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## It Is All in the Name: A Study of Consumers' Responses to Personalized Communication

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### ABSTRACT

Personalized communication is believed to be an effective persuasion strategy. However, few studies have examined the underlying processes responsible for its effects. This study investigates the role of perceived personalization as a mediating process. Three personalization strategies are compared: raising expectation, identification, and contextualization. The results confirm that perceived personalization mediates the effects of personalized advertising on attention, cognitive responses, and attitude toward the message. The increased attention caused by perceived personalization stimulates both positive and negative thoughts about the message. The findings imply that personalized advertisements have stronger effects when receivers are aware of the personalization elements.

### KEYWORDS

Personalization; advertising; perceived personalization; message processing

Personalization can be defined as a communication strategy that involves incorporating elements in a message that refer to each individual recipient and are based on the recipient's personal characteristics, such as name, gender, residence, occupation, and past behaviors (Baek and Morimoto 2011; Dijkstra and Ballast 2012; White, Zahay, Thorbjørnsen, and Shavitt 2008). Personalization has become one of the key ingredients of online marketing (Montgomery and Smith 2009). According to Jupiter Research (2007), 90% of regular commercial e-mail contains personalization. Personalization is also prevalent in banner advertising and advertising on social network sites. The reason behind this increasing use of personalization in advertising is the availability of consumers' information. Consumers share huge amounts of personal data, which marketers can use to make their offers and advertising personalized to a great extent.

With the increasing use of personalization, research on its effectiveness has also been growing (Sunikka and Bragge 2009). Some past studies have shown that personalization may be effective (Howard and Kerin 2004; Postma and Brokke 2001), whereas other studies showed it may be ineffective (Maslowska, van den Putte, and Smit 2011; Tsang, Ho, and Liang 2004; Yu and Cude 2009). We believe the reason why previous studies have produced mixed results may lie in a lack of attention to the underlying mechanism of personalization, with the majority of studies focusing on personalization's effectiveness but not its mechanisms (Dijkstra 2008). A few previous studies have recognized the importance of mediating processes, which could explain personalization effects, and examined several potential mediators, such as attention, cognitive response, and perceived personal relevance of the message (Dijkstra and Ballast

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Bas van den Putte (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is full professor of health communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam. His chair is sponsored by the Trimbos Institute, the national institute of mental health and addiction. Van den Putte is an expert on sociocognitive theories of health behavior and is an experienced researcher in the field of formative and evaluative studies on media campaigns and school interventions. His aim is to initiate and conduct research that increases theoretical and practical insight into the relationship between exposure to health interventions, social influences (especially interpersonal communication), and (determinants of) health behavior, which can be used by practitioners to increase the effectiveness of health interventions.

\*This research was conducted when the first author was working at the University of Amsterdam.

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2012; Dijkstra and De Vries 1999; Kramer, Spolter-Weisfeld, and Thakkar 2007).

We propose that another important mediating process may be constituted by perceived personalization. It has been suggested that personalization is effective because it makes the message personal (Dijkstra 2005). However, some of the previous studies have suggested a personalized message is not always perceived as such by the audience. This implies that actual personalization (personalization cues included in the message) and the personalization perceived by the audience of the message (whether the reader thinks or feels the message fits him or her) may be two different dimensions (e.g., Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998; De Keyser, Dens, and De Pelsmacker 2015; Kramer, Spolter-Weisfeld, and Thakkar 2007; Simonson 2005). However, to our knowledge, none of the previous studies have included perceived personalization as an explanatory mechanism of personalized advertising effectiveness and hence have not actually controlled for the level of personalization. This is surprising, considering that understanding what types of personalization are better at eliciting perceived personalization is very important for both researchers and marketers. Not only can it advance our understanding of the mechanism behind personalization's effectiveness and hence the discrepancies between the existing studies, but also it can help develop more effective personalization strategies and thus better advertising messages.

Personalization strategies may differ in their ability to trigger perceived personalization and thus lead to different results. Some previous studies have investigated the persuasive power of personalization strategies. However, most of them did so in the field of health communication, not advertising (e.g., Bull, Kreuter, and Scharff 1999; Dijkstra 2005). Different personalization strategies have mostly been used in combination and not separately. Hence, it is important to compare specific strategies in their impacts on processes and outcomes (Hawkins et al. 2008).

To fill the gaps in the literature, our study compares different personalization strategies and tests the role of perceived personalization as a mediator in the persuasion process. We include in our model three qualitatively different personalization strategies: raising expectation, identification, and contextualization, as well as a combination of the three. By creating a message containing all three strategies, we touch on the issue of degree of personalization and test whether more personalization means more persuasive power. Our approach also enables us to study the effect of perceived personalization as a mediator, as well as which strategy scores highest on perceived personalization. This is important if—as we predict—perceived personalization is responsible for personalization effects.

