Abstract

This paper serves as a brief introductory summary to the Questionnaire surveying research method, aiding new scholars to avoid common pitfalls and consider how to utilise the method most successfully in their studies.

1. Introduction to Surveys

Surveys are a popular strategy used to answer exploratory and descriptive research (Saunders et al. 2016) and enable the efficient collection of standardised data from a large population of participants. This enables researchers to conduct comparisons and conclude correlations within response data. There are multiple methods involved in surveying, such as questionnaires, structured observations and structured interviews. Cycyota and Harrison (2006) concluded that surveys in the form of mailed questionnaires (postage or email) are one of the best-researched data collection methods within the organisational sciences. In fact, survey questionnaires are widely used across first world countries by organisations and governments (Aldridge and Levine, 2001; Saunders et al. 2016). They are often accessed by members of the public via websites, newspapers and online bulletins etc. Aldridge and Levine (2001) state their widespread use is evidence of their success and research participants’ ability to understand them.

One of the first tasks when conducting a survey is to identify a sample of the population which data is to be collected from (Heeks et al. 2017). The sample is a sub-section of people who should ideally have the same characteristics of the wider population. There are numerous different sampling techniques that can be used, dependent upon the relevance to a particular study. Floyd and Fowler (2014) state the importance of carefully considering the sample size and design of the selection procedures to minimise potential sampling bias (discussed further in following section).
2. Pros and Cons to Surveys

Researchers can receive numerous benefits by employing surveys as their data collection method. As previously discussed, surveys are a popular and historically successful method used widely across the globe (Aldridge and Levine, 2001). Additionally, Williams (2007) found that such quantitative research methods have been in use, in some form or other, since 1250 A.D. and have since dominated western culture. Consequently, one can assume that research participants find surveys familiar and easier to understand than other research methods (Aldridge and Levine, 2001).

Furthermore, Baruch and Holtom (2008) conclude that surveys (specifically questionnaires) have great strength in assessing organisational concerns and observing associated trends. Their strength lies in the fact they can be distributed across large numbers of subjects (Heeks et al. 2017) and be subsequently used to suggest reasons for relationships between variables and produce models of such relationships (Saunders et al. 2016).

However, while surveys have their merits, they also have many critiques. Numerous scholars have challenged the scientific and humanistic validity of surveys due to the wide range of variables they cover, and the question of whether a small sample of participants can truly determine the views and beliefs of a wider population (Aldridge and Levine, 2001).

Further challenges arise with the response rates of surveys. Saunders et al. (2016) note that a researcher’s progress can be delayed, or even halted, while awaiting responses. Baruch and Holtom (2008) raised the risk of not receiving some responses at all, concluding that a 100% response rate is rarely achieved. They suggest this usually occurs for two reasons: survey delivery failure (i.e., incorrect participant details) and respondents’ unwillingness to partake. They found poor job satisfaction or organisational commitment impacted participants’ willingness to respond.

Both Baruch and Holtom (2008) and Floyd and Fowler (2014) concluded that if a survey did not receive 100% of responses, the probability of statistical bias is heightened.

Finally, Heeks et al. (2017) claim that when conducting surveys, researchers may unconsciously focus on their own geographical area and participants who share similar characteristics such as age, sex, gender, education level etc. Thus, biasedness is likely to occur in any scenario.

3. Best Practices for Applying Surveys

Following best practices can mitigate some of the aforementioned criticisms of a survey. Firstly, Saunders et al. (2016) discuss the importance of triangulating data to test validity. To cater for this, it is recommended to design the survey to be able to gather a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data (Allen et al. 2008; Woodside, 2010).

In response to the issue of survey response rates, Baruch and Holtom (2008) made numerous suggestions. They found that survey response rates increased when participants were guaranteed anonymity and felt invested in the topic of study. The latter of which can be achieved by distributing the survey with a covering letter detailing the purpose and objectives of the study (Saunders et al. 2016; Cycyota and Harrison, 2006). Scholars also appear to unilaterally agree that forging a relationship between the researcher and participant and gaining pre-consent before sending the survey will both increase response rates (Saunders et al. 2016; Cycyota and Harrison, 2006; Baruch and Holtom, 2008).
A further method of best practice is to test the survey for reliability and validity (Saunders et al. 2016). It is imperative to ensure that the survey is comprehended, and all questions are correctly interpreted. To conduct this, Saunders et al. recommend distributing a pilot questionnaire to ensure participants respond in the anticipated manner. Any bias should be eliminated by distributing the pilot to a separate sample audience.

4. Data Collection/Analysis

Numerous survey methods can be used to collect data from participants. Surveys are usually administered via face-to-face, post, telephone, email or the Internet (Heeks et al. 2017; Saunders et al. 2016). The method most examined in this paper is the questionnaire, due to being one of the most researched (Cycyota and Harrison 2006). Saunders et al. (2016) state that delivering a questionnaire via a structured interview yields a higher response rate as opposed to self-completed questionnaires. This being said, it also takes a lot longer to conduct and can present logistical issues. The self-completed questionnaire, which can also be sent via an Internet web portal, can account for a larger sample size and be easily analysed via computer. If a researcher considers the best practices discussed in the previous section, the self-completed questionnaire should hopefully receive a high response rate.

With the Internet based questionnaire chosen as a data collection method, Cresswell (2009) states that the next step is to identify the type of data to be collected, and the method for collecting that data (i.e., via open or closed answers). Saunders et al. (2016) re-iterate this and warn that questionnaire questions must be defined precisely, as they do not allow for follow-up questions in the same way an interview does.

Once the data collection method has been decided, Cresswell discusses several data analysis techniques. One method, which compliments the survey questionnaire, is the matrix of comparison. The survey questionnaire can produce open or closed answers, producing both qualitative and quantitative data. The matrix of comparison can combine and correlate both sets of data by using different axis. For example, the horizontal axis may hold the type of responder (i.e., project manager, business analyst etc.) while the vertical axis may hold the themes of the data collected. The matrix can contain qualitative quotes of data or counts of the number of times a pattern or theme has occurred in the participants’ answers. This method therefore allows a researcher to combine both sets of qualitative and quantitative data instead of focusing on just one type.

References


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