

Social Image and Social Distance

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Extended Abstract

Growing evidence shows that volunteers behave more pro-social in public than in private since they care deeply about how others perceive them. These image concerns influence a wide range of decisions ([Ariely, Bracha, and Meier, 2009](#); [Camerer et al., 2003](#)). Volunteers contribute more to public goods experiments when identifiable ([Andreoni and Petrie, 2004](#); [Rege and Telle, 2004](#)). Through pro-social behavior, volunteer signal to others and themselves that they are "good," altruistic volunteers who like to help others ([DellaVigna, List, and Malmendier, 2012](#); [Yoeli et al., 2013](#)).

Researchers confirmed this effect in field tests, finding that participation in pro-social programs and donations is higher when made public. ([Alpizar, Carlsson, and Johansson Stenman, 2008](#); [Ariely, Bracha, and Meier, 2009](#); [Cameron et al., 2013](#); [Karing, 2018](#); [Lacetera, Macis, and Slonim, 2012](#); [Soetevent, 2005](#)). Additionally, images of watching eyes are sufficient to increase pro-social behavior, although the size and robustness of the effect are debatable. [Haley and Fessler \(2005\)](#) showed that displaying subtle eye like stimuli caused participants to behave more generously in the Dictator Game. Watching eyes made the mean donation higher and increased the probability of donating something rather than nothing. Similar [Bateson et al. \(2013\)](#) discovered that in the presence of prominent signs depicting watching eyes, participants tend to vacate the table in the cafeteria after eating, 69% more than flower posters.

Social image motivation is modeled as a signaling game, where pro-social actions allow volunteers to signal their pro-sociality. The research literature suggests several approaches. The first approach refers to the level of observability; [Bénabou and Tirole](#)

(2006) presents a model of pro-social behavior in which volunteers want to signal that they are pro-social. In this model, volunteers behave pro-socially out of intrinsic motivation and image concern. Volunteers take altruistic actions to signal to others, or themselves, that they care about others.

The second approach refers to extrinsic incentives; the process is to vary incentives in a piece rate to perform a pro-social task and check if a lower piece rate rejects the effort, as predicted by the conditions in social signaling models crowding out and anti-bunching. For example, Ariely, Bracha, and Meier (2009) found that volunteers who received a low piece rate exerted less effort. See also, Bénabou and Tirole (2006); Birke (2020); Exley (2018). The third approach refers to social norms; Graf et al. (2021) attempted to explain why incentives affect pro-social behavior in different contexts. They validated the model using real-world blood donation discovered that the more positive the social norm, the greater and the likelihood of donating blood.

This article presents a new approach that refers to the role of signaling in pro-social behavior; The *social distance* approach. Our model suggests that social distance between the volunteer and the observer (friend or stranger) typically has two effects. As social distance decreases: (1) Social image receives a higher weight, but (2) behavior has less impact on the social image. The total effect of social distance reflects the trade-off of these two opposing forces and may depend on context and demographics.

Specifically, we add a new parameter to Bénabou and Tirole's (2006) formal pro-social behavior model that reflects the social distance to their model, the observer's identity, and examine whether it influences pro-social behavior. The results in a somewhat counterintuitive prediction: participants, on average, care less about stranger's beliefs than about friends (this is especially true of teenagers, who are the participants in the experiment). Nonetheless, we hypothesize that participants exert more effort to impress socially distant individuals, as their closest friends have already formed strong beliefs about them.

We also use a test of social preferences by [Birke \(2020\)](#) that expect participants to work harder to surpass the extrinsic preferences (personal payment threshold) to signal high pro-sociality in a pro-social environment. For example, suppose participants are motivated by Neo-classical incentives, outcome-based altruism, warm-glow giving, or social norms; such a personal payment threshold incentive induces bunching at the threshold. However, when social preferences drive participants, a personal payment threshold like this encourages anti-bunching to exceed the predetermined threshold to stand out from participants driven by external motivations. [Birke \(2020\)](#) develops this argument and provides initial supporting evidence in an online experiment. The current study is the first to test these predictions in the field.

We conducted a field experiment that was designed to manipulate external preferences (personal payment threshold) and social preferences (the observer's identity). Six hundred seventy participants in a walkathon were instructed to walk as many steps as possible in an allotted time. Their steps were converted into monetary donations to a community project. We then sent this information to observers. The results show that (1) Participants provide more effort under the observable condition than the non-observable one. (2) Participants provided more effort when strangers observed them than when friends observed them. (3) Participants provide effort strictly higher when others observe their effort in treatments with personal payment threshold than in treatments without one. This paper adds to the research literature the understanding of the interaction of social distance and social image that is important for designing behavioral interventions.