

Internet-Based Research: Is it a Viable Strategy for Increasing the Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Psychological Research?

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ABSTRACT - Although the United States has become increasingly diverse, most psychological research is still conducted with few or no ethnic minority participants. If psychological research is to be applicable to diverse ethnic groups and not just European Americans, it is imperative that methods for including ethnic minorities in psychological research be developed. This study is the first to investigate the comparability of data generated by two samples of African American participants – one via the Internet and one via traditional methods – as a way of investigating whether the resources of the Internet can be harnessed to increase sample diversity in psychological research. Identical data were collected from both samples and results revealed that there were no differences in the two samples in terms of the reliability of measures, the amount and pattern of missing data, or prevalence of reported substance use. That data collected via the Internet and via traditional means were identical suggests that the Internet might serve as both a primary participant pool as well as a supplement to locally recruited participants. A systematic plan for investigating the viability of the Internet as a strategy for increasing ethnic minority representation in research samples is provided.

Key Words: Ethnic Minority, Research Methods, Internet, Substance Use

As the population of the United States has become increasingly diverse, the need for ethnic minority representation in psychological research has never been greater. While there is wide-spread recognition of the need for diverse samples in research, the fact remains that most research studies have low (or no) ethnic minority participants. This point was made clearly in a recent review by Graham (1992) who, in reviewing six major American Psychological Association journals, found that only 3.6% of the empirical articles accepted for publication from 1970 to 1989 included African Americans as research participants.

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Importantly, the paucity of ethnic minority representation in research samples is not limited to African Americans, but applies to other ethnic minority groups (e.g., Hispanics) as well.

It is likely that the problem of poor sample diversity is creating a ripple effect that can be seen and felt throughout the field of psychology: inadequate ethnic minority representation in research samples means theory development is skewed and likely inadequate to address the issues of non-European American people, which, in turn, results in empirically-based clinical prevention and intervention programs that may be less than optimal for ethnic minorities. This may ultimately mean that European Americans, already a privileged group in our society (McIntosh, 2003; Rothenberg, 2002), benefit from psychological research while other segments of the U.S. population, already at greatest risk for experiencing problems – due to racism, socioeconomic disadvantage, etc. – may not benefit or may derive considerably less benefit than do European Americans (e.g., Chambless & Williams, 1995; Wallace & Muroff, 2002). In sum, the lack of appropriate representation of ethnic minorities in psychological research may mean that psychology, rather than being a helping profession, at best helps maintain the status quo and, at worst, perpetuates the very problems it desires to ameliorate. Thus, it is imperative, for multiple reasons, that researchers develop ways to address the problem of sample diversity in psychological research.

Researchers lament the lack of ethnic diversity in their research samples but feel they have little or no recourse for making the situation better. Most psychological and behavioral research is conducted at predominantly White institutions, making the lack of sample diversity seem unavoidable. Moreover, the fact that most journal editors do not require researchers to use representative samples, nor even to appropriately temper generalizations from ethnically skewed samples, for articles to be published speaks volumes of support for the viewpoint that nothing can be done. But is this true? Is there nothing that researchers can reasonably do to make their research samples better resemble the population to which they intend to generalize? This is an empirical question and the growing use of the Internet to conduct research provides a context for researchers to test this question directly.

Since 1995, it has been possible to conduct research via the Internet (Birnbaum, 2001) and a growing number of researchers have begun to use the Internet as a research tool. The first true Internet-based experiment published in a scientific journal investigated the determinants of attractiveness (Krantz, Ballard, & Sher, 1997). The authors conducted two identical experiments – one in the lab and one via the Internet – and found only minimal differences, which were due largely to modifications to stimuli on the computer screen rather than to fundamental differences between the two research settings. Since this study, many Internet-based experiments have been conducted on topics such as panic attacks (Stones & Perry, 1997), judgement and decision making (Birnbaum, 1999), personality (Buchanan & Smith, 1999), college student drinking (McCabe, 2002), and the effects of ecstasy and marijuana use on memory

functioning (Rodgers Buchanan, Scholey, Heffernan, Ling & Parrott, 2001). A consistent finding has been that there are not significant differences between traditional versus Internet-based research.

