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**LinkedIn as a research participant recruitment tool:  
Reflections from the football industry.**

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Keywords:	Social Media, LinkedIn, Recruitment, Qualitative Research, Football

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# LinkedIn as a research participant recruitment tool: Reflections from the football industry.

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The article explores the process of using LinkedIn to recruit hard-to-reach groups, reflecting on our experience of the football industry. We propose LinkedIn as a viable option to mitigate recruitment challenges, particularly in employment-focussed research.

**Approach:** We examine how LinkedIn was used to recruit 43 football backroom staff for a sociological research study. It outlines the process of using LinkedIn to contact participants, the ethical considerations made throughout the research process and reflects on why LinkedIn was effective for a primarily employment-focussed study.

**Findings:** We discuss the importance of insider knowledge for identifying LinkedIn as a potentially fruitful recruitment tool and how the functionality of the platform can be beneficial for a targeted recruitment method. We also explore the ethical and practical considerations of using social media for recruitment.

**Originality:** Previous research discusses social media as if they are indistinguishable and interchangeable with one another and we argue, that this neglects the importance of a platform's functionality. We discuss how the decision to use a particular social media platform to recruit should be grounded in the researcher's familiarity with the site, the functionality the platform offers, and the sample recruited. This article explicitly explores the considerations taken when using LinkedIn to help overcome recruitment challenges.

**Keywords:** social media, LinkedIn, recruitment, qualitative research, football

1  
2 Participant recruitment can be a challenging process, with financial  
3  
4 obstacles, travel requirements and the availability of the sample impacting the  
5  
6 scope of recruitment (Perez *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, researchers often look for  
7  
8 methods that might ease recruitment challenges. While the use of traditional  
9  
10 methods, such as letters and print media, has diminished as they are seen as  
11  
12 costly and not yielding high returns (Fenner *et al.*, 2012), the use of social  
13  
14 media (SM) has grown. SM allows researchers to target and reach potentially  
15  
16 otherwise inaccessible participants (Jones *et al.*, 2020). SM applications such  
17  
18 as Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram and Reddit have  
19  
20 previously been used to allow researchers to recruit participants with varying  
21  
22 demographics, characteristics, and backgrounds (Darko *et al.*, 2022). The  
23  
24 growth in SM for recruitment has led to discussions about the appropriateness  
25  
26 and ethics of the method (Bender *et al.*, 2017; Hokke *et al.*, 2020). With SM  
27  
28 primarily used as a content-sharing and networking tool, using it for academic  
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30 research raises ethical questions. SM has blurred the lines between public and  
31  
32 private online spaces, creating the need for academic research to explore its  
33  
34 use from a practical and methodological standpoint.  
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43 Most of the literature discussing SM for recruitment is in the health and  
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45 medical field (Bender *et al.*, 2017; Darko *et al.*, 2022; Gelinis *et al.*, 2017;  
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47 Jones *et al.*, 2020; King *et al.*, 2014; Leighton *et al.*, 2021; Topolovec-Vranic  
48  
49 and Natarajan, 2016). This literature justifies using SM due to the difficulty of  
50  
51 reaching people or groups with specific medical conditions and the requirement  
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53 of approaching people confidentially. Beyond this, there is minimal research on  
54  
55 how transferable the use of SM is to other fields, especially where recruitment  
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57 has been historically difficult. Much of the research discusses SM platforms  
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1  
2 interchangeably as if they are indistinguishable from one another. We argue  
3  
4 that this neglects how each SM site functions differently and how platforms may  
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6 be more suited to overcoming certain recruitment challenges. Previous research  
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8 has also tended to discuss using SM to reach and distribute invitations to a  
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10 mass of people, rather than the value it has in approaching individuals with  
11  
12 specific characteristics.  
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18 This paper focusses on LinkedIn as a participant recruitment tool.  
19  
20 LinkedIn describes itself as the 'world's largest professional network with more  
21  
22 than 875 million members in more than 200 countries' (LinkedIn, n. d.). **The**  
23  
24 **platform is** primarily orientated towards business and employment networking  
25  
26 (Bell and Waters, 2018). LinkedIn, previously, has been placed under the  
27  
28 umbrella of SM (Gelinis *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2020; Leighton *et al.*, 2021;  
29  
30 Stokes *et al.*, 2019), with minimal focus on **using this** for academic participant  
31  
32 recruitment and the advantages the platform poses, especially with  
33  
34 employment-based participation criteria. This is surprising considering the  
35  
36 professional networking focus of LinkedIn compared to other SM platforms. This  
37  
38 paper will explore our experiences in using LinkedIn to recruit participants for  
39  
40 qualitative interviews. Within this, we will focus on the specific functionalities of  
41  
42 LinkedIn and the benefits this provided for recruiting with employment-based  
43  
44 criteria. Firstly, it is important to discuss academic participant recruitment within  
45  
46 our field of professional football, an industry notably difficult to access, to  
47  
48 establish why using LinkedIn became necessary for this research.  
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## Participant Recruitment in the Football Industry

