

## Getting too personal: Reactance to highly personalized email solicitations

Tiffany Barnett White · Debra L. Zahay ·  
Helge Thorbjørnsen · Sharon Shavitt

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**Abstract** Research on the effects of personalized messages on consumers' behavioral responses has yielded mixed findings. We explore how e-mail personalization influences click-through intentions. Our results suggest that consumers experience personalization reactance in response to highly personalized messages when the fit between the offer in the message and consumers' personal characteristics is not explicitly justified by firms. Consequently, consumers are less willing to respond favorably to the offer. Results of two studies suggest that this effect primarily emerges for consumers who perceive the utility of the service to be relatively low. For those consumers with higher perceived utility, justification of personalization is less important because highly personalized messages are less likely to elicit reactance.

**Keywords** Personalization · Reactance · Relationships · Email · Consumers

The process of personalizing communication to consumers has been facilitated by electronic marketing communications technology (Ansari and Mela 2003; Thorbjørnsen et al. 2002; Zahay and Griffin 2003). Despite claims by commercial

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T. B. White (✉)  
College of Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,  
350 Wohlers Hall, 1206 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL, USA  
e-mail: tbwhite@uiuc.edu

D. L. Zahay  
Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA  
e-mail: zahay@niu.edu

H. Thorbjørnsen  
Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration, Bergen, Norway  
e-mail: helge.thorbjornsen@nhh.no

S. Shavitt  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, USA  
e-mail: shavitt@uiuc.edu

email firms that personalization enhances acceptance of marketing messages, academic findings on the effects of personalized messages are mixed. For example, findings by Postma and Brokke (2002) suggest that personalization can significantly increase click-through rates, yet others have found only modest or non-significant differences between the effects of more versus less personalized appeals (e.g., Porter and Whitcomb 2003). Moreover, the possibility that greater personalization can result in negative effects has yet to be investigated.

Our research addresses the effects of degree of personalization (not absence vs. presence of it). We investigate when and how degree of e-mail personalization influences consumers' click-through intentions (i.e., the extent to which consumers are willing to click to learn more about an email solicitation). Marketers' knowledge and use of distinctive aspects of consumers' personal characteristics can be instrumental in helping them to tailor offerings that are closely aligned with consumers' preferences. However, our research highlights conditions under which highly personalized messages can backfire, resulting in personalization reactance—that is, psychological resistance to subjectively inappropriate personalization. Personalization reactance occurs when highly personalized messages lead consumers to feel constrained by the sense of being too identifiable or observable by the firm. We argue that even permission-based use of personal information can elicit negative responses when the level of personalization is perceived to be inappropriate. In the sections that follow, we discuss possible drivers, outcomes and moderators of personalization reactance.

## 1 Personalization and distinct messages

In line with Postma and Brokke (2002) and others (e.g., Hoffman and Novak 1996), we use the term personalization in this research to refer to a specialized flow of communication that sends different recipients distinct messages tailored to their individual preferences or characteristics. In tailoring such messages, firms must evaluate what consumer information such as demographics, psychographics, or purchase histories to use in their attempts at “getting personal.” As an example, consider the following:

### 1. Message A:

Dear Jane: We thought you might be interested in joining others in Alaska, who have joined our new Scone-of-the-Month club.

### 2. Message B:

Dear Jane Doe: As a baker and chocolate lover, we thought you might be interested in joining others in Anchorage, Alaska, who have joined our new Scone-of-the-Month club.

These examples highlight an important dimension on which personalized messages vary—namely, their degree of distinctiveness, that is, the degree to which the personal information used in the message uniquely identifies or characterizes its recipient. For example, specifying that a recipient is from Anchorage, Alaska would eliminate over 99% of the U.S. population. That the same person is a baker would further eliminate, say, 95% of the population in Anchorage, and the information that

Jane is a chocolate-lover would eliminate more potential recipients. Therefore, such a message would represent a highly distinctive approach. Indeed, data from market research companies offer personalizing firms the ability to make informed estimates about base rates for various demographic or psychographic characteristics. As a result, these firms can more easily determine the extent to which a given characteristic is distinct.

