Harnessing Social Media in Survey Research

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Abstract
Engaging and retaining young adults in longitudinal survey research presents unique challenges, particularly among the predominately male, non-white, low-income, and highly mobile young adults who comprise the sample of the U.S. Department of Labor's evaluation of the YouthBuild program. In an effort to combat these challenges, the current study took an innovative approach that harnesses youth's ongoing engagement with social media to help increase survey participation across three waves of data collection. In this paper, we explore the effectiveness of incorporating social media, specifically Facebook, into an overall data collection strategy and assess the extent to which it influences response rates and survey retention over time. Overall, our early findings suggest that Facebook may be a useful tool for sample engagement and retention in longitudinal research. We find increased survey response in the first and second follow-up surveys for Facebook friends in our sample.

Key Words: social networking sites, longitudinal research, locating, hard-to-reach populations

1. Introduction

Reengaging high school dropouts in education and helping prepare them for self-sufficiency is a critical social policy issue. Nationally there are approximately three and a half to six million high school dropouts between 16 and 24 years of age;[1] and estimates from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that minority and low-income families are disproportionately at risk for dropping out. *Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis,* a report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, found that as early as their mid-twenties, high school dropouts

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[1] The National Center for Education Statistics estimates the number of dropouts at about three and a half million (National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education* [Washington: National Center for Education Statistics, 2012], table A-20-1). Analysis by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University—which considers GED holders as dropouts, counts dropouts who are institutionalized, and uses a different estimation methodology—places the number of dropouts at about six million. (Center for Labor Market Studies, *Left Behind in America: The Nation's Dropout Crisis* [Boston: Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009]).

experience labor market, earnings, and social and income problems that negatively affect their ability to successfully transition into careers and stable marriages.[2]

YouthBuild, a national second-chance program funded by the Department of Labor (DOL), seeks to address these negative consequences of dropping out by offering education and employment training to young people who leave the education system without earning a high school diploma. In 2010, DOL's Employment and Training Administration contracted with MDRC, Mathematica, and Social Policy Research to conduct a rigorous random assignment evaluation of the YouthBuild program. The primary sources of data for the impact analysis come from surveys administered at three points in time: 12-, 30-, and 48-months after youth enrolled in the program and were randomly assigned to receive or not receive YouthBuild services.

Engaging young adults in survey research presents unique challenges at every stage of the data collection process: from locating through contacting and ultimately in gaining cooperation. These challenges are compounded when the study population exhibits characteristics that are associated with low propensities to respond to survey requests; that is, being young, highly mobile, male, non-white, and low-income (Abraham, Maitland, and Bianchi 2006). Many of these characteristics are disproportionately represented among the population of high school dropouts and among the YouthBuild study participants (Sum, Khatiwadi, McLaughlin, and Palma 2009). A well-trained interviewing staff and well-thought-out incentive strategy can overcome most barriers to participation, but these are only effective after sample members are located and contact is established.

Locating young adults is complicated by their high mobility rates. The Census Bureau estimates that about 25 percent of young adults between the ages 20 and 29 moved between 2009 and 2010, the most recent years for which these data are available.[3] This is about twice the mobility rate found within the general population. Locating this highly mobile population is exacerbated by their limited "electronic footprint." As adults gain employment, establish credit lines, and purchase homes, they lay down "electronic footprints" that make them more easily traceable using online locating services. Once located, contacting young adults can be complicated by their reliance on cell phones and disinclination to use their phones for talking. Texting and social networking may be more effective means of communicating with this population than traditional telephone outreach. Nearly 66 percent of adults aged 25 to 29 reside in cell-phone only households, and disposable cell phones are becoming popular with this demographic group (Blumberg and Luke 2013).

