

When and How to Use Social Media in Research

In today's world, many people rely on social media for information on current events, cultural trends, and more. While we may sometimes find content that seems relevant to our academic work, it's important to distinguish when something on social media is a credible source for research and when it is not.

Defining Social Media

Social media broadly refers to websites or applications that focus on communication and shared, community-generated content. There are several different types of social media platforms, each with their own purpose, such as social networking (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), bookmarking (Pinterest), sharing news (Reddit, Digg), sharing media (Instagram, TikTok), and blogging (Tumblr). Social media users can include everyday people, public figures, businesses, institutions, and even government agencies.

When thinking about social media and research, some considerations can be extended to older or more accepted digital sources and platforms, like YouTube, Vimeo, and podcasts. While these platforms are often used by recognized organizations and professionals, they are still social platforms accessible to many users of varying credibility.

Terms to Know

1. **Platform:** The specific social media website or application (e.g., Twitter, TikTok)
2. **User:** The individual, group, or entity engaging on the platform (e.g., your cousin, the neighborhood bakery, the U.S. Department of State)
3. **Post:** The content being shared on the platform by a user, or the comments, replies, or subsequent collaborative engagement (e.g., a tweet, an Instagram story, a Facebook comment)
4. **Content:** The actual information or media being shared in the post (e.g., text, images, GIFs)

Differences from Other Sources

What separates social media from other sources, like periodicals or books? Books and periodicals go through a lot of editorial oversight, including research and fact-checking, which sometimes last for years. This means that there is often a time difference between these sources and the events or topics they discuss.

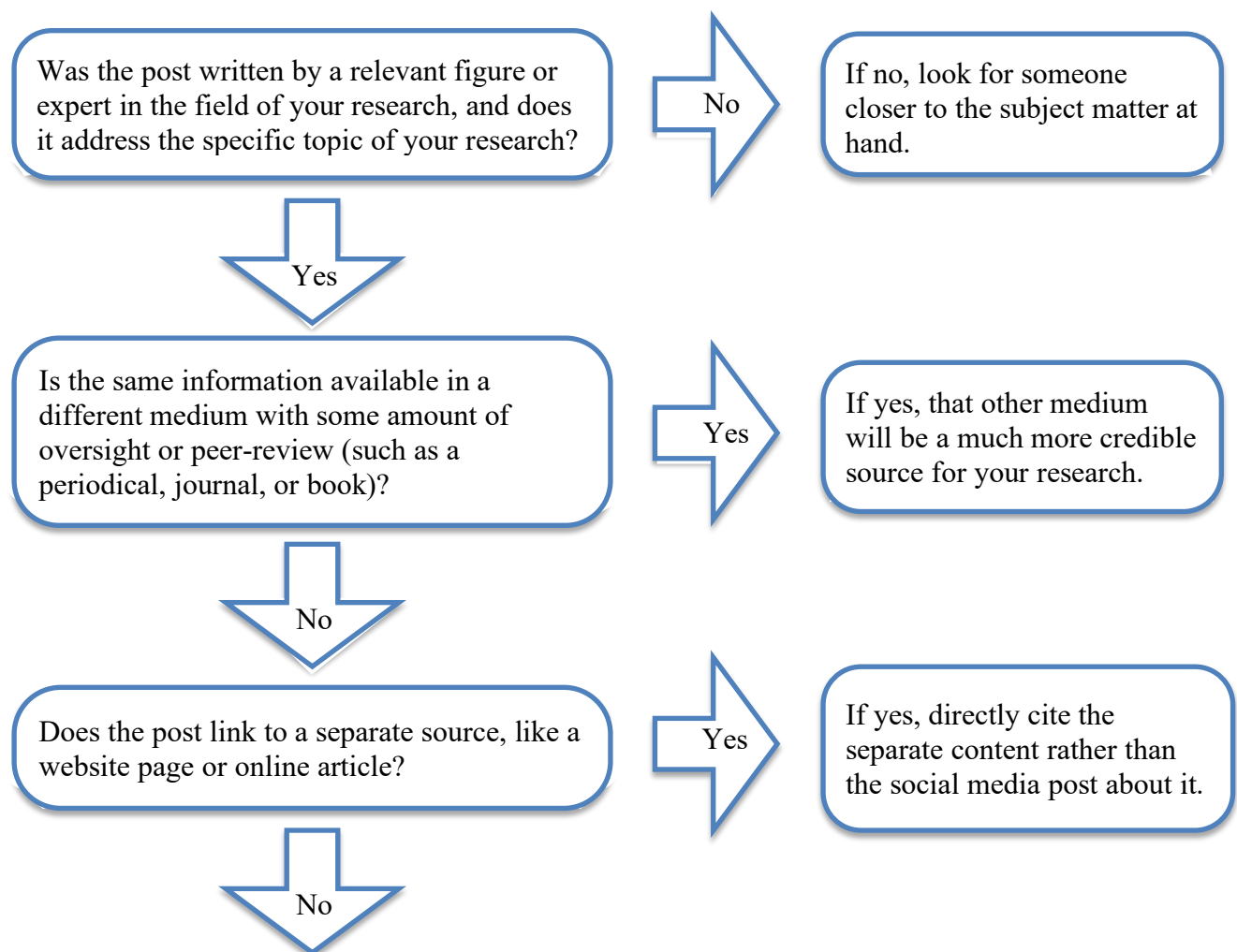
On the other hand, social media posts are designed for quick communication. This means that information on social media can be closer in time to the events and topics being discussed, but it comes with a lack of editorial oversight. There's a risk that some social media posts might be inaccurate, biased, or plagiarized.

