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# The Nature of Slacktivism: How the Social Observability of an Initial Act of Token Support Affects Subsequent Prosocial Action

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Prior research offers competing predictions regarding whether an initial token display of support for a cause (such as wearing a ribbon, signing a petition, or joining a Facebook group) subsequently leads to increased and otherwise more meaningful contributions to the cause. The present research proposes a conceptual framework elucidating two primary motivations that underlie subsequent helping behavior: a desire to present a positive image to others and a desire to be consistent with one's own values. Importantly, the socially observable nature (public vs. private) of initial token support is identified as a key moderator that influences when and why token support does or does not lead to meaningful support for the cause. Consumers exhibit greater helping on a subsequent, more meaningful task after providing an initial private (vs. public) display of token support for a cause. Finally, the authors demonstrate how value alignment and connection to the cause moderate the observed effects.

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Look, if you make a Facebook page we will "like" it—it's the least we can do. But it's also the most we can do. (Seth Meyers, *Weekend Update*, *Saturday Night Live*, September 22, 2012)

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Although intended as a satirical commentary, the above quote highlights what many assume is a prevalent behavior among consumers: slacktivism. We define slacktivism as a willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change (Davis 2011; Morozov 2009a). A variety of factors, including the dramatic increase in social media presence among charitable organizations and advocacy groups, has made it increasingly easy for consumers to engage in small token acts of support for causes. However, one predominant criticism that has emerged is that this increased online presence has done little more than create a generation of "slacktivists" who will engage in token displays of support for a cause but are not likely to subsequently engage in more meaningful contributions to the cause (Morozov 2009b). The current research examines the conditions under which such "slacktivist" behavior occurs and proposes that the social observability of the initial act of token support can play an important moderating role.

Consumers have multiple avenues open to them to engage in small token forms of support for an issue or cause. This can include signing a petition, wearing a bracelet or pin in

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support of a cause, or engaging in various forms of online support such as liking or joining a page on Facebook. We refer to these types of behaviors as *token support* because they allow consumers to affiliate with a cause in ways that show their support to themselves or others, with little associated effort or cost. We contrast token support with *meaningful support*, which we define as consumer contributions that require a significant cost, effort, or behavior change in ways that make *tangible contributions* to the cause. Examples of meaningful support include donating money and volunteering time and skills.

Anecdotally, marketing practitioners and social media pundits offer conflicting views of how token consumer support affects subsequent meaningful support. On the one hand, critics suggest that participating in token acts of support may not necessarily lead to a higher likelihood of engaging in more substantial support for the cause in the future (Morozov 2009a). On the other hand, some observers laud these token endorsements as a positive stepping stone toward more meaningful forms of social engagement in the future (Center for Social Impact Communication 2011; Fox 2012). Charitable organizations also appear divided on the issue. The vast number of token-support campaigns created to engage consumers suggests that the causes that employ them believe that they are successful. However, other organizations have advocated against such token displays of support in an attempt to curb slacktivist behavior. For example, UNICEF Sweden launched its “Likes Don’t Save Lives” campaign, which communicates to consumers that meaningful financial contributions, rather than mere token displays of support for the cause, are required to protect children in developing nations against disease (UNICEF Sweden 2013).

The current research explores the conditions under which an initial token act of support for a social cause increases subsequent meaningful contributions. We make the novel prediction that when the initial act of token support is high in social observability (i.e., it is public), people will be less likely to engage in subsequent meaningful contributions to the cause than when the initial act of token support is low in social observability (i.e., it is private). Our conceptual framework proposes that when the initial support situation is high in social observability, impression-management motives become activated (e.g., Leary and Kowalsky 1990). Consumers can satisfy these impression-management needs by engaging in a publicly observable token act of support for a positively viewed, prosocial cause. As a result of these impression-management motives already being satisfied, consumers will not be particularly motivated to contribute to the cause when a subsequent request for more meaningful support is made. Conversely, we propose that when token support is low in observability, consumers will be focused on the private (vs. public) self. Under private conditions, the desire to maintain consistency with one’s own values and behaviors will be most relevant for consumers when deciding to provide subsequent help for the cause (Bem 1972; Festinger 1957). Thus, after engaging in a private (vs. public) initial act of support for a cause, consumers are

predicted to be more likely to act consistently with their previous behavior and therefore be more inclined to help in response to a subsequent request.

The current research makes several notable contributions to the literature. First, we provide an initial empirical investigation of the conditions under which slacktivism will emerge—a topic primarily debated by the mass media. We outline the motives underlying a person’s likelihood to help after engaging in an initial token display of support, and we identify social observability as a key factor that determines when slacktivism may occur. In particular, we show that when an initial act of token support is made in a setting that is high in social observability, consumers will be less likely to help in response to a more meaningful follow-up request than when the initial act of token support is made in a setting that is low in social observability (studies 1–3). In doing so, we build on a body of work suggesting that people do tend to follow through with a second request after committing to a smaller act of support (e.g., Freedman and Fraser 1966). We also add to past work that examined moderators of this basic effect—the costliness of the initial behavior (Bénabou and Tirole 2004; Gneezy et al. 2011), the salience or importance of the initial behavior, and the degree of similarity between the first and second requests (Burger 1999)—by showing that social observability of the initial token act of support is an important moderator of these effects.

