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COM 432- Final Project

Slacktivism and the 2020 Elections

Key terms: Instagram- Twitter- Slacktivism- Performative activism- 2020 election- Age/race groups- U&G Theory- Imagined Audience

## **Introduction**

Slacktivism has been an issue presented to activists since social media became such a mainstream form of information, and it was no different during the 2020 election. Throughout the year, there were many human rights issues that gained much attention and it seemed as though many people on social media were actively taking action and becoming activists for these issues. However, with all the misinformation being spread on social media, and as it was apparent with the statistics of the elections, many of those people who posted those black squares on Instagram, or the videos speaking out against the human rights issues on Twitter, just took part in the slacktivism to save face on their social media accounts.

Looking at both sides of the election, slacktivism and the spread of misinformation widely determined many people's decisions for who they would vote for. However, with the act of slacktivism being present, it was easy for people to seem they would vote one way when, looking at statistics from the election, in fact they voted the opposite way. Social media may take an effect, not just on how people behave in general, but on the decisions people make on and off their social media accounts, however, slacktivism makes zero change on issues or people's behavior and decisions.

## **Slacktivism Explained**

First of all, the term "slacktivism" needs to be defined, as that is what a big portion of this paper is going to be talking about. To easily put it, "slacktivism describes the idea that online activities substitutes for offline action and therefore may lead to little change on the existing power structures," (Kanekoa, 2020 9.2 slide 6). In other words, when one thinks about the word "activism" usually one will think about change being made, both in the general world but also in the lives of an individual. One may even think of a specific person, such as Audrey Hepburn who helped out tirelessly to UNICEF and dedicated her life as a humanitarian, creating change for so many. However, the word "slacktivism," although having the word "activism" in there, is nowhere near the same term. When someone participates in slacktivism, no change is really being made, in the general public or personally. Slacktivism is when someone sticks to online media only for this performative activism. There could be different reasons one does take part in slacktivism, for example, wanting to save face on their socials with their audience so as not to lose any of their support or someone could genuinely believe what they are doing is making a huge difference and not even realize they are just doing performative activism.

Although there are reasons to believe that slacktivism is actually more good than bad, for example it creates more buzz and awareness toward the social issue, the arguments for this don't really add up. According to an article from the University of British Columbia, "when consumers gave public support, they were no more likely to provide more meaningful support for the cause than if someone was just randomly asked for the larger request," (Kristofferson, White, Peloza, 2014). To put this conclusion from the University of British Columbia study into different words, depending on whether or not one creates public (social media posts) or private (petitions, donations, volunteering, etc.) responses to the issue they are advocating for or against determines how effective a change the person will make. This is because if someone posts or reposts

something onto their social media, they may think, “Alright, I have done my job. Time to move on,” when in reality little to no difference was made in that action that person or those people contributed to.

Being able to recognize when oneself or someone else is contributing in slacktivism is important in order to know when it needs to stop or when a change in the way one is participating in “activism” needs to be done. So, providing some examples of social or human rights issues that garnered many slacktivists and the effects, or rather the little to zero effects, it had will be provided next. In an article talking about whether or not slacktivism is an effective form of activism or not, it is stated how according to a study done at Michigan University, “[the act of slacktivism] normally only reaches to other low-cost, low-risk solutions like signing an online petition but not contributing any money,” or in other words, slacktivism may mean one is trying to do something to fight, but in the end nothing is really being done, there is no risk being involved just doing what one thinks others want to see (Muslic, 2017). Back in 2003 in Sudan the government began attacking non-Arab civilians in a region called Darfur, causing a mass genocide of civilians. It was not until about 2006 to 2010 an online “activist community” was formed. Within this time, according to the Columbia Journalism Review, these “activists” sent thousands of emails to the then President Bush to send peacekeepers to the area and gained about one-hundred thousand US dollars (Sniderman, 2011). However, for one, the emails did not have much effect because there were so many that the staff at the white house could not keep up with them and in turn the emails began becoming blocked. Second, that one-hundred thousand dollars that was gained was after almost 3 years and only “came from less than one percent of the 1.2 million Save Darfur Members,” (Bower, 2014 p.23). So, while there were all of these people claiming to be activists and saying they were fighting to make a change on their social media accounts, more than 99 percent of them could not even be bothered to donate a single penny to enact real change.