## Theoretical Framework

### Defining Personalization

A number of scholars have tried to define personalization, which has led to a wide range of definitions (Vesonen 2007). We recognize personalization as one of the ingredients of tailoring, next to content matching and feedback (for discussion, see Hawkins et al. 2008). In our use of the term *personalized communication* we follow the definition offered by Dijkstra and Ballast (2012): “Personalization refers to incorporating elements in a text that refer to the recipient” (p. 61). A personalized text may comprise such individual features as gender, age, favorite brand, or one's first name. The aim of personalization is to increase readers' attention or motivation to process messages by implying the text is specially directed at him or her (Hawkins et al. 2008). In personalized communication the factual content of the message does not change (as it does, for example, with customization or tailoring), but personally recognizable cues are incorporated (Dijkstra 2005; Hawkins et al. 2008). Thus, personalization individualizes a message on a superficial level by implying the message is individualized, while in fact only the cues are individualized. As such personalization creates the context of the message content (Dijkstra and Ballast 2012, p. 61). This focus on the context of the message, and not the message itself, differentiates personalization from targeting, segmentation, or other tailoring strategies.

Personalization is popular in advertising because it is believed to provide benefits to both consumers and companies (Vesonen 2007), such as deeper customer engagement, as well as increased brand awareness, customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, and customer retention (Ansari and Mela 2003; Chellappa and Sin 2005). However, recent literature has also mentioned drawbacks of personalization. For example, White, Zahay, Thorbjørnsen, and Shavitt (2008) showed that personalization led to negative effects, such as reactance, when it was too personal or the use of personalization was not justified. A type of personalization that is used most often is mentioning the recipient's name. However, very few studies have investigated whether this strategy alone is persuasive (Dijkstra 2005). Howard and Kerin (2004) and Webb, Simmons, and Brandon (2005) looked into this question, with mixed results. Therefore, it is important to study whether and how personalized advertising leads to positive or negative outcomes.

### Personalization Strategies

Personalization means something different to different marketers and scholars (Vesonen and Raulas 2006). In

our study, we focus on three of the most popular personalization strategies as described by Hawkins and colleagues (2008): raising expectation, identification, and contextualization.

### **Raising Expectation of Personalization**

The first strategy, raising expectation, includes statements promising a personalized offer, for example, “This offer is *just for you!* We cordially invite you to USC, the University Sports Center, where you can take care of both your body and mind.” Such statements are included in advertisements to evoke self-referencing (Bombe and Gierl 2012) and are believed to create positive expectations (Hawkins et al. 2008). Factually, neither the content of the message nor the product is personalized; only the advert claims that this is so. Nevertheless, the expectation may have an effect on recipients’ responses independent of message content (Hawkins et al. 2008). This is possible because such claims can trigger perceptions of personalization, initiating a cognitive process of self-referencing (Bombe and Gierl 2012), which can be defined as a cognitive processing strategy, which relates information in the message to an individual’s self (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995).

### **Identification**

The second strategy, identification, identifies the recipient by name, for example, “Dear John, We cordially invite you to USC, the University Sports Center, where you can take care of both your body and mind.” This strategy capitalizes on the name effect. The name effect entails that people respond positively toward their own name (Nuttin 1985), which may positively bias their evaluation of the message. People also tend to exhibit greater levels of attention and self-referencing when addressed by name (Cherry 1953; Howard and Kerin 2011), and self-referent encoding leads to deeper processing (Dijkstra 2008). Moreover, such salutations may evoke feelings of familiarity and closeness, presumably leading to a relationship between the sender and the recipient (Lee and LaRose 2011), which may attract attention and enhance more careful processing (Howard and Kerin 2004).

Although including one’s name in a persuasive message is a popular strategy, few data on its effects are available (Dijkstra 2008). For example, Howard and Kerin (2004) demonstrated the effectiveness of the “[First-name], Try this. It works!” technique on requesting a free sample of drain cleaner. Dijkstra (2005) showed that personalizing a standard text by incorporating the participant’s first name three times, the number of cigarettes smoked, the type of cigarettes, and the number of years smoked increases behavior change. In other studies, by

contrast, this type of personalization was not effective (e.g., Bull, Kreuter, and Scharff 1999). Webb, Simmons, and Brandon (2005) showed that saying the information was prepared for [recipient’s name] and stating that the information is based on the information provided by the recipient was no more effective than standard information only.

