When to Collect Data? Choosing an Appropriate Time Frame for Data Collection During Ph.D. Program in India?

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When to Collect Data? Choosing an Appropriate Time Frame for Data Collection During Ph.D. Program in India?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to explain various research data collection time frames, their merits, and demerits, and most importantly the suitability of each data collection time frame concerning the stage/phase of research to enable Ph.D. scholars in India to understand the key difference between research methodology/design and research data collection time frames, in turn, guiding them to choose an appropriate data collection time frame.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Postmodernism philosophical paradigm; Inductive research approach; Observation data collection method; Longitudinal data collection time frame; Qualitative data analysis.

Findings/Result: As long as the Ph.D. scholars can understand all the available research data collection time frames and make mindful choices of data collection frames at various stages/phases of their research journey to answer their research question they will be able to determine (on their own) all the other choices in succeeding steps of doctoral-level research such as i) sample size; ii) sampling technique; iii) data collection instrument; iv) data analysis techniques. In addition, scholars will also be able to differentiate between research methodology/design and research data collection frames.

Originality/Value: There are a vast literature about each one of the research data collection time frames viz., Cross-Sectional, and Longitudinal (Panel; Cohort; Retrospective) time frames. However, only a few have explained them together comprehensively. In this article, we have attempted to capture most of the research data collection time frames briefly that would enable Ph.D. scholars in India to glance through and make scholarly data collection time frame choices.

Paper Type: Conceptual.

Keywords: Research Methodology; Research Design; Research Process; PhD; Ph.D.; Coursework; Doctoral Research; Research Data; Data Collection Time Frame; Data Collection Time Horizon; Time Frame; Time Horizon; Cross-sectional; Longitudinal; Panel Study; Cohort Study; Retrospective Study; Postmodernism

1. BACKGROUND :

There is a vast literature about the data collection time frames for doing doctoral-level research. Ph.D. scholars get confused with various terminologies about different types of research viz., Cross-sectional study; Longitudinal study, Panel study; Cohort study; Retrospective study, and so on. We determinedly believe that all these terminologies are related to merely the time frame used by the researchers to collect data. The reality is a majority of stakeholders in the research education system have a lower level of clarity about this predisposition. This lower level of clarity is resulting in the designing of unrealizable research data collection time frames by a majority of Ph.D. scholars in India. Scholars must avoid focussing on these terminologies and just understand that research methodology



and research data collection time frames are not the same. Research data collection time frames are just one of the choices scholars need to make during the doctoral-level research process.

Various research studies have identified factors affecting the Ph.D. success rate across the world. "To name a few a) scholar-supervisor/guide relationship; b) mentorship; c) dissertation process; d) role of the department; e) role of peer qualities; f) transformational learning experience provided; g) level of curiosity and interest in reviewing the existing literature; h) planning and time management skills; i) level of creative thinking and writing skills; j) amount of freedom in the research project; k) level of a supportive environment for Ph.D. scholars' well-being; l) higher-education practices; m) supervisors' research capabilities and gender; n) expectations set by the research environment; o) Ph.D. scholars' expectations; p) support network; q) level of Ph.D. scholars' socialization with the research community; r) Ph.D. scholars' navigation system; s) different terminologies for various components of doctoral-level research are given by different disciplines creating undue confusion in scholars' minds; t) data collection methods which just play the role of data collection and it is just one of the steps of the doctoral-level research process being portrayed as the research methodology/design; u) scholars' inability to identify their genuine interest in a fact/phenomenon/reality/truth/dependent variable, intensive review of existing literature, locating an important research gap, and finally formulating a research question; v) a lower level of clarity about the most important and indispensable step of the doctoral-level research process i.e., choosing an appropriate research philosophical paradigm that lays stepping stones toward answering the research question in a scientific and scholarly way; w) a lower level of clarity about the most important and indispensable step of the doctoral-level research process i.e., choosing an appropriate research approach/reasoning that paves path for decision concerning data collection and analysis; x) a humongous confusion among Ph.D. scholars in India about the difference between research methodology/design and research data collection methods" [1-52].

