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Fur babies, governance, and ability: Finding meaning in survey response rates

(Work-in-Progress)

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ABSTRACT

We demonstrate that the use of visual cues in reminder emails can elicit increased response rates. Survey demographics and response rates were drawn from an ongoing survey being conducted within a not-for-profit organisation in Australia. The use of animals (“fur babies”) has an impact on the younger and older demographics and those without a university education. These ages and educationally limited cohorts are often seen as problematic to motivate to engage with surveys. For this study, the optimal time to elicit most responses was 12 weeks.

Keywords: Demographic, survey reminder, survey period, visual cues.

INTRODUCTION

Conducting surveys and obtaining response rates that allow for meaningful conclusions to be drawn is challenging. It is well-documented in the literature, that increased survey response rates were tied to follow-ups and repeated contacts (Yammarino *et al.*, 1991; van Mol, 2017). Importantly, it is not uncommon for web-based surveys to have response rates well below 20%, with many researchers reporting rates of 10% or lower as meaningful to use to develop policy and inform planning decisions (van Mol, 2017). Furthermore, the reliability of surveys is often an issue as they have an innate bias with respondents seeking to report acceptable attitudes and behaviours (Singh and Tir, 2021; Butler *et al.*, 2022). There are three factors that have been identified to be directly linked to survey response rates: the level of workplace deviance; the cognitive ability of the staff; and the employees self perceives socioeconomic status (Lallukka *et al.*, 2020; Jenkins *et al.*, 2021; de New & Schurer, 2022).

Institutional responses to online surveys can provide insights into the governance behaviour within an origination. Those who fail to complete workplace surveys were found to have higher rates of workplace deviance (Jenkins *et al.*, 2021). Those who do respond to a survey and are Organisational compliance and conflict-averse, are also more likely to respond in ways that they perceive the organisation’s desires leading to distorted results (Singh and Tir, 2021). Cognitive dissonance theory postulates that a more compliant employee is likely to undertake actions that reduce conflict and have a belief that is easier to comply and fill out the survey, in contrast to those who do not fill out the survey and weigh the risk of consequences for non-compliance, and in the case of voluntary surveys with no consequence for failing to comply, therefore ignore it (Jenkins *et al.*, 2021). Thus, low rates of reply implicitly imply that the respondents are the more compliant employees and omit disruptors, and this compliant demographic is likely to generate a bias in terms of perceived Organisational desired responses. Importantly, non-compliance in surveys may indicate that there are underlying governance issues at play, and this can lead to direct costs to the organisation in form of reputational damage, loss of business, and regulatory action.

Recent studies indicate the use of surveys as a means of measuring cognitive ability. In particular, the performance of a task, such as the effective completion of a survey, can be used to indicate an individual’s personal ability and other skills with high achievers more likely to respond (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Kautz *et al.*, 2014; de New & Schurer, 2022). Diligence and willingness to cooperate in a survey are correlated with conscientiousness emotional stability and openness to experience, and non-compliance is often a marker of noncognitive ability (Hu, 2020; de New & Schurer, 2022). This can be narrowed down to three measures of cognitive ability to backward digital span, symbol-digit modalities, and national adult reading test (de New & Schurer, 2022). Surveys have a role in informing on the level of corporate ability, with higher compliance and survey completion rates indicative of a more cognitively able workplace.

Social class, measured in terms of socioeconomic position and health, indicates that there is a lower response rate to surveys from those who self-identify as socio-economically challenged (Lallukka *et al.*, 2020). This can be linked to the form of

employment and the relationship with an organisation that an individual has at the time of the survey, with higher responses from full-time and those with reduced absenteeism (Lallukka et al., 2020). Therefore, survey response rates may indicate a snapshot of employees' self-perceived health and welfare.

There have been limited studies into the use of visual cues to elicit higher response rates to surveys. In advertising, offering food cue images to the obese and others with eating disorders stimulus increased interest within those demographics to the subject matter being presented (Castellanos et al., 2009). However, little is known about the effects of visual cues to elicit an increase in survey response rates. This study examines the internal survey response rates in a not-for-profit organisation. In particular response rates to changing reminder formats and visual stimuli are graphically reported. Furthermore, response timing is matched with demographic information on age and education level.

