

Implicit Letter Preferences in Job Choice: An Experimental Test of the Role of Cognitive Load

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ABSTRACT. Research has shown that people prefer the letters in their names to letters that are not in their names. This name-letter effect seems to influence important life decision such as where one chooses to live or whom one chooses to marry. The authors' laboratory study investigated whether this effect generalizes to individuals' job-choice intentions under specific conditions. Furthermore, the authors hypothesized that name-letter preferences in job-choice intentions would be stronger under conditions of high cognitive load than under conditions of low cognitive load. Two experiments with final-year students attending a university in Belgium showed support for name-letter preferences in job-choice intentions. There was no support for the hypothesized moderating role of cognitive load. The authors discuss the implications of these results for theory and research on name-letter preferences and job choice.

Keywords: implicit egotism, job search, name-letter preference, organizational attraction, unconscious

JOB CHOICE IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT of people's professional lives because it determines the set of potential jobs from which job seekers choose and influences employment outcomes such as job attainment and employment quality (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001). During the last decade, theoretical models of organizational attraction and job choice have strongly emphasized the role of rational thinking processes in job choice. For example, a recent review and meta-analysis of the job search literature that Kanfer et al. conducted argued that job search constitutes goal-directed behavior that is subject to self-

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regulation processes such as goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reactions. Although this conceptualization of job search as a self-regulated, motivational process is valuable and has received clear empirical support (e.g., Song, Wanberg, Niu, & Xie, 2006; Van Hooft, Born, Taris, Van der Flier, & Blonk, 2005), few theoretical or empirical studies have explored whether other more implicit processes or heuristics play a role in job choice (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001).

In our study, we turned to the burgeoning literature on implicit social cognition to advance our understanding of potential implicit processes in job choice. Research on implicit social cognition suggests that potent and pervasive unconscious self-motives influence many important day-to-day decisions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Building on this line of research, we discuss and further investigate how presumably rational attitudes, such as those driving job choice, may be influenced by unconscious self-enhancement strivings. In addition, we explore whether such implicit self-enhancing attitudes toward an organization may become more prominent in the job-choice process under the influence of cognitive factors (e.g., cognitive load). Following this approach, to improve the current understanding of job-choice processes, we offer an interdisciplinary perspective inspired by insights from social psychology.

Previous Research on Job Choice

Empirical research has significantly increased our understanding of how people decide where to work (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Rynes, 1991). Several different phases in the job-choice process have been distinguished, with each phase being associated with many different applicant attitudes and intentions. First, applicants must decide whether to pursue a job or remain in the applicant pool. When deciding to pursue a job, applicants engage in many job-search behaviors (e.g., posting a résumé, attending a job interview). A subsequent step involves the overall attractiveness of one or more organizations to the applicant. The higher the organization's attraction, the higher the chance that applicants would apply for a position at that organization (Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar, 2003). After having applied for a job and receiving a job offer, applicants must consider whether to accept a position at the organization; this is commonly referred to as *acceptance intentions*. Last, applicants make a job choice that is typically dichotomous in nature (i.e., to accept or decline a job offer). As shown in a recent meta-analysis of job choice (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2004), these phases are highly interrelated. Willingness to look for a job leads to a higher chance of being attracted to an organization. An organization's attractiveness predicts acceptance intentions, which, in turn, predict the applicant's job choice.

Several important predictors have been identified that influence applicant attraction and subsequent intentions and behavior. Many different theoretical

models have guided researchers to identify predictors of applicant attraction; of these, the most important is likely Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (for other theories, see Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). According to Vroom's *expectancy theory*, job seekers are attracted to jobs that provide them with challenging and meaningful work, training, promotion opportunities, employment security, friendly colleagues, and a desirable work environment. There is extensive evidence showing that applicant perceptions of these job and organizational characteristics have a positive, direct effect on applicant intentions and choices (Chapman et al., 2005). Thus, on the basis of a range of job and organizational attributes, applicants have to make a choice among various job opportunities. Although there is no consensus on how job seekers make these decisions among jobs (Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001; Slaughter, Richard, & Martin, 2006), all theoretical accounts of job decision-making strategies have assumed that this is a conscious and deliberate process. Few researchers have tackled the issue of how other implicit, unconscious preferences may also influence job choices (for an exception, see Soelberg, 1967). Next, we discuss recent advances in research on implicit cognition and explore how these insights may advance our current understanding of factors affecting job choice.

