

Exploring Topic Sensitivity and Managers' Likelihood to Participate in Internet Surveys: A Research Note

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This study explores the relationship between sensitivity and topic importance to a manager and the likelihood of participation in an Internet-based survey on such topics. An Internet-based survey of business managers in Italy was conducted to measure sensitivity of 12 typical survey topics, the personal importance of each topic to a manager, and the manager's likelihood of participation in a survey of each of a subset of five topics from the total. Findings suggest that managers are most likely to participate in surveys about topics that are personally important to them, even when such topics are perceived as being sensitive.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of the present study is to examine business managers' views regarding sensitivity of a set of typical business research survey topics, personal importance of each topic, and the relationship between these factors and managers' likelihood of participating in a study involving one of the topics. Despite the importance of obtaining information from managers regarding various business topics, little to no research has examined managers' perceptions regarding topic sensitivity, nor how topic sensitivity impacts managers' willingness to disclose information in an Internet-based survey. Managers represent a specialized sample, like children, and as such require researchers to adopt their unique perspectives when formulating research questions and study design (Hair et al., 2016). Among considerations for specialized samples is the ability and willingness of the sample to participate and to provide accurate responses to the survey topic questions.

Business research often deals with topics that could cause managers to be reluctant to participate in the study or to provide honest responses to questions. For instance, responses to questions about the company's competitive advantage, pricing strategy, compliance with government regulations, or the manager's own personal behaviors, values, or relationships with others could reveal proprietary or personal information that might compromise or threaten either the manager's or the company's standing in the business environment. Cultural traits and individual factors, such as the manager's gender and

length of experience, could also play a role in determining what topics are regarded as intrusive or sensitive in nature.

Although topic sensitivity has been widely studied in general, there is a surprising gap in knowledge surrounding managers' perspectives and likelihood to participate in surveys about potentially sensitive business research topics. This study takes a step toward filling this gap by examining managers' attitudes toward various topics that they might be asked to respond to in an Internet-based survey and their likelihood to participate in such studies. The present study also examines the relationship between topic sensitivity and topic importance, given topic importance has been shown to increase participant motivation and survey response rates. Explored also are effects of gender and length of time in managerial position for each potential topic. Implications of findings for methodological and cross-cultural business research are discussed in the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

While little to no research has examined the issues of topic sensitivity or topic interest specifically in managerial samples, a substantial body of research has investigated these issues and their relationship to survey administration mode, willingness to participate, and data quality in general.

Topic Sensitivity

Researchers have offered various definitions for topic sensitivity. Sieber and Stanley (1988, p. 49) define sensitive topics as "studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research." Oppenheim (1992, p. 140) defines a topic as sensitive if "some respondents find it embarrassing and show reluctance to answer questions about it." Lee and Renzetti (1993, p. 5) define a sensitive topic as "one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat." Yet another view is that questions can be considered sensitive if respondents view them as intrusive, if the questions raise fears about repercussion of disclosing information, or if they trigger social desirability concerns (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Albaum, Roster, and Smith (2012, p. 73) define topic sensitivity as a topic that possess a substantial threat to those involved as it may be perceived as intrusive and could raise fears about potential repercussions or consequences of disclosing the information requested. There may be potential costs (or threats) to the respondent. What all of these definitions have in common is that sensitive topics evoke concerns, often emotional in nature, over information disclosure that render such studies problematic for both researchers and participants.

The issue of topic sensitivity has raised a number of methodological issues for survey researchers such as choice of mode of survey design (Einarsen & Våland, 2014; Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Presser & Stinson, 1998; Sakshaug, Yan, & Tourangeau, 2010), sampling (Renzetti & Lee, 1993, p. 30), measurement and validity concerns (Locander, Sudman, & Bradburn, 1976; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007), question and response construction including use of "forced answering" and "prefer not to answer" (Albaum et al., 2012; Bradburn, Sudman, & Associates, 1979; Jann, Jerke, & Krumpal, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011; Roster, Albaum, & Smith, 2014; Schaeffer, 2000), differences in topic sensitivity and interest by nations/cultures (Albaum et al., 2012), ethical treatment of survey participants (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2011; Seiber & Stanley, 1988), and effects of completion timing (Estelami, 2015). Overall, research in this area shows that surveys about sensitive topics can increase unit or item non-response error and potentially create measurement errors associated with socially desirable response styles. In an older study, Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau. (2008) examined the effects of different approaches to data collection, including IVR, CATI, and Internet-based surveys regarding response to potentially sensitive questions. The reported findings supported the growing body of evidence that survey administration by the Internet increases level of reporting sensitive information and reporting accuracy compared to the other approaches to data collection. This occurs because Internet-based surveys allow respondents to participate under a presumed cover of anonymity, unlike person-to-person administered surveys.

