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46 Recruitment via social media

Abstract: This chapter explores the challenges and advantages of using social media to recruit individuals from hard-to-reach populations to participate in research. It provides reflections on methodology, ethics, communication, and positionality based on the authors' online recruitment and interactions with members of the incel (involuntary celibate) community.

Keywords: incels, social media, online interviews, ethics, reflexivity

Introduction

Incels hide their identity and their affiliation to the online incel community from their offline environments (Lounela and Murphy, 2023). They mistrust outsiders, such as researchers or journalists, who criticize them for promoting antifeminism, misogyny, male supremacy, violence, and domestic terrorism (O'Donnell and Shor, 2022). So, how do we reach them, and how do we talk to them? In this chapter, I will explore both challenges and advantages of using social media to recruit individuals from hard-to-reach populations to participate in research. I provide reflections on methodology, ethics, communication, and positionality based on my online recruitment and interactions with members of the incel community.

As criminologists, we encounter various challenges and limitations during online recruitment and must continuously assess our actions before, during, and after participant interactions. The first considerations arise before recruitment, including ethical questions of anonymity, privacy rights, informed consent, and the practicalities of safeguarding our research participants and storing the interview data safely. We also need to build trust and rapport with our participants for the recruitment process to be successful. Part of that is to create credibility as researchers by familiarizing ourselves with the technologies we use to establish and uphold contact, while rapport refers to forming a positive relationship that makes the interviewee comfortable enough to openly share their experiences and thoughts (Nalita and Busher, 2012). Thus, assessing how we communicate and present ourselves throughout recruitment is crucial while upholding professional boundaries when facing gatekeeping, suspicion, or propaganda. It is also vital to assess our safety when interacting with individuals who may have committed crimes. Although recruitment processes online do not necessarily include offline interactions, we can still be susceptible to harm, such as doxing (i. e., revealing our personal information online), harassment, threats, or hacking.

The challenges of using social media in the recruitment process are plentiful. However, there are several advantageous aspects as well. Social media recruitment offers logistic convenience, eliminates the need for travel or transportation, and provides access to audio recording tools on the computer during the interview. It also reduces fi-

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nancial costs and minimizes personal exposure when trying to reach hard-to-reach individuals. One significant benefit is the flexibility of interviews, though this can also be problematic if they stretch out for an extended period (see App-Based Textual Interviews by Bakken). Notably, online interactions allow participants to control what they wish to share about themselves and how to communicate with us. Below, I will reflect on my experience conducting research with members of the incel community and discuss some fundamental aspects to consider when preparing for and conducting recruitment via social media.

The online incel subculture

Incels, a portmanteau of involuntary and celibate, are predominantly heterosexual men who have created an online subculture around their inability to form sexual or romantic relationships with women. They share experiences and grievances of loneliness, social isolation, alienation, and romantic rejection (Hoffman et al., 2020). Incels believe they cannot change their 'inceldom' status due to women's perceived genetic selectivity, which leads them to reject incels as sexual and romantic partners in favor of better-looking men (Baele et al., 2021). Their online activity varies, with some incels posting more extensively than others, amplifying controversial voices within the incel subculture that can result in broad generalizations about the entire incel community (Baele et al., 2022). Despite this, the online subculture is antagonistic towards outsiders, espousing misogyny, antifeminism, and violent fantasies that separates its members from the out-group, which includes 'regular' people, women, and sex-havers (Nagle, 2017). Although acts of violence by incels are rare (Cottee, 2021), the group has been associated with several mass killings, which were committed in the US in 2014, Canada in 2018, and the UK in 2022 (Lounela and Murphy, 2023).

Methodology: Why online recruitment?

We can use open sources and social media on the internet to observe, gain access, and research the activity and content of specific hard-to-reach populations who engage in deviant or criminal activity, such as illegal drug dealing or gang activity (Bakken, 2021; Pyrooz et al., 2015). These sources can provide important insights into online communities, their members, and the spaces they frequent. In the case of incels, researching forums and social media communication is vital in understanding their worldview, subcultural logic, and identity creation (Andersen, 2023). The divide between life 'online' and 'offline' is not easily separated, as both are intrinsically linked (Fileborn, 2016). However, individuals can act differently online than offline, and direct interaction with our research participants is sometimes necessary to gain additional nuance and knowledge that enables qualitative, interpretative, and critical approaches (see Online Ethnography by Gibbs and Hall and Accessing Online Communities by Kaufmann).

Thus, interviewees can raise additional questions, provide relevant context, and address significant concerns that may not be apparent in secondary data, big data sampling, or surveys.

The internet and online media are crucial for incels to express, form, and maintain their subcultural identity. However, incels often frame their grievances with antifeminism and misogyny (Ging, 2019). Interviews can enable them to elaborate on why they identify as 'involuntary celibate' based on their life experiences and how they navigate the shame and stigma associated with adopting the term 'incel.' As part of my Ph.D. research project, I recruited fourteen individuals who identified as incels or former incels. I primarily used my personal social media account on Facebook to contact participants through private incel groups. I conducted semi-structured interviews regarding their life history using Zoom or Discord, depending on the platform participants felt most comfortable with. I kept my camera on throughout the interviews to build rapport and trust, fostering a positive relationship between us (Nalita and Busher, 2012). Ten participants openly shared personal information, such as their names, ages, and country of origin. However, four participants preferred to remain anonymous by turning their cameras off, with one even using a voice modifier to further conceal his identity.

