ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Using Facebook to Recruit People with Dwarfism: Pros and Pitfalls for Disabled Participants and Researchers

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Social networking sites have gained widespread popularity and remain a popular way of keeping in contact with others. Drawing on networked individualism, this paper argues that Facebook is beneficial for recruiting disabled participants spread over a wide geographical area. The aim of the article is to provide a comparison between using Facebook as a recruitment tool and the more traditional form of face-to-face recruitment via attending events for people with dwarfism. These were the two main forms of recruitment used to understand how people with dwarfism navigate through public spaces. This paper argues that Facebook is not just good for recruiting disabled participants, but also for disabled researchers to use as an accessible form of recruitment. However, building on recruitment experiences, including those influenced by a digital divide, this paper demonstrates that caution must be taken when trying to recruit participants using Facebook alone. This paper offers recommendations for researchers considering using Facebook as a recruitment tool.

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) are widely used by people around the world as a way of staying connected to friends and to build social relations amongst people with shared interests and backgrounds. As of 2020 Facebook had over 2.6 billion active users (Statistica 2020), making it one of the most popular SNS globally. Facebook allows people to create their own profile, upload photographs and videos, and comment on and share posts. Users can also join various interest groups that are either open or closed to the public. Closed groups require the user to send a membership request to the administrator of the group. If accepted, the member is provided access to the group and can post on the group's newsfeed, upload images and comment on other member's posts. Facebook's ability to connect with others makes it an interesting form of recruit for hard-to-reach participants, including disabled people.

In the UK there are less than 6000 people with dwarfism (Shakespeare et al. 2007), and with the UK's population at approximately 66 million (ONS 2018), daily encounters with people with dwarfism are rare. I have dwarfism and before carrying out my doctoral research I rarely ever encountered anyone else with dwarfism. However, Shpigelman and Gill (2014b) point out that disabled people often use SNS as a way to meet and socialise online with other disabled people. I have many friends on Facebook who all have dwarfism and whom I keep in regular contact with. This I argue is due to networked individualism, which I shall explore in more detail below.

In this paper, I focus on the pros and cons of using Facebook to recruit disabled participants by reflecting on my doctoral fieldwork. In doing so, I provide a comparison between using Facebook and other more traditional forms of recruitment, including attending events held by associations for people with dwarfism. This paper argues that Facebook provides an additional way to recruit disabled participants whose access to more traditional forms of recruitment can be problematic. This paper demonstrates strategies that can be used to best utilise Facebook as a recruitment platform. However, building on recruitment experiences, it is argued that caution must be taken when trying to recruit participants using Facebook as it can present its own challenges, including issues of privacy. This paper exposes some of the ethical dilemmas Facebook poses and some of the biases created by a digital divide. I conclude by suggesting strategies to implement when using Facebook as a form of recruitment.

The Internet, SNS, and Disability

Inaccessible buildings, transport systems, and disablist attitudes can result in people with impairments being denied full access to the built environment. Kruse (2002: 175) uses the term '"*statuarized space*" to describe how the material

environment produces relative stature in common representations of space'. Everyday spaces are often disabling for people with dwarfism as they are created for the average-sized person; however, private spaces such as the home can be '*re-statuarized*' to be size suitable for them. Similarly, Facebook groups for people with dwarfism can be considered '*virtual re-statuarized*' spaces, which are not only size suitable but also allow them to socialise without encountering the typical social barriers that they experience, such as being stared at and called names by other members of society. For example, Shakespeare et al. (2010) demonstrated that 63% of their participants, who all had dwarfism, were afraid of leaving their homes as a result of social abuse. On the other hand, the internet provides a safe space to minimise this type of abuse, especially when part of a closed group specifically for people with dwarfism. However, it is important not to ignore that people with dwarfism can encounter other forms of bullying that are unique to the internet, including cyberbullying.

