

Using Social Media for Participant Recruitment in Early Childhood Education and Care Research: A Reflective Analysis

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Abstract

This methodological reflection examines the practical and ethical experiences of applying a constructionist methodological approach in a higher degree research project exploring Australian early childhood educators' understanding of emotional intelligence (EI) and how it relates to their daily practice. Three key reflections emerged: navigating ethics approval, using social media as a recruitment tool and managing micro-ethical dilemmas related to geo-location and participant interactions in online environments. These challenges highlight broader issues identified in literature regarding ethical complexity, researcher reflexivity and navigation of digital spaces (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2012). The online ethics application presented additional layers of procedural nuance, providing an opportunity for professional learning. The use of social media was advantageous in reaching a wide range of early childhood education and care workforce, aligning with literature that digital recruitment can enhance accessibility (Gelinas et al., 2017) however complicated the intended scope and raised issues of clarity of selection criteria and management of participants. Given the content of the survey addressed sensitive topics around emotional strain, stress and burnout, the research underscored the importance of maintaining transparency and reflexivity when interacting in digital spaces. These insights contribute to existing discussions about ethical practice in early childhood research and the digital research context, particularly for novice researchers and research supervisors.

Keywords:

Methodological Reflection, Ethics, Participant Recruitment, Partnership for the Goals, Social Media, Data Collection, Quality Education, Early Childhood Educators, Professionalism



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Introduction

Methodological choices play a central role in shaping research design, data collection and interpretation of results, particularly when exploring complex social and emotional challenges (Doyle, 2009; Lyndon, 2023). Beyond the technical considerations, research methodology is increasingly understood as a reflexive process in which researchers critically examine how their decisions,

assumptions and interactions influence the research process and the outcomes of the study (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). Therefore, methodological reflections serve as an important mechanism for the evaluation of research practices, supports in identifying challenges and generating insights that have the potential to inform future research.

As research has become increasingly performed within digitally mediated environments, the importance of methodological reflections has become more evident. Digital technologies and social media platforms have expanded opportunities for participant recruitment, communication, and dissemination of findings, offering researchers access to more geographical and broader populations. These technologies can increase recruitment efficiency and reduce costs to conduct research studies while facilitating engagement with professional communities that may be difficult to access through more traditional measures. However, with this increase in the use of digital spaces in research, it introduces new methodological and ethical considerations relating to privacy, confidentiality, recruitment, informed consent and clear distinctions between public and private (Franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Ethical considerations within research extend beyond formal institutional approval processes. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) argue that while procedural ethics provides an important framework for protecting participants, researchers must all navigate ethics in practice, often the unexpected ethical issues that emerge when conducting research. These micro-ethical dilemmas (Burke et al., 2024) require researchers to exercise reflexive judgement when responding to situations that cannot always be anticipated during the ethics approval process. Such dilemmas may arise at any stage of the research, such as participant recruitment, data collection and the dissemination of findings. The dynamic and changing nature of digital research can further intensify the ethical complexities, requiring ongoing consideration of safeguards to protect both researcher and participants, including issues related to privacy, confidentiality, online interactions and wellbeing.

This paper presents reflections from a study examining Australian early childhood educators (ECEs) experiences of burnout, joy and feelings of being overwhelmed in relation to emotional intelligence (EI). The study utilised online survey methods and social media recruitment strategies to engage Australian educators. Three key reflections from this study focus on navigating ethics approval, using social media for participant recruitment and addressing micro-ethical dilemmas associated with geo-location and the dissemination of findings. These reflections are grounded in practical and ethical challenges

encountered throughout the research process and consider the perspective of the lead author (a higher degree research student) and the supervisory team (co-authors). Through these reflections, the authors explore the methodological decisions, ethical complexity, and institutionalised system that influence research processes and outcomes. These reflections offer insights that may inform future research conducted within educational and digitally mediated contexts.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Context

These methodological reflections are situated within the Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, a workforce characterised by emotional labour, complex interpersonal relationships and increasingly demanding professional expectations (Andrew, 2015; Bull et al., 2024). ECEs are required to navigate relationships with children, families, colleagues, and regulatory authorities while maintaining responsive and supportive learning environments. Recent research has highlighted growing concerns regarding staff retention, educator wellbeing, stress, and burnout across the sector which reinforces the importance of research that seeks to understand educators lived experience (Bull et al., 2024; McMullen et al., 2020). Given these challenges, conducting ethical research in ECEC requires careful consideration of educator wellbeing and the contextual realities of the workforce.

