Act or interact?

The perceived influence of social media on millennial prosocial behaviours

ELLA WIRSTAD GUSTAFSSON

LINDA CNATTINGIUS
Act or interact? The perceived influence of social media on millennial prosocial behaviours

Linda Cnattingius
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden
lindacn@kth.se

Ella Wistrad Gustafsson
KTH Royal Institute of Technology
Stockholm, Sweden
ellag@kth.se

Abstract
With modern communication technology advancements, activist expression has become more common on social media platforms. Especially susceptible to these expressions is the millennial generation, whose lives are greatly permeated by media technology. This thesis aims to explore in what ways the social media platform Facebook influences millennials’ motivation to engage in substantial prosocial behaviours that are intended to benefit other people or society as a whole. Through mixed-method research design, participants’ attitudes towards Facebook as a platform for activism and its influence on prosocial motivational aspects, was explored. Results indicated that previous habits of supportive engagement and the cost of the supportive action influenced how the likeliness and motivation to engage in substantial supportive actions was affected by Facebook interaction. More precisely, higher levels of previous engagement, as well as engagement in costly, prosocial actions contributed to an increased motivation to engage further in such actions. Furthermore, social and contemporary aspects showed to play a large part for participants’ motivation to engage in costly and substantial prosocial actions.

Sammanfattning

Keywords social media activism, slacktivism, prosocial behaviour, moral self-licensing, media technology

1 Introduction
The format of social media has made it a popular platform for political and civic engagement. During the past years we have witnessed movements representing different social-political voices rising and spreading through hashtags on social media with impactful outcomes [4][15][23]. Although proven to have played an important part as political accelerators, some voices remain critical towards social media as a platform for political revolution [8][14]. Critical voices also aim to separate online activism from its passive counterpart, slacktivism, defined as, political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants [5]

Especially active in social-political online activism is the generation that is often referred to as the millennial generation i.e. people born 1981-2001 [10]. A defining aspect of this generation and their lives is the constant presence of Internet, and consequently, media technology permeating every facet of their lives. The millennials are a globally interconnected generation and by using social media to stay connected with others, they can catalyse online communities and motivate action [7]. While digital technologies, such as Facebook, have shown to sometimes provide powerful tools to engage and motivate, this thesis aims to study the potentials and pitfalls of Facebook, by exploring it’s perceived effects on substantial prosocial actions. Moreover, as individuals of the millennial generation have been called ‘digital natives’ due to their inherent relation to digital technology[11], this article will especially study possible consequences these technologies might have on individuals of this generation. Millennials have also shown to have a more positive attitude towards technology than older generations which could make them especially susceptible to such effects[11].

This thesis thereby aims to explore how millennials’ interaction on Facebook affects their motivation and likelihood to engage in substantial prosocial actions. Prosocial actions
are actions that are intended to benefit others or society as a whole, and often entails cost or risk to the self [22]. For the purpose of this study we have defined substantial prosocial actions as actions that has a direct, beneficial impact on a social movement such as donating money or volunteering.

Facebook is the social media platform which is most commonly used among millennials and allows its users to engage in social movements in multiple different ways, such as join discussion groups and organisations and receive live updates from these [7]. Users can also show their support to social movements and organisations by sharing, or liking content or profiles [20].

This study will give voice to, and act as a starting-point for further reflection regarding millennials’ perception of using social media such as Facebook as a platform for communicating and engaging in prosocial actions. By finding out more about millennials’ behaviour on Facebook, social movements can also improve and optimise their online presence in order to provoke offline activist actions among millennials and thereby cause a more substantial impact for change.

Further, the notion of an action as costly, substantial and impactful, as opposed to a costless, symbolic action that entails low-effort [6], will also be studied in order to gain a deeper understanding of social media as a platform for activism. Moreover, this study will explore the concept of moral self-licensing in a public social context, and how it might play an important role in social media’s effect on action and motivation. With these concepts explored the following questions will be explored using mixed-methods research design.

How do millennials perceive that their motivation to engage in prosocial actions is affected by interacting with Facebook content? How do millennials perceive Facebook as a platform for activism?

2 Related work

This section will review research and theories relating to this study. The related work will discuss the topics of slacktivism and behavioural licensing effects that could influence how participants are affected by Facebook interaction.

2.1 Slacktivism

The term slacktivism was introduced by Fred Clark and Dwight Ozard in 1995 and was described with a positive connotation [5]. It was used to shorten the term “slacker activism” which refers to activities for young people to participate in for affecting their society on an individual scale. However, the meaning of the word changed several years later when it was used in the article From Slacktivism to activism written by Evgeny Morozov [19]. In this article Morozov criticizes how people show their support for social movements by doing actions requiring no effort or risk taking, for example only joining a Facebook group and doing nothing else. As a part of his argumentation, he refers to his earlier research where he examines people’s general efforts to contribute to social causes and reached the conclusion that online contribution not having tangible impact on the cause. He defines slacktivism as:

“Slacktivism’ is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.”

