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Abstract

The following observations have emerged from the author's research experience involving the recruitment of focus group participants for a qualitative study on job search behaviors using technology. It is argued that Internet forums and message boards provide researchers with a robust approach to recruiting participants for qualitative study purposes. Advantages and characteristics of online communities are outlined to inform future practices based on the experience of engaging job-seekers who frequent a career advice board on the Internet. Challenges and limitations inherent to this methodology are also explored with techniques offered for maximizing the effectiveness of future recruitment. Use of Internet forums and message boards as objects of research versus as research tools is distinguished throughout. The paper contributes to a growing body of knowledge about harnessing the Internet to inform and support qualitative research.

Keywords

Online research methods, Internet recruitment, Qualitative research, Online Communities, E-recruitment

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The following observations have emerged from the author's research experience involving the recruitment of focus group participants for a qualitative study on job search behaviors using technology. It is argued that Internet forums and message boards provide researchers with a robust approach to recruiting participants for qualitative study purposes. Advantages and characteristics of online communities are outlined to inform future practices based on the experience of engaging job-seekers who frequent a career advice board on the Internet. Challenges and limitations inherent to this methodology are also explored with techniques offered for maximizing the effectiveness of future recruitment. Use of Internet forums and message boards as objects of research versus as research tools is distinguished throughout. The paper contributes to a growing body of knowledge about harnessing the Internet to inform and support qualitative research. Key Words: Online research methods, Internet recruitment, Qualitative research, Online Communities, E-recruitment

Introduction

Internet forums and message boards are online communities populated by users, or members, focused around a central issue or theme (Green, 2007). The rise of Internet use and accessibility has allowed for them to become an important means of communication (Castells, 2009; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005). Online communities are one among many interactive options for users exploring virtual socialization; others include chat rooms (Markey, 2002) and, more recently, social networking (Zhang, 2009) and social media websites (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013), among others. They also demonstrate a remarkable longevity and resilience despite their age. Emerging from the early years of personal computing and Internet use (Walden, 2000), forums and message boards remain relevant to the present day with many vibrant hubs connecting active users from across the globe (Faraj & Johnson, 2011). Academic scholars have historically recognized the potential for using forums and message boards in research beginning with the earliest iterations of online communities (Finn, 1995; King, 1996; Waskul & Douglas, 1996).

As tools of communication, forums and message boards offer users several unique characteristics over other alternatives. Hew (2009) explains that the conversations on forums and message boards between users can be archived, organized, and sorted. This adds an important dimension in addition to their interactive purpose by creating a repository of past information and exchanges. As a result, online communities have been recognized as sources of knowledge-sharing and almost encyclopedic storage of personal user experiences (Seraj, 2012). Academic researchers have capitalized on this archival capacity through studies employing data mining and analysis of user-created content stored in online community archives. Benton et al. (2011) provide a good overview of message board use for research purposes as a data gathering tool, writing that "Internet message boards provide a rich data resource for a variety of purposes" (p. 989). Generally, online communities tend to promote

some form of structure and control to promote user satisfaction. Experienced users, who are often volunteers and sometimes perceived as community leaders, can be tasked with enforcing predetermined rules, keeping discussions on track, and maintaining order on the boards (Zhang & Watts, 2008). Also encouraging participation is the fact that members of these online groups can choose to remain anonymous and therefore feel added comfort in discussing sensitive or private matters (Stommel & Koole, 2010). The specificity and anonymity associated with forums and message boards means that individuals sharing very ambiguous interests or experiencing very particular circumstances can find one another more easily and seek out a community of like-minded others. This becomes of particular value to researchers intent on recruiting participants on studies dealing with qualitatively exploring private or sensitive topics (Langer & Beckman, 2005).

