Chapter 9
Best Practice in Online Survey Research with Sensitive Topics

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ABSTRACT
This chapter addresses the main considerations in online survey research with sensitive topics. Advances in technology have allowed numerous options in addressing survey design, and thus created a need to evaluate and consider best approaches when using online survey research. This chapter identifies subjects such as item non-response in online survey research. In addition, this chapter includes a description of the differences in researching non-sensitive topics versus sensitive topics, and then lists a number of best practice strategies to reduce item non-response and improve the quality of survey data obtained. Included are specific considerations for defining sensitive topics and addressing gender differences when surveying more sensitive material. Additional resources in online survey research design are recommended.

INTRODUCTION
Electronic and Web-based or online surveys have become the prominent form of online survey research. This technological trend is not surprising because of the many benefits, including the ease of use found in these survey formats. In addition to the changing format of survey research, is the increasing frequency of researchers using surveys to explore sensitive topics. Electronic and online surveys are here to stay and will continue to be a mainstay in many fields of research. As differing survey formats rarely yield identical estimates, the benefits found with electronic and online survey formats increase their utility for a number of specific types of research topics (Schonlau et al., 2003). Sensitive subject matter is one research area that is receiving increased attention. With
the advancing application of technology, it is essential to understand best practices in research on these sensitive topics. This chapter reviews the literature on best practices of online survey research with sensitive topics. Additionally, the chapter will review the literature highlighting the key concerns impacting online survey research with sensitive topics. Included is a summary of the best practice considerations, and suggested strategies for addressing issues to be considered when conducting research with sensitive topics.

BACKGROUND

Trends in Online Survey Research

Many fields (e.g., business, health, social science, etc.) have found it beneficial to use electronic surveys as opposed to pencil-and-paper or interview surveys. The primary benefits of using electronic surveys are the saving of both time and money and the promotion of more honest responding (Heiervang & Goodman, 2011; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). Time benefits are found in both (1) the speedier administration and return of surveys, and (2) the ease of data use (Nulty, 2008). Furthermore, with the data already in electronic form, there is a decrease in data input errors (Heiervang & Goodman, 2011).

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE LITERATURE

Increasing Disclosure Rates on Surveys

Research indicates more honest responses are elicited by electronic surveys. Given the anonymity that electronic surveys afford, survey participants generally report feeling less vulnerable and more comfortable disclosing personal information on electronic surveys (Joinson, Paine, Buchanan, & Reips, 2008). This has been vital information for those fields exploring sensitive subject matter. With the higher rates of perceived anonymity produced by electronic survey format, participants are likely to report more honest and less socially desirable answers, thereby producing higher rates of truthfulness in the data results (Heiervang & Goodman, 2011).

Item Non-Response

Item non-response is one form of measurement error that influences research results (Dillman, 2007). Key influences in online survey research are respondent and questionnaire characteristics. In regard to questionnaire characteristics, prior research shows that survey items considered to be “sensitive” are a frequent factor influencing item non-response rates (Dillman, 2007; Shoemaker, Eichholz, & Skeews, 2002). In particular, items that request information about a participant’s income, relationship abuse, substance use, mental health concerns, and sexuality are considered sensitive and tend to be left unanswered by survey takers (Ripahn & Serfling, 2005; Thorton & Gupta, 2004; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Item non-response is also impacted by the cognitive effort necessary to answer the question (Shoemaker et al., 2002). Furthermore, item non-response is a greater concern on lengthy surveys (Dillman, 2007). Consequently, surveys will tend to have increased item non-response when requiring extra time from the respondent, whether it is to consider how much information to reveal, extended length and number of questions, or questions requiring more complicated conclusions. Although early research suggested that electronic survey formats produced lower rates of item non-response (Keisler & Sproull, 1986), other recent research suggests that survey format is relatively comparable in terms of item non-response (Börkan, 2010). Lower rates of item non-response on electronic formats
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