It cannot be denied that the lack of regulations and promotion of free speech on Facebook (Van Dijk 2020) has provided another platform to promote disablist hate speech. For example, on Facebook, there are numerous groups, such as 'Midget Monday Madness', which construct dwarfism in a derogatory way. Numerous groups have also been known to encourage users to share photographs they have taken of people with dwarfism, which people then mock in the comments section. Van Dijk (2020) points out that Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerburg has allowed Facebook to have minimal regulations in order to permit free speech. This has had unwanted implications, including the encouragement of hate speech. I have reported several derogatory groups and posts, including those that refer to people with dwarfism as 'midgets', but according to Facebook they do not go against their 'community standards' and remain online. It allows numerous people to openly mock people with dwarfism that they otherwise would not come into contact with.

According to Baym (2015), the internet has provided new opportunities for communication. Concerning networked individualism, numerous research has focused specifically on the benefits of SNS for disabled people (Holmes & O'Laughlin 2012; Shava 2014; Shpigelman & Gill 2014a and b; Zdrodowska 2014; Xu et al. 2014). The internet has shown to be an accessible space for disabled people (Davidson & Parr 2010; Kruse 2010; Sheldon 2004; Skelton & Valentine 2010). It can aid in bringing disabled people together and provides a more accessible platform for finding impairment-related information (Skelton & Valentine 2010). Wellman (2002) argues that supported social networks foster changes in 'network capital', in other words how people contact, interact with, and obtain information from each other. Kruse (2010) points out that the internet is used by people with dwarfism to correspond to others that they have previously met at events held by organisations for people with dwarfism. Through networked individualism, people can obtain support and friendship from those who do not live in the same area as them (Wellman 2002). Whilst events provide a limited timeframe for people with dwarfism to connect, Facebook allows a continual connection.

SNS is argued to be an important place enabling disabled people to share their voices (Zdrodowska 2014; Shava 2014; Xu et al. 2014). Shava (2014) suggests that SNS can be used as a place for disabled people to communicate, share, and disseminate information, which can be empowering as it can be used as a base for advocacy. Baym (2015) points out that internet users are more likely than non-internet users to engage in political activities. Mann (2018) suggests that online social movements, including #CripTheVote, provides new avenues for advocacy. This is especially relevant for disabled people, who cannot always partake in traditional forms of protest due to access barriers. According to Trevisan (2019), SNS allows disabled people to keep up to date with politics and contribute to political debates. This makes SNS a place for potentially engaging with disabled people for disability research, which is advocacy based.

Facebook is gaining an academic interest due to its widespread use and various forums, which allows researchers to connect easily with potential participants (Baltar & Brunet 2012; Bhutta 2012; Browne 2005; Caers & Castelyns 2010; Curtis 2014; Hirsch et al. 2014; Kapp et al. 2013; Melanthiou et al. 2015; Samuals & Zucco 2013). Bhutta (2012) suggests that SNS provide faster and cheaper ways to collect survey data. Survey links can be posted on group pages, reducing the need to send out hard copies. However, when using Facebook as a platform to collect data, it is important to take into account digital media ethics (Ess 2020; Van Dijk 2020). Facebook has been criticised for its poor privacy policies. Facebook was recently exposed for its involvement in the Cambridge Analytica scandal. The scandal allowed the illegal acquisition of personal information of Facebook users for political purposes. When researchers use Facebook to collect survey data, it also provides the opportunity for third parties to do the same. As a response to the unique ethical issues digital platforms including SNS create, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) provides its own ethical guidelines. One of the main issues is privacy and the collection of big data. Bender et al. (2017) point out that when using SNS for recruitment, it creates unique ethical dilemmas, including online tracking, profiling, and targeting. An important aspect of privacy is the right to be free from the intrusion of interference from others (Bender et al. 2017).

