



Episode 23: "Research Comes First in Behavioural Science Graduate Programs"

with Rishad Habib, PhD student in UBC Sauder's Marketing and Behavioural Science Division

Rishad Habib is an all-star Marketing and Behavioural Science PhD student in her 5th year at UBC Sauder School of Business. In sharing her experiences as a former MSc student and current PhD student, Rishad emphasizes the importance of research in both types of programs. We also discuss the challenges and rewards of conducting research as a graduate student, including both lab studies and field studies with partner organizations.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today, we're calling DIBS on Rishad Habib, a fifth-year PhD student at UBC Sauder School of Business, in the Marketing and Behavioural Science Division.

And I'm really thrilled we have Rishad with us today on the podcast. I've had the pleasure of working with Rishad in a few different ways. One of those ways, as our Certificate students know, is she's the invaluable Teaching Assistant for our pilot cohort of the program. She is also the one and only behind-the-scenes editor of our own Calling DIBS podcast. And on top of all of that, she's a fantastic grad student with a really neat research portfolio. So I'm thrilled we get to talk to Rishad today, on the record. So welcome to the podcast, Rishad.

RISHAD HABIB, GUEST: Thanks, Kirstin. Nice to be here.

APPELT: Excellent. Can you start by just telling us a little bit about yourself?

HABIB: What can I say that you haven't already? But thank you for that introduction. So I'm a PhD student at UBC. And before I did the PhD, I also did an MSc in Marketing and an undergrad in Marketing and I worked for a bit in telecom. I have two cats, which is essential information I should share. And I don't know, I love living in Vancouver, going on hikes or walks over here, and just really enjoy the whole research process and being a PhD student.

APPELT: Excellent. Excited to talk about that some more. So one of the reasons I thought it would be great for us to chat today is that I love how our division has this hybrid title of Marketing and Behavioural Science. And I think your work really brings both of those two pieces together. And like you just said, your earlier degrees were in Marketing. So what initially sparked your interest in Marketing?

HABIB: I think I've always been a bit interested in marketing. I can't verify this story, but my parents said that when I was really small and they wanted me to eat, they would have to record ads and show me ads. And I would not watch TV programs. I would just watch ads and eat. I think I just always like the idea of these communication strategies influencing us and making us behave in certain ways, it's just kind of fascinating.

APPELT: Wow, that's amazing, I've never heard of someone called to marketing so early. I love that story. So you started in the marketing side, but then, like we said, our division has this hybrid title and a lot of your research is on the behavioural sciences side. So what led you to the PhD program in Marketing and Behavioural sciences?

HABIB: So when I started the MSc, I wanted to do a PhD. So I chose like a research-based MSc program. And then during the course of that, I really got into like sustainability and ethical and prosocial behaviours because it seemed like those were the most interesting to study, at least to me. And there's always that tension between what you should do.

You should go and donate, but what you want to do is go and buy a new dress or a new gadget. So it's always, like, really difficult. And that's kind of really closely tied to the whole nudging for good or behavioural science part of it. You don't just show an ad to buy a product, but here you're actually thinking about the consequences of different framing strategies or different ways of providing information to people, and seeing which one can encourage them to make the choices they would normally make, or ideally make in their heads.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I love the direction that's taken you with your research. So, I think it would be interesting for the students to hear, because you're someone who's completed an MSc, and you're almost completed a PhD, so can you tell us a bit about graduate school and also how those two experiences differ?

HABIB: So the MSc, I like thinking of it as a mini PhD, at least in terms of the structure. So instead of two years of coursework in the PhD, I did one year of coursework in the MSc. And instead of spending about two to three years working primarily on your like thesis or dissertation, you get about another year to work on the thesis. So it has all the elements of a PhD, but just like in a more concentrated kind of form.

And I think it's a really good idea to do an MSc if you're thinking about doing a PhD, not just because it kind of teaches you tools or like skills or helps you find what you're interested in. But also, do you like doing research? Do you want to come up with your own ideas? Do you want to see them fail and then have to pivot and do other things? So I think it's a good testing ground to just see if you want to do it.

APPELT: That's a really good point, because the idea of research and the reality of research are a bit different. You think, you know, all of these hypotheses you have, you're going to test them. They're gonna be right. But then research actually does have a lot of wrong turns and meandering routes to get there. Yeah.

