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How does the email matter to the civic honesty? A comment on Cohn et al. (2019)

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Abstract

Cohn et al. (2019) designed the field experiment about the lost wallets across 40 countries to examine whether people attempt to contact the owners to return the 17,000 wallets. We discussed the design flaw in their experimental settings by reanalyzing the relationship between the rates of wallet return, in the Cohn et al. (2019)'s data, and the percentage of the Internet penetration (over population) as an upper bound of proportion email users. We found that countries with limited access to email have a lower rate of wallets' return after controlling other factors. Furthermore, we re-visited the Abeler et al. (2019)'s aggregated data to study whether the dishonest behaviors in the laboratory could predict the actual honesty behavior or not. It turns out that what happens in the lab makes no sense to our reality. This comment contributes to the extant literature about an experimental designation for honesty studies.

KEYWORDS

comment, experiment, honesty

1 | INTRODUCTION

Honesty is not an abstract definition because Burton (1963) indicated that a morally correct conduct would be defined as the honest behavior. Therefore, it is difficult to judge the behavior between failing to return a lost wallet and the tendency of taking possession of others' property in the study of Cohn

et al. (2019) if we only look at the rate of wallet return. Obviously, someone attempting to contact the owner's wallet should be taken into account as the dishonest behavior although the communicating tools are not supported to their actions. While Cohn et al. (2019) claimed that the main focus of this study is the differences in returning rate of between wallets with and without money, we indicate that the flaw in Cohn et al.'s experimental design might decrease the validity of their contributions.

The provided contact information in the wallet is likely to be insufficient for respondents to fully approach the owners. To be more precise, the volunteers in Cohn et al.'s experiment gave the "lost wallet" to lost-and-found and waited for returning it. Unfortunately, there are only name and email address that are provided in business card. This clearly leads to the unrealistic information and impossible task for participants to return a lost wallet. Undeniably, the countries with a lower rate of email usage or more difficulties to access Internet would have lower rates of returning the lost wallet, which should not be claimed due to dishonesty. Instead, the relevant information such as telephone number, personal home address, and working place addresses would considerably increase the rates of wallet return because of its availability and feasibility. Many previous studies used their addresses to receive the misdirected and lost items such as Franzen and Pointner (2013), Farrington (1979), West (2005), and so forth. Additionally, what if the recipients brought the lost wallet to the professional officers, for example, police station, etc. Then, the police officer might wait for someone who lost this wallet to contact the nearest station to pick up. Should we consider this behavior as dishonesty? Although Cohn et al. (2019) standardized the consistent settings across countries by using email address, we believe that one communication method might come with a strong confounding factor in the participant's behavior in terms of returning the lost wallet. In addition, it is likely that the authors did not consider the cultural differences in using practices of communication across countries. For example, in China, using emails to communicate could be seldom because chatting, for example WeChat, is likely to be the preferred method of human communication here (Josh Horwitz, 2017). Recently, China Internet Network Information Center (2018) claimed that Chinese people use their telephone and social media, including WeChat more frequently than writing an email. More noticeably, the lack of email usage does not appear in only China (Makarem & Antoun, 2016). This might be a problem in the other developing countries. Therefore, we find it difficult to put ourselves to convince the reliable results, captured the "*civic honesty*," arising from only one communication tool. To support our discussion, the following section will demonstrate our statistical analysis based on correlation and regression between the Internet penetration, proxied for the upper bound of email usage, and the returning rate of lost wallet, considered as the honesty level.

2 | FINDINGS

2.1 | The Internet penetration ratio and honesty

We revisited the published data in Cohn et al. (2019) for our main statistical test. Moreover, we also obtained the Internet penetration over the total population by country-level from the Internet World Stats.[1] Since there is no email usage ratio over the population, our proxy could be considered as an upper bound of proportion email users. Finally, we also used the GDP per capita and the Corruption Perception Index (2018) for further control variables. The correlation between the ratio of returning a wallet containing no money and the percentage of Internet penetration (over population) is 0.7223 ($p < 0.01$) while this ratio for a wallet containing money is 0.7532 ($p < 0.01$). It implies that there exists a high correlation between the number of people using Internet and the returning rate at the country level. Moreover, the latter correlation is slightly higher if the lost wallet contains money. It means

that the keepers in the higher Internet penetration ratio would probably make their effort to return the wallet having money since people have an aversion feeling to viewing oneself as a thief (Cohn et al., 2019). Both correlation coefficients are positive at 1% significance level. Table 1 exhibits the regression models that the penetration ratio could be considered as explanatory factor to the rate of wallet return among 38 countries. Noticeably, all coefficients of Internet penetration are significantly positive. Moreover, the coefficients of regression for "*money wallet*" are higher than the "no money wallet," which makes senses that people are more honest when money is involved. Additionally, Figure 1 represents the linear relationship between the Internet penetration ratio and the rate of wallets' return. This includes extraneous aspects like Internet and email usages play a role to return a wallet.

Our results still remain robust when controlling the number of wallets in each country. Meanwhile, the Internet penetration ratio is insignificant when using the corruption perception index as the dependent variable, for with- and without GDP per capita. Therefore, Internet, known as important information intermediary, has a significant positive effect on human behavior in terms of returning the misdirected items.

2.2 | How do the lab-experiments predict the field-experiment?

We employed the published data of Abeler et al. (2019) to investigate whether the cheating ratio in laboratory could predict the field experiment or not. By revisiting the data of Abeler et al. (2019) including 429 experiments across 90 papers involving more than 44,000 participants across 47 countries, we ran the regression between dishonesty-in-lab and the rate of wallets' return and summarized our results in Table 2.

