

Resource 11: A guide to using online methods

The following questions should be posed before you engage with online methods. This will gauge their suitability for your project:

1. Do your participants have access to the internet? For example, populations who have low incomes, or live remotely might be better approached with a drop and collect survey rather than an online one;
2. What is the sample you hope to reach? With internet-based research, the span of your research can be geographically very wide. It can also be harder to pin down an appropriate sample (using the sampling techniques discussed in the questionnaire section of Chapter 7). It is important to consider then, who exactly you want to reach, rather than ‘firing-off’ your emails and survey to just anyone;
3. How will you actually find and access your participants? It is often a myth that internet research is easier/simpler. It might be quick to send out a survey, for example, but how do you actually find and access suitable participants to whom you might send it? Unless you are using personal networks, this can be tricky and requires researcher consideration in advance, to ensure methods can be deployed successfully. Madge and O’Connor, for example, used an existing forum to access participants. Consider if you can find an entry point, or gatekeeper to the (online) community you seek to address;
4. In what ways will you build trust and rapport? One of the real disadvantages of internet-mediated research is the ‘loss of the personal touch’ (Bryman, 2004: 270). With online interviews or focus groups it can be difficult to build rapport vital to establish trust and to encourage participants to ‘open up’. This is even the case with technologies such as Skype where you can see participants but eye contact is less

direct, and introductory handshakes, impossible. Researchers have to be smart in ensuring they find ways to connect with participants when using online methods;

5. Do you have a back-up plan for low response rates? As Bryman notes, response rates for online research can be low (emails can be more easily ignored than phone calls, survey links can be discarded to the trash folder, and so on). Researchers should always plan to send reminders to participants (Madge, 2010: 176) but should also consider if additional methods are required if the data yield is low.