MI Diaries: Supplementary Materials

The supplementary materials contain further details about recruitment, team member roles, project branding, and the MI Diaries app.

1 Mission, Vision, Values

As highlighted in the main text, a project subteam referred to as "the Brand Team" was one of the unexpected benefits that emerged from working with a large and diverse group of students. The Brand Team is charged with the stewardship of the MI Diaries identity, and developing our research project as a unified brand (Furkioti & Rechsteiner, 2021). To facilitate this aim, the Brand Team developed explicit mission, vision, and values statements, which we include here. These serve as guides for all project decision making.

1.1 Mission:

To document changes in the lives and language of Michiganders, while fostering an inclusive community and a sense of connection in a time where neither are easy to experience. We aim to provide a place for diarists to confidentially share their true selves, while also contributing their stories to a larger historical archive of life during and after the pandemic.

1.2 Values:

– Authenticity: To provide participants with a space to share their stories where they can be open and authentic and be heard for who they are.

– Trustworthiness: To incorporate a code of professionalism in our work that assures diarists, scholars and the public of the high ethical and scholarly standards that we adhere to.

– Mentorship: To encourage students to further their professional development skills through research, project management and engagement with the community state-wide.

– Research Longevity: To recognize the historical value of this project by continuing to develop as a research opportunity for Michiganders by Michiganders.

1.3 Vision:

We are committed to providing people who live in Michigan with an active platform to express valuable insights into life during and after the pandemic. These insights are made more valuable by ensuring a diverse community of diarists. The audio diaries we collect will also contribute to new knowledge about

how language changes. We believe that MI Diaries will foster a continuous opportunity for researchers of multiple disciplines to develop professional skills and continue an ongoing archive of Michigan speech.

2 Prompts

Sending out new question prompts each week is one of the methods that we employ to both build virtual community with diarists and keep the project fresh and engaging. Diarists regularly comment that they look forward to opening our weekly emails to see what the new questions are each week. An analysis conducted in May 2021 found that between April 2020 and May 2021, the project sent out over 1,400 unique diary questions across all age groups.

2.1 Prompt development

The majority of our project meeting time is spent developing effective diary prompts for each of our three age groups. Three questions remain the same each week: "What are you grateful for this week", "Was anything particularly difficult this week", and "What was a news headline that stuck out to you this week"? These three prompts allow us to provide diarists with a space to reflect, while also allowing us to track any big personal changes that diarists are encountering, both in their personal lives and in their broader social landscape. The news question also has been very effective at eliciting soapbox style responses (Labov, 2001) to news stories.

In the remainder of our prompts, we aim to obtain a range of speaking styles from diarists each week, following the classic components of a sociolinguistic interview (Labov, 1984). As with in-person sociolinguistic interviews, personal narratives are some of the most difficult style of response to obtain. Unlike in-person interviews, however, there is no researcher present to encourage participants to go into more detail by asking follow up questions like "what happened next?" For this reason, the majority of team meeting time is spent creating narrative-eliciting diary prompts.

This process begins by first hearing about experiences that people have had in the past week, both from diary entries and from team members sharing what they did that week. We then work to turn that experience into a broader question. Most typically, the first-pass question is in the form of a yes-or-no question; this then takes further massaging into a final open-form question. As an example, one week during the winter a team member noticed a lot of cars in the ditch alongside the highway. The initial diary prompt created in response to this experience was "Have you ever gotten in a car accident?" We then worked to turn this into a broader question about driving experiences that would be less likely to trigger any traumatic memories, and could elicit stories beyond just accidents, and to make it a question explicitly asking for the story: "Have you ever had a scary experience driving in the snow?"

[associated audio-3-sneller.mp3 with "Have you ever had a scary experience driving in the snow" text]

In February and March of 2021, we ran a series of themed prompts in collaboration with our community partner, MSU Extension 4-H, which was running a teen photovoice project with weekly themes to prompt their photovoice participants. Teens in this photovoice project could use our diary prompts to help them reflect on the weekly theme and develop their ideas for the photovoice project.

