A Cross National Study of Topic Sensitivity: Implications for Web-Based Surveys

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Topic sensitivity can have a direct bearing on Web survey design choices such as whether to use forced answering and whether to offer non-substantive response options, like "prefer not to answer." Respondents from six diverse nations/cultures rated sensitivity of a list of 11 topics that might be the focus of a marketing research study. Differences among the cultural sub-samples were found for 9 of 11 topics. Findings indicate that perceived sensitivity of topics is emic- rather than etic-bound, which implies that cross-national researchers should not assume generalizability of topic sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

The use of Web surveys by academic and practitioner researchers in marketing is increasing rapidly. This is largely due to the advantages that Web surveys have in terms of speed, cost, and efficiency of data collection over other modes of data collection. In addition, Web-based survey programs offer researchers a wide variety of design options that can reduce sources of respondent error that are typically high in other self-administered methods, such as acquiescence, extreme responding, and social desirability (Miller, 2006).

One such Web survey design option that has not received much attention is the use of "forced answering," which requires respondents to enter an "appropriate" response before they are allowed to proceed to the next survey question. When used for all questions, one positive effect of forcing is that it virtually eliminates item omissions, or item non-response error. However, some survey researchers warn that forced answering could increase unit, or sample, non-response error (Dillman, 2007; Dillman, Tortola, & Bowker, 1998). Respondents could "break-off" and stop responding when confronted with forced answering questions (Peytchev, 2009), which lowers completion rates. Dillman and his associates (Dillman, 2007; Dillman et al., 1998) suggest one way around this is to provide a "prefer not to answer" (PNA) option, which, if used, would allow respondents to continue without providing a substantive response to each question. This, however, brings back item omission, because PNA is deliberate item omission. A study of U.S. Internet survey panelists conducted by Albaum, Roster, Wiley, Rossiter, and Smith (2010) found no evidence to support that forced answering lowers completion rates, whether or not

PNA is used. However, the topics in Albaum et al.'s (2010) study would not be perceived to be sensitive or threatening to most respondents. Results might differ if respondents were to be asked to respond to questions regarding sensitive topics. Furthermore, perceived sensitivity of topics could vary across cultures.

With the increased reporting of cross-national/cultural research in marketing, topic sensitivity takes on greater importance. Topic sensitivity can have a direct bearing on research design choices such as whether to use forced answering and whether to offer non-substantive response options, like "prefer not to answer." The primary objective of the present study is to examine topic sensitivity in different cultures/nations. We hypothesize that topic sensitivity will vary across nations with diverse cultures, thus indicating that sensitivity is a cultural emic (i.e., culture bound) rather than a cultural etic (culture free). Although the emic-etic distinction is a central concept in current thinking about cross-cultural research (Berry, 1980; Brislin, 1980), it has received little attention in cross-cultural research in marketing. As a related matter, we examine if personal interest in survey topics that might be deemed "sensitive" varies across different cultures/nations.

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Topic Sensitivity

The issue of topic sensitivity has raised a number of methodological issues for survey researchers, such as choice of survey design mode (Kreuter, Presser, & Tourangeau, 2008; Presser & Stinson, 1998; Sakshaug, Yan & Tourangeau, 2010; Tourangeau & Smith, 1996), question and response construction (Bradburn et al., 1979; Jann, Jerke, & Krumpal, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011; Schaeffer, 2000), measurement and validity concerns (Locander, Sudman, & Bradburn, 1976; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007), and ethical treatment of survey participants (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber; Seiber & Stanley, 1988). Overall, research in this area demonstrates that surveys about sensitive topics can increase item or unit non-response error and are prone to measurement errors associated with socially desirable response styles. In a recent study, Kreuter et al. (2008) examined the effects of different modes of data collection, including CATI, IVR, and Web, with regards to responses to potentially sensitive information. Findings from this study lend support to a growing body of evidence that survey administration by the Web increases the level of reporting of sensitive information and reporting accuracy relative to the other modes of data collection. This is primarily because Web-based surveys allow respondents to participate under a presumed cloak of anonymity, unlike person-administered surveys.

