Episode 32: "Graduate School Beyond the Certificate Program"

with Ekin Ok, PhD student in UBC Sauder's Marketing and Behavioural Science Division

Ekin Ok is a current PhD student in UBC Sauder's Marketing and Behavioural Science division and a graduate of two different Master's programs. Ekin and I compare and contrast Master's and PhD programs in fields related to BI. We cover their different purposes, application processes, structures, and student experiences. Ekin also tells us about her own research and how she stays organized and on task.

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 Ekin Ok, PhD student in Marketing and Behavioural Science at UBC's Sauder School of Business. And Ekin is more familiar to many of our listeners as the Teaching Assistant for this year's Advanced Professional Certificate in Behavioural Insights, Ekin also has her own research portfolio of projects looking at social influence in judgment and decision making and goal pursuit.

So today I'm really excited to talk to Ekin a bit more, I get to talk to her on a fairly regular basis, but we don't usually get to do a deep dive on her background and what she's doing. So it's fun to get to chat a little bit more on the record. So welcome to the podcast Ekin.

EKIN OK, GUEST: Thank you so much. Thank you for inviting me.

APPELT: Why don't we start out by just having you tell us a little bit about yourself.

OK: Sure. I'm a PhD student, as you said, in the Marketing and Behavioural Science division at Sauder, UBC. I am in my sixth year, hopefully will be my last, but we'll see. My research is broadly in consumer decision-making and behaviour.

And my dissertation is focused on consumer brand relationships where I am looking at or trying to answer the question of whether some consumers are more or less predisposed to turn into loyal customers. So, I'm developing a scale to measure this tendency and that's my dissertation. But as you said, I have other ongoing projects in different areas of consumer behaviour, like how our identities and our relationships affect our decision making in the consumption domain.

And so other than my research, I'm originally from Turkey. I have been living in Vancouver for over ten years now. And my hobbies, when I'm not working, I like playing volleyball, and this is not a surprise to you, going on hikes with my dog, Cooper.

APPELT: Ekin is a fellow Golden Doodle owner. So, lots of commiserating about the ups and downs of having a high energy dog. Well, thanks. And one of the things I think is interesting about folks in the behavioural insights space is so many of us don't come from what we would think of as a typical behavioural science

background. So, you, for example, your undergraduate degree was in political science. So, what was your journey from an undergrad in political science to a PhD in marketing and behavioural science?

OK: Yeah, well, I actually started in molecular biology and genetic engineering and then switched to social and political science in my second year and then I did an MA in conflict analysis and resolution. And after moving to Canada, another Master of Management degree at Sauder, and finally finding a home in the marketing and behavioural science department.

And to be honest, I don't have a good answer to how I chose this path. Looking back, in hindsight, I know neither molecular biology nor political science were well informed decisions. In Turkey, you typically choose your major prior to starting the university, right after you graduate from high school, after you take the university exam, which I think is just not the best way, for a 17-year-old to make that decision.

But I think what was a turning point for me was the social psych course I have taken. And that was when I decided, “Yes, this is exactly what I want to do, learn more about how people make decisions and how their social environment affects their choices”.

But the challenge with that was to apply for a grad school for a psychology degree, for a PhD in psychology, you must have a degree in psychology, which I didn't have. So marketing and behavioural science was the next best thing. Or it turned out to be a great choice because, as you know, consumer behaviour is a field that is heavily influenced by psychology.

So, and prior to starting the PhD, I actually audited a consumer behaviour course, a seminar at Sauder. So, I attended class and did all the readings. And so that also helped solidify my decision about, okay, this is what I want to do.

APPELT: That's really interesting. And I think that resonates with some of my experience. It wasn't until I was in a PhD in psychology that I realized that marketing had so much overlap with psychology and that even doing a PhD in marketing was even a possibility. I hadn't even realized that was an option. So, I think it's that idea, like the more you know, the more you realize these connections and then you find your home within the space and it all works out in the end.

OK: Definitely, yeah, definitely.

APPELT: Well, since you do have so many degrees and experience in the post-secondary space, some of our students and alumni are considering going on to other graduate programs, so that's Master's or PhDs. And you have experience in both of those things at Sauder. So, the Master of Management one year degree and then your PhD experience. And so I was wondering if we could speak a little bit about those different options and how they compare and contrast.