Furthermore, in reality, a majority of stakeholders in the research education system have a lower level of clarity about the most important and indispensable step of the doctoral-level research process i.e., choosing an appropriate research data collection frame to logically answer the research question and the difference between research methodology/design and research data collection time frames. In addition to this lower clarity, a majority of them guide the Ph.D. scholars to begin the journey without educating the scholars about the most important aspect of choosing a data collection time frame. In addition, they also mandate that scholars use certain research data collection time frames that are commonly used in a discipline or the one with which they are comfortable. This lower level of clarity and the beginning of the Ph.D. journey without a clear understanding of the essence of research data collection time frames is making it difficult for Ph.D. scholars to complete the journey successfully and most importantly if some scholars complete their Ph.D. journey successfully, their awareness about the reasons for choosing a particular research data collection time frame to answer their research question is very low. We believe that if the scholars can begin their Ph.D. journey by allocating a higher level of focus and time toward understanding various research data collection time frames available to answer their research question their journey will be with a very lower level of complications and with a higher level of awareness about the data collection time frame choice they make. But this reality is knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally, or unintentionally suppressed by a majority of stakeholders in the research education system in India. In other words, this suppressed reality has resulted in creating humungous confusion about the difference between research methodology/design and research data collection time frames among Ph.D. scholars in India.

One thing Ph.D. scholars must always remind themselves of throughout their Ph.D. journey is the fact that they will be awarded a Ph.D. degree for doing doctoral-level research. Doing doctoral-level research and generating research outputs such as research articles and a thesis determines the probability of success in getting a Ph.D. degree. The first step of the doctoral-level research process is identifying research gaps and formulating a research question, the second one is choosing an appropriate research philosophical paradigm, the third step is choosing an appropriate research adat collection method choices that ensure a logical answer is found to the research question, and the fifth step is choosing an appropriate data collection time frame [46-52]. It is thus inevitable and imperative that Ph.D. scholars understand various research data collection methods/method choices in depth and chose the appropriate one. The doctoral-level research which is the single most important requirement of the



Ph.D. program is cognitively demanding and intends to create researchers who can create new knowledge or interpret existing knowledge about reality by using different perspectives, paradigms, and reasoning. Knowledge sharing requires autonomy, good quality time, a stress-free brain for deep thinking, and the freedom to look for more meaningful findings. This is the single most important reason for making doctoral-level research flexible wherein the scientific and scholarly world gives autonomy to Ph.D. scholars to formulate their question and answer it within 3-6 years using an appropriate research approach/reasoning. Nevertheless, only 50% of scholars admitted to Ph.D. in India completed, and that too in ten years whether or not they are aware of the importance of reasoning in doctoral-level research [46].

2. OBJECTIVE :

There is humongous confusion among Ph.D. scholars in India about the difference between research methodology/design and research data collection time frames. When we ask the scholars, who are in their final stages of the Ph.D. program about what is their research methodology/design, surprisingly we get answers such as 'Cross-sectional', 'Longitudinal', 'Panel Study, or 'Cohort Study' from a significant majority of them. Furthermore, choosing one or more appropriate research data collection time frames is just one of the choices a scholar needs to make among many choices in the doctoral-level research process. And all the choices a scholar makes across all the steps of doctoral-level research cumulatively become a research methodology/design. *Owing to such confusion the key objective of this article is to explain various research data collection time frames, their merits, and demerits, and most importantly the suitability of data collection time frames concerning the stage/phase of research to enable Ph.D. scholars in India to understand the key difference between research methodology/design and research data collection time frames, in turn, guiding them to choose an appropriate data collection time frame.*

