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Lessons from the National Indigenous Physical Activity and Wellness (NIPAW) 2019 Conference

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Abstract

Background: This study investigates the interactions with Indigenous Elders, youth, scholars, and community members and their shared experiences of Indigenous way of life through the National Indigenous Physical Activity & Wellness (NIPAW) 2019 conference and communication through social media. **Purpose:** This project focused on improving community engagement for the NIPAW 2019 conference and on how the NIPAW 2019 online platforms (i.e., Facebook and email) strengthened community participation. Applications of these concepts were explored for future conferences. **Methods:** 27 posts that included informative videos, promotional posts, and an infographic were made for online promotions of NIPAW 2019 through the Indigenous Physical Activity and Cultural Circle (IPACC) Facebook page and Gmail. Conference logistics and administration were handled through these platforms in addition to Eventbrite. **Results:** The reach for the online posts averaged 879 viewers per post (n= 27 posts; SD=1531 viewers) and about 91 engagements per post (n=27 posts; SD=186 engagements). Communication through the NIPAW Gmail account also allowed for improved planning with the conference speakers. **Conclusion:** NIPAW 2019 improved Indigenous participation in health research by: 1) providing an open reciprocal sharing platform that facilitated Elder, youth, and community engagement in-conference and online, 2) being held on Samson Cree reserve which helped reduce physical and financial barriers to entry for Indigenous peoples, and 3) creating an online presence for Indigenous members unable to attend through NIPAW 2019 live streams, video vignettes, and discussion. These factors improved participation because they created a safe space for community members to engage in reciprocal, holistic learning. **Health & Fitness Journal of Canada 2019;12(2):102-108.**
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Introduction

Indigenous perspectives have been diminished by colonization and many Indigenous traditions, knowledge, and culture have been lost as a result (Iwama, M. Marshall, A. Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009; Reading & Wien, 2009). For this reason, the National Indigenous Physical Activity

& Wellness Conference (NIPAW) was created as a platform for Indigenous Elders, scholars, and community members to share their experiences on health and wellbeing (Indigenous Physical Activity and Cultural Circle (IPACC), 2018). NIPAW is Canada's largest conference for Indigenous peoples that focuses on

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physical activity and wellness (IPACC, 2018). In May 2019, this annual conference was held in Maskwacis, Alberta on Samson Cree territory (IPACC, 2018).

This year's conference slogan was "Indigenous Health & Healing in motion - a Two-Eyed seeing approach". This acknowledged that Indigenous health and healing is an active process that can be reconciled through the promotion of all four aspects of health in the medicine wheel (i.e., spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental health) (Dapice, 2006). Two-eyed seeing means combining Indigenous and Western knowledge for the benefit of all (Iwama et al., 2009). Indigenous people and researchers across Canada passionate about these subjects hosted sessions at the conference. They shared their experiences on how they have promoted holistic health in a two-eyed manner.

As part of an Indigenous Health and Wellbeing course at the University of British Columbia (UBC), KIN 489B, our group was tasked with working with the NIPAW 2019 conference administrators and assisting them with conference administration and logistics. We were responsible for creating an online presence for NIPAW 2019 and improving access for the conference to Indigenous communities across Canada.

Objectives

This project had two main goals: increase conference engagement and reach, and provide an evidence-based rationale to explain how NIPAW was able to improve participation within Indigenous communities.

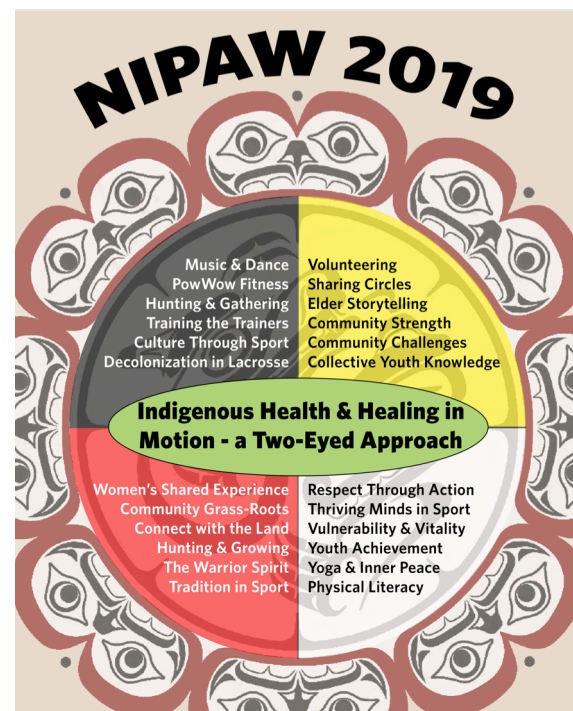
Methods

Twenty-seven online posts were created for the IPACC Facebook page: twelve posts had general information

