Names from Nowhere? Fictitious Country Names in Survey Vignettes Affect Experimental Results

RESEARCH NOTE

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Using fictitious country names in hypothetical scenarios is widespread in experimental international relations research. We survey sixty-four peer-reviewed articles to find that it is justified by reference to necessary “neutralization” compared to real-world scenarios. However, this neutralization effect has not been independently tested. Indeed, psychology and toponymy scholarship suggest that names entail implicit cues that can inadvertently bias survey results. We use a survey experiment to test neutralization and naming effects. We find not only limited evidence for neutralization, but also little evidence for systematic naming effects. Instead, if we find that respondents were often more willing to support using force against fictitious countries than even adversarial real-world countries. Real-world associations may provide a “deterrent” effect not captured by hypothetical scenarios with fictitious country names. In turn, fictionalization may decrease the stakes as experienced by respondents. Researchers should therefore carefully explain rationales for and expected effects of fictitious country names, and test their fictitious names independently.

El uso de nombres de países ficticios en escenarios hipotéticos está muy extendido en la investigación experimental en el ámbito de las RRII. En un estudio de 64 artículos revisados por pares, observamos que esto se justifica con referencia a la neutralización necesaria en comparación con los escenarios del mundo real. Sin embargo, este efecto de neutralización no se ha comprobado de forma independiente. De hecho, los estudios en el campo de la psicología y de la topónomia sugieren que los nombres conllevan pistas implícitas que pueden hacer que los resultados de las encuestas sean menos confiables. Utilizamos un experimento para comprobar los efectos de neutralización y asignación de nombres. Encontramos pruebas limitadas de neutralización, pero también pocas pruebas de efectos sistemáticos de la asignación de nombres. En cambio, observamos que los encuestados suelen estar más dispuestos a apoyar el uso de la fuerza contra países ficticios que incluso contra países reales. Las asociaciones del mundo real pueden proporcionar un efecto disuasorio que no se capta en los escenarios hipotéticos con nombres de países ficticios. A su vez, la fictionalización puede disminuir la importancia de los nombres ficticios de los países, y comprobar sus nombres ficticios de forma independiente.

L’utilisation de noms de pays fictifs dans les scénarios hypothétiques est courante dans la recherche expérimentale en relations internationales. Nous examinons 64 articles vérifiés par des pairs pour conclure qu’ils se justifient par référence à la nécessité de la neutralisation par rapport aux scénarios réels. Néanmoins, cet effet de neutralisation n’a pas fait l’objet d’une évaluation distincte. En effet, les chercheurs en psychologie et toponymie estiment que les noms véhiculent des indications implicites susceptibles d’influencer les résultats d’enquête. Nous avons recours à une expérience de sondage pour vérifier la neutralisation et les effets d’appellation. Nous ne recueillons qu’un nombre limité de preuves attestant de la neutralisation, mais aussi des effets d’appellation systématiques. Nous observons plutôt que les personnes sondées ont plus souvent tendance à soutenir l’usage de la force à l’encontre de pays fictifs que de pays réels, même en Europe. Les liens avec le monde réel peuvent produire un effet “dissuasif” non représenté par les scénarios hypothétiques incluant des noms de pays fictifs. La fictionalisation peut, qu’en elle, réduire les enjeux envisagés par les personnes sondées. Ainsi, les chercheurs devraient expliquer précisément les raisons motivant leur utilisation de noms de pays fictifs, et les effets attendus, mais aussi essayer leurs noms fictifs séparément.

Introduction

Experimental surveys have become an increasingly popular tool in IR research. They are used widely to gauge attitudes, simulate decisional dynamics, and elucidate psychological and behavioral concepts in political science and

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international relations (IR). They underpin work on peace and conflict, regime theory, foreign policy decision-making, public opinion, and media, as well as political psychology (e.g., Beer, Healy, and Bourne 2004; Hudson and Butler 2010; Mintz, Yang, and McDermott 2011; McDermott 2011a; Jensen, Mukherjee, and Bernhard 2014). Frequently, such research employs experimental surveys with vignettes describing hypothetical scenarios that involve fictitious countries (e.g., Kerej斯坦) or abstracted countries (e.g., “a country”). We have identified sixty-four peer-reviewed articles in political science and IR (published between 1971 and 2021) with a total of eighty-six unique fictitious countries in experimental vignettes (not including abstract names, e.g., “the state”).

