

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACE DATA

## PROMISES & PITFALLS FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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# THE RISE OF DIGITAL TRACE DATA

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- Digital traces as „records of activity (trace data) undertaken through an online information system” (Howison et al., 2011, p. 2)



Source: Alang Fung via Unsplash

e.g., analog vs. digital activities (Keusch & Kreuter, 2021)



Source: John Schnobrich via Unsplash

# THE RISE OF DIGITAL TRACE DATA

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- Digital traces as „records of activity (trace data) undertaken through an online information system” (Howison et al., 2011, p. 2)



Source: Danny G via Unsplash

e.g., individual behavior  
vs. social interaction

(Keusch & Kreuter, 2021)



Source: Alexander Andrews via Unsplash

# THE RISE OF DIGITAL TRACE DATA

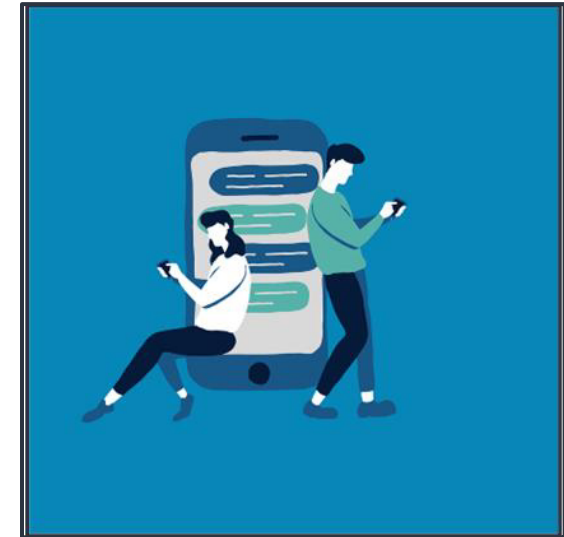
---

- Digital traces as „records of activity (trace data) undertaken through an online information system” (Howison et al., 2011, p. 2)



Source: Jacob Owens via Unsplash

e.g., public vs. private  
data (Haim & Hase, 2024)



Source: Elf-Moondance via Pixabay

# THE RISE OF DIGITAL TRACE DATA

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- Digital traces as „records of activity (trace data) undertaken through an online information system” (Howison et al., 2011, p. 2)
- Relevance due to **fine-grained, longitudinal, & less reactive nature** – e.g., to enrich or validate survey data (Keusch & Kreuter, 2021)
- Used to **study social science questions** on public opinion (Scharnow et al., 2020), labour market behavior (Rajkumar et al., 2022), or political communication (Jungherr, 2015)

# COLLECTING DIGITAL TRACES (Haim & Hase, 2023; Ohme et al., 2024)

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- **Platform-centric approaches** (e.g., APIs, industry collaborations)
  - Decreased or no access (Bruns, 2019; Freelon, 2018)
  - Limited control over samples & measurements (Bagchi et al., 2024; Ho, 2020; Schatto-Eckrodt, 2022)
  - Concerns about user consent

# COLLECTING DIGITAL TRACES (Haim & Hase, 2023; Ohme et al., 2024)

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- Platform-centric approaches (e.g., APIs, industry collaborations)
- **User-centric approaches** (Hase & Schmidbauer, 2024)
  - Active via sensors
  - Passive via tracking
  - Linkage
  - Data donations

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACES

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**1**

— What are data donation studies?

**2**

— What are important steps of data donation studies?

**3**

— What are promises & pitfalls of such studies?



1

# WHAT ARE DATA DONATION STUDIES?



Source: Saulo Mohana via Unsplash

# LEGAL CONTEXT

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- EU supports **right to own data for users** (§15 GDPR):
  - §15(1): Right of access to and information about the personal data undergoing processing
  - §15(3): Copy of the personal data
- Users must be able to **transmit data: data portability** (§ Art. 20 GDPR):
  - §20(1): Receive data in a structured, commonly used, and machine-readable format; transport data

# LEGAL CONTEXT

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According to legal requirements (Ausloos & Veale, 2021; Hase et al., 2024), data should be...

- Concise & easily accessible
- Transparent about included information
- Complete



**Use data for research?**

# DEFINITION: DATA DONATION STUDY

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Participants **download their data** from platforms as Data Download Packages (DDPs) & then **donate this data to research** via Data Donation Tools (DDTs).

Researchers use CSS methods to filter, anonymize & analyze this data.

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACES

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1

**What are data donation studies?** User-centric approach:

Participants download & donate their data to research.

2

What are important steps of data donation studies?

3

What are promises & pitfalls of such studies?

2



## DATA DONATION STUDY: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

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As part of a survey...



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**Let's continue with your data donation!**

In data donation studies, participants voluntarily share their data with researchers. Your donated data helps us to understand how people inform themselves on digital platforms.

Your data is completely anonymized so that we cannot draw any conclusions about who it came from. You can also decide for yourself which data you would like to donate - and which not.

**Would you like to donate your data?**

☐ Yes, I want to donate my data.

☐ No, I do not want to donate my data.



# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

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As part of a survey...



---

## Downloading Your Social Media Data

Before you click "Next", please download your data for the platforms for which you would like to donate data using these instructions. You are free to choose which platform(s) you would like to donate data from.

[Here, you will find instruction for how to download your data from Instagram.](#)

