

Pretesting Survey Questionnaire: A Guide on Dissemination

Sabrina Hashim¹, Siti Fatimah Mohamad², Sarina Abdul Halim-Lim³ & Nur Hidayah Che Ahmat⁴

Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia^{1,2,3}, Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Permatang Pauh Campus, 13500 Permatang Pauh, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia⁴
Corresponding Author Email: s_fatimah@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

A pretest is an integral aspect of a quantitative study as it highlights the improvisation needed to create effective survey questionnaires. It is important to administer a pretest to ensure the actual data collection can be properly conducted. This paper is part of ongoing research which describes the process of conducting a pretest through the distribution of survey questionnaires on an online platform. The pretest was conducted on hospitality and tourism students from two private colleges in Klang Valley. Steps on the expert review to evaluate the validity of the instrument are discussed in detail. The challenges faced in selecting participants and establishing contact with the targeted population are described. This included overcoming communication issues which needed to be done online because of the pandemic restrictions which limits the possibility of physical meeting with the representative of the selected colleges to seek permission for the study to be conducted. This paper discusses the execution as well as findings from the pretest and the improvement done in developing an effective survey questionnaire.

Keywords: Pretest, Survey Questionnaire, Private Colleges, Malaysia, Career Decision-Making, Hospitality and Tourism

Introduction

There has been a common misconception between a pretest and pilot testing. Nevertheless, both are pivotal components of a research survey that offers researchers a valuable opportunity to reflect on and improve their study before commencing with the actual data collection. The tests will enable researchers to avoid errors and produce valid research results. A pretest is an important process carried out prior to the actual data collection. It is essential that the sample collected is identical to the final model analysis. The purpose of pretesting the survey questionnaire is to ensure the respondents understand the questions in the survey questionnaire and that there is no issue with the choice of wording (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; Stockemer, 2019). It is imperative when the questionnaire scale refers to a specific context,

such as hospitality and tourism students (Hair et al., 2018). Pretesting the survey questionnaire will enable a researcher to refine the survey to eliminate analytical errors. On the contrary, a pilot study is a small-scale test or a trial run to determine the appropriation of measures and concepts in the survey questionnaire prior to conducting a major study (Polit et al., 2001). Conducting a pilot study provides the researcher an advance warning as to the point in the process where failure might occur. It allows the researcher to assess the feasibility on the full scale as well as whether the research protocol is realistic and workable (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002).

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the career decision-making process of undergraduates from hospitality diploma programs. The study focuses on examining the variables within the framework to analyze the factors affecting career decision-making. Thus, a pretest is deemed suitable to assess the reliability and validity of the survey questionnaire. This paper emphasizes the methodological execution of a pretest as part of ongoing research and not the current study's findings. It is reported that methodological study on questionnaire pretesting has been sparse. Pretesting questionnaires has received more attention in theory than in practice, despite its widely accepted importance (Ikart, 2019). Hence, this paper aimed to explain the flow of conducting a pretest starting from selecting the research instrument to review of the pretest results.

Background of The Study

Career decision-making has been a focus of a plethora of past research with the use of various instruments. Despite past studies on undergraduates and the efforts undertaken by private colleges to support the industry's demand, the industry fails to attract the right candidate (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2016). Furthermore, past studies have been focusing on degree holders in Malaysia from public universities (Ahmad et al., 2014; Putit et al., 2012). However, within the hospitality field, employees with a diploma qualification in hotels around Peninsula Malaysia are the largest group of employees that ranges between 21.0 to 53.2% (Abdul Majid et al., 2017; Suhairom et al., 2016). The situation calls for an in-depth look into the career decision-making process of diploma graduates to continuously support the supply of labour within the industry. In March 2021, the Ministry of Higher Education recorded a total of 71 private colleges in Malaysia offering various hospitality and tourism-related programs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). Therefore, for these reasons, the current ongoing study focuses on diploma students of hospitality and tourism programs from private colleges in Malaysia.

