



# Reaching and recruiting Turkish migrants for a clinical trial through Facebook: A process evaluation



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## ABSTRACT

Ethnic minorities are underrepresented in mental health research, especially in randomized controlled trials. Recruiting ethnic minorities is challenging and there is a need to develop effective recruitment strategies.

This study used data from a randomized controlled trial examining the effectiveness of an online guided self-help intervention for Turkish migrants with depressive symptoms. The recruitment process comprised six strategies in Dutch and Turkish: 1) a press release; 2) digital mailing; 3) the distribution of research information leaflets; 4) advertisements; 5) the Internet (in general terms); and 6) Facebook (FB). We describe the content and approach of each of the strategies and how effective they were in recruiting participants for our study. FB is evaluated in a step-by-step description of the recruitment strategy, together with its results in terms of effectiveness, specifically regarding data of FB Friends and messages received by FB Friends through FB.

Results showed that a total of 287 applied for the trial. The majority of applicants were recruited through FB (75.6%,  $n = 224$ ), of whom 74 (33%,  $n = 224$ ) were included in the trial. Traditional recruitment strategies were far less successful, yielding only 16.4% ( $n = 47$ ) of the total of 287 applicants, of whom only 3 (3.1%) were included in the trial.

Traditional recruitment strategies, such as research information leaflets and advertisements in newspapers, appear ineffective in recruiting ethnic minority groups for research purposes. The use of FB proved to be a more successful method. Future research should examine the factors that account for the potential effectiveness of FB as a recruitment method for hard-to-reach populations.

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic minorities are underrepresented in mental health research, and their inclusion in clinical research has been a challenge for many researchers (Miranda et al., 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Hussain-Gambles et al., 2004). Research shows that cultural characteristics are an important factor hindering the recruitment of ethnic minorities in clinical research. These characteristics include language barriers, religious beliefs and a negative attitude towards psychotherapy (Brown et al., 2014). However, not all of these barriers are due to cultural characteristics (Brown et al., 2014). In a systematic review, Brown and colleagues (2014) identified several barriers for participation in research by ethnic minorities. It was found that more mundane factors in the family or community, in health services and in the research process

itself also play a critical role in successful recruitment. These practical issues are also often encountered when working with native populations with a low socio-economic status and are thus not exclusive to ethnic minorities. Consequently, the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in clinical research has several negative implications such as inhibiting psychotherapy development and delivery (Brown et al., 2014). This can affect the generalizability of the study findings towards the ethnic minorities concerned.

In the past decades, several evidence-based psychotherapies have been developed in order to treat mental disorders, including depression. However, research examining the direct effect of psychotherapy in ethnic minorities is sparse (Ünlü Ince et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis suggested that psychotherapy is equally as effective in ethnic minorities as in native populations, after examining the ethnicity proportion of the population samples in 56 clinical trials in relation to the effect of psychotherapy (Ünlü Ince et al., 2014). Although these first findings are promising, insufficient randomized controlled trials are available to make direct comparisons between ethnic minorities and native groups. Moreover, there is still a gap between the unmet needs for treatment of

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ethnic minorities in both clinical and research settings. Tailor-made recruitment strategies are factors that might play an important role in filling this gap.

Although recruiting ethnic minorities in clinical research is difficult, Brown and colleagues (2014) have given several suggestions to overcome recruitment barriers. In their systematic review they suggest that the difficulty of recruiting ethnic minorities must be addressed at an early stage by modifying the protocol for research. Furthermore, human and financial resources should be expanded from the beginning of the research. It is noticeable, however, that all nine studies in this review were conducted in the United States, indicating a lack of European research on ethnic minorities. This focus on the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the United States may be positively influenced by US guidelines and policies that mandate the inclusion of ethnic minorities in clinical research by the National Institute of Health (NIH). European countries don't have such policies yet (Bhopal, 2009). Although several suggestions are given in the systematic review, these are mainly of a generic nature and do not provide concrete methods to improve recruitment strategies among ethnic minorities. It seems therefore, that more concrete strategies need to be developed to improve the inclusion of ethnic minorities in clinical research.

An innovative way to recruit participants for research is via the Internet, which can be utilized in many forms, such as by offering online psychotherapy. For example, Internet-interventions are shown to be easily accessed, have a high level of anonymity and a low threshold for acceptability (e.g. Griffiths and Christensen, 2006; Muñoz, 2010). Numerous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of online psychological interventions in the treatment of depression in adults (Richards and Richardson, 2012; Andersson and Cuijpers, 2009). However, little is known about the effectiveness of Internet-based psychotherapies in ethnic minorities since ethnic minorities are so far underrepresented in randomized controlled trials as well (Ünlü Ince et al., 2014).

