

A hand holding a glowing lightbulb against a sunset background. The lightbulb is the central focus, with its filament visible and a warm glow emanating from it. The hand is positioned in the lower right, with fingers wrapped around the base of the bulb. The background is a soft, warm gradient of orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is one of inspiration and innovation.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO RESEARCH IN THE PANDEMIC

Exploring the Potential of Large-Scale Online
Community-Based Discussion Platforms

BU CARES

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SUMMARY



DURING THE COVID-19 pandemic, several forums for community discussions, particularly in rural and remote communities with strict COVID-19 protocols, were no longer available in person. As such, one such research project in 2020-2021 – a community-based round table discussion on anti-racism and belonging – held the event online over Zoom.

Although it was a success, led to productive discussions, and furthered research outcomes (Lam et al., 2021), the unexpected methodological considerations inspired curiosity about the impact and factors involved in shifting to an online research methodology. In addition, the event led to further reflections about how moving the methodology online resulted in barriers and benefits for some participants.

Due to the rapid shift to online methodologies within rural community-engaged research as a result of the pandemic, a study resulted that explored three major questions.

- 1 What are the impacts of employing online platforms such as Zoom for community-engaged research?**
- 2 What challenges may be encountered by shifting to an online methodology?**
- 3 How might these challenges be creatively overcome?**

WHY SHOULD THIS BE STUDIED?

Using online communication platforms (e.g., Zoom, video/web conferencing) in qualitative research has been central in studies (Archibald et al., 2019; Han et al., 2019; Kite & Phongsavan, 2017) that aimed to analyze the applicability of such tools in different contexts. Whether through Facebook (Thrul et al., 2017) or platforms such as Reddit (Richard et al., 2021), researchers have explored the motivation of online communities to participate in online focus groups, chats, and interviews (Stancanelli, 2010; Stewart & Williams, 2005, Sweet, 2001).

The field of online technological research has certainly approached different study environments; however, this study still **found gaps in how to best elaborate on online research community practices within rural communities**, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. This interim report explores further potentialities and challenges of using online platforms in **rural community-based research** (Archibald et al., 2019).

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED SO FAR?

This report details an initial analysis of data collected in December 2022 and April 2023. A final report will be released at a later date.

With Zoom as the main tool to engage with community stakeholders and the help of online survey platforms, this study's results showed increased knowledge of **best practices for community-engaged discussions held online** and suggestions of a **rural research framework**; increased understanding of how **shifting research methodologies** online may impact participants (e.g., feeling of safety, comfort with technology, accessibility, sense of belonging, and community connections); and a roadmap of navigating **ethical and practical issues** related to shifting to an online methodology.

A photograph of a stack of books on a wooden surface. The books are arranged in two groups: a vertical stack on the left and a leaning stack on the right. The pages are aged and yellowed. The word 'LITERATURE' is written in white, uppercase letters inside a white rectangular box that is semi-transparent, allowing the book spines to be seen through it. The background is a light-colored wooden surface.

LITERATURE

RURAL, ONLINE



A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE

In the ever-evolving landscape of research methodologies, the integration of online platforms has emerged as a **transformative force**, reshaping the way scholars collect, analyze, and disseminate information (Budur et al., 2021). One prominent aspect of online platforms in research is the **democratization of data collection** (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020). Traditional methods often face limitations in reaching diverse and global populations. However, online platforms, such as social media and crowdsourcing websites, offer researchers unprecedented access to a wide range of participants. This inclusivity not only enhances the **external validity of studies** but also provides researchers with a **rich pool of data** for analysis.

QUALITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The use of online platforms has undoubtedly informed advancements in qualitative research methodologies. **Virtual ethnography** (Sweet, 2001), for instance, allows researchers to immerse themselves in online communities, studying social interactions and cultural phenomena in digital spaces. This approach not only expands **the scope of qualitative inquiry** but also challenges ethical considerations related to **online presence and autonomy** (Winter & Lavis, 2020).



COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

POTENTIAL FOR COMMUNICATION

Considering the outcomes of any research study, online platforms also play a pivotal role in the **dissemination of research** findings. Open-access repositories and academic social networks provide researchers with platforms to share their work globally, **fostering collaboration and accelerating the pace of scientific discovery**. The interactive nature of these platforms promotes real-time discussions and feedback, transforming the traditional, linear model of academic communication (Zou et al., 2020).

CHALLENGES & INNOVATION

Issues of **data privacy, digital literacy**, and the potential for **bias** in online samples require careful consideration (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020; Brandon, 2020; Winter & Lavis, 2020). As researchers navigate this dynamic terrain, it becomes critical to strike a balance between harnessing the benefits and addressing the associated ethical and methodological complexities of online platforms applied in research (Zou et al., 2020). The **innovative use of online platforms in research signifies a paradigm shift** in the ways rural community research practices are used. However, thoughtful and ethical considerations are pivotal to fully realizing the potential of this online platform application in advancing rural community inquiries.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a headset, is shown in profile, smiling and looking out a window. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an indoor office or home workspace. A potted plant is visible on the right side of the frame.

INCLUSION & BELONGING

IMPACT ON INCLUSION

One notable aspect of Zoom's impact on inclusion is its role in breaking down **geographical barriers** (Paniago et al., 2022) and bringing people from **different cultural loci** together. Through virtual meetings and classrooms, individuals from different locations can participate in discussions, collaborate on projects, and engage in learning experiences without the constraints of physical proximity. This has particularly **benefited marginalized groups** who may face challenges in accessing traditional educational (Karasel et al., 2020; Smith & Moura, 2022) or professional opportunities.

IMPACT ON ACCESSIBILITY

Zoom's features also lend themselves to creating accessible environments for individuals with **diverse needs** (Karasel et al., 2020). The platform's support for closed captioning, screen sharing, and customizable backgrounds enhances the experience for individuals with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and other accessibility requirements. In doing so, Zoom (Singh & Awasthi, 2020) becomes a tool for fostering an inclusive space where **participants of varying abilities can fully engage** in the virtual discourse. The breakout rooms have proven particularly effective in accommodating different learners and ensuring that every voice is heard in whichever form possible (e.g., chat, video), thus contributing to a more **equitable learning environment** (Nadezhda, 2020).

CHALLENGES & BELONGING

Some potential challenges and considerations in using Zoom for inclusive practices are intertwined with participants' **feelings of belonging** (Peacock et al., 2020). In addition, issues such as **digital fatigue, unequal access to technology**, and the need for **thoughtful facilitation** to ensure equitable participation are currently addressed in research considerations. Zoom's transformative potential in creating accessible and equitable educational and professional environments is unquestionable, however, **researchers' usability and comfortability** with the platform play a role in rural community engagement and belongingness.

CONTEXT & METHODOLOGY

A RESEARCH PROJECT in 2020-2021, intended as a small, community-based, round table discussion on anti-racism and belonging turned into a Zoom event with a large gathering of over 175 participants in group and breakout-room settings. After reflecting on the experience, the research team wondered how hosting the event over Zoom led to barriers and benefits for participants.

For example, **unfamiliar technology** or **lack of digital literacy** may have created barriers for some participants, and others could not access the event because of **poor Internet connections**. On the other hand, it may have led to **greater accessibility** for some members or more **willingness to participate** because of the option to turn their camera off. The **online format** may have also contributed to the large number of participants, and the large group dynamic may have resulted in **synergy** or **new connections**.

Some literature exists about conducting online focus groups as an area of potential and growth (Stancanelli, 2010; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Sweet, 2001). However, they focus on single focus groups or text-based data collection. There is also a gap in working with hard-to-reach or geographically dispersed populations (Kite & Phongsavan, 2017).

Inspired by the Zoom event, this study explored our unanswered methodological questions on online, rural, community-based research.



 **THE DATA**

Data was collected from Zoom community consultations held in December 2022 and April 2023 in rural Manitoba, reflections by the research team in monthly meetings, and participant feedback in a post-consultation survey.

