

# **The Beeline for Online: A Study on the Use of Online Survey by College Students and Professors**

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## **Abstract**

As universities are adapting a research-oriented thrust, their undergraduate students are expected to produce research papers. This may have been a heavy task before but with the advent of technology, students no longer find doing research particularly its data gathering aspect daunting. In fact, their data gathering procedure is most commonly done in the form of online survey because of its benefits. In this study, a survey among 215 research writing students and an interview with 20 research writing professors were conducted in order to identify their competencies and perceptions about the use of online surveys. This study found out that all the student respondents are adept and experienced in creating online survey; whereas, only 10% of the professors have experienced doing an actual online survey. Further, this study showed that both student researchers and the professors considered the ease and speed of administration as the two primary benefits in using online survey. Although both group of respondents agree with its benefits, they are only 50% confident of the accuracy of the online survey because they are aware of its vulnerability to pranks/prankster and susceptibility to manipulation of answers or survey results. They may have doubts but 68% of student researchers still used online survey and 90% of the professors still allow the student researchers to use it. From these findings, a number of implications and suggestions were unfolded.

## **I. Introduction**

The use of technology is a common occurrence in the classroom. Research writing is among the academic subjects that technology has proven useful. With the proliferation of research-oriented universities, students even in their undergraduate level are expected to produce research papers. This may sound heavy but with technology at their fingertips, students no longer find this task as daunting as before. Their data gathering procedure is most commonly done in the form of online survey because of the preconceived notion of the many benefits it could bring to the research process. It has facilitated the previously tedious task of data gathering through such instruments like Survey Monkey, Typeform, Google Forms, Zoho Survey, Survey Gizmo, Survey Planet, Facebook among others.

From paper-and-pen survey, online surveys are starting to dominate the data gathering procedure of any researchers (Lazar & Preece, 1999). Yun and Trumbo (2000) stated that when it comes to speed and response cycles, conducting electronic surveys is advantageous compared to postal surveys. As a matter of fact, “more than 100 world-wide web sites now invite visitors to participate in a wide variety of scientific research” (Hamilton, 1999, para. 1). The top three most used and explored online survey builder tools are: Survey Monkey, Google Forms, and Survey Gizmo (Marrs, 2014; Henderson, 2012).

SurveyMonkey is an online educational survey that also addresses the needs and concerns of students, professors, and administrators in doing questionnaires. It can be said that SurveyMonkey is one of the famous survey creation software for “getting unbiased responses” (Guay, 2015, para. 6). Educational survey samples and templates (e.g., university student satisfaction, university faculty satisfaction, university student graduation, student bullying, and highschool sports student feedback) are provided for easier and faster way of creating online surveys.

Google Docs is so far the most user-friendly among all the online survey builders for several reasons. In his Digital Inspiration site, Agarwal (2014) enumerated ten great reasons to consider Google Docs to be the quintessential instrument in constructing online polls and surveys --- it can have virtually limitless respondents, it can easily be accessible by anyone through mobile phones, it can send email notification to the survey host/creator, it caters free wide range types of questions (e.g. scale and grid), it provides the “pre-population” option, it supports “logic branching”, it can anonymously or visibly conduct survey among your connections who are also using Google Apps, it carries diverse functions (e.g. ImportXML and ImportHTML) that the data submitted as a survey can easily be transformed to a more complex process, and most importantly, all the mentioned features are available for free. To date, Google Forms is true to

what it promises as it can help anyone “collect and organize information big and small” and can “create beautiful, effortless, and polished forms” (Google.com, p.1).

Survey Gizmo provides different kinds of survey -- such as product feedback survey, customer satisfaction survey, event survey, post-event survey, employee satisfaction survey, benefits satisfaction survey – and each of these kinds has a template and guide for the users. It also provides several basic question types for a possible 50 respondents. Importantly, any data gathered from this survey can be exported to CSV.