In the article “Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means?” by Henric Christensen, the author examines what forms of activism performed on the internet should be defined as slacktivism or just online activism [5]. He uses Morozov’s definition of slacktivism and raises the criticism of online activism being less effective and online activities replacing traditional offline participation and thereby lowering overall levels of participation.

Furthermore, Christensen highlights that according to Morozov’s definition, slacktivism lacks the intention of involving people in social movements through actions that require a higher degree of effort and risk, and claims that not all forms of online activism can be defined as slacktivism. Moreover, he argues that if the content presented online by a social movement encourages people to further participation and involvement, rather than only joining Facebook groups and sharing posts, it should no longer be considered slacktivism. He also argues against Morozov, expressing the lack of evidence proving that online activism actions replaces the traditional forms of offline activism participation.

Other studies express the distinction between activism and slacktivism as especially blurry on social media, since activism sometimes relies on the type of slacktivism of the masses that is characteristic of social media interaction [3].

In “Clicktivism, Slacktivism, or ’Real’ Activism? Cultural Codes of American Activism in the Internet Era” Mary Butler describes the possibilities of internet, where people have the ability to spread information and discuss social change every second of the day [2]. Furthermore, she argues, internet facilitates connections between people over similar concerns without needing organisations or leaders. However, Malcolm Gladwell suggests that the internet “makes it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact” [8]. Other critics also emphasize that although the internet is effective to raise awareness, obtaining information about a problem does not increase the likelihood of further participation [5].

In this study we will define slacktivism as a term describing activist actions occurring online that does not encourage people to further, high-risk and high-effort contributions, but increases the individuals’ feel-good factor while having minimal impact on social movements.
2.1.1 Clicktivism

Another term, closely related to slacktivism, which also describes online activism, is clicktivism. In both the previously mentioned article by Cabrera et al., as well as in How Millennials Engage in Social Media Activism by Sasha Dookhoo, clicktivism is described as a subcategory of slacktivism [3] [7]. The similarities between the terms are both involving activist actions performed online, requiring minimal effort and low risk-taking. However, what differentiates the two, is the intention of the actions, where slacktivism is mainly performed for self-gain [6] whereas clicktivism is described as a reaction to the content [7].

2.1.2 Millennials and Slacktivism

In the previously mentioned article by Sasha Dookhoo, millennials are described as not particularly fond of engaging in social media activism, and do not partake much in such actions. However, they still partake in such behaviours to a larger extent than offline activism [7]. When they engage in online activism it is generally by performing slacktivism behaviours such as liking and sharing posts, in other words, low risk and low effort actions requiring little previous knowledge about the issue. Regardless of these signs of engagement, Dookhoo emphasises that millennials are passively contributing to activist issues.

Dookhoo continues by explaining that millennials participate in online activism to fulfill social aspects of interaction, in other words, to get a sense of participation and belonging. Further the author describes how millennials tend to avoid continuously engaging in behaviours regarding online activism if they have already recently done so, and thereby felt content with their contribution, which she bases on moral self-licensing theory.

2.2 Moral self-licensing on prosocial behaviour

The goal of this to study is to explore how interacting with Facebook content with prosocial connotations can affect millennials’ motivation to engage in further substantial prosocial actions. This section will present previous research that has been done on moral self-licensing theory, which suggests that people can use previous good actions to license bad actions [17]. Although moral self-licensing can work subconsciously, it can also be a justification strategy, deliberately used to excuse morally questionable behaviors [1]. In the context of online activism, this thesis will focus on the moral self-licensing effects on prosocial behaviour i.e. whether individuals whose morally desirable actions are fresh in mind, feel less inclined or motivated to contribute with tangible, substantial actions such as donating to charity [16]. The effect of moral self-licensing has proven, in various previous studies, to affect the likeliness of people engaging in behaviours that are immoral or unethical, after taking part in morally favorable behaviours [18].

2.2.1 Symbolic and substantial actions

Jordan et al. found that when letting people estimate how likely they were to engage in prosocial activities after describing a time in their past when they had acted morally, they reported fewer prosocial activities than those who described immoral actions [12].

Moreover, in a study conducted on moral licensing and impression-management, Cornelissen et al. opted to separate symbolic actions that are associated with minimal costs and limited tangible benefits, from more costly, substantial actions [6]. Their studies show that having the opportunity to express one’s support or positive intentions symbolically may have adverse effects on “real” contributions made and thus showing that, “slacktivism” may indeed have an undesirable impact on subsequent substantive prosocial behavior.

2.2.2 Cost

Similarly, studies conducted by Gneezy et al. explain how the self-licensing effect depends on how costly the action is to the individual [9]. Costly, initial, prosocial behaviours, they argue, results in consistent future behaviours, while costless behaviours subsequently leads to less consistent, and in some cases reduced prosocial behaviours. The suggestion of altruistic behaviour as costly, and thus a counterweight in the ongoing internal balancing of moral self-worth that results in moral (or immoral) behaviour is presented in the study conducted by Sachdeva et al. [21]. In this study, the researchers found that participants thinking and writing about their positive treats donated one fifth as much as those thinking about their negative treats.