And one thing that I find to be true is that Masters degrees are often a bit more applied, like focused on gaining the skills for use in an external role in the public, private or nonprofit sector. But PhD degrees tend to be a bit more academic looking at training the next generation of faculty. So, is that something that you found to be true? What did you see as the kind of distinctions between the programs?

OK: Yeah, absolutely. I would agree that Masters degrees are more applied, usually intended for a career outside of academia and therefore more focussed on giving you skills that you could directly apply to a professional role. Whereas a PhD, in most cases, I mean, it doesn't have to be this way, but typically it prepares you for a research career as a university professor. As you said, focused on training the next

generation of faculty and also to be a researcher generating scientific knowledge. And this was absolutely true in my experience in the MM and the PhD program.

In the MM program, the courses are on a variety of topics covering all fields of business, from accounting to HR to marketing information technology, just to give you business skills. In the PhD we do take courses in the first couple of years, like research methods or field specific seminars like consumer behaviour, judgment and decision-making. But I think the primary activity after you're done with the courses is just doing research, working on a research project. So I think I'd say that MM was a little bit of a lot of things, whereas PhD is certainly narrower in its scope and it's certainly more in-depth of a specific topic.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that resonates with my experience as well, that it's like you said, that broad survey where you get that broader exposure and then there is a really deep dive, and the more you get into your PhD, the more niche you become, like you focus not even on marketing and behavioural science and not even consumer behaviour and not even social influence, but like your specific piece of that. It's like really honing in.

OK: Yeah.

APPELT: And I think the other thing that you mentioned that certainly caught me by surprise in my own PhD program is when you think of grad school, you do kind of think of just being in courses all the time. But in a PhD program, for a lot of them, it is that initial coursework. But then the vast majority of your time is on research. And like you said, I did want to pick up on something else you said that it's a research career.

So, yeah training, the PhD, you may not stay in academia, but I think that research skill set is what is really being honed. And so, you know, at Columbia, we only took, I think, like six courses over the five years. And then after that, like you said, it's really that research focus.

OK: Yeah, I think in the MM you take like 20 courses, probably over nine months. Whereas in the PhD, I think I've taken like eight courses, including the statistics one, so.

APPELT: Yeah. So based on that, when would you recommend each type of program?

OK: MM is designed to be, or positioned as a program for those coming from non-business degrees who don't have a lot of work experience. Whereas, and I want to preface this by saying this is only my personal opinion, it's not a fact, but I'd suggest for those who have recently graduated from their Bachelor's degrees, working a little bit is not a bad idea to see how a career outside of academia is, to stop being a student for a little bit. And it's much easier to work first for a couple of years and then apply for a PhD than the other way around, I feel like.

And I think some people have this idea that they could do a PhD as like on the side while they are still working. It's not impossible, obviously, but at least for me, this PhD is a passion project that takes up all of your time. So it's not the passion project that you like to do on your free time.

APPELT: Free time is a bit of a foreign concept in grad school.

OK: Exactly. And other than the timing, I would say doing a PhD is reasonable or is definitely worth it if, you know, you want to stay in academia, whereas for a Masters it's to advance your knowledge of the business fields. So, sort of like fast track your way into a managerial role.

And I guess one of the differences between the two is one is typically one or two years, the other one is five, six, maybe seven years. So, I think people should be aware of the time commitments before deciding to apply for one of them.

APPELT: Absolutely. Yeah. And I think, again, what you said around the Master's degree, if it's management, it's specific to business. But whatever the Master's degree, it's often designed to either help you convert your career from one field to another or to take your career to the next level.

Whereas the PhD program is really, again, about that research career, whether it's in academia or outside of academia. But it's not something you do to get to that next level. It's got to be that passion project that you're willing to let it take up so much of your time, because it is, as you said, a five to seven year journey depending on the field you're going into.

OK: Yeah.

APPELT: And so since you've applied for both programs successfully, how did the application processes differ? Are they different in the level of work required? What's the information required?

OK: I would say PhD was more work. I don't know if this is true, but probably more selective than applying for a Masters program. There was more preparation needed to have a successful PhD application and that you should have a broad idea of which field you want to go into, what topics interest you.

And the PhD program, how it goes is heavily influenced by the faculty members in that program. So what they're working on, what their research interests are. So that's something you should definitely do your research on before you apply. And it's something you actually use in your application, in your statement of purpose, why you think that program is the best one for you. And your answer to that question should include “What excites you about the research that's being done there by the faculty members?”.