The execution of data collection for the current study employs a survey questionnaire, a pre-formulated written set of questions to which respondents record their answers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016, p. 142). This method has been commonly used among social science researchers in the twentieth century (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; Stockemer, 2019). Past studies on career decision-making have utilized survey questionnaires as a method of data collection (Chuang et al., 2020; Ireland & Lent, 2018; Perez-Lopez et al., 2019). Thus, the present study utilizes a survey questionnaire as a means to collect data. Before the execution of the pretest, the questionnaire was finalized, and a pretest form was prepared. The survey questionnaire was delivered via an online platform to facilitate the distribution of the questionnaire and pretest form. Questionnaires distributed electronically have the advantage when collecting data from geographically dispersed respondents and at the time of inconvenience to meet face to face (i.e., during the worldwide coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and national lockdown).

Methodology

This section details the stages that the researcher had undertaken to obtain the essential information and the minimum sample size to address the aim of the study. Figure 1 shows the stages taken during the pretest.

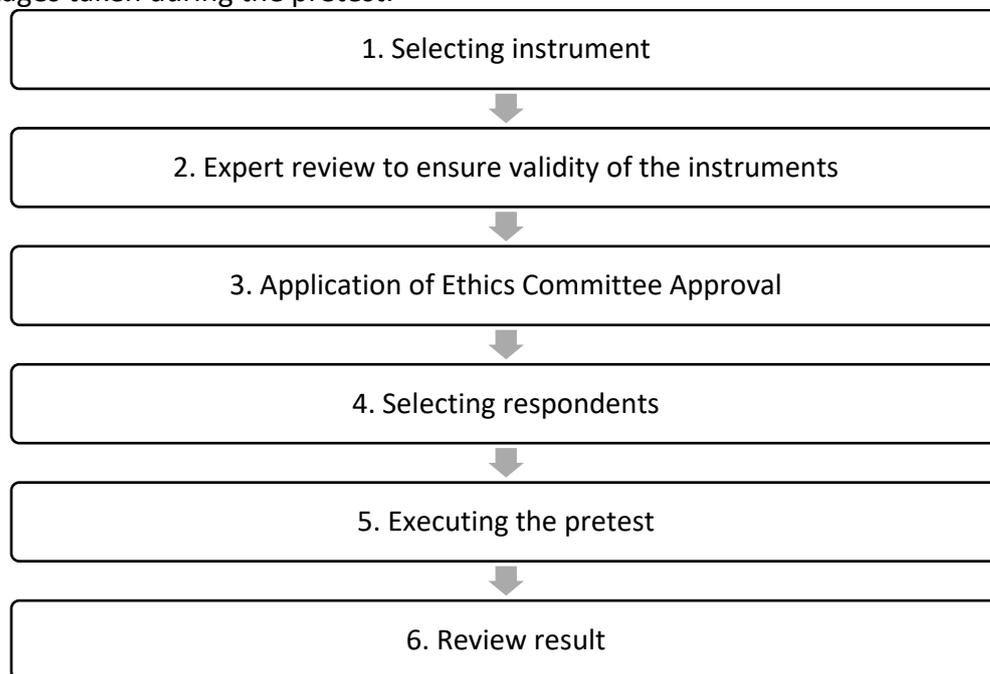


Figure 1: Stages of pretest

Selecting Instrument

This is a critical stage which requires the researcher to clearly define each construct within the framework in a manner that is consistent with past research (MacKenzie et al., 2011). This approach was conducted through a literature review of past theoretical and empirical studies on the construct as recommended by (MacKenzie, 2011).