Implicit Influences on Job Choice

Since the early years of psychology, social psychologists have acknowledged that the self is the central point of reference for social cognition, emotion, motivation, and interpersonal behavior (e.g., Allport, 1937; Festinger, 1957; James, 1890). That is, how people feel and think about themselves plays an important role in their lives. One of the best documented findings in this regard is the tendency of people to evaluate themselves favorably and their desire to maintain these favorable feelings about themselves. Various human attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors can be traced to this basic self-enhancement motive (for an overview of empirical findings, see Sedikides & Gregg, 2003; Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

Recent research in this domain has focused especially on the fact that many self-enhancing cognitions occur automatically or unconsciously (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Hetts & Pelham, 2001; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). It is assumed that individuals' positive automatic associations about themselves may influence their feelings about anything that is connected to their selves. One of the most remarkable observations regarding this issue is the *name-letter effect* (Nuttin, 1985), which refers to people's tendency to evaluate letters in their own name particularly favorably, relative to other letters. This unconscious effect, replicated across multiple cultures and countries (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1987), occurs for all of the letters in people's names, but it is particularly pronounced for the initials of people's first and last names. The basis of the name-letter effect seems to be the fact that people feel

ownership of their name letters and extend their favorable evaluation of themselves to the letters (Hoorens & Nuttin, 1993). In an impressive set of studies, Pelham and colleagues (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004; Pelham, Carvallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002) demonstrated that these name-letter preferences influence a range of important life decisions. For example, these researchers found that individuals prefer to live in places whose names resemble their first or last name (e.g., people named Louis are disproportionately likely to live in a city named St. Louis), choose occupations whose labels resemble their names (e.g., people named Dennis are overrepresented among dentists), and are disproportionately likely to marry others whose first or last names resemble their own (e.g., people named Dennis and people named Denise are more likely to end up together). These effects are generally small but statistically reliable and robust across a wide range of domains.

Hypotheses

The aim of our study was twofold. For our first goal, we sought to obtain further evidence for the role of the name-letter effect as a subtle influence on people's daily life decisions. More specifically, we examined whether the name-letter effect had predictive value for attitudes toward companies as potential employers. The question of whether the name-letter effect plays a role in determining where individuals intend to apply for a job is far from trivial. First, although recent studies have documented the role of the name-letter effect in a range of meaningful social behaviors, it remains unclear whether this effect generalizes to all contexts in which individuals have to choose between many options. For example, in a recent study testing the generality of the name-letter effect to attitudes in everyday life, Hodson and Olson (2005) found support for the name-letter effect in attitudes toward brands but not animals, foods, leisure activities, and national groups. Hodson and Olson noted, "Caution certainly seems warranted in assuming that the name-letter effect diffuses into ordinary evaluations in everyday life" (p. 1110). Therefore, it is clear that a further test of the generalizability of the name-letter effect to job search attitudes and intentions is of theoretical importance because it provides additional knowledge on the boundary conditions of the name-letter phenomenon. Second, as a theoretical contribution, investigating the name-letter effect in organizational attraction tests theoretical models of organizational attraction and job search, which have strongly emphasized the role of rational thinking processes (e.g., Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hooft et al., 2004). In these models, it is typically assumed that job seekers engage in a conscious decision-making process that involves evaluating the cost and values associated with a job search. Consequently, these models have virtually ignored possible implicit processes that may play a role in determining organizational attraction. If the name-letter effect affects organizational attraction, it would

provide evidence for the need of a more prominent role of implicit social cognition in these models.

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): Participants would report more favorable job-choice intentions toward organizations with matching name letters than toward other organizations.

