

# Virtual Engagement of Youth in the Time of COVID-19 and Social Uprisings: Youth Voice, Sex Trading, and the Future of Engaged Research

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## Abstract

This article describes a novel virtual participatory action research (VPAR) approach to engaging youth who trade sex in Minnesota. The Minnesota Youth Sex Trading (MYST) Project switched to an entirely virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of an intergenerational team, Millennial and Generation Z researchers created a research-brand using technical marketing skills and knowledge of online youth culture to engage youth and other stakeholders in the project. This approach centered trust-building, accountability, transparency, and authenticity to build an online community and increase connection with marginalized young people via Instagram. Responding to COVID-19 and social uprisings, we have adapted our engagement strategies in ways that contain valuable insights into young people's engagement in research. This article illuminates promising VPAR principles to engage youth online as experts in prevention, intervention, and wellness promotion, yielding important new insights about the future of engaged research.

*Keywords: engagement, youth voice, sex trading, COVID-19, social media*



Sex trading among youth disproportionately impacts marginalized people, particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of color-identifying (BIPOC) youth and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or other marginalized sexual and gender identities (LGBTQ+; Martin et al., 2021; Ulloa et al., 2016). Participatory action research (PAR) is a critical way to center youth voices to develop accurate and grounded knowledge as well as prevention and intervention strategies (Anyon et al., 2018; Gerassi et al., 2017; Martin, 2013; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Scholars and young activists have advocated innovative approaches to engaged research, including youth participatory action research, social activism, and movement building (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Rombalski, 2020). However, higher education engagement efforts can be expanded and enriched through greater recognition

of youth as essential research stakeholders with knowledge and leadership potential to cocreate research.

This article offers reflections on youth engagement from our work on the Minnesota Youth Sex Trading (MYST) Project. The MYST Project is a participatory, mixed-methods project working *with* youth and communities to prevent youth sex trading and its collateral harms. The term *youth sex trading* refers to anyone 24 years old or younger exchanging sex or sexual activity to receive something of value. It includes a wide range of experiences, such as exploitation and trafficking (Minnesota Department of Health, n.d.). This article describes our project, illustrates lessons learned, and proposes a novel theoretical and methodological approach that we refer to as *virtual participatory action research* (VPAR). This approach was born out of our team's adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic and antiracism social uprisings in Minneapolis,

the city where this research takes place and in which the recent police-involved murder of George Floyd occurred. These factors and events contribute new insights and practices to the field.

In this article, first, we review foundational literature on engagement in higher education and action research. Next, we describe the project and preliminary outcomes. Then, we define and describe our concept of a *research-brand* as an approach to building trust for engaging youth online. This includes how the concept evolved through practice and community partner collaboration. Finally, through a discussion of our theory of VPAR and lessons learned, we offer insights for researchers seeking to engage youth online or to engage any research population online to address gaps in underrepresented populations from their studies. This includes several rich ideas for the future of engaged research to increase access, reach, and representation for higher quality research and data outcomes.

## Literature Review

### Engagement in Higher Education

The MYST Project's approach to collaboration with young people moves to the future of engaged scholarship. This approach builds on a foundation of advancements in action-based and participatory research approaches in academia from the 1990s to the present. Institutions of higher education recognize the need to engage with communities to remain relevant, actualize civic purpose, and contribute to addressing our world's most pressing challenges while also meeting the tripartite mission of research, teaching, and service (Beaulieu, 2018; Boyer, 1990, 1996; Cantor et al., 2013; Furco, 2010; Seifer et al., 2012). Nevertheless, a gap remains between the ideals of engagement and academic practices' realities (Warren et al., 2018). Holland and Malone (2019) argued that grand and global challenges "require academic institutions to shift their culture and join in the development of effective actions" (p. 2). In other words, academic research needs to collaborate more broadly and be action focused to truly address our most pressing societal issues and remain a relevant and vital force in civil society in the future.

To answer the call to engage, some institutions have focused change efforts inter-

nally within higher education institutions, a process referred to as institutionalization of engagement. This work seeks to create infrastructural pathways that support engagement. Institutionalization also aims to raise engaged scholarship within academic reward systems such as promotion and tenure review, training, professional development, and revenue generation (Cunningham & Smith, 2020; Furco, 2010; Holland, 2009; Weerts, 2019). The work described in this article has benefited from robust work within the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus to create institutional support and readiness for an engaged scholarship (e.g., Barajas & Martin, 2016; Maruyama et al., 2009).

### Action and Participatory Research

Another branch of engaged scholarship calls for a more disruptive reenvisioning of higher education's role in society by focusing on social justice, equity, and power redistribution (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Fazey et al., 2020; Sandwick et al., 2018; Stoecker, 2008). Here, participatory knowledge creation goes well beyond academia's institutional needs, advocating for an emancipatory methodology rooted in principles of liberation (e.g., Freire, 1970/2010). Fazey et al. (2020) argued that "action is urgently needed to ensure our knowledge systems become a much more creative force in supporting the continuation of life on our planet" (p. 15).