### 1.1 Personalization reactance

Because firms can reach individuals with highly targeted messages at a price far below that of traditional media (Hoffman and Novak 1996), they often strive to acquire and incorporate personal information of increasing distinctiveness into their communications (Ansari and Mela 2003). However, consumers' reactions to such communications may differ from that intended by marketers. Specifically, they may be perceived as *too* personal—extending beyond friendly recognition to suggest an inappropriate level of familiarity with consumers' preferences and behaviors.

Although prior research has primarily focused on privacy concerns in reaction to unsolicited messages (e.g., Caudill and Murphy 2000), we suggest consumers may also bristle in response to solicited messages that convey highly distinctive knowledge of their personal characteristics. Messages containing such information may threaten consumers' perceived ability to avoid being closely observed by the firms with which they do business. As a result, consumers may experience a reaction akin to psychological reactance, a motivational state arising in a person whose freedom is perceived to be threatened (Brehm 1966). We build upon research on psychological reactance to suggest that highly distinctive personalization may result in personalization reactance—that is, psychological resistance in response to subjectively inappropriate personalization (which we refer to as simply “reactance”). If reactance reflects consumers' concerns that messages are too personal, then factors that enhance the extent to which such messages are perceived as appropriate or welcome should mitigate reactance and increase click-through intentions. We explore two factors that may mitigate potential reactance stemming from personalized messages of high distinctiveness: (1) justification (explicitly justifying the fit between the distinctive personal information and the focal offer in the message); and (2) perceived utility of the product/service featured in the offer.

### 1.2 Justification

Firms can decrease consumers' concerns that a personalized message is inappropriately personal by increasing the perceived fit between the offer and consumers' personal characteristics (Simonson 2005). We assume that firms are competent at maximizing actual fit (i.e., providing offers that are closely aligned with consumers' actual preferences). Instead, we explore the possibility that even messages for which fit is high can vary in the extent to which fit is *justified* to the consumer. Justification entails explaining how the use of consumers' personal information is relevant to the personalized offer. We suggest that reactance-based responses will vary for messages that are well versus poorly justified. In fact, existing research suggests that negative responses by message recipients are often a direct function of the degree to which a

given threatening message is perceived as manipulative (Campbell 1995) versus justified (Janis and Mann 1977) or legitimate (Brehm 1966). Specifically, attitudinal resistance is lowered when messages are seen as justified (e.g., perceived as beneficial to one's well being). Thus, by explicitly justifying how highly distinctive information is relevant to the solicited offer, firms can increase the perceived appropriateness of such messages, thereby reducing reactance and increasing click-through intentions.

### 1.3 Perceived utility

When considering whether and how much personal information to disclose to relationship-seeking firms, consumers actively weigh the potential benefits against the potential costs of disclosing and disclose only to the extent that net benefits are perceived (White 2004). We suggest that consumers' reactions to personalized messages are similarly influenced by whether the perceived utility (or "benefits") of the advertised goods or services offsets the psychological "costs" of receiving inappropriately personal messages. Indeed, consumers are generally willing to incur higher costs to acquire highly useful goods (Monroe 2003). Not surprisingly, perceived utility is an important driver of attitudes, intentions and actual use of various services (Ho 2006; Lin 2006; Nysveen et al. 2005).

Similarly, we argue that the effect of message distinctiveness will depend upon perceived utility. When perceived utility is high, consumers should welcome highly personalized messages from a company that provides useful benefits regardless of whether these messages are explicitly justified. However, when consumers perceive lower utility, levels of reactance (and click-through intentions) may depend upon the extent to which highly personalized messages are explicitly justified. Taken together, we suggest that consumers who perceive lower utility of an advertised service may experience reactance, and thus lower click-through-intentions, in response to more (versus less) distinctive messages for which the fit is not explicitly justified. However, for consumers with higher perceived utility, the effects of message distinctiveness will not depend on justification. We explore these issues in two studies. Study one examines the interaction effect of distinctiveness and justification on reactance and click-through intentions. Study two extends the results by exploring these variables in the context of high and low perceived utility.

