Does Slacktivism Hurt Activism?: The Effects of Moral Balancing and Consistency in Online Activism

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ABSTRACT
In this paper we explore how the decision of partaking in low-cost, low-risk online activism—slacktivism—may affect subsequent civic action. Based on moral balancing and consistency effects, we designed an online experiment to test if signing or not signing an online petition increased or decreased subsequent contribution to a charity. We found that participants who signed the online petition were significantly more likely to donate money to a related charity, demonstrating a consistency effect. We also found that participants who did not sign the petition donated significantly more money to an unrelated charity, demonstrating a moral balancing effect. The results suggest that exposure to an online activism influences individual decision on subsequent civic actions.

Author Keywords
Online Petitions, Consistency, Moral Balancing, Slacktivism

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces.

General Terms
Human Factors; Design.

INTRODUCTION
In recent years, we are witnessing a growth in social activism associated with the use of social media. For example on March 5th, 2012, an organization called Invisible Children uploaded a video called KONY 2012 on to video-sharing site YouTube and Vimeo. KONY2012 was the first part of their campaign to make Ugandan indicted war criminal Joseph Kony known to the world in order to have him arrested. The campaign's primary pleas were simple: watch the video, and share it. In less than a month, the video gained more than 100 million views around the world.

Social technology such as social network sites (e.g, *Facebook*) and content-sharing websites (e.g., *Youtube*, *Vimeo*) are allowing online interaction between people at unprecedented large scales. These technologies hold great potential for supporting activism and civic engagement. Besides the use of video-sharing sites like the KONY 2012 campaign, *Twitter* and *Google maps* have been used innovatively during emergency crises to identify demands and broker resources more efficiently [21]. Websites such as *Avaaz.org* and *Wikipedia* are used to discuss human right violations and online campaigns [7]. In the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the *International Red Cross (IRC)* raised more than seven million in four days via a text-message campaign [16]. Even the United States' White House recently (2011) launched an online petition system called *We the People* for citizens to organize online petitions.

However, these online actions have also been criticized as "slacktivism" that has no real impact on social change and even hurt future civic actions. The term slacktivism comes from combining slacker and activism. Slacktivism has been defined as "low-risk, low-cost activity via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity [17]." Examples of slacktivism includes activities such as clicking "like" to show support for an interest group on *Facebook*, signing online petitions, forwarding letters or videos about an issue, and painting one's profile green to support demographic election in Iraq.

Critics of slacktivism argue that slacktivism can hurt "real" civic actions such as protests, community volunteerism, and charity. Slacktivism may also substitute other civic actions because the people's inner urge to take action has been satisfied by their participation in the low-cost online action [3, 19]. This concern can be explained by research on moral balancing. Studies have found that performing a good deed liberates one's conscience to slack off on subsequent good-deeds [6, 8, 9, 18]. However, to date, this moral balancing effect has yet to be demonstrated in the online activism context. Does participating in online activism reduce people's subsequent civic participation?

There is, however, an alternative effect that needs to be considered when examining the efficacy of slacktivism. It may be possible that under certain circumstances, slacktivism can lead to increased likelihood or efforts in subsequent civic action. Cognitive dissonance theory assumes that individuals are motivated to reduce dissonance

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by altering their behavior or cognition to be consistent [2]. Cognitive dissonance theory would predict that partaking in slacktivism may increase people's likelihood of taking a related subsequent civic action because people want their behaviors to remain consistent. If they contributed to a pro-social cause, they are more likely to contribute to the same cause again. Current research demonstrating the moral balancing effect has only shown that people who made a prosocial choice are less likely to perform a *different*, subsequent prosocial action [6, 8]. But when the subsequent action is congruent to the initial action, can the initial participation actually raise subsequent participation?

The goal of this study is to examine whether the decision to sign or not sign an online petition (slacktivism) affects subsequent donation to charity. Specifically, under what conditions will moral balancing effects occur? And under what conditions will consistency concerns dominate one's decisions to take up a civic action?

In the wake of the Aurora, Colorado shooting in July 2012, we designed an online experiment that invited participants to sign an online petition either for banning assault rifles or in support of gun rights based on their attitude on the issue. Then we asked the participants if they were willing to donate part of their experiment compensation to either a gun control/gun right-related organization (congruent civic action), or an education organization (incongruent civic action).

We found that when the following civic action is unrelated to the previous issue, participants who did not sign the petition donated significantly more money than the control group, possibly because of a moral cleansing effect. However, when the subsequent action is closely related to the previous issue, signing the petition increases the likelihood of donating money, but not the amount. We also examined whether signing the petition influenced intentions to participate in a number of traditional civic action. The results showed that participating in the petition only increased intentions to participate in similar civic actions.

