



Research paper

Lessons from conducting trans-national Internet-mediated participatory research with hidden populations of cannabis cultivators



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ABSTRACT

Background: Internet-mediated research methods are increasingly used to access hidden populations. The International Cannabis Cultivation Questionnaire (ICCC) is an online survey designed to facilitate international comparisons into the relatively under-researched but increasingly significant phenomenon of domestic cannabis cultivation. The Global Cannabis Cultivation Research Consortium has used the ICCQ to survey over 6000 cannabis cultivators across 11 countries. In this paper, we describe and reflect upon our methodological approach, focusing on the digital and traditional recruitment methods used to access this hidden population and the challenges of working across multiple countries, cultures and languages. **Methods:** Descriptive statistics showing eligibility and completion rates and recruitment source by country of residence.

Results: Over three quarters of eligible respondents who were presented with the survey were included in the final sample of $n = 6528$. English-speaking countries expended more effort to recruit participants than non-English-speaking countries. The most effective recruitment modes were cannabis websites/groups (33%), Facebook (14%) and news articles (11%). While respondents recruited through news articles were older, growing practice variables were strikingly similar between these main recruitment modes.

Conclusion: Through this process, we learnt that there are trade-offs between hosting multiple surveys in each country vs. using one integrated database. We also found that although perceived anonymity is routinely assumed to be a benefit of using digital research methodologies, there are significant limits to research participant anonymity in the current era of mass digital surveillance, especially when the target group is particularly concerned about evading law enforcement. Finally, we list a number of specific recommendations for future researchers utilising Internet-mediated approaches to researching hidden populations.

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Introduction

Internet-mediated research methods have become more popular within the social sciences as both access to, and use of, the Internet have become increasingly unremarkable aspects of everyday life. Internet-mediated research methods may include interactions between researchers and participants through digital communications (e.g., surveys, interviews, discussion forums), as well as utilising the digital traces of existing online interactions as data (see [Hewson, 2014](#), for a review). Such methods have many advantages compared to face-to-face, postal or telephone research: large and geographically diverse samples can be accessed with relative ease; responses can be gathered relatively quickly; costs and other resource demands are relatively low; transcription and data-entry is automated; and flexibility and convenience are enhanced for both respondents and researchers ([Hewson & Laurent, 2008](#); [Kays, Keith, & Broughal, 2013](#); [Tuten, 2010](#); [van Gelder, Bretveld, & Roeleveld, 2010](#)). At the same time, Internet-mediated research methods are subject to criticism, with questions around sample representativeness and veracity of data collected, and concerns over privacy in the online environment ([Hewson & Laurent, 2008](#); [Tuten, 2010](#)). There is also the risk that the apparent ease of conducting Internet surveys masks the necessity for, and complexity of, participatory engagement that may distinguish successful from unsuccessful studies with hard-to-reach groups ([Barratt et al., 2012](#); [Barratt & Lenton, 2010](#)).

Internet-mediated research methods have been particularly useful in gathering data from hidden populations, such as drug users and drug dealers ([Coomber, 2011](#); [Kalogeraki, 2012](#); [Miller & Sønderlund, 2010](#); [Potter & Chatwin, 2011](#); [Temple & Brown, 2011](#)). However, the criticisms, especially around sample representativeness, also become more acute (see [Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2014](#)). In our experience, Internet-mediated research methods are worthy of serious consideration by researchers of hidden populations, so long as (a) suitable care is taken with survey design and recruitment strategies and (b) limitations and concerns are suitably acknowledged and accounted for in both the analysis of data and the interpretation and application of findings, particularly how they may or may not be generalisable beyond the sample population (see also [Barratt & Lenton, 2014](#)).

