Customer Surveys Are Not Always Accurate: A Conceptual Study

S. Suneetha Devi, Associate Professor, Padala Rama Reddi College of Commerce and Management, Hyderabad
Prof. A. Vidyadhar Reddy, Professor, Department of Business Management, Osmania University, Hyderabad.

Abstract
Most of the social science research and studies depend on surveys and the quality of survey data collected. In surveys, the researcher assumes that respondents report what they know and believe honestly and accurately. On the contrary, in several research studies and occurrences respondents have been found over stating or understating their responses which may or may not be deliberate. This study attempts to review relevant theories and studies and discuss their repercussion on survey measurement. The study found that almost all survey research instruments, all types of interviews including polls and focus groups are open to the risk of inaccurate information. Reliable information can only be acquired by combing various methods like observation, experimentation, multiple sources of data, formal model building and testing, document analysis, and comparison.

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Introduction
Most of the social science research and studies depend on surveys and the quality of survey data collected. Whether the respondents have answered the questions accurately, is crucially important for the cumulative knowledge in social sciences. Accuracy of responses may not be a sufficient condition for data quality, but it is a essential one.

In surveys, the researcher assumes that respondents report what they know and believe honestly and accurately. On the contrary, in several studies and occurrences, especially in polls surveys and job interviews, respondents have been found overstating or understating their responses which may or may not be deliberate. For example: when in a restaurant, when customer is asked “if the food is good”, there is an inclination to respond favourably because the negative response might place the service at peril. This study attempts to review relevant theories and studies and discuss their repercussion on survey measurement.

Literature Review
Numerous studies have been done and various measures have been developed to evaluate whether or not respondents are distorting their answers (Paulhus, 2002). A consensus has been found in collected works accrediting Social desirability bias for such distortion.

Social desirability
Social desirability is the tendency of some respondents to report an answer in a way they think to be more socially acceptable than would be their "true" answer. They do this to project a positive image of themselves and to avoid receiving negative evaluations. The product of the strategy is over reporting of socially desirable behaviours or attitudes and underreporting of socially undesirable behaviours or attitudes (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964). This affinity can pose a problem in research survey, especially when administering questionnaires.

Areas where socially desirable responding (SDR) is of special concern are self-reports of abilities, personality, sexual behaviour, and drug use. Other topics those are sensitive to social desirability bias:

a) Personal income and earnings, often inflated when low and deflated when high
b) Feelings of low self-worth and/or powerlessness, often denied
c) Excretory functions, often approached uncomfortably, if conversed at all
d) Defiance with medicinal dosing schedules, often inflated
e) Religion, often either escaped or uncomfortably approached
f) Patriotism, either inflated or, if denied, done so with a fear of other party's judgement
g) Bigotry and intolerance, often repudiated, even if it exists within the responder
h) Intellectual achievements, often inflated
i) Physical appearance, either inflated or deflated
j) Acts of real or imagined physical violence, often denied
k) Indicators of charity or "benevolence", often inflated
l) Illegal acts, often denied

In 1964, Wiggens classified socially desirable responding into two factors and labelled them Alpha and Gamma. Damarin and Messin opined that the Alpha factor might represent an unconscious, rather than deliberate, attempt to evaluated biases--which they called an autistic bias in self regard. In contrast, they opined the Gamma factor might represent a conscious or intentional attempt to bias their responses--which they called a propagandistic bias.
In 1978, Sackeim and Gur proposed Self Deception and Other Deception and according to Sackeim and Gur, some individuals seem to be unrealistically positive when they describe themselves, although seem to be oblivious to this distortion where as some individuals deliberately strive to depict themselves positively.

In 1984 Paulhus revised the classification that was proposed by Damarin and Messick and then epitomized by Sackeim and Gur. Paulhus classified socially desirable responding into self deception and impression management. His definition of self deception overlapped with the definition that was utilized by Sackeim and Gur (1978). Furthermore, his definition of impression management overlapped with the definition of other deception that was used by Sackeim and Gur (1978).

In 1991, Paulhus and Reid sub classified self deception into self enhancement and self denial. Self enhancement refers to the extent to which individuals inadvertently exaggerate their desirable qualities. Self denial refers to the degree to which individuals inadvertently conceal or minimize undesirable qualities.

In general, it is assumed that impression management and social desirability reflect undesirable tendencies. For example, some researchers assume that impression management implies defensive responses. When asked questions about themselves, respondents feel susceptible and respond defensively, inflating their qualities. Nevertheless, this susceptibility may compromise their performance in many public settings. In short, impression management or bias tends to coincide with impaired performance.

Alternatively, other researchers assume that impression management is adaptive. That is, some people are friendly and can willingly inhibit their inclinations to accommodate the needs of other individuals. Because of this capacity, they select responses to questions that are likely to be perceived as desirable. Therefore, impression management and related biases may instead coincide with excellent performance, at least in some situations.

Acquiescence
Acquiescence is the tendency to agree rather than disagree with propositions in general (Lentz, 1938). As studied by (Paulhus, 1984) some respondents tend to agree with statements or say “yes” to questions; whereas some respondents tend to disagree with statements or say “no” to questions. Rather than a mechanical response to any question, this tendency is assumed to emerge when the subject is uncertain. Some researchers have claimed that acquiescence can be a serious confound in self-reports of attitudes, ability and achievement, personality, and psycho-pathology. Moreover, acquiescence has been found to interact with social status variables such as race and education.

