

## **Complete Anonymity Compromises the Accuracy of Self-Reports**

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## **Abstract**

Studies have shown that allowing people to answer questionnaires completely anonymously yields more reports of socially inappropriate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and researchers have often assumed that this is evidence of increased honesty. But such evidence does not demonstrate that reports gathered under completely anonymous conditions are more accurate. Although complete anonymity may decrease a person's motivation to distort reports in socially desirable directions, complete anonymity may also decrease accountability, thereby decreasing motivation to answer thoughtfully and precisely. Three studies reported in this paper demonstrate that allowing college student participants to answer questions completely anonymously sometimes increased reports of socially undesirable attributes, but consistently reduced reporting accuracy and increased survey satisficing. These studies suggest that complete anonymity may compromise measurement accuracy rather than improve it.

**Keywords:** Anonymity, Social Desirability, Satisficing, Accountability, Response Bias

## **Complete Anonymity Compromises the Accuracy of Self-Reports**

A great deal of social science research collects data via questionnaires. In many such studies, participants are told not to provide identifying information, so that the participants know that their answers will be completely anonymous. Many textbooks on social science research advocate this method of collecting data (e.g., Colton & Covert, 2007; Evans & Rooney, 2008; Mitchell & Jolley, 2010). The provision of complete anonymity is presumed to facilitate collection of more accurate data by minimizing social desirability pressures. However, although a series of studies have yielded results consistent with increased reporting of socially undesirable responses under conditions of complete anonymity, the vast majority of these studies provide no direct evidence of improved accuracy, leaving their interpretation open to question.

In this paper, we propose a different interpretation of these results and a different view of complete anonymity. To be sure, complete anonymity allows research participants to know that their answers cannot be traced back to them. But complete anonymity may also do more: it may remove any sense of accountability for one's answers, thus reducing participant motivation to provide accurate reports. Consequently, participants may provide different answers because participants take cognitive shortcuts when responding, think less carefully in generating self-reports, and as a result, provide less accurate data.

### **Social Desirability Response Bias**

For decades, researchers have been concerned about participants' honesty when completing a questionnaire if honest responses would be embarrassing. Understandably, participants might feel more than a little sheepish if they were to report having abused alcohol to an interviewer who looks like she might disapprove, or to report not voting to a researcher who

seems very interested in politics, or to report harboring prejudicial feelings toward members of a particular racial group. Therefore, researchers have suspected that participants might intentionally lie under such circumstances and provide self-reports they know are inaccurate.

Some studies that explored this possibility failed to turn up supportive evidence. For example, despite the fact that cigarette smoking appears to be considered socially undesirable, studies comparing reports of tobacco use with blood tests of serum cotinine have turned up no evidence of under-reporting (Caraballo, Giovino, Pechacek, & Mowery, 2001; Patrick et al., 1994; Yeager & Krosnick, 2010). But other studies using a variety of methods have uncovered evidence suggesting that reports may have been intentionally distorted in socially desirable directions. For example, some studies found that the proportion of participants who told interviewers that they voted in a recent election was larger than the proportion of the population who voted according to official government records (e.g., Clausen, 1968; Traugott & Katosh, 1979).

Findings such as these have inspired researchers to develop personality inventories, such as Crowne and Marlow's (1960) battery, to identify people who are generally inclined to misrepresent themselves in socially desirable ways. A different approach adopts a situational perspective: whether misrepresentation occurs depends on the interaction of the content of a question and attributes of the situation in which the report is made. Tools such as the item count technique (Droitcour et al., 1991; Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010), the bogus pipeline (Jones & Sigall, 1971), the randomized response technique (Fox & Tracy, 1986; Himmelfarb & Lickteig, 1982; Lensvelt-Mulders, Hox, van der Heijden, & Maas, 2005; Warner, 1965), or simply telling people to be honest (Olson, Fazio, & Herman, 2007) were developed based on these principles.

But perhaps the most frequently advocated and utilized method for minimizing social

desirability pressures involves having participants complete written questionnaires while not identifying themselves on those questionnaires (e.g., Gaydos et al., 1998; Meier et al. 1998; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Turnley & Feldman, 2000). This approach presumes that if a person answers a questionnaire completely anonymously, then the incentives to misrepresent himself or herself in socially desirable ways disappear, so honest and accurate self-reports can be expected.

A variety of studies have shown that people randomly assigned to answer questionnaires completely anonymously reported more socially undesirable attributes than did people who answered the questionnaires while identifying themselves (e.g., Booth-Kewley, Edwards, & Rosenfeld, 1992; Gordon, 1987; Lautenschlager & Flaherty, 1990; Paulhus, 1984). For example, Gordon (1987) found that complete anonymity when completing paper questionnaires led to reports of fewer dental checkups, less teeth brushing, and less flossing. Likewise, Paulhus (1984) found that complete anonymity led people to provide reports that conveyed less flattering images of themselves.