Although there has been growing interest in research about topic sensitivity in general, few studies have examined exactly what survey topics potential respondents perceive to be intrusive or personally threatening. Examples include research by Bradburn and his associates who conducted studies in which respondents engaged in personal interviews about a topic traditionally considered to be threatening, and were then presented with different topics and asked to rate how uneasy they felt each topic would make “most people” feel if asked questions about such topics (Bradburn, Blair, & Stocking, 1978; Bradburn, Sudman, & Associates, 1979). In a similar way, Peterson and Ridgway (1986) asked mail survey respondents to rate how threatening they thought each of 22 topics would be to “people in general” as well as to them personally. These researchers report differences in ratings based on the perspective. In addition, prior research has been limited to general population or consumers as the population of interest. The present study extends investigations of topic sensitivity to attitudes of business managers. To our knowledge, no prior studies have examined the issue of topic sensitivity from the perspective of business managers asked to complete an Internet-based survey with the exception of a recent study by Keusch (2012) that looked at response rates in list-based Web survey samples using a sample of information technology managers. Methodological effects arising from Internet-based surveys among samples of managers have yet to be explored.

Topic Importance

Topic importance, or interest, has been viewed as an intrinsic motivation for participating in survey research (e.g., Brügger, Wetzels, de Ruyter, & Schillewaert, 2011; Cialdini, 1988; Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000). The importance of topics to a survey participant has been shown to increase response rates (Groves, Cialdini, & Couper, 1992; Groves, Presser, & Dipko, 2004) and can encourage respondents to provide more accurate responses to the questions asked (Tourangeau, Groves, & Redline, 2010). In general, topic importance and topic sensitivity have not been associated in prior research. However, the two issues are related in the sense that both impact respondents’ motivation to participate and provide accurate responses to the questions associated with survey topics. In the present study we ask about personal importance of each topic evaluated in order to assess their impact on likelihood to participate in future surveys dealing with that topic.

OBJECTIVE

As indicated above, the objective of this study is to examine business managers’ views regarding sensitivity of several potential survey topics, personal importance of these topic areas, and their likelihood of participation in Internet-based surveys regarding these topics. A lack of prior research and relevant theoretical background in this area of research implies that formal hypotheses cannot be tested. Instead, we pose the general research question: *What is the relationship between a manager’s perceived topic sensitivity, topic importance and his or her likelihood of participating in a future Internet-based survey about that topic?* Sensitive topics are the most difficult for researchers to obtain information on. A greater understanding of which topics are regarded as most sensitive by managers could in turn inform researchers’ decisions about methodological issues including survey mode, questionnaire design, and question format, as well as choice of appeals and incentives most likely to increase managers’ likelihood of participation in surveys about such topics.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Italy. The overall sample is comprised of business managers, all of whom were sales or marketing managers. The original sample frame consisted of 200 managers from organizations operating in Italy and were randomly selected from Amadeus-Bureau Van Dijk (a database of public and private firms which include Italian firms as well as multinational firms). Firstly, an appropriate sample of organizations was selected to maximize the generalizability of the findings. A total of 120 managers were purposively selected for inclusion in the study based on title and firm

characteristics. In the next step each manager was contacted directly to obtain their agreement to participate in the study. High level executives (CFO, CCO) and middle managers (e.g., managing directors, marketing managers) were targeted. Data collection was carried out with an Internet survey using Qualtrics. The research instrument was preceded by an introductory letter clarifying the purposes and objectives of the entire research project (see Figure 1). As an incentive, managers were offered a copy of an overall benchmark study to compare their responses to those of other participating managers. The final sample included 74 business managers from multiple companies.

