

# **Applying survey participation theory to Web surveys**

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## **Keywords**

Web survey participation behavior; survey (non-)participation theory; expert survey; principal components analysis

## **Purpose of the study**

The study aims at improving our understanding about the influence of societal-level, sample person, and survey design factors when inviting people to participate in Web surveys. The study links existing theoretical frameworks on survey participation behavior to state-of-the-art empirical findings from methodological Web survey research.

## **Design/methodology/approach**

In an expert survey, 37 psychological researchers at Austrian, German, and Swiss universities were asked to rate how suited 11 theoretical survey participation frameworks are to explain the influence of different factors on Web survey participation. I use principal component analysis (PCA) to visualize the relationship among the individual theoretical frameworks and between the frameworks and the factors influencing Web survey participation.

## **Findings**

Based on the expert ratings, most of the theoretical frameworks proposed for traditional survey modes are also applicable to Web surveys. Self-perception, commitment/involvement, Leverage-salience Theory, Planned Behavior, and Cognitive Dissonance can explain the influence of sample member characteristics (i.e., personality, topic interest, attitudes toward surveys, previous Web survey participation). Some of Cialdini's (2009) compliance heuristics are appropriate for explaining the effects of Web survey design attributes (e.g., reciprocity – unconditional incentives; authority-obedience and liking – sender and sponsor and reminders). Social Exchange Theory explains both sample person characteristics and Web survey design attributes.

## **Originality/value**

Methodological research on survey participation has mainly focused on the influence of individual survey design features on response rates, rather than on holistic theoretical frameworks explaining psychological effects during the survey participation decision process. This is the first study that establishes a systematic link between existing theoretical frameworks used to explain survey participation behavior and empirical findings on the influence of different factors on Web surveys participation.

### **Research limitations/implications**

This study uses expert ratings from a relatively small number of psychologists. Future studies should compare these findings to expert ratings from researchers in other fields, such as sociology, who might use different explanatory frameworks.

### **Practical implications**

This study helps researchers and practitioners to better understand the theoretical implication different factors have on sample members' participation decision in Web surveys. Therefore, the findings can provide guidance for designing and implementing Web surveys.

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