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Maximize Power: Online Panels and the Price-Quality Trade-Off

Laura Seelkopf (LMU)

Abstract

Survey-experimental research with online access panels of marketing research companies has increased markedly in the social sciences. These allow for fast access to quota-representative samples, which promise generalizable claims combined with causal inference. When selecting among companies researchers are confronted with a large price range – where high-price companies advocate their services as higher quality with respect to respondent attentiveness, honesty, and representativity along non-quota characteristics. Hence, researchers face a potential trade-off between sample quality and the statistical power their research budget can buy. Our study offers insights into this trade-off for the largest European economy. We asked all marketing companies competing on the German market to offer bids for scientific survey experimental research. Selecting three companies with a low, medium, and high price, and corresponding self-reported low, medium, and high panel quality, we fielded identical vignette, priming, and conjoint experiments to these three quota-representative samples, together with standard socio-demographic and attitudinal questions relevant to research in political behavior. Our evidence suggests that at least for experimental designs, the price-quality trade-off is less severe than often

assumed. We thus recommend maximizing statistical power by minimizing costs per respondent.

Keywords: survey methods; survey experiments; public opinion; online-access panels; statistical power