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## From Computer to Commuter: Considerations for the Use of Social Networking Sites for Participant Recruitment

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## From Computer to Commuter: Considerations for the Use of Social Networking Sites for Participant Recruitment

### Abstract

The rise in use and changing nature of the Internet has led to an increase in the number of people using discussion forums and social networking sites for the purpose of online social interaction, sharing experiences, and learning. Whilst researchers have begun to capitalize on the increasing pool of online participants for research online, very few studies have examined the benefits of online participant recruitment for offline data collection. Through the format of a 'back stage' essay, this paper follows the research process of participant recruitment using a social networking site to arrange offline interviews with local rail users in Mumbai and Chennai, India. This paper contributes to the literature about the methodological issues associated with ensuring authenticity of online-recruited research participants. It also builds on the existing literature about incorporating researcher safety into the method.

### Keywords

Researcher Safety, Rail Passengers, Online Recruitment, Trust, Authenticity, India, Interviews

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## From Computer to Commuter: Considerations for the Use of Social Networking Sites for Participant Recruitment

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*The rise in use and changing nature of the Internet has led to an increase in the number of people using discussion forums and social networking sites for the purpose of online social interaction, sharing experiences, and learning. Whilst researchers have begun to capitalize on the increasing pool of online participants for research online, very few studies have examined the benefits of online participant recruitment for offline data collection. Through the format of a 'back stage' essay, this paper follows the research process of participant recruitment using a social networking site to arrange offline interviews with local rail users in Mumbai and Chennai, India. This paper contributes to the literature about the methodological issues associated with ensuring authenticity of online-recruited research participants. It also builds on the existing literature about incorporating researcher safety into the method. Keywords: Researcher Safety, Rail Passengers, Online Recruitment, Trust, Authenticity, India, Interviews*

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### Introduction

This paper draws from a larger mixed methods study of the experience of rail passengers in crowded conditions in Mumbai and Chennai, India. This paper's aims are confined to the specifics of using a social networking site to recruit participants for face-to-face interviews. The website was the social networking and hospitality site, couchsurfing.org, which will be described in more detail later. To ensure a representational sample of passenger perceptions, the study sampled frequent rail users from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations within each city. Whilst some participants were recruited through a private recruitment company and some through the snowball sampling recruitment strategy (where participants recommend their contacts with the desired characteristic for participation; Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010), the primary method of participant recruitment (52 of 82 participants) was through couchsurfing.org.

There is a dearth of literature about methodological aspects of online recruitment for offline data collection and this paper helps to fill that gap. This paper will review Internet use in India and will examine previous research on the use of social networking sites for research purposes. Following this, a background to couchsurfing.org, the site used for recruitment will be given. Finally, a discussion surrounding the benefits and limitations for this method of recruitment will occur.

### The rise of Internet use in India

India's Internet use is dramatically increasing (Goel, Subramanyam, & Kamath, 2013; Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2013) and the scope for research in India on social networking sites has become apparent. Social networking sites in India are recorded as high use and high impact websites (Vaidyanathan, 3-1-2012) indeed in 2011, India ranked seventh worldwide for users of these sites (Ahmad, 2011). One social networking website with a steadily growing membership within India is couchsurfing.org. In 2012, the Indian membership of the

website stood at 55,000 members (Prabhakar, 6-5-2012) whilst the 2013 worldwide membership was 6 million (CouchSurfing, 2013).

### **Considerations when using social networking sites for recruitment**

For researchers using face-to-face methods, the recruitment of participants through traditional methods such as newspaper advertisements or postal requests (Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004) can be a challenge. The increase in Internet users and the rise in online social organization, such as social networking sites and discussion forums have opened a potential cache of participants in an extensive range of research fields (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; Ramo, Hall, & Prochaska, 2010; Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011). This provides scope for research online, or to recruit participants online for offline research.

The benefits and drawbacks of recruiting participants through online communities have been discussed over a range of topics including: the responses of video gamers to new games (Wood et al., 2004); perceptions of trust in hospitality websites (Lauterbach, Truong, Shah, Adamic, & Arbor, 2009; Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011; Tan, 2010); perceptions of personal and sexual safety in online dating websites (Bateson, Weisberg, McCaffery, & Luscombe, 2012; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008); and the outlook of people towards their disease and health outcomes (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006; Levine et al., 2011; Mendelson, 2007; Temple & Brown, 2011). Interestingly, all of these studies, bar Tan (2010), have recruited and studied their participants through online methods with no offline research occurring. This omission is notable due to the number of benefits that online recruitment for offline research offers, which will be discussed below.

