Conducing Qualitative Research Online During COVID-19

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1

Overview of Sessions

- History of internet
- How people use the internet in relation to health
- Online research: advantages and disadvantages
- Practicalities: consent, confidentiality, recruiting
- Possible data sources & methods
- Research examples



- The growth of the Internet globally has been one of the greatest cultural phenomena of our time;
 - it has impacted on nearly all areas of our life.
- In a way, a 'global village' has been created, and hence global boundaries have been bridged.
- We are connected to our friends, families, children, and even strangers in just a split second merely because of the rise of global technology.
- We now know more than ever before in human existence because we are not only able to reach out to other human beings but also because we can obtain knowledge rapidly.
- As our lives and societies are transformed by new technology, there are new forms of data for qualitative researchers to collect and new ways for us to analyse the data.

What is Online?

- When a computer is connected to a network and can communicate with other computers (or web-enabled devices).
- Commonly means being connected to the internet.
- Common terms (used interchangeably):
 - Online communication
 - Computer mediated communication (CMC)
 - Internet (Net)
 - Cyberspace (Liamputtong 2020)

History of the Internet

- 1969 internet grew out of the US Department of Defence's research into the networking of multiple computers through the commissioning of ARPANET (Advanced Research Project Agency Network).
- 1974 first commercial variant of ARPANET was introduced.
- 1984 the number of host computers networked together exceeded 1000.
- 1987 over 60,000 host computers; by 1992 over 1 million; by mid 1994 over 3.2 million; and by mid 1999 there were over 56,218 million hosts worldwide.

5

History of the Internet

- The World Wide Web and easy to use browsers became available in 1993.
- This made the web more accessible to more people, and facilitated the rapid growth of the internet.



Why is the Internet Important?

- It may be the greatest cultural phenomenon of our time.
- Connect, communicate and share knowledge with large numbers of other people, potentially across great distances.
- Massive online archive of information, experiences and data.



7

What Does it All Mean?

- Internet is increasingly a part of our personal, work, social and cultural lives.
- <u>BUT</u> internet access, usage and online activities vary by age, gender, ethnicity, geography and SES (along with connection speed and type).
- Not everyone will have access to the Internet, computor, nor capable of or feeling comfortable using it.
- As researchers, we need to think carefully about the feasibility of doing research online.



- Personal research on health issues
- On the advice from health professionals
- To seek professional advice
- Blogs, tweets
- Forums and chats
- Peer to peer support
- Health programs, e.g. prevention and disease management programs
- Purchasing medications & health care items
- Other, e.g. games, virtual worlds...

... Possible data sources for health researchers

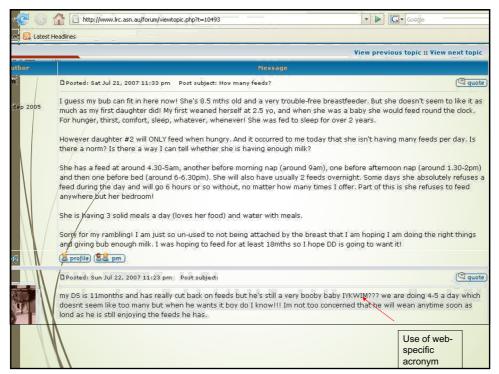
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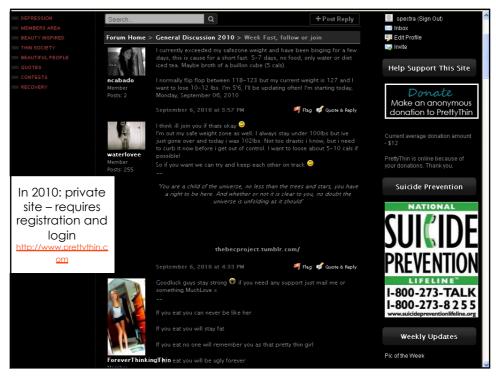
How Do People Use the Internet in Relation to Health?