Numerous past studies were conducted on the career decision process. However, the instruments selected for this study are based on their relevance to the framework's constructs. This includes the validity and reliability of the instruments within the context of this study. The instrument is designed to identify career decision self-efficacy (CDSE), career optimism, outcome expectations and exploration goals of hospitality and tourism diploma students. For the purpose of this article, the first selected instrument is CDSE. This multidimensional instrument tests behaviours pertinent to self-appraisal, gathering occupational information, selecting goals, making plans and problem-solving. Other chosen instruments were related to outcome expectations, career optimism and exploration goals, respectively. It was salient to obtain permission to execute the instrument prior to the pretest to maintain ethical conduct. The researcher contacted the original authors electronically through email and ResearchGate, a professional network site for researchers.

The questionnaire was presented in two languages, English and Malay, the most commonly used languages in Malaysia (MyGovernment, 2016). The instrument goes through a back translation process as proposed by Brislin (1970). The first stage involved translating the questionnaire by an appointed bilingual expert from English to Malay. The Malay questionnaire was then handed to another appointed bilingual expert for a blind translation to be translated into English. The two questionnaires were presented to an appointed academician for comparison to identify whether the two sets have the same meaning. This is

an important stage of the process as it will ensure clarity and detect possible linguistic errors before disseminating the questionnaire.

Expert Review to Ensure Validity of the Instruments

An expert panel typically includes subject matter experts and survey professionals experienced in survey design, data collection, coding, and data analysis (Czaja, 1998). This stage is conducted prior to the distribution of the survey questionnaire. The researcher has selected and sought advice from three panels which are academicians within the field of hospitality and tourism.

Application of Ethics Committee Approval

The researcher had applied for the ethics committee approval prior to the data collection phase. This is part of the requirement by the educational institution to ensure that the researcher adheres to the basic principles in the use of information obtained from the study. The aim of ethical approval is not only to protect participants, as a valuable part of the research process but also to protect the researcher.

Selecting Respondents

The initial number of students undergoing diploma hospitality and tourism in private colleges around Klang Valley was obtained from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). During this stage, the researcher contacted the general line provided on the government's official website, 1Malaysia One Call Center (1MOCC) and was directed to contact the person in charge. The researcher then emailed an enquiry and received a reply with the information needed from the MOHE's e-database. The steps for approaching the colleges are explained in Figure 2.