METHODS

The data used in this paper was drawn from a broader survey with participants from a not-for-profit organisation in Australia (Ethics Number - H8726). This paper deals with the first 15 weeks of the survey; however, at the time of writing the survey remains ongoing, and the wording of the email subject changed with each reminder. In seeking to elicit increased survey response numbers, a weekly email was sent to remind the participants and to highlight the importance of their contribution. As part of this reminder process, visual cues were included to attract the attention of potential respondents. Visual cues are classified into three categories: 1) slide – colourful with keywords; 2) video – a video of the primary researcher explaining the importance of the project; 3) images – images of the primary researcher's pet dogs, referred to in the remainder as “fur babies”. A total of 119 responses were received after the 15-week period. A total of 98 valid responses for age and education were received, although not all respondents answered both questions. Responses were charted by age and educational attainment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data indicate that the use of visual cues in emails elicits an increase in the rate of response to the survey (Figure 1). By week 12, the response rate was near zero, indicating in this case that 12 weeks is the optimal survey period (Figure 1). Soliciting and recontacting in increased response rates are highly dependent on the subject lines in the emails that are being sent (Liu, 2020). Using words that imply the importance of the necessity to respond has higher rates of engagement than passive subject lines (Cuciniello, 2013). In this study change in subject only had a marked effect on response rates when the term “CEO” was included, this term builds familiarity with the sender and simplicity increases the perceived importance of the survey and triggers increased rates from those less compliant employees. All other subject lines included a combination of the keywords “HR” + “PhD” + “your opinion” and these did not generate an increase in response rates. It can be argued that to engage with fewer complaint resonances the subject needs to reflect a level of authoritative, in this case from the CEO. This authoritative implies the importance to the survey and an implicit increased risk as a consequence of failing to comply (Jenkins et al., 2021).

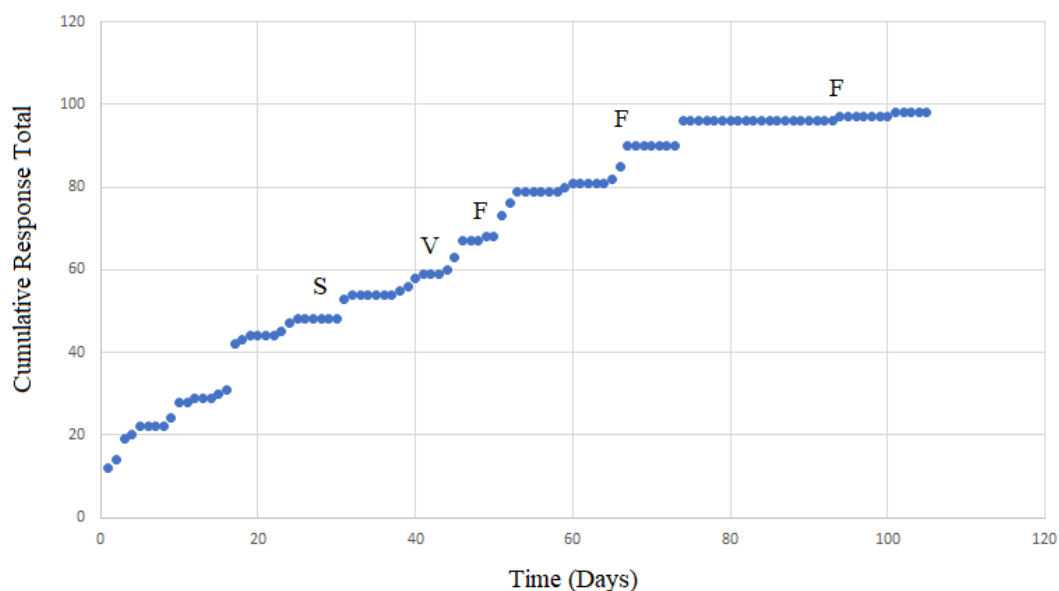


Figure 1: The daily cumulative survey response totals showing the time of stimuli (S = slide; V = video; F = animals) and the corresponding jump in response number. The first spike (~ week 3) corresponds to a subject change to the email to include the “CEO- HR survey, the second spike in week 11 reflects the engagement of a cohort of staff that has been on leave.

While the slide and video had some marked effect on the rate, the images of the animals lead to a sharp rise in responses. In particular, the use of animals engaged the 18-24, 25-34, 55-64 and 65-74 age cohorts, these groups had shown no responses in the prior three weeks to the animal cues (Figure 2). The 35-44 and 45-54 showed a steady engagement with the survey (Figure 2). The use of animal visual cues also led to an increase in the response rates from individuals who did not have university qualifications (Figure 2). Reduced rates of response from younger and less educated staff may reflect on their level of

engagement within the workplace with studies indicating that workplace response rates are linked to workplace satisfaction (Mueller et al., 2011). These cohorts tend to earn less and therefore see themselves as socio-economically challenged, a fact known to reduce survey response rates (Lallukka et al., 2020). The use of familiar cues, in this case, animals, generates a feeling of familiarity and this led to increased engagement reflected in the survey response rates after those cues in those demographics (Miller et al., 2021).

