



Confidentiality vs. Anonymity

Examples of how to ensure confidentiality

Researchers employ a number of methods to keep their subjects' identity confidential. Foremost, they keep their records secure through the use of password protected files, encryption when sending information over the internet, and even old-fashioned locked doors and drawers. They frequently do not record information in a way that links subject responses with identifying information (usually by use of a code known only to them). And because subjects may not be identified by names alone, but by other identifiers or by combinations of information about subjects, researchers will often only report aggregate findings, not individual-level data, to the public.

Examples of how to ensure anonymity

This means that no personally-identifying information can be collected in an anonymous study. Personally-identifying information includes, but is not limited to, names, addresses, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, government-issued ID numbers (e.g., social security numbers), photographs, and IP addresses. So make sure whatever data collection platform you are using, it does not collect the information above.

This also means that any study conducted face-to-face or over the phone cannot be considered anonymous; this rules out virtually all qualitative research that involves interviews.

Note that online surveys are the most common method of anonymous data collection, but this does not mean that all online survey research is anonymous.

For instance, if the researcher knows the e-mail addresses or IP addresses of the individuals who participated in the survey (for example, if you are collecting them to give them an e-gift card or to enter a drawing for a prize), the study cannot be considered anonymous.

Sometimes IRBs will require that participants have a way to withdraw their survey responses. In these cases, collecting a personal identifier such as an e-mail address may be unavoidable.

Additionally, depending on the study's sample frame, surveys that collect several pieces of demographic information may not be truly anonymous. For example, if your sample frame included employees at a specific company, a combination of demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, or tenure could possibly be used to identify a participant. Therefore, to ensure anonymity, you may have to collect fewer demographic variables if you are sampling from one small group of people (e.g., students within a small graduate program at a specific University).