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OPINION POLLS IN NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES AND THEIR IMPACT ON STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study tries to explore the impact of the collective opinion of a majority on an individual - the influence of opinion polls on individual opinions. A study was conducted using a questionnaire to find out whether the published opinion polls make any change in the opinion of university students doing Post-graduation, M. Phil and Ph D. Stratified and Systematic random sampling was done to select 50 respondents with different academic qualifications from different disciplines in the university. Findings showed a significant difference between males and females in being influenced by the opinion poll results.

KEYWORDS: Opinion Polls, Cognitive Dissonance, Compliance, Conformity, Selective Exposure Theory

INTRODUCTION

From which dress to wear to which party to vote for, a person keeps formulating opinions every moment one is confronted with choices. These opinions are not arbitrary since they are formed on the basis of various personal experiences, where the experiences could be intellectual, emotional or spiritual. These personal experiences need not be one's own. It

could be the collective experience of another person or a group of people. Opinion polls have somehow become an essential feature for newspapers and magazines and many of them are spending a lot of money on the polls besides allocating huge space in their editions to present survey results. The Hindu newspaper published the results of the opinion poll

conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in the op-ed page consecutively for six days from August 8, 2011 to August 13 2011.

Many researchers in the west regard opinion polls as a “critical force in shaping and transforming the society” (ESOMAR / WAPOR Guide, 2). They define opinion poll as a “scientific and representative survey designed to measure the views of a specific group”. (ESOMAR / WAPOR Guide, 5). Opinion is defined by the Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary as “a personal view not necessarily based on fact or knowledge” or as “the views of people in general”. They regard opinion poll as the “questioning of a small sample of people in order to assess wider public opinion”. Eugene L Hartley gives a novel idea about the opinion of an individual. In his own words “the opinion of an individual is a function of his group affiliation and thus individual opinion is a group matter” (Hartley, 669 - 670).

Cultural Anthropologists are of the opinion that people will change their attitude or opinion in two ways: (i) when the authority forces them through proposing an ultimatum and (ii) when they are ready to adopt the values held by the larger population (Sharpe, 2009). People usually will have a tendency to have conformity with the majority (to be on the safer side always). Conformity is defined as the “changing of individual’s beliefs/opinions and behaviour so that they become more similar to those of other group members” (Morgan et al. 356). Social Psychologists define compliance as the “adherence by the target to the source’s request or demands either with or without concomitant change in the attitude” (DeLamater and Myers, 555). Identification is a “defense mechanism in which one assimilates aspects of someone else’s opinion and behaviours” (Morgan et al. 581).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research tries to address the following questions:

1. Will the opinion of the students be changed because of their exposure to the opinion poll results published in the print media?
2. Is there any gender difference in terms of the impact of opinion poll surveys among the students?
3. Which are the most popular kinds of opinion polls among students?
4. Is there any difference between active members of the political parties and others in their attitude towards opinion polls?
5. Is there any difference among students from different disciplines in terms of their attitude towards opinion polls?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Navazio (1977) conducted an experimental research to find out the effect of opinion polls on students and concluded that there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups before and after the experimental condition of providing the opinion poll results through a mail survey.

Ceci and Kain (1982) found out that there was a significant difference in the voting intentions of the students after they were experimentally provided the opinion poll results data. Further, it was also found out that students who were not able to take a decision regarding voting came out with a strong opinion in conformity with the majority’s views depicted in the opinion poll results shown to them during the experimental research.

Another study shows that the change of opinion of the public will be influenced by the issue under test. If the issue is not of importance to the respondents there may be a change; whereas if the issue is of their interest and

something related to morality, especially abortion, there will not be any change in their opinion (Marsh 1985).

Researchers found out that people's attitude towards opinion polls have become significantly negative in the transition period between the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century. The reasons found out by several researchers in this field are compiled in the article of Kim et al. (2011). They pointed out that issues related to confidentiality and privacy, telemarketers, survey accuracy, and bias of polling organizations etc. are the causes of people harbouring negative feeling towards these polls (ibid). In the year 1996 around 73% of the citizen respondents opined that the United States of America would be better off if the leaders could follow the public opinion poll surveys. But in 2005 the same response was obtained only from 61% of the respondents (Kim et al.). The same survey also proposed that there is an improvement in people's belief in the accuracy of election polls in the print media. They found that more than 50% of the respondents followed at least one poll regularly in the media (Kim et al, 2011).