This work offers both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, our research extends current research on moral balancing, and is the first to empirically show that the desire for consistency can offset the desire to be morally balanced. We demonstrated that congruency between issues can influence whether consistency effect or moral balancing dominate subsequent civic participation decisions. From a practical perspective, our study is critical to the development of technology for online activism. It shows that online petitions do affect participants' subsequent decisions, and suggests online petition designs to use congruency to sustain civic participation. These are relevant to both campaign organizers and civic technology designers.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Online Activism from Lowered Cost

Online activism share many similarities with traditional civic actions. First, the actions impose costs and risks on participating individuals. Second, the goals cannot be obtained by an individual alone, thus the actions require a certain amount of participants to succeed. And third, like most civic actions, the goal is aimed towards collective goods such as reduced air pollution, better neighborhood security, or more worker benefits. Collective goods are characterized by their non-excludability, once they are provided, the whole community benefits regardless of how much effort each individual has contributed to making it possible. Therefore while the action requires large amount of people to contribute, rational agents have incentives to do nothing and free-ride on the collective outcome. This is described as the collective action problem [15]. Because of these similarities, rational agents are likely to not take action if they do not feel the need or if the personal cost of action is too high.

While online activism shares many similarities with traditional civic actions, the cost of participation online is generally much lower than traditional civic actions such as sit-ins, protests, hosting a community meeting, or writing a letter to the government. From a campaign organizer's perspective, social media makes it easier for organizers to find people with similar causes, communicate with one another, and promote their cause to a wider audience. From a participant's perspective, social media makes it easier to find issues that one might be interested in, thus reducing the cost of searching. Many online campaigns are often designed to make the actions simple in order to gain a large amount of support, thus for participants, participating in these online actions requires very little effort and time. The lowered cost and ease of participation may be a reason why people are more likely to partake in slacktivism than in traditional civic actions.

Supporters of online activism argue that social media can be used to reach a wider group of people by raising awareness or knowledge. The simple actions invite people who may otherwise never take traditional civic actions to partake in a collective action. Many point to various examples where slacktivism has directly or indirectly benefitted collective goods at never seen before scales, from raising millions of charitable contributions in a few days (i.e., donations after earthquake), to increasing awareness (i.e., KONY 2012) [16, 17].

In contrast, critics of slacktivism argue that these actions merely make people "feel good" about themselves. Not only are the contributions to actual social change limited, partaking in slacktivism may even be harmful to *future actions* because it satisfies people's motivations to take action but does not really have an effect.

Unfortunately, little is known about whether and how slacktivism may affect participants' choice of whether to partake in subsequent civic actions. If it does undermine subsequent activism, then we may need to reconsider the use of slacktivism for social change.

Moral Balancing: Licensing and Cleansing

Moral balancing can be used to explain how slacktivism may undermine subsequent activism. When people make decisions about partaking in civic actions, they will not only consider the costs and benefits of the action, but also draw on their past behaviors as references. Moral balancing posits that when individuals face a moral decision, they will draw on their own past moral behaviors to make the decision [9]. If the individual performed a morally good deed in the past, the individual will feel that he or she has been licensed to loosen up a little, and feel less guilty for making a morally dubious choice (moral licensing). In contrast, if the individual performed an unethical deed in the past, the individual will feel that he or she needs to make up for the bad deed by performing more ethical choices (moral cleansing). The case that past good deeds license bad deeds is known as the moral licensing effect. And the case that past bad deeds warrant more good deeds is known as a moral cleansing effect [18].

There are two possible explanations for how moral balancing works. The first explanation views one's overall moral behaviors as a bank account; a moral choice earns credits while a bad one loses credits [13]. A past good deed earns individuals moral credits that can be spent on immoral choices in the future. According to this explanation, the individual knows the current choice is immoral, but feels that his or her past good deeds have earned them the right to wander astray from their moral self-image. A second explanation is that the past moral action changes the meaning of the subsequent behavior. This explanation posits that individuals will think that their past behaviors have established themselves as a moral person, thus an occasional unmoral choice does not affect their moral self image [9].

The phenomenon of moral self-licensing or cleansing has been observed in different domains. For example, Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin [18] primed participants to write a short essay about themselves for their friends. One group was instructed to use morally positive words, and the other group used morally negative words. After writing the essay, participants were asked whether they were willing to donate part of their compensation to charity. The findings were consistent with the predictions of moral self-licensing and cleansing. Participants who wrote positively about themselves donated the least money out of the four groups. And participants who wrote negatively about themselves donated the highest amount. Another study showed that participants who purchased environmental-friendly products were more likely than those that purchased neutral products to lie or even steal in a subsequent test to gain more money [8]. Monin and Miller [11] found that past egalitarian acts licensed participants to make a subsequent discriminatory choice. Such balancing effects are also observed if participants were primed to think about a future choice before making a moral decision. Khan and Dhar [6] found that people who merely imagined themselves watching a high-brow movie (i.e. sophisticated but less enjoyable movie) later indulged themselves to choose a cookie over the low-fat yogurt.

