

## Open-Ended Comments: To Require or Not To Require?

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This study explores reactions and responses to open-ended questions on Web-based surveys. An experimental design is used to examine the effects of requiring participants to answer open-ended questions. Findings show that requiring these responses increases perceptions of item importance and the number of usable comments without increasing negative affective reactions.

It is difficult to think of any aspect of the working world that is untouched by technology. Organizational surveying is one area where technology has caused a major change from traditional practices (Couper, 2000). Not only has technology affected the survey experience for respondents, but it has also resulted in new approaches to constructing surveys and gathering data (DeMay, Chandonnet, & Fenlason, 2005). From a data collection standpoint, survey-related technologies have reduced many of the barriers to gathering responses in general and open-ended comments in particular. This has prompted a growing reliance on open-ended survey questions and an increased need to expand our understanding of how people view and react to these types of questions. The present study addresses this research need. The purpose of this research is to determine whether people view open-ended questions as less important than closed-ended questions. In addition, we examine whether requiring and prompting survey comments affects the perceived importance of open-ended questions as well as reactions to the survey in general. Finally, this study determines whether requiring and prompting open-ended responses increases the number of usable comments gathered from a survey.

### *Trends in Survey Technology and Open-Ended Questions*

Survey technologies continue to advance, providing new and improved options for both researchers and practitioners. One development that has had a significant impact on survey practice is the transition from paper-based to web-based surveys. An environmentally friendly alternative to paper questionnaires, web-based surveys can be efficiently distributed to many individuals simultaneously. Web-based technology has not only facilitated the dissemination of surveys, it has also reduced many of the traditional costs associated with using open-ended questions for both respondents and survey designers (Borg, 2005; Kulesa & Bishop, 2006; Thompson, Surface, Martin, & Sanders 2003). Whereas paper surveys collect written responses that need to be entered or typed, web-based surveys automatically capture comment data in a digital format, thereby eliminating the time-consuming step of typing or otherwise entering open-ended responses. Meanwhile, advances in computer-aided text analysis programs have eased the process of organizing and summarizing survey comments obtained from both paper- and web-based surveys.

Accompanying these technological advances is a renewed interest in including open-ended questions on organizational questionnaires.

Open-ended survey questions are valued as a data collection tool because of the in-depth information they can provide (Kraut, 1996; Wagner & Spencer, 1996). Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld, and Booth-Kewley (1997) argue that “open-ended questions can add flesh to the sometimes sterile numbers and deductions drawn from responses to closed-ended items” (p. 26). While they have been considered useful for quite some time, open-ended survey questions seem to be growing in popularity due to the ease with which they can now be collected and analyzed.

The increasing inclusion of open-ended questions on surveys has sparked a movement in the research literature to explore many previously unanswered questions about the data collection methodology commonly known as the “survey comment block” (Borg, 2005; Kulesa & Bishop, 2006; Poncheri, Lindberg, Thompson, & Surface, in press). The present study extends this line of research.

#### *Why Don't Participants Respond to Open-Ended Questions?*

Nonresponse error is a ubiquitous problem in survey research and occurs when respondents differ from the population of interest in ways that can have a meaningful impact on survey results (Dillman, 2000; Sills & Song, 2002). Two major types of nonresponse have been identified in survey research, unit and item nonresponse (Bosnjak & Tuten, 2001; Bosnjak, Tuten, & Wittman, 2005). Unit nonresponse occurs when a respondent does not answer any questions on a survey, resulting in the loss of a survey unit (i.e., respondent). Item nonresponse occurs when a respondent answers some of the questions on a survey, but skips others. Although the majority of this research has focused on closed-ended questions, nonresponse to open-ended questions can be viewed as a form of item nonresponse as well. Several studies have shown that most respondents do not provide open-ended comments, resulting in a high rate of item nonresponse to these types of questions (Borg, 2005; Poncheri et al., in press; Siem, 2005).

One potential reason that survey respondents may choose not to answer open-ended questions is that these questions might be perceived as

unimportant. This perception could stem from the larger proportion of closed-ended questions compared to open-ended questions that are typically found on surveys (Church & Waclawski, 1998). The greater number of closed-ended questions may be interpreted as an indication of the importance of these questions. Another possibility has to do with the placement of open-ended questions, which commonly appear at the end of a survey (Edwards et al., 1997), perhaps causing them to seem like a survey design “afterthought.” The fact that responses to closed- but not open-ended questions on web-based surveys are often explicitly required may also contribute to the perception that comment data are inconsequential. Finally, the wording of the open-ended question may affect responses. Mossholder, Settoon, Harris, and Armenakis (1995) argue that most open-ended questions are worded in a way that implies that they are optional, and therefore unimportant.