## 2 Study one

### 2.1 Method

Eighty-six undergraduates participated in a 2 (Distinctiveness: High vs. Low) × 2 (Justification: Present vs. Absent) factorial experiment. Participants were asked to view a screen capture for a hypothetical movie rental website, Movies2Go.com. They then read about one of Movies2Go's new customers, Pat, including a personal profile Pat had opted to complete that would be kept on file at Movies2Go. The profile contained Pat's first and last name, address, phone number, and favorite types of movies. In order to minimize the possibility that participants' reactions to the

personalized emails they would be shown later would be driven by concerns about privacy violations, the profile contained an opt-in box for special offers from Movies2Go, which Pat had checked to indicate interest in receiving such offers. Respondents were then shown a personalized email message sent to Pat by Movie2Go announcing a new home delivery service and a link that Pat could click to learn more information about the service.

Distinctiveness was manipulated by varying the number of items of personal information (one versus five) used in the email. In the low distinctiveness condition, Pat's email contained Pat's state of residence. In the high distinctiveness condition, it contained Pat's first and last name, city and state of residence, and phone number. Justification was manipulated by [not] providing an apparent connection between the personalized information used in the email solicitation and what was being offered in the email. Specifically, in the justification conditions, the email stated that the program was new and that, based on the identifying information used in the email, Pat was now in an area in which the new service was being offered. No such statement appeared in the no justification condition.

Respondents then rated Pat's likely responses to the email. Click-through intentions were measured with two items using a 7-pt. scale (1=not at all likely; 7=very likely; e.g., "How likely is it that Pat would respond favorably to this offer?";  $r=.59$ ). Next, reactance was measured using 7 items adapted from Edwards et al. (2002) and Hong and Faedda (1996) (1=disagree; 7=agree). Four items measured how likely Pat would be to consider the email interfering, intrusive, forced upon Pat, and unwelcomed and three items measured the perceived likelihood that Pat would feel compelled to resist, ignore, and dismiss the offer ( $\alpha=.79$ ). To check the distinctiveness and justification manipulations, participants then rated to what extent the personal information included in the email described the recipient generally versus distinctively and how relevant the personal information in the email was to the offer described.

In order to control for the possibility that respondents' personal reactions to the "look and feel" of the personalized email may have influenced their responses (Edwards et al. 2002), respondents were asked, "How attractive is the Movies2Go email to you?" (1=not very attractive; 7=very attractive). As one might expect, attractiveness ratings were positively correlated with click through intentions ( $r=0.49$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ) and negatively correlated with reactance ( $r=-0.34$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ). However, distinctiveness and justification did not interact to influence ratings of the attractiveness of the email. Thus, attractiveness ratings appear distinct from the key process we were seeking to capture through click through intentions. Consequently, in all subsequent analyses, we control for ratings of the attractiveness of the email message and assess the influence of distinctiveness and justification on click through intentions over and above attractiveness ratings. Finally, three items about Internet shopping habits measured the extent to which respondents: (1) shop online, (2) receive email offers, and (3) respond to Internet offers (1=not at all; 7=often;  $\alpha=0.81$ ).

### 3 Results

*Manipulation checks* All data were analyzed with 2 (Distinctiveness: High vs. Low)  $\times$  2 (Justification: Present vs. Absent) ANCOVAs, controlling for the perceived

attractiveness of the email and participants' online shopping habits. Supporting the distinctiveness manipulation, regardless of justification condition, those in the high vs. low distinctiveness conditions believed the personalized message contained more distinctive information ( $F(1, 80)=9.69$ ;  $p<0.05$ ;  $M_s$  (Means)=4.82 and 3.72, respectively). No other effects were significant. Similarly, in support of the justification manipulation, those in the justification vs. no-justification conditions perceived the personalized information to be significantly more relevant to the offer ( $F(1, 80)=32.84$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ;  $M_s=5.51$  vs. 3.81). No other effects were significant.