Another advantage of the Internet may be the potential to recruit larger samples at low costs (Ramo and Prochaska, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Barrera et al., 2014). Many Internet-based studies, however, continue to use more traditional recruitment methods such as newspapers and magazine advertisements, rather than the Internet itself (e.g. Alexander et al., 2008; Warmerdam et al., 2008).

The current study used data from a randomized controlled trial on the effectiveness of a web-based problem-solving therapy for Turkish migrants with depressive symptoms in the Netherlands (Ünlü Ince et al., 2013). The intervention was adapted to the specific needs of Turkish people living in the Netherlands. During the recruitment process, we faced several challenges in recruiting through traditional media, such as advertisements in Turkish newspapers. We also made use of recruitment strategies via the Internet, particularly through Facebook (FB). Because this was by far the most successful method, and is rather new, we decided to systematically describe how we used this method. We also provide some explanations for the potential success of this method in recruiting ethnic minorities for randomized controlled trials. Accordingly, we aim to contribute to the knowledge base of recruitment strategies for hard-to-reach populations, including ethnic minorities.

This paper will provide a detailed description of the recruitment process and the effectiveness of each recruitment strategy applied during the trial. We will do this by: 1) describing the recruitment strategies used; 2) evaluating the effectiveness of each recruitment strategy; 3) providing a step-by-step description of the use of FB as a recruitment strategy; and finally 4) exploring the recruitment process through FB in terms of users ("Friends") and messages received by "Friends".

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Background information about the main study

This study used data from a randomized controlled trial examining the effectiveness of an online guided self-help intervention for Turkish

migrants with depressive symptoms (Ünlü Ince et al., 2013). In brief, participants were recruited among the Turkish migrant population and included when they met the following inclusion criteria: 1) 18 years or older; 2) depressive symptoms; 3) access to a computer with Internet and an e-mail address and 4) a Turkish background (meaning the participant and/or at least one parent were born in Turkey).

Participants with suicidal ideations were excluded. We applied a strict protocol for study inclusion of participants, including the exclusion of suicidal participants. Contact with individuals who were potentially at risk for suicide is a feature of many rct's and independent of the recruitment strategy applied (i.e. not FB specific). This protocol was approved by an independent Medical Ethics Committee (METc VUmc) as written in the protocol paper of the study (Ünlü et al., 2010). The exclusion procedure steps were as following: suicidality was assessed in two steps as part of the online screening. First, the suicide item on the Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) was presented (Beck and Steer, 1987; Beck et al., 1996). Second, if the response was affirmative, the suicide risk was measured with the suicidality section of the Mini-international Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI) (Sheehan et al., 1998; Lecrubier et al., 1997; Van Vliet and De Beurs, 2007; Engeler, 2004). Participants with a moderate or high risk were advised to contact their general practitioner and were also referred to the online portal for suicide prevention ([www.113online.nl](http://www.113online.nl)). We added this description in the Methods section.

People could show their interest in the study by sending an e-mail to the researcher to obtain further instructions for the screening. A detailed description of the study procedure and the results of the trial have been published elsewhere (Ünlü et al., 2010; Ünlü Ince et al., 2013).

### 2.2. The recruitment strategies

The recruitment of participants for the randomized controlled study took place from June 2010 to March, 2012. Six strategies were applied during this recruitment process, in Dutch as well as in Turkish (shown in Table 1). These were 1) a press release; 2) digital mailing; 3) the distribution of research information leaflets; 4) advertisements; 5) the Internet (in general terms); and 6) Facebook. Five of these six strategies can be characterized as 'regular strategies' meaning that they are well-known and frequently used strategies to engage study participants (i.e. Van Ballegooijen et al., 2013; Warmerdam et al., 2008).

As these strategies appeared not to be effective in recruiting Turkish individuals for our study, we explored a rather new method, i.e. recruiting participants through Facebook (FB).

We will describe all these above-mentioned strategies in more detail, by focusing on (1) the content and approach of each one and (2) how effective they were in recruiting participants in our study. FB will be also evaluated not only in a step-by-step description of the recruitment strategy, and its results, but also by presenting data in terms of Friends and messages received by Friends through FB.

### 2.3. Description of the recruitment procedure

#### 2.3.1. Press release

The recruitment of participants started with a press release in Dutch published by the communications department of our university. This strategy is often successful in engaging participants for research on Internet-based guided and unguided interventions for common mental disorders (i.e. Van Spijker et al., 2014; Van Ballegooijen et al., 2013). The press release contained a brief description on the study and information on participation possibilities for Turkish persons with depressive complaints. Press agencies could use the press release either for publication or as means to contact the researcher for further information about the study.

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