

Relying on Young Ambassadors to Bolster COVID-19 Study Recruitment and Participation

Traci Hayes

University of Southern Mississippi

Wendy White

Tougaloo University

Abstract

In June 2020, young adults comprised 20% of the COVID-19 cases, and asymptomatic individuals were seen as “carriers” taking the virus into their homes and social settings. As with many health issues, the minority population was dealing with worse health outcomes. African American young adults were not excluded from this circumstance. In Mississippi, the group had some of the highest rates of COVID-19. Additionally, some young people across Mississippi were expressing that they felt unengaged and left out of the discussions on COVID-19. These concerns prompted the research project Young Adults Against COVID-19 (YAACOV), a project under the Mississippi Community Engagement Alliance Against COVID-19 Disparities (MS CEAL), funded by the National Institutes of Health. YAACOV was initiated to explore the perceptions, knowledge, and coping strategies of 18-29-year-old African Americans in Mississippi. To reach the recruitment goals, the YAACOV study team employed Young Ambassadors to help promote and recruit other young adults to participate in the study. The Young Ambassador initiative is the focus of the current case.

Keywords: COVID-19, young adults, ambassadors, community engagement, social media, communication

Introduction

Since 2020, many health officials and government leaders across the United States have been committed to mitigating the impact of the coronavirus. The first case of infection in January 2020 was just the beginning of an unprecedented health crisis, which has become a life changing priority for the world (CDC, 2020). During the onslaught of the virus, health leaders were making daily discoveries and disseminating information to help reduce the spread of the virus. The pertinent discoveries led health officials to focus the greatest attention on the most vulnerable populations – the elderly and individuals with pre-existing conditions. This was understandable considering many in these subgroups were challenged with weakened immune systems susceptible to the dangers presented by COVID-19. As the media continued to deliver messages of caution to adults across the country, one population was left out of the initial outreach. The population of young adults aged 18-29 are often viewed as the healthiest, strongest, and most fit among us. Nonetheless, research increasingly demonstrated that this group needed attention, information, and intervention because their behaviors were aiding in the spread of COVID-19 (Cunningham et al., 2020; Golden, 2020).

Case

In June 2020, young adults comprised 20% of the infectious cases and asymptomatic individuals were seen as “carriers” taking the virus into their homes and social settings (Cunningham et al., 2020; Stone, 2021). As with many health issues, the minority population was dealing with worse health outcomes. African American young adults were not excluded from this circumstance. These concerns prompted the research project Young Adults Against COVID-19 (YAACOV), a project under the Mississippi Community Engagement Alliance Against COVID-19 Disparities (MS CEAL), funded by the National Institutes of Health. The YAACOV study received approval from the Tougaloo College and University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Boards. The study was initiated in November 2020 to explore the perceptions, knowledge, and coping strategies of 18-29-year-old African American in Mississippi. The YAACOV study has three primary aims: (1) to explore the perceptions, knowledge, and community-engaged coping strategies that influence adherence to recommended prevention and mitigation behaviors between college-enrolled and non-college-enrolled young adults; (2) to identify factors that influence the uptake of COVID-19 information and education between college-enrolled and non-college-enrolled young adults; and (3) to assess the intent to sustain long-term prevention and mitigation strategies between college-enrolled and non-college-enrolled young adults.

Because of the health resiliency of this age group, they are often not the focus of health research and have little to no interest in participating in research studies (Powers, 2006). Therefore, they are often considered a “hard-to-reach” population. To reach the YAACOV recruitment goals, the YAACOV study team employed Young Ambassadors (YAs) to help promote and recruit other young adults to participate in the study, and this initiative is the focus of the current case study.

Recruitment of Young Ambassadors

Young men and women 18-29 years who self-describe as African American or having African ancestry were recruited to serve as Young Ambassadors. During the initiation of this study,

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African American young adults had some of the highest rates of COVID infection (Golden, 2020; Hensley, 2020). These individuals were identified through various means, including 1) social media postings, 2) recommendations from colleagues of local community organizations, and 3) partnering with the local HBCU's and community-based organizations. Approximately ten young adults were contacted to determine their interest.

Young Ambassador Training

The YA training consisted of a forty-five-minute virtual meeting with the Co-Principal (Co-PI) Investigator via Zoom. Each participant received a PowerPoint presentation that provided a comprehensive overview of the study and the goals, responsibilities of the YAs' role, and the research team's contact information. They were directed to the study website for additional information and to complete consent forms. A total of six young adults (four women and two men), signed the consent forms and completed the process to serve as YAs for the YAACOV study. The newly assigned YAs received study-branded communication materials including an electronic postcard to attach to emails and a social media ad to post to their platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. All materials included a uniform resource locator (URL) to connect to the study website. The YAs met bi-weekly with the Co-PI and project assistant. The YAs were incentivized with an Amazon gift card valued at \$100.00 for their service.

