

RESOURCE REVIEW

A review of free online survey tools for undergraduate students

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Abstract

Undergraduate students are often required to collect survey data as part of their studies, but they rarely receive any detailed guidance on choosing an appropriate free online survey tool. In addition, many universities do not provide undergraduate students with an institutionally supported and managed online survey tool. Because there are so many online survey services available, the lack of an institutionally managed survey tool coupled with a lack of proper guidance on their selection and use can cause a great deal of stress and possible expense to students. In order to alleviate this problem, ten prominent free online survey services were reviewed in order to give students, particularly undergraduate students in higher education, some guidance in this matter. Three essential criteria were borne in mind when evaluating the tools: ease of use; ability to export data, and; UK Data Protection Act compliance. Although this paper is predominantly focused on UK students undertaking surveys which collect data that could personally identify a respondent, conclusions are generalised to include recommendations for surveys collecting non-personally identifiable data, and for students studying outside of the UK. Based on the findings of the review, students needing to use a free online survey tool are recommended to use eSurv for all surveys, unless they are given alternative directions by academic staff or others at their institution. In addition, we further recommend that both eSurv and Quick Surveys are appropriate for surveys collecting non-personally identifiable data.

Keywords: Online Survey, Questionnaire, Survey, Market Research, eSurv.

1. Introduction

The University of Northampton (UoN) does not currently provide any central advice or guidance for undergraduate students regarding the use of free online survey tools. Furthermore, the University does not subscribe to or licence an online survey tool which is available for use by undergraduate or taught postgraduate students. However, following discussions with colleagues in other universities, it was found that UoN is in the majority amongst UK HEIs. Moreover, a review of the existing literature available uncovered only one paper, from Sao Paulo University (Rosa, Bressan, & Toledo, 2012), that compared the features available of eight free online survey tools. The lack of academic guidance and research on this subject may be due to the changing nature of online surveys, however, it does not help students navigating the potential minefield of choosing an appropriate free online survey tool from the many that are available. Added to this problem is advice in some research methods books (e.g. Bell and Waters, 2014) which, in a few cases, might be regarded as less than helpful. For example, when discussing Survey Monkey, the most popular online survey tool, Bell and Waters (2014) state; “*The free version is more than adequate for 100 hour projects*” (p.157). Following this kind of advice has led to many students being unable to export their survey data into a statistical package and being limited by the number of questions and responses. Additionally, where information has been obtained in the survey that might lead to the identification of an individual respondent, the data held by Survey Monkey may be deemed as not

complying with the UK Data Protection Act. In case of the former this has resulted in students spending considerable time inputting the data from scratch, paying a monthly premium to upgrade their free account or relying solely upon descriptive statistics. Such experiences have caused considerable upset and distress amongst students, as none of these options are desirable and the lack of ability to export raw survey data often comes as a surprise to them. This paper is intended to support students by helping them to choose an appropriate free online survey tool and providing them with an independent review of some of the tools available.

2. Method

This study is based on a review of ten free online survey tools. Five of the ten tools were chosen due to their frequency and prominence in search engine results, (Google, Yahoo and Bing). To be included in the study, free online survey tools had to be visible on the first page of all three search engines when searching for 'free online survey tools'. The free online survey tools derived from this process were Survey Monkey, Smart Survey, Kwik Survey, Free Online Survey, and Question Pro. Five further free online survey tools were selected based on recurring recommendations from colleagues at UoN and via the JISCMail lists of the Sigma Network (Excellence in Mathematics and Statistics Support) and ALT (Association for Learning Technology). The tools chosen by this method were eSurv, Poll Daddy, Google Forms, Qualtrics, and Quick Surveys. Although we looked at a number of features to evaluate the free online surveys tools, it was decided that there were three essential criteria a free online survey tool would have to meet in order for the authors to recommend it to a student. They were;

1. Be easy to create and deploy surveys with no limitations as to number or type of questions and responses;
2. Give free access to view and download the raw survey data;
3. Be compliant with the UK Data Protection Act (DPA).

Each component of an online survey tool was rated on a three point scale, which ranged from good, acceptable and not acceptable. If any online survey tool received a 'not acceptable' for any of our essential criteria it would be automatically discarded from our main recommendations. The ease of use was determined by an undergraduate student who compiled the same questionnaire on each of the survey tools reviewed. The ability to access and export raw data was self-reported by each individual survey tools' own website and was verified by our student. UK DPA compliance was determined by the UoN's Data Protection Officer based upon the statements made on each individual online survey's own website.

In a recent development, October 2015, European Advocate General Bot (2015) has found in his opinion that the Safe Harbour scheme, which allows American companies to self-certify to adhere to EU privacy policy (Export.gov, 2015), is invalid. Furthermore, this opinion has been subsequently supported by the European Court of Justice (2015) who conclude that when discussing the transfer of data to the United States; "that country does not afford an adequate level of protection of personal data" (p.3). Therefore, any online survey tool which transfers data from the EU to the United States is considered, in terms of our rating system for free online surveys tools, not to be acceptable given our requirement that the survey tool be compliant with the DPA.