Extremity Response Bias (ERB)
Extremity response bias (ERB) is the tendency to use the extreme choices on a rating scale (e.g., 1 and 7 on a seven-point scale). Situational factors such as ambiguity (Shulman, 1973), emotional arousal, and speediness (Paulhus, 1989) induce temporary rises in ERB. The individual exhibiting a consistent ERB across time and stimuli may be said to have an extremity response style; low scorers on this construct may be said to have a moderate response bias, tending to use the midpoint as often as possible. Early reviews by Peabody (1962) and Hamilton (1968) concluded that ERB is a consistent individual difference, and more recent studies have sustained this conclusion.

Anonymity
If respondent’s name is kept anonymous, researchers assume that anonymity can diminish social desirability biases. On the contrary, Lelkes et al (2012) showed, anonymity can also compromise the accuracy of some responses. Sometimes anonymous people do not feel accountable and therefore they more inclined to conserve their effort. They do not reflect upon questions carefully. Consequently, they often choose the first answer that is evoked in their mind; the accuracy of their answers may dissipate. Lelkes et al (2012) conducted a series of studies that explore this matter. In the first study, participants were asked to explore various websites to collect information about a specific topic: the mountain pygmy possum. Five websites were listed, although participants were also encouraged to search other sites that could be relevant to this topic. Then, half the participants were told to specify their name, whereas the other participants completed this task anonymously—and were indeed told to refrain from including information that could uncover their identity. Yet, unknown to participants, spyware was used to track the sites they visited.

Next, participants completed a measure that gauges whether they are willing to concede socially undesirable behaviours, such as “I have sometimes explored pornographic sites on the Internet.” In addition, participants indicated which sites they had visited. Finally, all participants completed a battery of four tests, including questions that gauged the extent to which they enjoyed the topic as well as the emotions they are experiencing now.

Anonymity did increase the likelihood that participants would concede to behaviours that are socially undesirable. Yet, anonymity also provoked inaccurate responses: The number of sites that anonymous participants claimed they visited was especially likely to diverge from the number of sites they actually visited.
thermore, when participants were anonymous, the variability of their responses diminished, especially during the third and fourth battery of questions. Presumably, because of fatigue and limited effort, they simply indicated the same response to almost all questions, called non-differentiation.

Levashina and Campion (2007) conducted a research on behaviours in job interviews that symbolise faking and impression management. Their study revealed embellishing; (e.g. "I exaggerated the impact of my performance in my past jobs."). tailoring; (e.g. "I distorted my qualifications to match qualifications required for the job."), fit enhancing; (e.g. "I inflated the fit between my values and goals and values and goals of the organization") constructing; (e.g. "I told fictional stories prepared in advance of the interview to best present my credentials"), inventing; (e.g. "I claimed that I have skills that I do not have."), borrowing; (e.g. "I described team accomplishments as primarily my own."), masking; (e.g. "I talked mainly about my strengths to mask my weaknesses."), distancing; (e.g. "I tried to suppress my connection to negative events in my work history"), omitting; (e.g. "I tried to avoid discussing my lack of skills or experiences"), conforming; (e.g. "I tried to agree with interviewer outwardly even when I disagree inwardly"), interview enhancing; (e.g. "I exaggerated my positive comments about the organization.")

This scale was used to uncover some interesting insights. For example, in an anonymous study, participants who conceded they apply these behaviours were more likely to be accepted into the next stage of a recruitment process (Levashina & Campion, 2007). In addition, people who completed a situational judgment interview, instead of a behavioural interview, were more inclined to exhibit these behaviours (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

Knowledge
Knowledge of respondents also may be reason for erroneous answers. Some of the respondents may not have relevant knowledge or information. Rather than accepting the ignorance, the respondents tend to guess the answers. Sometimes, even though the respondents have knowledge or information regarding the research subject, the knowledge or information may be inaccurate.

Memory
When respondents are asked about past behaviour or attitudes and opinions regarding past events or about future intended behaviour, respondents tend to depend on their memories. Researchers assume that respondents (a) have actually experienced the phenomenon being investigated, (b) have retained the experience in their memory and (c) have experiences stimulate information stored in memory or can prompt irrelevant or incorrect information stored in memory. Thus respondents are dependent on their memory processes for the answers (George Beam, 2012). Sometimes respondents do not have the experience of the phenomenon in question, but assume that they have or equate it with a similar experience. Sometimes, respondents do have a relevant experience but have difficulty in recalling what they have experienced. (George Beam 2012).

Conclusion
This study is not to undermine survey research but makes an attempt to understand the perils of having survey research as a primary source of reliable information. Almost all survey research instruments, all types of interviews including polls and focus groups are open to the risk of inaccurate information. In survey research, the researchers can only see answers to questions, it is impossible for them, or anyone else, to evaluate the results. They cannot know if the answers correspond to respondent’s actual behaviours (objective phenomena) or to their true beliefs and opinions (subjective phenomena). Reliable information can only be acquired combining various methods like observation, experimentation, multiple sources of data, formal model building and testing, document analysis, and comparison.

References


