ABSTRACT

One purported means for reducing the social desirability inherent in stated purchase intentions is indirect questioning, whereby the respondent is asked to comment about the probable buying behavior of another abstract individual. The contention is that respondents will project their own predilections unto the other person, thereby allowing for a more valid expression of their own purchase intentions. The 343 respondents to a survey intended to gauge interest in the creation of a graduate student association provided ratings of participation likelihood (very unlikely, somewhat unlikely, not sure, somewhat likely, very likely) for both themselves and for “other graduate students” in four potential functions: academic, social, advocacy, and community service. The perceived likelihood of others’ participation did correlate with one’s own stated level of likelihood in all four functions ($r = .47$ to $.51$), which is consistent with projection. However, counter to expectations, on only one function — academic — was the self rating higher than the rating of others’ interest, and notably, this was the function for which the expressed self interest was the highest. On all four functions, there was a systematic difference such that (1) other students’ likelihood is rated lower than one’s own likelihood when one’s own interest is high, and (2) other students’ likelihood is rated to be higher than one’s own likelihood when one’s stated likelihood is low. An anchoring and adjustment mechanism with regressive tendencies appears to be operating. The main implication of the results is that ratings of others’ interest are not necessarily going to be lower than the respondent’s own stated interest, even on socially desirable behaviors. Whether the interest rating assigned to others will be higher or lower than the respondent’s own interest depends on whether the self rating is low or high.

Keywords: Anonymity, Indirect Questioning, Potential Functions, Purchase Intentions, Social Desirability

DOI: 10.4018/ijtem.2013070102
INTRODUCTION

Graduate student associations (GSA) are typically discussed in the context of student governance (e.g. Ratsoy & Bing, 1999). In the United States and Canada, student participation in university governance became common in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Ratsoy & Bing, 1999). However, graduate student associations have a longer history and exist for several other reasons besides fostering student involvement in governance. The stated rationale for the formation of a graduate student association at Johns Hopkins University in 1891 for social reasons was presented in the journal Science (The Graduate Student Association, 1892) as follows:

There must be departmental isolation in every university, but this may become extreme. The best training for a capable and cultivated manhood can be obtained only as one mingles with his fellows and shares their varied experiences. An organization which could furnish some tie of social solidarity between students while in residence here, and bring the men into easy communication with universities when abroad has been lacking. This want, felt by the graduates and some members of the faculty, led to the formation. May 25, 1891, of the Graduate Students’ Association. Similar associations have been formed in the universities of Edinburgh, Paris, and in other European universities… Through these means it is believed that departmental isolation will be overcome; that men may, through this association, enter into a broader student life, and that the university at large will be convinced of the need for wider social relations than are found in the laboratory or seminar. (pp. 9-10)

Contemporary graduate student associations have varied functions. Reading their mission statements, it becomes evident that in addition to the social function (e.g. camaraderie) espoused in the Johns Hopkins quote, graduate student associations sponsor academic activities, advocate for student rights, and engage in community service. Participation rates, however, are often disappointing (e.g. Case, 2011). At one university, nearly 81% of graduate assistants indicated on a survey that they did not belong to the Graduate Student Association, yet all were members by default (Hahs, 1998).

Our university was interested in possibly creating a graduate student association. However, because most of our graduate students attend on a part-time basis, the concern was raised that the adage “if you build it, they will come” may not necessarily apply, as is the case in many other situations (Berkun, 2007). Consequently, a survey was commissioned to determine student interest in joining such an organization. Still, the fear was that students may claim to be interested, but would not join once membership became available. In order to have more faith in the students’ responses, we decided to employ both direct and indirect questioning to assess interest. In this article, we compare and contrast the answers we got by means of the two procedures. Our results were not exactly what we had expected based on the available literature.

Review of the Literature

In the review of the literature, we begin by discussing purchase intentions and how they can be contaminated by social desirability bias. One proposed means to control for it is indirect questioning. We review its theoretical underpinnings, the literature supporting its use, and identify some outstanding issues.

Purchase Intentions

For decades, colleges have been advised to embrace marketing research concepts and procedures as a means for determining the viability of proposed programs and services (Krampf & Heinlein, 1981). Whenever any new product or service is being contemplated (including educational offerings), it is prudent to determine whether it has the potential to succeed by surveying the intended audience regarding how much interest they have in the concept and whether they would buy it if it
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