

“Even a Penny Will Help!”: Legitimization of Paltry Donation and Social Proof in Soliciting Donation to a Charitable Organization

Sachiyo M. Shearman & Jina H. Yoo

“Even a penny will help!” is a donation solicitor’s effort in legitimating paltry donations in hopes of gaining higher compliance. This study reexamined the effect of Legitimization of Paltry Donation (LPD) in combination with Social Proof (SP) strategy. Participants were given one of four donation soliciting messages: simple request (control), LPD, SP, and LPD/SP. Compliance rate and size were examined through both the survey experiment and the field experiment. The LPD/SP condition yielded the highest rate of compliance both in the survey and field studies, followed by the LPD condition, the SP condition, and the control condition. As for the donation amount, results were not consistent across the two studies. Implications and limitations of the study were discussed.

Keywords: Legitimization; Social Influence; Social Proof

Many of us have encountered a door-to-door solicitor or organized fundraisers asking for a donation. Charitable organizations and non-profit organizations in the United States are hardly a small industry, as 850,000 existing non-profit organizations generated about \$200 billion in contributions in 2001 (Stamp, 2002). Fundraising has become crucial to non-profit organizations due to drastic cuts in federal support. As a result, non-profit organizations have become more dependent on private sources for donations (Kelly, 1991). In 1997, private contributions accounted for

Sachiyo Morinaga Shearman (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 2004) is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. Jina H. Yoo (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 2004) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri, USA. *Correspondence:* Sachiyo M. Shearman, School of Communication, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858. Tel.: (252) 328-2895; E-mail: shearmans@ecu.edu

more than 75 percent of the \$143.46 billion donated to non-profit organizations (Reis, 1998). Thus, employing effective messages when asking potential donors for donations is an important topic of study.

Specific phrases used in soliciting donations can impact the rate of donation. The mere addition of a phrase such as, “even a penny will help” or “even a dollar will help” to a simple request could dramatically increase the rate of compliance in soliciting donations to charitable organizations (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) investigated the effect of the legitimization of paltry donation (LPD) strategy in soliciting monetary contributions to a charitable organization and found that an addition of LPD strategy to the simple request enhanced the rate of compliance.

Other studies have reported that the LPD strategy is effective in increasing the rate of compliance in different contexts (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976; Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987; Reeves & Saucer, 1993; Reingen, 1978; Weyant, 1996). Also, LPD has been examined in combination with other compliance-gaining strategies such as the foot-in-the-door (Brockner et al., 1984), matching (Fraser & Hite, 1989), and manipulating anchor points of a donation (Fraser, Hite, & Sauser, 1988), and found that the effect of LPD strategy was overwhelming in terms of significantly increasing the rate of compliance. However, that was with a downside of lowered amount of donation amount, though not necessarily the total amount of donation (Fraser & Hite, 1989, for a summary of previous studies). Decreases in donation amount seem like a natural consequence of LPD strategy, though it is not an intention of donation solicitors.

In order to address this concern, Fraser et al. (1988) added a large anchorpoint (i.e., “we are asking people to contribute \$20 to the Humane Society”) to the LPD request (i.e., “even a penny will help”). Although the provision of the large anchorpoint did increase the average amount of donations, the total donation amount was not significantly different from that of the legitimization condition because fewer people donated. In fact, Fraser et al.’s (1988) phrase for the large anchorpoint was similar to a request for a large donation.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to reexamine the message effect of LPD and its effect in combination with the social proof (SP) strategy in an attempt to maximize the donation amount as well as the rate of compliance. The possible theoretical explanations for the processes of the legitimization strategy and social proof are discussed. In addition, the effectiveness of the messages is examined through both a survey experiment and a field experiment.