While more traditional methods for locating and contacting young adults, such as letters and phone calls, may be somewhat effective, a more contemporary approach that harnesses youth's ongoing engagement with the Internet may be critical to a successful locating and contact strategy. According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life report, 93 percent of young adults ages 18 to 29 go online, and of these online youth, nearly three-quarters use social networking sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr 2010). Facebook postings, tweets, and texting can all be effective ways of staying in

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[2] See Center for Labor Market Studies, *Left Behind in America*
[3] See United States Census Bureau, *The 2012 Statistical Abstract of the United States,* Table 30: "Mobility Status of the Population by Selected Characteristics." Available at [http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0031.pdf]. Accessed on May 22, 2014.

contact with this age group. With this in mind, we created an online presence, the YouthBuild Research Facebook page and profile, to facilitate locating and foster rapport using communication tools that youth prefer. However, the use of social media in survey research is a relatively new endeavor. In this paper, we explore the effectiveness of incorporating social media, specifically Facebook, into an overall data collection strategy and address three key research questions: (1) Do the demographic characteristics of Facebook friends or Facebook users differ from those of the overall sample of youth who enrolled in the YouthBuild evaluation; (2) What is the relationship between Facebook friend status and survey participation; and (3) If a positive relationship exists between Facebook friend status and survey participation, what factors might underlie that relationship?

2. Literature Review

The body of literature on the use of social media in survey research is limited, given the relative newness of the approach. The existing literature primarily addresses why Facebook might be useful and the advantages and disadvantages of its use. In this section, we review the existing research that informed our social media strategy.

2.1 Using New Technologies to Achieve Traditional Study Goals

Research indicates that persistence, creativity, and maintaining rapport are three key predictors of success on longitudinal studies (Hobden, Curtis Forney, Wyszacki Durham, and Toro 2011). Researchers cannot rely on one standard approach for retaining sample members but must devote considerable efforts to tailoring an engagement and retention plan specific to the characteristics of their study population (Mychasiuk and Benzies 2011; Sullivan, Rumpts, Campbell, Eby, and Davidson 1996). For the evaluation of the YouthBuild program, we had to work outside traditional modes of communication, which may not be effective with our sample members. Therefore, we turned to alternative modes of communication to establish rapport with our sample members and relied on technologies commonly used by young adults.

Our decision to use social networking sites as part of our youth engagement and retention plan is consistent with research demonstrating the popularity of the sites (Duggan and Smith 2014; Murphy, Hill, and Dean 2014). Of the current social networking sites, Facebook is the most prevalent across all ages. This trend is particularly noticeable for online users ages 18 to 29, of whom 84 percent report using Facebook (Duggan and Smith 2014).

Facebook is the dominant social networking platform across demographic groups, and continues to grow its reach. For example, the site has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, with black and Hispanic Internet users now being more likely to have a Facebook account than white users (Duggan and Smith 2014; Marlow 2009; Mook, Harrington, Skaff, and Wood 2013). Given its popularity, especially within the demographic groups that comprise our sample, we focused our social networking efforts on incorporating Facebook as a tool in our sample engagement and retention plan.

2.2 Recognizing Advantages and Limitations of Using Social Media in Survey Research

In addition to serving as a means to encourage open communication and obtain important contact information, Facebook can also be used to inform the survey design, recruit

sample members, and to supplement traditional surveys. A recent report by Murphy et al. (2014) mentions that recent studies have used Facebook in a variety of ways: to obtain contact information, inquire about attitudes and feelings toward survey topics and survey modes, invite people to become part of a study, and even to answer survey questions.

Many Facebook users use the site as a means to broadcast their thoughts, opinions, and preferences (Sage 2014). This suggests that one advantage to using Facebook is to encourage open communication between researchers and sample members. As Murphy, Hill, and Dean (2014) recently stated, "If people are now willing to disclose more private information, as they do on social media sites, they may be more willing to disclose it to researchers, especially if we adopt (or co-opt) new tools for eliciting that information" (p. 23). Over time, Facebook has created several features that help legitimize its position as an alternative mode of communication (Murphy et al. 2014). For example, Facebook has a messaging feature, which allows Facebook users to communicate privately, outside of public posts on Facebook profile walls. These features suggest that researchers might pursue new channels of communication in order to achieve the goals of establishing rapport with sample members and obtaining quality data.

Although incorporating social media into survey research may be appealing, there is some evidence indicating that using social media may be problematic. Foster and Elliot (2014) examined college students' thoughts and attitudes on using social media in research. In their study, 48 percent of the sample agreed with the statement, "I think it would be okay to be contacted for legitimate research purposes only." However, 40 percent indicated, "I think it is a violation of my privacy to have someone I don't know contact me through my social media accounts." This suggests using caution when approaching participants through social media and paying particular attention to assuring sample members of the legitimacy of the study.

