

Why Do People Participate in Surveys in Qatar?

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ABSTRACT— *In this paper, we assess respondent participation in academic public opinion surveys in the State of Qatar. Rates of participation in SESRI's face-to-face surveys remain at levels that far exceed those observed in Western and even other Middle Eastern countries and require no incentives. An examination of respondents' self-reported reasons for participation accords with major theories on participation in survey research. Subgroup analysis found the main distinction primarily on "national loyalty" as a participation motivator which was higher among older, better educated, and city-dwelling Qataris. Among younger Qataris, "expressing opinion" was a significantly higher motivator than among older. At this time results indicate no reason to explore using incentives in the immediate future.*

Keywords— respondent, survey, cooperation, salience, incentive

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper assesses respondent participation in academic public opinion surveys in the State of Qatar as conducted by an academic survey organization. Surveys conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University are voluntary, and respondents are not offered incentives. Nevertheless, rates of participation in SESRI's face-to-face surveys remain at levels that far exceed those observed in Western and even other Middle Eastern countries.

Since 2009 SESRI has conducted scores of face to face surveys in Qatar achieving high response rates and without providing any participation incentives. The latter is in line with the Arab region generally where most survey institutions do not offer incentives for participation. Indeed, in Gulf countries such as Qatar where per capita income reaches \$123,000 (World bank, 2015) many potential respondents may perceive an incentive as not only having no financial leverage, but as insulting.

This study aims to understand why Qatari citizens participate in household surveys conducted in the country. Using data from a 2015 Qatari household survey, we examine the reasons underlying individuals' decisions about participation, and attempt to apply survey response behavior theories to assess respondents in Arab Gulf countries.

Among the broader considerations for prompting survey participation are Social Exchange, Commitment and Involvement, and Leverage-salience (Scott Smith, 2006). In the marketing survey context, Andrea Fryrear (2015) indicates customer loyalty, brand recognition and perceived benefits as motivating factors for consumers that may have parallels in social science surveys in terms of establishing a survey organization or its flagship survey as something deemed worthy to participate in. In North America the Gallup Polling organization perhaps has a public reputation along these lines. In the context of Qatar, SESRI is identified with the country's only national university, and this association has important considerations. In his book on public opinion research in the Arab World, Shibley Telhami cautions researchers to be aware of potential security concerns among respondents in the region (Telham, 2013, pp. 10-11). In this case, being part of Qatar University may help brand a survey as important but at the same time interviewers must take care to reassure respondents of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the questionnaire.

There are a few common theories used to explain survey response behavior that researchers explored while examining results from the study. One of the more widely cited is Leverage-salience theory, which emphasizes interest in topic as a primary driver of likelihood to participate (Groves et al. 2004a; Schwartz et al. 2006). Another psychological approach is the Reciprocity axiom that stresses positive responses as reaction to a positive action by the interviewer or survey organization. One person elicits an in-kind response from another. This interaction psychology is reflected in incentive-based surveys but certainly not limited to such (Cavusgil and Elvey-Kirk 1998, p. 1170). A third consumer-oriented social psychology approach, short-handed as the Commitment/Involvement model, “encompasses the ranges of allegiance an individual may be said to have for the system of which he is a member” (Hornback 1971, p. 65). Getting respondents to feel committed (via their ego, sense of obligation, or sunk costs) to participating by increasing the involvement of the organization in making outreach can be an orientation of this approach. Two other psychological tactics may in some ways be two sides of the same coin: Self-perception theory and Cognitive dissonance theory. The former relies on the person’s desire to see themselves as socially responsible and consistent such that early positive engagement increases the likelihood of positive follow-up by creating a sense of obligation (Bem, 1972). Surveyors appeal to the respondent’s positive sense of themselves, and then use that to promote a deeper commitment to the research later. On the other side of the coin, cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) puts the motivational onus for responding to a survey on the respondent’s wish to minimize or avoid unpleasant self-perception associated with nonresponse (Hackler and Bourgette 1973; Furse and Stewart 1984) In practice, this advises that if interviewer A is refused by the respondent then a different interviewer should approach in the next contact so that the respondent avoids embarrassment and can reorient themselves back to their perception of themselves as a generous social actor. Finally, Social exchange theory applied to survey research emphasizes that people are most likely to respond when the survey organization can successfully present the benefits of participating in the survey as having greater marginal utility than any costs associated with answering a series of questions (Dillman et al. 2009, p. 22). The latter usually measured in time spent but can also entail security or confidentiality concerns among respondents.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Researchers notice high rates of response in Qatar and want to understand if the reasons motivating people to participate in public opinion surveys are different. While rates are high at the present, a secondary underlying motivation is to develop long-term strategies to maintain these high rates of response given that the small population of countries like Qatar can lead to a potential saturation effect. This inherently raises the branding component and how to promote it while simultaneously avoiding a concomitant increase in a common survey error known as “acquiescence bias” in which respondents subtly shape their responses in order to match their perception of the researchers’ or interviewers’ objectives. As in other parts of the world, participation in polls in Qatar is optional and confidential. SESRI also emphasizes per academic survey ethics the voluntary nature of the study and each question in order to minimize any sense that the survey participation could be coercive. No rewards are given for participation. This study examines the reasons underlying individuals’ decisions about survey participation, and assesses if there any differences among participant backgrounds which may link the reason for participation in Qatar with the common theories prevalent in survey research.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper presents results from our assessment of why Qatari citizens participate in household surveys conducted in the country using data from a 2015 survey of Qatari households. The questionnaire itself included an additional question intended to provide insight into the reasons underlying individuals’ decisions about participation in surveys. SESRI researchers then applied survey response behavior theories to assess and code the reasons. The main objectives of the overall study include:

- I. Determining reasons for participation in SESRI public opinion surveys conducted using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) instrument and a professionally trained survey team.
- II. Study Qatari attitudes towards participation in CAPI surveys.
- III. Assess subgroups differences.

4. METHODOLOGY

Using face to face interviews on a CAPI instrument, SESRI conducted a 2015 survey of 823 Qatari households. The survey had a response rate of 57.5% and a margin of error of 4.1%. Using a question added to the survey intended to understand participation, we examine the reasons underlying individuals’ decisions regarding response and non-response. Specifically, we asked people about their reasons for participating in surveys in the State of Qatar in general.

Interviewers are trained in best techniques in survey research, including proper solicitation tactics to maximize cooperation, verbatim approach to the survey instrument, cooperation with respondents over optimal time to conduct the interview, and multiple interview attempts. Interviewers are backed by a survey team, including a team leader and supervisors and administrative support to respond with alacrity should problems arrive. Surveys are programmed with Blaise software (Statistics Netherlands) to minimize error and provide instruction to the interviewer where appropriate. Survey participants were randomly selected to participate in a survey and survey paradata is collected in the background to assess and assure quality. A specific additional question was added to help understand participant decisions regarding response rationale. The question allowed open ended verbatim recording of respondent answers to be coded later by researchers.

5. RESULTS

Qatari respondents were asked a final open ended question: “What is/are your reason/s to participate in the survey” in Qatar. Response choices were volunteered by respondents and categories not read to them. Answers were recorded verbatim and later coded by the research team. This section presents these results, overall and by subgroup.

5.1 Reason to participate in surveys

The results indicated 28.5% choosing participation to be helpful to their country. A quarter (24.8%) of respondents stated that they were looking to express their opinions in general. Just over one fifth (22.5%) identified interest in the survey subject as important. Among remaining reasons, more than ten percent (12.5%) said they wanted to help out the interviewers, researchers and, or the sponsor, Qatar University. Finally, 7.4% said that they participated for some perceived (subjective) personal benefit. See Figure 1 for full tallies.

Figure 1: Reasons to participate in survey. All respondents.



5.2 Age

The research team examined the responses by age. The age variable was dichotomized into less than 40 years old and 40 years and above. A significant difference among respondents regarding reasons to participate in surveys was found on two items.

The first significant difference by age was on a patriotic sense of being “helpful to the country” where only 23.1% of participants 18 to 39 years old cited this compared to 35.8% of participants aged 40 years or above. The 12 point difference between the two groups is statistically significant.

For the second significantly different reason, a desire to “express their opinions,” the group of young people (18 to 39 years) was higher by 8 points (28.4%) than their elder counterparts (40 years and above) where only (19.9%) agreed with the same statement.

On the other hand, for the third widely cited reason we found no significant difference between the two groups, that is, when respondents chose the “subject of research” as a reason to participate. Here 23.6% of the young participants indicated research subject or topic as a reason versus (21.1%) of the older group. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Reasons according to respondent's age

Reasons	Age (18 – 39)	Age (40 +)
To be helpful to my country	23.1	35.8
Like to participate and express their opinions	28.4	19.9
Cause of the subject of the study	23.6	21.1
Help research, researcher and Qatar University (Sponsor)	11.1	13.9
To gain personal benefits of participation	2.9	1.7
There are no specific reasons	8.9	5.5
Other	2.0	2.0
Total	100.0	100.0

5.3 Respondent Gender

An examination of the results by gender found no statistically significant differences between male and female Qataris in their reasons to participate in a survey. See Table 2.

Table 2: Reasons according to respondent's gender

Reasons	Male	Female
To be helpful to my country	28.7	28.2
Like to participate and express their opinions	24.4	25.3
Cause of the subject of the study	23.4	21.4
Help research, researcher and Qatar University (Sponsor)	11.1	14.0
To gain personal benefits of participation	2.4	2.3
There are no specific reasons	7.0	7.8
Other	2.9	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0

5.3 Mode of life

Although there is no rural/urban mode of life classification in Qatar per se, it can be inferred from the geographic divisions which depend on an administration area. Accordingly, researchers classified these municipality locations to split respondents into two basic life status groups: those who live inside cities and those who live in areas that correspond to being outside cities. For city areas we included the administrative municipalities of Doha, Al Rayyan, Al Wakrah and Alkhor.