Despite methodological interest in this issue, there does not appear to be uniform precise agreement on the definition of a "sensitive topic." Lee and Renzetti (1990) observe that "one difficulty with the notion of a 'sensitive topic' is that the term is often used in the literature as if it were self-explanatory" (1990, p. 510). Definitions vary based on perspective and parties involved. In a general sense, Sieber and Stanley (1988, p. 49) define "socially sensitive research" as:

> "studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research."

Lee and Renzetti (1990, p. 512) further define "sensitive topics" as those that involve the threat of personal consequences for either the researcher or study participants:

> "…a sensitive topic is one that potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data."

Yet another view is that questions can be considered sensitive if respondents personally perceive them as intrusive, if the questions raise fears about the potential repercussion of disclosing information, or if they trigger social desirability concerns (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007).

For the present study, sensitivity of topic is defined as:

> "a topic that possesses a substantial threat to those involved as it may be perceived as intrusive and could raise fears about potential repercussions or consequences of disclosing the information requested. There may be potential costs (or threats) to the respondent."

This definition is consistent with the view that topic sensitivity is a matter of individual perception arising from the fear of personal consequences associated with information disclosure. Individual perceptions may be based on potential costs or threats arising from internal or external consequences of divulging personal information about sensitive topics.

Although there has been a substantial amount of research about topic sensitivity in general, very little research has addressed exactly what survey topics respondents perceive to be intrusive or personally threatening. Exemplars include research by Bradburn and his associates, who conducted a series of studies in which respondents engaged in personal interviews about a topic traditionally considered to be threatening, and were then presented with different topics and asked to rate how "uneasy" they felt each topic would make "most people" feel if asked questions about such topics (Bradburn et al., 1979; Bradburn, Sudman, Blair, & Stocking, 1978). In a similar fashion, Peterson and Ridgway (1986) asked mail survey respondents to rate how threatening they thought each of 22 topics would be to "people in general" as well as to "them personally." These authors report differences in ratings based on the perspective. Overall, respondents rated topics more threatening for people in general than for them personally. Topic sensitivity varied depending on respondents' gender and level of education. In addition, respondents in this study more frequently chose the response "will not answer this question" to questions about topics they rated as personally threatening than did respondents who rated the same topic as less threatening.

Although topic sensitivity is defined here and elsewhere as an individual matter, there may be consequences within a defined population on the extent of sensitivity of any topic. The aforementioned studies explored differences in topic sensitivity perceptions among U.S. respondents. The level of perceived sensitivity of a topic to respondents may vary across cultures/nations. Johnson, O'Rourke, Burris, and Owens assert that surveys are an "inherently social activity" and that "survey respondents are not merely autonomous information processors, rather, they all exist within complex social matrices that influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (2002, p. 55). Schaeffer (2000), following her detailed investigation of topics frequently regarded by researchers as "personally sensitive," concludes that respondents asked to provide self-reported information about a class of events or behaviors that might be deemed "sensitive" respond to these questions within the context of socially patterned ways of behaving. These social patterns of behavior arise from social norms, social reinforcement and sanctions that exist with culturally-defined societies, which can impact how easy (or uneasy) it is for members of a particular society to report accurately about behaviors that reflect cultural or social norms within groups.

Therefore, we hypothesize that topic sensitivity will vary across nations with diverse cultures, thus indicating that sensitivity is a cultural emic (i.e., culture bound) rather than a cultural etic (culture free):

H1: Topic sensitivity will vary across nations with diverse cultures.

Topic Interest

Topic interest has been regarded as an intrinsic motivation for participating in survey research (e.g., Brüggen, Wetzels, de Ruyter, & Schillewaert, 2011; Cialdini, 1988; Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000). Topic interest can increase responses rates (Groves, Presser, & Dipko, 2004; Groves, Cialdini, & Couper, 1992) and can lead respondents to provide more accurate responses to survey questions (Tourangeau, Groves, & Redline, 2010). The issue of topic interest has not generally been associated with topic sensitivity. However, the two issues are related in the sense that both impact respondents' motivation to participate and provide accurate responses to questions associated with survey topics. Topic sensitivity

has been identified as a de-motivating factor that leads to higher survey non-response (Beatty & Herrmann, 2002); however, topic interest could motivate a respondent to answer questions about a sensitive topic more truthfully and accurately.

