

What is in a name? An effect of similarity in computer-mediated communication

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Abstract

An experiment manipulating similarity was carried out in a computer-mediated context where 634 males and females taken at random from various email lists were solicited to visit a website for the benefit of a humanitarian organization. In half of the cases, the given-name of the solicitor, which appeared in his/her electronic address, was the same as that of the receiver. Results show that compliance to the request was significantly higher in the case of first name congruence. The data confirm that similarity between someone who needs help and a participant leads to enhanced helping behavior.

Keywords: *Computer mediated communication; Names; Similarity; Social influence*

Introduction

When some similarity between a solicitor and a person solicited exists, an increase in helping behavior is seen (Karylowski, 1976; Sole, Marton, & Hornstein, 1975; Yinon, Sharon, & Malkiman, 1983). Similarity between a solicitor and his/her target can be created in numerous ways, using race, status, appearance, or behavioral attitudes. Similarity in these aspects between solicitor and potential helper is sufficient to produce more compliance to the solicitor's request. Gaertner and Bickman (1971) found that white participants more favorably helped a solicitor of the same race whose car was broken down on the highway. Two studies have reproduced these results (Bickman & Kamzan, 1973; Wegner & Crano, 1975). This effect of being of same race between the solicitor and the participant is also observed in solicitation by telephone and when the ethnicity of the solicitor is manipulated by his/her accent (Harris & Klingbeil, 1976). People of high status have a higher tendency to help when solicited by someone of high status rather than someone of low status (Goodman & Gareis, 1993). Keasey and Keasey (1971) have found that the same apparel and similar appearance between potential helper and solicitor leads

to increased compliance with the solicitor's request. This effect was also observed when no direct request of help was addressed to the participant (Suedfeld, Bochner, & Matas, 1971). A similar attitude between the solicitor and the participant also enhances helping behavior. Similar political attitudes manipulated by displaying a support-sign for a candidate enhances compliance to the solicitor's request (Suefeld, Bochner, & Wnek, 1972). Similar opinions of social issues, such as capital punishment, have also been shown to affect helping behavior (Karabenick, Lerner, & Beecher, 1975). Incidental similarity between two strangers is also associated with greater compliance. Burger and colleagues (2004) found that undergraduates who believed they shared a birthday, first name or fingerprints with a confederate were more likely to comply with a request addressed by the confederate. Silvia (2005) also showed that communicators with identical first names and birthdays (Experiment 1) or identical congruent values (Experiment 2) as a target became more persuasive. It has also been found that such incidental similarities are associated with the positive evaluation of an unknown individual. Buller, LePoire, Aune and Eloy (1992) found that speech rate similarity between a speaker and a target increases the social attractiveness of the speaker and affects compliance to aid the speaker. Finch and Cialdini (1989) found that participants who were led to believe that they shared a birthday with Rasputin rated him less harshly. With 3-year-old children Fawcett and Markson (2010) showed that children prefer to play with a peer who shares their toy preferences.

A large part of these studies on the similarity-effect on helping have used face-to-face interaction between the solicitor and the potential helper. Nevertheless, some studies have shown that the physical presence of the solicitor is not required to create this complicity. A phone interaction is sufficient to create complicity based on similarity. Harris and Klingbeil (1976) found that the accent of the solicitor is a good technique to

manipulate his/her ethnicity. For this reason, it seemed useful to test if this similarity effect could be obtained in a situation in which people interacted in a computer mediated context where contact is not synchronous. An electronic mail (email) sent by a stranger to an internet user is a situation in which similarity could be introduced by various information. The first name contained in an email address is one piece of information that could potentially have an impact on the receiver. Numerous studies have shown that a person's first name has some psychological effects on his/her self-image (e.g. Albott & Bruning, 1970; Joubert, 1993) and is an important part of a person's self-identity (Garwood, 1976; Joubert, 1991).

The impact of similarity in first names between the sender and the receiver could thus be tested in a computer-mediated communication context. It may be expected that when the sender of an email has the same first name as the person who receives the message, this similarity would predispose the target to give his/her consent more easily to the solicitor's request.

Method

Participants

A total of 634 men and women were used in this experiment and their electronic addresses came from a list of electronic mail addresses taken from the internet. These addresses were obtained using various navigation software (Cocciemail Capture, Email Collector, Email Extractor) for procuring personal email addresses with the limiting parameter being that the addresses were on a French server (name@server.fr). Various directories have also been used to constitute our file of addresses. Due to the way these addresses were obtained, it was impossible to make a more precise description of the persons concerned in terms of age and occupation. After eliminating company addresses, those with no explicit given-name and those addresses that were invalid at the time of the experiment (no server, unknown destination on the server) a total of 634 addresses were available for further analyses. We proceeded by requesting, by electronic mail, that these 634 persons visit our website. The method used was approved by the ethical committee of the laboratory (CRPCC: Centre de Recherche en Psychologie Cognition et Communication) which reviewed the project.

