

UAB IRB Guidelines for Using Digital Marketing for Research Recruitment

1. Introduction

- a. The purpose of this document is to offer guidance to research teams that intend to use digital marketing to recruit and retain research participants. These guidelines do not include details on using social media to conduct research.
- b. In the following guidelines, digital marketing refers to using online channels to promote a research study to potential participants via the internet.
- c. The most used types of digital marketing include social media, digital advertising, and search engine marketing (SEM).
 - **Paid social media** is a method of advertising on social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, Reddit, etc. Paid ads for study recruitment include custom audiences and messaging that are intended to raise awareness about research opportunities to help recruit participants.
 - **Organic social media** is non-paid alternative research teams may use for engagement, retention, and communication.
 - **Digital advertising** is a method of paid marketing that delivers advertisements through digital channels like websites, mobile phones, video, audio, connected television, and apps.
 - **Search engine marketing** is paid advertising that is visible in search engine (Google, Bing, etc.) results from selected key words searched by users.
- d. Please note all recruitment marketing efforts must be approved by UAB's Institutional Review Board for Human Use (IRB). Approvals are not limited to the most common channels referenced in these guidelines. If you plan to use a channel not listed in these guidelines, approval from the IRB is still required.
- e. It is important to caveat that as technology continues to advance, so do the channels used to execute digital marketing. As a result, the content and recommendations made in these guidelines will continue to evolve.

2. IRB and Institutional Compliance

- a. All use of digital marketing for research recruitment must be approved by the IRB and must comply with UAB policies and guidelines. Please ensure that you have read the relevant policies:
 - [Digital and Mass Communications and Content Policy](#)
 - [UAB Brand Guidelines](#)
 - [UAB Marketing & Advertising Guidelines](#)
 - [UAB Marketing Approval Process](#)

- b. If funds awarded to UAB are being used to pay for a study's digital marketing, regardless of whether or not the UAB brand is featured in assets, all [marketing](#), [paid social media](#), [web](#), and [vendor](#) guidelines must be followed.
- c. UAB does not allow individual units to run [paid social ads](#), including sponsored and boosted posts. Instead, digital marketing is managed and purchased centrally through the Office of Marketing and Communications, or an approved agency. Benefits of this approach include:
 - Optimized media buys based on strategy that mitigates duplication among messaging and target audiences
 - Team of experts with proven campaign experience and results
 - Established relationships with partners, like Facebook and Google
 - Compliance with terms of services, policies, and updates across channels
 - Centralized billing process to minimize billing frequency

If research teams have interest in working with UAB's in-house fee for service agency – UAB Marketing & Creative Solutions - please submit a form at go.uab.edu/mcsolutions. If research teams prefer to work with an outside agency, please contact marketing@uab.edu to discuss options.

3. Participant Privacy and Data Security

- a. Research and marketing teams are responsible for ensuring that digital marketing recruitment methods remain in compliance with UAB's IRB and institutional standards.
- b. Unless approved by UAB, research teams are prohibited from screening, collecting, or storing personal health information (PHI) in social or digital platforms being used for paid marketing. Screening must take place in a UAB-approved platform (REDCap, FormAssembly, etc.). Teams that intend to capture any information (i.e. contact information or PHI) should develop and submit a plan for collection to the IRB for approval.
- c. The use of retargeting and pixel tracking in digital advertising creates personal identifiable information (PII) concerns for study participants. If this is a tactic included in your digital marketing plan, a thorough review will be required to assess the impact on participant privacy.
- d. The act of tagging, or mentioning a user, is a common behavior on social media. While individual users can control settings to allow others to tag or mention them in posts or comments, it is the responsibility of the research team to monitor comments on paid ads and organic posts to determine whether or not comments should be hidden.
- e. If a security breach occurs, pause paid ad campaigns and immediately report the incident to the IRB.

4. Use of Digital Marketing for Recruitment

- a. After UAB Marketing and Communications has approved your [digital marketing plan and assets](#), the IRB will review all content, creative assets, and channels being used to execute digital marketing.
- b. The IRB will evaluate your digital marketing plans and assets to ensure:
 - effectiveness to reach your study's target population.
 - recruitment methods adhere to ethical standards and principles.
 - appropriateness of language and the exclusion of using promise statements as a primary focus for incentive.
 - data captured has a protocol for delivery and storage.

5. Social Media Guidance for Recruitment/Communication/Retention

- a. **Use of personal accounts** - The use of personal social media accounts to recruit participants is allowed but come with its own risks that researchers and team members should be aware of. In some projects, personal connections through word of mouth or established networks may provide an avenue to potential participants. The following guidelines outline the use of engagement:
 - Posts and messaging should be submitted to IRB as part of your recruitment plan.
 - Paid social boosting or advertisement is not allowed on personal accounts in relation to your research project.
 - When posting, you should clearly state your affiliation as a UAB employee or student and describe your relation to the project. This helps create transparency and clarity for potential participants.
 - Provide a link to a study or departmental page on an official UAB website. This facilitates easy access for interested participants to find more information and confirm the legitimacy of the project.
 - Monitor comments and messages to insure participant privacy and unintentional disclosure of PHI. It is recommended to hide comments including foul language, hate speech, and information that can be perceived as dangerous.
 - Plan time and resources accordingly - while organic social media posting does not cost monetarily, it does require human time and effort. Please ensure you are prepared to moderate and maintain posts effectively.
 - Respect community norms and privacy – in private groups, obtain the permission of the moderator before sharing information.
 - Be aware of the risks associated with personal accounts:
 - Puts you in the position of being brand and content police on your personal channels, resulting in the mixing of your professional and personal life.

