Queer considerations: Exploring the use of social media for research recruitment within LGBTQ communities

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Abstract
The use of social media platforms (such as Facebook) for research recruitment has continued to increase, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Social media enables researchers to reach diverse communities that often do not have their voices heard in research. Social media research recruitment, however, can pose risks to both potential participants and the researchers. This topic paper presents ethical considerations related to social media recruitment, and offers an example of harassment and hate speech risks when social media is used for research recruitment. We explore the implications of hate speech risks for ethical research.

Keywords
Queer, LGBTQQIIP2SAA+, recruitment, social media, ethics, Facebook, COVID-19

Introduction
Contemporary Canadian values about sexual orientation

Over the last several decades Canada has made great strides in the advancement of legal rights and social values regarding diverse sexual orientations and genders. Canada is considered a progressive country regarding the general public’s
attitudes, beliefs, and values involving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirited, asexual, and androgynous communities (LGBTQQIP2SAA+) (Hunt and Pelz, 2016). For example, Canada was one of the first countries to legalize same-sex marriage (Johnson and Tremblay, 2018). Recently, the Liberal government has taken reconciliation steps and has offered an apology to the LGBTQQIP2SAA+ communities for past discriminatory acts and laws (Smith, 2020). In Canada, LGBTQQIP2SAA+ researchers within various disciplines are at liberty and encouraged to work and conduct research within their communities.

However, Canada is not a country that is free from negative attitudes, beliefs, and values in relation to diverse sexual orientations and genders. Many facets of Canadian society are still deeply hetero- and cis-normative (Grace et al., 2019) and people who identify within LGBTQQIP2SAA+ communities are still at increased risk of violence, hate speech, stigma, and microaggressions (Simpson, 2018). Hate speech often includes words such as “pedophiles”; words that invalidate LGBTQQIP2SAA+ identities and create harm in their communities (Fisher et al., 2018; Nadal et al., 2016; Sterzing et al., 2017; Sue, 2010). Microaggressions build up over time and leave lasting negative social impressions, negatively influencing the health and wellbeing of LGBTQQIP2SAA+ individuals (Meyer, 2003). The aim of this short topic paper is to explore the ethical implications of using social media as a recruitment tool for research within LGBTQQIP2SAA+ communities. Implications are illustrated through an example of microaggressions toward the authors of this paper.

Research ethics in Canada

In Canada, research involving human participants is guided by national policies known collectively as the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS-2) (Government of Canada, 2018). The foundations of the TCPS-2 include (i) respect for persons, (ii) concern for welfare, and (iii) concern for justice (Government of Canada, 2018). Canadian researchers are required to complete TCPS-2 training when applying for national funding. The foundations must be embedded in all aspects of the research process, including recruitment. The TCPS-2 recognizes and considers the ethical implications of recruiting for research purposes from marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQQIP2SAA+ community (Government of Canada, 2018).

Social media is becoming a popular form of research recruitment (Appel et al., 2019; Ferrigno and Sadea, 2019; Topolovec-Vranic and Natarajan, 2016). Research ethics boards (REBs) in Canadian universities are variable but recognize that recruitment of research participants through social media must be conducted in accordance with the TCPS-2 policies. All social media research recruitment procedures, therefore, undergo the same rigorous ethical review as other recruitment
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methods (poster, in-person scripts, emails). This includes tweets, Instagram posters, and Facebook ads, posts, and messages (Ryerson University, 2017).

Social media research recruitment, however, may be exposing researchers and potential participants to risks, including potential participants from the LGBTQQIP2SAA+ community (Arigo et al., 2018; Guillory et al., 2018; Mondal et al., 2017; Russomanno et al., 2019). Social media allows people from diverse backgrounds, who may not always share the same views of sexual orientation and gender, to come together to communicate (Russomanno et al., 2019). Social media provides the general public with an opportunity to express their views, often anonymously or through fake user accounts (Baider, 2018; Burnap and Williams, 2016; Leite et al., 2020; Mondal et al., 2017; Ring, 2013). Such factors may create unique risks for people of diverse sexual orientations and genders, including risks of harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence.

Researchers need to think carefully about how to use social media to recruit potential participants (Ryerson University, 2017). Several guidelines have been suggested in the literature for navigating social media platforms for recruitment purposes. For example, Russomanno et al. (2019) recommended familiarizing oneself with the website’s policies and “terms of use,” recruiting from communities of the desired participant populations, and managing the online communications of posts.

The study

The study took place from September to November 2020. The aim was to explore the nutritional and body image experiences of adult LGBTQQIP2SAA+ Canadians during the period of physical distancing and social isolation that was mandated by national public health agencies in response to the novel COVID-19 pandemic.

In Canada, the first death from COVID-19 was recorded on March 8, 2020 (The Canadian Press, 2021). Shortly afterward the national government took actions to limit the spread of infections, such as border closures and promotion of messages about social (physical) distancing and self-isolation (Detsky and Bogoch, 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced differently in each province of the country, there was considerable cooperation between provinces and few conflicting messages between regional, provincial, and federal governments (Detsky and Bogoch, 2020). Over the summer of 2020 there was a steady decline in cases of infection due to these measures, but by late summer and through the autumn of 2020, there was a resurgence of cases in all Canadian provinces and territories (Detsky and Bogoch, 2020).

The study was rooted in qualitative methodologies, and methods consisted of an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Recruitment was undertaken via a variety of strategies, including advertisements on social media platforms and
groups, relevant list-servs, emails to community service organizations and groups, and snowball sampling through the researchers’ networks.