### **Contextualization**

The last personalization strategy is contextualization. Contextualization entails framing a message in a context meaningful to the recipient with the use of contextual variables—as it is with other personalization strategies—but without changing the content of the message. A range of such variables is used to contextualize a message, for example, information about demographics, preferences, culture, and so forth. Contextualized messages often include pictures presenting people of the same gender, age, and ethnicity as the recipient. For example, one may consider the following specifics about the university, student status, and area of study to be contextual cues: “Dear [university name] student, We cordially invite you, as a [student of communication sciences], to USC, the University Sports Center, where you can take care of both your body and mind.” Contextualization refers to social identities, which are derived primarily from group memberships (Brown 2000). Hence, it is expected to attract attention and increase the motivation to process the message (Hawkins et al. 2008).

Previous research on advertising has shown that addressing consumers based on their social identities leads to enhanced persuasion by evoking an inference of similarity between the message and its recipient (Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier 2000; Reed 2004). Also, matching the message to some characteristics of the viewer, for example, using ads presenting models of the same ethnicity as the viewer, can increase self-referencing and processing of the message (Kreuter, Strecher, and Glassman 1999; Martin, Lee, and Yang 2004; Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2009).

### **How Personalization Works**

Although the majority of previous research has focused on the effectiveness of personalization and not its mechanism (Dijkstra 2008), some ideas about how personalization might work have been proposed (Hawkins et al. 2008). As stated by hierarchical models of persuasion, a sequence of steps is needed to effectively influence the receiver (Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2009). The effectiveness of a personalized message depends on its ability to influence intervening steps between exposure and behavior, such as attention, cognitive processing, attitude

toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, and behavioral intention (McGuire 2013). Personalized messages are believed to attract attention, increase processing, and exert persuasive effects by being recognized as “for me” and evoking the feeling of “me-ness” (Hawkins et al. 2008; Kalyanaraman and Sundar 2006; Petty, Wheeler, and Bizer 1999). Hence, perceived personalization (i.e., the feeling of “me-ness”) is necessary for effective personalized advertisements (Baek and Morimoto 2011).

We define perceived personalization as a recognition that the message is personalized for the individual. Hence, the recipient of the message sees that the information was tailored to his or her personal profile (see De Keyser, Dens, and De Pelsmacker 2015). As such, perceived personalization is closely related to perceived relevance but is not the same. Perceived relevance means that the information in the message was relevant or useful (De Keyser, Dens, and De Pelsmacker 2015). The content of the message does not need to be relevant to a person in order to be recognized as being personalized. In a similar vein, a message perceived as personal does not have to be involving. Involvement is a motivational state (Mittal 1989). If someone recognizes a message as addressing him or her personally, it does not mean that the message will activate motivations. To summarize, perceived personalization means noticing that the message has been personalized, but it does not necessarily mean that the message is perceived as being relevant or involving. However, both perceived relevance and involvement may be results of perceived personalization.

The three personalization strategies under study are expected to work by eliciting perceived personalization and triggering self-referencing. Because the strategies are qualitatively different and vary in the used cues, we can only speculate which strategy is most effective. It is plausible that identification strategy has the most positive effect because, as previously discussed, a person’s name is a very strong and easily recognizable cue. For raising expectation to be effective, recipients need to believe the claim it contains is true; while in case of contextualization, recipients need to notice personal cues in the text and identify with them. A message combining all three strategies may be very effective in evoking perceived personalization due to the additive effect. Therefore, we propose hypothesis 1:

**H1:** Four personalized messages will elicit perceived personalization, with the message combining all three strategies having the strongest effect, followed by the messages based on identification, contextualization, and raising expectation strategies, respectively.

Further, we propose that the perception of being personally addressed (i.e., perceived personalization)

attracts more attention. Self-referent cues, when perceived as such, are more likely to attract attention. For example, using second-person instead of third-person pronouns in a message has been shown to increase personal involvement and processing of a message (Burnkrant and Unnava 1989). Moreover, individuals have been shown to pay longer and more attention to personalized advertisements (Bang and Wojdyski 2016). Hence, we offer hypothesis 2:

**H2:** Perceived personalization triggers more attention.

Increased attention paid to the message evokes greater cognitive responses (i.e., more relevant thoughts). These thoughts can be either positive or negative. Although increased processing may lead to increased counterarguing (Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981), this should not be the case when a personalized message is being processed, because individuals are in a self-referencing mode. Hence, we can expect more positive thoughts about the message to be produced. Thus we propose hypothesis 3:

**H3:** Attention leads to deeper processing (i.e., more thoughts), with more positive than negative thoughts being produced.