3. RESEARCH DATA COLLECTION TIME FRAMES :

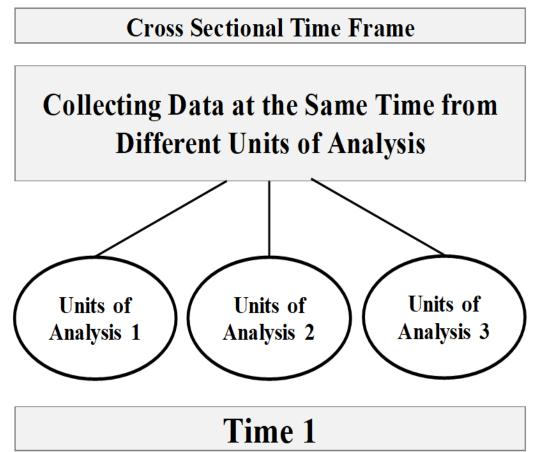
The research data collection time frame merely specifies the number of points in time at which scholars intend to gather data to answer their research question. The Cross-sectional and Longitudinal time frames are the two choices available. It is a higher level of decision-making in the Ph.D. research journey that determines the repeatability of research results which is a measure of the ability of the data collection method to generate similar results for multiple preparations of the same sample. It is a scientific/systematic/scholarly way of deciding on 'when' to collect data from the units of analysis/samples to answer the research question. An appropriate data collection time frame choice depends upon i) type of the research question (descriptive; relational; causal) [46] [49]; ii) research philosophical paradigm (positivism; interpretivism; critical realism; postmodernism; pragmatism) [46] [50] [52-82]; iii) the research approach/reasoning (deductive; inductive; abductive) [46] [51] [83-124]; iv) time available for scholars to collect data [46]; v); vii) data collection method and method choice [56]; vi) resources that are available for scholars to collect data [46]. Choosing a data collection time frame is one of the most important decisions scholars need to make during their Ph.D. journey. We strongly recommend scholars know their competence, research environment, and support system before finalizing a data collection time frame. Do note that the data collection methods tell us 'How' to collect data and once we have chosen this 'How' now in the immediate next step of doctoral-level research we need to choose 'When' to collect the data using the data collection methods/method choices chosen in the previous step [48]. There are two main types of time frames available to collect the research data to answer the research question such as i) Cross-sectional and ii) Longitudinal.

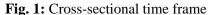
4. CROSS-SECTIONAL DATA COLLECTION TIME FRAME :

This type of time frame is also known as a Transverse study, One-shot study, and Prevalence study. Simply put, we will be collecting data from many different respondents/subjects/participants/units of analysis/samples/individuals/groups at a single point in time (just one-time), in other words, data are gathered just once, over a short period or basically, taking a snapshot of an ongoing situation. This time frame helps obtain information/data on variables of the research question in different contexts at the same time and find the relationship among variables of the research question limited to the units of analysis. What is very important to note is the fact that we will be observing variables without influencing them which is why the Cross-sectional time frame is not suitable for collecting data if Ph.D. scholars have chosen data collection methods that require intervention/treatment/experiment



[126-137] [163-164]. However, this time frame is most suitable when there are time and resources constraint and for the preliminary/exploratory phase of research. The findings can be used for further research.





We strongly recommend scholars use a Cross-sectional time frame only for the preliminary/exploratory/ early stages of their research during the Ph.D. program. Using this type is not recommended for explanatory, Confirmatory, and application stages/phases of the research. Unfortunately, the Cross-sectional time frame is most preferred by most Indian researchers during and even after the Ph.D. in the name of time constraints. A few examples are listed below to give more clarity about the Cross-sectional time frame of data collection.

- Collecting annual reports of two companies (Units of Analysis/Samples) for the latest year, comparing their financial performance (Dependent variable) and technology adoption (Independent variable) to determine whether or not there is a relationship between these Variables.
- Collecting data on past smoking habits (Independent variable) and current diagnoses of lung cancer (Dependent variable) in patients (Unit of Analysis/Sample) diagnosed with lung cancer.
- To know the prevalence of Covid-19 infection (Dependent Variable) in a village. We can design a population-based survey to assess the prevalence of Covid-19 cases. We can go to all the houses that were supposed to be included such as houses with people (Units of Analysis/Samples) having recent travel (Independent Variable) history in the study and examine the population. If the total sample surveyed is 500. Of these, we have found that 18 individuals have Covid-19 infection. Thus, the prevalence of Covid-19 in this community is (prevalence) 18/500 or 3.60/100 population.