A second important goal of our study was that we aimed to examine whether name-letter preferences have a stronger influence on day-to-day attitudes and intentions under conditions of high cognitive load. There is good reason to expect cognitive load magnifies the effects of name-letter preferences on day-to-day attitudes. Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) proposed a model of dual attitudes that outlined the complex interplay between implicit and explicit attitudes. The basic proposition of this model is that people can have dual attitudes, which are different evaluations of the same attitude toward an object: an automatic, implicit attitude and an explicit attitude (for other renditions of discrepancies between implicit and explicit attitudes, see Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Greenwald et al., 2002; Brinöl, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006). According to Wilson et al.'s model, the attitude that people endorse at any point in time—amid other factors—depends on whether they have the cognitive capacity to retrieve the explicit attitude and whether the explicit attitude overrides the implicit one.

We measured individuals' attitudes and intentions toward a range of companies. On the one hand, in basic terms of Wilson et al.'s (2000) model of dual attitudes, individuals may have an implicit attitude (toward these companies) that they are unaware of and that is activated automatically. As thoroughly documented in previous name-letter research (Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005), these attitudes are driven by implicit self-enhancement tendencies so that individuals tend to prefer objects (in this case, companies) whose names start with the same letters as their own name. On the other hand, individuals may also hold a range of explicit attitudes toward the companies that are presented as stimuli in our study. According to this model, the attitude that people rely on at a given moment depends on the available cognitive resources to retrieve the explicit attitude (Wilson et al., 2000). If cognitive resources are lacking (e.g., when people are under a high cognitive load), the implicit self-enhancing attitude becomes the default response. Therefore, this assumption implies that individuals' implicit attitudes should manifest themselves more strongly under conditions of high cognitive load, resulting in stronger name-letter preferences toward the stimuli (e.g., employing companies). Evidence supporting this assumption comes from earlier research in the self-enhancement domain. For example, Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, and Gilbert (1990; Experiment 3) conducted an experiment in which participants could choose to read a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of themselves. Participants in a high cognitive load condition were asked to memorize an eight-digit number, whereas participants in the low cognitive load condition

were allowed to write down the number. Results showed that participants with negative self-views preferred to read the favorable report in the high cognitive load condition and the unfavorable report in the low cognitive load condition. This shows that self-enhancing tendencies are stronger under high cognitive load (see Paulhus, 1993; Paulhus, Graf, & Van Selst, 1989; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2002).

To our knowledge, only one empirical study has directly examined the model of dual attitudes for name-letter preferences. Koole, Dijksterhuis, and van Knippenberg (2001) tested whether explicit self-evaluations were overruled by implicit self-evaluations when people were deprived of cognitive resources. In one experiment (Experiment 2) that was introduced as a study of aesthetic preferences, participants were asked to rate each letter of the alphabet on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all beautiful*) to 5 (*extremely beautiful*). Koole et al. found a positive bias for name letters when participants were encouraged to rely on feelings (e.g., "Give your first intuitive impression") but not when participants were encouraged to rely on extensive reasoning (e.g., "Carefully analyze and explain which features of the letters you like"). This suggests that implicit attitudes may be understood as automatic evaluations that can be overruled by more deliberative forms of processing. In a follow-up experiment, Koole et al. (Experiment 4) examined the role of cognitive resources more directly by asking participants to rehearse an eight-digit number while completing the experimental task. They found that explicit self-esteem was more congruent with implicit self-esteem—as reflected by the name-letter bias—under high cognitive load, than under low cognitive load conditions. Again, this shows that deliberative, explicit beliefs are subordinate to implicit self-evaluations under conditions of high cognitive load. These findings suggest that a high cognitive load may strengthen implicit beliefs and attitudes. Consequently, this may lead to stronger name-letter effects in attitudes toward real-life objects, such as the employing companies that we investigated. We proposed the following:

*H*₂: People would report more favorable job-choice intentions toward organizations with matching name letters under high cognitive load than under low cognitive load.

In sum, our theoretical contribution is twofold. In two experiments, we explored whether the name-letter effect generalizes to a context that has not been previously examined; namely, individuals' attitudes and intentions toward companies as employers. This may yield important evidence for models of organizational attraction and job choice that have primarily focused on rational thinking processes (e.g., Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hooft et al., 2004). On the basis of the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), we investigated whether cognitive load moderates name-letter preferences in individuals' attitudes. This may offer a possible explanation of the mechanism behind the name-letter effect.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 80 final-year students (34 men, 46 women; M age = 22.2 years, SD = 1.6 years) who were attending a university in Belgium. Students received a free movie ticket (valued at approximately US\$8) for participating. We focused on final-year students because these students typically had specific plans to apply for a job in the near future; this fact increases the ecological validity of the experiment. Mean application experience was 2.79 times (SD = 4.47 times), with 71.6% of participants having applied for a job at least once. All participants were randomly assigned to either the high or low cognitive load.