The men's professional football industry has been difficult to access for academic exploration. Tomlinson (1983, p.151) explained that people within football clubs can be 'quite suspicious of social researchers' and that clubs are 'jealously guarded worlds'. Insider access has been highlighted as important when recruiting within football (Brownrigg *et al.*, 2018; Law, 2019; 2021; Parker, 2016; Roderick, 2006). Kelly and Waddington (2006, p. 149) describe professional football as a 'notoriously closed social world' and personal contacts were the 'only realistic way' to recruit professional footballers and managers. Law (2019, p. 2) also stated that gaining access to professional footballers is 'almost impossible' without being an insider. Law (2019) sent over 100 letters to former and current professional footballers, but the response rate from cold calling was zero. Similarly, Roderick (2006) used this cold calling method of sending speculative letters and although he received some responses, most did not reply, and the majority of his 47 participants came from personal contacts.

Gatekeepers have also been a fruitful method of gaining access. Waddington (2014, p. 14) refers to a chance meeting with a former professional footballer facilitating contact with the Professional Footballers' Association, who allowed access to 'two or three' players as part of a purposive sample. In the same study, Waddington (2014, p. 14) explains that recruiting physiotherapists and club doctors was 'less problematic' as he utilized existing contacts – highlighting the significance of personal contacts even when recruiting non-players. Without playing experience, recruitment is challenging. Parker (2016, p. 108) explains how it took him over one year to gain access to an English professional football club to conduct ethnographic research, relying upon

1 gatekeepers 'in and around the academic community' to help negotiate access.  
2  
3  
4 Trust and acceptance were common themes to access members of the football  
5  
6 industry, as without insider status or gatekeepers, recruitment is challenging.  
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10  
11 Despite these challenges and the broader growth of SM for recruitment,  
12  
13 there is no research discussing the value of using SM to recruit participants  
14  
15 within the football industry. Research has used SM to recruit members of the  
16  
17 football industry previously (Higham *et al.*, 2021; Kent *et al.*, 2023; Rosenbloom  
18  
19 *et al.*, 2022), however, these studies did not detail why these SM platforms were  
20  
21 chosen or how they set up their SM profile for recruitment. This means our  
22  
23 methodological understanding of how and why LinkedIn is used for participant  
24  
25 recruitment is still limited. Therefore, to support fellow researchers with  
26  
27 recruitment challenges, we aim to provide awareness, reflecting upon our  
28  
29 experiences in the football industry, as to how LinkedIn can be used as an  
30  
31 effective participant recruitment tool. The article aims to discuss the viability of  
32  
33 using LinkedIn and the benefits it can provide for researchers in equally or more  
34  
35 challenging fields to recruit. Throughout we will provide our considerations and  
36  
37 practical recommendations for when using LinkedIn for this purpose. Before  
38  
39 doing this, it is important to provide the context of the study.  
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## 48 **The Study**

49  
50 As part of a PhD project, this study examined the working lives of  
51  
52 backroom staff (i.e. assistant managers, coaches, kit managers, strength and  
53  
54 conditioning coaches, sports scientists, physiotherapists, performance analysts  
55  
56 and scouts) in men's professional football clubs in the United Kingdom (UK).

57  
58 **Semi-structured** interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, exploring the  
59  
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1  
2 participants' motivations to work in football, their employment history (including  
3  
4 experiences of job applications, interviews, job descriptions and contract  
5  
6 negotiations), day-to-day working lives, relationships with key stakeholders, and  
7  
8 the impact of work on their life away from football. Each participant was  
9  
10 interviewed once and the interviews lasted on average 63 minutes (min 36  
11  
12 minutes; max = 101 minutes). Ethical approval for this study was granted by the  
13  
14 university ethics committee. 51 backroom staff participated – of which 43 were  
15  
16 recruited using LinkedIn, seven using a convenience sample and one from  
17  
18 snowball sampling.  
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25 Using LinkedIn, 311 eligible individuals were contacted to participate.  
26  
27 Each was an accepted connection of the lead author on LinkedIn. An  
28  
29 introductory message was sent by the lead author to outline the purpose of the  
30  
31 contact. If individuals affirmed their interest, they were then asked for their email  
32  
33 address and a copy of the participant information sheet (PIS) and consent form  
34  
35 were sent. 95 responded to the initial message stating that they were interested  
36  
37 and were sent a copy of the PIS. Furthermore, five declined to participate, two  
38  
39 were unable to participate due to time constraints, and four replied stating they  
40  
41 required permission from their line managers to take part – none of these  
42  
43 responded to say they were granted permission after a further follow-up. From  
44  
45 the 95 positive responses, 43 returned the consent form and completed the  
46  
47 interview.  
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55 This paper now turns to the process and considerations of using  
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57 LinkedIn. We will focus on the importance of insider knowledge and how we  
58  
59 considered positionality, the functionality of LinkedIn, how we handled user  
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1  
2 privacy and the ethical concerns of using LinkedIn with a focus on transparency.

