CLICKTIVISM OR SLACTIVISM? IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND MORAL LICENSING

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Abstract:

Online tools provide ample opportunity for individuals to engage in "clicktivism", i.e., expressing one's support to social causes and programs of social change. Since expressing one's support in this way is associated with minimal costs and limited tangible benefits, we refer to it as symbolic actions. We build on previous work on moral dynamics and suggest that engaging in such symbolic (prosocial) actions can undermine individuals' motivation to perform more substantial prosocial behavior (i.e, behavior that requires an investment of time, effort, or money). We propose that impression management explains the effect. In two studies, we find that engaging in symbolic actions leads to a moral licensing effect, but only for individuals high in impression management concerns, not for individuals low in impression management. We contribute in two ways to previous work on moral dynamics, (1) by showing that moral licensing can occur after symbolic actions, and (2) by suggesting that impression management can be an alternative explanation for moral licensing effects. In practical terms this paper suggests that clicktivism can easily turn into slacktivism. Follow-up research addresses ways to counteract this effect.

Keywords: Prosocial behavior, symbolic action, moral licensing, impression management

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Despite its short history, online activism has achieved notable success at raising public awareness regarding social issues, and achieving social change. Social media and online activism programs also provide ample opportunity for individuals to express their concern regarding social issues, and their support to organizations and programs directed at improving society in multiple domains (i.e., environmental protection, female emancipation, and human rights). Despite its successes, there are reasons to believe that there may be a shadow side to this phenomenon.

Expressing one's support to organizations and programs of social change often involves activities that require negligible effort and cost, such as adding one's email address under a petition or clicking an "I like" or "+1" button. Also, the tangible benefits of each individual action are limited. They mostly consist of a modest contribution to the goal of gathering a critical mass of people that signal their concern regarding a certain social problem. Such a critical mass of supporters adds legitimacy to demands for social change. Because both the costs and immediate benefits are virtually zero, we refer to such expressions of one's support as "symbolic actions". Participating in symbolic actions provides an opportunity for individuals to signal one's social and moral concern, at a low cost.

A welcome perk of engaging in symbolic action, is that it allows one to make a favorable impression on others. For some individuals, managing one's impression may in fact be the focal goal when participating in clicktivism. Critics have indeed argued that the internet era has created a generation of "slacktivists", rather than "clicktivists", who participate for personal validation. Slacktivists seem to think that with a single click of the

mouse they have done their share to improve society (e.g., Mozorov, 2011). Skeptics describe these individuals as "armchair do-gooders" who do not make a difference.[1]

We build on this idea, and on previous research in moral dynamics, and suggest that symbolic actions can, under certain conditions, undermine one's motivation to engage in other types of prosocial behavior, that would have tangible effects and produce meaningful societal changes (e.g., financially supporting an NGO or engaging in volunteer activities). Examples provided by the media suggest that such symbolic actions may indeed be a substitute for more substantive prosocial actions. For instance, the 1.7 million members of the Facebook "Save the Children of Africa" group raised only about $12,000 in several years.[2]

In this paper, we study how having the opportunity to provide symbolical support to a good cause affects subsequent prosocial behavior that requires an investment of time, effort, or money. We hypothesize that for some, a mere symbolic prosocial or moral action is sufficient to reduce subsequent substantive prosocial behavior. Moreover, we propose that impression management concerns explain this effect. In developing our hypotheses, we build on recent findings in moral dynamics and provide and an alternative explanation for the moral licensing effect.

