

# What's in a Name? Persuasion Perhaps

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Four studies demonstrate the potential influence of name similarity on perceptions of similarity to oneself in general, liking, and compliance. Some participants received a scenario in which the protagonist's name was similar to their own. These participants indicated that the character was more similar to themselves, reported greater liking for the person, and expressed more willingness to comply with a request for help than control participants did. In addition, the persuasive influence of name similarity on questionnaire return rates indicated that both undergraduates and college professors completed and returned questionnaires more frequently if the name on the cover letter was similar to their own. The influence of name similarity was independent of name familiarity. The importance of name similarity in eliciting overt behavioral action is discussed.

The similarity of another's name to one's own can influence perceptions of the other's similarity to oneself in general, liking for the other, and actual behavior. The research I report demonstrates these effects. The design builds on earlier evidence (Nuttin, 1987) that people prefer letters that appear in their own name more than others in the alphabet. Jones and Pelham (2001) reported that individuals are more willing to donate money to a candidate whose last name begins with the same letter as their own. More generally, people like their given name (Carnegie, 1936; Joubert, 1993), and few would be willing to change it (Garner, 2004b). Perhaps for this reason, voting preferences can be influenced by candidates with similar or familiar names (Cialdini, 1993; Dubois, 1979). Despite this research, several ambiguities arise concerning the antecedents of the observed effects. Furthermore, the impact of name similarity on actual behavior has not been fully explored.

In this research, I determined whether a name that is generally similar in appearance to a participants' (but may have additional letters that are foreign to one's own name) can elude impressions of liking and similarity to self. I further determined whether name similarity or name familiarity has the more persuasive influence. A name that is similar in appearance to one's own is likely to be familiar as well. In this research, I isolated the effects of these factors.

In addition, my research demonstrated the influence of name similarity on overt behavior. From a marketing per-

spective, this influence has particularly intriguing implications. Perceived similarity influences both liking and compliance, and people seem to be more willing to agree to the requests of similar others (Emswiller, Deaux, & Willits, 1971; Garner, 1994; Swap, 1977). For this reason, professional training seminars often teach sales personnel to use a number of means of ingratiating themselves with customers by appearing similar to them. The potential effects of a similar appearing name could provide another means of attaining this objective.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Historical Perspective

Historically, a person's name has conveyed a great deal of meaning and information. That is, names were frequently descriptive and developed from both nouns and adjectives (Reaney, 1967). Prior to the 14th century, most individuals had only one name (e.g., Robert, John, Henry, etc.). However, as populations began to increase and communities grew, there was a need to more precisely identify an individual or family. As a result, surnames or permanent family names were created. Originally, such names were derived in one of four basic ways: (a) *patronymics*, usually referring to the father's name with the word "son" following (e.g., Peterson, Johnson, etc.); (b) *toponymic*, identifying where a person was from or was living (e.g., Hill, Wood, or Lake); (c) *occupational*, referring to a person's vocation or social role (e.g., Baker, Taylor, Butler, Marshal, or Mayor); and (d) *epithets*, which are bynames that refer to some personal characteristic

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of the individual (e.g., Small, Armstrong, Brown, or Short; Reaney, 1967). A family name could impart information regarding their reputation in the community and was often intertwined with issues of class and social standing. In fact, the word *reputation* is offered as a synonym for name.

With this rich history and background, it is not surprising that Allport (1937) suggested that an individual's name was one of the most important components of self-identity. Carnegie (1936) offered that "a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language" (p. 83). Although vocational and other information may no longer be revealed in a person's name, researchers have consistently found that people like their given name (Joubert, 1993; Strumpfer, 1978). Garner (2004b) found that most people generally liked their name, and few would be willing to have their name legally changed.

### Previous Research

Not only do a people tend to like their own name, people may also prefer the individual letters that comprise it. Nuttin (1987) found that individuals significantly preferred the letters in their own names over all other letters in the alphabet. This name-letter effect suggests that people's perceived ownership of their name increases their liking for these name-similar letters, and this result has been demonstrated over many languages and cultures (also see Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997). These findings suggest that mere exposure alone cannot account for these phenomena, as the letters of one's name do not vary systematically in frequency of occurrence. Rather, the effects may reflect a self-regulatory mechanism or implicit egotism (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2001). That is, people prefer the letters in their own name not merely because they have been repeatedly exposed to these letters but because of the importance the name has for themselves (Allport, 1937; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002).

