friends/contacts (McClain, 2017) with the potential of making up to 5000 friends (Mazie, 2015) with whom he/she spends on average of 35 minutes daily (Facebook, 2019). It is in this e-society, that a new kind of friendship is shaped. Therefore, one can imagine that these friends end up being categorised on a continuum of intimacy from family, close friends, casual friends to acquaintances (Bryant and Marmo, 2012; Knapton, 2016; Stec, 2015) and even “I don’t know friends” (Kelly et al., 2010), depending on the level of interaction and intimacy (Bryant and Marmo, 2010; Stec, 2015).

The critical difference between friends and social media e-friends is made by empirical evidence that suggest that only 28% e-friends qualify as close friends. This means that social media users maintain distinctive series of hierarchically inclusive layers of social interaction and emotional closeness online as they used to do offline though face-to-face interactions (Sutcliffe et al., 2012). These layers of friendship embed values of emotional closeness with values of 5, 15, 50, 150 and beyond 500 (Dunbar, 2014). The hierarchical structure of e-

friendship on social media reinforces the layered status that this new generation of e-friends in user's life, which might raise questions of misrepresentation (Dunbar, 2016).

However, the researcher avoids equating exclusively the researched e-friends with acquaintances as this seems like practising “ethics-on-the-go” (Warfield et al, 2019), ignoring that her cultural and language sameness with these e-friends seems intensified in the host country. As co-national, migrant and e-friend, the researcher arguably has been entrusted with participants' stories more than if she were a distant researcher. This experience echoes that of other qualitative researchers (Brewis, 2014; Snell et al., 2013) and this feeling of trust was gracefully formulated by one of the e-friends who participated in this PhD study:

*“I hire Romanians because I can understand them, I can read them [...]. At home I feel at home, because I am together with my children, with my family [...]. In this society I am always alert. So, if you were British, I would have approached this interview differently. The fact that you are Romanian makes me feel relaxed! [...]” (EMR29).*

This comment shows how in the context of migration, cultural sameness overrides the mainstream otherness, enabling trustful, friendly researcher-researched relationship. A similar story to Taylor's (2011: 14), whereby “friends are likely to divulge more to you, forgetting that you are recording and that you may potentially publish what they are saying”.

However, the researcher acknowledges that by studying “with” e-friends, she has to manage the risk of transposing herself in the interpretation of these stories, diluting interviewees' stories (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). Her outsider entrepreneurial positionality was a great opportunity for stepping back and reinforcing this study as the participants' legitimized spokesperson (Rupp and Taylor, 2011).

Because most of the reported social media research is skewed towards big data, surveys or observation (Moreno et al, 2013), this fuels two complex issues which have ignited the ethics debate overshadowing social media-driven research. Firstly, the blurred distinction between public and private seems to persist, as some social media platforms, such as Twitter, are public, whilst others, such as Facebook, seem to blend different degrees of public and private. Secondly, the lack of clear differentiation between researching e-friends, *about* e-friends and *with* e-friends is encouraged by the tone of universalism embedded in the traditional ethical regulatory frameworks.

Supportive of the new challenges and undeniable opportunities that social media brings, rather than succumbing to the exclusively frozen Aristotelian meaning of deep intimacy-based friendship (Kaliarnta, 2016), the researcher argues that norms of friendship and interaction are context dependent and medium specific. Although this perspective seems to add to the complexity surrounding the attempt to reach a consensus of appropriateness and ethi(cs)quette of social media driven research or researching with e-friends (Fileborn, 2016), it also enables a better understanding of Friendship, as a research method associated with meeting expectations of collaborative researcher-researched relationships, based on professional trust (Ellisson et al., 2007). For researcher as much as for the participants recruited via Facebook, the research-based e-friendship, initiated by the potential participants themselves, was approached as a “stance of Friendship”, which implied collaborative relationship of knowledge co-creation based on respect, dignity and empathy and sensitivity (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Researcher-researched trust has been built through synergies created by researcher's cultural



and language insider positionality. Her Facebook profile, which has captured the researcher's association within the University and thus validated the invitation to research, and their association with other potential common e-friends. All these created a promising recruitment opportunity. However, honouring the stories of these e-friends for the researcher and her audience meant separating from them, without setting themselves apart. It was an exercise of consciously avoiding socially "merging", which would have compromised research objectivity and ownership of stories (Douglas and Carless, 2012; Owton and Allen-Collison, 2013).