While the reasoning behind the selection of a particular fictitious name is often not articulated, the assumption that fictitious or abstract country names function as a kind of empty placeholder and therefore have a neutralizing effect on experimental results underlies much of this research. Fictitious or abstract names should therefore remove bias and increase the validity of results. However, this assumption (the “neutralization hypothesis”) has not itself been empirically tested. Indeed, based on insights from toponymic, linguistic, and psychological research, fictitious country names are likely to contain implicit cues that can bias participant responses (“naming effects”). Building on relevant literature from IR and political science (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018; Kreps and Roblin 2019; McDonald 2020; Croco, Hamner, and McDonald 2021; Brutger et al. 2022) and adapting a widely used scenario from experimental IR (Tomz and Weeks 2013), we investigate whether different fictitious names equally neutralize a real-world country, and whether there are naming effects depending on the fictitious name employed.

Our results do not uniformly support the neutralization hypothesis. At the same time, we find only limited evidence for the existence of systematic naming effects. Instead, we find that participants were more willing, across the board, to support attacking fictitious countries than real-world counterparts. This “fictionalization effect” applied to both fictitious countries and abstracted country names. We find that the respondents’ willingness to use force is highest against country names more easily identifiable as fictitious, slightly lower for abstracted country names, and weaker still for fictitious names that closely resemble real-life places (e.g., Kerej斯坦). These findings raise the question whether fictionalization of real-world countries in experimental vignettes is the best way to measure general attitudes toward various aspects of IR. Respondents may be more willing to use violence in a doubly costless setting: not only is the scenario hypothetical, the possible targets are also fictionalized or abstracted. We conclude with implications and suggestions for further research.

**Experimental Research and Fictitious Country Names**

Fictitious or abstract country names in experimental survey vignettes can pose internal validity problems when they bias respondents’ answers. While external validity concerns have been reviewed extensively (e.g., Mintz, Yang, and McDermott 2011; Haimmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015; Kreps and Roblin 2019), internal validity concerns are less often scrutinized. Internal validity concerns the extent to which evidence, for example, an experimental survey, can actually support a particular causal claim. It requires researchers to ensure that there are no unknown or unmeasured factors in research design or execution that could affect the results or indeed offer alternative (better) explanations (McDermott 2011b). This extends to experimental vignettes.

Vignette features (including wording, question order, and survey length) can bias responses regardless of the underlying characteristics ostensibly being measured. Even minor changes can change the perceived meaning of questions or vignettes (Pasek and Krosnick 2010, 43). Also, experimental surveys are cognitively taxing. This can lead respondents to knowingly or unknowingly use “shortcuts,” including preconceived notions, schemas, or prejudices, to guide their responses, thereby effectively reaching outside of the experiment (Groves et al. 2011, 219). The vignette’s features should not inadvertently incentivize these shortcuts to an extent that fundamentally skews results (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018).

The use of fictitious or abstract country names in experimental IR research has not been subject to much scholarly scrutiny. This extends to their potentially independent causal effects on survey responses (for initial insights, see Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018; Kreps and Roblin 2019; McDonald 2020; Croco, Hamner, and McDonald 2021; Brutger et al. 2022). This is interesting because fictitious country names are often used in experimental surveys to prevent inadvertent biasing in vignette design: authors seek to address an internal validity concern around the biasing effects of real-world country names. However, the idea that fictitious country names can help with this concern rests on untested assumptions, as we detail below.

Experimental vignettes have employed a multitude of fictitious aspects and characters, such as fictitious regions (Keller and Yang 2016), fictitious characters (Caspí, Olekalns, and Druckman 2017; Balmas 2018; Schwartz and Blair 2020), non-state entities (García and Geva 2016), or fictitious op-eds (Baele, Coan, and Sterck 2018). We focus on fictitious countries in particular for two reasons: (1) The state is central to most mainstream conceptions of the discipline and (perhaps therefore) (2) the use of fictitious countries is a pervasive and easily traceable phenomenon in experimental IR research.

Early examples of fictitious countries in experimental IR research include articles on simulations (as quasi-experiments) otherwise used to train diplomats and graduate students (Guetzkow 1959; Brody 1963; Winham and Bovis 1978, 1979). Morse and Gergen (1971) and Hopmann and Walcott (1976) start employing vignettes with fictitious countries to investigate IR questions. Experimental usage of fictitious countries then takes off with Beer et al.’s piece on information cues and foreign policy choice (Beer et al. 1987). Their scenario is modeled after the Falklands crisis and uses “Afslandia” and “Bagumba.” An A–B logic seems likely, but they do not explain these names further aside from calling them “unlikely” and set in a “fantasy world” (Beer et al. 1987, 708).