*Click-through intentions* Click-through intentions were analyzed with the same ANCOVA model. As predicted, the effect of distinctiveness on click-through intentions depended on the presence of justification ( $F(1, 80)=4.69$ ;  $p<0.05$ ,  $\eta^2=0.06$ ). Whereas click-through intentions did not vary between high versus low distinctiveness conditions in the presence of justification ( $M_s=6.19$  vs. 6.03, respectively;  $F(1, 80)<1$ ; *ns*), when justification was absent, click-through intentions were lower for high versus low distinctiveness conditions ( $M_s=4.45$  vs. 5.56, respectively;  $F(80)=10.24$ ;  $p<0.005$ ).

*Reactance* Reactance was analyzed with the same ANCOVA model. As expected, the impact of distinctiveness on personalization reactance was moderated by justification ( $F(1, 80)=5.57$ ;  $p<0.05$ ,  $\eta^2=0.07$ ). When justification was present, distinctiveness did not affect reactance ( $M_s=3.35$  vs. 3.67;  $F(80)=0.66$ ; *ns*). However, when justification was absent, respondents perceived significantly more reactance in response to messages high versus low in distinctiveness ( $M_s=4.58$  vs. 3.73;  $F(80)=8.41$ ;  $p<0.005$ ).

Consistent with the requirements for mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986), reactance was negatively related to click-through intentions ( $r=-0.68$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ). To complete the test for whether the effects of distinctiveness and justification on individuals' click-through intentions were mediated by reactance, we added reactance as a covariate to the 2 (distinctiveness) $\times$ 2 (justification) ANCOVA. As expected, reactance was significant ( $F(1, 79)=29.80$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.19$ ) and the distinctiveness by justification interaction became non-significant ( $F(1, 79)=1.10$ , *ns*). Further support for this prediction was found using the criteria endorsed by Sobel (1982) for testing mediation (Goodman I test statistic=2.17;  $p<0.05$ ).

#### 4 Discussion

Click-through intentions were appreciably lower for highly distinctive (vs. less distinctive) personalized communications when the fit between consumers' personal characteristics and the personalized offer was not explicitly justified. That is, higher personalization appears to reduce effectiveness when the customer is given no reason for why their personal information is being used.

In using a hypothetical scenario in this study, we expected respondents to draw upon widely held norms about appropriate marketing communications. Respondents were asked to assume that Pat would respond as they would. Thus, it seems fair to assume respondents' beliefs about Pat's likely reactions mirrored their own

responses. Moreover, because our reactance-based account suggests that negative feelings would be even stronger for perceived threats to one's own versus a hypothetical others' freedom to be anonymous, judgments of another person's response to an inappropriately personalized message constitutes a conservative test of our account.

On the other hand, although it was assumed that respondents would report reactions on Pat's behalf that were similar to their own potential reactions, it is possible that respondents felt they differed from Pat in ways that may have influenced their responses. Consequently, Study 2 is an exploratory study in which we examined respondents' reactions to email communications that were personalized using their own personal information. We also considered perceived utility, specifically whether distinctiveness and justification play the same role among consumers who perceive high versus low service utility.

## 5 Study two

### 5.1 Method

Three hundred fifty-four undergraduates participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The design was a 2 (Distinctiveness: High vs. Low)  $\times$  2 (Justification: Present vs. Absent) between-subjects factorial. People were recruited to participate as movie reviewers for a website, [www.filmsandreviews.com](http://www.filmsandreviews.com), designed especially for this experiment. They were asked to post a review of any movie they chose. Prior to doing so, respondents registered on the website by completing a personal profile containing first and last name, address (city, state, and zip code), phone number, and movie preferences (e.g., romantic comedies, etc.). Twenty-three respondents opted out of future correspondence from Films and Reviews by un-checking a designated box. They did not receive future emails, resulting in a sample size of 331. After submitting their movie review, respondents did a 15–20 min unrelated filler task.

