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Guidelines on Acquiescence in Marketing Research

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Worldwide, companies spend an estimated 46 billion U.S. dollars annually on marketing research (Statista 2019). Given these investments, international big players and small start-ups alike base consequential decisions on the results of marketing research, which often uses survey methods that are easy to administer and interpret. Thereby, marketers implicitly assume that survey responses adequately capture respondents' true attitudes and preferences. These implicit assumptions are presumably shared by academic marketing researchers, who frequently use self-report to assess consumer attitudes (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson 1996). However, research has documented various response biases that systematically distort survey responses and therefore the results of academic as well as industry marketing research. Misguided investments of time and money based on biased findings can follow.

In this review, we discuss the acquiescence bias, which is the most prevalent response bias in survey-based research (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2006). Acquiescence means to respond affirmatively to self-report items irrespective of their content. For example, if consumers indicate their interest in a product on a 5-point Likert scale ("1 = not interested", "5 = very interested"), acquiescence leads to higher observed values (i.e., greater measured interest) than justified by consumers' true interest. Also other types of self-report items (e.g., nominal true/false choices or ordinal scales) are affected by acquiescence (Welkenhuysen-Gybels, Billiet, and Cambré 2003). Furthermore, acquiescence can produce spurious correlations between otherwise unrelated constructs (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012; Steinmetz and Posten 2017). Thus, acquiescence can lead to false conclusions when comparing means and correlations from groups (e.g., different segments) that differ in acquiescence or when interpreting absolute values on survey scales or yes/no items.

Given that acquiescence can significantly distort survey responses, past research has been dedicated to measurement and correction strategies for acquiescence (e.g., Krautz and Hoffmann 2018). Several such strategies have been developed as a result (e.g., trait acquiescence measure, balanced scales, or heterogeneous items). Whereas the usage of these strategies can decrease acquiescence, they can introduce various validity problems and are costly in terms of respondents' time (Greenleaf 1992). In light of this trade-off, identifying factors that foster or attenuate acquiescence can help researchers and practitioners to create settings that reduce acquiescence; and to make informed decisions when using strategies to mitigate acquiescence. Ultimately, marketing research can thus be conducted more efficiently and reliably.

Synthesizing and extending previous research, we identify individual differences as well as cultural and situational factors that foster acquiescence. We analyze existing strategies to counter the effects of acquiescence. Furthermore, we highlight when such strategies are beneficial—and when alternative market research methods that are unaffected by acquiescence are especially useful. Based on our analyses, we provide eight guidelines for marketers to assess, control for, and prevent acquiescence.

Individual Differences in Acquiescence

Some of the earliest research on acquiescence defined it as a personality variable that differs between individuals (Couch and Keniston 1960). Based on this understanding, three main strategies have been developed to identify (and potentially exclude from analyses) individual high-acquiescence respondents. As the first strategy, researchers can use an explicit measure of trait acquiescence. This measure extends surveys by a 19-item acquiescence scale (Couch and Keniston 1960). However, this scale is rarely used and consists of items whose wording seems somewhat outdated. Second, researchers construct surveys consisting of heterogeneous items, such that respondents' agreement with unrelated items signals acquiescence. However, content-heterogeneous items are difficult to design as item heterogeneity is not clearly defined and operationalized (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2006). Third, surveys contain both positively worded ("Vaccines can save lives") and negatively worded ("Vaccines cannot prevent deadly diseases") items to identify (and exclude if necessary) those who agree with both positive and negative items as respondents high in acquiescence (Welkenhuysen-Gybels et al. 2003). Such balanced scales are indeed less affected by acquiescence (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2006). However, researchers have recommended that balanced scales are used with caution, as respondents might be confused and the item error-variance might increase as a result (Weijters and Baumgartner 2012).

Over and above the potential measurement concerns, marketers might find the use of these three strategies inconvenient despite their benefits. As market research is increasingly using web-based short surveys with large sample sizes (Wilson 2018), the addition of a substantial number of items is hardly feasible. Newer research potentially offers another measurement option. It shows that respondents who score high in habitual interpersonal trust acquiesce to questions across a wide variety of content (Posten and Steinmetz 2020). In this view, acquiescence emerges when respondents accept the questions-asker's propositions because they generally trust others, which can be measured by adding a single item. Consequently, measuring habitual trust could be an efficient way to identify respondents who might acquiesce.