There are many advantages of using a Cross-sectional time frame for collecting the data such as i) it is relatively cheap and less time-consuming, ii) allows collect data from a large pool of respondents/subjects/participants/cases/units of analysis/samples/groups and compare differences between them, iii) helps capture a specific moment in time (National Censuses), and most importantly, iv) different variables can be observed at a time. However, there are disadvantages of using a Cross-



sectional time frame such as i) it is difficult to establish cause-and-effect relationships and ii) cannot be used to analyze behavior over a period or establish long-term trends and the timing of the crosssectional snapshot may be unrepresentative of the behavior of the group as a whole. Figure 1 illustrates the Cross-sectional time frame of data collection.

5. LONGITUDINAL DATA COLLECTION TIME FRAME :

In this type of time frame, we will be collecting data about variables and units of analysis/ samples/groups/respondents/participants/subjects of your research question over a period. This means, investigating the same variables/units of analysis several times continuously over a period through repeated observations to reveal the relative stability of the phenomenon. Collecting the data using a Longitudinal time frame helps us understand the dynamics of the problem in addition to allowing us to understand the change process/trend [138-164]. Scholars can collect the research data using a Longitudinal time frame in three different ways as explained below.

5.1. Panel Longitudinal Time Frame :

In this type of Longitudinal time frame of data collection, we will be selecting a cross-section of respondents/participants/groups/subjects/units of analysis/samples which are representative of a more significant population, and data is collected at specified intervals for a more extended period. The same units of analysis are used throughout. A few examples are listed below.

- Samsung Brand appointed 2000 customers (Units of Analysis) across India to collect their experience (Dependent Variable/Effect) with every new model (Independent Variable /Cause/Intervention/Treatment/Experiment) released into the market.
- The Stanford Marshmallow experiment on delayed gratification in 1972. Led by Psychologist Walter Mischel.
- Selecting a retail store (Unit of Analysis), recording sales quantity (Dependent Variable) and discount % (Independent Variable) at the end of every day for 06 months to determine the magnitude of the impact of discount (Independent Variable/Cause/Intervention/Treatment/ Experiment) on sales quantity (Effect).
- Selecting a batch of students (Unit of Analysis), recording test scores (Dependent Variable) and mode of teaching (Independent Variable) at the end of every class for 06 months to determine the magnitude of the impact of mode of teaching (Cause/Intervention/Treatment/Experiment) on test scores (Dependent Variable/Effect).

5.2. Cohort Longitudinal Time Frame :

This type of Longitudinal time frame of data collection involves selecting respondents/ participants/subjects/groups/units of analysis/samples based on a specific event such as year of birth, geographic location, or historical experience (share a common characteristic). In this type, we will merely observe units of analysis without any intervention/treatment/experiment. For example, selecting a group of people who were infected by Covid-19 and recording their psychological state of mind from the day they were infected pre-vaccination and post-vaccination. One can claim the impact of vaccination (Independent Variable) is positive on the psychological state of mind (Dependent Variable) of Covid-19 infected people (Units of Analysis/Samples). A few examples are listed below.

- Selecting a company (Unit of Analysis), recording financial performance (Dependent Variable) and level of technology adoption (Independent Variable) at the end of every month for one year to determine the magnitude of the impact of the level of technology adoption (Cause) on financial performance (Effect)
- Selecting pregnant women (Units of Analysis), recording their diet (Independent Variable) every month for 09 months and the birth weight of the baby (Dependent Variable) to determine the magnitude of the impact of the mother's diet during pregnancy (Cause) on baby's birth weight (Effect).

Longitudinal Time Frame

Collecting Data at Different Times from Same Units of Analysis

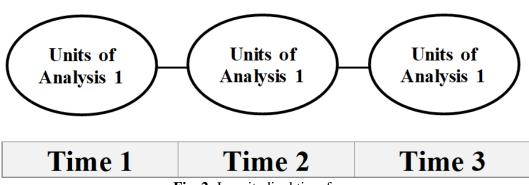


Fig. 2: Longitudinal time frame

5.3. Retrospective Longitudinal Time Frame :

This type of Longitudinal time frame of data collection involves looking to the past by looking at historical information such as medical records/archived records/case reports. This is helpful when scholars are planning to use already existing data, collected by an authentic organization or agency. For example, selecting a group of patients undergoing treatment for Cardio Vascular Disease (Units of Analysis) at Jayadeva Hospital, Bengaluru, India. Checking all the records of these patients from the case reports, and recording the Body-Mass-Index (Independent Variable) of patients in all the previous visits to the hospital to determine the causal relationship between levels of Body-Mass-Index (Cause) levels of Cardio Vascular Disease (Effect/Dependent Variable).