According to moral balancing, participating in slacktivism may actually reduce likelihood of participating in, or efforts devoted to, the subsequent action because it gives individuals a license to slack off a little without feeling guilty. On the other hand, not partaking in a slacktivism of one's concern may increase likelihood and efforts devoted to a subsequent action.

Consistency and Commitment

On the other hand, supporters of slacktivism argue that light-weight online action may attract people who might otherwise not take action, and that the experience of taking action might encourage further action. These arguments are aligned with the consistency assumption of cognitive dissonance theory [3]. Cognitive dissonance theory posits that people have an inner drive to keep one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors consistent. When there is a disjuncture between one's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors, this causes discomfort, a state of cognitive dissonance. In order to alleviate the discomfort, the individual will change his/her attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors to remain consistent. For example, cigarette smokers often know that smoking is bad for them, yet they smoke. This is a cognitive dissonance state, therefore smokers can either quit smoking (i.e. change the behavior), or reshape their belief and claim that only "heavy" smoking is harmful.

This psychological need for consistency has been used in a persuasion technique known as the foot-in-the-door technique. This technique entails the persuader making a small request that is likely to gain approval from an individual. Once the individual agrees with the request, the persuader then makes a larger request. Empirical research has shown that in order to remain consistent, the individuals who agreed to the small request are more likely to agree to a subsequent request even if it entails a higher cost [1]. The foot-in-the-door techniques have been shown to be effective even when the requests are made via computer-mediated communication such as emails [5].

A correlational survey study by Georgetown University's Center for Social Impact Communication and Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide surveyed 2,000 Americans aged 18 and over. They found that Americans who partake in slacktivism are twice as likely to volunteer in other civic actions, four times more likely to encourage writing a letter to government, and six times more likely to sign a petition than people who does not partake in slacktivisms [14]. However, due to the correlational nature of this study, it is

difficult to determine whether slacktivism lead to more participation, or people who are more civically engaged also tend to participate in slacktivism more.

Based on the assumption that individuals strive for consistency, one would predict that individuals who participate in the low-cost, low risk slacktivism are more likely to participate in a subsequent action even if it entails higher costs or risk.

Topic Congruency as a Moderator

If people have motivations to remain consistent, but sometime will balance their moral choices based on past and expected behaviors, the question becomes: when do people seek cognitive consistency? And when do people balance their moral decisions? Merritt, Effron, and Monin [9] suggest that because moral licensing works by changing how people interpret the subsequent action, it is more likely to happen when the meaning of the subsequent action is unclear and is open to interpretation.

In a study, Effron and Monin [2] asked participants to observe and rate behavior transgressions that are in the same or different domains. The results showed that observers were more forgiving of transgressions in different domains, but not when the behaviors are in the same domain. When the transgressions are in the same domain, observers viewed the person as more hypocritical. However, a recent study [18] suggests that observing other people's behavior is not moral balancing. Moral balancing only occurs when the behavior affects one's own self concept. This current study seeks to fill in this gap by conducting a field experiment in which the participants are asked to make moral choices after a personal decision to participate in slacktivism.

Based on the theories and previous studies, we hypothesize that people are more likely to behave consistently when the subsequent behavior is clearly related (congruent) to the slacktivism. And when the subsequent action is less related (incongruent), individuals will balance their efforts in the subsequent action based on their decision to partake or not in the slacktivism. In other words, partaking in slacktivism may undermine participation in an unrelated civic action, but not partaking in slacktivism may actually increase people's likelihood and efforts to an unrelated civic action.

H1a. **When the issues are incongruent, participating in online activism will *decrease* one's likelihood to perform a subsequent civic action. (moral licensing)**

H1b. When the issues are incongruent, not participating in online activism will *increase* one's likelihood to perform a subsequent civic action. (moral cleansing)

H2a. When the issues are congruent, participating in online activism will *increase* one's likelihood to perform a subsequent civic action. (consistency)

H2b. When the issues are congruent Not participating in online activism will *decrease* one's likelihood to perform a subsequent civic action. (consistency)

EXPERIMENT

We designed a 2x2 online experiment to test the hypotheses, manipulating whether or not participants were presented with a decision to participate in slacktivism (control—no petition/petition) and whether or not the post-slacktivism civic action was congruent to the slacktivism cause (congruent / incongruent charity cause).

Participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and were offered $1 for participating in our study. In addition, participants were told that one out of 10 participants will receive a $5 bonus, which enabled us to study participants' post-slacktivism activism decision—their decision on how much to donate to a charity. We limited the experiment to participants residing in the United States to ensure that the participants share similar understanding of the issues used in this study.

