Peer Review Report

Review Report on To remind or not to remind during recruitment? An analysis of the HeReCa online panel

Original Article, Int J Public Health

EVALUATION

Q 1   Please summarize the main findings of the study.

The study presents an interesting analysis of enrollment efforts as part of the German "Health Related Beliefs and Health Care Experiences in Germany" study. Based on a random sample of inhabitants of five German "Bundesländer", the authors recruited participants for this online study through personalized invitation letters (one invitation and one reminder). Next, the authors compared sociodemographic characteristics and retention of persons who enrolled after the initial invitation "first responders" and reminders "second responders". Because the two groups were not substantially different, recruitment costs for second responders were higher, and second responders had a higher propensity for drop-out, the authors conclude that reminders could be omitted to improve cost-efficiency of studies.

Q 2   Please highlight the limitations and strengths.

This is an interesting and informative study drawing on a large database. The study was well conducted. I see some limitations concerning external validity / generalizability of the findings (see below for detailed comments).

Q 3   Please provide your detailed review report to the authors. The editors prefer to receive your review structured in major and minor comments. Please consider in your review the methods (statistical methods valid and correctly applied (e.g. sample size, choice of test), is the study replicable based on the method description?), results, data interpretation and references. If there are any objective errors, or if the conclusions are not supported, you should detail your concerns.

This is a very well-conducted and written study. The analysis is sound and informative.
Overall, I only have a few minor points to offer

1) Terminology "first responders" "second responders"
This is a minor thing but first responders in English are usually the people who respond to emergencies (e.g. Fire Department, Rescue Teams). I would propose to rephrase to "first-attempt responders" or similar

2) Generalizability
2.1) Comparison with population in Bundesländer
The analysis compared persons who responded to initial invitations and reminders. It would also be important to compare participants to respective demographics in their Bundesländer. This would add context to the study and shed light on general representativeness of the online study.

2.2) Generalizability concerning context/timing of survey
If I understand correctly the study was at least partially performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and captured experiences of people during the pandemic (e.g. concerning healthcare). In other population-based studies we noted that recruitment and retention was markedly different during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. generally more interest and willingness to participate). Did the authors notice similar effects? If yes, maybe a short statement in the limitation section may be warranted.

3) Conclusion

The authors conclude in a quite general manner that dropping reminders could be justified. While I generally agree, this conclusion should be better qualified.

3.1) Scalability of digital study approaches

The authors arrived at their conclusion because recruitment involved paper mailings, which drove up costs. Against this background, I agree with their conclusion. However, in fully digital studies that involve emails rather than paper mailings, the conclusion would not necessarily hold. Digital recruitment is scalable, and the added costs per invitation are usually marginal. On the other hand, sending paper letters and reminders may be necessary for other reasons, e.g. to reach elderly populations.

3.2) Other strategies to increase efficiency

Generally, I would have liked to see a more in-depth, constructive discussion of how to increase enrollment efficiency. Several ideas come to mind, such as recruiting only with one single invitation but compensating with a larger number of invitations (which would at least save the effort for the reminders). Alternatively, hybrid approaches of entirely digital and paper-based invitations could be considered, e.g. with paper-invitations reserved for older study populations. Maybe the authors could elaborate a bit on possible strategies, which would also increase the usefulness of their study for practitioners.

PLEASE COMMENT

Q 4 — Is the title appropriate, concise, attractive?

yes, appropriate

Q 5 — Are the keywords appropriate?

yes, appropriate

Q 6 — Is the English language of sufficient quality?

yes

Q 7 — Is the quality of the figures and tables satisfactory?

Yes.

Q 8 — Does the reference list cover the relevant literature adequately and in an unbiased manner?)

yes

QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Q 9 — Originality — 4/5

Q 10 — Rigor — 4/5

Q 11 — Significance to the field — 4/5

Q 12 — Interest to a general audience — 3/5

Q 13 — Quality of the writing — 5/5

Q 14 Overall scientific quality of the study

REVISION LEVEL

Q 15 Please make a recommendation based on your comments:

Minor revisions.