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Recommendations for Performing Internet-Based Research on Sensitive Subject Matter with "Hidden" or Difficult-to-Reach Populations

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Since the mid-1990s, the rapidly increasing popularity of the Internet has contributed to a situation in which many men turn to Web sites to find sex partners with whom they can engage in risky behaviors. Scholars only recently began to examine the role of the Internet in harm-seeking and help-seeking behaviors. They are just now beginning to study and understand how to apply public health promotion principles to people using the Internet. Due in part to the relative newness of the Internet on the public health landscape, scholars wishing to conduct research or to implement health promotion programs online should consider a variety of challenges to doing such work—challenges that differ from those typically faced when undertaking similar work in other types of venues offline.

The purpose of this article is to address several of these research considerations. In particular, the present authors wish to provide researchers and health care specialists with key considerations when developing their own Internet-based research or health promotion

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programs. We also wish to furbish readers with some experience-based suggestions about how to avoid the potential pitfalls of conducting Internet-based studies. Moreover, our emphasis is on how to develop such programs when they are targeting hard-to-reach or "hidden" populations and/or when they deal with sensitive subject matter. Recommendations pertaining to the planning, recruitment, implementation, and evaluation stages of doing professional work online are provided.

KEYWORDS research methods, hidden populations, hard-to-reach populations, Internet, online

INTRODUCTION

Research methods courses and survey research methodology taught in college and graduate school often provide students with instruction regarding the proper ways to design and implement research studies of various types (see, for example, Creswell, 2003; Patten, 2005). Typically, such courses include educational units that focus on options for developing a scientifically acceptable study design, selection and randomization of study participants, proper questionnaire construction, training interviewers, good interviewing techniques, strategies for building rapport with study participants, and so forth. Only occasionally do research methods and survey research methods courses include information about working with "hidden" or difficult-to-reach populations and/or about studying personal, sensitive subject matter. When such instruction is not provided, people tend to not have the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and work successfully with populations that are resistant to research endeavors, or to talk with members of these populations about topics that are very personal in nature. This can be problematic, because many "hidden" populations require specialized research techniques to access them, to gain their trust, and to foster their cooperation with research endeavors.

Many research methods and survey research methods courses also tend to omit instruction specific to the use of the Internet to conduct human-subjects research. In all likelihood, this is the result of the relative newness of the Internet, coupled with the even greater newness of the use of the Internet as a vehicle for conducting social science- or public health-focused research. Increased interest in engaging in Internet-based research has followed the growth of the Internet closely in recent years. This is evident both in terms of learning about people and their lives ***and*** in terms of using the Internet as a way of offering people educational content, prevention messages, behavioral interventions, and so forth. Some authors have written about issues pertinent to doing Internet-based research with human subjects (Birnbaum, 2000; Cho

& LaRose, 1999; Mustanski, 2001), but generally speaking, this is a newer field of inquiry with relatively little having been written about it.

In this article, based on our own experiences conducting Internet-based human-subjects research, we offer readers some suggestions as they themselves plan and/or undertake their own Internet-based research or health promotion studies. In particular, our focus is on offering some experience-based "DOs and DON'Ts" with regard to conducting Internet-based research on sensitive subject matter with "hidden" or difficult-to-reach populations. Our aim is *not* to cover points traditionally made in "standard" research methods or survey research methods courses; but rather, we wish to provide information and suggestions that are specific to (1) the Internet, (2) working with "hidden" or difficult-to-reach populations, and (3) capturing research data on sensitive subjects. In separate sections, we discuss our recommendations applicable to the planning, recruitment, and implementation stages of undertaking an Internet-based research study. At the end of this article, in the Appendix, we provide readers with overviews of some of the Internet-based projects that we ourselves have conducted with "hidden" or difficult-to-reach populations, involving sensitive subject matter. These overviews are provided so that readers can derive a better understanding of the basis for the recommendations contained in this article. Each overview also provides supporting evidence of the success of the project in question, to bolster confidence in our suggestions.

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: THE PLANNING STAGE

In this section, we focus on topics of relevance to the planning stages of a new study that entails working with difficult-to-reach populations and/or difficult-to-study subject matter. Here, we wish to address five specific points for readers to consider: (1) establishing an official project Web site, (2) maximizing anonymity, (3) offering options for ways of collecting data, (4) gauging and maximizing interviewers' comfort level with the subject matter, and (5) strategies for dealing with multiple accounts or user names. We discuss each of these in turn.

Establishing an official project Web site to explain and promote a newly undertaken project is almost essential nowadays, particularly with Internet-based research projects. Experience working on *The Bareback Project* suggests that potential study participants appreciated having the ability to go to the Internet to read about the study. A substantial proportion of the people taking part in our studies (estimated at one-quarter to one-third of the participants in *The Bareback Project*) specifically requested a link to our project's home page prior to agreeing to participate in the study. We would expect

this proportion to increase gradually in the years to come, as more and more people become comfortable with the use of the Internet for information-gathering purposes. Having an official project Web site enabled people to find out more about the study, and to do so at a time that was convenient for them. Having such information available on the Internet allowed them to re-consult the information after an initial visit, and to share the Web site link with family members and trusted friends who could offer their own input with regard to the legitimacy of the study, express any concerns they themselves might have regarding participating in the project, and so forth. Our experience suggests that additional benefits might be derived if the project Web site can be subsumed within that of a larger company, research institute, or university. (This suggestion is made in contrast to a recommendation to establish a specific, independently maintained Web address that is unaffiliated with any well-established, community-known company, research institute, or university.) As long as they can be directed to the project's Web page(s) easily and directly, potential study participants seemed to feel reassured when they saw that our project was affiliated as part of a research center that was university based. Elsewhere in the journal issue in which the present article is published, Gilbert, Peterson, and Scanlon provide information about some layout- and design-related features that researchers might wish to consider as they develop their project-related Web sites. We encourage readers to heed some of these findings and suggestions as well.

Maximizing potential study participants' anonymity is likely to be an essential way of encouraging some of them to participate in an Internet-based study focusing on sensitive information. As a general rule, the more sensitive the information researchers plan to collect and/or the more difficult to reach the research population is, the more important it will be to offer respondents an opportunity to remain anonymous. Merely promising complete confidentiality will not be sufficient to entice some people to participate in a study, particularly one involving very personal information. While working on *The Bareback Project*, for example, men were never asked for their last name when interviews were scheduled or when answering their study-related questions prior to making the decision to participate. Men were asked to give their first name, so they could be addressed in some manner other than their online user name; and they were allowed to make up a name if they preferred to do that. That strategy worked fairly well most of the time. Fearing that their telephone number might not be safeguarded adequately, however, several men refused to give a telephone number to reach them for their interviews. Many of these individuals preferred to call the research team at a prearranged day and time to do the interviews, so that they themselves could control the divulgence of a telephone number. Some men specifically asked if a feature such as Caller ID (which would enable the research team to identify their telephone numbers) was being used, and agreed to participate only when they found out that it was not in use. Nowadays, with identity

theft being commonplace on the Internet, people increasingly have reason to be cautious with regard to the disclosure of their personal information to strangers—such as researchers—who approach them via the Internet. It is essential to develop ways that people can participate in research studies while feeling confident that their personal information will remain private and protected. Consequently, the less information that researchers collect about their study participants' identities, the better, at least from the point of view of enticing them to participate.