This form of acquitted friendship is a form of social bonding, or simply "being in the world with others" (Owton and Allen-Collison, 2014: 286), which allows for subjective and deeper personal stories to emerge during interviewing, without spoiling the professionally rooted interviewer-interviewee relationship (Owton and Allen-Collison, 2014).

There is still lots of reporting to do to support the formulation of social media guidelines from which the research community and the researched could benefit from. There are many concepts to be re-assessed and understood given the new e-society in which many of us choose to live on a daily basis. This untapped potential needs to be pursued with a reflective mindset.

Reflection is the active, intentional state of mind, through which prior beliefs and assumptions and their implications are analysed. It helps the researcher find a solution, by investigating deeply a situation perceived as obscure and conflicting, such as the ethics of researching with e-friends (Gomes Pessoa et al., 2019).

### **(Rein)forcing ethics for researching *with* e-friends: a matter of shared responsibility**

In this section, context-bound cases from an interpretative PhD study are presented as vehicles of addressing ethical challenges experienced by the researcher when recruiting 13 Facebook e-friends to participate in face-to-face interviews. It presents an overview of the regulatory framework guiding PhD studies focused on human subjects and it emphasises how the main ethical challenges, including informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, were tackled in an iterative effort to ensure ethical research. Organised as cases, these reflective examples are intended to create a bridge between theory and practice and to offer useful context-bound insights for researchers who are new to using Facebook as a recruitment tool for qualitative research. Consequently, these two overarching aims support the call advanced by the broader research community for a specific social media ethical framework.

### **Recruiting (on)line versus (off)line: the line that unites or divides the research community?**

By entering this forum, one may find themselves forced to take sides. Some argue that traditional regulatory frameworks, such as GDPR (2018) and Institutional Research Ethics Committees (IRECs), although universal in ethical approach, suffice in assisting researchers using social media recruitment methods (Gelinis et al., 2017). In this context, the researcher argues alongside other scholars for a need for a bespoke regulatory framework for social media-driven research (Chiauzzi and Wicks, 2019; Hand, 2018).

It is well known that research ethics are often presented to PhD researchers or other early career researchers by their universities as a self-explanatory online application, subject to approval by University Ethics Committees. This application is often approached in a disciplinary best practice manner and as one-size-fits all approach, with minimal attempts to counter the presumption that practice of ethics becomes “one-off box-ticking exercise” (Chiauzzi and Wicks, 2019).

These regulatory frameworks seem to create an environment of (rein)forcing these universal and traditionally-fitted guidelines onto new research methods, lacking the specifics of social media driven research, which could benefit from more flexible, context-bound ethics (Ienca et al., 2018).

Although, according to the Office for Human Research Protections report (2018), there is a myriad of national research ethics entities and regulations worldwide and in Europe in particular, standardising human subject focused research, reporting on ethical practice is deemed almost invisible outside the University Ethics Committee application in many disciplines except for medical studies (Henderson et al., 2013).

However, the most visible and overarching one is European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which uses university and local ethics committees as vehicles to enable ethical research practices by offering a framework for research participants’ privacy, informed consent and confidentiality (Hand, 2018).

As expected, and in line with tradition, the researcher has applied for ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee, which is also an institutional vehicle for GDPR, which included formal consent forms together with clear and transparent research implications for all parties involved. However, beyond this bureaucratic process, the researcher prioritized at all stages of the research a reflective, ethical practice, guided by the rule of causing no harm to participants (GDPR, 2018; Miller et al., 2016).

