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The Impact of Contextual Cues on Response Rate, Conversion Rate, and Destination Preference in Travel Surveys

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Bios

Bing Pan is an associate professor in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the College of Charleston located in Charleston, South Carolina, USA. His research interests include information technologies in tourism, consumer behavior, destination marketing, social media, search engine marketing and revenue management.

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Arch G. Woodside, professor of Marketing, Boston College, is a member and Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Association of Psychological Science, Global Innovation and Knowledge Academy, International Academy for the Study of Tourism, Royal Society of Canada, and Society for Marketing Advances.

Abstract

Does the researcher name, the email solicitation, and contextual questions in that message matter when conducting travel conversion research? The paper presents the results of an experiment whereby an online survey was adapted to investigate the effects of researcher identity, timing and the subject line of the solicitation email, and contextual questions on response rates, conversion rates, reported travel behavior, planning behavior and preferences toward destinations. The results indicate that a researcher's Western name will induce more responses than a Chinese name; surveys sent out on Saturday with a reminder on Monday generated more responses; varying wording in the subject line of the solicitation email did not generate different response rates nor did they affect conversion rates. The solicitation of the images of certain destinations earlier will impact respondents' reported preferences and behavior.

Keywords: conversion study, contextual cues, travel surveys, response rate, conversion rate.

The Impact of Contextual Cues on Response Rate, Conversion Rate, and Destination Preference in Travel Surveys

Introduction

Researchers frequently use conversion studies and traveler surveys to study travel behavior, advertisement effectiveness, traveler spending, and destination image (Burke and Gitelson 1990; Pratt et al. 2010; Pan and Li, 2011). Designing a quality travel survey however, is complicated and many times the collected data can contain bias rather than an accurate reflection of behavior, attitude, and impressions (Dolnicar, 2013). Besides methodological concerns on definitions of terms and wording of questions, contextual cues could play a significant role influencing the results of those studies. For example, who is conducting the study, what is the incentive, and who is sponsoring the study could impact response rates of online travel surveys (Pan, Woodside, and Meng, 2014). This study adapts an experiment of an online survey to study whether the names of the researcher, the timing and the content of the solicitation email, and the invoking of the experience or impression of a destination could impact the response rates, conversion rates, and preferences toward the destination.

Literature Review

Many methods are proposed in order to increase response rates and mitigate survey result biases. However, the studies of how contextual cues impact survey

response rates and survey results are limited. In this section, past studies on survey response theory and practices are reviewed.

Studies on Survey Responses

Response propensity theory states that each respondent has a likelihood to respond to a survey solicitation (Groves et al. 2006). When evaluating whether or not to participate in an online survey, potential respondents examine surveys for several cues as to its authenticity, value, and trustworthiness. In this paper, contextual cues are defined as the peripheral information contained in the survey which are not directly related to the goals of the study. The contextual cues for an online survey include subject line and content of the solicitation email, the researcher's name and affiliation, etc. Many methods using contextual information could be used to increase survey response propensity including researcher identity, pre-contacts, post-contacts, reminder messages, and personalized solicitation messages (Sheehan and McMillan 1999).

Impact of Researcher Identify

Chawla and Natarajan (1994) evaluated response rates from a mailed survey exercise that encompassed 800 persons from the U.S. industrial workforce. Their sample included only respondents with "domestic (i.e. American-Christian)-sounding names". Four hundred recipients received their survey request from a sender with an "American-Christian-sounding name". The other treatment group received their request from one of two researchers – one graduate student and one professor -- with

a “foreign-non-Christian-sounding name”. The results showed that "American-Christian-sounding name” sender’s request generated the higher response rate. The authors surmised that the perceived ethnic differences between the sender and receiver created an enhanced feeling of dissimilarity, which led to the lower response rate for the non-Western researchers.