Coinciding with this suggestion, we encourage researchers who are thinking about doing Internet-based research to consider *offering potential study participants various options of ways in which they can participate.* Based on our experiences, we believe that researchers would be wise to offer respondents several ways of participating in their studies, whenever this is feasible within the scientific constraints of the study design and with deference to the study's validity. Most of the men with whom we have dealt (perhaps half to two-thirds of those participating in *The Bareback Project*) were comfortable with the idea of completing a telephone interview (or at least willing to do so). But a sizable minority of the men would not entertain this option, leading some to decline to participate in the study. Several of the men who had been invited to take part in the project responded by asking if they could complete the questionnaire via e-mail, and others wanted to know if they could take the survey online, via an Internet survey engine (e.g., surveymonkey.com). In our opinion, future projects would be well-advised to give serious consideration to this option, when it is feasible (e.g., for a brief questionnaire that takes, at most, 15 minutes to complete). As the length of the interview increases, the chances diminish that people who are given an option to complete a lengthy questionnaire online will complete all of it.

As with any research study, each option pursued carries with it a set of advantages and disadvantages to the researchers and study participants alike. Any time study participants can be given the option of completing an interview via telephone, in person, via e-mail, *or* via the Internet (or by as many of these means as can be workable for the research team and the requirements of the study design), the likelihood that they will participate will increase. From a research methods perspective, this poses numerous challenges to the research team. If different methods of collecting data are used in one particular study, it will become incumbent upon the research team to examine the data obtained by each method to ensure comparability, assess self-selection bias, and so forth.

In planning new research studies and projects, we also advise researchers to *consider the comfort levels* that their interviewers, outreach workers, and recruiters have with the target population and with the subject matter being studied. In addition, the issue should be raised of *how knowledgeable their interviewers, outreach workers, and recruiters are* of the target

population and its members' beliefs, attitudes, normative expectations, and behavioral practices. Working with "hidden" or difficult-to-reach populations requires deft handling. People participating in research studies want, and in many cases need, to know that the research staff members with whom they are interacting understand them, understand their lives and their life issues, understand their concerns, and so forth.

When undertaking work on *The Bareback Project*, for example, these issues came to the forefront immediately. For example: Could a female interviewer be effective at engaging the men and making them feel comfortable in disclosing the intimate details of their sexual behaviors? Would it help in any way if the woman were lesbian, so as to be familiar, at a minimum, with some of the sexual orientation-related aspects of interviewing men looking for other men online? Could a heterosexual man be effective at these tasks? Would a female (heterosexual or homosexual) or a heterosexual man be viewed as credible by members of the target population? These were key questions and, as it turned out, valid ones. A substantial proportion of the men taking part in *The Bareback Project*—probably one-third to one-half of them—wanted to know the sexual orientation of the person interviewing them. Moreover, it was not uncommon for study participants to explain or elaborate upon their answers to some questions, then inquire of the interviewer "Do you know what I mean? Have you ever done that or been in that situation?" Interviewers' ability to say "yes," with complete honesty, was invaluable toward building trust, rapport, and confidence with the men they were interviewing. This is not to say that interviewers must "match" study participants' characteristics in all instances. Rather, it is a way of bringing to the attention of researchers and health care specialists the importance of considering such factors when designing a study that will target difficult-to-reach populations.

In addition, making sure that all interviewers are highly knowledgeable about the subject matter covered by the interview is an essential part of the interviewer training process, particularly when working with sensitive subject matter. Had the interviewers not been trained thoroughly on sexual behavior (particularly gay male sexual behavior) and drug use terminology prior to undertaking *The Bareback Project*, many of their interviews would have been more difficult to complete properly, vital information might have been lost, and many of their interviewees would have lost confidence in them as research professionals. Researchers planning studies involving difficult-to-reach populations and/or sensitive subject matter must instill in their recruiters, outreach workers, and interviewers the importance of treating all persons with respect and dignity, and the importance of responding to everything they hear during an interview in a nonplused way. Working on *The Bareback Project*, interviewers often had study participants recount for them stories of rampant drug use (occasionally among people who were the age of their parents and grandparents), knowingly infecting other men

with HIV, men's efforts to become HIV infected as quickly as possible, severe childhood traumatic experiences, and the like. Had the interviewers not listened patiently and professionally, and where appropriate sympathetically/empathetically, to all of these stories, *The Bareback Project* would not have been nearly as successful as it was in understanding the role that engaging in unprotected sex plays in men's lives. Rehearsing such listening, interacting, and responding skills during interviewer training is crucial for any research endeavor that will target sensitive subject matter or "hidden" populations.

The final planning stage issue that we wish to discuss pertains to *having a strategy for handling multiple user names or the use of multiple Web sites.* Researchers who plan to develop an Internet-based study must realize that many of the people they will wish to include in their studies are members of more than one targeted Web site. For *The Bareback Project*, for example, only 8.1% of the men interviewed reported that the particular site from which they were recruited was the only Web site they had used during the preceding month to meet other men for unprotected sex. Informally during the interviews, some men spoke of using more than 10 such Web sites on a regular basis for that purpose. In addition, many people who like a particular Web site create more than one user name or profile on that site, typically using their different online identities for different types of site usage. Again using *The Bareback Project* as an illustration, some men who considered themselves to be sexually versatile posted one profile for use when they were in a "bottom" mood (i.e., when they wanted to receive anal sex), one profile for use when they were in a "top" mood (i.e., when they wanted to be the insertive anal sex partner), one profile for use when they were in the mood for group sex, and so forth. Bowen, Daniel, Williams, and Baird (2008) have addressed some similar issues as these; their work is well worth consulting.

From a research methods perspective, this poses a problem for researchers because it is rare for researchers to want to double-count the same person in any given study. Researchers planning an Internet-based study need to strategize before they begin recruitment, to make sure that they have devised a way to identify and handle duplicate respondents. Identifying individuals who try to participate two or more times can be difficult, because many of them do not disclose the fact that they have already participated in the study. This occurs sometimes because they want the additional study participation money. Researchers might consider asking potential study participants during the screening process whether they have taken part in this particular study previously. Some individuals will answer honestly, thereby helping to minimize this source of bias. Some will not answer honestly, leaving the research team with the need to develop other ways of identifying the same person using multiple Web sites or multiple user names on one particular Web site.

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: THE RECRUITMENT STAGE

In this part of the article, we discuss some issues that are pertinent to the recruitment stage of a research project involving the use of the Internet for conducting a scientific inquiry into sensitive subject matter with hard-to-reach populations. We address eight such topics, in succession: (1) making the research team members' credentials available, (2) length of the initial approach, (3) how to approach potential study participants, (4) when to conduct recruitment activities, (5) where to conduct recruitment activities, (6) timeliness of responding to people, (7) offering a selection of payments, and (8) posting of photographs.

