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Laura Pelletier
Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Laura Pelletier

Minnesota State University

Professor Sandmann

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Laura Pelletier
Minnesota State University

This study explores the idea that email recipients use the email username of the sender as a mediated cue to make basic assumptions of the identity of the sender. For this study 215 participants completed self-report surveys asking their perceptions of a fictional work group member including sex, age, race, and work productivity. Most participants were able to create a basic identity of their fictitious group member based solely on their email username.

In today's world of modern technology, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has become a more common means of communication. CMC is not only used in addition to existing forms of communication, but also as a replacement for more traditional forms of communication. This means that perceptions about other people with respect to things like trustworthiness, capabilities, and character, are increasingly based on online interactions. In the case of email, the availability of personal information about the communication partners is somewhat restricted and the exchange of social cues is limited (Martin & Postmes, 2003).

One of the advantages of CMC, and of email in particular, is the capacity for it to be a socially "blind" medium. On the Internet, no one knows whether you are white or black, male or female, rich or poor. Yet, despite its potential as a social equalizer, email

can have the very opposite effect. The more ambiguous the information, the more likely it is to be shaped by one's stereotypes or expectancies. Inaccuracies, whether derived from stereotypes, erroneous first impressions, or negative preconceptions, can cause information to be interpreted in a manner consistent with those expectancies, thereby perpetuating the expectancies (Epley & Kruger, 2005). Many decisions in our everyday lives are based on judgments arising from minimal interactions. In turn others judge us as potential colleagues, guides, or traveling companions on the basis of superficial interactions or even distant visual and auditory perceptions (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995). In face-to-face conversation, partners develop initial impressions rapidly based on nonverbal characteristics such as physical appearance and vocal qualities, when such cues are available. As some "cues-filtered-out" authors point out, such cues are not apparent in CMC. However, linguistically borne cues are highly capable of conveying personality and attitude characteristics. While the absence of nonverbal cues should dampen impression development, language cues may compensate. By evaluating our language choices, others make attributions about social and professional status, background and education, and even the intent of communication (Walther, 1993).

One of the most common online identity markers is the email address. In many cases the identifying username (the information before the @ symbol) is created by the user. Email usernames can range from the individual's name or part thereof to fanciful "nicknames" created by the user. Email usernames may have no literal content at all, and may merely consist of a series of random numbers and letters. Some email usernames may be assigned, such as those from schools or through a user's work place, but many

others names associated with free email services are largely chosen by the user. This

gives the user the opportunity to create a username that is unique to their individual

identity or personality and gives them a form of impression management online

(Markman & Scott, 2005). This study is based on an earlier study done by Heisler and

Crabil (2006) and attempts to identify how an email recipient perceives the identity and

character of the email sender based solely on the username.

Hypothesis

H1: Study participants will utilize email usernames as a source of information about the sender of the message.

H2: Study participants will provide descriptive information for creative email usernames than for plain usernames.

H3: Study participants will view creative email usernames as having been chosen by senders more often than plain usernames. Conversely, plain usernames will be identified as having been assigned to the senders more often than creative usernames.

H4a: Owners of creative usernames will be perceived by participants as more productive and desirable to work with in group settings than owners of plain usernames.

H4b: Owners of creative usernames will be perceived as having more positive personality traits (e.g., more fun) than owners of plain usernames.

Method

The participants for this study were 215 undergraduate students at a Midwestern

United States university. One hundred male and 115 female participants with a median

reported age of 19.4 years.

The self-report surveys (see Appendix) consisted of two sections, each assessing

participants' perceptions of potential group members for an upcoming class project. The

participants were given instructions to imagine that they had just been assigned a group project by their instructor and were randomly assigned group members. The only information that they were given about their group members was their email addresses. Six email addresses were created using existing screen names and placing them with the generic domain address @any.com: cms99 ($n=33$), galactic_hedgehog ($n=35$), cfred499 ($n=39$), ihategluesticks ($n=36$), ab1997by ($n=35$), and fishbrains ($n=37$). Email addresses were paired such that participants were able to record their perceptions of different email usernames for each section.

In the first section of the survey, participants were asked to identify sex, age, and ethnicity of the given email address. In each case, participants were given categories to choose from (e.g. male/female) including "don't know." Then participants were asked questions about the email address such as "do you think the name was chosen or assigned," "would you open the email," and "explain why you would or would not open the email." In addition, there was a section that measured the participant's perceptions about their new group member. The scale contained 17 Likert-type items utilizing a 5-point response scale (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree). The 17-item scale consisted of two dimensions: perceptions related to personality and perceptions related to work or task productivity.