To increase the realism of our controlled experiment, we used White House's petition website—*We the People* (petition.whitehouse.gov)—for the slacktivism. The goal of *We the People* is to encourage citizens to organize and gather petitions for expressing opinions towards the government. If the petitions reach 25,000 within 30 days, the White House will issue an official response to it.

At the time of the study, the Colorado movie theater shooting had just occurred. Soon after the shooting, there were two opposing petitions on *We the People*. One of the petitions was in support of banning assault rifles; the other was to veto any potential assault rifle bans. This provided an opportunity with an actual social issue for which participants on both sides of an issue may consider signing a petition.

All participants were asked to register on *We the People* at the start of our study. This is to control for the amount of effort exerted across conditions. After registration, participants were given a set of questions measuring their general civic interest and attitudes on gun control issues.

Participants were then told that there was a petition on *We the People* that matches their view on gun control, and were asked to read the petition. The petition they saw depended on their response to the gun control questions—those who are for gun control were shown the pro-gun control petition, and vice versa. Those who were in the petition condition were also provided a link to the petition and were invited to sign the petition to make a difference (see Figure 1). The participants in the control condition were not given any additional instruction. In or random assignment, we assigned twice as many people to the petition condition because we need to further separate participants who signed the petition and those that did not in our analyses comparing those who signed to those who did not.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the gun-control petition page.

After the manipulation, participants answered a post-test questionnaire measuring their emotion, their past petition signing experience, their past donation experience, and their future intentions to participate in 10 different types of civic actions.

After this, the participants were reminded that one out of 10 participants would get an addition $5 bonus compensation for participating in this study. However, they can decide to keep it all to themselves, or donate part of it to charity. We created a collective action scenario by stating that "The total amount of money allocated to [the charity] by all the winning participants will be aggregated and donated at the end of the study." In this case, the responsibility of donation is diffused among all the participants.

Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a congruent charity (National Rifle Association for gun supporters and Brady Campaign for gun-control supporters) and half were assigned to an incongruent education charity (Reading is Fundamental). The participants were presented with a scrollbar in which the default is keeping the $5 bonus to themselves and donate nothing. They need to actively move the scrollbar to decide how much they are willing to donate. After the donation, we asked some demographic questions and their attitudes towards all three charities (National Rifle Association, Brady Campaign, and Reading is Fundamental). Whether the participants made a donation (i.e. likelihood) and how much (i.e. amount) they chose to donate are used as the primary dependent variables in this study—participation in civic action subsequent to slacktivism (the petition).

This petition-then-donation is a fairly common design. Sierra Club and Amnesty International also invite people to donate after they signed online petitions.

Participants

932 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical. After cleaning the data for participants who were responding to our questionnaire with the same response across all questions and participants who responded to the questionnaires with too little time on each page, 173 participants were removed, leaving 759 participants used for the analyses. The average age of the participants is 30.15 (*SD*=10.46), the youngest participant were 18 because we limited the study to participants' age over 18, and the oldest participant was 71 years old. There was slightly more females (52.2%, *n*=396) than males (47.5%, *n*=360), two of the participants (.3%) identified their sex as "other". The majority (87%) of the participants had "some college education" or higher.

As a manipulation check, we asked the participants if they thought signing the petition was difficult and risky (1 =not at all and 5 =extremely). The average score for difficulty was 1.35 (*SD*=.72), and the average score for risk was 1.92 (*SD*=1.07). The manipulation check indicated that for the participants in this study, signing the online petition was viewed as a low cost, low risk action, which fits the definition of slacktivism.

Analysis

Of the 759 participants included in the analyses, 230 (30.3%) are in the control condition, 200 (26.4%) chose not to sign the petition, and 339 (43.3%) signed the petition. Half of the participants are in the congruent condition (50.1%, n=380) and the other half are in the incongruent condition (49.9%, *n*=379). Across all the groups 56.1% (*n*=426) of the participants actively chose to donate some amount of money to charity. The distribution of the conditions is shown in table 1.

	Incongruent	Congruent	TOTAL
Control	116	114	230 (30.3%)
Not sign	104	96	200 (26.4%)
Sign	159	170	329 (43.3%)
TOTAL	379 (49.9%)	378 (50.1%)	759

Table 1: Distribution of participants among conditions

Preliminary analysis showed that the overall distribution of donation amounts was a non-normal distribution. This is mostly due to the bimodal distribution, with a second smaller center at 0—no donation. When we focus only on those who donated (n=426), the donation amount is considered normally distributed. Therefore we tried two methods of analyzing the data. First we conducted a multinomial logistic regression with a categorized donation amount as dependent variable. Then we used a two-step method analysis by analyzing the *likelihood* (i.e. donate or not) of making a donation with a binominal logistic regression, and the *amount* of donation by participants who made a donation with Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). The results of the two approaches were comparable.

