

FAQ 19: How should I refer to children's media activities?

What's the issue?

To achieve a high level of validity in research with children regarding their online activities requires mutual understanding and shared definitions of the terms used in the questions.

Common practice

Before beginning any research, it is vital to discover both the range of media technologies and activities in which children engage, and also what they call them. This form of pilot research is often done using qualitative methods such as a limited number of interviews or focus groups. When asking questions to children, the terms that will be used have to be carefully explained. The same holds for the children's understanding of the words they use. This issue is especially important with very young children. For example, when asking "Have you ever met in real life with strangers that you first met on the net?", the term "stranger" has to be explained in order to ensure children's valid response.

Pitfalls to avoid

- Children may misunderstand or misinterpret research questions even if these questions contain everyday language, like "stranger" or "new media". This may lead to invalid results
- Surveys that do not provide options like "other" or interviews that do not include questions like "what are you thinking of" make it difficult to follow up on children's own preferred terms.

Examples of studies looking at children's media activities

In the SAFT Children's Survey (Norway, 2005/06), the questionnaire included a wide range of activities for which children might use the internet, phrasing these in everyday language, using non-overlapping terms, including an 'other' option (some researchers invited respondents to write in what this was), and permitting multiple response options as needed:

'What kind of things do you do on the internet?' MORE THAN ONE ANSWER

Response options: Chatting in chat rooms/Using instant messaging/Sending and receiving email/Doing homework/Getting information other than for schoolwork/Playing games on the internet/Surfing for fun/shopping or making a purchase/Downloading music/Making personal website/blogging/publishing pictures or information/Downloading software/Watching pornography/Visiting fan sites/Visiting sites for hobbies (knitting, cats, model airplanes, etc.)/Visiting news sites (newspapers, online news services, etc.)/Other things/Do not know.

For further information, see SAFT (Safety Awareness Facts and Tools) Project, 2006 Parent and Children Survey. 2004–06: *Norwegian action plan for children, youth and the internet* and the European Commission Safer Internet Action Plan: Norwegian Media Authority.

The Pew Research Center's Parents, Kids and the Internet 2001 Survey tries to avoid social desirability biases by saying, 'Now I have a few questions about the kinds of things YOU do when you go online. Not everyone has done these things. Please just tell me whether you ever do each one, or not.'

The Ofcom Media Literacy Survey has a different list of response options, and also seeks to discover children's main activities, asking: 'Thinking about what you do when you use the internet, which of these do you use the internet for?' READ OUT – MULTICODE OK. 'And which would you say are your main uses?' CODE UP TO THREE RESPONSES.

Response options: Emails/Chat rooms/Instant messaging (MSN Messenger, AOL Messenger, etc.)/Reading or writing web-logs/Blogging/creating/updating websites/Schoolwork/homework/Sports news/Finding out things for someone else/Celebrity/showbiz news/Playing games/eBay/QXL/auction

sites/Downloading music/Looking at national or international news/Listening to radio/TV programme websites/Other (WRITE IN).

In the US, the 2005 national survey conducted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (Finkelhor, 2006) put these activities in the context of the last year, stating: 'Most of these questions ask about things that happened in the past year. First, I have some questions about what you do when you use the internet. In the past year, have you used the internet to' (Read list) [1 = Yes, 2 = No, 97 = Don't know/not sure, 98 = Refused/not ascertainable, 99 = Not applicable]: Go to websites/Use email/Use instant messages/Go to chat rooms/Play games/For school assignments/To download music, pictures, or videos from file-sharing programmes like Kazaa or Bear Share/To keep an online journal or blog/To use an online dating or romance site. (Panayiota Tsatsou, UK)

A researcher's experience

In the representative cross-national SAFT survey, we had over 100 research questions for the children to answer in a self-completion questionnaire form. Filters were included in the questionnaire, one of which was to single out those who used chat services in order to ask them more in-depth questions regarding uses and experiences. Children who did not answer 'yes' to the question 'Have you ever chatted on the internet?' were asked to skip the following 12 questions. When analysing the results it became clear that the numbers for children claiming to use chat services were substantially lower than expected based on other user reports and traffic data from the industry. Why? Many children did not label their use of MSN Messenger – the most popular tool for peer-to-peer communication in 2006 – as 'chat', but simply as 'messenger', making them not answer the follow-up questions regarding communication online. It is not just semantics. (Elisabeth Staksrud, Norway)

References and further resources

Finkelhor, D. (2006). *The Second Youth Internet Safety Survey (2005-2006)*. Crimes Against Children Research Center & National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.