Whilst the Internet can be a valuable resource for researchers to access participants for qualitative research, a number of guidelines and protocols exist (Mendelson, 2007; Wood et al., 2004) to enable the researcher to gain participant trust and negate exploitation (Moloney, Dietrich, Strickland, & Myerburg, 2003). For research quality, it is important to understand the computer literacy rate of target participants (Moloney et al., 2003; Ramo et al., 2010), to engage lurkers (Mendelson, 2007) and to ensure the authenticity of participants (Wood et al., 2004), as this can have implications on the researcher's safety and the research outcomes. These challenges are elaborated on below.

#### ***i. Computer literacy***

A potential bias of online participant recruitment is the demographic of reachable participants (Moloney et al., 2003; Ramo et al., 2010). Moloney et al. (2003) argue that the study sample may be predisposed towards professional people and those from households with higher incomes. In addition, individuals accessing social networking sites tend to be younger adults (Ramo et al., 2010), indeed the average age for users of couchsurfing.org (which was used in the study) is 28 years (CouchSurfing, 2012). If older people or those from a lower socioeconomic background are required for a study, accessing a representative sample through online recruitment may be challenging unless a specific site used by that demographic is located. These issues have been addressed in the literature for online surveys through two main techniques. The first acknowledges that the complete population is not included in that study and results are reported within "an artificially bounded sampling frame" (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003, p. 191; Yun & Trumbo, 2000). The second includes oversampling adjustment calculations (Kehoe & Pitkow, 1996; Smith, 1997). By using these methods, online studies can negate the effect of participant population bias.

## **ii. *Authenticity of the research participant***

The performative nature of some social networking sites such as Flickr (Elliott, 2013), World of Warcraft (Albrechtslund, 2011), and some marriage and dating websites (Pujazon-Zazik, Manasse, & Orrell-Valente, 2012; Sahib, Koning, & van Witteloostuijn, 2006) can create issues for researchers using online recruitment as many individuals on these forums create fictitious identities which do not emulate their offline persona and which may impact on the validity of the results (Kang, Brown, & Kiesler, 2013; Wood et al., 2004). Mendelson (2007) suggests the researcher only access forums or websites that “do not encourage identity play” so as to avoid misrepresentation which can be a “threat to the true value of the findings” (p. 321). For this study, the issue of authenticity was of concern, so a website that encouraged trust and honesty and the use of real names was chosen. User authenticity and trust within couchsurfing.org is discussed below.

## **iii. *Trust***

Whilst some online discussion groups are open to the public, others are only accessible to members through a login system or through approval of the group moderator. Researchers intending on joining a group with the goal of recruiting participants need to be aware of the group’s sensitivities. Ensuring research transparency, explaining the study to the moderator (Mendelson, 2007) and providing members with “sufficient information about the study ... and the methods to protect privacy” (Mendelson, 2007, p. 322) is vital. The provision of such information to group members encourages trust towards the researcher.

## **iv. *Engaging lurkers***

According to Mendelson (2007), the number of people who post regularly on online forums represents a small percentage of the group’s membership. Members who do not post on the discussion forums are known as lurkers (Mendelson, 2007, p. 320). These vocally inactive but silently active members are important to engage as they may be potential research participants. To discourage self-selection bias of frequent posters (Wood et al., 2004), lurkers may be accessed by encouraging group members to respond to research questions privately rather than on the public forum. This approach was used in a number of instances in the reported study to achieve a representative sample of the less active group members, such as women and people aged over 35, whilst ensuring their privacy from the group forum.

## **v. *Researcher safety***

Although there is comprehensive literature on researcher safety in field research (Belousov et al., 2007; Palmer & Thompson, 2010; Paterson, Gregory, & Thorne, 1999), there is little information about safety issues associated with online recruitment for offline research. This may be due to the relative newness of online recruitment and to the anonymity that the Internet provides in the format of pseudo-names and fictitious identities, which make such recruitment problematic and may dissuade some researchers. Not only can these factors impact on the “quality” of results (Wood et al., 2004) but, when meeting in an offline setting, the lack of honesty in an online profile may threaten the safety of the researcher as the true identity and actions of the participant may differ significantly from their online self-portrayal.

