

Recruiting Study Participants via Social Media

As more researchers are using social media to recruit study participants, the Nursing Research Office has designed this information sheet to provide tips and best practices for effective recruiting.

Advertising Your Study

You will need to create an advertisement (like a traditional recruitment poster) showing the details of your project. This could include a few sentences of background information, what participants would do, and your contact information if they want to learn more. Be sure to include images or catchy taglines to engage people and draw them in. Of course, these advertisements will need to be approved by the Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board (CHREB) as part of your ethics approval.

Linking to Online Surveys

Your advertisement can include a link to an online survey and/or a QR code. QR codes resemble a barcode; taking a picture of one with their cell phone takes participants to the survey automatically. QR codes can be generated when you create a survey in Qualtrics.

Social media is a very effective way to distribute online surveys. But be careful, this type of mass distribution may result in people responding to the survey who shouldn't be. To minimize this risk, make your recruitment ads very specific by outlining exactly who you want to complete the survey. As well, place several 'checks' in the survey itself – for example, if nurses are your target population, you could ask respondents if they are a nurse or not right up front. Also, if you are using Qualtrics as your online survey platform you can add 'captcha verification' to confirm that the respondent is not a bot.

Screening for Interviews/Focus Groups

If you are using social media for recruiting for interviews or focus groups, you should include your contact information (e.g., name, e-mail, and/or phone number) directly in the advertisement. When potential participants contact you, screening questions can be used to determine if they are eligible for your study. If so, you can then set up a mutually convenient time for the interview or focus group.

Choosing Social Media Platforms

The two most frequently used platforms for participant recruitment via social media are Facebook and Instagram, which are connected since Facebook owns both. On Facebook, create a "Page" that details your research program and activities (see 'Alberta FiCare' on FB for an example), including the specific project that you're recruiting for. You could then distribute to friends/family etc. for them to share on their own personal profiles. You can use similar strategies when designing your Instagram profile. However, consider making your Instagram profile a business account rather than a personal account (both are free) in order to access targeted advertising and page analytics (number of views per post, new followers, outreach, etc.).

Other social media platforms like LinkedIn, Snapchat, and Twitter have similar types of functionalities.

Using Targeted Ads

You can buy targeted ads to spread the word out about your project faster and to a wider audience. This cost is flexible and determined by you based on the desired ad format, frequency, target audience characteristics, etc. As well, you can search for FB groups that may correspond to study criteria – for example, groups for parents who currently have babies in the NICU – and then place a post on the

group's page to solicit participants. If you connect Facebook to Instagram, your targeted ads will appear on Instagram as well (Facebook sends the ads directly to Instagram).

Asking Organizations to Share Your Advertisements

Another effective way to spread the word about your study is to ask relevant organizations (e.g., CARNA for nurses) to post your advertisements/survey link/etc. on their social media page and/or website. As well, you can tag or # these organizations in your own posts. In both cases, you will need advance permission from each organization (e.g. in an email) - this must be included in your ethics application.

Helpful Resources:

- 1) Advertising on Facebook, step-by-step: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-advertise-on-facebook/>
- 2) Recruiting participants: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/03/ce-corner>
- 3) Using paid advertising: Ford et al. (2019). Youth study recruitment using paid advertising on Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook: Cross-sectional survey study. *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 5(4): e14080; <https://publichealth.jmir.org/2019/4/e14080>
- 4) Recruiting for health studies via Facebook:
 - I. Thornton et al. (2016). Recruiting for health, medical or psychosocial research using Facebook: Systematic review. *Internet Interventions*, (4)1, 72-81; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2016.02.001>
 - II. Whitaker et al. (2017). The use of Facebook in recruiting participants for health research purposes: A systematic review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 19(8):e290; <https://www.jmir.org/2017/8/e290>