Procedure and Materials

To replicate and extend previous name-letter findings, we closely followed and adapted a scenario that has previously been proven to be successful in evoking the name-letter effect for brand preferences (Brendl et al., 2005, Experiment 1). The study was presented to participants as one that was organized by a Japanese company interested in opening a subsidiary in Belgium. The Japanese company was interested in choosing a name that would quickly attract many Belgian employees. Therefore, the experimenter asked participants to indicate at which of three Japanese companies they would be most likely to apply for a job. Participants were run in matched pairs such that each participant pair received identical company names. Similar to Brendl et al.'s study, the experimenter created these names by adding the Japanese word stem *oki* to the first three letters of each participant's first name (taken from the consent form). For example, for the participant pair *Jane* and *Kelly* these would have been *Janoki* and *Keloki*. This matching procedure ensured that all company names appeared as name-letter matches and mismatches so that any intrinsic differences in attraction between the two company names could not confound the name-letter effect (see Brendl et al.; Nuttin, 1985). As an additional control and distractor, a third company name was added, *Quloki*, which did not match any of the participants' name letters and was constant for all participants.

Before being introduced to the three company names, we manipulated participants' cognitive capacity by asking them to hold either an eight-digit or one-digit number in their memory during the entire task. We asked participants to report the number at the end of the experiment together with several hypothesis awareness questions. Research assistants ensured that participants had no chance of writing down the numbers before being requested to recall them. We adopted

this specific cognitive load manipulation procedure because it was successful in amplifying associated self-enhancement tendencies in previous studies (e.g., Gramzow, Gaertner, & Sedikides, 2001; Koole et al., 2001; Paulhus et al., 1989; Swann et al., 1990).

Next, we presented the three company names in random order and asked the participants to complete a five-item measure of organizational attraction (Highhouse et al., 2003) along a 7-point Likert-type scale for each company. A sample item was "This company is attractive to me as a place for employment" ($M \alpha = .71$). Participants also completed a five-item measure of intentions to apply in each company (Highhouse et al.). A sample item was "If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go" ($M \alpha = .87$).

Last, a questionnaire probed for hypothesis awareness by asking participants to list all thoughts that they had during the study, precisely the purpose of the study as they perceived it, and anything that they may have found surprising during the study. On the basis of two independent coders' judgments of the open-ended responses, we identified 3 participants who could have been hypothesis aware (e.g., by indicating that we may have manipulated the brand names so that they resemble their own names). We excluded these 3 participants and an additional 3 participants from the respective matched pair from all analyses, resulting in 74 remaining participants for analysis.