 **THE PARTICIPANTS**

Invitations were sent to every rural municipality in the province, social organizations, immigration centres, school divisions, key community partners, and through social media. An Eventbrite registration link was used to have participants enrol. For both consultations, over 50 participants registered for the events, but six people attended the first consultation and 22 different participants were in the second consultation, in addition to the research team (e.g., faculty members, research facilitators and assistants, Zoom/tech specialists).

 **THE CONSULTATIONS**

As BU CARES actively conducts community-engaged research based on the needs of community partners, this consultation sought to explore the causes of polarization in individuals' beliefs, the impact of social media on the dividing opinions, and the strategies used by community members to heal and restore relationships.

 **THE PROCESS**

Data was transcribed (e.g., research team reflections and participants' answers to open-ended questions), and quantitative and qualitative records were coded to define recurring themes that emerged from this analysis. The research team worked in collaboration to verify and validate the findings and discussions.



FINDINGS

THE FINDINGS IN this study can be observed from **three different lenses**: the research design, the consultation, and the post-consultation phases. It is paramount to consider the various steps of the development of this research study as **reflections and decisions** on how to better engage with community members throughout the process.



DESIGN PHASE

MONTHLY MEETINGS BY the research team were helpful in addressing the issues below but led researchers to also question and problematize certain **inclusive practices**. This section outlines reflections made by the research team.

Moving forward with recruitment, after approval of the ethics board, these considerations enabled the research team to be attentive to practices and challenges that emerged during the next phase.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

When designing the study and considering Community Voices as a starting point for engaging with the community members through Zoom, the team was aware of potential issues and challenges that included

- Internet inequity in rural Manitoba,
- access to tech devices,
- technological literacy,
- mental health,
- socialization, and
- language barriers, among others.

AVAILABLE SUPPORT

An ethics application and the following available supports incorporated approaches that could potentially mitigate such issues and challenges.

- Provision of Internet access
- Technology support
- Translation
- Live interpretation
- Childcare
- Emotional distress support

WHO JOINS THE CONVERSATION

This phase challenged the team's notion of **digital inclusion**. Despite reaching out to different people in the community, we were still left with the problem of who we were, in fact, including in our conversations:

“We have addressed access and inclusion initiatives (e.g., interpreters for non-English speakers; childcare for mothers; internet access; devices; etc.) in our research study. Yet, we still face challenges as we consider including different perspectives of individuals who could participate in our consultations as well (e.g., homeless people, deaf or blind people, people with visible disabilities, and others). To what extent can community-engaged research be inclusive of the different populations we encounter in our communities? Thinking of the intersectional identities of our community members, how are we representing the voices of people who cannot attend our consultations for accessibility reasons? Do discussions of inclusion come from a privileged place? What is the best way to address our views of inclusion in community-engaged research?”

REACHING OUT TO THE COMMUNITY

Despite the valid questions presented, the research team needed to rely on community partners and members to raise those concerns, so together we could facilitate individuals' participation. As another member of the research team suggested,





“If we are concerned about access for neurodivergent people, I don’t think we can come up with ‘neurodivergent-informed practices for Zoom’ without talking to those groups specifically. Your statement, ‘discussions of inclusion come from a privileged place’ hits the nail on the head there.... I think we might have to come up with as many supports as we can reasonably manage, based on the literature review you are conducting, and then try our best. Then after the survey and the feedback in the discussions, we do another round implementing those changes.”

AVOIDING BLANKET INCLUSION PRACTICES

When designing this study, the timeline of the project and its funding needed to also be considered. While it was important to have conversations around Zoom inclusive practices, the team was also being reductive in anticipating problems and issues that were not yet introduced by the community members:

“It feels reductive to just make blanket inclusion practices. Maybe we need to think about framing this as questions for consideration when implementing a zoom methodology. Then take the feedback from each person and turn them into guiding questions for organizers to consider. That allows for intersectionality....”



CONSULTATION PHASE

OVER 50 PEOPLE registered for the community consultations. Of them, nearly 30 showed up to one of the meetings.