There are many advantages of using a Longitudinal time frame for collecting the research data such as i) it provides greater validation of research findings/claims, ii) generates unique data, iii) allows identifying trends, and most importantly iv) allows understanding units of analysis and variables of the research question in-depth. However, there are disadvantages to using a Longitudinal time frame such as i) it requires investing more time and cost, ii) an unpredictability factor is always present, and iii) a large sample size is needed. **Figure 2** illustrates the Longitudinal time frame of research data collection.

6. HOW TO CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE DATA COLLECTION TIME FRAME? :

We cannot rank these two main and three sub-time frames in any order of preference. All of them have their merits and demerits. What is important is the level of evidence that is required to defend/justify scholars' hypotheses and research findings. In addition to the level of confidence, other factors that play an important role in choosing one of these time frames are the stage/phase of the research; Research question (Descriptive; Relational; Causal); Time available; Resources available; Research philosophical paradigm; Research approach; scholar's competence; The level of authenticity, validity, reliability, and generalizability required to claim scholars' research findings/conclusion [46]. To enable scholars, to choose appropriate research data collection time frames we have listed a few options purely based on the phase of the research. Scholars need to be aware of the stage/phases and collect the data using different data collection time frames. This will ensure a clear understanding of each component of the research question (dependent variable, independent variable, and units of analysis) in depth before claiming their research findings.

Exploratory/Identification Phase: To understand how important the variables are, scholars can use



Cross-sectional time frames or Retrospective Longitudinal time frames

Descriptive Phase: To understand the existence of variables, scholars can use Cross-sectional or Retrospective Longitudinal time frames.

Explanatory Phase: To understand the direction of the relationship among variables, scholars can use Cross-sectional or Cohort Longitudinal time frames.

Confirmatory Phase: To understand the magnitude of the relationship among variables, scholars can use Panel Longitudinal time frames.

Application Phase: To understand the practical significance of the relationship among variables, scholars can use Panel Longitudinal time frames.

7. CONCLUSION :

Among the two main research data, collection time frames Longitudinal data collection time frame is the most preferred among scholars belonging to the Basic/Natural Science, Engineering, and Technology disciplines, and Cross-sectional time frames are the most preferred data collection time frames for scholars belonging to other disciplines in India. We understand the Ph.D. program is timebound and hence using a Cross-sectional time frame of data collection during the Ph.D. program is acceptable. But knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally, or intentionally a significant majority of researchers in India use the Cross-sectional time frame even after the completion of the Ph.D. program. The fear among Indian researchers is that Mixed-method choice and Multi-method choice of data collection require a lot of time investment and most importantly the research output in the form of research article publications will slow down drastically. The mere pressure on Ph.D. scholars and Ph.D. holders in India to publish a certain number of research articles which is connected to their performance measurement is also one of the key reasons for this. However, there are a few Institutes in India that motivate their Ph.D. and Post-doc researchers to use Longitudinal data collection time frames. Ph.D. scholars and Ph.D. holders must be aware that description, explanation, or claim about a reality/fact/truth/effect /dependent variable and a piece of complete knowledge about reality is complete only when they are derived from collecting and evaluating data using both Cross-sectional and Longitudinal data collection time frames.

It is the responsibility of every stakeholder in the research environment and system to ensure that the scholars are made aware of every step involved in carrying out doctoral-level research in addition to the purpose, objective, and key deliverables of various available data collection time frame for them to choose an appropriate one to achieve their key research objective during the Ph.D. journey. Designing robust coursework that is intended to create awareness about the essence of data collection time frames is an appropriate way of fulfilling this responsibility. As long as the Ph.D. scholars can understand all the available research data collection time frames and make mindful choices of time frames across various stages/phases of the research to answer their research question they will be able to determine (on their own) all the other choices in succeeding steps of doctoral-level research such as i) sample size; ii) sampling technique; iii) data collection instrument; iv) data analysis techniques.

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