
Influence of Social Conformity Bias on Gender Equality

Survey Report

Behavioral Decision Making I

Barcelona School of Economics

Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of social conformity bias on perceptions of gender equality within the academic environment. Utilizing Nudge Theory, we manipulate survey participants to align with social conformity, thereby increasing the likelihood of socially desirable responses. Through a list experiment designed to veil direct answers, we measure the Social Desirability Bias (SDB) in expressing support for gender equality. Our findings reveal a significant SDB across various thematic areas, suggesting that the academic sector's current strategies for combating gender bias may be undermined by the inclination to conform to social norms. This underscores the importance of developing interventions that address not only explicit biases but also the subtler influences of social conformity on the expression of genuine beliefs and attitudes towards gender equality in academia.

Submitted March 2024 by:

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1 Introduction

In the academic realm, gender bias constitutes a formidable obstacle to realizing equality and fairness. Especially, implicit bias, which influences judgment without the individual's awareness, presents a significant challenge in providing equity and inclusion for everyone in academia (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). This form of bias disproportionately affects women, intensifying existing inequalities and compromising efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. The impact of these biases extends beyond impeding women's career advancement; they are also associated with lower employment rates, wage gaps, reduced mental health, and a strained work-life balance (Skov, 2020; Ceci et al., 2023; Llorens et al., 2021). Gender bias, systematically documented across all facets of academic life, accumulates over the course of one's career path (Fernandes et al., 2020).

Given the significant investment in combatting gender bias within the academic sector, it is essential to develop a sophisticated understanding of gender bias. This requires pinpointing the specific scenarios in which gender biases emerge and devising the most efficient strategies for deploying resources to counteract sexism effectively.

A more general obstacle in combating biases is that individuals often do not publicly communicate their true views on sensitive topics. In studies, this so-called social desirability bias (SDB) becomes apparent when participants align their responses with social norms instead of representing their true views (Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987; Stantcheva, 2022) due to concerns about social image or stigma (Bénabou & Tirole, 2006), career concerns (Morris, 2001), and fear of reprisal (Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). This problem can lead to gender bias combating measures targeting the wrong points and proving to be ineffective and not goal-oriented.

In this study, we examine across four thematic areas whether and to what extent the academic environment exhibits a gender bias, which is partly obscured by adherence to social norms. We influence the survey participants by biasing them towards social conformity. To achieve this, we employ Nudge Theory, which suggests that due to the cognitive biases of individuals, the manner in which information and choices are presented can affect behavior (Adkisson, 2008). This approach increases the likelihood that they will provide the socially desirable response. Subsequently, we measure differences in Social Desirability Bias (SDB) using a specific question format, known as the list experiment, designed to capture the true opinions of the respondents by not forcing them to directly

answer the questions in such a way that their true opinions are revealed. We are guided by the methodology of Boring & Delfgaauw (2024), who measured SDB with regard to gender biases in the workplace. Our causal assertion is that induced social conformity leads to an increase in Social Desirability Bias (SDB) when expressing support for gender equality.

Our study uncovered a pronounced Social Desirability Bias (SDB) within academia, signifying that the battle against gender bias is further complicated by the inclination of individuals to conform to social expectations. This finding is pivotal, as it suggests that current strategies to combat gender bias might be less effective due to underreported or altered perceptions. The implication for academia is clear: to effectively promote gender equality, interventions must consider and directly address the influence of SDB on the expression of genuine beliefs and attitudes.

2 Mechanism

Survey respondents are initially allocated into one of two groups on a randomised basis, conformists, and non-conformists. To manipulate this behavioural pattern, we ask respondents to ‘Think about a time you aligned (opposed) with the majority viewpoint and write 3-5 emotions that describe how you felt’, for the conformist (non-conformist) group. The answer to this question is not relevant, but rather the mindset induced by asking it, and whether that effects our measurement of SDB. Theoretically, if you are prompted to think about a conformist memory rather than non-conformist one, you should express more of our measured bias, since you’re reminiscing of a time you aligned with the social norm.