Based on ethical challenges experienced when recruiting 13 e-friends via Facebook, the PhD researcher reinforces the need for a specific social media ethical framework, benefiting from traditional regulations. These e-societies and their research implications are increasing, having the potential to greatly impact research conduct. However, this approach should not emphasise a replacement of traditional sampling, but should be portrayed as a new stream of research opportunity sharing the same roots. This approach enables the efficient advance of methodological knowledge and it decreases the risk of repeating the same mistakes twice. Consequently, the so-called traditional regulatory frameworks are valuable in helping researchers reflectively engage in ethical research, whilst also seeking strategies to overcome the new challenges associated with new research methodology. This makes the routine of “ticking the box” through institutional ethical application a mere first step in researcher’s ethical journey and not the means to an end (Gelinis et al., 2017).

Similar to traditional recruitment methods, social media recruitment could be passive and active. Passive recruitment involves finding the social media platforms where targeted participants are recruited via adverts, posts and flyers. Active recruitment, used in this PhD study, used an inclusion criterion to invite the potential participants to an informally consented face-to-face interview (Gelinis et al., 2017).

## **Eti(cs)quette challenges and resolutions: in pursuit of ethical recruitment of e-friends**

By engaging in active recruitment through e-snowball sampling via Facebook, the researcher addressed the following challenges: separating private from public data as a means to protect participants' privacy, confidentiality and ensuring participants' informed consent.

The overarching binary debate between public and private overshadowing social media recruitment was one of the first ethical questions faced by researchers, who chose to recruit via Facebook because this is a social platform mainly used for socializing rather than sharing information as Twitter does (Kwak et al., 2010; Tosun, 2012); because it was the preferred platform by the study's passive gatekeepers and by the researched community and because of researcher's familiarity with it.

Active recruitment, in this case as in other studies, implies interactive exchange of information, including Messenger invitations, friend requests. This approach which encourages a semantic overlap between friends and e-friends could lead to a misunderstanding of researcher-researched relationship (Ellisson et al., 2007). As argued above and in line with previous research, the recruited Facebook friends portray a culturally-based trustful relationship; however, nonetheless, a less-tie friendship (Lin and Lu, 2011) with transparently discussed research implications, as detailed in the research informed consent form, signed by all participants.

By analysing the built-in Facebook privacy setting, Facebook, compared to Twitter for example, has an extra layer of privacy, requiring its users to set up a personal passworded account to access it, whilst Twitter does not. The passworded access to Facebook is a clear indication of this social media platform as being private. Once the user accesses her/his account, Facebook shares with the user the responsibility of setting different degrees of privacy, offering options of "information to be shared with public, friends, friends except, specific friends, only me, custom" (Annex 1). By choosing Facebook "profile by default", the users assume the responsibility of their data becoming public and thus accessible to third-party search engines. However, the users could easily change the privacy settings to suit their needs, by simply taking an active role in customizing their privacy setting (Baym and Boyd, 2012).

### **Managing participants' privacy**

Acknowledging Facebook privacy protocol, the researcher accessed her Facebook account and identified potential e-friends participants by using, with consented access, the networks of five passive gatekeepers, initially by screening self-reported Facebook profiles with the following research relevant inclusion criteria: London-based (location of residence), Romanian (name, profile language), entrepreneur (self-reported job, validated against Company house website and firm related postings).

As "friend of a friend" during this initial stage of recruitment, the researcher took the decision to brief and invite the potential participants based on the visibility of the self-reported profiles that her status as "a friend of a friend" allowed her. Based on the increased visibility of Facebook profiles experienced by the researcher through the networks of previous participants, one could easily argue that most Facebook accounts had by default low levels of privacy

(Farahbakhsh et al., 2017). Purposely set up this way by users or driven by the convenience of default design, this came as no surprise, since business visibility is also nurtured through social media and social capital is known to be a critical resource for migrant entrepreneurs in the host country (Bagwell, 2015; Williams and Krasniqi, 2018) and this community of migrant entrepreneurs in London, who were at the heart of this study, was no exception. However, the researcher, who has her privacy setting to “friends” and the setting to receive friend requests from “everyone”, received “friend request” from all invitees interested to participate in this study. This action of befriending the researcher is assumed to be initiated as a means to increase visibility of her profile, based on which participation in this study was made. Consequently, this new status of direct “e-friends” gave both parties involved in this research greater access to Facebook profiles. It seems that the researcher-researched commonalities identified enabled trust “necessities” to be addressed at both ends, before the face-to-face interview.

