

Recruitment Tools for Reaching Millennials: The Digital Difference

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Abstract

While some research has explored the use of Craigslist or other digital technologies to recruit research participants, little social science research has reflected on how digital technologies and Internet websites might be useful specifically for recruiting millennials. In this article, I discuss attempts to recruit millennial study participants through both digital and nondigital methods. Based on these attempts, I come to the conclusion that because U.S. millennials' social worlds are increasingly intertwined with digital technologies, this group of young people search for a range of opportunities and experiences primarily using digital means. Therefore, in order to recruit millennial participants in the United States most successfully, social researchers should consider using digital technologies.

Keywords

millennials, Craigslist, digital technologies, young adults, recruiting

What Is Already Known?

Social scientists have become increasingly interested in the impact digital technologies are having on both social life and the research process in Western society. In terms of participant recruitment, others have pointed out that digital technologies can be important for finding, and recruiting, members of stigmatized and minority groups in society. However, there has been less conversation about how digital technologies may be increasingly important in the recruitment of participants who belong to generational age categories (such as millennials).

What This Paper Adds?

In this research, the ubiquity of digital technology in U.S. millennials' worlds left unsuccessful any attempts to recruit participants using nondigital advertisements. I discuss how instead, using digital technologies to recruit research participants is of crucial importance for researchers seeking out millennials, regardless of the identity/social groups to which the millennials in question belong. I make the case that future research will need to consider digitally mediated recruiting methods when targeting millennials in the United States. In addition, this research suggests that digital advertising can be especially useful for recruiting diverse research samples.

Introduction

Social scientists are becoming increasingly interested in conducting research with the help of digital means (see Briassoulis, 2010; Hanna, 2012; Shields, 2003; Travers, 2009). Although using digital tools (such as the Internet or cell phones) to conduct research comes with challenges (Koo & Skinner, 2005), social researchers have recognized that there are also benefits. For example, some scholars have found the Internet to be an effective instrument for recruiting members of stigmatized social groups (Im & Chee, 2004; Worthen, 2013). However, as digitization becomes pervasive in much of Western society, the importance of using digital technologies to recruit may extend to those participants with normative social statuses and identities as well. This could be especially true for teenagers and young adults who increasingly experience an embeddedness of different digital technologies in their everyday lives and social worlds (Ito et al., 2009). At present and in the future, traditional methods of recruitment for qualitative research studies—such as posting fliers or advertising in newspaper

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classifieds—may not continue to be as successful in recruiting young people in the United States who are more and more accustomed to using digital means to navigate their lives.

In this article, I discuss attempts to recruit young adults in the United States who belong to the “millennial” generation—which refers here to those born between 1982 and 1993. In 2014–2015, I recruited 42 young adults between the ages of 22 and 32 as part of a larger project examining intimacy. Contrary to previous generations, millennials have experienced a rapid proliferation of digital technological advancement throughout their formative developmental years (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Digital technologies—including laptop computers, smart phones, Internet-mediated communication, and so on—have become central to millennials’ social, workplace, and educational worlds (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014). In the article that follows, I argue that the ubiquity of digital technology in U.S. millennials’ worlds left unsuccessful attempts to recruit participants using physical (paper) advertisements. I discuss how instead, my findings suggest that using digital technologies to recruit research participants is of crucial importance—especially for researchers seeking out *millennials* (or younger generations) who are members of not only minority and/or stigmatized groups, but majority social identity groups as well. I make the case that future research will need to consider digitally mediated recruiting methods when targeting U.S. millennials and younger populations. This could be especially important for qualitative researchers who wish to randomly recruit participants for in-depth interview studies. Below, I begin with some background on millennials and the research study, followed by the results of recruitment attempts, a discussion, and limitations and suggestions for future researchers.

