



Review Article

From Reach to Relationship: Reframing Social Media Recruitment as an Action Research Practice

Shaw N* 

Algoma University. Department of Biology. Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Canada

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***Corresponding author:** Shaw N. Algoma University.
Department of Biology. Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.
Canada, E-mail: nikki.shaw@algomau.ca

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Abstract

Social media is routine infrastructure for participant recruitment in health and social research, yet methodological discussions typically evaluate platforms by reach, cost, speed, targeting, and conversion. This paper reframes social media recruitment through an action-research lens, positioning recruitment as an early site where participation is constituted, relationships begin, power is negotiated, and learning occurs.

Drawing on scholarship about social-media recruitment and action research, we examine the practical possibilities and relational tensions of digitally mediated invitations to participate. Social media can reduce costs, accelerate access to dispersed and stigmatized populations, and enable adaptation, while also reproducing sampling inequalities, platform surveillance, algorithmic governance, hostile interactions, fraud, and verification labour.

We introduce recruitment-as-inquiry: the proposition that recruitment helps constitute the participatory field rather than merely populate it. We propose five interconnected practices: co-defining recruitment purpose; selecting platforms with communities; treating invitations as relational encounters; reflexively examining participation, absence, and exclusion; protecting integrity without undermining trust; and returning recruitment learning to subsequent inquiry and action. This framework extends action research upstream, aligning digital recruitment with its democratic, relational, reflexive, and transformative commitments.

Introduction

Recruitment is generally regarded as the preliminary stage before 'real' research gets under way, with participants being identified, screened and obtaining consent prior to the start of the inquiry. However, this kind of linear approach is difficult to keep in action research since relationships, participation, practical knowledge and transformation are essential elements of the inquiry rather than just additional features. According to the journal's quality framework, action research is defined as an approach that combines objective, intersubjective and subjective knowing, and it asks authors to demonstrate a transformative aim, partnership, contribution, a participative process, sustainability, developmental reflexivity and engaging writing [1].

Social media makes these commitments more apparent. A recruitment post functions as an invitation, a description

of the project, a meeting with the community, a form of communication mediated by algorithms, and is often the first time that potential participants assess the trustworthiness of the researchers and the research.

Research on social-media recruitment describes advantages in cost, reach, speed, and audience targeting alongside concerns about representativeness, fraud, uneven participation, privacy, and changing platform rules. These practical issues matter to action research because they shape who encounters an invitation and how a relationship begins.

Facebook, Instagram, X/Twitter, Reddit, WhatsApp, and WeChat each shape visibility, interaction, and trust in different ways. This paper asks how those conditions might become part of an action research process in which researchers and relevant communities reflect on participation and adapt their practice.

The paper advances this argument by making a particular contribution to both the theory and practice of action research. We suggest that recruitment should be regarded as a constitutive action-research practice rather than as a preliminary methodological activity. It represents an early form of intervention which helps to decide who can take part in the inquiry, which relationships come into being, whose knowledge becomes available for action, and what the research system itself can find out about its own boundaries. We refer to this as recruitment-as-inquiry.

This concept goes beyond the usual action-research cycles by moving the stages of action and reflection before any formal data collection takes place. It also shows that social-media recruitment is an example of a more general methodological concern, namely that administrative research practices can distribute power, participation, voice, and epistemic authority.

The studies cited here are used to illuminate practical situations and tensions. The paper develops a conceptual proposal for how recruitment can serve as a site of democratic inquiry, developmental reflexivity, and practical knowing.

The article is based on three questions: first, what the current evidence tells us regarding the practical advantages and limitations of the major social-media platforms when it comes to recruiting participants; second, how these features influence participation, power, trust, inclusion, and the production of knowledge; and third, what principles can help action researchers in designing social-media recruitment as a relational and reflexive element of the inquiry cycle?

Action research and the significance of recruitment

Action research should be seen as an approach to inquiry that links action and reflection, theory and practice, with participation and practical objectives. It is not the result of any one technique but comes about from the way in which the inquiry is set up—specifically in regard to who takes part, whose knowledge is regarded as valid, how the relationships are structured, how learning is produced, and whether the work helps build the capacity for significant action [2,3]. Because of this, recruitment cannot be considered methodologically harmless. The choice of where an invitation is displayed, the way it is phrased, who can see it, who it appears to be directed at, and who thus remains unseen all have an effect on the community of inquiry.