Based on our experience conducting our various projects, the present authors strongly suggest that researchers and health care professionals planning an Internet-based study *make their credentials readily available* to potential study participants. This may be done in a variety of ways. The official project Web site could be designed with a link to a separate page providing a brief biography and career summary for each key person working on the project. This is especially important for the principal investigator and for any research team members who are likely to have personal contact with the study participants. Potential respondents should be offered direct Web links to the universities or research centers where the researchers work, especially if credentials and other professionally identifying information are provided there already. Also, when approached initially to participate in a particular project, potential study participants should be encouraged to conduct a Yahoo! or Google search on the principal investigator's name, to see some of the other work that he or she has done. Working on *The Bareback Project*, for example, Klein and Lambing were surprised at the substantial number of men who took the time to "check them out" so that they could reassure themselves that they were being approached by legitimate researchers (as opposed to scam artists trying to obtain personal information from them for nefarious reasons). With increasing use of the Internet by scammers for untoward purposes, it becomes increasingly important for research teams wishing to avail themselves of Internet-based research samples to combat this by providing people with legitimacy-related information as early as possible in the recruitment process.

When it comes time for researchers to approach members of their target audience online to invite them to participate in their study, it would behoove them to *make that initial approach as brief as possible.* This can be very challenging, as it runs counter to the ordinary demands of providing potential study participants with full "up-front" disclosure as part of the informed consent process. Our own experience, however, suggests that response rates and participation rates are likely to be related inversely (and fairly strongly

inversely at that!) to the amount of verbiage used in the initial approach. For example, in *The Bareback Project*, Klein and Lambing opted for an initial approach that was a mere 225 words long. It provided men with a statement of the project's purpose, what would be expected of them if they elected to participate, an open-ended invitation to ask questions of any kind about the study or the research team, a variety of ways to contact the research team, brief mentioning of the payment and confidentiality of the research, and a suggestion that they conduct an Internet search on the principal investigator's name to feel reassured of the legitimacy of the project about which they were being contacted. This satisfied the protection of human subjects requirements in an ethical manner, and it did not alienate men by providing them with what they perceived to be so much detail/information/text that they stopped reading partway through the document.

Researchers planning an Internet-based study must also make decisions about *how to approach potential study participants*. A variety of options exist, and each has its unique constellation of advantages and disadvantages.

Option #1: Contact people via e-mail. This offers potential study participants the opportunity to read the research invitation at a time of their own choosing and convenience. However, it lacks a personal touch and makes it very easy for people to stop reading the invitation to participate before they have had a chance to give the matter careful thought. This approach also makes it difficult for researchers to know whether people have read and considered their offer to take part in the study, because many Web sites do not have a feature available showing whether someone has read an e-mail sent to them via the site. This can cause problems with the computation of participation, active refusal, and passive refusal rates, and for assessing research bias based on participation/refusal. (For example, if someone is sent an e-mail invitation to participate in a study but never opened the e-mail, that should not be counted against the researcher in the computation of refusal rates nor counted in the researcher's favor in the computation of participation rates.) Finally, approaching people via e-mail can lead to a time-consuming back-and-forth process when would-be study participants do not provide all of the information necessary to foster the next step in their participation (e.g., they provide a name but no contact information, or they provide a telephone number but no indication of good/bad times to call).

Option #2: Contact people via instant message. The approach offers as its principal benefit the immediacy of interaction. The research team member can discuss the project with the person interactively, answer any questions that the person may have interactively, and can get a "yes" or "no" answer relatively quickly. But using instant messages to recruit study participants has several drawbacks too. First, it can be intrusive, especially because the researcher has no way of knowing what the person being contacted was doing before he or she received the project-related instant message. Second, not all instant message systems inform the user of the recipient's online/offline

status. Yahoo! Instant Messenger and Skype, for example, relay messages to the recipient whenever he or she next comes online. As a sender, the person has no way of knowing whether his or her unanswered message is going unanswered because the person does not want to talk, if he or she is not online, *or* if he or she does not have the instant messaging software downloaded. Third, annoyed recipients of instant messages can, with a click of a button, report the person contacting them to the Web site's administrators, requesting them to take action against the sender. This can lead to suspensions of e-mail accounts without warning, and this can be a significant disruption to the smooth operation of an ongoing research study. This happened on several occasions during Moskowitz and Seal's study (described in this journal issue) as well as during Klein and Lambing's work on *The Bareback Project*.

Option #3: Contact people via chat room discussion. As with the instant messaging option, this approach offers the benefit of immediate interaction and the ability to speak with people about the project they are being asked to join. Again, however, drawbacks exist with this approach as well. Chat rooms are not private locations. Other persons in the chat room may join in on the conversation and influence people's decisions to or not to participate in the research endeavor. Moreover, people who have participated in the study may speak with others in the chat room at some point in the future when the research team returns there to do additional recruitment. This can taint the research process, either by a satisfied study participant "talking up" the benefits of having taken part in the study or by a dissatisfied study participant discouraging others from taking part in the study based on his or her own experiences. Also, many chat rooms are supervised by moderators who, at their discretion, may eject people for noncompliance with the "rules and regulations" or online etiquette established by that Web site or online service for its members. If they do not want to see research project recruitment taking place in their chat room, the moderators can prevent the researcher from being able to approach people there in the future.

There is no easy panacea for these issues. For *The Bareback Project*, Klein and Lambing opted for a combined approach that suited their study's research needs well. All persons were contacted initially via e-mail. In that manner, the researchers were able to supply potential participants with a study overview that they could read—or not read—at their own convenience. During the hours when study team members were engaged in recruitment activities, they were logged onto two different instant messaging services (typically, America Online / AIM, Yahoo! Instant Messenger, and/or MSN Messenger). In this way, people who wanted to speak with them about the study could reach them interactively, based on the contact information supplied to them in the original e-mail approach. This approach worked well, as some men clearly preferred all communication via e-mail, some preferred it via instant messaging, and some preferred to speak with someone by

telephone (which was possible because the main contact telephone number was supplied in the original e-mail sent to them).

Another recruitment-related consideration pertains to *when to perform recruitment activities*. Researchers engaging in Internet-based research studies need to bear in mind that their study participants use the Internet at very different hours of the day and on different days of the week. Some people are online almost constantly; others have a limited, routine set of hours during which they read/write e-mail; still others vary in their Internet use from week to week. Different "types" of persons are likely to use the Internet during different time periods, too. For example, people with full-time jobs are more likely to be online during the evening or on weekends than during the daytime. Persons who are unemployed or homemakers or living on disability or working a night shift are more likely than others to be online during the daytime. Consequently, eligible persons for most research studies may be found online nearly 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Therefore, it is wise to engage in recruitment activities at different times of day and on different days of the week, particularly if the researcher's goal is to derive a representative sample of Internet users for his or her online study. This is especially important if the study design calls for approaching people based on who is logged on at a particular point in time. We would like to offer one caveat here: Many people respond to invitations to participate in a research study almost immediately after they read the initial invitation. If they receive it during the late evening or on a weekend, they may feel "put off" if they are unable to reach someone or receive a response quickly because they are sending their reply during non-business hours. Therefore, in their initial approach to potential study participants, researchers should let people know the hours when a member of the research team may be reached. Our own experience suggested strongly that the more flexible the research team members could be with regard to doing recruitment, responding to potential study participants' questions, and doing interviews, the more likely they were to succeed in getting a better representation of their target audience in their research sample.

