SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Surveys, Advantages and Disadvantages of

As with any other method in the academic field, there are various advantages and disadvantages of utilizing surveys. A survey provides a method suitable for a number of topics and specializations in different areas of knowledge. Hence, the nature of the topic and the outcome sought decide what provides the most suitable method to collect data. Furthermore, a number of scholars consider the survey as one of the best methods to gather the largest amount of data from participants. A broad outline of the significance of the use of surveys within many fields exists in the literature, including the social sciences. Using surveys, researchers can obtain different types of data such as beliefs, opinions, behaviors, and attitudes of the participants. Surveys demonstrate a useful method in terms of allowing researchers to statistically estimate the distribution of characteristics in a population. This entry begins by reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of the basic structure and question types in a survey, and then reviews the benefits and drawbacks of common survey distribution methods. General advantages and disadvantages of surveys are then considered.

Structure and Content of Surveys

There are generally three sections for questionnaires: the introduction, substantive questions, and classification questions. The introduction provides the instructions and the overall directions that justify and identify the content of the questions. The instructions let the respondent know why the survey is being conducted and the nature of the questions. Often the instructions provide a frame of reference for the topic of the survey and how responses become generated and explain to the sample of respondents what to consider when the survey asks for responses.

In addition, open-ended and closed-ended questions constitute two types of questions as explained by the nature of the response expected. Open-ended questions do not present respondents with any response categories; rather, respondents compose and submit their own responses. The challenge of the open-ended questions becomes providing structure for generating a synthesis or overview of what the respondents provide. Open-ended questions produce unpredictable directions and choices on the part of the respondents. Researchers must consider how to or whether to follow-up with probes to answers. Some answers may be short or even provide irrelevant responses because the respondent did not understand the survey question intention.

Alternatively, closed-ended questions require less time and effort to answer because they present respondents with a limited number of predetermined response categories. Closed-ended questions speed up analysis because the responses are limited and are immediately provided in a numeric format. A limitation of this type of question is that the survey may produce answers that miss or incorrectly identify the issues in the content under consideration. The survey in a strict sense imposes structure rather than examining emergent structure in the minds of the sample.

Survey Distribution

There are different ways to distribute a survey, including onsite, online, phone, and via mail. An onsite survey is conducted at a location, like a shopping mall, where a survey becomes conducted about some issues like shopping or politics. If the topic involves something relevant to the mall, or the immediate geographic area, the location may serve the purposes of the data collection. A limitation of an onsite survey is that the time and location become limiting factors in potential generalization to the desired population.

Online surveys permit obtaining responses without the geographic limitation found for an onsite survey. The use of technology requires a means to distribute the survey that involves some advertising or placement. The survey may or may not produce representative samples depending on the match of the use of technology to

the intended frame of participants sought.

A phone survey usually relies on what are called "land" line phones. Current law in the United States does not permit random dialing of numbers that serve cellular or mobile phones. Many households, particularly with younger (under the age of 30) adults, do not use a landline phone. The use of phone surveys becomes problematic because many persons simply lack landline phones. Thus, the problem with phone surveys becomes the systematic noninclusion (and therefore lack of access) to some elements of the population that fail to use landline phones.

Mail surveys (using traditional hard copy approaches) reach a given geographic area but usually have poor return rates. The cost of the survey, based on the printed materials (and mailing fees), becomes expensive compared to the cost of other ways of generating useful data. The use of mail surveys has becomes less and less frequent by researchers. An alternative, using electronic mail, costs less than using traditional mail, but it usually produces even lower response rates.

Each type of survey distribution can serve to ease the process of data collection, especially considering researchers can use different distribution methods in a research study. On the other hand, the nature of the research topic plays a role in determining the most efficient and effective method of distributing a survey to gather data.

Survey Advantages

Among the numerous advantages of surveys, they help researchers to obtain potentially large amounts of data in a short period of time. As mentioned in the section on survey distribution, participants can answer surveys online or onsite, which can save time for both the researcher and the participants. Moreover, researchers can have assistance in administering surveys, as it requires no specific skills. Some professional survey services use automated phone dialing to solicit survey responses.