2.2.3 Observable nature

Lastly, Kristofferson et al. found that the socially observable nature of a task i.e. whether it is performed in public or private, also affects people’s subsequent engagement in prosocial, meaningful actions [13]. In this study, the participants who initially showed their support privately, exhibited greater helping on a more meaningful subsequent task than those who did it publicly. As in the study conducted by Cornelissen et al., the authors use the theory of impression-management to explain these findings, where the main objective of any support is claimed to rather be that of managing one’s own impression, and not supporting the cause per se [6]. As previously implied in this article, this underlying concept of self-gain or selfishness is what we use to separate slacktivism from activism.

3 Method

In order to investigate the participants’ view of Facebook as a platform for activism and its effect on their motivation to contribute, the participants were asked to perform a task in their Facebook application, followed by a survey and an interview. The participants were recruited from a course
within the Media Technology Bachelor at KTH Royal Institute of Technology. The sample consisted of 7 women and 12 men, born between the years 1991 and 1999, and thus, a part of the millennial generation. They were also required to be previously having encountered posts by any prosocial movement account on Facebook (eg. WWF, Greenpeace or Amnesty), in order to ensure that they are users of the platform as well as individuals who would normally engage and show concern for prosocial movements and could potentially be engaging in slacktivist actions. The questions for the two parts of the qualitative analysis can be found in appendix 1.

3.1 Supportive tasks
The study was conducted in two parts, one supportive task with a corresponding survey and one semi-structured interview. This section will describe the first part, which consisted of two different tasks that would allow the participant to show their support to a cause, both online and offline. After initially being informed to bring their phone to the study, the participant was asked to perform the tasks, carefully reading the instructions provided for each task.

3.1.1 Online supportive task
Through an informative form, the participants were prompted to find a post describing a social movement or activism they would like to support. For the purpose of this study, supportive practices are defined as participation and online sharing practices involving easy-to-use social media features which, on Facebook, can be practiced by either sharing, or liking content or profiles [20]. The participants were asked to engage in supportive practices characterised by low cost and public display. Furthermore, this task should, as authentically as possible, simulate a setting where the participant browses their Facebook account, and makes a decision to engage in a supportive, costless, public action. Therefore, the participants were informed that it was important that they chose a post they think they would usually have chosen to like or share on Facebook. Although the test can never be completely spontaneous, we aspired to preserve as much of the participants’ autonomy as possible in the tasks by giving them the possibility to make their own decision regarding what and how to support, and continuously reminding them their participation is completely voluntary. Once the participants had performed the supportive action on Facebook, they were prompted by the form, to provide details about to what they did och how they chose to do this. When this part was finished, the participant was informed that they had completed their task and was now going to continue on to the next part of the study. This was done in order to convey a feeling of independence and simulate the participant’s free choice to act in our upcoming request of a more costly action.

3.1.2 Offline supportive task
Before moving on to next part of the study, the participant was asked whether they would like to contribute further to the cause. An offline, supportive task defined by the authors as more costly to the participant than the act of liking or sharing on Facebook. The participants were informed that this would take 15 more minutes of the study, and were given the options to either choose to “Dedicate 15 more minutes” or “Move on to the next part”. At the time of choosing whether or not to continue contributing, the participants had only been informed about how much time they would sacrifice, and were not given any further details on what this contributions would entail in order to prevent other parameters affecting their decision. This entailed a risk or cost to the participants, which is characteristic of prosocial behaviour. The offline supportive task will test participants’ attitude towards contributing further by sacrificing their time as had been previously done by Cornelissen et al. in Clicktivism or Slacktivism? Impression Management and Moral Licensing[6]. The supportive action they were asked to engage in was characterised as volunteerism, which is the type of support that is more substantial and involves the user’s time and commitment for a selfless cause [24]. Since the interest of this study was only to examine whether the participant would choose to engage further or not, all participants moved on to the next part without spending 15 more minutes. All participants were handed the next part of the form after choosing their upcoming action, and were informed that in spite of what they had answered in the last part, they would continue on to the next one. They were also informed that their answer would be of use for them as a reference in their own reflections regarding the subject. Whether the participant chose to contribute or not was noted, and the first part of the study was finished.

3.1.3 Survey
Thereafter, the participants were asked to answer a survey that would investigate their attitude towards the significance of their previous action and their general Facebook usage. The participants were presented with 7 statements concerning this topic, and were asked to rate their attitude towards each statement on a 5-point scale of attitudes.

3.2 Interview
Lastly, the participants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner in order to explore their view on supportive online actions and behaviours equivalent to the ones in the tasks. The purpose of this interview was to gain a deeper understanding of their answers in the preceding task to learn more about the participant’s view on their own online behaviour. The interviews were then transcribed and recurring themes were extracted from the answers in order to understand the participants general perception of Facebook as a platform.
Act or interact? The perceived influence of social media on millennial prosocial behaviours

for activism and influencer of motivation to contribute to social movements and activism. The main questions of the semi-structured interview can be found in appendix 1.