This study was conducted in Australia and involved educators working across a range of ECEC services regulated under the National Quality Framework (NQF). The NQF establishes national standards relating to various components of early childhood, including but not limited to, children's health and hygiene, educational programs and practices, staffing arrangements and leadership (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2019). Educators are geographically dispersed across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities creating practical challenges for participant recruitment. Researchers have increasingly recognised that traditional methods such as email distribution lists and professional networks may not always provide sufficient access to the diverse educator population.

Opportunities have been created with the introduction of digital technologies and social media platforms in supporting a diverse range of participant recruitment. Platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn enable researchers to reach large professional communities quickly and cost effectively, while gaining access to participants across broad geographical locations. Previous studies have reported that social media recruitment can improve recruitment efficiency, increase participant diversity and enhance access to populations that may otherwise be difficult to engage

(Gelinas et al., 2017; Whitaker et al., 2017). There have been limitations identified including self-selection bias, privacy risks, representation concerns and challenges with informed consent within digital spaces (Gelinas et al., 2017; Zimmermann et al., 2022).

These challenges are particularly relevant when recruiting professionals whose online identities often span both personal and professional domains. Social media platforms can blur the boundaries between public and private spaces creating unique ethical complexities regarding participant privacy, researcher viability and informed consent (Zimmermann et al., 2022). Consistent with recommendations for online research, participants in this study were provided with a detailed participant information statement outlining the study's purpose, procedural risks, and participant rights. Consent was embedded within the survey requiring participants to actively indicate agreement before continuing to the questions. This approach was designed to ensure participation remained voluntary and informed, while maintaining anonymity (Early Childhood Australia, 2022).

The significance of these ethical considerations is becoming more recognised worldwide through an increase in the amount of documented ethical guidelines by various state and community bodies. For example, the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) emphasises the importance of robust ethical decision making throughout all stages of research, highlighting the need for researchers to respond reflexively to emerging ethical issues within digital spaces (Bertram et al., 2025). Similarly, Early Childhood Australia (2022) advocates for ethical frameworks that acknowledge evolving complexities of digital research within educational settings. Despite the growing use of social media recruitment across disciplines, relatively limited attention has been given to practical and ethical implications within ECEC research.

This paper underscores the need for tailored ethical guidelines that address specific challenges of conducting research within early childhood settings. These reflections are situated within the Australian early childhood education and care sector, providing guidance for novice researchers, supervisors and research institutions seeking to balance methodological severity with ethical responsibility in multifaceted educational contexts.

Ethical Considerations: Dissemination, Approval, Recruitment, and Conduct

Throughout this study, ethical considerations were at the forefront of each stage of development, from ethics approval to disseminating findings. The reflections presented in this article focus on dissemination, however, are part of a broader ethical path that

included approval, recruitment and data collection. This approach aligns with literature highlighting the value of ongoing reflexivity in research practices, especially for higher degree research students (Menning et al., 2025; Zimmermann et al., 2022).

Dissemination of Findings

The research team engaged in systematic reflexivity to ensure the findings in this reflective article were presented ethically and responsibly. Decisions regarding the inclusion of materials were guided by the Association of Internet Researchers (2019) principles. Each potential risk was considered in relation to harm, contextual integrity and confidentiality. For example, a social media comment was retained to illustrate micro-ethical dilemmas; the information is publicly accessible, however, all identifying details were removed.

