

Point of View



Using Images in Surveys

Online surveys offer the researcher the opportunity for their surveys to come to life with images, both moving and static; different fonts, layouts and colours; and interactive elements of all kinds.

Excepting of course the situation where the questioning 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?

For all imagery not directly being tested we can use the term “illustrations” to describe them. According to the Oxford English Dictionary illustration means to serve as an example of, or to explain and make clear.

Where the image is “explaining and making clear” the impact of the image must be positive. Imagine we wanted to know if a respondent was aware of a particular product packaging, or logo. It would make sense to show the item in question rather than to describe it. It should be noted of course that awareness of 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 is the illustration one of many typical instances of essentially the same thing and to what extent is it one of many possible alternatives of the thing in question.

Examples of one of many of essentially the same thing might be an electric drill. There is little design difference (other than colour) between all brands of electric drills.



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Examples of one of many possible alternatives might be “plants” or “holidays”. An illustration of a rose is an example of a plant, but 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 exemplar. 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 respondent see past the illustration to the words that define our actual question? Unfortunately the answer is ‘no’. The respondent will interpret the question in the light of **everything** they see on the page: the colours, 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.

We 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 is different. If illustration has no effect we should expect the number of people selecting “Summer Beach” (for example) as their preferred vacation type should 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 show that this is not the case. In every case one or both of the images used results in a deviation from the ‘truth’ that is the preference revealed by the plain text question.

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Images and Data In Accompanying PowerPoint File

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, in the extreme, be considered deliberate bias and thus run foul of ethical standards.

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