Next

---



# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



# Have you ever requested a copy of your own data from a platform (e.g., Google, Instagram, etc.)?

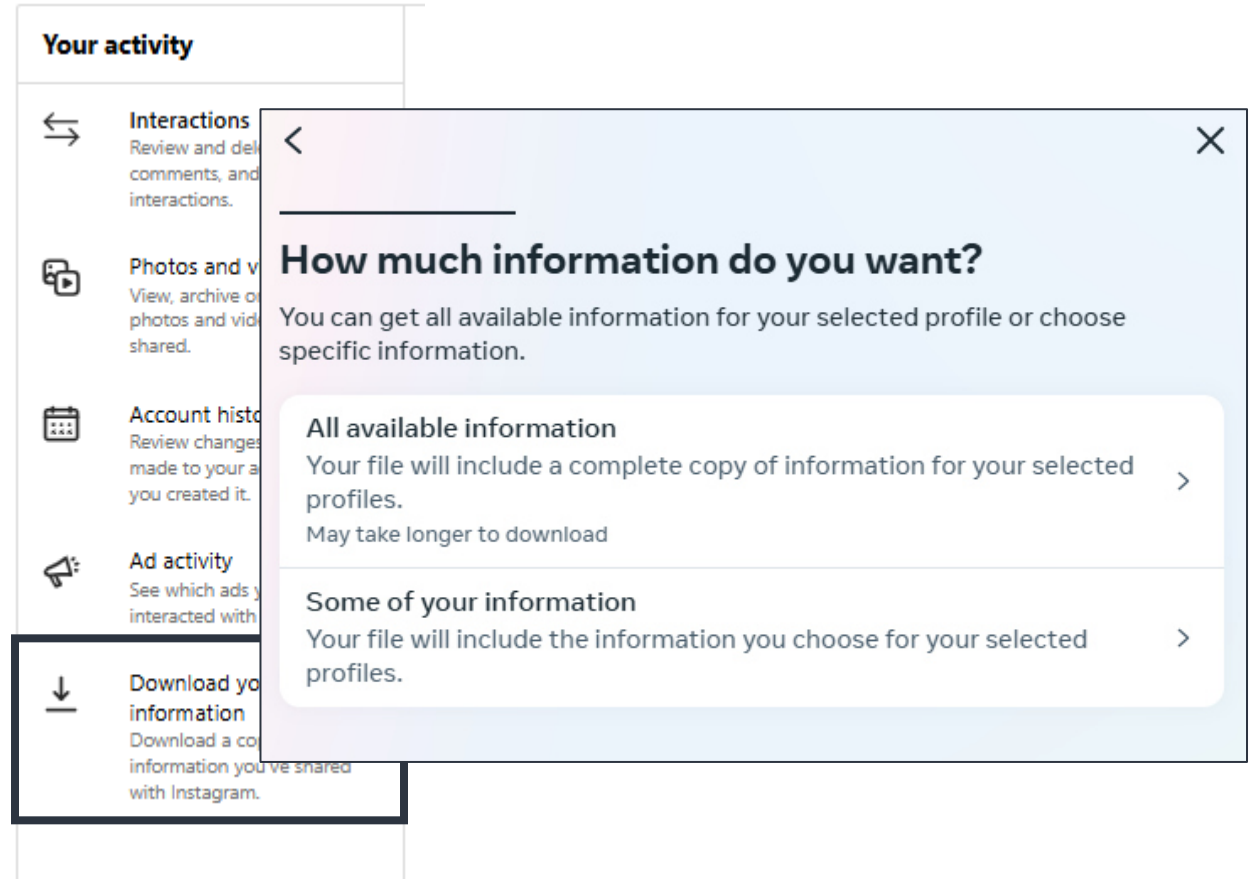


Few people know about/do this – e.g., 8% of all Swiss citizens (Pfiffner & Friemel, 2023, p. 17)

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



- 1 Data Request  
Users request data, e.g.,  
from Instagram.



# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



- 1** Data Request  
Users request data, e.g.,  
from Instagram.

The screenshot shows the Instagram 'Select information' screen. At the top, there's a title 'Select information' and a subtitle 'You can choose the types of information you want to download for each profile.' Below this, it says 'Profile 1 of 1'. The profile shown is 'valerie' on Instagram. Under the heading 'Your Instagram activity', there's a list of data types with checkboxes: 'Avatars Store', 'Checkout', 'Comments', 'Events', and 'Messages'. A 'Select all' link is next to the 'Your Instagram activity' heading. At the bottom, there's a blue 'Next' button.

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



- 1** Data Request  
Users request data, e.g.,  
from Instagram.

<>

Create files to download

When your download is ready, we'll send you a notification. For security, you'll only have 4 days to download your files.

valerie

Instagram

Download one time

Date range

Last year

>

Notify

>

Format

HTML

>

Media quality

Medium

>

Create files

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

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# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

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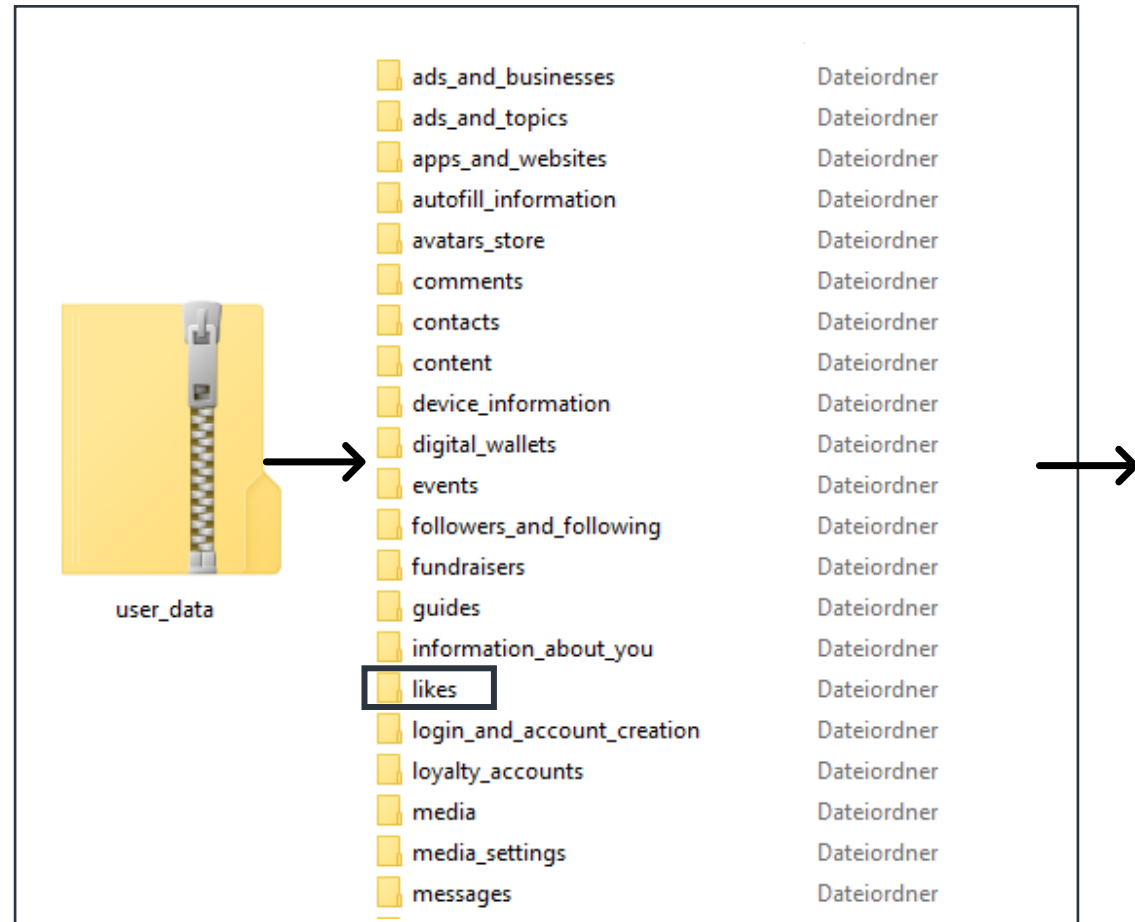
- 2** Download  
User download their  
Data Download  
Packages (DDPs).

- After a few hours/days, users get notified that their DDP is accessible.

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



2 Download  
User download their  
Data Download  
Packages (DDPs).





# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



- 2 Download  
User download their  
Data Download  
Packages (DDPs).

```
*liked_posts - Editor
Datei Bearbeiten Format Ansicht Hilfe
{
  "likes_media_likes": [
    {
      "title": "kiricheeeeeese",
      "media_list_data": [
        ],
      "string_list_data": [
        {
          "href": "https://www.instagram.com/p/kttM6Wly/",
          "timestamp": 1393065075
        }
      ]
    },
    {
      "title": "tagesschau",
      "media_list_data": [
        ],
      "string_list_data": [
        {
          "href": "https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs3LwsrI8/",
          "timestamp": 1392964862
        }
      ]
    }
  ]
},
}
```

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

---



- 2** Download  
User download their  
Data Download  
Packages (DDPs).