To facilitate the interpretation of our results, in the following section we present results from the two-step analysis with binominal logistic regression for likelihood and ANCOVA for donation amount. This two-step analysis preserves the actual donation amount for comparison.

RESULTS

Incongruent Issues

Based on the moral balancing effects, hypothesis 1 posits that in the incongruent condition, participants who signed the online petition will be less likely to donate money to a charity (H1a), whereas participants who did not sign the online petition will be more likely to donate money (H1b).

A binary logistic regression was used to test this hypothesis. The binary variable of whether or not the participants donated to charity was used as the dependent variable. The petition signing conditions (control, no sign, signed) were dummy-coded and entered as the independent variables with the control group as reference group. In order to control for the possibility of self-selection bias, that the relationship between petition-signing and donations are due to individual differences, we included age, gender, education level, past general donation level, and attitudes towards the incongruent education charity (Reading is Fundamental) as controlled covariates.

There was no significant difference between the groups in likelihood of donating to charity. Participants who signed the petition (63.5%, n=101) were not less likely to donate to charity, and participants who did not sign the petition (54.8%, n=57) were not more likely to donate than the control group (58.6%, n=68). However, the results showed older participants (p<.01) and males were more likely to make a donation (p<.05). And participants who have more favorable attitudes towards the charity were more likely to donate (p<.001). See Figure 2 for comparison.

The full model for the binary logistic regression was significant, X^2 (7, n=379) =72.14, p<.001. However, the Wald criterion demonstrated that neither the signing (p=.84) nor the not-sign (p=.99) condition were significant predictor of making a donation. Table 2 shows the logistic regression coefficient, Wald test, and odds ratio for each of the predictors.

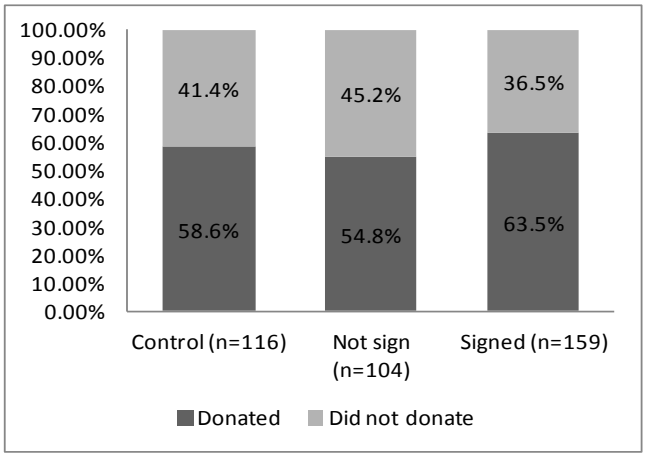

Figure 2: Percentage of incongruent donation between groups

PREDICTORS	B	Wald	p	Exp(B)
Age	-.031	6.905	.009	.970
Gender	.752	10.529	.001	2.121
Education	.004	.002	.965	1.004
Past donation level	.087	1.827	.176	1.091
Postive attitude towards charity	1.037	44.905	.000	2.820
No Sign (dummy coded)	.014	.002	.963	1.014
Sign (dummy coded)	.063	.052	.820	1.065
Constant	-3.923	25.400	.000	.020

Table 2: Binary logistic regression result on likelihood of incongruent donation

We then examined if there was a difference in amount donated in the subgroup of participants who chose to donate. An ANCOVA analysis was used to examine the subset of participants in the incongruent condition that donated to the education charity (n=226). The petition-signing conditions were used as the independent variable and the amount of donation was used as dependent variable. Again, age, gender, education, past general donation level, gun issue attitudes, and self-reported attitude towards the charity (Reading is Fundamental) are controlled as covariates. The result showed a significant difference between the groups, F(2, 218)=3.66, p<.05. (Table 3)

A post-hoc pair-wise Bonferroni test was used to examine if the results indicates moral licensing (H1a), moral cleansing (H1b), or both. The results showed that participants who signed the petition (M=2.25, SD=1.44) did not donate significantly less money to the incongruent charity than the control group (M=1.99, SD=1.28), hypothesis H1a was not supported. But participants who did not sign the petition donated significantly more money (M=2.58, SD=1.53) to charity in comparison to the control group, which suggest a moral cleansing effect (H1b).

