The Importance of Anonymity and Confidentiality for Conducting Survey Research

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Abstract

Purpose: Poor anonymity and confidential strategies by a researcher not only develop unprecedented and precedented harm to participants but also impacts the overall critical appraisal of the research outcomes. Therefore, understanding and applying anonymity and confidentiality in research is key for credible research. As such, this research expansively presents the importance of anonymity and confidentiality for research surveys through critical literature reviews of past works. **Research design, data and methodology:** This research has selected the literature content approach to obtain proper literature dataset which was proven by high degree of validity and reliability using only books and peer-reviewed research articles. The current authors have conducted screening procedure thoroughly to collect better fitted resources. **Results:** Research findings consistently mentioned the confidentiality and anonymity principles are preserved and implemented as a means of protecting the privacy of all individuals, establishing trust and rapport between researchers and study participants, as a way of critically upholding research ethical standards, and preserving the integrity of research processes. **Conclusions:** Confidentiality and anonymity are research ethical principles that help in providing informed consent to participants assuring subjects of the privacy of their personal data. As provided by research bodies and organizations, every research process has to incorporate the principles to meet credibility.

Keywords : Anonymity and Confidentiality, Survey Research Method, Publication Ethics

JEL Classification Code: C02, C35, O35

1. Introduction

Research processes entail the collection of reliable data that can be quantified to help in ascertaining, elaborating,

and asserting important scientific and social aspects. To achieve and reliably appraise the data collected, participants (research subjects), must be effectively involved in the research process (Zohrabi, 2013). As such, participants in research projects and studies are relied upon by scientists and researchers to willingly give information on their own opinions and behaviors in regard to a wide variety of subjects under investigation. When the identity of a participant or subject is not going to be exposed, the participant or subject has a greater possibility of offering genuine responses to questions that are asked. Because of this, anonymity and confidentiality serve an important purpose in research because they contribute to the production of results that are of high quality while also

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being objective.

Ideally, protecting the privacy of participants would require adhering to ethical rules such as maintaining confidentiality and anonymity when collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. The process of eliminating or changing any personally identifying information that was submitted by participants and included in the data encompasses the aspect of confidentiality, as elaborated by the previous work (Boruch & Cecil, 2016). On the other hand, anonymity is the practice of data collection without the acquisition of any personally identifying information (Vainio, 2013). When carrying out quantitative research, it is common practice to ensure that participants' anonymity is maintained, whereas when qualitative research is carried out, confidentiality is given the utmost importance. In both cases, the researcher will collect information from the participants while ensuring high levels of privacy.

Importantly, social scientists are less concerned with the specifics of individual people's lives and more interested in the patterns of behavior and experiences that people have. These interests make up key variables in research topics and only necessary data is collected. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect researchers to provide the people who take part in their studies with some level of respect, as researchers are typically less interested in characterizing the actions of individuals. Consequently, the credibility and reliability of research outcomes are enhanced. However, when anonymity and confidentiality are poorly considered by researchers, bias occurs leading to reduced credibility of the research outcomes.

It is important to note that misuse of confidential information by researchers breaches ethical and some legal standards of research procedures (Christen et al., 2020). Therefore, it is of high significance that researchers adhere to all ethical standards relating to anonymity and confidentiality when conducting studies. Quality research is assessed on the levels of lack of bias and favoritism which can be effectively achieved when anonymity and confidentiality standards are used in research where importantly necessary (Avidan et al., 2019). As participants' confidential information is kept private and protected, both the research and participants gain positive outcomes from the research process. However, poor anonymity and confidential strategies by a researcher not only develop unprecedented and precedented harm to participants but also impacts the overall critical appraisal of the research outcomes. Therefore, understanding and applying anonymity and confidentiality in research is key for credible research. As such, this paper expansively presents the importance of anonymity and confidentiality for research surveys through critical literature reviews of past works relating to the paper's topic.

2. Literature Review

The importance, usefulness, and required strategies for anonymity and confidentiality in research have been extensively captured in the literature. All these efforts by authors and researchers have been to create awareness and elaborate on the significance of anonymity and confidentiality in research processes. Qu and Dumay (2011) note that new researchers face a lot of challenges when conducting studies due to low experience relating to research processes, and especially ethical considerations. Further as put forward by Filkins et al. (2016) and Xu et al. (2011), researchers' implementation of confidentiality strategies determines research success, as much effort has to be put into the understanding, awareness, and effective implementation of anonymity and confidentiality in research, in current and future research. As such, more effective strategies have to be studied, appraised and put forward for use in research.