Millennials’ Digital Worlds

Young people in the United States—including those who are currently teens and young adults *as well as* those soon-to-be teens and young adults—increasingly experience their social worlds through digital technologies (Ito et al., 2009). The ease with which millennials navigate digital technologies has become one of the defining characteristics of the generation (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Young adults negotiate, experience, and navigate friendships (Boudreau, 2007), romantic relationships (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), sexual relationships (Goluboff, 2015), schooling (Tu & McIssac, 2002), and other aspects of their social lives using digital technologies. The rise in various job finder websites also means millennials look to the Internet or even digital applications (e.g., such as the LinkedIn “app”) for career opportunities as well. While older generations have begun using digital technologies such as the Internet, smart phones, and social media, millennials lead among adult groups in their usage of technology (Raine & Perrin, 2016). Some research suggests, for example, that millennials are considered the most technologically “sophisticated” among adult generations and

that millennials prefer using technology to facilitate certain social interactions (Bolton et al., 2013).

Despite the importance of technology in millennials’ lives, there is little sociological research on using technology to specifically recruit millennials for research studies. Much of the existing literature comes from economics or business and marketing (see, e.g., Ehrhard, Mayer, & Ziegert, 2010; Gorman, Nelson, & Glassman, 2004; Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). This literature is usually concerned with marketing to millennials (Smith, 2012) or millennials’ approach to labor and the workplace (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Some recent research does discuss participant recruitment using technology more generally. However, these studies most often focus on health behaviors or vulnerable and underrepresented populations such as, for example, those using alcohol or drugs (Frandsen, Walters, & Ferguson, 2014; Gioia, Sobell, Sobell, & Agrawal, 2016), HIV-positive individuals (Yuan, Bare, Johnson, & Saberi, 2014), men who have sex with men (Groves, 2011), individuals who are members of social minority or underrepresented groups (Alto, McCullough, & Levant, 2018), and adolescents (Pedersen & Kurz, 2016).

While social science researchers have tended to focus on recruiting hidden, special, or minority populations of young people using digital means (Sikkens, van San, Sieckelink, Boeije, & de Winter, 2016; Temple & Brown, 2011; Worthen, 2013), digital methods can be equally as important in recruiting those who identify with majority/normalized social groups and statuses. This is because it is no longer just members of certain social groups, but a *majority* of millennial young adults in the United States, who are now seeking out social opportunities and information online (Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

The Research Study

Although digital influence is significant in U.S. millennials’ lives, the content of the larger project here was not specifically about millennials’ relationship to technology. Substantively, the larger purpose of the project for which I sought participants was to explore young adults’ intimate relationship experiences and to specifically address “older” (age 22 and above) and postcollegiate millennials’ intimate lives and experiences. This was a response to the large number of research studies documenting the intimate lives of younger millennials and college students (see, e.g., Sweeney, 2014; Wade, 2017; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013) and a relative dearth of studies examining millennial young adults in their 20s and early 30s. While the participants interviewed for the project did discuss the influence of digital technologies on their intimate lives, in this article, I focus specifically on how digital technologies assisted in participant recruitment.

Initially, I conducted a pilot study in 2012 that resulted in 18 interviews. However, I restricted the pilot phase of the study to my own local peer groups and snowball sampling. For the second phase of the project starting in 2014, I obtained research funding from my university in order to pay participants US\$30 for their time. I decided on the sum of US\$30 because

I reasoned that this amount was high enough to encourage participation but not so high that participants would feel compelled to participate for the compensation alone. Another rationale behind the monetary incentive was to recruit a more diverse group of participants from different social networks. Whereas I recruited the participants for the pilot study largely through personal contacts and snowball sampling, I sought to increase the diversity of the sample (primarily in terms of social class, sexual identity, and hopefully race) in the second phase of the project by recruiting those previously unknown to either myself or my personal contacts. While the sample was one of convenience, I still sought as much diversity as possible in an attempt to discern whether identity/group membership differences had an impact on millennials' intimate experiences.

