

Issues in internet research

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The internet potentially provides a powerful tool for psychological investigation. Online questionnaires have the potential to remove two of the most labour intensive parts of the research cycle: data collection and data entry. However, as with any new technology being applied to a particular domain, the use of the internet has also raised potential problems. These include both methodological as well as ethical issues. The following information is important if you are planning to use the Internet for data collection and will help you prepare your ethics application.

Benefits of Internet research:

- Relatively easy to use systems can automatically collect and store data in a way which is transferable to popular statistical programs such as SPSS and SAS.
- Large samples can be collected with far less effort than with traditional methods which allows more complex experimental designs and provides studies with high levels of power
- Turn-over time can be significantly reduced, allowing studies that depend on a particular social climate or situation to be realistically completed, and allowing researchers to run more studies in a given time frame.
- Wide coverage over a number of groups can be obtained or studies can easily be targeted at specific groups

Concerns have been raised about:

- The diversity of samples
- The normality of samples on key aspects such as depression
- The transferability between internet and traditional formats
- The commitment of participants to undertake the research in a serious manner
- Participants real identity and repeat participation

While potentially damaging, careful design and targeting can reduce the likelihood of such issues arising. For a fuller review of how studies can be designed with the internet in mind readers are directed to [Gosling et al. \(2004\)](#). Other guidelines, including those related to Ethics, are described in [Michalak and Szabo \(1998\)](#) and [Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald \(2002\)](#).

The ethics of internet research

Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald (2002) point to three key ethical issues of special concern to researchers utilising the internet

- absence of a researcher
- adequate informed consent and debriefing
- protection of participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

The following suggestions about how best to deal with these and related issues, draw heavily upon this work.

Informed consent

An appropriately designed information sheet will normally provide participants with sufficient information so that they can make an informed decision about whether they wish to participate or not. In addition, the informed consent should inform them that they have the right to ask questions. As researchers are not present, this may pose a problem. Therefore, information sheets and consent forms should be especially clear and a contact e-mail must be given. In

addition, the consent form should also contain the requirement that participants indicate they have read and understood the information provided before being allowed to continue. This practice is commonly used in internet ticket bookings to ensure buyers have read terms and conditions of sale.

Debriefing and withdrawal

Once a participant has started the study it is important that they are adequately debriefed. Two major concerns surround debriefing. Computers are not infallible and it is possible that participants may lose contact with the site while completing the study. In addition, they may lose interest and simply go elsewhere. Both of these scenarios may lead to no de-briefing. Nosek et al (2002) present three methods of ensuring debriefing occurs.

- Take an email address at the start of the study. Debriefing emails can then be sent to all participants at the end of the study, regardless of whether or not they completed the questionnaire. *However, note that this takes away anonymity and that the researcher therefore needs to address issues in relation to confidentiality!*
- A 'right to withdraw button' could be placed on each page directing participants to a debriefing page (and the option to have their data to this point retained, or destroyed).
- Debriefing emails should ALWAYS allow participants to contact the investigators with any questions or concerns they may have.

In addition to the concerns raised by Nosek and colleagues we must consider the possibility that participants may wish to withdraw from the study some time after they have completed it. This can be achieved simply by emailing the participant a participant number (linked to email on one database, and their responses in another to ensure confidentiality) stating their right to have data removed without them giving any reasons. By clicking on a link in the mail they can have their data removed from the dataset without providing any additional information.

Data security

Above and beyond standard guidelines for participant confidentiality researchers using the internet need to be aware of additional factors relevant to participants' confidentiality. Data protection issues are the same as those of any other studies once it is entered into a dataset. Data on the university server Castor is secure, but care must be taken that information isn't intercepted while being sent (although the probability of this occur is very small). Use of SSL technology would help prevent this. Basic practice such as storing personal information such as email information separately from response is also important.

Access of studies by the public

Investigators using pen and paper measures, or lab studies have virtually one hundred percent control over who views their materials. RPS students or students approached on campus, or even members of the public are typically approached (possibly by mail) and requested to participate. Even blind recruitment via posters will allow some form of pre-questionnaire screening. Internet researchers do not always enjoy this privilege. Three separate types of access are available to online researchers, open access (where anyone with access to the web can enter the study), invited access (where participants can only enter the study when provided with a password) and intranet access (where participants can only access the computer if they are registered students, logging on from campus or only certain departments, say psychology students with RPS numbers). The latter access poses no real difference in terms of ethics than other studies, barring the other considerations mentioned above. Ethical consideration for invited access should perhaps focus on mostly who is to be invited and in what manner, and how the password will be controlled. Open access is a larger problem, as what may be considered non-personal and inoffensive to one large set of people may prove offensive to another. Such studies must ensure

that they deal with neutral topics and/or that any potentially offensive stimuli should be highlighted in the informed consent page.

Open access studies must also consider the possibility that children may take part in the study. As the burden lies with the researcher to ensure all participants can in fact give informed consent, it is recommended that the age of participants is taken, and that site designs avoid flashy or cartoon type graphics (Nosek et al, 2002)

References

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Nosek, B.A., Banaji, M.R., & Greenwald, A.G. (2002) E-Research: Ethics security, design, and control in psychological research on the internet. *Journal of social issues*, 58, 161-176.