Northeastern University
Human Subject Research Protection

Guidance: Recruiting participants for human subject research[1]

Overview

The IRB reviews study recruitment methods (including advertisements and payments) to evaluate whether they will affect the equitable selection of participants and ensure that the proposed methods adequately protect participants' rights and welfare.

All materials used to recruit participants for a research study, including oral scripts, must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to use. The protocol application should detail when, where, how, and by whom potential participants will be recruited.

This guidance provides items researchers should consider when recruiting participants by letter, phone, email, or social media.

Recruitment considerations

- Advertising and recruiting procedures must protect potential participants' confidentiality. In particular, names and contact information for potential participants must be collected and maintained confidentially.
- When obtaining the names of potential participants from third parties, you must consider whether any breach of confidentiality has occurred or privacy laws. For example, doctors must contact their patients for written permission before releasing their names to a third party.
- You are responsible for ensuring that approved procedures are followed by any third parties (e.g., therapists, teachers, or social service providers) who may be aiding in the recruitment and/or advertising process. Payment to professionals in exchange for the referral of potential participants ("finder's fees") and payment tied to the rate or timing of enrollment ("bonus payments") is prohibited.
- If a researcher plans to use snowball sampling to recruit participants, the participant population should be considered. Please refer to our Guidance Library for additional considerations with snowball sampling.
- You may not share the names of previous research participants with other researchers without permission from the participants.
- The number of times a study team can attempt to contact participants is study-dependent, and the IRB will assess the appropriateness of that number.

Guidance: Modes of contact

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[1] This guidance is fluid and, therefore, subject to change as new information emerges.

By letter

- **Mailed recruitment letters:** Letters, whether or not they precede a phone call, should clearly explain why the potential participants are being contacted and how the individual(s) sending the letter have identified the potential participants.
- **Recruitment of subjects from a previous study for a follow-up or other related study:** Letters should refer to the study in which the individual has already participated and state how the new research is related.
- **Recruitment of children through their school:** Letters should be addressed to parents/guardians; they can be provided in a packet that children take home.

By phone

If you plan to recruit or screen potential participants by phone, the IRB requires you to use a script to ensure consistency and completeness in the information that potential participants are given about the study or screening questions. You will need to upload these scripts as part of the IRB application.

By Email

- Only secure, university-issued email accounts may be used. Use encrypted email, if possible. Personal email accounts, such as @gmail.com, may not be used.
- Protocols or applications must describe how email will be used, including the source of email lists, targeted populations, frequency of emails, and methods for potential participants to remove themselves from the email list.

Use of social media

Social media can be defined as any online and mobile resource that provides a forum for generating, sharing, or discussing ideas and content; variably grouped as online communities (e.g., patient support groups, population-specific dating services); social networking (e.g., Facebook; Twitter); professional networking (e.g., LinkedIn); content production and sharing (e.g., YouTube, Tumblr, blogs); location-based services (e.g., Tinder, Grindr); and others.

- It is the responsibility of the research team when designing a protocol, to understand –
  - the social media site terms of use
  - aware of any research or recruitment-related restrictions to include a site's advertising, privacy, and prohibited content policies.
  - Be aware of the various privacy and data security provisions of social media sites and ensure that these provisions are consistent with the IRB's privacy and confidentiality guidelines.
- Submit all text for researcher-initiated posts and planned responses, and submit all images that may accompany the text.

- Another acceptable approach would be to create many different types of posts, as the IRB will typically accept "mix and match" content (images and texts that can be combined in various ways to create posts).
- Study teams are discouraged from using their personal social media accounts to purchase or place initial recruitment materials for studies.

> **Keep in mind that the IRB scope of review will be on a case-by-case basis. What might be acceptable on one platform, or for one study, might not be appropriate for another.**

What is the difference between Groups and Pages in Facebook?

Pages are open forums that companies, celebrities, and brands can create. These are public, and although only administrators of Pages can post to the account, people with personal Facebook profiles can comment on any posts or pictures. The comment feature cannot be disabled, but comments can be removed/hidden by the administrator.

Groups can be more private than Pages because the administrator can choose the privacy setting. The comment feature can be managed in each group as determined by the administrator.

- In "Closed Groups," only those who are invited to join can see content shared within it. Other people on Facebook can see that the Group exists and who are members but cannot see any information.
- "Secret Groups" are more private, and no one else on Facebook can see that the Group exists except its members. The Group will not appear on the personal Facebook profile.
- "Public Groups" allow anyone on Facebook to see that the group exists and view the information posted, but only Group members can post.
- Some online platforms have limitations for sending the invitation to potential participants that prevent the inclusion of all the IRB-required elements. In that instance, document the limitation in writing for the IRB, and if the recruitment invitation links directly to an online consent that contains all the required information, the IRB may accept the briefer ad.

Resources

Northwestern University
University of Wisconsin
Virginia Commonwealth University