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SCHOLARSHIP

KATJA LOZAR MANFREDA

WEB SURVEY ERRORS

UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, 2001.

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For web survey to become widely used as a complement to or as an alternative method of survey data collection, its validity needs to be tested. The author refers especially to convergent validity – the comparison of web survey results with results of other survey methods already proven to be valid. Such validity test indicates whether different methods, in this case different survey modes, are mutually exchangeable. It is commonly used to test validity of newly developed research methods.

In order to evaluate the validity of web surveys, the dissertation approaches this problem with a discussion of web survey errors. However, since there are a wide variety of uses of web surveys in practice today, but also many misunderstandings regarding their usefulness for scientific research, first the many types of web surveys are defined and described. Three typologies are given. The first typology was developed from the technical point of view. It includes all Internet surveys from the pioneering email surveys, through different types of web surveys to the latest integrated Internet surveys including web TV surveys, mobile Internet surveys and Internet CATI. The other two typologies include only web surveys that the dissertation deals with. The second typology focuses on the implementation aspect of web surveys. It distinguishes among three basic types – web surveys with general invitations, web surveys with individual invitations and intercept web surveys – and several subtypes, all together nine types of web surveys. A clear distinction among probability and non-probability web surveys is included in this typology. The third typology refers to the research fields where web surveys are used in practice: Internet usage, marketing research, customer satisfaction studies, web site assessment, establishment research, and psychological experiments.

In the rest of the dissertation the author then regularly refers to these types of web surveys when she discusses web survey errors. The specific survey errors are evaluated in relation to the types of web surveys and the purposes for which they are used. In the second part of the thesis the author concentrates on two types of web survey errors: the non-response error as an error of non-observation and the mode effect as an error of observation.

Regarding non-response error, the author shows that in general, web surveys experience lower response rates than other survey modes, when comparable samples are surveyed. This requires additional research about the factors influencing response in web surveys. However, owing to many types of web surveys, the (non)response in web surveys cannot be discussed only in terms of simple unit and item (non)response. Therefore, the author first defines the stages of the complex web survey process, including sampling stage, contact stage, questionnaire

retrieval, questionnaire completion and data-file construction. In relation to these stages, she also defines different response outcome rates for web surveys, i.e. response and completion rate, absorption and failure rate, co-operation rate, refusal rate, eligibility rate, click-through rate, and drop-out and complete rate.

Only after defining the basic concepts regarding non-response in web surveys, can she concentrate on the factors influencing this specific (non)response process. An extensive overview of research regarding different factors influencing response is presented: from the social and technological environment, through survey design characteristics to the characteristics of the participants (respondents) themselves. With two empirical studies she also tests the theory of non-response factors while applying the definitions of the different stages of the web survey process and different response outcome rates. In general, the hypothesis that different factors influence response at different stages of the web survey process is confirmed. That suggests that different measures should be developed to increase response at different stages. In addition, different variables should be taken into account when correcting for non-response bias by weighting or implementation procedures for individual stages of the web survey process.

Regarding mode effect, the author shows that web survey methodologists mostly address the practical question of whether a web survey produces the same result as other survey modes, given all the differences in the implementation procedures used. With one of her empirical studies comparing the web and the mail survey modes, she shows that differences in substantial responses rarely occur; however there are differences in the data quality measured with item non-response (larger for the web than the mail mode). Another approach to measuring mode effect error is studying the marginal effect of the survey mode by surveying the same participants with different survey methods. With another study using the latter approach, the author shows that substantial differences in responses are in general smaller for self-administered modes compared (web – mail) than for self- and interviewer-administered modes compared (web – telephone). For the web – telephone comparison, the substantial differences in answers increase especially with a larger number of answer categories, for sensitive questions and for difficult-to-answer questions. In both comparisons, the differences are also the largest for variables measuring attitudes while somewhat lower for behavioural and the lowest for factual variables. Specifically, respondents give fewer socially desirable answers in Web than in telephone survey, while there is no difference regarding this issue in web-mail comparison. In addition, in the web questionnaire respondents tend to report their Internet usage as less frequent than while answering the questionnaire in the “offline” world.

Survey errors should not be discussed without reference to survey costs, since in practice budget often limits the choice of implementation procedures for conducting web surveys. Therefore, in the last chapter the author proposes a methodological framework for evaluating errors and costs when deciding whether to use web instead of some other survey mode. Using this methodological framework, for a specific establishment study, she shows that a web survey with mail invitations can be used instead of a traditional mail survey, taking into account the costs and errors of the compared modes.