Although there are reasons to believe that open-ended comments are viewed as less critical than closed-ended ratings, this possibility has not been tested empirically. The present study addresses this research need.

*Hypothesis 1:* Open-ended questions will be viewed as less important than closed-ended questions in a standard Web-based survey.

#### *Requiring Open-Ended Comments*

If support is found for the hypothesis that open-ended questions are viewed as relatively unimportant, then it becomes essential to examine how survey researchers and practitioners interested in obtaining comment data can change this perception and persuade more respondents to provide comments. It is possible that open-ended questions are perceived as relatively unimportant because respondents are usually allowed to submit surveys even if they have left their “comment blocks” blank. Therefore, one way to change perceptions and encourage a higher level of response may be to require survey comments.

Many web-based survey applications have a feature which allows survey programmers to require responses to open- as well as closed-ended questions (Dillman, 2000). That is, web-

based surveys can be designed so that respondents are not allowed to advance to the next item or screen if a previous item has been left blank. Dillman (2000) notes that this feature “is often promoted as a distinct advantage of Web surveys” (p. 394). Although many survey designers require responses to closed-ended questions, Dillman (2000) cautions survey practitioners about the implications of doing so. He argues that there are situations in which it is legitimate for people to have no response to an item and that forcing a response can result in feelings of frustration and possibly attrition from the survey.

Based on the potentially negative outcomes of response requirements, Dillman (2000) recommends requiring responses, but also providing a “prefer not to answer” or “don’t know” option. Whereas this recommendation is technologically feasible, there are questions about the effects this practice may have on the data collected. Research has shown that when “don’t know” options are offered, a larger proportion of respondents choose this option as opposed to choosing from other response options provided (e.g., Schuman & Scott, 1989). This is problematic because it is unclear whether respondents truly have no opinion or if they are satisficing by choosing this response (DeRouvray & Couper, 2002). Although the preceding debate has occurred in the context of closed-ended questions, it also pertains to open-ended items. Thus, there is a concern that simply allowing respondents to select an option indicating they have “no comment” will do little to increase the number of open-ended responses received.

DeRouvray and Couper (2002) recently explored four different strategies for reducing the number of “no opinion” responses to fourteen closed-ended questions on a web-based survey. The strategy which resulted in the least amount of missing data was one in which an explicit “decline to answer” response was not offered, but the respondent was prompted each time a closed-ended question was not answered. The prompt allowed respondents to choose whether they would respond to the item or skip to the next item. This strategy was superior to three other strategies in which an explicit “decline to answer” response was offered.

Notably, DeRouvray and Couper’s (2002) prompting strategy could be applied to open-ended questions. This would entail encouraging, but not mandating, responses to open-ended questions through the use of a prompt. Such an approach may help communicate the importance of open-ended items without forcing otherwise unwilling people to comment.

In sum, ongoing debates in the literature suggest that requiring responses to open-ended questions will likely communicate their importance but could also adversely affect reactions to the survey. For this reason, employing a prompting strategy rather than an absolute response requirement may be a better way to increase perceptions that open-ended comments are important and valuable. The assumption that response requirements and prompting strategies influence respondents’ affective reactions to surveys as well as their perceptions of the importance of open-ended comments awaits empirical investigation. To address this need, the present study tests Dillman’s (2000) assertion regarding the frustration-inducing effects of response requirements by examining the affective reactions of respondents who are and are not required to provide survey comments.

*Hypothesis 2:* Respondents who are required to complete open-ended questions will have more negative reactions to the survey than those who are not required to comment.

In addition, this study examines whether prompting as well as requiring comments can communicate their importance.

*Hypothesis 3:* Respondents who are required and respondents who are prompted to complete open-ended questions will view open-ended questions as more important than respondents who are not required and not prompted to complete open-ended questions.

One final consideration is related to the quality of responses that are provided when individuals are either required or prompted to comment. It is unclear what type of response would result from requiring a comment, especially if the respondent does not have a

legitimate answer to an item (Dillman, 2000). To determine which survey conditions will result in the greatest number of usable comments, the following research question is proposed:

*Research Question:* Does the survey condition (i.e., required, prompted, or non-prompted) affect the tendency to provide a usable open-ended comment?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 300 students at a large southeastern university who volunteered to fulfill a course research requirement. Most participants (85.7%) were 20 or younger. Half of the sample (50.2%) was male and the majority (79.8%) was Caucasian. Overall, the majority of participants provided a favorable technological evaluation of their experiences with the web-based survey used in this study. Table 1 shows how participants rated the ease of using the technology needed to complete the survey administered in the present study. Descriptive baseline information on participants' past experiences with surveys is also provided in Table 1.

