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An exploration of a respondent pre-qualifying framework to increase response rates in social media initiated online surveys

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ABSTRACT

The use of web-based surveys is currently increasing due to its cost-effectiveness and agility as it provides access to market researchers to web-connected populations who are unlikely to answer through traditional survey methods. However, survey response rates in market research are in general decline and among survey platforms, web-based surveys have the highest rates of non-response. Thus, there is a need to address the declining response rates for web-based surveys particularly unit response rates – the likelihood the respondent would answer the survey. This paper proposes a respondent prequalifying framework that reduces unit non-response rates of web-based non-probabilistic surveys. A checklist of respondent characteristics influencing the likelihood of unit non-response was developed. The framework was then adopted for its applicability by replicating the recruitment phase of two case studies wherein the prequalifying checklist was applied with consideration to the respondent profile requirements of each study. While this paper does not intend to provide robust empirical evidence to the proposed framework, it demonstrates a promising framework that can be used to increase unit non-response rate by comprehensively integrating the pre-qualifying factors in the domain literature and carefully developing such framework to the most plausible direction a web-survey can be implemented. Findings suggest that (1) the proposed respondent prequalifying framework increases the unit response by prequalifying the sample in the recruitment stage, and (2) increasing the threshold value may increase unit response rates with careful consideration to some significant issues such as the weights assigned to the prequalifying factors, the quality of the background information of the respondents in relation to the prequalifying factors, and the sensitivity of the survey topic. The proposed framework is developed with strong theoretical grounding and detailed discussion for its practical use is also provided. The framework benefits market researchers by reducing unit non-response costs and increasing efficiency in social media-based market surveys.

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1. Introduction

A challenge in market research today is the increasing unit non-response rates in surveys (Bayart and Bonnel, 2015). Unit non-response is defined as not being able to get any survey measurements on a sample unit (Groves et al., 2002). Yan and Curtin (2010) described unit nonresponse as the complete absence of an interview from the respondent. Unit non-response rates are directly proportional to the cost of a survey (Groves et al., 2002) since additional effort and actions are needed to reduce non-response such as follow-up calls or employing additional interviewees. Two common responses exist when dealing with unit non-response. Researchers may either (1) weigh data to correct for non-

response errors (Armoogum and Dill, 2015) or (2) increase the response rate in areas such as questionnaire design, respondent burden, the use of multiple survey modes (Bonnel et al., 2015), and also the determination of the characteristics (e.g. motivations, culture, tendencies, and preferences) of the target respondents (Vivo et al., 2017).

Of the survey modes, a web-based survey has the highest rate of non-response (Szolnoki and Hoffmann, 2013) and samples from web surveys are still fewer representatives of the population and with a widening gap between the users and non-users of the internet (Choi et al., 2017). Mierzwa et al. (2016) argued that it is still far from the reliability of face-to-face interview (FTFI) that is considered the golden standard of research surveys having the highest response rate and reporting quality though it requires a considerable amount of logistics, resources, and personnel to do (Bonnel et al., 2015). However, web-surveys are seen to be a promising tool

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by researchers with the democratization of data processing and internet access (Bayart and Bonnel, 2015) especially with the increasing use of mobile internet access globally (de Abreu e Silva and Davis, 2015). Unlike phone interviews or FTFI, web-based surveys have the least average cost of contact due to limited required personnel to administer such approach (Bayart and Bonnel, 2015).

In web surveys, social media particularly Facebook has recently been used in surveys as researchers study user behavior and implications of social media use in the human experience in various disciplines (Kuru and Pasek, 2016). Bosnjak and Tuten (2001) highlighted that web-based survey method is still relatively new in research based on their review of the domain literature. It is even newer with social media site assisted surveys as pointed out by Gulbahar and Yildirim (2015). The built-in metrics and the user information available on Facebook make it attractive in social, political, and marketing studies, among others. Still, researchers face challenges in using social media such as individual biases, non-representativeness, high non-response rates, and even the content of the social media ad used to recruit respondents affects the response rate and kind of respondents the research would attract (Choi et al., 2017).

Several recent studies revealed declining response rates across various settings and survey methods (Krishnan and Poulouse, 2016; Stoop et al., 2016; Watanabe et al., 2017). Incentives, follow-up methods, and questionnaire design are areas that researchers improve to lower non-response rates although these mean additional costs especially for giving out incentives. However, in a review of the literature, Groves et al. (2002) have observed that sample designs which reduce the selection of subpopulations that produce low response rates have been in use and have shown to reduce survey costs. Responded characteristics or factors are taken into account by the sampling design to minimize non-response. Although studies on respondent factors related to non-response such as those of Schneider et al. (2012), Angeliki et al. (2016), and Akbulut et al. (2017) exist, there seems to be an absence of the collation of the findings of these factors across studies. Thus, there is a need to address the declining response rates in market research while keeping costs down and taking advantage of the collection of findings on respondent factors related to non-response.