As survey researchers continue to incorporate social networking sites into study designs, we must recognize the ever-changing environment of these platforms as one of the primary drawbacks to using social media in survey research. Facebook was the obvious social network of choice for our sample members. However, the development of other social networking sites means that Facebook may not necessarily be the site of choice for future studies. In fact, in late 2013, Facebook confirmed a trend that teenagers were becoming less active users. In addition, teens are also becoming more conscious of the need to protect their privacy (Madden et al. 2014; Olson 2013). This suggests that researchers need to be aware of the current trends in social media when designing their data collection strategies.

3. Design

In this section, we describe how we integrated Facebook into our study design on the evaluation of the YouthBuild program, from obtaining the relevant contact information from our sample members, to establishing a presence at the beginning of the project, to locating and communicating with sample members.

3.1 Obtaining Nontraditional Contact Information at Baseline

Upon application to a YouthBuild program, sample members completed a background information form, which collected demographic and contact information. Following best practices in survey research, these forms also collected contact information for up to three

people who might be able to help us get in touch with the sample members in the future. Given the challenges associated with this study population, we recognized it would be essential to collect information at baseline that would enable us to communicate with sample members using alternative avenues. In response, the baseline forms were designed to collect information about the social networking sites sample members and their contacts use, in addition to traditional contact information such as home address, phone numbers, and email addresses.

Once enrolled in the study, sample members were sent a $10 gift card as well as a letter welcoming them to the study. If sample members did not fully complete the contact sheet at the time of enrollment, they were mailed the form and asked again to complete it and return it to us using a prepaid envelope. Concurrent with this mailing, we began attempts to locate sample members on Facebook. Although we asked sample members about contact information for several social networking sites, we focused our efforts on Facebook because it was the predominant network used by our sample members. At the baseline, 68 percent of our sample indicated they use Facebook.

3.2 Establishing a Presence on Facebook

Before locating our sample members on Facebook, we created a Facebook page and profile.[4] Consistent with Foster and Elliot's (2014) findings, we legitimized our Facebook outreach by referencing our page and profile in our welcome letters. We used the Facebook page largely to disseminate information that we thought may be of interest to youth who apply to YouthBuild programs. For example, we posted news stories about youth making a positive difference in their communities. The page was set up only as a means to broadcast information and to establish our presence on Facebook, not to serve as a forum for discussion between researchers and sample members. Although Facebook allows for discussion on pages, we customized our settings to prevent this type of public discussion for the purposes of confidentiality (Mook, Harrington, Skaff, and Wood 2013).

3.3 Locating and Engaging Sample members through Facebook

We used the study representative profile to locate sample members, establish Facebook friend status with them, and communicate with them using Facebook messages. The profile was especially valuable to us in our locating and contacting efforts. Establishing friend status provided us with access to our sample members' profiles which, depending on their privacy settings, are where many people provide basic information such as where they live and work, along with contact information such as phone numbers and email addresses.

In addition to using Facebook as a locating tool, we used its message feature to communicate with sample members and send notifications about upcoming data collections. This feature was especially helpful once sample members accepted our friend status as we could then send messages directly to their Facebook inboxes. Until Facebook friend status is established, messages may be sent to an "Other" folder, which is not as easily accessible or noticeable as direct messages. The message feature allowed us to communicate with sample members in a mode with which they were comfortable and

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[4] In a 2012 American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) presentation, Mook, Harrington, Skaff and Wood (2012), provided extensive details about the nuances of Facebook and the issues survey researchers might want to consider to successfully and ethically incorporate Facebook into a study design.

familiar. Facebook friend status proved to be a critical component of our approach as it allowed us to obtain contact information and facilitated sample member outreach in its own right.

3.4 Obtaining Additional Data to Encourage Facebook Engagement

Prior to the 12-month follow-up survey, we attempted to locate and establish friend status with all sample members who indicated they used Facebook at the time of study enrollment. However, there were a number of sample members we could not locate, even though they indicated using Facebook at enrollment. Although we asked sample members for their Facebook usernames at the time of enrollment, we found that it was not uncommon for youth to make frequent updates to their Facebook usernames, which complicated our locating efforts. Once we did locate sample members on Facebook, however, we could easily find them again by using the URL associated with their profile, which is a permanent identifier.