Second, we integrate theoretical perspectives from both impression-management and self-consistency theories to outline a conceptual framework highlighting the mechanisms behind our effects. We demonstrate that when the context of token support is highly observable to others, impression-management motives become active. Under such public conditions, the show of token support satisfies these motives, reducing the desire to engage in subsequent support (study 3). Moreover, we show that providing token support in less observable contexts activates consistency motives (study 3) and increases perceived value alignment between self and cause (study 4 follow-up), subsequently leading to a greater willingness to provide meaningful support.

Third, we highlight the conditions under which consumers who make an initial display of public token support for a cause can be impelled to help on a subsequent task (study 4), thus mitigating the effects of slacktivism. In particular, we find that when consumers who have made an initial display of public support are able to focus on the alignment of values between the self and the cause (vs. those who do not), they are subsequently more likely to contribute to the cause in more meaningful ways. This finding is of theoretical importance, showing the conditions under which the motive to be consistent with one’s own values and behaviors can override impression-management concerns. This result also makes a substantive contribution for those tasked with building consumer support for social causes, showing how marketing practitioners can minimize slacktivist tendencies.

Finally, we identify a boundary condition for the observed effects—connection to the cause—and find that for individuals who have a high level of affective involvement with

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the cause, displaying public token support can lead to higher subsequent support than when the token support is made in private (study 5). Thus, we find that token-support programs can be effective, but primarily among those who are highly connected to the cause or organization. We next turn to a review of the literature and outline our conceptual framework.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### The Consequences of Engaging in Token Support for a Cause

Both marketing practice and empirical research generate competing predictions for how an initial act of token support for a cause has an impact on more meaningful subsequent forms of support. One perspective is supported by anecdotal evidence from media commentary reporting that consumers commonly behave in a “slacktivist” fashion by committing only to small, token acts of support, but not subsequently engaging in more meaningful forms of helping behaviors. This perspective is supported by empirical work on moral licensing (Khan and Dhar 2006). Moral licensing occurs when prior prosocial behavior gives people “license” to subsequently engage in less moral or helpful actions (Khan and Dhar 2006, 2007; Mazar and Zhong 2011; Monin and Miller 2001). In the consumer setting, for example, Khan and Dhar (2006) found that after consumers imagined engaging in community-service activities, they were more likely to choose luxury over necessity products and less likely to donate part or all of their participation payment to charity. The literature on moral licensing would predict that engaging in an initial act of token support for a cause will lead to a decreased propensity to make future meaningful contributions to the cause. Recent consumer research on prosocial behavior also supports this prediction. In an investigation of cause marketing programs, Krishna (2011) found that consumers donated less to a charity after purchasing a cause-marketing product (vs. the same product without donation).

An alternative perspective is supported by work on self-consistency, which predicts that once individuals have engaged in a particular behavior, they will be more likely to engage in congruent behaviors in the future (Aronson 1968; Bem 1972; Festinger 1957; Heider 1958). This is because consumers are motivated to maintain consistency between their past and future actions. For example, research on the foot-in-the-door (FITD) effect demonstrates that individuals are significantly more likely to comply with a large request after they have first agreed to a smaller request. In a classic investigation, Freedman and Fraser (1966) contacted housewives with a small initial request to answer a few questions regarding household cleaners. Three days later, researchers contacted the same housewives again, as well as others in a control condition who had not received the earlier request. This time, a larger request of a thorough search of their homes to catalogue household products was made. Women who initially agreed to the smaller request were significantly

more likely to agree to the larger request than women who had not initially received the small request.

The FITD effect appears to be fairly robust (Burger 1999) and has been replicated using various manipulations of initial (subsequent) requests such as accepting small (displaying large) campaign signs (Seligman, Bush, and Kirsh 1976), completing short (long) surveys (Wang, Brownstein, and Katzev 1989), and agreeing to a short (long) meeting request (Harari, Mohr, and Hosey 1980). Taken together, work on FITD effects, and self-consistency more generally, leads to the prediction that engaging in an initial act of token support for a cause will lead to an increased propensity to make future meaningful contributions to the cause. It is also noteworthy that many charitable organizations and advocacy groups appear to subscribe to the view that gaining initial token support from consumers leads to meaningful contributions to the cause. One investigation surveyed 53 advocacy groups in the United States and found a prevalent belief that the use of social media strengthens outreach efforts by finding and empowering new members toward furthering the missions of the respective causes (Obar, Zube, and Lampe 2012).

### The Moderating Role of Social Observability: The Public versus Private Nature of Support

The extant literature then leads to competing predictions regarding the downstream consequences of providing token support for a cause. We propose a framework to reconcile these competing predictions and to outline when an initial display of support for a cause does or does not increase consumer willingness to engage in more meaningful subsequent contributions to the cause. In particular, our framework suggests that the consequence of engaging in an initial act of token support for a cause depends on the socially observable nature of the initial token behavior.

We make the novel prediction that providing token support will not subsequently lead to more meaningful support for a cause under conditions that activate impression-management motives. Impression management refers to the tendency for individuals to be motivated by a desire to present themselves in a positive light to others (Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Schlenker 1980). Previous research has shown that impression-management motives prompt consumers to strategically alter their behaviors to present themselves positively (Ashworth, Darke, and Schaller 2005; Sengupta, Dahl, and Gorn 2005; White and Dahl 2006, 2007). For example, sociology research shows that, in online contexts, people may use token displays rather than explicit statements of views to construct and communicate positive identities to others (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). We first test for the role of impression-management concerns by varying the observability of the initial request. Following past research, impression-management concerns should become activated in more publicly observable settings (e.g., Ratner and Kahn 2002; White and Pelozo 2009). Under public conditions, engaging in an act of token

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support for a cause satisfies these impression-management concerns because the act of support has been viewed by others. As a result, we anticipate that consumers who make an initial act of token support in public will be no more likely to provide meaningful support than those who engaged in no initial act of support.

