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# Knowing Me, Knowing You: A Case Study of Social Networking Sites and Participant Recruitment

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**Abstract**

Social media technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr are increasingly popular. For social scientists, these applications and services represent a goldmine of activity data and a rich source of study participants. In this short paper, we discuss some ethical questions that arose when recruiting study participants for a field-based, qualitative interview study. After a brief description of the study, we list arguments for and against the approach we took, and highlight some dilemmas we faced as our study recruitment unfolded.

**Keywords**

Research ethics, methods, recruiting, sampling, case study, social networking, privacy, screening

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K.4.1 Public Policy Issues, K.7.4 The Computing Profession

**Introduction**

Considered and considerate recruitment of participants for qualitative and quantitative studies has always been key to conducting good research. New social media technologies offer new sources and methods for recruiting study participants including email distribution

lists, social networking sites and services such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter.

Whether studies are qualitative or quantitative, predominantly online or offline, experimental or elaborative, selecting settings and participants who fit the study's criteria is crucial to the validity of results. It is also incumbent upon researchers to be transparent and informative about study goals and methods, and to be careful about participant well-being and privacy preferences [3][5][7][9][10]. Safeguarding study participants, researchers and institutional interests has led to the creation of elaborate consent forms and terms of service agreements between researchers and study participants [1][2][6] and detailed Institutional Review Board (IRB) recommendations governing the use of human participants in studies [11][12].

### Case Study

In addressing the workshop themes, we present our experiences recruiting participants for a field-based interview study of hotel concierges. Our study sought to show how concierges learn their craft, accumulate knowledge, deal with guest queries, and create activity and travel plans.

### Recruiting Methodology

We considered numerous recruitment methods for our study: we posted advertisements on Craigslist and found little response; we sent emails to email distribution lists we subscribe to; we asked friends to recommend people they knew in the hospitality industry. None of these methods yielded any suitable participants. We explored approaching concierges during their work; however as part of our study we observed concierges at work and realized that such an

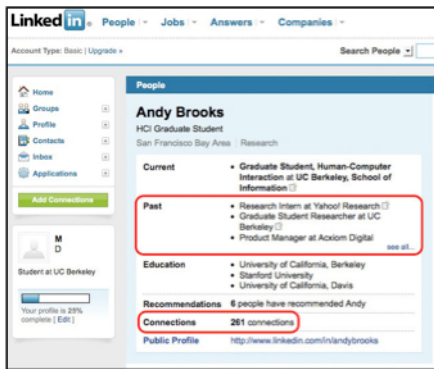
at-work solicitation would likely be ineffective; we observed that concierges were continually occupied with guest requests, and noted considerable management oversight and concern for professionalism on the part of concierges.

Given these challenges we turned to searching Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn for participants. We logged onto each site with our personal accounts and searched for "concierge". This method relied on individuals self-identifying themselves as concierges. Twitter returned numerous results; however most appeared to be individuals offering personal assistant services and not the hotel concierges we sought. We contacted a number of these individuals through direct messages, however none responded. Facebook and LinkedIn proved more fruitful. Both sites returned numerous matches, which we compiled into a spreadsheet: for each candidate we noted their name and hotel if listed in the profile. We also acquired a list of concierges from the local concierge association's publicly available web site<sup>1</sup> and searched both sites for those individuals. We added these individuals to our spreadsheet, noting their name and hotel. Not all of these candidates identified themselves as concierges on these sites.

Merging these two spreadsheets revealed considerable information about our candidate pool as well as each candidate. The spreadsheet offered an approximate snapshot of the concierge community, including age distribution, hotel name and class, and relationship status. Each candidate was then sent a personalized recruitment message explaining the project and how



**Figure 1.** Publicly accessible Facebook profile showing researcher's friends.



**Figure 2.** Publicly accessible LinkedIn profile showing researcher's past work experiences and number of connections.

<sup>1</sup> Northern California Concierge Association (NCCA). <http://www.nccaconcierge.org>

### ***Knowledge of the other through site surfing and data mining***

#### **Pro**

The data are already public; we have implied consent.