People turn to online communities for a variety of reasons. Forums and message boards have been labeled by some scholars as "self-help" strategies for individuals seeking to acquire new skills and knowledge about some craft, hobby, or activity. An example can be the Smith and Stewart (2012) study of an online bodybuilding community based on archived user-created content. These can also be referred to as advice-seeking communities where users turn to consult with others who may share similar interests or be facing similar circumstances. Ruble (2011) conducted research on an Internet board devoted to English-speaking language assistants living abroad in France. In other cases, online communities have been found to serve as support groups for users struggling to overcome problems or deal with personal struggles. Studies have examined the conversations and dialogues of forum and message board users grappling with mental health issues (Richards, 2009), suicide (Greidanus & Everall, 2010), as well as various illnesses (Armstrong et al., 2012; Mahato, 2011; Rodham et al., 2009), among others. Sometimes these categories merge, as in the case of online support groups for parents of children who are struggling with problems or afflictions (Clarke & Sargent, 2010; Kirby et al., 2008).

Internet forums and message boards also provide advantages to users seeking a positive and rewarding online community experience. The feature distinguishing them from chat rooms and even social networking/media options is the focus on some particular often narrow topic or theme. The Internet has proven itself to be an effective communication tool capable of bringing together very different people in very different parts of the world (Zahariadis et al., 2011). Langer and Beckman (2005) contend that for many, the Internet has replaced traditional word-of-mouth advice-seeking and allows for authentic and genuine communication with others. A study by McEwan and Zanolla (2013) recently demonstrated that users who initially met over an online community experienced greater closeness when later meeting in person, which supports the idea of communication authenticity, especially with respect to sensitive topics.

A Review of Recruitment Approaches

Researchers have relied on niche forum and message board communities to locate participants who would otherwise be too difficult to recruit using more broad or traditional methods. Those in the health sciences and nursing fields have been particularly keen on administering surveys and other quantitative data collection methods to online communities (Beck & Konnert, 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Huag et al., 2011). Of greater interest here, however, is the opportunity to conduct ethnographic research surrounding the discussions, exchanges, and conversations transpiring over these websites. As in the case of the author's experience, it can sometimes be beneficial to use forums and message boards to recruit participants for in-person qualitative research, including, among others, focus groups.

Kozinets (2002) uses the portmanteau "netnography" (Internet and ethnography) to describe the process of analyzing the archived written exchanges of online community members. This has since been validated as a methodology capable of elucidating the sought-after qualitative "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 3) needed to richly and thoroughly understand the culture of a particular group (Langer & Beckman, 2005). This understanding stems from the premise of ethnographic research suggesting that groups of individuals bound by regular interaction over a certain period of time will develop a culture (Patton, 2002). In netnography, qualitative researchers take an arms-length approach, observing and documenting the various nuances inherent to communication and interaction in the online community. Kozinets (2010) has produced a comprehensive handbook on the process of netnography which provides additional methodological detail concerning the many aspects associated with this technique. Studies adopting netnography have allowed researchers to gain insight into hidden worlds, including those of racist hate-groups (Hirvonen, 2013) and sexual deviants (Healy & Beverland, 2013), among others. Netnography has also been used to gather data in marketing management and consumer research to understand the priorities, satisfactions, and opinions of product users or prospective users on consumer-to-consumer (C2C) portals (Felix, 2012; Hewer & Brownlie, 2007; Kulmala et al., 2013). Lugosi et al. (2012) provide an excellent overview in this domain.

　　　　Besides analysis of data in the form of communications archived within online communities, qualitative researchers can choose to recruit participants in whole or in part from forums and message boards. However, literature implicating or exploring this process is scarce. Trier-Bieniek (2012) successfully recruited participants for telephone interviews for the purposes of analyzing a specific music genre by focusing her search around an online community devoted to a feminist musician. The combination of forum and message board recruitment and qualitative telephone interviews has been used successfully in other research (Nicolaou et al., 2009). Hibino and Shimazono (2013) conducted nine in-person interviews to study the experience of surrogacy among prospective surrogate mothers frequenting support message boards over the Internet. Some studies combine various data collection tools administered following recruitment from forums and message boards, for example, Frazier et al. (2010) used face-to-face focus groups and telephone interviews to research employment experiences among cancer survivors.