And I think it's interesting the way you described it, because it makes it sound like the certificate is a mini version of the MSc, which is a mini version of the PhD. Because in the certificate too, of course, they have one semester more focused on coursework and one semester more focused on the research.

HABIB: Yeah, for sure. And also the fact that they're doing the research. And I've already seen a lot of comments about, you know, the challenges of actually carrying out research, having to pivot to other ideas. And the data hasn't even come in yet for most people. So once that comes in, it'll either prove or disprove your hypotheses. And that can be emotional.

APPELT: Yeah, that's very true. And I think you've kind of already talked about this. But just to confirm, so one of the things that I was really surprised about, about PhD programs is the intensity of the focus on research. So at Columbia, we had similar to what you mentioned, like about two years of the program and really only like six total classes or something like that. And then the vast majority of the time is on research. And so that sounds like similar to your experience at UBC and also at your MSc.

HABIB: Yeah, absolutely. And there's a huge focus on doing research. At least at UBC, I didn't feel this pressure as much, when I was doing my MSc because I was completely new to research, I guess. But there's this pressure to start research while you're doing coursework and like balancing the two can be challenging.

APPELT: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. The primacy of research is it makes sense, but when you're not expecting it catches you a bit off guard that you have to hit the ground running with research.

HABIB: And also, I don't know what your experience was, but sometimes it can also be hard to look back on your research that you did early on and realize that you didn't do such a good job of it. And then wonder would it have been better to wait a little longer and start research once you were designing things a little better, I guess.

APPELT: Yeah, it's interesting, too, because there's also just a learning curve from doing research. It is a skill. And so that first project, even if you have more classwork under your belt, the first project is always going to be not your best ever research design, as you learn the tricks of the trade.

HABIB: But then I guess you learn from that and somebody points out your mistake or you point out your own mistakes, and that helps with the development.

APPELT: Exactly. And another thing that for me in my PhD program caught me off guard was the extent to which it's self-directed. So in my experience, once you are focused on the research, it's really up to you to push your research forward. Your advisors provide support and they check in, but you're the one who has to, like, structure your time and your project and provide that momentum. Has that been your experience? And can you talk about how you've navigated that and how you drive your research forward?

HABIB: Yeah, I think that's one of the unique and weirdest things about doing a PhD. You're completely, not completely on your own, but there is like you decide sort of what project you want to start, you decide what studies you want to do for those projects. You move it forward. There is a deadline, but it's sort of like somewhere in the future, at some point in time, it's very self-directed. So I think that that's one of the things that can be challenging if someone wants to do a PhD.

And like if they did the MSc or if they did something else beforehand, it can help with figuring out whether you like that lack of structure. I found it's challenging because technically you can take time off anytime you want. Like, if you want to go skiing in the middle of the week or take a few days off, you can do that. But anytime you take off is sort of bad for you. It's just pushing your research later and your graduation later.

But also on the other side, it can lead to you sort of spending way too much time on it, which is also bad for you. You could be working every day, every weekend. You can be working 14 hours a day. With work from home, you could technically never stop working except for sleeping. And that's also not sustainable in the long run. So it's kind of both setting priorities and making sure you make progress on things, but also setting boundaries for yourself and making sure you don't burn out, you don't overextend yourself.

So I don't know what your strategies were for that, Kirstin. I guess it helps to kind of have other things going on, other people that you can rely on. But also setting sort of schedules and priorities for yourself that, you know, these are the projects that are my priority. These are the ones I want to work on. And then, keeping a bullet journal. I know you do that, Kirstin, I do it in like a very mini form using different apps. I have Todoist which I love. And just scheduling different things that I need to do on that. It's a life saver. But I don't know what your strategies were.

APPELT: I'll have to check out that app. That sounds good. Yeah I would say I definitely had that same experience. And I've also heard people just kind of refer to it about academia and kind of consulting in general is like the good thing is that any day can be Saturday. Like you said, you can take off any day. But the downside is that every day is Saturday. So there's nothing special about Saturday. It makes it harder to make that delineation between work time and non-work time, which I think everyone experiences during Covid, but that's kind of normal, even in non-pandemic times in the academic world.

HABIB: It helps to have like a partner who is in the real world and who actually gets like an Easter day off, for instance. And I'm like oh okay, it is Easter. It's a holiday. I should take the day off, too. It helps because doesn't have to work on weekends and everything, and it keeps me a little attached to the real world instead of just like everyday being a Saturday.