2.2 Inclusive prompts

An important consideration in creating prompts is making the diary prompts maximally inclusive. This means that we take care to not presume anything about diarists' experiences. Questions for kids and teens about 'parents' are reframed to be about 'adults', 'family members', or 'parents or guardians', as relevant. Questions about holidays are framed as 'If you celebrate Halloween' rather than 'What did you do for

Halloween this year?'. For holidays in particular, we aim to include as many as we know of, from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds (e.g., Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Halloween, Diwali, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, Eid, Ramadan). Our hope is that this type of inclusive framing helps diarists feel more open and authentic.

While we aim to be inclusive of all diarists' experiences and viewpoints, there are nevertheless some viewpoints that are themselves non-inclusive or are otherwise harmful to other members of the community. In keeping with our project value of *trustworthiness*, we take care to frame diary prompts in a way that are less likely to elicit stories or opinions that are harmful (such as racist or anti-vax stances), and do not feature stories of this nature.

2.3 Example prompts for three age groups

Every week, our email for each age group begins with a thank-you, and any relevant updates from the team (Figure 1). This is followed by the featured stories blurb, which typically features stories from the relevant age group (adults for the adults email, teens for the teens email, etc.; Figure 2). The rest of email is tailored to each age group, with the Adults email linking to Adult selected stories and prompts (shown in (1)), the Teens email linking to Teen selected stories and prompts (2), and the Kids email linking to Kid selected stories and prompts (3).

March 19, 2021

Thank you so much to everyone who shared their stories with us this week. We appreciate everyone who took the time to share with us.

Lots of updates this week from the team:

- MI Diaries has been in the news this week! Check out this great piece on Literary Hub, which highlights our featured diarist stories. We also were featured in this piece by Bloomberg News, looking back at how the pandemic has changed peoples lives over the past year.

- For the next few weeks, our questions will center around a specific theme. These themes come from the weekly themes from one of our community partners, MSU Extension 4-H's "Visualizing a Year Like No Other" photo project. Check out more about the photo project, and about 4-H, here.

- Last week we heard some really great reflections about the theme of "action". This week's theme is "connection".

Fig. 1: Email introduction each week includes a thank-you message, and any updates from the team.
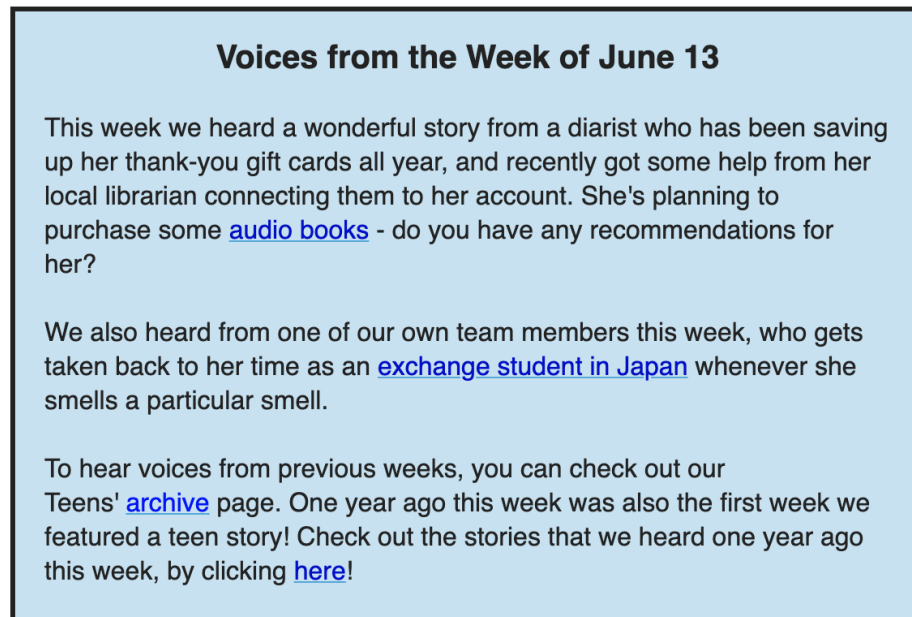
Voices from the Week of June 13

This week we heard a wonderful story from a diarist who has been saving up her thank-you gift cards all year, and recently got some help from her local librarian connecting them to her account. She's planning to purchase some audio books - do you have any recommendations for her?

We also heard from one of our own team members this week, who gets taken back to her time as an exchange student in Japan whenever she smells a particular smell.