3.5 Recognizing and Addressing Risks Related to Facebook Use in Survey Research

A primary concern with using social media in survey research is the ability to maintain respondent confidentiality. Regardless of whether we were using our Facebook page or profile, we adhered to strict security requirements for the evaluation. We customized our settings to prevent our Facebook friends from seeing any of the other people with whom we established friend status. We also linked all of our friends to Facebook's rules and regulations to remind them what they were agreeing to by having an account on Facebook. We used this reminder as an opportunity to encourage sample members to review their own privacy settings.

4. Methods

In this section, we review the research data, measures, and methods used to answer the research questions: (1) Do the demographic characteristics of Facebook friends or Facebook users differ from those of the overall sample of youth who enrolled in the YouthBuild evaluation; (2) What is the relationship between Facebook friend status and survey participation; and (3) If a positive relationship exists between Facebook friend status and survey participation, what factors might underlie that relationship?

4.1 Data Sources

We used several data sources to conduct our analysis. These include data from the baseline information form, survey and paradata from the 12-month follow-up survey, and survey data from the 30-month follow-up survey. Details of the data sources are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Source	Timing of Data Collection	Variables Included
Baseline information form	At application to YouthBuild program	Basic respondent demographics; additional contact information; contact mode preferences
Paradata from follow-up survey	12 months after random assignment	Facebook friend status; random assignment status (treatment or control) ; data on contact and locating attempts
Follow-up survey data	12 months and 30 months after random assignment	Completion status; completion mode (web, phone, field)

4.2 Sample Characteristics

The evaluation of the YouthBuild program sample includes 3,436 young adults who were between the ages of 16 and 24 when they applied to one of the 72 YouthBuild sites included in the study. The youth were enrolled in the study on a rolling basis, from August 2011 through January 2013.

The overall study sample is young, primarily male (64 percent), and predominately black (62 percent) or Hispanic (14 percent). Approximately 64 percent of the sample was randomly assigned to the evaluation treatment group, meaning they were to receive YouthBuild services.[5] Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the sample.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of YouthBuild Sample at Baseline

Variable	Percentage
Evaluation Treatment Group	64%
Male	64%
Age (average)	20.2
White, non-Hispanic	15%
Black, non-Hispanic	62%
Other, non-Hispanic	8%
Hispanic	14%
Has child or children	31%
In stable housing	76%
In temporary housing	18%
Other or unknown housing	6%
Facebook friend	14%
Facebook nonfriend	42%
Facebook nonuser	44%
N	3,436

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[5] As is often the case in random assignment evaluations involving social programs (Boruch, Weisburd, Turner, and Littell 2009), assignment to the treatment and control group varied across programs. The average treatment allocation is 60/40.

4.3 Key Measures and Analytical Approach

To answer the question about who in our sample engages in Facebook and whether they differ from the rest of the sample, we used simple descriptive analyses. We divided our sample into three groups according to members' Facebook presence and engagement with our study representative. A sample member is defined as a friend if he or she had a Facebook account and accepted the study representative's friend request on Facebook. A sample member is included in the nonfriend group if he or she reported using Facebook but did not accept the study representative's friend request. The nonfriend group also includes sample members who indicated they have Facebook but whom we could not locate on Facebook. A sample member is defined as a nonuser if he or she indicated not having a Facebook account at the baseline data collection. The breakdown of our sample by Facebook group is included in Table 2.

Next, we used a series of logistic and multinomial logistic regressions to address the question about the relationship between Facebook friend status and survey participation. Specifically, we examine the relationship between Facebook group and four outcome variables: (1) completion of the 12-month follow-up survey; (2) early completion of the 12-month survey, defined as completing it within the first five weeks of data collection; (3) mode of completion of the 12-month survey, either web, phone or field; and (4) completion of the 30-month follow-up survey.

Table 3 describes our four models and the type of analysis used and how each of the outcome variables was constructed. All regression models included controls for gender, age, race/ethnicity, housing stability, YouthBuild treatment or control status, and number of contacts the respondent provided at baseline. We controlled for these variables because they are associated with the likelihood that we would be able to locate sample members, and once located, associated with their propensity to participate. The results of the binomial and multinomial logistic regressions are reported as predicted probabilities, holding all other covariates at their means.