In the last section of the survey, participants received the second hypothetical group member's email address and were asked to write a description of the group member. Participants were encouraged to "feel free to describe what you think about this person and his/her beliefs and behaviors," and were given plenty of space to provide and open-ended description of their group member.

Coding

Coding was developed for the two open-ended survey questions: "explain why you would or would not open this email [from this email address]" and "please write a description of the person [based on the given email]."

For the first item, 12 categories emerged from participants responses for deciding to open/delete (see Table 1). Categories included a fear of viruses, spam/junk, and an unfamiliar sender.

Category	n	Percentage
Delete Message:	133	61.9%
Unfamiliar	73	34.0%
Spam/Junk	31	14.4%
Virus	15	6.9%
Unprofessional	8	3.7%
Emotional	2	1.0%
Other/Miscellaneous	4	2.0%
Open Message:	75	34.9%
Curiosity/Interest	20	9.3%
Open Anything/All	14	6.5%
Looks Normal/Looks OK	24	11.2%
Not Filtered	5	2.3%
Professional/Important Looking	5	2.3%
Email Name/Subject Line	5	2.3%
Other/Miscellaneous	2	0.01%

Table 1. Categories and frequencies for participants' reasons for disregard of email messages.

For the second open-ended item, participants' responses were coded for the type of information provided, rather than the specific content of the information. For instance "this person would be FUN" or "I think this person likes to party." These responses would be divided into categories about personality characteristics (fun) and social life (party person). More than one response could be coded into multiple categories for each participant and all responses were coded and counted. Thirteen categories were

identified in participants' responses (see Table 2). These included the group member's

age (including a specific age or an age range), sex, appearance, and personality traits. In

addition to providing descriptive information, some participants also indicated they were

unable to provide a description based only on a name. Therefore, another category

reflecting participants' unwillingness or inability to answer the item was included. Only

participants who indicated their concern were coded as "don't know." Participants not

responding or with blank questionnaires were counted as missing data.

Category	n	Percentage
Age	158	73.5%
Sex	138	64.2%
Social Activities	31	14.4%
Employment Status	52	24.2%
Personality	79	36.7%
Dedication/Work Ethic	29	13.5%
Ethnicity	7	3.3%
Major/Rational for College	9	4.2%
Physical Appearance	4	1.9%
Professional Sounding	10	4.7%
Other	15	7.0%
Don't Know	10	4.7%
No Response	4	1.9%

Table 2. Categories and frequencies for participants' open-ended descriptions of email users.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Information from usernames

For the first hypothesis, participants were asked to assess their group member

based solely on that group member's email address. Participants were asked to identify

the group member's sex, age, ethnicity, and whether they would open a message received

from this email username. Overall, 80% of respondents identified the group member's

biological sex, 70.2% identified an ethnicity, and 72.6% assigned the group member an age (see Table 3).

Category		n	Percent
Sex:			
	Male	128	59.5%
	Female	44	20.5%
	Don't Know	43	20.5%
Ethnicity:			
	Ethnicity Chosen	151	70.2%
	Don't Know	64	29.8%
Age:			
	Age Given	156	72.6%
	Don't Know	58	27.0%
	No Response	1	0.004%

Table 3. Frequencies for participants' perceptions of ethnicity, age, and sex.

Hypothesis 2, 3, 4: Creative vs. Plain Usernames

Hypothesis 2 stated that study participants will utilize email usernames as a source of information about the sender of the message. Nearly all participants were able to give information about their fictitious group members based solely on the email username given. Both the first section of the survey with information to choose from and the second section with an open-ended description of a group member garnered a great deal of information about the group members from a majority of the respondents showing that the email username was used as a source of information by the respondents.

Hypothesis 3 stated that study participants will view creative email usernames as having been chosen by senders more often than plain usernames. Conversely, plain usernames will be identified as having been assigned to the senders more often than creative usernames. Although it was shown in a prior study (Heisler & Crabil, 2005) that

creative usernames were more likely to be assigned as chosen by the study participants than plain usernames, this study shows that all of the email usernames created for the survey were labeled as "chosen" by the respondents (see Table 4). Only one username (cms99) was split nearly equally by respondents as chosen and assigned.

Username	n	Chosen	Assigned
cms99	33	17	16
glactic_hedgehog	35	34	1
cfred99	39	29	10
ihategluesticks	36	36	0
ab1997by	35	32	3
fishbrains	37	35	2

Table 4. Participants' perception of email decision (chosen vs. assigned) by email username.

