

SEEKING A GOOD PRACTICE OF CONDUCTING AN ONLINE SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

The internet is ubiquitous and involving for people. It has become common, therefore, that research practice seems to be moved to the internet with interests of social preferences, behaviour, activities etc. There are more and more social studies conducted on the internet and methodological online conditions are still an issue. The paper highlights a facet of responsibility for conducting research on the internet in accordance with highest ethical standards. This is an overview of available regulations which offers a course of good practice in e-research, online survey methods.

Key words: e-research, online survey, online research, recommendations, social study on the internet

A survey method mediated by internet technology considered in the paper involves a direct e-mail-based survey and a web-based survey submitted through the online platform, such as online areas integrating internet users with definite interests (e.g. newsgroups). In these cases, a research design seems to focus on many aspects related to specific conditions of participation, such as impact of using tools during a measurement. The testing practice in an electronic way seems to be different compared to a standard paper testing. Does the technical environment (and resulting sense of anonymity) increase participants' deception? What are researchers' ethical dilemmas then? Where can the answers for these key questions be found?

THE ISSUES OF SURVEY ON THE INTERNET

The indirect contact of a researcher with respondents is a dubious condition for measurement correctness and causes ethical issues. These are many focal points. Naming a few, there is no assurance that surveyed internet users understand the aim of research, a procedure of measurement or an instruction of a questionnaire presented in a distant way. Indeed, honesty of the respondents' involvement and their authenticity in a measurement are doubtful factors. An online-surveyed person is able to quit a poll more often than in conditions supervised by a researcher (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). A prudence in respondents' authenticity

during online surveys seems to be significant. An Internet as a space of entertainment and free activities causes an issue related to the circumstances of influential distractors during a measurement, e.g. operating other multimedia at the same time that might create a disturbance of attention. Control of measurement conditions in social surveying on the internet is impossible (Henne, 2004), unless there is an opportunity of direct contact with surveyed people and possibility of authenticating their identity, e.g. based on their e-mail addresses (International Test Commission [ITC], 2005). It is assumed that the electronic identification would reduce potential faking during an online study. Do surveyed internet users intend to be dishonest during online testing?

The issue is considered by Grieve and de Groot (Grieve & de Groot, 2011), who studied the degree of deceptive information during psychological online testing. Two groups of surveyed people were compared - those tested with a traditional method of so called 'paper and pencil' questionnaire and the others tested with online questionnaire. The participants were asked to fill in the tests according to a standard instruction of personality measurement (HEXACO-60) and a sense of depression (DASS-21). After the phase scholars requested to repeat those measurements by faking in two cases:

- By good faking, i.e. overestimating their personal traits and presenting themselves in a favourable way, as in a case of self-promotion during an interview,
- By bad faking, i.e. underestimating self-presentation with a sense of chronic depressive state.

Scholars proved no difference between the degrees of faking studies using online and traditional methods. Both measurements are confirmed in a case of overestimating personality measurement as well as in a case of declared fake depression. It is claimed that the internet testing method is commensurable with the traditional one. Furthermore, it is confirmed in other research by comparing measurement indicators of personality, competence and behaviour (Grieve, & de Groot, 2011) and by evidenced comparable reliability and validity of tests (Henne, 2004). Honesty of respondents seems to depend on their will of participation, not on a measurement method - standard or electronic. Therefore it might suggest that those who are willing to start and finish completing an online poll have an honest intention to answer questions included in a questionnaire.

The diversity of social activities on the internet seems to be an inspiring resource for research. Analysing Facebook.com, Lewis at al. (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008) indicate the data representing social preferences and behaviour that would be potential for research. The freely assembled data focus on current users' activities in a virtual environment of social network has been noted by the authors. It appears as an authorized registration of activities on individualised profiles of internet users. The data is sociocentric, including demographic and culture information, indicating mutual relations of populations' interests, diverse and assembled in a longitudinal way. However, the information utility in social research is still in question. The authors also noted that analysing a set of data collected in such a way does not enhance a representativeness of

a large population. The data are selected by internet users depending on their will of popularisation of the information about themselves. Furthermore, the case raises doubts related to a role of a researcher in informing surveyed people on procedure and the aim of a study. According to the ethical research code, research participants' consent is required. Thus, an access to analytical data from social media stressed by Lewis, et al. (2008) seems to be a scientific utility in the first phase of research observation, e.g. with the purpose of putting forward hypotheses. On the other hand, such an observation raises an ethical dilemma related to internet users' expectations that they are not being tracked for research purposes (although internet participation in social context seems to be inevitably related to an opportunity of following back online activities and lurking into personalised profiles of one another, e.g. Facebook Timeline). The question about the need for the feedback about such an observation is related to a reflection that springs to mind - the less intervention in internet users' sense of comfort, the more credibility of the outcomes received during an online test. Particularly, the scientific interest assumes the internet as a "natural" environment of surveyed people - internet users for whom virtual space seems to be more favourable towards uncontrolled, free, and anonymous activities. Paradoxically, the conditions of online testing should maintain a sense of such an atmosphere. A further question that seems to emerge is whether a surveyed group should be informed about online observation stressing the research purpose.

