

The Impact of Social Information on Behavior: Donation Behavior and Implications for Charitable Organizations

Review on the Impact of Social Information



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Abstract

In recent years, psychology and economics researchers have demonstrated growing interest in the extent to which information about other people influences one's own decisions, culminating in a surge in field, laboratory, and online experiments. This literature review provides an overview of empirical evidence on the influence of social information on various behaviors, focusing on donation behavior because research on the subject predominates. Published results concerning the impact of social information are mixed and context-dependent, with only a few studies indicating that social information has no effect or a negative effect on one's own behavior. However, most studies observe a positive effect. Besides donation behavior, behaviors studied include, for example, tipping behavior, environmentally conscious behavior, and political participation. This paper's findings have valuable practical implications based on empirical evidence, allowing managers and fundraisers of charitable organizations to take recommended actions to influence donation behavior and increase total donations. Furthermore, the paper identifies several opportunities for future research.

Keywords: Social Information; Social Norms; Social Comparison; Donation Behavior; Prosocial Behavior; Fundraising Campaigns; Charitable Organizations

Introduction

In recent years, psychology and economics researchers have demonstrated growing interest in the extent to which information about other people influences one's own decisions [1]. When certain information is not available, consumers often rely on social information (e.g., information about what others do or have done in this regard) as a basis and reference point for their own decisions [2,3]. Especially in the context of prosocial behavior, social information has been studied by economists and psychologists in both laboratory contexts [4-6] and field experiments [7-10].

Studies of prosocial behavior and social information predominantly focus on charitable giving. In the face of government funding cuts and increased competition for funds, charitable organizations are constantly challenged to find ways to attract donors and collect donations. Therefore, many studies have investigated what motivates donors to give, considering, for example, past giving behavior [11], trust [12], information source reliance [13], perceived donation efficacy [14], reputation [15],

social identity [16], personal values such as altruism [17], or sympathy and empathy [18].

To encourage donations, charities often provide information about the contributions of others during fundraising drives. For example, they publish past donations on social media platforms when operating crowdfunding campaigns. With the rapid increase in charitable solicitations [19], there is increasing interest in investigating mechanisms that may help solicit donations, including public disclosure of decisions and the use of social comparisons [20]. These mechanisms have largely been studied using experimental data from laboratory and field experiments [21,22,23] producing vast amounts of data and copious insights into the impact of social information on human behavior.

Thus, this literature review has two principal purposes. First, it provides an overview of empirical evidence on the influence of social information on various behaviors, focusing on donation behavior because research on the subject predominates. Synthesizing the current knowledge enables researchers to

obtain deeper insight into the existing research and identify gaps. Second, the findings have valuable practical implications based on empirical evidence, allowing, for example, managers and fundraisers of charitable organizations to take recommended actions to influence donation behavior and increase total donations.

The Impact of Social Information on Behavior in General

The influence of social information has been studied across various domains, including energy and water consumption [24-27], environmentally conscious behavior [28,29], contributions to charitable causes [1,39], political participation [30-32] and financial decisions [33,34]. Additionally, the impact of providing social information has been analyzed for behaviors such as flood adaptation behavior [35], tax evasion [36], tipping behavior [37], job choice [38], and writing online movie reviews [39].

These studies have produced mixed and context-dependent results. Regarding socially responsible behavior, individuals who received information about the high degree of social responsibility practiced by others performed more socially responsible behavior. Information about the low degree of social responsibility practiced by others did not change individual behavior compared to the scenario in which they did not receive social information [23]. Regarding environmental protection, social information has been shown to, for example, motivate guests to reuse their hotel towels [29], encourage green consumption (e.g., ecological coffee purchase behavior) [28], and promote reduced household water use by up to 6.8% [27]. Notably, in the latter example, the social information more strongly impacted high water-consumption households than low water-consumption households. This suggests that social information can be used to induce human behavior that benefits society and the environment.

However, results from studies on political participation illuminate the “dark side” of social information. Most studies in this field reveal that social information significantly shapes people’s voting behavior by inducing bandwagon voting [30, 32], which describes situations where an individual follows the behavioral patterns of the majority. In this case, information about the majority opinion leads individuals to subscribe to that opinion [40]. Bandwagon voting mitigates the efficiency of elections [30], meaning that information on the behavior of the majority group is ineffective in the context of democratic choices [32].