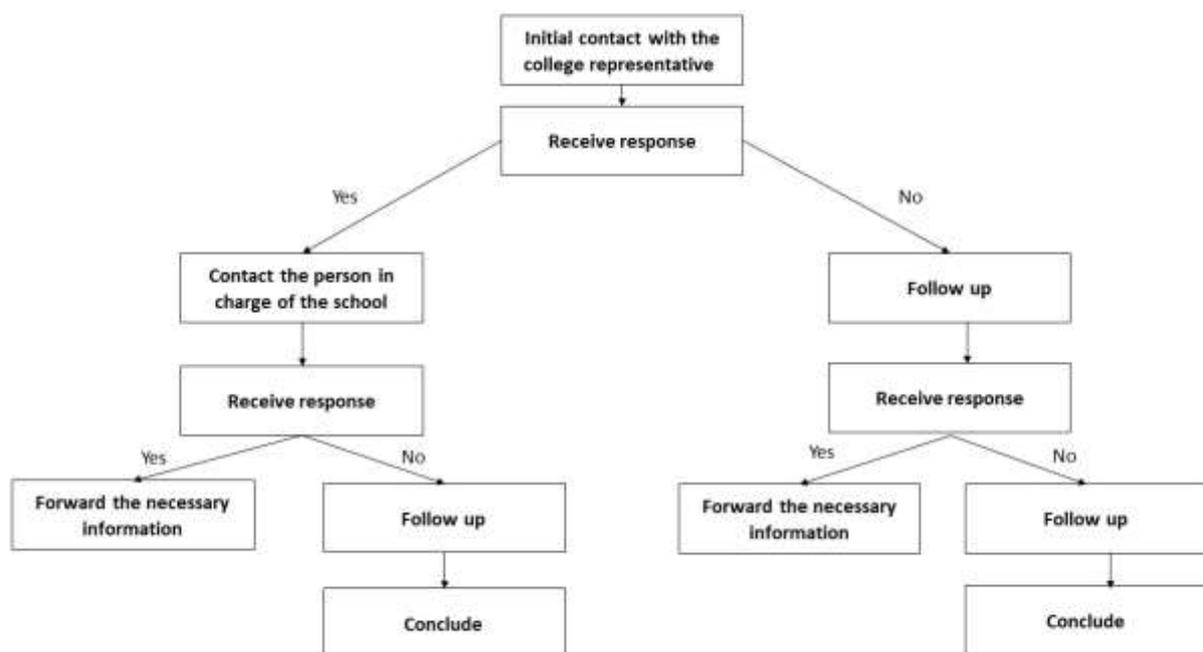


Figure 2: Steps for approaching colleges

Referring to the list provided by MOHE, the researcher contacted the person in charge of each college through various means. This depended on the information provided on the college's official website, which varied between email, inquiry form, WhatsApp messenger and phone messages.

In the process of completing this stage, there were challenges that the researcher had to overcome. An example of a challenge was the unavailability of direct contact with the hospitality school's dean or lecturers. Some colleges were practising a screening process for all inquiries. When the inquiry is sent to the general link, a representative from an assigned department will handle the inquiry. This is usually the information counter or sales and marketing department. Once they have verified the objective of the inquiry, they will then provide the email contact of the dean or lecturer. However, a few follow-ups were required for some colleges as the colleges needed to check with the person in charge to allow for the study to be conducted.

Upon completion of the steps, the list of colleges was further refined as it was found that some colleges were no longer operated or had stopped offering the diploma program. It was later found that out of 22 private colleges in Klang Valley listed by the MOHE, only 14 were operational and met the criteria of this study. The current study defined that the population for unit of analysis are hospitality and tourism diploma students from private colleges in Klang Valley, which includes hotel travel and tourism, hospitality / hotel / accommodation, culinary / gastronomy and foodservice (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2019, p. 2). It is important that the sample chosen represents the population for which the instruments are designed (MacKenzie et al., 2011) .

After receiving a favourable response, the researcher established contact through email with the dean or lecturers of the school. The written email consisted of an introduction to the researcher, the objectives of the study, a list of questions within the survey questionnaire and a link to the questionnaire. The researcher solicited advice on the best way to collect data from respondents. The email concluded with the researcher's contact information for further inquiry. At this stage, follow-up calls and emails were necessary for the researcher to receive a response.

The researcher excluded a few colleges due to unresponsiveness after multiple follow-up attempts. At the time of the pretest, the researcher was restricted by the pandemic ruling in Malaysia, which limits the movement of individuals. Educational institutions were required to restrict the entry of any individual who is not a part of the establishment to reduce the risk of COVID-19 virus infection.

After receiving responses from most colleges, two colleges were selected for the pretest stage. The researcher then sent out an email to the lecturers in charge. Further communication was done through WhatsApp messenger, as preferred by both lecturers. The total number of students from these private colleges was further confirmed through this method. This is crucial in determining the sample size for the pretest.

Executing the Pretest

The pretest was executed using Google Forms to facilitate the distribution of the questionnaire and pretest form. Past study has indicated that a student's response rate is higher when distributed through legitimate authority and within the means of their preferred social media platform (Ali et al., 2020). Another advantage of an electronically distributed questionnaire is that it allows the researcher to fully utilize the Internet to provide access to the targeted respondents who otherwise would be difficult to reach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The pandemic situation at the time of the pretest has forced educational institutions to carry out teaching and learning online. Thus, it was utterly difficult for the researcher to distribute the questionnaire by hand. Google Forms consisted of a function that automatically tabulates the result, which is time-efficient and cost-saving.

Generally, a pretest form includes three parts: a cover letter in part one, the questionnaire in part two and a pretest form in part three. The cover letter provides a brief introduction on the study conducted, the purpose of the pretest, the research background and the procedures for the pretest. The respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The questionnaire in part two included the items of each variable. The pretest form consisted of questions requiring respondents to provide feedback on questions and scales used and suggestions for improvement.

