# Social Media Based Diary Method

## Transcript

Full resource (and video): <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/all/?id=20838>

Hello and welcome to this NCRM training on Social Media Based Diary Methods.

So, to begin, what are diary methods? Well as the name suggests it is a research method where you ask your participants to keep a diary. And through these diaries, the researcher, that’s you, can collect a wealth of qualitative data over a set period of time. Social media-based diaries are also multi-modal as entries can be submitted in a multitude of ways. We’ll come on to that shortly. Diary methods can complement other methods, such as interviews, or they can be a main method in and of themselves. They are therefore a valuable but often overlooked research tool.

But why are they so great? Well through diary methods, you can explore the “everyday”, those repetitive or often overlooked behaviours and activities which enrich our lives and offer so much insight into the social world. Through diary methods, we can explore experiences, events, emotions, and so much more. In our diary methods, we can focus upon a specific theme or a particular research question. In short, you can tailor these methods to whatever your research aims to achieve. But diaries can be kept in many different ways, we could have a pen and paper diary, a specialized diary app, a video diary, so why social media? Well, given the centrality of social media to our everyday lives, it is extremely likely your participants will already be familiar with the platform you are proposing to use, and they probably use it regularly too, which is very useful when it comes to participant commitment and engagement!

I used diary methods in my research which explored the lived experiences of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian vegans in the UK. I was interested in understanding how veganism, religion, culture, food, and ethics all come together and shape everyday practices and understandings. I created 3 WhatsApp diary groups, one for Muslim vegans, one for Christian vegans, and one for Jewish vegans, and I asked my participants to share insight into what their Muslim, Jewish, or Christian vegan experience looked like. My diary groups ran for 3 months, so I was able to capture everyday experiences, as well as major religious celebrations. Participants shared photos, the ones on the screen are actually from my participants, but they also shared written reflections, meal diaries, and engaged in group discussion, further enriching my study.

So, I’ve already mentioned how social media-based diary methods are multi-modal, but what do I mean by that? Well, diary entries could be in the form of text, such as written reflections, links, records of behaviours and activities, essentially anything contained within a text message. Diary entries could also be in the form of photos, audio recordings, and videos. And of course, on social media, participants can also share emojis and other fun things that can offer further insight into what they are sharing.

So participants can share their diary entries in a multitude of ways, but they can also share them on a multitude of platforms. You could use WhatsApp, either by having participants message you individually, or by creating a group, as I did. You could use Facebook, either by making use of Facebook groups or Messenger chats. You could use Instagram, for example a participant could create a private channel that only you, the researcher follows, and they could post diary entries there. You could use X (formerly Twitter), Threads, or even TikTok. There are lots of platforms to choose from!

But of course there are some considerations that you will need to think through. So first of all, privacy. Are the spaces where you are conducting diary methods private or public? Who can see what the participant is sharing? And what implications does this have for ethics?

Who is controlling the spaces? When I created my WhatsApp diary groups, I was in control so only people I shared the link with or approved could join the group. If a participant was using Instagram, or X, or TikTok for example, then they would be the one in control of the space.

Access. So linked to the previous two points, who can access the spaces? If it’s a one-to-one chat between the participant and the researcher, then only the researcher can access the diary entries, if it’s a diary group like I set up, then it’s the researcher and fellow participants who have access, but if a participant were to say keep a photo diary on Instagram for example and their account was set to public, then anyone would be able to access the space.

And of course anonymity. Is anonymity important to your research? For most research projects, it is, so this will be a key consideration as you plan your diary methods. You may also need to consider whether your research is sensitive? Are there any other ethical considerations that you’ll need to address? These questions are really important as they can guide you in your decision-making.

So, we’ve already briefly discussed why and how we might use diary methods, but let’s focus now more so on their specific benefits. Well, diary methods offer more accurate insight into daily life as they can capture the specifics of experiences, events, behaviours, emotions, and more. This is because data is shared in real time, and so the participant does not have to rely on their memory for recalling such information. Diary methods therefore are particularly useful for repetitive behaviours. In my research, I was particularly interested in what people were eating. And since we typically eat 3 meals a day, that’s a lot for someone to try and remember in an interview. Diary methods therefore give participants the space and time to report on behaviours like that, making the data collected a lot more accurate and reliable. Furthermore, where diaries are usually kept over a period of time, the researcher could explore change and better understand how practices, for example, evolve.