This is important since the architecture of social media leads to an uneven distribution of visibility. Although researchers can choose demographic or interest-based audiences for paid advertisements, it is the platform algorithms that determine which users in fact see them. Unpaid recruitment relies on group membership, the structure of networks, the presence of moderators, the use of hashtags, reposting, and the willingness of community members to pass on invitations.

In both situations, researchers are working within a socio-technical system of which only some of the rules are visible. A campaign can be considered ‘successful’ in terms of cost-per-

click while at the same time systematically excluding people who have limited digital access, those who do not identify with the target categories, or those who distrust institutional advertising.

Looking at recruitment from an action research point of view extends the concept of recruitment quality. While efficiency is still important—since resources do matter—it is only one of a number of criteria. Recruitment should also be assessed in terms of the quality of the invitation, the way in which different voices and opportunities are distributed, the trust that it fosters or undermines, the learning that emerges about the setting, and how the recruitment practices can be improved as a result of that learning. This results in an iterative, not a linear, approach: recruit, observe, reflect with the relevant stakeholders, make adjustments, recruit again, and incorporate the lessons learned into future stages of the inquiry.

Conceptual approach and use of literature

This article is a conceptual contribution informed by selected empirical, methodological, and theoretical publications. Recruitment studies were chosen because they illustrate consequential questions about platform choice, reach, representativeness, privacy, fraud, participation, and power; action-research scholarship provides the interpretive commitments of purpose, partnership, reflexivity, and action. The publications were assembled through prior scholarly reading and citation-based engagement with the topic. No bounded database search, predefined eligibility rules, independent screening, or formal quality appraisal underpins this paper. We therefore do not claim comprehensive coverage, systematic selection, or an estimate of the prevalence or effectiveness of any recruitment approach.

The conceptual analysis asks what happens at the point of invitation: where an invitation appears, how it is framed, how people respond, who is less likely to encounter it, and how researchers respond to what they learn. We compare published examples across platforms and settings, identify recurring practical and relational tensions, and interpret those tensions through first-, second-, and third-person action-research inquiry. The five proposed practices are an analytical outcome of that interpretation. Supplementary Table S1 describes 22 illustrative publications by setting, population, platform, design, recruitment approach, outcomes, findings, and limitations where ascertainable. It provides source links and distinguishes full articles, reviews and methods papers from a conference abstract and a preprint. This descriptive table is not a quality appraisal; individual claims should be interpreted in light of each source type and its reported limitations.

What social media makes possible

The main practical advantage of social media lies in its capacity to alter the economics and speed of recruitment. Frandsen and others [4] found that social media was associated with reduced costs during the early stages of recruitment, but this benefit decreased as enrolment and completion progressed.

Christensen and colleagues [5] also observed that the average cost of participants was lower when using researcher-initiated online methods as compared to offline methods.

Heckman and others [6] demonstrated that unpaid posts and referrals could be extremely cheap when it came to screening, whereas paid recruitment through Instagram and Facebook was more expensive. The findings from these studies cautions against treating 'cost per click' or 'cost per screened person' as if they were equivalent to 'cost per usable participant'.

Speed is similarly compelling. Childers-Rockey et al. [7] described social-media recruitment as substantially faster than in-person recruitment, while studies of young people and digital mental-health research demonstrate how campaigns can assemble sizeable samples within short periods [8,9,10].

For geographically dispersed, stigmatized, or otherwise difficult-to-reach populations, digital recruitment can also reduce the dependence on physical institutions as gatekeepers. This can matter greatly in action research when the people most affected by an issue are not well represented in formal organizations or service settings.

Targeting tools offer another form of practical flexibility. Recruitment content can be adapted to specific audiences, and paid campaigns adjusted during recruitment. Institutional social-media systems can support multiple campaigns at scale. Yet action research changes how this flexibility is seen: tailoring is not just marketing optimization. It can become an iterative inquiry into language, legitimacy, relevance, and accessibility. A low-response post may reveal not only a weak advertisement but also a mismatch between researchers' assumptions and the community's understanding of the issue.