A few factors were considered when deciding the best tool to conduct the data collection. The use of online forms possesses a few deterrent factors for respondents to complete the survey in a timely manner (i.e., connectivity issues, time constraints, etc.). Thus, to simplify the process, part two and part three were combined to ease the flow of reading and assist with the respondent's understanding. The second part is the questionnaire which consists of 51 items designed to test the variables within the model framework. The questionnaire is divided into four sections which will be measured using a 5-point Likert scale. A 5-point is the most commonly used rating scale, which is easily understood by respondents and yields higher quality data than those with 7 or 11 points (Brace, 2004; Revilla et al., 2014). A mid-point rating is necessary as some evidence has shown that eliminating the mid-point leads to less positive responses to items (Garland, 1991).

Part three consisted of four open-ended questions within each section which includes ("Were the questions understandable?", "If your answer is no, please indicate the question's details (part, section and number of the question) and why is it difficult to understand?", "Were the scales understandable?" and "If your answer is no, please suggest what needs to be done to make the scale easier to understand."). Combining parts two and three will allow the respondents to immediately reflect on the questions while completing the open-ended questions.

Reviewing Result

The pretest was targeted to collect valid responses from 30 respondents of diploma hospitality and tourism students in two Klang Valley private colleges. This is aligned with previous research, which suggested that the sample size must not be less than 30 and not more than 500 to avoid Type II errors (Roscoe, 1975; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Upon completion, the total number of responses collected was 54 completed responses which are sufficient for data analysis.

At this stage, a past study has suggested that the instrument goes through a purification and refinement process (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Thus, the data collected was checked for validity

and reliability. In a quantitative study, validity is the extent to which a concept is accurately measured (Heale & Twycross, 2015). Validity indicates the extent to which observations accurately record the behaviour of interest (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Validity test comprises content validity, construct validity and criterion validity. The pretesting of the questionnaire is used to evaluate construct validity for this study.

Of the total 54 respondents, two respondents provided feedback on the first 25 items of the questionnaire. The first respondent highlighted the term used, which led to indecision when choosing an answer. The second respondent stated questions which were confusing. Thus, the feedback was reviewed to improve the survey questionnaire.

Reliability refers to the consistency of observations (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Cronbach's alpha is the commonly used test to check on the internal consistency of an instrument. SPSS software was used to test the internal consistency of the instrument. It was found that the items within the instruments met the minimum acceptable requirement of Cronbach's alpha 0.7.

Conclusion

The pretest study was found to be an important step as it highlights the respondents' understanding of the survey questionnaire. The initial number of private colleges within Klang Valley offering diplomas in hospitality and tourism programs was first listed as 22 colleges by the MOHE. However, after scrutinizing the list and the criteria for inclusion in this study, 14 private colleges were found suitable. Establishing contact with the targeted private colleges poses challenges that require tactful approaches. Respondents from two colleges were selected for the pretesting, resulting in 54 responses. The result of the pretest proves that the instruments selected are reliable.

A limitation of this pretest is the small number of respondents which reduces the possibility of a valid conclusion and increases the margin of errors. However, this small-scale sample size pretest was sufficient to refine the questionnaire. Although the purpose of a pretest is not to identify the reliability of the questionnaire, it may provide a preliminary indication. This article is intended to provide a guideline for future researchers within the related field of study. It is suggested that a pretest should be carried out on individuals in the population who are as similar as those who will be sampled and under conditions that are as close to the actual data collection. It is also vital to take careful notes on the issues observed during the pretest and figure out potential solutions when it comes to the actual data collection.

This article highlights the importance of a pretest study. Most importantly, it allows the researcher to identify possible issues within the survey questionnaire and it is based on personal experience. This article provides a guideline for future researchers to further understand the method to conducting a pretest study within the related context.

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