Child Abuse & Neglect 37 (2013) 716–720

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

Brief communication

Recruiting young adults to child maltreatment research through Facebook: A feasibility study☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 October 2012
Received in revised form 15 April 2013
Accepted 16 April 2013
Available online 12 June 2013

Keywords:
Maltreatment
Prevalence
Community sample
Online social networking
Facebook
Young people

Obtaining reliable estimates of the extent of child maltreatment in the community is a problem for researchers. Young people are highly desirable participants, albeit difficult to contact, for maltreatment research (Savage & McCarron, 2009). Common methods for recruiting representative community samples of young people include classroom sampling (Chen, Dunne, & Han, 2004); household sampling (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000); and telephone interviews (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010). Changes in the ways young people communicate represent an opportunity to explore alternate methods of participant recruitment (Steffens, Tonelli, & Davidsson, 2011). This study investigates the feasibility of using online social media to recruit young adults as participants in child maltreatment research.

Online social networking and young adults

Recently there has been greater activity on online social networking sites – especially among young populations (Goldsmith, 2008) who often use the internet to explore sensitive topics (Robinson & Parker, 2008). In Australia, 86% of 18–24 year olds use at least one form of online social networking weekly (ABS, 2011). At the time of writing, Facebook was the world's most popular online social networking site (Treadaway & Smith, 2010) with over half of its users aged between 18 and 25 years (Elmore, 2009). Facebook allows organizations to advertise to specific users through targeted campaigns that operate through an electronic bidding-system utilising budget parameters selected by the campaign owner (Facebook, 2011). Little is known about the effectiveness of using online social networking sites for participant recruitment. At the time data were collected for this study, only one previous study was identified which reported using Facebook advertisements to

☆ Funding for the production of this paper has been provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.04.009

Table 1
Sample experience of maltreatment in childhood (*n*).

Maltreatment type	Experience				Severity of experience[b]		Perceived maltreatment				
	No	Cause for concern[a]	Yes	Missing	Intermediate	Serious	Yes	No	Don't know	N/A	Missing
Emotional maltreatment	48	11	22	20	15	7	12	57	11	5	16
Physical abuse	30	2	69	2	65	32	10	73	12	1	5
Neglect	55	11	45	1	40	24	10	80	11	0	0
Exposure to domestic violence	61	18	20	2	13	7	–	–	–	–	–
Any (at least one type)	23	–	74	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

[a] Experiences of physical abuse and neglect do not equate to 101 as 'cause for concern' is included in the 'No' category. Due to the complexity of the measures these could not be calculated independent of one another.
[b] Participants may have experienced both intermediate and serious maltreatment for physical abuse and neglect thus these numbers do not equate to the number of those who experienced such maltreatment.

recruit young adults to participate in sensitive research (Rogers, Griffin, Wykle, & Fitzpatrick, 2009). The goal sample size was attained but the time this took was not reported. Research needs to investigate the benefits, shortcomings and limitations of using Facebook for participant recruitment. The present study aimed to determine if Facebook is viable for investigating childhood maltreatment. Specifically it aimed to determine (1) whether Facebook is likely to deliver a representative sample; (2) what types of users participate; and (3) their views on using Facebook for sensitive research.

Methods

Participants

Facebook invitations yielded a self-selected convenience sample of 122 participants. Three did not meet the age criterion and 18 dropped out before answering any maltreatment items (removed from analysis). Five more dropped out but were kept as they answered all items for at least one form of maltreatment. A final self-selected sample of 101 young adults (19 male, 81 female; 1 unknown) between 18 and 25 years ($M = 20.75$, $SD = 2.19$), living in South Australia with Facebook accounts, participated in an online retrospective self-report survey about positive and negative childhood experiences. Sixty-four responded to an advertisement and 33 to a 'wall' post (four indicated 'other'). Seventy-four per cent had experienced some form of maltreatment (as defined by the measure), the most prevalent being physical abuse (see Table 1). Only 15% perceived that they had been maltreated. Forty-six per cent experienced more than one type.

Measure

The Child-rearing and Children's Experience Interview (Cawson et al., 2000) was shortened (to exclude sexual abuse, extra-familial maltreatment and bullying) and adapted into an online survey using Survey Monkey. This study measured maltreatment commonly associated with sub-optimal parenting by describing particular childhood experiences within the family environment (including ones of neglect, physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, and exposure to domestic violence). Participants were then asked if they had experienced these during their childhood, by whom, and the chronicity and severity of the experience. Example maltreatment items include: did you ever you go to school in dirty clothes because there were no clean ones; were you ever hit on the bottom with a hard implement; were you made to feel embarrassed or humiliated; did physical violence ever take place between those caring for you? Participants were also asked for each maltreatment type (excluding exposure to domestic violence) if they considered the treatment they received to be abuse or neglect (i.e. perceived maltreatment). Facebook usage (account ownership duration, mode, purpose and frequency of access) and views on using Facebook for research were collected.

Procedure

Over three weeks in July–August 2011, an advertisement was distributed to Facebook users 18–25 years old living in South Australia using two methods: (1) a wall post distributed to a convenience sample of existing networks and (2) a purchased advertisement. The advertisement was very brief inviting 18–25 year olds to participate in a survey regarding their childhood experiences. It included the University logo and linked to an external website with participant information and the online survey. Help-line and support service details were provided prior to participation and throughout the questionnaire. The study was approved by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee.

Wall post: The advertisement was displayed as a 'wall post' (to a convenience sample of existing networks and on an NGO's Facebook page) inviting people to complete the survey and/or to share with their networks by re-posting on their own wall (i.e. snowball sampling).

Advertisement: The Facebook 'campaign' was targeted to users whose profiles indicated they were 18–25 year olds currently living in South Australia. Advertisements can be paid either on a cost per 1000 views or cost per click (CPC) basis. As the aim was to get people to click through to an external website, CPC was used. A daily or lifetime budget can be selected.

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