



Age *Demographic Series 2022*

Demographic best practice recommendations for multi-country work.

Context

ESOMAR, through its Professional Standards Committee, is developing recommendations on demographic standards to address inconsistencies that create barriers and inefficiencies in the exchange and evaluation of international data and present an inaccurate and sometimes distorted view. These recommendations, founded on evidence-based best practices, are designed to improve quality standards and facilitate the rapid creation of multi-country research projects and surveys to better provide meaningful global/regional results that can be more easily compared from one project to another. The objective is, therefore, to describe demographic groups in as globally consistent a way as possible and to develop a common demographic structure. The work has been carried out by a dedicated expert workgroup, validated by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee and a Client Sounding Board. This project is endorsed by the ESOMAR Council. Details of the project, its governance and its background are available in a dedicated area on the [ESOMAR site](#). The project deals with each demographic in turn and will update the material regularly. This recommendation covers age as a topic.

General recommended approach for the measurement of age

This general advice applies to all modes of online and offline research.

1. Gather participants' specific year age, either through a two-step question methodology or asking exact age rather than just using age bands alone.

Why? This will make this information more comparable from project to project.

2. Do not ask participants their age if this information is already held by the sample provider and can be appended to your survey.

Why? This is in order that respondents are not repeatedly asked for the same information, which leads to respondent friction.

3. If you need to take into account precisely when a participant's age changes from one year to the next, ask month of birth but not the exact day of the month.

Why? This is in considering from a privacy point of view, asking actual birth date does not bring added value in terms of research quality, but it can complicate de-identification procedures and create more exposure from a cybersecurity point of view.

How best to word the age question?

“What is your age?”

Avoid: asking “How **old** are you” or referring to ageing in the language you use.

Why? Using words like ‘old’ or similar terms in other languages can hold some implicit judgement and so is not recommended.

How to best design the age question?

Asking the exact age in years

The recommended method is to ask a **two-step question methodology**, using a nested age group question format, if technically possible with the survey software you use, where age groups are presented in bands. Once their age band is selected, they are then automatically presented their exact year in a dropdown list.

What is your age?

- *Under 18 years*
- *18-24 years*
- *25-34 years*
- *35-44 years*
- *45-54 years* --> after the age band is selected then ask exact year: 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54
- *55-64 years*
- *65-74 years*
- *75-84 years*
- *85-94 years*
- *95 or over*

Avoid: Presenting age in long dropdown lists without any age banding.

Why? *The recommended two-step methodology is the quickest and most ergonomic method of capturing age, removing the need for people to scroll to select their age. It is very frustrating for participants in older age groups to scroll down to find their age, especially on a mobile phone where they may have to scroll through several pages, which can result in some people reporting being of a younger age.*

Acceptable alternative: if you are unable to ask using a two-step question methodology, for example, if your survey technology does not allow or when conducting phone interviews or when conducting phone interviews or face-to-face interviews, the alternative recommended method is to ask people to type or voice their exact age.

What is your age?

.....Years (answer validated to numeric responses and maximum of 3 digits).

Why? *You will still obtain the participant's age but the reason why this is not recommended as the first-choice approach for online research specifically is it requires a little more work for participants to type their age, and research shows that a small number are uncomfortable with using their keyboard to type their age at the start of a survey, causing some unnecessary dropout.*

Advice on presenting age banding when using the two-step question methodology

- We recommend the starting age to be 18, or the age of majority, noting that special care must be taken to ascertain age of majority, due to the specific challenges in gathering data from children.
- When presenting age bands at the first stage of the two-step age question methodology, it is recommended to use mid-decade to mid-decade age groupings, i.e. 25-34, 35-44, rather than decade-divided age bands (30-39, 40-49).

Why? *This is because many people dread shifting up a decade in age but are less sensitive about the transition from, say, 35 to 36; it is proven to provide more reliable data.*

- The age band presented should go up to **95 years+**

Why? *This is more inclusive to the increasingly large number of older people completing online surveys. Even if you anticipate very few people answering a survey will be above a certain age, extended age bands also help make respondents in their 40s, 50s, and 60s feel less old and are thus more likely to report their age honestly. This approach is also more inclusive of older groups and represents their importance as citizens within social opinion research, and in terms of marketing potential.*

Alternative method for measuring age: Asking year of birth

Where the reliable assessment of age is very important (for example, when recruiting people to participate in a panel for ongoing research purposes).

Asking year of birth is a slightly more accurate method of recording age than asking age per se.

Why? *When asking a participant's age, some people do not remember how old they are or prefer to under or over state how old they are, and as a result, around 6% of people may slightly misreport their age. Participants are proven to report their year of birth slightly more reliably. Only 2% of participants misreport the year of birth in comparison.*

Note, however, asking year of birth is not recommended for general research purposes....

Why? *Age and year of birth will always be slightly out of synch based on someone's month of birth. (For example, someone who is born on 1 January will be nearly a year older than someone born on 31 December in the same year). This makes it harder to synchronise with age quota measurements often used by sample companies to provide a balanced sample. The only way to resolve this is to ask the exact date of birth which is not recommended for data privacy reasons, and it also involves more work for respondents.*

Because the differences are relatively small (research suggests there is less than a 2% difference between the two methods overall), we recommend using the year of birth only if it is considered really important to get a reliable age assessment. We recommend using year and month of birth only for sample recruitment purposes and always done using the correct privacy and consent methods.

When asking year of birth instead of age, we recommend asking in decade format starting from 1920 and again using a nested drop down list once the decade has been selected to pick the exact year.

What is your year of birth?

- 1920's or earlier
- 1930's
- 1940's
- 1950's
- 1960's --> if selected **then ask exact year:** 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964 etc
- 1970's
- 1980's
- 1990's
- 2000's
- 2010's

And in what month were you born?

January, February, March, April, May, June, etc

Avoid: Using long age or year of birth dropdown lists.

Why? *Nobody likes scrolling back through the decades to select their year of birth.*

Are there any legal, regional, or country-level considerations to be aware of when asking about age?

Yes

Restrictions on asking exact age: In some countries, such as Germany, you are specifically not allowed to ask a participant's exact date of birth for privacy reasons.

In adopting this recommendation, take into account the privacy and cultural issues in the geographies in which you are administering the questionnaire

Does this same advice apply to online and offline methodology?

Yes

There are some additional considerations when conducting face-to-face interviews about how polite it is to ask people their exact age in some countries.

Recommended additional wording

Add a **"Why are we asking this?"** information button option.

It is recommended as best practice to offer an explanation about the reason for asking what many people may consider to be a sensitive demographic question, such as a person's age.

Example explanation:

Why are we asking your age?

The reason we are asking your age is to ensure that the answers to this survey can represent the viewpoints of people from all the different age groups.

This is particularly advised when asking participants their exact age in face-to-face or phone interviews, where respondents may feel less comfortable revealing their age to someone they don't know.

Different advice for survey vs registration research processes

Please note that this advice is for asking age in general research and surveys. However, when participants are registering to be on a panel, asking their exact date of birth is required to assess a respondent's exact age, noting that this must be done using the correct privacy and consent methods.

The research that supports these recommendations

There has been some detailed academic research comparing different age measurement techniques, conducted by the University of Otago published in the IJMR, where split samples of respondents were asked their age and another sample their year of birth, with answers being compared to census data. There was a 6% error in age reporting, but only a 2% error reporting year of birth.

Industry validation

This recommendation has been prepared by a dedicated Project Team and validated by the ESOMAR Professional Standards Committee and a Client Sounding Board. For further details on the executives involved, [see the following pages](#)

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