

Slacktivism as a Detriment to Environmental Progress

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Slacktivism as a Detriment to Environmental Progress:

How Token Support Benefits Corporate Agendas and Overlooks Inclusivity

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It should come as no surprise that the distressing climate change patterns stem from human involvement; the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states in their 2014 report that “it is *extremely likely* that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature... was caused by the anthropogenic increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations” (p.48). In short, the progress humanity made throughout its existence - whether that is in the area of industry, economy, or technology - came at a price, endangering the future of the global environment through GHG emissions. The alarming state of the planet’s overall well-being has pushed environmentalism to the forefront of the public’s mind, a trend that is starkly visible on both corporate and individual social media accounts. While some may argue that this awareness is a completely positive occurrence, its flaw lies in the facilitation of token support without substantial action and the encouragement of non-inclusive, superficial solutions to the environmental issues affecting countless lives on an international scale.

To begin with, the aforementioned concept of token support towards a cause - in this case, environmentalism - without any subsequent attempts at carrying out change refers to a social phenomenon known as slacktivism. Researchers Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2014) define slacktivism as “a willingness to perform a... costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change” (p. 1149). Kristofferson et al. (2014) goes on to specify that ‘token support’ includes

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painless measures such as signing petitions, while ‘significant effort’ refers to behaviors like monetary donations or voluntary contributions - actions that require an extensive investment of time and energy. To put it succinctly, slacktivism relies upon the bare minimum of work required to elicit a feel-good effect, and to appease the need of doing one’s part for a movement. In the context of social media, this behavior often manifests through the sharing of crisis-related posts alongside comments of concern, with the underlying (if at times unintended) motive of exhibiting one’s cognizance and compassion to a pool of followers.

This form of slacktivism undoubtedly rings true for many social media users, particularly for high-profile individuals such as celebrities. Take, for instance, the following tweet from Kim Kardashian West in response to a video of heavy oceanic pollution in the Caribbean:

Kim Kardashian West

@KimKardashian

Follow

This is so sad

StanceGrounded @_SJPeace_
Sea Of Plastic' Discovered In The Caribbean Stretches Miles And Is Choking Wildlife
THIS IS NOT OK! THIS IS DISGUSTING!...

Show this thread

3:06 PM - 25 Apr 2019

42,840 Retweets 142,242 Likes

3.2K 43K 142K

Kardashian’s post is a textbook demonstration of slacktivism, as she merely comments on the distressing footage without any attempt at modeling further action for her 62 million followers. Regardless of what her intended message was, Kardashian’s four-word phrase comes off as a

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shallow understatement and a performative display of advocacy towards the problem at hand. An explanation for her behavior might be found in Kristofferson et. al's 2014 research, where they posit that the fulfillment of one's "impression management" needs - i.e., the desire to paint oneself in a positive light to others - through token support hinders later meaningful action (p.1163). Basically, because Kardashian voiced her opinion on a publicly visible platform, she satisfied the need to show others that she cares about current events, allowing her to believe that she has done her part. As such, she took no further action beyond the single tweet, despite the potential for meaningful environmental progress through her fame and wealth. Being critical of the messages shared within online forums and the purpose behind their creation – especially if they originate from individuals with significant influential spheres - is crucial in opposing slacktivism and in enacting genuine change for a cause. All in all, this single instance illustrates the fact that slacktivism creates a cycle of inaction through psychological gratification, thereby preventing proactive reactions to pressing contemporary problems.

That being said, social media platforms can still be used to push for substantial change. Take, for example, the following post from Leonardo DiCaprio promoting environmentalism:

The image shows a Twitter post from Leonardo DiCaprio (@LeoDiCaprio). The profile picture is a portrait of him. The post text reads: "Climate change is a race we can win. We already have the solutions, but we need governments, businesses & individuals to implement them. Demand #ClimateAction. bit.ly/ARaceWeCanWin". There is a blue 'Follow' button and a dropdown menu icon to the right of the post.

11:38 AM - 10 Sep 2018

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The contrast between Kardashian's post and DiCaprio's is stark. Instead of approaching the issue with a sense of sympathy, DiCaprio makes a direct call to action, pressuring different levels of authority to enact the environmental solutions waiting in the wings. Within his post, he includes a hashtag for his 19 million followers to rally under, while also embedding a link to the United Nations Summit - a huge conference attended by world leaders to implement the Paris Agreement and to foster climate action. These elements give DiCaprio's words a feeling of cohesion along with the added bonus of ethos, lending to the sincerity behind his message; his post also grants his following access to information channels regarding the environmental crises at hand – unlike many social media users, fulfilling his impression management needs seems to be the least of his concerns. DiCaprio's intensive measures of support does not just manifest in this single tweet; in fact, his social media showcases environmentally related posts and he supplements this spotlighting through the establishment of the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, dedicated to furthering environmentalist efforts. Unfortunately, displays of slacktivism are far more common than genuine activism from influential figures, such as DiCaprio – therefore, holding such figures accountable to their words and pressuring for more extensive support is essential to facilitating progress towards purposeful, comprehensive solutions.