Social media in particular has specific benefits too. It’s free, it’s familiar, and participants regularly use it, making it easier for them to remember to submit diary entries. Social media also allows for researcher presence, which is not only useful for sending gentle reminders if participant engagement drops, but it also facilitates timely data analysis, as the researcher can begin transcribing and analysing as soon as something is posted. Which is something I would strongly recommend as data loss is always a risk. If you opt to do diary groups, like me, there can be further benefits in the form of group discussion and improved participant engagement as well.

Different forms of media have their own benefits too. Audio recordings can be quicker and easier for participants, and where they are speaking freely and with greater fluency, their responses can be more authentic and provide greater depth in understanding. Additionally, through sound, the researcher can also analyse tone, emphasis, emotion, and more, thereby gaining a greater insight than they would with text alone.

Like audio, videos offer greater contextual insight but with the added benefit of the visual. Through video, researchers can explore emotions, body language, movement, and the background as well. Something else that is useful is if the participant wishes to give a demonstration, such as preparing a meal or showing how something is done, then video is the easiest and most effective medium to use.

Photos meanwhile are a popular medium as they are quick and convenient, and provide visual insight and a fuller contextual understanding, without the anxiety that can come with videoing oneself.

The two most commonly shared forms of media in my diary groups were text messages and photos. Here, you can see an array of photos depicting food preparation, table displays, meals on plates, everyday eating, religious eating, items bought, and hobbies such as gardening. It was much easier for my participants to take a photo and send it to me than attempt to capture what is depicted in those images in a text message.

As with any research method though, there are limitations to be aware of. Let’s explore 3 key considerations. Firstly, timeframe as this could have an impact on commitment, especially if participants deem the diary period to be too long. In turn, this can impact recruitment, so you could find it difficult to recruit participants for your study. Even after recruiting participants though, keeping them engaged and regularly sharing diary entries can be a challenge too. This is particularly so as the study progresses. But don’t worry, there are things that you can do.

Firstly, you’ll want to choose an appropriate length of time for your diary. It should be long enough that you are able to collect sufficient data that is of a sufficient quality, but it shouldn’t be too long that it puts people off and it impacts recruitment. If participants are expected to share diary entries regularly, you can’t expect them to keep it up for months on end. So strike a balance between frequency and length. Once you’ve made this decision, you’ll need to be really clear about it in your Participant Information Sheet and ensure clear communication during the recruitment stage. Building rapport at this time will not only make recruitment easier, but it’ll also help with participant engagement further down the line. On that note, whilst rapport is key, maintaining a presence in the diary spaces, by sharing gentle reminders or interacting with your participants can help keep them engaged too. When my diary groups started to get quiet, I’d ask a question, or post a reminder of how much time was left to re-engage my participants and encourage new posts.

There are also considerations if you’re working with specific media. Photos are a popular choice and luckily there aren’t many considerations. The main one is anonymity and confidentiality issues, particularly if participants take a photo of themselves or of other people. You can however get around this by depositing descriptions of the images instead of the images themselves.

With audio recordings, it might be difficult for participants to find a quiet space to record, in which case there may be privacy issues or background noise, which could affect the quality of the recording.

The same issues that apply to both photos and audio recordings apply to videos as well. Another consideration, which arguably applies to all media types though but more so for videos, is participant anxiety. Some participants may not feel comfortable with certain tasks, such as videoing themselves, so it is important to offer flexibility and choice.

So, we’ve now explored what social media-based diary methods is, the benefits, and the key considerations. Now, let’s briefly discuss design. The worksheet that accompanies this training resource will help you to design your own study which incorporates social media-based diary methods, but as a brief summary, you’ll need to think about the research question or topic that the diary methods will seek to explore, which social media platform or platforms you’ll want to use, what types of media you would like to collect, the timeframe for the diary, how structured you want the diary to be, and whether there are any ethical considerations to take into account. The image on the right is the prompt that I shared with my Muslim vegan participants, so you can see just how diverse diary methods can be. Have fun!

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