4 Results
This section presents the results obtained in the study. The results are presented in the same order as they were performed, according to the method. From the conducted semi-structured interview, two individual sections were extracted. Firstly, the supportive character of each individual was measured based on their answers from the interviews. Secondly, reoccurring themes were extracted in order to present participants’ thoughts.

4.1 Supportive tasks and survey
In this section, the results of the online and offline supportive task performed by the participants is presented. The subsequent survey examining the participants’ opinions on their actions in the supportive tasks, and their social media usage is lastly presented in a bar chart.

4.1.1 Online supportive task
From the sample of 19 participants, 7 chose to show their support to a post concerning climate/sustainability, 4 chose one concerning feminism and 3 chose religious minorities, all chose to like the post. Two participants chose to support posts concerning humanitarian aid/human rights by liking and two participants could not find a social movement cause to support on their Facebook accounts. One person found a cause about human rights and sustainability within the textile industry that she did support, but chose not to like or share. She added that she would usually not use Facebook to like posts like these since she was “trying to focus more consciously as long as her budget allows”.

4.1.2 Offline supportive task
The purpose of the offline supportive task was to learn more about each individual participant’s willingness to contribute to a prosocial cause in a more costly, substantial way than liking or sharing content online. The results of this task is presented in Table 1, where the four participants who wanted to contribute further to the cause by choosing to dedicate 15 more minutes of their time is indicated by a ‘Yes’ in the ‘Dedicate’ column. These results will later be compared to each participant’s previous habits of supporting a cause in a costly way in order to gain insight into important influential factors on prosocial behaviour.

4.1.3 Survey of attitudes
The results from the survey investigating the participants’ attitude towards the significance of their actions in the previous task and their general Facebook usage is presented in a stacked bar presenting the distribution of answers that were obtained for each question of the survey. Each question is indicated by a letter that corresponds to each bar in the chart presenting the distribution of answers of that question. The questions of the survey are presented with the chart.

1. Survey questions
a. When I showed my support by liking/sharing I felt that I made a substantial and impactful contribution.
b. When I was given the possibility to show my support further by spending 15 minutes of my time I felt that I was given the possibility to make a substantial and impactful contribution.
c. When I showed my support by liking/sharing I felt motivated to contribute further to the cause by sacrificing some of my time.
d. I feel motivated to contribute to offline activism when reading about activism online.
e. When I like/share content on Facebook I usually feel that I make a substantial and impactful contribution.
f. When I like/share content on Facebook regarding social movements and activism I usually feel motivated to make further contributions.
g. When I show my support to social movements and activism by likes and shares, I feel motivated to contribute further to the cause by sacrificing some of my time.

Figure 1. Stacked bar chart demonstrating sample distributions of answers of survey questions
4.2 Supportive character
To get a perception of the study’s participating individuals and their previous involvement in supporting social movements, the participants were asked questions about the nature of their previous engagement. In order to individually learn more about previous habits of supportive actions, the participants were asked if they had engaged in any supportive actions, defined by the authors as substantial and costly. The supportive actions were defined as: donating money to, being a member of, or volunteering for a cause supporting any social movement. For each question, the participant was scored one point if they had engaged in such actions, and the score of each participant was calculated, where 3 was the maximum score. This is presented in Table 1. The participants were then divided into two subgroups, where the supportive score of the individuals who chose to dedicate 15 minutes of their time, was compared to the individuals who chose not to do this. These results are presented in Table 2 where the group of people who chose to dedicate more time, the ’dedicators’, generally showed a higher mean supportive score than the participants who chose to continue without further dedication, the ’non-dedicaters’. Although the difference was not significant in this test (p < 0.075), the relatively high probability entails that if the test had been done on a larger group of people it is likely that the difference between the two groups would have been significant.

4.2.1 Defining activist actions
Further, the participants were asked to define what an activist action is. A few of the participants gave multiple answers whereas others gave none. About 14.3% of the given answers were actions performed online such as: liking posts, writing about issues on Facebook, administrating Facebook groups concerning social movements and signing online petitions. Also, 42.9% of the answers were about offline actions where some examples were: demonstrations, volunteering or joining an organisation. The remaining 42.9% of the answers were actions where it was not specified if whether they occurred online, offline, or could occur in both contexts. Spending time or energy where examples of such actions.

In addition to this, the participants were also asked if they have previously participated in any of the defined actions. About 31.6% of the participants explained that they have performed actions online and about 36.8% of them mentioned offline actions. The remaining 31.6% were participants that answered that they have not engaged in any activist actions.

4.3 Interview themes
Three main themes were retrieved from the reflections of the interviews: (1) Interaction as a motivator to further commitment, (2) Facebook as a mediator of important motivational aspects, (3) Facebook as a noisy and distracting platform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Gender (M/F)</th>
<th>Dedicate (Yes/No)</th>
<th>Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Sub groups supportive scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub group</th>
<th>Mean score</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedicaters</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dedicaters</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The percentages indicate how many of the participants mentioned the theme during the interviews and the themes have only been counted once for each participant, even if they did mention it multiple times. Every participant has been indicated by gender and birth year and the quotes have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors of this article.