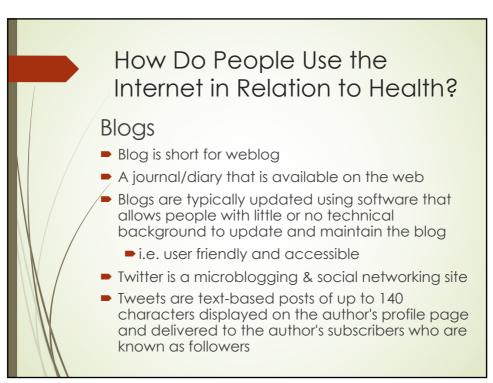
Forums

- Online discussion group peer to peer; professional to peer
- Participants read and post responses on topics of common interest
- Public domain forums
- Some require registration to view content; some require permission to join certain discussions (eg., sexual assault)

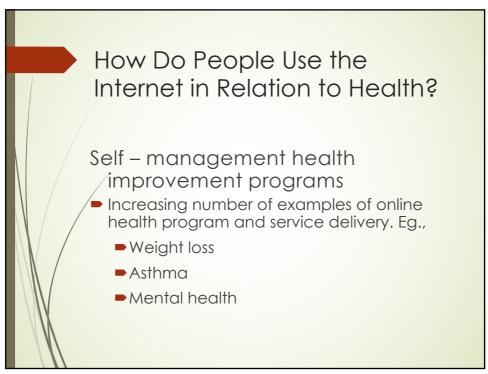


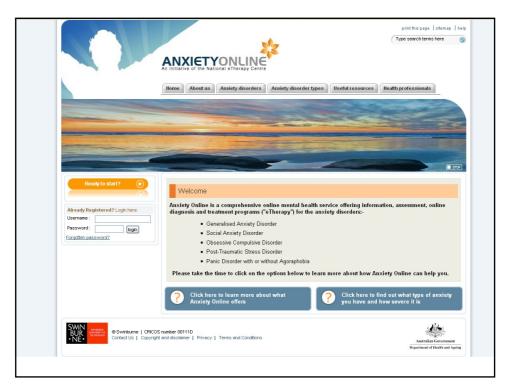














Online Research

- Internet-mediated research is an innovative, emergent area for qualitative data collection that has enormous potential, especially for including hard-to-reach populations, and is likely to be increasingly utilised in research. (Horrell et al. 2015: 267)
- Research conducted via the internet
 - email, forums, blogs, discussion groups, chat, websites, virtual worlds, video, photographs, audio, surveys, maps, trends
- In the last decade we have seen increasing use of the internet as a research tool; following on from trends in market research (Liamputtong, 2020).

19

Online Research - Advantages

- Global potentially extended geographic reach
- Anytime 24/7
- Speed and immediacy
- Access to potentially huge volumes of data
- Potential to cross socio-cultural boundaries
- Cheap(er)

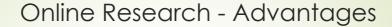
Online Research - Advantages

- Access to small / niche / dispersed / marginalised populations who may not be easy to access via face to face methods. Eg.,
 - Mothers at home with small children
 - People involved in illegal or stigmatised activities.
- Possibility of carrying out research in dangerous and politically sensitive areas – offers some protection to researcher and participant because of geography and anonymity.
- Participants may express opinions more openly, eg., opinions not considered politically correct.

21

Online Research - Advantages

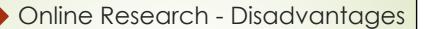
- Instantaneous/very rapid exchange between researcher and participant.
- Immediacy allows researcher to prompt participants.
- Quick turn around of data can mean better use of the researcher's 'contextual memory'.



- Greater equality between participant and researcher – 'democratisation of exchange'.
- Participants can decide how and when they will respond.
- Marginalities and socially ascribed roles can be less applicable (eg., gender, age, sexuality, race, disability).

Online Research - Advantages

- Can provide an immediate text-based transcript
 - → reduced cost/time to researcher
 - ↓ transcription errors
 - → ↑ accuracy.
- With email/chat/blog/forum research the data analysed is what the participant wrote.
- Can move data directly into data analysis software packages such as Nvivo.