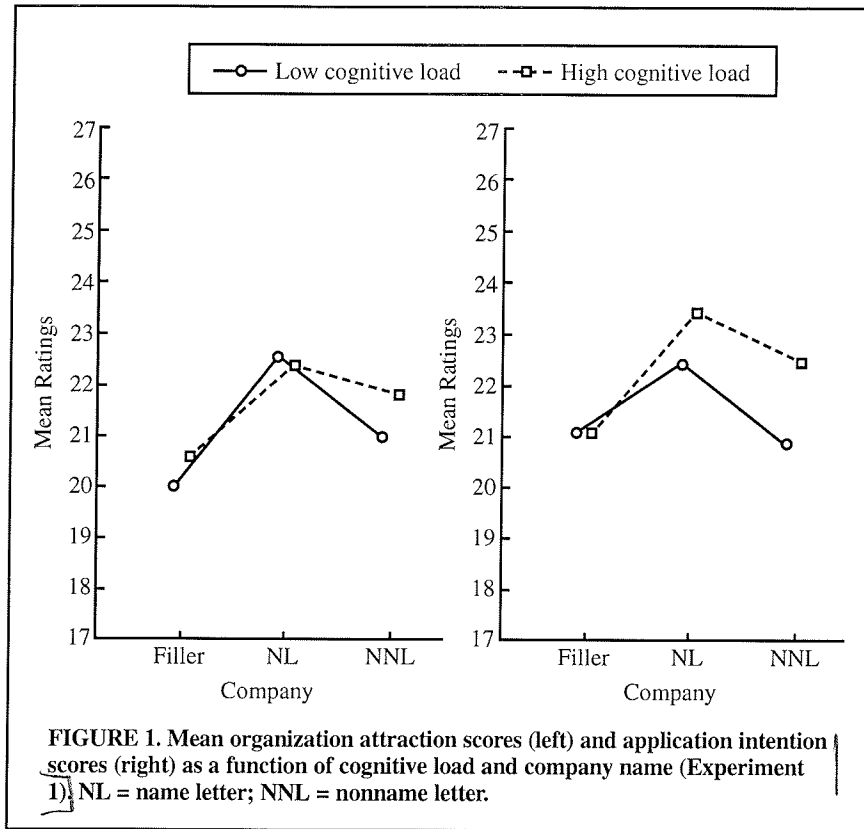
Results

To test H_1 , we conducted two repeated-measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with cognitive load (manipulated between-subjects effect: low vs. high) and company (manipulated within-subjects effect: filler name, name-letter name, nonname-letter name) as independent variables and organizational attraction scores and application intention scores as dependent variables. Figure 1 shows mean attraction scores across participants as a function of company and load.

As expected, the effect of company on attraction scores was significant, $F(2, 144) = 5.03, p < .01, M SE = 15.29$. Planned comparisons showed that name-letter names received higher attraction scores ($M = 22.5$) than did the filler name ($M = 20.3$) and nonname-letter names ($M = 21.4$), $F(1, 73) = 15.22, p < .001, M SE = 12.69$ and $F(1, 73) = 4.00, p < .05, M SE = 14.31$, respectively. Thus, H_1 was supported.

The effect of cognitive load and its interaction with company were not significant (both $F_s < 1$). Although Figure 1 shows a small tendency for a larger name-letter effect in the low cognitive load condition than in the high cognitive load condition, planned comparisons showed that this interaction was not significant ($F < 1$). Thus, H_2 was not supported.

A similar pattern of results emerged when we analyzed the intention ratings. Mean scores across participants as a function of company and load are also



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displayed in Figure 1. Again, the effect of company was significant, $F(2, 144) = 4.75, p < .01, M SE = 12.63$. Planned comparisons showed that name-letter names received higher application intention scores ($M = 22.9$) than did the filler name ($M = 21.1$), and the nonname-letter names ($M = 21.6$), $F(1, 73) = 8.25, p < .01, M SE = 13.00$ and $F(1, 73) = 5.17, p < .05, M SE = 13.32$, respectively. Again, the effect of cognitive load and its interaction with company were not significant (both F s < 1). Although Figure 1 shows a small tendency for a larger name-letter effect in the low cognitive-load condition than in the high cognitive-load condition, planned comparisons showed that this interaction was not significant ($F < 1$).

Discussion

The aforementioned results are straightforward. Regarding H_1 , we obtained a clear name-letter effect on both job-choice intentions. Participants were more attracted to company names that matched their own name and showed stronger

intentions to apply to work there. These findings constitute the first empirical evidence for the existence of a name-letter effect in organization attraction and job-choice intentions.

For H_2 , we predicted that the name-letter effect would interact with cognitive load, as Wilson et al.'s (2000) dual attitudes theory has outlined. Regarding this issue, the results are clear: The obtained name-letter effect did not interact with cognitive load on the attraction and intention scores. This lack of effect is unlikely to have been caused by the nature of our cognitive load manipulation because we used the same load procedure as did previous studies that investigated cognitive load effects on attitudes (e.g., Koole et al., 2001; Swann et al., 1990).