While closed-ended questions that are concise and specific help participants supply basic answers, open-ended questions enable participants to provide potentially rich data or perhaps introduce other potential avenues of research for a scholar to explore. In addition, surveys are a good way to obtain accurate data about sensitive issues. Participants generally feel freer to express their opinion about sensitive topics, especially if they are assured that their identity remains anonymous.

Another advantage of surveys is that the data are often easy to analyze, especially by using software programs such as SPSS. Researchers only need to input the data and select the way they want the program to analyze the data. However, researchers will need to articulate the results of the survey with their research hypotheses. Another advantage is that the data from surveys are easy to store and access. One final advantage of a survey is that data might lead to interesting findings that were not initially considered by the researcher.

Survey Limitations and Disadvantages

While there is an abundance of benefits to utilizing surveys when conducting research, there are some disadvantages, particularly related to participants' comprehension of the questions, data analysis, and time. If participants misunderstand questions, they might skip some questions they deem vague. In addition, participants' answers might be unclear or inaccurate based on their understanding of the questions. Secondly, some surveys, especially those using open-ended questions, may require a considerable investment of time by the participants to complete the survey. Another disadvantage of open-ended questions is that participants

might write some responses that are illegible or they might drift off course from the intended direction of the research by introducing irrelevant issues to the topic. It is also necessary to consider that some respondents do not give much thought into answering survey questions and give random answers, which could produce wrong findings during data analysis.

Dalal Albudaiwi

See also Experience Sampling Method; External Validity; Internal Validity; Sampling Theory; Survey: Contrast Questions; Survey: Demographic Questions; Survey Instructions; Survey Response Rates; Surveys, Using Others'; Triangulation

Further Readings

Allen, M., Titsworth, S., & Hunt, S. K. (2009). *Quantitative research in communication.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Blair, J., Czaja, R. F., & Blair, E. (2013). *Designing surveys: A guide to decisions and procedures* (3rd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Harris, D. F. (2014). *The complete guide to writing questionnaires: How to get better information for better decisions.* Portland, OR: I&M Press.

Holtz-Bacha, C., & Stomback, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Opinion polls and the media: Reflecting and shaping public opinions.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Punch, K. F. (2005). *Introduction to social research-quantitative & qualitative approaches.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Wildemuth, B. M. (Ed.). (2009). *Applications of social research method to questions in information and library science*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Dalal Albudaiwi

- surveys
- surveying
- disadvantage

SAGE reference

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Survey Wording

A survey is a set of questions or statements to which participants give responses. A survey provides one of the best methods to obtain a large amount of data from participants. In this manner, survey data can provide a quantitative, qualitative, and/or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. The wording of the items of the survey is important because different words can generate different answers. When writing survey questions, researchers must take into consideration the stimulus function of the prompt. Survey questions should invoke a commonly understood concept and ask for a reaction or evaluation of that concept using commonly understood words and phrases. This entry provides some general considerations about survey wording. It then reveals some elements in survey design that researchers should avoid or use with caution when utilizing. Finally, ethical considerations regarding survey wording are reviewed.

Researchers designing a survey should carefully consider how participants from the sample population will interpret the words of the items. Among various survey challenges, poor wording is a main concern in threatening the quality of the survey. Issues may involve generational interpretation and application of terms or whether separate samples respond differently to common expressions. A survey may have an intention of generating measurement of a specific outcome, but the wording of the survey may produce an outcome not sought by the researcher because the participants responded differently based on a misunderstanding of the survey wording. For example, there exist serious disagreements about the value and reaction to the terms "Latina/o" and "Hispanic" to describe the ethnicity, race, or nationality of a person. Participants may experience different reactions to the survey and thus may answer questions differently based on the interpretations that exist with a specific term.

