

Chapter 8

Social Presence in Virtual World Interviews

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ABSTRACT

Social presence varies from low, to moderate, to high in self-administered, telephone, and face-to-face survey interviews. New communication technologies add another layer of survey modes that can be understood along the same spectrum of social presence. Virtual worlds like Second Life are rapidly becoming popular environments for testing theories of social and economic behavior. Researchers who use Second Life as a data collection platform must consider the extent to which existing social theories hold in virtual environments. This study tests the hypothesis that indicators of interviewers' social presence observed in real world survey environments persist in virtual environments with avatar interviewers and respondents. Results from data quality indicators provide tentative support for the hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Survey modes vary according to communication technology and presentation format. Surveys are administered via paper, telephone, and web, and can be self-administered or interviewer-

administered, or a combination of both. All of the types of technology listed above have been used to present surveys in visual, auditory, or mixed format. Additionally, surveys vary by the extent of social presence in the interview setting from no social presence in a self-administered

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survey to high social presence in an in-person interviewer-administered survey. A persistent question in survey research is the extent to which social presence in the interview setting is desired.

The concept of social presence, a type of presence, or telepresence, has been the subject of much exploration (Lombard & Jones, 2007). It has been defined broadly as “a sense of being with another” (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003, p. 456) and more specifically as “a psychological state in which virtual (para-authentic or artificial) social actors are experienced as actual social actors in either sensory or nonsensory ways” (Lee, 2004, p. 37). Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2003) assert that the internet is an inherently social place where applications and environments are designed to increase social presence.

Social Presence and Survey Modes

The amount of social presence in a survey can have biasing effects on study results. For example, some respondents may report less honest answers to sensitive questions when an interviewer is present (Tourangeau & Smith, 1996; Turner et. al, 1998). The use of telephone interviewing gives way to less candid reporting of sensitive information as well, because respondents are speaking directly to another person (de Leeuw & Van der Zouwen, 1998; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Respondents may also be influenced by the visual appearance of the interviewer. An interviewer’s race, gender or perceived attractiveness has been found to not only influence the respondent’s trust, but also the respondent’s belief of what is a desirable response (Couper, 2008).

While these findings may encourage moving towards a self-administered surveying universe, there are advantages to using interviewers in survey research that cannot be ignored. Interviewers are not only helpful in persuading people to participate in surveys and keep them motivated to continue, but they are also useful for probing

respondents for accurate reporting and clarifying questions respondents may ask unpredictably. Respondents have been known to be more participatory and involved in the survey when an interviewer is involved than when there is no interviewer (Couper, 2008). The use of interviewers can also reduce item non-response compared to self-administered surveys. Interviewers can hide answer options such as “Don’t Know” and “Refuse,” whereas self-administered surveys have those options ready for the respondent to choose (Dillman, 2000).

Survey modes vary along a spectrum of social presence. Low social presence surveys include self-administered mail surveys and web surveys. Extremely low social presence surveys are mail and web surveys with text only. Somewhat higher social presence can be found in web surveys with pictures of individuals or with reactive communication technologies. High social presence surveys include face-to-face surveys, where the interviewer conveys presence through tone of voice, along with facial expressions, eye movement, body language and other visual cues. Telephone surveys have moderate social presence.

Developments in communication technologies add additional layers of survey modes to apply to the social presence spectrum. Telephone surveys can be administered by interactive voice response (IVR), maintaining the voice interaction that allows some social presence, but decreasing the personality behind the voice. Face-to-face interviews can be enhanced with components where the respondent listens to or watches an audio or video recording and enters answers privately into a computer. Web surveys may include avatars or other interviewer agents to encourage and provide feedback on respondents’ answers.

For the most part, new modes of survey research are attempting to combine the benefits of both interviewer and self-administered surveying, minus all of the disadvantages. That is, emergent survey technologies are applied in the hopes of providing

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