When people encounter a recognizable stimulus, such as letters in their own name or a similar appearing name, they could conceivably feel a sense of association between the stimulus and themselves, and this could increase their liking for it (Lee, 2001). Heider (1958) suggested that an implicit association is formed between people who perceive that they may share common attributes. Incidental associations, such as name similarity, might be among these attributes, leading to the formation of what Heider called a "unit relationship" and, consequently, to a sense of liking. Furthermore, the liking that results from name similarity could elicit a sense of more general similarity, and this in turn could increase willingness to comply with a request. Byrne (1971) and others have suggested that whether it be in the area of opinions, attitudes, or personality traits, people tend to like others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves and may be more willing to offer them help (also see Cialdini, 1993; Emswiller et al., 1971; Garner, 1994; Swap, 1977).

### Similarity Versus Familiarity

Some studies have shown that certain voters may cast ballots for candidates based on nothing more than name familiarity (Dubois, 1979). Cialdini (1993) reported that one attorney general candidate won his race by changing his last name to Brown. His new identity was associated with a name that was known in previous state political events and was no doubt more familiar to a greater number of voters. For years, the State Treasurer of Texas was repeatedly elected despite the fact that few people knew much about his views or policies. It was suggested that one reason for his continuing reelection was the fact that his name was Jesse James, a moniker synonymous with western folklore. Jones and Pelham (2001) found that individuals expressed more willingness to contribute campaign money to a candidate whose last name began with the same letter as their own. In the latter study, however, name similarity and name familiarity were partly confounded. Therefore, which factor had the predominant influence is unclear.

In fact, several effects of name similarity could be attributed to name familiarity as well. Specifically, stimuli to which people are more frequently exposed are more familiar (e.g., Bornstein, 1989; Zajonc, 1968) and tend to be liked more (Bargh, 1992, 2001; Moreland & Zajonc, 1976). Therefore, because people's names are familiar to them, they may form more favorable impressions on the basis of information that contains these names or similar ones. Exposure to a similar name could also bring to mind positive attitudes and feelings and could influence impressions for this reason (Bargh, 1992, 2001; Lee, 2001). Pelham, Mirenberg, and Carvallo (2002) found that people reported greater attraction to others whose names resembled their own. As a result of this attention, they may more readily agree to a request or favor (Cialdini, 2001). Although these findings are provocative, however, name familiarity—not name similarity—could be the critical mediating factor in these studies. In this research, I attempted to isolate the effects of these two factors.

### Effect on Actual Behavior

In this series of studies, I examined not only the impact of name similarity on more general perceptions of similarity and likeableness but also its influence on overt behavior. Previous research has typically focused on expressed preferences or judgments rather than actual behavior. Investigators (Joubert, 1993; Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1987) have found support for the notion that individuals preferred letters that comprised their own name or initials. However, in this research, I moved beyond an expression of preference and addressed the persuasive influence of a similar name on one's actual behavior. As noted earlier, voting in elections appears to have been influenced in part by the similarity and familiarity of the candidates' names (Cialdini, 1993). However, this finding does not necessarily provide evidence of the im-

pact of name similarity or familiarity on overt behavior. Rather, it may only reflect an influence of these factors on preferences that were reported in a voting booth rather than in a research questionnaire.

### Overview and Predictions

In Study 1, I determined whether mere name similarity can influence liking and the willingness to perform a favor. Participants read a scenario in which the name of the central character was either similar or dissimilar to their own. I expected that those persons who read the scenario containing the name-similar character would report that the character was similar to themselves, would evaluate the character more favorably, and would report greater willingness to perform a favor for that person.

Study 2 was similar to the first experiment except that the control group names were highly familiar, thus permitting the effects of name similarity and name familiarity to be distinguished. In addition, I examined the length of time that individuals in each name-similarity condition required to complete the task and the amount of information in the scenario that they were able to recall. These data provided further insight into the amount of cognitive processing that participants performed in each condition.

In Studies 3 and 4, participants received a mailed questionnaire along with a cover letter explaining the importance of the survey. The cover letter in one group was signed with a name similar to the recipients, whereas the cover letter in the second group was signed by one of several actual research assistants whose names are dissimilar from the recipient. The participants in Study 3 were drawn from undergraduate psychology students, whereas the survey materials in study 4 were distributed to University professors through interoffice mail. In both cases, I hypothesized that more surveys would be returned by recipients who received the questionnaire from someone whose name was similar to their own.