Interestingly, the coefficients of "*dishonesty-in-lab"* are insignificant across the different estimates, implying that what happens in the lab is less likely to predict the actual human behaviors in our life. Additionally, Gerlach et al. (2019) confirms that laboratory studies have the higher dishonesty than field experiments while our comment revisited the two novel and newly published data set indicates the contradictory results. In which, the dishonesty in laboratory study is lower than field experiment $F(6.64, 26, p < 0.01)$, implying different experimental paradigms come to different findings.

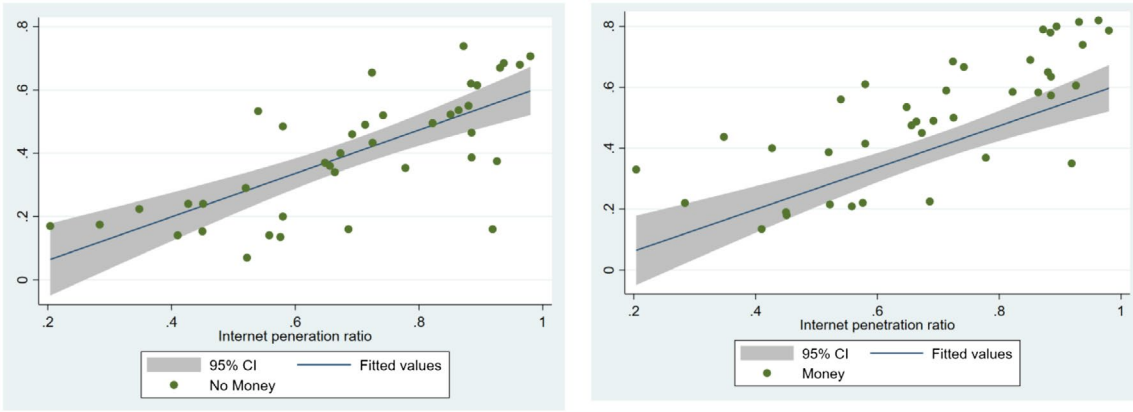
TABLE 1 Relationship between ratio of Internet penetration over population and rate of wallet return[a]

Variable	No money (1)	No money (2)	Money (1)	Money (2)
Internet penetration ratio	0.494***	0.390*	0.519**	0.469*
	[3.39]	[1.70]	[2.83]	[1.72]
Corruption perception index	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.002
	[1.26]	[0.90]	[1.36]	[1.05]
Log (GDP per capita)		0.033		0.016
		[0.75]		[0.27]
Constant	−0.058	−0.279	0.008	−0.097
	[−0.91]	[−0.91]	[0.12]	[−0.25]
R-squared (%)	51.52	52.01	56.88	56.99

Notes: List of 40 countries is available upon request. The dependent variables are the rate of wallets' return.

[a]The rate of wallet return is available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/honesty.

***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.



(a) No money in the lost wallet **(b)** Money in the lost wallet

FIGURE 1 The linear prediction plots [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 2 Relationship of country-level honesty between laboratory and field experiments

Variable	No money (1)	No money (2)	Money (1)	Money (2)
Dishonesty-in-lab	0.206	0.165	0.068	0.029
	[0.93]	[0.94]	[0.31]	[0.17]
Corruption perception index	0.007***	0.002	0.006***	0.002
	[5.52]	[1.05]	[7.34]	[0.95]
Log (GDP per capita)		0.097**		0.092*
		[2.39]		[1.81]
Constant	−0.04	−0.73**	0.119	−0.0530
	[−0.48]	[−2.61]	[1.57]	[−1.43]
R-squared (%)	51.49	58.88	51.93	0.5893

Notes: List of 27 countries is available upon request. The dependent variables are the rate of wallets' return. The "*dishonesty-in-lab*" is the average report by country, representing the dishonesty from the study of Abeler et al. (2019).

***$p < 0.01$; **$p < 0.05$; *$p < 0.1$.

3 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The internet penetration proxy is more significant than natural logarithm of GDP per cap to predict the money return rate. Internet penetration rate can be understood as some kind of upper bound of proportion email users, for instance, if they do not have internet, they would not use emails. Therefore, it is reasonable to see that in a country with less access to emails, there are less return of the wallet. In sum, we are concerned that this paper overlooks the alternative communication tools, which significantly influence the returning rate of wallet. More importantly, this is not only the case of China but also other countries which have the lower Internet or email usages; for example, South Africa, Indonesia, Kenya, Peru, and so forth. Thus, the notion that the only and solely email contacts and the returning rate of lost wallet might mislead the level of civic honesty.

In conclusion, we have to admit that this is an interesting paper on psychological response to financial incentives; the study is facing the huge flaw in designing the proper, consistent, and logically cultural setting for their experiments. By using the correlation and OLS regression, we found that the Internet penetration (also proxy as the email usage) could predict the returning rate for the lost wallet, which oversimplifies by providing only one contact method – email address. Meanwhile, the keeper wants to return but the current condition does not allow them to do that. It should not be considered as "dishonest behavior." More importantly, by using the two large dataset in honesty studies, we found that there is no relationship in what happens between laboratory and field experiment. This will open the interesting discussion regarding the heterogeneous behaviors in the different paradigms of the honesty study. It is still a fruitful avenue.

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ENDNOTE

[1] See more on https://www.internetworldstats.com/

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