

Untangling the Web

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The difficulties we graduate students face when conducting research include an over-reliance on the psychology research pool for participants; inability to access a unique population; and having little money to compensate participants. Internet technology offers new options for gaining access to participants. Several high-traffic Internet site options are described below, along with some suggestions for collecting data using those sites.

There are three important points of consideration before beginning this research: quality; ethics; and IRB approval. Concerning quality, collecting a few extra pieces of information for quality verification can be helpful. These include a question about English proficiency, asking about age in two different spaced out questions (e.g., one asking for age, another asking for month and year of birth), and a space for participants to report how they learned about the study. Incorporating multiple age questions can help “catch” underage participants who participated despite reading on the consent form that they needed to be age 18 or older. Utilizing a timestamp feature to monitor how long it took for participants to complete the questionnaire may help gauge the quality of responses based on completion time, or to see if the survey was open for days at a time.

With regard to ethics, it is important to plan in advance how confidentiality and privacy will be handled. To start, it is a good idea to set up a profile that clearly identifies you as a researcher (e.g., HappinessLab) and features only professional contact information. There are also potential problems depending on your area of interest. It’s helpful to be prepared for difficult situations, such as a member of a social network commenting on one of your study posts that they are intending to harm themselves. When conducting survey research, provide resources for further information and contact information for participants to email you for a summary of results if they are interested. More information can be found in Boyd and Ellison’s (2008) article describing social networks in detail.

Prior to collection, the IRB may scrutinize use of Internet sampling. Fortunately, there has been enough experience in psychological research using several of these platforms to provide examples. Specify that a profile will be set up that will be transparent in its purpose (i.e., research). If the study is anonymous and the survey information is simply being posted where it will be visible to an audience, approval through the human subjects committee will most likely proceed as any other project without identifying information. Refer to Halvais (2011) for additional ethical considerations.

Facebook (www.facebook.com)

Facebook is one of the most popular international social network sites. Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) recently published a review of 412 articles using Facebook for social science research and describe recruitment using Facebook applications, as well as gleaning information based off of user profile observation. One approach not addressed in their article is the use of advertising on Facebook. Ads appear on the right hand side of profiles and can be specified to target various demographic groups. An advertiser

is charged each time the ad is clicked. Another method is the use of groups, some of which are moderated; these might be used to post studies on the group's wall. Facebook is the site for a variety of mental-health related groups, from people who have bipolar disorder to those who have lost a family member to suicide.

Experience Project (www.experienceproject.com)

Experience Project (EP) is an online network connecting individuals who have shared similar experiences. One can browse topics or search for key words that will then produce stories that individuals identify with by clicking "me too" on a particular experience page. New stories can be created if a perspective or topic is not currently available. All experiences start with the letter I and topics are vastly varied. Examples include, "I live in a sexless marriage," "I am a closet lesbian" "I am a military wife." Some stories have several thousand members, (e.g., 31,371 members in the sexless marriage experience listed above). To post a survey, simply become a member of an experience group (membership is unmoderated) and then post a story. Stories can contain links but cannot contain email addresses, so correspondence can be directed to simply message the researcher making the post. Based on a search of Google Scholar, no studies have been conducted examining the use of Experience Project for psychology research.

Open Diary (www.opendiary.com)

Open Diary is a free website (account creation required to post) that hosts online journals and communities. Open Diary features Circles, which include members interested in specific topics. Circles require membership, which can be requested. These include circles such as "Abuse Survivors," "Addiction Recovery," "Children and Parenting," and "Marriage," as well as those identified by age and geographic location. As examples, the circles mentioned above have all been active in the last 30 days and have more than 1,000 members. Circle members can post announcements similar to a discussion board. Members can also be found by browsing or searching Interests, which feature categories ranging from names of movies and music to topics such as "sex addiction," "piercings," "coffee," and "Christianity." Another feature of Open Diary is "boards," also listed by topics. These are in the fashion of typical online discussion boards. Access to Open Diary is free and only requires an email address, username, and password. To conduct research on Open Diary, a researcher can create an entry in their own journal featuring the study, in addition to posting information about studies in circles and discussion boards.

Mechanical Turk (www.mturk.com)

Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) is a web-based form of data collection. Essentially, this is an online-based workforce. Those interested in having certain tasks performed (Requesters) are able to solicit Providers (those who complete tasks). A monetary compensation is set by the Requestor and Providers browse available tasks (HITs) and complete them. Providers can be located in the entire world, but Requesters are limited to the United States. As an example, a quick search of surveys indicated payments ranging from .01 (60 second completion) to \$4 (several hours in length). Buhrmester, Kwang & Gosling (2011) recently reviewed this website for psychological research and concluded that data resulting from MTurk provided data as diverse as other forms of Internet data collection, if not more so. Further, MTurk data resulted in alpha's similar to those in other published research from traditional samples, with test-retest correlations ranging between .80 to .94.

Online data collection opens up many opportunities for psychological research. These websites can be useful for quickly collecting survey data, recruiting for experimental studies, and soliciting for individuals interested in treatment or focus groups. As Internet-based technology continues to become more portable and accessible, the Internet can be a powerful tool to further the study of psychological phenomena.