Theoretical Frameworks

Legitimization

Jost and Major (2001) discussed the psychology of legitimization in fields such as political decision-making and social interactions. Legitimization is defined by Kelman (2001) as

the process of re-categorizing an action, policy, or claim—or a system, group, or person—such that what was previously illegitimate now becomes legitimate, or what was previously optional now becomes obligatory. In other words, legitimization entails acceptance of a claim or a claimant into the domain of moral acceptability or moral obligation. (p. 57)

Legitimization, therefore, refers to the acknowledgment that what was previously not accepted is to be accepted as a new standard or norm. LPD is a very simple legitimization message justifying a small donation. The phrase, “even a penny will help,” used to legitimize the paltry contribution, causes a shift in the normative amount of the donation, which is usually more than a penny, making a small donation of even a penny or a dollar, more acceptable.

Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) indicated that the motivation for self-presentation is one way to explain why the legitimization strategy works. Rejecting the minimal and pro-social request actually threatens one’s self-presentation need (i.e., a need to present himself or herself as helpful and socially responsible individual). Goffman (1967) emphasized that people engage in impression management either to create a desired image or to repair a damaged one. Scholars have warranted that one of the important reasons for us wanting to be viewed positively by others is to avoid negative sanctions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

Legitimization makes the request seem easy with a minimal cost for compliance, making it difficult for people to reject the request. The LPD tactic eliminates reasons for noncompliance, as it is considered self-evident that most people can afford a penny. Generally, people would not want to be perceived as an unhelpful person by rejecting the pro-social request of a minimal amount such as donating a penny. In fact, previous studies report such a link between social labeling and compliance (Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982; Gueguen, 2001). Therefore, legitimizing a small request can be more face-threatening, especially because rejecting the request is now more difficult.

Social Proof

Cialdini (2001) described social proof (SP) as a strategy that influences people’s perceptions of certain actions as “correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it” (p. 100). Like the LPD strategy, the social proof strategy influences the target individual’s normative belief about a behavior and encourages him or her to conform to the “normative behavior.” Using social proof, or appealing to people’s motivations to conform to “normative behavior,” has been found to be a very effective way to gain compliance (Cialdini, 2001; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik, 1999). The social proof tactic induces behavior changes in different contexts, including a heightened perceived humor when accompanied by a laugh track (Fuller & Sheehy-Skeffington, 1974; Nosanchuk & Lightstone, 1974) and perceived pain and expression of fear when socially confirmed (Craig & Parkachin, 1978; O’Conner, 1972).

This principle of social proof has its basis on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. Festinger (1954) claimed that it is through social comparison with referent others that people validate the appropriateness of their behaviors. According to the theory of social comparison, the perceived normative behavior of similar others affects target audiences' decision making. Weyant (1984) conducted an intriguing study that compared the effect of social proof strategy to the legitimization strategy (i.e. "even a penny will help"/"any amount will help"). Specifically, Weyant (1984) contrasted LPD strategy with Kraut's (1973) labeling strategy (i.e., "we found that *people like you* are likely to donate" with a simple request) and Festinger's (1954) social comparison strategy (i.e., "people who live in the *neighborhoods like this* are likely to help"). These two strategies can be categorized as social proof strategies because they emphasize similar others either characteristically or geographically. He concluded that the "even a penny" condition increased the rate of donation significantly more than the other conditions, including *people-like-you* and *neighborhoods-like-this*.

The present study attempts to use the social proof (SP) strategy to create a normative belief that *others-like-you* are donating and to indicate that *more-than-a-penny* has been the norm. Hence, the phrase "students like you have been donating about \$3 to \$5 dollars" was employed. The following hypotheses are proposed concerning legitimization of paltry donation (LPD) and social proof (SP), both separately and in combination.

- H1: *Participants in the legitimization of paltry donation (LPD) condition will have a higher rate of compliance than those in the control condition.*
- H2: *Participants in the social proof (SP) condition will have a higher rate of compliance than those in the control condition.*

The motivation for one to comply with a message that appeals to social comparison might be very similar to the ones observed in LPD. An individual's need to be seen as positive by the audience might cause them to feel that they should be doing what others (referent and/or similar others) have been or would be doing. When compared, however, Weyant (1984) reported that the labeling strategy and social comparison strategy alone did not significantly increase the rate of compliance over that of the control condition, although legitimization did increase rate of compliance significantly. Also, it has been reported that social proofing is more effective in a collectivistic culture than in an individualistic culture (Cialdini et al., 1999). Considering these previous findings, we hypothesize the following.