Moral licensing

Moral licensing occurs when a history of socially desirable behavior makes people feel they can afford to engage in ethically questionable behavior without discrediting themselves (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010; Miller & Effron, 2010). For instance, people are more willing to express prejudiced opinions when their past behavior has established their credentials as unbiased individuals (Monin & Miller, 2001a). Similarly, Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) showed that endorsing Obama in the context of the 2008 Presidential elections made people favor Whites on a subsequent task. Moral licensing effects were also

[1] http://www.one.org/us/2012/05/03/when-clicking-counts-in-defense-of-slacktivism-and-clicktivism/
[2] http://www.standard.co.uk/business/markets/just-why-does-goldman-sachs-want-to-be-friends-with-facebook-6554254.html

demonstrated in the context of consumer choice. For example, in Mazar and Zhong (2010), participants who made environmentally friendly product "choices" in a first phase—their choice set only contained green items—were more likely to cheat on subsequent tasks than participants who did not have the opportunity to make similarly green choices. Khan and Dhar (2006) showed that a hypothetical choice of which organization one would volunteer for, led people to indulge in luxury products. In the domain of charitable giving, Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009) found that merely thinking about one's positive traits reduces one's donations to charity.

Such effects are typically explained in terms of fluctuations in the moral self-image (Cornelissen, Bashshur, Rode, & Le Menestrel, Forthcoming; Jordan, Gino, Tenbrunsel, & Leliveld, 2012). According to this view, individuals hold a certain aspiration level regarding how "moral" they ought to be. A moral or prosocial act elevates the working level of the moral self-image (Monin & Jordan, 2009). If this working level exceeds the aspiration level, an individual feels licensed to engage in self-interested behavior.

This paper makes two contributions to previous moral licensing and moral dynamics research. First, we test whether a mere *symbolic* prosocial or moral *action* (i.e., an action that is other-directed, is not personally costly, and does not generate substantive beneficial outcomes for the recipient), is sufficient to produce a moral licensing effect. For example, when creating a user profile on social networks or dating websites, one may attempt to generate a favorable impression by indicating that one supports charitable and prosocial organizations. Second, we propose that *impression management* concerns provide a powerful route to moral licensing.

Impression management

People are concerned by how others perceive and evaluate them. Therefore, they actively engage in certain actions in an attempt to control the impression they make on others

(Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Although impression management is ubiquitous in social life (Schlenker, 1980), individuals differ in the extent to which they are concerned with the impression they make on others. Those high in impression management concerns are more preoccupied with the impression they make on others and behave highly responsively to social cues to ensure a desired image. In contrast, those low in impression management concern care less about how others think about them; their behaviour is less malleable by social and situational context and is more congruent with their own beliefs and dispositions.

Importantly, impression management occurs both when the audience is *real* or *imaginary* (Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Similarly, Miller and Effron (2010) suggested that *psychological* (as opposed to literal) presence of others might play a role in producing moral licensing effects. There is indeed some evidence that morally questionable behavior resulting from a moral licensing effect is mediated by individuals' *beliefs* about the extent to which others perceive them as moral or ethical (Monin & Miller, 2001b). That is, one's behavior is shaped by what one *imagines* could be the reaction of others if they knew about his/her behavior.

Being perceived as a moral person by others is generally considered desirable (Alexander, 1987; Goffman, 1959; Wedekind & Milinski, 2000). In impression formation, "warmth," (one factor of which is morality) is the prime dimension on which others are evaluated. This judgment is made automatically and quickly (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Willis & Todorov, 2006; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Other research suggests that, likewise, when managing one's impression, people desire to come across as warm (Leary, 1995; Nezlek, Schütz, & Sellin, 2007).

Symbolic prosocial or moral actions provide a convenient and cheap way to do so. Interestingly, *current image* (i.e., an individual's perception of how s/he is currently perceived

by others) is likely to shape subsequent impression management attempts (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, once an individual has established or signaled one's moral character in the eyes of others, his/her motivation to come across as moral may decrease. Instead, the individual may focus on the pursuit alternative goals. Therefore, if an individual faces a temptation to benefit the self by behaving in a less than ethical way, the likelihood of falling for that temptation may increase after engaging in a symbolic moral action. If the impression management explanation for moral licensing effects of symbolic prosocial or moral actions is true, we expect that moral licensing effects of symbolic actions will be especially pronounced for individuals that are highly concerned with impression management.

