

Stealing “lost” USB keys

Elmer Lastdrager, Lorena Montoya, Pieter Hartel, Marianne Junger

Purpose and Objectives

We want to investigate the influence of the victim and situation on stealing. We intend to test this by using the lost-letter technique from Merritt and Fowler (1948). The theory of the lost-letter technique is based on altruism: people can steal the letter, or behave altruistically and deliver it. In this study, we use USB keys instead of letters. In line with the results of Farrington and Knight (1979), we expect that USB keys that appear to be owned by a female are more likely to be returned than USB keys that are owned by males; USB keys indicating important content will be returned more than USB keys indicating less important content; subjects walking towards a service desk are more likely to return USB keys than subjects who are walking away from a service desk.

Methodology

We replicate the study of Farrington and Knight (1979) in a university environment. One hundred USB keys will be dropped near service desks of several university buildings. The units of analysis are individuals: the passers-by (subjects) that can ignore them or pick them up. The actions of the subjects will be observed and recorded by master students.

Three universities will participate (UT, RUN, TU/e). The population of subjects consists of passers-by of the service desk. These could be students, employees or contractors of the university. Subjects are self-selected and are unaware of any experiment. There is no risk for the subjects: if they pick up a USB key, they are allowed to keep it. The student observers will not contact the subjects. Students work in teams of 2-3 and drop the USB keys while pretending to tie their shoelace. The students will observe the USB key from +/- 25m away.

We employ a 2x2 between-subjects factorial design. There are 4 experimental conditions (i.e. the independent variables, which are the characteristics used to predict the dependent variable): male/female owner and importance of the data (both indicated with a sticker on the USB key). The control condition consists of USB keys in their original box (indicating no data and no known owner). The dependent variable (i.e. what we aim to predict) is binomial: return or non-return of the USB key.

We will employ the same statistical tools as Farrington and Knight used in their experiment. This allows us to compare our research to theirs. We will do a univariate analysis of variance (i.e. each individual variable in relation to the dependent variable). Additionally, we will create multivariate logistic regression models to explain the variance of the dependent variable using the predictor variables.

References

- C. Merritt and R. Fowler, “The pecuniary honesty of the public at large,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 90– 93, 1948.
- D.P. Farrington and B. J. Knight, “Two non-reactive field experiments on stealing from a ‘lost’ letter,” *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 277– 284, 1979.

3. Checklist for the principal researcher when submitting a request to the EC or the EC member for an assessment of the ethical permissibility of the proposed research

3.1 General

When answering the questions, it is advisable to consult the chapter on standardized research because the answers will be considered with this in mind.

1. Title of the project: *Stealing "lost" USB keys*
2. Principal researcher (with doctoral research also a professor): *Pieter Hartel & Marianne Junger*
3. Researchers/research assistants (doctoral candidates, students etc. where known): *Lorena Montoya, Elmer Lastdrager, about 30 master students*
4. Department responsible for the research: *EWI/DIES + MB/MR&V*
5. Location where research will be conducted: *Near the reception of UT, RUN & TU/e buildings*
6. Short description of the project (about 100 words): *In a nonreactive field experiment we intend to investigate the influence of the victim and the situation on stealing. USB keys will be dropped near the reception of a university building, waiting for passers-by to either ignore the USB key, to pick it up and take it away, or to pick it up and hand it in as lost property to the reception desk. The actions of the subjects will be observed and recorded by master students training to become researchers. The research hypothesis is that USB keys apparently belonging to a female are more likely to be returned than those belonging to a male. This is basically a replication study of: D. P. Farrington and B. J. Knight. Stealing from a "lost" letter: Effects of victim characteristics. Criminal Justice and Behaviour, 7(4):423-436, Dec 1980. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/009385488000700406>*
7. Expected duration of the project and research period: *1 day (5 Sep 2012)*
8. Number of experimental subjects: *about 50*
9. EC member of the department (if available): *Dr Pieter Hartel*

3.2 Questions about fulfilled general requirements and conditions

1. Has this research or similar research by the department been previously submitted to the EC?
 Yes,
 No
If yes, what was the number allocated to it by the EC?
Explanatory notes:
2. Under which category does the research fall with regard to the consideration of Medical / Not medical? (Also see Chapter 4.)
 Category D
 Category A
 Category B
 Category C
 Uncertain, explain why
Explanatory notes: *This is non-medical research with negligible risk, hence category D.*
3. Are adult, competent subjects selected?
 Yes, indicate in which of the ways named in the general requirements and conditions this is so
 No, explain
 Uncertain, explain why
Explanatory notes: *The subjects are mostly adults from the staff and students of the three universities who are expected to pass by the reception areas.*