So I guess whereas for a Masters program, you could do a more general one, just talk about your own career goals. I think the PhD application requires a little more customization. And I think at least in North America, both programs require GMAT or a GRE, that's the same.

But for PhD applications, as far as I know, it's just something to check off on the list of requirements as long as you're above a certain point, that's fine. And yeah, what matters more with the applications is the fit between your research interests and research interests of the faculty members who are working there.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think what you started to allude to about with the selectivity is obviously, it depends on the number of applicants. But with a Master's program, you're typically filling a cohort, whether the cohort is a small one with 20 people or a large one with 200 people, it's a cohort that goes through a program together. Whereas with the PhD, most programs are only taking somewhere like two to 10, in really big schools, they might take more like 30, but it's people who are going to be in it for the five to seven years. So, it is more about that fit with the faculty and the research.

And I think something else you alluded to was that with the Master's programs, usually there's some kind of expectation of a certain level of degree for your first post-secondary education and maybe some work experience. But with a PhD, there's often a requirement of some research experience. So, if you go straight from undergrad, you really have to have had some like research assistantship or something.
You can't usually go into a PhD program with no research background. And like you said, having an understanding of research and what area you're interested in is usually a pretty big part of the application.

And I was thinking, I didn't put this in my notes, but one other thing that we maybe should highlight for people who aren't familiar with the grad school space is that often for Masters programs, they are often expensive endeavors where you are having to pay a pretty large tuition, whereas for a lot of PhD programs in the sciences at good schools, your time is actually funded. So, you're not paying tuition and you're actually paid a stipend to cover your contributions to the research at the university. So, you might be doing teaching assistance and helping with faculty research. But you're not living the lux life, but you're not going into debt either. You're not paying a tuition.

OK: Yeah.

APPELT: Which is something that I certainly didn't know until I looked into it. Then I was like, “Oh, this is more attractive than I realized”. And then going into the grad school experience, we've talked a bit about the differences with the coursework.

Another thing that surprised me with the PhD is how self directed it is compared to something like a program where you're in coursework. When it's research, it's really up to you to push your research forward. If you're not coming back to your advisor and doing the analysis, doing things and keeping it going, it'll kind of just sit there. No one else is driving it but you. So has that been your experience? Can you talk a little bit about how you navigate that transition from the structure coming from outside to having the structure have to come from inside?

OK: Yeah, it definitely caught me off guard as well. Six years later, it's still something I grapple with from time to time. I guess I have a couple of tactics that work for me that I use. Like I set up deadlines for myself. But deadlines are not as effective when they're self-enforced. I try to have weekly meetings with the prof or with the other members of the project.

For my dissertation proposal, I did a 100-day calendar and used my partner to monitor my progress every night and I guess talking about accountability partners is going to sound like an ad, it's not, I'm not getting commissioned or anything, but one thing I've discovered recently that works really well for me is this program or platform called Focusmate. It’s much easier with someone else and you have a 50 minute work session. At the beginning, you tell one another your goals for that session, and at the end there is a debrief. But during those 45-50 minutes, you work not interrupted with your video on.

And it was great during the work from home period where there's more opportunity for distraction, I guess. It just worked out so well. I thought it was a bizarre idea. I actually heard it from Rishad, another PhD student, now is an Assistant Prof at Ryerson University. It worked out so well. So I guess my point is I definitely need those external pushes to keep myself motivated.

APPELT: Yeah, it's a good example of choice architecture. And like, if you're in a blank space choice architecture, it's up to you to build the choice architecture that works for you. Yeah, I remember being shocked, at Columbia, it was really after year two that you've finished coursework and then all of a sudden year three, you don't have those milestones. It's just you got to do the research.

And then with research projects, in the certificate program, they're a bit compressed because we just have the nine months, but with PhD research projects, they can be two, three-year projects. And so there aren't a lot of huge milestones and you kind of have to find them yourself and hold yourself to them. So, I like hearing about some of the techniques you've used. That's really interesting.

OK: Yeah. And I want to add that that is one of the most challenging parts of the PhD program that the rarity of milestones, success markers like your publications, completion of a research project, they take a long time and it's never, at least in my experience, a straightforward, smooth process. And being resilient is quite important there.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. I think something you don't really realize until you get into it is that research is actually filled with rejection, Might be a strong word, but like disappointment, whether it's your research results aren't what you expected or the project didn't get accepted for the paper, the first journal you submitted it to, or you didn't get the grant the first round. So building that resilience is really important.