Overview of studies

We conducted two experiments to explore whether having the opportunity to engage in symbolic moral actions decreases the likelihood of engaging in actual moral or prosocial behavior, and whether concerns for the impression that one makes on others explains the effect. Study 1 tested the effect of having the opportunity to express symbolic support for a social cause on investment of time and effort in the benefit of an NGO. In Study 2 we replicated the effect using a different different measure of prosocial behavior: financial contributions made to an NGO. In both studies, we explored whether impression management is the underlying mechanism of the moral licensing effect of symbolic actions.

Study 1: Providing slogans for an NGO campaign

In Study 1, we tested whether having the opportunity to engage in a symbolic action leads to a moral licensing effect.

Method

Participants and procedure. Seventy-five undergraduate students (59.2 % female, M_{age} = 21.87, *SD* = 2.95) participated in the experiment for a 9€ show-up fee. Each participant took a seat in a semi-closed cubicle in front of a computer. All participants first read a short

description about the work of a charitable organization (i.e., UNICEF). Then, about half of the participants could choose whether or not to tick a box that said “I support UNICEF” (similar to the “like” option on a Facebook page). The box did not appear for the other half of the participants. After that, instructions explained that the organization in question is collecting short and catchy slogans to communicate their mission. Participants were invited to help and provide such slogans, although it was mentioned that doing so was voluntary. The number of characters written by participants constituted our dependent variable.

Afterwards, we measured individual differences in self-monitoring as a proxy for impression management tendencies. Participants indicated their agreement, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*, with seven items from the Lennox and Wolfe (1984) self-monitoring scale that were designed to capture one’s ability to modify self-presentation. Sample items included “I have the ability to control the way I come across to people, depending on the impression I wish to give them,” and “I have trouble changing my behavior to suit different people and different situations" (reverse-coded), α = .76.

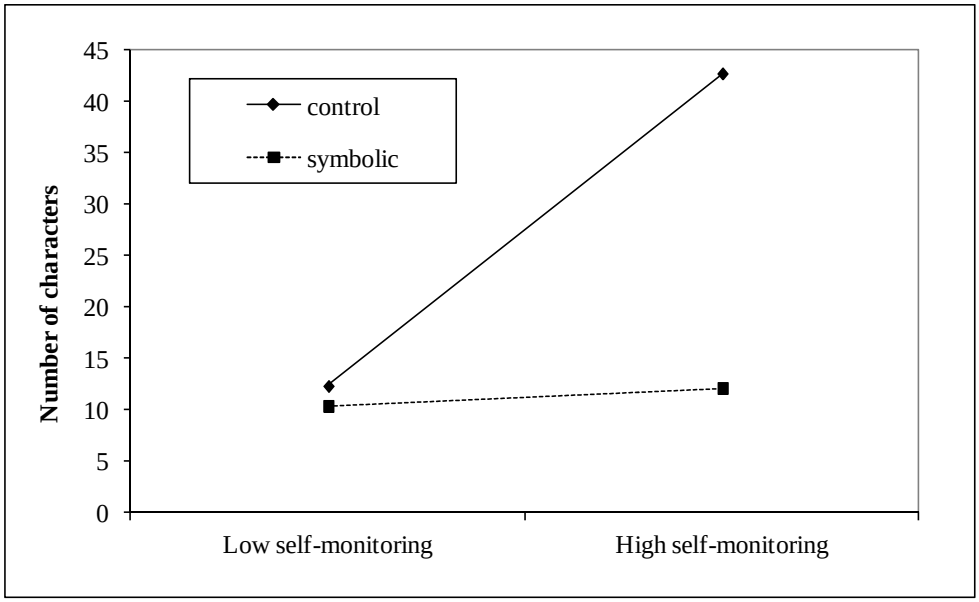
Results

We discarded the data of four participants, for whom the number of characters written deviated more than 3 SD’s from the mean. Then we ran a regression testing the effect of self-monitoring (as a continuous variable) and opportunity to perform a symbolic action (available versus not available) on the number of characters written (Hayes, In Press), see Figure 1.