According to cognitive response theory, individuals’ attitudes are influenced by their cognitive responses to the message that is thoughts about the message (Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2009). Hence, in accordance with previous studies, negative thoughts evoked by the message are expected to lead to less persuasion and positive thoughts are expected to lead to more persuasion (Petty, Briñol, and Priester 2009), as noted in hypothesis 4:

**H4:** Positive (negative) thoughts about the message increase (diminish) attitude toward the message.

Increased cognitive processing under self-reference has been shown to lead to more positive attitudes due to positivity bias related to the self (Burnkrant and Unnava 1995). Hence, we propose hypothesis 5:

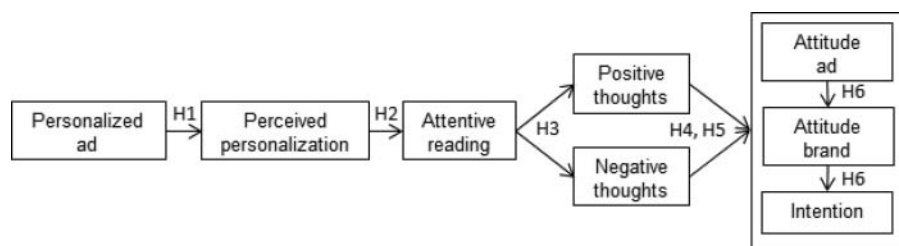
**H5:** The total effect of processing on attitude toward the message is positive.

Finally, in accordance with past literature, attitude toward the message leads to attitude toward the brand and intention. Thus, hypothesis 6 states:

**H6:** Positive attitude toward the message enhances intention via attitude toward the brand.

We summarize our hypotheses in [Figure 1](#).





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of personalization mechanism.

## Method

### Materials

Five different versions of a message that advertised membership of the University Sports Center (USC), which is an existing organization, were created based on an existing e-mail newsletter. The general content of the messages was the same in all conditions: Messages included information on sports, rates, and USC location. Also, the graphic elements of the newsletters, such as logo, colors, and fonts, were identical. The five versions of the newsletter corresponded to the different strategies: generic (no personalization), raising expectation, identification, contextualization, and a combination of the three personalization strategies. Besides the general content informing the recipients about the existence of the USC, its location, and the sports it offers (identical to the generic condition), the personalization conditions contained strategy-specific cues. In the raising expectation condition, the statement: “This message is just for you!” was added. In the identification condition, the participant’s name was mentioned three times in three different sections of the message: at the beginning (e.g., “Dear Anne”), in the middle, and at the end. In the contextualization condition, pictures adapted to the receiver’s gender and cues about being a student were used (e.g., “We invite you as a Communication Science student”). In the combined condition, all three personalization strategies were used (see the appendix for an example). The materials were shown and discussed with members of the target group (i.e., students) in a focus group ( $N = 10$ ). Based on their reactions the messages were adjusted and pretested among students ( $N = 64$ ), who were asked to express to what extent they felt personally addressed. Participants in the generic condition felt moderately personally addressed ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ), followed by the raising expectation ( $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), contextualization ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ), combined ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), and identification condition ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ).

### Participants and Procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment. Participants ( $N = 285$ , 73% women,  $M_{age} = 19.64$  years,  $SD = 2.14$ ) were undergraduates and members of a student survey panel at a Dutch university. They were not members of USC, the advertised organization, but potential customers. Participants in our study were randomly assigned to one of five conditions: generic ( $n = 60$ ), raising expectation ( $n = 59$ ), identification ( $n = 64$ ), contextualization ( $n = 39$ ), and combined ( $n = 63$ ). Participants received a link to an online experiment. First, they were asked several general questions about their age, gender, name, and so on. Next, they performed a filler task. Upon finishing this task, they were randomly exposed to one of the five versions of the message. Finally, they completed the questionnaire.

### Measures

All items in our questionnaire were measured on Likert-type scales from 1 (*Totally disagree*) to 5 (*Totally agree*). Perceived personalization was measured with four items ( $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = .91$ ): “Did you have a feeling that you were addressed personally in the newsletter?”; “Did you notice personal information in the newsletter?”; “Was the newsletter targeted at you?”; and “Could you recognize yourself in the group the newsletter was targeted at?” Attentive reading was measured with one question: “How thoroughly did you read the newsletter?” with four possible answers: *Not at all*, *Only just scanned it*, *Read it partially*, and *Read it carefully*. We treated it as a continuous variable measured on a 4-point scale ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = .81$ ). Cognitive responses were measured following the guidelines of Cacioppo and Petty (1981). Participants were asked to write down all they had been thinking about while reading the message. The thought-listing protocols were coded by two independent judges who received a coding manual and were trained in the procedure. The frequencies of positive ( $M = .44$ ,  $SD =$