Platform differences: Affordances, exclusions and relational consequences

Facebook/Meta has dominated the recruitment literature and often produces the largest absolute numbers of participants. Its strengths include a broad user base, mature advertising infrastructure, community groups, and the possibility of combining paid and unpaid strategies. In a pregnancy cohort, Facebook recruited the largest share of participants [11], and in research with tattoo artists it accounted for most respondents [12]. For action researchers, Facebook groups may provide access to existing communities of interest, but entry into those spaces raises questions of moderator authority, group norms, public/private boundaries, and whether researchers are engaging a community or merely extracting access to it.

Instagram's visual and mobile-first design can produce comparatively strong engagement. In the pregnancy cohort reported by Pekarsky et al. [11], Instagram generated the highest proportion of link clicks among users exposed to advertisements. Its strengths are therefore not identical to Facebook's: visual storytelling, short-form messaging, and younger audiences may make it especially useful when recruitment materials can be co-designed in accessible and culturally resonant forms. The same affordances can, however,

privilege people who are comfortable with image-centered self-presentation and whose digital practices align with the platform.

The selected sources offer limited grounds for a general ranking of X/Twitter as a direct recruitment channel. Its potential value may lie in networked dissemination, professional or advocacy communities, and amplification as well as enrolment. Platform value should therefore be assessed against the purpose of recruitment: public dialogue, intermediary reach, visibility, or eligible participation. These possible roles are propositions for context-specific evaluation, not comparative effectiveness findings from Table S1.

Reddit offers a different social architecture. Topic-specific communities and pseudonymity can make it attractive for sensitive or stigmatized research and for people who prefer not to connect participation to a public identity. Nesoff et al. [13] examined Reddit among several channels in research on hidden populations and documented the need to scrutinize response authenticity. Subreddit cultures are highly specific; moderators and community norms can determine whether research invitations are accepted, challenged, or removed. Ethical recruitment requires attention to the norms of the particular community.

WhatsApp and WeChat illustrate why dominant North American platforms should not be assumed to suit every community. The conference abstract by Brahmbhatt et al. [14] mentions both platforms, but provides insufficient detail to compare their recruitment outcomes. Mobile social-media recruitment in another setting is described by He et al. [15]; that comparison does not establish the effectiveness of WhatsApp or WeChat. Platform selection should follow the community and purpose of inquiry, with attention to whether interpersonal messaging supports trust or makes unsolicited contact intrusive.

The hidden costs: Representation, fraud and labour

The strongest challenge to celebratory accounts of social-media recruitment is representativeness. Frandsen et al. [4] found demographic and behavioural differences between social-media and traditionally recruited participants. Childers-Rockey et al. [7] reached people without prenatal care but did not obtain a population-representative sample. Pekarsky et al. [11] observed education and income differences across recruitment sources, and Heckman et al. [6] reported differences between recruited participants and population benchmarks. Social media can therefore broaden access while simultaneously creating new exclusions.

For action research, representativeness shapes whose experiences can inform action. Population-level digital participation provides a necessary context for interpreting recruitment samples. In the 2022 Canadian Internet Use Survey, 82.6% of adults aged 65 or older used the Internet, but 43.5% used social networking websites or apps; Internet use was 72.0% among those aged 75 or older [16]. These figures do not predict participation in a particular study, and the survey

excludes some populations, including long-term institutional residents and people on reserves. They do show why an online-only invitation may miss people even when general Internet access appears high. The older LGBTI recruitment case [17] illustrates how age, identity, social networks, and public commentary further condition who encounters and accepts an invitation. Researchers can compare emerging samples with appropriate population benchmarks, ask community partners about absent groups, and retain non-digital routes where warranted.

Fraud and automated responses have become a second major challenge. Nesoff et al. [13] reported extremely high levels of suspected bots or malicious submissions in an online survey, and Thompson et al. [18] described substantial suspected fraud in qualitative recruitment. Childers-Rockey et al. [7] documented the staff time required to implement safeguards. These findings complicate the claim that online recruitment is inexpensive: fraud prevention transfers costs into researcher labour, verification systems, delayed enrolment, and the risk of excluding legitimate participants whose responses appear atypical.