　　　　Besides the Trier-Bieniek (2012) study which discussed Internet recruitment for telephone interviews, very little has been written regarding the experiences of qualitative researchers who use Internet forums and message boards to recruit participants for academic research purposes. The scarcity of literature surrounding this topic represents the driving force behind the present work, which seeks to make a contribution to the literature by outlining in more specific detail the technical aspects of participant recruitment from online sources. This contribution is unique because it combines Internet recruitment with a face-to-face interviewing data collection approach.

The Experience of Recruiting from an Online Community

Language and Structure

　　　　Users of internet forums and message boards adhere to a unique, sometimes unwritten, and standardized terminology. Thurman (2008) provides some background on the phrasing commonly associated with English-language forums. It is important to note that these tendencies vary by region and language. For example, it is common for German-speaking members of an online community to frequently show satisfaction using the stylized acronym "*gg*" meaning big grin or großes grinsen (Baranowski, 2013, p. 77). Yet this expression is virtually unheard of elsewhere. Cantonese speakers writing in English over the Internet will

add the suffix la (喇) to their messages as an assertive expression, for instance, "of course I am going to the party la" (Fung & Carter, 2007). For the qualitative researcher engaging an online community for the first time, whether through indirect observation such as netnography or for direct recruitment purposes, some of the language used may appear foreign and confusing. Understanding this terminology relates closely to understanding the structure of online communities, as a particular nomenclature is used to identify sections, users, and actions which can be taken online.

Internet forums and message boards are usually broad enough such that they warrant subdivision into several categories. For example, an online community for cancer survivors might provide users with discussion sections dedicated exclusively to careers, relationships, and health advice, among others. Within each of these sections, users are allowed to create new discussion topics – these are known as "threads." Each thread is identified by a unique topic acting much like the subject line of an e-mail. Unlike sections, which are static, threads are organized automatically based on their activity level and age. Newer and more popular threads appear at the top of a section while older and less popular ones sink below and are often relegated out of immediate view. This occurrence is known as a "death;" while it is possible for a thread to be resurrected through a process known as "bumping," this is often frowned upon by users due to the information being out-of-date or the original author having lost interest or left the community altogether, therefore stifling the conversation. However, threads of particular importance, like those containing the forum rules, can be "pinned" to the top ensuring easy access for users due to placement in a high traffic or high visibility location.

Users or "members" who create new threads are referred to as "original posters" or through the acronym "OP." The OP designation can be used to refer both to the original message and the user who wrote it; as determined by context. After a thread is created, other members and the OP can make additional contributions known as "posts." Members and non-members who choose not to participate in discussions and visit a forum or message board only to read others' posts are known as "lurkers" (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002). Unlike a chat room where conversations flow immediately and quickly disappear, threads running on forums and message boards retain all of their posts and can be added on to after an indeterminate amount of time has passed. In many cases, the average member cannot completely delete or erase a post or thread. In the end, this creates a useful database of archived discussions for future unobtrusive qualitative analysis (Kozinets, 2010, p. 143).

Internet communities also have leaders in the form of administrators and moderators. The former, referred to as "admins," are usually the highest decision-making authority and have unlimited capacity to enforce the entire online community. The Roberts and Hunt (2012) study of an underground video-sharing board outlines the sanctions imposed by administrators on users who break the community regulations. Moderators, or "mods," usually play a smaller role and are assigned to monitoring only one specific section of the forum and have limited decision-making ability. They can, for example, close or "lock" a thread from receiving further replies if an exchange becomes overly heated or a discussion goes too off-track. Consequences as well as the threshold for intervention vary by community; for example, a holocaust survivor board is likely to be significantly less tolerant of anti-Semitism than a forum for Neo-Nazis.

Our research called for studying the perceptions of Canadian job-seekers interacting with an Internet-based governmental employment search and application portal. The research was based on the understanding that user perceptions of e-recruitment systems can help streamline these websites and contribute theoretically to the study of applicant reactions, which has been criticized for slowly adapting to technological changes in human resource management (HRM) and human resource information systems (HRIS) (Gilliland & Steiner, 2012). The rationale for the study was based on the increasingly role played by technology in human resources management (Wesolowski, 2014).

