Does initial slacktivist behavior induce moral licensing, thus decreasing the likelihood of more meaningful prosocial activity in the future?

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1. Introduction

Slacktivism is a term that grew over the years and it has been defined as a form of civic engagement with "low-risk, low-cost" (Rotman et al. 2011: 821). Although slacktivist behavior can occur in an offline environment by wearing a pin (cf. Kristofferson et al. 2014), it has been widely discussed in an online context, e.g. by signing online petitions (cf. Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010: 240). Critics describe slacktivism as "feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact" (Morozov 2009a: para.1), emphasizing on its inability to generate meaningful change. Morozov goes as far as saying that "'Slacktivism' is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation" (ibid. para.2), directly linking it to one of the deadly sins: sloth. Christensen further explained that "the slacktivists are seen as unwilling to get their hands dirty" (Christensen 2011: para.27). Conversely, advocates argue that by engaging in slacktivism, one can raise the public's awareness of an issue (cf. Vie 2014). Others have found empirical results that contradict the description of slacktivism used by critics (cf. Jones 2015: "Discussion" para.2), i.e. that online forms of civic engagement have crowded out meaningful in-person activism (cf. Morozov 2009b; cf. Gladwell 2010). Yet is there a negative influence of slacktivism on subsequent prosocial behavior? In the following paper, I will address this question by introducing the concept of moral licensing and by presenting different empirical research that has further investigated the issue.

2. Theoretical Framework

Moral licensing results in fluctuations between the level of morality, which an individual is striving for, and the perceived moral self, i.e. the "moral self-regard" (Monin and Jordan 2009: 347) and the answer to "How moral am I?" (ibid. 347). This moral-self-image can either exceed or fall below the desired morality stage, depending on the situation, e.g. volunteering at a soup kitchen would elevate it, potentially surpassing one's morality goal. According to Nisan's moral balance model (1991), this past good deed earns people *moral credits*, which can in turn be spent for morally dubious acts in the future. This underlying mechanism, i.e. collecting moral credits from past good deeds and using them on immoral actions later, is also the working force of Sachdeva et al.'s moral self-regulation model (2009). Others argue that past good deeds serve to establish one's moral self-image

towards the public, i.e. stating *I am a moral person* through "moral credentials" (Merritt et al. 2010: 6). Since one's morality has been proven in the past, one can "act in more morally problematic ways in the future" (Monin and Jordan 2009: 348). Empirical evidence on moral licensing has been found in political correctness (e.g. Monin and Miller 2001) and consumer choice (e.g. Khan and Dhar 2006). Moreover, unlike moral licensing, acting immorally can induce good deeds in the future through a mechanism referred to as "moral cleansing" (Sachdeva et al. 2009: 523; cf. O'Connor et al. 2020). When applying this theoretical framework to the question at hand, one would anticipate a moral licensing effect. If initial slacktivist behavior is perceived as a good deed, one would argue that moral credits have been earned, licensing one to decline subsequent prosocial action without feeling selfish. Since cause-related advocacy groups are continuously promoting symbolic online actions and the use of social media (cf. Obar et al. 2012), one would expect more slacktivism and less commitment to more meaningful engagement, i.e. when one's resources – time, effort or money – are being exploited in the process.

3. Literature review

The existing literature has been conflicted about the influence of social media on slacktivism and its subsequent effect on prosocial engagement. Based on surveys, Štětka and Mazák (2014) found a significant positive effect of online political involvement on subsequent action, thus contradicting slacktivist's critique. In the following section, I will study experimental economics approaches on the issue.

3.1 Analysis of Kristofferson et al.'s paper (2014)

Five experiments were conducted to examine the effect of slacktivism on subsequent action. Study 2 will not be discussed, as it only validates the findings of study 1 in a controlled laboratory environment (cf. Kristofferson et al. 2014, Figure 2: 1152). Studies 3 and 4 will be omitted as well, as they are not directly related to the question at hand.