The action research tension is especially sharp here. Integrity safeguards are necessary, but a security approach based entirely on suspicion can undermine the relational values participatory inquiry depends on. Verification should be proportionate, transparent when possible, and designed with attention to accessibility and equity. The goal is not maximum friction but credible participation without treating every prospective participant as a presumed adversary.

Ethics, platform governance and power

Social-media recruitment occurs within commercial infrastructures not controlled by researchers or participants. Platform policies affect which ads are allowed, which targeting options exist, and how content is classified. The possibility of changing algorithms and moderation rules complicates researchers' control over reach. This platform dependency means that researchers should document how platform decisions affect recruitment and interpret apparent campaign success with care.

Privacy concerns go beyond what participants disclose to researchers. Exposure to an ad may be generated by platform profiling, and interacting with a recruitment post can leave digital traces. Ethical reviews often focus on consent after a participant reaches the study site, but action researchers should also consider the ethics of the pathway that brought the person there. What assumptions were used to target them? Could the ad inadvertently reveal a sensitive interest? Does commenting on a public post expose a person's association with a stigmatized condition or identity?

The problem is intensified for stigmatized populations. Waling et al. [17] describe the need to manage hostile or negative commentary during recruitment. A public recruitment post can become a contested social space in which prospective participants witness trolling, stigma, or challenges to the

legitimacy of the research. Moderation is therefore not peripheral communications work; it can be part of the researcher's duty of care and part of the relational environment through which trust is established.

Institutional governance can help. Flood-Grady et al. [19] show the value of stakeholder-informed policies and centralized support for social-media recruitment. However, standardized procedures should not become a substitute for situated judgment. Action research requires researchers to remain attentive to the particular community, its histories with research, and the power relationships embedded in each recruitment setting.

Recruitment-as-inquiry: Extending the action research cycle upstream

Recruitment-as-inquiry names the proposition that invitation, selection, and response can themselves become sites of action and reflection. Participatory and community-engaged research already involves people in defining questions, building trust, and shaping access [3]. This proposal does not claim to originate those commitments. Its narrower contribution is to locate the threshold of entry within the inquiry: choices about platforms, eligibility language, moderation, accessibility, and fraud controls help constitute who can join the community of inquiry and what researchers can learn from absence.

In the proposed cycle, researchers make a provisional invitation, attend to responses and absences, interpret these with relevant partners, and revise the channel, language, relationship, or research design. The analytic distinction is whether learning about entry changes subsequent inquiry and action, rather than merely improving conversion. This process remains a conceptual model requiring empirical evaluation.

The concept also distinguishes action-research recruitment from commercial optimization. Both may iteratively modify messages based on engagement. Their purposes differ. Commercial optimization asks which intervention maximizes conversion. Recruitment-as-inquiry asks what the response teaches about participation, power, exclusion, relationship, and the research's worthwhile purpose, and whether researchers should change as a result. Adaptation is judged not only by increased enrolment but also by whether the process becomes more democratic, intelligible, equitable, trustworthy, and supports knowing-for-action.

Although developed here through social media, recruitment-as-inquiry is not inherently digital. The theoretical contribution is potentially applicable to recruitment through clinics, schools, community organizations, patient groups, professional networks, and other gatekept settings. Digital platforms make the dynamics unusually visible because targeting, algorithms, metrics, moderation, and public interaction expose the socio-technical mediation of participation. The wider action-research proposition is that recruitment deserves to be theorized as part of the inquiry architecture wherever entry into a project is structured by relationships, institutions, technologies, or researcher-defined categories.

The most important theoretical extension offered by this paper is to treat digitally mediated recruitment as a boundary practice connecting first-, second-, and third-person inquiry. These domains should not be understood as three separate methods. They are mutually informing locations of attention through which action researchers can examine the self in practice, relationships with others, and wider systems of knowledge and action. Social-media recruitment is unusually useful for seeing their interdependence because a seemingly simple act—posting an invitation—simultaneously expresses researcher assumptions, enters a relational field, and participates in a platform-mediated public system.