In 2014, Pan, Woodside and Meng surveyed website visitors who opted to receive email alerts from City A's (a tourist city in the Southeast United States) Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) website through an email solicitation and web form. Their study confirmed that “a survey sender lower in power status...results in lower response rates”. In their experiment, the lower power status related to the university affiliation of the sender, with the lower powered sender representing a regional university, versus the second sender from a well-known national university. However, the researcher affiliated with the regional university is from an ethnic minority and has a typical non-American name, while the researcher from the national university is a Caucasian with a typical American-Christian name. The combination of the two variables, power status and ethnicity, resulted in findings that failed to provide evidence as to which variable, or perhaps it was the combination of the two variables, had caused the noted response variation.

Impact of Subject Line

In addition, cues in the solicitation emails, the subject line of the email and the content of the email body, play a vital role in whether the participant chooses to open and respond to an email questionnaire (Tourangeau, Conrad & Couper, 2013). In

both these cases (the subject line and email body), potential participants are searching for contextual clues to assist them in determining a survey's its authenticity, value and trustworthiness.

Two factors on the subject line have been studied extensively; 1) length of the subject line; and 2) content of the subject line (Archer, 2008 Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). Porter and Whitcomb (2005) in an extensive study on the role of subject lines in email based surveys played a moderate factor. In the case of this study, stating the purpose of the survey and its connection to a university played a moderate role in enhancing response rate. Pan (2010) found that the content of the subject line however, did not alter response rates. These conflicting results indicate a need to explore whether the content of a subject line has an impact on open and conversion rates.

Impact of Email Content

The content of the email body has been well explored within the literature (Fan & Yan 2010, Shropshire, Hawdon & Witte 2009, Van Selm & Jankowski 2006). Typically, the research has centered around, 1) personalization of the email (Fan & Yan 2010); 2) length of the email (Shropshire, Hawdon & Witte 2009); 3) content of the email (Shropshire, Hawdon & Witte 2009); and 4) readability level of the email (Van Selm & Jankowski 2006). One area of the body that has not been explored as in-depth has been the signature line. Certain contextual cues encourage some respondents with certain characteristics to respond and thus could bias the results (Smith 2007).

Research Hypotheses

Based on the previous discussions, the following eight hypotheses were proposed. Eight null hypotheses were proposed as the following.

Hypothesis H1₀. A researcher with a Western name will generate the same response rates compared to one with a Chinese name;

Hypothesis H2₀. A researcher with a Chinese name combined with an official title will not help increase the response rate compared to a Chinese name without a title;

Hypothesis H3₀. Surveys first sent out during working hours will generate the same response rate compared to those first sent out during non-working hours;

Hypothesis H4₀. Different contextual cues in the subject line of the solicitation email will not affect response rates;

Hypothesis H5₀. Different contextual cues in the subject line of the solicitation email will not affect conversion rates;

Hypothesis H6₀. Reminding the respondents about a city will not impact their following answers to the question on the cities they recently traveled;

Hypothesis H7₀. Reminding the respondents about a city will not impact their following answers to the question on the cities in their consideration set;

Hypothesis H8₀. Reminding the respondents about a city will not impact their following answers to the question on the cities they preferred.

Research Method

The researchers adapted an online survey to test the impact of contextual cues to survey response rate, conversion rate, and responses on travel behavior, planning behavior and preferences toward destinations. The online surveys were sent out to the potential travelers who requested a visitor's guide from U.S. City A's convention and visitors' bureau (CVB) website. The practical goals of the survey were to investigate the conversion rate, demographics, travel patterns, and spending patterns. The survey was administered using Qualtrics, a flexible and popular online survey platform. The online project was conducted in the Spring of 2014. The total number of emails sent out is 34,372 with 2,622 completed responses returned (Table 1).

The researchers designed two sub-experiments: the first sub-experiment randomly divided the respondents into nine groups and manipulated researcher's name and title, the timing of distribution, and the subject line of the solicitation email (Table 1). The numbers of emails among the nine groups are not equal due to the fact that the condition of subject lines were appended at the second stage of the study and thus, contained less emails. The total emails sent out, the number of started responses in each group, the number of completed surveys and the ratio of respondents who stated that they had visited City A, were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed. Table 1 indicates the various groups and conditions.

