

Understanding the Role of Identity in Self-Reported Emotional Reactions to Political Information

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
of the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Honors Program

Yeshiva College
Yeshiva University
May 2023

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Introduction

Surveys have long been used to assess emotional responses in scientific studies. There are, however, some flaws within the survey method that can negatively impact the validity of the survey response data. One of these flaws is not taking into account the change in an answer based on how the respondents perceive the question being asked. Survey respondents will often infuse their opinion about a particular matter into a question that asks about something else, which effectively decreases the response validity of that question. This might occur because the respondent would prefer to express something else on the topic besides what they are directly being asked. Despite not being asked about certain factors, respondents may apply these factors to their answers to survey questions.

Previous research has shown that people's beliefs and emotions are closely tied together and can influence the way they respond to questions about emotions (Robinson & Feldman Barrett, 2010; Robinson & Clore, 2002). For example, when asked about the service at a restaurant, a respondent might respond positively because the food tasted good, even though the service was poor. The respondent might feel like reporting a positive orientation based on something they consider more important. In this case, the respondent could feel that the quality of the food is more important, so they will respond positively to the service even though they did not think too highly of it (Gal & Rucker, 2011). This response bias is a significant issue in survey research and can lead to inaccurate conclusions about people's emotions and attitudes (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016).

In today's society, politics plays a significant role in shaping people's beliefs, values, and emotions. This can lead to biased and unreliable responses when people are asked to report their emotional reactions to political information. For example, when asked about their level of fear in response to a political video, a respondent's answer may be influenced by their political party affiliation, even though the question did not explicitly ask about political affiliation. The

respondent may express fear not because they feel it, but because it is a way of expressing that they disagree with and disapprove of a political message. To address this issue, researchers have proposed two methods for reducing response bias in self-reported emotions: Identity Outlet and Subtraction.

A method along the lines of what we presently call 'Identity Outlet' was implemented in the study "Response Decoupling and Partisans' Evaluations of Politicians' Transgressions" by Yair and Schaffner (2022). This experiment investigates the impact of response decoupling on partisan evaluations of politicians' transgressions. Response decoupling refers to the process of separating one's emotional response to a situation from their evaluative response, which can be influenced by their partisan identity.

The experiment involved presenting participants with a real-life scenario in which a politician acted controversially. The participants were then randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. The control group was asked to provide a single evaluative response to the scenario, while the experimental group was asked to provide both an evaluative response and a separate emotional response. For example, the control group was asked to what extent they believed the action was appropriate. In the experimental group, the respondents were first asked a question that acted as an identity outlet and were then later asked the same question that was asked to the control group. The results showed that when participants were asked to provide both an evaluative and an emotional response, they were less likely to be influenced by their partisan identity in their evaluations. The authors argue that response decoupling provides an identity outlet for individuals, allowing them to express their emotions while still maintaining their partisan identity. By separating their emotional response from their evaluative response, individuals are able to make more objective evaluations of political transgressions, regardless of the party affiliation of the politician involved.

The Subtraction method involves inducing respondents to psychologically subtract the effect of their identity from their self-reported emotions. This is done by telling respondents to mentally subtract certain characteristics of a decision. More specifically, the survey question can be prefaced with a short paragraph asking to put aside feelings toward the particular person or idea being asked about. One example of the subtraction method can be found in the study by Berinsky (2018). The study was interested in reducing expressive responses in surveys. Expressive response is a phenomenon where respondents may provide biased responses due to their desire to convey opposition to a person or policy and can be limited by using the subtraction method. In the experiment, the control group was asked to respond true or false to a statement such as “Barack Obama is a Muslim”. The experimental group was asked the same question, but this question was pre-empted by an introduction that stated “In the grid below, you will see a series of statements. Regardless of how you feel about the people and policies mentioned in these statements, we want you to tell us what you believe to be true. Again, we ask that you try and ignore your personal feelings”. The point of this introduction is to subtract any expressive response that the respondent may have. Now, instead of answering the question to express a desired message, the respondent can be more objective in their responses and actually indicate what they do and do not believe.