Social information has been similarly found to provoke unfavorable financial decisions [33,34]. Providing social information can encourage individuals who identify strongly with an organization to invest in that organization or increase their investment, even if the organization is performing poorly. This investor group is often unaware of the risks and implications of their financial decisions [34]. This refers to not only investment decisions but also to retirement savings

decisions, where individual behavior is also influenced by social information. Providing information about the savings of others has been observed to reduce savings intention of individuals of low socioeconomic status, who are discouraged by the social comparison that accompanies social information [33].

In the case of tipping in restaurants, although pushing individuals to a certain level by providing social information on the tipping behavior of other customers may be more effective than providing no reference point, there apparently exists a point at which the suggested contribution is too high, triggering the opposite effect [37]. Chen et al. [39] argue that the effects of social information likely depend on the level of one’s own contribution relative to the information presented. In their study of voluntary online movie ratings, the authors reveal that providing social information about the median user’s number of movie ratings produces a fivefold increase in the rating levels of those below the median. However, for study participants who were already above the median, providing information about the median user’s monthly contribution reduced their contribution by 62%. This aligns with the findings of Frey and Meier [9] and Nomura et al. [41]. The effect, in which above-average contributors reduce their participation in response to receiving information about others, is referred to as the “boomerang effect” [42].

Meanwhile, several studies have seen negative social information (i.e., the negative opinions of others) significantly impact a person’s own opinions and enjoyment. For example, knowing that others rate a video poorly leads individuals to believe that they must rate the video similarly to establish conformity [44, 45,46].

Overall, it is apparent that individuals are influenced in their behavior by social information, with the effectiveness of providing social information dependent on several other factors. There are various explanations for the effect of social information. First, social information serves as a reference when the individual has no prior experience and requires an anchor to align their behavior [47]. Second, according to social identity theory, the more similar the information source is to an individual, the stronger the effectiveness of the social information [48,49]. Alternatively, individuals wanting to belong to a social group are encouraged to orient themselves towards the behavior and decisions of others [50].

Third, it is possible that individuals want to avoid feeling guilty [50,51]. For example, individuals may behave altruistically, with social information reinforcing their perception that they can help by donating [50]. Fourth, if individuals derive status or prestige from making donations [52] or infer the quality of the charity from the amount others donate [53], their contributions will relate positively to the donations of others. Thus, social information about the donations of others signals trustworthiness and the quality of an organization [50,53]. Fifth, social information about the number of other donors can also reduce donations, because

individuals may think that their contribution will not have a great impact [54,55].

Finally, social information serves as a social norm, and individuals want to act in a socially accepted way. Several researchers attribute the effectiveness of providing social information to a desire to comply with social norms [50,56,10]. The desire to conform to social norms can powerfully influence human behavior [57]. Failing to conform to these norms can have a moral cost [58] and possibly result in monetary or non-monetary sanctions [59]. The desire for conformity to social norms may also emerge as a means of acquiring information in the form of observing and imitating the behavior of others. That is, social comparisons can produce conformity when the behavior of others serves as a reference point for individual decision-making [60]. However, although participants are provided with social information by experimenters in research contexts, in real life, it is less apparent how people receive and evaluate social information when making a decision to donate to charity. Several researchers have argued that norms about appropriate contributions often derive from the behavior of others [61,62]. Conditionally cooperative individuals draw on social information from their social networks to identify perceived social norms for prosocial behavior, which affects their participation level in turn [51, 62].

The Impact of Social Information on Donation Behavior

The reasons why and under what circumstances individuals make charitable donations has long interested the social sciences. Although several researchers have analyzed the role of social information on donation behavior, there is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of providing social information. Several studies demonstrate that social information has either no effect [22,20,10] or a negative one [51,63,64] meaning that providing social information ultimately decreases donations. Nevertheless, most studies report social information's positive impact on participation rate or donation amount [21,22,65,66].

Still, the precise mechanisms remain unclear. Fischbacher et al. [66] reveal that when respondents receive information about an increase in the average contribution of other participants, they increase their own contribution by almost the same amount. Shang and Croson [67] observe that, compared to donors under control conditions, the contributions of donors who receive social information increase by about \$20 the following year. This result suggests that social information can have a lasting effect on behavior. In a later study, the same researchers demonstrate that social information can increase contributions by an average of 10–30% [10].

Social information increases the total donation amount because low contributions can be increased without decreasing high contributions [69]. Across existing studies, the average increase in donations is 14%, with [69,55] showing that social information

increases donation levels by 17% and 10%, respectively, but does not impact the number of donors. While several studies have similarly observed no effect of social information on participation rates [70,20] other studies have revealed a positive effect on the decision to donate [56,71,72].