## STUDY 1

### Method

**Participants.** In this study, 52 female and 30 male undergraduate psychology students participated to fulfill a class requirement. From a class roster of 91 names, 40 persons were randomly selected to read a scenario in which the protagonist's name was similar to their own. The remaining students read a scenario in which the protagonist's name was unfamiliar.

**Materials.** Each participant received a two-page packet purported to be a part of a reading comprehension study for the Communication Department. The first page contained a brief scenario that provided a description of a

fictitious person including physical and personality characteristics as well as certain likes and dislikes. The narrative also included comments about the scenarios fictitious character, which were reported to come from the characters' friends. The descriptions were kept neutral so that they would be applicable to both conditions without regard to gender. These scenarios were identical in every way with the exception of the name of the central figure. Those in the name-similar condition received a scenario in which the name of the central character was similar to the participant. The participants in the control condition received a scenario in which the central character was always named "Kerry Stanlin." A series of pretests suggested that this name was both gender neutral and was rated as moderately positive when compared to a more comprehensive list.

For the name-similar condition, a group of research judges created names that were similar but not identical to the 40 participants who were randomly selected from the class roll. Early in the semester, each class member had been asked to fill out a 3 × 5 in. index card that included their name and other pertinent data. This information was used to insure the name preferred by the student (e.g., Bob instead of Robert) was utilized in creating the name-similar conditions. In each case, the first name of the character was similar or identical to the participant and the last name was modified to create a similar appearing surname. For example, a name appearing on the class roll such as Robert Greer might become Bob Gregar and Cynthia Johnston may become Cindy Johanson. Several names posed particular challenges for the judges; however, in each case, agreement was reached.

The second page of the packet was completed after the participants had read the scenario. Each participant was asked to rate the likability of the central character, how willing he or she would be to perform a favor for this character if asked, and how similar he or she believed the character was to themselves. All measures were recorded on 13-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 13 (*extremely*). Several other questions dealt with the content of the story in keeping with the purported intention of the research effort. An open narrative section was also included in which participants could indicate the reasons for the rating decisions they made.

**Design and procedure.** Of the 82 students who participated in the experiment, 40 received name-similar packets and the remaining 42 were given control packets. Participants received a manila envelope that contained their randomly assigned scenario and questionnaire. The packets were not opened until after the instructions were read.

The participants were told that the enclosed materials involved a very short reading comprehension exercise that was being conducted at the request of the Communication Department. They were instructed to open the packet and were given 2 min to read the scenario. Once they had finished, they were told to turn the page and answer all of the questions without returning to the scenario. Finally, after responding to

all questions, they returned the form to the envelope for forwarding to the Communication Department. At the conclusion of the experiment, all packets were collected and participants were debriefed.

## Results

The effects of name similarity are summarized in the left half of Table 1. As predicted, participants who received the name-similar packet rated the central character as more similar to themselves ( $M = 8.90$ ) than control participants did ( $M = 5.66$ ),  $F(1, 80) = 57.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .417$ . They also rated the person as relatively more likable (9.87 vs. 7.90),  $F(1, 80) = 17.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .178$ , and were relatively more willing to do a favor for the person (9.37 vs. 7.59),  $F(1, 80) = 14.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .151$ . All measures were highly correlated, ranging from .75 to .89. Few individuals made remarks in the open comments section of the form to indicate why they made their respective decisions ( $n = 8$ ). These comments typically pertained to general attributes of the character being judged (e.g., “seemed like a nice person” or “sounded like someone I could trust”). Only three participants made comments that could be construed to indicate that name similarity might have been a factor in their ratings.

## Discussion

These results suggest that a similar appearing name can have a significant influence on not only perceptions of more general similarity to oneself but also liking and expressions of behavioral intentions. In Study 2, I confirmed these conclusions and addressed additional items of interest. In Study 1, the scenario read by participants in control conditions always contained the name Kerry Stanlin. Although care was taken to ensure that this name was both gender neutral and rated as moderately positive based on a series of pretests, this particular name could nevertheless have intrinsically less positive qualities than the names that were employed in name-similar conditions. In addition, the relative influence of name similarity and name familiarity were not isolated in Study 1. (That is, names that are similar to one’s own may also be viewed as familiar.) However, if familiarity has a stronger influence in general, then scenarios that contain familiar but

not similar names would result in expressions of similarity, liking, and willingness to engage in a favor similar to those observed in name-similar conditions. Alternatively, if name similarity provides the greater influence, one would expect comparable results to those realized in Study 1 under name-similar conditions, whereas scenarios with familiar (but not similar) names should be less likely to have a persuasive impact.

