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USING MOBILE PHONES FOR RESEARCH

Mobile research brings challenges as well as opportunities for researchers.

Research via mobile phone is driven by necessity as an increasing number of people can no longer be reached via landline, leading to potential coverage bias when using landline-only samples. There were a total of 3.6 billion mobile users worldwide in 2009, compared to 1.3 billion landline households, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (see Table 1).

An estimated 21% of US households are 'mobile-only', according to the 2009 National Health Interview Survey. The picture is similar across Asia, where there are almost twice as many mobile users compared to fixed line subscribers in China, Japan and Korea, whereas in India, mobile subscribers outnumber landline users by a factor of six, according to the ITU.

**TABLE 1:
LANDLINE AND MOBILE CONNECTIONS IN 2008/09**

Region	Landline (million)	5-year change	Mobile (million)	5-year change
Americas	280.5	-1%	748.3	24%
Asia Pacific	593.9	8%	1,384.6	27%
Africa	10.6	2%	245.6	47%
CIS	71.9	4%	313.9	46%
Middle East	35.1	6%	213.9	44%
Europe	259.9	-1%	721.7	11%
World	1,251.9	4%	3,628.0	26%

Source: ITU Statistical Profiles 2009

The picture is similar in Europe, where according to Eurobarometer, less than 70% of Europeans now use a landline (see Table 2). The scores for mobile-only homes range from less than 10% in Sweden, Germany and The Netherlands, to 66% in Finland and 75% in the Czech Republic.

But, another reason why mobile research is growing is that the mobile phone has become a standard tool of communication with multiple features, not only for voice but also for digital services, email, photos, videos, and even navigation, thus enabling researchers to collect a wide range of very rich data.

**TABLE 2:
MOBILE-ONLY RATES (SELECTED MARKETS)**

	2005	2009
Czech Republic	40%	75%
Finland	36%	66%
Austria	27%	47%
Portugal	33%	40%
Italy	25%	35%
Belgium	22%	31%
UK	7%	15%
France	14%	12%
Germany	5%	8%
The Netherlands	1%	7%
Sweden	1%	2%

Source: Eurobarometer (Second half 2005 and 2009)

SAMPLING

In the run-up to the US presidential elections, the Pew Research Center discovered clear political differences between landline and mobile telephone users, with mobile subscribers more likely to support the democratic candidate. Obama's advantage was most pronounced within the under-30 age group and with mobile subscribers that no longer use a landline.

Restricting sampling to landline-only users is likely to lead to relative coverage bias, but, as Marek Fuchs, professor for social research methodologies at Darmstadt University, pointed out at Globalpark's recent Mobile Research Conference in London, the magnitude of error varies greatly from country to country and between demographic segments. "As the mobile-only population typically differs from the general population with respect to key socio-demographic characteristics such as age, education and marital status, this group has to be taken into special consideration when aiming for high-quality estimates based on telephone surveys," he commented.

FLEXIBILITY WITH LIMITATIONS

Sampling is not the only issue. Whilst there are great benefits in using the full functionality of modern phones, the varying screen sizes and resolutions result in different displays of questionnaires, and as Mick Couper, professor at Michigan University, has shown, the visibility of answer choices affects results.

Given the typical mobile screen, text messages are probably best, according to Liz Nelson of Fly Research, and testing the usability of questionnaire design is vital. Length of interview seems less of an issue, but some delegates suggested that respondents should be given a choice to provide information via other channels with results being integrated afterwards.

Speed of response is a major advantage of mobile research, but privacy issues are often seen as a potential hurdle. There is, however, a growing body of evidence that the very personal nature of mobile phones actually encourages respondents to answer more sensitive questions, perhaps because they answer their phone in the privacy of their room rather than talk on a landline device in the kitchen or living room.

Researching children brings other issues. Christian Franzen of Mindshare conducted a study of 6-to13-year-old children who were given a smartphone to keep a 72-hour diary of all their activities. Participants received regular reminders but this was arranged in consultation with their parents, to avoid contact during school hours and after bedtime. The result: a detailed time-use survey, greatly enriched by pictures and videos the children sent in to illustrate the situations they experienced during the day.

GUIDELINES

This segment of the market research industry is likely to grow, and "guidelines are now welcome and overdue," according to Guy Rolfe, mobile knowledge leader at Kantar.

ESOMAR is publishing its Guideline on Conducting Survey Research via Mobile Phone: "These cover calling and texting. Other dimensions, such as WAP-based surveys, will be covered in ESOMAR's revised internet guideline," according to Diane Bowers, president of CASRO and chair of the project team developing the guideline.

The guidelines deal with a whole range of issues, some of which are already relevant to telephone research in general, such as hours of calling, or use of automated dialling and calling equipment. Others are much more specific to mobiles, such as respondent safety or financial compensation – the ICC/ESOMAR Code requires researchers to take all reasonable precautions to ensure that respondents are in no way adversely affected as a direct result of participating in a market research project.

For instance, whilst in most markets the caller pays, in the US the recipients of calls or text messages may also incur a charge. Similarly, when people travel outside their country they usually have to pay a roaming fee for incoming calls and texts. "The project team recognises that how a respondent can be reimbursed is still very complicated and we welcome input on this issue," commented Adam Phillips, chair of ESOMAR's Professional Standards Committee.

Privacy is another complex element, especially as regulatory environments and restrictions vary around the world. "The German regulations are very stringent whereas in some areas in Africa and Asia, legislation is currently not that strong, at least on an implementation level," commented Pravin Shekar of The Social Catalyst, also on the project team.

According to Bowers, "This is very much a work in progress but one that reflects our ethical and legal responsibilities to respondents and the increasing importance of mobile phones as a means of conducting survey research."

To download a copy of ESOMAR's Guideline on Conducting Survey Research via the Mobile Phone go to <http://www.esomar.org/index.php/codes-guidelines.html>. **RW**

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