We found a main effect of the symbolic action ($t(67) = -2.40$, $p < .03$). Those participants who had the opportunity to express their support to the organization symbolically, wrote fewer characters ($M = 11.30$, $SD = 22.18$), compared to those who did not have that opportunity ($M = 27.36$, $SD = 28.19$). Also, the main effect of self-monitoring was significant, $t(67) = 3.31$, $p < .01$. Both main effects were qualified by a significant opportunity to perform a symbolic action by self-monitoring interaction effect ($t(1, 67) = -2.44$, $p < .02$). Spotlight

analysis showed that for low self-monitors (at 1 SD below the mean), there was no effect of the availability of symbolic actions (95% CI: [-8.36;8.88]). For high self-monitors (at 1 SD above the mean), there was a significant effect of symbolic action (95% CI: [-23.13;-6.02]), see Figure 1. When we eliminated participants who had the opportunity to perform the symbolic action, but did not do so (10/37, 27%), we found the same pattern of results.

Figure 1. The interaction effect of symbolic action and self-monitoring on WTP for the NGO's chocolate, Study 1



Discussion

Symbolic actions may give rise to moral licensing effects. As expected, we found that this is the case for individuals high in impression management concerns. This is consistent with our suggestion that impression management may be an alternative explanation for moral licensing. In this study, this effect was so large that it translated into a main effect of symbolic action, despite the fact that we did not find a moral licensing effect for individuals low in impression management concerns.

Study 2: Willingness-to-pay for fair trade chocolate

Study 2 was designed to replicate the moral licensing effect of symbolic actions using a different dependent variable.

Method

Participants and procedure. One hundred nineteen undergraduate students (50.4% female, M_{age} = 20.37, *SD* = 2.02) participated in the study for a 9€ show-up fee. Each participant took a seat in a semi-closed cubicle in front of a computer. Participants first read a paragraph about an NGO working on fair trade issues (i.e., Intermon Oxfam). Then about half of them were given the option to express their support to this organization symbolically by clicking on a box saying "I support Intermon Oxfam". In a second phase of the experiment, we told our participants that they would be given a bar of chocolate marketed by that NGO. We then offered participants the opportunity to pay for the chocolate by contributing part of their participation fee to that NGO. Participants were free to indicate any amount from 0 and 9€. This contribution constituted our dependent variable. Subsequently, participants completed the Lennox and Wolfe (1984) self-monitoring scale (α = .76)