OK: Yeah.

APPELT: And I think to what you're saying too around just the projects being so long and then something I wasn't as prepared for is you're never really done with a project until years down the road. I keep coming back and you're like, this is for my first year, now I'm in my sixth year. Why am I still working on it?

OK: Yeah.

APPELT: And the number of projects you're juggling, usually you've got two, three, four or five or more projects on the go at a time.

OK: Yeah, yeah. You have your dissertation but just that on its own is not enough. I guess at least in the marketing program at UBC, people start to work on their dissertation in their third year onwards. So, but prior to that, in the first two or three years, you're expected to start different research projects, ideally with different faculty members to again find that fit. So, yeah, by the time, now I'm in sixth year, I have like seven or eight projects.

APPELT: Yeah. And kind of I think we've both experienced that, some of the reason you're doing a bunch of projects up front is that not all of them are going to be successful. So that's finding that idea that actually makes sense and you get results with it because there's a lot of ideas that sound good, but then when you do the research, they don't pan out.

OK: Yeah, lots of ideas that I think applies to everyone, and then I realize, “Oh, no, it's just me”.

APPELT: Well, I think we've covered some of the challenges. What have been some of the highlights of the PhD program?

OK: This is a tricky one because you would think it would be those specific benchmarks or specific milestones, as you said, like passing your comprehensive exams or passing your dissertation proposal or having your first article published, I think prior to having them done, that's what I would say, that “Oh, yeah, those are the highlights. Those are going to be the highlights. Like these are going to be these life changing experiences. Once I submit my dissertation proposal, my life is going to get an upgrade”. But it's not like that. I think it's called arrival fallacy.

I think what has been a more consistent highlight throughout the years is just the opportunity to work with and learn from really wonderful people who are very smart and supportive and are just really inspirational. So, like every conversation I have with Dale and hearing his answers to the questions I ask him, it's just been a "wow" experience.

The other highlight is the autonomy. So, I have this question that's really interesting to me and I want to find out answers to that. And that's what I'm going to do as my job and as I do that, receive feedback from really nice and smart and supportive people. So, it's more of a day to day activity, what you do that has been the highlight. I think that's what keeps most people going. They actually enjoy what they're doing.

APPELT: Yeah, I think it's certainly part of what I love, as well as the combination of being able to have conversations and inspiration from so many amazing folks and then being able to apply the ideas to so many different areas. Like it never gets old because there's always like, “Oh, what if we checked for this thing that will moderate the effect or what if we applied it to this other context?”.

OK: And it's interesting when you realize they don't apply it to that context, because then that becomes a new question. Why doesn't that work here? What is it about this context?

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Dave and I were just having one of those conversations in the car yesterday about some of the research he got where there's this really cool interaction. And, yeah, that's the kind of thing we like. Data nerds.

So, I wanted to pull on something else you said about autonomy, because I think, like you said, you have that intellectual autonomy to pursue any idea. But we also actually are pretty autonomous in our schedules once we're done with the classwork. I mean, we still have meetings, don't get me wrong. But in terms of, you know, you said there’s this downside of having to schedule your time to move yourself forward, there's also upsides of that.

So, you have that flexibility in your scheduling where you can work the hours that work for you. And so, it's certainly nice. And I've gotten so used to it that it's hard for me to imagine being in an environment where it is strictly nine to five, which again, pros and cons. But I wanted to highlight there.

OK: I feel like that's both a blessing and a curse. It can be a curse for some people who are not as self-disciplined as others. But yeah, the idea of going back to a regular work schedule, I mean, I actually like working on weekends or when I'm going for a couple of days on vacation, I like taking articles with me and reading them there. And I think that goes back to that whole you should like what you're doing on a daily basis without those specific milestones or success markers.

APPELT: Yeah, if you love it, then you enjoy doing it. I mean, we all need breaks from it, but we enjoy doing it. So yeah, absolutely. So, I think we've talked about a lot of aspects of grad school, but are there any last pieces of advice if anyone's considering grad school?

OK: Yeah, I think for those who are thinking of applying for a Masters, I would definitely suggest getting into touch with the alumni of that program, take them out for a coffee or set up a Zoom call with them, hear their perspective, see where they're working at now, what the program experience was like. So, make use of these social resources that are there that most people don't use.