The list experiment is the primary component of the survey and is used as a tool to measure SDB. Respondents to the survey are randomized to either the direct condition or veiled condition. Respondents are given lists of five statements under the veiled condition. There is a sensitive statement on every list. Without specifying which claims they agree with, the respondents must state how many of them they agree with. Respondents are required to say in the direct condition how many of the four non-sensitive claims they agree with, as well as if they directly agree with the sensitive statement. As a result, whereas respondents in the direct condition might be more likely to reply in a way that is socially acceptable to the sensitive question, those in the veiled condition are free

to express their genuine opinions because they are concealed. (provided the non-sensitive questions are chosen appropriately, as discussed below). Thus, our approximation of the SDB is calculated as the percentage change between the number of questions answered under veiled conditions and the number of questions answered under direct conditions. We use four potentially sensitive items:

1. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies give opportunities to people who deserve them and this is always fair.
2. Having a majority of male lecturers leads to a more efficient and clear learning environment.
3. When a woman gets a university offer instead of a man, it is likely due to a gender quota.
4. Women can deal with workload stress as well as men.

Item 1 looks at the perceived effectiveness of DEI policies within a university context, to see whether people truly believe that frameworks to promote equal opportunity are necessary. Item 2 picks up upon benevolent sexism, and whether respondents have any hidden opinions about whether women are not equally suited for the same tasks or roles as men. A recurrent issue with positive discrimination, particularly quota systems, is covered in item 3 (Foley and Williamson, 2019). Respondents who think that women are unfairly favoured by existing policies could be reluctant to express this opinion openly for fear that doing so would be interpreted as a disapproval of women in positions of authority (Bijkerk et al., 2021). Item 4 then captures whether respondents have a subconscious bias that aligns with traditional sexist stereotypes. Additionally, to later provide us with a robustness check, we include a fifth sensitive question, ‘I currently have a Netflix subscription’, therefore providing a total of five lists in the experiment. We would expect no difference between the veiled and direct lists for this item, since motivations to express whether you have a subscription should not differ depending upon how you are presented with this statement.

According to Glynn (2013) and Coffman et al. (2017), list experiments function best when each group of four non-sensitive items has one item with a low prevalence, one item with a high prevalence, and two final items that are negatively associated. This avoids floor and ceiling effects, which might reveal respondents’ opinions about the sensitive topics

even while they are wearing veils. A high prevalence statement is one where we would expect most people to agree with, and the opposite for low prevalence. Thus, on average, individuals should agree with 1 out of 2 of these statements regardless of being assigned to direct or veiled. We then employ two negatively correlated statements on a similar issue, where participants would agree with one statement or the other. Therefore, an ideal participant would agree with two statements under this mechanism, and thus we can effectively attribute any differences in veiled or direct to our sensitive questions.

Afterwards, we include demographic questions, such as the age, education, gender and political orientation of our respondents. Additionally, we include a simple attention check, by asking individuals to choose the statement that appeared in the previous list.

3 Results

Our experiment has concluded that across all questions, the conformity trigger leads to an increase in Social Desirability Bias. This social desirability bias is prevalent across all questions, and gives us insight into the different perceptions of gender equality in the university.