Cultural Differences in Acquiescence

Acquiescence does not only differ between individuals, but also between cultures. Acquiescence is especially pronounced in East-Asian cultures that are high in power distance and cultural collectivism (Krautz and Hoffmann 2018). That is, respondents from cultures (e.g., India) with large hierarchical differences (i.e., high power distance) or cultures that value group cohesion over individual uniqueness (i.e., high collectivism) are more likely to acquiesce than respondents from cultures with low power distance or individualism (e.g., Sweden). Cultural differences in acquiescence can pose a considerable problem for cross-cultural marketing, which has experienced a surge in recent years due to globalization (Leonidou et al. 2018). For example, if 50% of Swedish respondents indicate that they are interested in the product (whether on a yes/no or Likert scale item) and 60% of Indian respondents give the same response, these differences might well be solely due to greater acquiescence in India.

To account for cultural differences in acquiescence, the three types of strategies discussed above (i.e., explicit acquiescence measures, heterogeneous items, balanced scales) have been suggested, with the same practicality issues. Recent research has taken a different approach, by combining different question types (i.e., scales and true/false responses) to measure a single construct (pARS; Krautz and Hoffmann 2018). Via the deviation between the scale responses and true/false choices, acquiescence can be estimated. However, pARS

can only be applied to contexts in which consumers' objective knowledge is assessed with true/false choices. In contrast, in the majority of consumer contexts, marketers ask about constructs that are much more subjective (e.g., brand loyalty, evaluation of an ad or product). Despite its benefits, pARS can thus be applied to a limited range of surveys, but its potential is evident to identify specific cultures, subcultures, or segments that are high in acquiescence. Once such groups have been identified, surveys to target these groups can add more specific strategies against acquiescence.

Situational Determinants of Acquiescence

Over and above individual and cultural differences that foster acquiescence, research has highlighted situational factors that amplify this bias. Among these situational factors are consumers' lack of ability or motivation to respond accurately. In line with this notion, acquiescence increases when the question wording is vague or when respondents are uncertain of their true attitude or under time pressure (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 2006). Marketers would certainly be wise to avoid vague or ambiguous question wording in surveys. Yet, acquiescence would likely persist, as respondents with ample time and motivation to respond accurately might be difficult to recruit, especially when using online surveys (Savage and Waldman 2008).

Recent research has identified additional psychological factors that foster acquiescence, namely respondents' motivation to affiliate with the question-asker (Posten and Steinmetz 2018; Steinmetz and Posten 2017). When respondents thought about a friend reading their answers, acquiescence was greater than when they thought about a stranger. Because friends are more common targets of affiliation, these results suggest that affiliation motives increase acquiescence. This effect might pose a paradox for marketers: Whereas affiliation with brands is a desirable outcome of marketing (Veloutsou 2009), affiliation might undermine the accuracy of research about these brands. Two situations in particular could be problematic: first, (perceived) rejection by a brand, and second, marketing a brand as a friend. Regarding the first situation, research has shown that feeling rejected by an aspirational brand leads consumers to desire affiliation with the brand (Ward and Dahl 2014), for example when a consumer cannot afford signature products by a desired brand. Regarding the second situation, research has shown that consumers believe to have (friend-like) relationships with brands, stores, and salespeople (Kim and Kwon 2011). Such friend-like relationships might emerge especially for identity-relevant products such as clothing or entertainment.

Guidelines for Marketing Researchers

So far, we have identified individual and cultural respondent characteristics and contextual factors that render acquiescence likely. Among these are, paradoxically, contexts that are typically desired by marketers, namely affiliation between the consumer and a given brand. Based on these findings, our guidelines identify circumstances that might have previously not thought of as problematic for market research (e.g., covering an aspirational brand). Broadly speaking, our guidelines build on the notion that circumstances that foster trust, affiliation, and friend-like feelings to the researcher and/or the brand targeted by market research might undermine the veracity of the results because such circumstances can also foster acquiescence. Thus, with our guidelines we attempt to put recent research into practice (see Table 1).

Guideline 1: Assess the extent to which the respondents, the environment, or the research subject are prone to acquiescence.

At the onset of a marketing research project, marketers could assess to what extent their survey is prone to acquiescence. As discussed above, acquiescence is likely a problem if informants come from cultures that are high in power distance or collectivism (Krautz and Hoffmann 2018), or are habitually trusting (Posten and Steinmetz 2020). Acquiescence is also likely if the survey covers an aspirational brand or a brand with which consumers have friend-like ties (Kim and Kwon 2011; Ward and Dahl 2014), or if respondents are motivated to affiliate with the brand (Steinmetz and Posten 2017). Under such circumstances, we recommend the use of strategies to counter acquiescence.

Guideline 2: Assess to what extent the survey consists of item types that are prone to acquiescence, and to what extent responses inform decisions.