The question that remains, however, is whether Internet-based research can provide researchers with the ability to successfully target specific populations. That is, can Internet-based research be used as a means for targeting ethnic minority research participants, thereby creating more ethnically diverse research samples? Answering this question will take a multi-step process. The first step might involve comparing the properties of data generated from Internet versus traditional data collection means. If the data generated by these two approaches differ in systematic ways that confound the research question being investigated (e.g., data are less reliable for one data collection method compared to the other), procedures would need to be developed for addressing this problem before moving on to further steps in the process. Assuming the data are comparable, a second step might be investigating and comparing various Internet-based sample recruitment strategies to determine which are most likely to be successful at generating useable data and at netting ethnic minority participants. Importantly, both of these steps will need to be carried out separately by ethnic minority group, as one cannot assume that the pattern of responding will be the same for all ethnic minority members (step one) or that Internet-based recruitment strategies developed successfully to target one group will be equally successful for all groups (step two). Whether Internet-based recruitment strategies developed to target one ethnic group are equally successful with all ethnic groups is an empirical question, the answer to which is, as yet, un-investigated and unknown.

As an initial step in answering the question of whether the Internet might be a viable strategy for increasing minority representation in research, the current study investigated the comparability of data from two samples of African American college students, one collected through traditional means and the other via the Internet. The essential question was whether data collected through these two approaches was equivalent in terms of measurement characteristics, sample distributions, and amount of missing data. Given that these data were collected in the context of an alcohol study, of particular interest was also investigating whether there was sample equivalence in reporting about a sensitive behavior like substance use.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Identical data were collected from two samples of African American college students in order to compare data collected traditionally with that collected via the Internet. Sample characteristics and procedures of data collection are described below, separately for each sample. Importantly, there was no overlap in the two samples used in this study. Further, there were no statistically significant differences between the samples in terms of age or gender.

Sample 1. Participants were 33, primarily first-year, African American college students. Mean age for the sample was 20.67 ($SD = 5.09$), and 21.4% of the sample was male and 78.6 was female. Participants were recruited through the Psychology 100 subject pool at a mid-size, predominantly White, southern university during the Fall 2001 semester to participate in a study examining the predictors of alcohol use among African American undergraduates. After signing the informed consent form, participants were given the questionnaire packet to complete. Measures were given in a fixed order so that order of administration would be identical to that used in the Internet administration of the questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants received course credit for their participation and were given a debriefing form that contained additional information about the study and related references for students who wanted to do additional reading in the area.

Sample 2. Participants were 43 African American college students enrolled at the University during the Spring 2002 semester. Mean age for the sample was 21.79 ($SD = 5.27$), and 20.9% of the sample was male and 79.1 was female. Because an insufficient number of African American students enroll in Psychology 100 during the Spring semester, students for this sample were recruited through phone lists obtained from the University's Registrar's Office of a random sample of African American students. Students were contacted via telephone and asked to participate in a 15-minute screening session (for which they were compensated \$10). During this session, they were asked if they were interested in being contacted to participate in psychological research in exchange for \$10 compensation. Those who expressed an interest in being contacted for research were called and invited to participate in this study which was described to them as a study examining the predictors of alcohol use among African American undergraduates. Students who agreed to participate were asked to provide their e-mail addresses and were given additional information about the study. They were told this was a web study, and that they would be e-mailed the web link and instructions for completing the online survey (see Appendix). Since all students have e-mail addresses and access to the Internet, all who expressed interest were able to participate.

When participants logged on to the website, they saw the "Psychology Surveys Online" homepage which contained a button to click on for this study. Clicking on this button directed the participant to an informed consent page that was identical to that given to Sample 1 participants. Upon reading this general information page, students who were still interested in participating were directed to click on the CONTINUE button which pulled up the first page of the survey. The first page of the online survey requested that participants enter their identifying information (e.g., name, e-mail address). Importantly, this information was stored in a separate data table from participants' survey responses, though linked through an ID number. The bottom of each page contained a CONTINUE button which, on selection, would submit the page for processing, and advanced to the next page of the survey. Measures were

administered in identical order to that used with Sample 1. When a student clicked on the CONTINUE button on the last page of the survey, an information page was displayed similar to the debriefing information provided in the form of a handout to Sample 1 participants. However, in addition to the hard copy information Sample 1 participants received, the web page the online participants saw also contained web links to related, informative sites on the Internet such as NIAAA fact sheets regarding college student drinking.

The online database was checked weekly and students whose names appeared in the database were contacted via e-mail and given a date and time to appear in person at the research lab to receive their \$10 payment. Once participants were paid, their identifying information was deleted from the database.