Since fictitious countries have become ubiquitous, experimental IR has employed a colorful range of candidates (e.g., Alpha, Ruritania, Cygnus, Erqat, and Moereland). Fictitious country names used in experimental vignettes are often “passed down” to a wider network with shared senior authors (Beer et al. 1995; Bourne et al. 1996; Healy et al. 2002), but amended to fit new research (Beer, Healy, and Bourne 2004). Mintz and Geva invented the most influential such fictitious setup to investigate domestic incentives for keeping the democratic peace (Geva, DeRouen, and Mintz 1993; Mintz and Geva 1993). As no real cases exist of democracies invading their neighbors, the authors used a scenario that “borrowed features from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait”
(Mintz and Geva 1993, 491). Around the original dyad of Gorendy and Raggol, consecutive authors added Winmont, Minalo, Kerzoune, Purportes, Vermaid, and Zorka (Mintz et al. 1997; Geva and Hanson 1999; Redd 2002; Christensen and Redd 2004; Mintz 2004; Rubenzer and Redd 2010; Horowitz and Redd 2017, 2018).

**Neutralization**

Most authors do not explain why they use fictitious country names. Boetcher discusses the unintended consequences of framing in vignettes, but uses fictitious countries without further explanation (Boetcher 1995, 577). Others mention their scenario’s real-world basis (Astorino-Courtois 2000; Keller and Yang 2008; Davies and Johns 2013, 2016, 349). Of the scholars that justify the selection of a fictitious country, most argue that it is aimed at increasing internal validity.

Specifically, they suggest that the fictionalization has a neutralizing effect compared to using real-world names. Using fictitious countries would allow scholars to avoid the biases and preconceptions that participants may have about real countries, which could undermine the experiment and muddy results (Beer et al. 1992, 323; Sirin 2011, 289; McLean and Robyver 2017, 239). Unlike real countries, participants should have no prior associations or particular feelings about a fictitious country. Instead, they will have to wholly rely on the information that is given to them by the experimental vignette, allowing for a “pure” test of experimental manipulations (Balmas 2018, 510; O’Brien, Leidner, and Tropp 2018, 950). The use of fictionalized countries should therefore increase the validity, reliability, and generalizability of their findings. For example, Balmas suggests that “participants [ … ] could not have had prior knowledge about the citizens of Cedria” and therefore “evaluated Cedian based only on their evaluation of its leader, which could have been derived only from the content of the article” (Balmas 2018, 510).

This argument also holds for abstract versions of country names (e.g., “country X”, “a foreign adversary”). Earlier authors seemed to have shied away from such abstraction, perhaps because a fictitious name increases memorability, which is often advantageous. Still, abstraction with “the/a country/state” seems to have become experimental standard (e.g., Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Peterson 2017; Kreps and Maxey 2018; Schwartz and Blair 2020; Tomz, Weeks, and Yahi-Milo 2020), presumably because this would further “neutralize” experimental results compared to fictitious names.

Participants are assumed to lack knowledge of fictitious or abstract countries and will therefore only use the information that is conveyed about the country in the vignette, rather than any preconceived notions or attitudes that bias their responses. Fictitious countries are thus supposedly “empty” placeholders well suited to robustness tests and generalization beyond specific real-world cases (Li et al. 2016, 1008). However, this neutralizing effect is an assumption: it should itself be experimentally tested in the context of IR scholarship. To do so, we formulate the following hypotheses:

**H1**: A change in real-world country name will affect respondents’ willingness to use force.

This first hypothesis tests whether respondents care about names provided to them in vignettes in the first place. It could be the case, otherwise, that preferences about using military forces are fixed independent of provided context (e.g., strict pacifism) or that respondents may not pay attention to names at all, or as much as other information also provided to them.

**H2**: A change from a real-world country name to a fictitious or abstract country name will affect respondents’ willingness to use force.

**H3**: Respondents’ willingness to attack a fictitious/abstract country will lie between their willingness to attack a positively associated real-world country and a negatively associated real-world country.

While there is no clear-cut prediction about how neutralization may affect results based on the above studies, it often seems to imply the presence of a baseline attitude about foreign policy that can be amplified or dampened based on the associated country. In this sense, neutralization can function as a kind of mid-point between positive bias, for example, associated with a close ally, and negative bias, for example, associated with a foreign adversary.

**Naming Effects**

Scholarship in linguistics, and in particular on onomatology and toponymy, has long suggested (and experimentally tested) naming effects. Different names, including fictitious ones, may entail implicit information that biases participant responses (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018).

