Points for reflection

What kinds of claims would you like to make about your data and
   how much data would you need to support them?
Will it be easier to collect large amounts of data and then narrow
   them down, or to decide beforehand which specific data you want
   to collect?

In the case studies in this chapter, the two authors explain some of the
challenges they encountered when collecting data for their qualitative
research projects. Both Mariza Georgalou and Aoife Lenihan faced challenges
relating to the constantly changing nature of social media interactions. For
Mariza, this related to social events which took place during the time she was
collecting data. For Aoife, the sudden disappearance of the forum she was
studying put her research at risk. Both researchers had choices to make
about how to select their material in the first place, and when to stop
collecting data.

**Box 5.1 The discursive performance of self in social
network sites: Greeks on Facebook**

Mariza Georgalou

My PhD thesis explored the construction of identities on Facebook.
Embarking on detailed discourse analysis of both verbal and
visual modalities, I identified the ways in which Greek Facebook
users:

- located themselves in terms of place and time;
- shared their expertise and buttressed solidarity among colleagues
  and fellow students;
- communicated emotions, tastes, thoughts, opinions and assessments;
- controlled the flow of information on their walls to secure their
  privacy.

To gather my data, I combined systematic and longitudinal observa-
tion of Facebook profiles with direct (mediated and face-to-face)
engagement with their creators. The latter were recruited via con-
venience sampling. Initially, they were sent a message in which
I explained the purposes of my study, asking them to fill in an online

questionnaire on how they experienced social media mechanics. Five respondents (two females and three males; mean age = 28) agreed to participate in a series of semi-structured interviews via email, instant messaging and/or Facebook messages. My multimodal dataset included survey information, interview material, Facebook profile information, Facebook wall posts (status updates, comments, links, photos), field notes, and informants' comments on my analysis.

Drawing from my own research experience on Facebook, here are some helpful rules of thumb.

Prefer friends of friends as a first sampling resort. My initial contact message for finding informants was randomly sent to more than 100 MySpace and Facebook users. What I received was only 33 replies and a general feeling of unwillingness to be interviewed. I got frustrated and wasted precious time. When I asked my own friends and relatives to forward my message to contacts of theirs, the situation was surprisingly reversed. "I'm ready for a new questionnaire whenever you need, ok?!" one of my participants wrote.

Learn from your informants' social media practices. In preparing his MA dissertation, one of my informants created a Facebook event to recruit participants for his survey, asking his Facebook friends to share the event to that purpose. It was fun clicking 'going' to that particular event. Indeed, this kind of promotion proved to be very effective for my informant's study as 190 people completed his questionnaire in just 24 hours. Had I utilised Facebook in a similarly innovative way, I could have instantly got access to more interviewees.

Show people what you are doing with their data. How to handle data on my subjects' walls from users who had not given their consent constituted a thorny issue. Just asking for their permission to use their comments was not enough. Sending them samples of textual analysis of their Facebook interactions gave them a clearer picture of my research and secured their approval.

Be ready to reformulate your research plan. I started my PhD in 2009. My research took an unexpected turn within the next years because of the Greek financial and political crisis, which dominated the lives, and concomitantly the content of Facebook posts, of the people I was studying. In the end, almost half of my data was about the crisis, but this gave me the opportunity to examine stance-taking in my thesis.

#advice: Social media = cardiograph of society + language. if its content diverts u from initial RQ, seize chance to explore new linguistic topics.