HELP ON THE WEB: THE EFFECT OF THE SAME FIRST NAME BETWEEN THE SENDER AND THE RECEPTOR IN A REQUEST MADE BY E-MAIL

NICOLAS GUÉGUEN
Université de Bretagne-Sud, Vannes - France

Similarity between a solicitor and a subject (same race, attitudes, apparel appearance) leads to enhanced helping behavior. An experiment manipulating similarity was carried out in a computer-mediated context. Fifty students received an e-mail containing a survey on their food habits. This questionnaire came from a hypothetical student of the university in which the subjects were registered. In half of the cases, the first name of the solicitor, which appeared in his or her electronic address, was the same as the first name of the receptor. Results have shown that compliance to the request was significantly higher in the same first-name condition. No difference between the two conditions was found according to the delay of response.

Similarity between a solicitor and someone solicited traditionally enhances helping behavior. Similarity can be manipulated in different ways. Same race, status, apparel appearance, or attitude between solicitor and helper is sufficient to produce more compliance to the solicitor request. Gaertner and Bickman (1971) found that white subjects help a solicitor of the same race more favorably than a black solicitor. Numerous studies have replicated these results (Bickman & Kamzam, 1973; Wegner & Crano, 1975). This effect of same race is also obtained when the solicitation of help is made by phone and when ethnicity of the solicitor is manipulated by his or her accent (Harris & Klingbeil, 1976). People of high status help a high status solicitor more favorably than a low status solicitor (Goodman & Gareis, 1993). Keasey and Keasey (1971) have found that same apparel appearance between helper and solicitor led to increased compliance to the solicitor request. This effect is also observed on spontaneous helping behavior (Suedfeld, Bochner, & Matas, 1971). Similar political attitudes between a solicitor and a subject enhance compliance to the solicitor request (Suedfeld, Bochner, & Wnek, 1972). Similar attitudes toward capital punishment is also a factor influencing helping behavior of the target (Karabenick, Lerner, & Beecher, 1975).

Correspondence may be sent to Nicolas Guéguen, Université de Bretagne-Sud, IUT de Vannes-Département TC, Laboratoire GRESICO; 8, rue Montaigne, BP 561-56017; VANNES-FRANCE. (E-mail: Nicolas.Gueguen@iu.vannes.fr).
A large part of the studies on the effect of similarity on help traditionally used face-to-face or telephone interaction between the solicitor and the helper. Nevertheless, some studies show that the physical presence of the solicitor is not required to create this similarity. A phone interaction is sufficient to create this similarity (Harris & Klingbeil, 1976). For this reason, it seemed useful to test if this similarity effect could be obtained in a Web interaction where the communication is not synchronous. Despite the appearances, an electronic mail message sent by a stranger to an internet user is a situation where similarity could be introduced by various information. The first name contained in an electronic address is information which could have an impact on the receptor. Numerous studies have shown that first name has some psychological effects on his or her bearer (Albott & Bruning, 1970; Joubert, 1993). Research found that first name is an important part of the self-identity (Garwood, 1976; Joubert, 1991). Furthermore, despite the importance of first name for the self, the effect of similarity versus dissimilarity of the first name between a solicitor and a subject had not been tested in the helping literature. Such lack of research could be explained by methodological consideration. Indeed, in face-to-face interaction, it would be difficult to obtain the first name of a passerby selected at random in a street. The same is not true when interacting with people taken at random in a telephone directory. Unfortunately, the research on similarity on helping behavior is scarce and this aspect of similarity had not been tested previously.

We assume that there is a practical, a methodological, and a theoretical reason to test the effect of similarity versus dissimilarity of the first name on compliance to a request made by e-mail.

From a practical point of view, testing the effect of the first name of a solicitor on compliance to a request addressed by e-mail had some interest. It is well known that requests for survey increase on the Internet and that numerous Internet users show a certain saturation for these requests (Zhang, 2000). Mavis and Brocato (1998) found that postal surveys were superior to e-mail surveys with regard to response rate. These results were confirmed by numerous studies (Pealer & Weller, 2000; Shermis & Lombard, 1999). Furthermore, some studies have found that a follow-up mailing enhanced response rate to an e-mail survey to a level that was identical to the comparative postal survey (Raziano, Jayadevappa, Valenzula, Weiner, & Lavizzo-Moyrey, 2001). However, follow-up mailing increases the cost of the survey and increases the delay to obtain information. Therefore, it would be interesting to study factors that increase compliance to a request sent by e-mail without increasing cost or delay.