First-person inquiry concerns the researcher's capacity to notice and question their own purposes, assumptions, emotions, habits, positionality, and exercise of power. In digital recruitment this includes asking why a particular platform feels 'obvious'; what image of the desired participant is embedded in targeting criteria; what counts as a successful response; how the researcher reacts to low uptake, criticism, fraud, or hostile comments; and whether efficiency pressures encourage the researcher to privilege readily reachable participants. First-person reflexivity therefore moves beyond a retrospective positionality statement. It becomes an ongoing discipline of noticing how the researcher's choices help produce the recruitment field. A campaign that attracts a narrow demographic is not simply an external platform outcome; it is also an invitation to examine the assumptions and decisions through which that outcome was made possible.

Second-person inquiry concerns knowing and acting with others in a relational space. Here recruitment is not communication to a target population but an encounter with prospective participants, community moderators, advocacy groups, service organizations, and other system actors. Questions become dialogic: Does the wording make sense to the people it addresses? Does the invitation convey a purpose they regard as worthwhile? What forms of participation feel safe? Who has authority to invite researchers into an online community? What feedback changes the recruitment strategy? Partnership may range from consultation to co-research, but its depth and limits should be explicit. This is particularly important online, where researchers can mistakenly interpret technical access to a group as relational permission to recruit from it.

Third-person inquiry concerns knowledge that can travel beyond the immediate researcher-participant relationship into organizations, institutions, methodological communities, and public practice. Recruitment learning can contribute at this level when it is systematically documented and made actionable: for example, by producing institutional guidance for ethical digital recruitment, reporting platform-specific exclusions, developing accessible recruitment templates, establishing proportionate fraud-prevention protocols, or identifying policy problems created by commercial advertising rules. The third-person question is therefore not simply whether findings are publishable. It is whether situated learning can become sufficiently transparent, credible, and useful to inform practice elsewhere without erasing the context from which it arose.

The three domains create a recursive quality test. First-person inquiry without second-person partnership can become introspection detached from those affected by the research. Second-person participation without first-person reflexivity can leave researcher power insufficiently examined. Third-person claims without either can universalize local experience prematurely. Conversely, when the domains inform one another, recruitment becomes a productive site of developmental reflexivity: the researcher changes through engagement, relationships change through dialogue, and the resulting learning can alter wider research practice. This is the conceptual bridge between social-media recruitment and action research that a conventional platform-comparison review does not provide.

Recruitment as a cycle of action and reflection

A recruitment cycle can document a decision, its observed response, stakeholder interpretation, and subsequent adaptation. Useful evidence may include enrolment patterns, questions from prospective participants, moderator feedback, withdrawals, and accessibility concerns, handled within approved ethical boundaries. These observations should not be treated as consent to analyze private communications.

The cycle provides a proposed way to connect recruitment records with later methodological choices. Researchers should specify which observations were used, who interpreted them, and what changed, so readers can assess whether the claimed action-research learning occurred.

The literature on trauma-informed relational recruitment further demonstrates that access to 'hidden' participants is often produced through ongoing relationships rather than through a single advertisement. Ballantine et al. [20] emphasize community networking and relational engagement in sensitive interview research. This aligns strongly with action research: trust is not a conversion metric but a condition of meaningful participation.

A relational action-research framework for social-media recruitment

Our conceptual analysis proposes five linked practices for designing and reporting recruitment-as-inquiry. They are analytically developed prompts, not an empirically validated intervention or a universal protocol. The emphasis is on documenting movement from entry conditions and observed absence to shared interpretation and subsequent adaptation of the inquiry.

1. **Select platforms with communities, not simply for them.** Platform choice should be informed by where intended participants actually communicate, the norms of those spaces, accessibility, privacy expectations, and the role of moderators or community organizations. A multiplatform strategy is often methodologically stronger because no single digital space is socially neutral or demographically complete.