EXPERIMENT 2

Because we found a name-letter effect for job-choice intentions but failed to find the expected interaction effect with cognitive load in Experiment 1, we decided to test the same hypotheses again using a different design. At the beginning of this article, on the basis of the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), we argued that individuals would have an implicit and explicit attitude toward the companies presented in Experiment 1. Depending on the cognitive load, reported attitudes would be based more on individuals' explicit attitude (low cognitive load) or implicit attitude (high cognitive load). One possible explanation for the observed effects in Experiment 1 is that participants did not have an explicit attitude toward the stimuli because they were aware that the names were fictional and referred to one company. Thus, participants may not have disposed of any meaningful information or motivation to retrieve or construct an explicit attitude toward the names. As a consequence, the implicit attitude toward the company names, as reflected by the name-letter effect, may have emerged as the default attitude in both high and low cognitive load conditions. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we presented a list of names of real companies with job vacancies at that time. Because the names we presented referred to real and different companies, participants may have been more motivated and informed to retrieve or construct an explicit attitude toward the companies. Thus, we again expected that under low cognitive load conditions, attitude reports would be based on this actively constructed explicit attitude, whereas under high cognitive load conditions the implicit attitude would be dominant, leading to stronger name-letter preferences in the high cognitive load condition.

Experiment 2 also further extends the findings of Experiment 1 by examining whether the name-letter effect also occurs for job-choice intentions when weaker name-letter associations are present. In Experiment 1, the company names shared the first three letters of the first name of participants (e.g., Keloski was the company name when Kelly was the participant's name). One may argue that this is a weak test of the name-letter effect because of the strong name

association, which is highly unlikely to occur in the real world. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we presented a list of real company names each beginning with a different letter of the alphabet. This list enabled us to test whether the observed name-letter effect also generalized to initials (i.e., one letter) of the first and last names of participants (for a similar approach, see Hodson & Olson, 2005). This is a more conservative test of the name-letter effect.

Method

Participants and Design

Participants were 70 final-year students (32 men, 38 women) who were attending a university in Belgium. The mean age of participants was 22.1 years ($SD = 1.5$ years). Students received a free movie ticket (valued at approximately US\$8) for participating. Mean application experience was 2.91 times ($SD = 4.72$ times), with 71.8% of participants having applied for a job at least one time. None of the participants had previously applied for a job in a company that we included in the list. We randomly assigned all participants to a high or low cognitive load manipulation.