Similarly, Kaiser (2009) argues that when conducting qualitative research, one of the most difficult issues is protecting the respondent's anonymity while simultaneously providing rich and detailed accounts of social life. The literature on such research ethics and methodologies has not fully addressed such difficulties. Ideally, by carefully considering the audience for one's research and using an informed consent process, qualitative researchers can avoid confidentiality dilemmas that might otherwise lead them to not report rich, detailed data, according to Kaiser (2009), who cites an example from a study of breast cancer survivors. In another evaluation, Sherif (2018) elaborates that the richness of qualitative data for secondary analysis can only be enhanced when critical data collection methodologies and strategies have been used.

Significantly, when participants in research feel protected for their sentiments and opinions as influenced by effective anonymity and confidentiality strategies, they tend to effectively contribute to highly enriched data. Most research topics entail sensitive topics, and the study aims that reliable information can only be obtained when privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality are assured to participants (Tourangeau, 2018). Ideally, research data collections come with different categorizations in which participants' engagements must be considered in the levels of the sensitivity of the data collected. However, there is a need for future elucidation of effective criteria that help in data collection with the influence of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. In a similar way, researchers conducted web-based survey to assess the importance of anonymity and confidentiality concluding that participants understand the roles of anonymity and confidentiality in research, requiring researchers to be highly sensitive to the matter.

Whelan (2007) further suggests that in the future, the research could take into account how participants feel about their anonymity and confidentiality, with the goal of determining how purposeful and unintentional differences affect the findings. Kokolakis (2017) elaborates on the phenomenon of privacy paradox that encompasses participants' attitudes and behaviors toward the awareness, understanding, and perception of privacy in research. As such, these aspects influence research outcomes in the way research implements its privacy strategies and approaches. Ideally, participants' attitudes and behaviors relating to privacy concerns are important in research outputs. Therefore, as suggested by Kokolakis (2017), in future studies, rather than relying on self-reports of behavior, researchers should collect evidence of the actual behavior of participants and implement the right confidentiality approaches for the most reliable data outputs.

Gibson and Brand (2013) point out that research studies on the topic of suicide are one of the critical examples of studies that require high-end anonymity and confidentiality approaches. Even though it is widely acknowledged that there is a need for additional qualitative research on suicide, it is also abundantly obvious that the ethical considerations involved in carrying out such research need to be addressed. Research on suicide can be shaped and limited in various ways depending on the constraints that are placed on confidentiality and anonymity throughout the ethics review process. As a result, suggestions are required about ways in which anonymity and confidentiality constraints and methods relevant to suicide research can be enhanced (Gibson & Brand, 2013). As such, more credible information can be collected with anonymity and confidentiality playing significant roles. Elaborately, as explained by the study (Hassan, Rehmani & Chen, 2019), privacy has been a key element of most internet developments with the aim of protecting users' identities and confidential information. Like research studies, privacy is key for the maximum engagement of participants and their willingness to effectively partake in the processes. However, Hassan, Rehmani and Chen (2019) suggest that there is an important need for effective future integration of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity in the establishment of surveys, whether in-person or online.

Notably, there are occasions and exceptions where anonymity and confidentiality can be sidelined in research. However, scientific research communities insist on adherence to every ethical standard relating to anonymity and confidentiality. Sidelining the ethics in exceptional cases also requires following a set of ethics. Therefore, researchers, guided by the importance of anonymity and confidentiality in research, should always ensure that those who have access to the research data, such as the research

team or the person who transcribes the data, keep the data's confidentiality safe. For instance, data has to always be kept separate from identifiable individuals and stored in codes. Further, researchers should ensure that the records and data are kept confidential by refraining from discussing the concerns that arose from an individual interview with other people in a manner that could lead to the identification of an individual. Technological enhancements can improve confidentiality and anonymity in research. However, it should be considerable to think about what the concept of confidentiality implies for social research in the current century. This is especially true considering the rapidly advancing technologies and innovative approaches to social research and the dissemination of its findings, such as the utilization of visual and online methodologies. Ideally, as put forward by the prior studies (Wiles et al., 2008; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), with today's culture of increasing individualization, in which people want their story to be shared and have the power to make this happen, the concept of secrecy may not be one that is appropriate or desirable in certain types of social research, and this is something that needs to be considered and heavily researched.