Scholars of action and participatory research center validity claims in action and contextual meaning. Critical epistemologies in the participatory action framework for research focus on knowledge as action (e.g., Greenwood, 2008) and the ways in which modern science is grounded in exploitation and colonization (Smith, 2012). These approaches to knowledge disrupt the Cartesian logic of duality to recognize multiple ways of knowing (Bradbury, 2015; Stringer, 2014; Warren et al., 2018). Of course, research methods used within any specific project should reflect the appropriate level of rigor needed to answer coconstructed questions sufficiently.

In the introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*, Bradbury (2015) referred to the "alphabet soup" as a "family" of transformational approaches to inquiry that "manifests the fundamental values and innovations that constitute our evolving community" (p. 4). Youth-focused action

and participatory research are under an umbrella encompassing a proliferation of acronyms and approaches to engaged research, such as community-based participatory research, action research, and youth participatory action research.

Participatory and action research require deep and ongoing connections with community partners beyond a transactional, monetary exchange as an incentive for information. They necessitate trust-building, inclusion, democratization, decolonization, commitment, and valuation of the knowledge and expertise in lived experience (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Bradbury, 2015; Martin, 2013; Smith, 2012). These principles are especially true in knowledge creation with young people and marginalized populations. There are valid reasons why many young people, specifically BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth, may not trust adults or researchers. Mistrust may be due to experiences of criminalization, institutionalization, historical trauma, loss of autonomy, stigmatization, racism, microaggressions, and more (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Melander et al., 2019; Musto, 2016).

Anyon et al. (2018) and Shamrova and Cummings (2017) described how involving youth in action research promotes youth empowerment, leadership development, and youth engagement. Youth and young people are online, which shapes their sense of self (Coyne et al., 2013). A small (but growing) body of work suggests that it is possible to meaningfully engage youth online (Bowen et al., 2017), especially when showing respect for online youth culture. Although engaging youth in research presents numerous challenges (Hawke et al., 2020), we draw from the literature on youth engagement (Anyon et al., 2018) and the teachings of youth researchers themselves as necessary and foundational for cocreating research with youth (Rombalski, 2020; Young Women's Empowerment Project, 2009). Although community-based and action research are gaining traction among academic gatekeepers such as tenure committees, peer-reviewed journals, and competitive research grant funders, more change is needed to make this field genuinely inclusive of youth.

## What We Did and What We Learned

### Project Overview

The MYST Project is a mixed-methods,

participatory action research project conducted by a multidisciplinary, intergenerational team. The catalyst for this work was the addition of a new question to the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS; <https://education.mn.gov/mde/dse/health/mss/>) administered to ninth and 11th graders: "Have you traded sex or sexual activity to receive money, food, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, or anything else?" The MSS is a triennial population-based survey administered in Grades 5, 8, 9, and 11 in schools and other settings to assess risk and protective factors. Results from the MYST team's analysis of the data have set a scientifically established baseline for Minnesota's response to youth sexual exploitation (Martin et al., 2021).

This work is necessary because the field lacks a clear understanding of the prevalence, scope, scale, correlates, and causes of sex trading among youth. Sex trading is a clandestine activity that is often stigmatized, criminalized, and dangerous, and is thus challenging to research (Cwikel & Hoben, 2005; Gerassi et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2014). The large sample size and breadth of the MSS population-based survey provide an unprecedented window into the experiences of youth who trade sex.

The goal of the MYST Project is to guide future sexual exploitation prevention and intervention work across Minnesota, building on young people's assets, strengths, and protective factors. This research is not for inquiry's sake alone; its goal is to spur and support action in practice. Data and findings from this project will help ensure that Minnesota invests in evidence-based resources that are tailored for communities that need it the most. The project team partners and works with a wide range of organizations (e.g., governmental, nonprofits, coalitions) and individual stakeholders to cocreate the project, share findings, and develop prevention strategies based on the data.

The research combines quantitative analysis of data from the 2019 MSS with qualitative data gathered from key stakeholders and communities most impacted by sexual exploitation (e.g., youth and young people). The MYST Project uses community-engaged and action research approaches to ensure that the results are based on the assets and lived experiences of youth, their communities, and agencies working to prevent exploitation. The design was based

on our team's extensive experience doing community-based research on sex trading, exploitation, and trafficking (e.g., Fogel et al., 2016; Martin, 2015; Martin et al., 2018; Melander et al., 2019).

Originally, the MYST Project intended to travel across the state to connect with youth and adults to understand better how geography (such as rural, urban, suburban, and tribal nations), race/ethnicity, gender, and other factors intersect with youth trading sex. These plans included meeting youth with lived experience in the places they frequent (e.g., libraries, shelters) in partnership with youth-serving agencies. However, the COVID-19 pandemic radically disrupted our original plans for community engagement. We had to rapidly change our outreach methods and retool for an entirely virtual project.