Such naming effects could explain why neutralization might work for some names and not others, and what direction or strength we might expect the changes due to different names have, based on three types of interlinked cues that provide information on plausibility, familiarity, foreignness, and even value of different names: toponymic, lexicographic, and sound-symbolic.

Toponymic cues relate to knowledge of how place names usually work, and what these names mean or encode in terms of foreignness. Even fictitious names are usually oriented toward existing toponymy (e.g., in using endings such as –stan and –land). Some authors switch out real-world place names (e.g., of cities) for country names (McDermott and Cowden 2001; McDermott, Cowden, and Koopman 2002). This links to a plausibility requirement: to elicit reasonable responses, fictitious names must be believable to participants (Finch 1987, 111). Place names are revealing about a place’s “physical geography, culture, history, and population” (Kadmon 2000; Medway and Warnaby 2014, 154). For example, Winmont (Horowitz, Redd, and Ye 2014) or Highland (Schafer 1997, 1999) evokes hills or mountains. Place names also “evoke powerful images and connotations, contributing to the development of a sense of place” and help in “the social construction of space and the contested process of attaching meaning to places” (Graham and Howard 2012, 196). For example, Celesta (Keller and Yang 2016) evokes the sky and heaven. This induces cognitive effects, for example, that people tend to prefer places (they

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1 Perhaps authors enjoy inventing poignant or humorous names with hidden meanings, for example, Morse and Gergen’s (1971) Negreg or Dill and Schubiger’s (2021) Esor.

2 While, to our knowledge, this particular scholarship has not previously been introduced into IR, it connects with IR scholars’ increasing interest into the intersections of language, psychology, and IR. In particular, the perception of difference and its relevance for behavior has long been a focus in IR scholarship, especially in conflict studies (Kertzer and Tingley 2018). (See Fiereke 2002; Albert et al. 2008; McDermott 2011a; Kertzer and Tingley 2018).

3 Of the eighty-six fictitious country names we identified in experimental survey vignettes, fifteen fictitious country names end in –ia, six in –and, and two in –stan.
think are) more like their own, as well as according value judgments. Consider Westria that entails information about a geographical location, but could also be associated with “the West” as a sociocultural realm (Brooks and Valentino 2011). In turn, based on toponymic knowledge of English speakers, Drakhar (Keller and Yang 2016), Nizwar (Davies and Johns 2016), Bachran (Falomir-Pichastor et al. 2012), Kibagho (Terris and Tykocinski 2016), etc., may be associated with geographic and/or sociocultural spaces in Africa and the Middle East. Kuzeya (Sirin 2011) or Abazie might connote Eastern European or Central Asian countries (intentionally so in Falomir-Pichastor et al. 2012).

Lexicographic cues concern the degree of familiarity a name evokes given the respondent’s name lexicon. While Westria or Celesta might sound familiar compared to other known country names for an English-language speaker, Raggol might imply strangeness (Davies 1990, 208). In turn, we know from previous literature that the name lexicon interacts with sociocultural background and, importantly, normative judgments. For example, people are likely to be able to locate Kerejistan on a real-world map or even comment on its customs, regime type, etc., because they orient themselves toward what they do know (or think they know) about similarly named countries. It may not matter for this association whether the respondent knows that Kerejistan does not exist. Specific types of names become associated to associated characteristics precisely because names primarily function as referential markers (Bright 2003). The association of fictitious Kerejistan with, for example, Afghanistan in turn evokes value judgments, which may extend to factors under investigation, such as the legitimacy of killing noncombatants or the trustworthiness of leaders (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018).

Sound-symbolic cues aid in interpreting fictitious names based on language-specific sounds. This holds especially in contexts where information that might otherwise be considered crucial is lacking (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018). Sound symbolism suggests that there are relationships between the meaning of a word and certain letter combinations (producing sounds) it includes (Westbury et al. 2018, 122; Svanstessonn 2017 for a review). These nonarbitrary associations are based on word features and meanings already existing in the lexicon (Knoefelre et al. 2017; Westbury et al. 2018, 124). Sound symbolism relates to perceived “conventionality,” which in turn links with individual value judgments (Elsen 2017; Westbury et al. 2018). It thus imbues names with specific meaning: this may include, for example, size/shape, power (versus weakness), masculinity (versus femininity), and danger (versus safety) (Knoefelre et al. 2017). In marketing, different arrangements of vowels and consonants shape the interpretation of brand names (Klink 2000; Preziosi and Coane 2017). Consider the name Drakhar, whose consonant combinations (and the sounds they produce) may, for English speakers, be associated negatively: with harshness, darkness, danger, etc. Such inference of attribute meaning and evaluation through sound is automatic, uncontrollable, and outside of awareness (Yorkston and Menon 2004, 43).