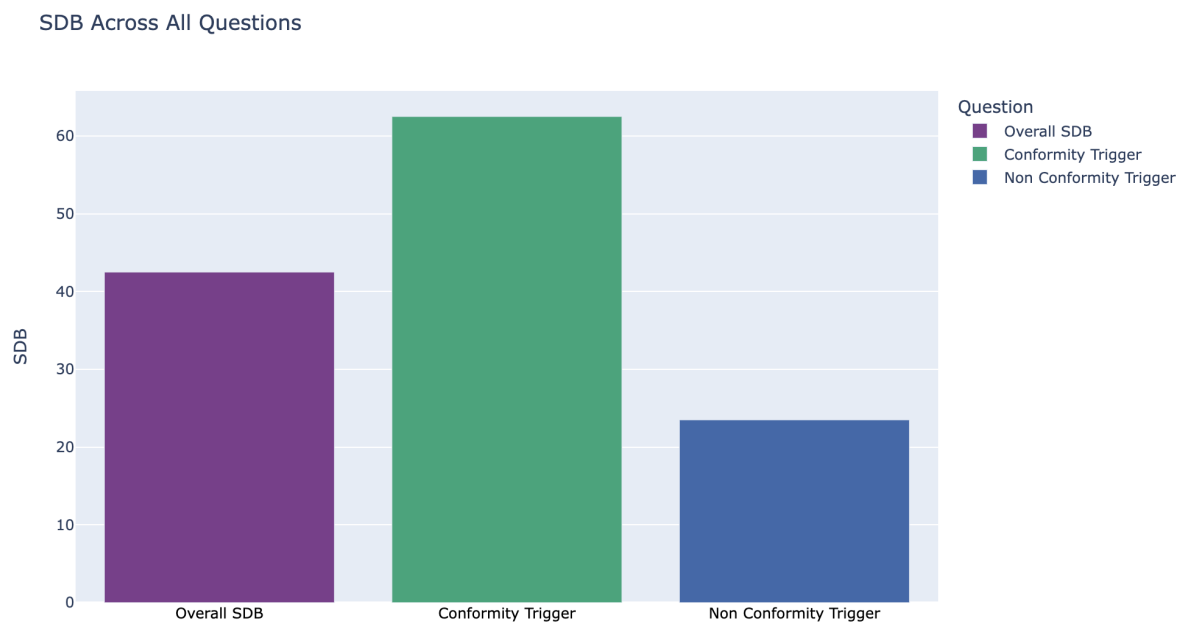


Figure 1

We ran regressions across all major variables including dummies for conformity and non-conformity. Due to the limited sample size, our results from our regression analysis were

Table 1: Summary of Results

Formed Question	Group and SDB	
	Group	SDB
Workload Stress	All Groups	8.36
	Conformity Group	15.41
	Non-Conformity Group	1.43
	Male Group	8.43
	Male Conformity Group	17.50
	Male Non-Conformity Group	1.79
	Female Group	8.45
	Female Conformity Group	12.79
	Female Non-Conformity Group	1.79
University Gender Quota	All Groups	30.67
	Conformity Group	30.56
	Non-Conformity Group	30.77
	Male Group	16.61
	Male Conformity Group	0.40
	Male Non-Conformity Group	32.10
	Female Group	48.57
	Female Conformity Group	66.67
	Female Non-Conformity Group	29.41
Netflix	All Groups	-1.86
	Conformity Group	-5.21
	Non-Conformity Group	1.43
	Male Group	-4.49
	Male Conformity Group	-8.33
	Male Non-Conformity Group	-1.68
	Female Group	1.77
	Female Conformity Group	-1.16
	Female Non-Conformity Group	6.21
Male Lecturers	All Groups	2.16
	Conformity Group	8.33
	Non-Conformity Group	-3.57
	Male Group	-2.65
	Male Conformity Group	8.04
	Male Non-Conformity Group	-11.76
	Female Group	6.60
	Female Conformity Group	3.45
	Female Non-Conformity Group	10.00
DEI Policies	All Groups	3.17
	Conformity Group	13.41
	Non-Conformity Group	-6.56
	Male Group	-8.59
	Male Conformity Group	5.77
	Male Non-Conformity Group	-18.59
	Female Group	18.18
	Female Conformity Group	21.71
	Female Non-Conformity Group	14.78

not significant. We find an alternative approach to calculating SDB that allows us to gain a general insight into the effects of conformity and non-conformity triggers.