To hear voices from previous weeks, you can check out our Teens' archive page. One year ago this week was also the first week we featured a teen story! Check out the stories that we heard one year ago this week, by clicking here!

Fig. 2: Featured stories for the Teen email from June 13.

1. **Adult prompts from March 19, 2021**
   – What are you grateful for this week?
   – Is there anything that's been particularly difficult this week?
   – Is there a news headline that has stuck out to you recently?
   – Have you found or created any unexpected community or connections in the past year?
   – How have you stayed connected to people this past year? Are there any apps that you use?
   – Has there ever been someone you didn't think you'd be friends with, but then you liked them after all?
   – What is a relationship that you cherish? How did you meet?
   – Do you think your phone or other devices are listening to you? Do you ever talk about something and then see an ad for that?
   – Have you ever felt like an imposter? What do you do when you start to feel like that?
   – What's your favorite tree? One of our kid team members likes the small tree outside their house because they can hug it. Another kid team member likes apple trees because they can eat the apples.
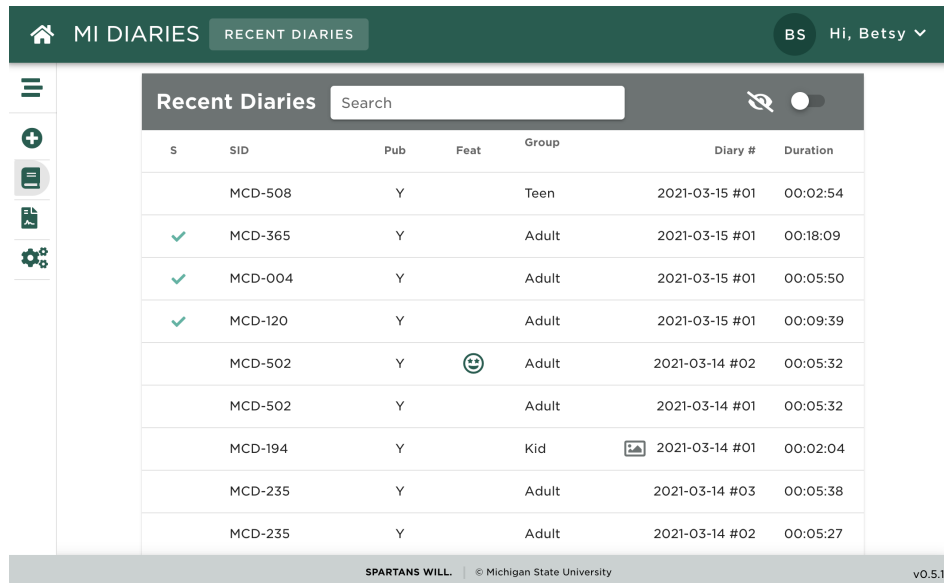
2. **Teen prompts from March 19, 2021**
   – What are you grateful for this week?
   – Is there anything that's been particularly difficult this week?
   – Have you found or created any unexpected community or connections in the past year?
   – Has there ever been someone you didn't think you'd be friends with, but then you liked them after all?
   – Have you ever met someone who you became friends with right away?
   – Who in your family are you the closest to? Who do you talk with when you have a problem to work through?
   – Have you ever had a really great experience working as part of a team to accomplish something? What about a bad experience working in a team?
   – How have you been keeping in touch with your friends over the past year? What's your favorite app for staying connected?

– Do you think of yourself as independent? What do you do independently?
– Have you ever had to try out for something, like a sports team or a play audition? What was it like? How did it go?

3. **Kid prompts from March 19, 2021**
   – **Featured question (thanks to a diarist!):** Would you rather be an animal that can fly, goes on land, or can swim?
   – **Featured question (thanks to a diarist!):** How many of your teeth have been loose at the same time? One of our diarists had three loose teeth at once!
   – What are you grateful for this week?
   – Was anything particularly hard for you this week?
   – Was there ever a time when you ate so much that you felt that you were going to be sick?
   – Have you ever met someone who you became friends with right away?
   – Has there ever been someone you didn't think you'd be friends with, but then you liked them after all?
   – What's the weirdest way you've lost a tooth?
   – If you could teleport, who's the first person you'd visit?
   – What's your favorite tree? One of our kid team members likes the small tree outside their house because they can hug it. Another kid team member likes apple trees because they can eat the apples.

