

Wiki Activity: Questionnaires

Find a questionnaire and critique the design, both the format and the questions used.

Consider areas such as 'why is this question included?', 'is the form of the question appropriate?' etc. How can you improve the questionnaire?

Put your analysis in the module wiki and comment on others' analyses.

I selected the Ofcom Media Attitudes Survey 2021. The survey was available online and on paper, which made it accessible to people with and without access to the Internet (good start). The paper survey is available here:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/239223/BBC-Performance-Tracker-2021-2022-paper-questionnaire.pdf, and the online survey is here:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/239222/BBC-Performance-Tracker-2021-2022-online-questionnaire.pdf.

There are a lot of differences between the online and paper versions of the questionnaire:

Firstly, the paper questionnaire does not make its purpose clear, nor that it is optional. The online version does, so perhaps the letter that was sent alongside the paper version included comments describing its purpose and stressing that it is optional, however I believe that best practice would be to include clear statements on the questionnaire itself.

Similarly, whilst the online questionnaire gives an estimated time to complete of 20-25 minutes, the paper version does not, which again is poor practice.

The sequencing of the questions is much clearer in the online questionnaire. The online version starts with some simple demographic questions to give respondents a comfortable beginning, whereas the paper version leaves the demographic questions until the end, which feels awkward.

Early in the paper questionnaire are questions about online usage, which then leads the participant to doing the online version if they are regular Internet users. There is clearly a push to try to get as many people as possible to complete the online version, which is understandable because the results would be much quicker to process. However, if the reason for making the paper version more cumbersome was to encourage people to complete the online version then that would be a mistake because it would potentially reduce the response rate for people who would only wish to complete the paper version, thereby skewing the results towards heavier online users.

I was also concerned about the different terms used for gender identity between online and paper surveys, especially given the sensitivities around this question. For example, the online version says:

S2. SHOWCARD S2

And now, a few questions about you. Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?

Please select one option

Man	1
Woman	2
Non-binary	3
In another way	4
Prefer not to say	5

Whereas the paper version says:

Q1. Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?

Please tick one option

Male		Prefer to use my own term	
Female		Prefer not to say	

Referring to best practice from University of Oxford (N.D.), the paper version uses best practice “Male” and “Female”, but excludes “non-binary”, including only “Prefer to use my own term”, which could sound insulting in this sensitive area (something not included as an option isn’t necessarily the respondents own term, and they might feel marginalised to be told that it is). The online version correctly includes “Non-binary”, but uses “Man” and “Woman” instead of “Male” and “Female”, which might be OK, but why make them different?

The questionnaire has decision logic so certain questions are presented based upon answers to previous questions. In the online questionnaire that is handled automatically, but in the paper version in needs to be described. I feel that the sequencing is not logical for Q10 because if there are no children under 16 (or don’t know/prefer not to say) the respondent is first directed to a section if they don’t live alone, and then to a different section if they do live alone. Starting with the negative scenario is less clear, so they should’ve started with the “live alone” option, after which the “do not live alone” flows much more logically:

Q10. Do any children aged under 16 live in your household?

Please tick all that apply

Yes, aged 0-2		CONTINUE TO Q11
Yes, aged 3-4		
Yes, aged 5-10		
Yes, aged 11-15		
No children aged under 16		SKIP TO Q12 IF YOU DO NOT LIVE ALONE
Don't know		SKIP TO Q13 IF YOU LIVE ALONE
Prefer not to say		

Finally, the online questionnaire asks about how often different channels are watched, but the paper version excludes those questions. If they were not important enough for the paper version, why include them in the online version? And if they were important, why exclude them from the paper version? Being easier to ask in the online version is not a good excuse, because it would only show results from online respondents which might not be a representative sample.

Moving away from differences between the online and paper questionnaires to observations that are consistent with both:

“The BBC’s public duties” section contains a series of questions with answers on a 10-point Likert scale (plus “don’t know”) where 1 is “least” and 10 is “most”. This is followed by a section comparing the BBC to other service providers, using a 5-point Likert scale (plus “don’t know”) ranging from “much better” to “much worse”. I have no objection to the different scale sizes, and certainly having a central “about the same” option for the comparison questions seems sensible so an odd-scale seems appropriate. The issue is that the sections change from an ascending scale to descending, which is quite jarring. There doesn’t seem to be a difference in research quality by using ascending or descending scales (Menold & Bogner, 2016), although (Story & Tait, 2019: 196) recommend presenting “from negative to positive”, but unless there is a specific need to check that a respondent is paying attention, I think the scales should remain consistent in order to make the survey easier to complete, and therefore more likely to be completed.

Having critiqued the questionnaires, they are not all bad. The wording of the questions appears to have been carefully considered, for the most part, to avoid ambiguity, assumptions and bias. They are perhaps a little too descriptive at times in order to avoid ambiguity, and so could have been a little more concise, but generally I think the questions are worded in a way to be clear and unbiased.

References

Menold, N. & Bogner, K. (2016) Design of rating scales in questionnaires. *GESIS survey guidelines*, 4.

Story, D.A. & Tait, A.R. (2019) Readers Toolbox: Understanding Research Methods. *American Society of Anaesthetics*, 130(2): 192-202.

University of Oxford (N.D.) Gender identity survey questions. Available from: <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/gender-identity-survey-questions> [Accessed 11 December 2023].