The data shows significant difference between these two groups on several choices. First, respondents who indicated willingness to participate to be helpful to the country were higher by 8 points in the city environment than the group living outside cities, that is, 31.2% to 23.4%, respectively. This difference between the groups also appears with respect to the respondents who stated that they participated for unspecific reasons, that is a gap of about seven points (5.4% and 11.2%, respectively).

On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the two group when they stated that their participation came because they would like to help the researcher and interviewer or that they support the sponsor (Qatar University) and research generally. Here the gap was well within the margin of error, 25.2% and 24.1%, respectively, for respondents inside and outside cities. See Table 3.

Table 3: Reasons according to respondent's mode of life

Reasons	Cities	Out-cities
To be helpful to my country	31.2	23.4
Like to participate and express their opinions	25.2	24.1
Cause of the subject of the study	22.8	21.9
Help research, researcher and Qatar University (Sponsor)	10.9	15.5
To gain personal benefits of participation	2.7	1.8
There are no specific reasons	5.4	11.2
Other	1.9	2.2
Total	100.0	100.0

5.3 Highest level of education

Respondents were asked about the highest level of education they had completed. For analysis purposes we dichotomized education categories into those who had completed a Bachelor's degree or above and those who completed a high school degree or less.

Almost a quarter of the respondents with a high school degree or less indicated that they participate in surveys because they would like to be helpful to the country (25.4%) but this is lower than the proportion of the Bachelor's degree or above who cited this reason (31.1%). This was a statistically significant difference of 5.7%. However, about 25% percent from both groups equally stated that they participate to express their opinion. Similarly, there was no difference between the two groups for other reasons motivating people to participate in surveys. See Table 4.

Table 4: Reasons according to respondent's highest level of education

Reasons	B.Sc. or Ms.	High School
To be helpful to my country	31.1	25.4
Like to participate and express their opinions	25.6	25.2
Cause of the subject of the study	21.2	23.6
Help research, researcher and Qatar University (Sponsor)	12.8	12.4
To gain personal benefits of participation	1.3	2.3
There are no specific reasons	5.4	9.4
Other	2.6	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has applied a major question regarding survey research, "why do people participate," to the situation in Qatar. To better understand Qatari participation in surveys, we asked respondents this question directly and then assessed these responses in light of prevailing theories that purport to explain survey response behavior. Our survey data shows almost identical participation rationales for Qatari respondents as given by other respondents around the world and provides support for elements in each of these theories. Second, we looked more closely at whether our respondents differ from each other with respect to age, gender, mode of life, and education in their rationale for participation.

Although there are no incentives in Qatar to take surveys, Qatar achieves fairly high response rates at levels at least comparable and generally higher than those achieved using incentives in surveys abroad. Moreover, our results in this study show volunteered reasons for participation in Qatar as similar to other countries: people participate to be helpful for the country or to assist research and sponsor. The reason accords with Commitment/Involvement theory and is higher among Qataris who are older, better educated, and live in urban areas. The subject of the survey was also cited as one of the important motivations to participate in Qatar. This accords most closely with elements of Leverage-salience theory and there were no significant subpopulation differences. The intention of expressing an opinion was also often cited among reasons to participate. This rationale was expressed at significantly higher rates among younger Qataris. Table 5 below summarizes the subgroup differences that were significant.

Table 5: Significant subgroup variation summary

Subgroup Variable	Participation reason	Group reporting at higher rate	P Value	Chi-Square Value
Age	helpful to country express opinions	older younger	0.004	28.26
Mode of life	helpful to country Unspecific	city out-city	0.001	15.97
Education	helpful to country	educated	0.022	26.63

The reasons examined in this study support the proposition that Qatari self-reported cooperation rationales are consistent with participation theories typically cited in literature reviews. In countries where survey research has reached maturity or saturation which pushes down participation, experiments with the use of incentives to prompt participation have been reported as effective in boosting participation to a limited extent without significantly changing the composition of the sample (Grauenhorst, Blohm and Koch, 2015). This is a hopeful finding for the future should it become necessary. However, at this point Qatar has no need to consider using incentives as it can still rely on the public's desire be helpful and express their opinions. Moreover, it should be able leverage the reputation of its academic survey unit to maintain robust rates of response. With the influx of other outside survey organizations and commercial operations, branding to maintain a distinction may become an increasingly important component of outreach. Finally, younger Qataris indicating the importance of expressing their opinion at high rates is a positive indicator for future survey response.

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