Hirsch et al. (2014) suggest SNS for engaging with hard-to-reach participants. Hard-to-reach participants can include people from a small minority group or international participants. As SNS provides an international platform, Facebook is beneficial for collecting large numbers of international participants (Bhutta 2012; Samuals & Zucco 2013). However, when accessing international participants, ethical pluralism must be considered (AoIR 2019). The ethical guidelines set out in one country may differ from another, thus the research must consider the most suitable course of practice. Furthermore, accessing international participants is reliant on internet access, which is significantly lower in countries in the Global South.

There exists a 'digital divide' (Goggin 2017), which relates to those who do have access to the internet and those who do not. There are numerous reasons for having limited or no access to the internet, including a lack of material and physical access which is often associated with those with poorer socio-economic backgrounds, including those that live in the Global South (Van Dijk 2020). There is also a lack of digital skills, which is often an attribute associated with older people, which results in less or no usage of the internet (Van Dijk 2020). Furthermore, internet users tend to be high-income and highly educated white people (Van Dijk 2020). Koo and Skinner (2005) point out that internet recruitment samples can often be unrepresentative. This indicates that if used to recruit disabled people, it is likely that it will result in younger, well-educated, white participants from the Global North.

In terms of digital divides, Goggin (2017) argues that disability has been given limited attention. Whilst digital technologies have the potential to reduce some disabling barriers, Trevisan (2018) points out that disabled people are less likely to access the internet than their non-disabled counterparts. This can be accredited to several factors, including disabled people's socio-economic background and the internet being constructed specifically for those without impairments. According to McDonald and Clayton (2012), some forms of digital technology contribute to disabled people's digital divide. This is especially true for those with visual or cognitive impairments. This means that trying to access some disabled participants may prove problematic when using Facebook. Furthermore, Facebook is a popular SNS site in Europe and North America; however, countries such as Japan and China have their own SNS sites, limiting access to participants outside of the western world.

Whilst research has focused on the benefits of SNS for disabled people and on research benefits, it has not explored the pros and cons of using SNS for disability research.

Methods

From 2010–2011 I recruited participants with dwarfism based in the UK, to partake in my doctoral research, which focused on their social and spatial experiences of public spaces. To gather the data semi-structured interviews, with the incorporation of photo-elicitation exercises were carried out. Whilst this paper draws on my own recruitment experiences, it does not engage with autoethnography. Autoethnography draws on the researcher's personal experiences (Ellis et al. 2011), whilst this paper focuses upon the pros and cons of a particular recruitment method I used.

Several recruitment methods were used to maximise the number of participants. A combination of contacting numerous organisations for people with dwarfism and attending events held by organisations, snowballing, and posting adverts on Facebook were all used as a way of recruitment.

Contacting the organisations provided a good starting point for recruitment, as I knew no people with dwarfism personally. All initial contact with organisations was made through gatekeepers. Gatekeepers are usually the first point of contact when wanting to recruit participants and can affect access to them (Sanghera & Thaper-Bjokert 2008). An email was sent out, which provided details of the research study and that I had dwarfism. I felt that revealing this information would give them some indication as to why I was carrying out the research. As I did not want to solely rely on gatekeepers, I also attended various events, which were held in numerous locations across the UK.

I used the process of traditional and SNS snowballing to recruit further participants. Traditional snowballing involves asking participants to pass on my contact details to anyone they thought might be interested in taking part. Snowballing is often used as a recruitment technique when the people being researched are difficult to recruit (Browne 2005). Furthermore, Facebook's powerful sharing features make it a useful platform for snowballing (Bender et al. 2017). SNS snowballing involved asking group members for people with dwarfism to share my post advertising the project on their own page.

Ethical approval was granted by the University where I was completing my PhD. Before conducting the interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet to read through and consent form to sign. Members at organisations mostly knew everyone and many shared the same group of friends. This made anonymity difficult. Worth (2008) suggests that it is difficult to provide participants with anonymity if the group is small and close-knit. Shakespeare et al. (2010) point out that recruiting people with dwarfism via one association made anonymity difficult within their research, as most people would easily recognise each other. Using several organisations and various Facebook groups that include members not part of any association aided in increasing participant anonymity. All participants were given pseudonyms. Other possible forms of identity such as age and place of residence were also left out where possible or made ambiguous. For example, instead of stating that a participant lived in London, their place of residence was referred to as a city in southeast England.