Indeed there are many advantages that electronic survey can bring to the research process. Many researchers from different disciplines have found online surveys helpful in gathering data. The most common benefits in using online survey are saving time, money, and resources. Sarraf, Brooks, and Cole (2014) conducted a study regarding the use of smartphone in answering an online survey among college students. They used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to find out the prevalence and impact of online survey being answered by the students from their smartphone. As the final analysis, they presented the obvious increase of the students’ comfortability in accessing online surveys. Further, it is cost-efficient for “computer-savvy” students (Carini, Hyek, Kuh, Kennedy, & Ouimet, 2003).

However, electronic surveys have numerous disadvantages too. Lefever, Dal, and Matthiasdottir (2007) stated in their study that online survey may not be so appealing among student respondents. As a matter of fact, some studies reveal that respondents are only attracted and motivated to answer online surveys when incentives are given to them. Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, and Chapman’s (2004) study showed that grade incentive was a big factor to encourage students to answer survey whereas cash incentives can create a significant impact to the web-based survey that was conducted to technologically sophisticated respondents as presented in Birnholtz, Horn, Finholt, and Joo Bae (2004). Thereby, online and traditional surveys still have not answered one of the researchers’ concerns – to meet the expected sample population.

From this fact, the researchers would like to find out the competence and perceptions of the students and professors in the undergraduate levels in using online surveys. At the latter, the limitations of the online surveys will also be presented. All things considered, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How competent are the students and professors in using online survey?
2. What are the students' and professors' perceptions in using online surveys?
3. What are the limitations of online surveys?

## **II. Research Design**

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were 215 college students enrolled in the ENGLRES (English Research) subject of a private university in Metro Manila. Likewise, 20 professors who, at the time of the survey, were teaching the subject were interviewed.

### *Instrument*

The instrument used for this study was a 10-item survey questionnaire consisting of a mix of multiple choice items, ranking, and an item where the respondents can give their own response. For the teacher respondents, four (6) standard interview questions were asked. These questions were:

- (1.) Do you require your students to use a specific kind of survey to gather data? Why?
- (2.) What do you think are the benefits of using online survey?
- (3.) What do you think are the drawbacks of online survey?
- (4.) Do you check your students' online surveys? If yes, how? If no, why?
- (5.) Have you tried doing an online survey?
- (6.) Do you answer online survey? If no, why?

### *Procedure*

Initially, classes where ENGLRES was taught were identified. After the classes have been identified, permission to conduct the survey among the students was obtained from the professors of these classes. Then, all students were asked to answer the given paper-and-pen survey questionnaire. After all the identified ENGLRES classes have accomplished the questionnaire, the researchers tabulated the responses per item. The frequency and percentage computation was then used for the quantitative treatment of the data. Subsequently, selected student researchers were interviewed to further solidify and secure the reasons for their answers.

The teacher interviews were conducted outside of their ENGLRES classes. The standard interview questions were asked and the responses were duly noted down. These responses were then tabulated to get the frequency count, after which the corresponding percentage was computed.

## **III. Data Analysis**

### ***A. The Competence of Students and Teacher in Using the Online Survey***

Almost all students are already exposed to educational technology. Because of this, most student researchers have innately developed the competence to use online surveys. These student researchers can be considered digital natives (Prensky, 2001). They have the 24-hour access to online sources like Facebook, Twitter, and E-mail (Bensal, Miraflores, Tan, & Thang, 2013). Given this kind of “e-environment”, there are instances that they need not be instructed or taught by their professors to use online survey. When they were tasked to do data gathering, it comes

spontaneous for them to do the survey online. Likewise, they can easily follow online directions in creating their online surveys. In fact, they can even have their personal choice of website in making online surveys.

