

A Not-So-Scientific Study of UW-Madison Students' Response to
Existentialism?

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ENGL 140: The Figure of the Outsider

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Background

Humanistic psychology is the psychological study of awareness, free will, happiness, and the many related aspects of the mind that are uniquely human and give life meaning. Within humanistic psychology, there exists a topic of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that began in the mid-1800s. It was a reaction against rationalism, science, and the Industrial Revolution debating how “Rationalism had lost touch with human experience.” The purpose of the movement was to regain contact with the experience of being alive and aware. Some of the key questions include: What is the nature of existence? How does it feel? And what does it mean?

Since we debated on the topics of existentialism vs. transcendentalism, the psychology course introduced the topic of existentialism in humanistic psychology and recently watching Everything Everywhere All at Once, I decided to see if UW-Madison students believed in individual freedom and choice. I also wanted to dedicate this creative project to hone my skills in order to write a properly formatted research paper in the future. Thus, I sought out my psychology professor and asked how a “study” can be completed within a week. After seeing the extreme confusion on my personality professor’s face as if I said I liked social psychology better, I decided to conduct my “study” through a survey.

Method

The team, as in I, created a professional looking UW-Madison themed Google form for the medium of the survey. The team researched questions related to existentialism and transcendentalism, then created a group of questions related to each topic without explicitly stating those topics. Eight total yes/no questions were created to target the two topics. The goal of adding transcendentalism is to see whether students preferred one over the other.

Survey: <https://forms.gle/BMBw3tG3M7o7ky8c6>

Existentialism:

- Should people have a right to be happy?

Yes = negative towards existentialism

Reason: According to existentialists, a person's life is not necessarily good because they are happy. A happy person might be living a bad life while an unhappy person might be living a good life. The reason for this is that life is "good" for existentialists insofar as it is "authentic."

- Can science, art, philosophy adequately explain why we are here and what we should do?

Yes = positive

Reason: Having an explanation of life can also explain why we exist.

- Do you believe you can create your own destiny?

Yes = positive

Reason: Knowing you can control your destiny and live how you want to live provides a sense of purposeful existence.

- Will artificial intelligence ever be able to mimic the creativity of a human?

Yes = negative

Reason: If AI will be able to have a level playing field with something that makes humans unique, then existence is futile.

Transcendentalism:

- Is it good to conform to social norms?

Yes = negative towards transcendentalism

Reason: Transcendentalists believed that humans were fundamentally good but corrupted by society and its institutions such as organized religion and politics. Instead of being part of them, humans should strive to be independent and self-reliant.

- Do you believe that people should free themselves from social constructs and live by their individual principles?

Yes = positive

Reason: People should free themselves from social constructs and live by their own means.

- Do you think that all people can follow their own standards and maintain a peaceful society?

Yes = positive

Reason: Even in a society, if people can live by their own standards, then it should also be seen as following your own self.

- Has consumerism led to a degradation of our values and goals in life?

Yes = positive

Reason: A degradation to your values and goals mean you are not following your own path, therefore knowing that is happening is positive towards transcendentalism.

The survey questions were written in the same tone as much as possible, and all answers contained only two options to limit any other factors that could impede the proper results of the study. When distributed, the questions are then randomized in order to keep the survey hidden from its real intent. Because we could not afford giving gift cards to every 10th person that filled out the study, I asked (begged) my closer friends to complete an anonymous survey and act as participants for this “research study.”