.65) and negative ( $M = .33$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) thoughts about the message and the advertised organization were coded. We decided not to combine positive and negative thoughts into one measure to create simple difference scores or ratios, but to keep positive and negative thoughts as two separate measures as such combined measures ignore psychological states underlying assessments of the positive and negative significance of a stimulus (for discussion, see Cacioppo, von Hippel, and Ernst 1997). We established rater reliability using the intraclass correlation coefficient ( $\alpha_{\text{positive}} = .70$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{negative}} = .75$ ) because each subject was rated by the same rater, but our data were not nominal. After coding was completed, we resolved discrepancies between the judges. Attitude toward the message was assessed on a 10-item semantic differential scale based on existing scales (Batra and Ahtola 1990; Megehee 2009) and included self-derived items relevant to personalization ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .77$ ): *Unattractive–Attractive*, *Unimportant–Important*, *Irrelevant–Relevant*, *Annoying–Pleasing*, *Dull–Interesting*, *Boring–Exciting*, *Unpleasant–Pleasant*, *Not for me–For me*, *Irritating–Pleasing*, and *Obtrusive–Unobtrusive*. Attitude toward USC was measured on a five-item semantic differential scale based on existing attitude scales ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = .73$ ): *Unattractive–Attractive*, *Unpleasant–Pleasant*, *Bad–Good*, *Not fun–Fun*, and *Bad quality–Good quality*. Intention was measured on a three-item scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ): “How probable are you to contact USC?”; “How probable are you to join USC?”; and “Are you going to tell others about USC?”

## Results

We used AMOS 19 to test the hypothesized model of personalization strategies effectiveness, as shown in Figure 1. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics by condition. To investigate the pattern of relations between the variables in the model, zero-order correlations between all dependent variables were computed (Table 2).

Because the personalization condition was a categorical variable with five categories, four dummy-coded variables were included as independent variables in the tested model. To assess model fit, three fit indices were used: chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and comparative fit index (CFI). A good model fit would be supported by an insignificant  $\chi^2$  at a 0.05 threshold, a RMSEA value of .05 or less with  $p$ -close higher than .05 and a CFI value of .95 or more (Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen 2008). CFI values between .90 and .95 and RMSEA values between .05 and .08 are acceptable though (Byrne 2001). Because  $\chi^2$

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics by personalization condition.

Statistics		M	SD	Min	Max
Perceived personalization	Generic	2.88	0.80	1.00	5.00
	Raising expectation	2.96	0.86	1.00	5.00
	Identification	3.41	0.78	1.50	4.75
	Contextualization	3.06	0.91	1.25	4.75
	Combined	3.77	0.89	1.00	5.00
Attentive reading	Generic	2.45	0.65	1.00	4.00
	Raising expectation	2.39	0.79	1.00	4.00
	Identification	2.50	0.85	1.00	4.00
	Contextualization	2.44	0.79	1.00	4.00
	Combined	2.56	0.93	1.00	4.00
Attitude ad	Generic	3.25	0.70	1.00	4.90
	Raising expectation	3.14	0.75	1.00	5.00
	Identification	3.05	0.77	1.20	4.30
	Contextualization	3.24	0.76	1.50	4.70
	Combined	3.25	0.88	1.00	5.00
Attitude brand	Generic	3.61	0.66	1.00	5.00
	Raising expectation	3.63	0.74	1.40	5.00
	Identification	3.64	0.72	1.20	5.00
	Contextualization	3.59	0.72	2.00	5.00
	Combined	3.70	0.79	1.00	5.00
Intention	Generic	2.73	1.23	1.00	5.00
	Raising expectation	2.39	1.06	1.00	4.67
	Identification	2.67	1.08	1.00	4.67
	Contextualization	2.90	1.02	1.00	4.67
	Combined	2.64	1.10	1.00	5.00
Positive thoughts	Generic	0.50	0.66	0.00	3.00
	Raising expectation	0.45	0.73	0.00	3.00
	Identification	0.43	0.65	0.00	3.00
	Contextualization	0.36	0.70	0.00	3.00
	Combined	0.43	0.55	0.00	2.00
Negative thoughts	Generic	0.24	0.47	0.00	2.00
	Raising expectation	0.30	0.85	0.00	6.00
	Identification	0.57	0.77	0.00	3.00
	Contextualization	0.24	0.51	0.00	2.00
	Combined	0.26	0.44	0.00	1.50

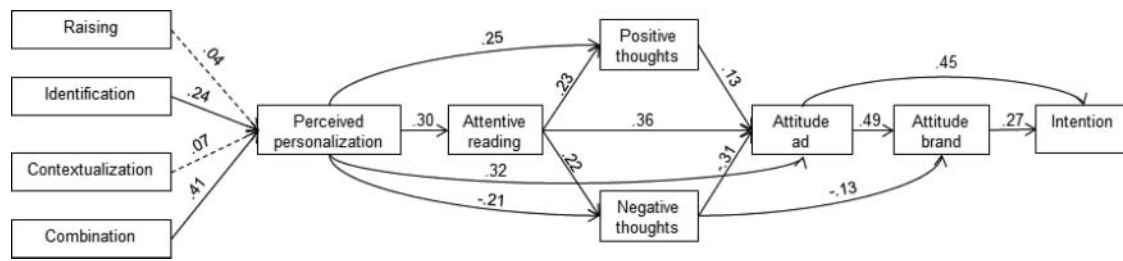
is characterized by a number of limitations, such as sensitivity to sample size and deviations from normality, we especially focused on CFI and RMSEA.