Conversely, we propose that when the initial act of token support for a cause is done in private, this will lead to consistency effects, wherein consumers will be more inclined to subsequently make meaningful contributions to the cause. We propose that this result is driven by a process of self-perception and consistency motivation. In particular, when behaviors are not socially observable (i.e., private), the consumer is more likely to be focused on the private self (White and Peloza 2009), responses are less prone to social influence, and attitudes are more likely to be derived from individual values and reasoning (Lamberton, Naylor, and Haws 2013; Simonson and Nowlis 2000). We believe that when social observability is low, this focus on the self makes one's own values and behaviors salient, leading to the inference that one's values are in line with previous actions. We make this prediction by drawing upon self-perception theory, which states that individuals infer their attitudes toward an object by observing their behavior toward it (Bem 1972). In our context, choosing to provide token support for a cause in a relatively private setting will lead individuals to infer that their attitudes and values must be in line with those of the cause when presented with a meaningful support request (i.e., "I supported this cause before; therefore I must agree with the values the cause stands for"). This focus on the private self will also motivate consumers to be consistent with these values. This is because when people are focused on the private self (vs. the public self), their internally held attitudes and beliefs become salient, and inconsistencies among these beliefs become aversive (Gibbons 1990; Goukens, Dewitte, and Warlop 2009). In other words, engaging in a token display of support in a private setting activates both a sense that one's values align with the organization's values and a motivation to behave in a consistent manner, namely by subsequently providing meaningful support to the cause in the future. As such, we anticipate that consumers will be more likely to provide meaningful subsequent support for a cause after an initial act of token support when social observability is low as opposed to high. Formally:

**H1:** Consumers who engage in an initial act of token support for a cause in private will demonstrate increased willingness to provide more meaningful subsequent support than consumers who provide initial public token support, or no initial token support (both of which will not differ from each other).

In addition, we test for our proposed underlying mechanisms. When token support is given in public (vs. private), we propose that impression-management motives are satisfied, leading to lower meaningful support for the cause.

Moreover, we suggest that after providing an initial act of support for the cause in private (vs. public), consumers will show increased consistency motives, leading to higher meaningful contributions to the cause. Formally:

**H2a:** Providing public initial token support for a cause satisfies impression-management motives, leading to a lower likelihood of engaging in subsequent support than when the initial token support is private.

**H2b:** Providing private initial token support for a cause leads to increased consistency motives, leading to a higher likelihood of engaging in subsequent support than when the initial token support is public.

We test our proposed framework in five studies. In a field setting, study 1 provides a preliminary test of hypothesis 1, such that an initial show of token support leads to greater helping in response to a subsequent, more substantial request when the initial act of support is private as opposed to public (or no support). Study 2 replicates this effect in a controlled environment using the physical signing of a petition as token support. In study 3, we replicate the previous findings and provide additional evidence that impression management and desire for consistency underlie the effects. Using the context of joining a Facebook group, study 4 employs a manipulation of value alignment between supporter and cause to demonstrate the conditions under which a public display of initial token support for the cause can lead to increased helping on a subsequent, more meaningful task. A final field study examines an additional moderator of the effects—connection to the cause.

## STUDY 1

We sought to provide a preliminary test of our predictions in a field study. This study was conducted at the University of British Columbia between the hours of 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. on the last business day before Remembrance Day. On November 11, Commonwealth countries recognize Remembrance Day to honor veterans who died in World War I. Wearing a poppy pin has come to symbolize support for veterans on Remembrance Day. We chose to test hypothesis 1 by offering a free poppy to individuals in a manner that would serve as either public or private token support for the cause. We compared three groups: one that publicly displayed their initial token support, one that privately engaged in initial token support, and one that was not requested to provide initial support. We then asked participants to engage in the more substantial act of donating money to the cause. We anticipated that individuals who accept a poppy privately will donate more than both individuals accepting and publicly displaying a poppy, and individuals not presented with the initial request, with no differences between the latter two conditions (hypothesis 1).

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## Procedure

Ninety-two individuals (estimated age 19–65, mean age 25.5, 51% female) not wearing a poppy were intercepted by a research assistant as they entered the student union building and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Private Token Support, Public Token Support, and No Token Support. In the two token-support conditions, participants were asked if they would accept a poppy to show their support for Remembrance Day. According to previous FITD research (Burger 1999; Freedman and Fraser 1966), it is imperative for participants to choose to agree to the initial request and not feel pressured or forced into compliance.

In the public token-support condition, participants were asked: “Good morning/afternoon. Would you accept a free poppy to wear right now to show your support for veterans and Remembrance Day?” Upon acceptance of this request, the research assistant ensured that the poppy was placed and visibly displayed on the participant’s coat or shirt. In the private token-support condition, the research assistant said: “Good morning/afternoon. Would you accept a free poppy to take with you to show your support for veterans and Remembrance Day?” Upon acceptance of this request, the research assistant gave the participant a small envelope containing a poppy to privately take with them.