This sort of evidence is consistent with the assumptions that (a) complete anonymity begets honesty, and (b) higher reports of undesirable behavior are more accurate (e.g., Bradburn, Sudman, Blair, & Stocking, 1978). However, these assumptions are just that—assumptions. The vast majority of studies in this literature have not attempted to validate the reports gathered under conditions of complete anonymity to corroborate the assumption of greater honesty. Rather, researchers have routinely adopted the “more is better” assumption: that more reports of socially undesirable attributes must be evidence of more accuracy. Although this may be the case, the absence of direct corroboration leaves this sort of evidence ambiguous in the end.

### **An Alternative Perspective on Complete Anonymity**

In this paper, we explore an alternative view of this evidence: that complete anonymity

may not be the effective fix that past studies suggest. Specifically, although complete anonymity certainly eliminates the possibility of undesirable consequences resulting from providing embarrassing self-reports, complete anonymity also eliminates a participant's sense of accountability, which may compromise reporting accuracy. Defined by Lerner and Tetlock (1999), accountability "refers to the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others" (p. 255).

A host of studies indicate that increasing the identifiability of a participant's responses increases that person's sense of accountability, and, consequently, the level of cognitive engagement he or she manifests in the task (e.g., Price 1987; Reicher & Levine, 1994a, 1994b; Schopler et al., 1995; Williams, Harkins, & Latane 1981; Zimbardo, 1969). That is, a participant who is identifiable is apparently more motivated to complete assigned tasks thoughtfully. Price (1987), for example, demonstrated that participants writing their names on an instruction sheet at the beginning of an experiment led to better recall of material that participants read during the experiment. And Gordon and Stuecher (1992) found that when asked to complete teacher evaluations, identifiable participants gave more linguistically complex responses to open-ended questions than did completely anonymous participants.

The theory of survey satisficing (Krosnick, 1991, 1999) posits that the level of effort a participant devotes to completing a questionnaire depends on his or her level of motivation. Answering a question optimally requires that a participant interpret its intended meaning, search memory for relevant information with which to construct an answer, integrate the retrieved information into a summary judgment, and express that judgment by selecting one of the response options offered by the question. When participant motivation declines, people are thought to shortcut this process by implementing a process called "satisficing." This can

manifest itself as a bias toward selecting the first response alternative offered, agreeing with assertions, evaluating a set of objects identically instead of differentiating among them, selecting an offered “don’t know” response option, and more (see Krosnick, 1991, 1999).

If accountability increases participant motivation to optimize when answering questions, then eliminating accountability may invite satisficing. Although complete anonymity appears to have increased reporting of socially undesirable attributes in past studies, the people who provided those responses may not, in fact, have been the people who genuinely possessed the undesirable attributes in question. Indeed, complete anonymity may have sometimes caused over-reporting rather than simply eliminating under-reporting, an outcome that past studies were not designed to detect.

### **The Present Investigation**

The three studies described here examined the effects of complete anonymity on satisficing, as well as on honesty and accuracy in reporting attributes with social desirability connotations. Based on theory and past research findings, we expected that:

1. Participants reporting completely anonymously will report more socially undesirable attributes.
2. Participants reporting completely anonymously might manifest more satisficing.
3. Participants reporting completely anonymously might provide less accurate reports of factual matters.

The studies entailed recording actual behavior (with which to assess reporting accuracy) without participants knowing that such recording was being done.

In the three studies, participants completed a questionnaire either completely anonymously or in an identified manner. We examined the frequency with which socially

desirable self-descriptions were provided, the accuracy of factual reports, and the extent of survey satisficing as manifested by non-differentiation. We examined accuracy in two ways: the mean level of attributes reported, and the comparability of rank orders of and spacing among participants.

Non-differentiation occurs when a participant is asked to answer a series of questions using the same set of closed-ended answer choices (e.g., a rating scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) and provides highly similar responses across items without putting much thought into answering, rather than thinking carefully and answering the different questions differently. The theory of satisficing predicts that reduced participant motivation should be especially likely to yield increased satisficing as participant fatigue grows toward the end of a long questionnaire, as evidenced by numerous studies (Backor, Golde, & Nie, 2007; Herzog and Bachman, 1981; Johnson, Sieveking, & Clanton, 1974; Kraut et al., 1975). Therefore, if complete anonymity reduces participant motivation to provide accurate reports, then complete anonymity may yield more evidence of satisficing at the end of a questionnaire than at the beginning.

## Study 1

### Method

**Participants.** At the University of Colorado, 73 undergraduates participated in this study in exchange for partial course credit in Introductory Psychology courses.

**Procedure.** Participants were told that the study was about how people search for information on the Internet and that each participant would be asked to gather information on one of eight topics, such as the film career of Brad Pitt and the mountain pygmy-possum. All participants were, in fact, asked to collect facts about the mountain pygmy-possum.



Participants were seated in front of a computer in a small room and were shown a bookmarked menu in Internet Explorer that listed 40 websites. Participants were told that while investigating their assigned topic, they could visit the five listed websites relevant to that topic and any other Internet sites *relevant to their topic* as well. The participants were told that after their investigation was completed, they would report their reactions to the experience on a paper questionnaire.