3 App interface

The back end interface of the MI Diaries app includes a secure log-in. New research assistant (RA) profiles can be added by PIs, after successful Human Subjects Training. On the Recent Diaries (Figure 3) screen, transcribers can easily mark entries as "corrected" (column S). Story selection RAs can easily see whether the diarist has agreed to potentially have their story published on the website (Pub), mark entries as containing a potential story to feature (Feat), see which age category the entry came in under so they can make sure to feature a story from each age group (Group), and see whether any incoming entries also include photo uploads from diarists (image logo).

The interface also tracks diary entries by Subject ID number (SID), date of submission (Diary #) and Duration of audio diary (Duration). A reports function supports participant payment, by enabling our Project Manager to easily obtain a list of diarists who have submitted 15 minutes of audio diary for each two-week pay period, and whether they have opted out of payment or not.

Clicking into individual entries brings users to a screen for each diary entry. Anonymized diarist information (subject ID) is included above, along with toggles so RAs can mark entries as possible stories to feature ('Feature Diary?') and hide them once they've been processed ('Hidden?'). The audio player allows RAs to play the entire entry. Audio is automatically run through automated speech recognition as they come in (processing time is typically around 5 minutes for entries longer than 20 minutes). The "Transcripts" section enables RAs to edit the time-alignment and the transcriptions in-browser, enabling multiple RAs to edit the same file synchronously. Each line is able to be played on its own by clicking the play button to the left of each transcription line, enabling RAs to re-play noisier segments. Transcribers mark files as "in progress" as they begin to fix transcription, and "complete" once the file has been fully corrected according to FAVE (Rosenfelder et al., 2014) transcription standards. Preliminary comparisons find that transcription editing using a first-pass ASR transcription in concert with this back end interface reduces transcriber time from around 20 minutes per minute of audio diary to 4 minutes per minute of audio.

The back end interface is written in Java and is stored on a Michigan State internal server. We would not have been able to keep up with real-time featured stories without the back end interface, and are extremely grateful to be able to work with Russ Werner (IT Specialist at Michigan State), who created
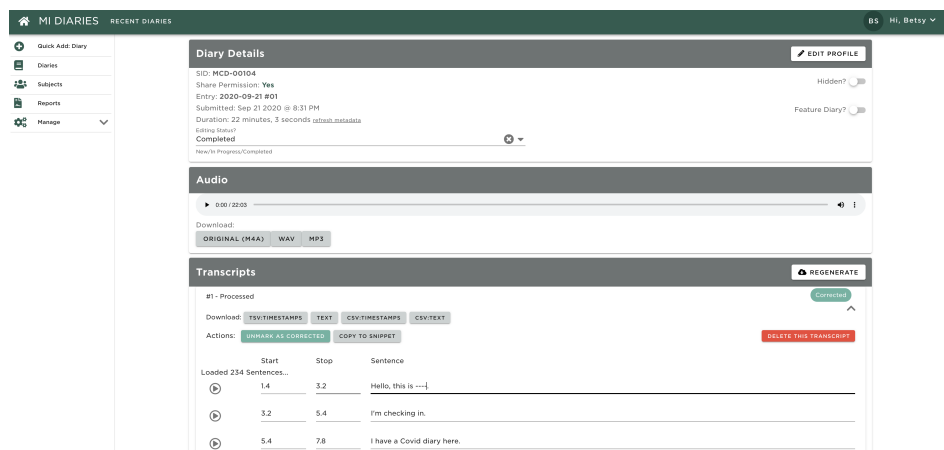
Fig. 3: Back-end interface of the MI Diaries app enables RAs to keep up with weekly story selection.

Fig. 4: Back-end interface of the MI Diaries app enables RAs to easily skim entries as they come in, and correct the time-alignment and transcriptions

and maintains the interface. We recognize our privilege in being able to have this kind of support. We plan to make the code for both the front end of the app and the back end interface publicly available so that researchers without access to specialized support may still be able to benefit from this kind of infrastructure (Sneller & Werner, in prep).

4 Building virtual community

Refining our project's brand identity to be recognizable and to invoke *authenticity* and *trustworthiness* has been one of the primary ways that we've tried to build a feeling of connection between diarists and the project. This has driven our visual rebranding (see Section 3.3 in the main document) elements.