Results

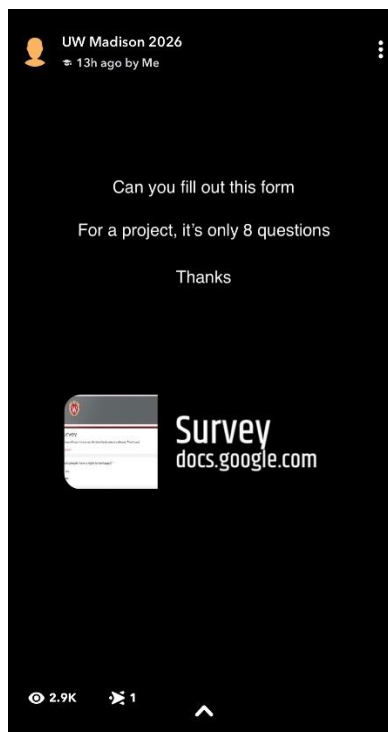
As the survey results piled in, the team began to notice a very strange correlation. To visualize the survey answers, Google forms displays a pie chart split into percentages for answers of A or B, A representing a certain color and B, another. Much to the dismay of the team, every one of the results contained only one single color, without fail, for every single question.



After further intensive investigation, the team realized that when the survey was distributed, all participants were eating dinner together at Gordon's Dining Center and decided it would be humorous to submit exactly identical answers, despite the survey's randomization format. Therefore, we can conclude that correlation is not causation, and a third factor effected the survey results. With existentialism in mind, there certainly was an existence of a group of individuals thinking its funny to troll the research team. Since we did not get the correct results, the team decided it was best to ask the participants to retake the survey, one by one, and also post on various social media in order to create a distributed sample.

Results, Part Two

The second round of results were much better. As of April 2nd, 2023 at 6:00 PM, The survey was able to collect a total of 88 responses, with a majority of respondents sourced from the UW-Madison Snapchat group chat story post.

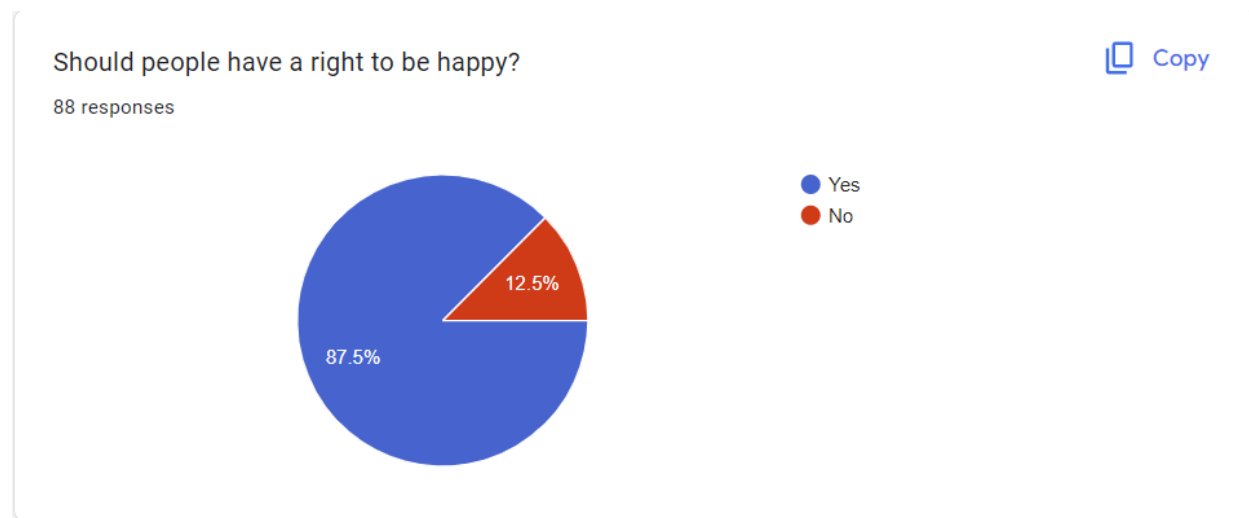


Here are the results:

Existentialism:

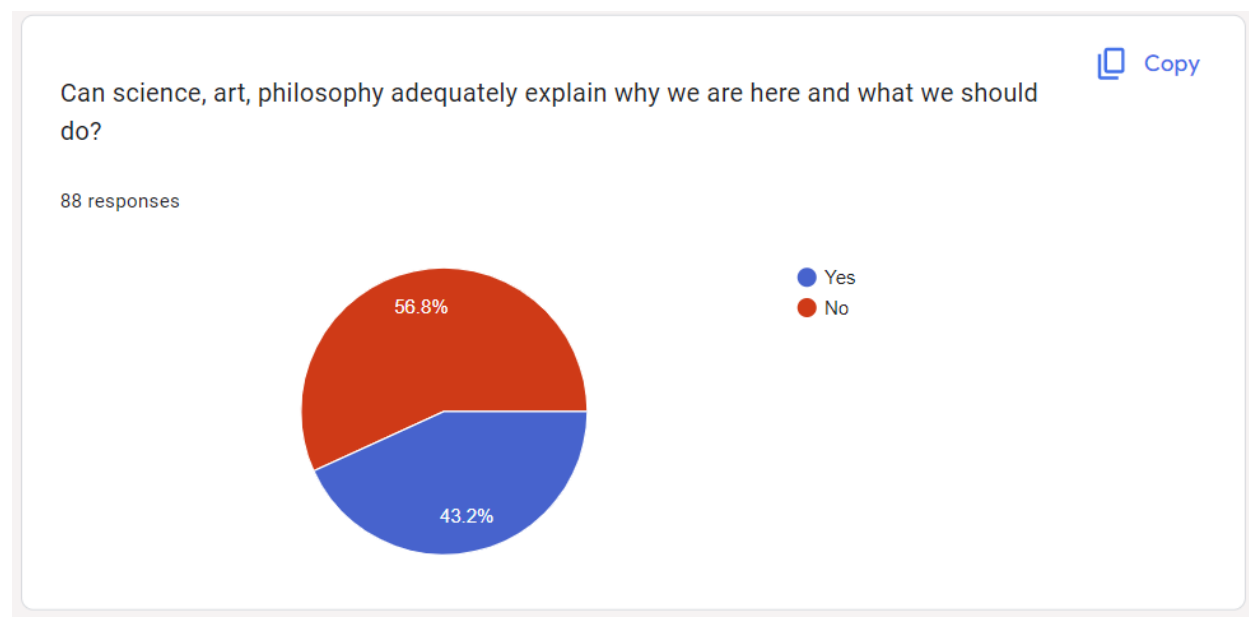
- Should people have a right to be happy?

Yes: 77 No: 11 – Negative towards existentialism



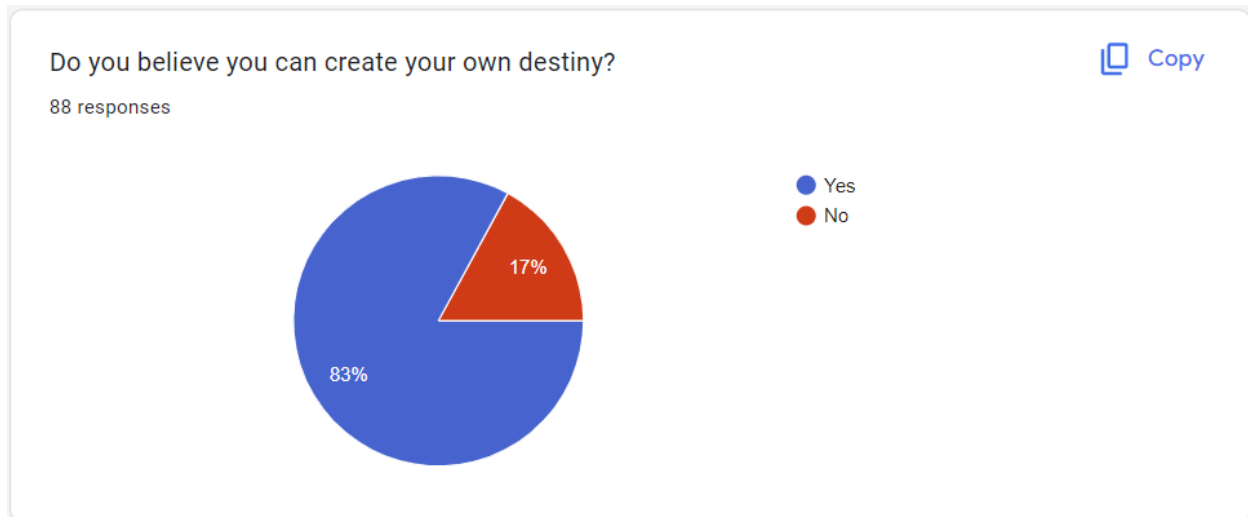
- Can science, art, philosophy adequately explain why we are here and what we should do?

