

Research methods 2.0. Virtual environments vs. traditional surveys: findings, appreciation, difficulty and perceived realism

G. N. G. Vanderveen, & F. Jelsma

Institute for Criminal Law and Criminology, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

Introduction: perceptions of graffiti

Graffiti is related to disorder, fear of crime, avoidance behavior and vandalism, at least in many criminological studies. In these studies, based on neighborhood observations and traditional survey methodology, graffiti is viewed as a uniform concept. All graffiti is deemed undesirable and should be removed, thus forming the foundation for *zero tolerance policy*. In the current study the assumption that graffiti is perceived as a homogeneous and undesirable environmental feature is investigated using a virtual environment and an online survey. Data were collected not only on perceptions of graffiti, but also on the appreciation and difficulty of the method used. Furthermore perceived realism of the graffiti examples presented in the virtual environment and the online survey were measured. These data enable the direct comparison of the two research methods, the virtual environment and the more traditional survey. This paper examines these methods concerning four aspects: substantive findings, appreciation, difficulty and realism.

Method: virtual environment vs. survey

A desktop virtual neighborhood was created. Respondents (N= 1249) could navigate freely but were required to visit eight different locations (e.g. skatepark, shopping center) that randomly presented three types of graffiti. Respondents could indicate which graffiti had to be removed and responded to several items. Three versions of the survey (N= 908) presented examples of graffiti textually, visually or as a combination of both. A subsample (N=283) completed both the online survey and the virtual environment. The order of the two methods and the version of the survey were randomized, to control for order effects. Following each research method, participants responded to items concerning appreciation,

difficulty and perceived realism of each single method.

Results

Both methods lead to similar substantive findings: graffiti is not a homogenous environmental feature. These findings are discussed briefly. The results demonstrate that the virtual environment used as research method validates the results from the survey. Yet, respondents appreciate the study in the virtual world more than the survey. The order of the methods influences the appreciation: grades for the entire study (online survey and virtual environment) are highest when the textual survey comes first and respondents end with the virtual environment. Overall, neither research method was considered difficult, but several respondent's comments indicate problems with the research in the virtual environment. The online survey containing both text and image was judged as most realistic, not the virtual environment.

Discussion

This study shows that virtual environments can lead to valid findings and is a research method highly appreciated by respondents. This is of particular importance in disciplines such as criminology where research is particularly vulnerable to lack of motivation and willingness of respondents to provide information, such as criminology. However, more effort is needed to exhaust the possibilities of virtual environments as research methods. Further implications and the (dis)advantages of both methods are discussed, using data from this study.

Acknowledgements

Data for this research were collected by order of the Ministry of Security and Justice (MVJ) and the Netherlands Centre for Crime Prevention and Community Safety (CCV).