- Lack of non-verbal data can be difficult for the participant and researcher.
- Easy to breach ethical issues online.
- Inherent security issues with email and other online communication.
- Limited by who has access to computer and internet (although this is decreasing...).
- Self-selected, biased populations.

Online Research - Disadvantages

- Patterns of internet use have ramifications for recruiting participants and the potential methods used for data collection.
- It may be difficult to sustain interaction over time.
- Participants can disappear into cyberspace.
- It can be difficult to get attention of potential participants due to information overload.

Synchronous & Asynchronous Data Collection

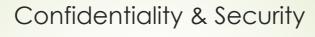
- Synchronous = 'real-time' or 'chat'
 - an interchange of messages between two or more users simultaneously logged on at different computer terminals... or other web-enable devices
- Asynchronous e.g. email, forums
 - allows users to type extended messages which are electronically transmitted to read, reply, print, forward or file them at their leisure

27

Gaining Consent Online

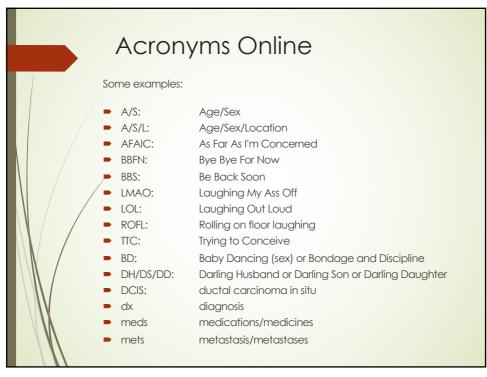
- Consent button to proceed past information/consent page of online survey.
- Email information sheet and consent form as an attachment or in body of email to potential participants.
- Set up a website with details of research project and consent form
 - Consent form can be downloaded and emailed back to researcher.
- Provide consent form (via file share capability) and ask for consent to be provided in the research space (e.g. in private chat window).
- Publish details of the research on the relevant website and request that people who don't consent contact you to opt out (useful for public domain websites).

Think about what's practical and what will work with the medium. Don't put additional barriers in the way!

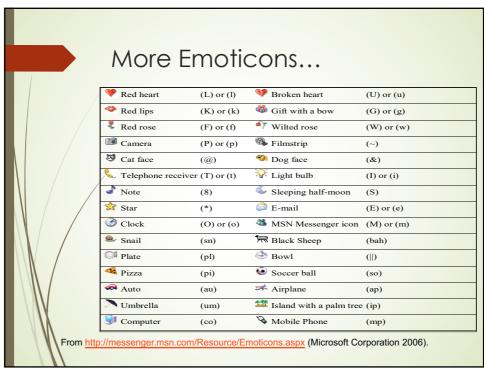


- More problematic than in conventional research
 - Online communications are often not secure you can't necessarily guarantee confidentiality
 - Email can easily forwarded on without the knowledge of the original sender
 - Can build/use secure websites (http:// vs https://).
- Use pseudonyms for participants and websites, forums etc, even though the participant may be already using a pseudonym.
- But if site and content is public domain then it is searchable - cannot ensure confidentiality if you use direct quotes in your findings.





	Emotic	ons		
	To send this:	Type this:	To send this:	Type this:
	Smile	:-) or :)	🍪 Open-mouthed	:-D or :d
	Surprised	:-O or :o	Tongue out	:-P or :p
	⁶ Wink	;-) or ;)	Sad	:-(or :(
	Confused	:-S or :s	Disappointed	:- or :
	Crying	:'(Embarrassed	:-\$ or :\$
	*Hot	(H) or (h)	Angry	:-@ or :@
	Angel	(A) or (a)	👹 Devil	(6)
	Don't tell anyone	:-#	Baring teeth	8o
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	I don't know	:^)	Thinking	*-)
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\ \\\	Sleepy	-)	Coffee cup	(C) or (c)
	Thumbs up	(Y) or (y)	Thumbs down	(N) or (n)