I also obtained evidence of the processes that underlie these effects. For example, one’s attention to the message or scenario might be heightened by the similarity of the character’s name. If this is so, the participant might scrutinize the message more carefully and thus might be better able to recall the information contained in it at a later point in time. In Study 2, I examined this possibility.

## STUDY 2

### Method

**Participants.** In this study, 65 female and 47 male undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses participated. From class rosters, half of the participants ( $n = 56$ ) were randomly assigned to receive the name-similar scenario as outlined in Study 1 and the remaining half ( $n = 56$ ) were assigned to a name-familiar (but not similar) condition.

**Materials.** As in Study 1, each participant received a two-page packet purported to be part of a reading comprehension exercise for the Communication Department. The general composition of the narrative as well as the process for creating the name-similar condition was identical to that found in Study 1. However, the control group received a scenario with a name that was highly familiar but was not similar to their own. These names were constructed from information obtained from the U.S. Social Security Administration and U.S. Census Bureau, which offer data on the most commonly occurring names in the United States. Accordingly, the most frequently occurring male and female first names were paired with the most frequently occurring last names. The top five last names with the greatest frequency and familiarity are Smith, Johnson, Williams, Jones, and Brown. The top five female and male names are Mary, Patricia, Linda, Barbara, and Elizabeth and James, John, Robert, Michael, and William, respectively. First and last names were combined to form five familiar male names and five familiar female names.

The second page of the packet was identical to that employed in Study 1. A follow-up instrument was also created to assess retention of the information presented in the scenario. This was a 10-question fill-in-the-blank questionnaire that was administered approximately 2 weeks after the initial data collection. The questionnaire, which contained items such as “What was the occupation of the individual in the

TABLE 1  
Mean Scores by Condition Across Studies 1 and 2

Items	Study 1		Study 2	
	Name Similar	“Kerry Stanlin”	Name Similar	Name Familiar
Similar to self	8.90	5.66	8.84	5.82
Liking	9.87	7.90	9.64	7.62
Willing to help	9.37	7.59	9.21	7.26

Note. All item comparisons by conditions across studies were nonsignificant.



story your read?" and "What types of activities did the individual report that they enjoyed?" was scored in terms of the percentage of items correct.

**Design and procedure.** In this study, 112 participants were present and received either a name-similar scenario ( $n = 56$ ) or a name-familiar ( $n = 56$ ) scenario packet based on previous random assignment. Because of the requirements imposed by this methodology, the materials were prepared in advance, and precautions were taken to ensure equivalence in groups. Participants in the name-similar condition were provided packets similar to those employed in Study 1. Those in the name-familiar condition randomly received a packet in which the central character's name was constructed from the U.S. Census and Social Security Administration data described earlier. Men ( $n = 22$ ) received the packets with the most familiar male names (e.g., James Smith, Robert Johnson, John Jones, etc.) and women ( $n = 34$ ) received packets with the most familiar female names (Mary Smith, Patricia Johnson, Linda Williams, etc.).

The procedures and instructions were similar to Study 1. The participants were asked to complete a short reading comprehension exercise that was being conducted at the request of the Communication Department. At the conclusion of the exercise, the students in this study were asked to bring their completed packet to one of the research assistants at the front of the room. The assistants recorded the time that the packet was returned. Participants were not debriefed immediately as in the previous study. A 2-week follow-up was conducted in which the 10-question, content-retention instrument was administered. Once this process was completed, the participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

## Results

The results of this study are summarized in the right half of Table 1. Consistent with the results in Study 1, participants in name-similar conditions indicated that the central character was more similar to themselves ( $M = 8.84$ ) than did participants in name-familiar conditions ( $M = 5.82$ ),  $F(1, 110) = 66.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .377$ . They also rated the character as relatively more likeable (9.64 vs. 7.62),  $F(1, 110) = 27.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .197$  and were more willing to do a favor for the person (9.21 vs. 7.26),  $F(1, 110) = 29.88$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .214$ . All measures were highly correlated, ranging from .68 to .71. There were no significant differences by gender in either condition. Participants in the name-familiar condition gave similarity-to-self ratings that were below the midpoint of the scale.