What survey topics are interesting or relevant to a particular culture/nation may be largely dependent on that culture's value systems. It is also likely to assume that interest in topics will vary in accordance with a nation/culture's educational, religious, industrial, technological, political, and economic well-being, as these major influences shape the life and attitudes of individuals living within that nation/culture. We reason that if cultural/nation differences in topic sensitivity are present, that differences might be related to topic interest, for many of the same reasons. Therefore, we offer the following hypothesis regarding the relationship between topic interest and sensitivity:

> *H2: Topic interest regarding sensitive topics will vary across nations with diverse cultures.*

METHODOLOGY

Sample

To test our hypotheses, data on topic sensitivity and topic interest were collected in six countries having diverse cultures. Countries sampled included Australia, China PRC, Hong Kong SAR, New Zealand, The Netherlands, and the United States. The countries included in the sample represent a range of cultural diversity, as illustrated by the range of index values for the cultural dimensions from Hofstede's schema (Hofstede 2001, pp. 500, 502). Individualism/collectivism varies from a high of 91 in the United States and 90 in Australia to a low of 20 in China PRC; uncertainly avoidance varies from 53 in The Netherlands to 29 in Hong Kong SAR; power distance varies from 80 in China PRC to 22 in New Zealand; masculinity varies from 66 in China to 8 in New Zealand: and long-term orientation ranges from 118 in China to 29 in the United States.

Data were obtained from students and faculty in one university in each country. A Web-based survey was used as the mode of data collection in all countries except Australia, from which data were obtained via a traditional paper-and-pencil self-administrated survey. Since English was the language of instruction in all universities, there was no need to translate the questionnaire in China, Hong Kong, and The Netherlands. In addition to the topic questions, respondents were asked their gender and age. Our goal was to seek variation in age and gender among samples, as these factors could impact individuals' perceptions regarding the sensitivity of topics and therefore prove to be significant covariates in our analyses. Considering the demographic characteristics of respondents, the gender distribution varied widely among the six countries, with females being in the majority in all countries but New Zealand. The range for females was 87.5% in China PRC to 40.9% in New Zealand. The average age of respondents also varied widely, ranging from 47.8 years in New Zealand to 26.7 years in China PRC.

Questionnaire and Measures

The questionnaire included 11 topics that might be the focus of a marketing research study. When selecting topics, we purposively selected topics with cross-national applicability that could be viewed as high, moderate, or low sensitivity. Respondents were first asked to indicate how "sensitive" each of the 11 topics would be to "them personally" if the topic of a survey, using a numerical rating scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = "not sensitive at all" to 5 = "extremely sensitive". This measure was designed to test our H1 hypothesis regarding cross-cultural attitudes toward topic sensitivity. "Sensitivity" was defined for the respondents using our definition, as described above. For the five countries in which an Internet survey was used for data collection, the order of presentation of the topics was rotated randomly for each respondent. In Australia, the order of presentation of the list of topics was randomly determined. Thus, the chance of carry-over effects was eliminated.

A related issue regarding the impact of topic sensitivity is that of respondent interest in answering questions about a topic, which is expressed in our H2 hypothesis. The present study examined the

relationship between sensitive topics and topic interest indirectly in a subsequent question that asked respondents to rate "how personally interesting" they would find the same set of 11 topics using a numerical rating scale of 1 to 5, where 1= "not at all interesting" to 5 = "extremely interesting." Once again, the order of presentation of the topics was rotated randomly for respondents who received an Internet survey and randomly determined for Australian respondents who received a traditional paper-and-pencil survey.

FINDINGS

The complete list of topics and ANOVA results for H1, topic sensitivity differences across countries, and for H2, topic interest differences across countries, are illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

TABLE 1
VALUES OF SENSITIVITY OF A SAMPLE OF TOPICS, ANOVA RESULTS[1]

