

## Confidentiality vs. Anonymity

In the data collection process, when researchers are trying to obtain information from survey participants, they frequently indicate that the survey will be conducted anonymously or confidentially. There are distinct differences between the two terms and the researcher should be clear on the meaning of each, as they are very important for the protection of the participant.

**It is also important to remember that a study, with only one data collection method, cannot be both confidential and anonymous.** Research participants should be informed beforehand of the type of data collection that will take place. They should also be informed of how long the data will be stored, where the data will be stored, and how it will be destroyed after an appropriate amount of time. When data is collected and held anonymously, it indicates that there are no identifying values that can link the information to the participant; not even the researcher could identify a specific participant.

Online survey tools are typically conducted anonymously, however, the researcher needs to be certain the IP address is not stored. The researcher also needs to keep in mind that too many identifying demographic variables could hinder the anonymity of the participants. In an anonymous study, the researcher needs to indicate how the participants will be kept anonymous. Be certain to include that no participants will be identified. It is also helpful to let the participant know that data will be analyzed at the group level.

When data is collected and held confidentially, the researcher can identify the subjects. One way of identifying the subjects is to assign an identifying number or code to each participant. Additionally, any survey that takes place in face to face environment is automatically labeled as confidential, as the researcher will know who provided the data. When data is collected confidentially, the information needs to be kept in a secure environment because the participants are identifiable. And similarly to anonymous data collection, it is also helpful to let the participant know that data will be analyzed at the group level in order to de-identify participants. Identifying numbers will not be presented in the results of the analyses.