**Time to complete the questionnaire.** Participants in the name-similar condition took significantly longer ( $M = 15.05$  min) to complete and return their packets than did those in the name-familiar condition ( $M = 12.44$  min),  $F(1, 108) = 13.91$ ,  $p < .01$ .

**Information recall.** The follow-up instrument designed to assess content retention of the scenario was administered to 101 of the original 112 participants. (Of the 11 missing participants, 7 were in the name-similar condition and 4 were in the name-familiar condition.) Although participants recalled a greater proportion of the information in name-similar conditions ( $M = 82.0\%$ ) than in name-familiar conditions ( $M = 78.9\%$ ), this difference was only marginally significant,  $F(1, 100) = 3.02$ ,  $p < .09$ . This may be due to the rather straightforward content in the scenario and the simple nature of the exercise.

## Discussion

The results suggest that name similarity rather than name familiarity had the dominant influence under the conditions we investigated. Participants in name-similar conditions relative to those in name-familiar conditions perceived themselves to be more similar to the character, liked the character more, and expressed greater willingness to do the person a favor. Thus, the familiar names used in this study did not have the same persuasive effect as the similar ones. It is possible that the participants viewed the similar names as so common relative to their own that they decreased their perceptions of similarity. This is somewhat akin to the false uniqueness effect (Goethals, Messick, & Allison, 1991) in which people believe and want to be viewed as distinctive rather than commonplace.

It is important to note that although the control names were intentionally created to be highly familiar, they may not be viewed as familiar as one's own name. As a result, one might argue that name familiarity remains a possible mediator. However, a comparison of the results of Studies 1 and 2 argues against this conclusion. Table 1 shows a strong correspondence in scores associated with the name-similar conditions in both studies. Furthermore, the data for the two control conditions are also very similar despite important differences in their construction. Although the common names in Study 2 may have been less familiar to participants than their own names, they were clearly more familiar than Kerry Stanlin. However, a post hoc analysis indicates that there is no significant difference between the mean ratings by condition (name similar or control) on any variable across the two studies ( $F < 1$  in all cases). Although caution should be exercised when making comparisons across studies, these experiments were conducted within a similar time frame and participants were drawn from the same participant population. Therefore, these results strongly argue against familiarity as the primary mediator.

Participants in Study 2 spent more time thinking about the scenario in name-similar than in name-familiar conditions and had nonsignificantly better recall of the information presented in former conditions. These data suggest that a similar name stimulated participants' attention to the content of the scenario, resulting in a more careful assessment of its impli-

cations. This may have led them to form more extreme favorable impressions of the character described and to be more willing to do a favor for the person.

To reiterate, Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence that name similarity can have a persuasive influence on participants' intention to respond to a person's request (viz., to do a favor). In the next two studies, I demonstrate that it can influence actual behavior as well.

### STUDY 3

#### Method

**Participants.** In this study, 100 students attending a variety of undergraduate psychology courses at a major urban university participated. Of those, 50 students were randomly assigned to receive a survey with a name-similar cover letter and 50 others were randomly assigned to receive a survey with a control cover letter.

**Materials.** The materials were an innocuous survey instrument that asked general opinions on matters related to campus activities and an accompanying cover letter. All materials were identical with the exception of the name and signature that appeared on the cover letter. The 50 participants who randomly received the name-similar packet had an attached cover letter signed with a name that was similar to their own. Creation of these names followed the procedure listed previously in Studies 1 and 2. The remaining 50 participants received a cover letter signed by one of the five members of the research team whom they were unlikely to know. In these cover letters, which were randomly assigned, the name was clearly printed at the bottom of the page and the person was identified as a Research Associate. An initial-type signature was also affixed.

**Design and procedure.** Each of the 100 participants in this study received either the name-similar packet or the control packet by U.S. mail. This approach overcame a number of potential problems associated with classroom administration or other delivery methods and increased the realism of the procedure. Names and addresses were retrieved from official university records as well as individual instructors' roll sheets. Participants were randomly assigned to either the name-similarity condition or control condition by means of a computer program. The cover letter requested that the recipients consider completing the survey and return same within 10 days. A return-address envelope was also included. At the conclusion of the study, all participants were provided with a detailed letter outlining the true nature of the study.