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative methodology was selected with data collection consisting of four consecutive in-person focus groups with job-seekers who used the e-recruitment portal. Interviews were conducted over the course of a year, once every three months, to account for delays in the public-sector hiring process and to gather detailed viewpoints surrounding website use (Schleicher et al., 2006). In order to recruit the focus group participants, we conducted recruitment over an Internet message board devoted to job-search and career advice. This innovative approach allowed for easy outreach with users of a very specific governmental website and proved successful in helping recruit a diverse population consistent with focus group interviewing (Kitzinger, 1994).

Recruitment Process

Our study called for recruitment of two sets of six focus group participants who were actively searching for a career in the public sector. In the past, a qualitative researcher may have conducted recruitment by liaising with a local career center or employment office catering to various communities – inner city, youth, and so on (Levin & Kammire, 1986). However, studies have proven that job-seekers are increasingly turning to the Internet for finding employment opportunities and completing applications to a significant extent predominantly online (Suvankulov et al., 2012; Tso et al., 2010). Accordingly, Van Rooy et al. (2004) showed that job-seekers achieve greater success implicating enhanced and interactive websites into their search. It was decided to recruit participants from a popular local job-search message board wherein members traded advice and opinions about civil service job opportunities, government testing, career growth potential, and so on. The ability of Internet forums and message boards to be centered around very particular topics helped narrow the search to an online community heavily focused around the public-sector employment search.

Selecting an Online Community

Based on a qualitative study design, the researcher sought to acquire an experiential understanding of users' interactions with a federal government e-recruitment portal. The selected approach called for elucidation of personal user stories and experiences (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) informing individual narratives of business-to-consumer (B2C) style portal interaction. To promote a plurality of voices and develop a thorough understanding of search behaviors and reactions, the goal involved recruiting a diverse variety of focus group participants. Kitzinger (1995) suggests that researchers using the focus group technique should recruit "[…] participants from diverse backgrounds, as it maximizes the possibility of exploring subjects from different perspectives" (p. 300). This is especially relevant to a qualitative study where job-seekers represented a variety of professional backgrounds, age groups, experience levels, and skill sets, but were all interested in public-service as a future career.

A significant benefit to recruitment from Internet forum and message boards is the ability to target people who share a strong interest in a particular area or who are experiencing very unique personal circumstances. Langer and Beckman (2005) provide a comprehensive account of the potential for researchers to access sensitive issues through online communities for data collection purposes. The geographically unlimited nature of the Internet can obviously impose some limitations to the recruitment of physical participants, which are discussed in a following section. Researchers are also reminded that effective Internet forum and message board recruitment can implicate a variety of online communities and that diversification can lead to richer and more thorough participant narratives, which is in accordance with qualitative study design (Flick, 2009, p. 177).

Before pursuing recruitment from an online community, researchers are encouraged to invest some time in observing users' conversations and interactions. Considerations should be made as to the activity level and relevance of the forum or message board. Is there a large base of regular members with respect to the purpose of the community? Are discussions pertinent to the research project being conducted? Most modern forums and message boards provide basic and accessible usage analytics informing of total registered users and how many of these are actively browsing at any given time. Our study selected a high-traffic community with close to 600,000 registered members 5,000 of whom navigated the board any given day.

Approaching the Community

Most forums and message boards, especially those with high traffic, are tempting targets for illicit online advertisers or "spammers" who want to promote their product or service to a large audience for free (Benton et al., 2011; Montagne, 2011). After a researcher has chosen an online community and registered an account, it is recommended to discuss recruitment feasibility with the site administrator. Researchers should also remember that even though the tone of conversations in an online community may be informal, all recruitment communication should be professional and adhere to a high standard of quality. Including scans of official documentation such as ethics certificates, funding information, and contact information will help maximize cooperation from community leaders and facilitate the recruitment process.

It is important to communicate information as briefly and specifically as possible. Most online community leaders are volunteers who fulfill their duties on personal time. Our experience involved requesting the authorship of a new thread explaining the project. Recruitment thread contents were provided to administrators from the outset. The decision was deferred to the moderator of the specific job-search forum subsection in question, who offered an approval within approximately one week. This particular community had been so inundated with spam, however, that a policy was instituted for all first-time posters to have their messages pre-approved before appearing in public view. As a result, all moderators were made aware of the upcoming thread and provided with information so as not to accidentally mistake it for an unwanted solicitation.