Topic	Australia	China PRC	Hong Kong SAR	*F*	*p*	All Countries
Ethnicity/cultural values	2.84(1.31)	3.50(0.75)	2.33(0.89)	4.76	.001	2.23(1.24)
Family income/personal finances	3.72(1.17)	3.62(0.91)	4.08(0.99)	3.49	.005	3.39(1.34)
Shoplifting/consumer theft	2.80(1.55)	3.50(0.75)	3.00(1.34)	2.45	.026	2.45(1.51)
Attitudes green marketing	2.24(1.26)	3.00(1.41)	2.42(0.99)	5.09	.001	1.82(1.19)
Ethical attitudes e.g. cheating or falsifying documents	3.12(1.42)	4.13(1.36)	3.08(1.00)	5.75	.001	2.64(1.49)
Assessments of employer/ supervisor	2.96(1.51)	3.25(1.28)	3.83(0.83)	3.63	.004	2.89(1.36)
Attitudes charitable giving	2.36(1.22)	2.88(1.46)	2.33(1.23)	1.35	.247	2.09(1.24)
Brand image of soft drinks	1.52(0.77)	3.50(0.76)	2.33(1.37)	17.61	.001	1.48(0.95)
Purchasing goods & services over the Internet	1.68(1.03)	3.38(1.30)	2.83(1.34)	5.52	.001	1.89(1.21)
Computer security behaviors	3.48(1.29)	3.88(0.99)	3.50(1.17)	5.72	.001	2.80(1.47)
Alcoholic beverage consumption and driving	2.52(1.36)	3.13(0.99)	2.75(1.29)	1.90	.099	2.27(1.36)
Sample Size	25	8	12			

[1]Scaled 1 to 5, where 1="not sensitive at all" and 5="extremely sensitive". (= Standard deviation)

TABLE 1 (CONT'D)
VALUES OF SENSITIVITY OF A SAMPLE OF TOPICS, ANOVA RESULTS[1]

Topic	The Netherlands	New Zealand	United States	*F*	*p*	All Countries
Ethnicity/cultural values	1.86(1.20)	2.04(0.84)	1.90(1.29)	4.76	.001	2.23(1.24)
Family income/personal finances	3.58(1.27)	3.45(1.29)	2.67(1.50)	3.49	.005	3.39(1.34)
Shoplifting/consumer theft	2.53(1.40)	2.13(1.52)	1.90(1.50)	2.45	.026	2.45(1.51)
Attitudes green marketing	1.47(0.88)	1.31(0.57)	1.63(1.36)	5.09	.001	1.82(1.19)
Ethical attitudes e.g. cheating or falsifying documents	2.86(1.38)	2.27(1.32)	1.82(1.47)	5.75	.001	2.64(1.49)
Assessments of employer/ supervisor	3.08(1.32)	2.95(1.33)	2.18(1.24)	3.63	.004	2.89(1.36)
Attitudes charitable giving	1.92(1.08)	1.95(1.13)	1.90(1.39)	1.35	.247	2.09(1.24)
Brand image of soft drinks	1.14(0.35)	1.32(0.72)	1.16(0.78)	17.61	.001	1.48(0.95)
Purchasing goods & services over the Internet	1.56(0.84)	1.91(1.11)	1.71(1.30)	5.52	.001	1.89(1.21)
Computer security behaviors	2.17(1.32)	3.13(1.49)	2.29(1.48)	5.72	.001	2.80(1.47)
Alcoholic beverage consumption and driving	2.22(1.20)	2.18(1.37)	1.84(1.51)	1.90	.099	2.27(1.36)
Sample Size	36	22	25			

[1]Scaled 1 to 5, where 1="not sensitive at all" and 5="extremely sensitive". (= Standard Deviation)

TABLE 2
VALUES OF INTEREST OF A SAMPLE OF TOPICS, ANOVA RESULTS[1]

Topic	Australia	China PRC	Hong Kong SAR	*F*	*p*	All Countries
Ethnicity/cultural values	3.48(1.16)	3.75(1.04)	3.08 (0.67)	1.24	.295	3.15(1.27)
Family income/personal finances	2.64(1.70)	3.50(0.93)	3.25(1.49)	1.88	.102	2.53(1.47)
Shoplifting/consumer theft	2.71(1.49)	2.63(1.19)	2.83(1.03)	1.38	.238	2.35(1.27)
Attitudes green marketing	3.17(1.37)	3.25(1.17)	2.58(0.90)	.662	.653	3.16(1.35)
Ethical attitudes e.g. cheating or falsifying documents	3.33(1.32)	4.00(0.93)	3.00(1.21)	1.35	.250	3.07(1.29)
Assessments of employer/ supervisor	3.48(1.12)	3.00(1.31)	3.83(1.03)	1.47	.203	3.27(1.20)
3.63 .004 2.89(1.36)						
Attitudes charitable giving	2.48(1.12)	3.50(1.07)	2.67(0.89)	1.10	.363	2.94(1.29)
Brand image of soft drinks	2.52(1.19)	3.25(0.71)	3.25(0.97)	3.07	.012	2.45(1.30)
Purchasing goods & services over the Internet	2.71(1.31)	3.25(1.17)	3.42(1.08)	1.19	.318	2.81(1.28)
Computer security behaviors	2.80(1.40)	3.75(1.04)	2.83(1.19)	2.11	.069	2.57(1.32)
Alcoholic beverage consumption and driving	2.90(1.37)	2.25(0.71)	2.33(0.65)	0.59	.710	2.63(1.25)
Sample Size	25	8	12			