Although ambitious, the reason I sought out a diverse sample is that among qualitative research studies on young adults in the United States, diverse samples are rare. In the past, many studies have focused on young adults from largely homogenous classed, raced, gendered, and sexual identity locations (see, e.g., Bell, 2013; Dalessandro, 2017; Dalessandro & Wilkins, 2017; Ray & Rosow, 2010; Silva, 2012, 2013; Sweeney, 2014; Wilkins, 2012). Because I sought to explore, within the context of one study, how different identities might impact young adults' experiences, I tried to obtain as diverse a sample as possible.

I recruited participants in the geographic area within approximately 60 miles of the university with which I am affiliated. This allowed me to focus on a diverse group of young adults sharing a common geography in the Western United States. I conducted face-to-face interviews with young adults. After 18 pilot interviews and 42 additional interviews, I concluded data collection because several prominent patterns in the data reached saturation. However, recruiting participants for the second phase of the project commenced slowly—until I began using digital technologies to find participants.

The Digital Difference

At the beginning of the study, I consulted another researcher who had done studies with young adults in the past and had success using paper recruitment fliers. The young adults interviewed for this previous study, based on age at the time of the interviews, qualified as a mix of "Generation X" and "millennial" young adults born on the cusp of the generational shift. Although there is some debate, most scholars characterize the shift from Generation X to millennial births as happening in the early 1980s (Carlson, 2008; Howe & Strauss, 2000). While paper fliers worked well for the researcher I consulted, I was unsuccessful in using paper fliers to recruit a few years later.

Initially, I designed some recruitment fliers to advertise the study and placed them in various locations around town including community boards in coffee shops, fitness centers, and grocery stores. Figure 1 is an example of one of the fliers I used. I have removed my identifying information and promotional photos here and replaced the identifiers with bracketed text. Some fliers also included pull tabs with my contact information.

By the conclusion of the study, I would receive no participants from the paper fliers, despite advertising the US\$30 incentive. In 2014, after waiting a few weeks with no indication of community interest, I decided to also place an advertisement on the Craigslist jobs board. Craigslist functions as a community discussion forum and classified advertisement website (Freese, 2011) where people can search for (or advertise) job opportunities, items for sale, housing, and personal advertisements.

I posit that Craigslist, in addition to Facebook, served an important role in the recruitment of millennials due to millennials' tendency to view these webpages looking for opportunities. Perhaps (or perhaps not) surprisingly, the advertisements attracted young people from a range of social and economic backgrounds. While I believe the research incentive I offered may have encouraged participants to reach out, everyone who responded to the advertisement saw the ad because they were looking online. In contrast, due to a response rate of zero, I believe the physical advertisements I originally posted went unnoticed by young adults in the target age range despite offering the US\$30 incentive.

For the study, I posted on the Craigslist boards serving the two metropolitan areas closest to the university affiliated with the research. These boards reach both urban centers and the surrounding suburbs. Since the study offered a onetime incentive of US\$30 for a confidential interview, I elected to post the advertisement under the "gigs" section of the wanted ads on the website. On Craigslist, a "gig" denotes a call for a short-term (usually paid) opportunity. When posting a gig advertisement, Craigslist asks for classification of the advertisement into a subcategory. Although clicking on gigs allows the audience to view all gigs posted regardless of how they are specifically classified, people can also click on a certain classification in order to see jobs posted in that category. I alternated between posting the gig advertisement under categories such as creative, crew, event, and labor because I believed those to be the most open-ended categories and hoped that young adults might be inclined to check those specific categories. Although I could have posted the advertisements elsewhere on the site, I elected to post them under gigs since the interview asked for a very short time commitment.

In order to seem attractive to potential participants, I tried to keep the copy of the advertisement simple. I framed my own role as a "student" so as to add credibility to the advertisement (in other words, to give a viable reason for wanting to know the details of participants' intimate lives). The copy of the advertisement specified that I was a student looking to interview people for a study on relationships, looking specifically for participants aged 22–32, and paying US\$30 cash for a onetime interview. I also noted that interviews would be kept confidential and that I could meet participants in locations of their choosing.