FIGURE 1
INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR ONLINE SURVEY

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT
“Sensitivity to research topics in business administration”

Dear Name and Surname,

The University of (names to be added) are conducting an international research project to study the sensitivity level of respondents towards certain business research topics. We would very much appreciate your participation in this pilot study. The questionnaire is one page and takes about 3 minutes to complete.

To access to the survey, please, click on the following link:

[http://\\$!://SurveyLink?d=Please Click here}](http://$!://SurveyLink?d=Please Click here})

- A copy of the research findings will be sent to all respondents.
- All of your answers will be kept strictly confidential. No individual or company will be identified. Only summary data and aggregate results from multiple firms will be published. No demographic information will be provided to anyone outside the research team.
- You have the right to skip any question you choose not to answer. However, we ask that you answer all data analysis. If you are not sure of an answer to a question, please provide your best estimate.

We will be happy to answer to any question or concerns you may have. Please, write to the following email address: **surveysentiveness@gmail.com**

Please accept my thanks for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A set of survey topics to be tested were compiled by the researchers. Choice of topics were arbitrary given the exploratory nature of the investigation, but informed by a review of topics and current scales used in business research (e.g., Bearden & Netemeyer, 1999). Twelve survey topic areas were selected for inclusion in the study. The measurement instrument (see the Appendix) presented respondents with three blocks of questions about these potential survey topics to assess level of sensitivity, level of importance and likelihood of participation in Internet-based surveys.

For the sensitivity and importance questions the same set of 12 topics was listed in each block. For likelihood of participation, 5 topics determined to be of most interest to business researchers were selected for inclusion in this block to avoid respondent fatigue. All topics were relevant to business managers, the population of interest in the study. The sensitivity scales ranged from Not Sensitive at All

(1) to Extremely Sensitive (5); the importance scale ranged from Not at all Important (1) to Extremely Important (5); and the likelihood scale ranged from Very Unlikely (1) to Very Likely (5).

FINDINGS

Findings are reported in two parts: demographic characteristics and issues regarding survey topics.

Demographic Characteristics

The characteristics of the obtained sample are shown in Table 1. The respondents worked in various industries ranging from distribution (retail or wholesale) to manufacturing to services to healthcare.

TABLE 1
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Total Sample	
	N	%
Gender		
Male	55	75.3
Female	18	24.7
Number of Employees in Company		
10 or less	13	17.6
11-50	14	18.9
51-100	4	5.4
101-200	6	8.1
201-500	5	6.8
More than 500	32	43.2
Education		
High School Graduate	11	14.9
Some College	16	21.6
Associate degree	39	52.7
Bachelor's or Master's degree	7	9.5
PhD and Other Professional Degrees	1	1.3
Corporate Experience		
5 Years or Less	23	31.1
6-10 Years	14	18.9
More than 10 Years	37	50.0
Type of Company		
Publicly-Traded	26	35.1
Not Publicly Traded	48	64.9

Looking at response rate, the overall sample size is 74, which is a 61.7% response rate. The average completion time for the 74 respondents was 5.41 minutes.

Issues Regarding Survey Topics

Table 2 presents the results of measures of topic sensitivity and topic importance for the 12 topics of relevance to business managers. For topic sensitivity, all mean values are above the midpoint of the scale. Interestingly, two topics, both of a personal nature, were viewed as near “extremely sensitive”: personal values overall (4.194) and personal business ethics (4.041). Further exploration examined if demographic characteristics had an effect on respondents’ sensitivity ratings. For the 12 topics there was no statistically significant difference ($p < .10$) for gender in any topic. Another demographic variable examined was years of experience. Using one-way Analysis of Variance, only two topics were statistically significantly different at $p < .10$: “computer security behaviors” and “personal behavior in doing my job”. For both topics respondents with less than 6 years of experience viewed these topics as being more sensitive than all other respondents.

A somewhat similar pattern emerged for topic importance. All mean values were above the midpoint of the scale, and two person-based topics were viewed to have the most importance to the respondents. Only one topic “computer security behavior” differed statistically significantly ($p < .10$) between genders. Female respondents reported that this topic was more personally important than did male respondents. For years of experience, importance of the topic “computer security behavior” differed statistically significantly ($p < .10$) with respondents having less than 6 years of experience indicating the most importance.

