



MRC-NIHR Trials Methodology Research Partnership: Webinar recording

Using Social Media in Clinical Trials

Presented, on behalf of the UK Trials Managers' Network, by Arabella Baker (University of Nottingham), Rachel Plachcinski (Independent PPI Consultant) and Thomas Oliver (Southampton Clinical Trials Unit)

17 April 2023

The slides are available below.

For any queries, please contact uktmn@nottingham.ac.uk

<https://youtu.be/ZIpBb0CQph4>



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**NOTTINGHAM
CLINICAL
TRIALS
UNIT**

at the University of Nottingham

Social media as a recruitment tool in a dermatology clinical trial

Arabella Baker

Centre of Evidence Based Dermatology

University of Nottingham





Aim:

- To evaluate the effect of weekly patient-reported symptom monitoring on trial outcomes

Trial configuration:

- Online, parallel group, randomised controlled trial of eight weeks duration
- Methodological trial, comparing weekly patient-reported questionnaires (intervention) with questionnaires sent only at week 8 (control)

Target population:

- People with self-reported eczema diagnosis by a healthcare professional

All trial processes occurred online:

- Recruitment
- Eligibility screening
- Consenting
- Randomisation
- Data collection
- Follow-up



Recruitment strategy

- Need for an internet-based recruitment mode
- Social media can reach potential participants on the web

Important characteristics of our recruitment strategy:

- Comprehensive
- Simultaneous use of multiple platforms
- Broad reach
- Targeting specific audiences
- Increased diversity
- Unpaid posts
- Paid adverts
- Low cost



Identifying appropriate social media platforms

Twitter:

- 480 million active users
- 25-34 years old (most popular)
- 35-49 years old
- Eczema organisations are present
- Often used for recruitment



Reddit:

- 430 million active users
- 18-29 years old (64%)
- 30-49 years old (29%)
- Eczema specific forums
- Less known platform of recruitment
- Targeting specific geographical locations



Instagram:

- 1.3 billion active users
- 90% are under 35 years old
- Many eczema communities
- Various content sharing methods



Facebook:

- 2.9 billion active users
- 51 million users in the UK
- Between 35 and 65+ years
- Paid advertising
- Targeted adverts based on age, gender, location, interests, keywords



Selecting social media platform for paid advertising

Things to consider:

- User demographics
- Advert performance tracking
- Optimisation of adverts
- Flexibility to modify the advert
- Potential reach
- Cost
- Conversion rate





Advertising campaign begins

Trial launch: 14th September 2021 (World Atopic Eczema Day)

Target sample size: 266 participants, recruited participants: 296

Approaches used for social media advertisement

Phase I

Free advertising (unpaid method)

- 14 September – 18 November 2021
- Regular posting of adverts
- Creating adverts for the target audience
- Tracking demographics
- Intermittent posting for 63 days

Phase II

Paid Facebook adverts (paid method)

- 28 December 2021 – 16 January 2022
- Advertising on Facebook and Instagram
- Boosting two existing posts to pilot the campaign
- Creating two targeted adverts
- Performance monitoring via Ads Manager



Adverts and boosted posts used in paid Facebook advertisements

Advert 1

Eczema Study Sponsored · 🌟

Researchers at the University of Nottingham are looking for people with eczema to take part in a fully online research study.

This study is looking at how people manage their condition remotely.

Why join?

- Quick and easy to take part
- Helps to track eczema symptoms
- Chance of winning a £20 shopping voucher



xerte.nottingham.ac.uk
Eczema Research Study

Sign Up

Advert 2

Eczema Study Sponsored · 🌟

Do you have eczema or know someone who does?

Take part in this fully online University of Nottingham study and help eczema research.

Why join?

- Quick and easy to take part
- Helps to track eczema symptoms
- Chance of winning a £20 shopping voucher



xerte.nottingham.ac.uk
EMO trial

Sign Up

Boosted post 1

Eczema Study Sponsored · 🌟

Do you have eczema or know someone who does?

Take part in this University of Nottingham study and help eczema research.

Visit www.emostudy.org to find out more and sign up!

**WE ARE
RECRUITING!**
DO YOU HAVE ECZEMA?

**JOIN OUR ONLINE STUDY AND HELP ECZEMA
RESEARCH 😊**

We are giving away 5 Amazon vouchers worth £20 each.
Please check out our website for more information at:
www.emostudy.org

xerte.nottingham.ac.uk
EMO trial

Sign Up

Boosted post 2

Eczema Study Sponsored · 🌟

We are researchers at the University of Nottingham and conducting a fully online eczema research study.

If you or your child have been diagnosed with eczema come and join our study.