Results – Facebook versus Traditional Forms of Recruitment

In regards to recruiting participants with dwarfism, conventional methods include attending events held by organisations for people with dwarfism (see Shakespeare et al. 2010; Kruse 2002, 2003). Whilst attending events aided in recruiting some participants, this form of recruitment was also met with difficulties. Being a new member of an association often made me feel out of place, despite sharing the same impairment as the majority of the members. There were a lot of cliques and people wanting to spend time catching up and taking part in activities. Yet, within Facebook groups, I felt less isolated as I could freely comment on posts, without feeling I was interrupting anyone's socialising and their participation in activities.

At events, I did leave some leaflets on tables, but even if someone picks one up, they can be left in the bottom of a handbag and forgotten about. Despite events meant to be supposedly safe spaces for people with dwarfism, I felt unsafe after being sexually assaulted at one event (see Pritchard 2019). Kruse (2003) points out that people with dwarfism often attend events held by organisations for people with dwarfism to find a potential romantic partner. This had implications for the research process and was one of the prompts to make me change recruitment tactics. Of course, this is not to ignore that people can be sexually harassed via the internet; however, it does prevent being physically sexually assaulted. I received some friend requests from men who sent messages that could be described as 'flirty', but I was able to block them before anything could escalate further. I also received abuse from one member of an association for daring to speak about the incident. In the end, I blocked him so that he was unable to send me any more private messages.

Facebook has many groups for people with dwarfism. Facebook is made up of various groups, which are virtual communities, linking people with similar interests or attributes (Bhutta 2012). Groups are either run by organisations or are not affiliated with any, including, but are not limited to: LPOnly (Little People Only) LP Women, H.E.L.P. – Health and Exercise for Little People, and Understanding Dwarfism. These are all closed groups, where prospective members have to either prove they have dwarfism or have a family member with dwarfism in order to join. As a person with dwarfism, I was able to join all of these groups. All groups adopt different terms that can refer to a person with dwarfism. The terminology used to refer to people with dwarfism differs from person to person and internationally. Little person is mostly favoured by people with dwarfism living in North America, whereas in the UK terms such as dwarf, person with dwarfism, and person of restricted growth are preferred. Thus, to find many groups I had to search for them using a variety of terms.

Groups such as LPOnly function as places to provide support and information for people with dwarfism from around the world. What many of these groups foster is a sense of agency, which allows people with dwarfism to create their own virtual re-statuarized spaces. LPOnly, which as the name suggests is a group for people with dwarfism only. According to Shpigelman and Gill (2014b), SNS can help to empower disabled people. LPOnly was set up by several women with dwarfism as a response to people with dwarfism being ignored within organisations, as these places are often dominated by the voices of average-sized parents. Drake (1994) argues that within voluntary organisations for disabled people, disabled people themselves are often excluded from positions of influence and ironically experience the same barriers and constraints that they experience within everyday society. Having their own groups on Facebook allows people with dwarfism to express their views freely without feeling judged or misunderstood by average-sized people.

Whilst LPOnly has over 600 members, one of the most popular organisations for people with dwarfism in the UK has just over 200 members, who are a mixture of both average-sized and people with dwarfism. Unsurprisingly, I found that my posts gained most interest in groups for people with dwarfism only, such as LPOnly. The reason for this was because other groups tended to be dominated by average-sized parents, who were not potential participants and tended to fill pages with parent-related posts, pushing my post to the bottom of the newsfeed. Added to this, not all events were popular amongst people with dwarfism, but rather average-sized parents of children with dwarfism. Often it is average-sized parents who join organisations to learn about dwarfism and gain support. Eighty percent of children with dwarfism are born to average-sized parents (Understanding Dwarfism 2013). This limited the number of potential participants at events and within some Facebook groups.