Thus, this work proposes the development of a respondent pre-qualifying tool for researchers to select better-responding survey population samples from social media (i.e., Facebook). The inherent factors of the respondents (e.g., characteristics, demographics, biases, culture, among others) that influence or are related to non-response that can be used to pre-qualify respondents, particularly for web-based surveys recruiting or initiated through social media, were reviewed from current literature. The proposed tool addresses non-response issues in the recruitment stage particularly in further filtering the target respondents' inherent factors. The focus of this paper would be limited to unit non-response wherein sample subjects do not participate in the survey. Two case studies described in the current literature were adopted in order to demonstrate the applicability of the proposed prequalifying framework and to gain useful insights regarding its application in actual research surveys. Note that providing robust empirical evidence to our proposed framework is not the main focus of this paper. The main goal of this work is to develop a respondent pre-qualifying framework that can be used to increase unit response rate by comprehensively integrating the pre-qualifying factors in the cutting-edge literature on this topic and carefully developing such framework to the most plausible direction a web-survey can go through. The proposed framework is developed with strong theoretical grounding and detailed discussion for its practical use is also provided. The contribution of this work is the development of a prequalifying framework that further filters respondents in order to increase

response rates in social media initiated web-surveys under a non-probabilistic sampling platform.

2. Review of related literature

2.1. Importance of marketing research

Peter and Donnelly (2011) argued that marketing research must be an aid to decision-making, not a substitute for it. Marketing research is a tool used to increase the chances of making good decisions as it involves the generation, analysis, and interpretation of the information about the environment for use in marketing decision-making. However, there are critical factors that must be recognized by marketing managers to mitigate bad decision-making (Peter and Donnelly, 2011). These are the following: (1) errors can be present even in the most carefully executed research, (2) marketing research does not provide certainty on what would happen in the future, (3) since no marketing research study includes all the factors which could influence the success of a certain strategy, marketing managers should use their own knowledge and experience to make decisions.

With the rapid expansion of the Internet, online or web surveys have become increasingly popular (Zhang et al., 2017). Beebe et al. (1997) identified a number of advantages for online survey approach: simplified work for the interviewers, fast data processing, and low costs. Couper et al. (2001) also affirmed that web-based surveys in research offer the least expensive mode of gathering data. Its capability for instantaneous checking (Dillman, 2007), capability to verify or clarify responses, better filters, have less physical logistics involved in the implementation of the survey, and faster and more accurate data processing and gathering (Bayart and Bonnel, 2015) could replace the traditional paper questionnaires with only minor effects on response rates as argued by Hohwü et al. (2013). Peter and Donnelly (2011) added that web-surveys enable visual stimuli and they can be answered at the convenience of respondents. With the web being digital in nature, the digital engagement can be used to appeal to new audiences and enrich the experience of the existing audience (Walmsley, 2016). On the other hand, Peter and Donnelly (2011) pointed out a number of disadvantages of web surveys. These are: (1) web surveys are prone to bogus responses, (2) they need to be checked for duplication, (3) self-selection bias by the respondents, (4) researchers limited ability to reach quality respondents and confirm responses, and the (4) difficulty in generating sample frames for probability sampling (Peter and Donnelly, 2011). Web surveys are also shaped by survey errors which include non-response errors (Alsnih, 2006; Groves and Lyberg, 2010). To add, web-based surveys are limited to the internet access and the capability of a respondent to use web technology (Bayart and Bonnel, 2015). Despite the advantages and disadvantages of the web survey, internet-based surveys have gained expansive use particularly in market research where they are used for testing various product or service concepts, customer satisfaction, and for brand evaluations (Angeliki et al., 2016).

2.2. Social media (i.e., Facebook) in marketing research

Gulbahar and Yildirim (2015) found that the importance of social media along with the internet has been recognized in every industry sector. It allows sharing of customer experiences through customer-generated content as noted by Blackshaw (2006). It creates differentiation from rivals and also allows the delivery or marketing initiatives through the internet across platforms. Constantindes (2014) proposed two roles of social media in marketing: as a source of customer's voice and market intelligence and as a direct public relations and marketing channel. This was

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