To find out more and sign up go to:
www.emostudy.org



xerte.nottingham.ac.uk
EMO trial

Sign Up

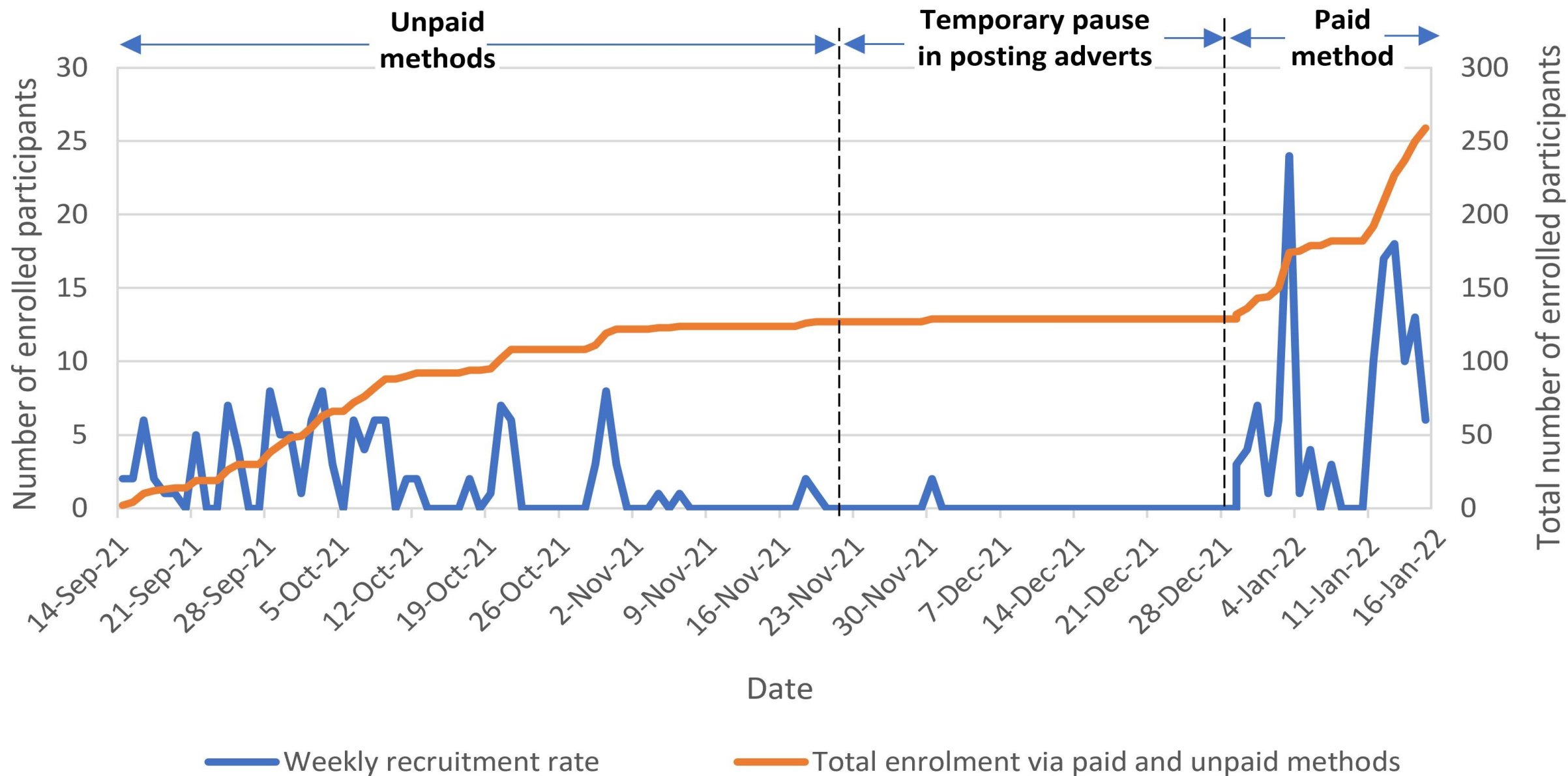


Results

Recruitment type	Number of expression of interest	Number of randomised participants
Paid method		
Facebook	56	41 (14%)
Instagram	123	82 (28%)
Total of paid method	179	123 (42%) in 16 days
Unpaid methods		
Reddit	152	121 (41%)
Twitter	10	7 (2%)
Instagram	8	6 (2%)
Facebook	3	2 (1%)
Total of unpaid methods	173	136 (46%) in 63 days



Weekly recruitment rate of paid and unpaid methods





Performance of paid Facebook adverts

Modality	Duration	Reach	Link clicks	Cost per link click	Spend
Advert 1	16 days	93,630	1,128	£0.16	£176.94
Advert 2	6 days	33,035	353	£0.17	£59.99
Boosted post 1	13 days	24,637	306	£0.06	£18.00
Boosted post 2	2 days	3,068	34	£0.15	£5.00
Total	N/A	154,370	1,821	£0.14	£259.93