The hypothesized model as presented in Figure 1 did not fit the data well,  $\chi^2$  (38,  $N = 285$ ) = 271.927,  $p = .000$ ; RMSEA = .147 with  $p$ -close = .000; CFI = .69. Figure 1 includes fully mediated relationships only. However, the modification indices suggested that several relationships between variables were only partially mediated. Because the relations were theoretically plausible, we decided to include them in the model. After adjusting the model accordingly (Figure 2), the model fit the data well,

**Table 2.** Zero-order correlations for all dependent variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perceived personalization	—					
2. Attention	.303***	—				
3. Positive thoughts	.320**	.306**	—			
4. Negative thoughts	-.144*	.160*	.013	—		
5. Attitude message	.518***	.448***	.340**	-.299**	—	
6. Attitude brand	.358***	.229***	.188*	-.280**	.527***	—
7. Intention	.379***	.275***	.221**	-.270**	.594***	.506***

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



**Figure 2.** Adjusted model of personalization mechanism. Coefficients represent standardized beta weights.

$\chi^2(32, N = 285) = 59.736, p = .002$ ; RMSEA = .055 with  $p$ -close = .323; CFI = .96. The analysis revealed that compared with the generic condition, two personalization conditions had an effect, namely the identification strategy and the combined strategy. Both conditions increased perceived personalization. To answer the question which condition had a stronger effect on perceived personalization (hypothesis 1), we estimated 95th bias-corrected<sup>percentile</sup> significance of the difference between the two standardized coefficients with AMOS. The results showed a significant difference (Est. =  $-.17$ , SE =  $.07$ , Lower CI =  $-.307$ , Upper CI =  $-.033$ ,  $p = .016$ ), proving that the effect of the combined condition ( $\beta = .41$ ) was significantly stronger than that of the identification condition ( $\beta = .24$ ). These results partially support hypothesis 1.

The results also revealed that the identification and combined strategies led to further persuasion effects. Perceived personalization increased recipients' attention, which supports hypothesis 2. It also influenced cognitive responses: It increased the number of positive thoughts and decreased the number of negative thoughts. In addition, perceived personalization had a positive effect on attitude toward the message. Furthermore, our model showed that increased attention had a positive effect on

attitude toward the message and triggered more processing as well, leading to both more positive and more negative thoughts (partially supporting hypothesis 3). Consequently, in line with hypothesis 4, positive thoughts evoked a more positive attitude toward the message, and negative thoughts led to more negative attitude toward both the message and the brand. To answer hypothesis 5, we estimated the total effect of attention on attitude toward the message. In line with the hypothesis, it was positive (Est. =  $.32$ , SE =  $.05$ , Lower CI =  $.214$ , Upper CI =  $.420$ ,  $p = .001$ ). Finally, we observed that attitude toward the message positively affected intention through brand attitude, thus supporting hypothesis 6. All unstandardized paths' coefficients are shown in Table 3.

Because perceived personalization can have both a positive and negative effect on attitude toward the message depending on the cognitive responses, we tested the total effect of perceived personalization on attitude toward the message with bootstrapping (2,000 samples with 95th bias-corrected<sup>percentile</sup> confidence intervals), which showed that the effect was positive and significant (Est. =  $.52$ , SE =  $.05$ , Lower CI =  $.417$ , Upper CI =  $.613$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

Finally, we wanted to establish what the total effect of personalization conditions on attitude toward the

**Table 3.** Path coefficients.

			Est.	SE	C.R.	<i>p</i>
Perceived personalization	←	Raising expectation	.083	.154	.538	.591
Perceived personalization	←	Identification	.527	.151	3.504	***
Perceived personalization	←	Contextualization	.176	.172	1.023	.306
Perceived personalization	←	Combined	.895	.151	5.923	***
Attention	←	Perceived personalization	.270	.050	5.357	***
Positive thoughts	←	Attention	.186	.046	4.010	***
Negative thoughts	←	Attention	.179	.048	3.710	***
Positive thoughts	←	Perceived personalization	.181	.041	3.370	***
Negative thoughts	←	Perceived personalization	-.151	.043	-3.511	***
Attitude message	←	Attention	.345	.046	6.725	***
Attitude message	←	Perceived personalization	.276	.041	7.517	***
Attitude message	←	Positive thoughts	.155	.056	2.780	**
Attitude message	←	Negative thoughts	-.374	.054	-6.953	***
Attitude brand	←	Negative thoughts	-.150	.059	-2.561	*
Attitude brand	←	Attitude message	.457	.049	9.327	***
Intention	←	Attitude brand	.408	.082	4.956	***
Intention	←	Attitude message	.651	.077	8.419	***

Note. Path coefficients are unstandardized regression weights.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



message was. We found that the effects of both the identification (Est. = .13, SE = .03, Lower CI = .062, Upper CI = .199,  $p = .001$ ) and combined (Est. = .40, SE = .04, Lower CI = .145, Upper CI = .300,  $p < .001$ ) strategies were positive and significant, while the effects of the raising expectation and contextualization conditions were nonsignificant ( $p = .584$  and  $p = .295$ , respectively).