Community members had the option to speak, write in the chat, or simply pass their turn in case they did not feel comfortable sharing their ideas. Having cameras on was also an option, and participants could keep their videos off. None of the participants required additional assistance (e.g., translators or interpreters) during the events, but one participant contacted the mental health support agent and received a follow-up from them.

As invitations were shared on social media, community members had the opportunity to voice their opinions even prior to the consultation. As shown below, the community members' **polarization of ideas** was part of recruitment. When the research team distributed the study invites, potential participants were already showing signs of disagreements and the role of social media in voicing their opinions on the matter. Observing participants' agency in social media spoke to the **potentiality of community outreach to large-scale studies** like these, and it warned the research team of likely challenges they would face when meeting participants online.



Community members expressing their opinions on community consultation

With the focus on analyzing the potentiality of Zoom in this type of research, the lower participation of the community members is problematic as the research goals were not entirely met, but it was still a valuable set of data. The research team continued to consult community members around the topic and identified several reasons why individuals may have opted not to participate in the study.



POST CONSULTATION PHASE

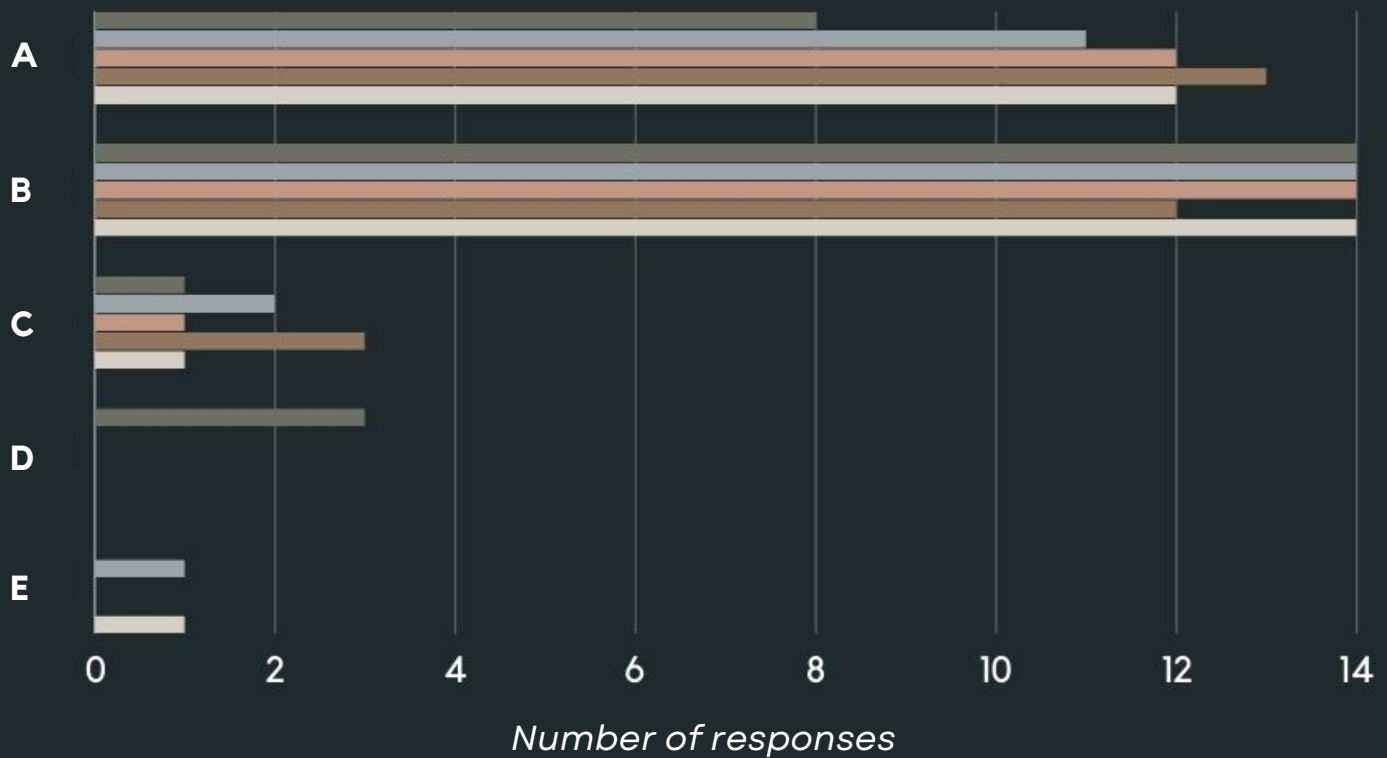
THE RESEARCH TEAM distributed a questionnaire among the community members who attended the consultation. This survey contained close- and open-ended questions to capture how participants felt using Zoom in this research. Participants' satisfaction with Zoom was unpacked with the two open-ended questions that offered individuals a chance to share their personal feelings towards being part of the consultation and to provide suggestions for improvement for a follow-up consultation.