Based on the above literature, we should find differences between the effects of various fictitious and abstract names (which we take from experimental IR literature and detail below) because of toponymic, lexicographic, and/or sound-symbolic cues.

**H₄:** An increase in toponymic cues evoking negative value judgments should increase respondents’ willingness to use force.

**H₅:** An increase in lexicographic cues evoking negative value judgments should increase respondents’ willingness to use force.

**H₆:** An increase in sound-symbolic cues evoking negative value judgments should increase respondents’ willingness to use force.

**Methods**

To test neutralization and naming effects of fictitious country names in experimental vignettes, we conducted an experimental survey through the YouGov Omnibus on July 25–26, 2019. Participants were representative of British adults (N = 1,613), and randomly assigned to treatment groups. Each treatment group was given the same vignette, with changes limited to the country name in a hypothetical scenario (full vignette and instructions in the online appendix).

Our vignette was based on Tomz and Weeks’ (2013) influential article on the democratic peace. It contained a disclaimer to participants that the scenario that we were describing was hypothetical, even though it might bear resemblance to then-current events. Where we used a fictitious country name, participants were also informed that it was a fictitious country. We did not include any potentially biasing information or other variables (regime type, alliances, military capabilities, etc.). Our experiment focuses on the effect of the difference in name only, rather than potential interaction effects between name and other information in more elaborate experiments. This allows the names to “soak up” some of the missing information respondents otherwise use to inform their choices. Absent this information, respondents are thus especially likely to use available cues. We have thus intentionally designed our experiment to be particularly sensitive to naming effects. This allows us to check whether names matter in the context of experimental IR, and whether the way they matter follows some systematic pattern (i.e., that suggested by naming effects scholarship).

A null result would indicate that even in an IR experiment explicitly designed to evoke naming effects (like ours), the difference in effect between various fictitious and abstract names is negligible. In turn, significant or mixed results would indicate the need for further research to assess the impact on specific experimental results, for example, in the form of replication studies, and for careful design of any future experimental vignettes.

The vignette described a situation in which a fictitious country was 6 months away from developing nuclear weapons, had unknown motivations and disposition toward the United Kingdom, and could be prevented from developing nuclear weapons if the UK military would strike its nuclear development sites. Participants were asked to rate their approval to attack the sites on a scale of 1 (“strongly disapprove”) to 7 (“strongly approve”). Participants were informed of the survey’s true purpose after they had answered and could withdraw consent (none did).

In addition to two real-world country names, we selected fictitious country names used in previous studies and published in high-ranking disciplinary journals. As explained, we tried to maximize expected difference between the selected names per the naming effects logic. This resulted in seven treatment groups:

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1 Standard examples involve pl and fj, which do not have a meaning themselves but may encode “short/rapid/intense visual experience/movement” in [glimmer, glint, gleam, glow, glare] or [flame, flicker, flutter, flare, fly], connoted with light. Similarly, it may be encoded pejoratively in [slant, sly, slander, slut, slump, slang, sloppy] (Svanstessonn 2017).
“Iran” (treatment group size N = 246). Iran is salient and schema-consistent to the scenario (Brugter et al. 2022, 14–15), given that the vignette is based on this real-world case and that the experiment was run during increased tensions between Iran and the United Kingdom over the Iranian nuclear program.

“Canada” (N = 194). Canada is schema-inconsistent to the scenario. Due to Canada’s friendly relations with the United Kingdom, we expect it to severely decrease participants’ willingness to use force compared to Iran.

“The/a country” (N = 229). Based on the neutralization and naming effect hypotheses, “a country” should be most empty in terms of preconceptions and cues.

“Celesta” (N = 205) (Keller and Yang 2016). “Celesta” provides lexicographic, toponymic, and sound-symbolic cues that are likely to evoke positive value judgments. We therefore expect it to decrease participants’ willingness to use force compared to all other fictitious names.

“Minalo” (N = 270) (Mintz et al. 1997; Redd 2002; Christensen and Redd 2004; Rubenzer and Redd 2010; Horowitz and Redd 2017, 2018). Minalo provides lexicographic cues that mean that we expect it to increase participants’ willingness to use force compared vis-à-vis “a country” and Celesta.