At this stage and during the interview, the researcher followed the embedded ethics of the data minimization principle (GDPR, Chapter II, Article 5, 2018, Annex 2), by capturing and using in the recruitment process only the relevant and consented data for the scope of this study. Additionally, by engaging in purpose rather than possibility-driven research practice, the researcher preserved the participants’ privacy by limiting their identification through data (Hand, 2018).

By adjusting the traditional snowball sampling to an online environment, the researcher wrote a private but standardised message via Messenger to each potential participant identified. This message included an overview of the research and an invitation to a formally consented, face-to-face interview, emphasising that the next action was with them. This approach was used as a means to avoid any unintentional harm or breach of personal privacy (Annex 3).

This recruitment process via Facebook showcases a case of “private” and “public” being non-binary values (Zook et al., 2017), a continuum of privacy responsibilities shared by researcher and researched (Bishop, 2017). The participants’ privacy was afterwards addressed by limiting the visibility of the researcher’s friends to outsiders and the rest of e-friends to “only me”, protecting the anonymity of research participants. Through this practice, the risk of de-identification of participants was properly addressed (Bishop, 2017; Ohm, 2010).

### **Managing participants’ confidentiality**

The next step in the recruitment process via Facebook was either stopping any form of contact if there was no action from the potential participant or they denied participation or establishing a line of communication for further clarifications and interview details if the research participant either “sent a friend request” or replied to the researcher’s private message via Messenger.

E-friending the researcher is a common social media practice, although some might argue that this raises an ethical issue of jeopardizing to some degree the confidentiality of participants brought together as e-friends (Baker, 2013). The Facebook privacy setting enables the researcher to limit the visibility of his/her friends to “only me”, which decreases this risk. In the advent of recent highly mediated accounts of data privacy breaches, Facebook continues to develop new data privacy features to meet the standards of the new regulations.

In this case, managing confidentiality meant protecting participants' identity and the research data associated with them, unless otherwise consented to in writing by participants (Surmiak, 2018; Surmiak, 2019).

The enforcement of research confidentiality required a shared effort between researcher and participant, keeping up to date on how Facebook works and what the confidentiality expectations are on both sides and at all stages of the research. This approach has proved efficient previously (Masson et al., 2013).

Confidentiality is a key currency of ethical research and in this study, it has been operationalised following GDPR rules (Chapter I, Article 4, Line 5; Annex 6), by ensuring appropriate Facebook security settings and pseudonymisation of participants by coding their names (i.e. from John C to EMR1). Additionally, the researcher recruited 13 participants from networks of five different passive gatekeepers, as a means to manage selection bias and to manage participants' anonymity. This approach decreased the likelihood of identities being re-identified, with fewer participants sharing the same network.

Additionally, aware of some of the risks reported by other scholars regarding unintentional breaches of participants' confidentiality by using Facebook to disseminate research findings or by collecting participants' data from Facebook (Lewis et al., 2008; Zimmer, 2010), to manage the risk of re-identification, the researcher limited Facebook interactions with the recruited e-friends to private messages via Messenger and by directing research-based conversations via e-mail as much as possible.

Since confidentiality could be breached by participants as well, either by commenting on their post about the study, by asking research questions on a public forum, by "liking" a study related page (Jones et al. 2012), whilst also opting for Facebook by default privacy setting, which allows public access to users' data (Parson, 2015), the researcher had the responsibility to prevent (Marsh and Bishop, 2014) and to communicate clearly these shared responsibilities to the participant e-friends.

