Chapter 7
Online Research Practice and Integrated Perspectives of Inquiry:
Dis(advantages) of Web and E-Mail Surveys

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ABSTRACT

The authors reconstruct the system of advantages and limits of e-mail data collection and web survey technique in social research; for this purpose, they examine in detail a set of studies that stimulate multiple reflections, both with reference to the overall value of survey research and on the role of the web for social sciences. The subject of all selected research designs is a complex social problem that involves the internet, both focus for observation and tool for research: voting intentions, social effects of the pandemic, the quality of university life, technology addiction. In each research experience, for different reasons—above all due to the lack of a single, self-sufficient data collection mode—, the authors favor the integration of research strategies: 1) mixed-modes of data collection, 2) follow-up panel web survey, 3) mixed methods research, 4) introduction of a preliminary pilot study, 5) multilevel survey.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the term *mode of data collection* cannot be traced to a single source and has become part of the lexicon of research since the 1970s (Groves and Kahn, 1979). Proposing a brief excursus on

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modes of data collection, we have gone from post interviews to face-to-face interviews, which were the main modes of data collection from the 1940s (Lyberg and Kasprzyk, 1991), to the development and widespread adoption of telephone surveys, first in the United States and later in Europe and elsewhere since the 1970s, up to the web surveys of the early 1990s.

Since the 1990s the use of the Internet has been rapid and widely recognised; just four years after its introduction, 50 million people worldwide were using the web. The internet usage rate has been impressive and has eclipsed all other previous technologies; just think that to reach this saturation level radio took almost 30 years and television 13 years. In 2018, users connected to the Internet in the world surpassed the 4 billion people threshold: a historical datum that shows how today more than half of the world population is online (Report Global Digital, 2018). The impact of the web was immediate and, to a certain extent, researchers were caught unprepared, even though in recent years we have witnessed an explosion in the use of the web to collect information previously collected in other ways. The turning point came in the mid-1990s, with the introduction of *Hyper Text Mark-up Language* (HTML): the web became an interactive medium and participation in computer-based surveys was perceived as easy and non-intrusive, respecting the anonymity of the interviewees. Moreover, with the spread of electronic mail, web surveys have been recognised for their potential to reach a very large public, guaranteeing a higher response rate in considerably less time/costs compared to paper or postal surveys (Ebert et al., 2018, Kehoe and Pitkow, 1996; Schmidt, 1997).

Why should a researcher prefer to write an online questionnaire instead of using the proven pen and paper system or the different telephone interview methods? As mentioned, the use of online data collection is cheaper in terms of time and costs, as well as being more efficient in the data encoding phase. Indeed, using a computerised support database, the transcription time of the data coincides with the time that the participant takes to answer the questionnaire, since the operation of inserting the answer is automatic: in this way the errors of manual transcription of data are also reduced (Reis and Gosling, 2010; Vicente and Reis, 2010).

Web surveys are now a practical and valuable resource for social scientists. The possibility of selecting populations that are connected and technologically expert, the low cost, the speed of delivery and response, the ease of compilation, in addition to the practical management of data cleaning, are all elements in favour of the Internet as a tool for research. Many authors (Boyle et al., 2016; Lindhjem and Navrud, 2011; Sakshaug, Yan, Tourangeau, 2010; Sills and Song, 2002; Watts, 1999; Smith, 1997) are in agreement in positively evaluating web surveys with respect to the following additional aspects: design flexibility, geographic scope, anonymity and contained error with respect to other methods of surveying such as postal, telephone or face to face. Another important advantage of web surveys is that through virtual communities a researcher can gain access in a short space of time to groups of people who share specific interests, attitudes, beliefs and values about a problem or an activity, even where they are separated by large geographical distances (Garton et al. 2003; Taylor 2000). A researcher interested in probing hard-to-reach populations can quickly gain access to a large number of such individuals by posting invitations to participate in newsgroups, chat rooms and blogs. With the face-to-face interviews the process would expand and it would be more complicated to find an equivalent number of people with specific attributes, interests and attitudes in a single physical place. For example, researchers can find a concentrated number of individuals who use streaming platforms or online or console gaming communities, or find populations that are difficult to reach, such as patients suffering from a rare disease by using forums or hashtags.