### *Design and Procedure*

This study included one independent variable, which was our non-response follow-up manipulation. It had three levels: control, required comment, and prompted comment. Four dependent variables were examined: perceived importance of closed-ended questions, perceived importance of open-ended questions, affective reactions toward the survey, and the presence/absence of a usable survey comment.

Individuals were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions based on the order in which they signed up to participate in the study. A list of random numbers in which each number was associated with one of the three conditions was generated prior to data collection and participants were assigned to conditions based on this list. Due to the fact that the numbers for each condition were randomly generated and compiled in the same list, a slightly different numbers of participants were assigned to each of the three conditions. All three groups completed

an online survey (containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions) as well as an online follow-up evaluation questionnaire. In terms of response to the online survey, there were 103 participants in the control group, 99 participants in the required comment group, and 98 participants in the prompted comment group. Those in the control group were not required to complete the open-ended questions in the survey. This condition was created to represent a standard organizational survey. If the individuals assigned to this condition did not provide comments, they did not receive an error message and were able to proceed and submit the survey. Individuals assigned to the required comment group were required to answer the open-ended questions. If the participants assigned to this condition did not answer the questions, they received the following error message: "The following required questions were left unanswered: [Item]" and were not allowed to continue to the next set of questions or submit the survey unless a response was provided. Finally, participants assigned to the prompted comment group received a follow-up message if they did not provide an answer to the open-ended questions. The prompt used in this study: "We would very much like to have your answer to this question. If you would like to provide an answer to this question, please do so in the space provided. If you would prefer not to answer this question, please type 'Skip' in the comment box. Then select the 'Next' button to continue the survey. Thank you!" was adapted from the one used in an earlier study by DeRouvray and Couper (2002).

### *Survey Instrument*

*Closed-ended items.* The survey administered in this study was the Student Assessment of the College Environment (SACE; Baker, 1997). The SACE was designed to evaluate the organizational climate of college/university life from the student perspective. This measure was chosen because it gathers opinions about organizational issues of importance to the student participants yet also resembles climate surveys typically administered to personnel operating in an employment setting. The SACE is composed of 58 closed-ended items which comprise five

categories: Instructional Services, Student Services, Administrative and Physical Services, Student Focus, and Social and Cultural Services. Participants were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with various elements of the college environment using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). An example item is “The quality of instruction in my field of interest.” The survey was programmed so that none of the respondents were explicitly required to complete these questions.

*Open-ended items.* One comment block followed each of the five categories on the SACE (Baker, 1997), resulting in a total of five open-ended questions. For example, the open-ended item related to Instructional Services read: “Please provide any additional comments about the instructional services at your institution.”

#### *Follow-Up Evaluation Questionnaire*

After respondents completed the SACE, they were advanced to a web page where they were asked if they wanted to complete a follow-up questionnaire containing 22 items assessing the dependent measures examined in this study. Almost all participants (96%) who completed the SACE also opted to complete the follow-up evaluation. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and coefficient alpha values for the constructs assessed on the follow-up evaluation.

*Reactions.* Affective reactions to the survey were measured with four items which asked participants to indicate their level of agreement using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). An example item is “I enjoyed completing this survey.” Responses to the four items were averaged to create an affective reactions scale score for each respondent.

*View of item importance.* To assess the degree to which participants viewed the survey items as important, two variables were measured: view of open-ended item importance (five items, which were averaged) and view of closed-ended item importance (five items, which were also averaged). The items measuring perceptions of open- and closed ended item importance mirrored each other. That is, for each question assessing perceptions of closed-ended item importance there was a corresponding

question which used the same wording to ask about open-ended item importance. Example items include “It was okay to skip the open-ended questions” (reverse scored) and “Answering the closed-ended questions was important.” Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with these items using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

#### *Usable Comment Coding*

Finally, each open-ended comment was coded as usable (coded as 1) or non-usable (coded as 2). The following are examples of non-usable responses: “no opinion,” “no additional comment,” “skip.”

## Results

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and correlations among the dependent measures assessed via the follow-up evaluation questionnaire. Hypothesis 1 predicted that open-ended questions would be viewed as less important than closed-ended questions in a standard Web-based survey. To examine this prediction, a t-test for two dependent samples was conducted using responses from the control group ( $N=100$ ) only. The two treatment groups were omitted from this analysis because we were interested in the manner in which individuals responding to “typical” web-based surveys (i.e., surveys where open-ended responses are neither prompted nor required) view the importance of the two types of items. Results demonstrated that open-ended questions were viewed as less important ( $M=3.39$ ,  $SD=.69$ ) than closed-ended questions ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=.59$ ),  $t(99)=-6.67$ ,  $p<.001$ , indicating support for Hypothesis 1. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that requiring respondents to complete open-ended questions would adversely impact affective reactions to the survey. Meanwhile, Hypothesis 3 predicted that both requiring and prompting respondents to answer open-ended questions would increase perceptions of open-ended item importance. See Table 3 for a summary of the affective reaction and perceived importance scores per condition.