### **Managing participants' informed consent**

Acknowledging the GDPR definition that consent is "any freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous indication of the data subject's wishes by which he or she, by a statement or by a clear affirmative action, signifies agreement to the processing of personal data relating to him or her" (GDPR, Chapter I, Article 4, Line 11, 2018), the researcher designed a bespoke consent form, submitted as part of ethics application for approval to University Ethics Committee.

Once the potential participant replied to researcher's private message via Messenger, either to request additional clarifications or to communicate her/his interest in participating in this study, the next step was the researcher sending via e-mail the relevant research documentation and consent form to the potential participants and allowing him/her up to a week time to read them before committing to a face-to-face interview. Additionally, this approach allowed the participants' direct access to research documentation and thus empowered them to have full control over their right to withdraw at any time. The written consent form was presented once more before the interview when the participants signed it.

The practice of informed consent goes beyond the signing off of this consent form, although this step remains very important. Informed consent is in essence about meeting expectations of the stakeholders involved; it is about clear communication and transparency, which enable acknowledgment and performance of this contractual informed consent and not just a consent form; it is about trust and commitment; it is an active exercise of shared responsibilities that expands beyond the immediate research aim and protocol, to impact lives. Consequently, the researcher becomes protective of participants' identities and their stories (Reich, 2015).

For the researcher the significance of informed consent lay at the heart of her social media-driven research. However, the empirical evidence in the research literature was limited, most of it emphasising social media being unfit for purpose when it comes to gaining informed consent online. This evidence broadly suggests that there is limited opportunity to directly assess participants' comprehension before consenting to the study. Although this might be the case for online surveys (Williams, 2012), it has not been the case for this qualitative study, which considered informed consent on a case by case and face-to-face basis.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to the literature on research methodology reflective practice and reporting which increases the opportunity to create relevant, rigorous guidelines to support an ethical social media driven research agenda. The focus of this paper although narrow remains very relevant for the research practice by outlining ethical implications of sampling via Facebook and when researching *with e-friends* as Facebook friends. Therefore, it offers illustrative and reflective research practice examples emphasising the ethical challenges faced by the researcher when sampling and researching with e-friends using Facebook.

It is researcher's hope that the illustrative examples used in this paper reinforced the fact there is great scope to further knowledge on ethical practice of engaging with social media platforms for recruiting and for disseminating research findings (Gelinis et al., 2017; Lunnay et al., 2015), as different social media platforms increasingly become mirroring e-societies.

Therefore, social media and Facebook in particular remain promising, yet broadly untapped and questionable sources for many research communities, due to the lack of clear, ethical guidelines to encourage engagement with its data and its "residents" (Kosinski et al, 2016).

In this context, this paper argues for flexible, social media ethical guidance, built upon empirical evidence inspired by researchers' reflective practice, as scholars have increasingly called for (Kamp et al., 2019). It argues that researching *with e-friends* has its semantic and intimacy particularities, which should be carefully considered. Consequently, properly managing the risk of misled transfer of meaning from Aristotelian friendship to e-friends, as operationalised in this study, is an a priori responsibility that should not be undermined.

Engaging with social media in research should be an educated act of balancing opportunities with known and unknown social media-bound risks, of data protection, confidentiality and informed consent. For the qualitative researcher this means a reflective, iterative practice of ethics in action, as social media and online interactions are dynamic and everchanging. Therefore, the researcher's intent is to communicate context-bound insights to assist and inform

other researchers in how to overcome some of the ethical challenges associated with social media-driven research.

By reflectively performing and reporting ethical research practices of recruiting via social media, researchers could expand this knowledge, engaging other scholars and institutional regulators in a dialogue of knowledge co-creation. As the ubiquity of new technologies is embedded in our lives impacting on all stages of research, from operational and ethical perspectives, the call for updated ethical guidelines expands beyond the online environment.

The researcher is aware that calling for more ethical awareness by reporting context-bound insights of performing ethics when recruiting via Facebook won't solve many of these complex issues. However, the effort was to contribute towards a growing ethical debate of using social media in participants' recruitment, this time for a qualitative interpretative study.