Participants were given 45 minutes to research their topic and were left completely alone during that time. After the 45 minutes, the researcher returned and overtly erased the history file from the computer's memory cache. He told the participants that he cleaned the computer so future participants would not visit the same sites that the present participant had visited.

After the history file was erased, the complete anonymity manipulation was delivered. Approximately half (37) of the participants were randomly assigned to write their name, student I.D. number, and email address on the first page of the paper questionnaire. The remaining 36 participants were instead told not to write any identifying marks on the questionnaire, "since it is very important that your responses be completely anonymous." Each participant was told to put his or her completed questionnaire in an envelope, seal it, and put the sealed envelope in a box filled with other envelopes.<sup>1</sup>

### **Measures.**

***Socially desirable answers.*** We computed the number of times a participant gave socially desirable responses to seven questions that, *prima facie*, had socially desirable implications (e.g., "I have sometimes explored pornographic sites on the Internet.").

***Accuracy.*** A spyware program installed on the computer covertly took a screen shot

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<sup>1</sup> In the three experiments described here, identifiable participants were told that the researchers needed their identifying information in case they want to ask follow-up questions later. All identifying information was destroyed during debriefing.

every few seconds, thereby keeping a record of all websites visited by each participant, and the questionnaire asked participants to report which sites they had visited. We constructed two measures of accuracy in reports of the websites visited relevant to the mountain pygmy-possum. First, we subtracted the number of sites reportedly visited from the number of sites actually visited. We also computed the absolute value of this discrepancy.

***Non-differentiation.*** Four batteries of questions each asked participants to answer questions on a single rating scale on topics disparate enough that differentiation would be expected. For example, one battery asked participants to report how much they would have enjoyed researching various topics, and another battery asked for ratings of the extent to which participants felt a variety of emotions. Batteries contained 8, 13, 12, and 6 items, respectively (see the Appendix). Non-differentiation for each battery was assessed by computing the average of the absolute difference between all possible pairs of responses in the battery. Each non-differentiation measure was then scaled to range from 0 to 1, such that higher values indicated more non-differentiation. We averaged the scores for the first two batteries administered to the respondents, to yield an index of non-differentiation when respondent fatigue was minimal. And we averaged the scores for the last two batteries administered to the respondents, to yield an index of non-differentiation when respondent fatigue was maximized. Non-differentiation was also measured by calculating each within-subject standard deviation<sup>2</sup> for each battery and then computing the average standard deviations for the first two batteries and the last two batteries.<sup>3</sup>

## **Results and Discussion**

*Socially desirable responses.* The proportion of identifiable participants who gave a

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<sup>2</sup> This was calculated by transposing the matrix of items and taking the standard deviation of each column (which corresponds to each subject).

<sup>3</sup> Because the order of questions was not rotated across respondents, we cannot separate the impact of later presentation of a battery from the content of that battery.

socially desirable answer to all seven of the questions on the social desirability battery was marginally significantly greater than the proportion of completely anonymous participants who did so (14 percent vs. 3 percent, respectively,  $\chi^2(1, N=73)=2.79, p<.10$ , Cohen's  $D=.39$ ). Similarly, identifiable participants gave socially desirable responses to an average of 3.76 of the 7 questions, whereas completely anonymous participants gave socially desirable responses to 3.25 questions, a difference that was not significant (Mann-Whitney  $U=574.5$ , ns, Cohen's  $D=.24$ ). Thus, the data hint that identifiable participants may have given more socially desirable responses than did completely anonymous participants.<sup>4</sup>

*Accuracy.* Identifiable participants reported the number of relevant websites visited more accurately than did the completely anonymous participants. The absolute difference between the number of relevant sites reportedly visited and relevant sites actually visited was smaller for identifiable participants than for completely anonymous participants ( $M=0.70$  vs.  $M=1.67$ , respectively, negative binomial  $b=-.86, p<.05$ , Cohen's  $D=.47$ ). Identifiable and completely anonymous participants did not differ significantly from each other in terms of signed error ( $M=-0.16$  vs.  $M=0.22$ , respectively,  $F(1, 70)=0.70$ , ns, Cohen's  $D=.19$ ).<sup>5</sup> Because absolute differences were significant, but signed differences were not, inaccuracy seems not to be driven by an increase in socially desirable responses among the identifiable participants.

In addition, actual behavior was a better predictor of reported behavior among identifiable participants than among anonymous participants. When reported behavior was regressed on actual behavior, the unstandardized regression coefficient representing the simple

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<sup>4</sup> The mean response to the items tinged with social desirability implications was 2.86 among identifiable respondents and 3.14 among completely anonymous respondents, a difference that was not statistically significant ( $t(71)=-.87, ns$ ).