Recruiting Participants

- Via email
- Special interest/relevant/appropriate websites
- Web searches
- Posting advertisements and hyperlinks on websites
- Advertising through Google ad words
- Ads in newsgroups, email list serves
- Social networking websites
- Formal gatekeepers, eg., forum moderators, website owners
- Conventional methods, eg., leaflets, fliers
- Snowball sampling

Recruiting Participants

If recruiting online, keep in mind:

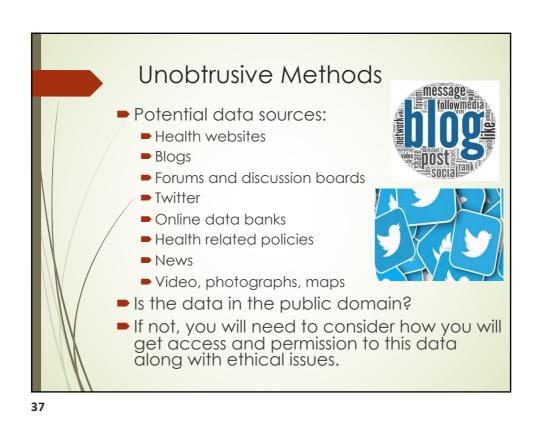
- Your call to participate needs to be interesting/engaging/ relevant/appropriate.
- You need to get their attention people are often multi-tasking when online.
- Many people use the internet for leisure activities you may be intruding on this
- Make it as easy as possible, eg., click on a link and be taken to relevant site.
- For many people the internet is about speed and convenience:
 - Make sure you address this.
- If your process is tedious, your email will be deleted/the browser closed or the potential participant will just move on to a more interesting activity.
- The internet gives power and control to the individual that's why people like it!
 - If they receive communication deemed irrelevant, they'll just move on.
 - You'll miss the opportunity.

35

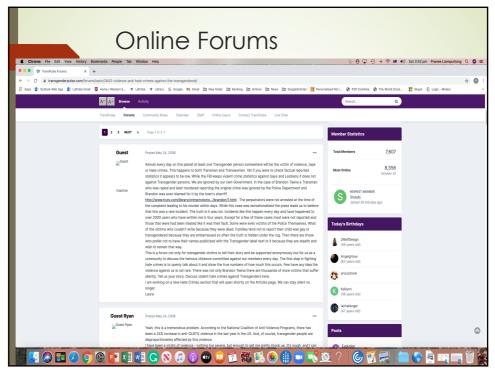
Collecting Data Online

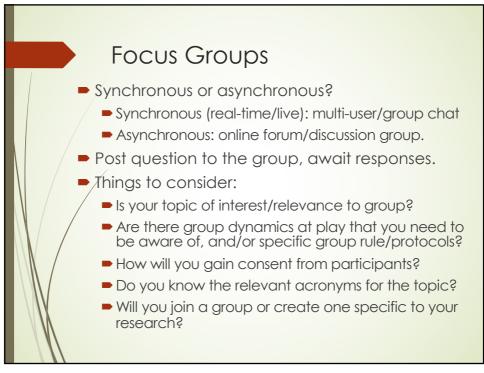
- Unobtrusive methods (eg., observation, document analysis, maps, trends, videos, photos, forum postings, news...)
- Focus groups
- Individual interviews
- Virtual ethnography
- Surveys and questionnaires





Online Forums https://www.transgenderpulse.com/forums/ Trans Pulse Forums Victims of Hate Crimes and Violence 62 replies Donnie_1961 16.7k views March 1 15 replies Robin68 726 views R February 13 9 replies BEAN_CHILD 303 views BEAN_CHILD 2 replies Julielynn 1k views J September 22, 20*





Focus Groups

- Reisner and colleagues (2018) virtual focus group with female-to-male trans masculine (TM) transgender individuals residing in the US.
- Four asynchronous virtual focus groups were conducted to explore issues related to sexual health care access with 27 transgender individuals.
- They wanted to examine barriers and facilitators to sexual health care services as well as means to enhance prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and improve access to cervical cancer screening for these marginalised individuals
- About six and eight participants were included in each virtual focus group to allow depth of discussion and group interaction.
- The focus group discussions contained a number of posted questions.
- The participant could respond to them over a 3-day period.
- A secure asynchronous bulletin board software was set up particularly for the study so that the participants could participate anonymously.
- Each focus group was facilitated by two moderators who were members, or allies
 of the transgender community.
- All participants were able to access each question and see responses thread, and respond to the comments of other participants.
- The moderators were able to send participants private messages to ask for clarification of a response as well as to remind participants to reply to a question set which had been posted.