In any situation where a researcher meets a participant in a face-to-face setting there exists a risk for the researcher's safety to be compromised (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Researchers need to be aware of the potential risks and combat these by devising study-specific safety protocols (Belousov et al., 2007; Gurney, 1985; Palmer & Thompson, 2010; Paterson et al., 1999).

For this study the risks to me surrounded my gender, the location of the interviews and my choice of clothing. To mitigate these I devised a safety protocol focusing on the interview location and my attire. Interviews were held in public places and I ensured that colleagues knew where I would be on any particular day, giving them this information in a sealed envelope. Whilst this may be seen as presenting an ethical conflict for the anonymity of my research participants, I asked that my contacts only read the contents of the envelope if I had not returned by a previously specified time and if they could not contact me on my mobile phone. In terms of clothing, I wore a *salwar kameez*, which is a modest and commonly worn traditional Indian attire for women and which allowed me to visually integrate with my surrounds.

### **Background to couchsurfing.org**

Launched in 2003, couchsurfing.org is a social networking site that falls under the banner of a hospitality exchange network (Tan, 2010). Members of the website (called *couchsurfers*) use online social networking to find and provide accommodation and travel-related information. It is a not-for-profit organization that, as of October 2013, had 6 million members (CouchSurfing, 2013) with an average age of 28 years and 47% of users identify as female (CouchSurfing, 2012). Couchsurfing.org aims to connect members with strangers, rather than with their pre-existing friends (Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011, p. 982). The website encourages members to exchange information, advice, and to meet fellow travelers, or locals and provides the facility for members to stay in each other's homes without monetary exchange. It relies on "reciprocity and trust" (Heesakkers, 2008; Lauterbach et al., 2009, p. 352) between members so they can accept the risk of staying with, hosting, or meeting a stranger (Adamic, Lauterbach, Teng, & Ackerman, 2011; Tan, 2010).

The couchsurfing.org website uses member Profiles, References, Vouching and Verification to establish and build trust between members. Each member has a Profile page where they may add photographs; include a personal portrayal and a description of their couch, if they have one to offer. As with other social networking sites, couchsurfers can "add friends" and this list is displayed on their Profile page. After contact with another member, positive or negative References may be left as feedback. References appear on a couchsurfer's Profile and are available for other members to see, acting as a testimonial. References are used by people wishing to make a connection to judge a person's honesty and personality (Heesakkers, 2008). The Reference system motivates members to be honest in their offline exchange as a bad reputation will avert other members from future interactions with that person (Lauterbach et al., 2009, p. 346). To further build trust, and to help people seek trustworthy members, there is a system called "Vouching." Unlike References, a Vouch cannot be removed, so it is encouraged to be given vigilantly. A couchsurfer may not vouch for others until they already have three Vouches of their own and these are displayed on their Profile. Finally, members may pay couchsurfing.org USD \$23 for the system to verify their geographical location. Once Verified, a Verification icon appears on that member's Profile. These four mechanisms of Profile building, References, Vouching and Verification help construct and maintain trust between couchsurfers (Lauterbach et al., 2009; Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011; Tan, 2010). Trust is an integral feature within the community with the Profile page acting as a *curriculum vitae* (Tan, 2010), allowing people to safely make contact

with strangers (Feng, Lazar, & Preece, 2004, p. 987). Like other social networking sites and forums, couchsurfing.org uses threaded discussion boards within groups to encourage open and efficient communication.

Whilst social networking sites such as Facebook encourage offline social gatherings with friends (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013), a difference seen in couchsurfing.org, (and also evident in dating websites; Bateson et al., 2012; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008) is the hybrid online/offline nature encouraging the face-to-face meeting of strangers (Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011; Tan, 2010). The benefits of this “geographical and virtual” (Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011, p. 982) contact between two environments is described by Tan (2010),

... actors negotiate trust through online profiles and then renegotiate it through face-to-face encounters, and after the encounter they are able to leave references in the online world, thus reinforcing trust in the community. (p. 379)

An online connection between members generates a basic level of trust, however meeting face-to-face intensifies the “sense of belonging” and “connectedness” (Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011). This trust and honesty between members makes couchsurfing.org an ideal recruitment platform as members are more likely to portray themselves in an accurate and authentic way than other social networking sites where more lenient validation protocols are in place. Whilst this is the case, exceptions to that rule exist and these will be discussed later.