A MANOVA was conducted to test Hypotheses 2 and 3. A significant main effect was found for experimental condition,  $F(4, 582)=5.49, p<.01, \eta^2_p=.04$ . A follow-up univariate ANOVA revealed no difference among the conditions in terms of affective reactions,  $F(2, 292)=0.90, p=.41$ . Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Another follow-up univariate ANOVA examining perceptions of open-ended item importance revealed a significant difference among the conditions,  $F(2, 292)=9.64, p<.01, \eta^2_p=.06$ . Bonferroni post hoc tests indicated that respondents who were required and respondents who were prompted to answer open-ended questions viewed these items as more important than control group respondents who were not required / prompted to respond. There was no significant difference between respondents who were required and respondents who were prompted to comment. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

To evaluate whether our manipulation affected the tendency to provide usable comments, 3x2 chi-square tests of independence were conducted separately for each of the five open-ended questions. The results of these omnibus tests revealed significant differences among conditions for all five questions (See Figures 1-5). A series of paired comparisons (i.e., three 2x2 chi-square tests of independence per open-ended question) were conducted as follow-up tests. A Bonferroni correction was applied prior to conducting these comparisons to control for family-wise Type I error. The findings showed that participants in the required and prompted groups were more likely to provide usable comments than participants in the control group. No significant differences were found between the required and prompted groups for four of the five open-ended questions. There was a significant difference found between the required and prompted groups for the 'Administrative and Physical Services' open-ended question such that respondents in the required group provided more usable comments than respondents in the prompted group.

## Discussion

Modern technologies have eased the process of collecting and analyzing survey comments, yet little is known about the factors that encourage or discourage respondents from providing them. The present study begins to shed light on this issue. Results revealed the open-ended questions included on a standard, web-based survey are generally viewed as less important than closed-ended items. However, requiring or prompting comments increases people's appreciation for the importance of responding to open-ended questions. At the same time, there is no evidence that such prompts and requirements annoy respondents, as participants in our study who were exposed to these conditions did not view the survey any less favorably than did those completing a standard web-based survey without non-response follow ups. Finally, our results showed that prompting and requiring comments increased the number of usable open-ended responses to the survey. For almost all dependent measures, the same pattern of results characterized the required and prompted comment groups, suggesting these two manipulations affect respondents similarly.

### *Practical Implications*

The findings from this study lead to several potentially useful guidelines for survey researchers and practitioners. Previous research by Poncheri et al. (in press) has shown that dissatisfied respondents are more likely to comment than satisfied respondents in a standard organizational survey, suggesting that nonresponse to open-ended questions can introduce sources of error. The present study provides a way for survey researchers to increase responses to open-ended questions through survey design, without increasing negative affective reactions to the survey. This can help researchers reduce open-ended item nonresponse and increase the generalizability of comment data to the larger survey sample. Furthermore, the fact that there was only one statistically significant difference (e.g., usable responses for the 'Administrative and Physical Services' open-ended question) between the two treatment conditions in this study indicates that

researchers can design surveys so that comments are either required or simply prompted.

This study also shows that when given appropriate cues, more participants provide useful qualitative information than when these cues are absent. This suggests that participants are not skipping open-ended questions because they do not have a legitimate answer as suggested by Dillman (2000), but rather skipping may be better understood as a form of satisficing. Survey consumers should be cautious when interpreting open-ended responses that are not explicitly required or encouraged since it is likely that the nonrespondents to these questions have opinions they are not providing.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

While this study has many practical implications, these implications must be interpreted in the context of several study limitations. This research used an experimental design with a student sample, which leads to questions about the generalizability of these results to organizational settings. To maximize external validity, we purposefully chose a survey that solicited opinions on climate-related issues of relevance to the survey population. Nevertheless, future research should seek to replicate these findings in an organizational setting.

Future research should also look at the effect of our study manipulations over time. In addition, it would be useful to know whether the number of open-ended response opportunities on a survey moderates the effects of requiring responses. It is unknown whether overexposure to this technique could lead to negative outcomes, such as unit nonresponse (i.e., respondents may attrit and choose not to respond to the survey at all).

A final limitation and opportunity for future research is related to the application of the non-response follow-ups manipulated in this study. This technique, which was developed specifically for use with Web-based surveys, does not translate well to paper-and-pencil measures. Although many organizations use Web-based surveying, this technology is not always available. Thus, the non-response follow-up techniques implemented in this study do not

hold value for organizations restricted to paper surveys. Future research should examine methods for encouraging responses to open-ended items on paper surveys.