Experimental design

Study 1 was conducted on the field, right before Remembrance Day (ibid. 1153). Participants were intercepted and randomly assigned to a public token-support condition, a private one or a control group. Those in the public setting were asked to visibly wear a pin, as a symbol of civic support for the veterans, whereas in the private condition the pin was given in an envelope. Upon acceptance of the pin, participants were stopped by another research assistant soon after, asking for donations to the same cause. The control group only received the second request.

Study 5 was conducted similarly to study 1, with some manipulations. Individuals were asked to show their support for the local hockey team, not the veterans (ibid. 1161). Also, instead of a pin, participants in the private condition were given a fridge magnet to ensure low social observability. After accepting one of the objects, participants had to indicate their connection to the cause. Another research assistant subsequently asked them to participate in a 5-minute survey on behalf of the team. The control group only received the second request and their relation to the cause was documented.

Results

The results of study 1 suggest that participants in the public condition donated significantly less (M=0.34$) than those in the private setting (M=0.86$) (ibid. 1153). Also, no significant difference between the donations of those in the public condition and those in the control group (M=0.15$) was found (cf. Figure 1), which means that the public token support did not influence the likelihood of donating. Since the average contribution in both token-support settings was higher than in the control group, a moral licensing effect did not occur.
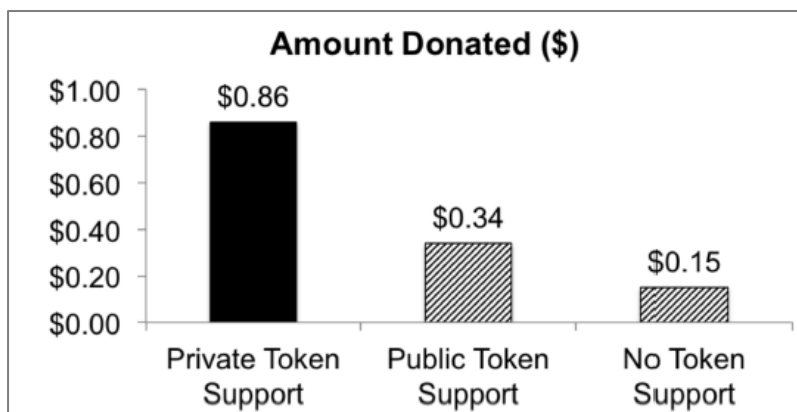

Figure 1: average amount donated in response to a second request
for meaningful support (Study 1) (ibid. 1153)

When including the connection to the cause of study 5 into the framework, the interaction effect between it and the condition variables (public or private) reached significance (ibid. Table 1: 1162). After publicly displaying their support, only participants without a strong connection to the cause completed fewer surveys.

Discussion

In both studies a moral licensing effect was not found, but publicly supporting a cause seems to decrease the effort one puts into the second request, when one is not highly connected to the cause. However, the privacy of the token-support in study 1 might not have been ensured since the pin could have been taken out of the envelope (ibid. 1161). Study 5 examined the connection-to-cause as a moderator in the context of a for-profit organization, further research should investigate this effect in a charitable context for a more accurate comparison between studies.

3.2 Analysis of Lee and Hsieh's paper (2013)

Experimental design

The experiment was conducted as an online experiment (cf. Lee and Hsieh 2013: 814). All participants were offered $1 in exchange for their time and were told that one out of 10 would receive a $5 bonus. Every participant had to register on "We the People" (petitions.whitehouse.gov) and answered some questions about gun control. Then, a pro or anti-gun control petition was presented for reading, according to their opinion on the subject. People who were randomly assigned to the petition condition received a link to sign it if they wanted. Those in the control condition got no further instructions. After this, all participants had to answer a few questions, e.g. on their intention to engage in different civic actions in the future. They were then reminded about the $5 bonus and were given the extra information that they could donate part of the money to charity, by adjusting the scrollbar that was set on "keeping the $5" (ibid. 815) to a number between 1-5. Half of them were presented with a congruent charity, i.e. one about gun-control. The others were able to donate to an incongruent charity about education.