Baseline demographics and self-reported recruitment method

Characteristic	Total, n (%)	Reddit	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Other ^a
Age range (years), n (%)						
0-13	15 (4.9%)	2 (0.6%)	2 (0.6%)	1 (0.3%)	4 (1.4%)	6 (2%)
14-19	104 (35.1%)	14 (4.7%)	2 (0.7%)	81 (27.4%)	0	7 (2.3%)
20-29	90 (30.4%)	67 (22.6%)	3 (1%)	4 (1.4%)	1 (0.3%)	15 (5.1%)
30-39	43 (15%)	30 (10.1%)	7 (2.4%)	2 (0.7%)	0	4 (1.3%)
40-49	16 (5.4%)	5 (1.7%)	6 (2%)	0	2 (0.7%)	3 (1%)
50-59	13 (4.3%)	3 (1%)	9 (3%)	0	0	1 (0.3%)
60-69	10 (3.3%)	0	9 (3%)	0	0	1 (0.3%)
70-74	5 (1.6%)	0	5 (1.6%)	0	0	0
Ethnicity, n (%)						
White	228 (77%)	92 (31.1%)	41 (13.9%)	57 (19.3%)	7 (2.3%)	31 (10.4%)
Asian	36 (12.1%)	19 (6.4%)	1 (0.3%)	13 (4.4%)	0	3 (1%)
Mixed background	15 (5.1%)	8 (2.7%)	0	6 (2%)	0	1 (0.3%)
Black	13 (4.4%)	0	0	11 (3.7%)	0	2 (0.7%)
Another ethnic group	4 (1.4%)	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)	0	0
Gender, n (%)						
Male	77 (26%)	49 (16.6%)	11 (3.7%)	6 (2%)	2 (0.7%)	9 (3%)
Female	210 (71%)	69 (23.3%)	32 (10.8%)	76 (25.7%)	5 (1.7%)	28 (9.5%)
Other	3 (1%)	2 (0.7%)	0	1 (0.3%)	0	0
Prefer not to say	6 (2%)	1 (0.3%)	0	5 (1.7%)	0	0

^aIncludes: word of mouth, web search, participant recruitment website, NHS website, Mumsnet, poster and email.

Efficiency of our recruitment strategy

- Three months of intermittent advertising
 - 400 expressions of interest
 - 259 participants recruited
 - Low cost
 - Broad demographic reach
 - Age range between 2 and 74 years old
 - Good completion rate of follow-up
- (paid method: 84% and unpaid methods: 82%)

Baker et al. *Trials* (2022) 23:905
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-022-06839-z>

Trials

RESEARCH

Open Access



A practical guide to implementing a successful social media recruitment strategy: lessons from the Eczema Monitoring Online trial

Arabella Baker^{1,2*}, Eleanor J. Mitchell² and Kim S. Thomas¹

Abstract

Background: Participant recruitment into clinical trials remains challenging. The global increase in the number of social media users has accelerated the use of social media as a modality of recruitment, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when traditional recruitment methods were reduced. However, there is limited evidence on the performance of social media recruitment strategies into eczema clinical trials.

Methods: From September 2021 to January 2022, we recruited participants with eczema into an online randomised controlled trial using free advertising on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Reddit (unpaid methods), followed by paid Facebook advertisements (paid method). Unpaid methods were used periodically for 63 days, whilst the paid method for 16 days. Interested individuals who clicked on the advertisement link were directed to the study website, where they could sign up to participate. Consenting, randomisation and data collection occurred exclusively online, using a database management web platform. Evaluation of the social media recruitment methods was performed, including the number of expression of interests, enrolment yield, cost, baseline characteristics and retention.

Results: Our multi-platform based social media recruitment strategy resulted in 400 expressions of interests, leading to 296 participants. Unpaid methods accounted for 136 (45.9%) of participants, incurring no financial cost. Paid Facebook adverts reached 154,370 individuals, resulting in 123 (41.6%) trial participants for a total cost of £259.93 (£2.11 per participant) and other recruitment methods resulted in 37 (12.5%) enrolments. Paid advertisements predominantly attracted younger participants below the age of 20, whereas unpaid methods mainly drew in participants between 20–29 years of age. The social media platforms recruited an ethnically diverse participant population. Completion rate of follow-up was slightly higher for the paid method ($n = 103$, 83.7%) compared with the unpaid methods ($n = 111$, 81.6%).

Conclusions: Unpaid social media posts recruited the most participants; however, it was time consuming for the researcher. Paid Facebook adverts rapidly recruited a large number of participants for a low cost and provided flexibility to target specific audiences. Our findings indicate that social media is an efficient tool that can potentially support recruitment to clinical trials.

Trial registration: ISRCTN45167024. Registered on 29 June 2021.



Challenges

- Creating and managing adverts was time-consuming
- Each platform has specific requirements for the posts
- Regular posting in forums to ensure visibility
- Free advertising does not provide insights into the performance of the posts
- Moderator reviews and approves paid Facebook adverts – takes time
- Monitoring advert performance requires close attention





Summary

- Social media advertising has a large coverage
- Cost-effective, depending on the target audience
- Time-intensive to advertise
- Monitoring advert performance is crucial
- Use advert analytics to evaluate progress
- Amend recruitment strategy based on performance
- Can augment traditional recruitment methods



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Thank you!

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Bump2Baby: Using social media to improve involvement and engagement in maternity research



bump2baby parents voices

Private group · 214 members



Joined ▼

+ Invite

About

Discussion

Featured

Rooms

Topics

Members

Events

Media

Files



Reaching more parents



Principles behind Bump2Baby

- Easy – going to a place already occupied by parents
- Enjoyable – keep it friendly and chatty
- Respectful - sharing personal experiences as well as opinions
- Relevant – sharing new research in line with members' interests
- 'Behind the scenes' – seeing projects in development and chatting to researchers about their work
- Showing impact – reporting back on impact of discussions and success (or otherwise) of bids



Methods



- Set up a page linked to a closed group
- Joining questions and group rules agreement required
- Drew up a post schedule
- Advertised through relevant organisations and boosted posts
- Admins: Rachel (independent), Eleanor, Sarah and Janine (Notts)