Along these same lines, researchers must give consideration to *where online they want to recruit* potential study participants. Nowadays, for most target populations, multiple Web sites cater to their interests and needs. This makes it important for researchers to make decisions regarding the number of Web sites they wish to use as the catchment areas for their studies, and which Web site(s) they wish to use for that purpose. Spending time on a variety of candidate Web sites and "getting a feel" for each of them is a worthwhile investment that researchers should make. During that process, special attention should be given to determining who exactly it is who uses that Web site, and why persons are choosing to become members of, or to spend time on, that particular Web site rather than on another Website

with a seemingly similar emphasis (e.g., gay.com versus adam4adam.com). This is critical, because it has a direct impact upon the target population that will be included/excluded from the study about to be implemented. The use of multiple Web sites is often advantageous, so as to enhance generalizability of one's research findings. However, as mentioned earlier, the use of multiple Web sites also increases the complexity of the research by making it difficult to know whether a particular person has been approached to participate elsewhere, whether a particular individual has participated in the study already, and so forth.

Another recruitment-related topic we would like to address is that of the *timeliness of responding* to people. In any research endeavor, it is advisable to answer people's questions and to try to schedule them for their interviews as quickly as possible. Yet never is this truer than when one is performing Internet-based research on sensitive subjects with difficult-to-reach populations. Whenever sensitive subject matter is involved, people often become skittish if they have too much time to think about participating in a study, or to rethink their decision to participate. The adage "Strike while the iron is hot" applies particularly well to this situation. When people are approached to participate in an Internet-based study dealing with sensitive subject matter, it is advantageous to the researcher to try to get them scheduled and interviewed as soon thereafter as possible. The large majority of them will not regret having participated in a well-run, well-executed project, no matter how personal the questions asked of them. In contrast, a sizable proportion of them *will* back out of a promise to participate if there is a lengthy gap between the time they are approached and the time they are actually interviewed. At most, this interval should be one week; ideally, it would be less than two days. Similarly, any time someone replies to an instant message, a chat room message, or an e-mail with questions about a study or with an interest in participating in it, it behooves the research team to respond as promptly as possible. Delays in responding or providing information communicate any of several unwanted messages to the recipient: The research team is disorganized, the research team does not really care about that individual's participation in the study, the research is not truly legitimate, *or* the researchers are not professional in their interactions with potential study participants. The best way to avoid these perceptions is by providing prompt, direct responses to all communications from previously contacted study invitees.

Offering potential study participants a choice of payment options is likely to enhance Internet-based research participation rates. Many previous studies have examined the effect of offering different types of research incentives on participation rates, almost always finding that providing people with cash in hand is an effective and preferable payment option (Cleary, Walter, & Matheson, 2008; Festinger, Marlowe, Dugosh, Croft, & Arabia, 2008). When an Internet-based study is involved, though, this is not an option and the

research team must be creative in determining what form(s) of payment to offer. Many payment options exist, but no one of them is necessarily better or more preferable than any other, particularly when dealing with difficult-to-reach research populations. Mailing a check or a money order to people is the closest thing to cash in hand as Internet-based researchers can offer. However, many study participants are not comfortable (in some instances, downright unwilling) giving their full name and mailing address to researchers, even after completing what they perceive to have been a 100% legitimate research interview. Of the men participating in *The Bareback Project*, for example, nearly half of the men selected a payment option that did not require them to provide their name and mailing address. The large majority of these men chose another option because of the importance they placed upon their anonymity. Moskowitz and Roloff (2008) had one effective way of handling this situation: In their online survey regarding vengeance and HIV nondisclosure among HIV-positive men, participants were told either to supply their initials or "Resident" with their address as a means to maintain anonymity when mailing the incentive. Another option is to deposit study participation money into an online account, such as PayPal, that the people can access and use. This offers the benefit of almost immediate receipt of the funds, but many people are unfamiliar with services like PayPal; many are uncomfortable using such services; and many have had negative previous experiences with such services, thereby rendering them unenthusiastic about using them again. Also, online payment services such as PayPal can increase the costs to the researcher, as they typically charge a fee to the sender for dispatching money. A third payment option, increasingly popular nowadays, is to make some type of online gift certificate available to study participants at vendors such as Amazon.com. This option offers most of the same advantages and disadvantages just discussed for PayPal. A fourth payment option, which many men who participated in *The Bareback Project* specifically requested, is to offer to donate the person's study participation money to a charity that supports a cause similar to that undertaken by one's own research study. Funding agencies and their rules and regulations for the dispensation of their money may preclude some researchers from implementing this option. When feasible, however, our own experience suggests that a substantial minority of study participant members will opt to have their money donated to a worthy charity. Our bottom-line recommendation to Internet-focused researchers, however, is to offer as many choices among payment options as possible, because some people will be unwilling to participate in a study collecting sensitive information if they dislike the options presented to them for receiving their study participant payment.

Finally, we would like to address one recruitment-related issue that is unlike all of the preceding—namely, the decision of *whether to post research team members' photographs* online. Many Web sites where research

recruitment efforts may be undertaken require users to create a profile before they can use or search the site. Indeed, this requirement seems to be growing in popularity on the Internet. This forces researchers to consider whether they wish to include any photographs of themselves in their profiles. When the Web site in question is known for fostering personal relationships, the usual expectation is that site members will post photographs of themselves. From a research perspective, though, this can work for *or* against the research endeavor. Many people using these members-only Web sites read an instant message or an e-mail sent to them only after reading the sender's personal information in the profile, including viewing his or her photographs first. It is not uncommon for people to delete a message or an e-mail from someone whose profile was not interesting or whose picture they personally found to be unattractive. Conversely, many people will not read a message or an e-mail from someone who has no profile posted or no photograph accompanying it. A great many online profiles explicitly state "No pic = no reply" or something to that effect. This puts the researcher into a genuine quandary and what is, in many instances, a no-win situation.

Adding to the complicated situation, our experiences suggest that some personal characteristics may enhance the likelihood of receiving a response from persons contacted during recruitment. During part of *The Bareback Project*, for example, one research assistant helping out with the project's recruitment efforts was a young, tall, well-built, attractive African-American man. Using the same approach script (verbatim) as all other members of the research team did, this particular man received replies from a substantially greater proportion of the people he had contacted than did anyone else working on the study. In part because of his good looks, in part because of his youth, and perhaps even because of his racial background, men on the site where he did his recruiting responded more consistently and more favorably to e-mails sent by him than by anyone else working on the project. Apparently, there was a benefit to having this particular man post a photograph of himself prior to conducting recruitment activities on the study. That same benefit was not derived by the other project members (who were considerably older and not as well-built), though. As another good example, online counselors in Moskowitz, Melton, and Owczarzak's (2009) investigation of instant message counseling chose to post pictures of themselves as they counseled individuals in a men-for-men gay.com chat room. As found for the *The Bareback Project*, this both fostered and suppressed participation. Oftentimes, the young male counselors (with accurate pictures in their profiles) were seduced by men in the chat room. When the counselors revealed that they were only there to counsel, some men recoiled and even actively chastised the counselors publicly in the chat room. In other instances, the pictures seemed to legitimize the counselors as real people and encouraged lengthy counseling sessions.

