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## Limitations of primary and secondary research

Limitations of primary research methods. Limitations of secondary research. Limitations of primary research.

Primary research is a research method that relies on direct data collection, rather than relying on data that’s already been collected by someone else. In other words, primary research is any type of research that you undertake yourself, firsthand, while using data that has already been collected is called secondary research. Example: Primary researchYou are interested in the quality of vegan options offered at your campus dining hall. You decide to conduct a survey of vegan students, asking them their thoughts. Primary research is often used in qualitative research, particularly in survey methodology, questionnaires, focus groups, and various types of interviews. While quantitative primary research does exist, it’s not as common.

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Tip: Primary vs.

### Advantages and Disadvantages

#### Advantages

- Resource implications – usually easier to gather than primary data
- Unobtrusive – already collected
- Longitudinal study may be possible
- Quality and permanence of data – eg. government surveys

#### Disadvantages

- Suitability
- Cost and access – may still be difficult in spite of resource advantages
- Validity of some secondary data (eg. Internet sources)

secondary sourcesIt can be easy to get confused about the difference between primary and secondary sources in your research. The key is to remember that primary sources provide firsthand information and evidence, while secondary sources provide secondhand information and commentary from previous works. When to use primary research Primary research is any research that you conduct yourself. It can be as simple as a 2-question survey, or as in-depth as a years-long longitudinal study. The only key is that data must be collected firsthand by you. Primary research is often used to supplement or strengthen existing secondary research. It is usually exploratory in nature, concerned with examining a research question where no preexisting knowledge exists. It is also sometimes called original research for this reason. Types of primary research Primary research can take many forms, but the most common types are: TipIn order to be successful, it’s important to carefully define your population and sample prior to getting started. Chances are you won’t be able to access every single member of your population, but your research should always aim to be generalizable to that population. This prevents sampling bias and selection bias from creeping in, affecting or invalidating your results. Surveys and questionnaires Surveys and questionnaires collect information about a group of people by asking them questions and analyzing the results. They are a solid choice if your research topic seeks to investigate something about the characteristics, preferences, opinions, or beliefs of a group of people.



Surveys and questionnaires can take place online, in person, or through the mail. It is best to have a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions, and how the questions are phrased matters. Be sure to avoid leading questions, and ask any related questions in groups, starting with the most basic ones first. Observational studies Observational studies are an easy and popular way to answer a research question based purely on what you, the researcher, observes. If there are practical or ethical concerns that prevent you from conducting a traditional experiment, observational studies are often a good stopgap. There are three types of observational studies: cross-sectional studies, cohort studies, and case-control studies. If you decide to conduct observational research, you can choose the one that’s best for you.

## Telephone Surveys

### Advantages

1. More flexibility compared to mail surveys
2. Quicker but will cost you some money (telephone bill)
3. High response rates

### Disadvantages

4. Interviews tend to be a lot shorter
5. More obtrusive than mail
6. Greater difficulties in rapport building - Researchers cannot study behaviour or body language
7. Long-distance calls are expensive

All three are quite straightforward and easy to design—just beware of confounding variables and observer bias creeping into your analysis. Interviews and focus groups Similarly to surveys and questionnaires, interviews and focus groups also rely on asking questions to collect information about a group of people. However, how this is done is slightly different.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of Primary Research

- Disadvantages
- Expensive
- Not immediately available – takes time to define problem, sampling frame, method and analysis.
- Not as readily accessible