#### Results

The overall return rate for all mailed questionnaires (28%) was similar to that typically obtained when no follow-up reminder or secondary mailing is used (Miller, 1991). Four sur-

veys were returned for incorrect address; however, two were from the control condition and two were from the name-similar condition. Persons who received the survey with the name-similar cover letter were significantly more likely to return the questionnaire (38%;  $n = 19$ ) than those who received the control cover letter (20%;  $n = 10$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 4.00, p < .05$ . There were no return-rate differences with respect to gender or academic classification.

#### Discussion

The name-similar cover letters seemed to activate the name-similarity effect observed in Studies 1 and 2, resulting in an increased return rate among this group. The use of multiple nonsimilar (but common) names in the control condition did not reveal any significant influence. Of potentially greater importance, however, is the persuasive power that name similarity can have on eliciting overt behavior. In this case, individuals who completed the survey had to accomplish a series of actual overt actions. That is, they had to pick the packet up from the post office, open the envelope and assess its contents including the name-similar (or dissimilar) cover letter, decide if they wanted to take the time to complete the form, place it in the return mailer, and finally, take it to the local post office for return delivery. Clearly, this sequence of activities requires a much greater commitment than merely indicating a general preference or intention.

In Study 4, I extended the realism of this approach by requesting the completion of questionnaires from University professors rather than students. In addition, the contingency of the effects on participants' identification of name similarity as an influencing factor was examined.

### STUDY 4

#### Methods

**Participants.** In this study, 60 university professors from a major urban campus were sent a survey identical to that used in Study 3. The names of these faculty recipients were acquired from official university records. (To insure that knowledge of this study did not bias the results, the names of psychology department faculty were excluded.) Thirty members randomly received the name-similar packet and an equal number randomly received the control packet.

**Materials.** The survey packets were created in the same fashion as in Study 3 following the protocol established in Study 1 for the creation of the similar appearing names. In control conditions, 10 cover letters were signed by each of three research assistants and were randomly distributed. In addition, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to each participant who returned a survey. This follow-up letter thanked participants for their help and solicited their assistance in

making the survey procedure more efficient and productive in the future. In this context, participants were asked to indicate any reasons they considered when deciding to complete and return the survey. Font style, general appearance, and importance of the information were listed as possible examples, although the format was open ended.

*Design and procedure.* Thirty university professors were randomly selected to receive a name-similar survey packet described previously. An additional 30 professors randomly received a control survey packet also created in accordance with Study 3 procedures. The materials were sent via interoffice mail and included a return-address envelope. Those who returned the survey within the requested 10 days were sent the follow-up questionnaire. This was done in an effort to determine if those in the name-similar condition identified the name similarity of the requester as a reason or consideration for the return of the survey.

At the conclusion of the study, all participants were provided with detailed correspondence outlining the true nature of the study. The communication listed a number to call if there were any concerns or questions. No requests for additional information or inquiry were received.

## Results

The hypothesis was confirmed. Those faculty members were significantly more likely to return their survey if they received a name-similar cover letter (56%;  $n = 17$ ) than if they did not (30%;  $n = 9$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.34, p < .04$ . Follow-up questionnaires were sent to all of those who returned their surveys regardless of condition. There was no significant content variation in the responses provided. Analysis of the follow-up questionnaire, which was returned by 9 of the 17 participants in the name-similar condition, revealed that none of the participants who returned their survey indicated that the name similarity of the sender was a reason for their response.

## Discussion

The results of Study 4 confirm the conclusion that perceived name similarity can influence overt behavioral outcomes. In this real-world setting, university professors who received the cover letter signed with a name that was similar to their own completed and returned the survey in significantly greater numbers than those in the control group. As identified in Study 3, the level of commitment involved in this behavioral sequence far exceeded the mere expression of a particular preference.

