



TIPSHEET – New Technology: Smartphones and Social Media

New technology is constantly shaping data collection techniques. Computers and the internet revolutionized how researchers are able to get questions to respondents enabling faster and cheaper survey data collection. Now smartphones and social media are changing how we think about surveys again. These technologies enable data to be captured as the respondent takes actions, an “in-the-moment” data collection process rather than the retrospective process that takes place when respondents answer questions. Since this is a very new area of data collection, this tipsheet focuses on what these technologies can offer rather.

Smartphones and Tablets

Smartphones by the numbers:¹

- 35% of American adults own a smartphone
 - 25% of all smartphone owners do most of their online browsing on their smartphone
 - Ownership highest among those in the upper income and education brackets, as well as among 25-34 year olds
- 30% of all adults use internet or email on a smartphone

Data collection opportunities using smartphones:

- Traditional survey methods: telephone call from an interviewer, web survey received via email or another method that the respondent completes using their smartphone

¹ Source: General Social Survey, Smith 2011. Tablet information from Pew 2011.

- Requests can be sent via text or email
- Apps: used mostly by younger and more educated
 - Respondent opts-in by installing the app
 - Can be designed for whatever purpose necessary, whether capturing data or reminding respondent to answer questions
 - Apps can handle multiple tasks for a complex research design
- GPS/Location data can be collected
 - Could be done automatically (provided respondent approval, of course)
 - Done voluntarily by many already—“check-ins”
 - Get information on frequency of visits to locations, how people travel, etc. in real time rather than asking respondents to recall their activity later (retrospectively).
- Other data that could be collected
 - Visual—pictures/video: immediate look at what individuals are experiencing
 - Bar code scanning: respondents could scan items, enabling researchers to track consumer activity as it is happening rather than asking about it retrospectively.

Data collected via smartphone cannot be representative of the entire US population, since there is only 35% penetration of the technology. These devices also bring up new concerns regarding respondent privacy and confidentiality that should be carefully monitored.

Social Media

Social media by the numbers:²

- Social networks and blogs reach 80% of US internet users
 - More time is spent on Facebook than any other site
 - Social network sites account for nearly 25% of the total time individuals spend on the internet.
- Facebook numbers:³
 - 49.9% of all people age 13 or over log into Facebook at least once per month

² Source: Nielsen “State of the Media: The Social Media Report” 2011.

³ Source: Wells and Link 2011.

- Only 2.4% of non-Facebook users logged into another social networking site, meaning that any research done using Facebook would miss very few social network users.

Social media data collection opportunities:

- Recruit participants for traditional mode surveys
 - Place ads to get volunteers for opt-in survey panels
 - Send a survey to a sample of users (you select sample)
 - Second Life: actually approach avatars that represent people and ask them to do a survey—a virtual form of the face-to-face survey
- Data available, often publicly, that users post on social media
 - Basic information: gender, birthday, education, sexual orientation, where they live, work information
 - Religious and political views
 - Personal websites
 - This information could be used to target potential research participants, to verify responses given on a survey, or to gather information about the sample without asking them any questions at all.

As with smartphones, using social media to collect data can introduce issues of privacy and confidentiality. Researchers should always consult the privacy agreements that social networking sites maintain with their users as well as their IRB or human subjects protection board. Used safely and correctly, with appropriate attention to privacy issues, smartphones and social media can be sources of huge amounts of data at relatively low costs to researchers.

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