<sup>5</sup> This analysis did not control for actual number of relevant sites visited—doing so would be equivalent to conducting an ANCOVA where the dependent variable is the number of relevant sites reported, and the actual number of sites visited is the covariate.

effect was stronger among identifiable participants ( $b=.18$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=.94$ ) than among anonymous participants ( $b=.11$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=.53$ ). In a regression in which reported behavior was regressed on actual behavior (mean deviated), a contrast coded variable indicating whether the participant was completely anonymous or identified (coded -1 and +1, respectively), and the interaction between the two, the simple effect of actual behavior was positive and significant, indicating that reported behavior was significantly related to actual behavior when combining across the conditions ( $b=.62$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=2.58$ ). The interaction was positive but not significant ( $b=.04$ ,  $p=.12$ , Cohen's  $D=.18$ ), thus hinting at the possibility that the association between actual and reported behavior was stronger in identifiable conditions.

*Non-differentiation.* As expected, identifiable and completely anonymous participants did not differ from one another in terms of the extent of non-differentiation in responses to the first two batteries in the questionnaire ( $M=.62$  vs.  $M=.63$ , respectively,  $t(71)=.75$ , ns, Cohen's  $D=-.17$ ). However, consistent with a pattern of greater fatigue-induced satisficing, completely anonymous participants were significantly more likely to engage in non-differentiation when answering the last two batteries in the questionnaire than were identifiable participants ( $M=0.69$  vs.  $M=0.65$ , respectively,  $t(71)=1.97$ ,  $p=.05$ , Cohen's  $D=.46$ ).<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the average within-subject standard deviation in responses to the first two batteries did not differ between identifiable and completely anonymous participants ( $M=2.13$  vs.  $2.20$ , respectively,  $t(71)=.99$ , ns, Cohen's  $D=-.11$ ). In the last two batteries, however, identifiable participants manifested a marginally significantly larger within-subject standard deviation than did completely anonymous participants ( $M=1.85$  vs.  $M=1.68$ , respectively,

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<sup>6</sup> The interaction of anonymity by question placement was not significant ( $b=.15$ , ns), but this test may not be informative, because the metrics used to assess non-differentiation in the different batteries were not identical.

$t(71)=1.65, p=.10, \text{Cohen's } D=.37$ ).<sup>7</sup>

## Summary

Although complete anonymity increased reports of socially undesirable attributes, it also increased non-differentiation, an indicator of satisficing. Most importantly, anonymity did not increase the accuracy of factual reports. In fact, anonymity decreased accuracy.

## Study 2

Our second study was designed to test the social desirability and accuracy hypotheses in a different context. Specifically, participants were given the opportunity to eat candy while performing a task and were later asked how much candy they had eaten. Assuming that eating a lot of candy appears to be gluttonous, participants who provided their reports completely anonymously were expected to admit to eating more candy than people who reported their candy consumption identifiably.

## Method

**Participants.** Participants were 89 students from the University of Colorado who participated in exchange for partial course credit in Introductory Psychology courses.

**Procedure.** Groups of 2 to 5 participants were led to a small room and seated at separate desks where they completed a paper questionnaire. They were each given a bowl of M&Ms and were told they could eat as many as they liked while they worked. Groups were randomly assigned to be either identifiable (by writing their names and social security numbers on the top of the questionnaires) or completely anonymous.

**Measures.** The last page of the questionnaire asked participants to report the number of M&Ms they had eaten by selecting one of a series of offered numeric ranges: “none,” “one or

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<sup>7</sup> The interaction of anonymity by question placement was not significant ( $b=.13, ns$ ), but this test may not be informative, because the metrics used to assess non-differentiation in the different batteries were not identical.

two,” “three to five” ... “96-100”. Responses were converted to numbers by assigning each respondent to the point in the range they selected that was closest to their actual consumption.<sup>8</sup>

We also counted the number of M&Ms actually eaten by each participant to assess accuracy.

## Results and Discussion

**Actual Behavior.** Identifiable participants ate marginally significantly fewer M&Ms ( $M=19.00$ ) than did completely anonymous participants ( $M=31.33$ ; negative binomial  $b=.50$ ,  $p=.06$ , Cohen’s  $D=.40$ ).<sup>9</sup>

**Reported Behavior.** Consistent with past findings that complete anonymity yields responses that appear to be more socially undesirable, identifiable participants reported eating marginally significantly fewer M&Ms ( $M=14.59$ ) than did completely anonymous participants ( $M=23.35$ ; negative binomial  $b=.47$ ,  $p=.06$ , Cohen’s  $D=.40$ ). However, when controlling for actual consumption, the difference was no longer significant ( $M_{adj}=20.84$  vs.  $M_{adj}=26.45$ , negative binomial  $b=.24$ , ns, Cohen’s  $D=.30$ ).