When attending events, average-sized parents are at an advantage, which aids in increasing their numbers. Unlike people with dwarfism, they will not encounter numerous disabling barriers to get to an event. People with dwarfism are more likely to make the effort to attend a larger event, which is held over a few days, as it outweighs some of the disabling consequences of public transport (Pritchard 2014). As one participant pointed out that she found it difficult to travel to events since she relied on public transport:

> I wish I could attend more events, but I can't as I don't have a car and public transport is hard for me to use (Arial).

People with dwarfism are sparsely located across the UK and thus if an event is held in the south of England, those from the north of England are unlikely to attend and vice versa. However, the internet is a useful tool for allowing disabled people to be able to access forums and to affiliate themselves with other disabled people (Sheldon 2004). This can be attributed to networked individualism.

Another benefit of networked individualism is that Facebook reduced logistical issues associated with attending events. Van Dijk (2020) argues that social media is a form of networked individualism that permits communication to be tied less to the parameters of time and place. Relying on events for recruitment made me time dependent on organisations, as I had to rely on when they would be holding events, which was not always that often. Ramo (2014) argues that Facebook is a cost-effective and efficient form of recruitment. Added to this, some UK organisations hold events at the same time as others, resulting in conflicts. This is partly political, as organisations compete for members. However, Facebook provides an easy way to have continual access to one another. Approximately two-thirds of users log into their Facebook account at least once a day (Ellison et al. 2007). This makes contacting participants potentially easier. On Facebook, people can either get to know each other through becoming 'friends' with people they may

have met at events or through non-association groups on Facebook. Ellison et al. (2007) found that the majority of respondents used Facebook to maintain or intensify relationships characterised by some form of offline connection such as existing friends or someone they have met socially. Facebook provided more time to get to know potential participants and for them to contact me with any further questions about the research.

Most people with dwarfism are 'impairment isolated' within society, in other words, they have little or no contact with people who share the same impairment as them. This is why many people with dwarfism join organisations. Wellman (2002) argues that networked societies allow for more interaction with others from diverse groups. Since joining Facebook and its numerous groups for people with dwarfism I have become friends with many people with dwarfism. 'Social Network Sites potentially allow disabled people to expand their communication channels and social circles' (Shpigelman & Gill, 2014a: 1601). Groups such as LPOnly allow people to contribute to all sorts of conversations at any time and from the comfort of their own home. However, people's patterns of access and use of Facebook can impact recruitment (Kosinski et al. 2015). Although LPOnly has a high volume of members, this does not mean that all are active. People vary their involvement in different networks. They may be active in some, occasional in others, or silent (Wellman 2002). In many of these groups, it is usually the same several members commenting on posts. However, 'lurkers', those who read posts but never post (Baym 2015), still had the opportunity to contact me without commenting on the post.

As a young, doctoral researcher, I felt I had two identities – my own identity, as a young person who often went out partying, and an academic, who needed to look professional to be taken seriously. Shpigelman and Gill (2014a) suggest that Facebook offers the opportunity to project a preferred identity. Facebook also allows you to add people as 'friends' to whom I added some potential participants who I had met at events and through both traditional and SNS forms of snowballing. Adding potential participants as 'friends' meant that they would be able to see my profile and potentially get to know me better. Participants were able to view most of my profile, such as my profile pictures, my interests, and recent posts. Facebook provides a setting for people to display information aids in facilitating a rapport between participants and the researcher. However, adding potential participants as friends impacted my privacy (Ess 2020). When friending potential participants, I limited what they could see on my profile page. For example, I did not want participants to see photos of me partying. Not sharing too much information about myself allowed me to remain professional. A more personalised approach to research entails the researchers managing their appearance and self-presentation in order to build a rapport and foster trust with potential participants (O'Connell & Layder 1994).