2. **Treat the invitation as a relational encounter.** Recruitment language should communicate respect, transparency, purpose, expectations, compensation where relevant, and why the research matters [21]. Where feasible, materials should be co-designed or reviewed by people with relevant lived experience. Visual and linguistic tailoring should improve intelligibility and recognition, not manipulate vulnerability.
3. **Monitor participation and exclusion reflexively.** Recruitment dashboards should include more than clicks and costs. Researchers should review emerging demographic patterns, completion, reasons for ineligibility or withdrawal, accessibility problems, community reactions, and the apparent absence of priority groups. These observations should trigger documented reflection and adaptation.
4. **Protect integrity without abandoning trust.** Layered fraud prevention is increasingly necessary, particularly when compensation is offered. The literature supports multiple verification measures rather than reliance on a single check [22]. In an action research approach, safeguards should be proportionate and should be reviewed for unintended exclusion, especially of participants using shared devices, privacy tools, assistive technologies, or non-standard response patterns.
5. **Feed recruitment learning back into action.** What is learned during recruitment should shape the rest of the study. If terminology is repeatedly misunderstood, instruments may need revision. If one group is absent, partnership strategies may need strengthening. If public comments reveal stigma or institutional misinformation, these observations may identify an action target. Recruitment thus becomes an early diagnostic and learning phase rather than a disposable logistical step.

Practical implications for action researchers

A central implication is that multiplatform recruitment should not mean simply buying ads on several services. The strongest strategy may combine paid and unpaid social media, community organizations, participant referral, professional networks, and offline routes. Goldman et al. and Baker et al. [23,24] support mixed approaches. The wider evidence shows why this matters: platform-specific demographic skews and algorithmic unpredictability make diversification a form of methodological resilience.

Reporting must also improve. Dallison et al. [25] emphasize the importance of specifying the platform, content, frequency, account type, and functionality used. Action research reporting should go further by describing who influenced recruitment decisions, what changed during the recruitment cycle, what tensions emerged, how power and inclusion were considered, and what researchers learned about their own assumptions. This makes reflexivity visible and allows readers to understand recruitment as part of the inquiry process [26].

Finally, sustainability requires institutional learning. Social-media recruitment expertise is often recreated study by study. Institutions can instead develop living guidance, fraud-response procedures, accessible templates, community partnership mechanisms, and ethical review practices that are updated as platforms change. The aim is not to freeze a rapidly changing digital environment into policy, but to leave capacity in the system for future researchers and communities.

The seven quality choice-points as a design test for digital recruitment

The proposed framework can be considered against the seven action-research quality choicepoints [27,28]. This is an interpretive alignment, not evidence that the framework satisfies or improves those criteria in practice.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed here presents a paradox. Social media can democratize access to research by reducing geographic barriers, bypassing institutional gatekeepers, and enabling people in stigmatized or dispersed communities to encounter research opportunities. Yet the same technologies can intensify exclusion through digital divides, demographic skews, commercial profiling, algorithmic opacity, and hostile public interaction. Action research is well suited to this paradox because it resists treating method as separate from relationships and purpose.

The specific theoretical contribution is to bring the formation of the participant group within the action-research cycle. Platforms, institutional rules, and eligibility choices shape the threshold of entry; first-person reflexivity, second-person dialogue, and third-person organizational learning offer three ways to examine and act on that threshold. The five practices translate this argument into questions that future empirical studies can test. Existing participatory approaches establish the value of shared inquiry; the proposed extension makes recruitment decisions and exclusions explicit objects of that inquiry.

This focus makes absence analytically relevant, while acknowledging that researchers rarely know who never saw an invitation. Where population benchmarks or partner knowledge are available, comparing expected and observed participation can expose potential gaps; it cannot by itself establish why individuals were absent. Reasons should be investigated with appropriate methods and without treating nonparticipants as data subjects by default.

The contribution is therefore not an argument that every recruitment interaction constitutes action research. A recruitment campaign becomes action-research practice only to the extent that it is connected to worthwhile purpose, participative relationships, systematic inquiry, reflexive learning, and consequential adaptation. This distinction protects the conceptual boundary between iterative marketing and action research. The presence of a feedback loop is insufficient; what matters is what is being learned, with whom, whose interests shape adaptation, and whether that learning changes both practice and the conditions for participation.

Table 1: Platform-specific considerations for action research recruitment.

