

SSI POV: Online

Using Images In Surveys

- Online surveys offer researchers the opportunity to bring questionnaires to life with images, both moving and static.
- Illustrations should be used with caution, since research shows that the same question can result in very different answers depending on which illustration is used to accompany it.

Do Images Bring a Risk of Bias?

Unless the survey is about the particular image or media clip itself, does the researcher need to be concerned with any effects other than increased involvement in the survey when using images?

Imagine we wanted to know if a participant was aware of a particular product packaging or logo. It would make sense to show the item rather than to describe it. (Of course, awareness of a brand based on recognition of a logo is not necessarily the same as recognition of a brand by its name in plain type.)

It is the usage of an illustration as an example of an object or concept that causes most problems because we have to make a judgment call as to what extent the illustration depicts the item in question.



There is little design difference (other than color) between all brands of electric drills.

But within the category “plants” or “holidays” there are many diverse examples. An illustration of a rose is an example of a plant, but a plant could equally have been illustrated by a tree, a grass, a cabbage or even seaweed—would they all lead to the same answer to the question: “Did you buy any plants last week?”

Every concept that is being illustrated is somewhere on a continuum from concrete (this plant) to the abstract (all plants). As we move from concrete to abstract it becomes more difficult to find an example.

This can be illustrated again with drills:

Which one of these could stand as the exemplar for “drills?”

But does it matter? If the illustration is accompanied by text,

can’t the participant see past the illustration to the words that define our actual



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question? Unfortunately the answer is “no.” The participant will interpret the question in the light of everything they see on the page: the colors, the order of answers, the order of instructions in the question and any pictures they see. If it is true that “a picture is worth a thousand words” then it should be possible by judicious use of images to manipulate the results of a survey.

In a recent study, SSI took the simple question of vacation type preference and showed either plain text or a series of pictures with the words underneath. In each treatment one of the pictures was different. If illustration has no effect, we should have expected the number of people selecting “Summer Beach” (for example) as their preferred vacation type to be the same regardless of whether they only saw the text or irrespective of which picture of a beach in summer they saw.

The results of the experiment clearly showed that this is not the case. In every case the images used resulted in a deviation from the preference given when people were shown the question in plain text without a picture.

It is extremely easy to manipulate opinion by the use of images. It is up to the researcher to decide whether their illustration captures the entirety of the concept they are trying to measure or not. If it does not then we would suggest caution. Who would have guessed, for example, that a picture of a Bangkok slum would more accurately replicate the concept of a “City Break” than a picture of Paris at sunset?

This manipulation could, if carried to an extreme, be considered deliberate bias and thus run foul of ethical standards.

SSI Recommendation

Researchers may give thought to reproducing the images, as well the text, in their data tables to provide context.