Our mixed-methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods both sequentially and concurrently (Cresswell et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2007) to include stakeholder voices at every step of the project. The MYST Project first conducted an initial rough-cut quantitative analysis of the MSS. We shared this broadly with stakeholders through statewide and national presentations ( $N = 9$ ) and one-on-one meetings ( $N = <10$ ) to get initial feedback on project direction. Then, we fielded a statewide online survey ( $N = 131$ ) to identify data needs and priorities for stakeholders. The findings of this survey informed our plans for deep-dive quantitative research. Following that survey, we created, developed, and implemented new research methodologies for online focus groups and conducted six virtual sessions with a specific group of stakeholders, licensed school nurses, over the summer of 2020. The MYST Project gathered compelling data regarding potential strategies for youth sex trading prevention and early intervention from licensed school nurses and plans to use this protocol to collect data from other stakeholders as well.

Finally, as youth voice is a crucial value and method in this project, we also developed and launched a team to virtually engage with youth. This team is connecting with youth to help guide quantitative analysis and surface prevention and intervention ideas directly from young people themselves. That work of incorporating youth voice is currently in the data collection phase and is described in depth below.

### Youth Researchers' Voice: @themystproject

Faculty leaders on the MYST Project invested in Millennial and Generation Z researchers to lead, strategize, and create methods to engage youth online. This investment was a deliberate strategy to ground the work in young people's expertise through a virtual engagement team (VET). The VET works within a broader, intergenerational structure of collaboration with experienced, engaged researchers. Mentorship on research methods and institutional review board (IRB) matters combined with support in troubleshooting actualizes the full potential of the VET to meaningfully engage with and learn from young people online. This structure fosters the future of engagement and the next generation of leading engaged scholars. The relationships between the VET and the other MYST team members are reciprocal. VET guidance and insights are integrated across all of the MYST Project's practices, content, and activities. Young researchers provide nuance and balance for the whole team to ensure that all aspects of the MYST Project center the expertise of youth.

The University of Minnesota instituted strict guidelines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prohibited in-person engagement (University of Minnesota, 2021). To adhere to this policy change, the VET from the MYST Project created an Instagram account with the handle @themystproject in August 2020. This account is a hub for young people, community members, and stakeholders; the VET curates content for these audiences' interests and needs. This content curation is a precursor to recruiting young people for study and exploration. The handle @themystproject became centrally associated with our *research-brand*. Unlike other forms of branding, a research-brand is not designed to sell a product, but rather is a hybrid of youth digital cultural competency and marketing concepts. It is designed to share our project values and knowledge in ways that foster an authentic connection with stakeholders. Reciprocal engagement of youth in research can then happen in the context of a shared online community, fostered through a research-brand.

Trust-building in social media spaces is based mainly on users evaluating another user's existing content before deciding to support or learn more, usually through "following." Both parties build upon this

parasocial relationship, and if a user aligns with a follower in values or interests, they may establish a sense of familiarity, comfort, support, and trust (Lovari & Materassi, 2020). For example, a user interested in social justice may follow an account that creates content on contemporary social justice discourse. In the case of @themystproject, the VET seeks to build trust based on what we share in our carefully curated posts that focus on sex trading, trafficking, and community well-being. According to marketing practices, we developed a research-brand that community members can decide to trust or uplift based on how we carry ourselves in this virtual space. The VET builds this trust by anticipating what topics community members will be interested in and responding to ongoing feedback.

The research-brand transparently demonstrates our values, vision, and approach through images, videos, words, and links posted on Instagram. The team owes some of its insights and practices to youth activists and youth social media practices before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of our research-brand, we model accountability and transparency by clearly displaying information about the MYST Project. This includes information about staff, funders, and emerging research findings. The VET develops content on other topics of interest to youth and our followers, such as critical information about sex trading, trafficking, and exploitation. Additionally, the VET shares trusted community resources,

such as where to access nonjudgmental services or local Minnesota events. The team also curates educational resources on related topics such as mental wellness and comprehensive sexuality education. Part of the effort to maintain trust in the virtual space means keeping up with current events. On social media, @themystproject creates messaging with related issues happening in society (see Figure 1) and acknowledges the heavy emotional nature of our account.

Examining how we share this content is crucial to understanding our contribution to the research practices we outline and champion within our theory of VPAR, which we discuss in depth in a later section. By focusing on the accessibility of our content, we deepened our trust-building efforts and demonstrated that we value inclusion. The VET uses clear, descriptive language to increase accessibility of written content, pictures, and videos. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate the VET's approach. For example, Figure 2 displays the straightforward language used to describe *consent*—a topic widely misunderstood by the general public and young people. Figure 3 shows an Instagram post designed to provide a clear description of PAR to empower the community with an accessible understanding of our work. We also created a Linktree where users can easily access community resources and resources for youth trading sex. This Linktree has become a hub for accessible long-form distribution of project information and a directory for resources (see Figure 4).



