Using qualitative research methods in discrete choice experiments: a systematic review

This study aimed to identify all published health studies that have reported the use of qualitative methods to inform the design and/or the interpretation of discrete choice experiments (DCEs).

DCEs were identified from a systematic search of the Medline database and classified on the quantity of qualitative research reported. Those with ‘extensive’ qualitative aspects were critically appraised using a newly developed structured tool.

A total of 277 articles (254 studies) were identified and included in the review. Of the 254 studies: 111 (44%) did not report the use of any qualitative methods; 114 (45%) reported minimal data on the use of qualitative methods; 29 (11%) reported, or cited, the extensive use of qualitative methods. A variety of applications of qualitative research were identified, including the selection of attributes and/or levels (n=95, 66%), piloting the DCE (n=26, 18%) and understanding respondents’ decision making processes (n=4, 3%). Popular qualitative research methods included focus groups (n=64, 45%) and interviews (n=108, 76%), with semi-structured interviews (n=25, 17%), structured interviews (n=5, 3%), cognitive debriefing techniques (n=12, 8%) being the most common approaches.

Survey to authors confirmed the findings of this result. All surveyed authors felt qualitative research made an improvement to their DCE studies.

Guidelines for the conduct of DCEs recommend the use of qualitative research methods to inform attribute and level selection and assess respondents’ comprehension of the choice tasks. This review indicates the implementation of these recommendations is not consistently reported by authors.

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