Instead of sending your questions out into the world, interviews and focus groups involve two or more people—one of whom is you, the interviewer, who asks the questions. There are 3 main types of interviews: While interviews are a rich source of information, they can also be deceptively challenging to do well. Be careful of interviewer bias creeping into your process. This is best mitigated by avoiding double-barreled questions and paying close attention to your tone and delivery while asking questions. Alternatively, a focus group is a group interview, led by a moderator. Focus groups can provide more nuanced interactions than individual interviews, but their small sample size means that external validity is low. Examples of primary research Primary research can often be quite simple to pursue yourself. Here are a few examples of different research methods you can use to explore different topics. Example: Survey questionnaireYou are interested in the perceptions of your fellow students on universal healthcare. You decide to conduct a survey of students, asking them their thoughts. Example: Observational studyYou are interested in the reactions of campus police to student protest movements on campus. You decide to observe firsthand, blending into crowds and conducting a naturalistic observation. Example: InterviewYou are interested in the acclimatization process of first-year international students in your dorm. You decide to conduct a semi-structured interview of these students, asking them their thoughts on homesickness, cultural competencies, and perceptions of assimilation. Advantages and disadvantages of primary research Primary research is a great choice for many research projects, but it has distinct advantages and disadvantages. Advantages of primary research Advantages include: The ability to conduct really tailored, thorough research, down to the “nitty-gritty” of your topic. You decide what you want to study or observe and how to go about doing that. You maintain control over the quality of the data collected, and can ensure firsthand that it is objective, reliable, and valid. The ensuing results are yours, for you to disseminate as you see fit. You maintain proprietary control over what you find out, allowing you to share your findings with like-minded individuals or those conducting related research that interests you for replication or discussion purposes. Disadvantages of primary research Disadvantages include: In order to be done well, primary research can be very expensive and time consuming. If you are constrained in terms of time or funding, it can be very difficult to conduct your own high-quality primary research. Primary research is often insufficient as a standalone research method, requiring secondary research to bolster it. Primary research can be prone to various types of research bias. Bias can manifest on the part of the researcher as observer bias, Pygmalion effect, or demand characteristics. It can occur on the part of participants as a Hawthorne effect or social desirability bias. Other interesting articles If you want to know more about statistics, methodology, or research bias, make sure to check out some of our other articles with explanations and examples. Frequently asked questions How do I prevent confounding variables from interfering with my research? There are several methods you can use to decrease the impact of confounding variables on your research: restriction, matching, statistical control and randomization. In restriction, you restrict your sample by only including certain subjects that have the same values of potential confounding variables. In matching, you match each of the subjects in your treatment group with a counterpart in the comparison group. The matched subjects have the same values on any potential confounding variables, and only differ in the independent variable. In statistical control, you include potential confounders as variables in your regression. In randomization, you randomly assign the treatment (or independent variable) in your study to a sufficiently large number of subjects, which allows you to control for all potential confounding variables. What are the benefits of collecting data? When conducting research, collecting original data has significant advantages: However, there are also some drawbacks: data collection can be time-consuming, labor-intensive and expensive. In some cases, it’s more efficient to use secondary data that has already been collected by someone else, but the data might be less reliable. If you want to cite this source, you can copy and paste the citation or click the “Cite this Scribbr article” button to automatically add the citation to our free Citation Generator. George, T. (2023, June 22). Primary Research | Definition, Types, & Examples. Scribbr. Retrieved July 19, 2023, from The essential difference between primary and secondary research lies in who collects the data. Primary research definition When you conduct primary research, you’re collecting data by doing your own surveys or observations. Secondary research definition: In secondary research, you’re looking at existing data from other researchers, such as academic journals, government agencies or national statistics. Free Ebook: The Qualtrics Handbook of Question Design When to use primary vs secondary research Primary research and secondary research both offer value in helping you gather information. Each research method can be used alone to good effect. But when you combine the two research methods, you have the ingredients for a highly effective market research strategy. Most research combines some element of both primary methods and secondary source consultation. So assuming you’re planning to do both primary and secondary research – which comes first? Conclusive research This form of primary research is carried out to solve a problem that the exploratory research – or other forms of primary data – has identified. For example, say the supermarket’s exploratory research found that employees weren’t happy. Conclusive research went deeper, revealing that the manager was rude, unreasonable, and difficult, making the employees unhappy and resulting in a poor employee experience which in turn led to less than excellent customer service. Thanks to the company’s choice to conduct primary research, a new manager was brought in, employees were happier and customer service improved. Examples of primary research All of the following are forms of primary research data. Primary research methods There are a number of primary research methods to choose from, and they are already familiar to most people. The ones you choose will depend on your budget, your time constraints, your research goals and whether you’re looking for quantitative or qualitative data. Surveys A survey can be carried out online, offline, face to face or via other media such as phone or SMS. It’s relatively cheap to do, since participants can self-administer the questionnaire in most cases. You can automate much of the process if you invest in good quality survey software. Interviews Primary research interviews can be carried out face to face, over the phone or via video calling. They’re more time-consuming than surveys, and they require the time and expense of a skilled interviewer and a dedicated room, phone line or video calling setup. However, a personal interview can provide a very rich primary source of data based not only on the participant’s answers but also on the observations of the interviewer. Focus groups A focus group is an interview with multiple participants at the same time. It often takes the form of a discussion moderated by the researcher. As well as taking less time and resources than a series of one-to-one interviews, a focus group can benefit from the interactions between participants which bring out more ideas and opinions. However this can also lead to conversations going off on a tangent, which the moderator must be able to skilfully avoid by guiding the group back to the relevant topic. Secondary research Secondary research is research that has already been done by someone else prior to your own research study. Secondary research is generally the best place to start any research project as it will reveal whether someone has already researched the same topic you’re interested in, or a similar topic that helps lay some of the groundwork for your research project. Even if your preliminary secondary research doesn’t turn up a study similar to your own research goals, it will still give you a stronger knowledge base that you can use to strengthen and refine your research hypothesis. You may even find some gaps in the market you didn’t know about before. The scope of secondary research resources is extremely broad. Here are just a few of the places you might look for relevant information. Books and magazines A public library can turn up a wealth of data in the form of books and magazines – and it doesn’t cost a penny to consult them. Market research reports Secondary research from professional research agencies can be highly valuable, as you can be confident the data collection methods and data analysis will be sound Scholarly