Yes: 38 No: 50 - Negative towards existentialism



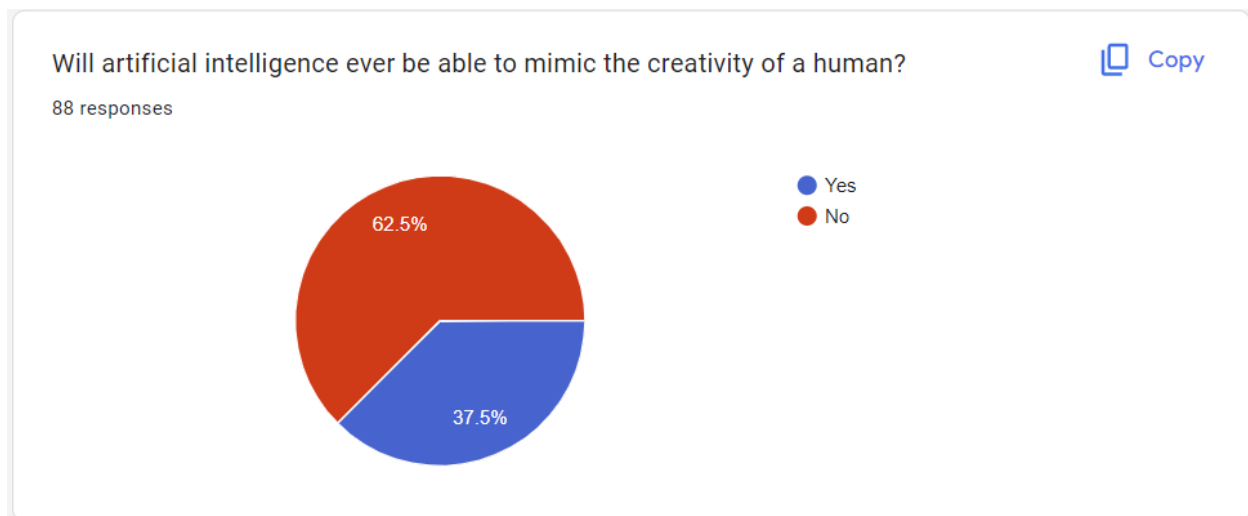
- Do you believe you can create your own destiny?

Yes: 73 No: 15 – Positive towards existentialism



- Will artificial intelligence ever be able to mimic the creativity of a human?

Yes: 33 No: 55 – Positive towards existentialism



Transcendentalism:

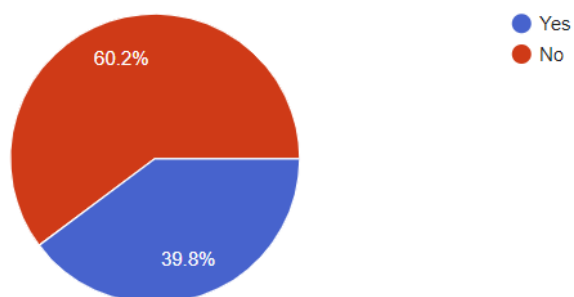
- Is it good to conform to social norms?

Yes: 35 No: 53 – Positive towards transcendentalism

Is it good to conform to social norms?

