“Cash or credit?” Feedback from patients on the use of reward programs in digital research

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Background & Objectives

A reward program is a structured strategy utilized in research to fairly compensate participants for their time, expertise, and contributions. They are widely considered to be an effective means of increasing engagement and maximizing retention of study participants, which aids the successful completion of research[1]. There are different types of rewards utilized in research, from cash payments and gift cards to prize draws and charitable donations. The successful implementation of each type of reward depends on several factors, including the research methodology, the type of participants and their attitudes towards reward programs, and the degree of participation effort required.

The objective of this project was to gain a better understanding of patient attitudes towards reward programs by exploring their perceptions on the use of rewards in digital research, including their expectations and preferences.

Methods

Individuals from the general population with any self-reported medical conditions were invited to complete a five-minute bespoke web-based survey comprising questions on their demographics, medical conditions, and perceptions on the use of several types of rewards as part of participation in a digital research study. Participants were also invited to provide any additional feedback before submitting their responses.

Results

Twenty-four individuals (mean age: 44, range: 24–72) completed the survey. A range of medical conditions was reported, including respiratory and neurological conditions.

As shown in **Figure 1**, cash payments were the preferred type of reward (n=9, 38%), followed by gift cards (n=7, 29%). When asked at what timepoint they would prefer to receive their reward of choice, over half of respondents (n=13, 54%) reported that they would prefer to receive their reward each time they performed a rewardable action, such as completing a study survey, rather than at set times.

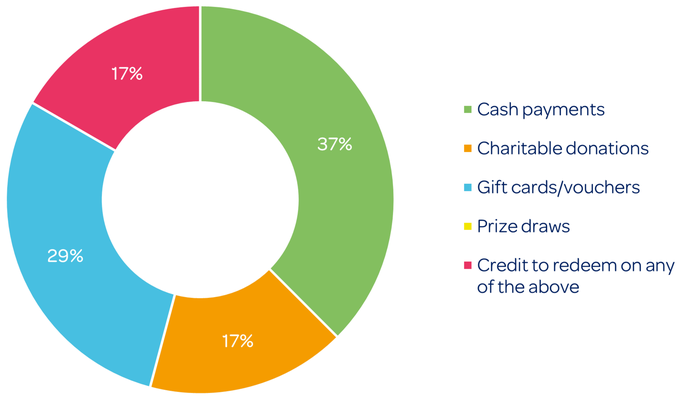

Figure 1: Percentage of preference for reward types

If charitable donation was the reward offered, half of respondents (n=12) preferred to receive updates about their total contributions and how they were being used at least once every three months (see **Figure 2**). When asked about their opt-out preferences, forty-two percent (n=10) of respondents wanted the choice to opt-out of receiving rewards. Further, half (n=12) of respondents reported that receiving one reminder would be sufficient whenever a new study survey became available.

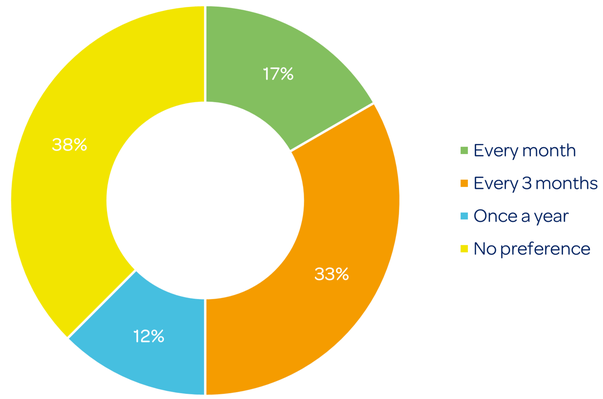

Figure 2: Preferred frequency of updates regarding charitable contributions

When asked how much they would expect to receive as a reward for completing a thirty-minute survey per month, reported figures ranged from 0-100 GBP per survey, with 10 GBP being the most reported figure. Related to their monetary reward expectations, several respondents left feedback to express their willingness to support valuable research and provide information freely without any compensation.

Discussion & Conclusions

Offering rewards is an expression of recognition and gratitude for the effort involved in research participation. Understanding attitudes towards reward programs is pertinent to maximizing their success.

As shown by the findings of this project, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reward programs. Perceptions on the use of reward programs in digital research are varied and likely influenced by a range of individual and contextual factors, including personal interest in the research aims and outcomes, ease of participation, expected time commitment, and type of reward offered.

As such, when designing and implementing reward programs in digital research, consideration of the target population’s preferences could play an important role in improving engagement and increasing recruitment and retention rates. Tailoring reward programs to meet the preferences of the target population is particularly important for longitudinal studies, where consistent and effortful engagement is crucial to the continuation and success of the research.

References

[1]Göritz AS. Incentives in Web Studies: Methodological Issues and a Review. I*nt J Internet Sci.* 2006;1(1):58-70.

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