Results

Findings need to be classified into congruent donations and incongruent ones. First, when only considering the participants confronted with a charity unrelated to gun-control, the *likelihood of donating money* was not significantly different between the groups (cf. Figure 2). More precisely, individuals who chose to sign the online petition were not less likely to donate money (63.5 %) than those who did not sign it (54.8%) or the control group (58.6%), demonstrating no negative subsequent effect of slacktivism. However, neither signing the petition nor the contrary was a significant predictor for donating money (cf. ibid. Table 2: 816). When comparing the *donated amount* within the groups pairwise, i.e. sign/not sign and control, no significant difference between the donations from those who previously signed the petition (M=2.25: 816) and the control group (M=1.99: 816) was found. These results suggest that engaging in slacktivist behavior does not license one to subsequently act less morally. Interestingly, the authors found a significant difference, when comparing those who did not sign (M= 2.58: 816) to the control group, implying a moral cleansing effect. Those who chose not to sign the petition subsequently donated more to charity.
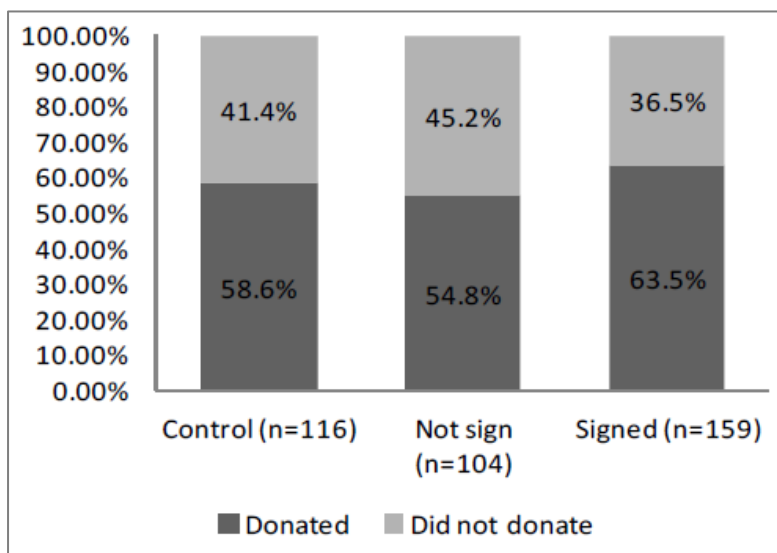

Figure 2: percentage of incongruent donation between groups
(Lee and Hsieh 2013: 816)

Now, the same conclusion can be drawn on the *likelihood of donating money* for participants faced with congruent issues. 62.9% of those who signed the petition contributed to the cause (cf. Figure 3), which is more than the control group (46.5%) and those who did not sign (41.7%). However, in this congruent setting, signing the

online petition reached significance as a predictor for donating (cf. Table 4: 817), which could be explained by self-consistency motives. Turning to the *donated amount*, no significant difference was noticed between the three settings (ibid. 817). Therefore, neither indication of moral licensing nor moral cleansing was found. All individuals put the same effort into the second request, which supports the theory of self-consistency.
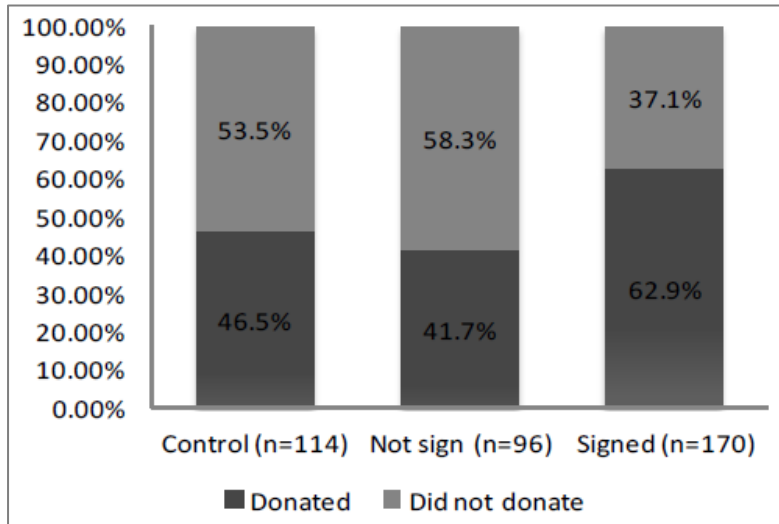