Since October 2015 the EU and the US have been working on a new protection to replace Safe Harbour. The EU College of Commissioners approved the new EU-US Privacy Shield arrangements in February 2016 and it is planned to operationalise the new process between 2016 and 2018. However until US survey companies sign up to the Privacy Shield they will still not be suitable tools for handling personal or otherwise confidential data for European students and researchers. US students will have fewer responsibilities to protect personal data in surveys carried out wholly within the US.

Legislation regarding the collection of non-personal identifiable information is much less stringent and all the survey tools reviewed in this paper would be acceptable as long as respondents are made aware before responding that IP addresses will be collected by the survey company and these could be used to identify individuals.

Therefore we have provided two sets of recommendations. One set of recommendations are for free online survey tools that are currently appropriate for the collection of personal data. We further add to this set of recommendations to include those free online survey tools that are appropriate for the collection of non-personal data

When considering whether or not a survey is likely to contain personal data, students and others creating and deploying surveys need to be aware that the definition of personal data is wide ranging, and is not limited only to data which contains obviously personally identifiable information, such as the name or email address of the respondent. Where information about a person's age, gender, ethnicity, etc., could be combined in order to identify a particular person (which may be likely if the survey population is small) this will constitute personal data (ICO, 2016). Survey creators are also reminded that any free text survey responses could contain personally identifiable data, even if it is not asked for in the response. Because of this, we recommend that, when in doubt, it is best to act on the assumption that personal data may be being collected, and to err on the side of caution and choose a UK DPA compliant survey tool.

3. Limitations

The information presented in the tables below (see Tables 1, 2 and 3), is considered to be correct at the time of submission (May 2016). However, due to the fluid nature of online surveys this is subject to change. Furthermore, due to the size of this study only ten online survey tools have been reviewed and therefore it is possible that alternative tools not reviewed are appropriate. It may also be possible that a survey company is acting in line with the Data Protection Act but have failed to reference it clearly on their web pages. Finally, this study is only concerned with free online survey tools and has not evaluated any versions which require payment from the outset, or any features of free online surveys which are available only as a paid upgrade to an initially free service.

4. Review

It must be stated from the outset that all survey tools reviewed offered some excellent features to the free user. However, many were either compromised by limitations, such as total number of questions or responses, or were outweighed by more serious issues, such as an inability for the user to freely access and download the raw data, or a lack of DPA compliance. Based on our essential criteria, for personal data, only two of the ten surveys passed this stage (see Table 1); namely eSurv and Qualtrics. However, whilst Qualtrics had some excellent features (such as the quality of the export to SPSS) it only offered the free user a trial of 250 responses before payment was required, and while this might be adequate for an individual project, it would not be suitable for a student wishing to carry out multiple surveys. Thus, while eSurv was not necessarily the highest rated tool in every component, it was the only remaining free version of an online survey tool we reviewed that obtained at least 'acceptable' with our three minimum requirements in that it was: (1) easy to create and deploy surveys with no limitations as to number or type of questions and responses; (2) gave free access to view and download raw data; (3) UK DPA compliant. In addition, eSurv offered additional benefits such as the use of branching/logic, simple generation of shortlinks and QR codes, mobile friendly, and (upon request) no adverts.

When we evaluated survey tools for non-personally identifiable data (see Table 1); in addition to eSurv and Qualtrics we would further recommend Quick Surveys. Again, Quick Surveys has the

added benefit of exporting directly into SPSS. Furthermore, Kwik Surveys and Google Forms also met all of our requirements except student experience. Although we stand by our recommendations we acknowledge that is based on the student undertaking this research and therefore recognise these tools might be suitable for other students. Our recommendations are based on our findings of the essential features (see table 2) and our desirable features (see Table 3).

Table 1. Overall Recommendations of 10 Free Online Survey Tools

	Survey Monkey	Smart Survey	Kwik Survey	Free Online Surveys	eSurv	Question Pro	Poll Daddy	Google Forms	Qualtrics	Quick Surveys
Recommendations										
Recommended for use (personal data)	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes*	No
Recommended for use (non-personal data)	No	No	No**	No	Yes	No	No	No**	Yes*	Yes

It should be noted that:

- * Qualtrics gives you a free trial of 250 responses before a subscription is required
- ** Google Forms and Kwik Survey are not recommended (for non-personal data) due to student feedback but both meet all other requirements