The survey wording must also be clear and lead the participants to provide responses that match the intent of the survey. For example, suppose a survey asks participants about their preference for a political candidate. The question asked could be, "Which candidate do you support for the elected position?" Alternatively, the question could be worded, "For which candidate are you planning to vote?" The first question asks what candidate a participant favors, while the second question asks who the participant will vote for, and the participant could have two different answers to those questions. A person may support or agree most with a particular candidate, but that candidate may have no chance of winning the election, so the person may intend to vote for a different candidate that has a more realistic chance of winning the election. The distinction of the two questions is one of attitude about the suitability of a candidate versus the actions a person will take in regards to making a choice among candidates. While the two views are often related, the action and attitude may become inconsistent for very rational and understood reasons.

Some General Considerations

Some main principles in writing questions are applicable for mail, web, or other types of surveys in which a respondent fills out the items by indicating a set of choices. A number of factors exist that affect the selection of the survey wording.

Nature of the Topic

Consider whether the topic is personal, professional, public, entertainment, etc. Each topic reflects a set of assumptions that people bring to the issue and they treat the survey consistent with that view. Consider the relationship between the topic and the targeted sample and whether the view is professional, public, technical, or personal.

Age of the Participants

Researcher should select words that are linguistically suitable for each age. Even participants from the same age group might comprehend the words differently due to education levels, cultural differences, etc. Therefore, researchers should avoid linguistically complex sentences and use words easily understood by all participants. The vocabulary choices should reflect not only the denotative meaning of the word but also consider the connotative implications of the word. The impact of using what is considered "loaded" or emotionally charged language may cause participants to respond in a biased way that potentially skews the data.

Gender of the Participants

Individuals have different experiences, often dictated by their gender, which may create divergent meanings of questions. The orientation of a person may change the relationship with the vocabulary used. The gender issue comes into play more prominently in languages in which the words and word transformations are gender-specific.

Sensitivity of the Topic

The sensitivity of the topic depends on the sample used by the person conducting the survey. One sample may consider issues of sexuality or birth control public policy issues whereas another sample may view such issues as extremely sensitive. For example, participants from some societies governed by a set of restrictive religious or political rules might not feel comfortable responding to some survey items. For example, some Muslim audiences may find any discussion of religious issues difficult and troubling because such discussions are left usually to professional clerics. The vocabulary for the discussion of some issues may be proscribed and expressions regulated both by custom as well as legal rules.

Tone of the Words Used

As a simple precondition, all the words in the individual items must work within the boundaries of all participants of the study. The items may, by using some words, incorporate a tone that triggers a particular valence response, either positive or negative. For example, using the word "addiction" in relationship to food or any kind of medication may cause a reaction (either positive or negative). As another example, a person that regularly uses heroin could be said to be a "drug abuser," "addict," "recreational user," or "illegal drug consumer." Each designation may be employed, but the emotionality of the reference as well as underlying values in the use of that reference become a part of the response. Participants may find a term's representation a validation or rejection of some held belief. The impact of the acceptance or rejection of a particular term may dictate the response on the part of the respondent. Researchers may wish to avoid using terms carrying an emotional reaction that might discourage people from answering the survey question and consider the implications for responses when choosing to employ those referents.

Elements to Avoid or Consider

There are certain types of words researchers have to be cautious about using when writing survey items. The

wording of survey items should encourage a person to express an opinion. Good survey items create the ability to provide a means to classify the sample on the basis of the responses. Items should encourage diversity in answers by providing some means of expression that encourages the members of the sample to provide an answer from a variety of views or orientations. This section provides some considerations of elements to avoid because the presence of the various words may create barriers to understanding the representation of the opinion. Particular items may generate reactance on the part of the members of the sample that cause a participant to drop out of the sample or create a motivation to answer the survey with inaccurate or misleading responses.