And then for the PhD, I would say, rather than the reputation of the school, what matters more is the faculty there. Again, is there someone there whose research fascinates you? That should be the main criteria. And when you're when you're working, when you're in the program, this is going to sound generic, but this really true, have something else that you're doing outside of your work, whether it's going for a run or playing volleyball or teaching tricks to your dog, which is the case for me. Have something else that you do ideally with other people outside of academia, so that when you have those down moments, when you get a rejection from an article, that you don't feel like your life has no purpose because don't take it personally.

APPELT: Yeah, yeah. It can feel very all consuming. So, it's important to have stuff outside of it to remind us that there is there is life outside of research and academia. Well, now that you're finishing up your PhD, you're on the job market, you're going to interviews left and right. What are you most looking forward to about being an assistant professor?

OK: Earning more money. I have to say that, but I guess, I mean, in terms of the kind of work that I would be doing, it's relatively similar to what I'm doing now as a Senior PhD student working on research primarily. But of course, there could be other tasks like teaching and service that you also have to do when you get an assistant professor position. Those are not necessarily the things I'm looking forward to. But I guess one thing is I am really excited about the prospect of mentoring my own students.

APPELT: Yeah, I think, like you said, in many ways being an assistant professor is just a natural continuation. So, it adds on more research autonomy, but you also have more teaching and more service. And the PhD programs, you do get a stipend, but it's not the same as having a full salary. So that's very fair. Well, I would be remiss if I didn't ask you about your own research projects. You told us a little bit about them at the top. But is there a favourite research project you want to tell us a little bit more about?

OK: Well, they're all my favourites, depending on how they progress. Some of them are my less favourite children. The one that I'm really excited about now is about prosocial gift-giving. So, this idea that you're making a donation to a cause or to an organization on behalf of someone else as a gift for them. And we are looking at what happens when you receive this type of gift, unasked, how does that affect your subsequent involvement with the organization down the road?

And the reason I like it is because we find that in certain cases it has a backfiring effect, that it actually makes you less likely to donate to or volunteer for the organization because you don't feel agency, you don't feel personal responsibility behind that initial donation decision. So, when the time comes that you're choosing between that organization and another one, you're more likely to choose the other one to donate. I think that's a pretty neat finding. I like the mechanism of not having agency, and it's also managerially relevant, I think. It's something that those organizations should know about that in certain cases it might backfire.

APPELT: So, yeah, that's really interesting. I feel like I have a thousand follow up questions, but I will save them for your next research talk. So I'm curious because that seems like the kind of project that you would probably do some testing in the lab, but you might also work with some partner organizations. So in your research, do you do more lab projects, do more field projects, do you do a mix? And how do you land on that?

OK: The mix is the ideal. I think typically I start with online studies. They're easiest to run just to see if what you're thinking is in the right direction. It's quick, it's relatively cheap. And also, lab studies, which we typically use undergraduate students, but that comes at the expense of external validity. Like to see what you find in the lab and with students can be replicated in real world to test the generalizability of your findings. So that's where field studies come into the picture. They're harder to get started on. You have to have an organization that's willing to work with you.

So for this gift giving project, actually we have tried connecting with a couple of organizations. We weren't successful. So right now all we have is lab studies or lab and online studies with adult samples. But I would love to have the chance to do this in the field setting. And nowadays most journals, not required, but it's definitely a plus if you show that what you are finding in the lab is also applicable to real world.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. I find the mix to work very well myself. There is that risk with lab research that it is something specific to a student population or a hypothetical task, where if you have real money or lives or time on the on the line, you might see something different.

OK: Yeah, just being in the lab environment too, like in real world, we have hundreds of things that are affecting our decision making that we don't really know of and they're more constrained in the lab.

APPELT: Absolutely. Well, I think we're just about out of time, so do you have a message for our BI practitioners in training?

OK: Well, it's been a pleasure attending class with you these past couple of weeks. I love reading the discussion boards and seeing examples that you bring to class from all sorts of areas. I'm looking forward to more of that. Just feel free to reach out, if you have any questions either about class material or about applying for a PhD and Masters. And I'm happy to help.

APPELT: Thanks. Yes. And I think you'll be seeing more of Ekin as you get into the capstone projects and are having trouble with Qualtrics and those kinds of things. Ekin has said she's willing to help with some of the pieces. Thank you Ekin, as always, it's lovely to get a chance to chat. And we all wish you lots of luck on the job market. Even though we don't really want you to leave UBC, we know it's what's best for you in the long run. So, thank you for making the time today to join us.

OK: Thank you. It's been great.

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