 Copy

88 responses



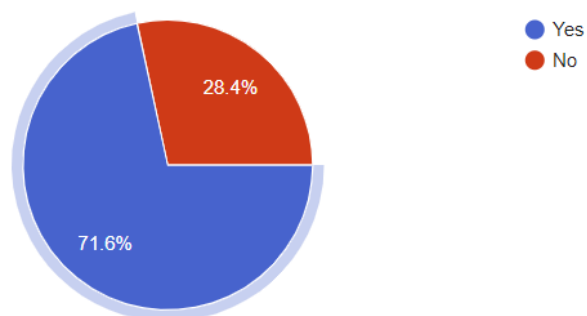
- Do you believe that people should free themselves from social constructs and live by their individual principles?

Yes: 63 No: 25 - Positive towards transcendentalism

Do you believe that people should free themselves from social constructs and live by their individual principles?

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88 responses



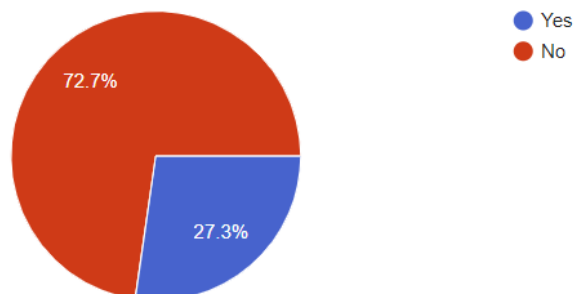
- Do you think that all people can follow their own standards and maintain a peaceful society?

Yes: 24 No: 64 - Negative towards transcendentalism

Do you think that all people can follow their own standards and maintain a peaceful society?

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88 responses



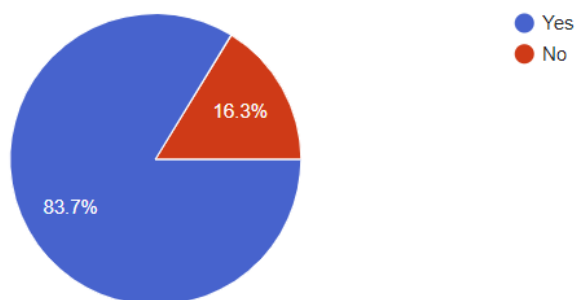
- Has consumerism led to a degradation of our values and goals in life?

Yes: 72 No: 14, 2 responses left blank b/c forgot to set question to required - Positive towards transcendentalism

Has consumerism led to a degradation of our values and goals in life?

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86 responses



Interpretation

After checking the results, UW-Madison students reacted neutrally towards existentialism and slightly more positively towards transcendentalism. However, a more accurate way to interpret the results is that UW-Madison students believe in **individualistic freedom**. More than half think science, art, philosophy cannot adequately explain why we are here and what we should do, which should mean there is a lack of meaning in the existence of “us”, but a large majority believe they control their own destiny. Students deny the belief that a potential higher intelligence could match our creativeness, offering a peace of mind that we can continue to live meaningfully. More than 60% of people think it is not ideal to conform to societal norms, and 70% of students believe you are able to free yourself from social constructs. This conclusion aligns with the western belief of individuality in previous psychology research studies.

The results of this survey also show that this was not a great study as it contained many factors that might alter the answers. Some questions could be worded in a more obvious tone and an easier interpretation. If there were more incentives, a short answer after each question could have been better to understand each person’s reasoning towards or against each philosophical topic.

I believe this “study” offered me valuable experience. I learned how to structure a research paper, conduct research, and interpret results with a creative mindset, which not many scientists use. I can take this knowledge and put it to use in the future when in a research lab or writing a paper. I also learned not to ask close friends to complete a survey when everyone is sitting together (creating groupthink) and to not conduct philosophical scientific research since it is hard to interpret correctly.

References

Carpenter, Stephanie, University of Wisconsin – Madison, PSYCH 403: Psychology of Personality, Spring 2023