This study aims to investigate whether identity biases self-reported emotional reactions and whether the combined methods of subtraction and identity outlet can reduce this bias. The first assessment includes measures of dispositions toward anger and anxiety, as well as self-identification as a pro-Israel activist. In the second assessment, participants are asked to read a description of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement(BDS) and report their emotional reactions under one of two conditions, with or without the use of identity outlet and subtraction. The hypothesis is that these methods will make the self-reported emotional reactions

both lower and less influenced by pro-Israel identity and more reflective of actual emotional dispositions. By exploring the impact of identity on emotional reactions and the effectiveness of different methods in reducing such biases, this study has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of how identity influences our responses to politically charged issues.

Method Section: Survey Procedure and Measures

The study involved two waves of surveys administered to participants. The purpose of the study is to assess how much identity biases people's reports of emotional reactions to a politically important subject. To do so, the two emotional dispositions, dispositional anger and dispositional anxiety, and the centrality of Israel activism to identity were assessed in the first wave of the study, which was followed by describing and assessing emotional response to the BDS movement in the second wave. The waves were administered six weeks apart. The respondents were Yeshiva University psychology students who were given course credit for participation in the study.

Wave 1 Survey

The first wave of the survey measured emotions and the centrality of Israel activism to identity. An initial assessment of the participants' emotions was first taken. Participants were asked to rate how well certain terms from the anger and anxiety subscales of the International Personality Item Pool Questionnaire (Goldberg, 2006) described them on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Very Inaccurate" to "Very Accurate". Some of the items for dispositional anxiety were: "I worry about things", "I fear for the worst", "I am afraid of many things", "I get stressed out easily", "I get stressed out easily", "I am not easily bothered by things". Some of the items for dispositional anger were: "I lose my temper", "I get angry easily", "I get irritated easily", "I get upset easily", and "I am often in a bad mood".

Finally, participants were asked to rate the importance of being an Israel supporter and to what extent they consider themselves as an Israel supporter on a five-point Likert scale. The respondents were asked to use this scale for six different phrases that were adapted from other measures of the centrality of particular political matters to one's identity (Bankert, Huddy, & Rosema, 2017). The questions were "How well does the term Israel supporter describe you?", "How important is being an Israel supporter to you?", "When talking about Israel supporters, how often do you use "we" instead of "they"?", and "To what extent do you think of yourself as being an Israel supporter?".

Respondents were then asked to answer the following two prompts based on a seven-point Likert scale: "Please rate how much you agree or disagree with this statement: "Being a supporter of Israel is an important reflection of who I am"" and "Please rate how much you agree or disagree with this statement: "In general, my support for Israel is an important part of my self-image"". With both this Israel identity as well as the anger and anxiety identity measures, respondents' scores were computed by averaging the responses to all relevant items and recoding the range from 0.00 to 1.00.

The survey questions asked 10 questions each for dispositional anger and dispositional anxiety. For the anger questions, there were five questions where an answer of five would indicate a high level of anger and five questions where a response of 5 would indicate no anger. The scores of the latter five questions were reverse-scored to combine these results with the results of the first five questions. If someone scored a 5 on a question where 5 indicated no anger, the score was converted to a 1.00. The scoring scale was then turned into a five-point scale ranging from zero to one, and the scores were averaged. A score of 0.00 indicates no anger whereas a score of 1.00 indicates a high level of anger. The same was done for ten dispositional anxiety questions.

There were six questions for the Israel identity part of the survey. The values for Israel Identity were also averaged from 0.00-1.00, with 1 being the highest measure of Israel Identity. The means, standard deviations, and internal reliability coefficients for each of the measures are shown in the table below.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Main Measures

Variable Name	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha Score
IPIP Dispositional Anger(Wave 1)	.33	.17	.84
IPIP Dispositional Anxiety(Wave 1)	.50	.19	.85
Israel Identity(Wave 1)	.74	.22	.89
Angry Response to BDS(Wave 2)	.70	.26	NA
Worried Response to BDS(Wave 2)	.51	.30	NA

Wave 2 Survey

The second wave of the survey asks participants to read a description of the BDS movement that was adapted from the Wikipedia entry before answering the questions. The description provided information about the objectives and coordination of the BDS movement.