After receiving the poppy, participants had to walk down a narrow concourse in order to enter the main cafeteria and shops. We positioned another research assistant at the end of this concourse who then made a second, more substantial request of participants. Specifically, this research assistant requested monetary donations on behalf of Canada’s war veterans, greeting each participant with the following line: “Good morning/afternoon. Would you like to make a donation to support Canada’s veterans?” If the participant chose to donate, he/she placed the donation in a small envelope in a larger donation bin. We selected this procedure to keep the actual donation amount relatively private and to track donation amounts.

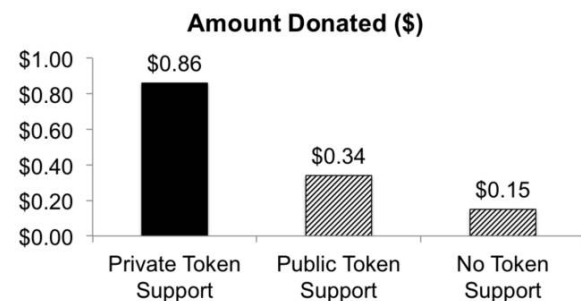
In the no token-support condition, individuals were approached using the same criterion as the experimental conditions (i.e., not wearing a poppy) and received the second request only. Finally, we covertly positioned a third research assistant between the two request locations to note the gender and approximate age of participants, and to subtly signal the second assistant which individuals to solicit with the subsequent request. Given that our investigation is interested in the subsequent behaviors of those who have freely chosen to engage in the initial act of token support, we note that we did not make the follow-up request to two participants who did not initially accept the poppy.

## Results

A one-way ANOVA with amount donated as the dependent variable was significant ( $F(2, 87) = 3.62, p < .05$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that, as predicted in hypothesis 1, participants in the private token-support condition donated

FIGURE 1

AVERAGE AMOUNT DONATED IN RESPONSE TO A SECOND REQUEST FOR MEANINGFUL SUPPORT (STUDY 1)



significantly more money than did participants in both the public token-support ( $M_{\text{private support}} = .86, SD = .50$  vs.  $M_{\text{public support}} = .34, SD = .38; t(87) = 1.96, p = .05$ ) and no-support conditions ( $M_{\text{private support}} = .86$  vs.  $M_{\text{no support}} = .15; SD = .36; t(87) = 2.65, p < .01$ ), with these latter two conditions showing no difference from each other ( $M_{\text{public support}} = .34$  vs.  $M_{\text{no support}} = .15; t(87) = .81, p > .40, NS$ ; see fig. 1). Similar results and significance levels emerge if the percentage of participants agreeing to the donation request is used as the dependent variable,  $P_{\text{private}} = 45.0\%$  (9/22),  $P_{\text{public}} = 30.0\%$  (6/35),  $P_{\text{no support}} = 25.0\%$  (5/33).

## Discussion

In a real-world field study with a diverse age sample, we provide preliminary support for our hypothesis that the nature of an initial act of token prosocial support (i.e., public vs. private) moderates the degree to which consumers will subsequently contribute to the cause. Specifically, individuals who perform a private initial act of token support for a cause donate more money to the cause when subsequently asked to do so than do those who engage in public-token support or those who engage in no-token support. Individuals providing public-token support for a cause were no more likely to provide meaningful support than were those who did not engage in an initial token act of support. Interestingly, neither FITD nor moral-licensing frameworks predict differences in donation behavior between public and private token-support conditions. Specifically, a FITD framework would predict that after agreeing to the small request, individuals in both public and private support conditions would donate significantly more to the cause than individuals in the control condition, regardless of the public nature of support. Moreover, a moral-licensing framework would predict that after agreeing to the small request, individuals in both support conditions would donate less than those in the control condition. The results of study 1 support our proposition that the socially observable nature of token support is a key moderator of when initial support leads to meaningful support for the cause. As a final

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point of interest, in addition to the \$100 donation made to acquire the poppies used in this study, participant donations amounted to more than \$50, all of which was subsequently donated to the cause.

## STUDY 2

Study 2 had two primary goals. First, we wished to replicate the findings from the field study in a more controlled laboratory setting. Second, we aimed to increase generalizability of the findings by examining another common form of initial token support, and by increasing the length of time between initial and subsequent requests. Although previous research has shown that the FITD effect holds when the time between requests is short (Chartrand, Pinckert, and Burger 1999), replication with a longer period between requests would enhance the robustness of our findings.

*Pretest.* In order to determine the most appropriate charitable causes to use in this study, a pretest was conducted. Consistent with previous research, we ensured that participants felt as though they chose to support a specific cause (Burger 1999), and we sought to identify two different causes that were positively as well as similarly viewed among the population of interest. Thirty-two undergraduates were asked how likely they would be to donate to 18 different charitable causes on a scale of 1 (very unlikely) to 7 (very likely; e.g., White and Peloza 2009). We selected natural-disaster relief and developing-world poverty as our two causes because both were rated significantly above the scale midpoint ( $M_{\text{disaster relief}} = 5.66$ ;  $t(31) = 6.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{\text{poverty}} = 5.41$ ;  $t(31) = 4.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not significantly different from each other ( $t(31) = 1.09$ ,  $p > .28$ ).