Figure 3: percentage of congruent donation between groups
(Lee and Hsieh 2013: 817)

Discussion

The findings of the experiment imply that engaging in slacktivism (viewing and perhaps signing an online petition) does not decrease the likelihood of engaging in a subsequent civic act (donating). On the contrary, it can increase it (self-consistency motives when the causes are similar) or increase the donated amount (moral cleansing when the issues are incongruent). However, increasing subsequent action might be limited to prosocial acts that are also low-cost (ibid. 819). When analyzing participant's responses on their future intention of engaging in civic actions, only the likelihood of signing another petition or writing letters to the government was increased. Actions, which are both relatively low-cost. The probability of attending a protest for example did not increase (ibid. Table 6: 818). One could also question the finding of only a moral cleansing effect. In this experiment, the cost of engaging in the subsequent task might not have been high enough. Moral licensing could be induced by raising the effort needed to perform the second request, e.g. by asking to volunteer at the charity.

3.3 Analysis of Cornelissen et al.'s paper (2013)

Experimental design

Two similar experiments were conducted (cf. Cornelissen et al. 2013: 6; ibid. 9). All participants were charged a 9€ show-up fee and were instructed to read the description of a charity (UNICEF in study 1, Intermon Oxfam in study 2). Then, half of the participants could symbolically express their support for the cause by ticking a box comparable to a "like-button" (ibid. 7). Participants of study 1 were then invited to voluntarily help UNICEF in finding slogans. Those in study 2 were told that they would receive a chocolate bar merchandised by Intermon Oxfam and that they could pay for it, by donating part of their participation fee. Subsequently, all participants completed a self-monitoring scale, which helped in measuring impression-management tendencies.

Results

Data of study 1 revealed a main effect of the symbolic action. Participants, who were able to tick the support box, significantly wrote fewer characters (M=11.30) than the control group (M=27.36) (ibid. 7). However, the main effect of self-monitoring was significant as well. High self-monitors, i.e. people who adjust their behavior according to how moral they are being perceived by others (cf. Goffman 1959), were influenced by engaging in slacktivism. They wrote significantly fewer characters than the control group. This moral licensing effect was not found for low self-monitors (cf. Figure 1).
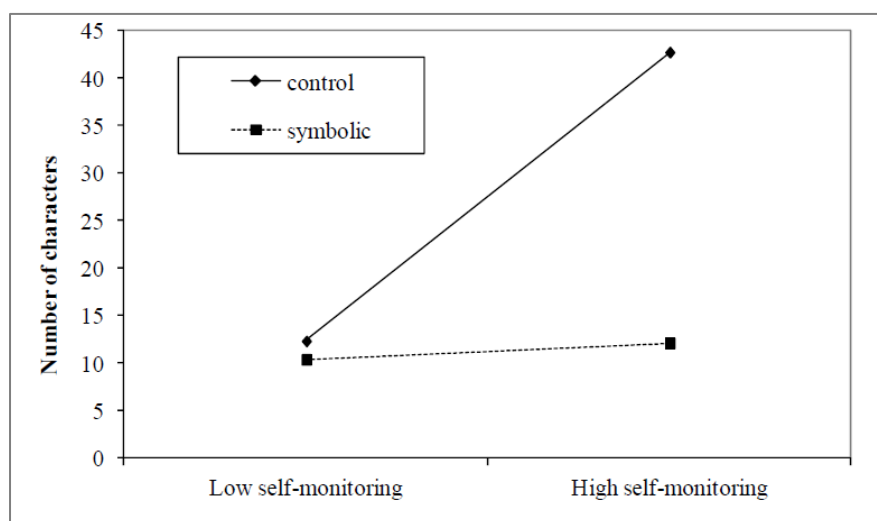