Not surprisingly, none of the recipients who returned the survey indicated that similarity of name was involved in their behavioral decision to complete and return the survey. Bornstein and D'Agostino (1992) suggested that such effects are strongest when they are perceived without con-

scious awareness. Although it is possible that the name similarity was noticed, it was apparently not identified as a conscious consideration in complying with the request. These findings are consistent with the increasing body of literature that has suggested people frequently rely on cognitive shortcuts in decision making (Chaiken, 1980, 1987; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The failure of participants to mention name similarity as a basis for their decision must be evaluated with caution due to the obvious failings of human memory over the 2-week interval between completion of the questionnaire and the follow-up survey. Furthermore, participants may have consciously considered name similarity at the time they first decided to complete the survey but may have considered only more proximal reasons for their decisions when later asked about it.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This series of studies provided strong support for the name-similarity effect. In doing so, they demonstrated that something as seemingly insignificant as name similarity can have a persuasive influence on perceptions of liking, perceptions of similarity to self, and the expressed intention to engage in tangible behavior (viz., agreeing to do a favor). In addition, name similarity induced individuals to engage in an overt behavioral task. This finding extends the implications of previous research, which has often considered only general preferences for the first or the last letter in one's name.

Studies 1 and 2 not only provided evidence that name similarity can have a potent influence on perceptions, but indicated that the effect occurred independently of name familiarity. If general name familiarity were equally persuasive, it should have had an influence in the control condition of Study 2 in which the names were quite familiar. In fact, this influence was not evident. Moreover, the effects in these conditions did not differ from those observed in control conditions of Study 1 in which the name (Kerry Stanlin) was unfamiliar as well as dissimilar. In combination, these data provide a strong argument against familiarity as the primary mediator.

It is possible that the common names used in Study 2 were so general as to have limited persuasive appeal. For example, the name John Smith may be among the most frequent and familiar names; however, its very generality may adversely impact any potential influence. One might pay more attention to something as the result of seeing a name similar to oneself, but a name as common as John Smith may hardly capture one's attention. Names that are popular, familiar, and associated with well known individuals (e.g., George Bush, Donald Trump, or Mohammed Ali) may have resulted in much different findings.

However, Study 2 provided a suggestion as to a potential mediating factor in this name similarity process. Those who

were in the name-similar condition took significantly longer to complete and return their packet and were nonsignificantly better able to recall its contents. This suggests that the similarity of the character's name may have stimulated participants to attend more carefully to the material they read and led them to respond more favorably to it for this reason. Likewise, a name that combines familiarity, similarity, and celebrity (e.g., George Bush) may induce more careful processing.

The results found in Studies 3 and 4 could also reflect this influence. If name similarity heightens one's attention to the material or message received, this could explain why participants in the name-similar condition were more likely to return the positively oriented questionnaire. That is, the similarity of the name on the cover sheet induced the recipient to consider this request more carefully and therefore to be more willing to comply with it. Future research might examine the impact of name similarity on a less legitimate request. If name similarity induces one to more carefully scrutinize the request, a less appealing request may result in a reduced rate of compliance.

The finding that something as seemingly insignificant as name similarity can influence overt behavior is provocative. In contrast to previous research, participants in Studies 3 and 4 were asked to do much more than offer a general preference for a letter in the alphabet or a political candidate, and so forth. Rather, they were asked for their time and effort to read, review, complete, and return a multipage questionnaire. The impact of name similarity on the performance of this chain of behavioral activities is quite noteworthy.

This series of studies can have important implications when considering the tactics of influence practitioners. Imagine creating a marketing campaign to increase sales for a particular item in which potential consumers are sent letters outlining the virtues of the product signed by a person, real or fictional, similar to the recipient? Or what if a consumer were provided with testimonials from persons with similar-appearing names? Other research demonstrated the effects of name similarity on donations to a nonprofit organization (Garner, 2004a). That is, persons who were sent a request letter with a similar name attached were more likely to agree to donate than those who receive the standard solicitation letter.

Although the findings presented here are clearly intriguing, additional research must examine the conditions under which this influence approach will have its greatest effect as well as the potential limitations. Future research could also examine the implications of names that are similar appearing versus names that are phonetically similar or the potential effect of ethnically identifiable names on expressions of similarity and compliance. Particularly concerning are the latent implications of such tactics by less than scrupulous influence practitioners who may utilize such an approach to insidiously influence unsuspecting consumers. The full potency of the name similarity effect may become all the more salient in a world in which cognitive economizing and heuristic shortcuts are the norm. So I ask the question, What's in a name?

From the perspective of influence and compliance, maybe much more than originally believed.

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