[1]Scaled 1 to 5, where 1=”not sensitive at all” and 5=”extremely sensitive”. (= Standard deviation)

TABLE 2 (CONT'D)
VALUES OF INTEREST OF A SAMPLE OF TOPICS, ANOVA RESULTS[1]

Topic	The Netherlands	New Zealand	United States	*F*	*p*	All Countries
Ethnicity/cultural values	3.06(1.26)	2.73(1.12)	3.14(1.62)	1.24	.295	3.15(1.27)
Family income/personal finances	2.19(1.22)	2.27(1.42)	2.48(1.57)	1.88	.102	2.53(1.47)
Shoplifting/consumer theft	2.03(1.06)	2.14(1.25)	2.38(1.42)	1.38	.238	2.35(1.27)
Attitudes green marketing	3.39(1.46)	3.09(1.07)	3.12(1.57)	.662	.653	3.16(1.35)
Ethical attitudes e.g. cheating or falsifying documents	2.81(1.22)	3.00(1.20)	3.05(1.49)	1.35	.250	3.07(1.29)
Assessments of employer/ supervisor	3.36(0.96)	3.23(1.27)	2.88(1.42)	1.47	.203	3.27(1.20)
Attitudes charitable giving	3.06(1.45)	2.91(1.07)	3.10(1.49)	1.10	.363	2.94(1.29)
Brand image of soft drinks	2.58(1.38)	1.86(1.17)	2.14(1.38)	3.07	.012	2.45(1.30)
Purchasing goods & services over the Internet	2.92(1.32)	2.64(1.18)	2.52(1.36)	1.19	.318	2.81(1.28)
Computer security behaviors	2.25(1.23)	2.36(1.18)	2.52(1.47)	2.11	.069	2.57(1.32)
Alcoholic beverage consumption and driving	2.75(1.25)	2.50(1.34)	2.62(1.42)	0.59	.710	2.63(1.25)
Sample Size	36	22	25			

[1]Scaled 1 to 5, where 1="not sensitive at all" and 5="extremely sensitive". (= Standard Deviation)

H1: Differences in Topic Sensitivity by Nations/Cultures

Results from an ANOVA test regarding differences in topic sensitivity across counties, which was our general hypothesis described in H1, are provided in Table 1. We find that there are significant differences ($p < .05$) between the six countries for 9 of the 11 topics, excluding "behaviors like alcoholic consumption and driving," and "attitudes toward charitable giving," both of which were rated moderately sensitive by all cultural sub-groups (overall means = 2.3 and 2.1, respectively). Our finding that 9 of 11 topics differed in sensitivity among these six cultural sub-samples supports our H1 hypothesis that perceived sensitivity of topics is emic- rather than etic-bound.

As far as the potential covariates, gender does not appear to have a significant influence on topic sensitivity but age can, depending on the topic. Across cultures, the only topic with significant differences ($p < .05$) between genders was "family income/personal finances," which was perceived as slightly more sensitive by females (mean = 3.6) than males (mean = 3.1) using independent samples t-tests ($t = 2.07$, $p < .05$). Examining each country's situation, gender had no effect on results in Australia, China PRC, Hong Kong SAR, and New Zealand. In The Netherlands females (mean = 2.9) rated "shoplifting or other forms of consumer theft" as more sensitive than did males (mean = 1.8). This finding is significant at $p < .02$ ($t = 2.50$). In the United States males (mean = 2.3) rated "purchasing goods and services over the Internet" as more sensitive than did females (mean = 1.31), which is significant at $p < .07$ ($t = 1.99$).

