

Best Practices for Anonymous Survey Research

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Intended audience: Student researchers in graduate and undergraduate programs at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota and their faculty research advisors

Overview

1. Complete the CITI training before beginning your application. The training gives a good background to the field of research ethics and the regulatory requirements.
2. Understand the difference between anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality in research.
3. One of the main goals of ethical research is to answer the research question with as little risk to the human subjects as possible, and to minimize risks that cannot be avoided. Risk can be present in the study design, the procedures, the topic, or in certain situations.
4. Know that some topics are sensitive in a professional setting - Think about the risks of data being accidentally disclosed. What could happen to the subjects? Would they face professional consequences? Would they face social consequences?
5. The IRB isn't looking for perfectly benign, risk-free studies. They are looking for clear, articulate applications that show that you (the Primary Investigator) have thought about all of the possible risks and have a plan to mitigate these risks.

Frequently Asked Questions

What makes a survey "anonymous"?

A survey is "anonymous" if it does not collect any personally identifiable information from participants, such as names or email addresses. This means that **no one, not even the researcher, will be able to identify a participant or their responses**, or know whether or not they participated in the study.

Why do I need to submit an application to the IRB to collect anonymous survey data?

Aren't anonymous surveys "exempt" from the federal regulations?

Exempt research is research that is "exempt" from the requirements of the Common Rule. To be considered exempt, the study must meet the criteria for exemption. **At Saint Mary's, only the IRB can determine whether or not a study meets the criteria for exemption before research can begin.**

Do I need consent for an anonymous survey? How do I obtain consent from anonymous respondents?

Yes. All anonymous surveys, tests, and questionnaires must be accompanied by consent language explaining the purpose of the study and clarifying the rights and expectations of potential respondents.

For a printed survey, the consent language should be printed on letterhead paper (if appropriate) and be on a separate page from the survey itself. **For an online survey, this consent language should appear on the first page that opens when the respondent gets to the website, before the page(s) with the survey itself.** Note that a consent form is not required when data are collected anonymously; the consent language serves as the consent form.

How do I make my survey anonymous? What online sites can I use?

Any survey that does not collect personally identifiable information from respondents is considered “anonymous”. Anonymous surveys can be printed on paper and distributed in-person or created and distributed online using sites such as **Google Forms, Qualtrics, or SurveyMonkey.**

Depending on the website used to create your online survey, you may need to change the default form settings to ensure anonymity. Some websites, such as Google Forms, require respondents to login with an email address in order to access the survey. Even if email addresses are not linked to participant responses, the researcher will know the identity of the survey respondents.

To maintain participant anonymity, **ensure that your online survey does not require a login and does not collect email or IP addresses from respondents.**

What is the difference between anonymity and privacy and confidentiality? Don't these mean the same thing?

No. Although privacy and confidentiality are closely related, they are not identical. **Privacy** is related to the **methods of gathering information** from research subjects, while **confidentiality** refers to the **obligations of researchers** (and institutions) to appropriately protect the information disclosed to them. Confidentiality procedures, as described during the informed consent process, allow subjects to decide what measure of control over their personal information they are willing to relinquish to researchers.

Anonymity, on the other hand, is “*a principle of research ethics stating that the identity of a study participant should remain unknown*”, even to the researcher (APA, 2018). Relatedly, confidentiality applies to situations in which a participant’s identity is known but should not be disclosed by the researcher.

In other words, a research study can only be considered **anonymous** if “*the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of human subjects cannot be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subject,*” such as an individual’s birth date or job title (Common Rule, 2018).

Are there limitations to anonymity in survey research?

Yes. Even if the researcher makes every effort to maintain the anonymity of their survey and survey respondents, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed online. Researchers collecting online survey data should consult the online site’s terms and conditions to ensure their survey does not collect IP addresses or require respondents to log in with a username or email address.

Researchers should also consider how they will store and secure the survey data to ensure participant responses are not inadvertently disclosed due to server vulnerabilities or breaches. Data should be stored securely in a locked physical location or online in a secure cloud storage and access to the survey data limited to the research team.