Chapter 3

Knockin' on Digital Doors:
Dealing with Online [Dis]Credit in an Era of Digital Scientific Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims at presenting and discussing credible online recruitment eliciting techniques targeting scientific purposes adjusted to the digital age. Based on several illustrations conducted by the author within the framework of both quantitative and qualitative inquiries, this chapter critically explores the digital ethos in three main challenges faced when dealing with online recruitment for scientific purposes: entering the normality of the everyday life, entering the idiosyncrasy of multicultural lives, and entering the chaos of busy lives. By the end, a toolbox for establishing and evaluating (dis)credibility within online recruitment strategies is presented. Moreover, it is argued that success of data collection at the present time in online environments seems to rely as ever on internal factors of the communication process vis-à-vis e-mail content, design and related strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The near-ubiquity of a permanent online existence, made possible through the generalized use of smartphones, tablets, and laptops, is evolving together with the increasing availability of free Wi-Fi access, not only in traditional areas such as military centers, computing environments, universities, commercial organizations, business centers, and highly trafficked cosmopolitan spots, is now found in the most diverse urban spaces, shopping malls, public transportation, and many private homes. This realization led the scientific community, particularly in the field of the social sciences, to look at the World Wide Web as a powerful alternative (or as a supplement) to personal recruitment for research purposes, metaphorically referred to as "knocking on doors."

As the younger generation is "born digital" and the use of the Internet in their daily lives is often perceived as a trivial and easy task, social researchers have, naturally, used the Internet to carry out their research projects (Gilbert, 2001; Punch, 2014). Despite the fact that even in the "net generation,"

the modes of accessing, using, and making sense of the Internet are not homogenous so much as they are socially shaped (Hargittai, 2010), the World Wide Web greatly expands the possibility of easily and rapidly accessing big data, reaching geographically dispersed groups of respondents, and locating samples to address rare topics (Couper, 2005; Fielding, Lee & Blank, 2008). Although recruiting for scientific purposes apparently has never been easier, recruitment now faces new challenges due to the absence of face-to-face interaction. Online, scientists have to compete with numerous advertisers, marketers, and swindlers of all kinds who overload individual mailboxes with hundreds of messages seducing the reader to open an email, follow a link, and, ultimately, do what they originally expected them to do, which might cause users harm or at least make them wary of any unknown or unsolicited digital communications in the future.

To be sure, most social scientists do not have extensive experience in digital connection and recruitment. Traditionally, recruitment for scientific purposes was based essentially in person-to-person communication, which, in turn, was anchored on external factors such as the credibility of the organizing or funding institution (usually a university or research center) or the researcher or team reputation; today, successful data collection in online environments still relies on person-to-person communication, but the process now entails different means of connection such as e-mail and attention to different strategies such as visual design.

Within this backdrop, this chapter aims to present and discuss credible social scientific online recruitment techniques adjusted to the digital age. In the background, the chapter starts by discussing how the Internet is affecting inquiry in social sciences. Afterwards, based on research conducted by the author within the framework of both quantitative and qualitative inquiries recently carried out at the University of Évora, Portugal, the chapter critically explores the many challenges faced when recruiting research participants online in an era of digital scientific inquiry. Metaphorically, online recruitment can be seen as "knocking on digital doors"[1], an action that will be successful if individuals – potential participants – assign credibility to the attempt. In three different sections, the article explores three areas of the online environment where this assessment is particularly demanding: within the normality of the everyday life, when dealing with the idiosyncrasy of multicultural lives, and, finally, when finding time in the chaos of busy lives. At the end of presenting arguments for best practices, a toolbox for establishing and evaluating credibility within online recruitment strategies is presented. The chapter ends with the presentation of future research directions and concludes by arguing that successful data collection in present online environments relies on internal factors of the communication process, namely e-mail content, design, and related strategies.

BACKGROUND: HOW DOES THE INTERNET AFFECT SOCIAL SCIENCE INQUIRY?

Traditionally, recruitment for scientific research was based essentially in person-to-person communication, which, in turn, was anchored on external factors such as the credibility of the organizing or funding institution, usually a university or research center, or the researcher or team reputation (Patton, 2002; Schostak, 2006).

In recent times, the Internet serves both as a location for social research and as a tool for conducting it (Fielding, Lee & Blank, 2008). Regarding this last aspect, the computer-based global information and communication system is changing the way social research is conducted because it facilitates data col-

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