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# A name alone is not enough: A reexamination of web-based personalization effect



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## ABSTRACT

Personalized information has become ubiquitous on the Internet. However, the conclusion on whether such information is always more effective than standardized information looks somewhat confusing in the literature. Some prior studies showed that a personalized message could generate more favorable outcomes than a standardized one, but others did not (sometimes with an almost identical study design). To provide a possible explanation why there existed such conflicting findings and conclusions in the personalization literature, the current study tested the influence of involvement on personalization in an advertising context. Through an experiment, it was found that the superiority of a personalized message over a standardized message was more salient when the message recipient was highly involved with the focal subject of the message than lowly involved.

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## 1. Introduction

We are entering an era of personalization as it is the “current online zeitgeist” (Li & Kalyanaraman, 2013, p. 273). The fundamental idea of this concept is to treat each message recipient as a unique entity and craft the message based on his or her characteristics and preferences (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). A personalized message is expected to be more memorable, more likeable, and more persuasive, than a non-personalized (standardized) message (Noar, Harrington, & Aldrich, 2009).

Although the effect of personalization has been examined in many prior studies across different domains, what seems confusing in the literature is whether a personalized message is always more effective than a standardized one. The research findings presented in prior studies point to very different, even opposite, conclusions. On the one hand, some research demonstrated the effectiveness of personalization (e.g., Beam & Kosicki, 2014; Ha & Janda, 2014; Heerwegh, Vanhove, Matthijs, & Loosveldt, 2005; Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006; Wogalter, Raciocot, Kalsher, & Simpson, 1994). On the other hand, other studies suggested that there was no significant difference between personalization and standardization in terms of persuasion effects (e.g., Li, 2016; Porter & Whitcomb,

2003). It is noteworthy that some of these studies were conducted in an almost identical fashion but they generated significantly different results (e.g., Heerwegh et al., 2005; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003). This confusion is also reflected in a meta-analysis (Noar, Benac, & Harris, 2007), which suggested that the overall effect size of personalization was only 0.074. As argued by Li (2016), researchers should pay more attention to the question of why the effect of personalization looks so inconsistent and unstable. What is the cause of this seemingly “random” personalization effect?

To address this research question, the current study adopts the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and tests the moderating effect of involvement on personalization in an online shopping and advertising context because personalization is widely believed to be a premier strategy in advertising (Rosen, 2012). It is argued that a simple personalization cue may not be sufficient to generate more favorable effects. Whether a personalized message will outperform a standardized message is contingent on how involved the message recipient is with the focal subject of the message.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical framework of personalization

The essence of personalization is to create a “match” between the message and the message recipient’s notion of “self”

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(Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). Because these types of messages tend to be generated and delivered online nowadays, personalization can be considered as a web-based phenomenon (Beam, 2014; Hanafizadeh, Behboudi, Ahadi, & Ghaderi Varkani, 2012). A person's "self" may be defined from many different perspectives, thus a "match" can be created in various ways such as linking the message to the message recipient's identity, values, and self-conception (Briñol & Petty, 2006). That is to say, a message can be personalized for an individual through several different approaches (Noar et al., 2009). Specifically, a personalized message can match the message recipient's unique characteristics such as name and address (Dijkstra, 2014; Li, 2016), tastes and beliefs such as news preferences and political ideologies (Beam, 2014; Li & Kalyanaraman, 2013), personality traits such as dominant/submissive and extroverted/introverted (Moon, 2002), and past behavior such as indoor temperature control (Abrahamse, Steg, Vlek, & Rothengatter, 2007). For example, when a message incorporates strong language consisting of assertions and commands, it may look personalized for an individual with a dominant personality (Moon, 2002). In contrast, the same information will look personalized for an individual with a submissive personality when it incorporates weak language consisting of questions and suggestions (Moon, 2002). For another example, a personalized message will suggest households who indicate setting their thermostat at 23 °C (73 °F) in the wintertime to lower it by a few degrees and explain how much energy they may save by doing so, but it will not make such a suggestion to households who indicate setting the thermostat at 18 °C (64 °F) because they are already saving energy (Abrahamse et al., 2007).