Situations such as these leave researchers wishing to do their own studies on the Internet to grapple with the issue of how to handle the matter of posting versus not posting photographs of the research team. Again, there is no one-suggestion-fits-all solution to be had here. Klein and Lambing's decision of how to handle this on *The Bareback Project* was for each person working on the study to create an honest, accurate profile for himself or herself, and to post one recent photograph of himself or herself, but to have that photograph "locked." Anybody wishing to see the picture merely had to send an e-mail requesting it to be unlocked, which made the photograph viewable by them. Moskowitz and colleagues (2009) decided to make the counselors' photographs public and viewable to anyone, at any time. Unmistakably, though, researchers doing Internet-based research, particularly on Web sites requiring profile posting and individual membership prior to granting full-access site usage, must decide how to handle this situation for their own work.

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: THE IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

In this final section of the paper, we will provide readers with our thoughts and recommendations on some issues pertaining to the implementation phase of an Internet-based study conducted with difficult-to-reach populations, involving sensitive subject matter. Here, we will discuss two specific topics: cancellation of user names or Web site memberships and making the interview a pleasurable experience.

Most Web sites have strict policies regarding what their operators consider to be proper usage of the site. After all, these Web sites were never intended to be used for research purposes. Approaching members online for the purpose of conducting research is, in many instances, an explicit or an implicit violation of the Web sites' terms of service. Accordingly, members who feel as if they have been bothered by other persons usually have recourse with the owners/operators of the Web sites, requesting that these persons be suspended or blocked from the Web site in the future, as Moskowitz and Seal *and* Klein and Lambing discovered. Researchers planning to conduct studies online need to be aware of this, because most Web sites that take member comments and complaints into consideration will suspend or block other persons without warning or notice. When they do this, most often, they place an internal block on the member's registration e-mail address, preventing that e-mail address from ever again being used to create a new user account on that site.

Depending upon the Web site in question, it may be possible for researchers to contact the owners/operators before undertaking their research, explain their study, and get the owners/operators to "buy in" so that member

complaints do not result in suspension of the researcher's account or user name. This is the most ethical way of approaching a new Internet-based research study, when it is feasible to gain the support of the owner/operator. Typically, though, the Web site owners/operators are not cooperative with the research process, and will not try to find a collaborative solution that will enable researchers to use their sites for recruitment purposes even if a substantial number of their members would be interested in participating in a research study.

In the absence of full cooperation on the part of the Web site owners/operators, researchers who still wish to use the Internet for participant recruitment are forced to take a variety of steps that, together, constitute an end-around approach to dealing with these challenges. First, all persons contacted on a particular Web site might be encouraged to contact the research team members *away* from that site. That way, if one of the researcher's user names is blocked or suspended suddenly, the researcher can still be in contact with potentially interested study participants. To facilitate this process, initial approaches to possible study participants should include a variety of off-Web site ways of contacting members of the research team. Second, in their initial approach to potential study participants, researchers are advised to request the person's contact information, and to request that people provide that information to them somewhere other than on the Web site where recruitment is being done. Third, members of the research team can develop a variety of user names, all created from the foundation of a different e-mail account, over a series of weeks or months. In this manner, whenever a Web site owner/operator blocks or suspends one account, another one that is "waiting in the wings" can be used. This will prevent the research team from experiencing recruitment delays while a new account is established, a new profile is set up, approval for the new profile is pending with the Web site, and so forth. Unlimited free Hotmail.com, Gmail.com, and Yahoo.com e-mail accounts can be created, and these particular sites are very useful for the purpose described herein. Moreover, researchers might wish to consider using various Internet-ready computers from which participants can be recruited. Web sites increasingly are being able to recognize users' IP addresses. If multiple computers are available for use, recruitment can continue on a different computer when/if another computer is tagged by a particular Web site as a violator of its terms of usage/service.[1]

Finally, we wish to conclude by discussing the importance of and ways of making the interview a pleasurable experience for study participants. As with any research study involving human subjects, participation and cooperation with the interview process are likely to be greatest when people find the research process to be enjoyable. We raise this issue in the present paper because it is a consideration that is of paramount importance when dealing with "hidden" or hard-to-reach populations and/or with sensitive subject matter. The more personal or intrusive a research study's questions are, the more

important it will be to help people to feel comfortable with the questioning-and-answering process. We can accomplish this many ways. One is to infuse humor into the interview at times when it is appropriate. Nothing dissolves participation-related anxiety and apprehensiveness better than a good laugh. During the interviewer training process, researchers should encourage their outreach team members, recruiters, and interviewers to put their individual sense of humor to use. This is something to be rehearsed during the training process, and refined throughout the study. Another way to increase the pleasurability of a recruitment discussion or an interview is to spend a bit of time just chatting with the participant. Opportunities to humanize the getting-to-know-you and interview processes almost always arise in a research encounter. It is important for research team members to learn how to avail themselves of these opportunities. Third, try to anticipate and avert respondent boredom with lengthier parts of an interview by forewarning them of a long section before it starts, or by promising them a deal ("If you'll bear with me, I'll get you through this section as best and as fast as I can"). Another way of doing this is by asking people to write something down during various parts of an interview—perhaps asking them to write down the response options for a particular part of the questionnaire. Anything that breaks up the otherwise-monotonous rhythm of what may be perceived to be an endless series of questions can reduce the boredom that tends to result from a lengthy interview, can build rapport with the study participant, can make the interview process less difficult for the study participant, and can reduce tedium for the interviewer, who may have to conduct several hundred such interviews. These are also excellent ways of helping people to feel more comfortable sharing personal, sensitive information, because they come to believe that the person speaking with them truly cares about what they have to say and about their well-being.

CONCLUSION

This article has offered readers some suggestions as they themselves plan and/or undertake their own Internet-based research or health promotion studies. With respect to the planning stage of such a project, our principal recommendations have included establishing an official project Web site, maximizing study participants' anonymity, offering options for different ways of collecting data, maximizing interviewers' comfort level with the subject matter, and having a strategy in place for dealing with multiple accounts or user names. Regarding the recruitment stage of undertaking such a study, we suggested making the research team members' credentials available, keeping the initial approach script as brief as possible, giving careful consideration as to how to approach potential study participants, making thoughtful decisions regarding when to conduct recruitment activities, selecting one's site(s) of

recruitment carefully, providing very timely responses to potential study participants, offering a selection of payment options, and weighing the benefits and drawbacks of posting of photographs of project personnel. With respect to the implementation phase of research, we offered some advice regarding how to avoid and/or cope with the potential cancellation of user names or Web site memberships and the importance of making the interview a pleasurable experience for study participants. We believe that accounting for the benefits and drawbacks associated with the multitude of decisions that must be made in order to implement a successful Internet-based study will assist researchers who are new to the process in avoiding frustrating delays or encountering significant problems with their projects, particularly as they target hard-to-reach populations and/or ask sensitive research questions.

