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Pragmatism, persistence and patience: A user perspective on strategies for data collection using popular online social networks

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Summary The increasing pervasiveness of the internet and social networking globally presents new opportunities and challenges for empirical social science researchers including those in nursing. Developments in computer-mediated communication are not static and there is potential for further advances and innovation in research methods embracing this technology. The aim of this paper is to present a reflexive account and critique of the use of social media as a means of data collection in a study that sought to explore the aesthetics of clinical leadership in contemporary nursing. In doing so, comparisons are drawn from using Twitter, Facebook and e-learning announcements as methods of recruitment and subsequent data collection via an online survey. The pragmatics of the internet and online social networks as vehicles for data collection are discussed. While questions remain about best practice to safeguard the scientific integrity of these approaches and the researchers and research participants who choose to participate, the potential exists for researchers to enhance and expand research methods without compromising rigour and validity. In the interests of sharpening thinking about this means of data collection dialogue and debate are needed on a range of research aspects including but not limited to pragmatics, new requirements in research training and development, legal and ethical guidelines and strengths and limitations encountered.

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Introduction

Seeking information via the virtual world is not new. The internet has emerged as an almost taken-for-granted tool for communication, having permeated into the workplace and home environment (Giordano & Giordano, 2011; Ryan, 2013), and accessed by individuals of all ages (West & Verran, 2013). Internet users of the world-wide-web are able to access information with relative ease and speed, using various search engines and networks, particularly with the arrival of mobile devices with internet access (Giordano & Giordano, 2011; Redfern, Ingles, Neubeck, Johnston, & Semsarian, 2013). Conversely, those seeking information from internet users can also do so with relative ease; the ways in which unsolicited invitations to complete surveys can "pop up" on computer screens reflects this and offers encouragement for researchers to consider the opportunities the internet can provide as a way of collecting data (O'Connor, Jackson, Goldsmith, & Skirton (2013); Ryan, 2013). It is apparent that many researchers across a range of disciplines are exploring ways of enhancing research approaches using internet and social media technology. Social media technologies such as online social networks (OSNs) continue to grow rapidly and are increasingly becoming one of the main methods of communication for many in the global community (Ferguson, 2013). These OSNs can serve a number of different purposes. Gormandy White (2013) identifies seven major social network categories, ranging from professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn) through to those dedicated to information sharing (e.g. Do-It-Yourself Community) and those designed principally to maintain social connections (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). Both Facebook and Twitter allow users to set up their own profiles, create personal contact lists, post messages, and share information including web links, videos, and photos (Heidemann, Klier, & Probst, 2012; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012). The efficiency and speed of this information sharing make these two OSNs powerful platforms for online communication. As Heidemann et al. (2012) highlight, Facebook users can actively endorse and spread posts with a single click of the "share" function. Twitter users, unlike those using Facebook, tend to focus more on offering opinion and information rather than socialising online (Hughes et al., 2012). Accessibility to these OSNs has exploded in recent years, with figures indicating that worldwide there around 750 million Facebook users and 100 million Twitter users (Serrano, 2011). Twitter and Facebook are consistently cited as the most popular OSNs (Antheunis, Tates, & Nieboer, 2013; Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearington, 2014).

For those involved in research projects the potential of the internet and OSNs is significant. Regardless of the methodological approach taken, researchers can adapt traditional methods of data collection such as interviews, surveys and focus groups to an online environment (Walker, 2013). There are some advantages to using OSNs for research data collection including the possibility of being able to access a larger pool of potential study participants, and do this more economically and in less time than more traditional means such producing and distributing hardcopy surveys or questionnaires (Ahern, 2005). As well, sensitive topic areas can

be more effectively researched using computer-mediated communication (East, Jackson, O'Brien, & Peters, 2008; Ryan, 2013) and anonymity afforded by online surveys can potentially improve the truthfulness of data (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007). Research participants can also find it more convenient to engage in data collection (Vallido, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2010). However, researchers taking this approach need to recognise that there are some challenges involved around establishing validity and rigour of research findings (Ahern, 2005; Walker, 2013) and issues such as social desirability (Groh, Ferrari, & Jason, 2009) and recall bias (Boone, Halligan, Mallett, Taylor, & Altman, 2012). This paper aims to outline and critique the use of OSNs for data collection in a study that sought to explore the aesthetics of clinical leadership in contemporary nursing.

Background

Effective leadership in nursing has been recognised as being of global importance to the nursing profession and a key to ensuring quality health care (ICN, 2012; Mannix, Wilkes, & Daly, 2013). Wide ranging inquiries into the state of health services, conducted in both Australia and the United Kingdom in recent years, highlight the critical nature of effective clinical leadership in achieving quality patient care (Department of Health, 2008; Francis, 2013; Garling, 2008). These have resulted in recommendations for improved clinical leadership (Francis, 2013; Garling, 2008). In the clinical nursing world leadership has been offered as the solution to the problems of its workplace (Jackson & Watson, 2009), including problems associated with staff skill mix (Parker, Giles, & Higgins, 2009), shrinking resources (Johnstone & Kanitsaki, 2009), workplace wrongdoing (Jackson, Hutchinson, Peters, Luck, & Saltman, 2013) and workplace violence (Jackson, Clare, & Mannix, 2002). To this end, the International Council of Nurses (ICN) positions leadership as one of its five core values driving ICN endeavours (ICN, 2012).

In order to research international nursing issues like clinical leadership, utilising the virtual environment of the internet, and OSNs in particular, can be realistic and cost-effective ways in which to gain a global perspective from contact with nurses across the world. Increasingly, researchers in nursing and health are turning to the internet and OSNs as methods of both seeking data for and disseminating data from their research projects. In a large longitudinal study of nursing and midwifery workforces in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom a dedicated website was established for data collection of a number of workforce participation measures (Huntington et al., 2009). Health-oriented OSNs have been effectively utilised in a randomised trial to promote weight loss and physical activity (Greene, Sacks, Piniewski, Kil, & Hahn, 2012). Rather than using a focused online social network, Ramo and Prochaska (2012) utilised Facebook's paid advertising programme to recruit and survey young adults about substance use, finding it a cost-effective method of recruiting and assessing health behaviours.

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