4.3.1 Interaction as a motivator to further commitment
Regarding the interaction possibilities available on Facebook such as liking, or sharing or one of the interaction possibilities presented in Table 2, the participants(36,8%) expressed them as engaging and motivating for showing support to a cause and to contribute further. Generally when describing the usage of the interactions it was implied that it occurred in conjunction with other time consuming actions to become more acquainted with the issue the Facebook-post describes. They described the action of liking a post as an indication of interest. A participant explained:

“When I like something it means that I actually dedicated time to read what it is about and really learn about it. I usually don’t just like things. So,
Act or interact? The perceived influence of social media on millennial prosocial behaviours

If I have liked something then I have sacrificed time and read about it and it makes me want to continue to read about it.” (female, 1997)

Further, various participants (47.7%) also expressed the experience of the interaction as not particularly impactful and therefore disengaging. A like was regularly described as a minimal action that can easily be overlooked and therefore could not make a crucial impact. An example from a participant was:

“I do not believe that likes have that big of an impact, because it is such a small thing in the way that only a few people will see that you did it.” (male, 1996)

When asked about the moral self-licensing effect, participants generally agreed to have experienced such an effect on moral behaviour in general (78.9%), but all, with exception of one participant, had never done so when interacting with content on Facebook. When providing examples of such experiences, participants referred to actions that were only beneficial to themselves, and not others. The participants commonly also referred to the insignificance of Facebook interaction such as liking or sharing to explain why they had never experience such a moral self-licensing effect when interacting with Facebook content. One participant expressed:

“I don’t think it matters that much, I mean... I don’t see it as a statement to like an article. I don’t feel like ‘I liked this article now, what a great action’.” (male, 1991)

The single participant who did recognise moral self-licensing effecting her behaviour on Facebook explained that this had happened when being exposed to a lot of content urging her to sign petitions.

“If I have donated to a group or something, and I see another that also needs a donation I might not do that. Or a petition. When I have signed and I get suggestions like ‘sign this too’, I don’t usually do that because then I have already done it to another” (female, 1997)

The participants (36.8%) also expressed that while the interaction on Facebook was not impactful enough, the content and information mediated through the platform was however motivating and engaging further contribution. They explained that what they see in their Facebook feeds can affect their thought processes and their reflections. A participant said:

“I believe more that what I see on Facebook can make me want to do something, to donate money or something like that, the fact that I read it. But then I do not know if the like itself makes me want to continue doing it[liking posts] or share it.” (female, 1999)

Another participant also expressed:

“It is not the like in itself, I do not necessarily have to like something to read the article that was shared. I don’t like everything that is shared.” (female, 1995)

But many participants (47.4%) expressed they were not active or showed what they perceived as a lot of support for social movements. An example of such a statement is:

“I do not participate very much, I am more of a lurker so to speak. I take note of information, check a few different sides of the political opinion and then I try to compile my own opinion about it. It doesn’t get much more than that, I do not share[posts] much or something like that.” (male, 1998)

4.3.2 Facebook as a mediator of important motivational aspects

When considering the motivation to support social movements on Facebook several participants (52.6%) expressed social aspect as a determining factor. The fact that a friend or family member liked a post or were attending an event motivated the participant to show interest as well. A participant expressed:

“It matters more if someone else has liked or shared something. Especially if someone shared something, like a friend that has shared something political or something, then I become more interested because that person has shown interest for it. If a close friend of mine has shared something I really agree with, then I might get more excited to engage in it.” (female, 1998)

Further, the participants (15.8%) indicated that the social aspects were also a motivational factor when occurring offline. A participant commented:

“(…) because the reason I joined Greenpeace and donated was because it was a personal encounter, a personal contact. Not because of something I saw online.” (female, 1992)

Contemporary events were also described as motivational to support social movements by the participants (31.6%). One participant reported donating money to a cause after having encountered information about it online.

“And now with the New Zealand incident, a lot of ‘fund me’-pages have appeared where you can donate. I get information about it on Facebook and on Instagram.” (female, 1998)

Participants (36.8%) also mentioned the informational aspect as essential to engagement. Participants describe how Facebook, as a platform containing a substantial amount of information, and therefore bringing attention to issues regarding social movements or contemporary events that
would otherwise have gone unnoticed, motivates them to engage. A participant expressed:

"I might not even have known about these contributing actions if it had not been for Facebook." (female, 1995)

4.3.3 Facebook as a noisy and distracting platform

Although mediating some important motivational aspects, participants (42,1%) also expressed that the information available in Facebook was rarely reliable, often due to the overwhelming variety of content accessible on the platform and the lack of source citing and ability to manage content. A participant explained:

"Less good [about Facebook] is the fact that the posted information is not always accurate. It is not controlled in any way. It is just normal people writing posts and whoever gets the most likes is usually the one who is seen the most." (male, 1992)

Additionally the participants(36,8%) expressed that the platform easily causes filter bubbles which polarises people, making it difficult to have valuable discussions about social movements issues.

