



# Identifying predictors of survey mode preference



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## ABSTRACT

To increase the likelihood of response, many survey organizations attempt to provide sample members with a mode they are thought to prefer. Mode assignment is typically based on conventional wisdom or results from mode choice studies that presented only limited options. In this paper we draw heavily on research and theory from the mode effects and the survey participation literatures to develop a framework for understanding what characteristics should predict mode preferences. We then test these characteristics using data from two different surveys. We find that measures of familiarity with and access to a mode are the strongest predictors of mode preference and measures of safety concerns, physical abilities, and normative concerns are unexpectedly weak predictors. Our findings suggest that variables that may exist on sample frames can be used to inform the assignment of “preferred” modes to sample members.

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## 1. Introduction

The public is increasingly choosing not to respond to surveys (Curtin et al., 2005; de Leeuw and de Heer, 2002). In the face of this challenge, some survey organizations are trying to increase response rates by providing sample members with the mode they prefer. Giving respondents their preferred mode is thought to generate goodwill and positive attitudes toward the survey (Dillman et al., 2009; Dillman and Tarnai, 1988; Groves and Kahn, 1979; Schaefer and Dillman, 1998; Shih and Fan, 2007). One recent study lent some support to this belief, finding that respondents who prefer the internet or the telephone mode are more likely to respond to internet and phone surveys than those who do not prefer these modes (Olson et al., 2012). However, most survey researchers do not have a measure of sample members' mode preferences prior to conducting their surveys, making assignment of a ‘preferred mode’ difficult. Instead, survey organizations draw on conventional wisdom about which demographic groups prefer particular modes (e.g., young people will prefer web), sometimes using studies that look at which groups choose which mode when offered a choice between two modes as guidance (e.g., Denniston et al., 2000; Dillman et al., 1994, 2009; Diment and Garrett-Jones, 2007; Shih and Fan, 2007).

Surveyors who want to cater to sample members' mode preferences need empirical evidence about what modes different types of sample members are likely to prefer. The objective of this paper is to provide that evidence by answering the question, “What respondent characteristics predict mode preferences?” We draw heavily on research and theory from the mode effects and survey participation literatures to develop a framework for understanding what characteristics should predict mode preferences. We then test these characteristics using data from two different surveys.

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## 2. Background

Several researchers have pointed out that different survey modes vary in the features that affect how respondents proceed through the stages of the response process (de Leeuw, 1992, 2005; Schwarz et al., 1991). We developed a four-category classification system in which each category represents a factor that would impact one's ability and comfort using a particular survey mode. Mode features are classified by whether they affect each of these factors, which include (1) familiarity with and access to the equipment needed to provide a response, (2) physical and cognitive requirements of completing the survey, (3) normative concerns that may be invoked in any given mode and (4) personal safety concerns that may arise in a mode. We hypothesize that respondents will prefer modes that they have at their disposal and that have features that minimize the physical and cognitive burden of responding as well as normative and personal safety concerns.

### 2.1. Mode features related to the logistics of responding

#### 2.1.1. Familiarity with and access to media

Respondents are expected to prefer survey modes that use familiar and comfortable technologies. Familiarity with and access to the technologies underlying survey modes vary across demographic groups. For example, internet penetration rates are higher in suburban and urban areas than rural areas (Rainie, 2010). In addition, young people, those with high household incomes, and those with higher educational attainment are more likely to use computers (Couper and Rowe, 1996) and the internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2013a; Rainie, 2010). Moreover, whereas women spend more time than men processing email (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), men spend more time in a wide variety of other internet activities (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2013b). Thus, we expect those from urban areas, the young, those with high incomes and education, and men to be more likely than their counterparts to prefer the internet over other modes.

Cell phone ownership also varies over demographic groups. Nonwhites, the highly educated, parents, those from suburban and urban areas, and Internet users report higher ownership and usage of cell phones than their counterparts (Lenhart, 2010). Our data do not allow us to test firm hypotheses about persons who prefer a cell phone survey, but we do expect those groups who are more likely to live in cell-phone only households, such as young people, those with lower income, those renting their home or living with unrelated roommates, men, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic black adults (Blumberg and Luke, 2013) to be less likely than their counterparts to prefer landline telephone surveys.

#### 2.1.2. External distractions

Some people may prefer survey modes that minimize distractions that may make responding less comfortable and more difficult. Schwarz et al. (1991) argued that external distractions may be less likely in interviewer-administered surveys because they are governed by general rules of politeness (e.g., interruptions are considered rude). As such, we might expect sample members who are likely to be interrupted (i.e., those with children, spouses, and employment) to prefer interviewer-administered modes. On the other hand, if being interrupted is unavoidable, we might expect sample members to prefer self-administered modes because these modes permit inattention and/or multitasking. These competing hypotheses will be tested in this paper.

### 2.2. Mode features related to the physical and cognitive demands of responding

#### 2.2.1. Visual versus aural presentation

Any factor that affects respondents' ability to process visual or aural communication should also affect their preferences for a visual or aural survey mode. For example, we expect those with hearing loss to prefer a visual mode as it has been shown that hearing loss leads to difficulties with everyday conversational tasks, including talking on the telephone (Dalton et al., 2003). Similarly, we expect those with vision loss to prefer an aural mode. Other age-related physical impairments like shaky or arthritic hands may also make it difficult for respondents to meet the physical demands of completing a survey by certain modes (e.g., writing by hand or operating a mouse and keyboard) thus impacting mode preference.

#### 2.2.2. Presence versus absence of interviewers: cognitive demands

Whether or not an interviewer is present also differs across survey modes (Schwarz et al., 1991; de Leeuw, 1992) and therefore may affect mode preferences. For example, interviewers read the survey questions, enter responses, provide clarification, and answer respondent inquiries (Fowler and Mangione, 1990; Tourangeau et al., 2000), all of which may be desirable for those with low literacy, low levels of education, or cognitive limitations. Yet, self-administered modes may also reduce cognitive demands in other ways by allowing respondents to set the pace, giving them more control over question order (de Leeuw, 1992), and imposing fewer demands on working memory (Tourangeau et al., 2000). In sum, we anticipate that the relationship between the cognitive demands of a mode and mode preference is complex. For example, we expect those with low literacy to prefer interviewer-administered modes and those with poor working memory to prefer self-administered modes.

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