Figure 1: study 1 (Cornelissen et al. 2013: 8)

The results found in study 2 were less strong than previously, but altogether replicated them (ibid. 9). When excluding the participants, who chose not to tick the box, although it appeared, a marginally significant interaction effect of self-monitoring and engaging in the symbolic act was found. For high self-monitors, a moral licensing effect was identified, whereas for the others it was not (cf. Figure 2).
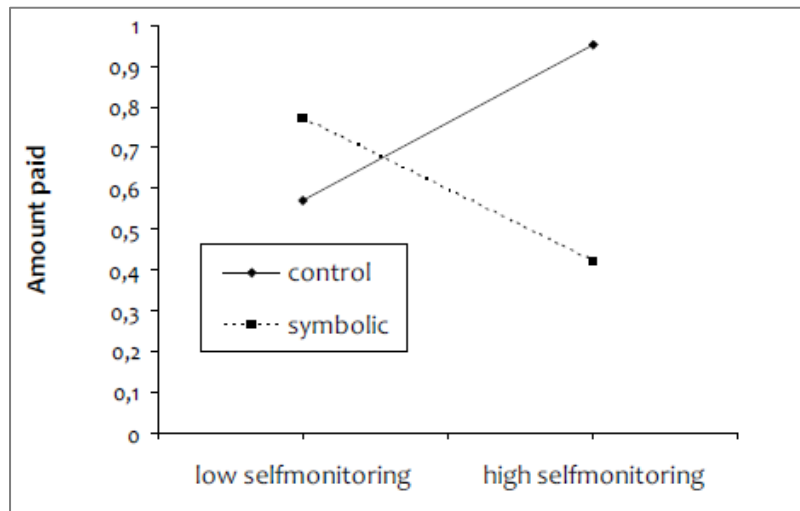

Figure 2: study 2 (Cornelissen et al. 2013: 10)

Discussion

Although in both studies a moral licensing effect was found, it was only noticed for participants high in impression-management concerns. Study 2's findings only reached marginal significance. An explanation might be that the subsequent task in study 2 required more effort (donating money) than the one in study 1 (donating time) (ibid. 10). Since different organizations were used in the studies, the results could be distorted, as people might be more familiar with one of them, thus more willing to engage in more meaningful action, regardless of their previous behavior.

4. General discussion

When comparing the results of these experiments, the ambivalence on the studied issue becomes clear. Although all studies have a similar set-up, i.e. first asking to express support for a cause symbolically and then requesting a larger contribution, a moral licensing effect was only found in Cornelissen et al.'s paper (2013), where individuals took part in the most costless token support. Also, it was limited to participants highly concerned about impression-management. Even in Lee and Hsieh's paper (2013), where the second request consisted in asking for donations as well, the impact of slacktivism was not identical. That is why further research should examine the degree of effort of slacktivism as a moderator, i.e. how low does it have to be to induce moral licensing. Considering the current findings, one would suggest that characteristics of slacktivism such as social observability (cf. Kristofferson et al. 2014), value alignment (ibid.) or congruence between topics (cf. Lee and Hsieh 2013) are influencing *the extent* to which a subsequent request is being completed, rather than slacktivism decreasing subsequent action.

5. Conclusion

As discussed previously, the concept of moral licensing has been widely researched and has been a valid explanation for phenomena in the past. However, the empirical evidence of this effect, in the context of slacktivism and subsequent action, is still lacking. Rather than moral licensing, the underlying mechanisms of the findings in the discussed papers could be impression management or self-consistency. Further research should investigate the influence of these forces, when questioning the impact of slacktivism on future prosocial behavior.

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