"The issue with the filter bubbles as well, is that... Like, those who think the same thing only sees their own views reflected, so that it does not encourage you to think differently. That makes it difficult to convince them as well." (male, 1991)

The participants(42,1%) frequently described the information available on Facebook as noisy. They expressed that the platform exposes them to a large amount of posts about various kinds of topics which makes it difficult for the information stay on their mind after putting their phone down or leaving their computer. A participant said:

"I think Facebook is a bit too extensive, there are so many things so you do not really know what is important."(male, 1998)

And followed later with:

"I get many [new thoughts], but I don’t think many of them sticks, it is so much noise, so there is nothing that stands out. It is difficult to find anything that sticks."

Besides being noisy, the participants(42,1%) also described the content as not customised to their interests, which demotivates them to use Facebook for activism purposes. They expressed that they preferred to use other platforms, such as Instagram, which they perceived as more customised to their preferences than Facebook. A participant expressed:

"I am probably more focused or attentive on Instagram. Facebook has lost its edge, because it is just so much. I feel like Instagram is more personalised for me. It is not as much crap. I think I am at least more selective about what I follow there. If I follow any social movement there, then I am more likely to want to see what appears there." (female, 1995)

The participants(26,3%) also described discussions held in the comment sections of Facebook posts as ineffective or counterproductive when aiming to discuss issues regarding activism, which discourages their engagement. A comment by a participant was:

"I get the feeling that many of those kinds of movements that exist on Facebook do not often have productive conversations in the comment section. That’s largely why I don’t follow them on Facebook. " (female, 1998)

Some of the participants(36,8%) described Facebook as fulfilling other purposes than to engage in activism such as communication or entertainment. Some examples mentioned by the participants were:

For me, Facebook doesn’t have that function in my life. It is a place where I write to people... Like, on messenger. But of course, if I saw Facebook more as a way for me to express myself then maybe I would have used it more for that purpose.” (male, 1991)

"I don’t see Facebook as a platform where I express my thoughts, it is more for entertainment and communication.” (male, 1998)

Additionally, participants(21,1%) speculated whether Facebook might, in fact, direct their attention off real activism. A participant expressed:

"Yes, but I actually think I would be more involved [if Facebook did not exist]. Then I would probably keep up with something that happened for real. And then you could not say that I am involved on Facebook, as I am now. Then I think I would be a little more committed to something really, maybe.” (female, 1995)

5 Discussion

This section will discuss the obtained results, limitations and further developments of this study. As this was a mixed-methods study, the results of the different parts of the study has been compared to each other in order to detect patterns and draw more nuanced conclusions from the obtained data.

5.1 Ambiguous attitudes

As shown in Figure 1, the participants’ attitudes towards the significance and impact of their online actions are incohesive and highly individual. These results are further explained by the thematic analysis, where these attitudes are have been put into context. The thematic analysis can also tell us what conclusions can be drawn about participants’ general
perception of Facebook as a platform for online activism and other influential aspects on their prosocial behaviours.

5.1.1 Prosocial action
The participants who expressed that they perceived the act of liking something as a meaningless action, often mentioned both the insignificance of the action on their own subsequent prosocial behaviour, as well as its intangible effects on the world outside the internet. The participants who did find the act of liking something as motivating, however, usually mentioned spending time reading about the content, or in some other way giving or sacrificing to the cause, in relation to interacting with the content. This corresponds to the suggestion that low-cost prosocial behaviour offer an ambiguous signal of the participant’s prosocial identity, and although any displays of prosocial behaviour is clearly positive, because it came of no cost for the participant, it is less likely that they perceive it as a diagnostic of their prosocial character [9]. In other words, the participants who gave something that was more costly to themselves in correlation to their interaction, also felt that it had a larger impact on both their own behaviour and the cause they intended to support with their action.

This suggestion also corresponds to the general ambiguity that participants expressed towards using Facebook as a platform for activism. Although they felt they were given the opportunity to easily show their support to a social movement and activism, they still expressed a feeling of not doing enough for the cause they cared for.

5.1.2 Moral self-licensing effects
Although previous studies indicate that the moral self-licensing effect may have an undesirable impact on substantial prosocial behaviour after interacting with prosocial content [6], the results of this study showed that participating millennials mainly did not perceive such an effect to be influencing their online behaviours. When inquiring about the participants’ experience of moral self-licensing, the level of cost entailed by the supportive action was again mentioned by the participants as a possible reason to why they had not perceived such an effect to be influencing their behaviour.

Interestingly, the one participant who expressed having experienced moral self-licensing effecting her behaviour when interacting with Facebook content, was an individual who also demonstrated a high level of supportive character. Moreover, this participant did express experiencing the supportive action affected by moral self-licensing as a more time-consuming one. From this, we can deduce that the cost of the supportive action can also affect the perception of a possible moral self-licensing effect on prosocial behaviour.