about ticket sales, five posts included live videos from the conference, five posts included information about conference speakers discussing the emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, and two-eyed seeing aspects of NIPAW 2019, and five video vignettes were made to compliment the speaker posts. A promotional infographic and slogan were made for online and brochure use (Figure 1).

Engagement and reach were measured through the built-in statistics software from Facebook and Gmail. For the purposes of this project, post engagement included any likes, shares, comments, or ticket clicks the posts generated, while post reach was an estimate of the number

Figure 1: National Indigenous Physical Activity and Wellness (NIPAW) 2019 Conference promotional infographic. The slogan is in the middle and the words in the circle were used with permission from presenter abstracts (IPACC, 2018). The colour scheme was adapted around the medicine wheel and the logo from the host national non-profit host, Indigenous Physical Activity and Cultural Circle, was used.



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of people who viewed the posts from the IPACC community or greater online community (Facebook, 2019). No demographic statistics were collected for conference day.

A separate NIPAW Gmail account was made to liaise with conference speakers and planners. Speaker schedules and abstracts were compiled, sorted, and updated using the Gmail platform. Communication with conference attendees was further managed through Facebook.

Results

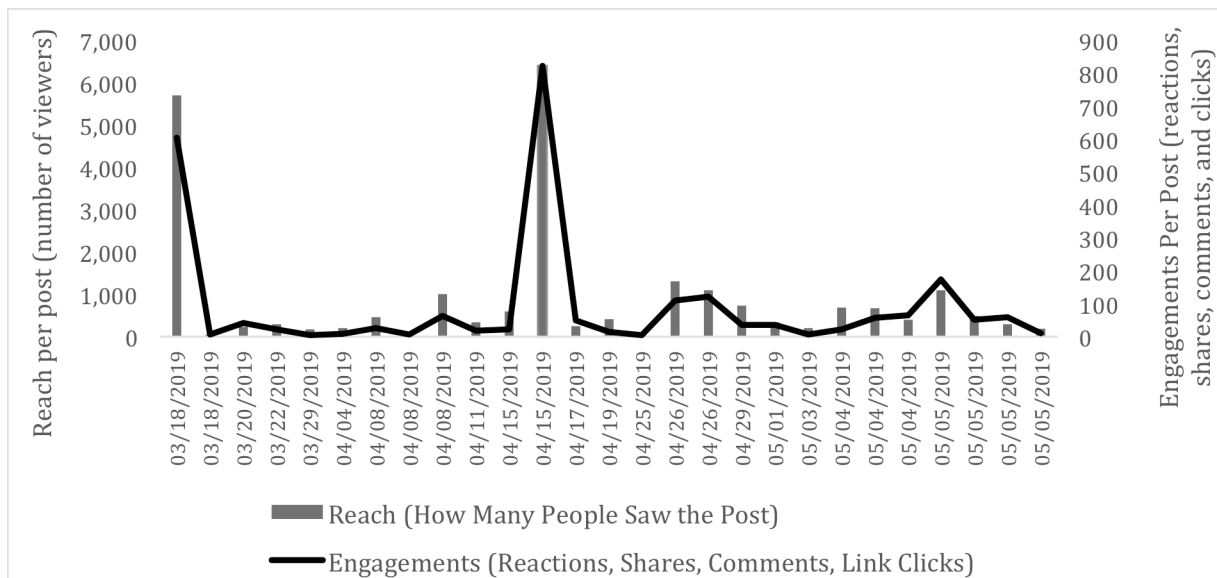
The results from this project are estimations based on Facebook statistics and include engagement and reach from 27 posts and 37 email conversations between March and May 2019.