Figure 1. @themystproject Post on Attacks on the U.S. and Minnesota Capitols  
Note. This image was created by our team and can be found on Instagram.



Figure 2. @themystproject Post on Consent  
 Note. This image was created by our team and can be found on Instagram.

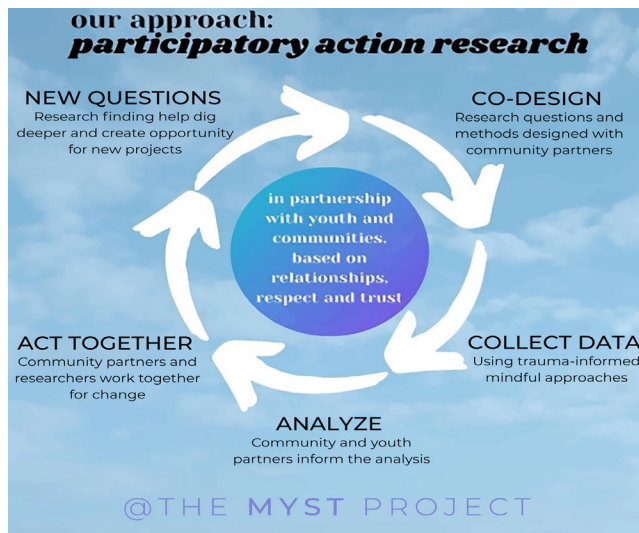


Figure 3. @themystproject Post on Participatory Action Research  
 Note. This image was created by our team and can be found on Instagram.

Next, creating a world with accessibility for people with disabilities has often been conceptualized in a physical sense. Our team recognizes the need to have and advocate for accessibility in the virtual realm. Therefore, we create visually accessible designs that include gradients and contrast for those with different sight abilities and to add retention to visual learning. Each post has a written description of the image in the caption or comment sections. Each video has closed captioning. Accessible information is typically an afterthought in electronic materials produced by institutions and organizations (Youngblood et al., 2018). Our

work has found that accessibility improves our engagement and is critical to fostering all people’s trust on the internet.

The VET has begun recruiting youth with lived experience through the @themystproject Instagram account. Recruitment started with a soft launch to gauge how youth would respond. Then, the VET carefully added paid promotions of recruitment posts to track and document how these different functions within Instagram impacted the pace of recruitment. Prior to recruitment it was imperative to first establish the project and create a reciprocal relationship by



Figure 4. @themystproject Linktree

Note. This Linktree was created by our team and can be found on Instagram.

developing our research-brand. Apart from this, the team takes its time to assess and document its practices as it disseminates content. These recursive and adaptable research methodologies ensure the consistent success of the project.

The way in which @themystproject has portrayed a research-brand builds deeply into setting the foundation to uplift youth voice in the research process. Trust, transparency, and accessibility are key to building a social media brand that has a unique focus of research. The initial purpose for @themystproject was recruitment and dissemination of research. However, through practice we have learned that the research-brand approach allows us to truly engage with youth in a meaningful way beyond research to build community, shared values, and knowledge.

### Virtual Space: @themystproject

Instagram is our primary virtual engagement venue. It is the platform our engagement team had the most expertise in using and was most suited for our specific functions of trust-building and recruitment. Instagram is a photo- and video-sharing social media platform launched in 2010 that now dominates young people's social media diet (HubSpot, n.d.). Young people shape this venue, as youth represent the user majority across many prominent social media platforms (Barnhart, 2021). Instagram has relatively few limitations on content creation, as a single post can include up to 10 images and has a generous limit of 2,200 characters (HubSpot, n.d.). For written content exceeding 2,200 characters, continued written content can be shared in the comments section of the post.

According to its culture of use, users utilize

Instagram primarily to curate cheerful, aestheticized, or glamorous content (Manovich, 2017). For example, a user may highlight successes in personal or professional milestones through stylish pictures, sharing stories with a generally inspiring or positive tone. This aligns with the MYST Project's emphasis on strengths- and assets-based approaches and its cultural use by young people, as we use the platform to highlight the often overlooked strengths, passions, hopes, and dreams of youth who trade sex. Instagram is an appropriate vehicle for conducting engagement and recruitment activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VET will soon start engaging with Twitter to drive traffic to @themystproject on Instagram. Although Instagram may still be most suitable for long-form posts, it is important to utilize the fast-paced, temporal nature of Twitter to complement our engagement strategies. Twitter is a micro-blogging social media platform launched in 2006 that distinguishes itself from other platforms through its culture of brevity, spontaneity, and its sometimes frantic and vitriolic communication and commentary style. This social media platform boasts more than 330 million users worldwide, and users often produce Dadaist-style visual content and 280-character-long written statements (Twitter, n.d.). Twitter's unique quality is its innovative tagging and search capabilities that quickly produce social media trends. These trends range from inconsequential topics such as comedic memes to serious social justice issues such as #BlackLivesMatter and the #MeToo movement. Twitter's user culture positions the platform as a prime place for the more discussion-heavy and time-sensitive aspects of our outreach and engagement strategy (Schnitzler et al., 2016).