The internet and social media have become essential aspects of our daily lives, facilitating the engagement and recruitment of research participants who were previously difficult to reach. In criminological research, combining online recruitment methods with personal interviews offers a valuable means of comprehensively understanding hard-to-reach populations and their experiences, particularly concerning potential involvement in marginalized, deviant, or criminal activities.

Ethics: Getting ready

Before recruitment begins, it is crucial to assess how we can maintain our well-being as researchers, as well as the well-being of our participants (Lumsden and Winter, 2014). This assessment involves identifying the demographics of interviewees and the online environments we intend to study to address our research questions accurately. We are also obligated to uphold our participants' rights to anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent (Fossheim and Ingierd, 2015). While structuring our research, we must consider these concerns when applying for ethical approval from an ethics committee or review board. This process is essential for identifying potential problems that may arise through our recruitment methods.

The requirement for ethics approval varies depending on the institution or country (e. g., AoIR, 2019; BSA, 2017; NESH, 2019), and many of their guidelines problematize our use of covert and deceptive research methods when conducting online research. Some guidelines mandate transparency about our research identity when recruiting individuals online. It is, therefore, vital for us as researchers to consider how much personal information we are comfortable disclosing. First, we must assess our digital

profile and online footprints that could expose personal information we prefer to keep private. We then, if necessary, limit access to our private social media and any identifiable information about ourselves. It is also essential to adopt general online safety measures to prevent hacking and the misuse of our passwords by updating them regularly, enabling two-step authenticators, and using malware programs. As an exercise in online security and safety, I recommend partnering with other students or researchers to simulate a 'doxing' scenario, where participants attempt to gather as much information about each other as possible. This exercise aims to reveal any identifying or uncomfortable information that can maliciously be used against you online.

Participants can share sensitive, traumatic, and even incriminating information about themselves online (Sidoti, 2023). As criminologists, we sometimes work with individuals who have committed, are currently engaging in, or are planning to engage in criminal activities. Therefore, being informed about the ethical considerations and legal requirements concerning our obligations to notify the authorities of specific crimes is critical. However, we must also balance this with our participants' well-being and confidentiality by safeguarding our interviewees' anonymity and managing the data safely. An example of the tension between research confidentiality and legal demands emerged in the controversial Boston College Tapes case, where researchers were compelled to release interviews with former paramilitaries to authorities (Sampson, 2016).

Members of the incel community have hacked and publicly published the private information of people they want to shame, harass, and potentially harm (Nagle, 2017). Throughout my recruitment, I selected smaller incel groups on Facebook and minimized my online exposure to the broader incel community. These groups differed from larger, puritanical incel forums since they were private, allowed outsiders, and prohibited encouraging violence. Most of my participants revealed their identities; therefore, upholding their security, confidentiality, and privacy was crucial. They requested to remain anonymous due to concerns and fears about social stigma, governmental control, and backlash from other incels.

Access: Getting in touch

We can use snowball and convenience sampling to recruit individuals online (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). Establishing credibility, trust, and rapport when interacting with our subjects, however, remains essential. This process can be particularly time-consuming and challenging for individuals from hard-to-reach communities (Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020). When we introduce ourselves, questions about our identity and research aims should be clear. However, tensions between us as researchers and our participants might still arise regarding power dynamics, conflicting agendas, and separating our public and private selves (Lavorgna and Sugiura, 2022b).

One approach is making ourselves known to the community by publishing recruitment posts within online spaces where wanted participants frequent. It should include

information about us as researchers, the research project, our professional contact information, and whom we want to interview. This approach casts a wide net as it is visible to active and inactive individuals within the community, which allows willing participants to ask further questions they might have. However, it can also expose us to potentially harmful community members, making it vital to determine if the online space is hostile towards researchers due to our positionality regarding gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or political affiliation. One measure to limit our exposure is by recruiting from smaller groups on social media, chat groups, or forums (see Researching Online Forums by Šupa).

Another approach involves contacting participants individually via direct messaging, text, apps, or e-mail (Bakken, 2022). Success varies depending on the participants' openness about their role in the online community and their trust in the conducted academic research. We must also stay flexible when contacting and recruiting potential participants since the instantaneous nature of online communication can pressure us to respond quickly (Fileborn, 2016). Some may only show initial interest, making us complete the interview on short notice, and might not respond later. Gatekeepers can play an essential role in gaining access to online recruitment and enable us access to forums, chat groups, or other relevant participants through recommendations or introductions (Banks, 2014). One way to create a positive relationship with gatekeepers online is by contacting them directly, establishing your role as a researcher, and expressing your interest in interviewing them due to their extensive knowledge of the community and their central role, such as being an administrator of a forum.

