

The challenges of decentralized recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic

Jessie Lever Taylor, MSc; Matt Wilkes, MD, PhD; Juliana Pugmire, DrPH, MPH; Nicole Zahradka, PhD

Background

During a global pandemic, traditional study recruitment strategies are limited. Current Health initiated a decentralized clinical study to remotely monitor vital signs in individuals who tested positive for COVID-19. The study was terminated early due to low enrollment.

Purpose

Identify factors that may have impacted recruitment and learnings for future decentralized trials.

Methods

Recruitment

Four recruitment strategies were explored: in-person, pairing with test centers, word of mouth, and social media. The primary methods of recruitment were social media and word of mouth, both directed to the company's online clinical research resource: Community by Current Health. In-person recruitment was eliminated due to risks of disease exposure and transmission to the study team. Test center pairing was unsuccessful, as test sites were discouraged from advertising research studies to avoid deterring those seeking testing.

Study Eligibility

Unvaccinated individuals in the US within 48 hours of a positive COVID-19 test result.

Metrics

Facebook advertising engagement and Current Health website traffic were tracked with a web analytics service (Google, Mountain View, CA, USA). Advertisement clicks, website views, eligibility form completions, and number of eligible volunteers were counted.

Results

Five out of 13 different study advertisements were live on Facebook at any one time.

Recruitment Funnel



Funding

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Discussion

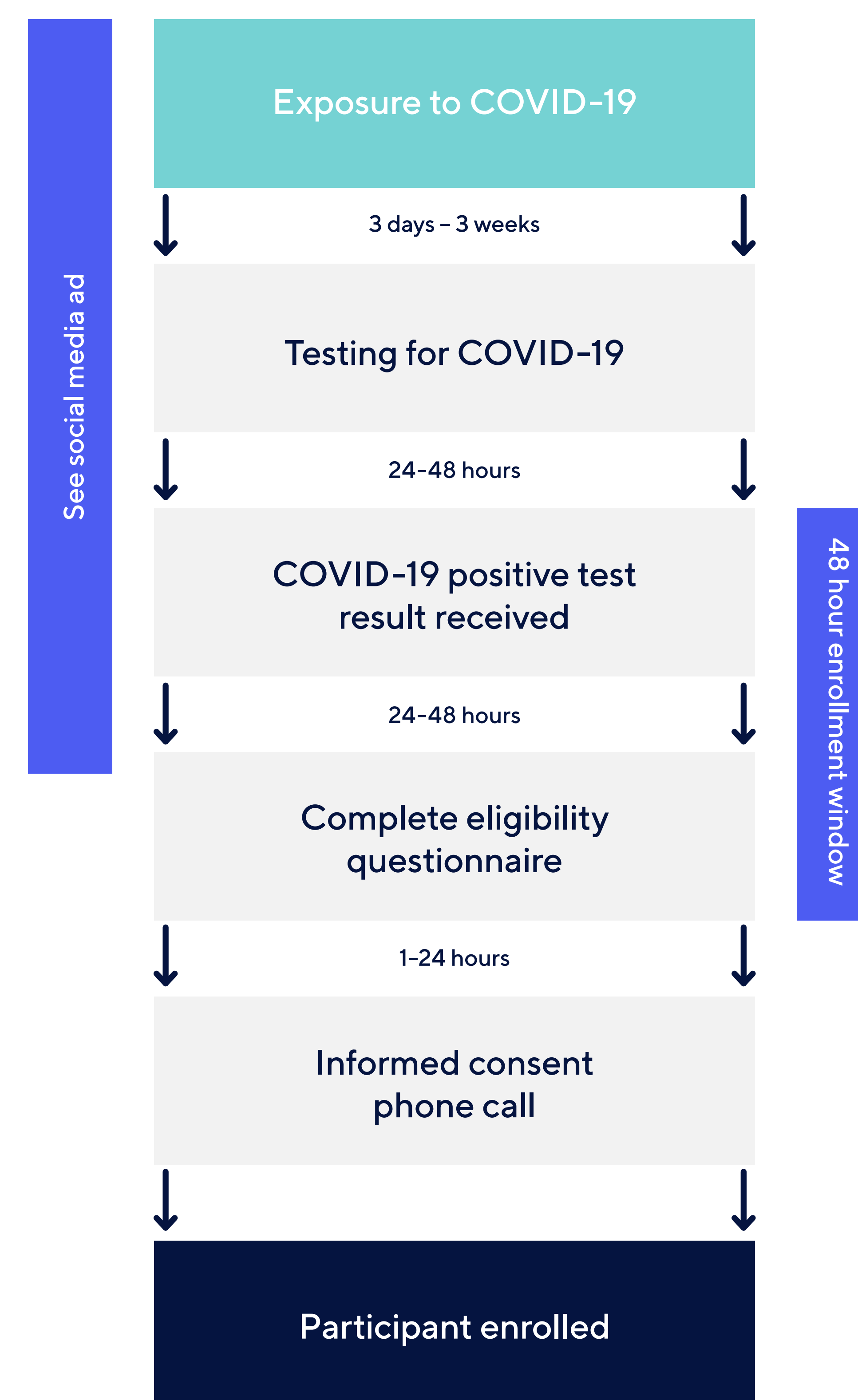
Although social media is an effective means of disseminating health information, other recruitment strategies may be more successful.