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Table 1

*Past Experiences with Surveys and Technological Evaluation Responses*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Past Experiences with Surveys</i>			
1. How often do you receive requests to take surveys?	299	2.70	.86
2. How often do you complete paper and pencil surveys when they are sent to you?	299	2.41	.99
3. How often do you complete surveys online?	299	2.75	.94
4. How often do you answer open-ended questions on surveys you are filling out?	298	2.53	.91
<i>Technological Evaluation</i>			
1. I had difficulty accessing the web-based survey.	300	1.54	.81
2. I encountered technical difficulties while completing the web-based survey.	299	1.41	.68
3. I had difficulty submitting the web-based survey.	297	1.34	.56
4. Overall, the process of taking the web-based survey went smoothly.	298	4.55	.71

*Note.* Past experiences with surveys response scale: 1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very often.

Technological evaluation response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix*

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Affective Reactions	3.93	.63	(.85)		
2. Closed-Ended Item Importance	4.02	.64	.23**	(.79)	
3. Open-Ended Item Importance	3.60	.59	.21**	.45**	(.78)

*Note.*  $N = 293$ . This  $N$  represents the number of individuals who provided responses to all items on these three scales; \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level. Response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Coefficient alpha values for each scale are provided on the diagonal.

Table 3

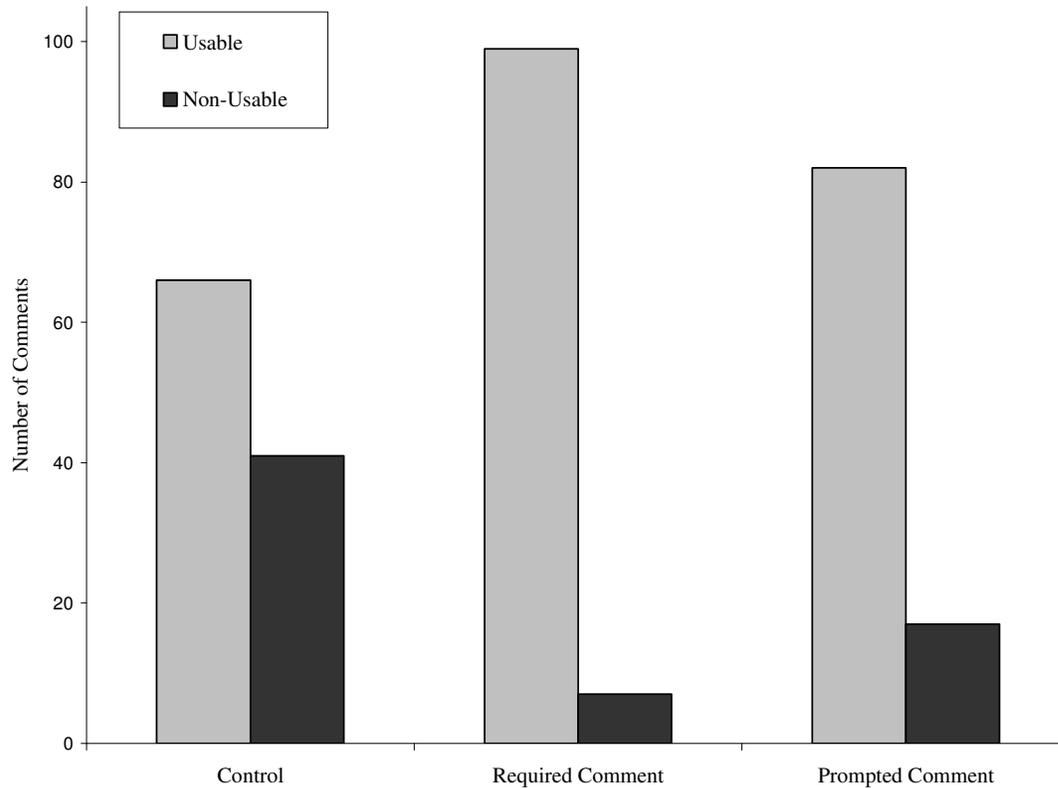
*Descriptive Statistics Per Dimension*

	Non-response Follow-up Manipulation								
	Control Group (Non-Prompted Group)			Required Comment Group			Prompted Comment Group		
	<i>N<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Affective Reactions	103	3.93	.63	96	3.88	.59	98	4.00	.64
Closed-Ended Item Importance	102	3.89	.59	99	3.75	.53	98	4.11	.60
Open-Ended Item Importance	101	3.39	.69	98	4.06	.57	98	3.69	.61

<sup>a</sup> Sample size varied across conditions because respondents who failed to rate all of the items comprising a given scale were dropped from analyses involving that scale.

