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To cite this article: Helmut M. Dietl , Carlos Gomez-Gonzalez , Paolo Moretti & Cornel Nesseler (2020): Does persistence pay off? Accessing social activities with a foreign-sounding name, Applied Economics Letters, DOI: [10.1080/13504851.2020.1784381](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2020.1784381)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504851.2020.1784381>



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Published online: 24 Jun 2020.



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Does persistence pay off? Accessing social activities with a foreign-sounding name

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine if a slight behavioural modification has an influence on discrimination. Specifically, we use a field experiment based on emails to observe if persistence increases the chances of joining a social group. We find that native- or foreign-sounding names are equally successful when being persistent. However, non-persistent individuals with foreign-sounding names suffer from discrimination. The results show that persistent individuals can be especially interesting in the context of field experiments.

KEYWORDS

Discrimination; field experiment; foreign names; persistence; response rate

JEL CLASSIFICATION

C93; D71; F22; J15; L83

I. Introduction

Contacting someone for the first time is part of daily life. Applying for a job, asking to rent an apartment, using the sharing economy, or trying to join a social group are all situations in which people often do not know each other beforehand. Research finds that certain groups frequently suffer from discrimination in these circumstances.

For example, African Americans in the US receive fewer responses when applying for a job (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), when asking to look at an apartment (Hanson and Hawley 2011), or when trying to book an AirBnB apartment (Edelman, Luca, and Svirsky 2017) or an Uber ride (Ge et al. 2016). However, this is not exclusively the case for African Americans but also for minorities in numerous other countries. For example, Turkish-sounding names receive fewer call backs in the German labour market (Kaas and Manger 2012), as do homosexual couples in the Swedish housing market (Ahmed and Hammarstedt 2009), or foreigners when trying to join a social activity in Switzerland (Nessler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl 2019).



In the majority of these field experiments, applicants experience a one-shot attempt. After a first contact, a no response or a negative response is

evaluated as a rejection. However, in more realistic scenarios some applicants could be persistent, i.e. trying again after the first failure. In scenarios of imperfect information, a reminder email may be perceived as a signal of effort and commitment (Connelly et al. 2011).

The influence of persistence is largely overlooked in this type of experiment. Only studies interested in increasing survey response rate report a positive influence of reminder messages, e.g. Misra, Stokols, and Marino (2012). For this purpose, we extend the study by Nesseler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl (2019), in which the authors measure access to social activities in Switzerland, by including the influence of persistence. Nesseler et al.'s study is ideal because it is recent, the data is publicly available, and social integration is especially interesting in Switzerland.¹

II. Experimental design and methods

We constructed a list of names for each group²; Swiss-French, Swiss-German, Swiss-Italian, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, and Arabic. We explicitly chose these foreign groups as they represent a sizable part of the foreign-born population in Switzerland (9.6%, 3.9% and 1.8%, respectively).³ We cannot

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¹Switzerland has the highest share of foreigners for every European country with more than 1 million inhabitants.

²Switzerland has three major language groups: French, German, and Italian. Romansh, the fourth recognized language, is spoken by less than 1% of the population.

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include other foreign groups such as French, German, and Italian because the official languages in Switzerland prevent Swiss citizens from identifying names from these groups as foreign names. To ensure that we have a representative sample we generated each name based on the frequency of their first- and last-name. A table with the full list of first- and last-names is available in the appendix (Table A1).⁴

Regarding email profiles, we generated random eight-digit gmail.com accounts. The receiver could see the sender's full name not only in the signature but also in the account from which the email was sent. While other email providers are also popular in Switzerland, we choose *Gmail* because these emails have a high probability of not being labelled as spam.⁵

We gathered the data of 607 amateur football clubs in Switzerland. We randomly selected one team for every club that had more than one team. We contacted the coach of a team. That ensured that the email was not lost between administrative personnel.

Similar to Nesseler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl (2019), we sent the email in the respective language of the club. We used official translations for the text in French, German, and Italian (the versions of these emails are included in the appendix, Tables A2-A4). The email read as follows:

Subject: Trial practice

Hello,

I am looking for a team that I can join. I think that I have already played on a similar level. Could I come for a trial training session?

Many thanks

Name 1-30

We sent out all emails on 3 February 2020 before noon. We categorized all responses into four

categories: no response, negative response, positive response, and positive response with further inquiries. A negative response meant that the sender was not invited to join a training session. A positive response meant that the sender was invited for a training session. A positive response with further inquiries meant that respondents wanted to know more (e.g. age or playing position). Once we received a response, we waited between 24 and 48 hours and wrote that the applicant was no longer interested in participating in a training session.⁶ We wrote this response email in accordance with the guidelines of the ethical committee of the University of Zurich.

We waited one week for clubs to answer. Among the clubs that did not respond, we randomly selected 100 clubs to send a second email to. The ethical committee of the University of Zurich did not allow us to send more than 100 new emails as being persistent could potentially reinforce negative stereotypes directed at foreigners. The reminder included 50 native-sounding names and 50 foreign-sounding names that were randomly assigned to clubs. In the reminder email we added that the sender is looking for a club in the region. Thus, clubs would have had the chance to respond to the second mail without necessarily inviting applicants to a trial practice. This opened a fifth response possibility: forwarding the applicant to another club. However, no club chose this option. The email reads as follows:

Subject: Trial practice

Hello,

I am still looking for a team in Region XY. Could I come for a trial training session?