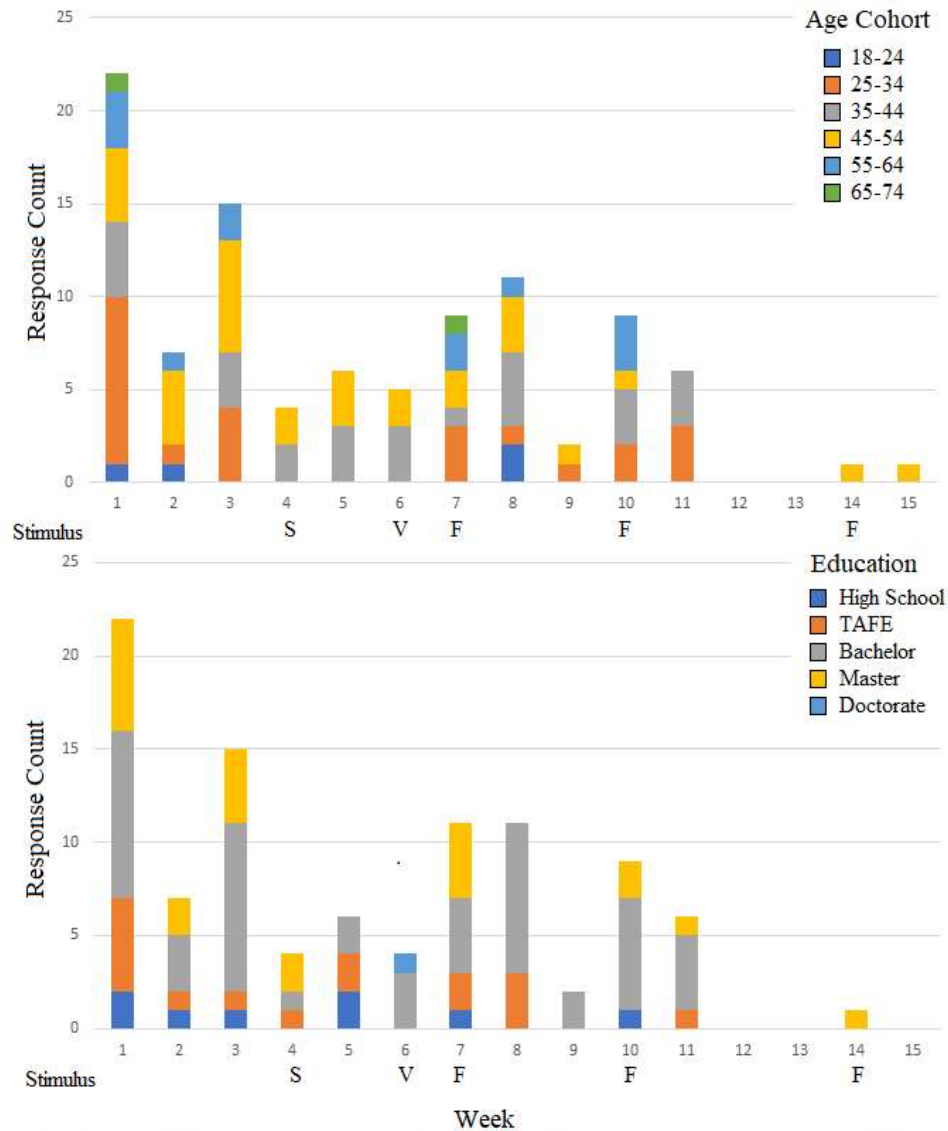


Figure 2: The weekly survey response rate by age and education demographic cohorts showing the extra stimuli (S = slide; V = video; F = animals) used as an inclusion in the weekly reminder notice to elicit responses. Images of the animal stimuli are shown. The disparity in the number of responses between the two cohorts reflects missing response data to the survey question.

CONCLUSION

The use of emotive imagery and reminders was shown to increase response rates to an organisational survey. Response rates not only enhance the validity of a survey, but also indicate the workplace deviance demographic, with higher response rates indicative of more compliance and functional ability within workplaces. Further research is needed in understanding the link between organisational survey response rates and the level of ability, governance, and compliance within an organisation. If this link can be established, then running simple surveys across a workforce will provide insight into the potential for cultural and deviance issues that may lie hidden within the workforce.

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