NOTE

1. The present authors wish to acknowledge the fact that the issues and potential solutions to the issues raised here, with regard to working within versus finding effective ways of circumventing the established parameters of using various Web sites, are complicated. Navigating these issues may entail making challenging decisions with regard to the implementation of an ethically sound, IRB-approvable project. For example, on a case-by-case basis, researchers need to evaluate whether it is or is not acceptable to continue to use a Web site whose owner/operator has blocked them due to violations of the site's terms of use. To determine this, the researchers must address the issue of harm done versus potential benefit of continuing the line of inquiry, and determine which outweighs which in their particular situation. They may need to work closely and collaboratively with members of their institutional review board/human subjects protection committee, in order to devise acceptable, effective solutions to these challenges.

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APPENDIX: PROJECT OVERVIEWS FOR THE CONTRIBUTORS AND EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

Project Overview: The Bareback Project (Hugh Klein, Thomas P. Lambing)

The principal goal of *The Bareback Project* was to learn more about the role that the Internet plays in the sexual risk practices of and sexual safety decisions made by men who use the Internet specifically to find other men for unprotected sex. *The Bareback Project* is a National Institute on Drug Abuse-funded initiative that began data collection in January 2008 and completed the data collection phase during spring 2009. In all, more than 300 men were interviewed by telephone, completing a one-time interview that

lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. Men were selected randomly from all across the United States, based on a random daily combination of the first letter of their online user name and on their race/ethnicity as stated in their profile. Men were approached either via e-mail (the large majority of the time), or by instant message (approximately 10% of the time) if they were known to be online at the time their profile was selected for recruitment. To facilitate comparisons between Caucasian men and men of color, the study design entailed oversampling men of color. Fourteen Web sites were used to identify and recruit men into the study. All of the Web sites either specifically targeted men looking for unprotected sex partners, or allowed users of the sites to indicate whether they wanted to find partners with whom they could engage in protected sex exclusively, protected sex occasionally, or unprotected sex exclusively. Only men whose profiles indicated an interest in identifying potential unprotected sex partners were included in this research.

To be eligible to participate in *The Bareback Project*, men had to be age 18 or older and they had to have a profile or a sexual hookup ad posted on one of the 14 targeted Web sites. With very few exceptions, the interviews were done by telephone. The few exceptions typically were made for men who were hearing impaired or for those whose financial situation made it impossible for them to incur the telephone charges associated with participating in a lengthy telephone call. When the interviews were completed, arrangements were made to pay study participants $35 for their time, either via depositing money into a PayPal account or by mailing a check to them.

The interviews conducted in conjunction with *The Bareback Project* were very detailed, capturing a great deal of information that most persons would consider to be highly sensitive. No identifying information was collected, although some basic demographic-type information was asked, including age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, sexual orientation, marital/relationship status, and ZIP code (which was used to compute population density in their location of residence). The interview began by inquiring about men's perceptions of discrimination based on sexual orientation, their degree of "outness" regarding their sexual orientation, and general health behaviors.

From there, it proceeded with a lengthy section on men's sexual practices, including the extent to which their sexual practices entailed condom use, the extent to which their sexual practices involved internal ejaculation, and how, if at all, their sexual practices differed with Internet-facilitated and non-Internet-facilitated sexual hookups. In addition to "standard" questions pertaining to receptive and insertive oral and anal sex, men were asked about a variety of other sexual practices, such as felching (eating semen out of another man's anus), double penile penetration, rimming (oral-anal contact), sharing sex toys, fisting, external ejaculation, masturbation of another man to the point of sexual climax, multiple-partner sexual encounters, and

"pimping out" or "being pimped out" by a partner (i.e., having a partner bring several persons to use or have sex with the individual). For men who had been involved sexually with women, additional questions were posed pertaining to those sexual practices as well. The sexual-behaviors part of the interview also inquired in detail about men's general preferences for *and* recent experiences with a variety of risk-enhancing sexual practices, such as engaging in rough sex, engaging in long-lasting sex, having anonymous sex, wanting sex that was wild or uninhibited, having sex in bathhouses or sex clubs, and having sex in public places. Questioning continued by inquiring about the extent of eroticism men experienced regarding the different sensory aspects of ejaculatory fluids, and finally by posing a series of "HIV risk hypotheticals" to the men and asking them what they thought they would do in each hypothetical scenario.

The next portion of the interview focused on men's substance use and abuse histories. It inquired about alcohol, Viagra or the equivalent, and the use of nine types of illegal drugs. Questions inquired about lifetime use, age of first use, frequency and quantity of recent use, amount of recent use in conjunction with sexual behaviors, preferences for drug use during sex (both for oneself and for one's sex partners), lifetime and recent experiences with 14 different drug dependency symptoms, and drug treatment history.

The interview proceeded by examining men's use of the Internet. Here, they were asked about their frequency of using the Internet for finding dating and sex partners on men-seeking-men (MSM) sites, the amount of time they typically spent engaging in such activities, the number of men they recently met (and the number of these men with whom they engaged in sex) as a result of the Internet, the proportions of men met online who they asked about their sexual history or their HIV serostatus prior to engaging in sex, their comparative likelihood of using the Internet for various meeting men-related purposes (e.g., for sex, for friendship, specifically for unprotected sex, etc.), and their perceptions of men's truthfulness online.

The interview concluded by capturing detailed information pertaining to a variety of psychological and psychosocial measures, and relevant aspects of men's lives. The concluding sections of the questionnaire covered such topics as childhood maltreatment, HIV transmission and testing-related knowledge, depression, self-esteem, impulsivity, HIV-related locus of control, condom use self-efficacy, attitudes toward condom use, current life satisfaction, optimism about the future, HIV information burnout, and partner communication.

What Were Some of *The Bareback Project's* Main Successes?

As one might expect, recruiting men to take part in the study was a difficult process. Despite the inherent difficulty, the research team was able to build a

research sample of more than 300 men, all of whom were persons who used the Internet specifically to identify partners for engaging in unprotected sex. Recruitment was a slow, steady process from the onset to the completion of this study, with no tapering off of willing participants as the study progressed. This is something the research team considers important, because the expectation at the beginning of the study was that a saturation point would be reached relatively early on, and that recruitment would become more difficult with time. Such was not the case, however.

Another surprisingly successful aspect of doing this research was that virtually none of the men interviewed objected to answering any of the questions posed to them, no matter how personal. One man declined to state his age ("I think age is a meaningless number and people who need to know about it are rude"); one man declined to indicate how much he likes having rough sex (on the basis that he prefers very gentle oral sex and very rough anal sex, and he refused to choose an overall preference ranking because his preferences regarding those practices were so different); and one man claimed an inability to recall some of the details about his past-30-days health practices. *All* other questions were answered by *all* of the men in the study. Moreover, very rarely did the interviewers express concerns about the truthfulness of the information that had been provided to them by study participants. Mean scores (on a 0–4 scale) on the interviewers' assessments of the data quality elements ranged from 3.65 for the amount of effort men put into thinking about their answers to 3.91 for their level of coherence during the interview. Cooperation with the interview process, comprehension of the interview questions, and adjudged honesty and forthrightness were also high, falling between the former two elements.