Typically timestamped data on... (Hase et al., 2024)

- **User characteristics** (e.g., profile information, privacy settings)
- **Activities** (e.g., social networks, likes, searches, messages)
- **Partly content & context** (e.g., [links to] ads/posts users engaged with; algorithmically inferred interests; rarely information about exposure)

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

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# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



3

## Data Donation

Users donate their data to research via Data Donation Tools (DDTs).



### Downloading Your Social Media Data

Before you click "Next", please download your data for the platforms for which you would like to donate data using these instructions. You are free to choose which platform(s) you would like to donate data from.

[Here, you will find instruction for how to download your data from Instagram.](#)

Next

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



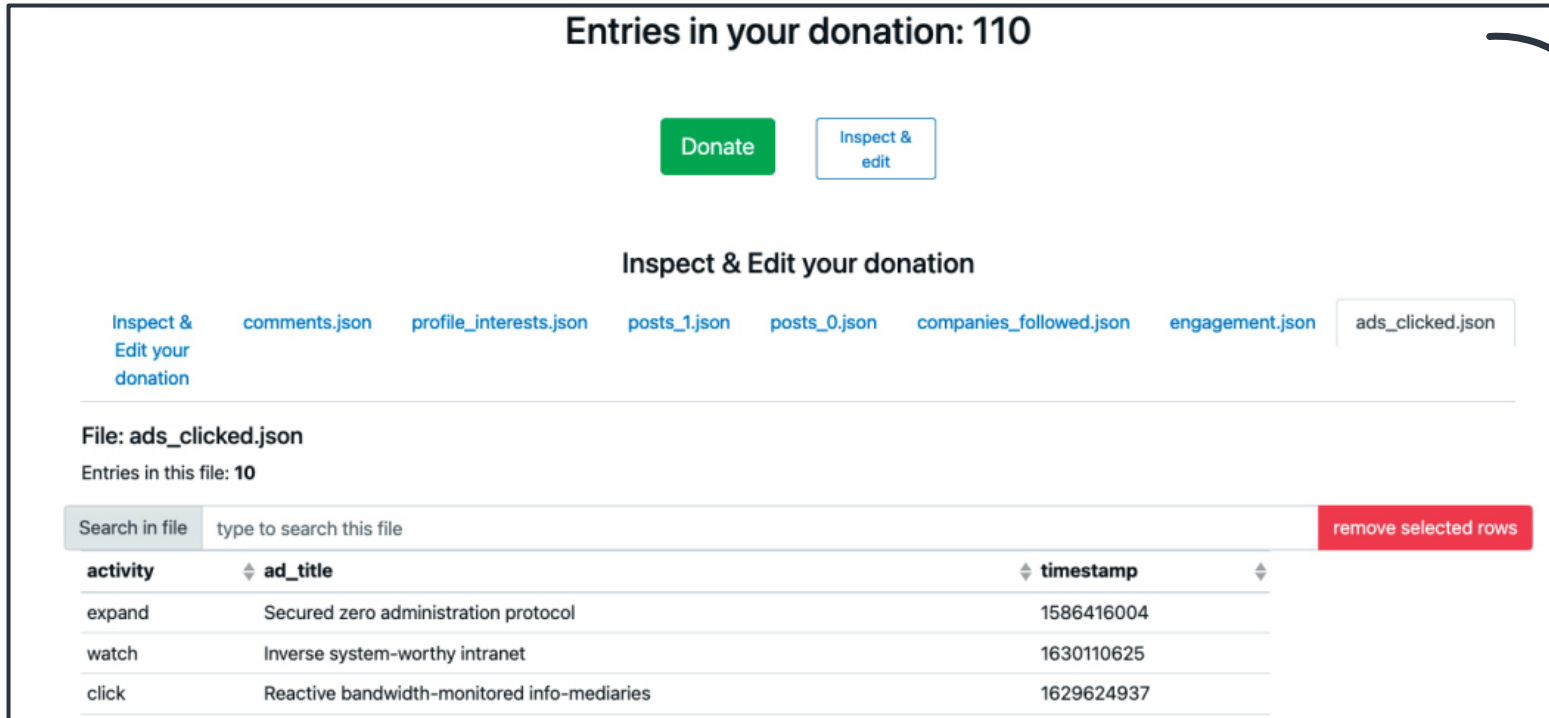
3

## Data Donation

Users donate their data to research via Data Donation Tools (DDTs).

The screenshot shows the LMU (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München) logo at the top. Below it, the text "Select file(s):" is displayed. Underneath, there is an Instagram icon. To the right of the icon, there is a text box that says "You can use the file selector to select the zipfile from your platform." and "You can also drag the folder into this box." Below this text box, there are two buttons: "Datei auswählen" and "Keine ausgewählt".

# DATA DONATIONS: PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE



Entries in your donation: 110

[Donate](#) [Inspect & edit](#)

Inspect & Edit your donation

[Inspect & Edit your donation](#) [comments.json](#) [profile\\_interests.json](#) [posts\\_1.json](#) [posts\\_0.json](#) [companies\\_followed.json](#) [engagement.json](#) [ads\\_clicked.json](#)

File: ads\_clicked.json  
Entries in this file: 10

Search in file type to search this file [remove selected rows](#)

activity	ad_title	timestamp
expand	Secured zero administration protocol	1586416004
watch	Inverse system-worthy intranet	1630110625
click	Reactive bandwidth-monitored info-mediaries	1629624937

- Participants can view data
- Participants can delete data before donation
- Participation **again** give informed consent

Source: Araujo et al., 2022, p. 278

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACES

---

1

**What are data donation studies?** User-centric approach:

Participants download & donate their data to research.

2

**What are important steps of data donation studies?**

Participants: Requesting, downloading & uploading data

3

What are promises & pitfalls of such studies?



3

## DATA DONATION STUDY: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE



Source: Markus Winkler via Pixabay



# DATA DONATIONS: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

Quality & Quantity  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-024-01983-x>



## Best practices for studies using digital data donation

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Accepted: 18 September 2024  
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### Abstract

Digital trace data form a rich, growing source of data for social sciences and humanities. Data donation offers an innovative and ethical approach to collect these digital trace data. In data donation studies, participants request a copy of the digital trace data a data controller (e.g., large digital social media or video platforms) collected about them. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation obliges platforms to provide such a copy. Next, the participant can choose to share (part of) this data copy with the researcher. This way, the researcher can obtain the digital trace data of interest with active consent of the participant. Setting up a data donation study involves several steps and considerations. If executed poorly, these steps might threaten a study's quality. In this paper, we introduce a workflow for setting up a robust data donation study. This workflow is based on error sources identified in the Total Error Framework for data donation by Boeschoten et al. (2022a) as well as on experiences in earlier data donation studies by the authors. The workflow is discussed in detail and linked to challenges and considerations for each step. We aim to provide a starting point with guidelines for researchers seeking to set up and conduct a data donation study.