**Accuracy.** The identifiable participants reported their M&M consumption more accurately than did the completely anonymous participants. Average absolute error among identifiable participants was 5.28 M&Ms, whereas average absolute error among completely anonymous participants was 10.44 M&Ms (negative binomial  $b=.68$ ,  $p<.05$ , Cohen’s  $D=.47$ ). As in Study 1, identifiable and completely anonymous participants did not differ significantly from each other in terms of signed error ( $M=4.41$  vs.  $M=7.98$ , respectively,  $F(1, 87)=2.02$ , ns, Cohen’s

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<sup>8</sup> This approach minimizes the error we attributed to respondents by giving them the benefit of the doubt within the range they selected. Similar results were obtained when we assigned each respondent to the midpoint of the range he or she selected instead.

<sup>9</sup> Negative binomial regression models were run in Studies 2 and 3 due to the overdispersed nature of the count data.

$D=.30$ ).<sup>10</sup>

To test the robustness of this finding, we took into account another factor that seemed likely to influence accuracy of reporting. A person who ate one or two M&Ms would presumably have an easy time remembering the number correctly. And because participants knew from the questionnaire that the total number of M&Ms in the bowl was 100 (the highest response option to the M&Ms question was “96-100 M&Ms”), people who nearly emptied the bowl would have had an easy time remembering accurately. Therefore, people who ate about 50 would have had the hardest time remembering accurately.

We therefore controlled for the proximity to 50 of the number of M&Ms each participant ate when predicting accuracy. Participants who ate half the candy were given the highest score (50). As consumption neared the end points, the scores decreased linearly. That is, for participants who ate 50 or fewer, the score was their actual consumption. For participants who ate more than 50, the score was 100 minus their actual consumption. Even when controlling for this variable, identifiable participants were marginally significantly more accurate than anonymous participants (average error: 6.14 versus 10.29, respectively; negative binomial  $b=.52$ ,  $p=.08$ , Cohen’s  $D=.38$ ).

In addition, actual behavior was a better predictor of reported behavior among identifiable participants than among anonymous participants. When actual behavior was regressed on reported behavior, the unstandardized regression coefficient representing the simple effect was stronger among identifiable participants ( $b=.05$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen’s  $D=2.73$ ) than among anonymous participants ( $b=.03$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen’s  $D=2.16$ ). In a regression in which reported behavior was regressed on actual behavior (mean deviated), a contrast coded variable indicating

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<sup>10</sup> A one-way ANOVA was used here, rather than a negative binomial model, because negative values of the dependent variable cannot be analyzed in count models.

whether the participant was completely anonymous or identified (coded -1 and +1, respectively), and the interaction between the two, the simple effect of actual behavior was positive and significant, indicating that reported behavior was significantly related to actual behavior when combining across the conditions ( $b=.04$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=2.57$ ). Furthermore, the interaction was positive and significant ( $b=.01$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=.73$ ), indicating that predictive power was significantly stronger among participants who were identifiable than among those who were completely anonymous.

Thus, complete anonymity resulted in both increased performance of socially undesirable behavior, even further increased reporting of performance of socially undesirable behavior, and decreased reporting accuracy.

### **Study 3**

As in Study 2, participants in this study were asked to report how much candy they ate while completing a questionnaire, so we could later assess the accuracy of these reports. Unlike Study 2, the candy consumption occurred before identifiability was manipulated, so the manipulation could not have altered the consumption behavior. Additionally, the consumption question elicited open-ended answers, rather than using the closed-ended approach employed in Study 2.

We also included a measure of impression management inclination in this study's questionnaire, implemented before the complete anonymity manipulation. Because higher levels of impression management inclination are thought to be associated with greater motivation to give the most socially desirable self-descriptions (Paulhus, 1984), we expected participants higher in impression management orientation to provide more desirable and less accurate reports of their behavior.



## Method

**Participants.** Participants were 86 volunteers, ages 16 to 18, who were enrolled in a summer program at Stanford University.

**Procedure.** Participants were asked to sit at a table in a private room. Already on the table was a questionnaire titled “Media Use Survey,” a bowl of 75 M&Ms, and a bowl of 75 Jelly Beans. The experimenter asked the participant to complete the questionnaire and notify her when he or she was done. She then told the participant that he or she was welcome to eat some candy while working on the questionnaire. The participant was then left to work on the questionnaire in complete privacy.

After finishing that questionnaire, the participant was asked to complete a second questionnaire. Before the experimenter left the room, she took the bowls of candy and told the participant that she was going to ready them for the next participant. The second questionnaire contained the complete anonymity instructions for a random half of the participants, wherein identifiable participants were asked to write their name, phone number, and email address on the first page of the second questionnaire, while anonymous participants were asked not to write any identifying information on the questionnaire.

The experimenters were blind to experimental condition, meaning that they did not know whether each participant completed the second questionnaire completely anonymously or identifiably.

**Measures.** The second questionnaire asked participants to report how many M&Ms they had eaten and how many Jelly Beans they had eaten. Responses to these open-ended questions were added together to yield a single consumption report.

At the beginning of the first questionnaire, participants completed the 20-item Impression

Management subscale of the Paulhus Deception Scales (Paulhus 1984). Appropriate items were reverse scored, and each participant's total score was the average of responses to the items in this battery. This score was rescaled to range from 0 (meaning least inclined to engage in impression management) and 1 (meaning most inclined to engage in impression management).