Surfing personal data for screening is so much quicker than sending preliminary questionnaires that also tend to have a low response rate.

The data provides a more holistic view of participants. We have access to more data, and issues we may not have thought to ask about in a screener – so we can better screen candidates and improve sampling.

Participants are more candid with researchers because they assume we know a lot about them and vice versa.

#### **Con**

Users may not think their data will be reviewed this way.

Data gathered from such efforts may be false or misleading.

Publishing results with such data may make it easier to identify participants, causing harm.

May violate web sites' terms of service.

**Table 1.** Arguments for and against surfing and mining data on social networking sites

we identified them as a potential participant. These messages were sent through the services' messaging systems. The sending researcher's personal Facebook account was marked private, thus only his "friends" could view his/her detailed profile information. The researcher's LinkedIn account profile was not restricted in such a way. Eight of our 12 concierge participants were recruited with this method, while four were a balance of referrals from these participants and those recruited while at work.

### **Key Ethical Issue: Knowledge of the Other**

We encountered three issues over the course of this study. These issues centered on the *knowledge of the other*, such as the researcher knowing information about the study participant and the participant being unaware of the researcher having that knowledge, and vice versa. We also consider the impact of this knowledge on how researchers screen participants collected via snowball recruiting methods. We summarize the arguments for and against this *knowledge of the other* in Table 1.

#### *Knowing Me*

During our interviews several participants gave hints that s/he had viewed one of the researcher's Facebook profile or had searched for him on the Internet. This led us to wonder what else the participant knew about the researchers, and to what extent responses were in fact being tailored by this knowledge of us. If the participant had viewed either or both of our profiles, how would this impact how they answered our questions? Perhaps they would feel more familiar with us, and be more candid. Or perhaps they would be wary of our motives and provide misleading information. Must we acknowledge these concerns in our findings?

#### *Knowing You*

We found it surprisingly easy to access detailed information profiles on people; it was an ethical choice to make clear boundaries about how much we would research before gaining participant permission and a clear sense of *their* desires about how much of their information was shared. Recent research illustrates well that developments in Flash cookies and HTTP cache-control headers coupled with easily available social networking data make it eerily easy to develop detailed profiles about people simply from their "casual" Internet use. [4] Are people aware of how easy this is? We doubt it. Is that something that should concern us given our commitment to openness and transparency? Is it our job to educate users as part of the introduction to our study, knowing that such knowledge may well lead to concern and non-participation or mean we are selecting for people with specific viewpoints around data sharing?

From the outset of recruiting we were concerned how our methods may impact sampling, and how "incidental" knowledge we were privy to from their social networking presence may affect our analyses. We were relying on concierges self-identifying themselves, and were concerned that we should have approached the Concierge Association for permission to use their member list, even though it was publicly available. We were able to see nearly all of our participants' profiles; few had restricted access to "friends". We saw status updates, friends, photographs, and group memberships, from which we possibly could infer other information about the participant. [13] Does (the participant) posting this information on a public forum provide implied consent? How did viewing this information affect our sampling efforts? How can we *not* see this information? Even if we did not explicitly record this

information for our study, did it subconsciously impact our analysis? When does viewing a site with “incidental” or “peripheral” information become inappropriate?

A number of our participants explicitly requested anonymity lest their employers or the association discover their comments. Were others privy to our association via the social networking service features (wall postings, friending) and what potential affect may that have had?

Two of our participants were snowball referrals from fellow participants. Before contacting these individuals we vetted their credentials by searching for them on Facebook and LinkedIn, and via Internet search engines. We pursued those that we thought would best enhance our study: those of a different age group, level of experience, or hotel class. Should we have taken the referrals on faith, and not checked their credentials? Is it doing due diligence? Does it matter whether we do this before or after their participation?

### Conclusion

Email distribution lists, social networking sites and services such as Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter offer tremendous opportunities to recruit study participants and enrich study findings. However researchers must be ever mindful of ethical concerns and continue to protect participants from harm. Recognizing and addressing the implications of the *knowledge of the other* will improve research validity and protect study participants.

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