**Keywords** Data donation · Digital trace data · Data quality · Local processing · Privacy preservation

Carrière et al., 2024

## DIGITALE DATENSPUREN NUTZBAR MACHEN

Datenspenden als Methode der Kommunikationswissenschaft



Quelle: Foto von Sara Kurfeß auf Unsplash

### ON THIS PAGE

Infos zum Workshop  
Materialien  
Weiterführende  
Tutorials  
Weiterführende  
Literatur

### INFOS ZUM WORKSHOP

- Methodenworkshop als Teil der Jahrestagung der Fachgruppen Wissenschaftskommunikation und Journalistik/Journalismusforschung der DGPK 2023. s. [Call for Participants](#)
- 20. September 2023, 11:00 - 13:30 Uhr
- Workshop-Leitung: Valerie Hase (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München). Mehr Infos: [github.com/valeriehase](https://github.com/valeriehase) & [valerie-hase.com](https://valerie-hase.com)



Hase, 2023

# DATA DONATIONS: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

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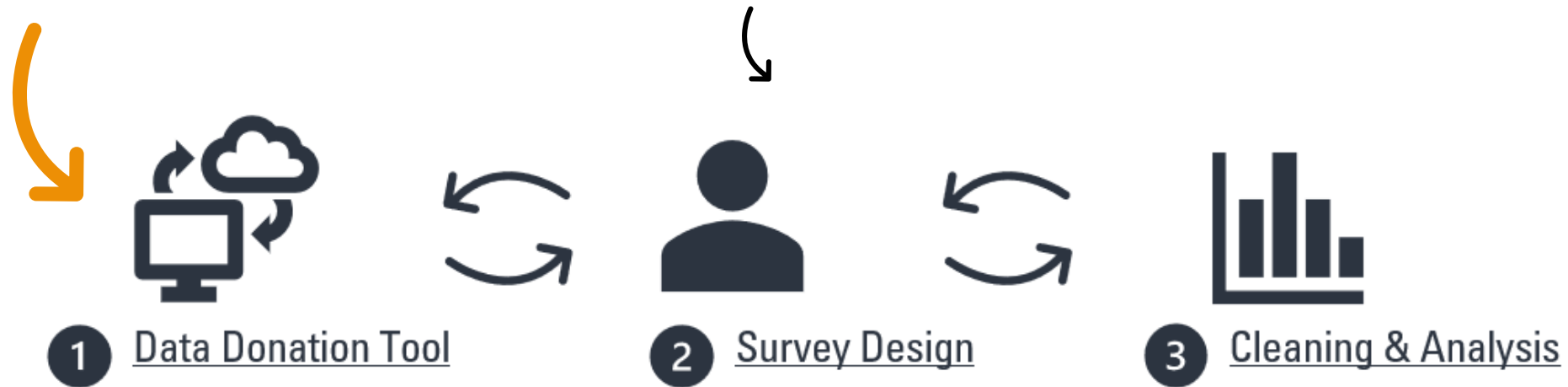
Data donation studies often involve (Carrière et al., 2024) . . .

- Social scientists (e.g., figuring out substantive RQs)
- Methodologists (e.g., text-as-data, survey design)
- Research engineers/IT experts (e.g., setting up server)
- Data protection/legal experts (e.g., IRB approval)

# DATA DONATIONS: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

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Deciding on a RQ that can be answered with a data donation study



Sharing methods & data (see further Munzert et al., 2023)



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## DECISIONS: DATA DONATION TOOL



- I. Which Data Donation Tool should we use?
- II. Which files/metrics do we want to extract?
- III. How is data preprocessed?

# I. WHICH DATA DONATION TOOL SHOULD WE USE?

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Most Data Donation Tools rely on **privacy-by-design** ...

1. Local extraction of files
2. Local anonymization (and further processing)
3. Data minimization/interaction by participants
4. Informed consent (again)
5. Data send to researcher database

# I. WHICH DATA DONATION TOOL SHOULD WE USE?

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1

Data Donation Tool

Many open source tools, for example...

- OSD2F, now PORT/Next (Boeschoten et al., 2022, 2023)
- Data Donation Module (Pfiffner et al., 2024)
- Social Media Donator ( *TikTok* ) (Zanettou et al., 2022)
- WhatsR ( *WhatsApp* ) (Kohne, 2024)
- PrimaDona ( *Facebook, WhatsApp* ) (Hakobyan et al., 2024)

## II. WHICH FILES/METRICS DO WE WANT TO EXTRACT?

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**Local extraction** of files (often .zip folders with .html/.json files)

Important: Handling exceptions!



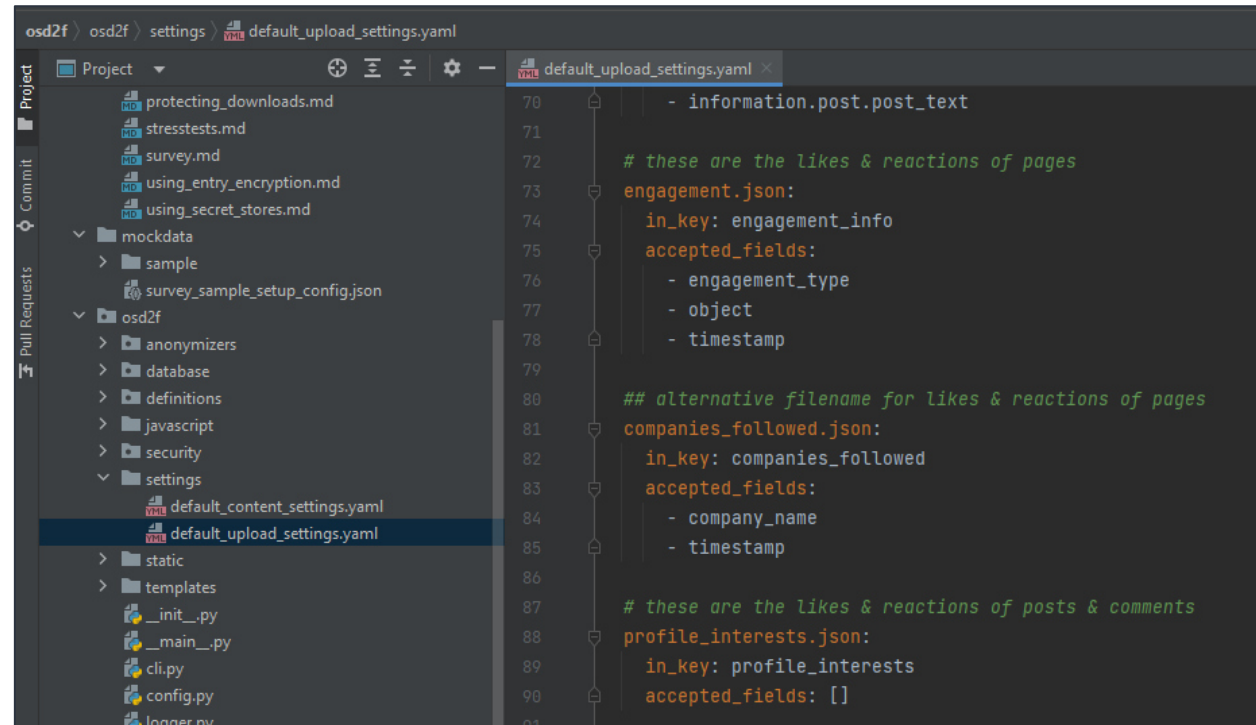
user\_data

ads_and_businesses	Dateiordner
ads_and_topics	Dateiordner
apps_and_websites	Dateiordner
autofill_information	Dateiordner
avatars_store	Dateiordner
comments	Dateiordner
contacts	Dateiordner
content	Dateiordner
device_information	Dateiordner
digital_wallets	Dateiordner
events	Dateiordner
followers_and_following	Dateiordner
fundraisers	Dateiordner
guides	Dateiordner
information_about_you	Dateiordner
likes	Dateiordner
login_and_account_creation	Dateiordner
loyalty_accounts	Dateiordner
media	Dateiordner
media_settings	Dateiordner
messages	Dateiordner