Next, respondents evaluated an email that had been personalized based on the information they had previously provided. Similar to Study 1, the emails varied in terms of distinctiveness and justification, with the exception that in the highly distinctive conditions respondents' phone numbers were replaced with their reported movie preferences. Respondents rated their click-through intentions and personalization reactance as in study 1. Perceived utility was then measured using 4 items based on those used by Aggarwal (2004) to measure exchange relationship perceptions (i.e., perceptions of utility maximization;  $\alpha = .78$ ). Next, respondents completed the manipulation checks from study 1 and, as a covariate measure, rated, "How attractive is the Films and Reviews website to you?" (1—not at all attractive; 7—very attractive).

## 6 Results

*Manipulation checks* The manipulation check data were analyzed with 2 (Distinctiveness)  $\times$  2 (Justification)  $\times$  2 (Perceived Utility: High/Low) ANCOVAs, controlling

for participants' website attractiveness ratings and online shopping habits. Supporting the distinctiveness manipulation, regardless of level of justification or perceived utility, those in the high vs. low distinctiveness conditions believed the personalized message contained more distinctive information ( $F(1, 318)=4.77; p<0.05$ ;  $M_s=3.41$  and  $3.13$ , respectively). Similarly, in directional support of the justification manipulation, those in the justification vs. no-justification conditions perceived the personalized information to be more relevant to the offer ( $F(1, 318)=3.28; p<0.07$ ;  $M_s=4.32$  vs.  $4.01$ ). Neither effect was moderated by perceived utility.

**Confound check** Because perceived utility was measured after the distinctiveness and justification manipulations, it is possible that the manipulations affected these perceptions. For example, those experiencing personalization reactance in response to a given personalized email may have subsequently rated the Movies and Reviews website as lower in perceived utility. To explore this possibility, we analyzed the effects of distinctiveness and justification on perceived utility in a  $2 \times 2$  ANCOVA. There were neither main effects of distinctiveness and justification nor an interaction effect ( $F_s(1, 322)<1.5$ ; *ns*), suggesting that utility judgments were made independently of these manipulations.

**Click-through intentions** Regression analysis was used to model click-through intentions. As expected, click-through intentions were significantly influenced by perceived utility ( $\beta=0.39$ ;  $t=2.37$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), as well as the three way interaction between distinctiveness, justification, and perceived utility ( $\beta=0.68$ ;  $t=2.09$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). To further analyze the means, a median split (median=4.5) was used to characterize utility perceptions as high or low and click-through intentions were analyzed using the ANCOVA model described above. As expected, a main effect for perceived utility indicated that, overall, those with higher versus lower perceived utility reported significantly higher click-through intentions ( $M_s 3.95$  vs.  $3.07$  respectively;  $F(1, 318)=19.31$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.06$ ).

More importantly, there was a significant distinctiveness  $\times$  justification  $\times$  perceived utility interaction ( $F(1, 318)=4.65$ ;  $p<0.05$ ,  $\eta^2=0.01$ ) (see Table 1). The pattern of means is directionally consistent with our predictions. Specifically, among those with

**Table 1** Study 2: Mean click-through intentions and personalization reactance scores

	Low utility		High utility	
	Low Distinctiveness	High Distinctiveness	Low Distinctiveness	High Distinctiveness
Justification absent	3.20 <sup>a</sup>	2.62 <sup>b</sup>	3.84 <sup>a</sup>	3.84 <sup>a</sup>
Justification present	3.12 <sup>a</sup>	3.32 <sup>a</sup>	4.55 <sup>b</sup>	3.59 <sup>a</sup>
Personalization reactance				
Justification absent	4.97 <sup>a</sup>	5.39 <sup>b</sup>	4.42 <sup>a</sup>	4.65 <sup>a</sup>
Justification present	5.27 <sup>a</sup>	5.01 <sup>a</sup>	3.91 <sup>b</sup>	4.76 <sup>a</sup>