Sensitive words may create misleading responses or cause respondents to withdraw from completing the survey. Consider a variety of social factors (e.g., culture, politics, religion) that may impact how a person views the world. Researchers should consider what terms to use when describing some set of choices or the issue under consideration. For example, in an Islamic country, the discussion of religious affiliation represents a sensitive matter. Some people may deny that any differences exist among those who profess an identity as a Muslim. While such a question may be something viewed by many generating a survey as a simple demographic characteristic (e.g., Christians may be viewed as Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran), in some Middle Eastern countries the division becomes associated with violence and fear. Answering the question may create suspicion or hostility and therefore should be avoided among some populations. Similarly, questions about ethnicity, race, or sexuality may involve designations or references that require careful consideration. Particular terms carry important meanings of identity for the respondent and may create unintended impressions.

Researchers should also be careful not to use *misleading or vague words* that create an unintended impression. Participants do not want to spend much time trying to determine what certain words mean. In addition, misleading words do not help participants answer questions correctly. Therefore, the vagueness of the words in the questions often leads to confusing results. Scholars like Weimiao Fan and Zheng Yan point out that a survey question with poor wording will lead a respondent to misunderstand the question and give an inaccurate answer. Often a term or idea is something essential or important to the person asking the question but something that members of the sample do not understand. For example, suppose the survey asks a sample about support the United States is providing for Kurdish rebels. The geographic location and identification of the rebels may exist outside the knowledge of members of the sample. There are many different Kurdish rebel groups, each with a different agenda. For most audiences, particularly in the United States, the responses reflect only a vague understanding of the particular reference. Asking questions about the value of supporting the "freedom" fighters may create a response when no real attitude exists because that term creates an emotional connection to a cause not understood by the respondent.

Ambiguous words are words with more than one meaning. In this case, some participants may respond to one meaning or application of the word while other participants respond to a different meaning. Accordingly, interpreting the results will be complicated due to the different understanding of the questions. What typically happens is that the researcher will interpret the response by an intended meaning of the item but many respondents are answering what amounts to a different question.

Ethical Considerations

Some ethical considerations should be kept in mind while designing surveys. Since some terms and expressions possess different meanings in different societies, asking survey questions about certain issues or using certain words within a measure may be acceptable in some societies while in other societies it might be taboo.

Words Evoke Discrimination and Racism

Researchers should certainly avoid using any word that might arouse thoughts or feelings of discrimination. This requires that the researcher has experience and knowledge of the society in which the participants belong, in order to avoid any words that may signal thoughts of discrimination or racism. The sample responds to the concept not only on a cognitive level, but also on an emotional level. A negative emotional response may cause the sample to drop out of the survey or act negatively to various questions, thus impacting the results.

Use Caution With Issues Related to Religion and Other Holistic Affiliations, Beliefs, or Rituals

Some issues related to religion and spirituality can be sensitive. The more information the researchers have about the participants and their societies, the better survey the researchers can design.

Words Stir Up Political Issues

Political issues are also considered to have the potential to stir up strong emotions, so researchers should be cautious when asking questions about politics. Researchers must make sure that questions about politics are worded in a way that they are unbiased. Researchers also need to be aware of the rules and regulations of the country in which they conduct the survey.

Avoid Biased Words in the Survey

Biased words could lead to problems for the researcher because the words might offend participants. Topics relating to religion, politics, and health sometimes evoke strong responses from participants. To be safe, researchers should select their words carefully (e.g., using appropriately unbiased words when talking about a minority group).

Translations Must Be Accurate

Sometimes researchers need to translate the survey due to the variety of the sample. Translating surveys can be problematic and complicated if proper safeguards are not put into place. For example, a researcher might face trouble while translating some words and expressions. Many words and sentences the researchers might need to translate are complex words that are not easily translated from one language to another.

Overall, when writing survey questions, basic principles such as keeping questions simple and avoiding biased and vague language will help produce reliable results. The answers to the survey questions affect the results. The clearer and simpler the wording of the survey, the better the results.

