

CAN FACEBOOK BE USED FOR RESEARCH?

Experiences using Facebook to recruit pregnant women for a randomized controlled trial



BACKGROUND

The recruitment portion of human research studies is often expensive and resource intensive. Extending the recruitment period can negatively affect time-sensitive study funding, delay data collection and analyses, and ultimately delay the release of evidence necessary to change practice. Edmonton, Alberta, has been noted previously to be a difficult center in which to access and recruit pregnant women for research.

THE STUDY

The recruitment goal was 70 healthy pregnant women between 8 and 20 weeks' gestation, living in the greater Edmonton area. The purpose of this paper was to evaluate the effectiveness of paid advertisements on Facebook as a platform for recruiting women to this randomized control trial (RCT) in comparison with traditional recruitments approaches. Recruitment for the RCT using traditional approaches was used for 215 days and included printed posters and brochures, word of mouth, newspaper advertisements, local television news health report, booths at mommy and baby fairs, and advertisements in physicians' offices. A Facebook account was created to distribute paid advertisements that ran for 26 nonconsecutive days. Advertisements were targeted to Facebook users based on the following criteria: female, 23-40 years of age, living in Edmonton + 25-mile radius geographic area, and "Interests" related to pregnancy.

WHY FACEBOOK?

With an average of 1.09 billion users daily, Facebook is the social media site that individuals engage in most often. The greatest proportion of users are women between the ages of 18 and 49 years, which highlights its potential to recruit participants for prenatal studies. Facebook advertisements have been proven useful for other studies recruiting participants from "hard to reach" populations. As it is more targeted than many of the traditional approaches with specific demographic and geographic characteristics defined.



FINDINGS

MONTHLY INTEREST RATE

The traditional approaches alone had an overall interest rate of 8.7 women/month.

Adding Facebook advertisements to traditional recruitment approaches increased the overall interest rate to 29.7 women/month.



ELIGIBLE PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT RATE

Traditional approaches resulted in a recruitment rate of 0.21 eligible participants/day.

Facebook advertisements resulted in a recruitment rate of 0.96 eligible participants/day.



ESTIMATED TIME IN RECRUITMENT

Using only traditional methods, it would have taken close to 1 year to reach the recruitment target.

Adding Facebook advertisements shortened recruitment to less than 6 months.



COST PER ELIGIBLE PARTICIPANT

Traditional approaches cost approximately \$24.15 per eligible participant (excluding the free television health report, \$33.97 otherwise).

Facebook advertisements had a cost per eligible participant of \$20.28.



CONCLUSION

Social media and other emerging means of mass communication hold promise as means to complement traditional strategies used for recruiting participants because they can reach a large number of people in a short amount of time. Utilizing the combination of traditional recruitment approaches and social media-based approaches is ideal to avoid selection bias.

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