journals, often available in reference libraries Peer-reviewed journals have been examined by experts from the relevant educational institutions, meaning there has been an extra layer of oversight and careful consideration of the data points before publication. Government reports and studies Public domain data, such as census data, can provide relevant information for your research project, not least in choosing the appropriate research population for a primary research method.

If the information you need isn't readily available, try contacting the relevant government agencies. White papers Businesses often produce white papers as a means of showcasing their expertise and value in their field. White papers can be helpful in secondary research methods, although they may not be as carefully vetted as academic papers or public records. Trade or industry associations Associations may have secondary data that goes back a long way and offers a general overview of a particular industry. This data collected over time can be very helpful in laying the foundations of your particular research project. Private company data Some businesses may offer their company data to those conducting research in return for fees or with explicit permissions. However, if a business has data that's closely relevant to yours, it's likely they are a competitor and may flat out refuse your request. Learn more about secondary research Examples of secondary research data These are all forms of secondary research data in action: A newspaper report quoting statistics sourced by a journalist Facts from primary research articles quoted during a debate club meeting A blog post discussing new national figures on the economy A company consulting previous research published by a competitor Secondary research methods Literature reviews A core part of the secondary research process, involving data collection and constructing an argument around multiple sources. A literature review involves gathering information from a wide range of secondary sources on one topic and summarizing them in a report or in the introduction to primary research data. Content analysis This systematic approach is widely used in social science disciplines. It uses codes for themes, tropes or key phrases which are tallied up according to how often they occur in the secondary data. The results help researchers to draw conclusions from qualitative data. Data analysis using digital tools You can analyze large volumes of data using software that can recognize and categorize natural language. More advanced tools will even be able to identify relationships and semantic connections within the secondary research materials. Comparing primary vs secondary research We've established that both primary research and secondary research have benefits for your business, and that there are major differences in terms of the research process, the cost, the research skills involved and the types of data gathered. But is one of them better than the other? The answer largely depends on your situation. Whether primary or secondary research wins out in your specific case depends on the particular topic you're interested in and the resources you have available. The positive aspects of one method might be enough to sway you, or the drawbacks - such as a lack of credible evidence already published, as might be the case in very fast-moving industries - might make one method totally unsuitable. Here's an at-a-glance look at the features and characteristics of primary vs secondary research, illustrating some of the key differences between them.

Primary research Secondary research Self-conducted original research Research already conducted by other researchers independent of your project Qualitative and quantitative research Qualitative and quantitative research Relatively expensive to acquire Relatively cheap to acquire Focused on your business' needs Not focused on your business' needs (usually, unless you have relevant in-house data from past research) Takes some time to collect and analyze Quick to access Tailored to your project Not tailored to your project What are the pros and cons of primary research? Primary research provides original data and allows you to pinpoint the issues you're interested in and collect data from your target market - with all the effort that entails. Benefits of primary research: Tells you what you need to know, nothing irrelevant Yours exclusively - once acquired, you may be able to sell primary data or use it for marketing Teaches you more about your business Can help foster new working relationships and connections between silos Primary research methods can provide upskilling opportunities - employees gain new research skills Limitations of primary research: Lacks context from other research on related subjects Can be expensive Results aren't ready to use until the project is complete Any mistakes you make in in research design or implementation could compromise your data quality May not have lasting relevance - although it could fulfill a benchmarking function if things change What are the pros and cons of secondary research? Secondary research relies on secondary sources, which can be both an advantage and a drawback. After all, other people are doing the work, but they're also setting the research parameters. Benefits of secondary research: It's often low cost or even free to access in the public domain Supplies a knowledge base for researchers to learn from Data is complete, has been analyzed and checked, saving you time and costs It's ready to use as soon as you acquire it Limitations of secondary research May not provide enough specific information Conducting a literature review in a well-researched subject area can become overwhelming No added value from publishing or re-selling your research data Results are inconclusive - you'll only ever be interpreting data from another organization's experience, not your own Details of the research methodology are unknown May be out of date - always check carefully the original research was conducted