When Research Participants Don’t Tell It Like It Is: Pinpointing the Effects of Social Desirability Bias Using Self Vs. Indirect-Questioning

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Social desirability bias reflects the basic human nature to present oneself in a positive manner to others. Typically, this tendency takes the form of over-reporting opinions and behaviors that are congruent with values deemed socially acceptable and under-reporting those deemed socially undesirable. This bias concerns many behavioral researchers because of its threat to construct validity in measurement construction. However, social desirability bias is not just a problem for scale construction, but it can also present problems as a moderating variable or confounding factor when examining behavior. Since so much consumer behavior research examines the influences of others on attitudes and behaviors, as well as social/symbolic presentation, we would expect consumer research to potentially suffer from the compromising effects of social desirability bias. King and Bruner's (2000) investigation of papers published in top marketing journals from 1980-1997 revealed that only thirteen papers tested social desirability bias as a potential source of error.


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Social desirability bias reflects the basic human nature to present oneself in a positive manner to others. Typically, this tendency takes the form of over-reporting opinions and behaviors that are congruent with values deemed socially acceptable and under-reporting those deemed socially undesirable. This bias concerns many behavioral researchers because of its threat to construct validity in measurement construction. However, social desirability bias is not just a problem for scale construction, but it can also present problems as a moderating variable or confounding factor when examining behavior. Since so much consumer behavior research examines the influences of others on attitudes and behaviors, as well as social/symbolic presentation, we would expect consumer research to potentially suffer from the compromising effects of social desirability bias. King and Bruner’s (2000) investigation of papers published in top marketing journals from 1980-1997 revealed that only thirteen papers tested social desirability bias as a potential source of error.

Research designs that use a self-report format and measure constructs that have high social influence appear to foster problems with social-desirability bias (Fisher 1993; Fisher and Tellis 1998; Jo 2000; King and Bruner 2000). The use of indirect questioning is believed to lower social desirability bias by asking participants to report from the perspective of another person (Fisher 1993; Fisher and Tellis 1998). The assumption is that participants will project their own opinions and behaviors onto the referent person (Calder and Burnkrant 1977; Grubb and Stern 1971; Haire 1950). Self-report questioning methods, on the other hand, may increase the potential for social desirability bias as the participant seeks to manage the researcher’s impression of him or her.

Recently, consumer behavior researchers were called to increase attention to social-desirability bias in design, measure construction, and analysis (Fisher 2000; King and Bruner 2000; Mick 1996). This research contributes to the discussion of the effects of social desirability bias in consumer research by examining the differences in responses between a self-report and an indirect-questioning method in split samples for two different studies of consumer behavior. These studies show the differences in reports that can be attributed to this bias.

The first study examines the influence of other people’s opinions in a consumer’s post-purchase evaluation and determination of satisfaction and looks at the use of this comparison standard for both expressive and private products. A 2 (questioning method) x 2 (product) between subjects experiment was performed. Each participant received a scenario about a recent purchase of either an expressive or private product and were asked to report on comparison standards used during post-purchase evaluation and satisfaction determination for either “you” (self-report) or “Jordan, a typical college student” (indirect-question). Results indicated significantly higher reporting of the use of other people’s opinions by the indirect-question group during both post-purchase evaluation and satisfaction determination. Additionally, participants using an indirect question format rated other people’s opinions as a more important comparison standard than did those using a self-report. Third, the difference in reported use of other people’s opinions between participants using indirect vs self-report formats showed strong significance for expressive products, but not for private products.

The second study is an exploratory survey of the effects of social desirability bias in a particular situation, health communication. It examines the ways in which physicians and patients discuss advertised prescription medications, motivations and attitudes behind those discussions, and outcomes of the conversations. It is qualitative in nature, and observes the potential moderating impact of social desirability bias on reported attitudes and behaviors related to patient-physician communication. Social norms typically encourage cooperation with those in authority and perceived power, but patients may feel intimidated by their physician. Given the nature of the communication relationship between patient and physician, social desirability may moderate the reported willingness to discuss medications, since patients want to appear cooperative and informed, and thus may self-report a high willingness to interact with their physician, but they may actually be intimidated or anxious.

Additionally, social desirability may play a role in reported attitudes towards persuasive communications (prescription advertising in this study). Research has found that when thinking about prescription drug ads in general, self-reported attitudes towards the ads tend to be rated lower than when a specific advertisement is being evaluated. In terms of social desirability influence, a person rating prescription advertisements in general may feel less compelled to please the researcher with positive evaluations than when evaluating a specific brand ad and may even unconsciously desire to appear unaffected by and unimpressed by this type of advertising (i.e., “I’m not persuaded by these ads, but others are.”). Thus, while general attitude measures toward prescription drug ads would seem socially neutral, we might expect that with indirect-questioning, more favorable attitudes towards the ads to be reported.

Like the first study, a split sample was employed in order to observe potential between subjects moderating effects of social desirability bias. Study results supported the hypotheses about the effects of social desirability bias on the reporting of communication about, and attitudes toward, advertising. Participants evaluated themselves as more willing to discuss medications than typical others. Additionally, participants self-reported more moderate attitudes towards prescription drug advertisements than typical others.

The goal of this research was to examine the effects of social desirability bias in consumer research. While most consumer behavior studies examine social desirability bias as a threat to construct validity during measurement development, this research differs in that it considers social desirability bias as a moderator, or confound, in an empirical study explaining attitudes and behaviors. While the information goals of the two studies presented differ, results of both studies exemplify the potential sources of error from social desirability bias in consumer research. Results support that indirect-questioning methods evoke higher responses of socially undesirable behavior (e.g., influence from other persons and advertising) than a self-report. Additionally, the second study illustrated that a self-report question format would show higher reports of socially desirable behavior (e.g., discussions with physicians) than an indirect-question format.
References