The main proposition is that social media presents a valuable research opportunity for those researchers willing to "multitask", by querying between traditional ethical principles, reflective practice of situated cases and participants' ethical understanding and expectations, as this paper aims to achieve, without claiming to be a comprehensive summary of all ethical challenges researchers may face when recruiting a sample using social media.

Since the researcher's experience using social media for this PhD interpretative study has proved to be an ongoing and iterative practice of reflective negotiations between new and traditional practices (Fileborn, 2016), one could argue that achieving an all-encompassing ethical guideline is very difficult, if not impossible, given its everchanging dynamics as previously voiced (Markham and Buchanan, 2012; Snee, 2013).

However, as the world around us is on a fast-technological track, embedding untapped research potential, technology and social media-driven research is a matter of when it reaches its full potential rather than if. Exploring the "how" could enable a real opportunity for a successful research career for those who dare leverage all these opportunities, even if this journey of exploring beyond traditions implies taking risks in order to create new knowledge.

Research seems to catch up with other professional fields by increasingly becoming the result of multiple synchronised and synergetic efficiencies, whilst reporting on ethical conduct calls for an update of the traditional regulatory frameworks according to new realities (Chiazzi and Wicks, 2019). Within this increasingly technology and social media-driven society, researchers need to find new synergies to deliver timely, valuable and impactful research outcomes. As one of the top social media platforms, Facebook could assist researchers in meeting some of these expectations. However, in order to enjoy the full spectrum of benefits that Facebook's untapped research potential promises for all stakeholders, there are still challenges and ethical concerns to be addressed (Gelinis et al., 2017).

## **Ethics statement**

This PhD study used General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) as regulatory guidelines for an ethical research practice which prioritised informed consent, data privacy and confidentiality of all research participants and at all stages of the research process. Formally, it applied for research approval from University Ethics Committee, process which was completed in June 2018.

In practice, research aim, process and their right to withdraw have been discussed and clarified with all research participants before signing off the consent form and thus before interviews.

Participants' confidentiality has been protected through name coding and carefully avoiding any re-identification by using focused interview extracts rather than big parts and by avoiding to cite directly any personal, easily identifiable data.

All the audio and transcription files have been individually passworded and saved on an external drive to ensure data protection from any third-party.



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## Appendix

### Annex 1: Facebook privacy settings and tools

**Privacy Settings and Tools**

Section	Setting	Current Value	Action
Your activity	Who can see your future posts?	Friends	Edit
	Review all your posts and things you're tagged in		Use Activity Log
	Limit the audience for posts you've shared with friends of friends or Public?		Limit Past Posts
How people can find and contact you	Who can send you friend requests?	Everyone	Edit
	Who can see your friends list?	Friends	Close
	Who can see your contact information?		
	Who can see your email address you	Everyone	Edit
	Who can see your phone number you	Everyone	Edit
	Who can see your contact information outside of Facebook	No	Edit

**Who can see your friends list?** Close

Remember that your friends control who can see their friendships on their own timelines. If people can see your friendship on another timeline, they'll be able to see it in News Feed, search and other places on Facebook. If you set this to Only me, only you will be able to see your full friends list on your timeline. Other people will only see mutual friends.

- Public
- ✓ Friends
- Friends except...
- Specific friends
- Only me
- Custom
- See All

Source: Facebook (2019): Privacy settings and tools

## Annex 2: Facebook privacy settings and tools

**Privacy Settings and Tools**

**Your activity**

**Who can see your future posts?** Close

You decide who can see your posts each time you create a new post. Facebook will use that audience for future posts unless you change it.

What's on your mind?