- H3: *Participants in the legitimization of paltry donation (LPD) condition will have a higher rate of compliance than those in the social proof (SP) condition.*

Previous studies reported that the use of LPD strategy would increase the rate of compliance and lower the amount of donation (Fraser, Hite, & Sauer, 1988). In order to prevent the LPD from lowering the amount of donation while keeping high rate of compliance, Fraser et al. (1988) used large anchorpoints. This strategy was not successful, as having a large anchorpoint simply increased the size of the request. Hence, in addition to the LPD, the SP message with the moderate amount of money

donation (i.e., \$3–5 dollars) and with social comparison “students like you” was employed. The goal is to maintain the enhanced rate of donation while keeping the amount of donation from being lowered by the LPD strategy. The addition of SP to the LPD would likely increase compliance while keeping the normative amount of donation from decreasing.

H4: The combination of the LPD and SP would cause 4a) a higher rate of compliance as well as 4b) a larger amount of donation than other conditions.

Survey Study

Three hundred and ninety undergraduate students (241 females, 148 males, and one unclassified) completed a short survey for extra credit. Almost 78% of the participants classified themselves as White/Caucasian ($n = 302$), 13.6% as African American ($n = 53$), 2.5% Asian and Pacific Islander ($n = 10$), 1.8% Hispanic American ($n = 7$), 1.5% Native American ($n = 6$), and 3% Mixed and other ($n = 12$). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 49 years old, with the mean of 22.12 and a standard deviation of 4.14.

The survey study was employed at two state universities: one in the Midwest and one in the East. Participants received a scenario that described a hypothetical situation where a donation solicitor would ask the participant for a donation with one of four solicitor’s request messages: simple request (Control), LPD, SP, and the combination of LPD and SP. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different hypothetical situations. The hypothetical scenario was that a solicitor was asking the participant for a donation for non-profit organization (i.e., American Heart Association). In the control condition, a simple request followed, “Would you be willing to help us by giving a single donation?” In the LPD condition, the question added a phrase “even a penny will help” after the simple request (“Would you be willing to help us by giving a single donation? Even a penny will help!”). The SP condition asked “Would you be willing to help us by giving a single donation? We have been receiving donation from lots of students like you ranging from \$3 to \$5”. The amount given here was based on the information regarding an average amount of money donated in other studies (Cialdini & Schroeder, 1976). Finally, both LPD and SP strategies were combined after the simple request (i.e., “Would you be willing to help us by giving a single donation? We have been receiving donation from lots of students like you ranging from \$3 to \$5, but even a penny will help!”) After they read a soliciting message, they were asked whether they would donate or not in a forced question format (i.e., “Would you be willing to donate?”). If they said yes, they were asked to report how much they would donate (i.e., “If so, how much do you want to donate?”). Some demographic questions as well as the cash they actually possessed at the time of survey were asked.

Survey Study Results

Approximately 73% of the participants ($n = 286$) reported to donate based on the message they received in the scenario. Sixty-one percent of participants in the control

Table 1 Frequency and Percentage on the Reported Rate of Compliance for Each Condition from the Survey Study

Conditions	Donate (n = 286)	Not donate (n = 140)	Total (n = 390)	% Agreed (rate of compliance)
Control	63	40	103	61.2
LPD	78	20	98	79.6
SP	68	30	98	69.4
LPD & SP	77	14	91	84.6

condition pledged to donate, while 78% donated on average in three conditions (LPD, SP, and LPD/SP). The descriptive statistics for the compliance rate of each condition are displayed in Table 1.

Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4a were tested using chi-square and contrast analyses on the rate of compliance among four conditions. Chi-square analysis on the rate of compliance across four conditions revealed that the rate of compliance was significantly different across message conditions: $\chi^2(3) = 16.47, p < .001$. The compliance rate for the control condition was significantly lower than the other three conditions, $t(386) = -3.342, p < .001$.

