

# Measuring Attitudes on Sensitive Subjects

## > Implicit and Explicit Attitudes

Much of marketing strategy and tactical decision making is based on our understanding of how customers think and the influence of their perceptions and attitudes on the decision process. An **implicit attitude** is one that can influence other objects.<sup>2</sup> For example, when you have a positive attitude toward a person, you are likely to have a positive attitude about the products that person recommends. Thus Hanes underwear gets our positive nod because we admire its celebrity endorser, Michael Jordan. Project Implicit, a collaboration of researchers at four universities (Harvard University, Yale University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington) is studying the effects of implicit attitudes and the effects of gender, race and age on those attitudes.

When a customer holds an attitude that is generally accepted, he or she is more likely to express it. An **explicit attitude** is an expressed positive or negative evaluation. For example, you might have a positive explicit attitude about your favorite musical group. That attitude is revealed when you tell your friends about the “mind-blowing concert” you enjoyed last evening or the group’s latest “inspiring and ground-breaking” CD. Learning, usually from experience, reinforces attitudes. The natural extension of learning is habitual behavior.<sup>3</sup> A marketer needs a customer to hold a positive attitude in order to increase his or her likelihood of purchase and, ultimately, of adoption.

Not all attitudes are expressed; some are suppressed by their holders. Social acceptance by reference groups and political correctness influence our willingness to express attitudes. You might not enjoy Disney World, but when your friends and your children—and every Super Bowl winner—cheers that destination as the ideal vacation, expressing your attitude might put you on the outside looking in. Given enough time and social pressure, customers can suppress their true attitudes. Thus marketers accept that people don’t always “speak their minds.” This is why we measure attitudes about sensitive issues covertly, with less-than-direct questions.

## > Sensitive Attitudes

A **sensitive attitude** is one that holders feel uncomfortable sharing with others for a myriad of reasons. But marketers often need participants to express those attitudes to solve marketing dilemmas. One of the topics about which individuals are most sensitive is sexual activity. Among the most critical public health marketing issues among teenagers are prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and teen pregnancy. Imagine, therefore, that you are hired to determine teens’ attitudes on these sensitive topics. Where would you start in creating such a questionnaire? What scales would you use? Would you use tested scales or craft custom scales for your project? Would you create a scale that asks questions directly or indirectly of participants?

As part of a partnership related to sexual health among teens, health philanthropy Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) and *Seventeen* magazine have surveyed periodically a national probability sample of teens. One KFF/*Seventeen* survey was conducted by International Communications Research (ICR) as part of TeenEXCEL, ICR’s monthly telephone omnibus survey of teens. Following focus groups held in Chicago among teen girls, a survey was crafted by staff at KFF and *Seventeen*. KFF would use the data to develop health advocacy programs. *Seventeen* would use the data to craft articles and issue themes. ICR interviewed 512 teens aged 15 to 17 between September 5 and September 10, 2002. How did researchers on this project measure teen attitudes?

## Close-Up: Measuring Attitudes on Sensitive Subjects

Take a look at a sample of the scales used (shown below), paying particular attention to question wording. Remember that this study was conducted by phone. Each time you see the parenthetical “(INSERT)” in the question, the phrases which follow the main part of the question are inserted one at a time by the interviewer. For example, for the first question below, the first time the interviewer asks the question she asks:

Sometimes people your age feel pressure when it comes to sex. Please tell me how much pressure do “girls feel from other girls” about sex?—a lot, some, only a little, or none?

The interviewer pauses for an answer, then asks:

How much pressure do “girls feel from boys” about sex?—a lot, some, only a little, or none?

The interviewer repeats each parenthetical phrase and the scale until all have been asked and answered.

- Sometimes people your age feel pressure when it comes to sex. Please tell me how much pressure (INSERT) about sex—a lot, some, only a little, or none?
  - (Insert 1) Girls feel from other girls
  - (Insert 2) Girls feel from boys
  - (Insert 3) Boys feel from girls
  - (Insert 4) Boys feel from other boys
- My next question is about roles that girls and boys often have in a relationship. For each of the following, please tell me if it is usually the girl, usually the boy, or both equally? How about (INSERT)—would you say usually the girl, usually the boy, or both equally?
  - (Insert 1) Who asks whom out on a date for the first time?
  - (Insert 2) Who make the first move sexually?
  - (Insert 3) Who makes sure that birth control is used?
  - (Insert 4) Who brings up having sex?
  - (Insert 5) Who says “NO” to sex?
- Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree that (INSERT)
  - (Insert 1) It is okay for girls to initiate sexual activity
  - (Insert 2) Once you have sex with a partner it is hard to say “no” in the future.
  - (Insert 3) There is a double standard for boys and girls when it comes to sex, that it is okay for boys to have a lot of partners but not for girls.
- Next I have a couple of questions about virginity and abstinence. Would you say that it is generally considered a good thing or a bad thing for (insert)?
  - (Insert 1) A girl to be a virgin?
  - (Insert 2) A boy to be a virgin?
- In general, how long do most people your age date someone before having sex? (Read Choices When Necessary)
  - A month or less
  - 2-3 months
  - 4-6 months
  - 6- months to a year
  - A year or longer.

Projective techniques influence scale choice and scale design when the attitudes being measured are sensitive for the participant. Nominal data scales are used rarely when measuring complex and sensitive attitudes. Ordinal or interval scales are more likely. The scale wording must make the participant feel comfortable while extracting a deeply felt, and

potentially suppressed, attitude. Letting the participant project his or her attitude to “another” assists the participant in expressing an attitude that he or she may not have expressed before.

[Projective techniques were discussed in Chapter 9.]

>Glossary

**implicit attitude** an attitude about one object that influences the attitude about other objects.

**explicit attitude**: an expressed positive or negative evaluation.

**sensitive attitude** one that a holder feels uncomfortable sharing with others.

>Activities

1. To see a sample of your own implicit attitudes, you can participate in a demonstration test at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/index.jsp>
2. If you are interested in the full range of questions or the results of this *SexSmarts* study on gender roles, you will find the data charts and the executive summary report at [www.kkf.org](http://www.kkf.org).

>Sources

1. The material for this Close-Up was developed using Greenwald, A. G., Banaji, M. R. (1995). Implicit social cognition: Attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes. *Psychological Review*. Vol 102(1), 4-27; Greenwald, A. G., McGhee, D. E., & Schwartz, J. L. K. (1998). Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The implicit association test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol 74, 1464-1480; Banaji, M. R., & Hardin, C. D. (1996). Automatic stereotyping. *Psychological Science*. Vol 7(3), 136-141; Banaji, M. R., Hardin, C., & Rothman, A. J. (1993). Implicit stereotyping in person judgment. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*. Vol 65 (2), 272-281. Numerous pages for the Project Implicit site [implicit.harvard.edu/implicit](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit); William E Arens. *Contemporary Advertising*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 2002, chapter 4; and the SexSmart gender roles survey at [www.kkf.org](http://www.kkf.org).
2. “General FAQs about IAT” Implicit Association Test, Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/faqs.html>).
3. William E. Arens. *Contemporary Advertising*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 2002. p. 148.