We measure SDB by calculating the percentage change between the number of questions answered under veiled conditions and the number of questions answered under direct conditions. We infer statistical significance through distance from our placebo, which had 1.4% SDB. We also collected data from respondents on political leaning. Our results showed heavily skewed responses toward left leaning respondents, so we log scaled the political alignment scores and created a dummy for the data of left and right. Below in Figure 2 we can see the effects of political alignment on SDB. Each question has nuanced results based on the topic, group and gender that responded. We can see more nuanced breakdowns of the per question responses in Table 1.

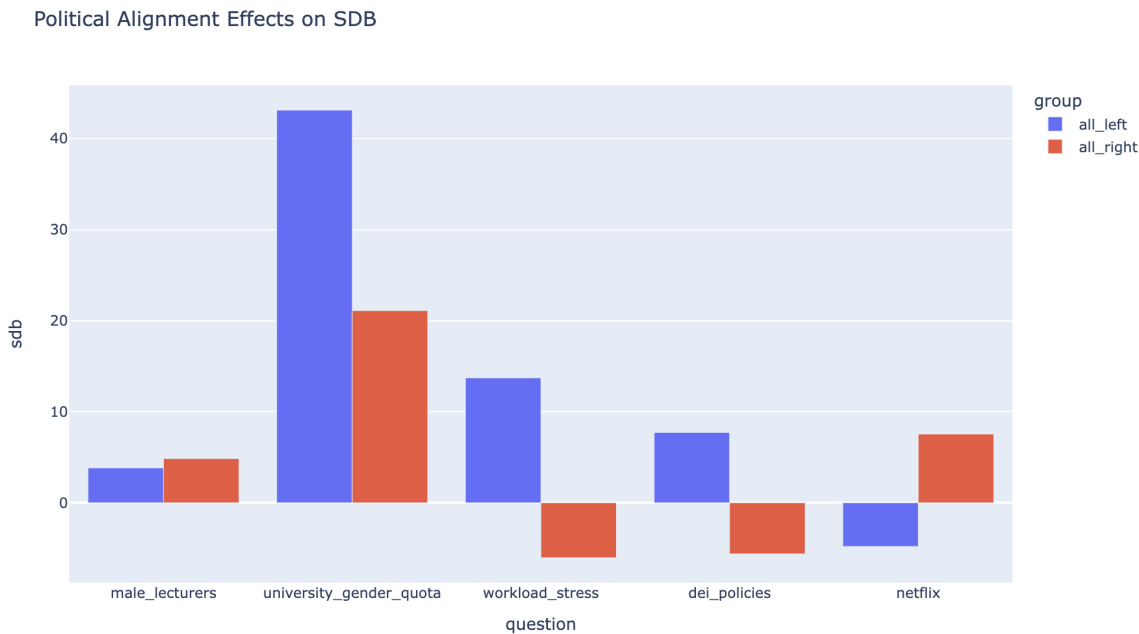


Figure 2

Male Lecturers

Having a majority of male lecturers leads to a more efficient and clear learning environment

The male lecturers question attempts to provoke a bias of preference for male lecturers. The expectation for this question was to observe an overwhelming majority of women disagreeing with this statement regardless of trigger or SDB conditions and men expressing

higher levels of SDB. As we can see in Table 1, we see moderate levels of SDB in the female group compared to the placebo group. The conformity group is not significant, while the non-conformity group is significant. Overall this is in line with the hypothesis, but the non-conformity group SDB indicates that women are slightly more likely to prefer male lecturers under veiled conditions. For men, the change in SDB becomes significantly negative at -11.74%, indicating that men strongly disagree with having a majority of male lecturers under SDB conditions. This indicates that there is a clear distinction between true male and female perceptions of male lecturers in the learning environment. There is no clear significance of political alignment on perceptions of male lecturers.

University Gender Quota

When a woman gets a university offer instead of a man, it is likely due to a gender quota.