Ultimately, of the 42 participants making up the second round of study recruitment, I found 21 (10 women and 11 men) directly through these advertisements. I used snowball sampling as well, and after I concluded interviews, many of the

participants I found through Craigslist offered to spread word of the study to others in their peer groups, which resulted in a few more interviews. Although the sample was one of convenience, bound by geographical and self-selection constraints, Craigslist assisted in contributing to diversity in the sample. Social class diversity, and to a lesser extent, racial diversity increased notably when compared to the pilot study. At the same time, Craigslist participants came from a variety of social backgrounds, and participants were members of social minority groups as well as majority groups. While I did use another website to recruit as well—which I discuss below—Craigslist advertisements proved a fruitful endeavor.

While early in the study, I accepted participants regardless of their demographic nuances (besides age, which I limited to 22 to 32 years old), as the study went on, I found that I gathered a disproportionate amount of college-educated and/or middle-to upper-middle-class participants in the study. However, much of this disproportion was not due to imbalanced responses on Craigslist, but due to college-educated participants being more likely to share the study with their friends, who then contacted me for interviews. I then began asking interested participants from Craigslist about their education levels as a way to better discern social class. I was generally able to find a diverse number of participants through Craigslist, although as I will discuss below, this approach did have limitations.

One group I had trouble recruiting through the Craigslist advertisement was lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)-identified participants. Because of this, a contact offered to share information about the study to a private LGBTQ group on Facebook affiliated with an alumni network of a local university. My information was posted only once, and four individuals contacted me from the group wanting more information. All four agreed to be interviewed. With the exception of two participants found through Craigslist, the remainder of the LGBTQ participants in the study came from referrals. Although I had more success finding “straight”-identified individuals through Craigslist, I also did not specifically advertise for LGBTQ participants. Doing so could perhaps have led to more LGBTQ participants contacting me through Craigslist. However, because I gathered 21 participants from Craigslist, the two LGBTQ-identified participants account for approximately 9% (technically 9.5%) of respondents. This percentage is close to the number of U.S. millennials who identify as LGBTQ, which research estimates to be somewhere around 7% (Jones & Cox, 2015). This suggests that a study larger than the present one might gather from Craigslist advertisements a representative sample of LGBTQ-identified millennial young adults.

Although I primarily used Craigslist to recruit participants, other aspects of digital technology helped in the recruitment of millennials for this study. E-mails (both through Craigslist and through referrals) helped potential participants seek more information about the study in a noncommittal way (without the pressure to commit to the study immediately). Second, text messaging with potential participants (since I encouraged initial participants to share my e-mail and phone number) served a

similar purpose in that participants could ask for more information without the pressure of talking on the phone.

Safely Signaling Interest: E-mail and Text Messages

Through Craigslist, participants could e-mail me directly in order to express interest in participating or to ask more questions. From that initial exchange, many potential participants agreed to an interview and chose an interview location. This aspect of communication seemed to work well because it allowed participants to assess whether they were comfortable participating in the project without feeling pressured to participate. This supports other research as well, which finds that giving potential participants the opportunity to signal interest using digital tools can improve the likelihood that participants will agree to a face-to-face interview (Grov, Ventuneac, Rendina, Jimenez, & Parsons, 2012).

Although I found 25 of the 42 participants directly through either Craigslist or Facebook, I found most of the remaining participants through snowball sampling. These participants were those who heard about the study and expressed interest in participating. Despite the absence of Craigslist or Facebook, however, digital technology figured prominently in recruiting these millennials for interviews as well.