A final measure examined is respondent likelihood to participate in a survey for the five selected potential topics. Results are shown in Table 3. The highest likelihood scores were for “personal business ethics” and “personal behavior in doing my job”. Except for “government behavior regarding business” (2.94), the other topics scored between 3 and 4 on a 5-pt. scale. There were no statistically significant difference ($p < .10$) between females and males for any likelihood scale. For years of experience there was a statistically significant difference ($p < .10$) with respondents having less than 6 years of experience indicating the highest likelihood of participating in a survey for the topic “government behavior regarding business.” Less experienced managers reported the highest likelihood means for the other 4 topics, but none were statistically significantly higher than more experienced managers.

What is the relationship between topic sensitivity, topic importance and likelihood of participation in a survey about these topics among business managers? This was a central question we sought to answer in this exploratory study. To address this question, we correlated topic sensitivity and topic importance to likelihood to participate scores for the five topics randomly selected from the 12 topics of interest. Results are shown in Table 4. For the total sample although more than one-half of the correlations are statistically significant at $p < .05$, the amount of variance explained (r^2) was a maximum of only 16%. We tested for any effect that the interaction of sensitivity and importance might have on the likelihood of participation. Using Analysis of Variance, a statistically significant interaction ($p < .07$) resulted for two topics: (1) personal values overall, and (2) personal behavior in doing my job. There was no statistically significant interaction for the other three topics ($p > .19$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Three topics emerged as the most sensitive, having the most importance, and the highest likelihood of participation. Each was of a personal nature. One interpretation of this is that Italian managers are not necessarily afraid of being asked questions of a personal nature about their values and behavior.

We also examined if perceived topic sensitivity, topic importance, or likelihood of participation varied based on demographic characteristics of respondents. Only the topic “computer security behaviors” differed between genders and effects were found only for topic importance. Females regarded computer security behaviors as more important than did male respondents. In terms of years of experience, where a significant difference emerged, managers with the least years of experience reported the highest level of

sensitivity for “computer security behaviors” and for “personal behavior in doing my job”, the highest level of importance for “computer security behaviors” and the highest likelihood of participation in surveys for the topic “government behavior regarding business”.

The present study was conducted with a sample of business managers in Italy. Would results be similar with samples from other nations/cultures? Using the Hofstede schema (Hofstede, 2001), most likely one could expect similar results from other individualistic countries such as the United States. However there might be differences in countries that are more collectivist such as China. Clearly, cultural managerial values could differ greatly. Future research should explore the topic sensitivity matter in other cultures/nations.

TABLE 2
MEAN VALUES OF TOPIC SENSITIVITY^a AND TOPIC IMPORTANCE^b

Topic	Total Sample ^c
<i>Sensitivity</i>	
Government actions affecting my company	3.699
Market orientation	3.838
Government behavior regarding business	3.699
Excellence in business	3.583
Assessment of employer/supervisor	3.833
Person values overall	4.194
Organizational culture	3.863
Competitors' behavior	3.740
Person behavior in doing my job	3.973
Computer security behaviors	3.378
Personal business ethics	4.041
Social issues	3.527
<i>Importance</i>	
Personal values overall	4.270
Assessment of employer/supervisor	3.905
Competitors' behavior	3.865
Social issues	3.877
Government actions affecting my company	3.514
Market orientation	4.069
Excellence in business	3.987
Personal business ethics	4.283
Organizational culture	4.000
Computer security behaviors	3.500
Personal behavior in doing my job	4.283
Government behavior regarding business	3.568

^aScale ranged from 1 (Not sensitive) to 5 (Extremely sensitive). Sample size varied from 72 to 74.

^bScale ranged from 1 (Not at all Important) to 5 (extremely I important). Sample size varied from 73 to 74.

^cSample size varied from 72 to 74.

TABLE 3
MEAN VALUES OF LIKELIHOOD OF SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Topic	Total Sample ^b
Government behavior regarding business	2.944
Assessment of employer/supervisor	3.699
Personal values overall	3.750
Personal business ethics	3.781
Personal behavior in doing my job	3.819

^aScale values ranged from very Unlikely (1) to Very Likely (5).