## Results

**Actual Behavior.** Identifiable and anonymous participants did not differ significantly in how much candy they ate (see Table 1, column 1, row 1).<sup>11</sup> Likewise, impression management scores were not associated with actual consumption (see Table 1, column 1, row 2, Cohen's  $D=.23$ ). As expected, the time of day when the participant completed the experiment had a significant effect: people who participated during lunch time and dinner time (11:30 am-1:30 pm and 5:00 pm-6:30 pm) ate significantly more candy (about 7 pieces on average) than people who participated at other times (negative binomial  $b=1.05$ ,  $p<.05$ , Cohen's  $D=.53$ ).

**Reported Behavior.** Consistent with past studies, identifiable participants reported eating marginally significantly less candy than did completely anonymous participants ( $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 4.31$  vs.  $M_{\text{adjusted}} = 8.62$ ; negative binomial  $b = -.69$ ,  $p<.10$ , Cohen's  $D=.38$ ). Surprisingly, however, impression management scores were not associated with reported consumption (see Table 1, Column 2, Row 2, Cohen's  $D=.12$ ).

**Accuracy.** Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, average absolute error was marginally significantly smaller among identifiable participants than among completely anonymous participants (Error:  $M_{\text{adjusted}}=.71$  vs.  $M_{\text{adjusted}}=1.80$ , negative binomial  $b=-.93$ ,  $p=.06$ ; see Table 1, Column 3, Row 1, Cohen's  $D=.43$ ). Furthermore, people with higher impression management

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<sup>11</sup> Seven participants (six in the identifiable condition, 1 in the anonymous condition) were removed from all analyses because an analysis of studentized residuals and Cook's Statistics indicated that these cases were inordinately influential of the results of the accuracy analysis - studentized residuals were greater than 3, and Cook's Statistics were greater than 1.

scores manifested less error in their reports of candy consumption (negative binomial  $b=-2.95$ ,  $p<.05$ ; see Table 1, Column 3, Row 2, Cohen's  $D=.44$ ).<sup>12</sup> Participants who completed the procedure during meal times provided less accurate reports than did participants who completed the procedure at other times (negative binomial  $b=1.22$ ,  $p<.05$ ). As in Studies 1 and 2, anonymity was not associated with signed error ( $M_{\text{adjusted}}=.85$  vs.  $M_{\text{adjusted}}=1.92$ ,  $F(1, 82)=.36$ , ns, Cohen's  $D=.05$ ).

Actual behavior was a better predictor of reported behavior among identifiable participants than among anonymous participants. When reported behavior was regressed on actual behavior, the unstandardized regression coefficient representing the simple effect was stronger among identifiable participants ( $b=.18$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=1.60$ ) than among anonymous participants ( $b=.12$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=1.36$ ). In a regression in which reported behavior was regressed on reported behavior (mean deviated), a contrast coded variable indicating whether the participant was completely anonymous or identified (coded -1 and +1, respectively), and the interaction between the two, the simple effect of actual behavior was positive and significant, indicating that reported behavior was significantly related to actual behavior on average across the conditions ( $b=.16$ ,  $p<.001$ , Cohen's  $D=2.61$ ). Furthermore, the interaction was positive and significant ( $b=.04$ ,  $p<.01$ , Cohen's  $D=.33$ ), indicating that predictive power was significantly stronger among participants who were identifiable than among those who were completely anonymous.

## Summary

As in Studies 1 and 2, identifiability led to increased accuracy of behavioral reports. In addition, higher levels of impression management orientation were associated with less accuracy,

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<sup>12</sup> The interaction between condition (identifiable versus completely anonymous) and impression management score was not statistically significant (negative binomial  $b=1.98$ , ns).

though not more socially desirable self-descriptions.

### **General Discussion**

Many researchers have believed that when “the anonymity of an interview situation is increased, people tend to give more honest answers or disclose more embarrassing information about themselves than in a less anonymous setting” (Muhlenfeld, 2005, p. 994). The present studies challenged this claim. In only one of our three studies did complete anonymity lead participants to describe themselves in more embarrassing ways according to one analysis, though not according to another analysis of the same data. And in none of the three studies did complete anonymity lead participants to give more honest answers. In fact, complete anonymity always yielded less accurate self-reports.

Additional evidence suggests a possible cognitive mechanism of the reduced accuracy. Complete anonymity promoted non-differentiation late in a long questionnaire. And the observed interaction between factors thought to encourage satisficing (question placement and complete anonymity) in yielding non-differentiation is consistent with the original formulation of satisficing theory (see Krosnick, 1991) and with empirical evidence testing for such interactions (e.g., Holbrook, Krosnick, Moore, & Tourangeau, 2007). Thus, perhaps because of a reduced sense of accountability, completely anonymous participants executed the cognitive response process more superficially and generated less accurate self-reports as a result.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that researchers seeking to maximize honesty and accuracy in questionnaire responses and to understand the effects of complete anonymity should perhaps reconsider the default approach that has been taken in so much past research. We have seen that complete anonymity can sometimes change the distributions of answers in directions that appear to signal greater validity and less withholding of embarrassing facts. But when

subjected to careful scrutiny, this interpretation of a traditional empirical finding turns out to be incorrect. In future studies, it might be wisest for investigators to build in comparisons with validity criteria instead of simply assuming that more reporting of embarrassing attributes signals greater accuracy and honesty.