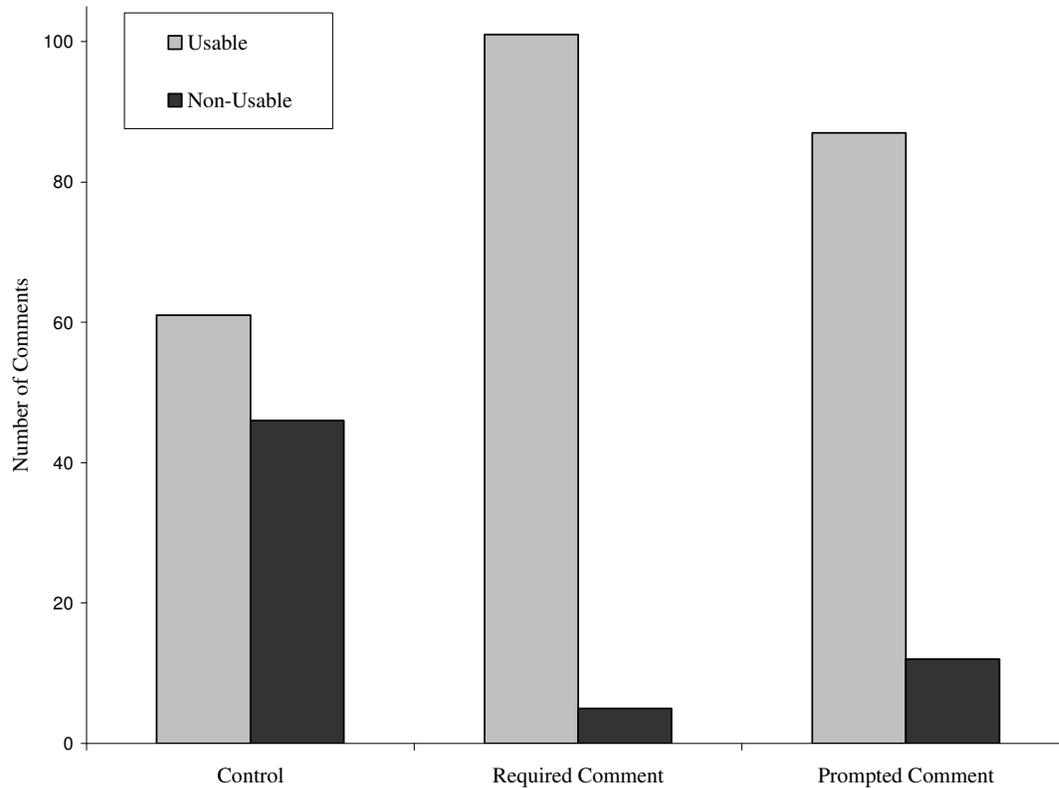
*Note.* Response scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither disagree nor agree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Figure 1. Chi-Square Analyses Comparing Usable Comments Pertaining to Question 1 (Instructional Services) Across Survey Conditions