## II. WHICH FILES/METRICS DO WE WANT TO EXTRACT?

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**Local extraction** of files (often .zip folders with .html/.json files)



The screenshot shows a code editor with a project structure on the left and a YAML file open in the main editor. The project structure includes folders like 'mockdata', 'sample', 'osd2f', 'anonymizers', 'database', 'definitions', 'javascript', 'security', 'settings', 'static', and 'templates'. The 'settings' folder is expanded, showing 'default\_content\_settings.yaml' and 'default\_upload\_settings.yaml'. The 'default\_upload\_settings.yaml' file is open in the main editor, showing the following content:

```
70 - information.post.post_text
71
72 # these are the likes & reactions of pages
73 engagement.json:
74   in_key: engagement_info
75   accepted_fields:
76     - engagement_type
77     - object
78     - timestamp
79
80 ## alternative filename for likes & reactions of pages
81 companies_followed.json:
82   in_key: companies_followed
83   accepted_fields:
84     - company_name
85     - timestamp
86
87 # these are the likes & reactions of posts & comments
88 profile_interests.json:
89   in_key: profile_interests
90   accepted_fields: []
```



# III. HOW IS DATA PREPROCESSED?

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## 1. **Anonymization** (Boeschoten et al., 2021)

- Whitelists
- Build-in classifiers

## 2. **Aggregation**

## 3. **Data extension** (Wedel et al., 2024)

- APIs (problematic!)
- Scraping
- Annotations by participants

# III. HOW IS DATA PREPROCESSED?

---

Local preprocessing (e.g., anonymization)

Entries in your donation: 21

[Inspect & edit](#) [Donate](#)

[Inspect & Edit your donation](#) [ads\\_clicked.json](#) **engagement.json** [profile\\_interests.json](#) [messages.json](#)

**engagement.json** Entries in this file: 5 10

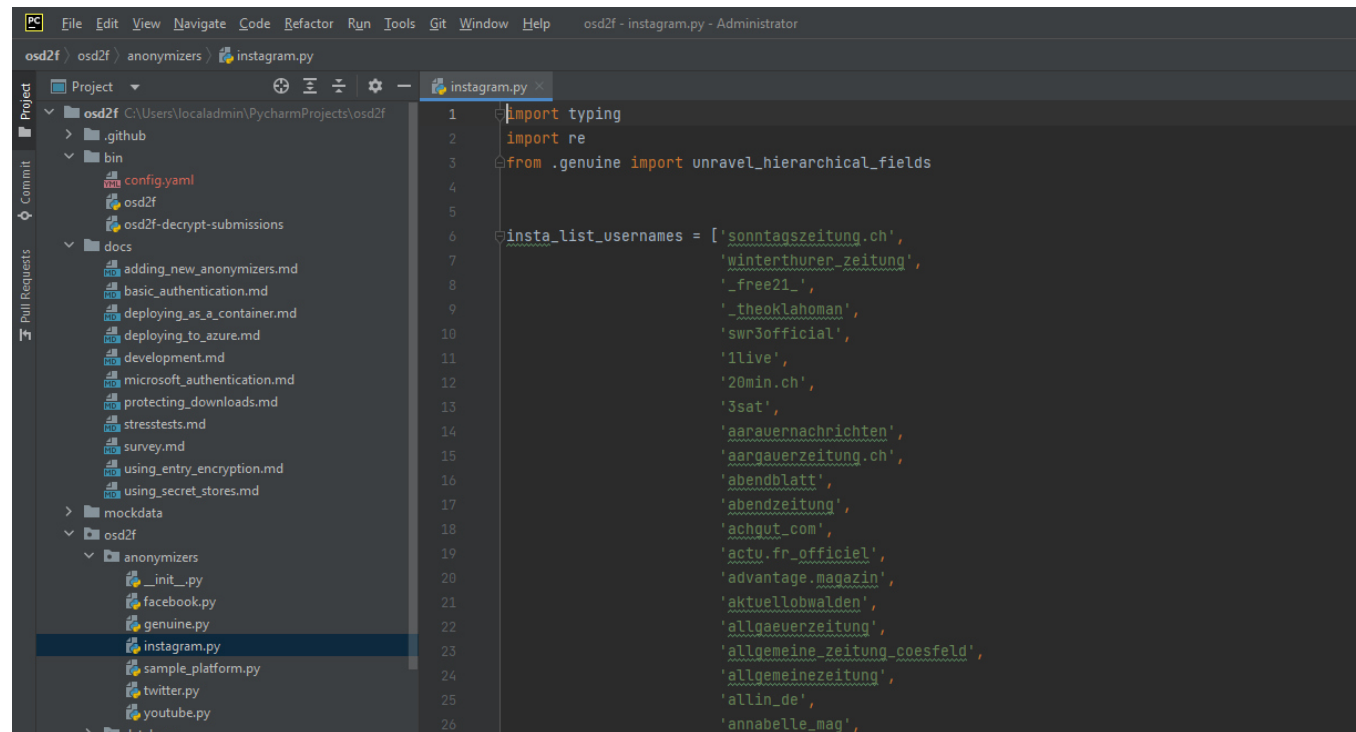
[remove selected rows](#)

engagement_type	object	timestamp
like	USER	October 25, 2020 1:45 AM
angry emoticon	USER	October 31, 2020 8:59 AM
like	Tagesschau	September 15, 2021 2:45 AM
click	Zeit	October 20, 2021 8:40 AM
share	USER	May 3, 2022 7:26 PM

