

INFO 241: Project Description

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Abstract:

Does wearing university-branded merchandise promote social bonding between strangers on a college campus?

Social integration at large universities can be challenging, with many students feeling isolated despite being surrounded by peers. Previous research has shown that shared identifiers, such as school pride or common experiences, can foster a sense of belonging. We hypothesize that university-branded merchandise could act as a subtle social cue that promotes interaction and bonding between strangers. To test this, we conducted a field experiment in which student distributors handed out flyers promoting a club event on campus, with an associated QR code to measure sign-ups. The distributors were randomly assigned to wear university-branded, neutral non-branded, or rival university merchandise. We found that flyer acceptance and engagement, measured by the scan rate of the provided QR codes, were 20% higher when the distributor wore university-branded clothing, suggesting that shared identifiers like merchandise can enhance social bonding. These findings indicate that simple interventions, such as wearing school gear, may help mitigate feelings of isolation on campus and promote stronger social connections among students.

Theory, Concept under Investigation:

Previous research has shown that shared group identity can foster a sense of belonging and increase prosocial behavior, even when other demographic factors, such as ethnicity, differ.¹ This experiment is designed to test how university affiliation can create an in-group or shared group identity among strangers, which may influence engagement behaviors (i.e. recruitment to a club event). This experiment aims to test whether university affiliation can create an in-group identity among strangers, influencing engagement behaviors such as recruitment to a club event. Clothing, as a visual signal of in-group membership, may play a role in this process. For example, studies have shown that individuals dressed neatly received more donations than those dressed messily, highlighting the influence of appearance on behavior.² However, the effect of specific clothing types can vary by context, as seen in research showing no difference in donation amounts between people wearing Santa costumes and those in suits. This suggests that while clothing can influence social interactions, the meaning attached to the attire may be more important than appearance alone.

Treatment Variants:

Pairs of distributors will stand on Sproul Plaza and the Memorial Glade on UC Berkeley campus at various times during the day, distributing flyers with QR codes to students passing by. In the treatment condition, the group will wear highly visible UC Berkeley merchandise. In the control condition, they will either wear casual, non-branded college attire or highly visible Stanford (UC Berkeley's rival) merchandise.

¹ Levin et al., 2009

² Osbaldiston & De Boer, 2011

Mechanisms:

We hypothesize that wearing university merchandise enhances prosocial interactions among strangers on campus by signaling in-group membership. We will measure this effect by assessing how often individuals engage with our outreach efforts—not only by accepting flyers but also by scanning the QR codes provided. These indicators will serve as proxies for social bonding within the student community.

To explicitly test this mechanism, we included a control group dressed in neutral clothing to determine if their reception differs significantly from the treatment group wearing UC Berkeley merchandise. Additionally, we could explore the impact of attire unrelated to the university that still promotes a potential shared cause, such as clothing featuring a political slogan. This will allow us to assess whether the observed effects are specifically tied to university affiliation or if they extend to broader perceptions of in-group membership. If recruitment rates do not differ significantly between the university-branded group and the generic attire group, it would suggest that the mechanism driving social bonding is not solely linked to university merchandise. Instead, it may reflect a more general tendency toward cooperation based on perceived in-group status among students.

Experiment Design:

We will employ a between-subjects design without administering any pre- or post-treatment tests. Our experiment will take place at UC Berkeley on Tuesdays and Thursdays, which feature similar campus-wide class schedules, between 1 PM and 3 PM. Our group will be divided into pairs to hand out flyers promoting various club events of general interest to the student body. The treatment and control conditions will alternate every five minutes, starting with the control condition on Tuesday and the treatment condition on Thursday. We will update the QR code version on the flyers accordingly.

Once we collect our data, we will calculate the average number of flyers distributed per condition and the percentage of QR code scans relative to the total number of flyers given out. Before starting our field experiment, we will conduct a power analysis to determine the amount of data needed to demonstrate a statistically significant treatment effect in our analysis.

Recruitment:

Individuals who walk through the two main areas on campus—Sproul Plaza and Memorial Glade—and accept our flyers will be recruited for our experiment. At each location, two rotating members of our group will approach students with flyers, wearing either matching university-branded, non-branded, or rival-branded attire.

References:

- [1] Levin, S., Sinclair, S., Sidanius, J., & Van Laar, C. (2009). Ethnic and university identities across the college years: A common in-group identity perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(2), 287–306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2009.01601.x>
- [2] Osbaldiston, R., & De Boer, B. (2011). The effects of wearing a costume on charitable donations. *Psychological Reports*, 108(1), 167–168. <https://doi.org/10.2466/01.07.PR0.108.1.167-168>