

Recruitment in the COVID Era: Using Targeted Facebook Ads to Recruit PrEP Using Sexual Minority Men

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Background:

Internet-based social media recruitment is a proven feasible and cost-effective strategy to recruit *sexual minority men (SMM)* into HIV prevention trials given the ability to connect with potential participants whenever they log onto social media. With the emergence of COVID-19, many researchers have had to rely almost exclusively on online recruitment (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). Here, we report how our team successfully used targeted Facebook ads to recruit SMM during the COVID-19 pandemic to participate in an mHealth intervention to improve pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) adherence and maintenance. Findings may provide important guidance for other researchers facing similar remote recruitment challenges.

Methods:

From March to June 2021, Facebook ad campaigns were used to disseminate an eligibility screener link to an online Qualtrics survey. Ads were targeted by age (18-29 years), location (United States), language (English), and SMM-related keywords (e.g., Gay Pride, The Trevor Project). Each ad campaign included three picture ads that rotated across the four-day Facebook campaign. Ads included images of SMM and couples who were estimated to be around the target enrollment age, a brief description of the study, and the compensation amount for participation in the study.

Results:

Of the approximate 41 million accounts for males, age 18-29 in the United States, Facebook estimated that 44% (18 million) may have been reached through the keywords our team used. Across all campaigns, we ran 15 ads, which generated 621,407 impressions, yielding 3,175 clicks, at an overall cost of \$1,693. The average cost per click was \$1.88. The success of individual ads varied widely from a 0.20% to 2.13% click through rate. There was a rise in both clicks and impressions as the ad campaigns were refined to reach PrEP-using SMM. Our campaign yielded 270 completed screeners, of which 122 (45%) met inclusion criteria, and 80 (66%; our enrollment target) completed enrollment procedures. Enrolled participants were 80 SMM (*Mage* = 25.1 years; 53.7% racial/ethnic minority), representing 26 states and Washington D.C.. The final cost per enrolled and randomized participant was \$4.73.

Implications:

Targeted Facebook ads were an effective and cost-efficient strategy to enroll a racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse sample of PrEP-using MSM into a 6-month mHealth intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lessons learned to optimize remote recruitment of diverse SMM, as well as ways to address foreseeable challenges, will be presented.