The university gender quota question attempts to elicit a bias on perceptions of gender equality in university admissions. The expectation with this question is that most people would align with a politically correct answer that the current system is equitable. However, we see from the results in Table 1, that both men and women express high levels of SDB overall. Male respondents express SDB only in the non-conformity scenario. This indicates that the expected mainstream opinion for men is actually that women get accepted to university over men solely because of gender quota. For women, in both the conformity and non-conformity scenarios, there is a large social desirability bias. This is unusual, but indicates a unanimous veiled opinion that women are more likely to get into university because of a gender quota. Political alignment has a strong effect on the SDB, with left leaning respondents finding more agreement with gender biased admissions under veiled conditions.

Workload Stress

Women can deal with workload stress as well as men. This question is aimed at uncovering gender perceptions about the abilities of men and women under workload stress. Across all scenarios, the second highest amount of SDB was expressed. SDB was only significantly expressed when the conformity trigger was applied, without the conformity trigger the levels of SDB are not significant when compared with the placebo group. This means that when women and men are triggered to conform they express high levels of SDB, agreeing more with the opinion that women can deal with workload stress as well as men. Within political alignment, we see a strong negative change in SDB for the left,

indicating that they are more likely to express their true opinions, agreeing with women’s ability to deal with workload stress as well as men.

DEI Policies

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies give opportunities to people who deserve them and this is always fair.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policy perception was the most responsive to the conformity trigger. Most specifically, at the overall level, we see a 13.4% increase in SDB in the conformity group and a -6.56% decrease in SDB in the non-conformity group. This means that most people have true opinions that DEI policies do not give opportunities to people who deserve them. We also see some marginal impact of political alignment on the SDB for DEI policies with left leaning respondents expressing more SDB while the right express significantly less SDB.

4 Conclusion

Our study investigated the impact of social conformity bias on perceptions of gender equality in academia. Using nudge theory and a list experiment method, we aimed to measure social desirability bias (SDB) and its influence on participants’ responses. Results confirmed a significant presence of SDB, suggesting that individuals often align their responses with perceived social norms, potentially masking their true views on gender equality.

The findings suggest that current strategies for addressing gender bias in academia may not fully account for the nuances of social conformity. This poses a challenge for developing effective interventions that encourage authentic expression of beliefs and attitudes about gender equality.

Future research would benefit from expanding the diversity of participants, with a particular focus on those working in academia, to capture a broader range of perspectives. Due to limitations, our study is primarily focused on active students and less on people involved in teaching, research, research funding distribution, and people in academic institutions in general. Although our survey respondents are individuals who will be able to shape the influence of gender bias in academia in the future, the disadvantages faced by women, especially today, remain a problem that needs to be addressed as quickly and

vigorously as possible. Because of the strong interaction we saw in our experiment, we are confident that our results will hold up with relevant extensions.

Potential extensions to our study would be to qualitatively adjust the nonsensical statements of the list experiment questions. In particular, the interaction of negatively correlated statements could be improved with a prior pilot study, which would allow the experiment to provide even more precise results regarding the SDB in terms of gender bias in academia.

In summary, this study highlights the need for more nuanced approaches to addressing gender bias in academia and emphasizes the importance of considering social desirability bias when designing interventions and policies aimed at promoting true gender equality. Further research is needed to develop methodologies that effectively address SDB and its associated disadvantages for women.