3  
4 Firstly, the importance of insider knowledge will be explored.  
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7

### 8 9 **Insider Knowledge and Considering Positionality**

10  
11 Without insider access and knowledge, conducting research can be  
12 challenging and therefore the research team having some degree of insider  
13 status was beneficial. The lead author had previously volunteered and worked  
14 as a football scout at professional clubs and organisations, and one of the co-  
15 authors was a former professional footballer. This afforded the research team a  
16 degree of insider status. Given this, initially, we anticipated that convenience  
17 sampling would be the greater contributor to our sample, yet only seven were  
18 recruited from this method. LinkedIn became a far more fruitful tool. We would  
19 argue that the necessity to use SM further emphasises the challenges of  
20 recruiting within this field – that even though we had insider status, this alone  
21 was not sufficient to generate the sample size we hoped for.  
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39 Our insider knowledge identified LinkedIn as a realistic and potentially  
40 fruitful option for recruitment. Jones *et al.* (2020) explain how SM recruitment is  
41 most effective when the researcher is familiar with the platform and the  
42 population under examination. The first author's previous roles within football  
43 were obtained through LinkedIn, therefore, we were aware of how it was  
44 commonly used for networking and job advertisement in the industry. Our  
45 experience of using this platform meant we knew potential participants had  
46 already shown a willingness to engage with other users and this contributed to  
47 our thinking that this would be more successful than cold calling. In that respect,  
48 our insider status helped us develop the knowledge which facilitated the  
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2 decision to use LinkedIn. Compared to other SM platforms, LinkedIn had a  
3  
4 more active professional presence of those working within the football industry.  
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6 Although we were aware that Facebook, Instagram, and X also have a  
7  
8 substantial football presence, this was less tailored towards those working  
9  
10 within the game and may be more suitable for engaging larger research  
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12 samples for questionnaire research, rather than approaching individuals for  
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14 interviews.  
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21 Our involvement meant we understood the difficulties academics can  
22  
23 face within football. Football clubs have historically been viewed as sites of anti-  
24  
25 intellectualism (Gearing, 1999) and people in football have been suspicious of  
26  
27 social researchers (Tomlinson, 1983). We were aware that individuals within the  
28  
29 industry would be cautious when speaking to people they viewed as outsiders.  
30  
31 They were likely to be guarded about what topics were discussed to protect  
32  
33 their own and their clubs' interests (Carter, 2007; Cleland, 2009; Sherwood *et*  
34  
35 *al.*, 2017). It was key to build trust with participants – not least because using  
36  
37 LinkedIn, the lead author did not speak to them in person until the interview.  
38  
39 Due to the potential sensitivity of the topics being discussed (i.e., money, family  
40  
41 life, relationships), we wanted participants to understand that although the lead  
42  
43 author was from an academic background, he had experience working in the  
44  
45 industry. It was important to legitimize our position by emphasizing the lead  
46  
47 author's insider status on the LinkedIn profile and clarifying that the research  
48  
49 was conducted through the auspices of an academic institution. Managing  
50  
51 these positions was challenging and involved appearing professional yet not too  
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53 academic.  
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2 We used the figurational **sensitising** concept of involvement and  
3  
4 detachment (Elias, 1987) **as a guiding principle to manage our positionality and**  
5  
6 **approach to reflexivity**. Elias (1987, p. 237) explains that to understand human  
7  
8 groups 'one needs to know, as it were, from inside how human beings  
9  
10 experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know without active  
11  
12 participation and involvement'. We encourage researchers to take an active  
13  
14 interest or participation in the industry they are recruiting from to develop an  
15  
16 understanding of the lives of potential participants. Our involvement was central  
17  
18 as a means of identifying LinkedIn as a potential recruitment tool and  
19  
20 legitimizing the lead author as an industry insider. As a research team with  
21  
22 varying degrees of experience in football (a scout, a former professional  
23  
24 footballer and one researcher had no experience in professional football), we  
25  
26 had different blends of involvement and detachment. **We, as a research team,**  
27  
28 **remained in regular reflexive dialogue about the lead author's insider status to**  
29  
30 **manage our positionality, especially regarding how our knowledge could be**  
31  
32 **utilized most effectively. This was done throughout the participant recruitment**  
33  
34 **phase of the project, as well as during data collection and analysis – to ensure**  
35  
36 **we had an appreciation of the balance of involvement and detachment.**  
37  
38 **Specifically in the recruitment phase, we discussed how** the lead author  
39  
40 presented themselves on LinkedIn with their experiences as well as how we  
41  
42 interacted with potential participants was indicative of presenting ourselves as  
43  
44 involved-researchers.  
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55 Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that an insider position can hamper data  
56  
57 collection as the interviewee may make assumptions about the researcher's  
58  
59 knowledge, therefore, not fully exploring their personal experiences. **This is why**  
60