### **Recruiting successfully through a social networking site**

This section will discuss my methodological process of recruitment through couchsurfing.org as a successful strategy of online recruitment for offline research.

To achieve the aims of the study and to ensure that a comprehensive representative sample of society was included in the research (Hamilton & Bowers, 2006), I needed to talk to rail commuters from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In total, 82 participants were recruited through three strategies. Ten participants were recruited through snowballing with eight from a higher socioeconomic background and two from a lower socioeconomic background. To access participants specifically from a higher socioeconomic background, couchsurfing.org was used (n=52). For people from a lower socioeconomic background a moderator and translator was engaged. Owing to typically poor access to the Internet (Haseloff, 2005), lower education levels and fewer English speakers pertaining to people of a lower socioeconomic level (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2010; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006) the likelihood of recruiting that demographic through couchsurfing.org was improbable. Those interviews were capped at 20 participants due to cost restrictions.

Whilst traditional advocates of qualitative research recruitment may be in opposition to such a varied, non-homogeneous recruitment method, I argue that without a range of recruitment strategies I would have been unlikely to recruit enough lower socioeconomic participants, causing significant bias in my data set. This was also discussed by McLean and Campbell (2003) when researching multi-ethnic communities in England. For reasons discussed below, I found that the method stood as a valuable recruitment tool, especially for research being conducted in a foreign country.

Before the commencement of the research, I had an established Profile on couchsurfing.org which had been active since 2007. I was conscious that the entrance of researchers into an online community can be viewed as an “intrusion” (Mendelson, 2007, p. 318). Nevertheless, I was confident that my Profile would be well received in India's

couchsurfing community because I had over 50 positive References with no negative or neutral References. I presented as a legitimate member of the community, rather than someone joining couchsurfing.org simply to conduct research. This approach is in keeping with Lenert and Skoczen's recommendation that researchers intending on recruiting participants online "should familiarize themselves with the culture and etiquette of the group prior to posting messages" (2002, p. 252).

Recruitment through couchsurfing.org consisted of five strategies to gather a cross section of participants (Ramo et al., 2010). These were: group posting; attendance at group events; members contacting me; direct emails from me to members; and snowballing.

Upon arrival in India, I updated my Profile to include information about the study and to indicate that I was searching for interview participants. Following this, I joined the most active groups in each city. In Mumbai, these were: "Mumbai" with 4753 members in January 2012 and "Mumbai meetings and happenings" with 1693 members. In Chennai I joined "Chennai" with 1274 members. I used the groups to identify social events occurring in each city and attended many of these to ensure recognition as someone using the website for social purposes, not just for research. I also posted messages on the group pages introducing myself, explaining my research and asking people to contact me if they were interested in participating in an interview. As compensation I offered a meal at the public location where we met. By joining the groups, I was able to create both an online and offline presence in the local couchsurfing.org community which helped me to build a trustworthy reputation and dissipated suspicion of my image as a researcher (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972).

Whilst the trust and genuineness between members makes couchsurfing.org an ideal recruitment platform for participants, exceptions to that rule exist. On ten occasions, I received emails from members in both cities (all male) that I perceived as "sleazy," containing unsolicited sexual content. These overtures allowed me to reflect on a survey about couchsurfing.org where women had concerns about unwanted sexual attention (Adamic et al., 2011). In terms of male advances towards female researchers, the experience of Gurney (1985) researching in a male-dominated environment and experiencing sexual harassment stood out, as did Baum's comments that "most published research presents a sanitized view of the research process..." (1998, p. 112).

On the group forum, I found that responses were skewed towards younger males from Mumbai. To counter this, I referred to my predetermined quota of participant attributes (Arcury & Quandt, 1999), including age, gender and residential location in each city and noted which characteristics required more participants, identifying that I was lacking interviews from females and people above 35 years of age. I elected to directly contact members who fitted these specifications through Private Message. Messaging members directly has been demonstrated to be effective both from personal experience when "surfing" and in the literature (Rosen & Lafontaine, 2011). Interviews with these people, found that the majority were lurkers who rarely read the discussion forums, preferring contact through Private Message. A total of twelve participants, primarily females and aged above 35 were recruited through Private Message.

