

Assessing the Effects of White Guilt: Activism vs. Slacktivism

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In today's world, social media constantly inundates us with viral videos and stories of individual bigotry while giving us ample opportunity to profess our outrage with little to no personal cost. We consider the possibility that such expressions of outrage at the blatant acts of racism perpetrated by other White Americans (e.g., Tweeting about one's anger at a White woman who calls the cops on an innocent Black man) may serve as a means of alleviating people's own guilt. If this is true, such expressions of outrage may actually reduce White Americans' willingness to engage in and support more concrete and costly efforts to address racial justice (e.g., donating to racial justice organizations).

The present study examined whether guilt-inducing reminders of White privilege motivate White Americans' to donate money to fight racial injustice, and whether this effect is attenuated by the opportunity to express moral outrage at another White person's bigotry. Based on past research, we predicted that the exonerating function of denouncing the unjust actions of another's racism will effectively reduce White privilege-induced participant's willingness to make a more costly contribution to racial justice (i.e., donating money to the NAACP). Based on previous research we anticipated this effect would be strongest for those low in the trait of Justice Sensitivity, who are more concerned with alleviating feelings of guilt than restoring justice.

We recruited participants ($N = 896$) on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online platform that matches workers with requesters and compensates workers for the completion of small tasks. We required that participants were White, Non-Hispanic/Latino adults currently residing in the United States. After answering demographics questions participants completed the Justice Sensitivity Scale. Participants then were randomly assigned to either complete a short survey about White privilege meant to induce feelings of guilt, or a control survey with questions about adult privilege. Participants then completed a collective guilt measure, which assessed guilt about injustices perpetrated by White Americans against Black Americans. Participants then read a news article that described a racially charged incident in which a White woman falsely accused and assaulted a young Black man. Next, participants completed measures to assess their feelings of outrage as well as their general mood. Participants were then randomly assigned to either express, in writing, their feelings towards the White woman in the article, or write an objective, unbiased, synopsis of the article. Finally, participants then saw our donation choice assessment where they purportedly had the opportunity to donate all, none, or some of their participation earnings to the NAACP.

As predicted, among low justice sensitive participants, guilt elicited by reminders of White privilege fueled increased anger at another individuals' racist actions as well as an increased willingness to donate. When participants got the opportunity to express their outrage at someone else's racism they donated less money to the NAACP. Although the White privilege induction elicited guilt, outrage, and a greater tendency to donate to NAACP, the opportunity to express outrage another person's racism wiped out this donation effect. We found that this pattern of effects only occurred for participants who had low justice sensitivity. Those high in justice sensitivity showed high levels of outrage and a high willingness to donate regardless of whether they were made to think about White privilege or had the opportunity to express their anger at the bigoted woman. Among some people, specifically those who are not already committed to justice, guilt leads to outrage against others, and if those people are given the opportunity to express their outrage then they stick with this slacktivism; however, if those people are not given this opportunity to express their outrage then they are more likely to donate and perform genuine activism.

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