

Recruiting participants in the 21st century: Australian longitudinal study on women's health

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Aims: To recruit a representative sample of at least 10,000 women aged 18-23 from across Australia using traditional and innovative methods, and to identify and evaluate the different recruitment methods.

Methods: In 2012-2013, five broad recruitment strategies were used to encourage 18-23 year old women to enrol in a longitudinal study that involves completion of annual online surveys. Focus group data were used to develop methods that would be attractive to this age group and to target advertising to groups that might be hard to reach, such as women living in rural and remote areas. The sample was monitored throughout recruiting, so that successful methods could be augmented and underrepresented groups could be targeted.

Strategies included Facebook (including Facebook advertising that targeted specific groups of women), other web activities (eg Twitter, YouTube, websites), referral, traditional media (eg posters, flyers, radio), and the use of a fashion company promotion. Respondents were asked to indicate which strategy led them to the online survey. Demographic characteristics of each recruitment group were compared with the Census. Multinomial logistic regression was used to compare demographic characteristics of each recruitment group with the reference group (ie Facebook).

Results: The aim of recruiting at least 10,000 women from across Australia was met, the sample of 17, 069 women was found to be broadly representative of women in Australia aged 18-23 on measures of area, age and marital status, with some overrepresentation of women with higher levels of education. Of the women who enrolled, 70% indicated Facebook, 5% other web activities, 7% referral, 5% traditional media, and 13% the fashion company promotion. Census comparisons showed women recruited via Facebook had similar age, area and relationship distributions as women of the same age in the Census. Women in all groups had higher educational qualifications and were more likely to be studying than women of the same age in the Census. The fashion company promotion attracted more urban women than the other categories, and Facebook attracted a greater proportion of women with less than Year 12 qualifications. Specific recruitment strategies that were used to engage women from non-urban areas will be discussed.

Conclusion: In the face of increasing difficulties with recruiting the general public into research studies, a flexible, responsive approach using new and traditional media was found to be successful in recruiting a cohort of young women.