

CREB retreat case study 1: Recruitment

An application has been submitted for a study involving an exercise intervention aimed at men with type II diabetes. They plan to place a study ad on Facebook, which allows them to target their advert based on the location, gender, age, likes & interests, marital status, workplace and education of their audience. Is this ethically acceptable?

Discussion points to talk around

- Although different from placing an ad in the paper, personalized ads are an unavoidable and expected feature of site usage for all Facebook users. The researchers have no idea of the actual people being targeted as this is handled by Facebook itself. For this reason, it is potentially *less* problematic than other recruitment strategies on Facebook.
- BREB have started to ask for the ad targeting options the applicants have specified when they create the ad, as well as the ad itself.
- Concerns have been raised about using Facebook as a recruitment source for some types of studies, given demographics of Facebook users. While this is primarily a methodological issue, might become an ethical issue if study results are biased towards certain populations (e.g. young, middle class, etc.)

What if the applicants planned to place a copy of the study advertisement on the Facebook page of the BC chapter of the Canadian Diabetes Association in order to recruit potential participants? Is this ethically acceptable?

Discussion points to talk around

- Permission to post would be required unless applicant is already a member
- It's a common practice but one concern raised is that when people post study ads on these pages they already know identities of group members. Thus, it's different from posting on a notice board. Is this an issue?
- Consider open vs. closed pages (if open, anyone can see members and postings, if closed anyone can see members, but only members can see posts)
- Consider content of posts (if public) – informational? Personal?
- Possibility of people responding to the ad posting with another post saying “sign me up!”, thereby making confidentiality impossible. (This can be minimized by asking them to respond personally using the contact details provided).

What if the researchers wanted to directly approach members of the social networking site to participate in the study based on information in their profile publicly available to the Facebook community? (e.g. a male belonging to a “Diabetes support” Facebook group).

Discussion points to talk around

- This is considered to be most ethically problematic, although the BREB has not ruled it out completely.
- If you are willing to consider this type of approach, there are some issues to consider: is the Facebook group open or closed? (In both cases their identities are known, but in the latter group, members are looking for more privacy).
- Do the members of the group make their information publicly available to the Facebook or internet community or do they have high privacy settings?

CREB retreat case study 2: Creating a study page

A research team are conducting a 'smoke-free home' intervention that involves 2 pre-tests and 4 post-tests (one a week after the intervention, 1 a month later, 1 six months later and 1 a year later) that include measurements of cotinine levels of non-smoking household members to determine whether levels of environmental tobacco smoke exposure have reduced as a result of the intervention. They decide to set up a Facebook page associated with the study that will include regular posts from study team members (e.g. latest research findings about secondhand smoke, quit smoking information and supports, etc.) that will be helpful for participants trying to keep their homes smoke free and as a way of keeping participants engaged and excited about the study (and reducing attrition rates). They figure the page will also allow them to post general information – e.g. reminders regarding project milestones, etc., as well as helping them to feed information back to participants. Are there potential ethical issues with doing this?

Discussion points to talk around

- If study participants join the page and post to it, they will be publicly associated with the study and confidentiality of participants' identities cannot be maintained (unless the page is set up as a "secret" group)
- Participants will also know each others' identities (although if the intervention occurred in a group setting this would be inevitable anyway)
- How can they deal with this? By making it clear that if anyone wants to join the page (or "likes" it), they will be associated with the study and confidentiality of their identity cannot be maintained. In theory, if they have the page completely open (i.e. to anyone using the internet) they could provide updates, etc., without anyone needing to join the page.