It is important not to over-generalize the evidence reported here. Our findings apply to student participants and paper questionnaires and one particular type of anonymity. Future research is needed to see whether the same principles apply to other modes of data collection from other populations. In particular, we should hesitate before assuming that the current findings apply to situations in which human interviewers administer questionnaires orally. In those situations, complete anonymity is impossible, even when using techniques such as ACASI (audio computer-assisted self-interviewing; see, e.g., Harmon et al., 2009). In such situations, an interviewer can promise a participant that his or her responses will be kept confidential. Such a promise of confidentiality may have different effects than the complete anonymity assured by the paper questionnaires in our studies. In particular, a human interviewer asking questions orally may create the sense of accountability needed to motivate participants to provide accurate answers in a way that a paper questionnaire cannot. The use of ACASI in such situations may further contribute to a sense of confidentiality while not creating the sense of complete anonymity that appears to have been deleterious in the present studies.

In light of our findings, it is interesting to revisit evidence reported by Ong and Weiss (2000). Their college student participants were given the opportunity to cheat while taking a test in a private room (a helpful book was on a shelf, and participants were told not to consult it). Weeks later, participants filled out a questionnaire asking whether they had “ever, even once, used unapproved material on an exam, quiz, or any other form of test.” Half of the participants

wrote their names on the questionnaires, whereas the other half did not. Among the people who did not consult the book during the text, none reported that they cheated on the questionnaire. But among the people who had consulted the book, 25% of the people who were identifiable reported having cheated, whereas 74% of the people who answered anonymously said that they cheated. Thus, anonymity appears to have improved reporting accuracy.

Of course, this evidence is a bit ambiguous, because the questionnaire did not ask specifically about whether the participant had cheated when taking the test in the earlier phase of the experiment. It is possible that the increased reports of cheating occurred because the people who cheated on the experiment's test were in the habit of cheating regularly (for supportive evidence, see Hessing, Elffers, & Wiegel, 1988), had forgotten the particular incident of cheating in the experiment, and were reporting their cheating behavior in other contexts.

Furthermore, it may be important to note that Ong and Weiss's (2000) question measuring cheating offered two answer choices: yes and no. This is one of the response formats that past research suggests is susceptible to acquiescence response bias, which appears to be the result of weak satisficing (see, e.g., Krosnick, 1999). Specifically, satisficing is thought to increase the likelihood of an affirmative response to a yes/no question when the participant can easily generate a reason to answer affirmatively. If complete anonymity decreases accountability, decreases motivation to optimize, and thereby increases the likelihood of weak satisficing, then the increase in affirmative answers to the cheating question could have been the result of weak satisficing rather than of greater honesty. It would therefore be interesting to repeat the Ong and Weiss (2000) study employing a question format that is not susceptible to acquiescence, to see if the same increase in accuracy due to anonymity is observed.

Many open questions remain in this arena, and other possibilities for future studies are

numerous. For one, research should look at other tests of accuracy and measures of survey satisficing. For example, given the present results, we would expect identifiable participants to select fewer offered “don’t know” responses and to be less susceptible than completely anonymous participants to acquiescence, primacy, and recency effects. Furthermore, the effects of complete anonymity on reporting accuracy should be tested in various modes of survey administration, including face-to-face interviewing, telephone interviewing, and computer self-administration.

The present studies suggest that researchers should not automatically assume that promising participants complete anonymity will increase the quality of the collected responses. Particularly among college students who often complete questionnaires to fulfill course requirements, such a guarantee may serve to sanction half-hearted survey completion rather than freeing students up to respond with greater honesty.

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Table 1. Negative Binomial Regression Prediction Actual Behavior, Reported Behavior, and Error in Study 3

Predictor	Dependent Variable		
	Actual Behavior	Reported Behavior	Absolute Error
Identifiable condition (vs. completely anonymous)	-.63	-.69+	-0.93+
Impression management	-1.33	-.73	-2.95+
Experiment completed at meal time	1.05*	1.13*	1.22*
Intercept	2.35***	2.03**	1.44+
N	79	79	79

