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Press Release

New Approach in Statistics Uses Smartphones instead of Diaries

Mannheim data scientist Professor Florian Keusch and researchers from six other European countries have received a grant for a new project of the European Commission and EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the European Union. The goal of the project is to develop and test intelligent, smartphone-based survey methods for official statistics in Europe.

Every ten years, EUROSTAT conducts a survey in Europe to find out how much time people spend on various activities, for example on paid work, housework, care work, social activities, travel, and leisure. Every five years, there is another survey for statistical purposes to find out how people use the money they earn and what they spend their money on. Up to now, those participating in EUROSTAT surveys had to answer the questions on paper or use simple computer logs. Now, intelligent applications (smart surveys) are to be developed and tested. Seven European countries participate in the collaborative “Smart Survey Implementation” project. The Federal Statistical Office of Germany and the University of Mannheim are the only institutions in Germany participating in the project.

The subproject at the University of Mannheim will receive funding of more than 200,000 euros for the next two years. The project will start on 1 May 2023. In addition to Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, France, Italy, and Slovenia are also part of the project.

“We want to bring existing survey methods into the 21st century and make it possible to use a smartphone app for daily logs”, the head of the subproject at the University of Mannheim, Professor Florian Keusch, who holds the chair of Data Science and Methodology, explains.

The benefits of smartphone surveys are easy to identify: The data entries are more accurate because users can log them right away instead of trying to remember things to enter in the evening, when sitting on the couch. In addition, smartphones have sensors and tools to facilitate data entries: The geolocation of the user is automatically determined, and users can simply take a photo of an invoice.

The big problem, however, is the acceptance of such an app. This is where the Mannheim subproject comes into play: “We want to conduct a large-scale test to find out if the various population groups in Germany are willing to download an app provided by the Federal Statistical Office of Germany and use it for statistical purposes”, says Keusch. In the first step of the project, researchers will identify potential obstacles. In the second step, these results will be used to test strategies on how to convince users of the benefits of the digital process.

The initial situation in some of the six other countries participating in the project is different: Digital pioneers like Norway are much further ahead when it comes to the use of apps. The official system has long been digitized. In the Netherlands, for example, interviewers are allowed to help respondents to download apps. In Germany, it is not possible to provide that kind of assistance. Therefore, the study must be adapted to national requirements. “In the end, EUROSTAT expects results that can be applied to all countries and that make smart survey methods the standard everywhere in a few years”, the head of the Mannheim subproject says.

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