- Individuals may use your content to create scams – be mindful of comments and engagement and how users engage with your content. If appropriate, we encourage the inclusion of the following statement on your website or posting: *Please note - UAB will never request any personal or payment information via comments, direct messages or any other social media platform; stay alert to scams and make use of UAB's official site for information.
 - Review UAB's social media guidelines for employees:
<https://www.uab.edu/toolkit/social/guidelines>
- b. University approved accounts** - Research teams that wish to have recruitment content posted on social media, either organic or paid, may do so through university-approved accounts.
- Organic, or non-paid, posts must be approved by the IRB. Research teams can request permission to post approved content from the [campus communicator](#) for the respective account.
 - UAB does not allow individual units to run paid social ads, including boosted/sponsored posts. Paid ads are managed and purchased at a central level by Marketing and Communications, or by an approved marketing vendor. If research teams have interest in learning about working with UAB's in-house fee for service agency – UAB Marketing & Creative Solutions - for a paid social campaign, please submit a form at go.uab.edu/mcsolutions. If research teams prefer to work with an outside agency, please contact marketing@uab.edu to discuss options.
 - Teams that wish to create new accounts or groups for their studies should seek [marketing approval through Marketing and Communications](#). Teams cannot post or run ads through these accounts prior to receiving approval.
 - Study accounts - Research teams are discouraged from creating study-specific social media accounts. The benefits from using UAB-approved accounts include:
 - Brand equity
 - Established audience
 - Active community
- c. Types of acceptable social media communications:**
- One-way messaging (posting)
 - One-way methods do not involve direct communication or interaction with potential participants. This includes organic posts or ad placements that do not include engagement features, like comments, reactions, or shares.
 - Interactive messaging

- Interactive recruitment methods involve two-way communication with potential study participants. This includes, but is not limited to, posts and ad placements where comments, likes, shares, and direct messages are enabled. Teams that choose to utilize interactive messaging must have a plan for the moderation of interactions from potential participants. This information should be included in the IRB submission.
- Private or public groups, pages, and accounts
 - Some recruitment teams may choose to engage with potential and enrolled participants through groups (e.g. Facebook groups, Reddit subreddits, etc.). Teams that intend to utilize groups must identify a community management plan and moderator who will manage communications and interactions with participants.
- d. Moderation of social engagements

Teams that intend to use social media channels must develop a plan for moderation and community management.

 - Define a moderator(s). This person(s) should be regularly monitoring comments, reactions, and messages for posts and groups. A plan for monitoring frequency, and team members responsible for moderation, should be included in the IRB submission for the study (see section 8 for additional details).
 - It is recommended to hide comments including foul language, hate speech, and information that can be perceived as dangerous.
 - Any participants (potential or enrolled) that contact the social media account via private message (e.g. Facebook Messenger, Instagram Direct Message) should be provided with contact information for the study team, and directed to communicate with the study team outside of social media. No personal information should be exchanged via private or direct message.
 - The study team should develop responses, or guidance for responses, for potential and enrolled participant questions submitted through social media channels.

6. IRB Submission Guidance

Research teams that opt to use **paid** social or digital ads are required to first submit a [Marketing Approval Form](#) to Marketing and Communications. Once approved by Marketing and Communications, research teams must submit the digital marketing recruitment plan for IRB approval. Should the research team make any changes to the IRB-approved plan, such as using additional platforms, updating content, etc., an amendment with the revised plan must be submitted for approval. The digital marketing recruitment plan should include the following:

- a. List of digital marketing channels that will be used for recruitment

- b.** Description of the user journey through the digital marketing recruitment process
- c.** Link(s) to the website associated with the recruitment materials. Note this will be the website where users are directed when ads are clicked. This includes websites and survey pages.
- d.** Description of data that will be collected through recruitment efforts, how the data will be stored, and how this data will be used. This should also include a list of which research team members will be privy to this information.
- e.** Community management plan for any team intending to utilize social media channels, either organic or paid. The community management plan should include:
 - Research team member, or social media manager, responsible for moderation
 - Frequency of moderation (e.g. daily, weekly, bi-weekly)
- f.** Targeting criteria for ads (if applicable), including demographic, geographic, and contextual qualifiers
- g.** Mock-ups of all planned visual and written recruitment materials. This includes graphics, images, banners, videos, post text, landing page text, captions, etc.
 - If the same visual materials will be used in a variety of sizes, please include the asset with a list of the additional sizes.
 - Teams should plan for optimizations and updating campaign elements. It is recommended to submit several variations of recruitment materials (i.e. alternate graphics and captions) to alleviate the need for future submissions/amendments which could impact your campaign timeline.

A digital marketing recruitment plan template can be found [here](#).