



## Craigslist versus print newspaper advertising for recruiting research participants for alcohol studies: Cost and participant characteristics



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- 1st study to compare differences for Craigslist (CL) and print newspapers (PN) ads
- Significant differences between CL and PN participants on most variables
- Significantly different costs per participant for CL (\$1.46) vs. PN (\$117) ads
- Web and social media sites effective and easy ways to recruit younger participants
- With some limitations, CL is an efficient and inexpensive recruitment tool.

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Technology has transformed our lifestyles in dramatic and significant ways, including new and less expensive options for recruiting study participants. This study examines cost and participant differences between two recruitment sources, Craigslist (CL), and print newspapers (PNs). This paper also reviewed and compared studies involving clinical trials published since 2010 that recruited participants using CL alone or in combination with other methods.

**Method:** Secondary data analyses from a parent study involving a randomized controlled trial of a mail-based intervention to promote self-change with problem drinkers.

**Results:** Significant differences were found between CL and PN participants on most demographic and pretreatment drinking variables. While all participants had AUDIT scores suggestive of an alcohol problem and reported drinking at high-risk levels, CL participants had less severe drinking problem histories, were considerably younger, and had a higher socioeconomic status than PN participants. The total advertising costs for the 65 CL ads (\$275) were significantly less than the 69 PN ads (\$33,311). The recruiting cost per eligible participant was vastly less expensive using CL (\$1.46) compared to print newspaper ads (\$116.88).

**Conclusions:** Using CL is a viable recruitment method for soliciting participants, particularly those that are younger, for alcohol intervention studies. It is also less expensive than newspaper ads. When CL participants were recruited, they reported being slightly more confident to change their drinking than PN participants. Limitations of using CL are discussed, including that some initial ad responders gave inconsistent answers to similar questions and a few tried to enter the study more than once.

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### 1. Introduction

Technology, which has become an integral part of our everyday lives, has radically changed the way we live and work, including how participants are recruited for research studies. Of the 321 million people in the U.S., 49% used Facebook in 2015 (Statista, 2015, June 8). Last year 87% of those living in North America used the Internet compared to 44% in

2000, a 98% increase in 14 years (Internet World stats, n.d.). While more Internet users were younger 10 years ago, recent research suggests a growing number of older adults are accessing the Internet, especially those that are more affluent and better educated (Older Adults and Technology Reports, n.d.).

Craigslist.org (Craigslist), a website for classified advertisements and discussion forums, is the 9th most popular Internet website in the United States (Alexa, 2015 May). Founded in 1995 in the San Francisco bay area, it was incorporated as a private for-profit company in 1999 (Craigslist Corporate History, 2008, April 21). Today it takes postings

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from individuals in more than 70 countries and in 12 different languages. It has also become a popular website for recruiting participants for research studies. It allows the placing of a single advertisement in any one geographic location (e.g., cities or metropolitan areas) for several days to a week, often at no cost. Based on factsheets from Craigslist (CL, 2015, May 5), it is estimated that 60 million people in the U.S. access CL monthly. Further, each month more than 80 million classified ads are posted. These statistics indicate that CL ads target an extremely large and broad audience.

Before the advent of the Internet, most researchers used some type of print (e.g., newspapers, magazines, flyers) or broadcast ads (e.g., radio, TV), or a snowball technique to recruit participants. Today, multiple web, Internet, and social media sites (e.g., email, Google Adwords, CL, Facebook) are being used to recruit participants into clinical trials. Because the use of the web and social media is a relatively recent recruitment method for clinical trials, we found, as did Frandsen, Walters, and Ferguson (2014), that there are “few studies that directly compared a sample obtained from a social media to one collected using traditional recruitment strategies” (p. 250). While studies have used CL to recruit different groups (e.g., smokers: Bansal-Travers, O'Connor, Fix, and Cummings, 2011; Mohebati et al., 2012; Ramo, Hall, and Prochaska, 2010; alcohol: Siegel, DiLoreto, Johnson, Fortunato, and DeJong, 2011; obesity: Worthen, 2013; HIV risk and substance use with MSM: Grov, 2011; Grov, Rendina, and Parsons, 2014), little is known about the differences between individuals recruited through CL versus other recruitment sources. It should be noted that there is no specific category called “research studies” for posting CL ads. Researchers that have used CL have reported placing ads in different sections (e.g., “jobs” or “volunteers”).