# III. HOW IS DATA PREPROCESSED?

---

## Local preprocessing (e.g., anonymization)

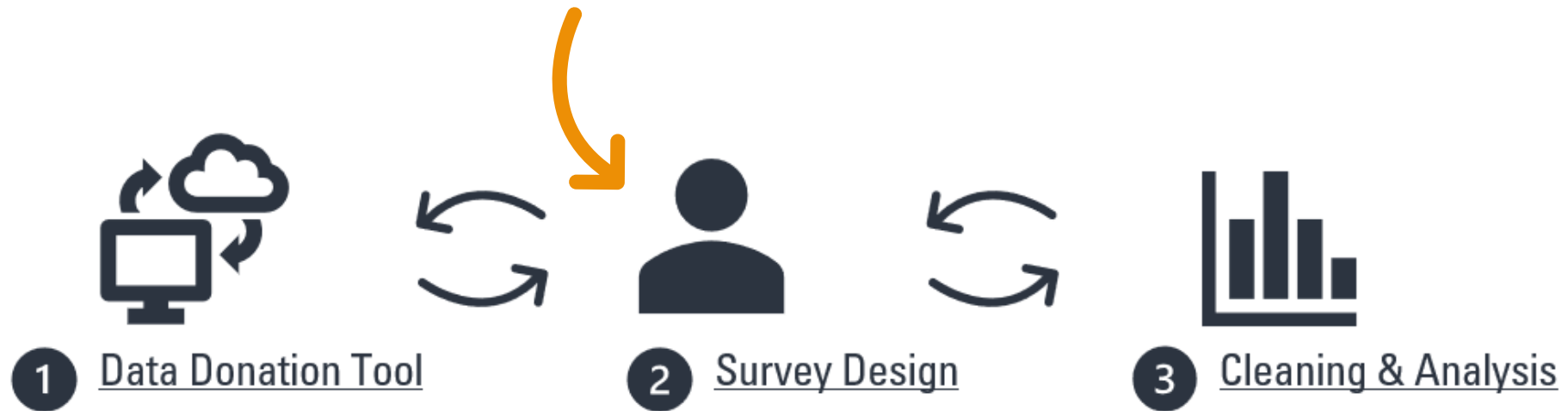


The screenshot shows a PyCharm IDE window titled 'osd2f - instagram.py - Administrator'. The left sidebar displays the project structure for 'osd2f' located at 'C:\Users\localadmin\PycharmProjects\osd2f'. The project contains several folders and files, including 'bin', 'config.yaml', 'osd2f', 'osd2f-decrypt-submissions', 'docs', 'mockdata', and 'anonymizers'. The 'anonymizers' folder is expanded, showing files like '\_init\_.py', 'facebook.py', 'genuine.py', 'instagram.py', 'sample\_platform.py', 'twitter.py', and 'youtube.py'. The 'instagram.py' file is selected and its content is displayed in the main editor. The code in 'instagram.py' includes imports for 'typing', 're', and 'unravel\_hierarchical\_fields' from 'genuine'. It also defines a list of usernames for Instagram, including 'sonntagszeitung.ch', 'winterthurer-zeitung', 'free21', 'theoklahoman', 'swr3official', '1live', '20min.ch', '3sat', 'aarauernachrichten', 'aargauerzeitung.ch', 'abendblatt', 'abendzeitung', 'achgut.com', 'actu.fr.official', 'advantage.magazin', 'aktuellobwalden', 'allgaeuerzeitung', 'allgemeine-zeitung-coesfeld', 'allgemeinezeitung', 'allin.de', and 'annabelle\_mag'.

```
1 import typing
2 import re
3 from .genuine import unravel_hierarchical_fields
4
5
6 insta_list_usernames = ['sonntagszeitung.ch',
7                          'winterthurer-zeitung',
8                          '_free21_',
9                          '_theoklahoman',
10                         'swr3official',
11                         '1live',
12                         '20min.ch',
13                         '3sat',
14                         'aarauernachrichten',
15                         'aargauerzeitung.ch',
16                         'abendblatt',
17                         'abendzeitung',
18                         'achgut.com',
19                         'actu.fr.official',
20                         'advantage.magazin',
21                         'aktuellobwalden',
22                         'allgaeuerzeitung',
23                         'allgemeine-zeitung-coesfeld',
24                         'allgemeinezeitung',
25                         'allin.de',
26                         'annabelle_mag',
```

# DATA DONATIONS: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

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## DECISIONS: SURVEY DESIGN



IV. How is the data donation task  
integrated in the survey?

V. How are participants recruited?

## IV. HOW IS THE DATA DONATION TASK INTEGRATED?

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### 2 Survey Design

Fewer tools, for example...

- PORT/Next (Boeschoten et al., 2022, 2023)
- OSD2F for SoSci Survey (Haim et al., 2023)
- Also: instructions for participants!

# V. HOW ARE PARTICIPANTS RECRUITED?

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## 2 Survey Design

- To date, often non-probability samples (see later: bias)
- High participant burden: incentivisation, reminders, etc.?

# DATA DONATIONS: RESEARCHER PERSPECTIVE

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## DECISIONS: CLEANING & ANALYSIS



VI. How are data points classified?

VII. How are data points  
aggregated/modelled?

# VI. HOW ARE DATA POINTS CLASSIFIED?

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## 3 Cleaning & Analysis

Debate about how to classify digital traces (Clemm van Hohenberg et al., 2024) . . .

- e.g., classification via accounts vs. URLs vs. content (Adam et al., 2024; Bosch, 2023; Reiss, 2023; van Hoof et al., 2024)
- e.g., classification of „exposure“/engagement (Clemm van Hohenberg et al., 2024; Mangold et al., 2022)
- e.g., handling missing data (Dahlke et al., 2023; Knöpfle & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2024)

## VII. HOW ARE DATA POINTS AGGREGATED/MODELLED?

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### 3 Cleaning & Analysis

Debate about how to model digital traces (Clemm van

Hohenberg et al., 2024) . . .

- e.g., nestedness within individuals, over time, across platforms, etc.
- e.g., skewness of „interesting“ behaviour

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACES

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1

**What are data donation studies?** User-centric approach:

Participants download & donate their data to research.

2

**What are important steps of data donation studies?**

Participants: Requesting, downloading & uploading data;

Researchers: DDT, survey design, cleaning, analysis – many degrees of freedom!

3

**What are promises & pitfalls of such studies?**

# 4

## DATA DONATIONS: PROMISES & PITFALLS



Source: kilarov.zaneit via Unsplash

# DATA DONATIONS: PROMISES

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- ✓ Less reactive, longitudinal, and highly granular data
- ✓ Partly new data (e.g., algorithmically inferred interests)
- ✓ Reliance on user consent & current provision in law (GDPR, DSA)
- ✓ Data Donation Tools largely open-source

# DATA DONATIONS: PROMISES & PITFALLS

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- ✗ free of errors related to representation
- ✗ free of errors related to measurements
- ✗ to date: playground for methodologists?

# PITFALL 1: ERRORS OF REPRESENTATION

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**Errors in representation**, for example due to ... (Boeschoten et al., 2022)

- Non-probability samples
- Low response rates, also compared to tracking (Silber et al., 2022), and potentially bias (Hase & Haim, 2024; Keusch et al., 2024; Ohme et al., 2021)
- Systematic drop-out for specific metrics/platforms
- Can „classic“ survey design strategies mitigate bias? (Hase & Haim, 2024)
  - A-posteriori: incentives, timing of request, etc. (Keusch et al., 2024; Kmetty et al., 2024; Silber et al., 2022)
  - Post-hoc: weighting, etc. (Park et al., 2022)



# EXAMPLE: ERRORS OF REPRESENTATION

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(Hase & Haim, 2024)



Errors of representation in surveys integrating the collection of digital traces

(Jürgens, 2020; Keusch et al., 2023; Struminskaya et al., 2021; Ohme et al., 2021)



*How prevalent is non-response error in data donation studies?*  
*Can we address it?*