*Main Study.* Ninety-three English-speaking undergraduates from the University of British Columbia participated in the study in exchange for course credit or \$10, and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (nature of the context: public, private)  $\times$  2 (initial token support: present, absent) between-participants experimental design. Participants completed the study at individual computer terminals in groups of 10–15 per session.

### Procedure

Upon arrival to the lab, participants were told that they would be evaluating the effectiveness of communications used by local charitable organizations. Given the results of the pretest, we created marketing materials to represent two charitable organizations ostensibly operating in the Vancouver area: “Combating Poverty in Developing Nations” and “International Disaster Support Relief.” Participants were told that both organizations were formed recently and were requesting feedback regarding their marketing materials. After reviewing the promotional materials for both charities, participants were presented with information to manipulate both token support and nature of the token-support context.

*Initial Token Support.* In the initial token-support conditions, participants were told that both organizations were lobbying the national government via a petition to increase funding for their causes, and that participants could choose to help by signing one of the two petitions (see appendix for specific descriptions). Which charity to support (and whether to support one) was the participant’s own decision. In the initial no-token-support conditions, participants were told that in order to ensure proper credit for participation, they should sign their name on one of the two attendance sheets.

*Nature of Context.* In the public conditions, participants walked to the front of the room and signed either one of the two organization petitions, or one of two attendance sheets. In the private conditions, participants were given a ballot to sign at their individual computer stations then were instructed to place their signed ballots in a box at the back of the room to either indicate their support for one of the two charitable petitions or to track attendance.

Participants then answered cover-story questions regarding the organization they chose to support. In the no-token-support conditions, participants were randomly assigned to evaluate one of the charities. In addition, participants answered the following manipulation check item on a scale of 1 (very private) to 7 (very public): “How public or private was the petition (attendance sign-in procedure) that you chose to sign?” In addition, participants completed a measure to assess the degree to which their own values were congruent with those of the cause (see study 4 for the specific items). After answering those questions, participants completed an unrelated study. At the end of the experimental session, participants were presented with the dependent variable: the larger request for support.

*Dependent Variable.* Approximately 45–60 minutes after agreeing to the initial request, participants were told that the charitable organization they chose to support through petition signing (or evaluated in the no-support conditions) was requesting support from university students to help launch a mail campaign. Specifically, help was required to stuff envelopes for this campaign. The amount of time participants were willing to volunteer (on a sliding scale of 0–150 minutes) served as our dependent variable.

### Results

*Manipulation Check.* The manipulation check revealed that our efforts to vary the social observability of context were successful. Participants perceived signing the petition/attendance sheet at the front of the room to be more relatively more public than placing the signed ballot in a box at the back of the room ( $M_{\text{public}} = 5.40$  vs.  $M_{\text{private}} = 4.07$ ;  $t(87) = 3.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We note that although the mean in the private condition is at the scale midpoint, our interest is in the relative difference in perceived observability of the initial act of token support across conditions.

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**Dependent Variable.** Four participants (1 public support, 2 private/no support, 1 public/no support) chose not to sign the petition or attendance sheet and were excluded from the analysis. In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA with the number of minutes volunteered as the dependent variable. The ANOVA revealed no effect of either initial token support ( $F(1, 85) = .63, p > .40$ ) or nature of context ( $F(1, 85) = .80, p > .35$ ) variables. However, the predicted interaction was marginally significant ( $F(1, 85) = 3.34, p = .07$ ). We note that when we included value alignment as a covariate it was significant ( $F(1, 84) = 13.4, p < .001$ ), and the interaction reached significance when including this covariate ( $F(1, 84) = 4.53, p < .05$ ). Planned contrasts revealed that, as anticipated, after an initial act of token support, participants were willing to volunteer significantly more time when the context was private as opposed to public ( $M_{\text{private support}} = 56.8, SD = 45.0$  vs.  $M_{\text{public support}} = 32.3, SD = 31.1$ ;  $F(1, 43) = 4.64, p < .05$ ). As would be predicted from our framework, no differences emerged in the support-absent conditions ( $M_{\text{private absent}} = 33.2, SD = 41.8$  vs.  $M_{\text{public absent}} = 41.6, SD = 50.9$ ;  $F(1, 42) = .36, p > .55, NS$ ; see fig. 2). As a final note, we also measured to ensure that differences in mood did not account for the observed effects. As expected, no main effects or interactions emerged when predicting mood in this or subsequent studies and will not be discussed further.

## Discussion

Study 2 replicated our field study findings in support of hypothesis 1 such that when participants engaged in an initial act of token support toward the cause, they volunteered significantly more time in response to a subsequent request when the action had been undertaken in private as opposed to public. When no initial act of token support was made, we did not observe differences in willingness to contribute time as a function of the nature of the context.

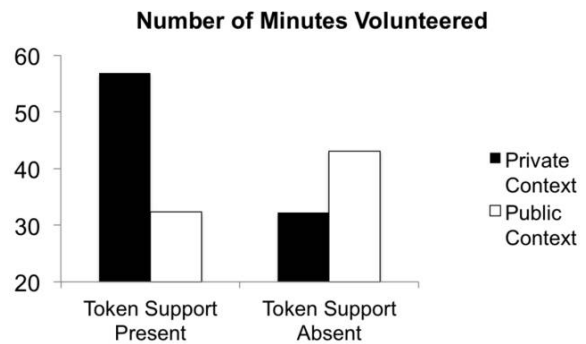
We note that although planned contrasts supported our theorizing, the interaction only reached marginal significance. Because we randomly assigned control participants to evaluate one of the charities (i.e., we did not let them choose a cause to support as in the other conditions), we believe it is appropriate to consider this analysis using perceived value alignment as a covariate. When included in the model the interaction reached significance, and contrast significance levels remained the same. Although we did not have the statistical power to conduct a moderation analysis, this organizational value alignment finding is very interesting, and we return to it in study 4.