Lilach Nir (2011) is of the view that mass media are the most important and effective source to get an idea about the public perception of an issue which in turn may affect our own personal belief systems.

There is literature that indicates that the attitude and opinion of the people changes or is influenced by the opinion polls whereas some studies negated the influence of polls on attitudinal changes. This study aims at finding out the preferences of students of Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, to different kinds of opinion polls and to what extent they will be influenced by them.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The selective exposure theory of media holds that people will look for news and opinions that will go along with their views (Bryant and Davies,). Though this theory stands, there are people who will be greatly influenced by the opinions of others. Opinion poll results are in a way a tool that will influence the opinions of people to some extent. In 1957, Leon Festinger proposed Cognitive Dissonance theory which suggests that there is always a "psychological conflict" in the person who is having "two or more incompatible beliefs simultaneously" (Crisp & Turner, 90 - 92). This dissonance or conflict may be reduced by changing both the opposing beliefs or by accepting and changing to a new belief system totally or temporarily (Augoustinos et al., 128). Another related theory is the Theory of Persuasion referring to attitude change via an external message (Crisp and Turner). There are two ways in which a persuasive message can change the attitude of people. The central route is followed when people are motivated and are capable of thinking carefully about the content of a message. When people are not willing to analyze message content they follow the peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the former individual is influenced by the quality and strength of the message/argument whereas in the latter the individual pays attention to the cues like attractiveness of the communicator or the amount of information presented. Elements of both these theories will be used in interpreting the research findings.

METHODOLOGY & SAMPLE

The study was conducted using a questionnaire to find out whether opinion polls published in the print media have any impact on the students of Bharathiar University, Coimbatore. Stratified random sampling was used to select 58 respondents with different

academic qualifications from different disciplines in the university. They were personally approached and the questionnaire was given to each of them with proper instructions. The filled up questionnaires were collected from 50 respondents on the very next day. Eight of the selected respondents failed to give back the filled questionnaire due to different reasons. The total sample size for this study is 50 with 26 male respondents and 24 female respondents. Their age group ranged from 22 to 40. Among them 27 are from different science departments while 23 are from various social science departments.

STATISTICAL TOOLS USED

SPSS 17.0 was used to analyze the data. Researcher made use of Chi square and independent sample t tests to find out how the data supports the objectives.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 depicts that a significant difference is found in the t test scores between male and female in their preference to the kinds

of opinion poll surveys, especially in the Sports (t= -7.454, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .000) election polls (t= -4.718, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .000), environment (t= 2.722, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .009), health (t= 5.716, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .000), film (t= 3.094, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .003) and life style (t= 3.290, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .002). Females rate health, film and environment as their major interests in opinion polls whereas males rate sexual behaviour and sports as their topics of interest in opinion polls. Science students have a preference for the environmental related opinion polls (t= -3.414, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .001) compared to their social science counterparts. The younger age category (22 to 31) is interested more in education related opinion polls (t= -2.742, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .009) and those above 32 are interested more in opinion polls related to the sexual behaviour (t= 2.212, df= 48, sig 2- tailed= .032).

Table 1 Showing Gender & Opinion Polls of Interest

T test for equality of Means 95% confidence interval of the Difference			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Sports	-7.454	48	.000
Election Polls	-4.718	48	.000
Education	-.809	48	.423
Environment	2.722	48	.009
Health	5.716	48	.000
Sexual Behaviour	-1.563	48	.125
Film	3.094	48	.003
Lifestyle	3.290	48	.002

A very interesting fact observed in **Table 2** is that very extreme opposite positions were taken by males and females in their attitude towards the opinion polls. In the nine statements given related to their attitude towards opinion poll and its influence, female respondents almost invariably “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to statements like “I think the

opinion polls clearly represent people’s views” (t= 8.748, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000), “I believe in the results revealed in the opinion poll surveys” (t= 6.988, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000), “I change my mind after going through the opinion poll results” (t= 8.748, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000), “My attitude and opinions will be influenced by the published opinion polls” (t= 6.822, df= 48, sig



2-tailed= .000) etc.. The female respondents strongly disagreed to the statements “I think the opinion polls are really fabricated” ($t = -18.409$, $df = 48$, sig 2-tailed= .000). Interestingly male respondents had exactly the opposite views about opinion polls. The statement “majority is always right and minority is always wrong” was either disagreed or strongly

disagreed upon by males and females invariably. Majority of the respondents gave their comment as ‘agree’ to the statement “Exit polls are more reliable than OP”. A ‘no opinion’ (neutral) position was taken mainly by the males and some of the female members in the case of the statement “I will post my vote if the opinion poll if the topic is of my interest”.

