

## **From the couch to the bike: an evaluation of a cycling skills training program for women**

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### **Abstract**

Safety concerns is the major barrier to cycling participation in Australia, particularly for women. This is an evaluation study of *Wheel Women* a cycling skills and group ride program designed to encourage safe and regular cycling for women. Currently underway, the study includes: 1) analysis of Wheel Women participants (n=150) (e.g. demographics, cycling skills training, skills and fitness progression, cycling frequency); 2) an online survey of participants and non-participants, and; 3) in-depth interviews. Findings will determine the effectiveness of the program to: provide skills training, improve safe cycling skills, increased cycling participation and identify improvements to further increase safe cycling.

### **Background**

Research has established why women do not ride and concerns about safety has been repeatedly identified as the main barrier (Garrard et al. 2006, Garrard et al. 2008). These concerns, both actual and perceived, keep women from riding and often result in them discouraging, restricting or preventing their children from riding (Haworth 2012). Further, as Bonham and Wilson reported, life events often interrupt cycling for women as other priorities (e.g. social relationships, the ‘cool’ factor, becoming a mother) lead to them choosing to decrease or stop cycling (2012). While the barriers to cycling are well researched, there has been little attention on what is needed to support adult women to ride bicycles.

It is likely that cycling skills and training programs could assist women to overcome their concerns about cycling and increase female cycling participation in Australia. However, it is important to determine the effectiveness of programs. This study is an evaluation one female-specific cycling training program called Wheel Women, based in Melbourne, Victoria. The aims of this study are to:

- determine if the program provide safe cycling skills and training
- identify if the program lead to ongoing behaviour change with measurable increases in cycling activity
- clarify if the program is more or less successful among different women and how the program may be modified to further increase women cycling participation.

### **Method**

This study is an outcome evaluation of the Wheel Women program using a quasi-experimental time-series design that is being conducted in three stages. Stage 1 is review of the participation and skill progression of women participants from January 2013 to December 2015. De-identified data for all women who have participated in a Wheel Women program were analysed including demographics and baseline cycling skills level and progression during their engagement with Wheel Women. Stage 2 is an online survey of Wheel Women participants. All the women who have completed a Wheel Women program were invited to participate. The survey is still open and preliminary results are presented here. Final analyses will include details on non-respondents. Stage 3 are in-depth semi-structured interviews with women who have completed the online survey and agreed to participate. This stage and the analysis yet to be completed.

## Results

Since the inception of *Wheel Women* in 2013, 426 females have completed a ride or program. This includes women who have participated in a skills training program and built their skills and experience over numerous group rides, as well as women who have participated in a single ride event. The analysis of the data from Stage 1 is currently underway and will be completed by July 2016.

To date, 60 women have responded to the online survey. The majority were aged between 41-60 years (78.3%) and prior to joining *Wheel Women*, half (53.3%) rode a bicycle infrequently (a few times a year or less often) including 10 women who had not ridden a bicycle as an adult, 2 of whom did not know how to ride a bicycle. The main barriers to cycling were: I had no one to ride with (43.4%), concerns about safety (39.1%) and lack of skills (36.9%).

Benefits of cycling were reported in a range of variables including: improved fitness (84.6%), weight loss (38.0%), improvements to mental health (82.0%), increased social interaction (86.5%) and half the women reported feeling more confident in their life off the bike (48.0%). These women also represent an economic boon, in 2015, over a third (35%) spent over \$1,000 on cycling gear excluding a bicycle, including 12 women who spent over \$2,000 each. Further, over half the women had purchased a new bicycle since joining *Wheel Women*, totaling \$83,249 with an average purchase price of \$2,312.

## Conclusions

Adult women are largely missing from the cycling population in Australia. *Wheel Women* is a program that is addressing the needs of these latent cyclists by facilitating regular group rides and providing the training and support needed for women to feel confident to cycle. The program is providing individual benefits including improved health outcomes (physical and mental health) with many reporting increased confidence off the bicycle. Further, the economic potential of women is largely untapped with substantial demand from women who are supported to cycle. The final interview stage of this study will contribute further insights and outcomes from this study will provide insights into how to successfully engage with women and these findings may be useful for those programs seeking to target a similar audience.

## References

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