The first sub-study was designed to test group-wise comparisons. The conditions are always two levels while controlling other variables: Chinese researcher versus Western researcher (H_{I0}); with or without the Ph.D. and Professor as the title

($H2_0$); Saturday emailing versus Monday emailing ($H3_0$); the subject line with a question asking about whether or not they visited City A, versus whether or not they requested a Visitors Guide ($H4_0$ and $H5_0$); a subject line asking whether or not they requested a Visitors Guide versus none asked ($H4_0$ and $H5_0$).

In more details, we adopted a traditional Chinese name (For example, Bing Li) and a traditional Western name (For example, John Smith). The actual names used in the study are both real researchers in the same university in City A. The gender, position, and title of the two researchers are identical, except the distinction of the name. However, in one condition, we listed “Ph.D. and Associate Professor” after the Chinese name; for the others, we left the title out. Also, in seven conditions, we worded the subject line of the solicitation email as “Did you visit City A? Complete an online survey and win an iPad Mini!”; in one condition, we left out the “did you visit...” phrase; in another condition, we worded the subject line as “Did you request a visitor’s guide?”. Three groups were sent the solicitation email on Saturday morning, two groups were sent on Monday morning, and the four other groups were sent on Wednesday morning. All solicitations happened at 9AM; an identical reminder email was sent two days later at 9AM (Appendix I).

The second sub-experiment manipulated the questions in the survey: at the beginning of the survey, each respondent was randomly assigned a question asking about their impressions of one or a couple of cities: City A, one of the four competing cities of City A (City B, C, D, and E), or all five cities. Toward the end of the survey, the respondent was asked about the city they recently traveled to, the cities they have considered for the trip, the likelihood the respondent will recommend the city to a

Table and Figures

Table 1. Response Rates of Nine Groups

Group	Researcher*	Title	Subject Line	Day	Total Emails	Failed	Bounced	Started	Completed	Started to Valid	Completion to Valid	Completion to Started
1	Bing Li	Yes	Did you visit?	Saturday	4,910	1	230	547	373	11.7%	8.0%	68.2%
2	Bing Li	Yes	Did you visit?	Monday	4,911	4	306	423	288	9.2%	6.3%	68.1%
3	Bing Li	Yes	<i>None</i>	Wednesday	2,456	0	137	211	146	9.1%	6.3%	69.2%
4	Bing Li	Yes	Did you Visit?	Wednesday	2,454	0	143	257	172	11.1%	7.4%	66.9%
5	Bing Li	No	Did you visit?	Saturday	4,910	3	197	539	374	11.4%	7.9%	69.4%
6	Bing Li	No	Did you visit?	Monday	4,910	3	272	476	319	10.3%	6.9%	67.0%
7	Bing Li	No	Did you visit?	Wednesday	2,455	2	124	224	156	9.6%	6.7%	69.6%
8	Bing Li	No	Did you request?	Wednesday	2,456	2	128	284	185	12.2%	8.0%	65.1%
9	John Smith	No	Did you visit?	Saturday	4,910	4	200	867	609	18.4%	12.9%	70.2%
Total					34,372	19	1,737	3,828	2,622	11.7%	8.0%	68.5%

**These are pseudo names for anonymous review purpose.*

friend, and a ranked preferences of five cities (A, B, C, D, and E) to which the respondents are willing to travel (Appendix II). The conditions are two-levels: whether or not the City was mentioned; the dependent variables are the ranking of those cities. The goal is to see if the solicitation of the city's image and travel experience in previous questions will impact the report of their travel behavior, planning behavior, and personal preferences.

Since the manipulation of the second sub-experiment is randomized and orthogonal to the conditions in the first one, the two sub-experiments are considered independent to each other and tested as such. For both sub-experiments, multiple chi-square tests were conducted to test the hypotheses 1-8.