Measures

Alcohol use. Participants were asked to indicate whether they consume alcohol and, if so, the age at which they had their first drink. Additionally, a quantity-frequency questionnaire was used to assess alcohol use. Participants were asked to indicate how often over the past year they consumed alcohol, and responses ranged from "once" in the past year to "four or more times a day." Participants were also asked to indicate, on average, how many drinks they consumed during a typical drinking occasion during the past year. They were told "a drink is defined as one 12-ounce beer, one 5-ounce glass of wine, one mixed drink with 1½ ounces of 80-proof of hard liquor or one shot." Responses ranged from "I didn't drink any alcohol" to "more than 25 drinks." Finally, they were asked how often, in the past year, they had gotten drunk on alcohol. Responses ranged from "never" to "four or more times a day."

Alcohol expectancies. Alcohol expectancies were assessed with a modified version of Rohsenow's (1983) 40-item Alcohol Effects Questionnaire, which is a modified version of Brown, Goldman, Inn, and Anderson's (1980) 90-item Alcohol Expectancy Questionnaire. Rohsenow's (1983) modification included shortening the six positive expectancy subscales and adding two negative expectancy subscales. In this study two modifications were made to the Rohsenow's (1983) measure, both consistent with those proposed by George, Frone, Cooper, Russell, Skinner and Windle (1995). First, the original instructions (Brown et al., 1980), which emphasize responding in terms of personal beliefs about alcohol were used instead of Rohsenow's (1983) instructions which ask respondents to indicate agreement with items based on the actual effects of a few alcoholic drinks. The verbatim instructions that were used are: "I want you to respond according to your own personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about alcohol now. I am interested in what you think about alcohol, regardless of what other people might think." The second modification concerned the response format. The original instrument used a dichotomous, agree/disagree response format. However, researchers (e.g., Leigh, 1989) have argued that such a format poses psychometric problems and fails to provide information about the strength of endorsement. Thus, in the current study we

used the expanded six-point continuum suggested by George et al. (1995), where responses were agree strongly, agree moderately, agree slightly, disagree slightly, disagree moderately, and disagree strongly. The psychometric properties of the AEQ using this modified format are strong; coefficient alphas have been found to range from .83 to .92 for the subscales and the factor structure of the scale has been found to be invariant across ethnicity and gender (George et al., 1995).

In extant literature, alcohol expectancies have been typically operationalized in one of these ways: using a total alcohol expectancy score, using positive versus negative expectancy scores, and using expectancy subscale scores. Each approach was used in this study to facilitate the comparison of the results of this study with existing research. The total score was calculated by summing all 40 items. Scores on the positive expectancy items were summed to create a positive expectancy composite and, likewise, scores on the negative expectancy items were summed to create a negative expectancy composite. Using the factor loadings reported in George et al. (1995), scores were summed on each of the eight subscales: global positive, social and physical pleasure, social expressiveness, sexual enhancement, power and aggression, tension reduction and relaxation, cognitive and physical impairment, and careless unconcern.

Sensation seeking. Sensation seeking was measured using Zuckerman's (1994) 40-item sensation seeking scale. All items were summed to form a total sensation seeking composite variable. Additionally, scores were computed for each subscale: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility. This scale has been widely used to measure this personality dimension. Zuckerman (1994) reports that the internal reliabilities range from .83 to .86 for the total scale score, from .77 to .82 for the thrill and adventure and adventure seeking subscale, from .61 to .67 for the experience seeking subscale, from .74 to .78 for the disinhibition subscale, and from .56 to .65 for the boredom susceptibility subscale.

Results

Since the aim of this study was to examine differences in data collected using traditional means versus the Internet, the primary analytic strategy was to compare the two samples on each of the measures. The key question was determining whether there were statistically significant differences in the two samples in terms of the internal reliability of the expectancies and sensation seeking measures, the distributions of substance use variables, and the amount and pattern of missing data.

Table 1 displays the coefficient alphas for each subscale of the alcohol expectancies questionnaire and the sensation seeking scale. For each subscale, coefficients from the traditional sample were compared with those from the Internet sample using Fisher's R to Z transformations in order to determine whether any were significantly different by sample. These analyses revealed that there were no statistically significant differences. That is, data generated from the traditional and Internet samples were equally reliable in terms of alcohol

expectancies and sensation seeking.

As can be seen in the table, there was also no statistically significant difference in the proportion of both samples that reported they had consumed alcohol. In both samples, about 80% of participants had consumed alcohol. Results of t-tests revealed that there were also no statistically significant differences on any of the other alcohol use variables. That is, the age of onset, frequency of use, average consumption, and frequency of getting drunk were all equivalent across samples.