These decisions were made collaboratively as a team; the lead author proposed the approach, the supervisors reviewed and provided direct guidance and instruction, and the procedures were cross-checked against ethical guidelines. While formal IRB approval was not required, the decision-making process was informed by established ethical principles and reflective dialogue within the research team. This approach ensured that the materials used were ethically and contextually sensitive.

Ethical Rationale

The ethical issues highlighted in dissemination were chosen because they represent the recurring challenges in digital research. Digital platforms can blur the boundaries between public and private spaces, complicating consent and participant autonomy (Zimmermann et al., 2022). To address these concerns, researchers need to embed consent into the survey flow, clearly articulate participant rights and adopt transparent practices (Early Childhood Australia, 2022). Decisions were guided by a principle of situated ethical reflexivity, which weighed the value of including illustrative examples against the responsibility to protect participants and the institution.

By documenting this reflective process, the paper contributes to literature on ethical practice in early childhood education and care research, demonstrating practical strategies for balancing transparency, scholarly rigour and participant anonymity (Bertram et al., 2025; Zimmermann et al., 2022). In addition, these reflections highlight the importance of professional development for novice researchers in navigating ethical complexities.

In the following sections, the lead author reflects on the challenges she encountered and discusses each in relation to the literature. Finally, we draw our

conclusions and provide recommendations to inform policy and practice within research institutions.

Lead Author Reflection: Ethics Approval

The lead author, as a higher degree research (HDR) student, navigated the institutions online ethics approval platform for the first time. The platform was designed to streamline applications. While intended to enhance efficiency, usability challenges were encountered regarding account set-up, understanding the different sections and managing multi-level approval.

These challenges contributed to delays in commencing the study, especially when clarifying the inclusion of an honorarium for early childhood educators who participated in the study, who are typically underpaid and hold low-status roles (Bull et al., 2024). The research team carefully considered the ethical implications of offering compensation, balancing respect for educators' time with avoidance of undue inducement, in alignment with the EECERA Ethical Code (Bertram et al., 2025).

Within the lead author's reflection, the cause of these delays was exacerbated by limited prior training and the need to coordinate with supervisors who were also unfamiliar with the platform. Multiple submissions and requests for clarification were necessary to ensure compliance with ethical standards. This demonstrates that online systems require user familiarity and institutional support for effective implementation.

Team Discussion

While the online platforms are proposed to increase efficiency and transparency within the ethical approval process (Rani et al., 2024; Sheehy et al., 2020), evidence suggests the benefits are not automatically realised. Usability challenges can slow approvals, creating stress for HDR students and requiring supervisory intervention. Dialogue between supervisors and students can mitigate these challenges by facilitating ethical decision-making and micro-reflection on the research process (Burke et al., 2024). Institutions implementing digital platforms need to provide targeted training and ongoing support to ensure novice researchers can effectively navigate the ethical process.

Lead Author Reflection: Social Media Participant Recruitment

Social media recruitment was employed to reach a broader audience of Australian early childhood educators. Initial posts of platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook inadvertently attracted international participants, despite the study's focus on Australian educators. The post was revised to explicitly state

inclusion criteria and re-shared via Facebook to engage the target population.

Ethical considerations included informed consent, privacy and authenticity of engagement. Embedded in the survey flow was a multi-page information sheet and consent form; only participants who selected "yes" could proceed.

When posting on social media (e.g. LinkedIn and Facebook), the team received some positive feedback from the online community, who emphasised the importance of this study. They commented, "... emotional intelligence is crucial in education. Engaging with this research helps develop supportive environments for our children. Well done promoting such important studies". The contributor's feedback further validated the importance of this research and the relevance of identifying the role EI has in shaping educators' practices and experiences within the ECEC sector (Kapoor et al., 2018). This process of reflection, adjustment, and filtering helped ensure the integrity of the research continued to align with the study's aims and outcomes, thereby achieving its intended scope.