CONSIDERING ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The Internet seems to be a public space but still with social norms of mutual respect. A current discussion about the issue of social research within the electronic environment is demanded as technology is constantly changes. This was considered by The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and resulted in recommendations focused on ethical and professional issues in research on and about the internet. It is established as *Ethical decision-making and Internet research 2.0: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee* (The Association of Internet Researchers [AoIR], 2002, 2012). The document formed in a set of questions offers consistent consideration of ethical issues related to online research, including defining the context of study, enhancement of participants involved in the study and significance of an object of study, defining methodology, research data and results management, and also identifying risks and advantages of a study. It aims at assisting researchers in decisions related to investigation planned on the internet. The more considered the project research in a range of ethics issues, the more methodologically valid and valuable the scientific results. First of all, it requires an ethical approach of social research in general and principles of preserving human rights of surveyed people, respectful of their dignity, welfare, and equity (after AoIR, 2012, p. 4). Furthermore, their privacy issue springs to mind when considering research mediated by internet technology. The AOIR recommendations highlight the issue focusing on the various

types of information assembled in different online venues, e.g. data referring to social interactions (networks, forums, chatrooms with comments and discussion activities), online activities (texts, images, multimedia, customization and system configurations registered on online resources), location (search activities on a web, GPS registration), and online archives, in particular, of commercial web services (clickstream and trace data). Thus, ethical research practice on the internet should cover a wide spectrum of questions which need to be asked before phases of planning, conducting, results publication and dissemination (Markham, 2012; AoIR, 2012, p. 3).

A subsequent point of view of considered ethical issues is presented by International Test Commission in *ITC Guidelines on Computer-Based and Internet Delivered Testing* (International Test Commission [ITC], 2005, 2013). This is another policy that integrates existing regulations, principles, standards and codes of practice of online research. The document involves recommendations of good practice applicable, in particular, in psychological and school testing, clinical or health diagnosis (e.g. weaknesses and strengths identification for planning development program, therapy or intervention), and work or organizational analyses (e.g. professional development consultancy, employees assessment). The guidelines are addressed to test users who employ measurement tools, conduct and supervise research, assess test results and apply them. They are also addressed to test-takers and other stakeholders, such as test developers, who design online measurements, or test publishers. Based on four main facets the issues of online testing are considered by:

1. Technology usage within the framework of testing on the internet. However, it can also be related to offline computer testing, when using electronic version of a test without internet connection.
2. Security significance, such as in a case of maintaining the confidentiality, e.g. electronically stored data and measurement results.
3. Quality measurement with reference to:
 - using only validated tests with the evidence of psychometric properties (test reliability, validity etc.)
 - seeking an evidence of test equivalence in a case of test adaptation from a standard paper version to an online version (including comparable reliabilities, means, standard deviations; common correlations and comparable correlations with other tests)
4. Options of measurement control including:
 - introduction to measurement conditions and description addressed to test takers
 - online test compatibility with surveyed environment (country regulations)
 - defining the level of supervision of testing (open, controlled, supervised, managed mode)
 - providing the level of controlled authenticity of test takers (e.g. an option of logging into a testing platform)

SEEKING A GOOD PRACTICE

To dispel doubts related to online measurement correctness, a researcher can take advantage of the recommendations mentioned above. In a nutshell, firstly, online research can be planned by defining a target population and a supervisor's role determining the level of striving for authorization of test-takers. The ITC Guidelines (2005, 2013) appear as useful suggestions in the light of mentioned dubious conditions of internet testing, such as the need to minimize participants' faking or the requirement of their consent. In these cases a good practice might be found with reference to described levels of research supervision. A few options are suggested:

- an open mode - an option without supervision and authorization of test takers, an online measurement where a registration is not required
- a controlled mode - where a group of surveyed internet users are not supervised but cover only known people
- a supervised mode - a case of testing with registration requirement and participants' authorization
- a managed mode - a case of supervised lab testing in controlled conditions, e.g. related to a technical access and special quality of tools, with a selection of participants and their competences

Thus, research would be conducted on social media profiles of defined and known social network (controlled mode) or by e-mail contact with unknown people (supervised mode). A chosen level of authorisation (related to test-takers' consent for participation in a study) and an online contact opportunity allow the presentation of an aim and a procedure of study to test-takers relevantly (Nosek et al., 2002). It is necessary to keep conditions of a study anonymous, despite direct contact with participants by email. Their sense of comfort decreases inhibitions and is crucial for their honesty. Thus, a clear message about anonymous measurement is suggested to be announced (McInroy, 2016). Used technology (platform, application, online service) depending on a chosen supervision mode should also be adjusted to ethical aspects of data management, e.g. maintaining confidentiality and privacy of saved information.

The experience of internet usage in research in a wide range of social studies indicates assets to internet access (due to geographical and time availability) to the large number of potentially surveyed people (e.g. differentiated by race or by ethnicity), including specific groups of those who can be more open and honest because of distant contact and a sense of anonymity (Henne, 2004; McInroy, 2016; Nosek et al., 2002). However, it is worth admitting that the access to online respondents seems to be explored in many social fields from sociology and psychology to marketing. It can be related to social overload caused by answering every kind of a public opinion poll or a questionnaire. As the result, an interest in participation in online surveys is evanescent. Therefore, it is not an easy scientific task, such as in a case of psychometric measurements on the internet, to keep involvement of hundreds of surveyed people for maintaining groups' representativeness. However, online social research is significant for understanding contemporary societies, for minimizing threats and assisting development.

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