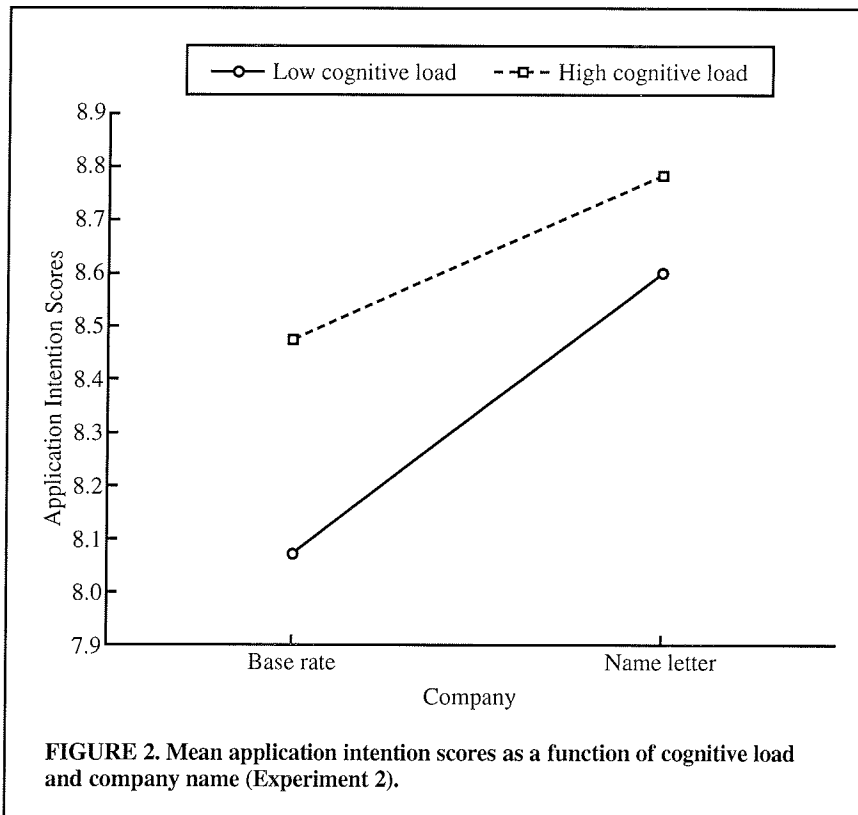
Procedure and Materials

We introduced our study to the participants as one that focused on college students' job search intentions in the final months before graduation. After the cognitive load manipulation (identical to Experiment 1), participants received a list of 26 company names, 1 for each letter of the alphabet, and the presentation order on the page was randomly determined. We told the participants that each company published at least one job advertisement in the last month. To compose the list, we randomly selected company names from that month's edition (January, 2006) of a Belgian paper that published job advertisements so that we obtained a real company name for each letter of the alphabet (e.g., Sanctorum, Duvinox, Artexis). For each company, participants completed two items measuring their job-choice intentions on a 7-point Likert-type scale (Cronbach's alphas ranged from .57 to .82 for the different companies). The items were "If this company invited me for a job interview, I would go" and "I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company." We chose to use only these two items for brevity and because application intentions were the best predictor of actual job choice in the real world (Van Hooft et al., 2004). Last, after completing their intentions toward the companies, participants completed the same hypothesis-awareness questions as in Experiment 1. On the basis of two independent coders' judgments of these open-ended responses, no participants were excluded from further analyses because no one reported any suspicions concerning the hypothesis of our study.

Results

For each participant, we calculated a base rate job-choice intention score; this was the mean job-choice intention score across 24 companies, excluding the ratings for the 2 companies that matched the first or last name initials. Then, we compared these base rates with the mean job-choice intention scores for companies that matched the participant's first or last name (name-letter condition) initials in a repeated-measures effect ANOVA with company (within-subjects effect: base rate vs. name-letter) and cognitive load (between-subjects effect: low vs. high) as independent variables. Figure 2 shows the mean application intention scores by company and cognitive load.

Replicating the findings from Experiment 1 and again supporting H_1 , the effect of company was significant, $F(1, 68) = 9.18, p < .01, M SE = 0.66$. Job-choice intentions scores were significantly higher for companies that matched participants' first or last name initials (name-letter condition, $M = 8.69, SD = 1.57$) than for other companies (base rate condition, $M = 8.27, SD = 1.22$).



Again, H_2 was not supported: The effect of cognitive load and its interaction with company were not significant (both $F_s < 1$).

Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 are similar to those of Experiment 1. Again, we obtained a significant name-letter effect: Companies that matched participants' first or last name initials received significantly higher job-choice intention scores than did companies that did not. This finding suggests that the results from Experiment 1 generalized to real companies that share only one initial with potential job applicants, instead of the first three letters (Experiment 1). Also, similar to Experiment 1 and contrary to predictions of the dual attitudes theory (Wilson et al., 2000), this name-letter effect did not interact with cognitive load, even though we used the same cognitive load manipulation as have studies that yielded support for moderating effects of this factor (Swann et al., 1990; Koole et al., 2001).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The obtained results are twofold. First, across two experimental studies, we found evidence for a name-letter effect in job-choice intentions toward companies. Participants had more favorable attitudes and were more likely to apply to companies that shared one (Experiment 1) or three letters (Experiment 2) with their own names. Second, in both experiments, the hypothesized interaction effect between cognitive load and name letters was not significant. Name-letter preferences in job-choice intentions appeared equally strong in high and low cognitive load conditions. In the remainder of this article, we discuss the theoretical implications of these findings. It should be noted that the main contribution of our study is on a theoretical level because it advances our understanding of job-choice intentions and name-letter preferences. From a practical point of view, the current findings are limited in suggesting practical guidelines to develop specific recruitment procedures.