Results

In this study, we define a response rate as the rate of completed surveys to the total non-failed and non-bounced emails sent out. Chi-square tests were conducted comparing different groups with 0.05 significance level (Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). For example, Group 5 and 9 only differ in the name of the researcher. The test shows that a Western name generated more than 60% more responses than a Chinese name. The impact is significant and thus, H_{10} is rejected. What caused this dereference? In order to further investigate the different response rates among different demographic groups, we investigated different response rates for the two researchers of respondents in different demographics (Table 4). The results show that respondents from foreign countries or Asian countries are equally likely to respond to

the Chinese researcher and Western researcher; it is not the same ratio for American respondents. In all four sub-areas of the United States, all of the respondents are less likely to respond to the Chinese researcher. However, a Chi-square test on the differences of the four areas does not yield significant differences: thus, the respondents in four areas of the U.S. are equally less likely to respond to the Chinese researcher. The age, marital status, or employment status of a respondent also does not make a difference; they are equally less likely to respond to the Chinese researcher. Having a household income of less than \$45,000 USD however, will exacerbate the phenomenon with those respondents being less likely to respond to the Chinese researcher than higher income respondents.

Table 2. Conversion Rates of Nine Groups

Hypothesis	Total Completed	Visited City A	Conversion Rate
1	373	307	82.3%
2	288	233	80.9%
3	146	113	77.4%
4	172	139	80.8%
5	374	296	79.1%
6	319	270	84.6%
7	156	116	74.4%
8	185	134	72.4%
9	609	477	78.3%
Total	2,622	2,085	79.5%

Table 3. Hypotheses Testing on Response Rates and Conversion Rates

Hypothesis	Comparison Groups	Difference	Percent of difference	Chi-Square test P value	Result (0.05 level)
1	5 vs. 9	7.9% vs. 12.9%	63.3%	0.0001	Reject
2	5 and 6 vs. 1 and 2	7.4% vs. 7.1%	-3.9%	0.2292	Fail to reject
3	1 and 5 vs. 2 and 6	8.0% vs. 6.6%	-17.4%	0.0002	Reject
4	3 vs. 4	6.3% vs. 7.4%	17.4%	0.0688	Fail to reject
4	7 vs. 8	6.7% vs. 8.0%	19.4%	0.0562	Fail to reject
5	3 vs. 4 (Conversion)	77.4% vs. 80.8%	4.4%	0.2706	Fail to reject
5	7 vs. 8 (Conversion)	74.4% vs. 72.4%	-2.7%	0.3912	Fail to reject

Table 4. Testing Number of Responses from Respondents in Different Areas

Areas	Chinese Researcher			Western Researcher			P Value
	Sample	Completed	Ratio	Sample	Completed	Ratio	
Foreign Countries	194	31	16.0%	188	34	18.1%	0.3404
Asian Countries	7	1	14.3%	7	1	14.3%	0.7692
U.S. Midwest States	1,002	94	9.4%	1,047	138	13.2%	0.0040
U.S. Southern States	2,346	144	6.1%	2,393	275	11.5%	0.0001
U.S. Northeast States	843	70	8.3%	773	108	14.0%	0.0002
U.S. West States	324	35	10.8%	300	52	17.3%	0.0001

**Chi-square test on the differences among four U.S. areas is 2.13, $p = 0.5440$*

The added title of “Ph.D. and Associate Professor” also did not help the Chinese researcher to achieve a higher response rate, contrary to our expectation.

Thus, we failed to reject H_{20} (Table 3).

Solicitation emails sent on Saturday (with a reminder email after 48 hours on Monday) generated a significantly higher number of responses than those sent out on Monday (a reminder email after 48 hours on Wednesday) (H_{30} rejected) with the difference being almost 20%. In order to further investigate the response patterns, we graphed the cumulative numbers of responses from two groups of surveys in the first five days, when around 95% of responses returned (Figure 1). Though for the first two hours, first emailing on Monday generated more responses than that on Saturday, in total that for the first group, the first email solicitation Saturday seems to have captured those respondents who filled out the surveys during the weekends and the Monday email reminder generated responses for those who filled out the surveys during working hours. It seems that when the Monday first emails combined with Wednesday reminders in the second group reach those who tend to respond during weekends, it was already too late. Thus, contrary to previous studies (Pan, 2010), email solicitation sent out during both weekends and weekdays tend to have more

responses. However, first email on Thursdays and the reminders on Saturday could possibly reach a similar higher response rates. However, this remains to be tested.