## STUDY 3

Taken together, the results of studies 1 and 2 provide support for the notion that an initial act of public token support is no more effective than no initial act of support, and less effective than a private act of token support, in motivating meaningful contributions to a cause. In study 3, we sought to provide evidence for the proposed processes

FIGURE 2

NUMBER OF MINUTES VOLUNTEERED FOR SUBSEQUENT REQUEST (TO STUFF ENVELOPES) TO SUPPORT CHOSEN CHARITY (STUDY 2)



underlying the effects. Although the manipulation of the public versus private nature of the support context (as in studies 1 and 2) is often used to infer that impression-management concerns are operating (e.g., Leary and Kowalski 1990), in the current study we wished to generate additional evidence for our proposition that a decreased willingness to provide meaningful support might be driven by the resolution of impression-management concerns among those whose initial support was made in public (hypothesis 2a). We achieve this goal by employing a repeated-measures design and measuring impression-management motives before and after participants engaged in token support. If the logic underlying our conceptualization is accurate, and the act of engaging in a token display of support in public resolves impression-management motives, we should observe a decrease in impression-management motives between time one and time two for participants providing public but not private token support.

We also wished to provide direct evidence that engaging in private (vs. public) token support leads to an increased desire to be consistent with one's values and behaviors. As noted above, our conceptualization proposes that when the setting is private in nature, individuals will focus on the individual, private self. This focus on the private self will lead to (a) greater perceived value alignment between the self and the cause as well as (b) a desire to be consistent with those values. This is because when social observability is low, this focus on the individual self makes one's own values and behaviors salient (Gibbons 1990). The act of providing token support for the cause in private then leads to the inference that one's values are in line with previous actions (i.e., high value alignment; see, e.g., Bem 1972). In addition, people will become motivated to be consistent with these values because the focus on the private self makes internally held attitudes and beliefs salient, and inconsistencies among these beliefs become aversive (e.g., Gibbons

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1990; Goukens et al. 2009). This desire for consistency will lead to increased meaningful support when token support is given in private as opposed to public (hypothesis 2b). We test this prediction by measuring consistency motives after participants engage in token support, and we predict that participants will show higher consistency scores after providing private (vs. public) token support.

A third goal of study 3 was to employ a true control group. We wished to replicate the results of studies 1 and 2 while adhering more closely to previous FITD frameworks. One limitation of study 2 was that participants in the support-absent conditions were still exposed to the charitable organization materials, and as such, they did not represent a true control group. Although the results of study 2 support our predictions, traditional FITD control conditions present participants only with the larger request. We employ a separate control condition in study 3 that presents only the second, more meaningful request. Moreover, to eliminate any misperceptions of time valuation (i.e., when selecting from a sliding scale of minutes to volunteer), in this study participants responded to the meaningful support request with a “yes” or “no” response, which holds the time-donation amount constant.

## Procedure

One hundred thirty-two English-speaking undergraduates from the University of British Columbia (ages 18–56,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.7$ , 56.3% female) participated in this study in exchange for \$10 and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in a between-participants design: public token support, private token support, no support. Similar to study 2, participants arrived to the lab in groups of up to 15 people and were seated at individual computer terminals.

*Impression-Management Motives, Time 1.* We first sought to test our claim that providing public (vs. private) token support satisfies impression-management motives (hypothesis 2a). Before participants examined the marketing materials or engaged in an initial act of token support, they were directed to answer six questions regarding current impression-management motives on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale (e.g., “I care about how positively others view me,” “I want to present myself in a positive way”; White and Pelozo 2009).

*Token Support.* Participants then received the same charitable organization instructions, materials, and token-support manipulation used in study 2. As in study 2, the signing of the petition was their own choice. Evaluation of materials and signing of petitions took approximately 5–10 minutes.

*Impression-Management Motives, Time 2.* Upon providing token support, participants were instructed to answer a series of follow-up questions before continuing with the study. These questions included the same six impression-management items assessed at the beginning of the study.

*Consistency Motives.* We next sought to test the consistency component of our framework (hypothesis 2b). We operationalized consistency motives by measuring participant scores using a six-item index from the Preference for Consistency (PFC) scale in a range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree; Cialdini, Trost, and Newsom 1995; e.g., “It is important to me that others view me as a stable person”). Participants then completed an unrelated study for approximately 40 minutes before being presented with the dependent variable.

*Dependent Variable.* Participants were asked if they would be willing to help by stuffing envelopes for 60 minutes for an upcoming mail campaign. Responses were analyzed as a binary variable (not willing to volunteer = 0, willing to volunteer = 1).

*Control Condition.* Following the traditional FITD paradigm, participants in the control condition completed only the unrelated study and were randomly presented with the support request from one of the two charitable organizations at the end of the experimental session. They were not exposed to any of the charitable organization materials prior to receiving the meaningful request.

## Results

*Participants.* Two participants in the private token-support condition did not sign the petition, and six participants (4 public, 2 private) failed attention or open-ended dependent variable checks and were excluded from the analyses.

