Mini-research Paper 3: Taco Ticket Experiment

**Introduction:**

Most nonprofit organizations rely heavily on donations from the public to support their cause or foundation and sometimes obtaining donations is like pulling teeth. It’s one thing asking somebody you know and trust for money, but it’s another entirely asking a stranger to financially or otherwise support a cause they may not be involved with. The best technique of increasing donor-participation is widely debated amongst social scientists and psychologists and there is anything but a consensus on the issue.

**Literature Review:**

There is a myriad of reasons why a person may comply to the request of another and there has been extensive research done to understand those reasons. In a series of experiments performed by Carlsmith and Gross (1969) it was found that people were much more likely to comply to a request if it was accompanied by feelings of guilt and even more so than if a request was paired with sympathy (p.238). In other words, people were more likely to comply with a request if doing so alleviated guilt they felt towards another individual or cause than they were to comply if they only sympathized with a person or cause. On the other end of the spectrum, Isen and Levin (1972), in their two-part study, found evidence supporting “the notion that feeling good leads to helping,” (p. 387). Sanders (2017) performed an experiment in the workplace to see if personalized emails from the CEO would increase donor participation and his study suggests that people are more inclined to give when they feel a personal connection to the person asking (p. 133-134). While all the experiments show a correlation between certain emotions and compliance rates, they provide little insight in the way of motivations and reasoning behind their compliance and how said correlations can be realistically applied.

Freedman and Fraser (1966) designed two experiments intended to fill in the research gap and provide a real-life technique to increase donor compliance. They found that their “foot-in-the-door” method increased the compliance rate from the first to the second request meaning that people are more likely to comply to a request when they feel involved in the process (p. 200-201). Another technique, coined “the low-ball technique” by Cialdini, Et al. (1978) offers people an incredibly low price (or commitment) to gain compliance only to later rescind the original offer and still retain commitment to the original decision (p. 464). Both techniques aim to increase compliance of the population but the low-ball technique also aims to increase commitment level and final payout while the foot-in-the-door technique is more so focused on quantity of compliers. Joule (1987) conducted a short experiment testing the effectiveness of the two techniques and found that “the low-ball technique revealed to be more globally effective than the foot-in-the-door technique, in terms of both verbal and behavioral compliance,” (p. 364). It should, however, be noted that the foot-in-the-door technique is still an effective means of raising compliance and Gueguen (2013) found that it can even be effective when asking for donations of blood rather than money (p. 492).

A third technique for increasing donor compliance is known as the “even a penny helps” technique originally named by Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) in their two-part experiment with middle-income families and the American Cancer Society (p. 600). They found that by adding “even a penny helps” when asking for donations, the number of donations increased but there was no significant difference in the size of contributions (p. 603). Dolinski, Et al. (2005) retested Cialdini and Schroeder (1976) in a variety of different social situations to measure the validity of the technique and found that “even a penny” remained an effective tool for increasing compliance and even showed a significant difference in gift size (p. 1167-1168). The technique was retested once more by Jacob, Charles-Sire, and Guéguen (2013) with food products instead of monetary donations and yielded several interesting results. The experiment further supported “even a penny” as an effective means of raising donor compliance both in terms of monetary and food donations, and was still effective when not asking for immediate donations (p. 832). Our Communication Research Methods class aimed to recreate the Jacob, Charles-Sire, and Guéguen (2013) experiment to further test the validity of the “even a penny” technique and modified a few elements to establish our final hypothesis.

Hypotheses: App State students will buy more taco tickets in support of a fundraiser if the volunteers selling them wear official buttons than when they don’t.

**Methods:**

Given our class size and limited in-class time available, the class conducted a pilot study to determine whether a full experiment would be successful in our environment. We sold tickets during a half-hour block on a Monday and Wednesday from 12:30-1pm with volunteers switching positions at the fifteen-minute mark. We sold $5 tickets that benefitted a local fundraiser and allowed the purchaser to receive two tacos and a drink at a date in the future. We tried to control for foot traffic and class times by setting up a sellers table on the second floor of the communication building during the last half hour to catch people as they were changing classes. Additionally, we decided not to sell tickets on Friday because there would be less people than usual in the building. The experiment was designed by our research methods class through discussion and votes along with the help of our professor. Along with the four volunteers in charge of selling tickets, one student was assigned to observe at the table and record the number of tickets sold and to which gender they were sold to see if gender played a significant role. Volunteers varied on their method of selling as some waited for people to approach the table and others called people over and asked them directly. Buttons identifying the event and organization hosting it were worn during the Wednesday session, but not the Monday session. Our population included everyone who happened to be on the second floor and/or changing classes at the time the table was set up.

**Results:**

On day one, (Monday) three tickets were sold to three female students. On day two, (Wednesday) four tickets were sold.

**Discussion/Conclusion:**

There are many aspect of our pilot study that, if expanded, would need to be improved. Our first issue is that the volunteers selling tickets were much more enthusiastic the second day than the first, which could very easily have swayed the results. In addition to that, multiple people showed interest in purchasing a ticket on day one but did not have money so they came back on day two and bought a ticket then. This compromises the validity of the experiment because it is not actually measuring the impact of the buttons on our population. Our second major issue is that we had no real way of determining our sample size so therefore could not calculate what percentage of the total sample bought tickets. For this to be expanded upon and replicated, it would need to be set up in a much more controlled environment with defined roles for volunteers to truly test the effect of the buttons. As of now we have no way of knowing if the buttons persuaded anyone to buy tickets or if it was all volunteer enthusiasm. Our pilot study revealed that the communication building is not an ideal spot for fundraising because it does not provide the amount of foot traffic that other locations on campus do so future research would need to take that into account. Overall, the pilot study shows promise as a good starting place for this type of research but will require a lot of modification moving forward.

**Resources:**

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