1 involvement and detachment became an important sensitising concept to the  
2 research team. This was to ensure that insider knowledge was not to the  
3 detriment of the research process but provided advantages in participant  
4 recruitment, data collection and analysis. The focus was attaining an  
5 appropriate balance of involvement and detachment. Law (2019) discussed how  
6 he considered involvement and detachment when collecting data with  
7 professional footballers and concluded that there is no way of knowing whether  
8 an appropriate balance of involvement and detachment was achieved. We  
9 agree that we can never fully know if an appropriate balance was achieved, as  
10 levels of involvement and detachment cannot be measured. Therefore, as  
11 researchers, it is important to consider positionality and the importance of how  
12 they present themselves to the target population, particularly on SM. It is  
13 important to consider why, in certain circumstances, a researcher may have to  
14 position themselves as more or less involved or detached, with an  
15 understanding of their position relative to their participants.

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39 The lead author disclosing their experiences of working in football on  
40 their LinkedIn profile aimed to show participants, before they replied to the initial  
41 message, that they understood and had an interest in the industry. We wanted  
42 participants to feel comfortable speaking about these topics and appreciate that  
43 they would be speaking to someone with knowledge of their experiences – not  
44 just an academic from LinkedIn. It is impossible to say whether the participants  
45 viewed the first author as an insider without asking them. However, the level of  
46 openness participants discussed topics such as money, family life and, in some  
47 cases, mental health, demonstrates, to some degree, that participants felt  
48 comfortable – which would have been unlikely if they saw the researcher as a  
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1 complete outsider (Law, 2019; Waddington, 2014). Building rapport with  
2 participants is challenging, especially when using SM. We recommend having  
3 an initial **conversation** before the interview. This provides further opportunity for  
4 participants to question the legitimacy of the interviewer as an insider and build  
5 trust. Some participants in this study asked the first author about the  
6 experiences listed on **their LinkedIn profile, which showed how this was**  
7 **checked before the interview and offered the first author the opportunity to**  
8 establish their credentials to participants before conducting data collection.  
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23 Insider access has been described as necessary for research with hard-  
24 to-reach groups. Whilst we agree, to some extent, we contend that more  
25 nuance is required. Being an insider contributes more than just knowing  
26 potential participants, it impacts how people perceive researchers and consider  
27 them legitimate (Law, 2019). Insider knowledge can be important for developing  
28 an empathetic understanding of the participants' lives and the most effective  
29 ways to recruit within an industry. Researchers, especially those exploring hard-  
30 to-reach groups, must consider their insider status and plan how their position  
31 may influence their recruitment strategy. Using **a sensitising concept** such as  
32 involvement and detachment can help researchers **take a reflexive approach to**  
33 **navigating their positionality**. When using SM, it is important to be aware of the  
34 factors that may influence recruitment, the barriers which may limit their ability  
35 to respond and how the platform chosen can be used most effectively. Insider  
36 knowledge can help address these factors. We would argue that it is not  
37 enough to assume being an insider guarantees recruitment, instead, it should  
38 be considered as part of the research plan. Researchers should be flexible with  
39 their recruitment methods as they become increasingly embedded within the  
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2 industry and be willing to lean upon their insider knowledge to help overcome  
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4 recruitment challenges.  
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## 8 9 **Functionality of LinkedIn**