41

Focus Groups

- Methodologically, the authors contended that virtual focus group discussions "may offer unique advantages for research with rare, geophaphically dispersed, or marginalized populations and/or sensitive topics that may be difficult to discuss in-person" (p. 1670.)
- Practically, virtual focus group discussions were able to bring together voices from a marginalised individuals who were in need of social support.
- This has implications for the potential of using online intervention methods to implement sexual health information, services and programs to marginalised people.
- The authors concluded :
 - Given the sensitive nature of sexual health screening for TM individuals, online focus group discussions were an ideal format to elicit the information needed to improve the community's access to care and develop best practices for conducting sexual health screening with the underserved population (p. 1670).



- Real time chat (synchronous) (eg., Zoom, Skype, instant messaging [IM]).
- Email (asynchronous).
- Online interviewing is its own distinctive social practice and should not be compared or equated to face to face interviewing.
- Lack of physical presence means that understandings and perceptions of others need to be mediated through text.

Interviews via Zoom

- Zoom is a collaborative, cloud-based videoconferencing service offering features such as online meetings, group messaging services, and secure recording of sessions.
- Like Skype, Zoom offers the ability to communicate in real time with geographically dispersed individuals via computer, tablet, or mobile device.
- However, Zoom possesses a number of additional advantages that enhance its potential research utility.
- A key advantage is its ability to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software.
- This feature is particularly important in research where the protection of highly sensitive data is required.
- Other important security features include user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and the ability to backup recordings to online remote server networks ("the cloud") or local drives, which can then be shared securely for the purpose of collaboration (Zoom Video Communications Inc., 2016).

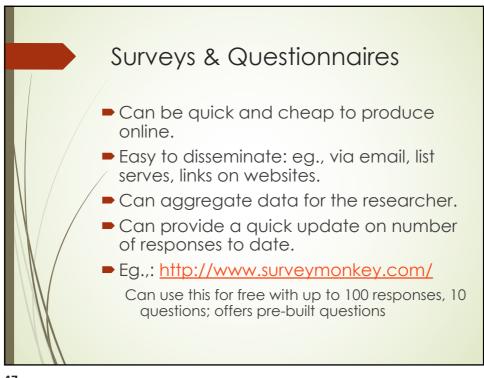
Virtual Ethnography

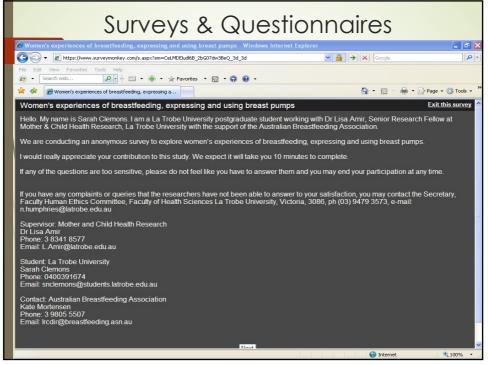
- The emerging concept of 'global ethnography', 'virtual ethnography', or 'cyber community' enables new ways of doing ethnographic fieldwork in cyberspace.
- Hine (2000: 64) argues that interactive media such as the internet provide
 - 'a challenge and an opportunity for ethnography, by bringing into question the notion of a site of interaction'.
- To Hine, cyberspace is not a space that is separated from 'any connections to "real life" and face-to-face interaction.
- It has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used.
- It also depends on technologies that are used and understood differently in different contexts, and that have to be acquired, learnt, interpreted, and incorporated into context.
- And these are essentially ethnographic principles.