5 Literature

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6 Appendix

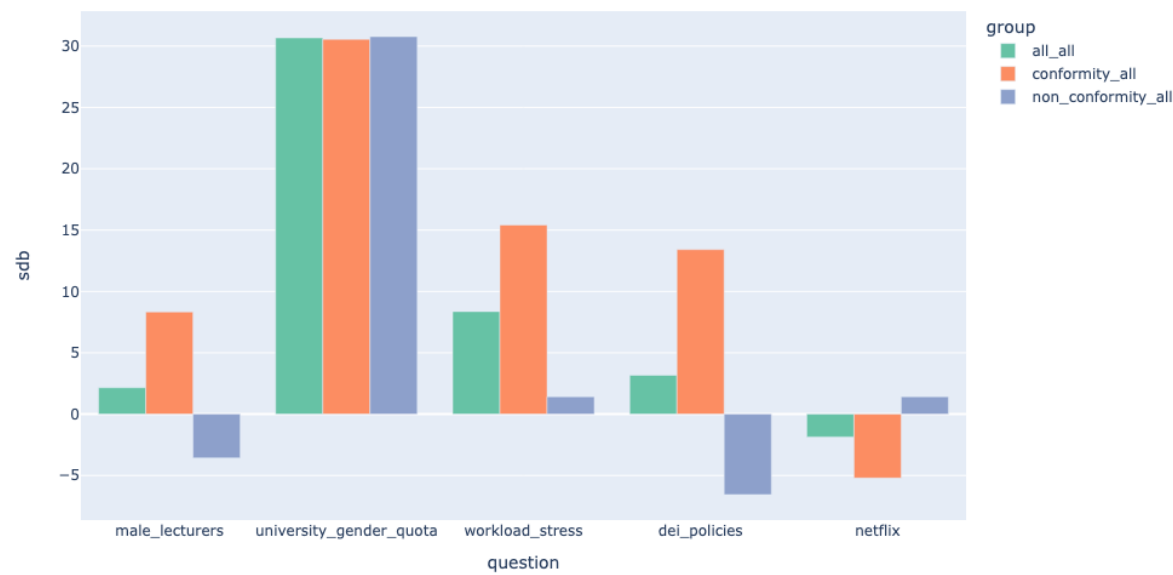
6.1 Participants

Table 2: Summary of Participants by Gender Identity, Age, and Schooling

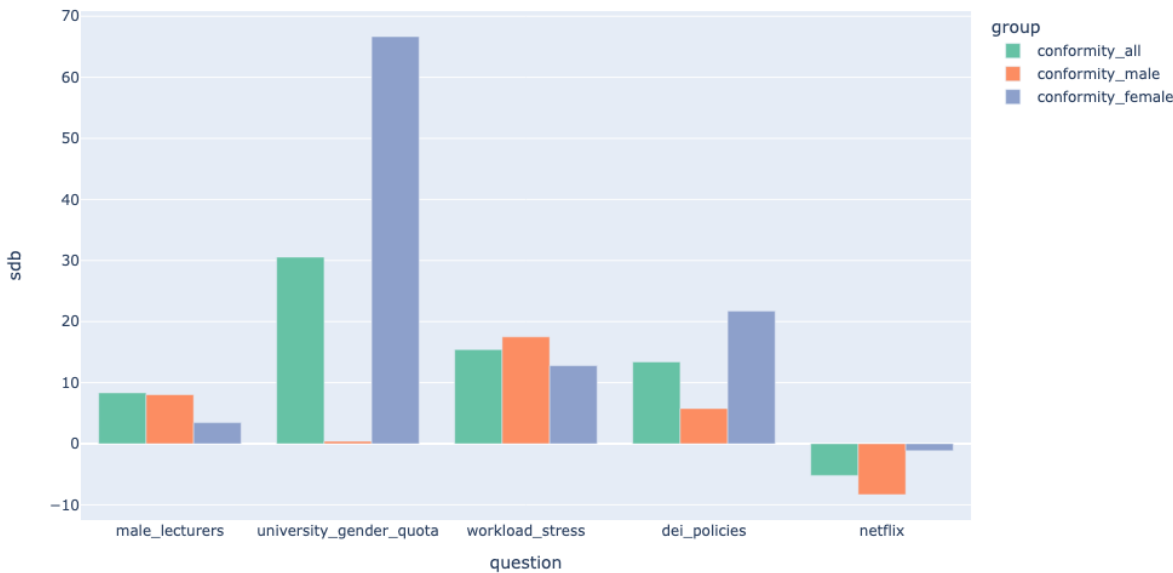
Gender Identity	Age	Schooling	Count
Female	18-24	Bachelor's degree	14
		High school	9
		Master's degree	4
		Some college	4
Female	25-34	Bachelor's degree	9
		High school	1
		Doctoral degree	1
		Master's degree	5
		Professional degree	1
Male	18-24	Bachelor's degree	18
		Doctoral degree	1
		High school	8
		Master's degree	1
		Some college	5
Male	25-34	Bachelor's degree	7
		Doctoral degree	2
		High school	2
		Master's degree	6
		Professional degree	1
Male	35-44	Master's degree	1
Male	45-54	Bachelor's degree	1
Male	55-64	Doctoral degree	1