APPELT: Yeah, that's one of the downsides of Dave and me both being in academia, because we have no link to the real world, other than the dog, I guess. So those are some of the challenges. Are there any other facets of the PhD program that you found particularly challenging?

HABIB: I think one thing that's really challenging for me is letting go of projects. Letting go of projects is always really hard, especially because you don't want to end projects you've started. And it's hard to also send them off to other people to be criticized and to be torn apart. And you're never really sure that it's ready to sort of go out there on its own. Maybe you should just run another study. Maybe it should have another field study so that, I think, is one of the most challenging parts.

APPELT: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. It's exactly like you said. Some of them, they started out so promising and then, you know, it's sunk costs like, well, we've put so much work into it. And it seemed like such a good idea. So it's hard to let it go. And then on the flip side, like you said, it's hard to decide when is it ready to send to a journal for publication.

And then I think, as you also alluded, there is a surprising amount of rejection involved in research, where when you're presenting, you want to present to conferences, you might hear a no or when you send it to a journal, it's more often, it's very rare that you just get accepted off the bat. You usually have at least one, if not two or three rounds of revising and resubmit. And sometimes the journal just says no. And so you get a lot of, you know, what can charitably be called constructive criticism, but often feels, you know, not quite that constructive, and more just negative. So that part is definitely challenging for me.

HABIB: And it's also challenging, like the best thing you can get is a revise and resubmit with tons of things that you need to do and possibly people tearing apart your arguments and saying you didn't do things the right way. That's a good outcome.

APPELT: Yeah, it's not the highlight for me. So what are some of the highlights for you of the PhD program or of research more generally?

HABIB: I think the biggest highlight is the people in the PhD program, like the faculty, the PhD students. I've made lots of good friends along the way. So I think that's even in the MSc as well, lot's of friends I'm still in touch with. I think another highlight is sort of being able to choose who you work with, where you work, when you work. There's a lot of freedom, we just talked about that. And I know it's like a bad thing as well as a good thing. I think it's also definitely one of the highlights.

APPELT: Yeah, I love the ability to choose the research ideas that I find compelling and explore those avenues, and it's hard to do those in other contexts. It's really nice having that freedom to explore the ideas that you're passionate about.

HABIB: Yeah, absolutely.

APPELT: Well, now that you're close to finishing up your PhD, you're on the job market for Assistant Professor positions. So what are you most looking forward to about being an Assistant Professor?

HABIB: I think one of the good things would be to have more money. I just want to be direct about that, but also not just for me myself, but to have an actual research budget. I could I could run some things on my own. I could just, you know, pay for a few studies and see how they turn out, and feel that that money is sort of mine to spend on research. I think that would be a really cool, cool thing to have. Also, I'm assuming it would be somewhere else. So being able to move somewhere else, meet new people, work with new people, make those connections. That would be something that I would really look forward to.

APPELT: Absolutely on both of those points, because research in most cases, we're paying to cover participant's time and we might have other costs related to developing research materials. So there is that research budget element required. And that's a lot of times why either faculty have research budgets or they're applying for grants and being in a position as a faculty person, it's easier to get grants. I think that's definitely true.

And then about your point about moving somewhere new, I know I felt when I finished my PhD program that I was really ready to start somewhere new and get new ideas, cross pollinating with other folks and develop new connections. I think you will enjoy both of those things quite a lot. And so one of the things moving over to the research side of the house more directly, one of the reasons I think you are an attractive candidate on the job market is your research portfolio.

And I think what's neat about your research is that you have, even in just your PhD program, looked at a number of different ways to use behavioural science to encourage positive behaviour change. You've got projects on environmentally sustainable behaviors, prosocial behaviours like organ donation and charitable giving. So can you tell us about one of your favorite research projects?

HABIB: Yeah, I thought I would talk about the Organ Donor Registration Project, which was recently just published in the Journal of Consumer Psychology.

APPELT: Congratulations for that, by the way.

HABIB: Thank you. The project really started because we noticed there were advertisements from the Trillium Gift of Life Network where they were highlighting the fact that only 22% of Toronto residents are registered as organ donors and that seemed like not the best way to communicate it, because if I'm a Toronto resident saying that, like, "Okay, so why should I register? Why should I sign up for it?". So, we looked around and there is quite a high support for organ donor registration in Canada, even though the actual number of people registered are really low.