Team Discussion

The use of social media in participant recruitment has become increasingly popular. This is due to its effectiveness and ease of use in recruiting participants for studies and reaching new cohorts (Darko et al., 2022). However, while there are many advantages to using social media, it can also introduce challenges and raise numerous ethical considerations that need to be addressed in the study design and ethics application. Some of the advantages of using social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are that they provide researchers with access to a diverse audience. Researchers can recruit participants from a wide range of diverse demographic backgrounds, making it easier and accessible to find people who match the specific criteria (Darko et al., 2022). Additionally, it is a low-cost method of recruitment, with postings available free of charge; the only requirement is to have an account. Furthermore, social media is a fast way to recruit participants (Gelinas et al., 2017). Social media platforms can enable you to tailor your posts when targeting specific groups based on the study's criteria. It is valuable as it provides a large sample of the population at a low cost (Benedict et al., 2019).

While there are many benefits to the use of social media, it also raises some concerns regarding bias, privacy and confidentiality, among others. Bias may occur as it is not a random sample of the population; however, it is accessible to particular groups, which may affect the generalisation of the research findings (Darko et al., 2022). Recruiting by social media also poses an ethical challenge about privacy, confidentiality and

informed consent (Benedict et al., 2019). For example, the nature of social media may blur the lines between personal interaction and professional research (Gelinias et al., 2017). Additionally, participants may question the authenticity of the research recruitment, given the prevalence of misinformation online. In this study, social media has changed the way researchers recruit participants by providing a powerful tool to engage a broader and more diverse range of people. This approach must address the ethical concerns, such as informed consent, privacy and confidentiality (Gelinias et al., 2017). By following ethical guidelines, researchers can effectively utilise social media to reach a diverse range of participants.

Lead Author Reflection: Ethical Dilemma with Geo-location Data

During the data collection stage via Qualtrics, an online survey platform, geo-location tags revealed that some participants were outside of Australia, despite the eligibility criteria. The lead author manually filtered out responses to include only Australian educators, discarding international responses. This decision was guided by ethical obligations to ensure data integrity and alignment with the approved study scope.

This scenario presented a micro-ethical dilemma (Burke et al., 2024), requiring reflection on balancing ethical principles, participant respect and scholarly rigour. Decisions were documented, as well as supervisors' consultations. As a result, amendments were made to ensure transparency and adherence to ethical codes.

Team Discussion

As HDR students conduct research, they may encounter a range of challenges when navigating research ethics. Challenges and situations arise that require ethical awareness and flexibility in navigating the process without compromising the integrity of the research (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). For example, Burke et al. (2024) describe the term 'micro-ethical dilemma', which refers to the smaller, subtle ethical challenges that may arise during the conduct of the research. These micro-ethical dilemmas extend beyond what was anticipated and recorded in the ethics application process, requiring flexibility from both the HDR student and the supervisory team. Burke et al. (2024) identified dialogue as being the most important way that supervisors and HDR students can work through these challenges. Dialogue creates the opportunity for the student researcher to develop micro-ethical reflexivity, which is a skill combining ethical awareness in the moment and later reflecting on how it impacted their actions and decisions as a researcher (Burke et al., 2024).

Integrating Literature and Reflection

The reflections presented in this study highlight the complexities of conducting research as a HDR student, particularly within the early childhood education and care sector, where ethical considerations are amplified by the emotional labour and relational nature of the professional practice (Andrew, 2015; Bull et al., 2024; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017). By integrating the practical experience of the lead author within the existing literature, this section demonstrates how micro-ethical dilemmas, methodological decisions and institutional systems intersect to shape research outcomes.

Ethics Approval and Digital Platforms

The lead author's experience with the institution's online ethics platform illustrates the tension between institutional narratives of efficiency and the lived experience of first-time researchers. While digital ethics systems have been designed to streamline applications, increase transparency and reduce administrative burden (Rani et al., 2024; Sheehy et al., 2020), these benefits are not automatically realised. As noted by Van De Mierop et al. (2022) usability challenges and teething issues can exacerbate stress for first-time researchers. The lead author's experience highlights the importance of adequate training and support, particularly for HDR students balancing research, employment and personal responsibilities. These reflections extend the literature on ethics administration by highlighting how digital platforms can unintentionally create barriers that impact research timelines and student wellbeing.