Analysis of variance among age groups revealed four of the selected topics varied in perceived sensitivity depending on age. Across cultures, respondents age 35 or under rated the topics "ethnicity and cultures" and "ethical attitudes toward behaviors like cheating" higher in sensitivity than those aged 35 or older. Older respondents (age 46 or over) rated "shoplifting or other forms of consumer theft" higher in sensitivity than younger respondents. Finally, both younger (35 or under) and older (56 or over)

respondents rated behaviors like "alcoholic beverage consumption" higher in sensitivity than middle-age respondents.

H2: Differences in Topic Interest by Nations/Cultures

In order to test H2, differences in topic interest toward sensitive topics among nations/cultures, we first conducted a correlation analyses between the 11 items based on respondents' measures regarding sensitivity and interest. Overall, only 5 correlations were significant at $p <$. 05 out of 66 possible (11 topics and 6 countries) and 9 of 66 were significant at $p < .10$. Clearly, this indicates that such a relationship is not strong. Overall, the ANOVA findings revealed significant differences in interest among cultures/nations only for the topic "brand image of soft drinks" ($F = 3.07$, $p < .05$). Based on these findings, we conclude that H2 is not supported.

There were also few differences in covariates across cultures in terms of topic interest. One topic, "assessment of your employer/supervisor" was rated as significantly more interesting to males (mean = 3.5) than females (mean = 3.1) ($t = 2.04$, $p < .05$). As far as age, younger respondents (age 19 to 25) rated the topic "brand image of soft drinks" significantly more interesting than did older respondents, significantly so in The Netherlands ($F = 3.26$, $p < .05$). Male respondents in Hong Kong rated purchasing goods over the Internet significantly more interesting than did females (mean males = 4.2 vs. mean females = 2.9, $t = 2.6$, $p < .05$). No other relationships between gender or age and topic interest were found to be significant within or across cultures.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A flurry of methodological research has focused on design aspects of Web surveys. Yet, one design option, that of forced answering, has received little attention. By employing forced answering, researchers are assured zero item omissions. When should options like PNA be used? This appears to be a Web design issue that involves tradeoffs between data quantity and data quality. As previously mentioned, one study using a U.S. sample found no evidence to support that forced answering lowers completion rates, whether or not PNA is used (Albaum et al., 2010). But, the topics in this study would not be perceived to be sensitive or threatening to most respondents. However, this same study exposed an interaction effect that revealed a tradeoff between quality and quantity of data. Most researchers (and University Institutional Human Subject Review Boards) agree that respondents should not be forced to answer sensitive questions that could make them uncomfortable or pose a substantial threat. What is not well understood are what questions or topics are regarded as "sensitive" by respondents or how respondents' perceptions of question sensitivity can be impacted by culture or respondent characteristics. From a cultural analysis perspective, results from this study support the notion that research topic sensitivity is a cultural emic, rather than an etic. This implies that cross-national researchers should not assume generalizability of topic sensitivity when they make Web survey design choices regarding use of forced answering and "opt-out" response options such as "prefer not to answer." Furthermore, topic sensitivity can be influenced by respondent characteristics, particularly age.

As a related matter, this study explored the relationship between topic sensitivity and personal interest in answering questions about a topic. Topic sensitivity has been viewed as a demotivating factor that potentially decreases unit and item omissions, while topic interest has been viewed as a motivating factor that can counteract these same concerns. To date, the relationship between these two opposing motivational forces has not been empirically investigated. We reasoned that topic interest could vary across cultures for many of the same reasons topic sensitivity was expected to vary across cultures. However, that does not appear to be the case.

LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results from this study cannot be generalized to the broader populations of the six countries. One limitation is the small samples that resulted. Another limitation is that only 11 topics were examined.

However, we attempted to select broad topics that are routinely studied within the marketing and social science literature. Different results could be obtained with different topics. Clearly, the topic of sensitivity warrants further investigation to determine guidelines for researchers who wish to understand the implications of employing forced answering, especially in cross-national studies.

Results from the present study support the notion that research topic sensitivity is a cultural emic, rather than an etic. We did not, however, find support for a relationship between topic sensitivity and topic interest. Interest in answering questions about a topic is a dimension of survey research that deserves its own methodological research. Interest may be related to question wording and response format, however. Future research could explore how these aspects of interest influence respondents' willingness to provide complete and truthful responses to questions about sensitive topics.

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