Table 2 Showing Gender and Attitude towards the Opinion Polls

t-test for Equality of Means 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
Statements	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
OP clearly represent people views	8.748	48	.000
I believe in the results revealed in OP surveys	9.788	48	.000
I will change my mind after going thru OP	6.988	48	.000
I will post my vote in OP if topic is of my interest	2.012	48	.050
Majority is always right minority is always wrong	.965	48	.339
Exit polls are more reliable than OP	-.211	48	.834
If OP results are against my convictions I will neglect it	-7.579	48	.000
I think OP are fabricated	-18.409	48	.000
My attitude and opinions will be influenced by OP	6.822	48	.000

A significant difference was found in the opinion of the senior and younger age categories of students in the t test in their attitude towards the statements like “I think OP are fabricated” ($t = 2.604$, $df = 48$, sig 2-tailed= .012), and “I believe in the results revealed in the Opinion Poll surveys” ($t = -2.230$, $df = 48$, sig

2-tailed= .030). Invariably respondents in both the age categories strongly disagreed to the statement “Majority is always right and minority is always wrong”. Branch of study is found to have no significant difference related to the attitude towards opinion polls.

Table 3 Showing Gender and Purpose of Opinion Polls

T test for equality of Means 95% confidence interval of the Difference			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Commercial purpose	-14.256	48	.000
Publicity	-9.629	48	.000
For institutions / political parties	-4.944	48	.000
Increasing circulation	1.398	48	.168
Bringing out public opinion	18.209	48	.000
Making people aware of the significance of the issue	11.649	48	.000
Sensationalizing	1.593	48	.118
Lifestyle	3.290	48	.002

The above table (Table 3) it is clear that female respondents regard the motivation behind the Opinion Polls as either to “bring out public opinion” ($t = 18.209$, $df = 48$, sig 2-tailed= .000) or to “make people aware of the

significance of the issue” ($t = 11.649$, $df = 48$, sig 2-tailed= .000). On the opposite side male respondents rate these two are the least preferred items as the motivation behind opinion polls. They regard “commercial

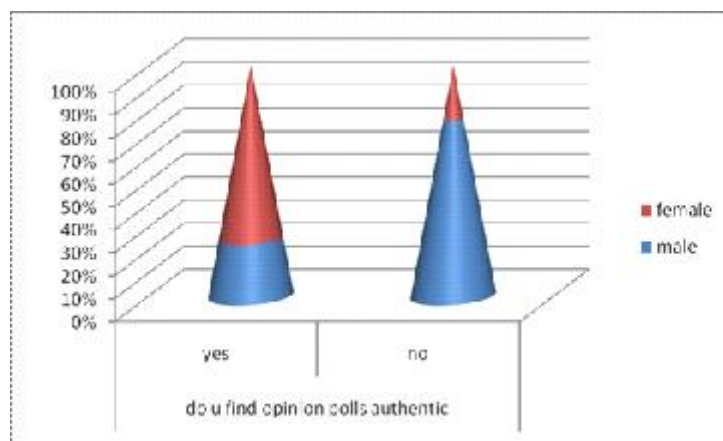
purpose” (t= -14.256, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000) or “publicity” (t= -9.629, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000) or “institutional/political interest” (t= -4.944, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .000) as the motivations behind public opinion. In other words female ranked the motivations behind the opinion polls in the descending order from 1 to 7 as bringing out public opinion, making people aware of the significance of the issue, increasing circulation, sensationalizing, publicity, institutional/political interests and commercial purposes. Males ranked them as commercial purpose, publicity, institutional/political interest, increasing circulation, sensationalizing, making people aware of the significance of the issue and bringing out the public opinion. Here also the extreme opposite positions taken by males and females are noteworthy.