Social Media Participant Recruitment

The use of social media for participant recruitment illustrates the potential and the ethical complexities of digital platforms in research. Social media allows access to a diverse range of the population and facilitates rapid, low-cost recruitment (Benedict et al., 2019; Darko et al., 2022; Gelinias et al., 2017). However, the lead author's experience reveals how posts can attract participants outside the intended demographic, raising questions of consent, privacy and data inclusion. This aligns with research lighting that digital recruitment can blur the boundaries between personal and professional spaces, complicating informed consent and engagement with participants in an authentic way (Gelinias et al., 2017; Zimmermann et al., 2022). By revising the recruitment post to explicitly target Australian educators and consulting with ethical guidelines (Association of Internet Researchers), the research team demonstrated reflexivity in addressing these micro-ethical challenges. These actions provide a model for other researchers in navigating the ethical tensions inherent in online recruitment,

particularly within sensitive professional contexts like early childhood education and care.

Geo-Location Data and Inclusion Criteria

The discovery of the geo-location data embedded within survey responses by participants presented a micro-ethical dilemma regarding inclusion and exclusion. Although the survey was intended for Australian educators, responses from international participants required filtering, balancing the respect for participants' time and contribution with the integrity of the research aims. Literature on ethical data management emphasises the importance of clear inclusion/exclusion criteria and reflexivity in handling unexpected data (Burke et al., 2024; Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). This situation demonstrated how micro-ethical dilemmas emerge during data collection, necessitating ongoing dialogue between the HDR student and the supervisory team to ensure decisions are ethically justified, documented and consistent with the study's ethics approval and objectives.

Reflexivity, Micro-Ethical Dilemmas, and Research Integrity

Across the three reflections, the concept of micro-ethical dilemmas is central. These subtle and often unanticipated challenges require researchers to engage in ethical reflexivity, considering what is allowed under formal ethical guidelines, and also what is respectful, contextually sensitive and aligned with professional norms (Burke et al., 2024). By documenting these dilemmas, the lead author contributes to methodological knowledge by demonstrating how HDR students can navigate ethical complexities, where ethical choices involve balancing transparency, anonymity and the reputational consideration of participants and institutions.

Implications for the ECEC Sector and Future Research

These reflections have some implications for researchers working within the ECEC sector, particularly those engaging in digitally mediated research and social media recruitment. First, the reflections highlight the importance of anticipating ethical complexity beyond procedural approval processes. Researchers need to plan for micro-ethical decision-making throughout the cycle of research, including recruitment and dissemination. This is particularly relevant in online environments where issues such as privacy, consent and geo-location can emerge unexpectedly during data collection.

Secondly, the findings emphasise the need for more intentional and transparent recruitment planning when using social media. Researchers should carefully consider how platforms can blur the line between professional and personal, and explicitly design

recruitment materials that minimise coercion, protect anonymity and separate the researcher's role from informal online interactions. This includes sharing consent processes that are layered and revisited, using plain language in the participant information sheet and building clear opt-out mechanisms at multiple stages of participation within the online survey.

Finally, the reflections suggest a need for stronger methodological preparation for early career researchers and higher degree research students conducting digital research. Rather than a sole focus on procedural ethics compliance, research training programs may look at including discussions of ethics in practice, including case exploration of micro-ethical dilemmas, and digital consent. Additionally, supervisory relationships play a crucial role in supporting reflexive ethical judgement, particularly when encountering unanticipated challenges during data collection and dissemination.

Methodological and ethical decision making are inseparable from research design and implementation. Ethical practice emerges continuously throughout the process rather than being confined to the formal approval stages in the beginning of research and therefore requires ongoing reflexivity and adaptive decision-making. These insights offer a practical guide for emerging and established researchers seeking to conduct ethically responsible and methodologically rigorous research within digital environment in the ECEC context.

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