Another difficulty is that Facebook allows for a criss-cross of diverse relations (Van Dijk 2020). On Facebook, I have numerous friends, such as people with dwarfism, my family, school friends, and university friends. Some of these people have never met offline, but on Facebook, their differing personalities can clash. For example, not so long ago a family member responded to one of my posts, about a disablist encounter I had, ironically using a disablist slur in regards to the perpetrator. This prompted a colleague of mine to comment, reprimanding my family member for his inappropriate post. Whilst I was not responsible for either post I did feel like I could be easily judged because it was my post, and I was friends with both. Schwarz and Shani (2016) argue that Facebook's potential for political activism can result in 'political defriending', which involves defriending Facebook friends based on the political views they share on the site. I became concerned that potential participants could 'defriend' me based on the views shared by others on my Facebook page. Thinking back, it would have been more appropriate to create a separate Facebook account for recruitment purposes. However, this was difficult because by the time I got back from one event I already had several friend requests.

The participants' privacy should also be taken into consideration. Ess (2020) argues that there is a 'privacy paradox', which suggests that although Facebook users deem the privacy of their personal information important, most of them will give it up voluntarily. For example, simply joining groups meant that people had already freely disclosed their identity as a person with dwarfism online.

Due to my dwarfism and presence in several groups, I received numerous friend requests from other people with dwarfism. Facebook is depicted as a platform to see and to be seen (Caers et al. 2013). As a personal user, I tend not to accept friend requests from strangers. However, when recruiting participants, I would accept friend requests as I viewed them as potential participants. I was able to add them as a friend and subtly remind them about the research project, which we could discuss via Facebook messenger, an online private chat service. I would message them about the project and if they were not interested, I could easily unfriend them. In most cases, I have found that people with dwarfism want to add me as a friend purely because of my dwarfism. This became apparent when I began receiving numerous friend requests from people I did not know. When I questioned why they wanted to add me as a friend, their response was because they wanted to make friends with 'all dwarfs'. Caers et al. (2013) point out that online friends are not necessarily offline friends. A difficulty with Facebook is that people are not always who they seem.

A common concern with Facebook is the production of 'fake' profiles (Baym 2015). Facebook provides the right settings for people to create a fake identity. For example, a profile picture could be a google image. There is a specific group called LPAdmins, which is for all admins of groups for people with dwarfism to alert others of potentially fake accounts trying to join their groups. One of the reasons behind this is because some average-sized men with a fetish for women with dwarfism like to try and join these groups. I was also informed about this problem by a committee member of one association. She relayed to me how some average-sized men asked to attend events as they were interested in meeting women with dwarfism. It is a lot easier to identify them when they are trying to attend an event in person; however, Facebook provides them with the opportunity to create a different identity.

Organisations are often full of like-minded people who share the same values as them. For example, one association is very proactive in fighting against derogatory media representations of dwarfism and therefore is unlikely to attract people with dwarfism who work in the industry. However, most Facebook groups are made up of a diverse range of people. Ramo (2014) points out that using Facebook as a form of recruitment is successful in engaging with a diverse range of individuals. Furthermore, Melanthiou et al. (2015) found that SNS can be beneficial for attracting and screening potential participants. It is possible to select participants based on what they post within groups. Caers and Castelyns (2010) point out that using Facebook as a recruitment tool can create bias as researchers can view the participant's information. Whilst researchers need to ensure that the advert only attracts participants relevant to the study, sometimes researchers may be reluctant to include some participants based on what they know about them. Caers and Castelyns (2010) suggest using Facebook can deter researchers from recruiting those with particular profile pictures. For example, if someone's profile picture was of them dressed as an Oompa Loompa, I needed to ensure that if they were willing to take part in the research that I did not dismiss them based on my views about dwarf entertainment. Furthermore, Facebook can attract criticism from those with different views. For example, on Facebook, some dwarf entertainers insulted my research and claimed that I could not accept my dwarfism because it challenged the work they do.