### Documenting and Measuring Outcomes of VPAR

As is customary with action and participatory research, the process of project design, launch, and engagement is iterative and emergent (Stringer, 2014). This kind of iterative learning and development requires strong documentation of the work and the ability to measure impact in real time as the project is being developed and implemented (Holland, 2009). The goals for the VET at its inception were formative and experimental. We sought information to help us develop and refine the virtual strategy, track

and document the quantity and quality of engagement from specific tactics, and use this information as a feedback loop. Desired outcomes were identified to help us translate the work into tangible recruitment outcomes that will be implemented in full during the next project phase. The VET uses both quantitative metrics and qualitative inquiry to guide implementation and track progress toward our engagement goals. In addition to typical research and evaluation methods for tracking engagement, social media tools themselves offer a wide variety of means for this through engagement metrics.

### Marketing Tools

The VET utilizes marketing metrics to measure and document virtual engagement outcomes. In digital marketing, *engagement* is an umbrella term for how a user or audience interacts with a brand's content in terms of actions such as clicks, likes, or shares (Montells, 2019). Digital marketers differentiate between clicks that lead to desired actions or behaviors and all other actions or behaviors; this is referred to as *conversion marketing*. This approach examines the conversion rate between the created content and the desired outcome. In typical business marketing, *conversion* refers to whether a user clicks on paid content with product advertisements and whether there is a sale. Higher education engagement efforts can adapt conversion rates to measure desired outcomes of engaged research, such as how many people completed a survey or attended a virtual event.

Engagement is measured through *insights*, which offer quantitative perspectives on how effective engagement is. Insight metrics include (1) *reach*—the number of users who viewed any one piece of created content—and (2) *impressions*—the number of times any single piece of content reached a user. Thus, if a user views a single post more than once, multiple impressions are counted (HubSpot, n.d.). Analyzing reach and impressions allows us to understand when a post performs better than others in terms of reaching more people. Social media platform algorithms accelerate posts with more reach and impressions to engage even more people. In this way, generating likes, comments, views, and impressions creates more and more reach. Insight metrics offer perspective on levels of user audience engagement with published content.



The dissemination of social media content can proceed organically, propelled by users sharing and elevating the content within their own networks. It can also be accelerated nonorganically, using means such as paid advertisement and paid promotions to increase reach and impressions. Social media platforms allow users to pay a small fee (e.g., \$5) to promote a post to a targeted subset of users based on geography, age, and other characteristics. Promoting a post prioritizes its position to the beginning of the feed; the content is more likely to reach the user, and to reach them earlier. If the post isn't receiving adequate engagement, the paid promotions will not yield any deeper engagement. Thus, it is critical to ensure the created content is visually appealing and trustworthy in its first iteration to ensure its success with the intended audience.

*Measuring Engagement in @themystproject*

For the @themystproject research-brand, the outcome we desire is youth willingness to participate in a study, comment, share content, or visit our Linktree. The connection between content and desired outcome in social media is not static; it is an open-ended relationship that evolves over time. The VET creates engaging content by listening to users, engaging community partners,

and learning from conversations with young people in iterative and reciprocal ways. We transform concepts developed for marketing brand strategy to engage young people in our research.

Additionally, the VET gathers and analyzes qualitative data through user feedback. In response to content, people who engage with project posts can offer their feedback and ideas using the comment and messaging features built into the social media platform (e.g., Instagram). Comments help researchers gauge users' interest in particular topics, whatever they may be. These comments provide feedback for shaping future content. Figure 5 provides an example of comments the VET received on an Instagram post expressing gratitude for creating content on a topic. The comments demonstrate that at least some users are developing trust and that they appreciated transparency through talking about issues that are not frequently discussed. Figure 4 was @themystproject's post that was commented on the most. This positive feedback gave us insight that in-depth and well explained posts are popular among our audiences. This helps us build trust with the community for sharing accurate posts on topics they care about.

In October 2020, the VET sought to analyze and compare engagement with specific con-



Figure 5. @themystproject Post on the Intersections of Trading Sex, Sexual Violence, and Chemical Addiction

tent using organic versus nonorganic modes of promoting a post. The VET posted content to our Instagram profile and tracked organic engagement. Then the same content was boosted nonorganically with paid promotion and user demographic targeting to reach our desired audience of youth aged 16–21 living in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Table 1 shows the difference in engagement as measured by Instagram analytics. A small monetary investment increased all engagement outcomes, including how many users saw the post, liked and commented on it, clicked to our Instagram profile, and how many times users saw the post.