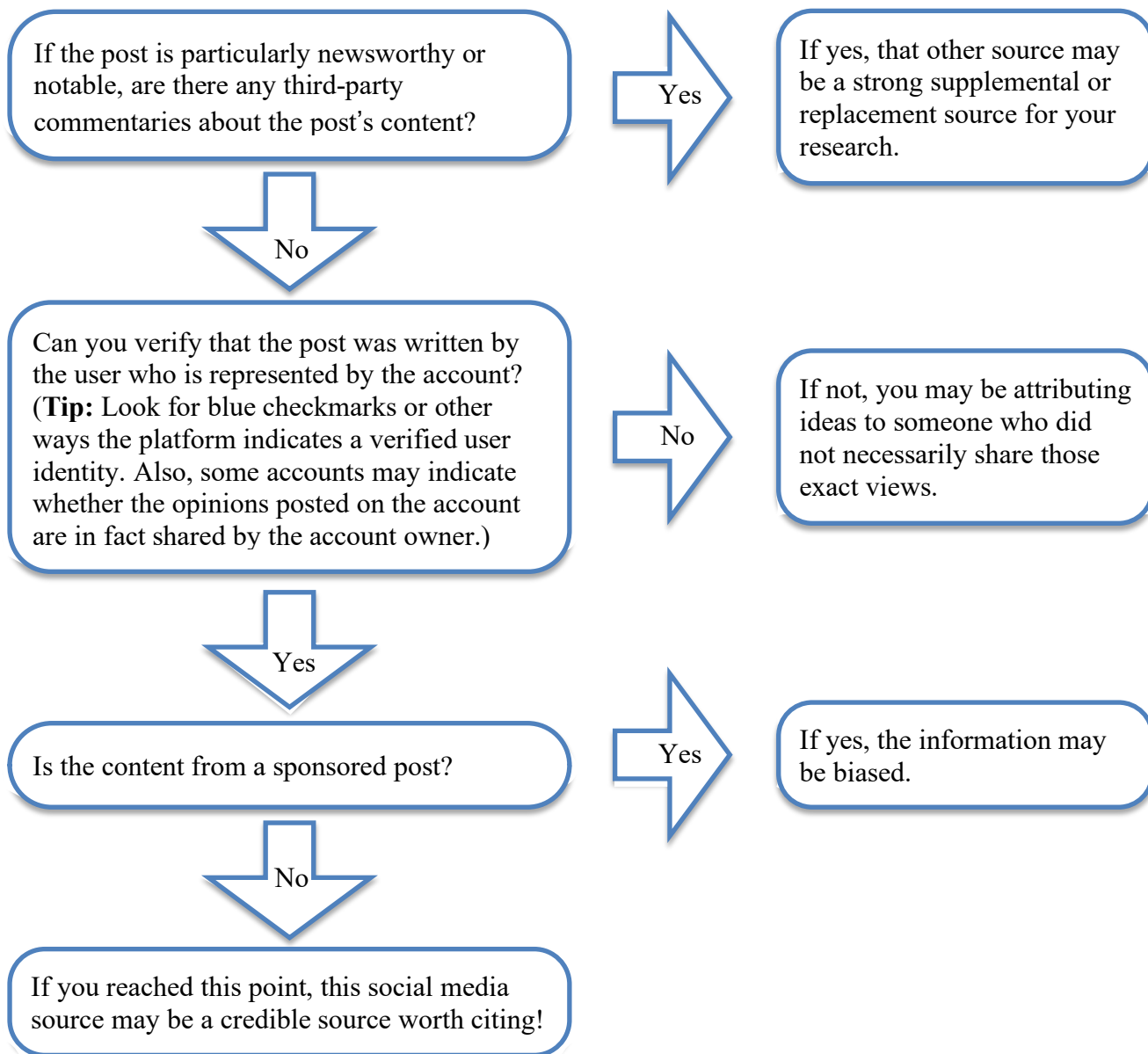
Additionally, one can usually assume that the authors of books and periodicals were responsible for writing these sources. However, some social media accounts representing businesses, institutions, or public figures may be managed by a third-party, making it difficult to ascertain whether the content on these accounts can be attributed correctly.