^bNumber of respondents varied from 71 to 73.

TABLE 4
CORRELATION OF TOPIC SENSITIVITY AND TOPIC IMPORTANCE WITH LIKELIHOOD OF PARTICIPATION

Topic	<u>Total Sample</u>	
	Sensitivity	Importance
Government behavior regarding business	.40**	.35**
Assessment of employer/supervisor	.39**	.30**
Personal values overall	.07	.31**
Personal business ethics	.10	.38**
Personal behavior in doing my job	.30*	.16

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

What survey topics are interesting or relevant to a particular culture/nation may be largely dependent on the culture's value systems. It is also reasonable to assume that interest in topics will vary in accordance with a culture/nation's educational, religious, industrial, technological, political, and economic well-being (these are not listed in any order of impact), as these major influences shape the life and attitudes of individuals living within that culture/nation. In the present study we selected topics that are routinely studied within the business community. Different results could be obtained with different topics.

Another area for future research is the relationship between topic sensitivity and topic importance. As a related matter, the present study explored the relationship between topic sensitivity and personal importance of a topic in answering questions about the topic. Topic sensitivity has been viewed as a demotivating factor that can decrease survey participation and increase item omissions of those who

choose to participate, while topic importance has been viewed as a motivating factor that can counteract these same concerns. To date, the relationship between these two opposing motivational forces has not been empirically investigated. Personal importance of a topic in answering questions about the topic is a dimension of survey research that deserves its own methodological research. However, importance may be related to question wording and response format. Future research could explore how these aspects of importance influence respondents' willingness to provide complete and truthful answers to questions about sensitive topics.

The present study was exploratory in nature and relied upon a relatively small sample of managers from one country. Future research is needed to replicate this study with a larger and culturally-diverse sample of managers, especially samples that compare attitudes of managers from developed nations to those from less-developed nations. Studies that expose cross-cultural differences in business managers' attitudes toward business topics and perceived levels of sensitivity and importance in participating in surveys about potentially sensitive topics could inform important methodological issues that impact design of Internet-based surveys.

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APPENDIX: Questionnaire Used in Study

How sensitive to you is each of the following potential research topics? Please indicate by selecting a number between 1 and 5 where 1= "not sensitive at all"/ 5= "extremely sensitive"

Assessment employer/supervisor
 Computer security behaviors
 Personal business ethics
 Organizational culture
 Personal behavior in doing my job
 Market orientation

Excellence in business
Competitors' behavior
Government behavior regarding business
Personal values overall
Social issues
Government actions affecting my company

How personally important to you is each of the following potential research topics to be? Please indicate by selecting a number between 1 and 5 where 1= "not at all important"/5= "extremely important"

Assessment of employer/supervisor
Computer security behaviors
Personal business ethics
Organizational culture
Personal behavior in doing my job
Market orientation
Excellence in business
Competitors' behavior
Government behavior regarding business
Personal values overall
Social issues
Government actions affecting my company

If you received a request to participate in a survey with one of the following topics, what is the likelihood that you would participate? Please indicate by selecting a number between 1 and 5 where 1 = "very unlikely"/5 = "Very likely"

Assessment of employer/supervisor
Personal business ethics
Government behavior regarding business
Personal values overall
Personal behavior in doing my job

Firm Characteristics:

Number of employees
10 or less employees
11-50
51-100
101-200
201`-500
More than 500 employees

Type
Publicly-Traded Company
Not Publicly-Traded Company

Industry

- Retail/Wholesale
- Mining/Construction
- Manufacturing
- Transportation/Energy
- Communications/Media
- Tech (Software/Biotech)
- Banking/Finance/Insurance
- Service/Consulting
- Healthcare/Pharmaceutical
- Other

Personal Information:

Gender

- Male
- Female

Level of Instruction

- High School Diploma
- Some College
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree (Masters)
- Post Graduate degree (PhD or a number of other professional degrees)

Corporate experience

- 5 or less years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years

Position Held

(open-ended question)

Thank you for your precious time. Please press the Next button to complete the survey