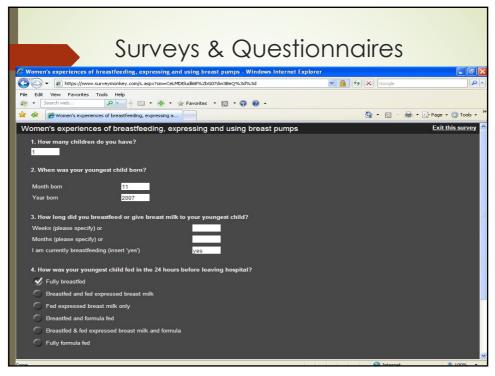
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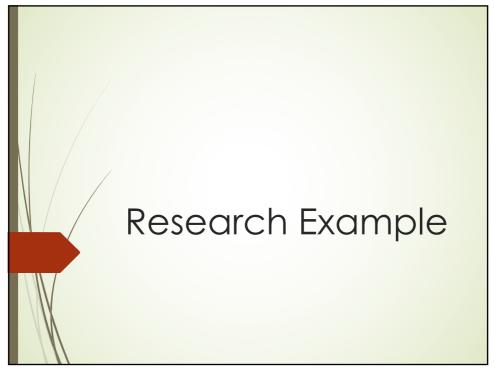
Virtual Ethnography

- Participation observation, an essential part of ethnography, has been adopted in literature in online research.
- Markham (1998) undertook an ethnographic study of a lived experience of what it means to go and be online.
- She wished to understand the way of life in a virtual community by participating online:
 - I wanted to know why people spent so much time online. I wondered what cyberspace meant to them, how it affected or changed their lives. I wanted to know how they were making sense of their experiences as they shifted between being in the physical world and being in these textual worlds created by the exchange of messages, where they could re-create bodies, or leave them behind. (p. 16)
- To do so, Markham became involved in creating and negotiating the very context that became the object of analysis by immersing herself as one of the users.











- Embodying Transgender: An Analysis of Trans Women in Online Forums (Liamputtong et al., 2020)
- We used the unobtrusive method that involve data collection where the collection does not influence the outcomes, as there is no direct interaction with participants.
- Such methods include analyses of published materials, archival research, and online forums, among other methods.
- These methods produce more 'naturalistic' data. Due to anonymity, participants are likely to be less restrained in discussing sensitive or taboo topics.
- Trans women who are willing to discuss their experiences of sexual violence are a small and hard-to-reach group.
- Online forums can provide access to rich data on this topic.

Unobtrusive Methods

- The unobtrusive method is situated within a hermeneutics methodological approach.
- Hermeneutics offers a theoretical standpoint that researchers can use for their interpretive understanding of the data (in the case of this paper,
 - it is the text posted online by trans women) with special attention to context and purpose.
- Data collection within hermeneutics has its foundation in the act of writing Such data include lived experiences written in diaries, journals, and posted on online forums.
- Hermeneutics is employed extensively in the unobtrusive methods where researchers attempt to understand written texts from published materials.

Unobtrusive Methods

- Since many online forums or subforums specified 'no researchers' (meaning the use of data for research purposes are prohibited), the project was limited to forums that did not make this stipulation.
- We also excluded online forums that lacked recent engagement (the forums were inactive for a while).
- The forums chosen were the subreddits r/asktransgender, r/transsupport, and r/transgenderau, along with one relevant thread from TransPulse Forums.
- Other online forums for trans women were excluded due to lack of recent engagement.
- Threads were selected based on relevance to themes, length of thread, and recency.

53

Unobtrusive Methods

- Thirty-nine threads were chosen that were focused around the project's research themes of violence and safety, being trans and a person of colour, and trans identity and health.
- As we selected for more recent threads, over half (20) of the threads were posted within the past few years (since 2017) and all except eight were posted less than five years ago (since 2015).
- The oldest thread was posted in 2012.
- In total thirty-eight original posts, and 950 comments were coded.
- The longest thread contained 103 comments in response to the original post, and the shortest contained 5 comments in response to the original post.