When interviewing the initial participants, I encouraged everyone to “tell friends” about the interview and to share my e-mail address and cell/mobile phone number widely. Some participants enjoyed the study and spread the word, telling their friends to contact me. Of those people who chose to contact me, it was always either through e-mail or through text messaging. While sociological data on individuals’ opinions of text messaging versus talking on the phone is scarce, some reports find that those in the United States much prefer texting to talking on the phone (Shropshire, 2015). E-mail and text provided participants with a low-stakes interaction in which they could signal interest in participating but also gather more information without the pressure of having a phone conversation or committing to an interview on the spot. Participants could think about their decision and plan out what they would say in response (see Ito et al., 2009) as opposed to feeling they had to make a decision right away.

While the use of text messaging and e-mail to set up interviews might seem routine in contemporary Western society, it also must not be taken for granted. Were interview participants instructed to call directly, some (or many) of them would have likely shied away from the interaction. E-mail and text messaging offered potential participants the opportunity to request more information about the study and the opportunity to take their time in deciding whether or not to participate.

Discussion

Although this research study relies on a convenience sample, the research process highlights a noteworthy component of millennial research participant recruitment in the United States. As economic and marketing studies also point out

(Ehrhart et al., 2010; Smith, 2012), when attempting to recruit millennials, technology is key. While the actual data of this study are comprised of face-to-face interviews with millennials, recruiting these people would have been much more difficult had I not utilized digital technologies. This is especially true for those participants recruited anonymously rather than those found through social networks. The large volume of millennials who use (and arguably are coming to rely on) digital technologies means that reaching them through nondigital pathways will be exceedingly difficult going into the future. Millennials specifically search online for opportunities, and this study suggests that they are much less likely to stop and observe advertisements on physical community boards or in newspapers. Instead, technology and digital communication are essential to young people's social worlds (Gibson & Sode-man, 2014; Ito et al., 2009) and are impacting how they seek opportunities (including news, community events, or employment opportunities). Craigslist is only one example of an online space where young adults go to find opportunities in the local community (Freese, 2011). While I am not arguing that technology is always better—and in fact, I would argue that face-to-face interviewing is preferable in some cases to interviewing techniques that rely primarily on technology—technology was crucial in this study in terms of recruiting participants.

Had it not been for online advertising, some of the goals of the study (such as increasing diversity) may have been much more difficult to achieve. No one responded to the numerous physical advertisements placed around town despite the US\$30 incentive. This is probably due to millennials failing to notice and read the advertisements. In contrast, I received an outpouring of responses from millennials looking to Craigslist for gig opportunities. Craigslist facilitated the discovery of a wider range of research study participants than probably would have been possible without the use of technology. In addition, although I found young adults through digital means who had non-normative social identities (such as having an LGBTQ identity), I found many young adults with normative social identities. While Worthen (2013) found Craigslist to be a useful tool for recruiting people with stigmatized identities, I found Craigslist to be useful for recruiting those with normalized identities (such as, e.g., heterosexual or “straight” sexual identities) as well.

Yet in addition to the advertisements placed online, texting and e-mail played an important part in recruiting. Researchers have documented individuals' preference for texting over phone calls (Shropshire, 2015), and I posit that texting and e-mail helped in finding participants recruited both anonymously and through snowball sampling. E-mail and texting allowed participants to ask for more information about the study without being pressured to commit to an interview. Had young people been required to call directly, I do not believe I would have heard from many (if any) potential participants. Surveys, polls, and journalistic reports consistently find that millennials, in particular, prefer e-mailing and texting to talking on the phone (Hofschneider, 2013; Sugar, 2015).

While in the past, individuals interested in study participation or making extra money might have looked to newspapers or physical community bulletin boards for opportunities and might have called a phone number to express interest, millennials today are using digital technologies to accomplish the same goals. My own attempts to use physical advertisements to attract millennials did not prevail, and I never received a phone call from a potential participant. Instead, I received text messages and e-mails, and at least a few young adults per day responded to the Craigslist advertisements for every day the advertisements were live on the site. This was also true, to a lesser extent, for the Facebook post advertisement—though this advertisement reached a smaller audience. This evidence indicates that digital technologies are important tools for social scientists specifically trying to recruit millennials. I found technology to be a significant part of the process of recruiting millennials across a range of identity statuses (both minority and majority statuses).

