



Asking sensitive demographic questions

CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

Objectives

To assess consumer comfort and the best method of asking sensitive trait questions such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity/country of origin, disabilities experience, and religious affiliation in Germany and France.

Target audience

Sample Size: n|500 per country (US, France, Germany) Ages 18+
Balanced to Census Proportions of:

- US: age, gender, HHI, ethnicity*
- Germany: age, gender, HHI
- France: age, gender, HHI

Methodology

After conducting secondary research in understanding laws and best practices related to consumers' profiling in the regions of interest, a 5-minute quantitative survey was developed to test different ways to ask gender, sexual orientation, and country of origin questions.

- Disabilities and religious affiliation questions were also asked including a prefer not to answer option to gauge the proportion of people willing to answer the question.
- Then each seen trait question was evaluated by respondents in terms of comfort with answering, ease of understanding, the feeling of being included, and having all the expected options.
- Field Period: August – September 2022

Asking sensitive questions requires care across cultures

Our research offers insights into the best practices for asking sensitive demographic questions in cross-cultural settings. We recommend that measurement decisions should prioritize the survey respondent, followed by concerns for fair representation and statistical bias. Below are more detailed specifics for the different kinds of questions.

Going beyond binary: Approaching gender

Sensitive gender questions are important as traditional binary categories may not represent everyone's experience with gender. Our research found that standard and non-binary gender options perform similarly in all three countries, with France showing a preference for the standard 2-option style. Pronoun questions were not as popular.

Gauging comfort: Questions on sexual orientation

It is important to ask sensitive sexual orientation questions because sexual orientation is a fundamental aspect of a person's identity and can impact their experiences in society and health outcomes. We saw that willingness to answer a sexual orientation question was high in all three markets when asked upfront.



Navigating nationalities: Asking country of origin

Country of origin questions are important for understanding social and health disparities, as ethnicity and immigration status play a significant role. We found that Germans prefer immigration level over a specific list of origins, but both tested questions perform similarly.

Counting everyone: Disability and religious affiliation

Sensitive questions like disabilities and religious affiliation are important as they can impact a person's life experiences and health outcomes. Understanding the prevalence of these traits is crucial for ensuring that policies and services are inclusive and equitable. While French respondents were more comfortable answering disabilities questions than Germans, willingness to answer was high in both countries. A "prefer not to answer" option is important for both disabilities and religious affiliation questions.

Gender

Standard method of asking gender (2 options) as well as one including non-binary and opt-out options, perform similarly in all three countries. France shows higher comfort with the standard, 2-option style. Pronouns question is least preferred.

US RECOMMENDATIONS

Use standard method of asking gender (2 options) OR one including non-binary and opt-out options as both are acceptable. Pronouns question does not perform as well.

Hispanics find the regular 2-option question to be easiest to understand but are accepting and comfortable with the other options as well.

FRANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Use standard method of asking gender (2 options) OR one including non-binary and opt-out options as both are acceptable. However, take note that France shows higher comfort with the standard, 2-option style.

Pronouns question does not perform as well.

GERMANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Use standard method of asking gender (2 options) OR one including non-binary and opt-out options as both are acceptable. Pronouns question does not perform as well.

	GENDER QUESTION 1 What is your gender? 1. Male 2. Female			GENDER QUESTION 2 How do you describe your gender? 1. Male 2. Female 3. Non-binary 4. Prefer not to answer			GENDER QUESTION 3 Which of the following set of pronouns do you prefer people to use to refer to you? 1. She, her, hers 2. He, him, his 3. They, them, theirs identify with another pronoun 4. Prefer not to use pronouns 5. Prefer not to answer		
	US	FR	DE	US	FR	DE	US	FR	DE
I felt comfortable answering this question	90%	93% ▲ Q2	74%	88%	86%	75% ▲ Q3	83%	87%	65%
This question was easy to understand	95%	93%	83%	91%	90%	84% ▲ Q3	89%	90%	74%
This question made me feel included	69%	63%	48%*	64%	68% ▲ Q3	44%	61%	53%	47%*
This question had all the options I would expect	83%	78%	71%	81%	84% ▲ Q3	75%	75%	75%	70%
% preferred not to answer question	-	-	-	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%

*Note: The diagnostic evaluation of “made me feel included” may have resulted in lower score in Germany due to translation comprehension. The translation issue did not affect the actual demographic question, just the diagnostic measure above.