A successful method of recruitment through couchsurfing.org across both gender and city categories was snowballing. At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if they knew a rail traveler whom would be willing to speak to me, specifying that I needed to contact females. Many participants were willing to introduce me to their friends, colleagues and family members.

Two days before the interview I emailed the participant to confirm our meeting and on the morning of the interview I sent a confirmation text message. As well as increasing the likelihood that the participant would be present for the interview, it demonstrated that I

valued their attendance (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001) and indeed, on no occasion did a participant cancel their interview.

For researcher and participant safety reasons, the interviews were held in public places, such as cafés, malls or local parks. The interview style began with a short conversation about couchsurfing.org and their experiences with the website to build rapport. This format aided the participant's comfort, as the "first minutes of an interview are important to establishing good contact between the participant and researcher" (Kvale, 1996 in Hamilton & Bowers, 2006, p. 827). The interview followed a semi-structured format with the participant often leading the discussion (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1990). In this way the participant could feel in control of the interview, seeing themselves as the expert (Bowers, 1989; Palmer & Thompson, 2010). I used a Livescribe Echo™ Smartpen to record the conversation and to make notes (Schreiner, 2008). The pen is beneficial as its presence is not as intimidating as a voice recorder, allowing the participants to relax and to focus on the conversation.

Following the interview, as a form of reciprocity I wrote each respondent a Reference on their couchsurfing.org Profile. In many instances they wrote a Reference for me, mentioning the interview which served to further strengthen my "researcher" Profile in the community.

My familiarity with the website prior to the study was important as I had insight into the functioning of the community, furthering my ability to recruit a range of participants. When using social networking sites or discussion forums for recruitment purposes, the researcher's familiarity with the website is key for successful participant recruitment.

### **The benefits and limitations to using couchsurfing.org as a recruitment strategy**

Four benefits and four limitations for using couchsurfing.org for recruitment were identified. Benefits included:

- 1) engaging hard to reach populations;
- 2) high rate of participation;
- 3) limited use of pseudo-names, and
- 4) safety for the researcher and participant.

Limitations to using couchsurfing.org included:

- 1) the overuse of a website for research;
- 2) limited access to lower socioeconomic participants;
- 3) the potential for a power imbalance, and
- 4) people on couchsurfing.org having different values to the overall population.

These will be discussed in more detail below.

#### **Benefits**

##### ***1) Engaging hard to reach populations***

When recruiting through the Internet, it is important to identify where the source of participants will be located and target that website accordingly (Mendelson, 2007). For example, Levine et al. (2011) wanted to engage youth of color - with HIV prevention

interventions. They chose the social networking site, MySpace, as it was understood that this population accessed that website frequently. In another example, Mendelson (2007) aimed to research women living with the medical condition lupus, and therefore joined discussion forums specific to that disease. In my case, I aimed to recruit English speaking rail users whom I could ensure posed no offline threat to me. I also wanted to target a range of ages, occupations and geographical locations in each city. Using an online strategy for recruitment allowed me to access a dispersed geographical distribution of members; contact people with a range of occupations; and, as the website is run in English, ensure participants had a good level of the language. Although young males were typically the quickest to respond, I used targeted methods through the website to ensure access to the diverse range of participants needed.

## **2) *High rate of participation***

Within couchsurfing.org, I had varying success rates through different recruitment strategies. My most successful technique for accessing participants was through a public posting in groups. This was closely followed by snowballing after interviews. Each of the five recruitment methods within couchsurfing.org were unique in attracting different strata of participants to the study.

## **3) *Limited use of pseudo-names***

The nature of the couchsurfing.org website as a hospitality exchange network with online and offline aspects means that the system is dissuasive towards people using pseudo-names rather than their real name. As a result, the authenticity of the research participant is likely to be more genuine.

## **4) *Researcher and participant safety***

One of the main advantages of using couchsurfing.org over other social networking sites for participant recruitment was the Profile and Reference system that allowed me to review participant's Profiles prior to my meeting them, and vice versa. For my researcher safety protocol, Profiles were required to be well "filled-out;" to have at least one photograph and to have at least two positive References and no negative References. When emailing members directly, I selected Profiles which had been active in the last week due to the higher likelihood of a reply.