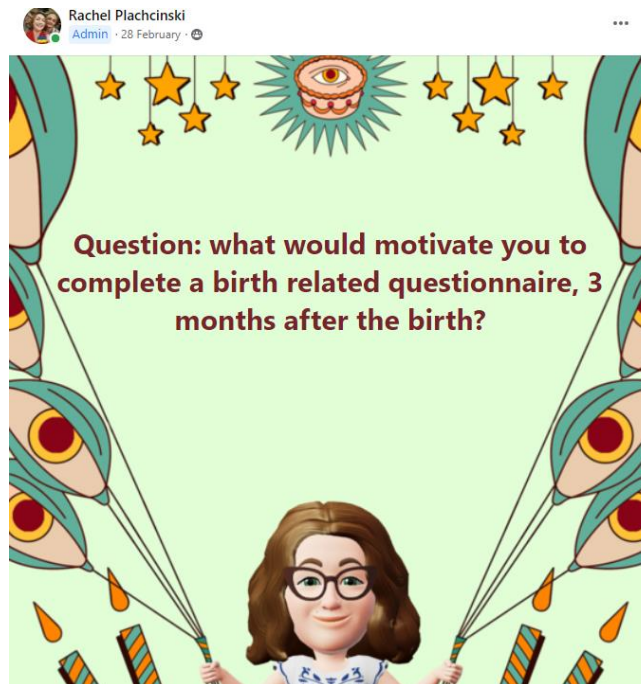
- Feed open to all
- Intention to share posts across both Facebook and Instagram
- Supported by Nottingham CTU team member

Content



Rachel Plachcinski
Admin · 24 March at 16:23 · 🌐

Remember the GBS3 trial, comparing methods of testing for Group B Strep?
Recruitment is under way and we are putting together some posters to improve awareness amongst pregnant women in a bid to increase recruitment. We'd like to know what you think of the wording and images on these posters.
You'll notice two different offers to women on the posters. That's because randomisation is by site, rather than individual women - some trusts are offering swabs at the start of labour... See more



Rachel Plachcinski created a poll.
Admin · 15 March at 16:03 · 🌐

Birth centres offer midwife-led care (no obstetricians or major pain relief are available). How do you feel about this option?

<input type="checkbox"/> Liked the idea but advised it wasn't the best option for me	36% >	×
<input type="checkbox"/> Liked the idea and gave birth there	8% >	×
<input type="checkbox"/> It didn't appeal to me at all	28% >	×
<input type="checkbox"/> Liked the idea but it wasn't available locally	12% >	×
<input type="checkbox"/> Went to the birth centre in labour but was transferred to a consultant unit	4% >	×
<input type="checkbox"/> Added by Kathryn Kelly Was available but chose home instead	12% >	×

Content



Rachel Plachcinski

Admin · 27 February · 🌐

Questions, concerns, experiences about pain relief for babies in neonatal units? Join our Zoom chat tonight (Monday February 27 - link in comments) or let us know and we'll ask and report back.



Rachel Plachcinski shared a link.

Admin · 16 February · 🌐

Just seen a big story in the news about misleading claims on infant formula. I'm still searching for the paper in the BMJ, in the meantime here's a reminder about First Steps Nutrition Trust, a great little charity providing evidence based information about feeding babies and toddlers, including a comprehensive guide to the different brands of formula available in the UK



INFANTMILKINFO.ORG

INFANT MILK INFORMATION | Types of infant milks on the UK market

we provide information about the types of infant milks on the UK market and for infant formula, follow-on formula and infant milks marketed

[View insights](#)

72 post reach >

👍 Kathryn Kelly, Mo Ade and 3 others

9 comments



Rachel Plachcinski

Admin · 20 March at 10:34 · 🌐

Reporting today from the Maternity and Neonatal Summit in Leeds. Huge room, absolute packed with NHS England people, research people, MVP lay members and chairs, and so phenomenally experienced maternity activists who have shaped my life and my career. I'm excited!



Rachel Plachcinski shared a link.

Admin · 2 d · 🌐

A Jewish man heading a department of obstetrics and gynecology in a Catholic hospital, he set out to question what was considered routine; "What was the evidence? Why do we do this? Who started this nonsense? How do we change it?"
A life well lived, and some great points we all need to bear in mind when developing and using evidence.



ONLINELIBRARY.WILEY.COM

Homage to Dr. Murray Enkin and the complexity of evidence-based medicine

Click on the article title to read more.

[View insights](#)

27 post reach >

👍 Kathryn Kelly

1 comment



Impact



- 250 group members, 154 B2B page likes
- Greatest interaction is 10am and 10pm
- Most popular posts invite members to share personal stories
- Input used in four funded studies and six studies in development, covering study design, seeking consent, outcomes and data collection
- Helped recruit to various study-specific PPIE groups
- Members enjoy learning about research relevant to their interests, and shaping future research



Lessons learnt

- Getting to grips with Facebook tools and the algorithm
- Instagram needs a dedicated leader, preferably a parent or maternity activist
- Allocating time to build an audience
- Need to build linked resources such as a parent-friendly website, for example <http://parentingsciencegang.org.uk/>
- Building interaction around the demands on parents' time
- An enjoyable time sink!

Thank you



- Rachel.Plachcinski@gmail.com
- <https://www.facebook.com/bump2babyparentsvoicesinresearch>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/649895299057386>



Using Social Media as a Recruitment Tool for Clinical Trials

Tom Oliver
Southampton Clinical Trials Unit
2023





UK Social Media Usage

- 53 million active social media users (77.9%) in the UK (2021)
- Social media engagement is a very cost-effective way of informing and recruiting potential trial participants

Barriers

- Concerns around use of patient's online data
- Uncertainty over correct way to approach patients and rules for use.