From the 28 survey respondents, nearly 95% of participants felt either satisfied or very satisfied with being on Zoom in this study. Regarding the opportunity to listen and feeling of safety on Zoom, one participant was neither dissatisfied nor satisfied with the applicability of Zoom in those aspects. The collected responses confirmed themes related to **safety and belonging** as well as **accessibility**, and they inform the RURAL framework explored later in this report.

CLOSE-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Q1** How satisfied were you with using Zoom for community-based research?
- Q2** How satisfied were you with your ability to speak over Zoom?
- Q3** How satisfied were you with your ability to listen over Zoom?
- Q4** How satisfied were you with feelings of safety?
- Q5** How satisfied were you with the ease of use of Zoom?

A Very satisfied **B** Satisfied **C** Neither **D** Dissatisfied **E** Very dissatisfied



OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- Q6** How did you feel about using Zoom for this kind of research?
- Q7** Did you have any suggestions about how we can improve using Zoom for research?



SAFETY & BELONGING

EXPERIENCED FEELINGS

One of the goals of developing community consultations in rural Manitoba is to foster a sense of safety and belonging among community members. In a Zoom setting, safety and belonging emerged as **feelings** that participants in the consultations experienced.

“We had a great group that I felt contributed to a sense of safety and belonging.”

FAMILIARITY WITH ZOOM

The familiarity with Zoom, stemming from routines during COVID-19, enabled participants to focus on different aspects of **socialization and community building**:



“As we become more familiar with Zoom [...] it becomes more and more effective with building relationships and with establishing trust in the research relationship.”

LACKING ENVIRONMENT

Even though Zoom stipulates a more fast-paced environment, there is still the need to create an environment where people can really get to know each other or **establish relationships:**

“I know we all try, but we need to be purposeful about trust-building in that environment [Zoom].”


Ultimately, in an in-person event, **breaks between discussion** sections are important for the relationship building of the community members. A Zoom consultation is set up, and even though breaks are provided, these short times are used by attendees to disconnect from the screen, take food and/or washroom breaks, and stretch from the long hours sitting. Consequently, this reflection urges researchers to rethink the opportunity avenues this type of methodology is creating and subsequently accessibility and inclusive practices in place.



ACCESSIBILITY



FLEXIBILITY AND EASE OF LOCATION



Accessibility is probably the most recurrent and provocative finding in this study. While the participation of different community members is an encouraging outcome, it leaves us with unanswered questions. For example, we recognize the potential to approach people from **different localities** (e.g., anyone with Internet access could have participated from their homes anywhere in the province) and the easier way to help participants include such events in their **busy schedules**.

“I do think that it does not make use of the foot-in-the-door technique that being involved in a study inherently tends to cause, as being able to reach or reject the Zoom call from your own home creates a low-effort environment that might make it easier to opt out once they’ve signed up.”



THE SOCIAL PLATFORM PREREQUISITE

Although online research provides community members with opportunities to engage in research, there are challenges as well. One emergent finding suggests that for people to participate in this type of research, they need **access to other online social platforms or social connections** within their communities, as invitations were shared through Facebook and Instagram and through community organizations.

“Social media has its effects on our people, information is key. Not all have access to social media.”