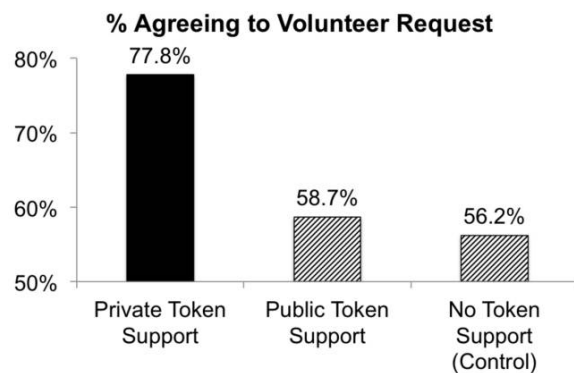
*Dependent Variable.* We first created two dummy variables using the private-support condition as the reference condition and entered both into a logistic regression to predict agreement with the follow-up request. Replicating studies 1 and 2 and supporting hypothesis 1, participants providing private token support were significantly more likely to provide meaningful support than were participants providing public token support ( $P_{\text{private}} = 77.8\%$  vs.  $P_{\text{public}} = 58.7\%$ ;  $b = -.90$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 3.72$ ,  $p = .05$ ) and participants receiving only the larger request ( $P_{\text{private}} = 77.8\%$  vs.  $P_{\text{control}} = 56.3\%$ ;  $b = -.00$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ), both of which did not differ from each other ( $p > .79$ ; see fig. 3).

*Impression-Management Motives.* In order to test our hypothesis that providing public token support satisfies impression-management motives, we contrast-coded token support and conducted a 2 (token support: public, private)  $\times$  2 (impression-management measurement: presupport, postsupport) mixed-model ANOVA with impression-management measurement as a within-subjects factor. The impression-management measures showed acceptable reliability ( $\alpha_{\text{pre}} = .74$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{post}} = .83$ ). Results revealed a marginal main effect of support type ( $M_{\text{private support}} = 5.73$ ,  $SD = .57$  vs.  $M_{\text{public support}} = 5.50$ ,  $SD = .83$ ;  $F(1, 89) = 2.83$ ,  $p < .10$ ), a marginal main effect of impression-management measurement ( $M_{\text{presupport}} = 5.66$ ,  $SD = .66$  vs.  $M_{\text{postsupport}} =$

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FIGURE 3

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS AGREEING TO  
SUBSEQUENT VOLUNTEER SUPPORT REQUEST (STUDY 3)



5.57,  $SD = .78$ ;  $F(1, 89) = 3.32$ ,  $p < .10$ ), and a significant interaction between support type and impression management ( $F(1, 89) = 5.74$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Participants showed a significant decrease in impression-management motives after providing public token support ( $M_{\text{presupport}} = 5.61$  vs.  $M_{\text{postsupport}} = 5.39$ ;  $F(1, 45) = 6.80$ ,  $p < .05$ ); however, participants showed no change in impression-management motives after providing private token support for a charitable organization ( $M_{\text{presupport}} = 5.72$  vs.  $M_{\text{postsupport}} = 5.75$ ;  $F(1, 44) = .24$ ,  $p > .60$ ). This result provides direct evidence for hypothesis 2a that engaging in public token support satisfies impression-management motives. To test whether satisfied impression-management motives led to a decrease in agreement with the follow-up request, we entered postsupport impression-management scores into a logistic regression to predict volunteering. As predicted, lower impression-management scores led to a marginal trend indicating lower agreement to volunteer ( $b = .51$ , Wald  $\chi(1) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .09$ ). We next tested the overall indirect effect following Preacher and Hayes (2007) bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 samples with replacement. As would be expected given the marginal result of impression-management scores on agreement with the volunteer request, the 95% CI included zero ( $b = -.14$ ,  $CI_{95} = -.49, .03$ ), indicating that impression management satisfaction did not significantly mediate the effect of social observability on lower agreement with the volunteer request. We return to this result in the discussion section.

**Consistency Motives.** The six consistency items showed acceptable reliability and were averaged to form a consistency index ( $\alpha = .78$ ). In line with our conceptual framework and supporting hypothesis 2b, participants exhibited higher consistency motives after engaging in private versus public token support ( $M_{\text{private support}} = 5.21$ ,  $SD = .84$  vs.  $M_{\text{public support}} = 4.79$ ,  $SD = .98$ ;  $F(1, 89) = 4.90$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

We next entered consistency scores into a logistic regression to predict agreement with the volunteer request. Consistent with our conceptual framework, higher consistency scores significantly predicted agreement to volunteer to stuff envelopes ( $b = .52$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Following Preacher and Hayes (2007) bootstrapping procedure, we tested the indirect effect of token support type on volunteering through consistency. The 95% CI did not include zero ( $b = -.22$ ,  $CI_{95} = -.66$  to  $-.01$ ). This result supports hypothesis 2b and suggests that providing an initial act of private token support leads to higher consistency motives, which, in turn, lead to higher subsequent support for the cause.

## Discussion

Replicating the results of studies 1 and 2, study 3 shows that providing private token support leads to more meaningful subsequent support than does providing public token support or no token support (hypothesis 1). Importantly, however, the results of study 3 also support the hypothesis that providing public (as opposed to private) token support for a cause leads to a resolution of impression-management motives, which, in turn, leads to a lower likelihood of agreeing to provide meaningful support for the cause (hypothesis 2a). Moreover, providing private (vs. public) token support leads to higher motivation to behave consistently, resulting in an increased willingness to provide more meaningful support in response to a subsequent request (hypothesis 2b).