We suggest that marketers consider whether their survey consists of item types affected by acquiescence. In particular when interpreting Likert scales, yes/no choices, or correlations, the error variance might be inflated and responses might not reflect true attitudes. In such cases, it would be wise to exert special caution if survey responses directly inform decisions. For example, in case a restaurant plans to roll out a new pizza topping if a certain percentage of customers reply “yes” to the question whether they would like this topping, acquiescence could inflate this percentage, such that the roll-out decision relies on incorrect information.

Guideline 3: If the risk of acquiescence is high, use alternative methods if possible.

If the risk of acquiescence seems high due to the above considerations (cf. Guidelines 1-2), marketers could use methods that are typically less affected by acquiescence. Such techniques include the application of ranking rather than rating scales (Harzing et al. 2009) or the item count technique developed for researching sensitive consumer issues (e.g., criminal behaviour, de Jong and Pieters 2019). Given their resilience to acquiescence, we suggest using such alternative methods whenever the research question allows.

Guideline 4: Add single-item control measures of factors that foster acquiescence.

When designing surveys and experiments, marketers could make use of the relation between trust and acquiescence (Posten and Steinmetz 2020). These relations suggest a novel means to assess and control for acquiescence. In some of their studies, Posten and Steinmetz (2020) used a single-item measure of respondents’ interpersonal trust to predict acquiescence, in online as well as laboratory settings. Such a single-item measure (e.g., “How trustworthy did you find the person asking you questions?”) could be integrated even into very short online surveys, and responses could be used as a control variable in the analyses.

Guideline 5: Combine surveys with methods that are less prone to acquiescence.

Over and above the previous suggestions to counter acquiescence, marketers could use multi-method approaches whenever acquiescence is likely. Surveys on existing products or services can be complemented by observational data (e.g., online search data), whereas surveys on novel products and services can be complemented by experiments that can provide physiological and behavioral data. Such multi-method approaches curb the effects of acquiescence on a single method because they combine different data sources.

Guideline 6: Reduce environmental factors that could foster acquiescence.

Regardless of the specific risk of acquiescence, we suggest that marketers ensure that the survey environment does not foster acquiescence. If respondents complete surveys face to

face, this could take place in a physically neutral space that does not signal affiliation through a friendly atmosphere. As one remedy, we suggest that marketers use, if possible, computer-administered surveys without much interpersonal interaction to reduce possible effects of personal affiliation on acquiescence.

Guideline 7: Separate respondent recruitment and survey administration.

Advising marketers to use interpersonally neutral environments might be contrary to the experience of market researchers who at times use affiliation, trust, and personal warmth to recruit survey respondents. On the one hand, affiliation is undoubtedly helpful to recruit respondents. On the other hand, affiliation can distort responses. A solution to this paradox could be to separate recruitment and survey administration as much as possible. One way to do so would be to create temporal, spatial, or personal distance, for example such that the recruiter is a different person than the survey administrator. Whereas the recruiter can capitalize on affiliation and trust to find respondents, the administrator can create a neutral space that is free of such cues to prevent acquiescence. The same applies to web surveys. Whereas the recruitment could take place in trusted apps, the survey itself could be taken on separate neutral websites.

Guideline 8: Mask the recipient of the survey responses.

An additional way to potentially reduce acquiescence would be to dilute the identification of the recipient of respondents' answers. As research has shown, acquiescence increases if respondents believe their answers will be read by a friend (Steinmetz and Posten 2017). By implication, if respondents believe their answers will be read by representatives of an aspirational or affiliative brand, they might acquiesce more. Thus, marketers could try to ask about several brands or products within one survey, and some questions could serve as filler items to obscure who will read the survey responses. Thereby, respondents might feel less motivation to affiliate through acquiescence.

Conclusion

Acquiescence can pose a significant problem for the validity of marketing research. As a result, a variety of strategies to assess it have been developed. We reviewed these strategies, and integrated them into a broader discussion of the individual, cultural, and situational factors that foster acquiescence. Therefrom, we developed guidelines for marketers to address the concern of acquiescence when designing, administering, and interpreting surveys.

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	Recommendation	Research Design
Guideline 1	Assess the extent to which the respondents, the environment, or the research subject are prone to acquiescence.	Assessing the risk of acquiescence before data collection
Guideline 2	Assess to what extent the survey consists of item types that are prone to acquiescence, and to what extent responses inform decisions.	
Guideline 3	If the risk of acquiescence is high, use alternative methods if possible.	Modifying the survey questions and analysis plan
Guideline 4	Add single-item control measures of factors that foster acquiescence.	
Guideline 5	Combine surveys with methods that are less prone to acquiescence.	
Guideline 6	Reduce environmental factors that could foster acquiescence.	Modifying the data collection environment
Guideline 7	Separate respondent recruitment and survey administration.	
Guideline 8	Mask the recipient of the survey responses.	

Table 1. Overview of our eight guidelines and the stage of the research design to which they apply.