From a methodological point of view, it will be interesting to test the effect of first-name similarity in a computer-mediated context. According to Markey (2000), interaction via Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is governed by the same social laws as in other contexts of communication but the main drawback to Computer-Mediated Communication Systems is the scarcity and the poor level of social
information transmitted by such systems. CMC’s users are looking for and appreciate such information. D’Ambra, Rice, and O’Connor (1998) found that e-mail users evaluated the communication richness of CMC’s systems by their capacity to transmit social information traditionally transmitted by face-to-face or phone communication. They found that voice-mail or Web-Cam is really appreciated because such systems have the capacity to transmit social information that is absent in classical e-mail communication. Kiesler, Sproull, and Waters (1996) estimate that because social information is scarce in CMC, each detail transmitted has a powerful impact on the receptor over other communication modes where such information is transmitted more fully. So, in an e-mail communication between two strangers, social information such as first name could exert an influence on interaction and perception such as in face-to-face interaction.

Lastly, studying the effect of similarity of first name on compliance to a request had some theoretical interest. Indeed, the research on first name had tested only the effect of the evaluation or the appreciation of first name on his or her bearer. Furthermore, despite the importance of first name for the self and for the self-evaluation or self-perception, there is no empirical evaluation of the effect of first name on behavior. Testing the effect of similarity of first name between a solicitor and a subject could help us to evaluate the importance of such information on the behavior of people.

Hypothesis

For the three reasons cited above, the impact of similarity of the first name between the sender and the receptor could then be tested in a computer-mediated communication context. As we have found that similarity enhanced helping behavior and that first name is important information for the self, it could be expected that when a sender of an e-mail had the same first name as the receptor, this similarity would predispose the receptor to give his or her consent more easily to the solicitor request.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 51 undergraduate students (25 female and 26 male) in computer sciences or in mathematics at the University of Bretagne-Sud in France. These subjects were recruited at the moment of their Internet connection on a free-to-use workstation located in their department. The experiment took place after 6.30 p.m. to be sure that the subjects were not in class. One subject (1 male) was eliminated from the experiment because he logged out during the time assigned to the experiment. Subjects in this experiment were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions. Furthermore, because the experiment was conducted with first name, 9 subjects were omitted from the sample.
Two judges (2 students: 1 male and 1 female) were instructed to read carefully the list of first names of the sample and to evaluate unusual names. A high reliability was found between the two judges ($r = .91$). Nine first names were considered by them as unusual. Three first names were of an ethnic group other than the majority of people of the sample, while the other six were uncommon.

**Procedure**

Different electronic addresses had been created for the occasion, containing the name of a server of another part of the university in the same town. In each case, the e-mail sent to the subjects contained a signature showing that the sender of the mail was a student in statistics located in the same university. The subjects were allocated to the experimental or to the control situation according to a random order. Two male investigators were used in this experiment. One of them was able to check if the subject was connected and if he or she had the corresponding profile. He then transferred the subject's address to his collaborator who consulted his random allocation list of subjects' condition before transmitting his e-mail. The collaborator then sent the message. In both conditions the following e-mail was sent to the subject: "Hello, I don't want to take advantage but could you help me? Well, with 3 of my study friends we have to perform a statistical analysis of the diet habits of students. For this we will have to analyze a questionnaire and we will be evaluated on the analysis of the collected data. Would you accept answering it? Just in case, I attached an HTML form that was given to us and that you will have to send back by clicking on the send button at the end of the form. Thanks in advance and have a nice day." This request was chosen for the necessary effort it required; a preliminary test showed that 15-20 minutes were needed to fill out the questionnaire containing 40 questions of the type "How many times of week do you eat fresh vegetables? What type of drink do you normally take with your lunch: beer, wine, soda, fizzy or flat water?" Besides, such a request seemed in accordance with the training of the senders who were supposed to be students in statistics.

In the university department where the experiment took place, electronic addresses of the students were made with the first name of each student followed by the surname and then followed by the academic department (i.e.: first-name.Surname@univ-ubs.fr). In the experimental condition the first name used to create the electronic address of the solicitor was the same as the first name of the student. In the control condition, six familiar first names (3 male and 3 female) were employed to create the electronic addresses but in each case, the first name employed was quite different from the first name of the target. A female first name was sent to a female subject whereas a male first name was sent to a male subject.