In November 2020, the VET piloted recruitment and data collection protocols with youth experts and compensated them to provide feedback on study materials prior to launching. In December 2020, the VET posted study recruitment content using only organic means of promotion. We sought to recruit youth aged 16–21 who were knowledgeable about or had lived experience with trading sex. From this single recruitment post, 24 young people viewed the study in the survey platform in Qualtrics, and 17 youth consented to participate in either a survey or an interview. Of those who consented, eight were 16–17 years old, six were 18–19 years old, and one was 21 years old. Two individuals indicated they were not in the study age range and were ineligible to participate. Based on these participants’ experiences and survey/interview responses, the VET revised the survey and semistructured interview protocol. The VET recently relaunched study recruitment using paid promotions, but does not yet have engagement results.

As of April 2021, the VET posted 78 images and stories, including some trial posts for recruitment. The Instagram profile @themystproject had 522 followers and followed 813 individuals and partners. We averaged approximately 5–10% engagement on posts, meaning that we received likes, comments, or reposts from approximately that number of Instagram profiles in relation to our total followers. Some posts received much higher percentages of engagement. The VET surpassed our initial goals for building a research-brand that attracts followers, and we continue iteratively adapting our engagement strategies.

### Discussion: Theorizing VPAR and Its Best Practices

The VET’s work surfaced new methods and theories for engaging with youth in the digital era. This section explores new theorizing about the necessity of virtual participatory action research (VPAR) in relation to engagement with youth and young people in research. The hands-on work of constructing the @themystproject research-brand was iteratively interwoven with our emerging theorization about VPAR. Action research is grounded in cycles of action, engagement, and reflection (Bradbury, 2015; Stringer, 2014). We used this new approach to build on our existing knowledge of youth online culture, lessons from the social uprisings and mutual aid movements, and social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic. This work culminated in the novel concept of a research-brand. We suggest that the concept of a research-brand is an effective way to authentically

**Table 1. Instagram Metrics for @themystproject**

	Advertised Post (\$20 for 4 days)	Nonadvertised post
<b>Reach</b> (How many people see the post)	3,316	213
<b>Likes</b>	110 (25% of the total following)	34 (9% of the total following)
<b>Comments</b>	7	0
<b>Profile Visits</b> (Driven to the profile by the post)	36	6
<b>Impressions</b> (How many times someone saw a post)	4,085	283

Note. Data derived from the @themystproject business account on Instagram.

engage youth in alignment with youth online culture. Together these lessons led us to articulate our best practices for youth engagement in VPAR.

To translate effectively to online spaces, researchers should be fluent in online youth cultural practices and communications. Researchers cannot simply move study materials online. When designing and executing community outreach and engagement in the virtual space, it is crucial to understand the complexities of online communication, interaction, and culture production and how virtual space differs from the in-person world. The digital sphere is a cultural venue of its own that interacts with culture production in nonvirtual life and vice versa. It has its own rules for socializing and building interpersonal relationships for individuals (i.e., users) to navigate. Yet many engaged researchers are not integrated with this virtual world of community, or even familiar with it.

Virtual cultural rules and venues are constantly shifting, but these changes were accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these adaptations to work and life will remain, such as comfort and familiarity with virtual meetings or working from home. This type of change is not unprecedented, as numerous disability activists and theorists established the groundwork of social accessibility and accommodation, including through devices and the internet. Likewise, social uprisings such as those in Minnesota have illuminated the future of U.S. race relations, alternatives to policing, and community solidarity that cannot be undone. Youth have been at the forefront of social change movements while simultaneously being sidelined and made invisible in these movements (Middaugh et al., 2017). As youth use social media to participate in social uprisings, whether in person or virtually, many are wary of the ways they are surveilled and seek to mitigate risks through self-censoring and taking conversations offline. Our team has experienced these cultural shifts firsthand. The future of engaged research cannot afford to miss out on the insights and complexities of how COVID-19-related technological advancements and widespread social uprising affects social media use.

In the process of transitioning to VPAR we learned that this approach is not only a useful adaptation to research during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also poten-

tially helps us reach youth who may be left behind by in-person engagement. For example, the VET can connect with our online community to raise consciousness about sex trading and thus can potentially reach youth who did not previously identify themselves as having traded sex. Further, VPAR is a tool for engaging with youth who are geographically isolated or disconnected from resources and services. Youth who are surveilled, profiled, or stigmatized may prefer the anonymity that VPAR offers. Finally, many young people who are neither in school nor seeking services are harder to reach by in-person engagement but are online and can be reached through VPAR. Table 2 shows the expansive reach of VPAR and how it can uplift the voice of youth who may have been unintentionally silenced with traditional practices.