Table 1
Measurement characteristics for data collected via traditional versus web-based procedures

	Web Sample		Traditional Sample	
	α / M^a	Percent Missing	α / M^a	Percent Missing
Alcohol Expectancies				
Composites				
Positive expectancies	.93	0	.95	.023
Negative expectancies	.90	0	.86	.023
Subscales				
Global positive	.71	0	.76	.009
Social & physical pleasure	.78	0	.88	.009
Social expressiveness	.89	0	.92	.019
Sexual enhancement	.90	0	.86	.014
Power & aggression	.82	0	.69	.012
Tension reduction & relaxation	.66	0	.82	.009
Cognitive & physical impairment	.83	0	.81	.009
Careless unconcern	.81	0	.66	.023
Sensation Seeking				
Thrill Seeking	.78	.003	.79	.007
Experience Seeking	.31	.003	.37	.012
Disinhibition	.63	0	.60	.014
Boredom Susceptibility	.52	0	.40	.007
Alcohol Use				
Ever consumed (yes)	79%	0	81%	0
Age at first drink	16.1 (3.2)	3 ^b	16.4 (3.3)	4 ^b
Frequency of use	3.8 (3.2)	0	4.4 (3.3)	0
Average consumption	3.3 (2.9)	0	2.8 (2.6)	0
Frequency of getting drunk	2.0 (3.1)	0	2.3 (3.0)	0

^aCoefficient alphas are provided in this column for the expectancies and sensation seeking subscales, percentages are provided for the dichotomous ever used alcohol variable, and means (with standard deviations in parentheses) are provided for the all other alcohol use items.

^bMissing data for the alcohol use variables are not percentages but are counts of the number of people who did not answer the question.

To examine rates of missing data, missing variable analyses were conducted for each subscale. For the alcohol expectancies and sensation seeking subscales, a count of the number of missing data points for each subscale was computed. This number was then divided by the total number of data points for each respective subscale. The result represents the proportion of missing data for each subscale. Results indicate that the rate of missing data in both samples was negligible. There were no missing data in the traditional sample and rates of missing data in the Internet sample were near zero for every subscale. For the single-item alcohol use questions, a simple count of the number of people who did not answer the question was generated. As can be seen in the table, the pattern of missing data on the alcohol use variables was the same for both samples. There was missing data on only one of the five alcohol use variables, and it was the same variable in both samples. In the traditional sample, four people did not answer the question of the age at which they started drinking and three people did not answer this question in the Internet sample. Thus, overall, the rate of missing data was comparably low for both the traditional and Internet samples.

Discussion

Most psychological research in the U. S. is conducted with predominantly European American samples, making it impossible to generalize findings to ethnic minority groups. In recognition of this problem, in 1992, the American Psychological Association published its *Guidelines for providers of psychological services to ethnic, linguistic, and culturally diverse populations*, and a short time later recommended that its members include ethnicity in the description of research samples (American Psychological Association, 1994). In 1994, the National Institutes of Health began requiring that ethnic minority persons be included in federally-funded research (Hohmann & Parron, 1996). However, despite these recommendations, policy requirements, and the efforts of many researchers, ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in psychological research. Discovering effective ways to remedy this problem is imperative. In light of the increasing use of the Internet to conduct research, an obvious question is whether Internet-based research, because it extends beyond the demographic limitations of the geographic location of the researcher, might be a viable strategy for increasing the representation of ethnic minorities in psychological research. If the answer to this question is yes, a substantial barrier to using heterogeneous research samples can be removed and the field can begin to require that even researchers who use college student samples must use samples that are appropriately diverse.

As a first step in answering this question, an identical survey was given to two groups of African American students attending a predominantly White university. One sample, recruited through a psychology subject pool, a common method for recruiting participants for psychological research, completed the survey through the traditional, in-person, pencil-and-paper method. The other

sample, recruited randomly from the general student population, completed the survey via the Internet. Analyses comparing the data generated by the Internet versus traditional sample revealed no differences in the internal consistency of measures of alcohol expectancies, and sensation-seeking, no differences in the prevalence rates of alcohol use reported by participants, and no differences in the rate or pattern of missing data. From this it seems reasonable to conclude that the Internet might serve as both a primary participant pool and also as a supplement to locally recruited participants. That no differences emerged in this study suggests the two groups could be combined within the same sample. However, more research is needed before one can fully and confidently answer the question posed by this study.