“Kerejistan” (N = 246) (Druckman, Olekhalns, and Smith 2009; Druckman and Olekhalns 2013; Caspi, Olekhalns, and Druckman 2017). “Kerejistan” provides lexicographic and toponymic cues that are likely to evoke negative value judgments. We therefore expect it to increase participants’ willingness to use force compared to “a country,” Celesta and Minalo.

“Drakhar” (N = 223) (Keller and Yang 2008, 2016). “Drakhar” provides toponymic, lexicographic, and sound-symbolic cues that are likely to evoke negative value judgments. We therefore expect it to increase participants’ willingness to use force compared to “a country,” Celesta, Minalo, and Kerejistan.

### Results

Across treatment groups, respondents slightly favor not using military force in this scenario (mean = 3.71), with 25 percent of all respondents opting for the middle option and clustering around both extreme responses (Table 1).

The treatment-group-specific averages are loosely clustered around the across-group average, with the clearest deviations in mean for Canada and Celesta. Iran, our baseline country, has a mean response of 3.57 (Table 2). Interestingly, all fictitious country names score higher than Iran on average.

![Table 1. Overall approval of use of force (1 = lowest, 7 = highest) across all treatment groups](attachment:image1.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>1 (lowest)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7 (highest)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>1,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>19.65</td>
<td>10.79</td>
<td>12.09</td>
<td>25.23</td>
<td>13.83</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>12.83</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant response</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>95% confidence interval</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-------------</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.708617</td>
<td>0.0482489</td>
<td>3.61398</td>
<td>3.803255</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Table 2. Mean approval for use of force, standard deviations, and number of responses by treatment](attachment:image2.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Average approval</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2.319588</td>
<td>1.6417253</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>3.569106</td>
<td>1.9020131</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerejistan</td>
<td>3.792683</td>
<td>1.8388404</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The country</td>
<td>3.890833</td>
<td>1.894441</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minalo</td>
<td>3.985185</td>
<td>1.9995519</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drakhar</td>
<td>4.094171</td>
<td>1.9160564</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celesta</td>
<td>4.102439</td>
<td>1.8508726</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

control for respondent age, gender, political attention, and education level.

Respondents are significantly less likely to support using military force to strike in a hypothetical scenario that employs Canada than one that employs Iran. This provides confirmatory evidence that the names provided in the scenario matter to respondents, that is, that exchanging the country name in the vignette can have a significant effect on responses (H1). We find some existence of a neutralization effect for fictitious and abstract country names in the sense that they differ from the Iran baseline (H2). While all fictitious country names differ from the real-world baseline Iran, not all differences are statistically significant.

However, contrary to H3, respondents are more likely to support attacking Celesta, Drakhar, and Minalo (p < 0.01) as well as “the country” (p < 0.05). Rather than at some mid-point between a friendly, positively associated country (Canada) and an adversarial, negatively associated country (Iran), respondent support for using force was consistently higher for fictitious countries. Kerejistan is not significantly different compared to Iran (p = 0.208). Overall, this provides weak support for the neutralization hypothesis, and suggests that a different, “fictionalization” effect might be at play, which we discuss below. Female respondents as well as those with a higher education level were less willing to support using military force (p < 0.01).

The confidence intervals (Figure 1) already indicate mixed results regarding systematic naming effects (H1, H2, H3). A Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there was statistically significant difference in willingness to use force between all seven treatment groups (compared by mean ranks; χ²(2) = 127.527, p = 0.0001; Table 4). We used Dunn–Bonferroni post hoc tests on each pair of groups, and adjusted the p-values for false discovery rates using the Benjamini–Hochberg method. As expected, this provided significant differences between the Iran and Canada treatment groups as well as between Canada and all fictitious country names. Iran was also significantly different from Celesta and Drakhar at p < 0.05. However, it did not significantly
Table 3. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression on “Iran” as baseline