## **Limitations**

### **1) *The overuse of a website for research***

Approaching any online or offline community as a researcher must be carried out with appropriate knowledge of that community. Often, it is necessary for the researcher to demonstrate a prior understanding of, and experience within that community, demonstrating to members that they can be trusted. Whilst this paper has documented my positive methodological experience of recruiting participants using couchsurfing.org, it must be noted that my previous experience with the community was an asset in gaining participant trust. Although it was a useful and beneficial method of recruitment for my research, the researcher's personal history with the site is an important consideration and we do not

advocate unfamiliar couchsurfing.org users to conduct research on the website as this may be viewed in a negative light by the community.

### **2) *Limited access to lower socioeconomic participants***

As discussed earlier, in India fewer people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have access to the Internet. Subsequently, the use of couchsurfing.org to target some populations is ineffective. As a result I engaged a private recruitment company to access participants from this group.

### **3) *Power imbalance***

In her study of online to offline trust in couchsurfing.org, Tan (2010) discussed the potential for a power imbalance in her interviews. This was caused by her relationship as host interviewing her couchsurfers and subsequent concern that they may feel obliged to participate. To ameliorate this, she asked them to sign a consent form and explained that they could end the study early with no ramifications to their accommodation status. Despite these measures, the fact that participants were staying in her house for free may inadvertently coerce them into a feeling of reciprocity, making them less likely to terminate the interview. Like Tan, I used couchsurfing.org to recruit participants but unlike Tan, I met my participants specifically for the interview, rather than hosting them. This lessened any power imbalance as our meeting occurred specifically for the interview, making the boundaries of research clearly delineated. In my email correspondence with participants, and upon meeting them, I was clear that they were able to terminate the interview at any time and, prior to the interview they read and signed a consent form. Online and offline interactions with the participant are therefore important to consider and monitor to ensure no power imbalance in the relationship occurs.

### **4) *Different values***

A bias of using couchsurfing.org for recruitment is that the people who are members may have different values to other people in that culture. Being a member of couchsurfing.org requires the individual to be open-minded, prepared to meet strangers in public, or, even to host strangers in their homes (Tan, 2010). Whilst India's culture encourages hospitality (Banerjee, 2008), this does not necessarily extend to hospitality to strangers from the Internet.

## **Discussion**

This paper has followed an innovative technique of recruiting participants online for offline interviews. We have explored issues surrounding online recruitment strategies and built on the existing literature about incorporating researcher and participant safety into the methodological process. Additionally, we have demonstrated the effectiveness of using couchsurfing.org in a foreign country as a recruitment channel, particularly with respect to participant authenticity and accessing hard to reach populations.

This paper has found that the severity of the risk incurred by recruiting online is affected by the chosen website. For example, the Reference system on couchsurfing.org means members are more likely to portray themselves honestly (Tan, 2010), whereas members of chat rooms, World of Warcraft or eHarmony have less reason to (Albrechtslund, 2011; Elliott, 2013; Pujazon-Zazik et al., 2012). Choosing the appropriate website for

recruitment is therefore important, and couchsurfing.org proved ideal in providing accurately represented members.

With regards to researcher safety, recruitment online for offline interviews may be advantageous over more traditional forms of recruitment such as an advertisement or by electronic media or flyer, especially when conducting research in large urban areas in a foreign country. On couchsurfing.org I was able to target rail users and to screen potential participants prior to face-to-face contact, something that may not be possible through customary means. Whilst these safety and Reference safeguards are already a popular feature of user retail websites such as Amazon.com and EBay (Gilliland & Rudd, 2012), these safety benefits may also be a future consideration for websites where there is an online to offline component such as gumtree.com, craigslist.org and dating websites, where current safeguards can easily be bypassed (Pujazon-Zazik et al., 2012, p. 520). Couchsurfing.org provided a new format for participant recruitment in which trust could be negotiated, researcher and participant safety ensured, and language barrier concerns annulled prior to meeting offline. Whilst this paper relates specifically to a study conducted in India by an Australian researcher, there is scope for this method to inform a diverse range of research in different countries and in various fields, especially where the researcher is entering an unfamiliar environment. Although we have specifically focused on the benefits of recruitment through couchsurfing.org, further studies could examine the benefits of other social networking sites for recruitment.

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