Procedure

A website was constructed especially for our experiment. The site was called "*Childhood Victim of Mines*" (CVM) and the home page showed various photos, accompanied by poignant text, of children who were victims of injuries inflicted by personal land mines. A message was sent with listserv software to the individuals whose email addresses we had previously

obtained. The message that was sent contained the following text: "*Spend five minutes of your time on the children who were victims of mines by clicking on.*" This sentence was followed by a hypertext link containing the server and site address. To connect to this site the recipient was required simply to click on the link.

We used six common first names for our control (3 usually used for men and 3 for women) to create our false return email addresses. In each case, the given-name employed was different than the given-name of the target (i.e., nicolas.martin@server.fr sent an email to eric.dupont@server.fr). In the experimental condition, the given-name used to create our false return email address was the same as the given-name of the person being solicited (i.e., nicolas.martin@server.fr sent an email to nicolas.dupont@server.fr).

After clicking the link on our page, the participant was led to another home page that contained a further link inviting the participant to donate to CVM. Subsequently, the participant was connected to a second page showing a photograph of two children and a message of acknowledgement. This page contained yet another link with the following phrase: "*Help the children by asking for a donation form*". Clicking on this link then led the participant to another page that again showed a photograph of a child and a text informing the participant that this was a new site and that it was not yet possible to receive donations. However, in large characters, a message indicated that it was possible to send gifts for children and the official hypertext links of three well-known humanitarian organizations were included.

The activation of the different links was recorded, but the assessment of the behavior of the participant was stopped after the activation of the selected link to one of the three humanitarian organizations. It is, therefore, impossible to know if any of our participants actually made a donation.

Results

The choice to consult our donation and the choice to follow the hypertext link to an official site of the proposed humanitarian organizations were the two dependent variables measured in this experiment. Data are presented in Table 1. The first two percentages were calculated on all samples of participants who visited our donation page. The last percentages were calculated with respect to participants who followed the link to the official site of one of the humanitarian organizations.

A significant difference appeared between the two groups that activated our donation page ($\chi^2(1, N = 634) = 21.65, p < .001$). When the participant and the solicitor had the same first name, the participants were more likely to comply with the request. A significant difference was observed concerning the percentage of hits on one of the proposed sites when the number of hits is compared with the total number of participants

Table 1
Percentages of people who visited the Web page where a donation could be made and those who activated the link to an official site for a humanitarian organization

	Experimental condition	
	Same given name (N = 309)	Different given name (N = 325)
Activation of the donation page	21.68	4.31
Activation of link to official humanitarian organization site		
Total percentage of participants tested	8.41	1.85
Percentage of participants activating donation page	38.81	42.86

that visited the home page ($\chi^2(1, N = 6.34) = 6.89, p < .01$). When the participant and the solicitor had the same first name, the participant more frequently followed the links to one of the three websites. However, comparison between the number of participants that clicked on the donation page reveals no statistical difference ($\chi^2(1, N = 86) = 0.10, p = .75$).

Discussion

Our results show that when a person requesting something by email has the same first name as the person to whom the email is sent, the receiver showed increased compliance with the request. Previous studies have shown that the physical presence of a solicitor is not necessary to increase compliance to a request. With this new experiment, it appears that presence is not necessary in a synchronous communication between the solicitor and the participant 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 effectiveness of using similarity between the helper and the solicitor to influence helping behavior. They are consistent with previous studies where similarity was manipulated by physical appearance or convergence of attitudes (Harris & Klingbeil, 1976; Goodman & Gareis, 1993; Suefeld, Bochner, & Wnek, 1972). Our experiment also confirms the importance of a person's first name as a social variable. A person's name is a part of self-identity (Garwood, 1976; Joubert, 1991) and is an important factor influencing the perception and evaluation of people (Erwin, 1994; Etaugh, Bridges, Cummings-Hill, & Cohen, 1999; Leak & Ware, 1989; Tompkins & Boor, 1980). When evaluating a stranger on the web, we react more positively if the person

shares our first name. This positive perception could then enhance our compliance to the requests we receive.

Our results confirmed that computer-mediated communication is a good setting to test the efficiency of compliance techniques on human behavior: experimental costs are relatively low; large samples can be tested; and experiments can be conducted rapidly. Marketing professionals could use this technique to influence the number of people who respond to a survey or who buy something on a business site. Guéguen and Jacob (2002) have shown that an electronic "Foot-in-the-Door" technique is a good compliance procedure for increasing donation rates on a website. Further research will then be necessary to test other compliance-gaining techniques, such as the "low-ball" (Cialdini, Cacioppo, Bassett, & Miller 1978), the "even a penny will help" (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976) or the "lure" (Joule, Gouilloux & Weber, 1989) techniques in a computer-mediated communication setting.

Despite the scarcity of social information in a computer-mediated context, our experiment shows that it is possible to create similarity between two correspondents in an email interaction. Given the results of our experiment, it seems that people's behavior can be influenced on the web by using the "name congruence" technique. This technique also has some practical interests for website managers or online sellers who want to increase the number of their website visitors.

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