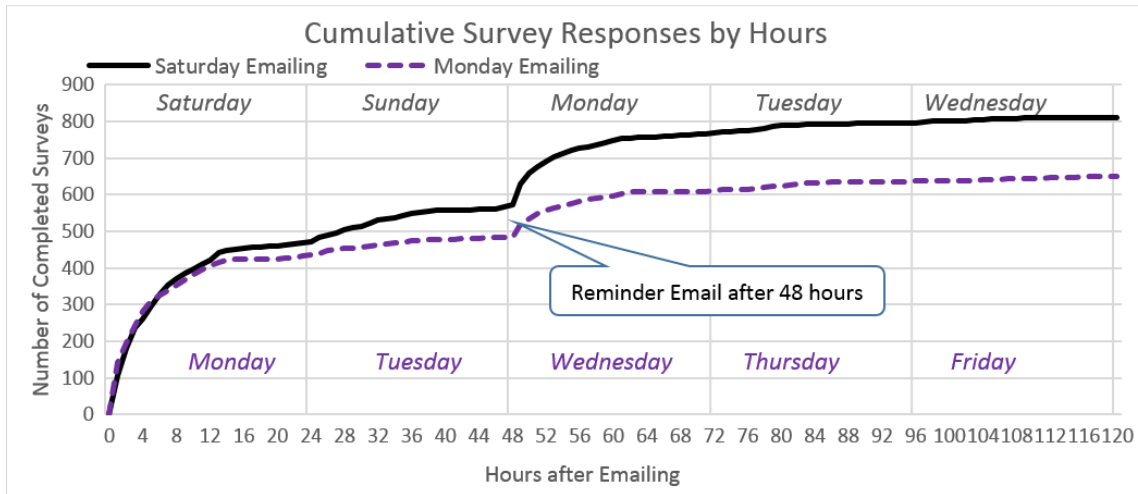


Figure 1. The Number of Survey Responses by Hours, Saturday versus Monday

The subject line asking about “did you receive a visitor’s guide?...” did not generate significantly more responses than those worded as “did you visit City A?...” (fail to reject H_{4_0}) neither did it affect conversion rates significantly (fail to reject H_{5_0}) (Table 3).

The impact of image solicitation question on following responses on travel behavior, planning behavior, and destination preferences were tested with Chi-Square and Mann-Whitney U tests at a 0.05 significance level. The results indicate that asking the respondents to list City A’s image did not impact the ratio of those mentioning that city as the city they most recently visited (fail to reject H_{6_0}) nor of it being one of the considered cities for their most recent trip (fail to reject H_{7_0}). For two closely competing cities of City A – City B and City D -- however, the solicitation of the image of that city will increase the rank of preference of that city (Table 5; H_{8_0} rejected). That is, when one of the two cities were mentioned, the

subjects will be more likely to rank them higher as preferred city to visit. One possible explanation is that the visitors are likely to have visited those two cities, and thus, the solicitation of direct experience increased their preference for those two cities. However, the survey did not contain a question on their past traveling experience to the five cities so the assumption remains to be tested.

Table 5. Testing Ranks of Preference of Destination Cities (Hypothesis 8)

City	Rank with image solicitation*	Rank without solicitation*	Mann-Whitney U Test P value
A	1.78	1.81	0.993
B	2.47	2.62	0.045
C	3.21	3.23	0.766
D	3.25	3.42	0.021
E	3.93	4.00	0.163

**1 being the most preferred city and 5 being the least preferred city*

Conclusions

Researcher identity impacts response rates; a researcher with a Western name will induce at least 60% more survey responses than a Chinese name. Even the title of Ph.D. and Professor won't help mitigate that disadvantage. The bias is almost universal and the degrees are not significantly different among different demographics groups, except that respondents with a household income of 45K or less will be even less likely to respond to the Chinese researcher. Non-U.S. and Asian respondents do not appear to have such bias.

Contextual cues in the solicitation email subject line does not matter for response rates nor conversion rates; Saturday emailing seems to ensure a higher response rate by 20% by capturing both the weekend emailing group and work day emailing group. Questions to elicit the impression of a traveled destination will likely

increase the preference of some destinations. Thus, researchers should avoid elicitation of any destinations before the actual preference question.