The return rate of the questionnaire was then measured and a delay of a maximum of 7 days was allowed before declaring a no-response. The response time was also taken into account as a dependant variable.
Results

Concerning the compliance rate to the request (completing the questionnaire and sending it back), 72% (18/25) in the experimental situation did send back the filled out questionnaire against 44% (11/25) in the control situation. The difference between these two rates was significant, $X^2(1, N = 50) = 4.02$, $p < .05$. When the subject and the solicitor had the same first name, compliance to the request was easier. The latency time for answering was initially calculated in minutes. Considering the fact that some subjects waited 3 days before answering, a log transformation of this period was made. The mean value of the latency time of 2.08 ($SD = 0.83$) was found for the experimental condition against 2.17 ($SD = 1.12$) for the control situation. Despite appearances, the difference between these two means was not statistically significant, $t(28) = 0.25$, $p > .20$, two-tailed. The experimental condition did not lead to a quicker response time for the subjects who chose to answer.

Discussion

In our experience we have found that when a solicitor of a request made by e-mail had the same first name as the receptor, compliance to the request increased. Previous studies have shown that the physical presence of the solicitor was not necessary to increase compliance to the request. With this new experiment, it appears that this presence does not necessitate a synchronous communication between the solicitor and the subject and congruence of first names appears to be a good new technique to create similarity in a context where classical similarity techniques are difficult to manipulate. These results confirm the efficacy of similarity between the helper and the solicitor on helping behavior and are consistent with previous studies on helping behavior where similarity was manipulated by physical appearance or convergence of attitudes (Goodman & Gareis, 1993; Harris & Klingbeil, 1976; Suefeld, Bochner, & Wnek, 1972). Our experiment also confirms the importance of first name as a social variable. Name is a part of the self-identity (Garwood, 1976; Joubert, 1991) and is an important factor influencing perception and evaluation of people (Erwin, 1994, Etaugh, Bridges, Cummings-Hill, & Cohen, 1999, Leak & Ware, 1989; Tompkins & Boor, 1980). So it seems that we evaluated a stranger in the Web positively when he or she had the same first name as ourselves. This positive perception could then enhance compliance to the solicitor request. This effect has some theoretical importance because research of names had traditionally focused on evaluation and perception but the effect of first names on behavior had not been tested. Research had found that first name is an important part of the self (Garwood, 1976; Joubert, 1991) but the importance of this self-information on a subject's behavior still remained unknown.

These findings also have methodological implications. Firstly, considering the preliminary nature of this experiment, it will be interesting to use the methodology employed here to test the impact of people's
evaluation of a target toward his or her first name. It will be interesting to
test if a solicitor with a positive evaluation of his or her first name will be
helped more favorably than a solicitor with a negative evaluation of his or
her first name. It will then be interesting for further studies to test other
factors associated with first name. First names of people of different
ethnic groups could be used in order to test the effects of ethnic
stereotypes on the Web. This technique could be used as a new measure
of stereotype because, on the Web, people would have no pressure to
help someone of a different ethnic group as in face-to-face interaction.
Secondly, despite the scarcity of social information in a Computer-
Mediated Context, we found in this experiment that it is possible to create
similarity between two correspondents in an e-mail interaction. It would be
interesting for further research to test other factors of similarity such as
information about status or physical attractiveness (photography). It
would also be interesting to test helping behavior with the “name
congruence” technique in other contexts (e-mail interaction between two
correspondents with the same name but living in different countries).

In a practical perspective, our results show that this form of similarity
manipulated in a Computer-Mediated Context could enhance favorably
the rate of compliance to a survey request. Zhang (2000) found that
Internet users showed a certain saturation for these requests and that
response rates were lower. In a previous study, we have found that an
“electronic foot-in-the-door” was a good compliance technique on the
Internet (Guéguen, 2002). It seems that the technique of the “electronic
name similarity” is a good technique to increase compliance to a request
made on the Web. This would be a good technological method to obtain
higher response rates on Web surveys and then, to increase samples
representativeness. As this technique of compliance is new, replications
are now necessary to test its robustness. Of course such results raise
ethical questions because it is very easy to create, automatically, an
address which contains the same first name as the first name of the
target. Then, it would be easy for web-marketers to use this technique
with their mailing list in order to increase the response rate to a survey or
to influence consumer behavior. Using this technique would then be
assimilated to a business manipulation.

Some limitations in this experiment should lead us to interpret the
findings cautiously. The sample tested was small and was limited to
students in computer sciences or in mathematics. So there was a strong
likeness between the solicitor and the subject but we do not know if
similarity of first name had an impact when the solicitor and the subject
have nothing in common. The request used in this experiment was a
prosocial request and we have not tested the effect of the technique with
a commercial or a private request. Further studies on this technique will
have to test these aspects of generalization.
References