To better summarize existing studies on CL as a study recruitment source, we reviewed and compared studies involving clinical trials published since 2010 that recruited participants using only CL or in combination with other methods. Studies not designed as clinical interventions were excluded (e.g., examined relatives' perceptions of preschoolers' body sizes: Eli, Howell, Fisher, and Nowicka, 2014; beta tests to confirm technological feasibility: Ybarra, Prescott, and Holtrop, 2014). Nine studies met these criteria and are described in Table 1. For the five studies that used recruitment sources besides CL, data for those sources are included. Several studies compared multiple recruitment sources but did not include CL as a recruitment method; therefore, they are not listed in Table 1 [e.g., Frandsen et al. (2014), Facebook vs. print media; Heffner, Wyszynski, Comstock, Mercer, & Bricker, 2013, Facebook vs. word-of-mouth, print media]. Lastly, one study that used multiple recruitment sources including CL was excluded as only four participants were recruited from there (Morgan, Jorm, and Mackinnon, 2013).

While the total cost of advertising is important, the effectiveness of a recruitment method is ultimately related to the number of participants who are enrolled in a study. Consequently, the best way to evaluate and compare the cost-effectiveness of different recruitment methods is to examine the cost per eligible participant by recruitment source. As can be seen in Table 1, the cost per enrolled participant is somewhat variable across studies. Another observation when comparing different types of web-based/Internet recruitment sites is that while some have great potential for reaching large audiences, proportionally the final sample can be much smaller. The following two clinical trials, which only used Facebook, are good examples. Brief et al. (2013) examined almost 11,000 returning combat veterans who had visited Facebook focusing on reducing their alcohol use and PTSD symptoms, and of those 3,500 were assessed for eligibility with about 1,340 determined to be initially eligible yielding a final study sample size of 617. Ramo, Rodriguez, Chavez, Sommer, and Prochaska (2014) using 36 different Facebook ads to target young adult smokers generated 3,198,373 impressions and 5895 unique clicks. The unique clicks only resulted in 10% (586) potentially eligible participants of whom only 39% (230) provided consent to participate in the study. While the reported advertising

costs averaged \$8.80 per eligible consented participant, only 34% (79/230) of the final study sample entered the actual study.

The present study used a secondary data analysis to evaluate the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of CL versus print newspaper (PN) ads to recruit participants for a randomized controlled trial designed to promote self-change from alcohol problems (Sobell, Sobell, Gioia, Montgomery, and Marker, 2010, August). The analysis had two objectives: (a) to compare demographic and alcohol history variables for participants recruited using Craigslist.org with those recruited using a traditional strategy, PNs; and (b) to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of using CL versus PNs for recruiting research participants. In this paper, we also review the opportunities and challenges offered by CL for researchers.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study participants

For purposes of the present analysis, participants are allocated to one of two groups (CL: Craigslist.org; PN: print newspaper) based on where they saw the study ad (Sobell et al., 2010, August). Participants were recruited over a 20-month period using the following inclusion criteria: (a) must have seen the study ad (i.e., not have been told about it) and provided the date they saw the ad; (b) had to identify the source of the ad they saw (e.g., name of newspaper or CL, and the city where it was posted); (c) had to call and be screened within 30 days of seeing the ad; (d) had to be  $\geq 21$  years of age, the legal drinking age in the U.S.; (e) English speaking; (f) had a permanent address (e.g., P.O. boxes and shelter type facilities were excluded as all study materials were sent and received via courier); (g) one participant per household; and (h) in the 90 days prior to seeing the ad reported (i) binge drinking [i.e.,  $\geq 5$  standard drinks (1 U.S. standard drink = 0.6 oz. of absolute ethanol or 14 g of absolute ethanol) on at least 5 days], or (ii) drinking on average  $\geq 15$  standard drinks per week for men or  $\geq 8$  standard drinks per week for women]. These drinking criteria are consistent with the risk drinking criteria used by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2007). In addition, callers who called more than once after being told they did not meet the eligibility criteria were deemed ineligible and were only counted one time. The study involved no face-to-face contact with participants.

The study was conducted at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) in Fort Lauderdale (FL) and was approved by NSU's Institutional Review Board. The 473 participants in the final study cohort had volunteered to participate in a randomized clinical trial (RCT) designed to promote self-change from alcohol problems. Henceforth, the RCT will be referred to as the parent study. Because the parent study has been described elsewhere (Sobell et al., 2010, August), only procedures relevant to the present manuscript will be described.

### 2.2. Advertisements

Study ads were placed in PNs and on CL in the 48 contiguous states in the U.S. and the District of Columbia. At the time of the study, the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data were used to select cities or geographic areas in each state with large populations. The same ads were used to recruit participants for PNs and CL. The ads as they appeared in print are shown in Fig. 1.

#### 2.2.1. Craigslist (CL)

Ads for CL were posted by going to the main web page (Craigslist.org) and identifying an area of a state (e.g., South Florida), or county (e.g., Miami/Dade), or a specific city. For this study, the “jobs” section of Craigslist was used because other researchers had told us that this is where most research study ads are posted. Under the “jobs” section the subcategory “ETC” was selected. To post an ad it was necessary to

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