For example, in this study, participants in both the Internet and traditional groups came from the same university. Thus, this study provided a test of whether data generated via Internet survey are as reliable as data generated through traditional means (i.e., step one). This study did not, however, directly address the issue of sample recruitment via the Internet. Thus, in addition to replicating the findings of this study with African American and other ethnic groups, future research also needs to begin developing procedures for actually recruiting ethnic minority research participants via the Internet (i.e., step two). An important issue to attend to in this regard is the demographic characteristics of participants. Since access to the Internet presupposes access to a computer, research participants recruited via the Internet are not likely to be low-income. The growing availability of free access to computers via local public libraries is increasing the number of ethnic group members who can use the Internet. Yet, there has been far less penetration of this technology in low-income communities compared to middle and upper class communities. Thus, research samples generated via the Internet are likely to be skewed toward the middle and upper end of the socioeconomic continuum. However, this does not pose a problem that is unique to Internet-based research. Since the majority of psychological research is conducted on European American middle and upper class college students, most psychological research is skewed in the same way.

Importantly, the results of this study are consistent with a growing body of Internet-based research showing that research samples generated via the Internet are comparable to those generated through traditional pencil-and-paper methods. This has been the consistent finding of researchers investigating panic attacks (Stones & Perry, 1997), judgement and decision making (Birnbaum, 1999), personality (Buchanan & Smith, 1999), and college student drinking (McCabe, 2002), and increasingly studies are being published using data completed generated via the Internet (e.g., Rodgers et al., 2001). This study adds substantially to this existing literature because it is the first to use an ethnic minority sample.

However, the results of this study must be considered in light of the small sample size that was used, the study's primary limitation. At the predominantly White university where this research was conducted, researchers are typically

only able to recruit, on average, about 10 African American research participants for any given research study (with less than 10 being the norm). Thus, the same lack of ethnic diversity in research samples lamented by other researchers is true at this institution as well, making the sample size of 76 African Americans used in this study seem quite large by comparison. While, in an absolute sense, the sample size in this study was small, compared to most published research on African Americans, the sample is quite large. Inspection of the table shows that virtually all coefficients for the traditional versus Internet samples are very comparable; this engenders some confidence in the tenability of the findings in this study. A more compelling and convincing statement could be made about the equivalence of traditional versus Internet-based data collection approaches if these results are replicated with a larger sample. However, as a first step in the examination of the viability of internet-based research with an ethnic minority sample, this study is promising.

In conclusion, results of this study give a "green light" to continued investigations of whether the Internet represents a viable strategy for increasing the representation of ethnic minorities in psychological research. This study is the first to investigate this question with ethnic minority research participants and, consistent with such research on European American samples, findings of this study indicate that the rate and pattern of responses by African Americans to questions about personality, alcohol use, and alcohol use expectancies are the same regardless whether they participated in person or via the Internet. Other researchers (e.g., Rodgers et al., 2001) have already demonstrated that research participants can be recruited via the Internet. Thus, in addition to replicating the results of this study, investigating whether ethnic group members can be also recruited via the Internet and recruited in large enough numbers to meaningfully improve sample diversity in psychological research is a necessary next step. For psychological research to be applicable to diverse ethnic group members, and not just European Americans, successful methods for including ethnic minorities in research must be developed. Harnessing the benefits of the Internet might be one way of accomplishing this aim.

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Appendix

Text of the E-mail Message Sent to Study Participants

Thanks for agreeing to participate in our study on alcohol use among African American college students. This e-mail contains instructions for completing the online questionnaire as well as a web link for accessing the questionnaire.

Special Instructions for Netscape Users: To view the questionnaire you will need to use Internet Explorer as your web browser. If you are using Netscape, you will need to download Internet Explorer before you begin. Once you have downloaded Internet Explorer, return to this e-mail message and click the link below to access the questionnaire. Click here to download Internet Explorer for free: <http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie/default.asp>.

General Instructions for Completing the Online Questionnaire:

1. All fields on the first page of the questionnaire, and all pull-down menus must be completed in order for us to receive your data.
2. Remember, when we receive your data, we will contact you via e-mail to make arrangements for you to come in to receive your payment.
3. If you have any problems while completing the questionnaire or questions regarding this study, please e-mail us at tbrow2@uky.edu.

HERE'S THE LINK FOR THE QUESTIONNAIRE: <http://www.psychsurveysonline.com>.

Thanks again for your participation in this project!