PREDICTORS	Mean Square	F	p	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	4.337	2.198	.036	.066
Intercept	2.923	1.482	.225	.007
Age	1.618	.820	.366	.004
Gender	.199	.101	.751	.000
Education	1.380	.700	.404	.003
Past donation level	5.383	2.729	.100	.012
Positive attitude towards charity	6.642	3.367	.068	.015
Sign Condition	7.481	3.792	.024	.034
Total n	226			

Table 3: ANCOVA results of incongruent donation amount

These results suggest that when the topic of the subsequent action is incongruent to the slacktivism, the slacktivism did not seem to affect likelihood of partaking in the subsequent action. But when the participants do take action, individuals

who did not perform the slacktivism will devote more efforts in the subsequent action, possibly because of a moral cleansing effect.

Congruent Issues

Hypothesis 2 posited that people will maintain consistency when the charity is related to the online petition: signing the online petition will increase their likelihood of donating money (H2a); and not signing the online petition will decrease their likelihood of donating money (H2b).

More than half (62.9%, *n*=107) of the participants who signed the petition donated money to the related charity. This percentage is higher compared to the 41.7% (*n*=40) who did not sign, and also the control group (46.6%, *n*=53). See Figure 3 for comparison.

We ran a similar binary logistic regression to the one conducted in the incongruent condition to test hypothesis 2a and 2b. The binary variable of donation or not was used as the dependent variable. The dummy-coded petition signing conditions were used as the independent variables with the control group as reference group. We included the same control variables as in the previous analyses, except that attitude towards the charity is now a congruent organization (NRA for gun supporter, Brady foundation for gun-control supporters).

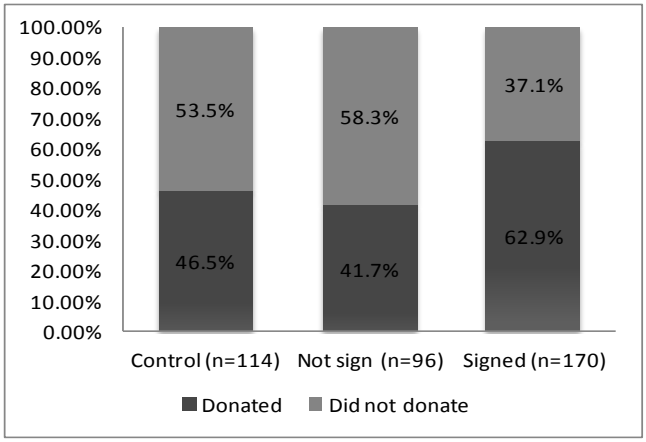

Figure 3: Percentage of congruent donation between groups

The results showed that males (p<.05), participants with higher education level (p<.05), participants who had stronger attitudes towards gun issues (p<.01), and more favorable attitudes towards the charity organization (p<.001) were more likely to make a donation. Despite all these, our hypothesis 1a was supported as signing the petition was a significant predictor of making a donation even after the self-selection biases were controlled for. The odds ratio indicates that an increase of 1 in signing the petition increases the odds of making a donation by 1.92 (Table 4). However, hypothesis 2b was not supported. Participants who did not sign the petition were no less likely to make a donation. The full model for the binary logistic regression was significant, $X^2(8, n=380) = 56.90$, p<.001. The Wald criterion demonstrated that the signing condition significantly predicted making a donation, p=.01.

PREDICTORS	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	-.006	.262	.609	.994
Gender	.573	6.446	.011	1.774
Education	-.212	5.315	.021	.809
Past donation level	.062	1.034	.309	1.064
Gun issue attitude strength	-.770	10.613	.001	.463
Positive attitude towards charity	.543	16.637	.000	1.721
No Sign (dummy coded)	-.049	.027	.870	.952
Sign (dummy coded)	.653	6.185	.013	1.922
Constant	.189	.033	.856	1.208

Table 4: Binary logistic regression result on likelihood of congruent donation

We also examined if participants who signed the petition will donate more money to a related charity than participants who did not sign the petition, and whether participants who did not sign the petition will donate less.

Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to analyze the subset of participants who donated in the congruent condition (*n*=199). The signing condition was used as independent variable, the donation amount was used as dependent variable, and the same control variables were controlled as covariates. The results indicate that there was no significant difference in amount of money donated between the signing conditions (F[2, 192]=1.06, *n.s.*). Participants who signed the petition (*M*=1.91, *SD*=1.32) did not donate more than participants who did not sign (*M*=2.02, *SD*=1.49), or the control group (*M*=1.68, *SD*=1.20). (Table 5).

Overall the results in the congruent condition show that when the subsequent action is related to the slacktivism, participants who signed the petition are more likely to participate in the following action, but not with more effort.