All the aforementioned contextual cues did not impact conversion rates from the survey. Those cues did not impact the reported travel behavior and travel planning behavior either. This lends legitimacy in the results of the conversion studies. Those results are reliable indicators of travelers' behavior in different study conditions. Questions containing cues on a specific destination however, may elicit the direct experience of that destination and thus bias the results of the following preference questions.

Discussions on Research Identify Effect to Response Rate

It certainly seems that e-mail recipients have a significantly greater level of concern opening unsolicited emails from a Chinese sender than they do when receiving an identical email from a Western sender. The finding certainly adds to the Chawla and Natarajan's (1994) conclusion that perceived ethnic differences between a sender and receiver results in enhanced feelings of dissimilarity and lower response rates to survey requests. Comparing these results to those reported by Chawla and Natarajan (1994) suggests that the degree of discrepancy has become even more pronounced in an electronic survey environment than had been the case for their mailed-survey exercise. There is, however, a second, plausible and less onerous explanation for at least a part of the 60% response discrepancy between the two treatment groups in the current study. When discussing these findings with students, they noted that emails from their Chinese-named professors are often trapped by their university e-mail system and sent to their spam filter. Regardless of the cause,

whether the issue is a recipient-based or a technology-based bias, or likely a combination of the two, the problem is one worthy of consideration as researchers plan to conduct their future online research.

The 60% differential noted herein, a gap that can easily represent the difference between a successful and unsuccessful data collection effort is simply too great to ignore. Researchers with Chinese surnames, when conducting USA based online sampling exercises, should consider either adopting a pseudonym email account, which may or may not be approved by their university's Institutional Review Board, or they should partner with a Western-named colleague, whose email account should be used to send the survey request. Neither is an attractive suggestion, but both options are far more likely to result in a successful research effort.

We propose additional research be conducted to answer several additional questions. It would be of value to conduct a similar study with a non-USA sample. This research yielded a small number of such respondents, but the number was insufficient to make any general claim. Are recipients of online surveys requests from countries other than the USA as likely to reflect a similar response bias, either personal or perhaps technological, as did the current USA-based sample population? Similarly, what would happen were this study replicated in China? Would the results invert, with higher response rates received by the Chinese-named researcher? Only future research will provide the answers to these important questions.

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Appendix I. Email Solicitation Sample in Group 5

From: Bing Li <noreply@qemailserver.com>
Date: Sat, Feb 8, 2014 at 9:03 AM
Subject: Did you visit City A? Complete a survey and win an iPad Mini!
To: Mary Smith <marysmith12345@gmail.com>

Dear Mary,

I am conducting a survey on visitor behavior and satisfaction for those travelers who requested a Visitors Guide from the City A Convention and Visitors Bureau. In 2013, you requested a Visitor's Guide from the Bureau. Please participate by completing the survey even if you did not visit Charleston recently.

The study is sponsored by the City A Convention and Visitors Bureau. By responding to the survey, you are helping to increase knowledge about traveler behavior and travel-related services. The survey takes at most 5-8 minutes to finish. Complete the survey and you are invited to enter for a chance to win an iPad Mini. This survey is voluntary and all responses are anonymous, confidential and no email address will be coded with answers.

Please click on the following link to go to the survey directly. If the link does not work, please copy and paste the URL in your browser. Thank you for participating in the study! Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study.

Follow this link to the Survey:
Take the Survey

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
http://university1.qualtrics.com/WRQualtricsSurveyEngine/?Q_SS=824abcdefg

Sincerely,

Ling

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Appendix II. Image/Experience Solicitation and Preference Ranking

What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of **City A** as a tourist destination?
Please list up to three items:

1.
2.
3.



Please rank the following destinations according to your preference for taking a leisure trip, assuming traveling cost is NOT an issue (**number 1 is MOST preferred; number 5 is the LEAST preferred**) (*required*):

	1	2	3	4	5
City A	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
City B	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
City C	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
City D	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
City E	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