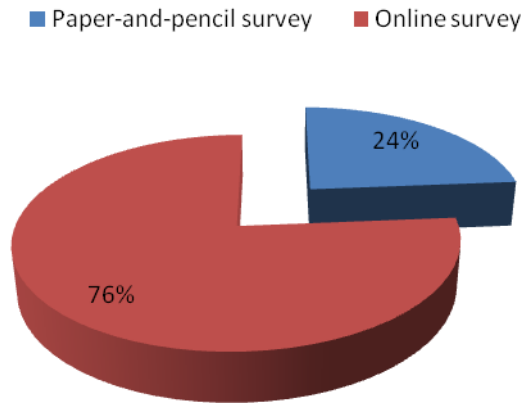


Figure 1. Preferred Type of Survey

According to the student researchers, using online surveys come so easy for them because they had done it several times as their other subject requirements. As a matter of fact, more than 50 percent of them instantly chose online survey over the paper-and-pen type of survey. However, the remaining percentage of the student researchers does not use online survey not because they do not know how to use online survey but because of the two reasons: they had unpleasant experience using online survey because their respondents before did not take it seriously and the others know that their respondents do not have access in online world or it would be easier for them to do it personally. For example, the respondents are full-time housewives, athletes, prostitutes and the like.

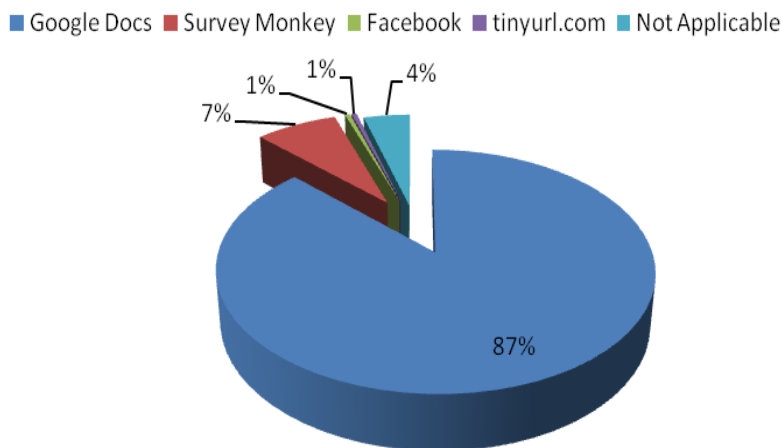
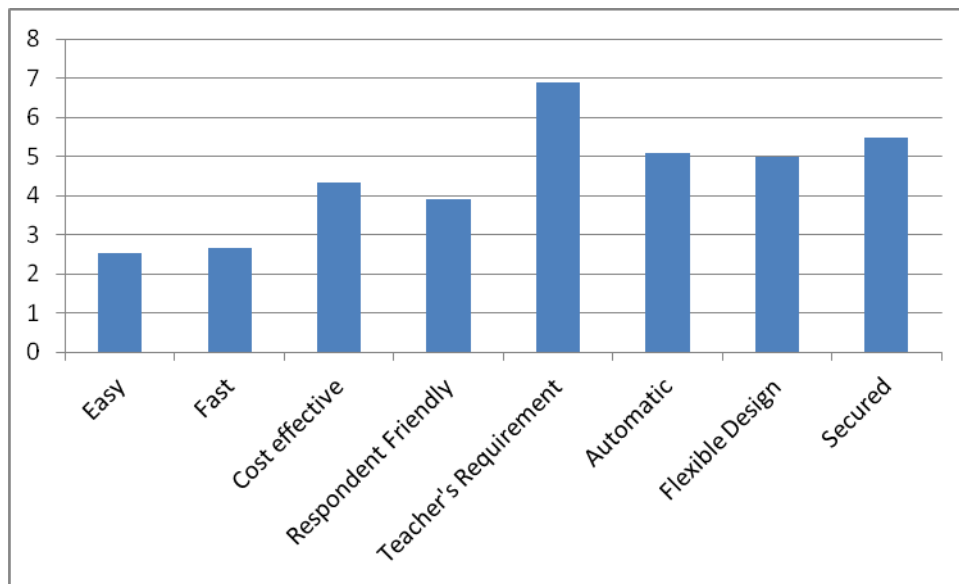


Figure 2. Preferred Online Survey Tools

In line with the preferred online survey tools, the majority of the students preferred Google Forms in conducting their online survey because of the many advantages they realized and experienced when they once used it. First, they all said that it was user-friendly. The steps in doing a survey are not complicated at all. Even during the first time they used this, it did not take them much time to create their own survey. Another reason for considering it user-friendly is that it can easily be accessed in one's mobile phone. Second, all of them mentioned about the systematic order it has, for example, the researcher can immediately get email notifications when respondents answered their survey; the researcher need not find another website that could convert their result to non-prose form (e.g., graphs, charts, tables) because Google Forms can provide it . Lastly, it is for free.