| Coefficient | Standard error | t     | P > |t|  | 95% confidence interval |
|-------------|----------------|-------|-----|---|-------------------------|
| Constant    | 4.804849       | 0.3157116 | 15.22 | 0.000 | 4.185598 | 5.42101 |
| Country     |                |        |     |    |                         |
| Canada      | −1.266281      | 0.1762189 | −7.19 | 0.000 | −1.611924 | −0.9206368 |
| Celesta     | 0.5250181      | 0.1733122 | 3.03  | 0.002 | 0.1850756 | 0.8649607  |
| Drakhar     | 0.5147249      | 0.1695385 | 3.04  | 0.002 | 0.1821842 | 0.8472655  |
| Kerejistan  | 0.2081938      | 0.1654583 | 1.26  | 0.208 | −0.1165437 | 0.5327514  |
| Minalo      | 0.4209486      | 0.161504   | 2.60  | 0.009 | 0.1052673 | 0.7368299  |
| The country | 0.3316844      | 0.1683771 | 1.97  | 0.049 | 0.0014219 | 0.6619469  |
| Age         | 0.0012402      | 0.002993   | 0.41  | 0.679 | −0.0046303 | 0.0071108  |
| Gender      | −0.3712228     | 0.0927164 | −4.00 | 0.000 | −0.5530811 | −0.1893646 |
| Highest education | −0.3859341 | 0.0635528 | −6.07 | 0.000 | −0.5105895 | −0.2612786 |
| Political attention | 0.0081894 | 0.0214211 | 0.38  | 0.702 | −0.0383827 | 0.0592057 |

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Figure 1. Response effect estimates and confidence intervals of treatment groups mapped against the baseline “Iran” (vertical line at position “0”).

differ compared to Kerejistan, Minalo, and “the country.” Importantly, the fictitious country names did not perform significantly differently compared to each other in the way we might expect based on naming effects literature (H1–6). Of our experiment’s fictitious countries, Kerejistan performed most similar to Iran (compared to other fictitious names). Beyond Kerejistan, we did not find evidence that variation between different fictitious country names has an effect on survey responses.

Discussion

Previous studies that employed fictitious or abstract country names did often not provide an explicit reason for doing so. Even among those articles that did, usually based on internal validity concerns, none demonstrated (in either the article text or the respective appendices, where available) that fictitious country names actually provided a neutralization effect. Instead, they relied on two untested assumptions: that all fictitious country names are similarly neutralizing and that there is no biasing effect from the fictitious name itself. Our experiment seeks to test these assumptions to investigate what effect, if any, fictionalized or abstract names have on respondents’ willingness to use force.

We find only limited support for the neutralization hypothesis. The example of Kerejistan (as compared to the Iran baseline) already shows that not all fictitious names have a uniform effect. It also runs counter to the neutralization hypothesis that both fictionalized and abstract names

\[^5\] With the possible exception of Dill and Schubiger, who show that the name “Esor” did not drive their results (Dill and Schubiger 2021).
increase willingness to use force. We also find only limited evidentiary support for systematic naming effects (with the exception of Kerejistan), that is, differences between fictitious names induced by lexicographic, toponymic, or sound-symbolic cues. While Celesta, Drakhar, and Minalo prompted significantly different responses compared to the baseline Iran, the different fictitious names were not significantly different from each other. This matters because they were selected based on assumed difference of embedded cues. Even below significance thresholds, the order and direction in which the fictitious names differ from the baseline do not support the naming effect hypotheses.

Notably, our findings suggest that fictitious and abstract names increase participants’ willingness to support the use of force compared to real-world (or realistic) counterparts. This holds even compared to schema-consistent real world, adversarial, and/or pariah states. It questions whether the neutralization effect actually neutralizes—or whether indeed there is a “fictionalization effect” that may lead scholars to overestimate respondents’ willingness to use force in hypothetical scenarios involving fictitious or abstract countries. Our results suggest that the more clearly fictitious a country name, the easier to condone attacking it—fictionality and its perceived costlessness can therefore embolden respondents to provide more aggressive responses.

These results point to the relevance of perceived realistic-ness: the more “real” a country name sounds to respondents, the weaker the fictionalization effect. In particular, there seems to be a deterrent effect associated with realistic-ness, for example, of being able to imagine more easily the consequences associated with attacking Iran, especially bar any additional information that “fills out” the scenario. The realistic-ness of a country name is (at least partially) a function of perceived toponymic plausibility and lexicographic familiarity. Note that this could also lead respondents to consider real-life country names unrealistic, depending on their individual knowledge of country names, geography, and their respective native languages. While we have not separately asked our respondents to rate the realistic-ness of the provided name or scenario, it seems likely that different fictitious names connote realistic-ness to different degrees. Consider the difference between Celesta, Drakhar, and Minalo on the one hand, and Kerejistan on the other—respondents may more readily identify the former as fictitious, while the latter may challenge respondents not familiar with the geography of central Asia. In turn, perceived realistic-ness influences their responses.