Dalal Albudaiwi

See also [Freedom of Expression](#); [Gender-Specific Language](#); [Health Care Disparities](#); [Religious Communi-

cation; Scales, Semantic Differential; Survey: Leading Questions; Survey: Open-Ended Questions; Survey Response Rates; Underrepresented Group; Vulnerable Groups

Further Readings

Allen, M., Titsworth, S., & Hunt, S. K. (2009). *Quantitative research in communication.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Converse, J. M., & Presser, S. (1986). *Survey questions: Handcrafting the standardized questionnaire.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Fink, A. (2002). *How to ask survey questions*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Dalal Albudaiwi

- surveys
- surveying
- attitudes

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods

Survey Instructions

Survey instructions are a set of directions at the beginning of a survey tool that provide important information for participants regarding the purpose of the data collection and how to correctly complete the data assessment. Survey instructions are also often found throughout the survey when a new question format or section of the survey is introduced to the participant that requires further instructions. Communication researchers frequently use surveys as a tool to collect data to answer research questions or hypotheses. For example, a researcher may use a survey tool to collect data from adults in a romantic relationship regarding how they engage in conflict within their relationship. Understanding what components to address and how to properly write survey instructions is essential in the creation of an effective survey. This entry discusses and provides examples of each of the components that need to be included within survey instructions. It also addresses how to create instructions for each of the different types of questions that may be included within a survey.

Survey instructions help orient participants to the purpose of the survey and how the data will be utilized after it is collected. Instructions are often located at the beginning of the survey and before each new section within the tool. In addition to providing directions, instructions may also contain key information such as how long it will take to complete the survey, the purpose behind data collection, and the role of the participants as they answer each question. Writing clear and easy-to-follow survey instructions is a key aspect of creating an effective survey. Communication researchers often utilize surveys as a data collection tool that informs broader research question or hypotheses findings within the field of communication. Moreover, drafting and including clear, concise survey instructions is an essential component of the development and implementation of an effective survey tool.

Survey Instruction Components

Many surveys begin with a brief introduction that explains the topic and purpose of the survey. Several pieces of information typically are found within the introduction including: (a) name of the organization and role of the researchers conducting the survey; (b) purpose or goal of the survey; (c) how long the survey will take to complete; (d) how the information will be used; (e) whether responses are anonymous, confidential, or tracked; and (f) pertinent instructions not included in the survey questions.

Identifying the organization sponsoring the research provides participants with a better understanding of why the research project is being conducted. For example, if the research being conducted is for a pharmaceutical company, the participant may infer that the data collected will be used to help create marketing campaigns for a newly developed medicine. Conversely, if a university is sponsoring the research project, participants may conclude the endeavor is part of a larger research initiative to further knowledge within a particular field of study. In addition to identifying the organization, the primary investigating researcher and co-investigators should be listed by name and title. Including such information within the survey instructions provides full disclosure of who is leading the research. By identifying both the organization sponsoring the research and the researchers who are serving as the primary and co-investigators of the project, researchers provide participants with a clearer comprehension of how the data collected will be used.

Conveying the purpose or goal of the research is an important component of survey instructions. One or two sentences providing a clear, concise description of the rationale behind the research should be included after the organization and researchers have been identified. The purpose should convey the goal of the research and why the research is being undertaken. The following is an example: "The purpose of this survey is to explore how adult children handle conflict within their own romantic relationships. The information obtained from this survey will be used by communication researchers to better understand how conflict impacts romantic relationships and what strategies couples use to negotiate conflict when it arises." In other words, by providing participants with both the purpose and goal of the research project, researchers clearly explain why the research is being undertaken and what societal benefits may arise from participants' completing the survey.

Another important piece of information to include is how long it will take participants to complete the survey. Conveying the time requirement demonstrates a respect for the individual's time and helps participants judge if they have enough time to complete the survey now or if they need to wait until they have a larger span of time. If the survey is relatively short, sharing how much time is needed to complete the survey may also encourage participants to complete the survey immediately.