On the part of the professors' competence, most of them claimed that making online surveys can be easy; however, the majority of them have not experienced creating one. All of them are still using the traditional type of survey – paper-and-pencil. They preferred this because they find this type of survey personal and immediate since most of them avail their students or colleagues as their respondents.

***B. The Perception of the Students and Professors in Using the Online Survey***



*Figure 3. The Students' Perception: Preference in Using Online Survey*

The reasons for preference in using online survey among college students are shown in Figure 3. As can be seen, the two primary reasons are its ease and speed of administration. The students find online survey easy to use because the student researchers need not use pen and paper to construct the questionnaires, photocopy the questionnaire for the target respondents, and go around to physically distribute the form. Furthermore, the student researchers find it fast because

it reduces the time in preparing survey questionnaires, and the results can automatically be tabulated and computed once the respondents' replies are keyed in. Thus, it shortens the process of data gathering.

Accordingly, the student researchers have the notion that online surveys can invite more respondents to reply due to the widespread use of technology. As mentioned in Figure 2 discussion, survey questionnaire can be answered through the use of mobile phones. In line with technology sophistication and innovations, there are many websites that offer templates for different survey purposes so the choice is at the student researchers' fingertips. Additionally, the figure also shows that the student researchers find online survey cost effective, its design can be flexible and automatic. Because the questionnaires are disseminated online, the cost in producing and distributing the survey is not a factor to be considered anymore.

On the part of the teacher respondents, only 10% do not prefer their students to use online surveys for their research papers. The main reasons for this are: (1.) the professors are either not yet ready or do not want to take the risk of venturing to non-traditional method of data gathering; and (2.) they want to have physical proof that the proper data gathering procedures were properly observed by the students. The remaining 90% of the teacher respondents are open to the idea of allowing their students to use online surveys; although, they themselves have not used online survey in doing their respective research projects. In fact, only 1 teacher has actually used online survey in conducting a research. Therefore, they required their students to send them the links of their online survey and/or print the exact survey page with the results. This way they can check if the student researchers honestly conducted their online survey.