2 survey experiments with integrated data donation

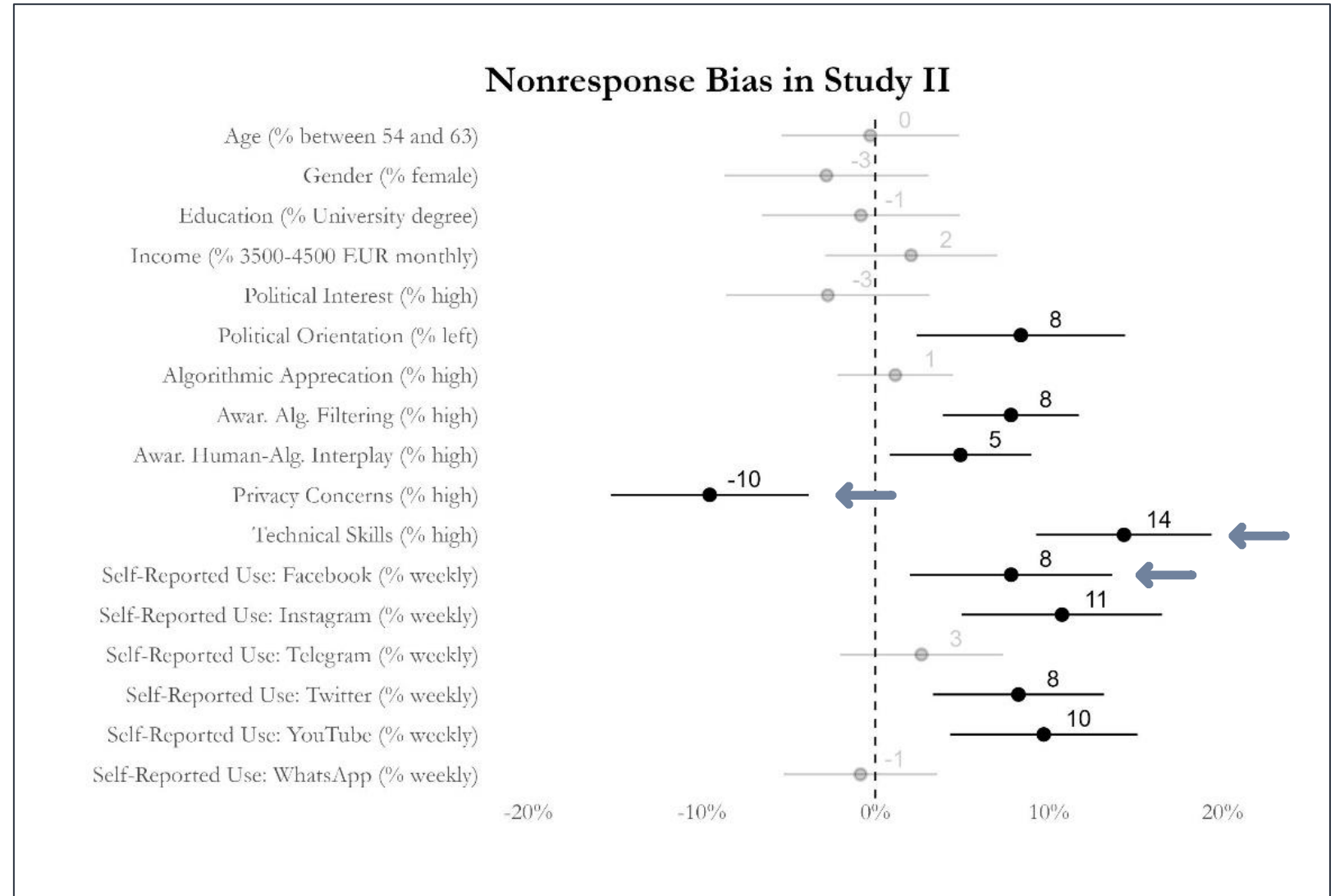
(see Haim et al., 2023 for tool)



Non-probability sample online panel ( $N = 2,309$ ) & student sample ( $N = 345$ )

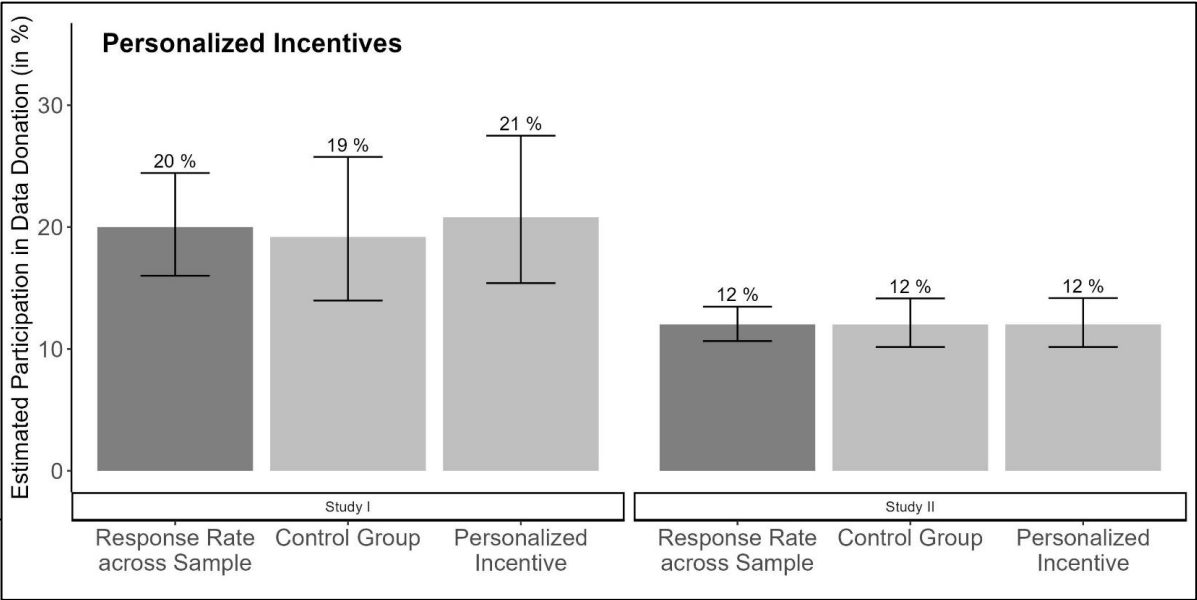
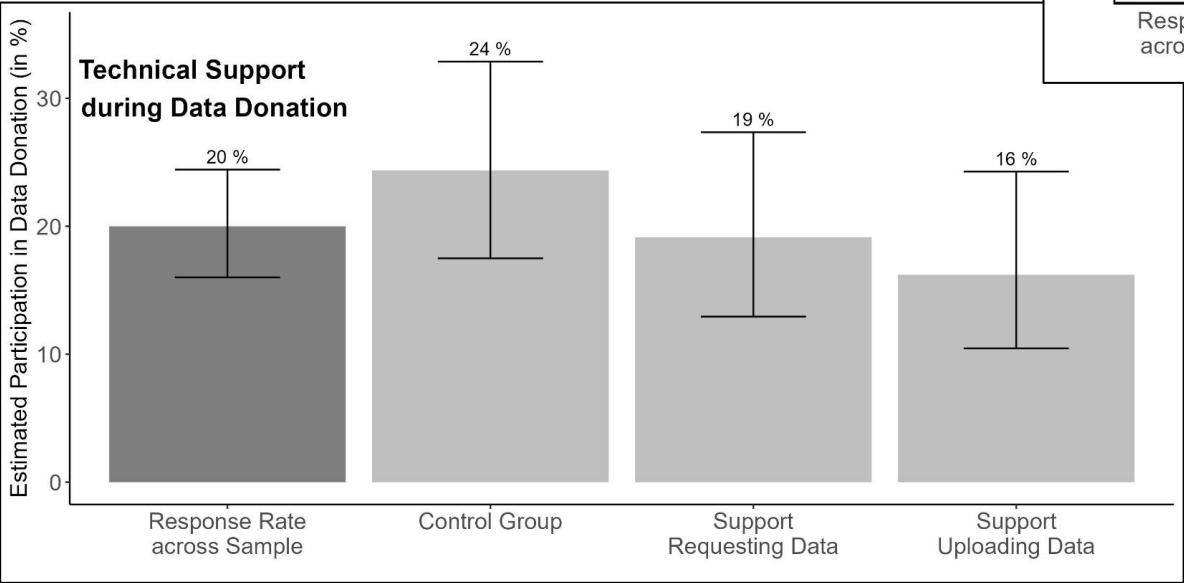
## EXAMPLE: ERRORS OF REPRESENTATION