We hybridized engaged research principles and digital marketing skills to tailor our engagement efforts. Taking the research-brand approach can directly benefit the future of the project's social media account reach, partnerships, future funding, and study results. Online youth culture shows that trust can be built on social media when providing relevant content and spending time developing relationships, as is often practiced in branding. We built trust with youth by posting content on topics and values youth care about, in visually accessible and engaging formats, with plain, easy-to-understand language that mirrors the ways youth communicate. We used social media insights on engagement by utilizing qualitative and quantitative feedback alike through communicative and noncommunicative actions. Young researchers on our team integrated these lenses and tools into the MYST Project to build an online community that shares resources and knowledge, as well as engaging and recruiting young people in research. This novel VPAR approach builds on theory from existing PAR proliferations on how to adapt the value of cultural competency to the online space in the digital age. This theory takes wisdom gained from the COVID-19 era to shape the future of engaged research.

### **Lessons Learned**

In the process of shifting methodology to the virtual world, the MYST Project identified three principles instrumental to successful VPAR. These principles are the pillars of our work, and we recommend these as best practices for researchers looking

**Table 2. Youth for Whom In-Person Engagement May Not Be Effective**

<b>Youth who do not self-identify as trading sex</b>	Because of societal misconceptions, trauma responses, or lack of exposure to education on the topic, some youth who trade sex may not self-identify as participants of the activity. This designation includes trading sex, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and survival sex.
<b>Isolated youth</b>	Many youth who trade sex are geographically isolated, often by their traffickers or individuals who have power over them. They could be geographically far away from the project's location or geographically isolated from community service providers. They could also be unable to leave or travel due to a lack of access to transportation.
<b>Disconnected youth</b>	Youth who are disconnected from youth-oriented and community supports (or currently on waiting lists and not yet connected). They can be missed when working with community-based partners and can be hard to contact in person.
<b>Surveilled youth</b>	Youth who have a person (such as a guardian or trafficker) watching where they go and whom they talk with in person who cannot participate in research, services, or supports. This group also includes youth who are oversurveilled by the police and may distrust institutions and research.
<b>Youth out of school</b>	Youth who are not in school—due to school push-out, truancy, bullying, physical or mental challenges, family crisis, or lack of resources—may be more isolated.
<b>Youth lacking accessibility</b>	Youth who face barriers to accessing in-person engagement methods based on their disabilities. Barriers can include physical inaccessibility (i.e., lack of ramps, elevators, curb cuts outside the building, light/auditory accommodations), lack of a sign language interpreter, or reliance on a guardian/caretaker.

to engage young people online to promote systemic change. & Jiang, 2018).

### **1. Hire Young People to Devise and Implement VPAR**

The foundation of PAR relies on the unique strengths brought together by researchers and community members during the research process. Partnership develops from engaging with those who would typically be the “subjects” of the research topic or project (Stringer, 2014). Employing young people to lead VPAR efforts brings the expertise of youth to the fore. This staffing model centers the research’s potential subjects and builds on the knowledge of those most familiar with youth-centered online culture. Youth researchers are best positioned to curate content so it is culturally and socially relevant to the targeted audience of youth. Young people can engage effectively with other young people (Anderson

Hiring young people who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and youth with particular lived experiences relevant to research aims can significantly increase accessibility and trust with an online audience who share these identities. These team members have expertise in the real-life strengths and complexities that can arise within the research. For some young researchers with marginalized identities, engaging with youth who share identities or experiences with them can be an empowering experience. It may help them process or heal from pain or trauma by knowing they positively impact others who share in their lived realities (Corbett, 2018). On the other hand, it is crucial to consider that these researchers may experience unwanted physical, mental, or emotional effects. For example, someone with lived experience in trading sex may relive trauma while reviewing survey re-

sponses discussing that topic. Giving young investigators time, space, and support to engage with their emotions and experiences is vital within this practice. Participation from youth with lived experience requires commitment and support from senior researchers to safely, ethically, and meaningfully engage younger researchers with lived experiences (Cody & D'Arcy, 2019). These relationships are mutually beneficial. Senior researchers can transfer knowledge of existing research methods, and young researchers can develop, adapt, and advance methods to adjust with current trends and societal change in order to improve future research.

The purpose of PAR is to support benefits and autonomy to communities by implementing changes in research practices that better align the research and its subsequent findings with the goals and experiences of the population studied. Therefore, our team suggests that higher education should shift power within intergenerational research teams so that young researchers have leadership roles alongside more experienced practitioners. The voices of youth in research create a more authentic online research-brand. Their messages come with language and communication techniques that are often absent from experienced academic investigators' knowledge base. Youth are preconnected to the virtual networks through their familiarity with (and potentially higher user aptitude for) virtual engagement and social media (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). They can influence people within their personal and preestablished virtual networks to engage in the research online.

