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Recommendations for the conduct of online trials

Recruitment

- * Online recruitment is cheap and highly effective (but will recruit a self-selected sample)
- * Advertising via Facebook can recruit participants from pre-specified demographic groups
- * Online trial procedures (registration, consent, randomization, emailed reminders and communication with researchers) are acceptable to young people and can minimize researcher work if automated
- * The legitimacy of a research institution should be made clear – for example, a university logo may convey reassurance about the motivations for the study and use of data
- * Repeated registrations can be minimized by collecting personal details (name, address, email address, date of birth at two time points)
- * Sending compensation by post facilitates the submission of accurate postal addresses, potentially reducing fraud

Data collection

- * Online data collection is acceptable and convenient for young people
- * Online data collection is efficient for researchers, yielding data in forms convenient for analysis
- * Online data collection can yield data with high internal consistency
- * The creation of test participants who register before the main participants can provide early warning of potential problems

Follow up

- * Higher value compensation increases response rates (i.e. retention at 3-month follow-up)
- * Repeated email prompting increases overall response rates
- * Postal follow up of non-responders boosts response rates
- * Contact by telephone or text message could also be considered
- * Mechanisms to keep contact details up to date are needed
- * Offline contact with participants may reduce the potential for fraud, for example, compensation sent by post to guard against repeat registrations

Implications for online *sexual health* research

Recruitment

- * An online environment for sexual health research is popular with young people and highly suitable for sexual health research
- * It is challenging recruiting young people under 18 into online sexual health research, particularly those under 16
- * Compensation encourages participation

Data collection

- * Online questionnaires are convenient and acceptable to young people
- * Detailed sexual health questioning online is acceptable to young people, with good completion rates and good internal validity
- * Sexual health question response options should be as inclusive and non-judgmental as possible to encourage participation and honest responses
- * Questions should be direct and provide clear definitions, for example, defining what is meant by ‘sex’ for particular questions; specifying the context for an answer – e.g. whether physical violence is unwanted or by mutual consent (as in the case of Bondage, Domination, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) practices)
- * Measurement of sexual health outcomes may prompt reflection on behavior– researchers could consider minimal baseline measurement to minimize measurement reactivity

- * Research materials sent by post should be in plain packaging and not display any sexual health branding, and participants should be informed of this when enrolling
- * Chlamydia urine sampling (by post) is not a good biological outcome measure in the context of poor response rates and low point prevalence
- * Researchers should make clear the importance of each individual's response for the success of the research