Managing Feedback

We made the strategic decision to limit communication to only one thread on the forum. This was also due partly to strict regulations imposed by the institutional ethics board requiring approval of all messages shared with the public. All project information was contained in a single OP and interested members were encouraged to contact the researcher privately either over e-mail or a private message through the board's own messaging system. Qualitative researchers who are investigating private or sensitive topics may benefit from providing the option of using an online community's proprietary messaging system to protect some users' anonymity. However, this requires daily monitoring of the forum or message board to ensure prospective participants are issued timely replies.

Despite being discouraged from making direct replies in the recruitment thread, members nevertheless made posts about their experiences using the online job-search portal. This was unexpected and, due to a requirement of ethical clearance for all publicly posted information, the researcher was unable to write public replies and clarifications to questions asked in the thread. Solicitation of respondents who were engaging in these discussions for the study was also prohibited. In hindsight, it would have been advisable for the researcher to request for the thread to be locked immediately upon creation. More information regarding this unforeseen consequence is provided in a further section.

All correspondence with prospective participants should be courteous and professional, again, even if their messages are short and informal. Recall that effective qualitative research depends on trust-building between the researcher and participant (Vander Laenen, 2009; Zalan & Lewis, 2004). While job-seekers were eager to share their experiences (and frustrations) using an online career portal, sexual deviants or recovering addicts may be more apprehensive and less comfortable transferring their anonymous internet behavior into the "real world." In our case, a researcher provided his telephone number to all respondents and encouraged them to call at any time if they had questions or reservations. This proved to be successful for efficiently arranging the focus groups and corresponding with participants. Information about privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality was also included in the recruitment message but shortened and written in a language accessible to most English language comprehension levels.

Researchers managing recruitment for an in-person qualitative study on Internet forums and message boards will likely need to practice patience to achieve success with this methodology. Not all participants who initially show an interest will ultimately participate. Similarly, participants who appear less enthusiastic at first may eventually become very dedicated to the project. The standard procedures inherent to qualitative data collection processes apply regardless of recruitment methodology, and researchers should do their best to accommodate the individual needs and preferences of participants including rescheduling interviews if required (Pitney & Parker, 2009, p. 46). Despite these problems, online forums and message boards can provide researchers with potential participants who are very personally or emotionally invested in their niche or circumstance. Trier-Bieniek (2012) explains that conducting recruitment on an online community of dedicated fans of a feminist musician was met with enthusiastic replies: "I received a flood of email from women all over the United States expressing their interest and excitement at the possibility of being a part of my study" (p. 634). Similarly, it was assumed that job-seekers who invest personal time in consulting with others on a variety of steps related to finding work would be highly motivated to participate. This assumption ultimately proved to be correct.

Closing Recruitment Process and Project Completion

Given that information posted on Internet forums and message boards is archived, it is important to communicate a specific window of time wherein recruitment will take place. Inclusion of dates with a corresponding year will avoid future frustration on behalf of users who may read the recruitment message and feel interested in volunteering long after the research has been completed and, hopefully, published. Provided that researchers are cleared to do so by their respective ethical committee, participants, and the forum or message board administration, providing an update to the online community regarding the eventual status of the project may be perceived as respectful and could help create a path for future scholars.

A big question surrounds how researchers should handle the information they disseminate over an Internet forum or message board after their project has been completed. It is important to note that some online communities frown upon members erasing or "editing out" the content of their messages because this stifles the flow of future information-gathering and communication. However, leaving the recruitment message as-is could result in disappointment even if recruitment dates are clearly listed. This dilemma can be circumvented by editing a conspicuous disclaimer into the thread topic and content of the OP to indicate that the recruitment process is closed. It is recommended that researchers prepare these texts well in advance to facilitate ethics clearance given that, as in our case, all public correspondence must first be cleared by the institution's ethics board.