(Hase & Haim, 2024)



# EXAMPLE: ERRORS OF REPRESENTATION

(Hase & Haim, 2024)



# PITFALL 2: MEASUREMENT ERROR

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**Measurement error**, for example due to... (Boeschoten et al., 2022)

- Mismatch between social science concepts/theories & DDPs measurements
- Missing data due to volatility in DDPs (Carrière et al., 2024) or platform non-compliance (Hase et al., 2024)
- Misclassification via NLP methods (TeBlunthuis et al., 2024)

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## EXAMPLE: MEASUREMENT ERROR

(Hase et al., 2024)

### Challenges: **burdensome data access**

- Different interfaces
- Notification about data availability
- Period of data availability

### Challenges: **lack of transparency**

- Completeness?
- Measurements?
- Changes?

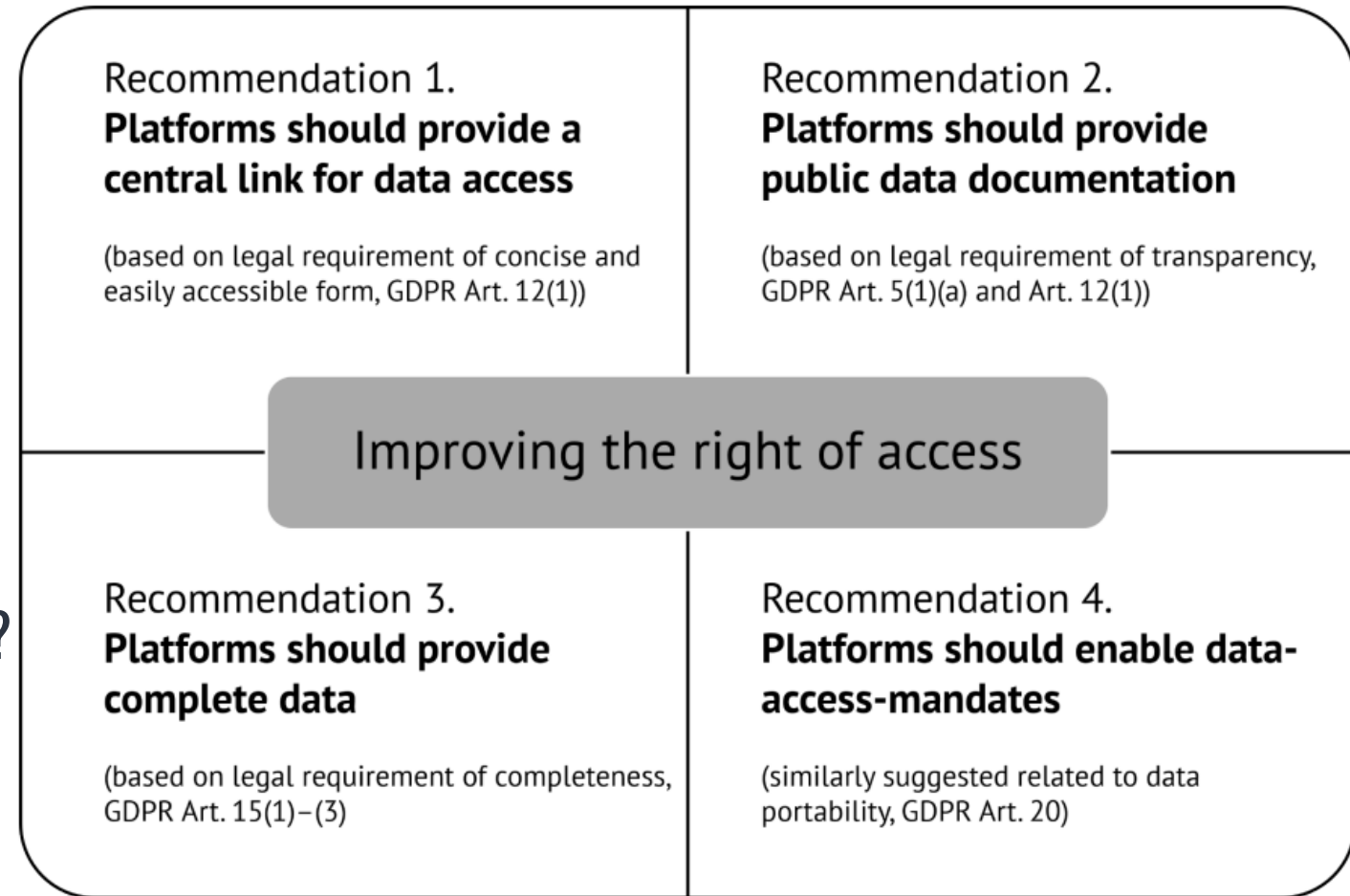
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## EXAMPLE: MEASUREMENT ERROR

(Hase et al., 2024)



Maybe DSA, Art. 40?



# PITFALL 3: METHODOLOGICAL PLAYGROUND?

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To date, **methodological rather than empirical use** . . . (Hase & Schmidbauer, 2024)

- (Vignette) experiments on errors of representation
- Opinion pieces on measurement error
- Best practice guidelines

Empirical application to answer substantial social science questions?

# USING DATA DONATIONS TO COLLECT DIGITAL TRACES

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1

**What are data donation studies?** User-centric approach:

Participants download & donate their data to research.

2

**What are important steps of data donation studies?**

Participants: Requesting, downloading & uploading data;

Researchers: DDT, survey design, cleaning, analysis – many degrees of freedom!

3

**What are promises & pitfalls of such studies?**


Granular & longitudinal data, but lack of standardization & control introduces errors related to samples & measurements. To date: Empirical use limited!



# THE ROAD AHEAD: WHAT IS NEXT FOR DATA DONATION STUDIES?

- More documentation & potentially better measurements due to DSA (for VLOPs)
- Increased use within probability samples / established panels
- Increased empirical application
- Continuing struggles with in-tool classification & audio-visual data

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