T-test comparisons among conditions indicated that the rate of compliance for the control condition was significantly lower than LPD: $t(199) = 2.899, p < .01$ and LPD/SP, $t(192) = 3.748, p < .001$. The SP condition did not yield significantly higher compliance than the control condition, $t(199) = 1.22, n.s.$ When used alone, the LPD strategy improved the rate of compliance significantly more than the simple request used in the control condition, though not in the SP condition. Although the rate of compliance for the LDP was higher than the SP, there was no significant difference between two conditions, $t(194) = 1.641, n.s.$ The combination of the LPD and SP strategies produced the highest rate of compliance, which was significantly different from the other conditions, $t(386) = 2.797, p < .01$. Hypotheses 1 and 4a were supported, though hypotheses 2 and 3 were not.

In addition to the rate of compliance, size of compliance (i.e., pledged donation amount) was examined. Approximately 70% ($n = 274^1$) indicated a certain amount of money to donate, ranging from 50 cents to 35 dollars. The mean was \$4.85 and standard deviation was \$4.30. The mode was \$5 ($n = 109$), followed by \$3 ($n = 51$), \$1 ($n = 38$), \$2 ($n = 28$), and \$10 ($n = 19$). Contrary to our expectations, the mean donation amount for the control condition (\$6.29) was higher than for the other three conditions, LPD (\$4.42), SP (\$4.09), and LPD/SP (\$3.73). Descriptive statistics for the amount of the donation as well as total amount of donation received by each condition are displayed in the Table 2.²

Among those participants who pledge to donate, a two-way ANOVA (LDP, SP as predictor variables) and contrast analyses on the amount of donations were conducted. The overall effect of two diverging types of messages on the amount of donation

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics on the Amount of Money Pledged to Donate for Each Condition from the Survey Study

Conditions	N	Mean (\$)	SD (\$)	Total (\$)	Range (\$)
Control	60	6.29	6.87	378	1–35
LPD	74	4.42	4.24	327	0.5–21
SP	66	4.09	1.79	270	1–10
LPD & SP	74	3.73	2.63	276	1–20

were found, overall $F(3, 273) = 4.619, p < .01$. There were a significant main effect of LPD, $F(1, 273) = 4.753, p < .05$, and SP, $F(1, 273) = 7.955, p < .01$, but no interaction effect for LPD and SP, $F(1, 273) = 2.119, p = .139$.

A contrast test revealed that the mean donation amount in control condition was significantly higher than the rest of three conditions, $t(271) = -3.588, p < .001$. There was no significant difference among LPD, SP, and LPD/SP conditions. Hypothesis 4b predicted that the LPD/SP condition would yield a larger size of compliance than other strategies. In fact, contrary to our prediction, the control condition yielded the largest total amount of donations as well as the largest average amount. Even though the combination of the LPD and SP strategies produced the highest rate of compliance, this condition yielded neither a higher average donation nor total donation amount.

In order to examine the effect of participants' sex on the rate and amount of donation, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. There was no effect of sex on the rate of donation, as 75% of males ($n = 111$) pledged to donate, as opposed to 72.2% females ($n = 174$), $F(1, 389) = 0.366, p = .314$. Among those donated, the amount of donations pledged by males (\$4.10) and by females (\$4.87) were not significantly different, $F(1, 389) = 1.002, p = .317$.

Field Study

The field experiment was conducted in order to examine the message effect in a naturalistic field setting where participants received face-to-face donation soliciting messages. In addition, we examined whether a significant discrepancy existed between the survey experiment and the field study. Four research assistants were trained to be donation solicitors using the four soliciting messages: simple request (control condition), LPD, SP, and the combination of LPD and SP. The confederate-solicitors received training to ensure consistency across their soliciting attempts. Solicitors were kept blind to the details of the hypotheses.