Survey instructions also need to share how the data collected will be used by the researchers. If the survey is being conducted by academic researchers, the investigators will usually indicate that the information will be used to help inform a larger body of knowledge on the topic and highlight future areas of research needed within a specific realm of communication research. Sometimes a project transcends academic interests because it also provides useful information for the sample population. In such cases, researchers should take care to note that the data collected will be used to improve the situation for a select population. For example, communication researchers may seek to better understand provider-HIV positive patient communication in order to develop best practices for physician-patient communication training. The result of this data collection may provide useful strategies for faculty as they train medical providers, subsequently providing better care for persons living with HIV. Clearly communicating how data will be used helps to inform participants' decisions regarding whether they will complete the survey.

Participants also need to be informed of whether the data collected will be anonymous, confidential, or tracked. This element of the survey instructions clearly articulates whether the answers provided by the participant could be linked back to the individual. For a study to be considered anonymous, the identity of the participant must not be known by the researchers, preventing any link between the participant and the data. For online surveys, accomplishing anonymity can be particularly challenging as most survey platforms automatically collect IP address information from participants unless directly programmed not to collect such data. In order for a survey to be classified as confidential, identifying information may be collected by researchers and typically stored in a separate data file. In such instances, researchers are obligated to explain on consent forms which members of the research team will have access to identifying data and when, and if, it will ever be disclosed. Finally, if a survey use tracked data, there are clear identifiers within the data set that link the answers provided by the participant back to a specific individual. Researchers must distinctly identify the survey type (e.g., anonymous, confidential, or tracked) within the survey instructions so that participants understand whether or not the information provided can be linked back to them and the possible outcomes of such links.

Additional pertinent information to the successful completion of the survey tool is the final component to address when developing effective survey instructions. Often researchers utilize this section to address specific scenarios or information that they want participants to focus on when answering the questions within the data assessment. For example, researchers may ask adults to answer the questions posed based on their current or most recent romantic relationship. Researchers may include additional information to address cultural or role differences among participants.

An example of survey instructions found at the beginning of a communication research survey is as follows:

> This research is being conducted by primary investigator Nancy A. Burrell, Professor, and co-investigator Kristine M. Nicolini, Doctoral Student, at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. The purpose of this survey is to explore how adult children handle conflict within their own romantic relationships based on observed conflict management strategies modeled by their parents and will be used to better understand how family-of-origin conflict may impact romantic relationships in adulthood. The survey will take 15 minutes to complete and all responses are confidential. Please focus on your most recent romantic relationship as you answer each question below. Thank you in advance for your participation.

While general instructions are used at the beginning of a survey as a mechanism to communicate the scope of the research being conducted, more specific instructions may be needed at the beginning of each section of the survey. Often researchers will utilize several different measurement scales within the same survey tool. In such cases, writing clear and easy-to-understand instructions for each section within a survey is of vital importance to ensure participants understand how to correctly complete the section. Additionally, some sections may only pertain to certain participants. In such cases, survey instructions may direct participants to complete a certain section of questions only if they provided a specific answer to a specific question. For example, a set of internal survey instructions may read, "Please complete this section if you answered 'yes' to question 11. If you answered no to question 11, please skip to question 15."

Developing clear, easy-to-understand survey instructions both at the beginning and throughout the survey tool is vital to the collection of an accurate dataset. Taking time to think through each of the important components to include at the beginning and throughout the survey are important steps in developing and implementing accurate survey instructions to ensure participants correctly complete the data assessment.

Nancy A. Burrell and Kristine M. Nicolini

See also Confidentiality and Anonymity of Participants; Data; Respondents; Survey Wording

Further Readings

Ha, L., Hu, X., Fang, L., Henize, S., Park, S., Stana, A., & Zhang, X. (2015). Use of survey research in top mass communication journals 2001–2010 and the total survey error paradigm. *Review of Communication, 15*(1), 39–59.

Harkness, J. (2012). Comparative survey research. In *The handbook of comparative communication research*, pp. 445–458. London, UK: Routledge.

Web Center for Social Research Methods. (n.d.). *Constructing the survey.* Retrieved from http://www.social-researchmethods.net/kb/survwrit.php

Nancy A. Burrell & Kristine M. Nicolini

- surveys
- surveying

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n612
10.4135/9781483381411.n612