Ring-fencing around advertising language (an attempt to reduce misinformation around COVID-19) delayed Facebook advertisement approval.

Time was a critical factor in recruitment and eligibility for two reasons:

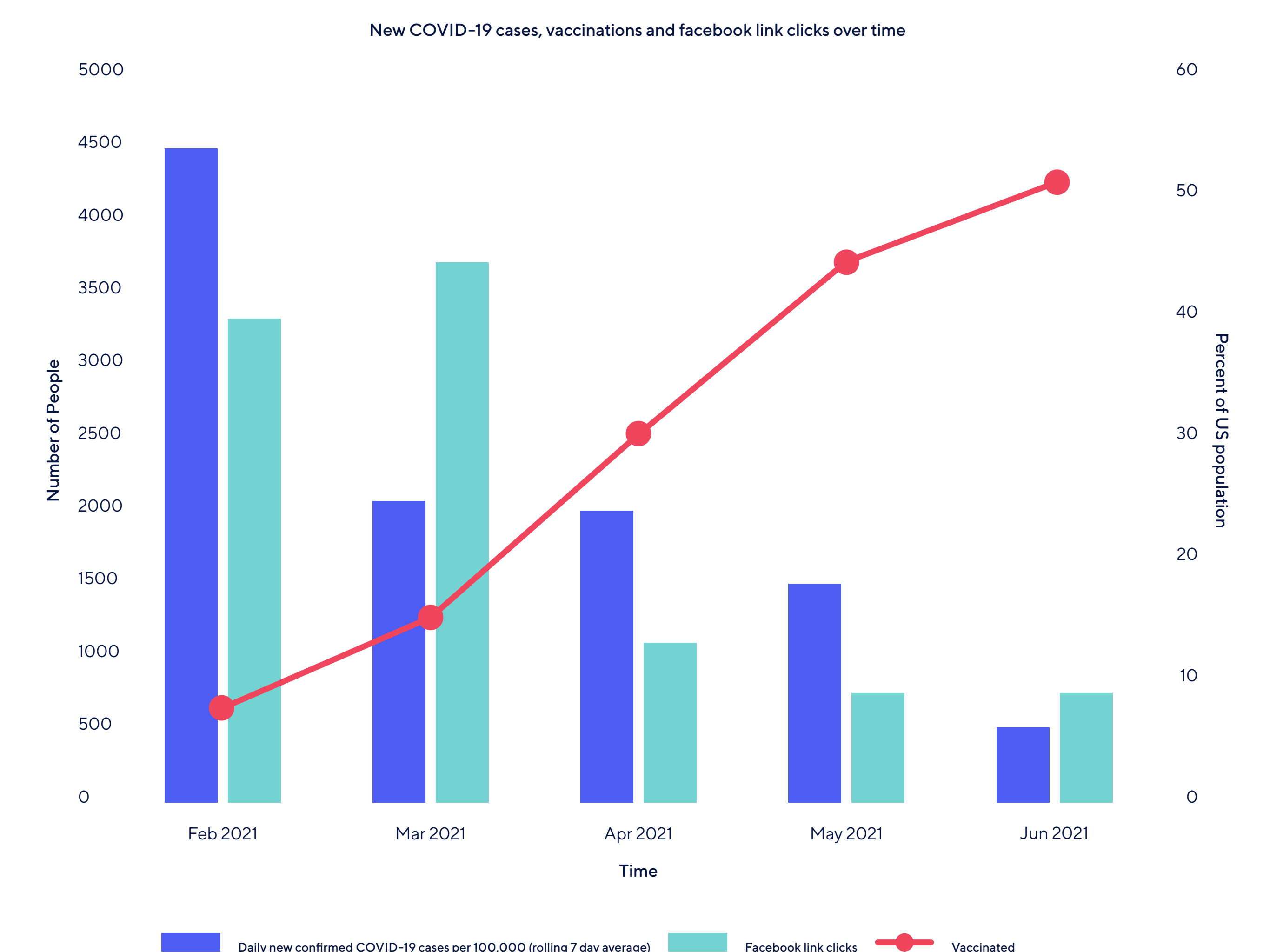
One

Time-sensitive inclusion criteria meant there was a small window to volunteer after testing positive.



Two

Progression of the pandemic and increased vaccination meant the eligible population rapidly declined. We saw an associated decline in unique Facebook link clicks. There was a decrease in unique advertisement clicks per day from 100.83 in March 2021 to 28.97 in May 2021. According to CDC numbers, this corresponded to a decrease in 7-day average case rate of new COVID cases of 45,748 and an additional 298.62 million vaccine doses administered over this time period.



Despite the high number of Facebook advertisement clicks, the number of eligible volunteers who made it through the recruitment funnel was low.

The nature of COVID-19 meant several eligible participants reported feeling too ill to complete the consent process. Conversion rate performance has been reported to be more successful when using offline recruitment strategies.

Future studies should include a range of advertising language during initial IRB submission to account for potential social media advertisement rejection. Additional offline recruitment strategies are essential: online recruitment alone is unlikely to yield sufficient participants and may result in population bias due to illness severity.

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