### **Slacktivism, the U&G Theory, and the Imagined Audience Theory**

The Uses and Gratification Theory, the U&G Theory for short, is how the use of something returns with a gratification, or how certain affordances are being used to receive gratification. It may be used to explain the usage of users by seeing how different affordances are being used by the users in different environments (Kanekoa, 2020 2.1 slide 7). The Imagined Audience Theory is an audience one makes up in their head. To expand on this, when someone is choosing to post something on Instagram, for example, they don’t necessarily just post what they want to post, but they think in their head that what they are going to post is what their “audience” wants to see. The Imagined Audience is there due to the fact through social media usage, we do not have that face to face interaction of a real audience, which makes it easier for people to share things across the Web to that large audience we have made up in our head. As for what slacktivism is, that has already been explained in great detail. All three of these theories, however, go together. It was stated earlier how one participates in slacktivism by sticking to social media to do some type of performative activism, and that they will post things that they think their audience wants to be seen posted. This is where the imagined audience comes in. With the imagined audience we, as humans, think we know what the people who are following us want us to post, so we will keep up with that. From doing that, in turn we receive likes, follows, retweets, reposts, etc., which in turn from that we will get a sense of belonging, as if we are fitting in, and for some even a pure sense of joy, almost like some type of high. Here is where the Uses and Gratification Theory comes into play. The specific social media platform is being used, the right type of posts are being created and shared, other people like it, the original

consumer posting these posts is receiving their gratification. The issue with this is then all that is going to be used are the same tactics and affordances that made the person who posted those posts receive that gratification. This is how slacktivism then begins at hand. It is thought of by the person that their audience wants to see that they are doing something about an issue, whatever it may be, and in order for them to get the likes they need to get that sense of gratification again, they will post or say whatever to receive it. For example, if there was a big human rights issue, no matter where it was going on, and this person sees there are others posting about it to bring awareness, they too will do the same thing. They, the person needing their sense of gratification, will repost all of the posts, use any of the hashtags that are becoming big, make their posts and videos about it, etc., and claim they are just doing their part to spread awareness as an activist. However, while that person may be spreading the information to people who may not know about it, that individual person is not making any changes in their personal life or doing anything outside of their social media posts to actually help the cause, all that has been done is saving face on their socials and receiving that gratification by giving their imagined audience what that person thinks the audience wants to see. Putting all of this together, is how someone partakes in the performative activism, called slacktivism, and how the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Imagined Audience Theory combine together to turn someone into someone to be known as a slacktivist.

### **Social Media and Decision Making**

Slacktivism is not just brought on by the Uses and Gratification Theory and the Imagined Audience Theory, social media, such as Instagram and Twitter, have an enormous effect on whether or not a person will partake in slacktivism as well. Now, that may seem obvious considering slacktivism is done through social media, but this point is not about the obvious, point-blank statement. Social media is an incredibly persuasive place if someone is not well informed enough about something because there are so many things being said about the same topic that people always seem to believe is true. It has also become a rather convenient place for many people. In today's day and age, more than ever, people are constantly getting more and more attention on their socials which in turn brings them revenue, and with a large following, or audience, there will be people who will believe anything that person has to say, even without evidence to back them up. While there have been some studies done on how social media affects one's behaviors, the focus here is how when someone participates in slacktivism on their social media, it has little to no effect on their behavior or decisions made outside of social media.