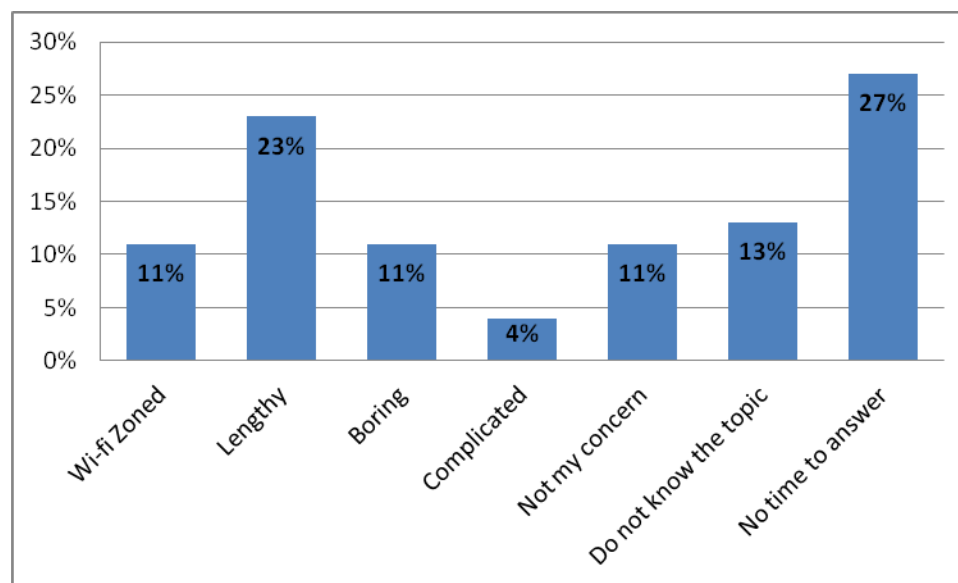
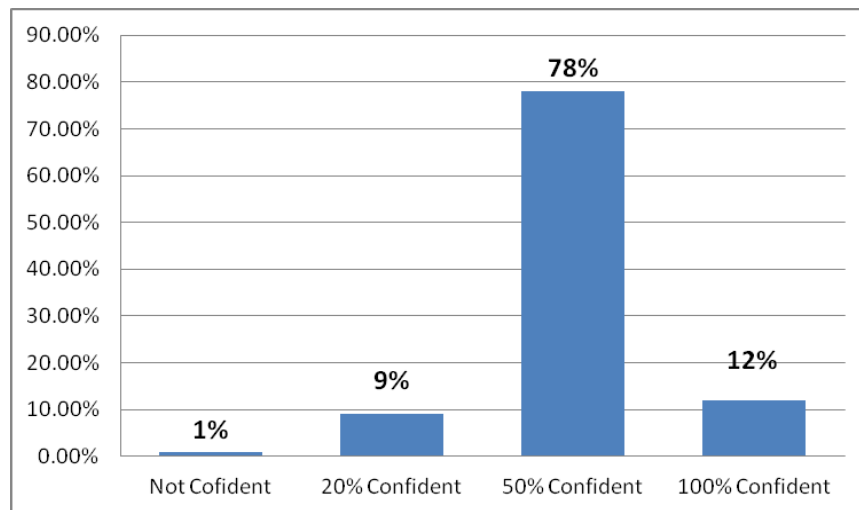


Figure 4. The Students' Perception: The Reasons for not Answering an Online Survey

Figure 4 presents the reasons for not answering an online survey. It can be seen that the length of the survey and the time to be allotted in answering it are the two major reasons why an online survey may not be too appealing for the target respondents. The verbosity of the statements or questions and the number of questions and choices can discourage the respondents. Because of the length, they then find answering the survey time consuming since it would involve understanding the questions and the choices asked of them. Both group of respondents (professors and student researchers) confirmed that they experienced receiving online surveys that are lengthy and confusing. The other factors for not answering online surveys could be that the topic might not be their concerns or answering the survey would not give them any benefits at all.



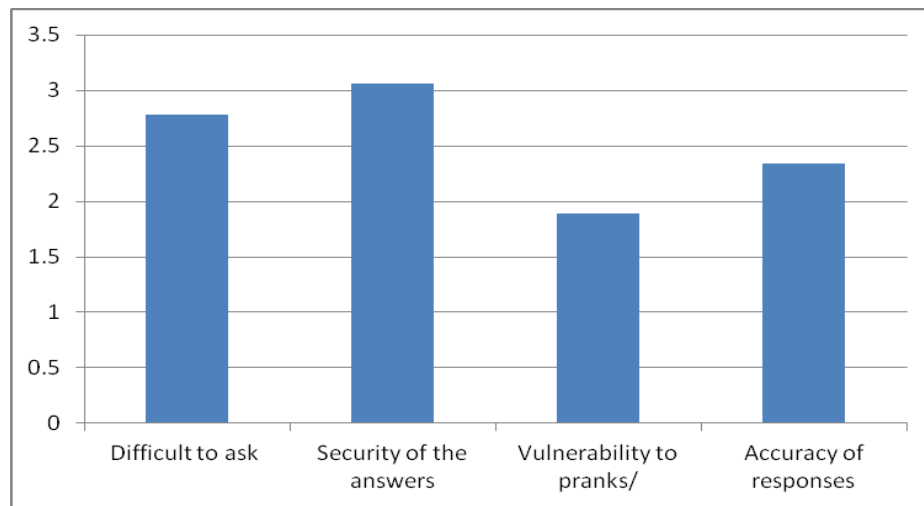
*Figure 5. The Students' Perception: Level of Confidence of the Accuracy of the Online Survey Results*