Third, there was very little evidence of underreporting or social desirability responding in *The Bareback Project*. Nearly half of the study participants (44.5%) reported illegal drug use during the month prior to interview, and 85.7% admitted to lifetime use of an illegal drug. Both of these figures are substantially higher than estimates for the American adult male population-at-large (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2008). Two-thirds of the men (67.0%) reported no condom use during the month prior to interview and another 26.9% reported using condoms less than one-third of the time. Nearly half of the men (42.8%) admitted to having been sexually abused during their formative years, and about half as many (21.8%) of the men had been moderately or severely emotionally abused during their formative years. Again, these figures are substantially higher than those reported for men in the general population (Dube et al., 2005). More than one-quarter of the men (26.1%) gave answers indicating that they were clinically depressed at the time of their interview, and another 19.5% were depression impaired but subclinical in their level of depression. These figures are also much greater than those reported for depression among men in the adult general population (Marcotte, Wilcox-Gok, & Redmon, 1999).

The preceding examples are not the kinds of answers that one would expect if men were underreporting undesirable behaviors or experiences; and taken together, they offer great confidence in the quality of the data obtained in *The Bareback Project*.

Project Overview: Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions (Lisa K. Gilbert, Folishade Omisore)

The goal of this five-year project, sponsored by the Division of Viral Hepatitis at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), was to increase awareness of, knowledge about, and intentions to get hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccinations among MSM online. The project began in 2003 and ended in 2008. In 2004, the first phase consisted of an initial quantitative online survey hosted by GayHealth.com. Participants ($N = 968$) were asked about their sexual and vaccination histories, as well as their perceptions of risk, severity of hepatitis, and knowledge about hepatitis A and hepatitis B (Gilbert, Levandowski, Peterson, & Scanlon, 2010). The last survey question asked if they would be interested in participating in an in-depth qualitative study to compare campaigns designed for MSM, and provide their opinions about preferences for sexual health messaging, visuals, text amount, and tone.

The initial approach was to host a series of Virtual Focus Groups, using iChat® software (which had been somewhat successful in a project with women regarding genital herpes). With help from a panel of population experts in men's sexual health and hepatitis prevention, the research team selected three campaigns for comparison and posted them on a Web page. The study protocol called for the men to view the three campaigns, and then complete interviews with the research team online, using real-time Virtual Focus Group. The more-than-forty men who said they were interested in participating in this second phase were grouped by age categories and queried (via anonymous e-mail address) about a time that would work for the focus group interview. This process was difficult and time-consuming, and because of this delay, many lost interest. (Readers are encouraged to consult the comments made earlier in this article, regarding the importance of prompt scheduling.) The research team scheduled a number of groups, and only one man actually logged in to participate. Thus, the researchers switched gears and developed a Word document, using the form function, to allow participants to fill in the blanks, write text blocks, and complete the survey at a convenient time for them. They were given a URL, asked to view the campaigns, and then complete the series of questions detailed in this edition. With this formative evaluation information, a new online educational Web site was developed, and subsequently tested, revised, launched, and evaluated.

Over the course of this five-year project, the *Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions* research team discovered a number of useful techniques in terms of formative evaluation, development of measures and methods, and sample recruitment. For each data collection effort, local men of diverse ethnicity, race, and age from the priority population (MSM online) were recruited and cognitively tested using a modified version of a longer protocol (Willis, 1994). In each case, only 5 to 10 men were interviewed, at either project offices or a location convenient for the participants. The data-gathering tools were tested by asking question-by-question if the wording was right (not offensive, how the study participants themselves would say it, how the participants themselves would ask a friend the same question), what was missing, if the length was acceptable, what they would answer and not answer, and so forth. These interviews yielded a great deal of information regarding the use of appropriate language. For example, one risk factor for acquiring hepatitis A is oral contact with fecal matter. Was it more acceptable to use "feces" or "poop"? (Men recommended using both.) Also, with survey wording, some men preferred the term "sexual activity" rather than "sexual behavior," which they perceived as judgmental. The research team was able to refine the survey tools to include a variety of "non-researchy" terms. One interesting finding was that men did not like the term "vaccinated against" because they found it confusing (in a double-negative way).

The research team investigated a number of survey software options, and over the course of the project, three different approaches were selected. The first survey was hosted on another organization's Web site (GayHealth.com). Their IT team designed the code, their server collected the data, and then the data were sent to the project team in batches. This approach was costly in terms of labor hours, and the research team did not have control of when they would receive the data or the ability to make any changes. For the second effort, Inquisite® survey software was used. It is a package that is expensive and also requires significant IT expertise. For the last data collection effort, the research team used Survey Monkey® software, which is very inexpensive, very easy to learn, and very easy to use. The drawbacks of this method are (1) the data are stored on their server until they are downloaded, (2) the backgrounds are preselected, so no logos or art can be posted differentially throughout, and (3) once posted, if changes are made, old and new databases are different. The criteria to keep in mind when selecting survey software are these: (1) the ability to customize the survey (format of questions, background), (2) the logic, branching and numbering of questions, (3) one's project budget, (4) the number of survey responses expected, (5) data storage (whose server and archiving data), and (6) data export and analysis.

To evaluate the *Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions* Web site educational materials, Gilbert and colleagues conducted user tests, which consisted of a small sample of 5 to 10 local MSM who came to the project's

offices and reviewed the site with a researcher asking specific questions about acceptability, content length and depth, features, links, graphics, and specific questions such as "What do you expect to see after this page?" User testing protocols were inexpensive, quick, easily found online, and efficiently identified both programmatic and technological issues. People were given $50 in cash to compensate for their time, effort, and fuel.

For each data collection effort, the research team also field-tested the methods and measures to see which questions were answered and which were skipped. After a series of trial and error, they determined that for this population and with this method of data collection, contrary to typical survey development advice (which recommends asking the most sensitive questions at the end of the survey), participants were more likely to take an interest in the survey if the provocative questions were asked early on. By necessity (for eligibility determination and IRB approval), the study team had to obtain consent and ask people their age, gender, and geographic location first, and then ask about seeking partners on the Internet, numbers of lifetime male partners, etc. At the end of the survey, the demographic questions were completed. The research team found that, if all of the demographic questions were asked up front, few people completed the entire survey. As other researchers have noted, summarizing the informed consent question into one short paragraph was key to gaining participation. Moreover, the number of participants appeared to be inversely proportional to the length of the online survey. Thus, one pitfall of doing online research is the inability to validate measures by asking multiple questions about each item. By splitting one longer survey into three shorter surveys (hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and a campaign critique), the *Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions* team was able to recruit nearly 400 MSM to complete one of three versions of the final campaign evaluation.

In terms of recruitment, contrary to general survey advice, the *Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions* team found that men were *more* likely to complete online surveys during the holidays. (A subsequent informal discussion with Hugh Klein revealed that this was his experience, too, while working on *The Bareback Project*.) For compensating online survey participants, the research team had great success with anonymous $25 gift cards (e.g., giveanything.com). Men provided an e-mail address, and then several days after survey completion, they received an online coupon/gift card redeemable at more than 300 online stores.