Anonymity and confidentiality provide some levels of social and individual rights when undertaking surveys. Lancaster (2017) highlights the need for confidentiality when power relations between researchers and participants play a critical function in the process and outcomes of research. There are complex domains of research in which confidentiality and anonymity are highly important requiring researchers to exercise high levels of research ethics. Lancaster (2017) examined the processes of Australian drug policy development through research surveys to elucidate the intertwining of power and research ethics. Ideally, administrations seek specific data that participants are not always willing to divulge. Therefore, effective implementation of anonymity and confidentiality can be a significant driving force in such situations. Therefore, there is a need for elaborately developing confidentiality strategies when engaging the processes of such surveys. Profoundly, Ali and Kelly (2004) note that social research can only achieve the highest levels of reliable information when participants, for instance, consumers during market research, feel empowered in what they are going to say. Significantly, as informed consent forms one of the basics of ethical research processes, the importance of informed consent in research, insisting researchers have to be keenly implementing proper approaches for the same. However, the author proposes that researchers need to consider whether their ability to fulfill their mandate of affording respondents' dignity, respect, autonomy, and beneficence is hindered by the unadulterated application of the concept of anonymity.

If it is, then they need to evaluate why this is the case and develop sophisticated approaches.

3. Results

The primary reason for upholding confidentiality and anonymity ethical guidelines during research is so that study participants can be shielded from any potential harm. Respondents whose identities are revealed alongside reports of their individual characterization cause potential harm to those respondents who possessed stigmatizing traits or behaviors (Surmiak, 2018). If the identities of vulnerable populations are exposed, such as children, the less privileged, or subordinates in the workplace, this could result in adverse effects on these groups. Therefore, there is an adamant need for researchers to uphold confidentiality and anonymity principles during research processes.

The Belmont Report places a strong focus on beneficence, which instructs researchers not to cause any harm to the people who participate in their studies, therefore this priority should always align with researchers' priorities, as explained by Bromley et al. (2015). Importantly, the confidentiality and anonymity principles are preserved and implemented as a means of protecting the privacy of all individuals, establishing trust and rapport between researchers and study participants, as a way of critically upholding research ethical standards, and preserving the integrity of research processes. Further, the principles also foster autonomy and provide participants with control and more freedom during research studies.

3.1. Protecting the Privacy of Participants in Research

Market Before engaging in any research study or survey, participants always need the affirmation of protection of their personal information that could potentially cause harm to them. Ideally, researchers go out quantifying sensitive research topics in which participants who contribute to the data collection require privacy protection. As such, it is upon the researcher to uphold every necessary confidentiality and anonymity principle to protect the privacy of the subject (Novak, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017).

During research processes, no participants should have to worry about getting hurt because their private information got out because they took part in the research. Participating in research is always voluntary, and everyone who takes part has to be assured of their safety influenced by privacy (Brandimarte et al., 2013). Importantly, it is the researcher's role and responsibility to keep research subjects' information private, since the research outputs are more useful to researchers than participants at that time (Alase, 2017). Researchers should respect the privacy rights of participants which in turn impacts positively on the outputs of their research.

Hence, research should never come before a person's basic right to privacy, which is almost never the case. So, those who plan, approve, and carry out research must figure out how to do it in a way that protects the privacy of the people who take part. Profoundly, any violations of confidentiality are an infringement of a person's rights and put the research participant at risk of harm to their dignity, such as social embarrassment and shame, and even worse, economic predicaments. Such aspects occur when participants provide sensitive information about themselves leading to social embarrassment when confidentiality is violated, and when participants provide data about their workplaces or organization and privacy is not protected, leading to problems with their managers.