PREDICTORS	Mean Square	F	P	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	8.013	5.389	.000	.184
Intercept	.438	.294	.588	.002
Age	10.545	7.091	.008	.036
Gender	3.936	2.647	.105	.014
Education	.298	.200	.655	.001
Past donation level	9.910	6.665	.011	.034
Gun issue attitude strength	.126	.085	.771	.000
Positive attitude towards charity	8.720	5.864	.016	.030
Sign conditions	1.581	1.063	.347	.011
Total n	200			

Table 5: ANCOVA of congruent donation amount

	Not sign	Sign	ΔR^2
Attend Protest	.01 (.43)	.04 (1.34)	.001
Buy Products in Support	.008 (.20)	.72 (1.92)	.005
Community Meeting	.02 (.52)	.07 (1.91)	.004
Debate with Others	-.04 (-.90)	.02 (.64)	.003
Persuade Friends	-.08 (-2.19)*	.03 (.79)	.009
Post or Forward News	-.04 (-1.32)	.04 (1.15)	.005
Sign Petition	-.17 (-4.52)***	.15 (3.90)***	.075
Volunteer	0 (.05)	.04 (1.12)	.001
Wear Badge	-.07 (-2.10)*	.01 (.21)	.006
Write Letter to Government	-.05 (-1.36)	.08 (2.28)*	.01

Numbers indicate adjusted beta coefficients. t statistics are shown in parenthesis.

***p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001**

Table 6: Hierarchical regression results

Intentions for Other Civic Actions

Because donating to charity is only one of many possible civic actions that one could participate in subsequent to slacktivism, we wanted to explore whether the decision to partake or not partake in slacktivism would affect intentions to participate in other future civic actions. After the experiment manipulation (control/ decision for petition), we asked participants to rate their likelihood of participating in 10 different civic actions on 5-point scales (1=*extremely unlikely* and 5 =*extremely likely*). Overall, participants in this study report highest intentions to participate in a petition (*M*=3.93, *SD*=1.16) and have the lowest intentions to participate in future protests (M=2.47, SD=1.24).

In order to examine if signing the petition increased or decreased intentions for these 10 future actions, we conducted 10 separate hierarchical regressions with the dummy-coded signing conditions (not sign/ sign) as the independent variable using the control group as reference group, and the intention for the 10 actions as separate dependent variables. Age, gender, education, and general civic interests were controlled by inserting them into the first block. The regression results are shown in Table 6.

The results indicated that after controlling for age, gender, education and general civic interests. Signing the petition only increased intentions to sign future petitions and to write letters to the government. It did not increase or decrease intentions on any of the other eight civic actions. Interestingly, these two actions also appear to be the two that will incur the least cost on participants in our list of civic actions. We will revisit this in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

Increasingly, people and organizations are using information communication technologies for various forms of activism, such as fundraising, community building, lobbying and organizing. However, despite its potential to reach people and raise awareness at large scales, critics continue to question the efficacy of this low-cost, low risk form of activism. Critics argue that slacktivism may hurt real activism—people may feel satisfied through their slacktivism and this type of low-cost civic participation decreases other subsequent activities that could make a difference. If critics are correct, then we must re-consider the use of slacktivism.

Fortunately, contrary to critics' concern, we found no evidence that performing one form of slacktivism (i.e., signing online petitions) will undermine a subsequent civic activity (i.e., donating to a charity). In fact, we found scenarios where "slacktivism" can actually *increase* likelihood of participation in a subsequent collective action. When compared to the control condition, participants who signed petition were more likely to donate to a charity when the charity was related to the petition's cause (63% of those who signed donated compared to 46% who donated in the control condition).

In addition, what has been often overlooked in the discussion of slacktivism's efficacy is its effects on the people who decline to participate. In this study we found that when people are invited to sign a petition and decline to do so, they actually subsequently donated more to an incongruent charity. Compared to the control group, those who chose not to sign the petition donated about 30% (59 cents) more than those in the control condition.

Campaign designers can leverage this moral cleansing effect to increase compliance. Campaign designers could make a large, excessive online request for issue A that is likely to be turned down, which would make people feel guilty for their inaction. Then, the campaign designers would follow-up with a request for an unrelated issue B. That would then result in higher support for issue B than if people were approached to support issue B right away.

While this is similar to the door-in-the-face strategy from persuasion literature, there are subtle differences and we caution a direct comparison without additional research. The key difference is that the door-in-the-face technique usually requires an initial request that is costly and unreasonable [5]. This could be why the door-in-the-face technique has been shown to work regardless of the congruency between first and second tasks, but our moral cleansing effect only works when the tasks are incongruent.

Due to the positive influence slacktivism may have on participants and non-participants alike, our results actually show that slacktivism in general may help subsequent activism, regardless of how many people actually choose to participate in the slacktivism. When collapsing all our conditions together, simply *being asked* to sign the petition increased subsequent donation from the participants (from \$0.98 to \$1.25, t [756]=2.39, p=0.01).