10  
11 LinkedIn was used to recruit for this study because of the research  
12  
13 team's knowledge of the platform and its importance within football, but also the  
14  
15 functionality LinkedIn offered compared to other SM. The primary purpose of  
16  
17 LinkedIn, as established, is business and employment networking. Due to this,  
18  
19 many of the functions and search capabilities allow you to search for individuals  
20  
21 with specific work experiences, job roles and qualifications. This is beneficial  
22  
23 when conducting a purposive sampling method with primarily occupation-  
24  
25 focussed criteria. Compared to other SM sites, LinkedIn had more appropriate  
26  
27 search tools for the study criteria. Whilst Facebook, for example, has some  
28  
29 search functions, such as by mutual friends, location, and workplace, these are  
30  
31 limited compared to LinkedIn, which can be used to search by mutual  
32  
33 connections, location, industry, profile language, previous company, current  
34  
35 company, schools/universities attended and job title. This wider range of search  
36  
37 functions allowed for a more direct and relevant recruitment process on  
38  
39 LinkedIn, compared to what would have been feasible through Facebook, X, or  
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41 Instagram.  
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51 As an employment networking platform, LinkedIn's search features were  
52  
53 tailored towards 'job filters'. Filtering by current/past companies or job title  
54  
55 helped to find staff in roles aligning with the study criteria. Similarly, searching  
56  
57 the term 'first team' along with the role helped to further refine this. Searching  
58  
59 terms such as 'first team coach' or 'first team physiotherapist' highlighted  
60

1 individuals most closely aligned with the criteria. Although this could retrieve  
2 results from other sports and industries where these job titles are common, it  
3  
4 results from other sports and industries where these job titles are common, it  
5  
6 narrowed the search to a more manageable figure. Search filters improve the  
7  
8 chances of reaching potential participants from the target population rather than  
9  
10 reaching a broader audience (King *et al.*, 2014). Also, we were able to search  
11  
12 by education experience and although this was not a study criterion, this further  
13  
14 diversified the sample. Viewing the potential participants' qualifications,  
15  
16 employment and football-specific experiences helped to pursue a more diverse  
17  
18 sample, rather than approaching those most available to the researcher.  
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25 We used LinkedIn search functions in combination to refine the search  
26  
27 and find individuals with complementary experiences to the existing sample. For  
28  
29 example, at the time of writing, searching the term 'coach' on LinkedIn produced  
30  
31 1,700,000 results, however, 'first team coach' returned 1,200 results. Although  
32  
33 many of these will not fit the criteria, using just one search filter provides a more  
34  
35 manageable and refined search to find eligible participants. Furthermore, setting  
36  
37 the location filter to the UK reduced this figure from 1,200 to 585. This search  
38  
39 could be further narrowed by searching for staff who listed specific clubs as  
40  
41 their current or previous employer and by mutual connections. Searching by  
42  
43 mutual connections narrowed the results from 585 to 461 users, ensuring the  
44  
45 search was even more relevant. We recommend exploring these search filters  
46  
47 to see how they may be used alone or in combination to find potential  
48  
49 participants who meet your recruitment criteria. For us, this functionality was  
50  
51 useful when looking for individuals who were currently or previously employed  
52  
53 by specific organisations. This could be valuable for researchers in disciplines  
54  
55 with hard-to-reach populations, who are targeting participants with particular  
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1 employment or educational experiences. The level of detail available on  
2  
3  
4 LinkedIn about users' employment history and experience can help researchers  
5  
6 strive for a broad sample and learn more about potential participants before  
7  
8 approaching them. For those approaching hard-to-reach populations, this can  
9  
10 be invaluable as it means only the most relevant people are contacted and is  
11  
12 more time-efficient. The process of searching for, requesting connections, and  
13  
14 contacting participants individually did take time, however, minimising the  
15  
16 search results and ensuring only relevant individuals were contacted made the  
17  
18 processes quicker than other recruitment methods, such as speculative letters  
19  
20 or using gatekeepers.  
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27 Familiarity with the platform is often a leading factor for researchers  
28  
29 when choosing a SM site for participant recruitment (Hirsch *et al.*, 2014; Jones  
30  
31 *et al.*, 2020). To ensure the process is less time-consuming and the researcher  
32  
33 is more comfortable, this is understandable. However, we would argue that for a  
34  
35 more effective use of SM, there should be greater thought placed on the  
36  
37 platform chosen – familiarity should be just one consideration. Factors such as  
38  
39 the presence of the target population and the functionality of the platform should  
40  
41 also be considered. If recruiting a specific population, the benefits particular SM  
42  
43 platforms offer should be considered by researchers. Jackson (2023) discusses  
44  
45 how SM platforms attract different populations, using the example of how it  
46  
47 would be more appropriate to use Snapchat or TikTok to recruit participants for  
48  
49 a study exploring young people and mental health, compared to Facebook, as  
50  
51 the average age of users is lower on these platforms. Researchers should  
52  
53 undertake due diligence with the SM platforms they intend to use, to identify  
54  
55 whether there is an active presence of their target population and how suitable  
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1  
2 the search features are for their study. We add that LinkedIn, particularly for  
3  
4 employment-focussed research where the main participation criteria relate to an  
5  
6 individual's role and employer, provides a more suitable platform for recruitment  
7  
8 than other SM.  
9