One hundred and forty-five individuals participated in the study, receiving one of the four messages that were identical to the messages used in the survey study. This field study was conducted in the lobby of a building with a bookstore and a main food court, located in the center of the campus at a large Midwestern university.

With the approval of the American Heart Association, informational brochures, banners, t-shirts, notepads, and cards with the AHA logo commonly employed in fund-raising activities were used to decorate the area. Individuals walking past our AHA donation tables were targeted. The confederate-solicitors approached the target individual with "Hello," and then delivered their request for donations using one of four messages.

After each solicitation, the target participant was told that this was in fact a part of a study and was given a debriefing statement and a consent form. They were asked whether they wanted their money back, and whether they would allow us to use their response for the study.³ If they agreed, they completed a one-page questionnaire with demographic questions.

Field Study Results

Chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the rate of compliance across strategies. It was found that the message significantly influenced the rate of compliance, $\chi^2(3) = 30.34$, $p < .001$ (see Table 3). Contrast analyses and t-tests showed that the control condition was significantly different from the rest of the conditions, $t(141) = -4.44$, $p < .001$, and respectively LPD, $t(68) = -3.032$, $p < .01$; SP, $t(71) = -2.488$, $p < .05$; and LPD/SP, $t(78) = -6.632$, $p < .001$. When used alone, both the LPD and SP strategies improved the rate of compliance significantly more than the simple request in the control condition. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. The rate of compliance between LPD and SP used alone was not significantly different, $t(63) = .516$, n.s.; therefore, hypothesis 3, which predicted that LPD would yield higher compliance rate than SP strategy, was not supported. The combination of the LPD and SP strategies produced the highest rate of compliance, which was significantly different from the other conditions, $t(141) = 5.240$, $p < .001$. Hypothesis 4a was supported.

Two-way ANOVA and contrast analyses with LPD and SP as predictor variables on donation amounts were conducted for those who pledged to donate. The overall effect of two diverging types of messages on the amount of donation were found, overall $F(3, 48) = 9.464$, $p < .001$. There were significant main effects of LPD,

Table 3 Frequency and Percentage on the Rate of Compliance for Each Condition from the Field Study

Conditions	Donate (n = 50)	Not donate (n = 95)	Total (n = 145)	% Agreed (rate of compliance)
Control	3	36	39	7.69
LPD	11	20	31	35.5
SP	10	24	34	29.4
LPD & SP	26	14	41	65.9

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics on the Amount of Money Donated for Each Condition from the Field Study

Conditions	N	Mean (\$)	SD (\$)	Total (\$)	Range (\$)
Control	3	4.33	4.93	13.00	0–10
LPD	11	0.78	0.57	8.63	0–2
SP	10	5.64	5.28	56.35	0–20
LPD & SP	26	1.90	1.54	49.52	0–5

$F(1, 48) = 5.728, p < .05$, and SP, $F(1, 48) = 9.444, p < .01$, but not interaction effects for LPD and SP, $F(1, 48) = 1.420, p = .240$.

Approximately 34% ($n = 50$) of the participants actually donated money, ranging from two cents to 20 dollars. The average donation across the four conditions was \$2.55 and the standard deviation was \$3.23. The highest average donation was observed in the SP condition (\$5.63), followed by the Control (\$4.33), LPD/SP (\$1.90), and LPD (\$0.78) (see Table 4). Due to the small and unequal sample sizes for each condition, individual t-test comparisons were not conducted. Contrast tests, however, indicated that the LPD condition and LPD/SP condition yielded a significantly lower amount of donation compared to the SP and control conditions, $t(46) = 3.461, p < 0.01$. Hypothesis 4b was not supported. The result indicates that LPD message either used alone or in combination with the SP condition lowers the amount of donation. Although the rate of compliance was higher for the LPD/SP condition, it did not yield a larger amount of donation.