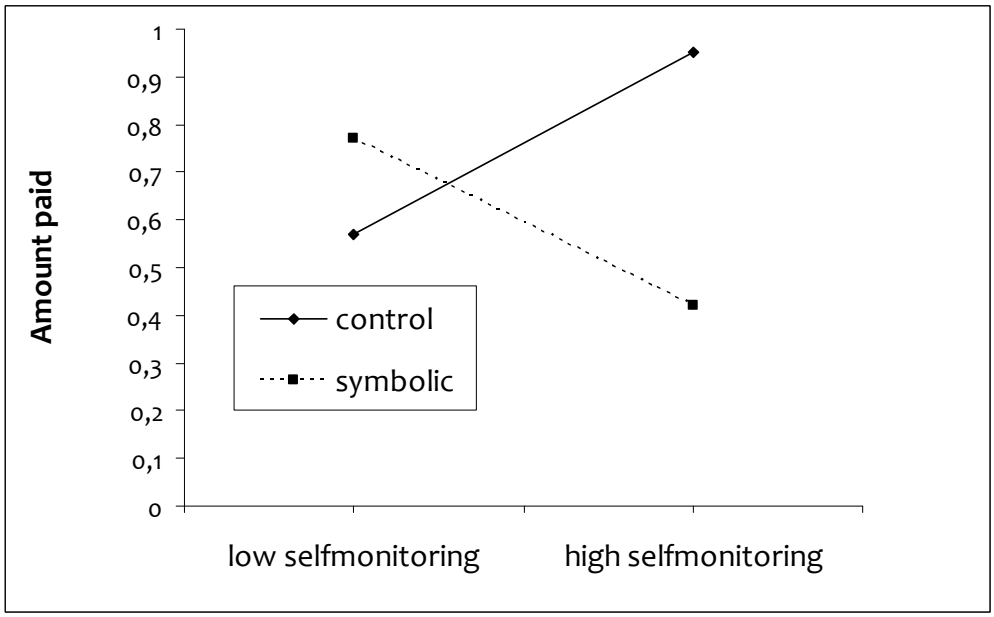
Results

When including all participants (those who performed the symbolic action, i.e., those who did indicate that they "support Intermon Oxfam" when they had the opportunity, and those who did not), the interaction effect of self-monitoring (as a continuous variable) and having the opportunity to perform a symbolic action was not significant ($t(114) = -1.41$, $p = .16$). Spotlight analysis showed that for individuals high in impression management concerns (1 SD above the mean), the effect of the symbolic action was marginally significant (90% CI: [-0.80;0.002]). When excluding those participants who did not indicate that they "support Intermon Oxfam" when they had the opportunity (24/61, 39%), we found a marginally significant interaction effect of self-monitoring (as a continuous variable) and engaging in a symbolic act ($t(90) = -1.73$, $p < .09$). Spotlight analysis showed that, for participants high in

self-monitoring (at 1 SD above the mean), there was a marginally significant effect of symbolic action (90% CI: [-1.00;-0.05]). For low self-monitors (at 1 SD below the mean), there was no effect of the availability of symbolic actions (90% CI: [-0.29;0.69]).

Figure 2

Number of characters written for the NGO's slogans, Study 2



Discussion

This study replicated the pattern found in Study 1, although results were less strong. There may be multiple reasons why this is the case. There may be crucial differences between the DV's (donating effort versus donating money), or perhaps the NGO in Study 2 (i.e., Intermon Oxfam) is less well know or less well liked than the one in Study 1 (UNICEF). Follow up studies will attempt to shed further light on these findings. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the data pattern is very similar. Symbolic actions may undermine individual's motivation to contribute in a more substantial way, for those individual high in impression management concerns.

General Discussion

With the rise of social media, concerns start to be expressed on how managing one's image in those media affects subsequent behavior and whether it in fact leads to the substitution of real prosocial actions by "slacktivism". For instance, does symbolically supporting a social cause on Facebook or participating in online activism programs make people more or less likely to undertake more substantial prosocial actions? In this paper, we tested the hypothesis that having an opportunity to *symbolically support* a good cause reduces subsequent prosocial or moral action that makes a real difference for the beneficiary. In two studies, we found that having the opportunity to express one's support or positive intentions symbolically may have adverse effects on "real" contributions made. The moral licensing effect of symbolic actions only emerged among those high in impression management concerns. These results suggest that impression management might provide an alternative explanation for the licensing effect of symbolic prosocial actions. Future studies will seek further support to this claim.

Importantly, our results on the role of impression management in producing a moral licensing effect do not imply that concerns for self-image are not relevant in the context of symbolic actions. In fact, impressions that one makes on others influence how people perceive themselves (Goffman, 1959) because people obtain from others diagnostic information that allows more accurate self-knowledge (Trope, 1986). Impression management also affects self-image by helping to maintain and enhance self-esteem and to get closer to their "ideal self" (Leary & Kowalsky, 1990; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). Thus, the regards of others and self-regard are closely intertwined. However, in our studies, symbolic support did not affect measures for moral self-image.

Our results on the moral licensing effect of symbolic actions are especially relevant in domains where symbolic expression of one's opinion is the norm, such as in individuals' profiles on social networks or activities in online activism programs. Our results suggest that

"slacktivism" may indeed have an undesirable impact on subsequent substantive prosocial behavior.

Current follow-up studies are testing whether feeling of successful impression management mediate the effects we find in these studies. Additionally, we are currently testing whether it is possible to counteract the moral licensing effect provoked by symbolic actions. A substantial body of literature has documented on moral consistency effects. We are testing whether following up a symbolic act by an empowering message may reverse the effect of symbolic actions.

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