

## **Ethical Considerations of Using Email Surveys-Survey Research Review**

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Because electronic mail is rapidly becoming such a large part of our communications system, this survey method deserves special attention. In particular, researchers should consider four basic ethical issues if they choose to use email surveys.

**Sample Representatives:** Since researchers who choose to do surveys, have an ethical obligation to use population samples that are inclusive of race, gender, educational and income levels, etc., if you choose to utilize e-mail to administer your survey you face some serious problems. Individuals who have access to personal computers, modems and the Internet are not necessarily representative of a population. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers not use an e-mail survey when a more inclusive research method is available. However, if you do choose to do an e-mail survey because of its other advantages, you might consider including as part of your survey write up a reminder of the limitations of sample representativeness when using this method.

**Data Analysis:** Even though e-mail surveys tend to have greater response rates, researchers still do not necessarily know exactly who has responded. For example, some e-mail accounts are screened by an unintended viewer before they reach the intended viewer. This issue challenges the external validity of the study. According to Gore and Marshaled (1995), because of this challenge, "researchers should avoid using inferential analysis for electronic surveys" .

**Confidentiality versus Anonymity:** An electronic response is never truly anonymous, since researchers know the respondents' e-mail addresses. According to Gore and Marshaled (1995), researchers are ethically required to guard the confidentiality of their respondents and to assure respondents that they will do so.

**Responsible Quotation:** It is considered acceptable for researchers to correct typographical or grammatical errors before quoting respondents since respondents do not have the ability to edit their responses. According to Gore and Marshaled (1995), researchers are also faced with the problem of "casual language" use common to electronic communication (p. 78). Casual language responses may be difficult to report within the formal language used in journal articles.