Many thanks

Name 1-30

Table 1 provides an overview of the covariates used in the analysis. We distinguish between the

³We used the numbers provided by Eurostat. The numbers do not include naturalized citizens or foreign-born citizens younger than 15. We included Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia Herzegovina as countries with Serbo-Croatian sounding names; Turkey with Turkish sounding names; Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen as Arabic sounding names. Eurostat does not provide data for several other foreign groups in Switzerland that have Arabic sounding names (e.g. Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia). Thus, the percentage of foreigners with Arabic sounding names might be higher.

⁴To confirm the validity of the names we performed surveys at various public places in Switzerland and asked respondents whether the names sounded native or foreign. The majority of the respondents was able to correctly categorize the names.

⁵Prior to the experiment start, we sent test emails and verified that these were not labelled as spam.

⁶The 24–48 h window aimed to prevent receivers that responded to emails from getting upset with an immediate negative rejection from the sender while minimizing the uncertainty generated by the experiment.

Table 1. Summary statistics.

Variables from experiment	First email		Persistence (reminder) email	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Response	.560	.497	.31	.464
Native-sounding name	.489	.5	.5	.503
Swiss-French sounding name	.17	.376	.22	.416
Swiss-German sounding name	.157	.364	.14	.349
Swiss-Italian sounding name	.163	.37	.14	.349
Serbo/Croatian sounding name	.173	.379	.18	.386
Turkish sounding name	.165	.371	.13	.338
Arabic sounding name	.173	.379	.19	.394
Control variables	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Club has a youth section	.808	.394	.82	.386
Foreigner rate	.229	.104	.233	.11
Total inhabitants	.76	.839	.79	.96
Right wing votes	.289	.1	.287	.099
Number of clubs in the area	4.683	4.243	4.9	4.239
Leagues	4.75	1.163	4.73	1.262
Observations	607*		100	

* The variable *club has a youth section* was not always available. The complete model misses these observations, but the results remain unaltered.

first and the second (persistence) email. To control for external factors that could have an influence on the decision to respond, we use the following control variables: club has a youth section, foreigner rate, total inhabitants, right wing votes, and number of other amateur football clubs in the area. Here, area is defined by the first three digits of the postcode.⁷

III. Results

We sent out 310 emails with native-sounding names and 297 with foreign-sounding names. Native-sounding names received a positive response in 60.9% of the cases, foreign-sounding names in 51.3% of the cases. These results are not significantly different from the findings of Nessler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl (2019).⁸

The results from Table 2 show that foreign-sounding names receive significantly fewer responses.⁹ While the covariates influence the response rate, e.g. a higher rate of foreigners decreases the chance to receive a response, foreign-sounding names consistently receive fewer responses. Models 3 and 4 show that this is mainly due to Arabic-sounding names.

Table 2. Regression results. First email to clubs.

Variables	Dependent variable: Response Yes/No (1/0)			
	Native/Foreign names		Native/Foreign name groups	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Native-sounding name	.097**	.076*		
	(.040)	(.040)		
Foreign-sounding name	omitted	omitted		
Swiss-German sounding name			omitted	omitted
Swiss-French sounding name			-.048	-.039
			(.070)	(.069)
Swiss-Italian sounding name			.015	.000
			(.070)	(.070)
Serbo/Croatian sounding name			-.069	-.043
			(.070)	(.070)
Turkish sounding name			-.091	-.077
			(.071)	(.071)
Arabic sounding name			-.164**	-.148**
			(.070)	(.070)
Club has a youth section		-.000		.003
		(.056)		(.057)
Foreigner rate		-.497**		-.466**
		(.236)		(.237)
Total inhabitants		.037		.036
		(.028)		(.029)
Right wing votes		.341		.324
		(.213)		(.213)
Number of clubs in the area		.001		.000
		(.006)		(.006)
Constant	.513***	.108	.621***	.188
	(.028)	(.171)	(.050)	(.173)
League control		Y		Y
R-squared	.009	.040	.014	.043
Observations	607	600	607	600

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$

After sending out 100 reminder emails, native-sounding names received a positive response in 30.0% of the cases and foreign-sounding names in 32.0% of the cases. The response rate for the reminder emails (31.0%) is significantly lower than for the first emails (56.0%) and does not show differences by name origin. Table 3 shows that neither foreign-sounding names nor Arabic-sounding names received fewer responses.¹⁰

Different mechanisms may explain the positive role of persistence. One possibility is that the observed discrimination (after the first email) responds to a problem of imperfect information and perceived distance (Eriksen 2002), which is reduced with the reminder email (if understood as a signal of commitment and interest by the receiver). However, more

⁷Postcodes have four digits in Switzerland. Every additional digit separates the region of the previous digit in several parts.