Preparation

- Set out your social media intentions in your trial protocol and supporting documentation.
- Further guidance expected as social media recruitment becomes a more widely used tool.





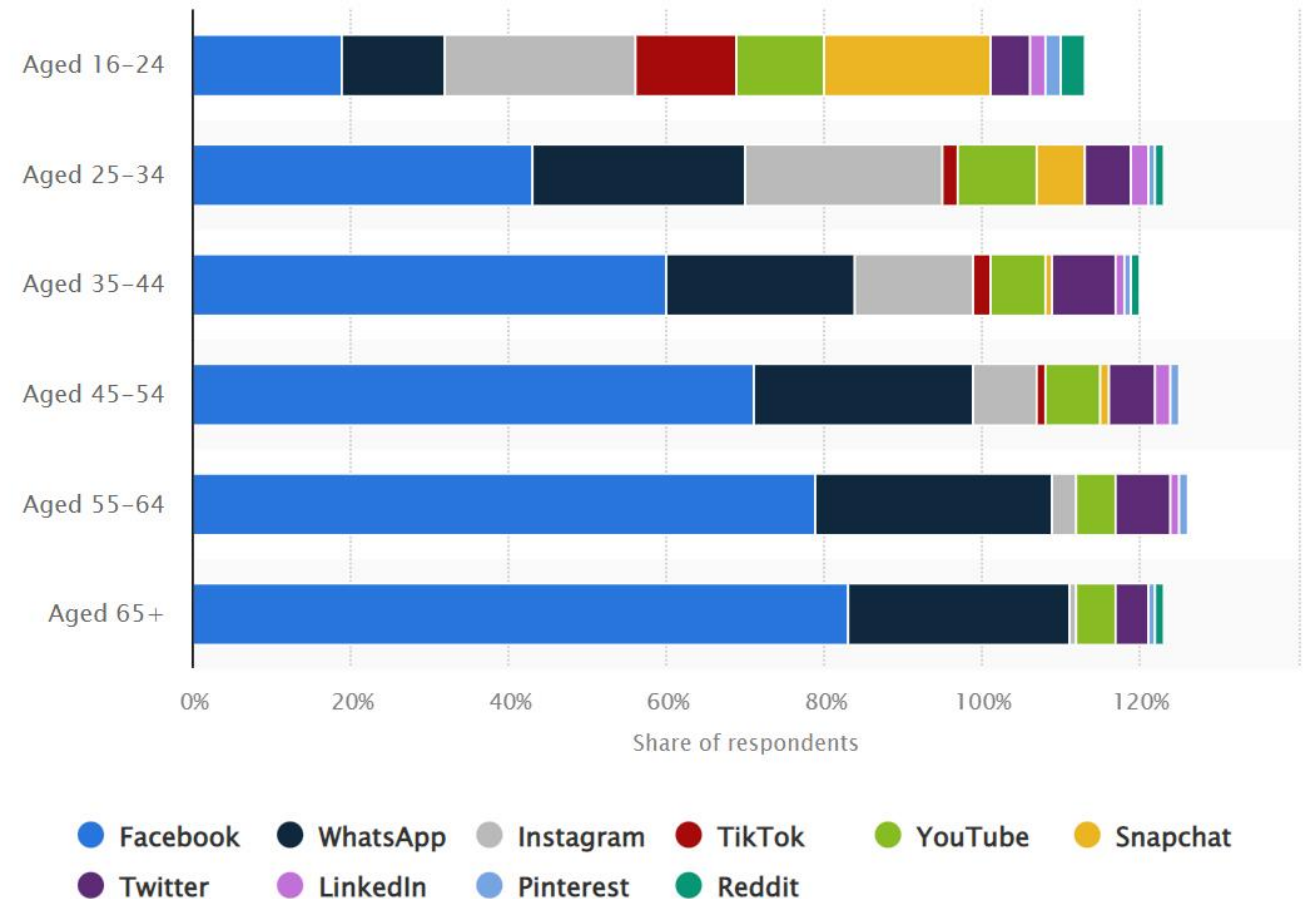
Picking the right platform for your trial

Considerations

- Patient Characteristics:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Condition-specific
- Platform-Specific
 - Total userbase vs. levels of engagement
 - One or multiple platforms
 - Cross posting to save time
 - Trial perception on given platform

Platform Summary

- **Facebook** – Older demographic; largest userbase
- **Instagram** – Younger demographic; mainly visual platform
- **Twitter** – Better reach for healthcare professionals; frequent posting required



Details: United Kingdom; 2020; 2,166 respondents; 16 years and older; those with a social media profile or account on any sites or apps.; Computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI)



Setting up your account

Twitter

- Similar to a personal account
- Use an easily identifiable account name
- Do not enter your personal information – ensure DOB is >18 years old