Young Ambassadors Outreach and Engagement Activities

The Young Ambassadors were selected for the purpose of sharing information to recruit other young adults aged 18-29 to participate in the YAACOV study. The YAs represented the central and southern regions of Mississippi. However, by leveraging their networks they were able to recruit other young adults from across the state. The YAs disseminated study information via their social media platforms and other web-based communication on a bi-weekly basis. Each was required to recruit six to ten of their peers to participate in one focus group. The YAs provided the names and email addresses of their peers who were contacted by a member of the YAACOV study team and then scheduled for a focus group. Along with the focus group participants, the YAs identified other young adults to complete the online CEAL Common Survey. The young adults who completed the survey completed an additional form that asked how they heard about the study. If a YA was the source of information, the survey participant was directed to identify the YA by name. This enabled the research team to determine how many young adults each YA reached.

The YAs engaged twenty-six (n=26) young adults to participate in six focus groups and a total of 250 completed the online survey. The YAs worked closely with the study Co-PI investigator who provided oversight. During the bi-weekly meetings, the YAs offered their insight regarding outreach strategies. The meetings were documented, and the notes were reviewed to identify tactics to improve outreach efforts.

Discussion

Due to the COVID-19 mandates to shelter in place and social distance, reaching this hard-to-reach group was challenging; and therefore, the YAs' use of social and digital media was

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essential for communicating throughout the implementation of the study. Social and digital media also ensured that communication was bi-directional between them and the participating young adults as well as the research team.

The meetings with the research team offered a chance to debrief. The YAs were able to share their observations and insights resulting from engagement with the young adults. First, the YAs shared that the young adults wanted to have a voice in the COVID-19 discussion. Second, the YAs shared that their peers viewed them as trusted sources for connecting them to COVID-19 information and felt that they could discuss their experiences coping during the pandemic. YAs involvement in meaningful roles served to connect their peers to pertinent COVID-19 information and resources available in the state (Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Shook & Keup, 2012). The frequent exchanges with the YAs helped the research team to better understand subtle changes that were occurring among the young adults and reaffirmed comments mentioned by the young adults who were participating in the study focus groups. In May 2021, the YAACOV team noticed that the YAs, along with the young adults participating in the focus groups, seemed less interested in the subject of COVID-19. The YAs expressed that the COVID-19 information was becoming overwhelming. Some expressed being fatigued, more specifically “COVID fatigue.”

As the shelter-in-place guidelines were being lifted across the state, the YAs were ready to return to normal. While the YAs’ efforts had resulted in the research team achieving its sample size goals for the focus groups, the YAs expressed that recruiting for the CEAL survey was becoming more difficult. The YAs attributed their waning efforts to being bombarded by the amount of COVID-19 coverage along with their strong desire to move beyond the pandemic.

Lessons Learned

Collaborating with the YAs provided key insights pertaining to how often to post content and elements to integrate in content development for engaging their peers. Some of the lessons learned from their participation included: 1) the need to identify individuals to serve as YAs with an established social media following; 2) the need for a more structured process for reporting metrics and peer insights; 3) the need to update and enhance the training throughout the process, and 4) the need to increase the number of YAs to expand reach and impact.

YAs should have a minimum number of followers (i.e., 200 or more) to ensure a greater number of young adults are exposed to the pertinent information. Additional tools are needed to enable the YAs to easily report metrics and milestones reached and to more accurately capture and report comments and recommendations offered by their peers during engagement. Improving this process will enable the YAs, along with the research team, to monitor their performance and determine their success in the role. A well-developed training for future YAs may increase their ability to adapt to the changes and demands of community engagement and participant recruitment. The training should be recorded and archived so the YAs can reference it to sustain their performance. YAs were extremely active in social, professional, and academic settings. As the shelter-in-place guidelines loosened, the YAs’ previous obligations were resurfacing and were taking precedence over the ambassador duties. Increasing the number of YAs will help to spread the workload and possibly expand efforts into underrepresented regions of the state.

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The YAACOV study team is currently working to integrate the lessons learned from the initial engagement plan to continue and expand the Young Ambassadors program for future COVID-19 research initiatives.

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