Nutrition discussion forum

Nutrition research using electronic mail

Increasing demands on research resources such as time and money require innovations in the methods that nutrition scientists commonly use. The past two decades have witnessed staggering advances in telecommunications throughout society. Computers now play a major role in the lives of most nutrition scientists and electronic mail (email) is frequently used as a means of communication.

Of all the Internet tools, the simplicity of email must facilitate its adoption and use. Worldwide, governments, industries, schools, households and the academic community have adopted email alongside the telephone, fax and postal mail as important modes of communication. Academics have reported the use of email in undergraduate teaching (Wild & Winniford, 1993; Pitt, 1996) and for scholarly discussion groups (Huff & Soblöff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilöff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; Berge & Collins, 1995) yet discussion of email as a research tool in academic discussion groups (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993; 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spreadsheet for analysis. This could advance human nutrition as it would permit a greater throughput of samples and less error in re-keying data. Email gives the scientists greater control over the logistics of questionnaire despatch. Large mailshots of the same message are possible and most email packages allow the sender to confirm a message’s delivery time and time of reading by the recipient. From our study, the fifty-six unknown addresses were all returned within 40 min of despatch and of the 204 ‘hits’, the majority (183, 90 %) were opened and read by the students within 5 h. Careful consideration is required of the ethical issues surrounding the use of email as a research tool. Email can not preserve the anonymity of the respondent. This may compromise the validity of electronic questionnaires although scientists could make assurances of confidentiality.

In conclusion, there are significant uncertainties about the use of email as a research tool in nutrition science. Although it is likely that email users will become more representative of the general population over the next decade, I suggest that, at present, only very narrowly defined populations with protected access, i.e. individual email addresses, should be contacted using email as a research tool in nutrition. The continuing development of software will improve the delivery of questionnaires by email and the Internet (Schmidt, 1997). Selwyn & Robson (1998) argues that: ‘at the present time using e-mail offers the researcher many advantages, temporally, spatially and in terms of easy access to otherwise unreachable samples’. There is a substantial need for experimental research to be carried out to test the validity of electronic methodologies as reliable alternatives to well-established methods. Only if nutritionists increasingly engage in this scientific process can peer-reviewed criteria for the use of email in nutrition research be developed. I invite comments and the collaborative exploration of some of the issues raised by this letter.

References


Nutritionists should be encouraged to make the best use of recent developments in information technology in teaching (Wise, 1998a) and research (Wise, 1999). The letter by Eley (1999) with regard to using the Internet for research raises some interesting ideas on computer use that deserve comment. She suggests that we might use email to send questionnaires to subjects, who respond by email, and that the files returned could be entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. Any published information relating to the Internet will suffer from the results of the rapid evolution of this medium. There are many questions raised by our students’ use of the Internet as a source of information, especially with regard to referencing the material. There is no control on the material so it is not refereed, nor is its presence on the Internet guaranteed tomorrow. I can provide more recent information on the Internet than she has done in her letter simply because it has taken time to publish that information in the traditional fashion and it is now out of date. References

Using the Internet in nutrition research – reply by Wise