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11  
12  
13 We also used public LinkedIn posts in our recruitment strategy, which  
14  
15 would appear on the feed of our connections. Despite the reach of these posts,  
16  
17 this method was less successful. The final call for participants post (Figure 1)  
18  
19 received 2,085 views from LinkedIn members. Of these, 36 physiotherapists, 34  
20  
21 performance analysts, 24 scouts, 15 heads of recruitment and 14 recruitment  
22  
23 analysts received the post on their feeds. Despite inviting those who had seen  
24  
25 the post and were interested to contact the lead author, no participants were  
26  
27 recruited from this method. All participants recruited through LinkedIn were  
28  
29 through the active process of direct messages. We feel this approach aids in  
30  
31 ensuring only the most relevant individuals are contacted to take part in this  
32  
33 study and leads to more engagement from potential participants. These public  
34  
35 posts advertised the research and aided transparency, yet, did little to recruit  
36  
37 participants. Transparency was a key part of respecting user privacy and our  
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39 ethical considerations, which the article will now **explore**.  
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📌 Last Call for Participants for PhD Research Study 📌

I am looking to interview backroom staff at professional football clubs in the UK for my PhD research at **[Anonymised for Peer Review]**

If you work full-time in the first team at a men's professional football club and are interested in taking part in a one-hour online interview please get in touch.

I am looking to interview people in a variety of roles such as coaches, S&C coaches, sports scientists, kit managers, physiotherapists, sport rehabilitators, analysts and scouts.

If you are at all interested in taking part please get in touch, or if you can offer any help and support it would be greatly appreciated.

[#phd](#) [#university](#) [#football](#) [#soccer](#) [#unitedkingdom](#) [#backroomstaff](#)  
[#coaching](#) [#scouting](#) [#physiotherapist](#) [#interview](#) [#research](#) [#recruitment](#)

Figure 1. Last Call for Participants Post on the First Author's LinkedIn profile.

### Respecting User's Privacy, Ethical Considerations and Transparency

The ethics of using SM should be at the forefront of a researcher's considerations. Researchers must have a clear understanding of the terms and conditions outlined by the SM platform, whilst respecting the privacy of the individual and their information (Darko *et al.*, 2022). In respecting any potential participant, we **decided to** only approach individuals who had accepted a LinkedIn connection request from the first author. Using LinkedIn's 'Premium' feature it would have been possible to directly message any LinkedIn user, however, we felt this was not respectful of their privacy. Gelinas *et al.* (2017) argue that although information on SM profiles has been made voluntarily public, it was unlikely shared for use by researchers and therefore we felt it was important to only make contact individuals if they have authorised access **to the direct message functionality**. This allowed connections to decline the request to stop any approach, but also to view the lead author's LinkedIn profile. Similarly,