Elsewhere, there are unclear findings regarding which type of social information has the greatest impact. While some field experiments have presented the proportion of other donors as social information [9,73] other studies have provided information about the contributions of individuals in specific percentiles within a donation scale [22,74] or about the proportion of capital already raised to meet a goal [75]. Collectively, these studies indicate that social information in the 64% to 95% range of the respective scales (i.e., roughly the top third to top 5% of donation or giving levels) is most effective. Notably, experiments involving tests using social information describing extreme circumstances reveal the ineffectiveness of this approach; examples include social information about contributions from people in the 99th percentile and information stating that 100% of other people donate [22,73]. This indicates the limits of social information, suggesting that information about very high contributions from other individuals does not necessarily positively influence a person's contributions.

Although social information can positively impact financial donations to charity [9,10,56,71] Moseley et al. [76] suggest that it does not benefit donations of time, i.e., volunteering. That is, volunteers with a volunteer share below the median find any level of social information demotivating, whether moderate, high, or very high [76]. That the specific levels of social information shown to effectively increase financial contributions [10,56,68,73,75] were not reflected in the results of Moseley et al. [76] is consistent with the notion that time is not equivalent to money, meaning individuals value the two resources differently [78].

Using social information to influence a sustainable behavior such as volunteering, which requires a significant personal investment of time and effort, including face-to-face interaction, is more difficult than influencing one-time actions such as financial donations [79]. Previous research suggests that a complex set of factors motivates individuals to volunteer, with factors relating to role identity, the perceived expectations of others, and image motivation [80]. Thus, given volunteering represents a more effortful activity than donating money, a simple numerical representation of the contribution of others, even if it exudes an implicit social norm, may not be sufficient encouragement in itself. This finding importantly challenges the expectations of social information theory as developed in the donations context.

Research results are similarly mixed for blood donations. In this context, social information includes descriptions of the social impact of blood donations on society [81,82], directing attention to social norms and values [83], describing current blood

shortages and associated complications [84,85], and inviting people to donate blood. Most studies report positive effects of social information [84,86,81,87]. However, other researchers have observed negative effects or no effect at all.

Van Teunenbroek et al. [54] suggests that the effect of social information on donation behavior depends on who disseminates the information (e.g., identification with the source or not), what the content of the information is (donation level of others), and where the donation is made (in public or anonymously). Moreover, several studies reveal that not all donor groups are influenced by social information in the same way. Donors who are very generous and want to donate all their money do not reduce their donation amount based on social information [10,20,69]. Furthermore, older adults are more positively influenced by information about the recipient than young adults [88], and social information has a more pronounced positive influence on those with a lower affinity and who have not previously donated [11].

Discussion and Conclusion

Interest in the influence of social information on charitable causes (i.e., information about other people's donations) has increased in recent years, leading to a surge in field, laboratory, and online experiments that mostly indicate social information's positive impact.

This review's results have several implications. First, charitable organizations can provide social information to increase the donations of individuals. Several studies have demonstrated that social information about the donations of others can influence an individual's contributions positively [11,21,22,65,66]. According to Van Teunenbroek et al. [54], injunctive social information (i.e., information about which behavior is appropriate) can increase donation levels and donor mood more than descriptive social norms (i.e., information about the most common behavior). Nevertheless, combining both types most effectively positively influences donation behavior. According to van Teunenbroek et al. [54], providing social information represents a low-risk intervention that is simple and relatively inexpensive to implement. Elsewhere, several studies have addressed whether downward or upward comparison more effectively reinforces prosocial behavior. The consensus is that downward comparisons (e.g., emphasizing that the potential donor has more resources than other social groups or the recipient group) reinforces prosocial behavior, whereas upward comparisons (e.g., emphasizing that the potential donor has fewer resources than other social groups) decreases prosocial behavior [51,89,90]. Additionally, Ye et al. [87] show that numerical information rather than verbal information has a stronger effect on prosocial behavior for audiences with high numeracy. If potential donors can be classified according to their numeracy, organizations should provide downward comparisons involving numerical social information to more educated individuals and downward comparisons involving verbal social information to

less educated individuals. Similarly, charitable organizations could provide individualized social information on donations to potential donors with different financial resources to increase the likelihood of receiving higher donations from individuals with greater financial capabilities.

