

# Reading Metadata

The chart captures a step by step process for reading metadata from social media content. The goal for each step is to evaluate different types of “red flags”—characteristics which can, when taken together, indicate likely manipulation and coordinated inauthentic behavior. None of these red flags can be interpreted as concrete evidence on their own. However, when taken together all of the following metadata categories—including interaction between other accounts—allows readers, researchers, and users to see the traces of manipulative data craft. By examining the interaction between accounts and their followers, steps 4 and 5 allow readers to locate evidence of manipulation and disinformation resulting from coordinated engagement strategies that generate inauthentic behavior.

**1 Account Names**

**Red Flags**

- Double consonants, default avatars, random numbers
- Screen name different from user name
- Nonverified account
- Name contains the words “Official” or “Real”

**To Verify**

- Search for user name and screen name on other platforms

**2 Recycled Banner, Bio, Profile Pics, or Content**

**Red Flags**

- Available on Wikipedia, Internet Archive, or other public platforms
- Posted to other social media accounts
- Far more reposts than “original” content
- Lots of duplicate content over time

**To Verify**

- Search for images with reverse image search tools to discover copied or original image sources
- Search distinct phrases with “quotes” to discover sources of copied content
- Compare to profiles from other platforms with similar account names

**3 Content Tags**

**Red Flags**

- Location check-ins or geotags that contradict the content of posts
- Total absence of content or geotags
- Absence of other accounts tagging themselves in content
- Pervasive use of linkshorteners for automated messaging and mass content posting

**To Verify**

- Trace content back to the platform of original upload
- Use APIs or other tools to verify geotags and client source

**4 Followers**

**Red Flags**

- Recent account creation
- Followed by large numbers of suspicious accounts
- Nonsense comments from followers
- Sudden growth in followers or following

**To Verify**

- Examine Wayback Machine archive of account to determine rate of growth
- Conduct steps 1 and 2 with a sample of followers to ensure authentic behavior with account engagement

**5 Authentic Interaction**

**Red Flags**

- Inaccurate descriptions of content suggesting mismatches, dubious origins, or false context
- Unrelated hashtags
- Automated responses from other accounts (e.g., “Thanks for the follow! Check out my webpage!”)
- Low rates of being liked or shared by other accounts
- Content promoted by ad purchase

**To Verify**

- Search for conversations, interaction, and activity between the account and followers
- Assess whether followers interacting with the account’s activity are engaging in good faith, meaningful reception, or unique responses
- Confirm that replies are not simply automated messages, reshares, or responses with links

From *Data Craft: The Manipulation of Social Media Metadata*