A matched message (a personalized message) tends to generate stronger persuasion effects than a mismatched message (a non-personalized message). This argument can be explained by one of the classic dual-process theories of persuasion—Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). According to HSM, people may take one or two modes – *systematic* processing and *heuristic* processing – to process a message, depending on different levels of cognitive ability (e.g., knowledge in the domain) and capacity (e.g., time constraint). In the case of *systematic* processing, people are likely to scrutinize the message in an analytical and comprehensive way and form their attitudes based on the actual content (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). On the other hand, in the case of *heuristic* processing, people make less cognitive effort to process the information and they tend to form their attitudes based on heuristic cues (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). The key difference between these two modes is that the same communication variable such as the message source may influence people's attitude-formation in very different ways. When people have enough cognitive ability and capacity, the communication variable will be scrutinized comprehensively. However, when the ability or capacity is low, only those judgement-relevant heuristic cues will be processed (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). In the day-to-day life, people are "economy-minded" (Todorov, Chaiken, & Henderson, 2002, p. 196), and they tend to process information with the least effort (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). In other words, *heuristic* processing that requires less cognitive effort usually outperforms *systematic* processing (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Todorov et al., 2002). People adopt *systematic* processing mode only when they have a strong motivation (Todorov et al., 2002). This reflects the *sufficiency principle* of HSM, which suggests that people will spend the minimum amount of cognitive effort to reach their goal of accuracy and confidence (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). To apply this reasoning to personalization, a message that matches the message recipient's characteristics may be more effective than a message that mismatches because matching serves as a judgement-relevant heuristic cue.

## 2.2. Contradictory findings of personalization effects

There exist many different ways to personalize a message for a person. In other words, there are multiple ways to create a match between a message and a person. The most straightforward way to personalize a message, also widely adopted by business communication professionals, is to incorporate the message recipient's name in the message since a person's name is a critical attribute of his or her self-identity (Yu & Cude, 2009). The rationale of such a personalization approach is based on the assumption that people prefer to see their names in a message rather than a generic term because they are "in love" with their names (the "name letter effect") (Nuttin, 1985). This "narcissistic" nature of human being was demonstrated in a classic psychological study that showed the letters of one's name were more attractive than other letters (Nuttin, 1985). In that study, research participants were exposed to the letters of their own names as well as other random letters. It was found that their attitudes toward the letters of their names were significantly more favorable than toward the random letters. It was also suggested that this preference occurred at a subconscious level because participants were unable to discover any name Gestalt in the presented stimulus letter lists.

If people were so "in love" with their names, would they respond favorably to personalized messages that contain their names? Unfortunately, the literature did not offer a clean and clear answer to this question because prior studies presented very different, or even opposite, results and conclusions. For example, in two similar studies that examined how personalization might improve web survey response rates (Heerwegh et al., 2005; Porter & Whitcomb, 2003), the research findings were quite different. In Heerwegh et al. (2005), a standardized email that said "Dear student" in the salutation was sent to a group of students and a personalized email that incorporated the message recipient's name in the salutation such as "Dear John Smith" was sent to another group of students, both inviting them for an online survey. The study results showed that the response rate generated by the personalized email was significantly higher than that generated by the standardized email. However, in Porter and Whitcomb (2003) where the effects of standardized emails with an impersonal salutation such as "Dear student" and an impersonal email address of the message sender such as "surveyresearch@institution.edu" and personalized emails with a personal salutation such as "Dear Jane" and a personal email address of the message sender such as "jsmith@institution.edu" were compared, no significant difference was discovered regarding the response rate.

Such contradictory conclusions on personalization can also be found in several other studies. On the one hand, some research showed superiority of personalization over standardization. For example, in Wogalter et al. (1994), research participants were asked to weigh, measure, and mix several "chemical substances" (they were actually water, cooking oil, and powdered soap combined with food coloring) in a laboratory. There were plastic gloves and face masks on a table along with other materials and equipment for people to use, and there was a warning sign suggesting them to use mask and gloves for the safety reason. Two types of warning signs were tested, with one being standardized ("CAUTION! IRRITANT Use mask and Gloves") and the other being personalized (replacing "CAUTION" with each participant's first name). It was found that the personalized warning sign had a greater alerting effect than the standardized one because a significantly higher percentage of participants exposed to the personalized sign wore mask and gloves. However, on the other hand, prior research also suggested that a personalized message with the message recipient's name did not outperform a standardized message. For example, participants were randomly exposed to one of the two versions of an advertising

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