Means within a given utility condition that do not share a common superscript differ at a significance level of  $p<0.10$  or less

low perceived utility, consistent with the results of Study 1, the effect of distinctiveness differs directionally, though not significantly, upon the absence versus presence of justification ( $F(1, 318)=1.85$ ; *ns*). When justification was present, click-through intentions did not differ as a function of distinctiveness level ( $M_s=3.32$  vs.  $3.12$ ;  $F(1, 318)<1$ , *ns*). However, when justification was absent, respondents were less willing to click-through in response to messages high versus low in distinctiveness ( $M_s=2.49$  vs.  $3.12$ ;  $F(1, 318)=3.61$ ,  $p<0.06$ ). In contrast, when respondents perceived higher utility, a different pattern emerged ( $F(1, 318)=4.58$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). As expected, when justification was absent, message distinctiveness did not affect click-through intentions ( $M_s=3.96$  vs.  $3.88$  for high versus low distinctive messages;  $F(1, 318)<1$ ; *ns*). However, and unexpectedly, when justification was present, click-through intentions were higher for low versus high distinctiveness messages ( $M_s=4.84$  vs.  $3.96$ , respectively;  $F(1, 318)=6.60$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Though not predicted, this finding is not at odds with our account. When perceived utility is high, respondents may have considered the net benefits of low distinctiveness message to be relatively high, particularly when the personalized message is well justified by the firm. As a result, they may have higher than average click-through intentions.

**Reactance** Results of regression analysis reveal that, as expected, reactance was significantly influenced by utility perceptions ( $\beta=0.32$ ,  $t=2.78$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), as well as the interaction effects of distinctiveness, justification, and perceived utility ( $\beta=0.50$ ,  $t=2.21$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). For means comparison, reactance perceptions were then analyzed with the same ANCOVA model described previously. As expected, a significant main effect of perceived utility indicated that, overall, respondents with high (versus low) perceived utility reported significantly lower levels of reactance ( $M_s=4.44$  vs.  $5.16$  for high versus low perceived utility;  $F(1, 318)=25.88$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.08$ ). Also as predicted, the distinctiveness  $\times$  justification  $\times$  perceived utility interaction was significant ( $F(1, 318)=5.28$ ;  $p<0.05$ ,  $\eta^2=0.02$ ). As shown in Table 1, the pattern of means for reactance mirrors those for click through intentions.

Consistent with the requirements for mediation, reactance was significantly negatively related to click-through intentions ( $r=-0.54$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ). To complete the test for whether the effects of distinctiveness and justification on individuals' click-through intentions were mediated by reactance, we added reactance as a covariate to the 2 (distinctiveness) $\times$ 2 (justification) $\times$ 2 (utility perceptions) ANCOVA. As predicted, reactance was significant ( $F(1, 317)=80.79$ ;  $p<0.0001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.22$ ) and the distinctiveness $\times$ justification $\times$ utility perception interaction became non-significant ( $F(1, 317)=1.55$ , *ns*). Further support was found using the criteria recommended by Sobel (1982) for testing mediation (Goodman I test statistic=3.11;  $p<0.005$ ).

