

The Art of Compromise: Door-in-the-Face Strategy in Securing Financial Assistance from Family Members

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ABSTRACT

The Door-in-the-Face (DITF) technique, a cornerstone of compliance research, employs an initial exaggerated request anticipated to be rejected, followed by a more modest true request, capitalizing on reciprocity norms and perceptual contrast. This single-case naturalistic field experiment examines DITF efficacy within familial financial negotiations via WhatsApp, a context underexplored in recent digital literature. Objectives include applying DITF principles—compromise perception, reciprocity, and contrast—to elevate compliance rates from a projected 0% to higher acceptance. Findings showed that the target (subject's brother) rejected RM100 for a fabricated "traffic fine" but acquiesced to RM50 subsequently, yielding 100% compliance on the target request which affirm DITF robustness and underscore relational trust as a key moderator in close-knit dyads using digital channels. Theoretical contributions refine social influence models, practical implications span family dynamics, digital negotiation training and everyday persuasion.

Keywords: Door-in-the-Face, compliance, social influence, reciprocity norms, family relationships, WhatsApp

INTRODUCTION

Social influence strategies like Door-in-the-Face (DITF) exemplify how sequential requests exploit cognitive and normative heuristics to foster compliance. Initially demonstrated in charitable solicitations, DITF posits that rejecting a large favor creates a reciprocity obligation, prompting concession to a smaller one. Concurrently, contrast effects render the second request comparatively palatable (Branscombe & Baron, 2024). Foundational mechanisms include the norm of reciprocity—wherein compromise by the requester binds the target socially (Cialdini, 2009)—and self-presentation concerns, where targets view agreement as portraying benevolence (Fennis et al., 2011). Recent work highlights negative affect (e.g., guilt) post-large-request refusal as a driver of target compliance (O'Keefe & Wang, 2024).

Recent scholarship extends DITF to relational and digital contexts, revealing enhanced effects in high-trust bonds like family, where emotional interdependence amplifies perceived legitimacy, particularly via platforms like WhatsApp. Meta-analyses confirm moderate-to-large effects ($d \approx 0.50-0.70$) across prosocial, financial and health domains, moderated by cultural factors such as collectivism in East Asian samples (Li et al., 2023; Fennis & Janssen, 2021). In Malaysia's family-centric culture - where filial obligations and "saving face" prevail—DITF holds untapped potential for naturalistic digital applications, amid rising digital financial interactions (Abdullah & Tan, 2022).

This study addresses a gap in single-case field validations by operationalizing DITF via WhatsApp in authentic sibling financial aid. Specific objectives are: (1) to deploy DITF in requesting RM100 (large, implausible) followed by RM50 (target, reasonable); (2) to quantify compliance shift via rejection-to-acceptance transition in chat logs; (3) to dissect mediating roles of reciprocity norms, contrast perception, and interpersonal rapport; and (4) to evaluate contextual moderators like digital delivery and relational history for generalizability.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a single-case naturalistic design, which is appropriate for examining psychological processes within real-life contexts and capturing idiographic patterns of behavior (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013). Naturalistic designs allow researchers to observe authentic interpersonal interactions without artificial laboratory manipulation. In this experiment, the Door-in-the-Face (DITF) compliance technique, first described by Robert Cialdini and colleagues, was tested in a real communication setting.

The interaction occurred through the messaging application WhatsApp, which provided a natural communication channel commonly used for daily social interactions. This platform also allowed precise documentation of the timing, wording, and responses within the conversation (Aziz et al., 2024).

Participants

Two individuals were involved in the interaction:

- **Confederate (requester):**
A male undergraduate psychology student in her 20s who intentionally implemented the compliance technique as part of the experimental procedure.
- **Target participant (brother):**
A 40-year-old employed adult male residing in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia. The participant had an established familial relationship with the confederate, characterized by prior mutual assistance and regular communication. This existing rapport was important because compliance techniques such as the Door-in-the-Face strategy often operate within established social relationships where norms of reciprocity and helping behavior already exist.

Because this was a single-case design, the aim was not statistical generalization but rather demonstrating the psychological mechanism of compliance in a real-life interaction.

Materials and Data Collection

The primary data source consisted of digital conversation records obtained from WhatsApp. Two forms of documentation were used:

1. Verbatim screenshots of the conversation
2. Exported chat logs from the application

These records preserved the exact wording, time stamps, and sequence of messages, which are important for analyzing compliance techniques that rely heavily on message timing and framing.

Additionally, emojis were included as part of the communication. Emojis were treated as nonverbal cues that helped convey emotional tone, urgency, and politeness within digital interactions.