A post can be left on for as long as necessary, but its popularity depends on how many other posts are posted on the group's page and how many comments each post receives. If several people comment on the post, it remains on top of the newsfeed. If nobody responds to the post and other new posts are placed on the page the post will be forgotten about. To move the post back to the top of the page, they can be "bumped" to gather more attention. Bumping a post simply involves writing 'bump' in the post's comment box. Most posts remain popular only for a short time.

When advertising a research project on Facebook Kapp et al. (2013) stress the importance of ensuring that a research advert encourages the potential participant to take part. People's newsfeeds will contain numerous posts from friends and any groups that they may follow, many of which will be ignored. Thus, knowing the aims of some of the groups, made it important to structure the advert to attract their members. As LPOnly is an activism page and by framing the project as having potential political impact I felt aided in generating a lot of interest. Shpigelman and Gill (2014a) point out that SNS promote political engagement. People with dwarfism can use Facebook to be politically engaged with rights for people with dwarfism. For example, on LPOnly one member shared a post about how a popular fashion store was selling t-shirts with the phrase 'midgets make great pets'. Mann (2018) argues that SNS can assist in the construction of social identity and provide opportunities for solidarity and connection. As a collective, we were able to devise a petition and contact the store who subsequently removed the t-shirts. I felt that being part of that collective helped to showcase my commitment to fighting for equality for people with dwarfism, which would help to convince people that my doctoral work would have future benefits.

Potential participants were free to 'like' and ask questions through commenting on the post. The questions were visible to all members and provided a way of providing further information to all potential participants. Responding to comments allowed for further information to be divulged about the project. It was important to ensure that comments to the post were kept to questions about the research as opposed to potential participants sharing their experiences. This was due to ethical reasons, as comments do not provide anonymity. Thus, it is important to moderate comments (Bender et al. 2017). Whilst moderating the comments helped to prevent other group members from seeing these posts, other interaction with the post could be used by third parties. For example, just 'liking' the post can be used by third parties to collect data (Ess 2020). Whilst people are already sharing their information by being a member of Facebook and contributing to various posts, it is worth providing a privacy notice (Bender et al. 2017). This can include advice for people to clear their internet browsing history (cookies) to limit how much data third parties can gather.

I also commented on the post asking if others would share it. Bhutta (2012) and Browne (2005) point out that SNS are beneficial for recruiting participants via 'snowballing'. Asking other members to share the post acted as a form of virtual snowballing. Due to SNS's purpose of building networks between people, members will have numerous 'friends' with whom they can share the research information. Bhutta (2012) argues that this is because users quickly and easily disseminate information. Unlike traditional snowballing, users can simply share a post advertising a research project on their page, which can be seen by all of their Facebook friends.

Baltar and Brunet (2012) suggest that using Facebook results in a higher response rate than traditional methods of snowballing. This they argue is because the researcher shows their personal information and contributes to groups of interest. Allowing participants to learn more about the researcher, such as basic personal information, aids in facilitating a rapport. This I felt would enable me to build a rapport with participants as they could get to know a little about me. Baym (2015) argues that a person can have several online identities. Had I initially planned to use Facebook as a form of recruitment I would have created a separate profile, which only exposed a bit of my personal information and focused more on my identity as a doctoral researcher.

Facebook can allow researchers to connect with participants living anywhere in the world, allowing for potential access to international participants. The majority of the groups that I was part of had members from various countries, who took an interest in my research. However, I had to reject a few interested international potential participants as I had committed to interviewing people with dwarfism living in the UK only. Despite this, I have learnt that it is beneficial for future research, which can aid in providing an international perspective to the research. As pointed out by Meekosha (2011), Disability Studies tends to focus on disability in western society, ignoring the voices of disabled people living

in the Global South. The experiences of people with dwarfism living in the Global South are important to consider. For example, one participant, who is originally from South-East Asia, touched upon some different experiences, such as being perceived as a 'bad omen' because of her dwarfism. However, as shown, the recruitment of international participants via Facebook is likely to be hampered by limited internet access for many people living in the Global South.