▲ Indicates a significantly higher score than referenced question, within country, at the 95% confidence level.

	SEXUAL ORIENTATION QUESTION 1 Which of the following best represents your sexual orientation? 1. Asexual 2. Bisexual 3. Gay or Lesbian 4. Heterosexual (straight) 5. Pansexual 6. Prefer to self-describe [Optional OE] 7. Prefer not to answer 8. I don't understand what the question means			SEXUAL ORIENTATION QUESTION 2 Are you willing to answer a sexual orientation question? 1. Yes 2. No [[IF YES]] Which of the following best represents your sexual orientation? 1. Asexual 2. Bisexual 3. Gay or Lesbian 4. Heterosexual (straight) 5. Pansexual 6. Prefer to self-describe [Optional OE] 7. Prefer not to answer 8. I don't understand what the question means		
	US	FR	DE	US	FR	DE
I felt comfortable answering this question	83%	80%	66%	93% ▲ Q1	91% ▲ Q1	72%
This question was easy to understand	87%	86%	77%	93% ▲ Q1	91%	86% ▲ Q1
This question made me feel included	61%	62%	46%*	72% ▲ Q1	70%	47%*
This question had all the options I would expect	76%	82%	73%	82%	84%	77%
% preferred not to answer question	1%	4%	3%	<1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)	1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)	1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)
% didn't understand question	2%	2%	1%	<1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)	1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)	1% (among 94% that were willing to answer the question)

*Note: The diagnostic evaluation of "made me feel included" may have resulted in lower score in Germany due to translation comprehension. The translation issue did not affect the actual demographic question, just the diagnostic measure above.

▲ Indicates a significantly higher score than referenced question, within country, at the 95% confidence level

Sexual orientation

Including a willingness to answer a sexual orientation question prior to collecting the data resonates well in all three markets.

US RECOMMENDATIONS

Include a willingness to answer a sexual orientation question prior to collecting the data. Results in 6% opting out of question but promotes a significantly higher comfort with survey.

FRANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Include a willingness to answer a sexual orientation question prior to collecting the data. Results in 4% opting out of question but promotes a significantly higher comfort with survey.

GERMANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Include a willingness to answer a sexual orientation question prior to collecting the data. Results in 6% opting out of question but promotes a significantly higher comfort with survey.

Country of origin

Both tested country of origin questions perform similarly so either method is suitable. Both the French and Germans feel comfortable answering both questions. Germans do feel that the immigration level question has more adequate number of options than the specific list of origins.

US RECOMMENDATIONS

Americans feel comfortable answering the immigration level question. Hispanics' comfort is consistent with the rest of the US sentiment.

FRANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Use any of the 2 country of origin questions tested. French feel comfortable answering both questions.

GERMANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Use any of the 2 country of origin questions tested. Germans feel comfortable answering both questions, however only half of them state the questions make them feel included, despite majority feeling it has all the expected options. Germans do feel that the immigration level question has more adequate number of options than the specific list of origins.

	[IMMIGRATION LEVEL] COUNTRY OF ORIGIN QUESTION 1			[SPECIFIC ORIGIN] COUNTRY OF ORIGIN QUESTION 2		
	What is your origin?			Are you willing to answer a question about your nationality origin?		
	1. I was born in [country] and so were my parents 2. I was born in [country] and so was one of my parents 3. I was born in [country] and unsure where my parents were born 4. I was born in [country] and so were my parents 5. I was born outside of [country] but both of my parents were born in [country] 6. I was born outside of [country] but at least one of my parents was born in [country] I was born outside of [country] and so were both of my parents I was born outside of [country] and unsure where my parents were born 7. Prefer not to answer			1. Yes 2. No [IF YES] What is your origin? Germany: German, Turkish, Italian, Polish, Greek, Russian, Syrian, Romanian, Other, Prefer not to answer France: French, Algerian/Moroccan Berber, Italian, Portuguese, Moroccan Arab, Fleming Algerian Arab, Basque, Turkish, Spanish, Other, Prefer not to answer		
	US	FR	DE	US	FR	DE
I felt comfortable answering this question	89%	87%	77%	-	88%	81%
This question was easy to understand	92%	89%	82%	-	92%	85%
This question made me feel included	73%	69%	47%*	-	66%	53%*
This question had all the options I would expect	86%	81%	81% ▲ Q2	-	77%	70%
% preferred not to answer question	2%	2%	2%	-	0% (among 99% that were willing to answer the question)	0% (among 99% that were willing to answer the question)

*Note: The diagnostic evaluation of "made me feel included" may have resulted in lower score in Germany due to translation comprehension. The translation issue did not affect the actual demographic question, just the diagnostic measure above.