Hypothesis 4 stated that owners of creative usernames will be perceived by participants as more productive and desirable to work with in group settings than owners of plain usernames. Creative usernames were viewed as more unproductive (50%) than plain usernames which had more neutral responses (50.5%). The group member with the username fishbrains was labeled as the most unproductive member (59.9%) and had comments such as "doesn't seem very smart" and "sounds dumb." Group member cfredd99 was viewed as the most productive member (51.3%) and had comments like "sounds intelligent and good to work with." Overall, the creative usernames were perceived as less productive (50%) than the members with plain usernames (see Table 5).

cms99 (*n*=33)		
	productive	7 (21.2%)
	unproductive	8 (24.2%)
	neutral	18 (54.5%)
ab1997by (*n*=35)		
	productive	11 (31.4%)
	unproductive	7 (20%)
	neutral	16 (45.7%)
cfred499 (*n*=39)		
	productive	12 (30.8%)
	unproductive	7 (17.9%)
	neutral	20 (51.3%)
Plain Usernames (*n*=107)		
	productive	30 (28%)
	unproductive	22 (20.5%)
	neutral	54 (50.5%)
galactic_hedgehog (*n*=35)		
	productive	5 (14.3%)
	unproductive	12 (34.3%)
	neutral	17 (48.6%)
ihategluesticks (*n*=36)		
	productive	3 (8.3%)
	unproductive	20 (55.6%)
	neutral	13 (36.1%)
fishbrains (*n*=37)		
	productive	3 (8.1%)
	unproductive	22 (59.5%)
	neutral	12 (32.4%)
Creative Usernames (*n*=108)		
	productive	14 (13%)
	unproductive	54 (50%)
	neutral	42 (38.9%)

Table 5. Participants' perceptions of group members' level of productivity.

Hypothesis 4 also stated that owners of creative usernames will be perceived as having more positive personality traits (e.g., more fun) than owners of plain usernames. Group members with plain usernames were seen as having less positive personality traits (20.5%) than group members with creative usernames (31.5%). However, the group members with creative usernames had higher numbers of respondents who labeled them as having negative personality traits (42.6%) than those members with plain usernames (31.8%). The group member cms99 had the highest number (33.3%) of respondents

viewing them as having negative personality traits in the plain username group while galactic_hedgehog had the highest negative personality number (54.3%) for the members with creative usernames. Ihategluesticks (47.2%) was the only group member to receive a rating of positive personality traits by respondents. Overall, group members with both creative and plain usernames had higher percentages of respondents viewing them as having negative personality traits as opposed to positive personality traits. The creative vs. plain username did not seem to make a big difference to respondents' perception of personality (see Table 6).

cms99 (n=33)		
	positive	4 (12.1%)
	negative	11 (33.3%)
	neutral	18 (54.5%)
ab1997by (n=35)		
	positive	9 (25.7%)
	negative	11 (31.4%)
	neutral	14 (40%)
cfred499 (n=39)		
	positive	9 (23.1%)
	negative	12 (30.8%)
	neutral	18 (46.2%)
Plain Usernames (n=107)		
	positive	22 (20.5%)
	negative	34 (31.8%)
	neutral	50 (46.7%)
galactic_hedgehog (n=35)		
	positive	8 (22.9%)
	negative	19 (54.3%)
	neutral	12 (34.3%)
ihategluesticks (n=36)		
	positive	17 (47.2%)
	negative	13 (36.1%)
	neutral	6 (16.7%)
fishbrains (n=37)		
	positive	9 (24.3%)
	negative	14 (37.8%)
	neutral	14 (37.8%)
Creative Usernames (n=108)		
	positive	34 (31.5%)
	negative	46 (42.6%)
	neutral	32 (29.6%)

Table 6. Participants' perceptions of group members' personality traits.

Conclusion

This study shows that people are able to make judgments online about a message sender based solely on his or her email username. The majority of respondents were able to assign age, sex, and ethnicity to group members having been given only an email address. With open ended questions the majority of respondents were able to give basic information and in some cases very detailed information about their assigned group member with only the email address provided to them. While not all hypotheses were supported, it is obvious that with today's Internet technology people can and do make judgments about others even with limited or no social cues.