Table 3: Summary of Dependent Variables

Model	Analysis	Dependent Variable
Complete 12-month follow-up survey	Logistic regression	1= Complete 12 month survey 0= Nonrespondent
Complete 12-month follow-up survey early	Logistic regression	1= Complete 12 month survey within 5 weeks of sample release 0= Nonrespondent or completed survey after 5 weeks
Completion of 12-month follow-up survey by mode	Multinomial regression	1= Complete by web 2= Complete by phone 3= Complete by field 0= Non-complete
Completion of 30-month follow-up survey	Logistic regression	1= Complete 30-month survey 0= Nonrespondent

5. Results

5.1 Who Engages in Facebook Use?

Despite the broad use of Facebook in the general population, we found our Facebook friends differed from the rest of the study population on several characteristics. Although our study sample is predominately male and non-white, we find that Facebook users in our sample—and particularly our Facebook friends—are significantly more likely to be female ($p < .05$) and white, non-Hispanic ($p < .05$) compared to nonusers. Although the trend for more of our friends to be female aligns with research suggesting that women use Facebook at higher rates than men, the differences in Facebook use by the race/ethnicity of our sample members were surprising, given research citing higher Facebook use amongst Black and Hispanic Internet users (Duggan and Smith 2014; Marlow 2009; Mook, Harrington, Skaff, and Wood 2013).

We also find that our Facebook friends are significantly more likely to be in the evaluation treatment group ($p < .01$) compared to nonusers and nonfriends. Traditionally sample members in the control group are more challenging to reach because they did not receive program services. In the YouthBuild evaluation, this may result in control members being less inclined to befriend the representative of a study about YouthBuild.

Table 4 presents the breakdown of our sample by Facebook group.

Table 4: Differences in Characteristics and Study Variables, by Facebook Group

Facebook Group	% of Sample	% Female	% White, Non-Hispanic	% Treatment Group
Facebook friend	14	46	22	69
Facebook nonfriend	42	41*	17*	61*
Facebook nonuser	44	28*	10*	66*
Total sample	100	36	15	64

* indicates significant differences between our Facebook Friends and other Facebook Groups at p < .05 level.

5.2 Evaluating Benefits of Facebook Friendship in Longitudinal Survey Research

Overall, our 12-month follow-up survey response rate was 81 percent, with 2,783 completed surveys. The 14 percent of sample members who were our Facebook friends prior to the first wave of data collection (n = 471) were significantly more likely to complete the 12-month survey, even after controlling for the baseline variables ($p < .01$). Our Facebook friends had an 89 percent predicted probability of completing the 12-month survey compared with 82 percent for nonfriends ($p < .001$) and 80 percent for nonusers ($p < .001$).

In addition to completing the 12-month survey at a higher rate than our nonfriends and nonusers, our Facebook friends were significantly more likely to complete the 12-month survey early compared to nonusers. There was a significant difference in early completion between Facebook friends and nonfriends ($p = .011$).

Lastly, our Facebook friends were significantly more likely to complete the survey by web, the least expensive mode, than nonfriends and nonusers. Our Facebook friends had

a 34 percent predicted probability of responding by web, compared with 28 percent for nonfriends ($p < .01$) and 27 percent for nonusers ($p < .01$).

Table 5 provides the breakdown of our 12-month completion rates, by Facebook group.

Table 5: 12-Month Data Collection Adjusted-Predicted Probabilities of Response, by Facebook Group

Facebook Group	12-Month Predicted Probabilities	12-Month Early Predicted Probabilities	12-Month Mode Predicted Probabilities by		
			Web	Phone	Field
Facebook friend	22	69	34	38	16
Facebook non-friend	17**	61**	28**	37*	17
Nonuser	10**	66**	27**	36**	16*

** indicates significant differences between our Facebook friends and other groups at p < .01 level.

* indicates significant differences between our Facebook friends and other groups at p < .05 level.

The 30-month follow-up survey is currently underway. Preliminary data from this data collection indicate that the high completion rates among our Facebook friends persist. Among the early released cases for the 30-month survey (n = 646), our Facebook friends have a 59 percent predicted probability of completing, compared with 42 percent for nonfriends (p < .01) and 35 percent for nonusers (p < .01). This demonstrates that our Facebook friends are still significantly more likely to complete the survey compared to nonusers and nonfriends.

6. Discussion

Our analysis suggests that Facebook may indeed be a useful tool for sample engagement and retention. In this section, we provide some discussion of our findings as well as the limitations of and future directions for this research.

