

Essay 2

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First Impressions

Every businessperson knows that a good first impression is valuable, but mastering the subtlety can be challenging. Researchers at the University of Limerick, Ireland studied one such subtlety, the inclusion of an author's middle initial in an academic publication. Their 2014 paper discovered a causal relationship between the inclusion of a middle initial in an academic publication and the reader's evaluation of the publication. Using 85 Limerick undergraduates in randomized laboratory trials, they found that evaluations of the paper were almost a full point (out of 5) higher if the author's name included one or two middle initials.

The researchers proposed that we have been conditioned to see more formal titles in an academic setting, notably a middle initial. Therefore the mechanism by which a middle initial causes a higher evaluation is that people associate the middle initial to an established mental pattern matching formal publications. Patterns like this are useful at an individual level, for example any researcher who believes the thesis of this paper would be wise to include their middle initial on future publications. There are also business applications to this insight, especially in online advertising where people make a decision whether to click based on many poorly understood factors. Perhaps the inclusion of a middle initial in certain contexts could drive more clicks.

Further Study

The University of Limerick paper opens several possibilities for further exploration. They specifically note that there is no effect when the middle initial is included in writing about sports or other non-academic topics. Therefore it would be interesting to study those areas to determine what could impact people's perception of quality in the entertainment space. Of particular interest is online writing about entertainment, where there are far fewer institutions to help readers determine the reliability of an article.

Since the University of Limerick researchers already studied middle initials, my question revolves around the first name of the article's author. Since it is easy to publish an online article under any name, some outlets might be inclined to publish their writing with names that engender trust from their readers. The particular first names of interest will be those that peaked in popularity at various times in the United States (statistics are available from the Social Security Administration). Do older or younger sounding names cause the reader to trust an online article's contents?

Experiment Setup

In order to setup this experiment, a fake online blog would be needed with only a single article

designed to simulate the look and feel of typical online content. The article would need to present an opinion about sports, film, or music and would ideally be neutral in terms of language and tone. Critically the name of the author should be displayed predominantly, which is common practice in a small blog. At the bottom of the article would be buttons that allow the reader to rank the trustworthiness of the article on a numerical scale, which will be our outcome measurement. We might also wish to measure the time a user spends on the page before they vote, to ensure they actually read the article.

The site will be entirely static content with the exception of the voting buttons and the name of the blog. We will create 7 treatment groups, with each treatment group representing a decade from 1950 to 2010. The first name on the title of the blog will be a name that was (1) one of the 20 most popular names during a birth year in that decade and (2) peaked in popularity during that decade. For each decade a handful of names may fit the criteria and all will be used. When a new user visits the site, they will receive a web page with a randomly selected name from a randomly selected treatment group and their vote will be recorded.

It will likely be necessary to run a trial phase of this experiment to ensure the test site is operational and intuitive for the experiment subjects. The trial phase will not necessitate random sampling and can be simply friends and family of the researchers.

Experiment Subjects

In an ideal experiment, we make a random selection of our population of interest for each treatment group. In this case the population we are studying is people who live in the United States and would read an online article about entertainment. We could reach this population by running online ads, but there would be a couple of issues. First is just the cost of running search ads to direct random users to our page, but there are also concerns about non-response bias and reaching the entire population instead of just people who search for related terms.

A more practical experiment would require us to make some compromises. A possible source of readers for the article is a human task assignment system like Mechanical Turk, which would eliminate the non-response bias but would not fully cover our population. For budgetary reasons this might have to be close enough to our population in order to collect responses, although we will need to take care to ensure that readers are minimally from the US. Using a service like this makes the experiment execution fairly simple, as we just need to pay an appropriate number of people to read the article and record their responses. If a large enough number of responses can be collected, there is potential to re-run this experiment with different articles on different subjects.

Conclusion

The issue of trust in online publishing is of particular interest in the "fake news" era. Determining the subtle ways in which a platform can engender trust in its readers is a topic of concern for businesses and the public. If a causal link can show that certain names are more trustworthy in a particular domain, then we could expect online publishers to use that tactic to influence opinions

to a greater degree. Hopefully as we learn more about the psychology surrounding the way people interact with online content, we can develop better ways to identify and overcome our subtle biases.