Challenges and Limitations

Location

The World Wide Web attracts an international audience. Forums and message boards are open to members from across the globe, consistent with the borderless nature of the Internet (Maier, 2010). Many North-American based forums will in fact attract users who are from non-English speaking countries, especially when it comes to certain hobbies. Hewer and Brownlie (2007) provide some interesting examples implicating automotive communities and various cultures. Researchers conducting recruitment for qualitative studies should recognize this as an inherent limitation. The more specific a subject, the more it is likely an online community will be comprised of fewer users representing a larger variety of countries.

Conducting recruitment of job-seekers for in-person interviews was straightforward due to the ubiquitous nature of the employment search process. A focus on public-sector careers narrowed down the possibilities further as the vast majority of government operations at the federal level in Canada are concentrated in one major geographic region (Graham & Swimmer, 2009). The data-gathering methodology selected can also help researchers circumvent these limitations. Many qualitative studies have successfully combined Internet forum and message board recruitment with traditional telephone interviewing (Karagiorgi & Lymbouridou, 2009; Nicolaou et al., 2009; Trier-Bieniek, 2012) and online webcam-based interviewing through services such as Skype (Rouleau & Von Ranson, 2011). An insightful work by Stewart and Williams (2005) explored the possibility of online focus group interviews which take into account the basic features of traditional online communities but digitize these with multimedia and interactive components to allow for gathering detailed information about users' feelings and emotions.

Recruitment Message Visibility

Despite not relying on instantaneous relay of information like chat rooms, many Internet forums and message boards can experience high activity. The job-search board discussed here, for example, is updated daily with new threads and posts about upcoming opportunities, the latest hiring trends, and ongoing competitions, not to mention equally popular exchanges of opinion and debate amongst members. One of its most frequented and recurring topics involves letter carriers providing advice to job-seekers interested in working for the Canadian national postal service Canada Post – at the time of recruitment, this thread had over 620,000 individual views and over 6,400 posts.

Unfortunately, the researcher's recruitment invitation did not fare the same level of popularity and would have quickly sunk down the list in favor of other discussions. Luckily, members making posts in the recruitment thread (despite doing so against the posted instructions) served as much-needed bumps that allowed for the message to be displayed prominently for several days. In the future, it would have been preferred for a moderator to pin the recruitment thread for a specified duration. This would have allowed for it to be permanently and prominently featured to anyone browsing the board. Some communities may only reserve this procedure for a very limited type of communication, like outlining and explaining the forum rules for instance, so researchers should not push otherwise to prevent being seen as intrusive. Because pinning a thread requires intervention from community leaders, it may incur ethical challenges such as the mistaken assumption that the researcher's study is endorsed by administrators or moderators. Researchers should pay attention to how their recruitment messages appear to the public when displayed on an Internet forum or

message board. The addition of disclaimers and other explanatory messages can help add clarification as needed.

Interactivity

The process explained herein describes very limited interaction with an online community that serves only to recruit study participants. But recruitment threads made by a researcher are not immune from feedback by a community's broader membership. Earlier, it was mentioned that when a recruitment message was displayed on the job-search board it received several pages worth of public replies. This is not unusual given the purpose of many message boards as trading posts of solutions and advice. Morrow (2006) conducted a study of the pattern of conversations on Internet forums and message boards discovering that most new threads involve a member asking for help or advice with regards to a problem, are followed by other members offering answers or clarification, and finally end with the OP thanking the community. Depken and Zhang (2010) discovered, however, that not all user conversations on Internet forums and message boards are amicable. In some cases, messages can be off-topic, irrelevant, or provide little to no contribution to the discussion.

The recruitment message shared with the job-search community invoked some interesting public replies. Some members began offering their opinions regarding the job-search portal as if they were participating in an interview in which no questions had yet been asked. Others stated that they would be interested in being part of a focus group, while members who were still unsure used the public thread to ask for clarification about logistical factors related to the project. One user expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of compensation offered by the researcher's institution for the activity, which influenced another member to agree and write a follow-up post with a similar opinion.