Friends Post

**Who should see this?**

- Public**  
Anyone on or off Facebook
- Friends**  
Your friends on Facebook
- Friends except...**  
Don't show to some friends
- Only me**  
Only me
- More...**

**How people can find and contact you**

- Review all your posts and things you've shared Use Activity Log
- Limit the audience for posts you've shared with friends of friends or Public? Limit Past Posts
- Who can send you friend requests? Edit
- Who can see your friends list? Edit
- Who can look you up using the email addresses you've provided? Edit
- Who can look you up using the phone numbers you've provided? Edit
- Do you want search engines outside of Facebook to link to your Profile? **No** Edit

Source: Facebook (2019): Privacy settings and tools

## **Annex 3: GDPR and the principles of processing personal data**

### *CHAPTER II /Principles /Article 5*

#### **Principles relating to processing of personal data**

1. Personal data shall be:

- (a) processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject ('lawfulness, fairness and transparency');
- (b) collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes; further processing for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes shall, in accordance with Article 89(1), not be considered to be incompatible with the initial purposes ('purpose limitation');
- (c) adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed ('data minimisation');
- (d) accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date; every reasonable step must be taken to ensure that personal data that are inaccurate, having regard to the purposes for which they are processed, are erased or rectified without delay ('accuracy');
- (e) kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed; personal data may be stored for longer periods insofar as the personal data will be processed solely for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes in accordance with Article 89(1) subject to implementation of the appropriate technical and organisational measures required by this Regulation in order to safeguard the rights and freedoms of the data subject ('storage limitation');
- (f) processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data, including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage, using appropriate technical or organisational measures ('integrity and confidentiality').

2. The controller shall be responsible for, and be able to demonstrate compliance with, paragraph 1 ('accountability').

Source: General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

## **Annex 4: GDPR and the condition of consent**

### *Article 7*

#### **Conditions for consent**

1. Where processing is based on consent, the controller shall be able to demonstrate that the data subject has consented to processing of his or her personal data.
2. If the data subject's consent is given in the context of a written declaration which also concerns other matters, the request for consent shall be presented in a manner which is clearly distinguishable from the other matters, in an intelligible and easily accessible form, using clear and plain language. Any part of such a declaration which constitutes an infringement of this Regulation shall not be binding.
3. The data subject shall have the right to withdraw his or her consent at any time. The withdrawal of consent shall not affect the lawfulness of processing based on consent before its withdrawal. Prior to giving consent, the data subject shall be informed thereof. It shall be as easy to withdraw as to give consent.
4. When assessing whether consent is freely given, utmost account shall be taken of whether, *inter alia*, the performance of a contract, including the provision of a service, is conditional on consent to the processing of personal data that is not necessary for the performance of that contract.

Source: General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

## **Annex 5: GDPR ad data protection by design and default**

### *Article 25*

#### **Data protection by design and by default**

1. Taking into account the state of the art, the cost of implementation and the nature, scope, context and purposes of processing as well as the risks of varying likelihood and severity for rights and freedoms of natural persons posed by the processing, the controller shall, both at the time of the determination of the means for processing and at the time of the processing itself, implement appropriate technical and organisational measures, such as pseudonymisation, which are designed to implement data-protection principles, such as data minimisation, in an effective manner and to integrate the necessary safeguards into the processing in order to meet the requirements of this Regulation and protect the rights of data subjects.
2. The controller shall implement appropriate technical and organisational measures for ensuring that, by default, only personal data which are necessary for each specific purpose of the processing are processed. That obligation applies to the amount of personal data collected, the extent of their processing, the period of their storage and their accessibility. In particular, such measures shall ensure that by default personal data are not made accessible without the individual's intervention to an indefinite number of natural persons.
3. An approved certification mechanism pursuant to Article 42 may be used as an element to demonstrate compliance with the requirements set out in paragraphs 1 and 2 of this Article.

Source: General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

## **Annex 6: GDPR and confidentiality/ pseudonymisation**

(5) 'pseudonymisation' means the processing of personal data in such a manner that the personal data can no longer be attributed to a specific data subject without the use of additional information, provided that such additional information is kept separately and is subject to technical and organisational measures to ensure that the personal data are not attributed to an identified or identifiable natural person; (GDPR, Chapter I, Article 4).

Source: General Data Protection Regulation (2018)