Instagram

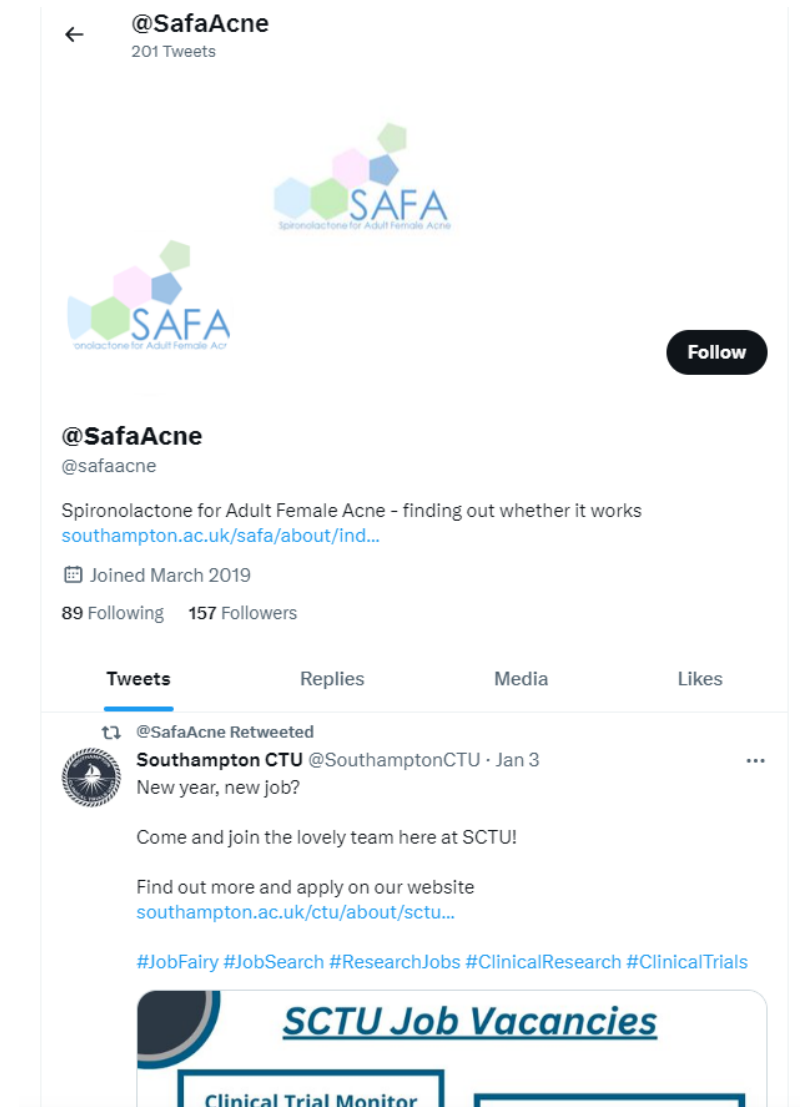
- Set up as normal account then switch to a Business Account
- Enter pertinent business information relating to trials unit / trial itself
- Link to your trial's Facebook account
- Targeted Ads and 'insights' available

Facebook

- Set up a Business Page under a normal (trial) account
- Business pages contains 'About' section; trial logos and cover photos; 'Learn More' button (to link patients to your website) - prior to publishing the page and going live.
- Other useful considerations are automatic message replies; FAQs (including links to PIS or how to contact the trial team); turning off Reviews.



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Creating Content - Twitter

Know the algorithm

- Post frequently (at least once a week)
- Engage with tweets and the community
- Time of day
- Variety of media (GIFs, images, text, links, polls)
- Location
- Credibility
- Relevant hashtags



Content

- Split posts up into small, frequent bitesize pieces
- Professional language to engage with healthcare professionals, who can relay via retweets
- Behind the scenes posts (recruitment numbers; updates from sites; future plans)
- Use 1-2 relevant hashtags per post
- Media drives engagement:
 - Images – 150% more engagement
 - GIFs – 55% more engagement
 - Videos – 10x more engagement!



Creating Content - Instagram

Know the algorithm

- Post frequently
- Timely responses to messages and comments
- Interacting with other similar accounts / content
- Relationship of poster and viewer (have they interacted with your content before?)
- Relationship to current trending topics
- Interest (does the user typically interact with this type of content?)
- Length of video
- Relevant hashtags

Content

- Experiment with both attention-grabbing short posts and descriptive longer posts.
- Tailor hashtags for each post, and keep an eye on trending topics.
- Visual media is key but be aware of the 1min limit on videos.
- Stories: keep to short visual posts (10 second videos) with a punchy message.
- Aim language at appropriate age group – consider emojis but remain professional.





Creating Content - Facebook

Know the algorithm

- Post frequently
- Timely responses to messages and comments
- Sharing posts from other Pages
- Posts on Groups & other Pages
- Native video upload (i.e. direct video, not youtube)
- Time of day

Content

- Promote flagship media posts using Targeted Facebook Ads (*more later*)
- Use lay language but remain factual:
 - Avoid “If you suffer from ...” text or listing specific treatments
 - Consider use of disease statistics and “Learn more about research taking place at X...” text
- Contact established Facebook Groups relating to relevant conditions to understand the rules for posting on their pages
- Emphasise academic research – users can respond negatively to pharmaceutical posts
- Don’t be afraid to turn off comments!





Targeted Ads (Facebook)

Benefits

- Greatly increase the reach of your account
- Tailor ads to specific users and locations
- Can prove the most cost-effective route for recruitment
- Simpler than you may think!