An obvious pitfall when using Facebook as a recruitment method is missing out on potential participants who do not have access to the internet. On Facebook, I mostly engaged with younger people with dwarfism. Furthermore, Baym (2015) points out that internet users are more likely to have a higher educational and economic background. Both of these factors can be attributed to a digital divide. Therefore, it is that using Facebook alone to recruit people with dwarfism can produce a narrow range of participants. This is one of the reasons that other methods of recruitment were also utilized, including snowballing. Im and Chee (2005) argue that it is important to use multiple recruitment sources and strategies to recruit a diverse range of participants.

Even those with access to the internet may choose to avoid groups for people who share their condition. Relying on Facebook for recruitment includes people not having to disclose their identity. Asynchronous communication gives people more control over what identities they disclose (Wellman 2002). Some people with dwarfism may use SNS to hide their condition and thus avoid groups for people with dwarfism. For example, some people with dwarfism avoid organisations for people with dwarfism as they do not want to see and be reminded of their physical difference (Ablon 1984). In physical spaces, some people will only see a person's dwarfism and make preconceived judgements about them based on what they know about dwarfism. SNS allows a person with dwarfism to expose what particular identity they want to. For example, if they are a football fan they can join an SNS group dedicated to their favourite team and just construct themselves as their 'number one fan'. This allows them to build relationships based on shared interests rather than characteristics, which is argued to be empowering for disenfranchised groups (Wellman 2002). Whilst I relied on groups specifically for people with dwarfism, it meant that I possibly missed out on recruiting people not part of these groups.

Conclusion

Disabled researchers encounter numerous barriers to research and thus it is important to consider the ways that research can be made more inclusive. There are several benefits to using Facebook as a recruitment tool, such as reducing disabling barriers and the ability to build a rapport with participants.

This paper has explored the numerous strategies that can be used to successfully recruit participants via Facebook. It is recommended that a separate profile is created or to limit how much potential participants can see on your profile, which is possible to do using the settings feature. This can help researchers to retain a professional appearance. However, participants may not be fully aware of how they can limit what they want researchers to see and thus researchers should advise them on what they can do to set their own privacy levels.

To increase the chances of recruitment researchers should join interest groups relating to their participants. In my case, I joined groups such as LPOnly to get to know potential participants and be able to make them aware of the research. My positionality as a person with dwarfism made this possible; however, it may not be for a non-disabled researcher as many Facebook groups for people with dwarfism only permit people with the condition to join.

Researchers must ensure that they are active in different interest groups but do not become too opinionated or get pulled into heated debates. This may cause people to be reluctant to take part in their research, especially if they are using qualitative methods which usually entail more interaction with participants. Having a good presence in these groups allows for people to become familiar with the researcher. It demonstrates that they are not just there as a researcher, but as someone who shares their identity and is proactive in raising awareness.

People with dwarfism can use Facebook to develop friendships with others and be politically engaged with rights for people with dwarfism. Reflecting on my observations has demonstrated some of the problems encountered within events held by organisations for people with dwarfism, including the dominance of average-sized parents. Whilst organisations can provide good support for new parents, further research could consider the possible ableism that exists within these spaces. There seemed to be a difference between events held by organisations and groups for people with dwarfism on Facebook. The latter is often more politically engaged with the rights of people with dwarfism. Further research could explore the potential benefits of Facebook as an advocacy platform for disabled people.

The main concern when using Facebook as a recruitment tool is the privacy of the participants. Whilst researchers can implement tools to increase participants' anonymity, using Facebook means that participants are likely to share personal details with third parties, often unbeknown to them. Furthermore, it is important to consider the possible ethical implications for potential participants, who share aspects of their personal life when they befriend a researcher. Their choice to 'friend' a researcher may be for different purposes, and this needs to be communicated between them and the researcher.

Lastly, it is important to consider using several recruitment strategies and not solely rely on Facebook, to recruit participants who do not have access to the internet or SNS and thus minimise recruitment bias.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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