Our team has a history of using in-person research practices to engage people with lived experience of sexual exploitation, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC communities. Our present research team shares in these identities that are most central to understanding youth who trade sex, and we have youth leaders who identify with a range of lived experience, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC communities, and are from the Millennial and Generation Z generations. These young researchers are leaders of this research and have developed a culturally competent, inclusive, and trauma-informed research approach to addressing youth sex trading.

## 2. Prioritize Building Trust in Virtual Spaces

Due to the lack of trust during the COVID-19

pandemic and the recent social uprisings, developing trust in a virtual community was a top priority of this project. The MYST Project has recently observed that building trust in the virtual space is difficult and presents unique challenges compared to in-person connection. Social media platform software is designed to generate and circulate mass amounts of information (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). However, not all information on social media is accurate. The rise of "fake news" and abuses of social media during the pandemic have seeded mistrust. Therefore, it is difficult for users to decide what to trust and believe is factual in a virtual space (Lovari & Materassi, 2020).

Developing trust in a virtual space should be prioritized and built meaningfully over time. We established these considerations by actively communicating on social media, creating content with community importance, accessibility, and project transparency. These considerations harness social media tools and research practices to deliver a research-brand that increases trust on social media. We engage with youth voices, distribute information on community resources or services, and educate on topics of youth exploitation. The VET interacts with community members by sharing stories and photos and commenting on related materials. These practices of trust-building were foundational as a lesson learned from our theory on VPAR in a virtual space.

Youth sex trading is an underresearched and sensitive topic. Our previous research has suggested that trust building is uniquely vital when engaging youth who trade sex either in person or online (Gerassi et al., 2017; Martin, 2013, 2015). Without trust, youth are unlikely to disclose that they have traded sex due to shame and fears of rejection or stigma. It is difficult for youth who trade sex and youth from BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities to trust those working in this field due to a deep distrust in institutions and often a lack of shared identity with service providers (Melander et al., 2019). This mistrust further applies to research and academic institutions. Trust-building is a central component of participatory action research (Bradbury, 2015); even though it may appear different in online engagement, it is nonetheless equally important.

## 3. Center Authenticity and Transparency

Any project, organization, government

entity, or service provider working on youth sex trading should strive to create a safe environment, incorporate a trauma-informed approach, and understand the complex experiences of the youth who trade sex (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2019). Youth who experience trading sex typically have other adverse experiences and may have a deep mistrust of other people (Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001). In recognizing these experiences, the MYST Project works to build a positive rapport online by including trauma-informed, wellness-enhancing resources and bringing attention to the experiences of youth who trade sex. Centering authenticity and transparency on social media necessitates the genuine consideration of young people's experiences. For the VET, this was achieved through posting videos and images of the team members running the account, disclosing funders, and defining project goals in accessible terms. This display of transparency provides followers a more personable and clear understanding of @themystproject. We understand that to have a successful VPAR strategy means fostering a genuine connection with social media followers to truly reach the threshold of trust.

Historically, some universities, such as the University of Minnesota, do not have a great rapport with BIPOC communities (Manthey, 2020) or other marginalized communities. Therefore, VPAR offers a way for community member and institution relationships to shift to a more genuine connection where research affiliation is acknowledged to foster authenticity and transparency. For instance, our team has explicitly stated our association with the University of Minnesota. Although our team is not responsible for engagement writ large at the University of Minnesota, we carry the institution with us when we engage. Thus, authenticity and transparency in our actions are even more critical, both to signify the MYST Project values and to build bridges.

## Conclusion

This article describes our team's efforts to meaningfully engage with youth who trade sex during the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth are online and the virtual world has its own unique culture and communicative norms. Fluency in online culture will help our engagement efforts fully meet youth where they are in virtual spaces. Further, knowledge and understanding of how youth use social media for activism and social justice work also provided insights about the particular need for authenticity, trust, and transparency in our research-brand. The pandemic spurred us to develop a novel virtual participatory action research (VPAR) approach that offers valuable principles and practices for online engagement. Specifically, we created an Instagram account @themystproject to serve as a project hub to reach youth, build community with them, and invite them to address the complex social issues and phenomena related to youth trading sex through knowledge cocreation.

Our team's history of community-based participatory research helped us draw from the established engagement toolkit and transform it into a strategy that can be intentionally implemented in a virtual format. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated that society can function online when necessary, but existing online tools have yet to be fully integrated into engaged research practices. By hiring young people, taking time to build trust, and translating the principles of authenticity and transparency to the virtual world, we developed a novel and promising approach to the engaged research process. We do not anticipate that virtual engagement will entirely replace in-person connection with youth. Rather, we envision eventually interweaving these modes of engagement. The pandemic taught us that VPAR can and should become a mainstay of engagement efforts in higher education if we want to more meaningfully engage with youth and other marginalized groups in research.

## Authors' Conflict of Interest Note

We have no known conflict of interest.

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