Aside from consistent branding, we have incorporated ways to help diarists feel connected to each other and to the project wherever we could. Our primary approaches to building virtual community, aside from consistent branding, have been the following.

4.1 Prompt questions

Aside from making engaging with the project new and interesting each week, our question prompts often also include small ways for diarists to feel connected with each other. Sometimes this takes the form of explicitly responding to something another diarist has said, for instance: "One of our diarists went on a road trip this last week. Have you ever gone on a road trip? Where did you go?". Other times this takes the form of featuring a question that a diarist has suggested: "**Featured question (thanks to a diarist!):** How many of your teeth have been loose at the same time? One of our diarists had three loose teeth at once!". Lastly, we often also include personal snippets from team members in our prompt questions: "Have you ever made a decision based on touch? One of our team members chooses books by the way the cover feels."

4.2 Selected Stories

Selecting a handful of stories from diarists each week is an important component of our virtual community building. Diarists get to hear each other's experiences each week, and we give brief reactions to each selected story as part of our weekly email, soliciting feedback from diarists as well (see Figure 2 for an example).

Student research assistants comprising the 'story selection team' are responsible for listening through and selecting featured stories each week, which has been facilitated by the back end interface of the MI Diaries app (Figure 3). We aim to feature 1-2 stories from each of the 3 age groups (kids, teens, adults) every week. Some weeks we have been unable to feature kid or teen stories, due to a combination of low participation rates and some participants not opting-in to allowing their stories to be featured. Diarists regularly respond to the selected stories each week in their diary entries, and additionally report that participating in the project helps make them feel less alone. Selecting the stories to be featured is therefore a key element of running our project, and requires a thoughtful approach.

4.2.1 Story selection criteria

Featured stories are selected following a set of criteria. We aim to represent a range of experiences in our featured stories, from week to week. We also intend that the stories we feature should be a reflection of the types of stories that we have heard that week. In other words, if we receive a number of diary entries that all discuss a particular news event or diarists' responses to some recent change in the weather, we try to feature at least one of those stories. Finally, we aim to select true narratives (Labov & Waletzky, 1967)

where possible. When true narratives are difficult to find, we occasionally feature diarist answers to more targeted questions, like our semantic differentials or would-you-rather questions.

Semantic differentials are a common technique used in sociolinguistic interviews to obtain un-self-monitored tokens of interest (Labov, 1984). Participants are asked to explain the difference in meaning between two similar words (like *sneakers* and *tennis shoes*), and typically produce several stressed tokens of each word of interest in their answer. Words are chosen that contain at least one variable of particular interest, such as the /ɛ/ in *tennis shoes*, which has been undergoing a change in Michigan English over the past few decades (Eckert, 1989; Labov et al., 2006). Semantic differentials allow researchers to avoid the hypercorrection in pronunciation that often happens in read speech like word lists or even reading passages. We have added to this technique a "would-you-rather" question, which can serve the same analytical purpose but has the benefit of being a familiar genre of silly question, particularly for younger participants. In a would-you-rather question, participants are asked "would you rather X or Y"; like "would you rather be a cat or a dog?" These are designed to obtain stressed tokens of vowels of interest, but have the added bonus of being slightly whimsical and therefore more fun; while many diarists skip various questions each week, most diarists respond to these questions.

[associated audio-4-sneller.mp3 with "sneakers and tennis shoes" text]

[associated audio-5-sneller.mp3 with "would you rather be a cat or a dog" text]

In selecting featured stories for our archives, we are aware that we are building a public-facing time capsule of the pandemic. These stories have drawn a fair amount of public interest, both from the media and from the general public. We therefore feel a responsibility to ensure that we embody our project values of *authenticity* and *trustworthiness*. These values occasionally are in conflict; for instance, although the project is aimed at diarists ages 3 and up, we nevertheless do not censor swearing in audio submissions. We have opted to include the original audio when a featured story includes swearing, but to censor the accompanying transcript with a canonical [****] and include a disclaimer in the text so that visitors can decide whether they want to listen to the audio or not.

[associated audio-6-sneller.mp3 with "swearing" text]

Finally, as mentioned in the main text, we take care to share stories that reflect the wide range of experiences that we hear about, including stories of mundane life (such as walking around the neighborhood), great joy (such as celebrating a new baby) and hardship (such as sharing the losses of this past year).