Limitations and Future Research

Although the study demonstrates that using Craigslist and other digital means of communication (e-mail, texting, and Facebook) are useful in recruiting millennial participants, there are some potential limitations to the study. Some of these limitations have to do with using Craigslist to recruit participants. Some research has argued that since Craigslist is organized by large metropolitan areas and must be accessed through an Internet connection, those in rural areas or those without an Internet connection might be excluded (Worthen, 2013). Although it is possible that advertising digitally could have limited the participants I reached, it is very difficult to tell. I found that participants in less populated suburbs or more rural areas did utilize Craigslist to look for gigs, even though they were located outside a city. While the somewhat limited reach of Craigslist is definitely a potential limitation more generally, it may be more of a problem if attempting to contact older adults as opposed to younger adults. Young people in the United States utilize digital technologies at impressive rates. According to one recent report, about 92% of teenagers in the United States report going online at least once a day and 24% of teenagers report being online “almost constantly” (Lenhart, 2015). Teenagers and young adults are increasingly online much more often than not.

Despite the findings in this article, more work is needed to confirm the finding that electronic advertisements will be more successful at recruiting young people than physical advertisements. Another study that explores recruitment for different age cohorts of adults using both physical and electronic advertisements would affirm the findings, especially by comparing not only electronic and physical advertisements but also response rates for different types of advertisements by age cohort. Further testing could also include different study topics. The study topic here—intimate relationships—is personal and potentially intimidating. However, a less intimidating study topic might increase the response rate from physical

Adults Needed for Relationship Study! \$30

Are you between the ages of 22-32? Interested in talking about relationships, intimacy and sexuality? I am a graduate student in the Sociology Department at [University] looking for people willing to share their experiences. I am looking for **MEN** and **WOMEN**, as well as people of **ANY** and **ALL** sexual orientations. You will be compensated \$30 for participating in the study.

ALL INTERVIEWS WILL BE

- Done at a time and place convenient for you
- Confidential
- Greatly appreciated!

If you are interested or have any questions, please contact me at [email]. I want to hear from you!

[original advertising photos removed]

If you have questions about your rights as a research study participant, you can call the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is independent from the research team. You can call the IRB if you have concerns or complaints that you do not want to talk to the study team about. The IRB phone number is [555-555-5555].

Interested? Email [name] at: [email]

Figure 1. Example Flier.

advertisements. There is not enough reason to believe yet that physical advertisements will *always* fail in attempts to recruit millennials, although this was the case in my study. In order to support or challenge this, more tests are needed.

In the future, it would also be useful to conduct a study wherein researchers post general advertisements and assess who responds to the advertisements in order to decipher the true diversity of respondents (or how closely the respondent pool reflects population demographics). It would be useful to adjust the advertisement language to target specific groups of people (in terms of race, education level, sexual identity, and so on) and gauge how the language of the ads might impact participants' interest in the study, their willingness to be interviewed, and the likelihood of finding participants from desired demographic groups.

Lastly, that Craigslist required the choosing of a subclassification for the gig advertisements could have potentially excluded some participants. I did not advertise under every gig category, for example, and it is possible that people looking for very specific types of gigs, but who did not see my ad because of where it was posted, may have ultimately been interested in the study. I chose not to post multiple advertisements at the same time under different headings so as not to confuse participants or to look suspicious. However, in the future, if researchers conduct a similar study over a longer period of time, it would be useful to advertise under each different heading and compare. Ultimately, the study sample is one of convenience and is nonrepresentative. However, a larger study whose main focus is millennial recruiting techniques could help clarify some of the uncertainties and limitations that I have outlined above.

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