The researcher did not expect such a breadth of public replies to the initial recruitment message. Recall, the thread contained an advisory for members to direct all of their questions and comments to the researcher directly. While the replies served to garner additional interest in the project and maintain the popularity of the thread, they ultimately only cluttered the board and offered very little value. It would have therefore been preferred to have requested that a moderator lock the thread to restrict public replies and essentially force users to bring their questions and concerns directly to the researcher.

Discussion

This study sought to contribute to the literature on qualitative research methodology by elaborating on researchers' experiences recruiting participants from an online community for face-to-face focus group interviews. Whereas scholars have written about Internet-based participant recruitment in the past, work in this area is limited and, largely because of distance, implicates boundary-free data collection approaches such as telephone interviewing (Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

Internet forums and message boards can be robust recruitment tools for qualitative researchers. They can offer entry into hidden worlds of sensitive topics and social taboos (Stommel & Koole, 2010) and also provide the diversity needed for attaining a plurality of participant experiences and narratives (Kim & Jin, 2006). In our case, the diversity of focus group participants helped to gather a plurality of job-search experiences which led to producing varied results from which generalization could be explored in the future. Regular visitors invest personal time to have discussions and conversations about matters they deem relevant and personally important. These could be devoted fans of a particular artist or musical genre reflecting members' valued socio-cultural or personality traits (Perkins, 2012; Reysen et al.,

2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Williams, 2013). Of particular interest to scholars conducting qualitative studies in the health sciences, some message boards unite people afflicted with specific conditions or disorders (Armstrong et al., 2012; Mahato, 2011; Rodham et al., 2009) or offer community for parents and relatives of the ill (Clarke & Sargent, 2010; Kirby et al., 2008). As in our case, Internet forums and message boards can also bring together individuals searching for a future career in the federal government.

Scholars have already recognized the value of research data archived in the discourses and exchanges of online communities for quantitative analysis (Kenen et al., 2007; Persky et al., 2013; Sherman & Greenfield, 2013). Qualitative researchers have also sought to capitalize on the information shared by members of online communities. Netnography, for instance, has been described as an efficient tool for researchers interested in studying sensitive topics in-depth (Langer & Beckman, 2005) and explore C2C interaction for market research purposes (Chan & Li, 2009), among others. Research projects implicating recruitment of participants from online communities for the purposes of further collecting new qualitative data are scarce, however, as the process is not without certain significant limitations.

The borderless nature of the Internet means that Internet discussion communities attract members from across the globe (Maier, 2010). Researchers can and have circumvented this problem, firstly, by attempting to recruit from regional online communities as in the case of the study described here. A second approach involves combining Internet forum and message board recruitment with more accessible qualitative data collection techniques. These can involve more traditional methods such as telephone interviews (Karagiorgi & Lymbouridou, 2009; Nicolaou et al., 2009; Trier-Bieniek, 2012) or new innovative techniques including, but not limited to, online webcam interviewing (Rouleau & Von Ranson, 2011), participant journaling, or even photovoice and photo novella based research. Future researchers are encouraged to explore and share their experienced recruiting from Internet forums and message boards for projects using technological or innovative data collection strategies.

It is also important to acknowledge the unpredictable nature of online communities. We were surprised with the variety of replies and messages spurred by our recruitment thread on the career advice forum. In the future, we would have requested the moderator to both pin and lock our recruitment thread as ethical constraints prevented us from writing public replies to respondents. However, other researchers may just as well be disappointed discovering that their project is not seen in as popular terms or that willing participants are unable to participate because of the aforementioned geographic limitations. Researchers should consider conducting background work to determine whether Internet forum and message board recruitment is truly the most appropriate methodology for their projects.

Like any other approach to research, recruitment through online communities must be conducted professionally, respectfully, and in accordance with relevant ethical regulations and policies. There is no question that conversations transpiring over the Internet, especially amongst largely anonymous users, will invoke some degree of informality (Marcoccia, 2012). However, researchers should remain professional in their correspondence with community administrators and members for the purposes of establishing trust and facilitating future study. It is also important to understand at least the basic terminologies and "e-discourse" used in conversations regarding forum and message board functionality and operation. This paper has sought to provide some guidance here and with respect to the process of engaging online communities for recruitment of participants for qualitative research.

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