IMPACT OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE ON RETAINING PARTICIPANTS IN AN ONLINE COVID-19 LONGITUDINAL COHORT STUDY

Thomas AJ[1], Nguyen T[1], Nguyen L[1], Altermatt A[1], Young K[1], Kerr P[1], Heath K[1], Stewart AC[1,2], Wilkinson AL[1,2], Sadewo GR[3], Wang P[3], Fletcher-Lartey S[1], Lusher D[3], Hill S[4], Stoove M[1,2], Gibney K[5], Hellard M[1,2,5,6]

[1]Disease Elimination, Burnet Institute, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, [2]School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, [3]Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, [4]La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, [5]Doherty Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne 3000, Australia, [6]Department of Infectious Diseases, The Alfred and Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the key role of social research for informing public health responses. To support reliability and validity of social research, robust processes for recruiting and, in the case of longitudinal studies, retaining study participants to reduce selection and attrition bias is needed. Studies have investigated mostly individual-level factors associated with willingness to participate in research, such as age, sex, or education level, but few have explored social network influences on continued participation. We investigated the influence of participants' social networks on their continued participation in a complex longitudinal COVID-19 social network study.

Methods: Data come from Optimise, a longitudinal cohort and social networks study conducted in Victoria, Australia, that aims to inform COVID-19 responses. Baseline recruitment occurred between September 2020 and September 2021 and retention was assessed in November 2021. Participants were invited to complete five follow-up surveys per month and occasional "snapshot" surveys. Attrition was calculated as the number of participants who formally withdrew or lost-to-follow-up divided by the total number baseline recruitments. We explored the influence of four social network categories on participants' continued participation: personal, support, activity, and co-worker. The social network analysis was conducted using Autologistic Actor Attribute Models (ALAAMs).

Results: 663 participants were included in analyses, of which 16 withdrawn and 52 were lost-to-follow-up, giving an overall attrition rate of 10.4%. In addition to individual-level factors of age, gender, and residential location being associated with retention, ALAAM analysis indicated social network influences on study participation through personal and support networks.

Conclusion: Our study demonstrates, during a global pandemic, while there was a high willingness to engage in on longitudinal studies of COVID-19, retention was associated particular social networks whose influence on study findings needs to be considered when translating findings into policy and practice response.