Of course, the flaws of slacktivism reach beyond the enabling of perfunctory advocacy - rather, its primary flaw lies in its emphasis upon quick and seemingly painless solutions without considering the nuances of a given issue. A well-known example from recent memory exhibiting this would be the campaign to ban single-use plastic straws from major businesses. The general reasoning behind the ban is that disposable plastics are a major environmental pollutant in the

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world's oceans, posing a considerable threat to marine life. Data measured by a slew of researchers supports this, with one team finding that a minimum of 233,400 tons of macroplastic items, along with 35,540 tons of microplastics, are currently afloat throughout the planet's oceans, endangering an untold number of species and habitats (Eriksen, 2014, p. 9). Proponents of the ban advised the purchase of reusable metal straws as an alternative, with some rallying under the banner of "saving the turtles". The slacktivist aspect of this campaign rests in the idea that the minor action of obtaining and utilizing reusable straws is equivalent to significant measures of marine conservation, like cleaning a beach or donating funds towards an organization. Furthermore, a glaring fault in this proposal is the ableist consequences that would result from the banning of single-use straws. An online post penned by disabled writer Erin Vallely (2018) details these consequences, asserting that certain conditions can prevent individuals from forgoing single-use straws entirely; for instance, those affected by mobility or motor difficulties require the flexibility of plastic straws for medicinal or fluid intake, while others might struggle with the required maintenance of reusable alternatives. Vallely (2018) ends the piece with a powerful statement, affirming that "we do not deserve to be shamed for our needs". Evidently, slacktivism can lead to an oversimplification of an intricate topic and exclude valuable perspectives on solutions that are simultaneously serviceable and inclusive to all parties.

In addition to its failure to pay more mind to inclusive solutions, slacktivism also benefits corporate agendas by steering the conversation away from their complicity in the current state of the global environment. It is no secret that corporations, especially those within the fossil fuels sector, are culpable for a bulk of the GHG emissions that drive climate change. According to the latest Carbon Majors Report, "[51%] of global industrial emissions... can be traced to just 25

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corporate and state producing entities”, with the highest emitting companies being ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron, amongst others (Griffin & Heede, 2017, p. 8). Moreover, Griffin & Heede (2017) contend that these corporations should have been aware of their products’ harmful environmental effects since 1988, and yet the extraction of fossil fuels has only intensified in the present day. Ironically enough, the social media accounts of the listed firms all revolve around an eco-friendly image, claiming that the company is doing their best to minimize their impact upon the environment. This is blatantly seen on ExxonMobil’s Twitter page, where they push environmentally considerate attitudes despite being one of the top contributors to GHG emissions (Griffin & Heede, 2017):

ExxonMobil  @exxonmobil · Jul 8
 We're researching algae biofuel with about 40% of its mass as fat, which can be turned into fuel. The swish is just a nice bonus. #SoothingScience



This publicity tactic, wherein a firm deliberately distributes positive information and withholds negative information to promote an overtly favorable image, is known as greenwashing (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014). The prominence of this trend lends to the idea

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that consumers must critically evaluate messages originating from for-profit organizations.

Ultimately, a company's marketing promises regarding environmental advocacy will prove fruitless as long as their business model is dependent upon the commerce of an inherently unsustainable and ecologically damaging resource; their measures to come across as environmentally mindful are, more often than not, forms of active misdirection meant to distract customers from the reality of the situation. By focusing upon quick, convenient solutions, slacktivism deters consumers from looking beyond the individual level and challenging themselves to scrutinize a root cause of climate change issues: corporate greed.

With all this in mind, the key to combating slacktivism and progressing towards a better, global environmental well-being relies upon refining one's media literacy skills. Even if it is perfectly acceptable to find ways to reduce individual carbon footprints and environmental impact, it is an undeniable fact that to bring about substantial change, a more analytic, big picture lens must be adopted. Any piece of media is created for a specific purpose and with a message embedded in it, a fact that responsible media consumers will keep in mind. Being aware of the ongoing debate concerning environmentalism – i.e., following commentary and contemplating its purpose for being shared, considering from whom or from where it originated, and what narratives might be excluded - will promote a deeper understanding of the topic's nuances. In the end, maintaining a critical perspective and keeping an eye out for instances of slacktivism or greenwashing can assist in holding corporations accountable for employing these practices, while also inviting marginalized groups to voice their opinion on the issue, allowing for the formulation of inclusive solutions.

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