

Research Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Questionnaires can be thought of as a kind of written interview. They can be carried out face to face, by telephone, computer or post.

Questionnaires provide a relatively cheap, quick and efficient way of obtaining large amounts of information from a large sample of people.

Data can be collected relatively quickly because the researcher would not need to be present when the questionnaires were completed. This is useful for large populations when interviews would be impractical.

However, a problem with questionnaires is that respondents may lie due to social desirability. Most people want to present a positive image of themselves and so may lie or bend the truth to look good, e.g., pupils would exaggerate revision duration.

Questionnaires can be an effective means of measuring the behavior, attitudes, preferences, opinions and, intentions of relatively large numbers of subjects more cheaply and quickly than other methods. An important distinction is between open-ended and closed questions.

Type of Questions

Often a questionnaire uses both open and closed questions to collect data. This is beneficial as it means both quantitative and qualitative data can be obtained.

Closed Questions

Closed questions structure the answer by only allowing responses which fit into pre-decided categories.

Data that can be placed into a category is called nominal data. The category can be restricted to as few as two options, i.e., dichotomous (e.g., 'yes' or 'no,' 'male' or 'female'), or include quite complex lists of alternatives from which the respondent can choose (e.g., polytomous).

Closed questions can also provide ordinal data (which can be ranked). This often involves using a continuous rating scale to measure the strength of attitudes or emotions. For example, strongly agree / agree / neutral / disagree / strongly disagree / unable to answer.

Closed questions have been used to research type A personality (e.g., Friedman & Rosenman, 1974), and also to assess life events which may cause stress (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and attachment (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

Strengths

They can be economical. This means they can provide large amounts of research data for relatively low costs. Therefore, a large sample size can be obtained which should be representative of the population, which a researcher can then generalize from.

The respondent provides information which can be easily converted into quantitative data (e.g., count the number of 'yes' or 'no' answers), allowing statistical analysis of the responses.

The questions are standardized. All respondents are asked exactly the same questions in the same order. This means a questionnaire can be replicated easily to check for reliability. Therefore, a second researcher can use the questionnaire to check that the results are consistent.

Limitations

They lack detail. Because the responses are fixed, there is less scope for respondents to supply answers which reflect their true feelings on a topic.

Open Questions

Open questions allow people to express what they think in their own words. Open-ended questions enable the respondent to answer in as much detail as they like in their own words. For example: “can you tell me how happy you feel right now?”

If you want to gather more in-depth answers from your respondents, then open questions will work better. These give no pre-set answer options and instead allow the respondents to put down exactly what they like in their own words.

Open questions are often used for complex questions that cannot be answered in a few simple categories but require more detail and discussion.

Lawrence Kohlberg presented his participants with moral dilemmas. One of the most famous concerns a character called Heinz who is faced with the choice between watching his wife die of cancer or stealing the only drug that could help her.

Participants were asked whether Heinz should steal the drug or not and, more importantly, for their reasons why upholding or breaking the law is right

Strengths

Rich qualitative data is obtained as open questions allow the respondent to elaborate on their answer. This means the research can find out why a person holds a certain attitude.

Limitations

Time-consuming to collect the data. It takes longer for the respondent to complete open questions. This is a problem as a smaller sample size may be obtained.

Time-consuming to analyze the data. It takes longer for the researcher to analyze qualitative data as they have to read the answers and try to put them into categories by coding, which is often subjective and difficult. However, Smith (1992) has devoted an entire book to the issues of thematic content analysis. It includes 14 different scoring systems for open-ended questions.

Not suitable for less educated respondents as open questions require superior writing skills and a better ability to express one's feelings verbally.

Questionnaire Design

With some questionnaires suffering from a response rate as low as 5%, it is essential that a questionnaire is well designed.

There are a number of important factors in questionnaire design.

Aims

Make sure that all questions asked address the aims of the research. However, use only one feature of the construct you are investigating in per item.

Length

The longer the questionnaire, the less likely people will complete it. Questions should be short, clear, and be to the point; any unnecessary questions/items should be omitted.

Pilot Study

Run a small scale practice study to ensure people understand the questions. People will also be able to give detailed honest feedback on the questionnaire design.

Question Order

Questions should progress logically from the least sensitive to the most sensitive, from the factual and behavioral to the cognitive, and from the more general to the more specific.

The researcher should ensure that the answer to a question is not influenced by previous questions.

Terminology

There should be a minimum of technical jargon. Questions should be simple, to the point and easy to understand.

The language of a questionnaire should be appropriate to the vocabulary of the group of people being studied. Use statements which are interpreted in the same way by members of different subpopulations of the population of interest.

For example, the researcher must change the language of questions to match the social background of respondents' age / educational level / social class / ethnicity etc.

Presentation

Make sure it looks professional, include clear and concise instructions. If sent through the post make sure the envelope does not signify 'junk mail.'

Ethical Issues

The researcher must ensure that the information provided by the respondent is kept confidential, e.g., name, address, etc.

This means questionnaires are good for researching sensitive topics as respondents will be more honest when they cannot be identified. Keeping the questionnaire

confidential should also reduce the likelihood of any psychological harm, such as embarrassment.

Participants must provide informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire, and must be aware that they have the right to withdraw their information at any time during the survey/ study.

Problems with Postal Questionnaires

The data might not be valid (i.e., truthful) as we can never be sure that the right person actually completed the postal questionnaire.

Also, postal questionnaires may not be representative of the population they are studying?

This is because some questionnaires may be lost in the post reducing the sample size.

The questionnaire may be completed by someone who is not a member of the research population.

Those with strong views on the questionnaire's subject are more likely to complete it than those with no interest in it.

Benefits of a Pilot Study

A pilot study is a practice / small-scale study conducted before the main study. It allows the researcher to try out the study with a few participants so that adjustments can be made before the main study, so saving time and money.

It is important to conduct a questionnaire pilot study for the following reasons:

Check that respondents understand the terminology used in the questionnaire.

Check that emotive questions have not been used as they make people defensive and could invalidate their answers.

Check that leading questions have not been used as they could bias the respondent's answer.

Ensure the questionnaire can be completed in an appropriate time frame (i.e., it's not too long).

Source-<https://www.simplypsychology.org/questionnaires.html>