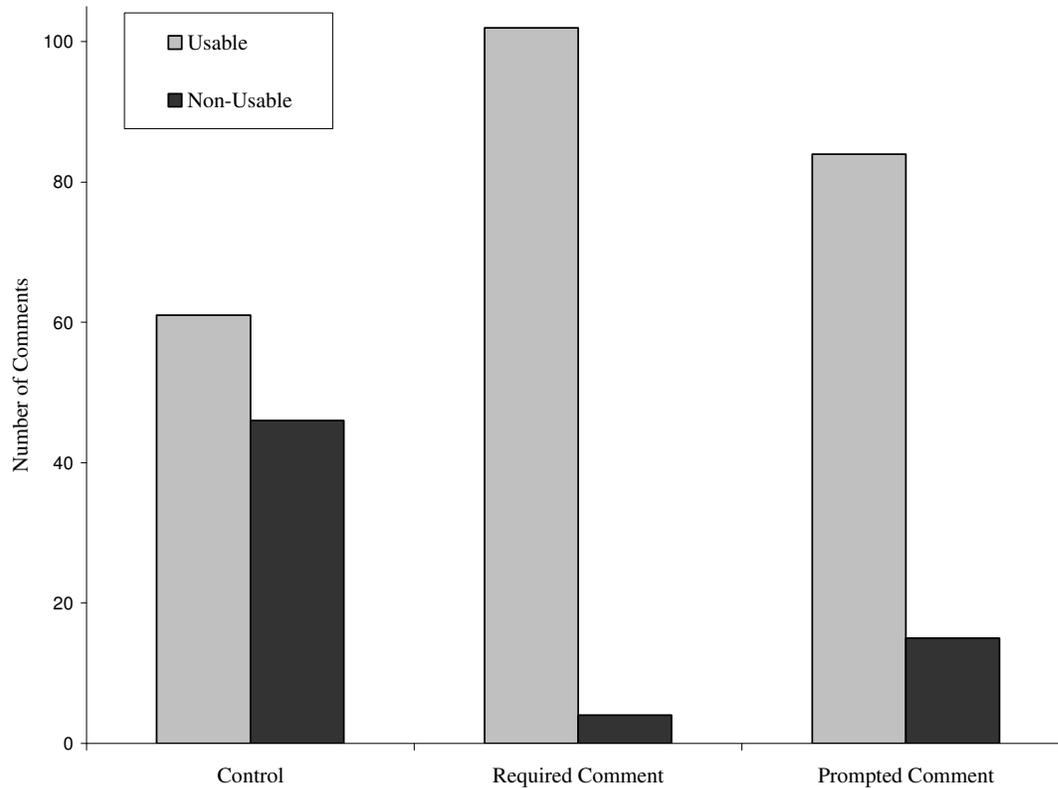
*Note.* An omnibus test [ $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 33.65, p < .001$ ] indicated that this study's non-response follow-up manipulation affected the number of usable comments pertaining to Instructional Services. Three 2 x 2 follow-up chi-square tests of independence showed that participants in the required group and participants in the prompted group were more likely to provide usable comments than those in the control group. No significant differences were found between the required and prompted groups.

Figure 2. Chi-Square Analyses Comparing Usable Comments Pertaining to Question 2 (Student Services) Across Survey Conditions



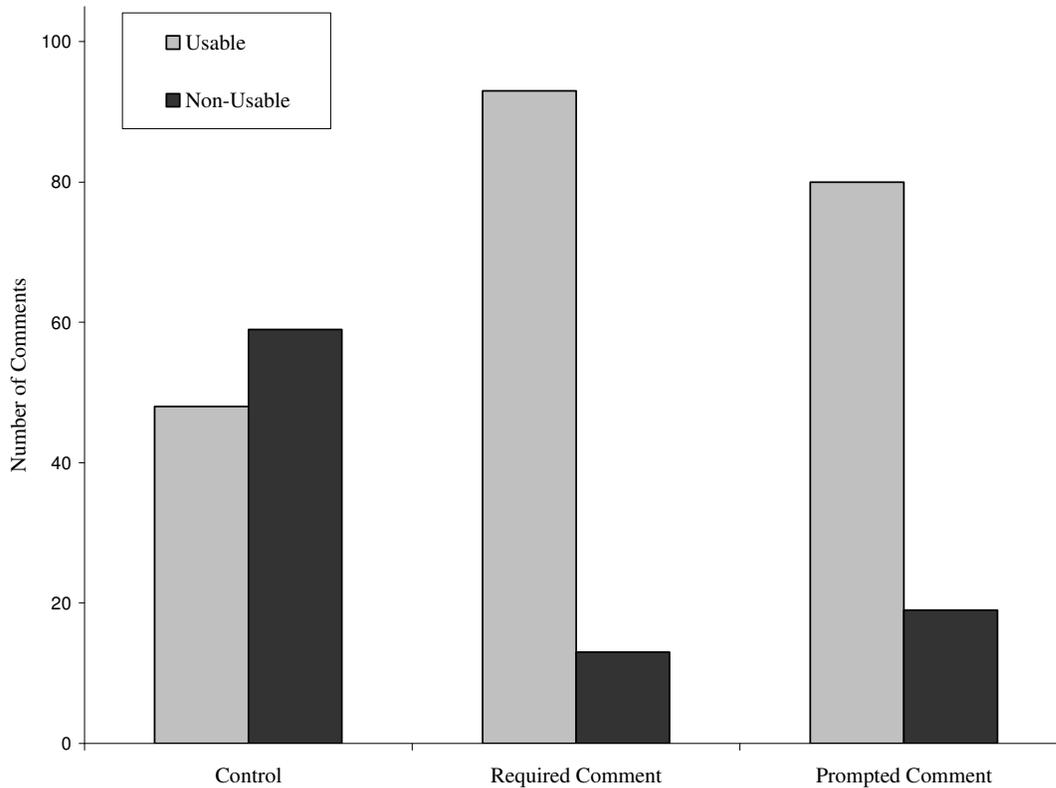
*Note.* An omnibus test [ $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 54.27, p < .001$ ] indicated that this study's non-response follow-up manipulation affected the number of usable comments pertaining to Student Services. Three 2 x 2 follow-up chi-square tests of independence showed that participants in the required group and participants in the prompted group were more likely to provide usable comments than those in the control group. No significant differences were found between the required and prompted groups.