6.1 Factors Underlying the Relationship between Facebook Use and Survey Participation

There are a few factors we suspect underlie the high levels of participation and survey response from our Facebook friends. The first factor is enhanced ability to locate sample members. Facebook allows us to obtain current contact information more easily than traditional modes of communication. Facebook also provides a more permanent link than other pieces of contact information. While phone numbers and addresses of our sample members are likely to change over time, the URL associated with a Facebook profile remains constant. Therefore, once we establish Facebook friend status, we have a reliable source to turn to when we have reason to think that the contact information we have on file is outdated. We can access our Facebook friends' profiles to obtain updated contact information. In fact, we received an updated email, telephone number, or address for 74 percent of our Facebook friends.

The second factor to consider is that using Facebook increases communication with respondents in a mode they already use. The majority of people who use Facebook do not

simply have accounts that are static; they check and update these accounts very frequently (Duggan and Smith 2014). Instead of sending letters that may never be opened or making calls that are too often screened and ignored, reaching out in a mode of communication that is familiar and regular to our sample members better enables us to engage them and secure their continued participation.

The third factor that may explain the success of Facebook is one of spurious association in which Facebook friend status and survey response are related through another shared, but unmeasured variable. As discussed in the next section, there were limitations to the number of socio-demographic characteristics that we could control for, making it difficult to refute self-selection or omitted variable bias. Nevertheless, because the differences in survey completion between Facebook friends and both non friends and nonusers were so substantial, it is reasonable to suspect that these differences are at least due in part to a true relationship between Facebook friend status and survey response.

6.2 Limitations

In addition to the analytical limitations of our inability to control for all possible differences in the characteristics of our Facebook friends versus other groups, this study has some limitations regarding generalization. This research was conducted with a very specific population—YouthBuild applicants. Given that our study sample consists of young, highly-mobile, minority, low-income adults, our findings cannot be generalized to the general public. Additionally, our data collection efforts began at a time when Facebook use was very high and there were not many other social network contenders. Furthermore, considering Facebook was the only social networking site we incorporated into our approach, we cannot speak to the effectiveness of using other types of social media. Despite these limitations, the results indicate that there is compelling reason to believe Facebook is effective and suggests the need for future research to incorporate and evaluate the impacts of using social media in survey research.

6.3 Future Work

Future research should seek to unpack the mechanisms that might underlie the relationship between Facebook use and study participation. As we proceed with additional follow-up surveys on the evaluation of the YouthBuild program, we will continue to analyze how our Facebook presence and interactions impact study participation and survey completion over time.

One item that warrants further analysis is survey completion mode for our Facebook friends compared to nonfriends and nonusers. We found that our Facebook friends were not only more likely to complete the survey, but that they were more likely to complete it by web, the least expensive data collection mode. While it takes additional time and effort to engage sample members with Facebook, we suspect that the cost savings realized by them completing in a less expensive mode offsets these costs. Conducting a cost analysis would help to confirm this.

We are also interested to look more closely at the role of rapport in our researcher–sample member interactions on Facebook. Anecdotally, we have many stories that suggest having a familiar, informal way to interact with researchers encourages sample members to ask questions and address concerns that may typically discourage their study participation. We can analyze the types of conversations we have had with sample members through Facebook in order to empirically determine if there are trends in the content and results of Facebook communication.

Given research indicating that Facebook use may be declining, especially among younger populations (Madden et al. 2013), we believe that future research should move beyond focusing solely on Facebook. Despite the success we have seen using Facebook, we recognize the need to remain open to new technologies and modes of communication in the future.

Finally, the current study focuses on response rates as the primary measure of quality. In the future, we plan to examine other measures of quality, such as the representativeness of the response data, in order to better understand the impact of social networking sites on our ability to collect high quality survey data in longitudinal research.

6.4 Conclusions

The analysis presented here suggests that locating sample members and communicating with them through social networking sites such as Facebook provides an innovative approach to the challenge of conducting longitudinal research with hard-to-reach young adults. Through careful consideration of the mechanisms that might underlie the relationship between Facebook friend status and study participation, researchers may craft a customized engagement and retention plan to maximize study participation. If used appropriately, Facebook, and potentially other new patterns of communication, can augment traditional approaches to increase sample member participation in longitudinal studies.

Acknowledgements

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