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$

## Appendix

### *Study 1*

#### *Measures of Socially Desirable Responses*

1. "I have sometimes explored pornographic sites on the Internet." To what extent do you agree with the above statement? (Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (7); Answers of 1, 2, or 3 were treated as socially desirable.)
2. "I have sometimes downloaded music from sites without paying the copyright fees." To what extent do you agree with the above statement? (Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (7); Answers of 1, 2, and 3 were treated as socially desirable.)
3. "Sometimes I visit sites on the Internet that I would be ashamed to admit to others that I visited." To what extent do you agree with the above statement? (Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (7); Answers of 1, 2, and 3 were treated as socially desirable.)
4. "I never visit sites on the Internet that I would be ashamed to admit to others that I visited." To what extent do you agree with the above statement? (Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (7); Answers of 5, 6, and 7 were treated as socially desirable.)
5. "I have never explored pornographic sites on the Internet." To what extent do you agree with the above statement? (Answers were given on a 7-point rating scale ranging from disagree (1) to agree (7); Answers of 5, 6, and 7 were treated as socially desirable.)
6. "For this set of questions we would like you to indicate how often, if ever, you have visited any of the following websites. Pornographic websites." (Answer choices included:



Never visited, Visited once, Visited several times, Visited often, and Visited regularly;  
An answer of “Never visited” was treated as socially desirable.)

7. “For this set of questions, we would like you to indicate how often, if ever, you have visited any of the following websites. Websites where one can download copies of term papers.” (Answer choices included: Never visited, Visited once, Visited several times, Visited often, and Visited regularly; An answer of “Never visited” was treated as socially desirable.)

### *Measures of Non-Differentiation*

An index of non-differentiation was computed for each of the following batteries, which are presented in the order in which they appeared on the questionnaire.

#### *Battery 1: Enjoyed Other Tasks Battery.*

1. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Deciding what car to purchase.”  
(Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))
2. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Describing the music and musical influence of Phish.” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))
3. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Identifying the causes of the 1929 stock market crash.” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))
4. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Tracing the film career of Brad Pitt.” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))
5. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Describing the scientific contributions of Sir Isaac Newton.” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))
6. “To what extent would you have enjoyed... Researching an anticipated Caribbean vacation.”(Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

7. "To what extent would you have enjoyed... Researching the artistic career of Michelangelo." (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

*Battery 2: Attitudes towards the Internet I.*

1. "For researching most any topic, the university library is a more valuable resource than is the Internet. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

2. "Public access to the Internet in libraries, for instance, should be controlled so that pornographic and other offensive sites cannot be viewed. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

3. "Parents should not monitor and/or restrict their children's Internet usage. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

4. "The press has exaggerated the danger posed to young Internet surfers by potential sexual predators. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

5. "The Internet is a valuable research tool. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

6. "I spend less time surfing the Internet than I used to. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

7. "Our society suffers from information overload. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

8. "Computers intimidate me more than they should. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

9. "Our society as a whole is much more efficient because of recent

developments in computer technology. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

10. "It is extremely important these days to be computer-savvy. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

11. "The world wide web represents one of the most dramatic changes in history. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

12. "Because of email, I think I use the telephone to keep in touch with my family and friends less than I used to. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

13. "Anyone who doesn't use the Internet is missing a lot. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

*Battery 3: Attitudes towards the Internet II.*

1. "I sometimes have trouble getting computer programs to do what I want them to do. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

2. "I would love to be a professional computer programmer. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

3. "For researching most any topic, the Internet is a more valuable resource than is the university library. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

4. "I have downloaded a lot of music over the Internet. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

5. "Public access to the Internet in libraries, for instance, should be unrestricted. Any restriction amounts to violating constitutional guarantees of free speech. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
6. "I spend more time surfing the Internet than I used to. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
7. "You can waste an awful lot of time on the Internet. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
8. "Parents should monitor and/or restrict their children's Internet usage. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
9. "The press has correctly portrayed the danger posed to young Internet surfers by potential sexual predators. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
10. "It is scary that all kinds of hate groups can promote themselves on the Internet. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
11. "Terrorist groups that promote violence on their Internet sites should be prosecuted. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))
12. "It doesn't bother me to use my credit card to pay for something on the Internet. To what extent do you agree with the above statement?" (Disagree (1) to Agree (7))

*Battery 4: Negative Emotions Battery.*

1. "Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the

period when you were doing your research. Bored” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

2. “Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the period when you were doing your research. Sad” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

3. “Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the period when you were doing your research. Anxious” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

4. “Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the period when you were doing your research. Frustrated” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

5. “Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the period when you were doing your research. Sleepy” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

6. “Please indicate the extent to which you felt the given emotion during the period when you were doing your research. Uncertain” (Not at all (1) to Very Much (7))

## *Study 2*

### *Measurement of M&M Consumption*

About how many M&Ms did you eat while you completed the survey?

- None
- One or Two
- Three to Five
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30

\_\_\_\_ 31-35  
\_\_\_\_ 36-40  
\_\_\_\_ 41-45  
\_\_\_\_ 46-50  
\_\_\_\_ 51-55  
\_\_\_\_ 56-60  
\_\_\_\_ 61-65  
\_\_\_\_ 66-70  
\_\_\_\_ 71-75  
\_\_\_\_ 76-80  
\_\_\_\_ 81-85  
\_\_\_\_ 86-90  
\_\_\_\_ 91-95  
\_\_\_\_ 96-100