## Discussion

Personalization is believed to be an effective marketing strategy, but the results of past studies are inconclusive, showing both positive and negative outcomes. To understand the discrepancy in empirical results it may help to identify the mechanism underlying personalization. The aim of our study was to expand our knowledge of personalized advertising by examining its working mechanism and the effects of different strategies. Hence, we developed and tested a model explaining how personalization may affect message receivers' reactions.

We expected that the four personalized messages would elicit perceived personalization, with the message combining all three strategies having the strongest effect, followed by the identification, contextualization, and raising expectation strategies. The results partially supported our hypothesis: Only the combined and identification strategies triggered perceived personalization. Further, we hypothesized that perceived personalization would trigger more attention, which would lead to deeper processing (i.e., more thoughts), with more positive than negative thoughts being produced. Indeed, perceived personalization increased participants' attention, which had a positive effect on attitude toward the message and triggered more positive and negative thoughts. As expected, positive and negative thoughts about the message respectively increased and diminished attitude toward the message, and the total effect of processing on attitude toward the message was positive. Finally, positive attitude toward the message was shown to enhance intention via attitude toward the brand.

Our study shows that personalized advertising works via perceived personalization, attention, and cognitive responses. It also indicates that whether personalized advertising works depends on the strategy used. Significant paths were found only for messages including the recipient's name, in the identification and combined strategies. It has been shown that one's name is at the core of one's self-schema (Dijkstra 2008) and is processed even in an inattention situation (Mack and Rock 1998). Therefore, when people notice their names, they recognize that a message is personalized, pay more attention to both the name and the message, and produce

more positive thoughts and less negative thoughts. This is in line with previous research in other disciplines, showing that using self-referent cues increases positively biased processing of a message (Burnkrant and Unnava 1989). In our study, perceived personalization also had a direct positive effect on attitude toward the message. The reason for this effect may be that self-referencing activates the positive affect associated with the self, which gets transferred to the ad, leading to a more positive attitude toward it (Debevec and Iyer 1988; Debevec and Romeo 1992).

As stated, the raising expectation strategy did not have any effect. This finding is in line with the study of Bombe and Gierl (2012), who found such statements not to affect attitudes in case of favorable brands or in combination with strong arguments. They also showed that these claims can even impair attitudes in cases of unfavorable brands or in combinations with weak arguments. It is possible that the claim "this message is just for you" simply was not believable. Such statements have been often used in promotional e-mails and on shopping websites. Thus, individuals may know that such offers are in fact not especially made for them. According to the persuasion knowledge model of Friestad and Wright (1994), consumers have knowledge about different strategies used by advertisers. When they see a "for you" statement, they might recognize it as a persuasion strategy, which might activate skepticism toward the message and disbelief of the claim.

Considering the lack of effect of the contextualization strategy, it might be that the characteristics used for personalization may have not been distinctive enough to activate self-referencing. According to Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier (2000), the chances that the identification process will be activated depend on how rare and how personally important the trait is. When the trait belongs to self-defining characteristics and is numerically rare, the chances of influencing the recipient are higher than when the trait is common and less central to the self (Brumbaugh 2009). In our study, we used basic demographic information, such as gender, field of study, and university. This kind of contextualizing may not have been sufficiently distinctive and/or central to the students' self. Hence, it would be interesting to examine which personal and in-group characteristics are strong enough to activate self-referencing.

Further, we showed that perceived personalization triggered by the identification and combined strategies stimulates attention to the message, positive thoughts, and attitude toward the message. It also diminishes the number of negative thoughts. Although we expected a full mediation, the additional direct effect of perceived personalization on both positive and negative thoughts

and attitude toward the message is theoretically plausible. These effects show that recognizing the message as personalized, providing the feeling of “me-ness,” can trigger message processing and enhance attitude toward the message. This mechanism should be further explored in future research. Also, perceived personalization should be considered by researchers when creating personalization conditions.