First, an example of a social and human rights issue that gained immense participation in this past year, the Black Lives Matter Movement. This movement gained a lot of traction back in May 2020 even though it has been happening for a while now, but has had different names in the past. There were posts upon posts being created, shared, and re-shared through any social media out there. There were also many protests that happened, and are still happening around the country today. Even though there were people out on the streets truly fighting for a cause they, there were many people not even doing the bare minimum, they were being slacktivists. The slacktivists were only posting that black square that was all over Instagram, retweeting tweets on Twitter giving information about everything that was going on, or reposting Instagram posts that were being made and tagging the hashtags, etc. By just looking at the overall face value of this, it seems as if there is no issue with that, people are spreading word about the movement. Which, there is no issue with that, it's the slacktivism that comes in to play where the issue begins. Social media makes it easy for this to happen, it even makes it almost persuasive to take part in because, as mentioned before, if someone is posting all of these things they will get rewarded

with the gratification of likes and follows. However, there is no effect that is able to come out of all of it because on Instagram someone may be posting all of these posts, but the decisions and ways they live in their personal lives is not changed, meaning what many people are trying to fight for will not change.

Now, in the year 2020 there were many events that took place, but one of the most notable would be the presidential election between Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden. Going strictly based off of the amount of people, and who, had shared anything about the Black Lives Matter movement as well as some other movements that were gaining a lot of attention, the winner should have been announced by a landslide. However, that was nowhere near the case of what happened. There were many people who posted about the movement, but in the end turned against that movement and voted for Trump, such as Thomas Bosco, the owner of a cafe in upper Manhattan, New York City. Bosco placed signs for the movement all around his cafe, but according to an article in *The New York Times*, in an open letter he wrote he supports and loves his community, “but at the end of the day, I support [Trump]...” Mr. Bosco then said he voted for Mr. Trump in 2016 and planned to do so again,” (Paybarah, 2020). Unfortunately, Basco was not the only case like this, many people who provided “support,” or better phrased as slacktivism, for the movement went against what it stands for and voted for Donald Trump. When demographics are taken into account, it’s shown how the majority of white people, including those who said they support the Black Live Matters movement, still voted for Trump. An article posted by *The Guardian* shared statistics that show how “Trump was estimated to have won about 57% of white votes... and that African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans voted strongly for Biden” which of course includes those who did not show any support towards the movement, but also includes those who did. The slacktivism that was done by these people made no change, no impact in fighting for what the movement was because there was no effect on the way these people behaved outside of social media or the decisions they made, especially when it came to the 2020 presidential election.

### **Conclusion**

While slacktivism does bring some awareness to a cause, there is not much it does for any movement. No change comes out of it unless the person, or people, posting about it makes changes for themselves. People can make as many posts as they want, but if they stop as the hashtags die down or the mainstream media stops reporting on it, their lives are not changed, the issues that are being fought for are not changed, and their decisions and behaviors remain the same.

In conclusion, partaking in performative activism such as slacktivism, does little to nothing for anyone involved and even not involved unless the actions being stated are actually taken seriously and not just posted for one’s perceived audience to see. Without the imagined audience or the U&G Theory, slacktivism would be far less and more change would be made because people would not have the need to post what they think has to be posted in order to receive the gratification of likes and reposts.

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## Outline

**Introduction (no more than 1-2 paragraph):** What is slacktivism and how has social media increased participation in such. (Use Kanekoa, 2020 definition 9.2 slide 6) [*slacktivism describes the idea that online activities substitutes for offline action and therefore may lead to little change on the existing power structures*]

Why does it matter (2020 election)... both sides

## Body

What is slacktivism, what are some examples from the past

How slacktivism is achieved through the U&G Theory... how this ties into the Imagined

Audience Theory

How Instagram and Twitter can persuade users to into slacktivism. Also how it affects, or rather may not affect their behavior/decisions offline (such as the 2020 elections)

## Conclusion

The issues of slacktivism, the detrimental effect it (and social media as a whole) can have on society

Recap