SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE PROCEDURE FOR RESEARCHERS

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Background

Social media has emerged as a widely used and powerful communication tool. It is therefore no surprise that it has become a major platform for advertising to the public, and most social media applications derive their income from advertising. Given its widespread usage and reach, it is increasingly being applied to reach potential participants to inform them about clinical research and to encourage participation.

From a regulatory perspective, use of social media as an advertising platform does not differ in any material way from the use of other media – that is, the content of any written or spoken material must abide by ethical and legal requirements. However, there are some additional privacy-related ethical and legal concerns raised due to the ability to engage with people in open forums where individuals may not understand the implications and reach of the personal information on their profiles.

When considering use of social media, it is important that researchers understand the advantages and limitations of these platforms to ensure they have considered and addressed the relevant ethical and research governance issues.

Purpose

To describe the specific compliance requirements for advertising research projects using social media.

Responsibilities

This document covers the responsibilities for researchers involved with using social media for advertising and patient recruitment.

Procedure

Ethical approval

As with all advertising material to be used to recruit potential participants, any material to hosted on social media platforms must comply with the National Statement and obtain appropriate ethical review.

Institutional Approval

Researchers wishing to create or use social media for research purposes must also comply with institutional requirements. Use of an institution's Facebook page may be used to recruit patients and is typically managed by Institutional Communications team. Researchers will require their approval to do so and will need to provide evidence of ethics approval to obtain this.

Information required to obtain approval

Approval will need to be obtained prior to posting. It is also required to provide complete detail regarding which social media site(s) will be used, how it will be utilised and by whom, for example:

1. Paid advertisements that target by groups such as gender or age range to advertise research and recruit patients;

    a. advertising or recruitment through the institution's existing Facebook page; c. the use of the private messaging system for study information or tracing a past patient/participant; or

    b. use of a specific Facebook/Twitter account for a study.

2. An explanation of how security of information and privacy of individuals will be maintained. Researchers will need to address and clarify how participant privacy and confidentiality will be protected.

    Information regarding the limitations to privacy must be clearly outlined e.g. depending on an individual's privacy settings, the study name can appear on their own page if they 'like' the study page; parents/participants may be able to see the names of other participants if an individual 'likes' a comment or photo on the study page or if they write a comment (post) for the study page.

3. Identify who is acting as Administrator and will be responsible for:

    a. monitoring and managing posts associated with the social media page;

    b. control over wall posts, including their review, approval and removal.

    The Administrator should be within the study team.

4. If researchers wish to trace/contact potential participants via the private messaging service (Messenger/WhatsApp), a tracing message (approved by the HREC) should be used as there may be more than one person with the same name.

5. For a paid advertisement of a research study (e.g. on Facebook/LinkedIn), the advertisement may involve a few words (and/or a picture) and then a link to another specific website (or a contact person) should potential participants want more information about the research, thus protecting privacy.

6. If there is to be an invitation to participants to follow the study on the social media platform, the ethics submissions should detail the invitation process (wording/documentation).

7. If researchers wish to apply for approval to set up a specific social media account for a study, they must write a proposal including the following: the platforms to be utilised, for what purpose, the management and monitoring of the platform, and what content is to be featured. This must be submitted to and approved by the institution's Comms team.

Depending on the sensitivity of the research matter privacy and confidentiality (or lack of) may need to be made clear to participants. Researchers may wish to consider the use of a warning e.g. Depending on your Facebook privacy settings, posts that you follow, like or comment on may be able to be seen by your Facebook Friends or others. However, it should be acknowledged and considered that there is no guarantee that participants will read this warning before 'liking' any comments or photos.

Further guidance on advertising

As a rule, social media posts must abide by the same guidance as traditional advertising.

Advertisements must:

•   Be clear about the purpose of the study.

•   Must not be false or misleading.

•   Must not suggest bias towards the proposed treatment or coercive statements .

[1] https://bellberry.co m.au/wp-content/uploads/BA-G9-Advertising-and-social-media-1.pdf

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