Chapter X
Web-Based Surveys in China

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, Web-based surveys have received increased attention given their potential to cut the costs and time associated with paper-based surveys. In this chapter, we consider the feasibility of using the Web as a data collection medium in China, with a current Internet population of 253 million. Following a review of the literature regarding the design, implementation and application of Web surveys, and the current state of data collection in developing countries in general and China in particular, we describe how we have developed and implemented two Web-based survey instruments in the Chinese context. The survey data, both qualitative and quantitative, is analysed and discussed with a view to drawing up instructive guidance for researchers interested to use the Web as a data collection tool in China, as well as developing countries more generally. The Web-based survey has great potential in these contexts, if sensitively designed and implemented. We consider the implications of this research and identify areas where future research is necessary.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empirical research in China has traditionally applied a variety of research methods. Key amongst these have been surveys of various sectors of the population. Some of these surveys have relied on secondary data, e.g. from government sources, but the paper-based questionnaire has also been frequently deployed. The toolbox of survey techniques has recently been extended with the development of web-based surveys – surveys that reside on web sites and are completed online. In this exploratory study, we report on how we have engaged in a number of projects that involve the collection of survey data in China with web-based survey instruments and so provide initial answers to the question "Is it feasible to use the web to collect survey data in China?".

In the first of these studies, we investigated the ethical reasoning of IT professionals in China. In the second study, we investigated attitudes towards knowledge sharing in a single SME located in Beijing and Shanghai. The main thrust of this article is methodological, given our research question. However, we do make reference to both ethical and knowledge management issues on occasion as they relate to the survey instruments.

Following this introduction, we concisely review a number of literatures germane to this study, viz.: web-based surveys, data collection in developing countries in general, as well as in China in particular; and the Chinese experience with web-based surveys. We then explain the precise methodological approach used in this study, with a detailed description of the way we operationalised the research instrument on the web, and the procedures associated with ensuring the rigor of the research design. The survey results follow, with a particular emphasis on the methodological issues which are then discussed before we conclude with key findings and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to review the literature on web-based surveys in a systematic fashion, we followed the following protocol. Firstly, we reviewed the literature on web-based surveys in general (i.e. without any restriction to China or other developing countries), in order to identify current practices as well as the broadly recognised advantages and disadvantages of this adaptation of the paper-based survey method (§2.1). Secondly, we looked at current data collection methods in developing countries: we considered paper-, email- and web-based surveys (§2.2). These two areas of literature were not restricted to the Information Systems or Information Management domains. We explain our search protocol in greater detail below. Finally, we focused our literature search on the specific case of data collection in China (§2.3), and the use of web-surveys in that context (§2.4). At this stage of the search process, while we searched the English language databases, we also looked at Chinese language databases, which cover publications in Chinese that are published inside China. Finally, we summarise the relevant literature findings (§2.5).

2.1 Web-Based Surveys

In the early years of the web (i.e. the mid-1990s), most websites were relatively static entities that only provided a one-way information dissemination channel. However, as Thompson et al. (2003) observe, it was quickly realised that websites had a great potential to receive and process information, which would significantly enhance their value. This view is supported by Dillman (2000, p.400) who observes that web-surveys are poised to be the next significant development in the survey methodological tradition (after random sampling in the 1940s and telephone interviews in the 1970s) as "no other method of collecting data offers so much potential for so little cost". Given this potential, web programming techniques were

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