1  
2 in respecting the individual's privacy, a PIS and consent form were only sent to  
3  
4 the 95 individuals who expressed interest in participating, to make the approach  
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6 less like cold calling. This provided individuals with the opportunity to ask  
7  
8 questions and raise any concerns. Many of these concerns related to anonymity  
9  
10 and confidentiality, which were clarified in the PIS, however, providing this  
11  
12 opportunity to ask questions offered a more 'personal touch'. This also provided  
13  
14 the opportunity to build rapport with the participants earlier in the interview  
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16 process – which has been discussed as a challenge when recruiting through  
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18 SM (Jones *et al.*, 2020; King *et al.*, 2014).  
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25 Transparency was a central concern for this research. Recruiting a  
26  
27 sample from environments where the media have negatively influenced public  
28  
29 perception, we must be mindful of how as researchers we may be perceived by  
30  
31 the target population. We were aware, within football, how some of the negative  
32  
33 news reporting about the experiences of the backroom staff may lead to  
34  
35 potential participants being hesitant to partake in this research. Despite football  
36  
37 often being the centre of media attention and discussed widely amongst  
38  
39 supporters and the public alike, what occurs behind the scenes is often  
40  
41 protected and the realities concealed (Parker, 2000; Sked, 2017). Information  
42  
43 disclosed by clubs is usually controlled by club media staff and press officers,  
44  
45 employed to manage the image and reputation of the club and limit stories  
46  
47 being twisted. Platts and Smith (2017, p. 18) describe the effect of this, in the  
48  
49 lives of players, as leading to 'one-sided, overly romanticized and glorified  
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51 media-led presentations of the apparent luxuries of pursuing a career in  
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53 professional football'. Transparency was key to legitimizing ourselves as  
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55 researchers and clarifying that the study was conducted for academic purposes,  
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1  
2 to distance ourselves from the media who may attempt to access backroom  
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4 staff to gain gossip, conjecture, and insight into the behind-the-scenes realities.  
5  
6 Our awareness of these challenges faced when accessing those inside  
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8 organisations which are widely discussed and often criticised was important.  
9  
10 We were aware that some contacts may be ill-informed about what academic  
11  
12 research entailed, especially if they had limited involvement in academia or had  
13  
14 not previously partaken in research. Researchers should be aware of the  
15  
16 context that their study takes place within, as this awareness of the barriers and  
17  
18 challenges can help to overcome recruitment obstacles.  
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25         Based on our experiences, we feel that the LinkedIn profile offered an  
26  
27 opportunity for researchers to enhance transparency to their potential  
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29 participants. The key information, we argue, to include on the profile is  
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31 institutional information to give legitimacy to the researcher and initial insight  
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33 into the research being conducted, at the same time as being transparent about  
34  
35 the reason for the contact. To provide an example, in our research, the lead  
36  
37 author's profile included their 'job title' listed as a PhD student at a named  
38  
39 academic institution and the 'about' section stated the research topic and  
40  
41 disclosed football-specific qualifications. Similarly, a participant invitation  
42  
43 message was displayed on the profile, so any user who visited the profile was  
44  
45 able to see a brief overview of the research being conducted and the  
46  
47 prospective participants required. This was to provide greater transparency that  
48  
49 during the period of conducting the research the LinkedIn account was primarily  
50  
51 driven towards participant recruitment. Information that remained on the profile  
52  
53 about the first author's academic and professional experience was as a means  
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2 of further legitimizing their position as a researcher on this topic, rather than for  
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4 a potential employer.  
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9 Anonymity and confidentiality were of utmost concern to those working in  
10 the professional football industry. Most individuals were approached without any  
11 prior relationship and contact, other than the connection request, so we were  
12 aware they may be hesitant to speak openly about typically guarded topics  
13 (Law, 2019; Roderick, 2006). Researchers need to think about how participants  
14 can be made to feel more comfortable speaking about topics which they may  
15 feel guarded about. We recognised that highlighting how the research team had  
16 conducted similar research previously and that we had experience within the  
17 industry would help with this. Also, using LinkedIn, we felt that the profile was a  
18 useful means of providing insight into the first author's experiences before the  
19 potential participant responded to the initial message. If we approached  
20 participants through a letter or email, as previous research attempted, we would  
21 have been unable to give that level of detail to the participants, other than  
22 through a lengthy first message. Detailed initial messages are less likely to be  
23 engaged with (Lang *et al.*, 2023), therefore it was important to be succinct and  
24 simply outline why we were contacting them. For example, our opening  
25 message included a polite greeting, a concise introduction to the researcher  
26 and reason for contacting them, inviting those who were interested to respond  
27 for more information and thanking those messaged for their time regardless of  
28 subsequent interest in taking part. Combining the short message with  
29 information on the profile about the first author's academic and football  
30 experiences ensured individuals contacted were able to retrieve information  
31 about the study and who was conducting it. In our experience, therefore,  
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2 researchers need to demonstrate their credentials to participants early in the  
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4 research process, especially when using SM, to provide greater credence to  
5  
6 their position and start the process of building trust. This trust is crucial when  
7  
8 discussing potentially sensitive topics, such as employment, money, family life  
9  
10 and relationships, as the participant would need to feel comfortable having  
11  
12 these conversations and trusting that this would remain confidential and  
13  
14 anonymous.  
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21 In considering the ethical concerns of SM recruitment, it is important to  
22  
23 be vigilant about the privacy settings on the LinkedIn account. This is to ensure  
24  
25 that whilst the account is visible to potential participants, researchers should  
26  
27 work hard to avoid putting potential interviewees at risk of relinquishing their  
28  
29 anonymity. This is necessary to ensure other users are unable to see the  
30  
31 researcher's LinkedIn connections, as this could potentially reveal who was  
32  
33 interviewed (Hokke *et al.*, 2020). Though, in the case of our study, the likelihood  
34  
35 of other users deducing who had been interviewed from the lead author's 1,100  
36  
37 LinkedIn connections was minimal, we still wanted to limit any potential  
38  
39 breaches of confidentiality and anonymity. To do this, the LinkedIn profile was  
40  
41 set to the highest privacy setting, so other users would not be able to see the  
42  
43 connections. As much as it was important to manage the security of the  
44  
45 LinkedIn page, it was also important to respect the information made public by  
46  
47 other users (Gelinas *et al.*, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Researchers should  
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49 manage the information publicly available carefully, especially if the topic of  
50  
51 exploration is potentially sensitive or could lead to any risk (Hokke *et al.*, 2020).  
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53 It is key for participants to have an informed understanding of their participation  
54  
55 and that only certain personal information would be used within research – for  
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2 example, the participants' job title and league level of the club they worked for  
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4 were used with their consent in this research. This was outlined to participants  
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6 early in the recruitment process, further emphasizing this transparency.  
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8 Although more information was publicly available on their LinkedIn profiles, this  
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10 was not used within the research other than for recruitment purposes.  
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12 Researchers must have a grasp of the privacy settings of any SM platforms  
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14 used, limit what can be accessed on their profiles and treat all participant  
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16 information with respect.  
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## 22 **Conclusions and Future Research**