So, we tested whether combining these low descriptive norms and these high injunctive norms, those like norms of what things should be, people think. 90% of Canadians think you should register as an organ donor. Combining these would be more effective than just presenting one of these on their own. And we found that, yeah, it's definitely better to at least add a high injunctive norm and not just put a single low descriptive norm

on its own because people feel much more responsible for registering as an organ donor, if they see that incongruence. That inconsistency and incongruence really drives them to and motivates them to register themselves.

APPELT: So something like the majority of Canadians support organ donation, but only 20 percent of people actually donate. Is that kind of a message?

HABIB: Yeah, that's exactly the message, except for the majority, it's like 90% of Canadians support organ donation, which is really high, but only 20% are actually registered.

APPELT: Yeah, that's really neat. And I think that really is relevant for the certificate because we've talked about social norms and how they can work well or they can also backfire. And like you said, 20% by itself makes it seem like an unusual behaviour. So it's neat that having that juxtaposition of the injunctive and descriptive that that works so well.

HABIB: Yeah, it was pretty neat to run that project.

APPELT: Absolutely. And what are some new research directions that you're either pursuing or hoping to pursue once you have your own research budget?

HABIB: So I think at the moment, one of the challenges of doing a PhD program is to limit the number of projects and new projects you start. At some point, I was trying to not take on too many new projects, but I always wanted to work on a bunch of different things. And so I'm always thinking of new directions I want to go.

I've also been interested in anthropomorphism just as a concept. Like the fact that we see these inanimate things and we treat them like they're human. So it could be like Amazon's Alexa and Google's Google. So these voice technologies, make them come alive. But there's also a Rumba's or other technological things that sort of feel more human or going towards that.

So how does that sort of affect the way we interact with the devices and also what we search on those devices, how might that impact our future decisions about it? I don't know, I thought that would be interesting. I haven't done anything on it yet, but it's sort of like areas I'd like to research.

APPELT: Yeah, those would be really interesting. You can think of ways they could combine as well, like the idea of different AIs having different effects on, you know, someone who uses a Google AI versus an Amazon AI. How does that impact the different characteristics of the different AIs, how they impact things like charitable giving or other behaviours?

HABIB: Yeah, I was thinking one thing would be interesting to see how searching for something via text versus searching for it via Google. Sometimes when I don't know the answer to something, I just say, you know, Google, can you tell me the answer to this question? And does that affect sort of what I think about that, because I'm hearing the information? So say even just COVID cases, I see a number in my screen versus I hear someone telling me that there's this many cases. So does that make that come alive more? Yeah. It would be interesting to look at.

APPELT: Definitely. And then also just the idea of contrasting that with if someone you hear someone telling you, so like when it's Dr. Henry saying that versus Alexa saying that. How does that affect how we perceive the

information? Of course that's all predicated on Google or Amazon hearing you correctly and not just sending you down a wrong--

HABIB: Yeah, I was about to say, "hey" and then "Google", and I stopped myself because every time I do that, it starts up.

APPELT: Well, I'm excited to see what you do with your research. It sounds like really interesting directions to go. And it sounds like you'll be continuing in the vein of having ones that are more lab-based and more real-world based. So I was wondering how you typically work when you have projects that have lab and field components. How do you combine those?

HABIB: So the lab research is really good for having that internal validity component of it and seeing whether X leads to Y, for instance. And the field projects are really good to test it in the real world and have that external validity. So I think I usually start off with lab projects and I know the other people start it the other way, but I usually start off with lab projects, test the idea in the lab, and then sort of move on to testing the idea in a field setting.

Part of it is usually because field studies are larger or more difficult and expensive to run. So it's kind of good to see that there's initial evidence of something before scaling up to that level. But it can also be like you could have a really cool dataset. You could observe something that's happening in the real world and then sort of analyze it and then move on to the lab studies as well. So I think it could work either way.

APPELT: Yeah, I think what you're saying there is very true that if you come across a data set or phenomenon in the real world, then you can use that and then hack on it in the lab. But if you have an idea, then sometimes it's a lot cheaper to test it in the lab and make sure it works before taking it into the wild. I know right now we have a project with BC Hydro where we're going to have the opportunity to have a year's worth of data. And so you don't want to, you know, test something that's not likely to work with that amazing opportunity. So we're doing a number of lab studies to make sure we have a good idea before we bring it into the real world.