## 7 General discussion

The primary goal of this research was to explore circumstances affecting the success of personalization efforts. Rather than assuming personalization efforts should result in uniformly positive responses, this research incorporated relevant theories from consumer psychology to understand when a message might be considered inappropriately personal. With advances in technology, firms are able, and often

eager, to make increasingly targeted offers that are based on knowledge of increasingly distinctive consumer characteristics. Our findings highlight circumstances under which consumers' responses to such efforts are negative—as well as factors that may attenuate these negative reactions. In so doing, we offer theoretical and practical insights into how firms can optimize consumer responses to personalization.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the responses of consumers who have not yet been convinced of a firm's value proposition (i.e., consumers with lower utility perceptions) to highly targeted personalization efforts depend importantly on the extent to which these messages are perceived to be justified. In particular, responses to messages personalized at high (versus low) levels of distinctiveness did not vary when the message was explicitly justified by the personalizing firm; however, these consumers experienced higher reactance and lower click-through intentions in the absence of such justification. Consequently, our results imply that firms hoping to deepen consumer relationships through personalization should maximize perceived utility before sending highly distinct personalized messages.

It should be noted that even when highly distinctive personalized messages were explicitly justified, they resulted in click-through intentions that were at best equal to, not higher than, low distinctiveness messages. Thus, although consumers may be willing to reveal distinct information when utility judgments are low or uncertain (e.g., the respondents in our study voluntarily provided the information in the profile, regardless of perceived utility), our results suggest that explicitly justifying the fit between offers and highly distinctive information in messages is useful for minimizing personalization reactance and increasing click-through intentions. This finding provides initial support for our notion that, similar to other types of exchange relationships, consumers' reactions to exchanges involving their personal information may follow a utility maximization principle: they appear willing to incur the psychological "costs" of highly personalized messages only to the extent that they perceive net benefits that offset these costs.

These findings are of particular interest to personalizing firms. First, increased knowledge of the determinants of effective personalization may help brands and firms increase click-through rates on personalized e-mail campaigns and on other forms of "push" marketing efforts. Second, at least for initial personalization attempts, our results imply that messages personalized at low levels of distinctiveness may outperform those that are highly distinctive (regardless of justification). In contrast, when highly distinctive messages are unavoidable or otherwise compelling from the firm's perspective in initial exchanges, our results caution against sending these messages in the absence of an explicit justification.

Third, knowledge of what causes negative responses to personalized e-mails may help firms to eliminate marketing efforts that are detrimental to the consumer-brand relationship. Negative consumer response to personalized e-mail solicitations may cause more harm to the brand than the simple lack of response on the e-mail. Specifically, efforts perceived as overly restrictive, too much of a "hard sell," or as otherwise limiting to the consumer may seriously jeopardize future business and even terminate existing consumer-brand relationships. However, our results suggest a managerially actionable circumstance under which a negative backlash can be avoided. By highlighting the utility of its offerings—or by specifically targeting audiences whose behaviors suggest they might find the firm's offerings to be highly

useful—a firm can better manage how consumers will react to their personalization attempts.

## 8 Limitations and future research directions

Although we have focused here on email communications, examining the concepts of distinctiveness, personalization reactance, justification and perceived utility offers a richer framework for understanding successful personalized communications in any medium. However, it is important to clarify the constraints of our research approach. In particular, our second study was largely exploratory in nature and the demonstrated effects were relatively small (Cohen 1988). Although we found generally consistent directional support for our hypotheses, more research is necessary to fully understand consumers' responses to highly personalized messages. It would also be desirable to test the generalizability of our framework using a non-student sample in a non-laboratory setting.

Because we did not endeavor to compare highly distinctive personalization to no personalization in this research, it should be noted that our findings do not examine the absolute benefits of personalizing. Instead, we examine personalization at varying levels of distinctiveness and justification. Whether click-through intentions would be higher for personalized messages compared to not personalizing at all is an issue that warrants additional research. Finally, this research focuses on the fit between the personalized offer and consumers' personal information (e.g., address and phone number). However, the personalized messages in this research are arguably low in terms of the fit between the target offer (i.e., a home delivery service) and the respondent's personal preferences. It may be that an offer that more closely matches consumers' personal preferences would further moderate consumers' reactions to highly personalized emails. Thus, research on factors such as message fit as well as other dimensions on which personalized messages may vary reflects fertile areas for future research.

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