3.2. Establishing Trust and Rapport Between Researchers and Study Participants

The When participants in research studies are assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, there is a significant establishment of trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants, as explained and elaborated by Bolderstone (2012), Joinson et al. (2010) and Karnieli et al. (2009). Positive relationships between researchers and subjects are key to the successful outcomes of a research process necessitating researchers to always strive to establish trust and rapport at the early stages of research processes. Importantly, as influenced by anonymity and confidentiality principles, openness, and transparency of a researcher to participants build trust and rapport which is essential for effective data collection. It is important to note that the transferability and credibility of research data are determined by the trustworthiness involved in the research process (Curtin & Fossey, 2007). Significantly, the simplest way of establishing credible trustworthiness between the researcher and the subjects is by assuring them of their privacy rights through effective confidentiality and anonymity strategies.

Establishing and maintaining trust and rapport is one of the most important foundations for effective communication. Ideally, after a successful rapport has been established, there will be an increase in trust, as well as mutual respect, and communication will become more efficient (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This aspect is what most researchers should always seek in the early processes of studies. Both the researcher and the volunteer will have a deeper grasp of and trust in their relationships with each other. When two individuals have trust in one another and an understanding of one another, their communication will

become more open and in-depth, which will result in the production of data that is rich in meaning and credibility. Therefore, the outcome will most certainly be to the advantage of the research study.

3.3.   Upholding Research Ethical Standards Giving the Research Process Integrity

One of the most important functions of adhering to confidentiality and anonymity principles in research is to maintain research integrity. Credible research is only approved when the research had adhered to confidentiality and anonymity principles and guidelines (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). Research credibility, through in-depth information provided by participants, is achieved when all ethical codes have been adhered to. More specifically, as confidentiality and anonymity are one of the most important ethical codes, strict adherence to the principles ensures credible and authentic research, as further explained by Alase (2017). When confidentiality and anonymity codes are used in the process of research, its transferability is enhanced. This aspect, being one factor of credible research, it is adamant that researchers engage these codes in their research processes so that the studies can attain the highest integrity levels.

Confidentiality and anonymity foster trust and respect between the researcher and participants which positively impacts the data collection process in studies. Ideally, if these research codes are not followed and the study still ends up gaining in-depth data, the study can be easily termed as not credible, and its integrity not approved. However, starting out a research process with informed consent briefing, the research process is already on the right path to being approved as one with integrity. Significantly, most research studies are critically appraised by critical reviewers and approved organizations who analyze the credibility and trustworthiness of research studies. Therefore, for a study to pass the integrity test, it must have incorporated and rationalize all confidentiality and anonymity principles (Krol et al., 2016). Therefore, as the importance of confidentiality and anonymity principles in research encompass the significance of providing privacy security to participants and creating trust, they also enable research studies to attain credibility and integrity.

3.4. Provide Autonomy, Control, And Freedom to Participants

Confidentiality and anonymity strategies help in building good rapport and trust and assure participants of their privacy and security in participating in research studies. Consequently, as participants are assured of their privacy and trust and respect have been established, the subjects become free and take control in the process. This autonomy is significantly important in the data collection process as participants feel free to divulge any required information (Giordano et al., 2007). As participants engage in their own ways, ideas, and interests while following the research processes as laid out by the research, more in-depth information is collected.

Notably, without elaborate confidentiality and anonymity strategies by researchers, participants' level of engagement in a study is lowered. Ideally, when one feels their privacy is in jeopardy while being asked to provide sensitive information, they might be unwilling to participate or provide limited data. However, when participants' autonomy is enhanced through choice, as explained by Halperin et al. (2018), more engagement in the study is achieved. Therefore, the implementation of proper confidentiality and anonymity approaches provides the importance of in-depth data collection by enhancing participants' autonomy, control in the study, and freedom of expression. It is also important to note that during the confidentiality and anonymity briefing process in the research, participants choose whether or not to participate through the informed consent ethical code. Therefore, as they accept to participate as influenced by good rapport and trust, they develop more enthusiasm for participation created by a good confidentiality briefing strategy.
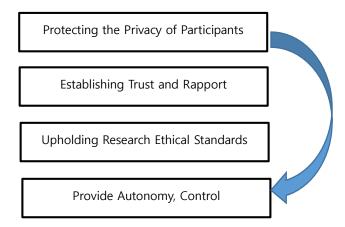