Lastly, we can conclude that although many of the participants had experienced the moral self-licensing effect on desirable behaviours in general, they did not perceive it to affect their prosocial behaviour on Facebook or anywhere else.

5.1.3 Supportive character
From the supportive characteristics of the participants we can draw the conclusion that they do have causes they care more or less about, and wish to show their support or make a contribution to. However, from the themes extracted from the interviews we understand that many of the participants perceive online activism as not always significant for the movement. Furthermore, as proposed in the article by Gneezy et al., where the researchers draw on self-perception theory to suggest that when asked to engage in prosocial behavior that is personally costly, people would interpret that as a signal of their prosocial identity[9]. This notion could serve as a possible explanation why those participants who showed a higher level of previous engagement, and thus presumably a higher level of prosocial disposition in substantial, prosocial behaviours, showed a higher likelihood to engage in the costly, prosocial offline task.

5.2 Influential aspects on Facebook interaction
In this section we discuss other aspects influencing participants’ motivation to engage prosocial behaviour.

5.2.1 Social aspects
An aspect that showed to highly affect participants’ perceived likeliness and motivation to engage in substantial prosocial behaviour, was the social aspect of an action. The social aspect of a prosocial action affected both participants’ online and offline behaviour. For example, participants explained how they, by the use of Facebook, planned and later went to a demonstration together with a group of friends or that they donated money after talking to a recruiter in the streets. Furthermore, the social aspect showed, thorough examples provided in the interviews, to be an especially impactful motivator to costly, substantial prosocial actions such as attending demonstrations, donating money or joining a prosocial organisation. When describing actions of activism they had previously engaged in, which were usually of a substantial, tangible nature, many of the participants mentioned engaging in that action together with friends or family. This can be interpreted as an indication of the motivational importance of social aspects. Furthermore, as social interaction is fundamental to Facebook as platform and, according to the previously mentioned article by Sasha Dookhoo, an important reason why millennials participate in online activism in the first place, we can conclude that this is another aspect of Facebook interaction that has the ability to influence prosocial behaviour.

Moreover, every interaction on Facebook results in a response which is usually observable by the public. In concurrence with the study performed by Kristofferson et al., the publicly observable nature of Facebook interaction could
be another influencing factor on prosocial behaviour. Moreover, as discussed in the article by Cornelissen et al., if the main objective of any supportive action is rather about self-management than about selflessly giving, than the publicly observable nature of Facebook interaction would make Facebook a suitable platform to engage in such high-publicity, low-cost actions.

5.2.2 Contemporary aspects

Furthermore, the contemporariness of an event also seemed to play a large part in participants’ motivation to contribute to a social movement in a subsequent, costly manner. Participants expressed usually having engaged in costly, substantial prosocial actions when being reminded of how to aid in a contemporary, pressing situation. The motivational effects of contemporary aspects would make the instant information exchange that is characteristic of social media platforms, a suitable quality of any platform for activism.

5.3 Facebook as a platform for activism

With the themes extracted from the interviews we can conclude that Facebook is playing a significant part in how these millennials assimilate activism in general. Moreover, as millennials belong to a generation who are habitually using media technology, they showed an optimistic attitude towards internet and social media in general, as assumed, but seemed particularly discontent with Facebook as a platform for activism. We can also conclude that although participants showed to have ambiguous views on the significance and impact of their Facebook interaction, the majority perceived Facebook as poorly customised to their preferences and interests, providing unreliable information and noisy due to the abundance of information. Although experiencing such a discontent with Facebook as a platform for activism, the participants also expressed having to use Facebook, to some extent against their will, if they wanted to try making their voice heard.

5.4 Slacktivism

As earlier defined, slacktivism is as a term describing activist actions occurring online that does not encourage people to further, high-risk and high-effort contributions, but increases the individuals’ feel-good factor while having minimal impact on social movements. This section will discuss the participants’ involvement in slacktivism.

As previously mentioned, Dookhoo argued that millennials often engage in online activism to fulfill the social aspects of the interaction, i.e. to get a sense of belonging among friends and acquaintances. This correspond with the results of this study, where the participants commonly mentioned the social aspects of Facebook interaction as motivating and affecting their prosocial behaviour by supporting social movements such as reading and sharing posts. However, the social aspects was also motivational enough for the participants to engage in offline activism and substantial prosocial actions such as participating in demonstrations or donating.

Further, while several participants perceived Facebook as an important mediator of information, bringing attention to activism issues that would otherwise have gone unnoticed, others described the platform as a noisy distraction from influential posts regarding activism. As mentioned earlier in the article by Christensen et al, critics claimed that solely raising awareness about issues does not encourage people to engage in substantial prosocial behaviours. This statement corresponds with the provided results showing the small amount of participants having previously performed any action they perceived as an activist action, as well as the large amount of participants describing themselves as passively engaging in activism. Moreover, few participants have performed all of the three actions defined, in this study, as substantial and prosocial. These findings also correlate with Dookhoo’s statement that millennials are generally passive when engaging in activism.

