

SSI POV: Online

Questionnaire Length, Fatigue Effects and Response Quality

SSI has tracked the impact of questionnaire length on fatigue and data quality across several years and found the effects of increasing length have remained consistent over time:

- **Response rate does not depend on interview length.**
- **Longer surveys do not necessarily mean increased drop out; most drop out has occurred by the halfway stage, irrespective of interview length.**
- **Participants get fatigued, pay less attention to the task in hand and increase their speed of response as the interview progresses.**
- **Data quality suffers as interview length increases .**

Although response rates have plummeted since online research began, drop-out rates have remained remarkably constant. This shows, perhaps, that people have the same level of attention span, or at least the same level of commitment to complete a task once they've started.

When Does Drop Out Occur?

Whether a survey is short (about 10 minutes) or long (about 30 minutes) most of the drop out occurs by the halfway point of the survey. We have noted in recent years that people are taking a shorter time than they used to to complete surveys. This may be due to increased bandwidth leading to faster response time, or to increasing familiarity with the survey environment on the part of many participants (knowing where the buttons are and the like). By employing a block-rotation design, we see that as the same block of questions are moved further back in the study, the time taken to complete them gradually reduces. This could be due to increased familiarity with the question set; but we were able to show that at least some of the increased speed was due to fatigue.

Slider Scale Tests Demonstrate the Impact of Fatigue

Among the satisficing tests were slider scales. The slider bar was positioned at the mid-point so it was possible to click on "next" without moving the slider and still leave some data behind. The likelihood of skipping the question rose as the skippable question was encountered further and further into the questionnaire. This was particularly true for the long survey, which, at nearly 25 minutes, is still too long.

One block of questions about holidays was only shown to people who said they'd been on a holiday. Since participants were randomly assigned to see this block either early or late in the survey (1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th position) we would expect to see the incidence of qualification to be the same wherever it was positioned, and the same incidence in both the long and short surveys. This was not the case. The

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highest incidence of qualification for the short break's block of questions was 68%. This occurred on the short survey when positioned first. The level of qualification declined at each position further into the questionnaire to finally reach 50% when the block was positioned 4th. The same phenomenon occurred on the long survey. Qualification started out at 64% and finished at 47%.

Open-End Questions Reveal Answers Shorten as Survey Progresses

Data quality can also be measured by answers in open questions. There should be no real difference between the number of words or number of characters used in the same open-end question, whether it was asked first or last. We found that in the long survey the number of characters typed decreased as the survey progressed.

The only reason we can see the data quality effects is that we have a block rotation design in this experiment. If we did not, then how would we judge the quality of the responses we got later in a long survey?

The Participant Viewpoint

Participants (especially online panelists) tend to keep going on to the end. Is it their fault that they are tired and cannot think as clearly as we would like them to?

In the "old days" of telephone and face-to-face interviewing, the interviewer would hear when participants became tired and started to satisfice. They would take pity on them, perhaps dropping out of interview mode for a moment or two, providing a mental break before going back to the task in hand.

Where in our online surveys do we offer our participants the same courtesy?

This research was original conducted in 2004. When SSI repeated it in 2009, it appeared that participants were not as diligent as participants were in 2004. It is hard to believe that they are hugely different people; it is more likely that it is we, as market researchers, who have caused this change.

The survey we presented them in the 2009 research was certainly not "best-in-class" given everything we know now about survey design. (This was deliberately so to maintain comparability with our 2004 experiment.) We'd like to think that the participants treated it in part with the disdain it deserved rather than being inherently less involved and engaged than the 2004 participants.

SSI's Conclusion

Interview lengths of 20 minutes or less can produce wonderful and engaged responses if well-designed. The fact that we saw very much less satisficing and cheating in the short survey attests to this.

We make no apology in repeating the conclusion of 2004:

"If researchers work to keep surveys shorter, it will not only help ensure response quality, but it will also make for more motivated and responsive participants."