The reach for the online posts ranged between 53 viewers to 6400 viewers, averaging 879 viewers per post (n= 27 posts; SD=1531 viewers; Figure 2). The posts also received between 4 to 822 engagements, averaging about 91

engagements per post (n=27 posts; SD=186 engagements). Collectively, these posts accounted for about 60.5%, 81.7%, and 61.1% of all page reach for the months of March, April, and May respectively. As well, these posts accounted for about 65.9%, 79.1%, and 57.4% of all page engagements for the months of March, April, and May respectively.

The conference event page itself had a total lifetime reach of 3,700 viewers (this number is affected by posts with links to the conference but is an independent estimate of reach for the event). From these viewers, 180 people said they were thinking of attending the conference and 153 of those people purchased tickets for the conference. Collectively, this represents an increase in attendance of 20.5% and increase in reach of 184.6% over the NIPAW Conference in 2018. The conference had 28 speakers, 4 of whom were local Samson Cree speakers.

Figure 2: The figure below depicts the National Indigenous Physical Activity and Wellness 2019 Conference post dates, reach, and engagement. Reach is an estimate of how many people were able to see the posts on Facebook. Engagement measures how many times a post was reacted to, shared, clicked, or commented on. The data spikes correlate with the infographic post, event program release, and live promotional videos.



Discussion

The engagement and reach that we were able to generate for NIPAW 2019 suggests that we were successful at accomplishing our first objective of increased reach and engagement. The online posts not only drove more traffic to the IPACC page, but they also increased overall interest in NIPAW 2019 from Indigenous communities in Samson Cree Nation. The conference hosted over 30 local community members and 4 Samson Cree speakers which is an increase over previous years and over other conferences (IPACC, 2018). While these Facebook statistics are estimates, they do provide evidence to the conclusion that NIPAW 2019 was able to better reach Indigenous voices and needs.

There are a variety of reasons why NIPAW 2019 had such reach to Indigenous voices. Specifically, three aspects of the conference planning and structure may have contributed: 1) an open reciprocal sharing platform that facilitates Elder, youth, and community engagement in-conference and online (Kahn et al., 2016), 2) close proximity to the Samson Cree reserve which helps reduce physical and financial barriers to entry for Indigenous peoples (Foulds, Bredin, & Warburton, 2011), and 3) facilitation of active online engagement for Indigenous members unable to attend through NIPAW 2019 live streams, video vignettes, and discussion threads (Blodgett et al., 2010; Hallett, Chandler, & Lalonde, 2007; Lai et al., 2019).

NIPAW was planned, promoted, and coordinated in consultation with Indigenous community Elders and members (IPACC, 2018). These individuals were themselves attendees and contributors of NIPAW 2019. Employing a collaborative and participatory planning

process (IPACC, 2018) allowed NIPAW's platform to be more decolonized (Budd et al., 2015; Corntassel, 2012), culturally safe (Foulds et al., 2011), and relevant to Indigenous points of view (Howell et al., 2016; Kahn et al., 2016). Platforms that allow for community and Elder involvement are highly sought out by Indigenous communities looking to revitalize their culture and traditional knowledge, especially those on the Samson Cree reserve (Samson Cree, 2018). Having Elders from Samson Cree reserve present at the conference also ensures that community-specific Indigenous cultural practices and oral traditions are respected (Kahn et al., 2016). This reverence for traditional practices makes Indigenous members more likely to attend since they can trust that NIPAW will respect traditional ways of knowing (Auger, Howell, & Gomes, 2016; Foulds et al., 2011).

This structure is not typical of a research conference (Budd et al., 2015; Petsko, 2006), but better reflects the holistic, reciprocal, and two-eyed nature of contemporary Indigenous knowledge transfer (Auger et al., 2016). At NIPAW, conference speakers could speak from experience and integrate both Indigenous and Western points of view into their talks (IPACC, 2018). These sessions also actively involve Indigenous youth and Elders in the discussion. Collectively, this engagement of youth, Elders, researchers, and non-researchers facilitates a reciprocal discussion (i.e. an open, two-way discussion) of content and is an added reason why Indigenous engagement was higher at this conference (Corntassel, 2012; Foulds et al., 2011).