23  
24 Research regarding SM as a recruitment tool is continually growing and  
25  
26 developing. The scope of how useful LinkedIn will be is underexplored and  
27  
28 future research will be required to expand upon this to examine how SM can  
29  
30 help manage recruitment challenges, particularly in fields where access is  
31  
32 especially difficult. This study has demonstrated the value of using LinkedIn to  
33  
34 recruit from the relatively 'closed social world' of professional football (Kelly and  
35  
36 Waddington, 2006, p. 149). This platform helped us overcome challenges  
37  
38 during participant recruitment in an employment-focussed study. Bell and  
39  
40 Waters (2018, p. 163) state that LinkedIn as a recruitment tool 'isn't perfect but  
41  
42 it does the job', and this has been our experience. Only 106 (95 interested and  
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44 11 declining) out of 311 individuals contacted responded to the initial message,  
45  
46 demonstrating the challenge that remains in recruiting participants on a larger  
47  
48 scale. Despite this, LinkedIn appears a more fruitful option for researchers  
49  
50 compared to speculative attempts, such as letters and emails, used in previous  
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52 research. Our knowledge of the use of LinkedIn within the football industry  
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54 highlighted the viability of such an approach, but further understanding is  
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2 needed to assert how viable this method is for other industries, with equally or  
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4 more difficult-to-access participants.  
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9         LinkedIn is not a fix all recruitment solution – there are limitations to the  
10 method. Though this research was not striving for sample generalizability, we  
11 are aware that due to how backroom staff are often recruited within football (i.e.,  
12 through personal contacts or former footballers ‘stepping up’ into backroom  
13 roles), many individuals who would have been eligible to participate would  
14 simply not be LinkedIn users. Leighton *et al.* (2021) argue that using SM can  
15 create sampling bias skewed towards those with an active SM presence and to  
16 some extent, we agree with this. However, we would argue that LinkedIn is  
17 especially useful in this regard because it is used less for SM purposes and  
18 more as a professional networking platform. Therefore, unlike other SM,  
19 LinkedIn will be used by individuals in certain professions as a professional  
20 resource, who may otherwise not use SM. This further distinguishes LinkedIn as  
21 an academic recruitment resource. Although the presence of eligible  
22 participants on a platform can often be mitigated by employing multiple  
23 recruitment methods, this still requires consideration throughout the research  
24 process. This study has focussed on professional football staff as a hard-to-  
25 reach group; however, we acknowledge that for other hard-to-reach groups,  
26 using SM as we have may not be possible. Utilising the search functions on  
27 platforms such as LinkedIn should allow for this to be discovered quickly. A final  
28 (potential) limitation is an unintended consequence of using SM to recruit.  
29  
30 Marland and Esselment (2019) explain how although SM provides greater  
31 scope to contact individuals, especially those in positions of power and hard-to-  
32 reach groups, it means these individuals are likely to receive a greater number  
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2 of requests to participate in research. In that respect, if individuals become  
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4 inundated with requests to participate it may (unintentionally) lead to a  
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6 lessening likelihood of receiving responses.  
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10  
11 Future research should explore how using LinkedIn for participant  
12 recruitment translates to other industries, especially where hard-to-reach  
13 populations are sought. Examining how transferable this method is to non-  
14 sporting disciplines would be interesting and in doing so, explore how this  
15 approach can support researchers with little to no insider experience. Similarly,  
16 to understand this method more comprehensively, particularly from an  
17 effectiveness and ethical standpoint, it would be interesting to explore the views  
18 of the interviewees about being recruited through LinkedIn. This could provide  
19 greater insight into how participants felt about being approached through  
20 LinkedIn, why they responded to the initial message and their thoughts towards  
21 using LinkedIn for this purpose. Understanding the participants' perspectives  
22 would provide greater insight into the nuances of using personal contacts within  
23 participant recruitment and highlight both the benefits and drawbacks of such a  
24 strategy. We hope that this article prompts researchers to consider the wider  
25 range of tools available for participant recruitment that could be the most fruitful  
26 moving forward, especially for those encountering recruitment obstacles.  
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