For the last data collection effort, the research team experimented with various recruitment strategies. The researchers posted ads to Craigslist (free of charge) and purchased banner ads on social networking sites. Caution is urged here, however, as advertising on some of these sites was expensive ($5,000) and yielded little project-related benefit, while others were free of charge for nonprofit organizations and yielded more visitors.

In summary, the *Real Risks—Real Consequences—Real Solutions* team found the Internet an ideal method for: (1) gathering quick, inexpensive, and useful formative data prior to designing sexual health educational materials, (2) reaching self-reportedly high-risk MSM with sexual health messages in a cost-effective and easily updatable format, (3) quickly measuring perceptions about sexual health and disease prevention topics among large audiences, and (4) asking very personal and sensitive personal health and behavior questions. In addition, online program delivery and evaluation captures the attention of men from all geographic locations, not just urban areas.

Project Overview: The Craigslist Men's Project (David A. Moskowitz, David W. Seal)

The Craigslist Men's Project was not funded by any organization and cost a total of about $60 to implement, which was the expense associated with a three-month subscription to the services provided by surveymonkey.com. The researchers did not provide incentives for the men taking the 20- to 30-minute survey. The researchers had no other operating costs in terms of staff or materials; all solicitations to take the survey were sent out by the authors. As mentioned in the article published in this journal, the study's response rate was low. However, of those men who actually started to complete the relatively lengthy survey, a sizeable majority completed it in its entirety (more than 70%). The researchers were able to develop a sample of 535 men in about six weeks time, by spending approximately four hours per day sending out recruitment e-mails to potential study participants.

As illustrated by *The Bareback Project*, there exists enormous interest in the risk-taking behaviors of MSM, particularly those who use the Internet to find their partners. Yet, where Klein and Lambing focused on men who intentionally eschew condoms, in *The Craigslist Men's Project*, Moskowitz and Seal were more interested in MSM on the down-low (i.e., highly closeted MSM), MSM adhering to different gay and bisexual subcultures, MSM personality traits (e.g., narcissism), and MSM body attributes (e.g., height, weight, penis size, muscularity, and hairiness). Craigslist.org (Craigslist) was an obvious forum to acquire the data necessary to draw conclusions about the psychosexual behaviors of such MSM, as well as the correlates of risk-taking behaviors in this population. Anecdotal evidence and peer-reviewed research (Ward, 2007, 2008) identified Craigslist users as more behaviorally bisexual and more likely to advertise a multitude of specific "turn-ons" and "turn-offs" relative to men using other Web sites (e.g., Bear411.com). Therefore, it was not surprising that: the sample was almost 40% bisexual or "heterosexual"; almost 20% reported being married to a woman; a majority of the men reported affiliations with different subgroups (e.g., leathermen, bears, twinks, cross-dressers, etc.); and many men reported being amenable

to many different sexual behaviors (e.g., erotic asphyxiation, scatology, and sadomasochism).

Men were solicited to take the survey through block message. With no financial incentive, the researchers knew that they needed to provide the men with an appeal to take the survey. Public outcry to those ads placed by men who were found to mislead and tease other men (i.e., a post that might read, "Re: GBM looking for tonight—is a liar!") suggested that many Craigslist men were angry with men who had misrepresented their intentions. This feeling was exacerbated after they had e-mailed such men for a substantial amount of time, often exchanging several nude pictures. Thus, the research team thought this might be used to create a viable appeal for the men to take the survey. Consequently, the initial approach to potential study participants began with, "Have you ever wondered why men on Craigslist tend to play e-mail games? Have you ever been stood up by a Craigslist date? Have you ever e-mailed your pictures without any reply?" This attracted an initial 294 men to complete the survey within the first four weeks.

Power analyses revealed that this sample size was insufficient to detect small and even medium effect sizes for the analyses that would test several of Moskowitz and Seal's research questions. Thus, they opted to repeat the survey advertising in all of the cities, with a change to the "approach script" message. This time, they included some statistics that had been collected from the 294 men as a means to increase the legitimacy associated with the project (i.e., that they were, indeed, performing an academically supported study) and to provide the community with some data that might actually interest them. They began the second e-mail campaign with the following:

> What we've found out so far: (1) Most Craigslist guys are only successful in actually hooking up 10% of the time. (2) The top reasons for rejecting a guy upon meeting him: (a) he looked like he had an STD/HIV (said 56.9% of guys), (b) he weighed more than he seemed (said 55.1% of guys), (c) he was older than he seemed (said 53.4% of guys), (d) he was less attractive than he seemed (said 52.7%). (3) 32.8% of men said that they have played games and toyed with other men. (4) And most interesting: 57.8% of men reported that *the mere process* of posting and responding to other men was an extremely erotic component of the hookup process. More results to come if you take the survey!

Instructions and the Web link to the survey followed this introduction.

Moskowitz and Seal did not conduct process analyses to gauge differences between these two approaches to recruiting study participants. However, many more men e-mailed them about the data they were reporting and requested more information on the study, the university, and the researchers. Reporting some initial and (by peer-reviewed standards) very raw

data proved to entice men who perhaps dismissed our first round of advertising as "spam." As a lesson, it is important to tailor and adapt study advertisements, particularly as advertising reaches a certain degree of saturation (e.g., e-mailing all English-speaking Craigslist cities). Research in which there is no tangible benefit to the participant or no actual incentive to participate requires enormous vigilance and creativity to keep recruitment active. The researcher must create a psychological incentive or appeal.

All post-survey e-mails that inquired about results or "the stats" were answered with the precise data requested. For example, one participant e-mailed, "So why are men such flakes?" Moskowitz and Seal answered that the data suggested a cluster of reasons that included youthfulness and sensation seeking. Also, they indicated that, for many men, the eroticism derived from e-mailing and exchanging nude pictures was sufficient to satisfy the purposes of a posted Craigslist ad. These computer-mediated behaviors facilitated orgasm; the men were able to masturbate to such electronic communication (i.e., engage in cyber sex). Overall, the methods employed were well-suited for acquiring a large sample of men. More important, they provided a way to return information back to the study participants, which is often rare in research.

The obvious benefit to conducting the research using recruitment methods and testing hypotheses with *The Craigslist Men's Project* approach is cost. This was the most inexpensive project the researchers have conducted to date. Granted, the opportunity cost of the research team's time was substantial. A research assistant, whose job it would have been to generate the invitation-to-participate e-mails, would have freed the investigators' time to start other projects. Yet, in research such "amenities" may not be available. For example, the graduate student rarely has any money to perform his or her research, but is often required to construct and implement novel studies. As a corollary, he or she is forced to conduct studies on the most inexpensive, convenient sample of over-researched individuals (i.e., undergraduate students). *The Craigslist Men's Project* study represented a way to circumvent those obstacles: Recruitment could be conducted at any time, day or night, outside of time obligations to a mentor or department; the study was inexpensive; and the research was performed with a relatively hidden and under-researched population. Thus, the obvious methodological benefit to this study was its providing evidence that research need not be hindered, halted, or otherwise impacted by lack of institutional resources.

Moskowitz and Seal encourage young researchers or other researchers with further questions or who need advice on cost-efficient survey methodology to contact them personally about their methods.