Indeed, our results indicate that Kerejistan does not have significantly different effects on participant responses compared to Iran. Kerejistan may evoke connotations that are, on average and for British respondents, similar to those evoked by Iran. The close lexicographic and toponymic association of Kerejistan with, for example, Afghanistan seems likely to evoke value judgments that overlap with those respondents make regarding Muslim, Middle-Eastern, or autocratic states, despite the considerable real-world differences between Iran and Afghanistan. This possible information equivalence problematizes the neutralization hypothesis: not all fictitious country names are similarly neutralizing. It implies the necessity for experimental researchers to carefully justify or pilot fictitious country names and scenarios in advance of collecting results (also see Steiner, Atzmüller, and Su 2017).
Among the treatments employed, “the country” is the most abstract fictionalization—it does not offer a name but a placeholder. In terms of results, it constitutes a borderline case. While not significantly different from Iran in our cross-treatment comparison above, participants evaluated “the country” similar to the other fictitious names. In principle, its lexicographic, toponymic, and sound-symbolic “emptiness” could induce respondents to think about which country could be meant—which, given the salience of Iran to both the context in which our experiment was conducted and the hypothetical vignette, could have led respondents to infer that the vignette meant Iran. Instead, “the country” seems to have increased the willingness to support the use of force in similar ways to the other fictitious names. From this perspective, it is thus not consistently less fictitious (or more neutral) than more colorful names. This is especially relevant because employing abstract names has become standard in experimental IR more recently.

Finally, then, we may ask whether fictionalization of real-world countries (through experimental vignettes) is the best way to measure general attitudes toward IR or foreign policy choice (also see McDonald 2020; Croco, Hanmer, and McDonald 2021). It may well be preconceived notions about a country (name) that predict survey responses, rather than the respondents’ attitudes toward foreign policies. This is the standard justification for using fictitious names in the first place. However, doing so may carry its own effects, persuasive enough so that past results would not in fact capture any “true” baseline untainted by the preconceptions respondents hold about real-world countries. Is the respondents’ acceptance of attacking fictitious countries (rather than Iran) more reflective of participants’ general attitudes, or only of their attitude toward fictitious countries (McDonald 2020)? If the latter, previous research employing fictitious country names may have too freely generalized respondents’ attitudes on a wide range of concepts and processes of IR.

Conclusion

We challenge the assumption that fictitious names are an unproblematic means of removing respondent bias in experimental IR research. What name is chosen for the vignette matters—and experimental researchers need to factor this into their survey design (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughley 2018; Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018). The most common rationale for the use of fictitious or abstract country names within experimental surveys suggests that they provide what we label the “neutralization effect,” allowing respondents to provide their views on the phenomena of interest while avoiding that their personal opinions of real countries and/or available background information bias their responses. Testing this assumption, we find limited support for the neutralization effect, which indicates that previous experimental results may not be as robust as previously assumed. We also find only limited support for systematic naming effects (beyond perceived toponymic closeness in the example of Iran and Kerejistan). We find an overall effect of fictitious and abstract country names on responses of increasing willingness to use force. However, these results seem to be driven by a different kind of logic than the hypothesized naming effects.

Instead, complementing previous literature (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughley 2018; Brugger et al. 2022), we find evidence suggestive of a fictionalization effect. Respondents are more willing to use violence against fictitious countries regardless of the name employed, more so even than against real-world countries that are perceived as adversarial. The breakdown of real-world associations induced by fictionalization seems to cognitively decrease the stakes as experienced by respondents; in turn, realistic or plausible names may have a deterrent effect. The fictionalization effect constitutes an important avenue for future research, including with an eye to generalization beyond the characteristics of the population here surveyed.

Notably, our results cannot currently tell us whether, for example, the results of Tomz and Weeks’ study would differ (in what way) had they used any particular, different name in their vignette. This is partially a function of our experimental design: in particular, future research may seek to investigate the strength of the fictionalization effect when experimental vignettes include additional information/variables. Interaction between names and other information might vary, for example, where people have stronger attitudes toward some policy areas rather than others (e.g., toward using force compared to trade sanctions). The fictionalization effect could be stronger if respondents base their responses on their attitudes toward the countries involved to compensate for their lack of strongly held general attitudes toward less salient issues. This means that while it must remain unclear to what extent the internal validity of any one study employing fictitious names is undermined, we uphold the possibility that different names can affect survey responses by increasing willingness to use force and perhaps also in other unintended ways. At a minimum, this indicates that abstraction and fictionalization need to be justified carefully, matched with the overall research design, and ideally piloted in pre-surveys before use in experimental vignettes.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the International Studies Quarterly data archive.

Funder Information

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References