Key factors:

- Audience
- Aim
- Budget
- Media
- Community Guidelines
- Visitor Interaction
- Insights and Analytics

A screenshot of a Facebook advertisement for 'COVID Trial at Home'. The ad features a blue background with a microscopic view of virus particles. The main text reads 'COVID trial at home' in large, bold letters. Below this, it says 'For details of how to take part visit: www.covidtrialathome.com'. The ad is published by 'Covidtrialathome Clinical Trial' on June 18, 2020. It shows 20,764 people reached and 156 engagements. The ad is developed by Synairgen, whose logo is visible in the bottom right corner of the ad image. The Facebook interface shows the ad is liked by 18 people and has 133 shares. The bottom of the image shows the Facebook comment input area with the text 'Comment as COVID Trial at Home' and a 'Press Enter to post.' prompt.



Targeted Ads (Facebook)

Audience

- Choose **Age Range**; **Gender**
- Choose **Location**: where the ads will be shown.
Maximum of 7 locations with radius of 1-80km.
 - Focusing ads in a small area vs. spreading over a larger area.
- **Detailed Targeting**: include or exclude audience based on the demographics; interests; behaviours
 - Can explore an audience with an interest in specific disease area.
 - Careful not to narrow down your population too much!
- Think both patients; and relatives of patients

Aim

- Aims include: Increasing traffic to website; Boosting video views; Brand awareness; etc
- Recommended to select increasing traffic to your trial website.

A screenshot of the Facebook 'Create audience' interface. The 'Gender' section has 'All' selected. The 'Age' section shows a slider from 18 to 65+. The 'Locations' section lists three locations: 'Southampton + 10 mi', 'Queen Alexandra Hospital + 9 km', and 'Bournemouth Road, Poole, England, United Kingdom + 8 km'. Below this is a map showing the locations with blue circles indicating the radius. The 'Audience definition' section shows a progress bar from 'Specific' to 'Broad' and an 'Estimated audience size' of 1.2M-1.4M. At the bottom are 'Cancel' and 'Save audience' buttons.



Targeted Ads (Facebook)

Budget

- Cost relates to how many users see your trial ads
- Run continuously or for a set time?
- Daily or total budget?
- Able to adapt budget for ongoing ad

Media

- Consider piloting small ad runs first to refine media and content
- ‘Boost’ existing flagship posts linking back to your trial website
- Short, snappy messages with simple graphics/GIFs to grab the public’s attention
 - Ad text can “pre-screen” patients but be careful not to overcomplicate – the pre-screening can happen on your website!

A screenshot of the Facebook 'Promote your website' ad creation interface. The interface is divided into several sections: 'Ad creative' with a 'Use a post' link, 'Description' with a text box containing information about the SNG001 trial, 'Media 1/5' with a 'Select Media' button and a preview of a 'COVID trial at home' graphic, 'Ad preview' with a 'See All Previews' link, 'Estimated daily results' showing 'Estimated reach unavailable', and 'Payment summary' showing a total budget of £14.00 GBP for 7 days. At the bottom, there is a 'Promote Now' button and a link to the 'Help Centre'.



Targeted Ads (Facebook)

Community Guidelines

- Monitored by an AI
- Beware assuming individuals' medical conditions or appearing to profit from health disasters
- Avoid reference to specific prescription drugs as could breach UK medicine advertisement laws
- Appeal, appeal, appeal!

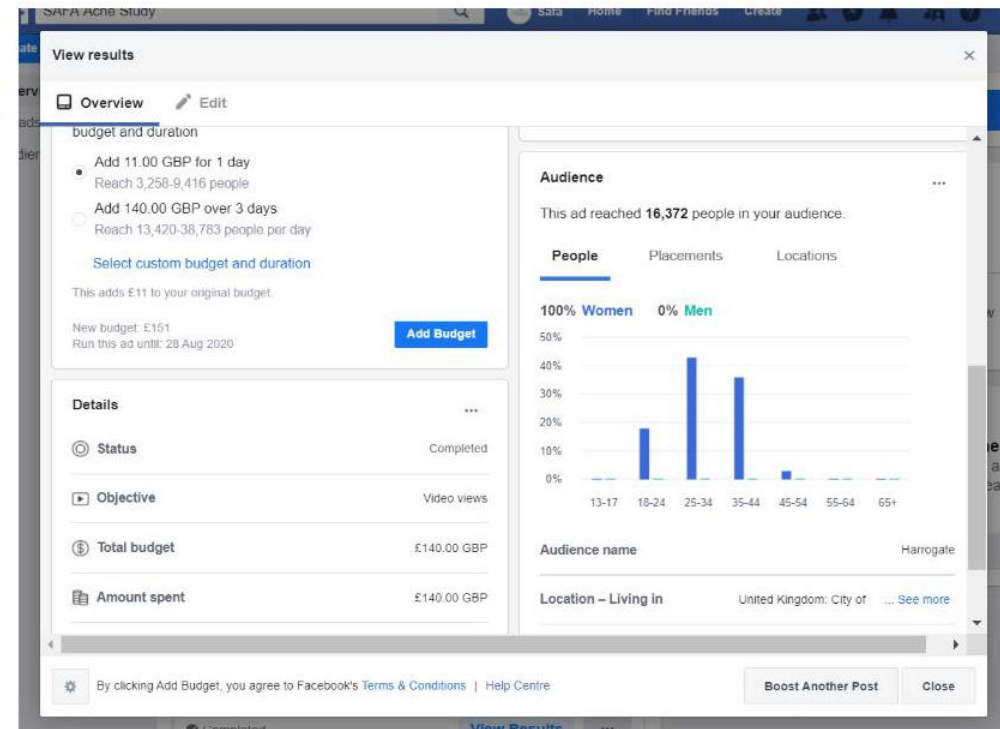
Visitor Interaction

- Engage with inquisitive or positive comments
- Use misconceptions as an opportunity to educate, but be polite and friendly!
- Do not engage in negative comments – if necessary, remove comments and block users
- Turn off comments if negative engagement poses an issue!





