



# Pro-social behavior in the TV show “Come Dine With Me”: An empirical investigation



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## ABSTRACT

We investigate the influence of social approval, reputation, and individual characteristics on voting behavior in the German version of the TV show “Come Dine With Me”. Five contestants prepare a dinner for each other during the course of a week and evaluate each other’s performance. The winner receives a monetary prize. Evaluations remain concealed until the show is broadcast. Because actual voting behavior remains concealed during the show, a contestant could evaluate his/her opponents as zero in an effort to increase his/her own chances of winning, without risking later punishment in the form of low scores. However, this behavior is not observed in our dataset, which runs from 2006 to 2011. We find that all of the following have a significant influence on the evaluating behavior: the objective sophistication of a meal; the order of cooking; whether a person has already cooked; and the social similarity between contestant and evaluator. These findings help to improve understanding of the impact that reputation and social approval have on economic decision making.

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## 1. Introduction

Interaction between human beings is, to a large extent, governed by social norms that have evolved over time and have been instilled in us since childhood. In the absence of compliance with social norms, everyday interaction would be difficult because every situation would require the persons involved to establish acceptable behavior anew, or to coordinate regarding some mutually acceptable behavior. Compliance with a social norm can be enforced through so-called moralistic punishment. Moralistic punishment is defined as: “... the enforcement of social norms by outraged but otherwise not directly affected third parties” (Carpenter & Matthews, 2012, p. 555). Another important dimension that leads people to adhere to norms is the potential loss of reputation in the eyes of their peers, often termed social approval (Benabou & Tirole, 2003, 2006; Bernheim, 1994; Holländer, 1990). In his seminal article, Bernheim (1994) postulates: “When popularity

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is sufficiently important relative to intrinsic utility (defined as utility directly derived from consumption), many individuals conform to a single, homogenous standard of behavior, despite heterogeneous underlying preferences" (p. 844). Bernheim's model also allows for deviations from a norm for agents with extreme preferences. This explains the need for third party punishment because, in certain situations, the intrinsic utility gain may lead to deviations from the norm.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the influence of social approval, reputation, and personal traits on the voting behavior of contestants in the German version of the TV show "Come Dine With Me". In order to address these questions, we employ a dataset including shows from the years 2006–2011. The German version is called "Das perfekte Dinner", and for clarity of exposition, we will refer to the German version of the show as "The Perfect Dinner" in the rest of this paper. The TV show offers a unique setting to test the impact of these factors because contestants' ratings are concealed and, therefore, are unobservable by the co-contestants during the show and are not revealed to the public and contestants until the final broadcast. Thus, due to the fact that voting behavior is unobservable during the show, one might expect contestants to behave selfishly in order to win a monetary prize, if it is assumed that they do not care about any social effects. Yet there are various other factors that may interact with voting behavior having and have a social component, such as the order in which the contestants cook, whether or not a person has already cooked, and the social similarity of the contestants. In order to assess the influence of these factors, we estimate several different regression models that explain the evaluation scores a cook receives from an evaluator.

Our work adds in several ways to the literature addressing the impact of social factors on economic decisions. First, we have a richer dataset than previous studies on the TV show "The Perfect Dinner", and thus are able to explore in a more robust fashion effects stemming from social and reputational effects. Furthermore, we go beyond the preceding studies by investigating new issues such as the effect of objective sophistication; social similarity between contestants; the effect of past voting behavior; and the effect of a prior performance. Second, we supply empirical evidence for theoretical models related to the impact of social factors on economic decision making. By addressing a range of potential social factors that have not been examined previously in this context, this paper can serve as input for a range of theoretical specifications. We find that reputational factors do not play a role. In contrast, the social similarity between contestants, whether they have already cooked, and the order in which they cook all play a significant role in explaining voting behavior. Furthermore, objective sophistication also has a significant impact and renders our results more robust than those of previous studies.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes in detail the rules and courses of action in the TV show "The Perfect Dinner" and offers an overview of the economic literature related to behavior in TV shows. In Section 3, we describe our data and formulate our hypotheses regarding contestants' behavior. In Section 4, we explain our econometric approach; this is followed by a discussion of our results in Section 5. Finally, we conclude in Section 6.

## 2. Description of "The Perfect Dinner" and literature review

The original show was first broadcast in Great Britain in 2005 under the title "*Come Dine With Me*". Since then, identical or very similar shows have been selected for broadcasting in 32 countries worldwide,<sup>3</sup> and reach large audiences<sup>4</sup> in their respective countries. The German version of the show, "*The Perfect Dinner*" has the following rules: each day, one of the five contestants cooks for the whole group; the overall time span of one round therefore is 5 days. The dinner is prepared in the home of the cook. Contestants must announce the menu they plan to cook before the beginning of the show and cannot change it afterward. Furthermore, they do not have any influence on the order of cooking, which is determined by the TV channel producing the show. Each contestant receives 600€ for expenses before the show. At the end of each dinner, the performance of the cook is rated by his or her peers on a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 representing the highest score. This score does not only reflect the quality of the food, but also the overall impression of the evening, meaning that the ability of the host to make the whole evening an enjoyable experience for the contestants is also rated. Evaluations are performed confidentially so that each contestant has to decide on his or her evaluation with no knowledge of the evaluations of the other competitors; any communication regarding this matter is prevented by the TV crew. Evaluations remain undisclosed until the show is broadcast, approximately 3 months later. At the end of the week, the results, although not detailed individual evaluations, are announced and the contestant with the highest total collective score wins a prize of 1500€. If there is a draw, the prize is divided equally among the winners.

Despite the great popularity of the show, there are only a few studies that investigate "The Perfect Dinner" from an economic standpoint. Haigler, Jenewein, Wakolbinger, and Müller (2010) consider the sequential position effects of the German version and find that a negative position effect exists for the first competitor. Ahmed (2011) compares the means of points given in the Swedish version of the show and finds no significant differences between the voting behavior of men and women. Schüller and Upmann (2013) consider the show from a game theoretical point of view. They model it as a simultaneous non-cooperative game with evaluations as strategic variables and show that, in the absence of social concerns, there are many Nash-equilibria. Employing part of the same data set used for this study, they find that players reach a Nash equilibrium only once and that this equilibrium differs from the zero-equilibrium. Therefore, non-equilibrium behavior seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the German show is called *Das perfekte Dinner* (since March 2006); the French, *Un Dîner Presque Parfait* (since February 2008); the Turkish, *Yemekteyiz* (since October 2008), etc.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come\\_Dine\\_with\\_Me](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Dine_with_Me).

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