▲ Indicates a significantly higher score than referenced question, within country, at the 95% confidence level.

Disability and religious affiliation

The French are more comfortable than Germans in answering the disabilities question, but overall willingness to answer the question is high across both countries, especially when compared to the US. Including prefer not to answer option is especially important for the disabilities and religion affiliation questions.

	DISABILITIES QUESTION			RELIGION AFFILIATION QUESTION		
	Do you cope with or help someone else cope with any disabilities such as mobility impairment, blindness/vision loss, deafness/hearing loss, attention deficit disorder, attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), learning disabilities, etc.?			What is your religious affiliation?		
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Yes, I personally have a disability Yes, I help someone else with a disability No, I don't have personal experience Prefer not to answer 			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Christian Muslim Orthodox Jew Buddhist Atheist Other Prefer not to answer 		
	US	FR	DE	US	FR	DE
I felt comfortable answering this question	86%	87%	67%	83%	83%	73%
This question was easy to understand	89%	89%	81%	91%	90%	81%
This question made me feel included	66%	66%	43%*	68%	67%	46%*
This question had all the options I would expect	80%	79%	71%	73%	82%	69%
% preferred not to answer question	7%	3%	3%	11%	6%	7%

*Note: The diagnostic evaluation of “made me feel included” may have resulted in lower score in Germany due to translation comprehension. The translation issue did not affect the actual demographic question, just the diagnostic measure above.

US RECOMMENDATIONS

Disability: Include a “prefer not to answer” option. US shows higher hesitancy to answer the question.

Religion: Include a “prefer not to answer” option. US shows higher hesitancy to answer the question

FRANCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Disability: Include a “prefer not to answer” option.

Religion: Include a “prefer not to answer” option.

GERMANY RECOMMENDATIONS

Disability: Include a “prefer not to answer” option. Overall comfort with answering is high but Germans do seem less comfortable than French.

Religion: Include a “prefer not to answer” option. Overall comfort with answering is high but Germans do seem less comfortable than French.

The measurement of specific demographics may represent a particular challenge to researchers because some demographics may change definitions over time.

An appropriate measurement of a construct today might not be an appropriate measure of the same construct tomorrow. Researchers are not simply moving to a more diverse way of coding certain demographics, but instead a recognition that a particular construct may be perceived as a different construct from others.

The challenge increases when we attempt to apply the same measurement to different countries, where cultural characteristics and inheritance play a role as well.



The present research only scratches the surface of the complexities associated with the measurement of sensitive demographic questions.

The current study does not attempt to make broader recommendations for one best way to measure the demographic characteristics in question.

Larger scale research is needed to identify the respondents who did not feel comfortable answering the questions and understand the ethical and emotional considerations associated with their preference to not provide a response. Additional research will be helpful to potentially identify specific demographic clusters and socio-economic characteristics of such respondents.

It is also important to recognize that there will be statistical consequences from nonresponse rate and non-binary gender (e.g., weighting). Therefore, any measurement decisions should be based on consideration for the survey respondent, followed by concerns surrounding fair representation and statistical bias.



About aytm

A MARKET RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS TECHNOLOGY COMPANY

We offer end-to-end services to support the production of survey data. With over 20 years of experience conducting research, we have built a reputation as experts in the field.

- Our team includes statisticians, researchers, and developers who have worked on sampling automation and algorithms for more than a decade.
- We continuously work on improving our predictive modeling and multi-layer fraud detection mechanisms, ensuring speedy and high-quality sample survey completion.

ASKING SENSITIVE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS



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OUR PROPRIETARY PANEL

At aytm, we don't just support the production of survey data, we also produce our own data through our proprietary panel. PaidViewpoint unique community of global respondents who are eager to share their opinions and insights.

- We rely on our panel to provide high-quality, representative samples for our research studies, and nurture our community through fair and transparent incentives.
- Our Panel Opps team are experts in sample design and sample management, and we regularly expand our sampling knowledge through research-on-research initiatives and unique surveys that require advanced sampling strategies and solutions.

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