Figure 1: Research Findings

4. Discussions

It is of the utmost importance that every researcher has a solid understanding of the ethical rules pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity, and that these features be effectively implemented in research operations. In an ideal world, the necessity of integrating the principles not only

extends from the requirement that the studies be credible and possess high levels of integrity but also has a positive impact on the data-gathering outputs of the research (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researchers need to first earn the participants' informed consent before continuing with the research process. Once this step has been completed, the study can only move forward in the proper direction if there is a level of trust and rapport between the participants and the researchers. As a result, the process of doing research ought to be approached with the intention of utilizing the strategies that have proven to be the most successful in terms of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

Most significantly, maintaining participants' privacy and safety while doing research requires maintaining their anonymity as well as confidentiality. Ideally, it is ethical to always keep the personal information of the participants safe and secure. This can only be disclosed or kept open under certain circumstances, all of which must adhere to predetermined ethical criteria to be permitted. According to the suggestions of the prior research (Petrova et al., 2016), the protection of personal information of each and every subject should be of the utmost concern at all times. If the participants' input into the study problem can be demonstrated to meet certain credibility requirements, researchers are not concerned with the participant's personal particulars. When conducting studies, this component needs to be one of the primary goals that researchers strive for. Importantly, research conducted in the modern era has largely concentrated on delicate and sensitive topics that influence communities on both a social and an economic level. For quantification and resolution of these situations, in-depth information from specific participants who have previous experience dealing with similar matters demanding high-level protection of personal data is required. In this manner, their safety will be ensured, as there will be no risk of any damage coming to them, as confidentiality and anonymity are utilized in the processes.

The protection of research participants' privacy and anonymity is of the utmost importance, as it is the only way to prevent participants from suffering adverse effects on any front, be they social, economic, or psychological. Hence, in the long run, sophisticated procedures will need to be employed to collect reliable data. By conducting critical reviews and appraisals of such research, the levels of credibility and integrity will be high and will be effectively authorized. It is not only immoral but also unlawful to conduct research without using protocols to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants (Dennis et al., 2019; Vandekerckhove & Lewis, 2012). Researchers who do not follow the appropriate ethical norms risk facing disciplinary actions from both the legal and academic communities. It's possible that a researcher will be barred from carrying out any further research or studies in the long run. Every ethical concern in research, including anonymity and anonymity, is accepted, approved, and enforced by relevant institutional agencies, and the relevance of these considerations is replicated in the procedures of research.

There is a possibility of selection bias in relation to the chosen body of literature that has been given in support of the research review, which is one of the most significant limitations of this review. Blinding bias is always present when selective outcome reporting occurs in research processes, which makes it difficult to get an accurate view of the research issue. Ideally, the criteria for selecting specific pieces of literature that are relevant to the research topic would require several ways that proceed step by step. In addition, because the significance of privacy and anonymity has been extensively investigated in the study, there is a pressing need for more elaboration on the specific ways in which these concepts influence the findings of the research using a variety of quantitative scales. It is necessary to conduct additional studies in order to have a better understanding of the significance of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study process. As a result of this, particular aspects of importance will be discussed together with the weight that they have in regard to the significance of the study.

In addition, it is necessary for the research to define and classify certain ways and strategies for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in order to successfully elaborate on the significance of the principles underlying the research. Because different contexts, research methods, and types require different approaches to maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, it is necessary to discuss the particularities of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the various settings and contexts in which research is conducted.

Confidentiality and anonymity are research ethical principles that help in providing informed consent to participants assuring subjects of the privacy of their personal data. As provided by research bodies and organizations, every research process has to incorporate the principles to meet credibility and integrity standards. As such, studies that do not incorporate these aspects are deemed not only not credible and unethical but also illegal. Significantly, researchers are required to utilize confidentiality and anonymity protocols in their studies which come with additional benefits to the studies in addition to being approved as ethical and credible. Ideally, confidentiality and anonymity positively impact in-depth research data collection as they enhance the establishment of trust and rapport between participants and researchers. When this aspect is developed, participants tend to engage

more freely in studies generating more in-depth data. Importantly, participants' privacy is key in ensuring their safety and well-being when they partake in a sensitive survey. As such, to ensure their well-being, researchers have to adhere to every confidentiality and anonymity procedure and approach. Despite the research limitations of selection bias associated with most research reviews, this paper elaborately appraises the importance of confidentiality and anonymity in research proposing the effective implementation of necessary approaches and strategies by researchers in research processes.

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