Platform	Common strengths	Recurring limitations	Relational/action-research question	Potential role
Facebook/Meta	Large reach; mature ads; groups; paid/unpaid options	Sampling skews; public comments; platform moderation; fraud	Are researchers entering an existing community respectfully, and who controls access?	Broad recruitment; groups; targeted campaigns
Instagram	Visual engagement; mobile use; younger audiences	Image-centered participation; demographic skew; commercial targeting	Can materials be co-designed to be recognizable and accessible without becoming manipulative?	Visual recruitment; younger populations
X/Twitter	Network amplification; advocacy/professional publics	Often high cost and low direct enrolment in reviewed studies	Is the goal enrolment, public dialogue, intermediary reach, or visibility?	Amplification; network dissemination
Reddit	Pseudonymity; topic communities; sensitive subjects	Community-specific rules; moderator gatekeeping; fraud risk	What are the subreddit norms, and has permission/community legitimacy been established?	Sensitive/hidden populations; topic-specific recruitment
WhatsApp	Interpersonal networks; regional relevance; closed communication	Potential intrusiveness; forwarding beyond intended context	Does recruitment travel through trusted relationships or create unwanted contact?	Community/network recruitment
WeChat	Regional/cultural relevance; integrated communication	Context-specific governance and access; limited evidence in corpus	Does the platform reflect participants' actual communication ecology?	Regionally appropriate recruitment

A practical test: when is recruitment functioning as action research?

Purpose: Is recruitment being used to advance a worthwhile and explicit transformative purpose, rather than only to satisfy a sample target?

Participation: Have relevant people influenced how entry into the inquiry is designed, and are the depth and limits of that influence transparent?

Inquiry: Are responses, absences, questions, tensions, and exclusions being systematically noticed and interpreted as potential learning?

Reflexivity: Is the researcher examining how their assumptions, identity, institutional position, and definitions of legitimacy shape who can enter?

Action: Does recruitment learning lead to consequential adaptation of relationships, recruitment practices, methods, or the research problem itself?

Proliferation and sustaining: Is useful recruitment learning documented in a form that can strengthen future community, institutional, or action-research practice?

There is therefore no universally 'best' platform. Platform value is relational: it depends on the population, purpose, topic sensitivity, form of participation sought, local digital ecology, resources, and ethical constraints. The action-research question is not which platform wins in the abstract, but which combination of relationships and channels best supports the inquiry's participative and transformative purpose.

The framework should not be interpreted as requiring every prospective participant to become a co-researcher. Participation exists on a continuum, and recruitment design must remain proportionate to the study. The stronger claim is that researchers should make the politics and relational consequences of recruitment visible. Even where stakeholder involvement is limited, researchers can be explicit about that limitation, examine whose interests shaped recruitment, and adapt when evidence of exclusion emerges.

Limitations

This paper develops a conceptual proposal rather than testing an intervention or offering a comprehensive synthesis of recruitment research. The selected examples vary in setting, platform, population, and design; the 22 sources include reviews, methods papers, a preprint, and a conference abstract alongside primary studies. Their selection was not governed by a reproducible review protocol, and no formal study-level quality appraisal was conducted. Consequently, the discussion may omit counterexamples and cannot establish how often a problem occurs or which platform is most effective. Supplementary Table S1 is descriptive and identifies the available source for each entry; some details could not be checked in a complete peer-reviewed article. Platform policies change, and much of the cited research concerns health studies in high-income settings. Future action research should examine whether the five practices improve inclusion, trust,

participation quality, and capacity for collective action in different communities and contexts.

Conclusion

Recruitment-as-inquiry is offered as a conceptual extension of action research: invitation and entry can be examined as early moments in which the participatory field takes shape. The proposed five practices make those moments open to shared reflection and adaptation. Their practical value remains to be tested in empirical action research that measures both who participates and what changes in relationships, methods, and subsequent action.

Statements and declarations

Ethics approval: Not applicable. This paper is a conceptual analysis informed by published literature; it did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Data availability: All materials analyzed in this paper are published sources listed in the reference section.

Author contributions: NS: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Conceptual Analysis; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing; Visualization; Project Administration.

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AI was used to assist in compiling the references and managing the corresponding documents. It was also used as a spelling and grammar checker.

(FINAL-Supplementary-Table)

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