Participants were then asked a series of questions about the BDS movement after reading the description. Respondents were randomly assigned to either the control group or the Identity Outlet and Subtraction Group. Respondents in the control group were first asked these two questions: “How much had you heard about the BDS movement prior to reading this description from Wikipedia?” and “How consistent was Wikipedia’s description of the BDS movement with what you had heard about the movement previously?”. The answers to these first two questions were not important for the study, rather they were just there to keep the conditions comparable to the Identity Outlet condition. The control group respondents were then asked these questions about their emotional reactions: “When thinking about the BDS movement, how angry do you feel?” and “When thinking about the BDS movement, how worried do you feel?”. Respondents in the Identity Outlet condition were first given the following two identity outlet questions: “How unfair and misleading do you think the BDS movement’s way of describing Israel is?” and “How important do you think it is for Israel supporters to oppose the efforts of the BDS movement?”. They were then given a prompt that stated “Now we would like to ask you about your emotional reactions to the BDS movement. Regardless of how unfair and misleading you think the BDS movement is and how important you think it is to oppose the movement, just tell us how much you feel these particular emotions when thinking about the BDS movement.”. This prompt acts as the mechanism for the subtraction method. After implementing both the identity outlet and subtraction methods, the respondents in this group were then asked the same questions as the respondents of the control group.

Results

The average of the angry response for the control group was a value of 0.70, while the average for the identity outlet condition group was 0.68. To determine if the difference in these values was significant, an independent sample t-test with equal variances assumed was performed. The

test result was a t-value of 0.39 with 149 degrees of freedom, indicating a p-value of 0.70. The difference between the results was therefore insignificant, showing that identity outlet and subtraction did not reduce self-reported angry reactions relative to the control condition.

For the anxiety results, the average response for the control group was a value of 0.52 and the average for the identity control group was 0.50. A t-test was done and a t-value of 0.30 was found with 149 degrees of freedom, which led to a p-value of 0.77. There was no significant difference between the results of the two groups, meaning that identity outlet and subtraction did not reduce self-reported worry relative to the control condition.

The next part of the study used regression analysis to determine if identity outlet and subtraction change the effects of emotional dispositions and Israel Identity on self-reported anger and anxiety in response to the BDS description.

In the control condition, the effect of anxiety on worried reaction is $b=0.29$, with a p-value of 0.14. The corresponding impact of anxiety on worried reaction in the Identity Outlet condition was $b=0.31$ with a p-value of 0.08. The Identity Outlet condition did not significantly alter the effect of emotional disposition on emotional reactions to Israel BDS information.

Next, the same correlation was tested but with anger instead of anxiety, with the angry reaction to the BDS movement as the outcome variable. The b-value in the control condition was 0.40 with a p-value of .02, while for the Identity Outlet condition, the b-value was 0.31 with a p-value of 0.11

The effect of Israel identity on the angry reaction was also tested. In the control condition, Israel identity had a correlation value of $b=0.26$, while in the identity outlet condition, it had a value of $b=0.15$. This difference was not statistically significant.

It was found that identity outlet and subtraction did not decrease reports of self-reported angry or worried reactions to BDS, and it did not change the effects of previously assessed emotional dispositions or Israel identity on these.

Discussion

The hypothesis of this study was that the identity outlet and subtraction methods would decrease the anger and anxiety reactions of the survey respondents and would make these responses more rooted in emotional dispositions and less rooted in Israel activist identity. However, the identity outlet and subtraction methods had no real effects on the survey responses. While the results did differ, they did so by insignificant amounts. One possible reason is that the survey respondents in the control group responded honestly about their emotional reactions during the survey.

Alternatively, the sample size might have been too small to detect the effects that exist. A second hypothesis of this study was that the identity outlet and subtraction group would have no increased association between emotional dispositions and emotional reactions to BDS, and decreased associations between Israel Identity and emotional reactions to BDS, but the difference in results was also not significant. Possible reasons for why this is not the case are the same as given above.

The study aimed to investigate whether identity would influence individuals' self-reported emotional responses to political messages and whether the combined use of Identity Outlet and Subtraction methods would effectively reduce this bias. The findings suggest two potential outcomes: individuals may be capable of accurately reporting their emotional reactions to political events, or they may not be able to do so, and the Identity Outlet and Subtraction methods may not effectively correct this bias.

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