⁸The public dataset provided by Nessler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl (2019) is available in: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/PZLYUN>. This allows us to perform a Mann-Whitney two-sample analysis. The results show that neither the results for foreign-sounding names ($n = 616$; $z = -0.897$; Probability $> |z| = 0.3695$) nor the results for native-sounding names ($n = 1,179$; $z = -0.398$; Probability $> |z| = 0.6908$) are significantly different.

⁹Using a logit regression with marginal effects yields the same results.

¹⁰We do not include control variables in Table 3 as the results would suffer from overfitting.

Table 3. Regression results. Persistence (second) email to clubs.

	Dependent variable: Response Yes/No (1/0)	
	Native/Foreign names	Native/Foreign name groups
	Model 1	Model 2
Native-sounding name	-.020 (.093)	omitted
Foreign-sounding name	omitted	omitted
Swiss-German sounding name		
Swiss-French sounding name		.312** (.146)
Swiss-Italian sounding name		.071 (.149)
Serbo/Croatian sounding name		.190 (.150)
Turkish sounding name		.165 (.164)
Arabic sounding name		.173 (.146)
Constant	.320*** (.067)	.143 (.096)
R-squared	.000	.046
Observations	100	100

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .1$

research is needed to clarify the implicit meaning of the signal in this context (Connelly et al. 2011). Other factors related to omitted variables or receiver selection bias are unlikely to explain the difference after the second email with the randomized experimental design (Gaddis 2018).

IV. Conclusion

The results show that individuals with foreign-sounding names suffer from discrimination when trying to integrate. The magnitude is similar to previous research examining social integration in Switzerland (Nessler, Gomez-Gonzalez, and Dietl 2019). Additionally, we find that a reminder email is perceived as a positive signal (Connelly et al. 2011), which increases the chances of receiving a response to join a club. This result is especially interesting for field experiments, which have largely overlooked the influence of persistence. Our study highlights the empirical significance of persistence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung [Spark / CRSK-1_190264].

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Appendix

Data availability

The data for this study is available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/7XVFFJ>

Table A1. Names used.

Swiss-French	Swiss-German	Swiss-Italian	Serbo/Croatian	Turkish	Arabic
Pierre Dufour	Daniel Keller	Alessandro Fumagalli	Shkodran Berisha	Yusuf Gülen	Mehdi Zitouni
Jean Fèvre	Thomas Meyer	Roberto Bernasconi	Yasin Mehmeti	Ahmet Demirci	Noureddine Mansouri
Philippe Bernard	Christian Frei	Michele Ferrari	Dejan Shehu	Mehmet Yildirim	Abdel Naser
Nicolas Rochat	Walter Kunz	Andrea Bianchi	Aleksandar Ivanović	Ali Aydin	Ahmed Rahman
Michel Dubois	Martin Lüthi	Marco Rezzonico	Goran Gajic	Amir Brahimi	Rahim Khalil

Table A2. Content of the emails in German.

German
<p>First email</p> <p><i>Subject: Probetraining</i></p> <p><i>Guten Tag,</i></p> <p><i>Ich bin auf der Suche nach einem Team, dem ich beitreten kann. Ich denke, dass ich zuvor bereits auf einem ähnlichen Niveau gespielt habe. Ist es möglich an einem Probetraining teilzunehmen?</i></p> <p><i>Vielen Dank</i></p>
<p>Second email</p> <p><i>Subject: Probetraining</i></p> <p><i>Guten Tag,</i></p> <p><i>Ich bin weiterhin auf der Suche nach einem Team in der ___Region___. Ist es möglich an einem Probetraining teilzunehmen?</i></p> <p><i>Vielen Dank</i></p>

Table A3. Content of the emails in French.

French
<p>First email</p> <p><i>Objet: séance d'essai</i></p> <p><i>Bonjour,</i></p> <p><i>Je suis à la recherche d'une équipe que je pourrais rejoindre. Je pense avoir déjà joué à un niveau similaire auparavant. Serait-il donc possible de faire un essai dans votre équipe?</i></p> <p><i>Merci d'avance et cordiales salutations"</i></p>
<p>Second email</p> <p><i>Objet: séance d'essai</i></p> <p><i>Bonjour,</i></p> <p><i>Je suis toujours à la recherche d'une équipe dans la ___Region___. Serait-il donc possible de participer à un entraînement d'essai?</i></p> <p><i>Merci d'avance et cordiales salutations</i></p>

Table A4. Content of the emails in Italian.

Italian
<p>First email</p> <p><i>Oggetto: Selezioni</i></p> <p><i>Buongiorno, sto cercando un gruppo di lavoro al quale poter aderire. Penso di aver già raggiunto un simile livello. Ci sarebbe la possibilità di partecipare a delle selezioni?</i></p> <p><i>Grazie anticipatamente</i></p>
<p>Second email</p> <p><i>Oggetto: Selezioni</i></p> <p><i>Buongiorno, sto ancora cercando un gruppo di lavoro nella regione ___Region___. Ci sarebbe la possibilità di partecipare alle selezioni?</i></p> <p><i>Grazie anticipatamente</i></p>