**The ethics process**

The researchers completed the standard ethical application at their institution. This application was aligned with the national TCPS-2 guidelines, including guidelines for research recruitment through social media. The application required a detailed description of the recruitment process, including the numbers of participants required, demographic characteristics (including age for consent purposes), inclusion/exclusion criteria, and methods for recruitment, as well as all recruitment tools (e.g. flyers, email scripts, letters, advertisements, social media posts). The ethics application went through two rounds of review by the institutional REB before being approved.

**The recruitment process**

The platforms chosen for social media research recruitment were Facebook and Twitter. Initially, we shared the approved emails through personal correspondence with our community network connections. Secondly, we created a research Facebook page with the intention of branding the project and promoting it to a wide audience. Social media ethics discourage the use of personal social media accounts because personal accounts may reveal private details about the researchers (Ryerson University, 2017). We provided basic details on the newly created research pages as a way to assure the authenticity of the study. The settings on the research Facebook page allowed potential participants to message and ask questions about the study as part of the informed consent process. It was hoped that the research page would create a safe place for LGBTQQIP2SAA+ individuals interested in the research to seek information. The research page, however, was open to all users of Facebook. The REB-approved advertisements were posted to the Facebook page. In addition, paid Facebook Marketplace ads, again using the REB-approved versions, were utilized because they enable researchers to target potential participants according to interests. LGBTQQIP2SAA+ interest groups, as well as health and nutrition groups, were selected as targets for our Facebook Marketplace ads.

**Recruitment concerns**

Within a short period of time, negative and homophobic comments were posted to the research page. These were followed by similar comments posted on the Marketplace Ads. Comments included the following: “The P is for Pedo we all know it, fuck right off”; “you are normalizing it” (diverse sexual orientations and
genders); “your meaningless nonsense words isn’t going to cover that shit up and you are fucked for defending it”; “no kids, no animals, that simple, if you need another nonsense letter in your gay Babylonian nonsense word club so bad you’re gonna let in the P’s then the culture will burn.” These comments were posted in quick secession as a discussion thread on one of the advertisements posted by multiple users. The posts were deleted as soon as the researchers became aware of the hate speech. The users who posted these messages were also blocked and reported to Facebook for inappropriate behavior. This, however, only angered the users and resulted in them using other accounts to bombard the inbox of the research page with threatening messages. One such message received was, “you dirty fuckin pedophiles think you can shut me up? If you don’t delete this pedo groups I will trace your IP address and have you dealt with.” The user was once again reported to Facebook. These comments are oppressive, homophobic, and reflective of deeply rooted hetero- and cis-normative social norms that position gender and sexually diverse people as criminal, immoral, sick, or outside of societal considerations of “normal” (Fisher et al., 2018).

It was decided that the research Facebook page and the paid advertisements would be discontinued as a means of recruitment. The incidents were reported to the Associate Vice-President, Research of the institution, and the department head of the principal investigator.

**The implications**

**Implications for the study.** The implications for the study cannot be truly measured. The comments and messages we received on Facebook created disrespect, harm, concern for the welfare of our potential participants, and violated human rights and laws that Canadian ethics guidelines are designed to uphold (Government of Canada, 2018). There is no mechanism for measuring how the discontinuation of the research Facebook page and advertisements influenced the number of potential participants. When recruitment processes are halted due to hate speech, the number of potential participants may be decreased, effectively silencing their voices. However, as the REB-approved ethics for this study had multiple research strategies for the recruitment of participants, we were able to continue to completion, through our community network recruitment process.

**Implications for the researchers.** As qualitative researchers, we take the epistemological stance that we cannot separate ourselves from our research or our research processes. As such we include a brief reflection on this experience to underscore that hate speech and threats of violence within social media messages do not only cause harm to potential participants but also to the researchers. Although it might be tempting to see such behavior as predictable, given social attitudes on diverse
gender and sexualities, we feel it is not. We cannot predict, nor should we, the levels of hate directed at us as members of the LGBTQIP2SAA+ communities. It should be noted that this is the first time such incidents happened to us through the use of social media as a tool for recruitment, despite previous research within the LGBTQIP2SAA+ communities that recruited via similar methods. It could be that the current social, cultural, and political contexts are exacerbating hate speech. The impacts of this hate speech were felt by both researchers on emotional, mental, and physical levels. Upon disclosure of this incident to the Associate Vice-President, Research, and the departmental head, support services were recommended to both researchers.

**Conclusion and lessons learned**

Social media can be a useful and effective tool for reaching gender and sexually diverse individuals for research, but we must weigh the risks and benefits of social media recruitment tools. Researchers who utilize social media platforms for participant recruitment need to carefully consider the impact of such methods on their potential participants and how they can reduce the risk of stigma, harassment, and harm. Perhaps all forms of communication, such as the ability to send messages to a research social media page, should be discontinued even if it prevents potential participants from asking questions and seeking answers from the researchers. To compensate, a generic research email could be added to the recruitment page so that potential participants are able to contact the researchers for more information. This, however, still exposes researchers and student research assistants to harm if people use it in hateful ways. Another possibility would be for researchers to target only existing Facebook groups for research recruitment rather than generating a new research Facebook page. Facebook groups are closed groups for specific communities so researchers would need to request access or ask for the administrator’s permission to post an advertisement within the group.

Finally, we recommend that researchers who are thinking about using social media for research recruitment, familiarize themselves with all options and privacy settings on the relevant social media platforms. Ethical use of social media in research requires researchers to move beyond casual usage to becoming an expert in use/misuse. For ethical research, recruitment methods must not perpetuate hate in any form.

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