Computer Mediated Communication is growing in business, private, and academic domains (Walther, 1993). This changing atmosphere of communication necessitates the need to change how we view others and ourselves online. Social and communication cues transform and adapt to these new virtual surroundings; moreover impression management changes. Something as simple as an email username or online screen name offers recipients a chance to glean information about the sender. Right or wrong, a receiver can and will make assumptions and stereotypes about the message sender. This study shows that even with limited or ambiguous information, others make judgments about the person. Thus, it is important to choose an email username or other online name carefully in order to manage good impressions about ourselves.

Appendix:

Survey given to respondents:

Please check or fill-in a response as needed.

I am: ◯ Male ◯ Female

My Age_____

DIRECTIONS:
You've just been randomly assigned to work with two other students on a class project.
You have not been given any information about the project or the other individuals, but
the instructor did send you the email addresses of your group members. Their email addresses are listed below. Please answer each of the following questions regarding each group member.

First group member's email:_____

What do you think this individual's sex is?

◯ Male ◯ Female ◯ Unsure

What do you think this individual's age is?

◯ Age_____ ◯ Unsure

What do you think this individual's ethnicity is?

◯ White/Caucasian non Hispanic ◯ Chicano-Mexican American

◯ Black/African non Hispanic ◯ Hispanic

◯ American Indian/Alaskan Native ◯ Asian/Pacific

◯ Other Unsure

Do you think this person chose their email address or do you think it was assigned (by school, an employer, etc.)?

◯ Chose his/herself ◯ Was assigned

If you didn't know this person was assigned to your group and you received an email from
this address would you open the email?

◯ Yes   ◯ No

Please explain why you would or would not open this email:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Still thinking about the first group member, please answer the following questions by circling the NUMBER that reflects your beliefs or attitude:

I am looking forward to working with this person.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

I believe this person will be a responsible group member.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

I believe this person will be hard-working (within our group).

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

This person will be fun to work with.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

I think this person takes school seriously.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

I would like to spend time with this person outside of school.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

This group member will contribute equally to the project.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

This person will be difficult to work with.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

This person will make our group more creative and entertaining.

| Strongly Agree | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Strongly Disagree |

This person is outgoing.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

This person will do good work (on this project).

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

This person will be organized.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

I believe this person will be hard to contact/difficult to contact (regarding projects).

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

This person is shy and reserved.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

If not assigned, I would have chosen to be in this person's group.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

This person will be frustrating to me.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

I would NOT socialize with this person outside of class or school.

Strongly Agree	1	2	3	4	5	Strongly Disagree

Below is the email address of your second group member. In the space provided below, please write a description of this person. For example, what do you think about this person's age, employment, gender, and reason for entering school. Feel free to describe what you think about this person and his/her beliefs and behaviors.

Second group members email_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Author Biography:

Laura Pelletier received her undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree from Minnesota State University-Mankato in the department of Speech Communication, graduating Magna Cum Laude in December of 2008. She is currently working on her Master of Fine Arts-Forensics in the Speech Communication department at MSU-Mankato. In addition to working on her graduate degree, she is also a teaching assistant in the department teaching Fundamentals of Speech classes. Laura is a member of the speech honor society Lambda Pi Eta, Delta Phi Chapter, was the 2007-2008 Wolff Family Speech Communication scholarship recipient, and has been elected to the 2009 *Who's Who Among Students in American Universities & Colleges* in recognition of outstanding merit and accomplishment as a student at MSU-Mankato. She conducted this research as part of a senior project under the direction of Dr. Dan Cronn-Mills in the Speech Communication Department.

Mentor biography:

Warren Sandmann is a professor and faculty member in the Speech Communication Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He received his Ph.D. in Communication Studies (emphasis in Rhetorical Studies) from the University of Iowa in 1992. In addition to his teaching at Minnesota State University, he has taught at the State University of New York at Geneseo and San Jose State University. Dr. Sandmann's research interests are in Rhetorical Theory and Law, Freedom of Expression, Argumentation, Communication and Technology, and Communication Education. He has published or co-published 21 articles, five book reviews, three book chapters, and has presented over 80 state, regional and national conference papers. Dr. Sandmann has taught numerous different courses, supervised over 200 interns and individual studies, and has served as the primary advisor on 16 MA thesis projects. In addition to teaching, Dr. Sandmann has served as a Director and Assistant Director of Forensics, Department Chair, Graduate Director, Graduate Teaching Director, and Basic Course Director, and has also served as University Assessment Coordinator and Assistant Vice President for Undergraduate Studies. Starting summer 2009, Dr. Sandmann will be serving as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Minnesota State University.