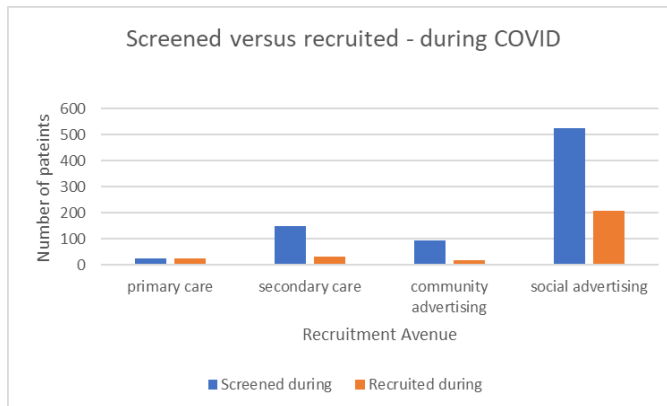
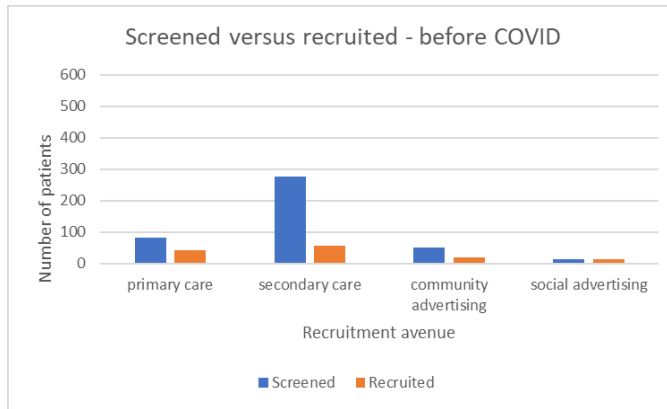
- View demographics seeing / interacting with your ads
- Review how successful certain 'campaigns' are
- Consider setting up Google Analytics on trial websites to track recruitment conversion rate





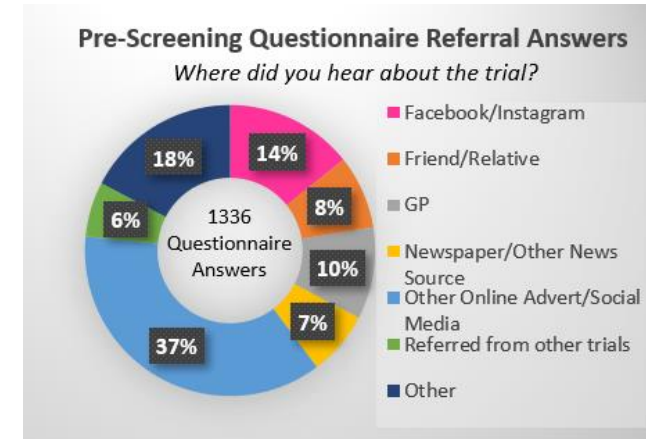
Success in SCTU trials

SAFA Trial – Female Acne

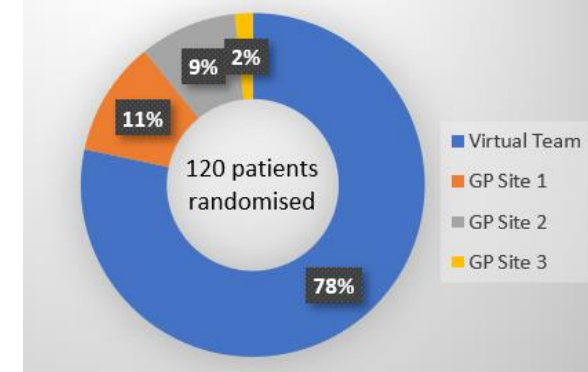


- Social media campaigns have greatly boosted recruitment in select SCTU trials
- Used to complement patient identification at site; or as dominant identification method in decentralised trials
- Costs comparable to PIC sites with greater return
- Did not appear to impact retention
- Resource is required to manage accounts

SG016 Home – COVID-19



Randomised patients by recruit site





Take Home Points

- Choose which platform(s) suit your target demographic best and where to focus your efforts.
- Plan your strategy beforehand outlining what content ideas you want to post where, what images/quotes you need to request and collate, etc. and what audiences you wish to tailor targeted advertisements to.
- Decide on your budget, either daily or running total, for advertisements, how many ads you will run, how long for and where. Remember to keep an eye for negative feedback!
- Review analytics to tailor recruitment advertisements as the trial develops
- Remember to keep posting regularly at your peak times/days



Special thanks to Jess Boxall (CIRU) and Susi Renz (SCTU) for providing much of the information used in these slides

Thank you for listening!