However, while performing slacktivism increased likelihood of performing a congruent subsequent civic action, our findings also suggest that this increase may only be limited to scenarios where the subsequent civic action is also relatively low-cost. Our analyses of participants' intentions showed that signing the petition did not increase or decrease participants' intentions to participate in subsequent high cost actions such as attending protests, it only increased intentions to sign future petitions and write letters. To better inform slacktivism use, future studies need to build up on this current study to examine how the relative cost of actions affects the relationship between slacktivism and subsequent civic actions.

Theoretical Contributions

Besides making practical contributions by demonstrating the efficacy of online activism, this research also advances our understanding of when moral balancing occurs.

At the root of the slacktivism discussion is the concept of moral balancing—that performing good deeds license us to perform bad deeds and that performing bad deeds requires personal cleansing with good deeds. According to existing literature on slacktivism, we hypothesized that participants who signed the petition would contribute less to the charity subsequently (licensing effect), whereas those who did not sign the petition would contribute more to the charity (cleansing effect). We found no evidence for a licensing effect. But our results do support the cleansing effect when the issues are incongruent.

If moral balancing is in effect here, why did we only observe the cleansing effect but not the licensing effect? While our study is similar in structure compared to prior moral balancing studies [8, 9, 10, 18], one potential difference is that the cost of our second action (donation) may not be high enough to induce the moral licensing effect. Prior work suggests that in order for the licensing effect to be observed, the second action must be costly to the individual so that they will have more incentives to avoid taking action [18]. In our study, participants were offered a 1 in 10 chance to win \$5, which has only an expected value of \$0.50. The temptation to act in a potentially discrediting way is perhaps not that strong, while the cost of behaving in a socially-positive way is not that high—hence we observe the cleansing effect but not the licensing effect. In other words, participants in this study maybe more likely to donate money because of the low expected payoff. But the fact that there was significant difference between our petition conditions and the control group suggest that the petition choice does affect subsequent decisions on donation to charity.

Despite the interesting effects of moral balancing, an unanswered question is how these effects can be integrated with the wealth of research on consistency – when would one's behavior history constrain one to act consistently rather than liberate one to act inconsistently? Recent research has suggested that whether consistency comes in effect may be determined by the issue congruency (domains) between the first and subsequent moral actions. For example, Effron and Monin [2] hypothesized that moral balancing are more likely to be observed when the issues are unrelated. They asked observers to rate transgression behaviors and found that the target's past good deeds reduced condemnation from observers more when they were in a different domain than the subsequent transgression, but not when they were in the same domain. However it is unclear whether their finding are in fact moral licensing or on other effect because other studies have demonstrated that moral licensing is only effective when the action threatens one's own self-concept [18].

To extend this line of research, we tested participants' own contribution to charity when the charity is congruent to the petition's cause (gun control). Our findings suggest that while partaking in slacktivism increases likelihood of participating in a related subsequent civic action, it did not increase the amount of money donated. One possible explanation for this result is that participants who signed the petition sought to act consistent to avoid appearing hypocritical, thus they are more likely to comply with the charity request, but only devoting *enough* efforts to appear consistent. This explanation matches Schwarzwald, Bizman, and Raz's finding [20], in a similar petition-then-donation setup, participants who agreed to the first action are less concerned with the amount of donation but more about the act of donating itself.

LIMITATIONS AND GENERALIZABILITY

In our study design, we were careful in trying to balance control and realism—using controlled manipulations while also utilized two then-active petitions on White House's petition system. However, there are potential confounds that limit the generalizability of the study. First the sample came from Amazon's Mechanical Turk; it is possible that the sample is biased towards individuals who are more accustomed to using the internet and have more experience

with the technology-aided activism. While this may be appropriate for studying slacktivism, as they may be the population who are more likely to participate in online activism, our findings may not generalize to other populations that do not spend as much time online and may have different perceptions of online activism.

Second, individuals may have also self-selected into participating in our study as they are told up front that the study is about gun control and civic participation. Our participants may then be more involved in the issue and feel stronger needs to express their opinions. Future studies may also consider replicating our results when the slacktivism are used for different causes.

Finally, we focused on a common, but specific form of online activism--signing online petitions in this study. More research is needed to confirm that our findings do generalize to other types of other low-cost online actions that may be considered slacktivism.

CONCLUSION

We used two actual online petitions on *We the People* to examine how decisions to participate in slacktivism or not influenced likelihood of donating and the amount of money donated to a subsequent charity. The results suggest that when the subsequent action is closely related to the slacktivism, people are motivated to remain consistent. But when the subsequent action is ambiguous or less related to the slacktivism, people will increase or decrease their likelihood and intensity based on their previous choice about the slacktivism. Campaign designers can design campaign that taps into these two psychological effects.

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