Arguably, not all rural community members are being invited to partake in these types of studies. Despite the efforts of contacting local organizations in such communities, part of those populations are **unaware** that these events are constantly happening.

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape. A multi-lane highway with a complex interchange system runs through the center. The surrounding area is a patchwork of green fields, some with trees, and a few small buildings or farm structures. The overall scene is a mix of natural and developed land.

RURAL FRAMEWORK

RURAL RELATIONSHIP
USABILITY
RELIABILITY
ACCESSIBILITY
LOCAL BUY-IN



THE INTRODUCTION OF a RURAL framework for online community-based research implies a personalized and context-specific approach. This framework acknowledges the unique challenges and opportunities within rural settings, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all methodology may not adequately capture the nuances of diverse rural communities, and underscores the need for flexibility and adaptability in different rural research processes. Different communities, particularly those in rural settings, have distinct characteristics, values, and challenges that require culturally responsive approaches. The acknowledgment of rural diversity encouraged researchers to engage in a more dynamic and collaborative research paradigm, considering the complexities of research methods and the specific needs of each community.

RURAL RELATIONALITY

The emphasis is on acknowledging and understanding the **uniqueness of social dynamics and relationships** in different rural communities. Relationality (Atia & Doherty, 2021; Kasabov, 2014) delves into the intricate connections that rearrange rural experiences. This aspect recognizes that rural communities have plural social structures, where personal relationships become part of trust building, even through research. For community-based research to explore rural relationality in different studies, the **interplay of cultural, local, social, and economic nuances** is required to navigate interpersonal connections.

USABILITY

Usability in rural, community-based research involves ensuring that online platforms and tools are accessible (Salemink et al., 2017; Nantais et al., 2021) at different levels such as **technological device availability, Internet access, and digital literacy**. The goal is to make sure the technology is user-friendly for community members and researchers. Ideally, researchers are also aware of the rural members' expertise in the chosen tools. Usability of technology in place facilitates **engaging participation** and can foster **critical informative community input** on a given topic. The usability aspect is closely related to inclusive research practices, which can guarantee meaningful rural members' contributions.

RELATABILITY

Relatability is about developing trust and dependability throughout the research processes, guided by ethical and credible practices. When building rapport with participating rural communities, researchers ought to emphasize **transparency, ethical conduct, and empathy** toward community members. The trust created between researchers and participants in a study may help **mitigate sociocultural biases, enhance data credibility, and contribute to a more accurate definition** of the study context.



ACCESSIBILITY

Within the accessibility paradigm (Knight, 2021), researchers complement that previously mentioned by making sure the research processes and outcomes are reaching **broader audiences within rural communities**. Social aspects such as language barriers, availability of resources, and awareness of diverse rural contexts are important factors to consider under accessibility. This results in the **democratization of meaning-making processes** and the applicability of research discussions to **real-life scenarios**.

LOCAL BUY-IN

Finally, local buy-in emphasizes the importance of community organizations and individuals' involvement and support of the research. The intent to collaborate with non-academic community members demonstrates that researchers value local perspectives. This is a sign that studies not only address local needs but also align research goals with ongoing and relevant issues identified and informed by local populations. The local buy-in of community collaborators (Crow & Murray, 2020) can situate cultural nuances, identify insights that may be overlooked by researchers, and bring an outside critical perspective to the development of a study.

FINAL THOUGHTS

FROM AN equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA) perspective, these issues legitimize the marginalization of diverse voices that can be useful in promoting social integration and relationship-building (Salemink et al., 2017). In response to these challenges, the applicability of a RURAL framework in online community-based research launched a network of online and in-person research hubs that connected rural community members in different locations across rural Manitoba.

Through research team dialogues and reflections, it was clear that the art of establishing and facilitating a network of connected research hubs for rural community-based research was fraught with logistical complexities, and often institutional processes worked in opposition to increasing equity and accessibility in rural research. Certainly, the partnerships that arose from this community consultation are now able to be invited to future research studies. The upcoming report will identify some key findings that can further inform future rural community-based practices.

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