Procedure

The interaction took place on July 15, 2025, and followed the structured steps of the Door-in-the-Face technique, which involves presenting a large request likely to be rejected, followed immediately by a smaller, more reasonable request.

Step 1: Initial Large Request (High Anchor)

At 2:15 PM, the confederate sent the first message requesting financial assistance:

“Bro, can I borrow RM100? I need to pay for a traffic summons today. If I don’t pay it, they might seize my car.”

This request was intentionally designed to be relatively large and somewhat unreasonable, based on the typical financial expectations within the sibling relationship. Previous informal patterns suggested that borrowing RM100 would likely exceed the brother’s usual willingness to provide immediate assistance. According to compliance research, such requests often have a rejection probability of 90–100%, which is necessary for activating the Door-in-the-Face effect.

Step 2: Rejection of the Initial Request

At 2:17 PM, the participant responded:

“If RM100 is too much, try to find another way first.”

This reply functioned as a clear rejection, indicating reluctance to comply with the large request.

Step 3: Immediate Target Request (Reduced Request)

Within approximately 30 seconds (2:17:30 PM) of the rejection, the confederate delivered the second request:

“Ok, Alright, if RM100 is too much, RM50 would already help me settle part of it. □”

This message strategically emphasized compromise and flexibility, which is a central mechanism in the Door-in-the-Face technique. The reduction from RM100 to RM50 framed the second request as more reasonable and manageable.

Step 4: Compliance Outcome

At 2:18 PM, the participant responded positively:

“RM50 is fine. Go ahead.”

Shortly after, the participant transferred RM50 via a bank transfer application, confirming compliance with the second request.

Operationalization of the Compliance Technique

The experiment operationalized the Door-in-the-Face technique through three key elements:

1. Large initial request designed to be rejected (RM100).
2. Immediate follow-up request with a smaller amount (RM50).
3. Framing the reduction as a concession, encouraging reciprocal cooperation from the participant.

The rapid transition between requests (less than 30 seconds) ensured that the participant perceived the second request as a direct concession following the rejection, which is essential for triggering the reciprocity norm.

Ethical Considerations

The interaction took place within a natural familial relationship, minimizing potential psychological harm. The financial request was modest and within typical family support norms. After the activity, the participant was debriefed regarding the purpose of the experiment, and consent was obtained for using the anonymized conversation as part of the study documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

WhatsApp logs confirmed the brother rejected RM100 at 2:17 PM: "if RM100 is too much, try to find another way first" (compliance: 0%). The pivot to RM50 at 2:17:30 PM yielded immediate compliance: "RM50 is fine. Go ahead" with transfer at 2:18 PM (100% compliance). Attitude shift was instantaneous (<1 min), with no counter offers. Post-interaction rapport remained high (self-rated 6/7), suggesting no relational strain. This binary transition (0% → 100%) mirrors lab effect sizes (Fennis & Janssen, 2021), with qualitative evidence of contrast in the rapid concession.

The observed compliance shift robustly validates DITF's core tenets, extending foundational lab paradigms (Cialdini et al., 1975) to ecological family finance via WhatsApp, where negative affect post-rejection boosts target acceptance. Primary mechanisms—reciprocity norms and perceptual contrast—operated synergistically: The brother's rejection rationale echoed the requester's compromise, invoking mutual concession and indebtedness (Cialdini, 2009). Quantitatively, the 0%–100% pivot aligns with meta-analytic hedges' $d = 0.61$ for financial requests (Fennis & Janssen, 2021). Contrast effects were evident in seamless acceptance, amplified by digital anchoring. Self-presentation motives further catalyzed agreement. WhatsApp's relational trust buffered reactance, elevating effects in East Asian collectivism, including Malaysian social influence on compliance (Li et al., 2023; Abdullah & Tan, 2022).

Contrasting with foot-in-the-door, DITF excelled in this high-stakes digital finance context (Burger, 1999). Novelty lies in WhatsApp micro-dynamics (e.g., <1-min pivot, emojis), refining models for digital social influence curricula. Links to behavioral economics position DITF as a nudge.

CONCLUSION

The practical implications of this study explain that DITF via WhatsApp equips ethical persuasion for Malaysian family budgeting, asnaf appeals, or workplace wellbeing interventions. However, this study has limitation. Single-case design limits generalizability; unmeasured confounds (e.g., notification timing) threaten validity. No direct RM50 baseline. Future research with larger, more diverse samples and controlled designs is recommended to refine this study.

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