The findings of our study bring further evidence for the generalizability of the name-letter effect in daily life decisions (Pelham et al., 2005) and suggest the existence of implicit moderators of rational thinking processes commonly assumed to drive organizational attraction and job choice (e.g., Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Van Hooft et al., 2004). Some caution is needed when interpreting the obtained findings. In our study, final-year students reported their attitudes and intentions toward fictional organizations (Experiment 1) or company names. No other information about the employing organizations was available. It is possible that name-letter preferences may only influence job-choice intentions when they are salient; namely, in the absence of other information. The salience of name letters and, thus, the implicit influence on job choice may change when more information on the employing companies becomes

available. Further research is needed to test the robustness of implicit name-letter preferences on job choices.

Name-letter preferences emerged not only when strong name-letter connections were present (Experiment 1) but also when individuals only shared their first and last name initials with the company (Experiment 2). The majority of previous name-letter studies are based on archival, correlational data; thus, we cannot completely rule out third-variable explanations (for an exception, see Jones et al., 2004). Our experimental study extends this research by providing solid experimental evidence that allows for causal inferences about the role of the name letter in real-life decisions. A question for further research is why this and other studies (Pelham et al., 2005) found support for name-letter preferences in daily life decisions and attitudes, whereas a few other studies failed to find such support (e.g., Hodson & Olson, 2005). A plausible theory that Hodson and Olson advanced is that name-letter effects should especially emerge for attitudes toward objects (e.g., brands) that serve a value-expressive function. The current findings seem to support this theory. Where people choose to work communicates something about their identity, themselves, and how they feel about their selves (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). For example, research on organizational attraction and employer image has shown that holding a company in low regard has a negative effect on the self-esteem of employees (Lievens, Van Hove, & Anseel, 2007). As a result, organizational preferences may be particularly susceptible to implicit self-esteem effects such as the name-letter effect. Therefore, an interesting route for future research is to examine whether value-expressive characteristics of objects moderate the prevalence of the name-letter effect in attitudes. Another possible moderator to consider is the importance of the decision to be made. It is possible that important choices such as job choice decisions involve a level of self-threat-making name-letter preferences more salient which may not be the case with more mundane preferences (e.g., food, leisure activities).

Second, our finding that cognitive load did not moderate the name-letter effect contrasts with previous research showing stronger self-enhancement effects under high cognitive load (e.g., Koole et al., 2001; Paulhus, 1993; Swann et al., 1990). As expected, we found a clear name-letter effect under high cognitive load but why did we find an equally strong name-letter preference under a low cognitive load? A possible explanation that our cognitive load manipulation was ineffective seems unlikely because we used the same manipulation as did previous researchers whose findings yielded significant cognitive load effects. One could argue that our studies lacked statistical power to detect cognitive load effects. Again, this seems unlikely because of our large participant sample ($N = 74$ and $N = 70$, respectively). Also, previous researchers (e.g., Koole et al.) who used the same cognitive load manipulation and similar participants found an effect of cognitive load on name-letter preferences with fewer participants ($N = 50$). A more viable, theoretical explanation is that the implicit attitude was also the most accessible attitude in the low load condition and, therefore, activated automatically. Wilson

et al. (2000) noted that, apart from the cognitive capacity, the motivation to retrieve the explicit attitude may also affect whether people report their implicit or explicit attitude. Although we manipulated participants' cognitive capacity, it is possible that individuals were not motivated to retrieve an explicit attitude (or construct one). It is possible that increasing people's motivation (e.g., by instructing participants that they would have to explain their preferences) in combination with a low cognitive load, would significantly decrease name-letter preferences. However, pending further investigation, this suggestion remains speculative.

Although scientists and laypeople think human behavior, such as job choice, is rationally driven (Cable & Turban, 2001), our findings show that unconscious processes, such as name-letter preferences, at least partially underlie the preferences toward companies. Our research further complements other research that has shown that a range of unconscious processes influence people's attitudes, cognitions, and interpersonal behavior (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Our findings may have important implications, such as in the domain of applied psychology, in which theoretical models of job choice should take implicit processes into account.

AUTHOR NOTES

Frederik Anseel is an assistant professor in the Department of Personnel Management, Work, and Organizational Psychology at Ghent University, Belgium. His research interests mainly focus on strategies for enhancing feedback interventions in organizations. **Wouter Duyck** is an assistant professor in the Department of Experimental Psychology at Ghent University. His research interests mainly focus on psycholinguistics, computational modeling, and number processing.

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