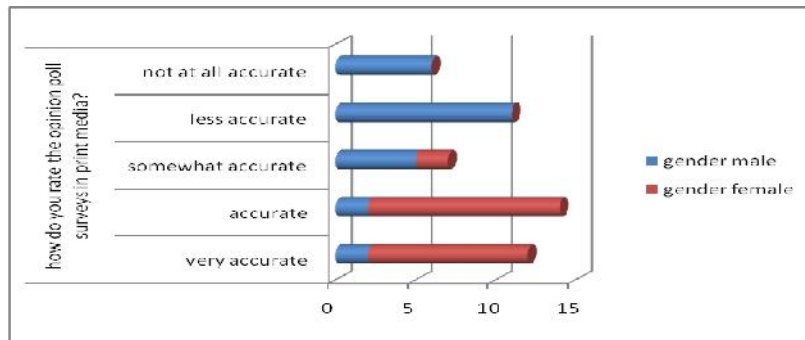
Respondents in the younger age category regard “making people aware of the significance of the issue” (t= -2.924, df= 48, sig

2-tailed= .005) and “bringing out public opinion” (t= -2.768, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .008) are the main motivations behind the Opinion Polls in the print media, whereas the senior category finds “commercial purposes” (t= 3.101, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .003) and “publicity” (t= 2.302, df= 48, sig 2-tailed= .026) as motivation behind Opinion Polls. These are found to have statistically significant difference.

Those who have participated in any opinion poll surveys ranked “commercial purpose” as the main motivation behind but those who haven’t participated in the opinion poll surveys consider “bringing out public opinion” as the motivation behind Opinion Polls. A very significant difference is seen (as shown in **Graphs 1&2** below) between males and females in their attitude towards the authenticity of the Opinion Polls. Females rate opinion polls really authentic and the results very accurate. Here also male respondents are seen in the other end which is having a high statistical significance in the chi square test.

Graph 1 Showing Gender & Authenticity of the Opinion Polls



Graph 2 Showing Gender & Accuracy of the Opinion Polls

Those who spend more time reading newspapers either commented “agree” or “strongly agree” to the statement “Exit polls are more reliable than OP” (chi square= 22.430, df= 12, sig. 2-sided= .033), which has a significant difference. The statements “OP clearly represent people’s views” (chi square= 33.330, df= 16, sig. 2-sided= .007), “I believe in the results revealed in OP surveys” (chi square= 33.029, df= 16, sig. 2-sided=.007), were commented “agree” or “strongly agree” by those who rate opinion polls in print media as either “accurate” or “very accurate”. Those who have the opinion that Opinion Polls are authentic “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to the statement “I think the OP are fabricated” (chi square= 15.981, df= 3, sig. 2-sided=.001).

There is a very significant difference between the male and female respondents in their preferences of magazines. Male respondents rank Film magazines and Sports magazines at the top spot followed by the General magazines, Business magazines and Health magazines. But the female respondents rank them as Health & Film magazines at the top followed by Sports, general and business magazines. An interesting finding is that males and females, younger and senior age categories and students of science and social science invariably ranked Film magazine either in the first or second places.

Though there is no significant difference in the chi square values male respondents and those in the younger age category seem to be more frequent visitors of Opinion Poll surveys. Among the 26 male respondents 13 go through Opinion Poll surveys daily and seven very often. Six out of 11 respondents who are active members of some political parties ranked election polls as the most preferred kind of Opinion Polls.

CONCLUSION

Opinion polls affect males and females in different ways. Women in general have a tendency to believe the media input. But spending more time on reading newspaper men tend to have a skeptical notion about opinion poll results. On the other hand, females are seen spending more time reading magazines and are getting influenced more by opinion polls. People’s ideas and opinions may be changed just not because some opinion polls are conducted somewhere; but because they are repeatedly shown in media. What comes in print media will be taken and read again and again especially those who spend more time on it. Here the study was conducted in just one campus and its findings cannot be generalized to the larger student population as the demographics and psychographics of the students vary. Even then we can conclude that most of the female students who are reading some particular magazines or newspapers take

it for granted that whatever published will be more close to reality. This “closer-to-reality-perception” by the female students which will be higher than the male students is the cause of their being more influenced by the opinion polls published.

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