Name Similarity Encourages Generosity
A Field Experiment in Email Personalization

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Introduction

• Names can attract attention1, and people tend to like and feel socially close to similar others2–3.
• However, concerns over privacy can limit the effectiveness of using names to persuade4, and mass-personalization can sometimes be ineffective5, 6.
• Can overtly matching a potential donor to a person in need by name lead to an increased charitable behavior?

In a randomized email field experiment with DonorsChoose.org (N = 30,297), donors who shared a surname with a teacher were more likely to open, click, donate, and donated more to the teacher’s classroom. Different-surname donors were also more generous when they shared a first-letter with the requesting teacher.

Method

• Preregistered yoked design
• Each teacher was matched with two same-surname donors
• Donors randomly assigned to condition
• Donor-teacher pairs in name-mismatch condition scrambled such that donor and teacher do not share a surname
• No deception, actual matches
• Participants received an email from DonorsChoose requesting funds for a project in the teacher’s classroom

Donor-teacher pairs in name-mismatch condition scrambled. N = 15,142.

Main Results

N = 30,297

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Name Match</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count Opened Email</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count Clicked Link</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count Made Donation</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Donation Amount</td>
<td>$0.09</td>
<td>$0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All comparisons significant at p < .01

Name Commonness

Do people with less common names react more favorably?
• No full surname-matches (exception: likelihood of clicking)
• Yes: name-letter matches on donation likelihood and donation amount

Conclusions

• Name-matching enhanced charitable behavior
• Robust when controlling for ethnicity, suggesting effects above-and-beyond in-group favoritism
• Small name-letter effect in a well-controlled real-world randomized setting7
• Suggestive evidence for two processes:
  • Attention
  • Enhancing feelings of social closeness

References


Working paper available on SSRN. Corresponding author: kurt.munz@stern.nyu.edu