Discussion

The present paper revisited the legitimization of paltry donation strategy and the social proof strategy through survey and field studies. Authors examined the impact of two strategies used solely and in combination on rate and size of compliance. As predicted, all three experimental conditions (LPD strategy, SP strategy, and LPD/SP condition) yielded a higher rate of compliance than the control condition. The current data provided confirming evidence that both LPD and SP used with simple donation soliciting requests work effectively to increase compliance rates for donation. The LDP and SP used in combination induced higher compliance, though not the largest total donation.

Two identical studies were conducted to examine the effectiveness of the donation solicitation messages using different methods: a survey experiment and a field experiment. Message effects on the rate of compliance by four conditions, however, were consistent across two studies. The LPD/SP condition yielded the highest rate of compliance in both studies, followed by the LPD condition, the SP condition, and the control condition. However, significantly higher rates of compliance were reported

by the participants in survey study (70%) relative to those in the field study (34%) across four conditions.

As for the donation amount, the two studies yielded diverging results. Participants in the survey study reported higher donations on average across the four conditions (\$4.85) than those in field study (\$2.55). In the survey study, the control condition yielded the highest average donation as well as largest total amount of donation, followed by LPD, LPD/SP, and SP condition. Conversely, in the field study, the SP condition yielded the highest donation amount as well as highest total amount of donation, followed by the LDP/SP, Control, and LPD conditions.

Discrepancies between our two experimental studies were observed both in terms of donation compliance rate and donation amount. This finding warns us to be cautious in interpreting results of survey studies that are intended to measure actual behaviors.

In the survey study, the control condition yielded the highest amount of donation. This could mean that any additional message beyond a simple request could potentially be harmful in our attempt to obtain higher amounts of donations, regardless of the increased rate of the compliance. Householder and Giles (2006) reported higher initial compliance rates for the control condition compared with three different levels of door-in-the-face conditions for a pro-social request. For a pro-social request like this one, it is possible that a simple message can be sufficiently or even more appealing, which could result in higher commitment from the targeted audience. Also, the unique experimental messages included in this study could have implied the lower amounts of donations than their normative amount of donation (e.g., "even a penny will help or "\$3 to \$5"), which could have lowered the amount of donation they were going to pledge.

However, in the field study, the SP condition yielded the highest total amount of donation followed by the LPD/SP condition. The medium used for soliciting messages, either face-to-face interaction or a written letter, could impact the rate and size of compliance. Previous studies reported that LPD works most effectively in face-to-face than via other channels (Brockner et al., 1984; DeJong & Oopik, 1992; Reeves, Macolini, & Martin, 1987). This indicates that the self-presentation concern appears to moderate the LPD strategy and compliance behaviors. Theoretically it makes sense that both LDP and SP would work most effectively when the target audiences' self-presentation concern is present.

One limitation to this study could be message length. Naturally, the LPD/SP condition became the longest soliciting message out of the four conditions. Although the participants only received one message, a longer message might have created a more persuasive message, which has been pointed out as one of the heuristic principles (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985).

Several extraneous variables could impact the participants' donation behavior. For example, prior impressions of the particular charity might have been in effect. If a participant holds positive images of the particular charity or feels familiar with the organization, he or she might be more susceptible to the donation solicitor's messages in deciding to donate or how much to donate. In fact, Bendapudi, Surendra,

and Bendapudi (1996) indicated the importance of a charity's image as the single most critical element of determining a donating decision. An independent charity evaluator, CharityNavigator.org, which rates more than 5,000 charitable organizations in the U.S. with 3 million estimated users as of 2006, reports that they continuously receive requests for information for the additional charities. Thus, future research may include the attitudinal measures of the particular charity organization.

Notes

- [1] There are 10 participants who did not report how much to donate, and two who reported to donate more than \$10,000. The data of these 12 participants were not included in this part of analyses, and that is why there is a discrepancy from those who reported to donate ($n = 286$).
- [2] One participant who said that who pledge to donate more than \$1000 was deleted from the data, as the amount was considered to be an outlier being more than five standard deviations away from the mean.
- [3] All the money obtained from this study was actually donated to the American Heart Association at the completion of the study.

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