Snowball sampling was, in my case, relatively successful for the online recruitment of incels. Due to the anonymous and mistrusting nature of the incel community, few participants were close to or knew other incels personally. There were, however, exceptions, as some were part of smaller chat groups on Facebook or Discord servers that allowed them to communicate more openly. For example, one participant was unfamiliar and uncomfortable using Zoom as a communication tool. However, he instead wanted to communicate using Discord due to its familiarity, making it easier for him to stay anonymous. To accommodate this, I created a server to conduct the interview, allowing the participant to recruit and invite other incels he knew into the server after he completed his interview.

Communication: What to say?

Building trust and rapport with individuals online is an ongoing aspect of the recruitment and interview process. Criminologists often address sensitive topics and engage with vulnerable populations (see Vulnerability by Ranchordas and Beck). Online interactions can create flexible and informal social settings for participants, giving interviewees more control of the interview environment (Bakken, 2022). Although participants may not have total control, they can interrupt or pause interviews and choose how to communicate—through text, audio, or video—and what they wish to share

by anonymizing their identities using pseudonyms or encryption. However, this can also create power asymmetries and tension, especially when researchers are required to disclose their identities, unlike participants (Lavorgna and Sugiura, 2022a).

Online interaction reduces travel time and costs, enabling us to contact multiple people simultaneously. It can mediate the relationship of trust in various ways, where the anonymous and fleeting nature of online interactions can create a sense of distance between the researcher and the participant. However, the lack of physical presence can also make some participants feel more comfortable, with the possibility of testing our technical knowledge (Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020), thereby increasing trust. Nevertheless, online research can present challenges when compared to face-to-face methods. Participants may quickly stop responding or withdraw from the study (Mardones-Bravo, 2023). For instance, when seeking informed consent from research participants, a challenge arises if interviewees withdraw after receiving an information letter and consent form, stop responding, or fail to attend scheduled interviews. The formality of the process can intimidate some—despite previous communication having been more relaxed and unproblematic. During my recruitment of incels, some stopped responding or blocked me at this stage. However, most were keen to share their experiences to correct misconceptions about their community and were less concerned about the consent form.

The written information letter given to participants should include information about the purpose of the project, the responsible institution, the reasons for the invitation, and what their participation entails (e. g., length of the interview and possible questions). It should also include a section about personal privacy, participants' rights, and contact information for further information—additionally, have a section about the possibility of withdrawing from the research project. Following the information letter, the consent form should include checkboxes for the participants to fill out and sign in written form. Nonetheless, obtaining written consent online can be challenging when interviewees have limited knowledge or access to programs that enable electronic signing. If it is impossible to get written consent, many ethical guidelines accept recorded oral consent as sufficient, provided the participant is fully informed.

Setting clear boundaries between our professional and personal lives is crucial in online research. Throughout my recruitment of incels, I used my personal Facebook profile, which blurred the lines between public and private (Andersen and Sugiura, 2024). I did this to build trust and rapport, demonstrating that I was not there to demonize incels and that I was not deceptively infiltrating their community. Most participants were more focused on conveying their perspectives than on me, but after some interviews, I received friend requests on my social media account. I politely declined these requests, explaining that I needed to maintain a professional distance to protect both the identity of my participants and my own privacy. I was concerned that my participants might react negatively to being turned down, potentially causing conflict (Lavorgna and Sugiura, 2022b). Fortunately, that was not the case in my experience.

Conclusion

Digital research offers unique opportunities and is essential for understanding the evolving landscape of internet-related harm. Online recruitment provides access to diverse and hard-to-reach populations, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their behavior. The process, however, can be complex as our positionality, presence, and use of social media impact the situation. Nonetheless, we can manage these complexities with appropriate strategies and sensitivity to participants' rights:

- Ethical challenges: These include maintaining participants' anonymity and privacy rights, protecting sensitive information through proper data management, and obtaining informed consent.
- Methodological challenges: These involve addressing trust, safety, and communication issues on online platforms and comprehending power dynamics and personal boundaries in the context of digital recruitment.
- Security challenges: These require assessment and minimization of our digital profile and online footprints to avoid inadvertent exposure of our confidential information.

This chapter aims to inform and guide researchers and students about the intricacies of conducting recruitment via social media. Adopting a reflexive approach can help handle some of these concerns (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). In other words, we must reflect on how our identity might influence participant recruitment and interactions throughout our research process online.

Suggested reading

Participant recruitment on social media:

- Fileborn, B. (2016). Participant recruitment in an online era: A reflection on ethics and identity. *Research Ethics*, 12(2), 97–115.
- Internet research ethics and data management:
- Fossheim, H., & Ingierd, H. (2015). *Internet Research Ethics.* Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Reflexivity and positionality in criminological research and qualitative research:
- Lumsden, K., & Winter, A. (2014). *Reflexivity in Criminological Research: Experiences with the Powerful and the Powerless.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2018). *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research.* Third edition. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Qualitative and online research in criminology:
- Faria, R., & Dodge, M. (2023) *Qualitative Research in Criminology: Cutting-Edge Methods.* Cham: Springer.

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