Why Take a Survey? What Participants Tell Us

Understanding why people participate in surveys is central to improving recruitment, reducing nonresponse bias, and maintaining panel retention. This research investigates reported participation motives using a measurement instrument designed to capture intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with an emphasis on key survey design features (e.g., incentives, length, mode). The instrument was implemented across five studies spanning diverse populations and sample sources (including probability, non-probability, and student samples) and fielded in rating and ranking formats to capture both absolute endorsement of motives and their relative priority. Beyond comparisons across sample sources, one study included a nonresponse follow-up, enabling direct comparisons between respondents and true nonrespondents, and another study linked the motive measures to participation in subsequent panel waves. Across studies, we find clear differences in reported motive patterns between populations and samples, alongside substantial heterogeneity in motive orientations ranging from primarily intrinsic to primarily extrinsic. High participation-prone respondents show broad endorsement (many reasons rated important and several selected), whereas low participation-prone respondents show broad rejection (most reasons rated low and few or none selected). Taken together, the findings imply that, in contexts where perceived costs are salient and expected gains are minimal, survey design should focus not only on incentives but also on reducing reasons to opt out.

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