[associated audio-7-sneller.mp3 with "walking around the neighborhood" text]

[associated audio-8-sneller.mp3 with "new baby" text]

[associated audio-9-sneller.mp3 with "losses of this past year" text]

4.3 Social media

Finally, we have created social media accounts on Facebook Instagram, and Twitter to help build awareness of the project and more community engagement.

In our initial conception, we planned to use Facebook and Instagram to give diarists more chances to engage with each other and with the project, similar to the approach discussed in (**NesbittWatts2021**). We share links to the selected stories from each week, and occasionally share good news from team members, ranging from big news items such as being awarded a prize to small celebrations such as going blueberry picking for the first time. Our goal with team member news posts is in part to demonstrate the kinds of stories – including the mundane – that we are hoping diarists will want to share with us, as well as allow diarists and community members to feel that they are getting to know members of the team. We note that

it requires a fair amount of maintenance to create and effectively maintain these accounts; we created a new project team role specifically for social media management in May 2021 and have as a result been able to increase the frequency of, visual appeal of, and engagement with our social media posts. We see social media engagement as an important tool in building a sense of community with diarists, and continue to look for ways to improve our engagement.

The project's Twitter account has to date primarily served as a venue to connect with non-diarist stakeholders, such as other researchers, promotional posts from the university, and interested members of the media.

4.4 Meet the Team on our website

Similarly to the featured social media posts about team member updates, we also include photos and selected stories from every member of the research team on our "Meet the Team" page of our website. Our goal here, as with social media posts, is to help make diarists more comfortable by demonstrating what participating in the project is like, as well as to help diarists feel more comfortable with the team.

5 Recruitment

We included an optional "How did you hear about the project" question as part of the sign up process in early November 2020. Because it is optional and because the first few months didn't include this question, the majority of sign ups are unspecified for recruitment. Given the sign up dates, we attribute the majority of these to university listservs and early social media shares. Diarist demographics are broken down in Figure 5 by gender,[1] ethnicity, and decade of birth. Figure 6 shows the same participant demographic data, broken down by gender, ethnicity, and decade of birth.
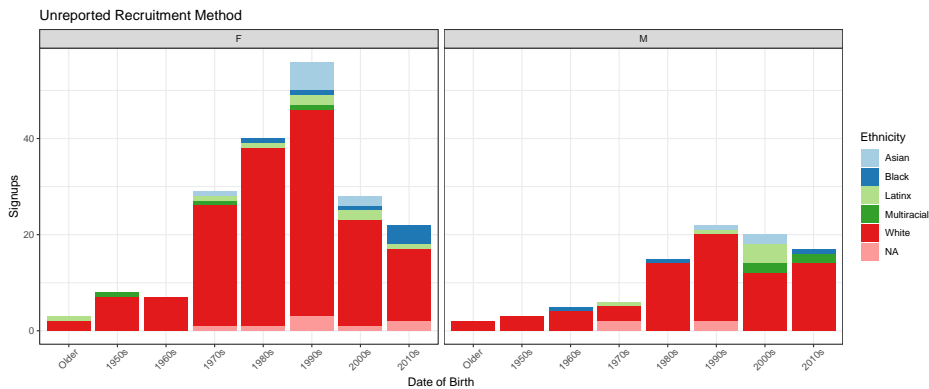

Fig. 5: Participant demographics (age by decade, ethnicity, and gender) for unspecified recruitment methods.

Posting to Reddit remains our most successful recruitment technique, and also the technique that achieves the most gender parity. While our participant sample so far loosely approximates the demographics of the state, we continue to pursue additional recruitment methods to boost participation of minoritized Michiganders. We also note that the majority of techniques identified here are specific to adult participants;