- Thematic analysis method was adopted in order to construct patterns and themes in the data.
- Codes were generated iteratively through multiple readings of the text.
- Codes were then examined for patterns, and these identified patterns were reviewed to construct themes.
- My RA did the first round of data analysis and cross-checked by me.
- The generated codes and constructed themes were discussed between the first and second authors to ensure a credibility of the constructed findings.
- The findings were also checked for credibility by a transwoman.
- Thick descriptions of our findings are provided in the Finding section.
- Theory (Embodying transgender) is used to assist in the interpretations of our data.

Results

- Three key themes were generated from the online forum:
- Questioning Identity,
- Gender Dysphoria (GD) and Ambiguity,
- Gatekeeping and Medicalised Narratives of Transgender People: Blocking or Opening the Way.



Questioning Identity: 'HELP I have no idea what I am'

- Transgender identity is often framed in popular culture and medical discourses as being 'born in the wrong body' or always knowing 'that they were in some way different from everyone else'.
- Some trans women, following these narratives, provide evidence of how they always liked dressing up as a girl, for as long as they could remember.
- However, while some trans women 'always knew', others do not follow such a clear path.
- Many threads in the online forums focused on being unsure about one's transgender identity.
- Some forum posters whose experiences fell outside this clear narrative felt uncertain or worried about whether they were 'really' trans.

57

Results

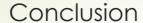
- Some forum poster "never had like a 'moment' or anything of realisation".
- This quote indicates that some people expect a clear knowledge of one's gender identity to emerge, either in a moment, or through a linear process.
- However, many participants experienced vacillation and non-linear processes of 'uncovering'
 - ▶ When I was a kid I would steal my sisters clothes constantly and wear them in private. Now that I'm an adult I have my own stash of clothes and makeup that I use. I also constantly think about transitioning and am envious of women and other MtFs [male-to-female trans people] that pass really well. However I never had like a 'moment' or anything of realization. I would prefer the body of a woman, but I dont feel "wrong" or anything presenting as a man. This kinda freaks me out because it makes me feel like I might not actually be trans, and if I were to transition I might regret it.



- Trans women participating in online forums in our study face many challenges in being a transgender person.
- In embodying their transgender, many interact with others in society as well as health care providers.
- It is crucial that we understand the ways trans women to express their gender identity.
- Trans women have heterogeneous experiences which often do not match those of expected discourses (and diagnoses) which have implications for access to treatments to achieve their desired gender identity.
- We argue that transgender individuals have the rights to carry out self-determination practice as a way to achieve their gender autonomy.
- Health care providers must understand the way trans women embody their identity as one of the myriad diverse human expressions of one's own gender.

Where To From Here?

- The internet and online environment is constantly changing and developing.
- As researchers we need to keep abreast of these changes to remain relevant.
- The potential use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit as source of data.
- Increasing convergence of various technologies and media...eg., smart phones, digital TV, etc.
- The potential use of WhatsApp, LINE, Viber, Zalo, etc for data collection.



- The use of online methodologies in qualitative research (and quantitative research for that matter) is likely to increase in popularity in the future.
- Numerous factors need to be considered if researchers wish to conduct online research.
- Researching online should not be seen as an easy option, as there are many issues to be carefully considered.
- It has been shown clearly that online technologies have had a great impact on what we as qualitative researchers do.
- As new technologies are emerged (some are still beyond our imagination), we will need to pay great attention to their possible use in our research in the health and social sciences.

Conclusion

- However, qualitative data collection over the internet must remain true to the philosophical stance of the qualitative approach.
- In whatever technological form we choose to conduct our research, Brown (2002: 11) suggests:
 - We should not lose sight of the interpretive researcher-led qualities of more traditional forms of qualitative research.
 - Metaphorically, the computer desktop replaces the physical desktop, filing cabinet, and the floor of the researcher's office'.
 - Therefore, in conducting cyber health and social research, we need to keep 'the research process qualitative in the sense that it remains highly flexible, open-ended, and idiographic in practical application'.

Papers/Books To Read....

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