Increased attention leads to more processing of the ad, which in turn affects attitudes. We showed that this effect is twofold. On one hand, attention paid to a personalized ad may trigger more positive thoughts, which leads to a more positive attitude toward the message. On the other hand, in contrast to the effect of perceived personalization, attentive reading of a personalized message may also evoke more negative thoughts, leading to less favorable attitude toward the message. Thus, attention alone increases both positive and negative thoughts. This shows that increased processing can go two ways: Besides positive thoughts about the message, it may also lead to increased counterarguing (Petty, Ostrom, and Brock 1981), irritation (Aaker and Bruzzone 1985), and inferences of a persuasion attempt (Campbell, 1995), which can lower advertising effectiveness (Campbell 1995). In our study, the effect of positive thoughts on attitude toward the message was smaller than the effect of negative thoughts. This stronger effect of negative thoughts can be explained by the negativity effect, so a greater impact of negative than positive evaluations on a subject (Peeters and Czapinski 1990). Negative information has a stronger effect because it is weighted more heavily.

Summarizing all effects, perceived personalization has positive direct effects (i.e., more positive and less negative thoughts), but the effect on cognitive responses via attention is mixed (i.e., both more positive and negative thoughts). Furthermore, the effect of negative thoughts on attitude toward the message and attitude toward the brand is larger than the effect of positive thoughts. How does this balance out? Even though attention stimulates both positive and negative thoughts, the total effect of perceived personalization, and consequently exposure to a personalized message, is positive. This emphasizes the role of perceived personalization as a personalization mechanism.

## Implications

Findings from this study have some useful implications. First, they show that perceived personalization should be considered while discussing the effects of personalized communication strategies. Personalizing advertising by including the recipient's name may lead to both

positively and negatively valenced cognitive responses. Therefore, more research is needed on when a personalized message is perceived as such and when it has the ability to evoke positive versus negative cognitive responses.

Second, concerning raising expectation, we would think that this strategy may not be worth employing, at least not on its own. In our case it did not lead to any effects, and in the study of Bombe and Gierl (2012) it even undermined consumers' attitudes. It is possible that consumers do not believe raising expectation claims. However, consumers are not a homogenous group and may differ with respect to perceived trustworthiness or believability of such claims. Future studies should investigate if there are types of communication or consumers for whom this strategy may be effective and under which conditions that could be the case.

Third, with regard to contextualization, it is plausible our chosen contextualization cues were not personally relevant enough for our target group. Hence, the variables we used to manipulate the message influenced the nonsignificant results. Thus, we suggest, if one wants to use contextualization, it should be based on preassessed personal and social identities, such as a social role the recipient strongly identifies with, and not simple demographics, such as gender or occupation.

Finally, our method (i.e., a controlled experiment) may be partially responsible for the nonsignificant results because participants could have guessed the aim of the study. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of personalization in a more natural setting. Correspondingly, different strategies may trigger different aspects of perceived personalization. Hence, more specific measures per strategy should be developed. In addition, different products may be more suitable for personalization. For example, personalization in messages advertising identity- and status-related products may work better. Hence, different products should be studied.

Currently, personalization is a very popular and broadly used marketing strategy. Our study shows that personalized messages may only be more persuasive than no personalization when they are perceived as such and trigger positive thoughts. Our results imply this is most likely when the recipient's name is included in the message.

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## Appendix

Following is an example of a message (combined condition) used in the experiment.

Combined (female)



**Sporten bij de USC**

Hallo Anne!  
Dit bericht is speciaal voor jou.

Wij nodigen je, als Communicatiewetenschap student, van harte uit bij USC, het sportcentrum van de UvA waar zowel lichaam als geest kan worden verzorgd.

Het maakt niet uit wat je doet in je leven of hoe sportief je bent, bij USC is altijd iets te vinden!

- meer dan 70 sporten (bv. tennis, yoga, groep fitness, volleybal en hockey)
- vriendelijke en professionele service
- veel leuke UvA studenten
- kortingen en speciale aanbiedingen voor UvA studenten
- sociale evenementen
- vele sportverenigingen voor medestudenten
- goedkoper dan andere sportcentra (bijvoorbeeld drie maanden fitness of groepslessen voor 42 euro)

Je kunt ons vinden in het centrum, vlak bij het Bushuis en aan de rand van Amsterdam.

Kom, we zien jou, als CW student graag bij het UvA Sport Centrum!

Met vriendelijke groet,  
Pauline Broersma, Sportbale USC

PS Anne, wie contact met ons?

De Boelelaan 46  
1082 LR Amsterdam  
tel (020) 301 35 35  
fax (020) 301 35 90  
[usc@usc.uva.nl](mailto:usc@usc.uva.nl)

Hi Anne!

This message is just for you!

We invite you, as a communication sciences student, to join USC, a UvA sport centre .

→ More than 70 sports, e.g., tennis, yoga, group fitness, volleyball and hockey.

→ Other nice students from the UvA

→ Special offers for UvA students

→ Student sport organizations

→ Close to the Bushuis (Communication Sciences building)

Anne, we would be happy to see you, a CW (Communication Sciences) student, in USC!

Anne, would you like to contact us?