4. Are the subjects completely free to participate in the research, and to withdraw from participation whenever they wish and for whatever reason?
- Yes
 No, explain why not
 Uncertain, explain why
- Explanatory notes: *The subjects do not know that they are participating in the research but it is completely free from risks. Subjects who choose to keep the USB stick that they found may keep it. The researchers will merely observe and record what the subjects do and they will not approach the subjects. The sticks are fully functional and brand new so it carries no data that might harm the computer of the subject.*
5. In the event that it may be necessary to screen experimental subjects in order to reduce the risks of adverse effects of the research: Will the subjects be screened?
- Screening is not necessary, explain why not
 Yes, explain how
 No, explain why not
 Uncertain, explain why
- Explanatory notes: *The risk for subjects is nil, hence no screening is required.*
6. Does the method used allow for the possibility of making an accidental diagnostic finding which the experimental subject should be informed about? (See general conditions.)
- No, the method does not allow for this possibility
 Yes, and the subject has given signed assent for the method to be used
 Yes, but the subject has not given signed assent for the method to be used
 Uncertain, explain why
- Explanatory notes: *Not applicable. No diagnosis will be made. The researchers will not be able to discover anything about the subjects that any other bystander could not discover too.*
7. Are subjects briefed before participation and do they sign an informed consent beforehand in accordance with the general conditions?
- Yes, attach the information brochure and the form to be signed
 No, explain why not
 Uncertain, explain why
- Explanatory notes: *Subjects are not briefed because this would invalidate the research. Subjects are not debriefed because the participation in the experiment cannot have any adverse effect on the subject and the subjects remain anonymous.*
8. Are the requirements with regard to anonymity and privacy satisfied as stipulated in § 5.2.7?
- Yes
 No, explain why not
 Uncertain, explain why
- Explanatory notes: *All researchers will complete and sign a PII form to state that they will treat all data according to § 5.2.7.*
9. If any deception should take place, does the procedure comply with the general terms and conditions (no deception regarding risks, accurate debriefing)?
- No deception takes place
 The deception which takes place complies fully with the conditions (explain)
 The deception which takes place does not comply with the conditions (explain)
- If deception does take place, attach the method of debriefing
- Explanatory notes: *No deception takes place as from the point of view of the subject the lost USB keys used in the experiment cannot be distinguished from truly lost USB keys. There is no risk for the subjects.*
10. Is it possible that after the recruitment of experimental subjects, a substantial number will withdraw from participating because, for one reason or another, the research is unpleasant?

No

Yes, that is possible

If yes, then attach the recruitment text paying close attention to what is stated about this in the protocol.

Explanatory notes. *Not applicable.*

3.3 Questions regarding specific types of standard research

Answer the following questions based on the department to which the research belongs.

11. Does the research fall **entirely** within one of the descriptions of standard research as set out in the described standard research of the department?

Yes, go to question 12

No, go to question 13

Uncertain, explain what about, and go to question 13

Explanatory notes:

12. If yes, what type of research is it? Give a more detailed specification of parts of the research which are not mentioned by name in this description (for example: What precisely are the stimuli? Or: What precisely is the task?)

The Lost USB key is an instance of our standard laboratory research, where we use the campus as a living laboratory. The particulars are as follows

- *5x8=40 USB keys with sticker containing name and phone number will be "lost"*
- *2x2 between subjects factorial design*
- *4 experimental conditions*
 - *Male/Female name on sticker and*
 - *Important/Scratch indication of the importance of the "data"*
- *1 control condition (10 USB sticks)*
 - *No sticker*
- *Dependent variable*
 - *Return/Non return*
- *USB keys "lost" near reception of UT, RUN, or TU/e building on Wed 5 Sep 2012*
- *Same procedure each time: one of the students ties shoelace, drops USB key, walks 25m, observes what the subject does*
- *Student observation team notes date, time, location, name on sticker USB key, subject dress, age, gender, whether the subject is alone or has companions, and subject action*
- *Students will work in teams of 2/3*
- *Only one team will be active at the same time per reception area*
- *No more than three teams per reception area over the whole day*
- *We have permission from David Korringa, head of facility management to perform the experiment, but only at the receptions of:*
 - *UT: Cubicus, Carré, Horst, ITC, Ravelijn, Vrijhof, ITC*
 - *RUN: Huygens*
 - *TU/e: Potentiaal*

13. If no, or if uncertain, give as complete a description as possible of the research. Refer where appropriate to the standard descriptions and indicate the differences with your research. In any case, all possible relevant data for an ethical consideration should be provided.