Table 2. Results of Individual Essential Features of 10 Free Online Survey Tools

	Survey Monkey	Smart Survey	Kwik Survey	Free Online Surveys	eSurv	Question Pro	Poll Daddy	Google Forms	Qualtrics	Quick Surveys
Essential Features										
Meets UK data protection standards	No	Yes, good	No	Yes, acceptable	Yes, acceptable	No	Yes, acceptable	No	Yes, acceptable	No
User friendly interface	Yes	Yes	Okay	Yes	Okay	Okay	Okay	Yes	Yes	Okay
Raw data exporting	No	No	Yes, csv	No	Yes, csv	No	No	Yes, csv	Yes, csv and sav	Yes, csv and sav
Maximum number of questions	10	15	No limit	20	No limit	10	10	No limit	No limit	No limit
Maximum number of responses	100 per survey	100 per survey	No limit	50 per survey	No limit	100 per survey	1000 per survey	No limit	250 total	No limit
User friendly experience and set-up	Okay	Poor	Poor	Okay	Good	Okay	Okay	Poor	Good	Good

Table 3: Overall Results of Individual Desirable Features of 10 Free Online Survey Tools

	Survey Monkey	Smart Survey	Kwik Survey	Free Online Surveys	eSurv	Question Pro	Poll Daddy	Google Forms	Qualtrics	Quick Surveys
Desirable Features										
Schedule the survey start date	-	No	-	-	Yes	-	-	-	Yes	Yes
Customise the survey	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Easy survey integration with social networks	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Survey views well on a mobile phone	-	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Okay	-	Yes	Yes
Upload multimedia to the survey	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Logic / branching	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Custom message	-	No	-	-	Yes	No	No	-	-	-
Storage time	-	Poor	-	Okay	Good	-	Poor	-	-	-

It should be noted that cells including '-' indicates that conclusive information was not available

5. Conclusion

Where students need to carry out online surveys, and where academic staff do not have a preference as to which tool the students use, this review currently recommends that students use eSurv (see <http://esurv.org>).

eSurv is funded by six universities; three in the United States, two in Europe and one in Canada (eSurv, 2015). It is DPA compliant (eSurv, 2016a), does not charge for access to raw data, and has none of the limitations or restrictions associated with many of the free online survey tools. Although the surveys deployed using eSurv do carry adverts, these can be removed at no cost by

making a request to eSurv. There is no option to purchase additional features or upgrades to eSurv and all users are able to access the full product (eSurv, 2016b).

eSurv is an appropriate tool for both personally identifiable and non-personally identifiable data, although if the data collected is only non-personally identifiable information we would also recommend Quick Surveys. However it must be emphasised the more personal information that is being collected, the more careful students and researchers need to be and the more limited set of survey tools should be considered. If and when the Privacy Shield is introduced and if and when Quick Surveys sign up to this then we would be happy to recommend Quick Surveys for all data collections.

Regardless of data compliance legislation this paper would not recommend undergraduate students to use the free versions of Survey Monkey, Smart Survey, Free Online Surveys, Question Pro, or Poll Daddy.

One final recommendation we would make is to encourage institutions either to financially support and promote eSurv to its students or to purchase a site license to allow undergraduate students free access to an appropriate online survey tool, such as BOS for example (BOS, 2016). This would avoid any unnecessary distress, time and/or cost caused to students by having to choose an appropriate tool themselves. Furthermore if a site licence was in place for undergraduate students then relevant support and guidance on both the survey tool and best practices could be provided centrally, thus benefitting students and enhancing the student experience.

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7. Affiliations and Disclaimer

Please let it be noted that the above recommendations are the personal opinions of the authors and not a representation of the authors' institution. Furthermore, the authors have no affiliation to any of the free online survey tools highlighted in this review. The review of the online survey tools was carried out between January and May 2015, and some of the features of the tools may have changed since that time. Additionally, some of the criteria, particularly 'user friendly interface' and 'user friendly experience and setup' are entirely subjective and based on the experience of a first-time user. All decisions made on Data Protection compliance were based on the information given on the providers' websites. The content of webpages helped to highlight the value providers put on such compliance and their understanding of the legislation. The authors have, to the best of their abilities, tried to provide an honest and accurate view of a complex and changing set of tools for a specific audience (UK higher education students and academics) and it should not be inferred from this paper that the survey tools not recommended will not be useful to other people in other institutions or in other contexts. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this paper, if the providers of any of the survey tools listed feel that we have been unfair or have provided information that, at the time of the review, was not accurate, then we are happy to discuss this with them and to update the information in our paper accordingly.

8. Appendix

Addresses of the survey tools reviewed in this study are provided below:

- eSurv: <http://esurv.org>
- Free Online Surveys: <https://freeonlinesurveys.com>
- Google Forms: <https://www.google.com/forms/about>
- Kwik Survey: <https://kwiksurveys.com>
- Poll Daddy: <https://polldaddy.com>
- Qualtrics: <https://www.qualtrics.com>
- Question Pro: <http://www.questionpro.com>
- Quick Surveys: <https://www.quicksurveys.com>
- Smart Survey: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk>
- Survey Monkey: <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk>

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