HABIB: Yeah, that is so cool to have a longitudinal, year long data set.

APPELT: Yeah. Don't want to waste that opportunity.

HABIB: It's ideal. But then there's so much noise in real data that even if you don't find something, it can be like, okay, but maybe this is the reason why. Like, maybe I'm not finding anything because we didn't control for this. We didn't control for that, so having the lab study, that's a really good strategy.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. And so in some of your research, like the organ donation project you referenced, and some of your charitable giving work and others, I know you have experience working with partner organizations. And as our students know, partner organizations bring lots of opportunities, but it can also offer some challenges in how to structure and work together on projects. So what have some of the challenges been for you when you're working with partner organizations? And what are your strategies for dealing with those challenges?

HABIB: Yeah, that's an excellent question and one I struggle with sometimes. I mean, it's great working with partner organizations because they bring so much to the table and they have real experience with those areas and they know what's going on in their specific areas much, much more than I would know.

So like when we worked with BC transplant, it was really great to sort of meet some people who were working on the other side, which is like living organ donation, where usually people give to their family members or their partners. And it was just like really great to get that perspective on it.

But there are definitely a lot of challenges with working with partner organizations. I think one of the biggest challenges is sort of turnover, sometimes with different places there's changes in who's working and there's also changes in leadership, which causes changes in priorities. So, for instance, with sustainability, that might be really, really important at one point in time, but then there could be a new management, a new CEO and they might decide, "No, sustainability is not that important". And that deprioritizes any project that is related to that.

Also, if you have a key point of contact in an organization and they leave at a certain point in time, it can be really hard to kind of get other people interested. So I think it's best to get buy-in from as many people as possible and not just, "Yes, there should be a key point of contact", but maybe other people in the team, other people higher up, if you can talk to the higher up, you can go managers, their managers, then it's easier to keep the project going even if the key person leaves. Yeah, I think that's one of the biggest challenges of working with partner organizations.

APPELT: Yeah, I've definitely had that same experience where the turnover can really either delay the project or sometimes just derail it completely because the opportunity just goes with the person who's moved on. So that's some of the downsides of partner work. What do you find rewarding about working with partner organizations?

HABIB: I think the biggest reward in working with them is to actually see your work in the field and see it be used and see people actually not just saying that they would do something, but actually doing something. And they have much greater scalability than we have. So if they like the idea and if it seems to be effective, then they could scale it to send it to millions of people or everybody in the province, or everybody in the country. So there is massive reach that partner organizations can have.

And that would mean that you know, for instance, if that organ donation message encourages like just one out of thousands of people, it's still going to increase the number of organ donors. And that's going to help save lives in the long run. So that would be really cool if that does happen.

APPELT: Yeah. The opportunity to have real-world impact is certainly the most exciting part of research for me. Well, this has been amazing. Do you have any last messages for our BI practitioners in training?

HABIB: Well, I just want to say hi and that it's been great sort of working with you all for the last nine months and sort of seeing how the ideas have developed over time. And I am really looking forward to the last few steps in this journey. So I think it's very cool that you've all taken the step to be on this journey in the first place. But the sort of final project and the final presentations, I'm really excited to see what happens because the projects are so exciting and so important and relevant, so many different areas. So I'm very curious to see what the data looks like and what you find.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. It's the most exciting part with significant results, non significant results. It's just exciting to see what it looks like and what the implications are.

HABIB: And also what the final design and everything is like, because I think most people are at the at the point where they've finalized everything. And it is running now, but there may be changes even going forward. So kind of seeing what it ends up as is exciting.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Well, my last question, was there anything I didn't ask that I should have? Any last thoughts that you have?

HABIB: I think you covered everything. I don't really know. Was there anything else you wanted to ask, Kirstin? Or say?

APPELT: No, I think I think that was really good.

HABIB: Well, awesome.

APPELT: Well, thank you, Rishad. It has been great to chat about research and your time at UBC. And we'll all be very proud, but very sad to see you graduate. I know we've all talked about ways we can try to keep you around because we've enjoyed having you here. And I think our listeners today will enjoy hearing about your projects and hearing more about the grad student experience. So thank you for joining us today.

HABIB: Thank you for having me on the podcast.

APPELT: And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.