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1 Gender and Ethnicity were both free text blanks. Responses were hand-coded into the bins presented here. In addition to Male and Female participants, we also recruited 17 Nonbinary participants (majority from Reddit).
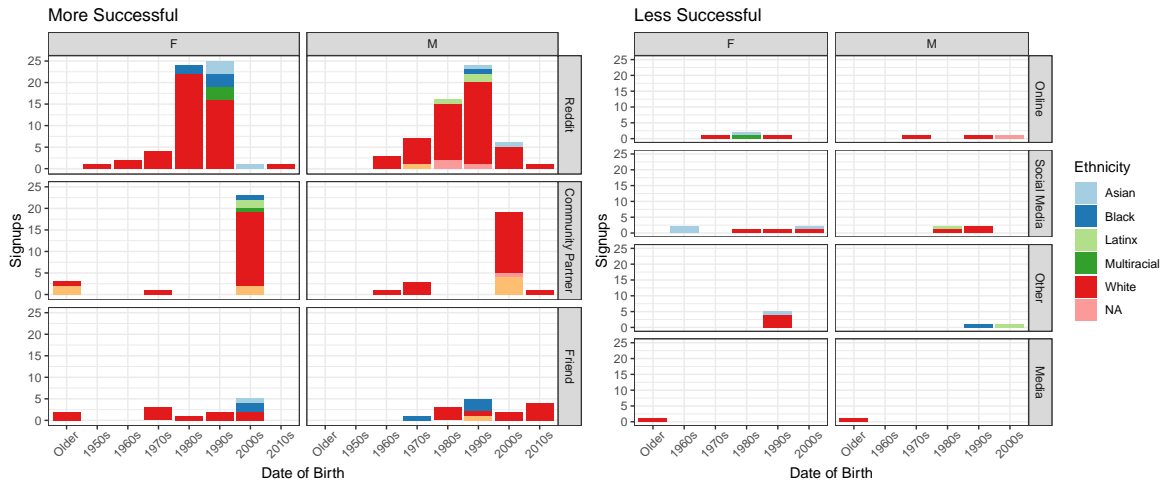
Fig. 6: Participant demographics (age by decade, ethnicity, and gender) for more successful (left) and less successful (right) recruitment techniques.

development of successful child and teen recruitment and retention is ongoing. Recruitment posts that included a flyer were more successful than posts without a flyer; posts with our updated flyer (Figure 7b) were more successful than our first flyer (Figure 7a).

(a) Old recruitment flyer

(b) Current recruitment flyer

Fig. 7: New recruitment flyers simplified the original design, use our updated logos, and provide a clearer directive to readers.

6 Child Assent Video Script

Dr. Sneller: Hi, I'm Betsy Sneller from Michigan State University.

Dr. Wagner: And I'm Suzanne Wagner from Michigan State University. We're doing a diary project to find out how coronavirus is affecting people in Michigan, including kids like you.

Dr. Sneller: If you're a kid who lives in Michigan, your life has probably changed a lot because of coronavirus! Your school has closed, people outside are wearing masks, and there are probably lots of other changes as well. We want to know how kids lives are different now, and how they've stayed the same too.

Dr. Wagner: We'd love it if you would help us with this research. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. Nobody will be upset with you if you decide you'd rather do something else. And you can stop being in the study any time you like.

Dr. Sneller: But if you DO want to help us, this is what will happen. Each week, we'll send some questions to you or the person who takes care of you. You can read the questions, or an adult can read them to you. The questions will be things like, "What can you see out of your window right now?" and "How are you staying in touch with your friends?"

Dr. Wagner: You'll find a quiet and comfortable place to answer the questions, like your bedroom or a soft chair. A blanket fort would be perfect! You'll speak your answers into a phone, tablet or computer. Nobody will see your face. You'll only record your voice. You or a grown-up will

send us the recording.

Dr. Sneller: You don't have to do this every week. You could send us a diary recording every other week, or even less often than that. That's totally okay with us! And you only have to answer the questions you want to answer. You can ignore the others.

Dr. Wagner: Only Betsy and I and our team will know your name. We won't share it with anyone else, including your teachers and your friends. But if you let us, we might include a little bit of one of your recordings on our website, without any name on it, so that other kids in Michigan can hear about your life. You can hear about other kids on our website too, and find out how their lives have changed as well.

Dr. Sneller: Every two weeks, if you've sent us some recordings of you talking for 15 minutes or more, we'll send you or the person who takes care of you a gift card for five dollars.

Dr. Wagner: We hope you'll send us your thoughts about your life these days in Michigan! If you have any questions about the study, you can either tell your parents and have them talk to us, or talk to us yourself. Our e-mail address and phone number are at the bottom of every page on the website.

Dr. Sneller: Thanks for listening! Bye!

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