The Global Cannabis Cultivation Research Consortium (GCCRC) was created in 2009 at a meeting of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy, after scholars from different countries presented their work on domestic cannabis cultivation (domestic meaning cannabis grown in the same country that it is consumed), and found that they had broad aims in common ([Barratt et al., 2012](#)). The GCCRC developed an online survey designed to facilitate international comparisons into the relatively under-researched but increasingly significant phenomenon of domestic cannabis cultivation ([Decorte, Potter, & Bouchard, 2011](#); [United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2014](#)). We chose to use Internet-mediated research methods to facilitate dialogue with online groups of anonymous cannabis cultivators, access large numbers of cannabis cultivators anonymously from diverse locations, and enable global collaboration with limited project funding; objectives which could not have been achieved through alternative methods. Our International Cannabis Cultivation Questionnaire (ICCQ) has been successfully run in eleven industrialised countries producing a dataset of 6528 completed responses. As demonstrated in this special issue, it has provided important insights not only into the characteristics of cannabis growing and cannabis growers in these countries but also into the design and execution of online surveys aimed at hidden populations. Here we reflect on our experiences in survey design and sample recruitment. In particular, we discuss our efforts to improve the data collected through techniques aimed at increasing sample size and response rates, ensuring

greater quality of survey responses, and our attempts to assess potential biases in our final dataset resulting from our recruitment and data-collection methods. As such, this paper has two aims. First, we document and analyse our own experiences of the ICCQ, which complements our earlier methodological report ([Barratt et al., 2012](#)) and provides background to our various articles in this volume ([Hakkarainen et al., 2014](#); [Lenton, Frank, Barratt, Dahl, & Potter, 2014](#); [Nguyen, Malm, & Bouchard, 2014](#); [Paoli and Decorte, 2014](#); [Potter et al., 2014](#)). Second, we provide recommendations to assist the planning of future trans-national Internet-mediated research with hidden populations.

The article proceeds with a brief overview of Internet-mediated research methods as used in drug research. We then outline the ICCQ project with a short discussion of the background and rationale to our research and a more detailed outline of our own methodology. We introduce some analyses undertaken to attempt to understand potential sampling biases within our approach. In the ensuing discussion, we propose methodological techniques that can help maximise both the number of respondents and the quality of data provided by them in online surveys, and argue that such approaches are not only valid but valuable additions to our attempts to find out more about hidden populations such as cannabis growers. Our conclusions bring together a number of recommendations and observations that have emerged from our own experiences and that we feel are useful to share with other researchers seeking to engage with Internet-mediated methods targeting hidden populations.

Internet-mediated research with hidden populations

Internet-mediated research methods are increasingly utilised within the health and social sciences ([Lee, Fielding, & Blank, 2008](#); [van Gelder et al., 2010](#)). Their established advantages pertinent to those researching sensitive topics or hidden populations include: being able to offer enhanced anonymity, privacy and safety; the opportunity to participate when and where convenient and comfortable; and the reduction of fears and suspicions related to participation in the research ([Kays et al., 2013](#); [Miller & Sønderlund, 2010](#)). Internet-mediated research into drug issues dates back to the mid-1990s when [Coomber \(1997\)](#) opted for an online method as a way of persuading dealers to provide information about their illegal activities. While the most commonly used online method in drugs research is the survey (as reviewed by [Kalogeraki, 2012](#); [Miller & Sønderlund, 2010](#)), approaches also encompass qualitative online interviewing (e.g., [Barratt, 2012](#); [van Hout & Bingham, 2013](#)), textual analysis of website content (e.g., [Daniulaityte et al., 2013](#); [Kjellgren, Henningson, & Soussan, 2013](#); [van Hout, 2014](#)), and Internet-based recruitment of traditionally hidden populations through specialist websites, discussion forums and online communities (as reviewed by [Barratt & Lenton, 2010](#); [Potter & Chatwin, 2011](#)).

Despite the increasing use and advantages of Internet-mediated research methods there are a number of concerns and criticisms to be considered. While levels of access to, familiarity with and (regular) use of the Internet have increased rapidly in recent years to the point of near universality, at least in many of the World's most developed countries (see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>), some people still do not have access to the Internet and so will be excluded from online studies. Many more may not use the Internet regularly or may choose not to respond to online research requests. As such, researchers still need to consider whether those who do not respond to Internet surveys (for whatever reason) are notably different from those who do ([Couper, 2000](#)). Coverage error may be of concern for research with populations likely to make limited use of the Internet ([Potter & Chatwin, 2011](#)).

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