Figure 5 shows the students' level of confidence of the accuracy of the online survey results. As seen, most students say that they are only 50% confident of its accuracy. They themselves have doubts about the people answering their surveys and the truthfulness of the respondents' choices in answering the survey questions. They know that because of the anonymity of the respondents they cannot fully ensure that the survey was seriously answered by the respondent, was not answered more than once by the same person, or the one who responded to the survey was actually not their target respondent. Additionally, the student researchers know that there is minimal chance to verify the answers they got from the online survey. From this finding, it can be said that the student respondents are aware that online surveys are not fool proof.



On the part of the teacher respondents, they are also not that confident about the online survey results' accuracy because they are cognizant that these surveys can easily be manipulated since the verification of the respondents and their responses is difficult to check. However, to give the student researchers the experience on how data gathering is done, they allow them to use online survey. A measure that they employ to assure that the students are observing the proper data gathering procedure, they require the students to submit hardcopy of the results and/or send the links of their online surveys to them.

### ***C. The Limitations of Online Surveys***



*Figure 6. The Limitations of Using Online Survey*

The weaknesses of using online surveys are shown in Figure 6. As presented, the student researchers identified the vulnerability to pranks/pranksters and accuracy of responses as its two primary flaws. Many student researchers are aware that online survey is susceptible to pranksters. In fact, all student researchers who were interviewed confirmed that they already experienced that their online surveys were frivolously answered by random strangers. Also, they know that it was difficult for them to physically monitor the respondents' actual answering of the survey. Thus, the doubts about the accuracy of the responses arise since the respondents cannot make clarifications if there are any. Aside from this, they know that they themselves as researchers can answer their own survey questionnaire as many times as they need in order to comply with the subject's requirement. One student researcher said, "We, or any researchers, can easily manipulate the answers. We can answer the survey ourselves; the teacher might not easily realize it unlike if it is on paper" (personal communication, March, 18, 2015).

All the teacher respondents also identified vulnerability to pranks/pranksters and accuracy of responses as the weaknesses of using online survey. This is somehow a validation of their notion that online surveys can easily be manipulated. In relation to Figure 3's preference in using online survey (addressing the students' dishonesty - manipulation of the survey), the professors require their students to send them the links of their students' online survey or to give them a hardcopy of the online result page. This task could be an additional load for them but they believe that this can somehow send a message to their students that they have to take their data gathering seriously and honestly.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Online survey seems to be the best thing that has happened in the field of doing research. Its benefits are invaluable as students affirm that online survey can facilitate the research process particularly the data gathering aspect through its ease and speed of use. While the students are more technology savvy than their professors when it comes to online survey, the latter are not totally averse to incorporating online survey in their research classroom. However, both students and professors expressed that they are still wary about results gathered from an online survey since there is the perception that online survey is susceptible to manipulation. To counter this and to ensure that proper data gathering procedures are used, the professors either ask the students to provide the links of the online survey or they require the submission of a hard copy of the survey results. For both the student and teacher respondents, the issue of length is an apparent limitation to answering an online survey. Verbosity, the number items, the amount of time that will be spent responding to the survey, and the inability to make clarifications are some factors that make online surveys unappealing.

Online survey as a research tool has no doubt helped students view research as less tedious and less daunting. The use of online survey in research can cut across distance and time thus allowing student researchers to have far-reaching data source. However, implementing measures such as those which can secure the responses given should be considered to counter data manipulation. With such security measures, the level of confidence attributed to online survey results may also improve. To address the issue of length of the survey and the time needed to accomplish it, setting a standard number of items that an online survey should have may help. Likewise, survey instructions, questions, statements, or choices could be kept simple and straight-to-point to make the survey more respondent-friendly. Finally, professors could look into their own attitudes towards the use of online surveys. One way to maximize the online survey is for the research professors to strongly clarify and implement the factors to consider in doing a survey – short, simple, organized, and unbiased.

**Reference list and appendix are subject access request.**