6.2 Results

Overall SDB by group



SDB by group with Conformity Trigger



SDB by group with Non Conformity Trigger



6.3 Questionnaire

6.3.1 Section 1: Information Sheet

Name and contact information of the PI:

Dr. Gael Le Mens,
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James Connolly (james.connolly@bse.eu),
Jake Pereira (jake.pereira@bse.eu),
Andrew Bennett (andrew.bennett@bse.eu)

Institution: Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Objectives of the study: The goal of this study is to uncover prevailing perceptions on leading topics in the university setting. The duration of this project is 2 weeks.

Methodology and participation: In this research study, you will be make a sequence of decisions. This survey is 10 questions, 5 demographic, and 5 topic focused questions. Respondents will be asked questions in a randomized order. Some questions may contain sensitive information, and participation in these questions is voluntary.

Privacy: In order to protect your privacy, no directly identifiable information (e.g. name, email or address) will be collected. In the data file shared with members of the research team not involved in data collection, you will be identified by a numerical code that cannot be used to identify you. Only anonymized data will be published. Anonymized data may be reused for other research projects or archived or published in a public repository. At the end of the experiment, you will be provided with a string of alphanumeric characters that you should copy in the appropriate field to confirm your participation in the study and receive the corresponding payment.

Payment-related data: Payment-related data will be kept for the duration of the project and for its scientific validation and according to UPF regulations.

Compensation: You will not be paid for your participation.

Risks and benefits: Participating in this study does not entail risks greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is on a voluntary basis and you may withdraw from the study at any time without having to justify why.

Contact information: If you have any question about this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator (Daniel Burkhardt, daniel.burkhardt@bse.eu)

For doubts, complaints, or questions about this study or about your rights as a research participant: You may contact UPF's Institutional Committee for the Ethical Review of Projects (CIREP) by phone (+34935422186) or by email (secretaria.cirep@upf.edu). CIREP is not part of the research team and will treat any information you send confidentially.

In accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 (EU):

- **Data controller:** Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Pl. de la Mercè, 10-12. 08002 Barcelona. Tel. +34935422000. You can contact UPF's Data Protection Officer by sending an email to dpd@upf.edu.
- **Purposes of the processing:** Carrying out the above-mentioned research project. Personal data will be kept during the execution of the project and two more years after its finalization for its scientific validation.
- **Legal basis:** Data owner's consent. You can withdraw your consent at any time.
- **Recipients:** Your personal data will only be processed by Universitat Pompeu Fabra and will not be transferred to third parties without your consent, except otherwise provided by law.
- **Rights:** You can access your data; request their rectification, deletion, and in certain cases their portability; you may object to their processing and apply for their limitation by following the procedures described at

Consent Question

- ☐ I give my consent
- ☐ I do not give my consent

6.3.2 Section 2: Treatments

Conformity Treatment

Think about a time you aligned with the majority viewpoint and write 3-5 emotions that describe how you felt.

Nonconformity Treatment

Think about a time you opposed the majority viewpoint and write 3-5 emotions that describe how you felt.