5.5 Limitations

As this was a study of an explorative nature, the participants were sampled in a purposive manner, and therefore, fairly homogeneous as it consisted of people of a higher education, all studying Media Technology in Stockholm, Sweden. There was also a majority of males participating in the study which may have affected the results, since the females generally engaged more in activism could be detected from the interviews. Future research should be tested on a bigger variety of people with a more even representation of the genders.

5.5.1 Method discussion

The interview themes played an important role in this study, where the purpose was to gain an insight into millennials’ attitudes towards Facebook as a platform for activism, and how interacting with its content can affect their motivation to engage in prosocial behaviours. However, interviewing participants individually comes with certain limitations and possibilities. For this study, an alternative interviewing method, such as interviewing the participants in focus groups would perhaps illustrate different views than the ones obtained by individual interviews. Also, another possible method could be solely collecting quantitative data about the participants opinions about Facebook as a platform for activism.

Furthermore, as the results of the participants’ perceived moral self-licensing effect did not correspond to previous research to such large extent, the question of whether the moral self-licensing effect on prosocial behaviours can even be perceived, or if it is only effecting unconscious behaviours, became relevant. Moreover, since most participants expressed having experienced the moral self-licensing effect on desirable behaviours that were not beneficial to others than themselves, we do not know if the perceivability of this effect
Act or interact? The perceived influence of social media on millennial prosocial behaviours

could be dependant on that aspect. Further studies will be have to be made researching this topic.

5.6 Conclusion

This study aimed to answer the questions: ‘How do millennials perceive that their motivation to engage in prosocial actions is affected by interacting with Facebook content? How do millennials perceive Facebook as a platform for activism?’. By combining the results of online and offline supportive tasks performed by the participants, with the answers of an explorative survey and themes extracted from semi-structured interviews, we were able to answer the research questions and identify possible influential aspects. From the research we can conclude that the social interaction of Facebook does motivate millennials to engage in online activism, but it does also encourage them to perform substantial and costly actions which are signs of non-slacktivism behaviours. We can also conclude that Facebook is playing a significant part in how these millennials assimilate activism and prosocial behaviours in general, but that they are experiencing a dissonance in what they want to do, what they are urged to do, and what they are actually doing. Moreover, whether these millennials perceive interacting with content on Facebook as a motivating factor to contribute further to social movements has shown to depend on the level of engagement they show in relation to their interaction. Similarly, the perceived motivation and likeliness to engage in further prosocial actions has shown, in this study, to depend on previous level of engagement. Furthermore, this study showed that social and contemporary aspects of Facebook interaction are highly influencing how motivation to engage in costly prosocial actions is affected by Facebook usage. Ultimately, this study has illustrated a possible distinction between interacting and acting, and how the former can affect the latter. This study has also acted to give voice to millennials’ perception of using social media to communicate and engage in activism. This information can be used by social movements to provoke costly activist actions among millennials, and thereby cause a more substantial impact for change. The results of this study can also act as a starting-point for millennials to reflect upon how they would like to contribute to activism and in what ways their motivation to engage in prosocial behaviour is affected by social media usage.

By finding out more about millennials’ behaviour on Facebook, social movements can improve and optimise their online presence in order to provoke offline activist actions among millennials and thereby cause a more substantial impact for change.

6 Acknowledgments

Lastly, we would like to give special thanks to the participants of this study who contributed vastly to this work with their thoughts and opinions. We would also like to thank our supervisor, Marie Louise Juul Søndergaard, for useful guidance and feedback throughout the process.

References

A Appendices

The interview was conducted in a semi-structured manner and the audio was recorded after participant’s signed consent. The interview was held in Swedish, questions and obtained answers were translated by the authors.

- Do you support any social movements? If yes, which ones?
- How do you support these organisations? Are you using Facebook to do this?
- How do you think one should contribute to a movement in order to have a substantial impact?
- Do you consider yourself an activist? Why / why not?
- What is an activist action according to you?
- Have you ever engaged in an activist action? What?
- Have you ever been a member in an organisation supporting a social movement? What motivated you to do it?
- Have you ever volunteered to support a social movement? What motivated you to do it?
- Have you ever donated to a cause supporting a social movement? What motivated you to do it?
- Do you think Facebook is a good platform to engage and motivate you and others to support social movements and activism?
- What makes Facebook a suitable/less suitable platform to support social movements and activism?
- How do you believe your actions on Facebook can affect your actions in real life?
- Do you believe likes and shares on Facebook can affect your motivation to selflessly sacrifice for example time and money for a social movement?
- Have you ever compensated for morally doubtful behaviour with morally desirable behaviour? For example: you feel that it is okay to take the elevator to the second floor because you went to the gym this morning. Can you come up with any examples when you have experienced this?
- How do you believe that this way of using desirable behaviours to legitimise less desirable behaviours can affect your Facebook usage? Can the feeling you get after liking or sharing content that supports a good cause on Facebook affect your motivation to selflessly sacrifice for example time or money?
- If you would imagine a life without Facebook and social media, do you believe that you would experience the same willingness to contribute to good causes as you do now? And what do believe you would do to contribute then?

10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00263.x