Figure 3. Chi-Square Analyses Comparing Usable Comments Pertaining to Question 3 (Administrative and Physical Services) Across Survey Conditions



*Note.* An omnibus test [ $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 52.49, p < .001$ ] indicated that this study's non-response follow-up manipulation affected the number of usable comments pertaining to Administrative and Physical Services. Three 2 x 2 follow-up chi-square tests of independence showed that participants in the required group and participants in the prompted group were more likely to provide usable comments than those in the control group. A significant difference was found between the required and prompted groups for this dimension, such that respondents in the required comment group were more likely to provide usable comments than respondents in the prompted comment group.

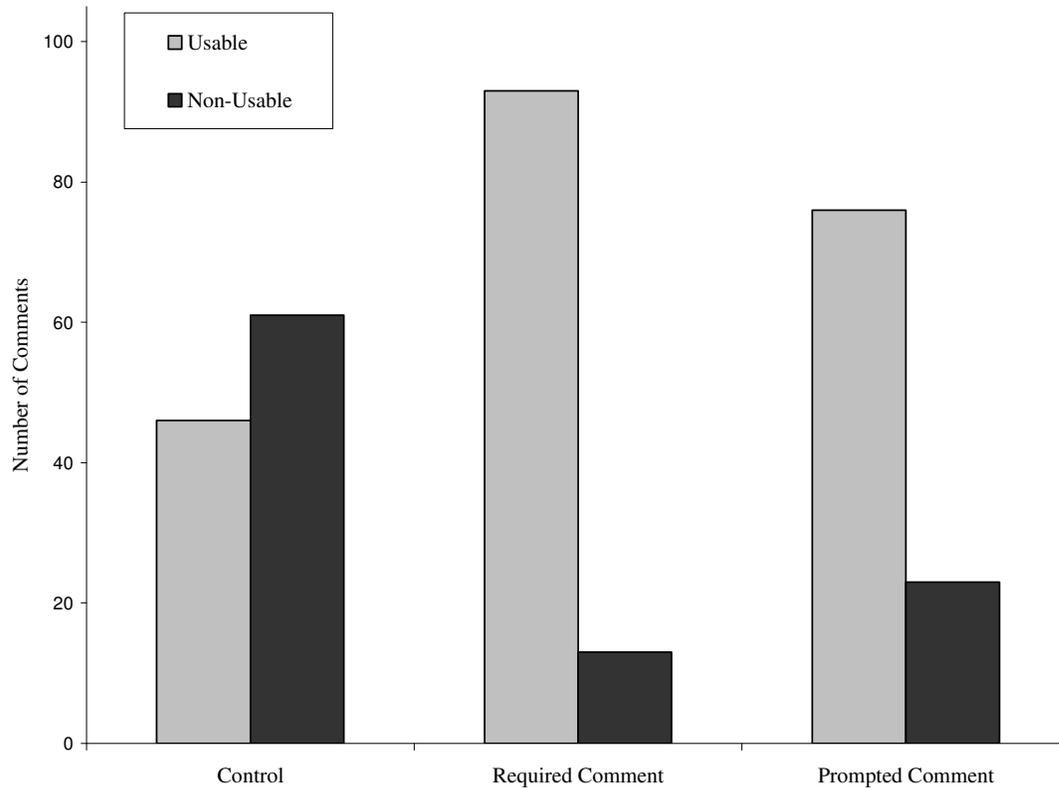
Figure 4. Chi-Square Analyses Comparing Usable Comments Pertaining to Question 4 (Student Focus) Across Survey Conditions



*Note.* An omnibus test [ $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 54.37, p < .001$ ] indicated that this study's non-response follow-up manipulation affected the number of usable comments pertaining to Student Focus.

Three 2 x 2 follow-up chi-square tests of independence showed that participants in the required group and participants in the prompted group were more likely to provide usable comments than those in the control group. No significant differences were found between the required and prompted groups.

Figure 5. Chi-Square Analyses Comparing Usable Comments Pertaining to Question 5 (Social and Cultural Services) Across Survey Conditions



*Note.* An omnibus test [ $\chi^2(2, N = 312) = 53.94, p < .001$ ] indicated that this study's non-response follow-up manipulation affected the number of usable comments pertaining to Social and Cultural Services. Three 2 x 2 follow-up chi-square tests of independence showed that participants in the required group and participants in the prompted group were more likely to provide usable comments than those in the control group. No significant differences were found between the required and prompted groups.