Lastly, because of the ever-changing nature of the internet, it can be difficult to archive content. When a post is deleted or a platform disappears, the information can sometimes be lost forever.

Determining the Credibility of a Source

There are many questions a person should ask themselves to determine whether a social media post is a good academic source. When thinking about using a social media post in your research, ask yourself the following questions:





Other Examples of Credible Social Media Sources

Given the wide influence and timeliness of social media, there are plenty of specific instances where referencing a social media post may especially fit the purpose of your research. For example, a post may be an appropriate source in the following scenarios:

1. Your research is about people's opinions, and you're citing a post as an example.
2. You're analyzing social media as evidence of online trends or people's use of these platforms.

Note: If there has already been academic or journalistic commentary on these trends, consider those sources first.

3. A post has real world implications on a topic you're researching (e.g., a politician's incendiary tweet or an employee speaking out about work conditions).

Ultimately, the choice to reference a social media post will come down to discretion, diligence, and purposeful use.

Citing Social Media

Citing social media can be challenging. Citations already vary across style guides and formats. To add to this, platforms change often and go in and out of popular usage, so there are not many formalized guides on how to cite every social media platform.

So if you're citing social media, look to trusted sources, like a university or style guide website, for up-to-date examples of citation formats. Often, you'll need to include the user, the platform, the post's title, the type of post, its publication date, and your date of access. If you are unsure about your citation, ask your professor for guidance.

Lastly, in the case where a user deletes a post or the post itself is temporary (e.g., an Instagram story), it may be a good idea to save a screenshot of the post's content or use an online archive tool to save the information you'll be using.

Activity

Read the following scenarios where students are deciding whether a social media post would be appropriate to reference in their research. Try to determine from the circumstances whether these students should or should not use these sources.

1. Maria is doing research on Romantic poets and wants to cite a Twitter thread written by various English scholars who are discussing biases in the canon of Romanticism. Should she cite this source?
2. Thomas is writing a paper about cinematography and wants to cite a popular review on YouTube of one of his favorite movies. Should he cite this source?
3. Lee is researching nutrition trends and wants to cite an Instagram user's post about a new diet supplement, but it's marked as a sponsored post. Should they cite this source?
4. Yi is writing a paper on the influence of Frank Gehry and wants to cite a photo she saw on Pinterest of one of the buildings he designed. Should she cite this source?
5. Jennifer is studying U.S. politics and wants to cite a charged Twitter exchange between two politicians in her paper. Should she cite this source?
6. Devon is researching the Black Lives Matter movement and wants to cite a TikTok video that featured someone sharing relevant historical facts. Should he cite this source?
7. Vikram is writing about climate change and wants to cite some emotional comments on a Facebook post about a newly extinct species. Should he cite this source?
8. Ivy is writing a paper on public transportation perceptions and wants to cite posts from a Facebook group of public transportation enthusiasts. Should they cite this source?

Answer Key

1. Yes, assuming this discussion is relevant to the paper's specific topic. These posts come from academics who are talking about their areas of expertise, so this would be a credible and relevant source.
2. Maybe. If the user who posted the review was a film critic and/or specifically discussed cinematography, then this might be an acceptable source. Otherwise, it may be better to look elsewhere for a more credible and relevant option.
3. Probably not. Assuming the post's subject is important to the research, this post could be referenced as an example of a trend; however, the student would have to disclose the post's sponsorship, which might negatively affect their research.
4. No. Unfortunately, as a bookmarking platform, Pinterest is known for making it difficult for users to locate and attribute sources in their content. It may be better to look at other archives or mediums that have clearer attributions.
5. Yes, assuming the relevance of the exchange for the project. However, if the exchange was especially newsworthy, it might also be a good option to look for journalistic commentary on the exchange.
6. Maybe. Unless the user in the video is an expert on the subject or provided references in the video, a more formal source for these historical facts may be more appropriate. However, if the paper was addressing online trends or considering how this topic is discussed on social media, then this TikTok could be cited as an example.
7. No. While the topics may be tangentially connected, this source isn't particularly relevant, and the comments may not have been written by experts on the topic.
8. Yes. The posts seem relevant to the topic, which deals specifically with public opinion. This may be a fitting source, although it may be good idea to find additional sources to balance against these positively biased sources.

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