Engagement may have been further enhanced by the fact that NIPAW 2019 was held at the Ermineskin Junior Senior

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High School on the Samson Cree reserve. Being on-reserve and near a school removes the physical barriers to attending for Elders and youth within the local community (Blodgett et al., 2010), in this case members from the Samson Cree nation in Alberta (Samson Cree, 2018; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2015). The physical barriers that exist for Indigenous communities differ by region, but generally involve the fact that most Indigenous communities are remotely located and thus far from city centers where most conferences, like NIPAW, may take place (Reading & Wein, 2009). For Elders, these barriers are more pronounced because many Elders may be incapable of travelling long distances to attend due to age-related physical restrictions or unable to attend due to limited funding or time (Kant, Vertinsky, Zheng, & Smith, 2013; Molyneaux et al., 2014). Youth experience similar barriers to attending but are more limited by the fact that they need guardians present (Kahn et al., 2016; Molyneaux et al., 2014). Hosting the conference on-reserve greatly alleviated these issues for Elders and youth, which meant the conference was able to host the necessary stakeholders needed for reciprocal knowledge transfer (Blodgett et al., 2010; Foulds et al., 2011).

Additionally, holding the conference on-reserve reduced travel costs for speakers and Indigenous community members in Alberta, making local engagement more possible and likely (Howell et al., 2016; Reading & Wein, 2009). Furthermore, NIPAW offered financial aid to volunteers, local Indigenous vendors, and conference attendees unable to afford tickets, like local youth (Blodgett et al., 2010; IPACC, 2018; Reading & Wein, 2009). IPACC subsidized costs for lodging, tickets, food,

and transport for the conference so that, on average, supported attendees paid about \$100-\$200 less during the conference weekend (Alberta, 2019; IPACC, 2018). This did not cover all conference costs but helped make it more accessible for Indigenous attendees (Blodgett et al., 2010; Foulds et al., 2011). This encouraged more families to send their youth to the conference and allow for reciprocal knowledge transfer during the conference (Iwama et al., 2009).

The ability to use online platforms like Facebook and Gmail further reduced the barriers to participation for Indigenous members (Molyneaux et al., 2014). Many Indigenous communities, especially in Canada, are far from each other and in rural areas making them remote and unable to attend conferences like these (Chapman & Greenhow, 2019; Molyneaux et al., 2014; Reading & Wien, 2009). Many communities fortunately have access to internet facilities and thus access to email and Facebook, making communication and participation between these remote populations and NIPAW possible (Chapman & Greenhow, 2019; Molyneaux et al., 2014). NIPAW 2019 hosted live streams of the conference for the IPACC community to engage with and created videos explaining conference goals or speaker topics (IPACC, 2018). These online engagement pieces made it possible for online supporters to still be involved (Budd et al., 2015). The fact that NIPAW addressed financial and physical barriers to participation by being held on-reserve and providing access to the conference online made it valued by Indigenous communities because it allowed communities to meet and share ideas in a traditional and culturally safe context (Corntassel, 2012; Foulds et al., 2011; Samson Cree, 2018).

Other health and wellness conferences should apply similar strategies to NIPAW 2019, like hosting conferences closer to interested communities and prioritizing reciprocal knowledge sharing, to make their conferences more accessible to Indigenous peoples. This is important because there is a lack of support for Indigenous knowledge in Western science and educational institutions. By promoting Indigenous perspectives, health and wellness conferences can start meeting the TRC's Calls to Action (Calls to Action 10, 20-24, and 66) and be more holistic.

Conclusion

NIPAW 2019 effectively engaged with and represented Indigenous voices in contemporary health research. It managed to improve Indigenous participation in the conference by holding the conference on Samson Cree reserve, hosting Indigenous Elders and youth, and reducing financial and physical barriers to attendance. By creating an online presence through live conference streams, discussion boards, and sharing of conference materials online through Facebook, Gmail, and Eventbrite, NIPAW was able to provide an accessible platform for open and reciprocal knowledge transfer.

Furthermore, NIPAW ensured that the conference was culturally safe, relevant, and respectful of Indigenous perspectives, by involving all community stakeholders in the planning, preparation, and execution of all aspects of the conference. Altogether, such actions made NIPAW appealing and applicable for many Indigenous groups. Other conference planners would benefit from applying these lessons to further improve Indigenous access to research in Canada.

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Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Michael Salloum, BKin; Tiffany Trinh, BKin; Maddi Mondin, BKin; Courtney Lofstrom, BKin; Ryan Randhawa, BKin; Darren E. R. Warburton MSc, PhD, HFFC CEP.

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