6.3.3 Section 3: List Experiment Questions

Veiled Questions

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- Having a majority of male lecturers leads to a more efficient and clear learning environment.
- The continuous use of fossil fuels is a sustainable, long-term option for the future.
- Developing countries should be given the resources to access internet.
- The Death penalty should always be a viable punishment option.
- Prison rehabilitation needs to be adopted by more governments and given more resources.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- The government should legalize the medicinal use of cannabis.
- Everyone should generally do what they can to be more environmentally conscious.
- The government should use harsher punishments for recreational cannabis use.
- When a woman gets a university offer instead of a man, it is likely due to a gender quota.
- All countries worldwide should have access to nuclear weapons.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- Guns should be more accessible to everyone worldwide.
- Women can deal with workload stress as well as men.
- Universities should have policies that maintain the discretion of their students' grades.
- The consumption of animals is essential for the human diet.
- People should shift towards a plant-based diet to preserve the environment.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- Private healthcare is justified by the deficiencies of state-provided healthcare.
- AI in the future should be incorporated into the university system rather than harshly trying to restrict it.
- All movies and books should be government-reviewed and approved before public release.
- Universal healthcare should be provided by the state.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies give opportunities to people who deserve them and this is always fair.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- A healthy diet can generally contribute, on average, to longer lifespan.
- Universities should be able to monitor search histories on personal devices.
- Vaccinations should be an international travel requirement.
- Vaccinations should be left to the individual's discretion.
- I have a Netflix subscription.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5

Direct Questions

Do you agree with the following statement?

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies give opportunities to people who deserve them and this is always fair.

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- The continuous use of fossil fuels is a sustainable, long-term option for the future.
- Developing countries should be given the resources to access internet.

- The Death penalty should always be a viable punishment option.
- Prison rehabilitation needs to be adopted by more governments and given more resources.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4

Do you agree with the following statement?

Women can deal with workload stress as well as men.

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- The government should legalize the medicinal use of cannabis.
- Everyone should generally do what they can to be more environmentally conscious.
- The government should use harsher punishments for recreational cannabis use.
- All countries worldwide should have access to nuclear weapons.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

Do you agree with the following statement?

When a woman gets a university offer instead of a man, it is likely due to a gender quota.

☐ yes

☐ no

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- Guns should be more accessible to everyone worldwide.
- Universities should have policies that maintain the discretion of their students' grades.
- The consumption of animals is essential for the human diet.
- People should shift towards a plant-based diet to preserve the environment.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

☐ 0

☐ 1

☐ 2

☐ 3

☐ 4

Do you agree with the following statement?

I have a Netflix subscription.

☐ yes

☐ no

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- Private healthcare is justified by the deficiencies of state-provided healthcare.
- AI in the future should be incorporated into the university system rather than harshly trying to restrict it.
- All movies and books should be government-reviewed and approved before public release.
- Universal healthcare should be provided by the state.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4

Do you agree with the following statement?

Having a majority of male lecturers leads to a more efficient and clear learning environment.

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Below are five statements. Please tell us with how many of them you agree. We do not need to know which ones, just how many.

- A healthy diet can generally contribute, on average, to longer lifespan.
- Universities should be able to monitor search histories on personal devices.
- Vaccinations should be an international travel requirement.

- Vaccinations should be left to the individual's discretion.

Please indicate the total number of statements that you agree with.

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4

6.3.4 Section 4: Attention Test

Which statement appeared in a previous question?

- ☐ Salad is a healthy dinner option and typically consists of green vegetables.
- ☐ Universities should be able to monitor search histories on personal devices.
- ☐ Soccer is a game played on a pitch for 90 minutes and is played around the world.
- ☐ Universities are locations at which people study a wide variety of subjects.

6.3.5 Section 5: Demographics Question Block

How old are you?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24 years old
- ☐ 25-34 years old
- ☐ 35-44 years old
- ☐ 45-54 years old
- ☐ 55-64 years old
- ☐ 65+ years old

How do you describe yourself?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe:
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- ☐ Less than high school degree
- ☐ High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
- ☐ Some college but no degree, Associate degree in college (2-year)
- ☐ Associate degree in college (2-year) Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
- ☐ Master's degree
- ☐ Doctoral degree
- ☐ Professional degree (JD, MD)

Political Bias

In political matters, people talk of “the left” and “the right”. Generally speaking, how would you place your views on this scale?

left right