Second, charitable organizations can shape perceived social norms to affect participation rates and donation amounts. According to Wiepking and Heijnen [61], fundraisers should provide potential donors with social information, especially when soliciting donations using high-consent-rate methods, such as door-to-door and street campaigns. This affects both perceived norms (the amount the potential donor considers appropriate) and, consequently, the eventual contribution. Providing social information before a donor decides to contribute increases contributions to charities at almost no cost to the organization [74]. Social information that reinforces the social norms of potential donors can include mentioning the percentage of people who donate within a specific time period, the percentage of the public who donate to an organization, or the percentage of donors who renew their membership each year. This information can be used to both acquire new donors and increase retention of existing donors. Moreover, it is recommended that communication efforts focus on highlighting the critical situation (e.g., in hospitals due to the shortage of blood donations) and the essential contribution of the individual [11,87]. Descriptions of the urgent needs of the recipients, not only in print but also in videos, can increase public empathy and, thus, the intention to donate [87].

The third implication is the importance of considering the limits of this effect. Investigating the harmful effects of negative social information--such as "only a few have donated" or "the responses are low" on the willingness to support charitable organizations--Le et al. [88] observe that this kind of social information negatively impacts prevention-oriented target groups but not promotion-oriented target groups. Therefore, it is recommended that marketing campaigns focus on promotion (by communicating peace promotion) rather than prevention (by communicating crime prevention). Furthermore, information about the efficiency, trustworthiness, and quality of an organization should be provided because the harmful effects of negative social information are based on people's doubts about these aspects. According to Wang et al. [84], the impact of social information on donation intention is stronger when the information is provided by an official rather than an unofficial information source. Thus, it is important that official organizations disseminate social information to utilize the associated credibility and authority. Providing indicators on the outcome and achievements of the organization or descriptions of the campaigns and programs implemented can highlight the relevance and efficacy of the charity, increasing participation rates, especially among individuals with low attachment to the cause or who have never donated before [11].

Additionally, the organization can provide other incentives, such as the offer to publicly present the individual's donation

to satisfy their desire for a positive image or reputation. Fourth, when social information is “too high,” it no longer affects contribution level. Social information that is too high may be ignored by the target donor because it is considered irrelevant [22]. Another explanation is that potential donors do not perceive their contribution to have a significant impact if a high number of others donate, leading them to decide against it [54,55]. This finding has important practical implications, namely, that the provision of social information is a self-limiting process that requires an internal optimum. According to Croson and Shang [22], this internal optimum is located between the 90th to 95th contribution percentiles.

Fifth, when considering strategies for increasing donations, it is important to consider that they are not used unethically. Therefore, the information provided to potential donors about the donations of others (or the donation rate) should be trustworthy and accurate. This means protecting the anonymity of donors whose information is provided by either asking permission or publishing aggregate statistics (e.g., the percentage of people who donate) to preclude individuals from being identified. Additionally, misleading strategies are likely ineffective. As mentioned, existing research suggests that providing too much social information cannot effectively increase contributions [22].

Finally, it is worth noting that this paper’s findings have implications for not only soliciting charitable contributions but also promoting other (prosocial) behaviors. According to Shang et al. [89], findings regarding the impact of social information can be applied to various domains and behaviors. This suggests that social information can positively influence, for example, tipping behavior [37], environmentally conscious behavior [27-29] and political participation [30,32]. However, it is important to examine the anticipated effects of social information in the respective context to avoid potential opposite effects [37].

Further Research Needs

This paper’s findings indicate several opportunities for future research. First, future studies should examine whether the positive and negative effects of social information differ between organization types (for example, between nonprofit and governmental organizations) and whether the effects also depend on how long the organization has existed. Second, further research should examine different donor groups to determine which types of social information influence which donor groups. This should include analyzing broad sociodemographic characteristics to determine the extent to which the effect of social information depends on an individual’s age, gender, education level, migration background, socioeconomic status, and personality traits. Third, given the observation of van Teunenbroek et al. [54] that it is uncertain whether overall per-person donations increase or whether substitution occurs (i.e., a person increases their donation to one charity but decreases their donation to another charity), further research should address possible substitution effects.

Finally, it is worth considering that although some studies have revealed that providing social information can encourage individuals to switch from the minority position to the majority position [90], other studies have observed the opposite effect [3,91] a phenomenon Saito et al. [3] describe as the underdog effect in a study indicating that information about others changes the decision of 21% of the majority group, with minorities maintaining their original decision. This might be due to those pertaining to the minority condition perceiving inequality between charitable projects, therefore becoming even more determined to contribute to the minority project. Future research could examine the underdog effect in more detail by analyzing the individual conditions that encourage a switch from the majority to minority decision and vice versa [3,92].

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