Although the findings from study 3 support our conceptual model, one limitation should be noted. The resolution of impression-management motives only marginally predicted the agreement to the volunteer request, resulting in a nonsignificant indirect effect for impression management at conventional significance levels. One possibility is that this is due to the nature of impression management, along with the procedure employed in our study. In our study, impression-management motives were satisfied after participants engaged in public token support for a charitable organization; an act that presumably communicated a positive impression, as well as support for the cause, to others. However, later in the experimental session, participants were presented with consistency motivation measures. Although the dependent variable was not viewed by others (i.e., it did not objectively allow for impression management), for a small subset of individuals, completing the consistency task might have activated a desire to continue to impression manage in consistent ways by helping the cause when asked to do so on a subsequent request. Those who were particularly attuned to the social context in which the study was held (i.e., Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss 1975), for example, might have been motivated to impression manage in this way. This may have led to a slight dilution of the impression management effect on the dependent variable. We do note, however, that the pattern of results is supportive of our framework and that the confidence interval was close to reaching significance (i.e., the indirect effect is significant at the 10% level of significance,  $b = -.14$ ,  $CI_{90} = -.46, -.001$ ). We

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also note that our novel methodology of measuring impression-management motives both before and after participants engaged in token support provides strong support for our proposed process. Individuals who had the opportunity to provide token support in a public context reported lower impression-management motives at time 2 than did those who merely had the opportunity to give token support in a private context. This provides compelling evidence that engaging in public token support resolves the desire to impression-manage, as our conceptual framework suggests.

In order to further examine the role of impression management and provide strong support for hypothesis 2a, an additional study that took a different approach was conducted. Spencer, Zanna, and Fong (2005) argue that “when a psychological process is difficult to measure, but easy to manipulate, a moderation-of-process experimental design is most appropriate” (Spencer et al. 2005, 848). Following this logic, we manipulated the opportunity to impression manage by varying whether the cause requesting support was a positively viewed nonprofit or neutrally viewed for-profit organization. An impression-management view would predict that an initial act of providing token support for a cause will allow the consumer to present a positive self-image to others only if the organization being supported is viewed in a positive light, and not if it is viewed as being neutral. Undergraduates ( $n = 238$ ) took part in a 2 (nature of context: public, private)  $\times$  2 (type of organization: positive, neutral) between-participants experimental design in which participants provided either public or private token support for either positively viewed (causes from studies 2 and 3) or neutrally viewed (local automotive repair and financial planning) organizations, then received a volunteer request at the end of the session. A pretest providing descriptions of the organizations confirmed that support for the charitable causes provided significantly higher impression-management opportunities than did support for the for-profit organizations (e.g., “Others would view supporting this charity/firm in a positive light,” “I would view people that support this charity/firm in a positive light”; all positive vs. neutral contrast  $p < .001$ ). The results of the main study revealed that when an initial act of token support satisfied the need to impression-manage (i.e., the organization is positively viewed), consumers were less likely to help on a subsequent task when the token support was publicly observable (as opposed to private;  $p < .05$ ). However, when providing the act of token support did not offer any impression-management possibilities (i.e., the organization is viewed as being neutral), no differences in subsequent meaningful support emerged between public and private initial acts of support ( $p > .50$ ). These findings suggest that the observed differences between the public- and private-support conditions emerge in contexts where an initial act of token support allows for impression management to occur, but not in contexts where this initial act of token support does not allow for impression management.

To summarize, study 3 provides multiple lines of evidence regarding the role of impression management. First, it shows

that the social observability of the initial act of token support moderates the effect in predicted ways. Second, the employed repeated-measures design demonstrates that engaging in public token support satisfies impression-management motivation. Third, reduced impression-management motives marginally predict lower meaningful support. Finally, by manipulating the opportunity for impression management, the follow-up study shows that the decrease in meaningful support after providing public token support occurs only when the supported cause allows consumers to impression-manage.

## STUDY 4

Taken together, the previous studies show that an initial act of token support for a cause can either have no impact or create an increase in subsequent support for a cause, depending on the social observability of the initial support. Importantly, consumers have multiple avenues open to them to engage in very public forms of token support (e.g., wearing a physical symbol in support of a cause, putting a symbol on one’s car, liking or joining a group on Facebook), in ways that are relatively easy and costless. One question that arises, then, is whether a way exists to overcome the tendency to withhold more meaningful contributions to the cause following an initial act of public support.

As noted earlier, we propose that consumers engaging in private token support (vs. public) will be motivated to focus inward. This inward focus will subsequently lead them to perceive that the values of the cause are truly in line with their own values (e.g., Bem 1972), and this will result in a desire to be consistent with those values when subsequently asked to help the cause in a more meaningful way. In this study we manipulate the perceived value alignment between token supporter and cause. This methodology allows us to provide evidence that perceived value alignment between self and cause is the mechanism behind the tendency to be more likely to comply with a subsequent substantial request after an initial act of token support is made in private as opposed to public. We propose that if consumers who have made an initial public (vs. private) display of token support are asked to focus on how their own values align with those of the cause, the tendency to show decreased support upon a subsequent, more meaningful request for help can be reversed. Conversely, we propose that if consumers who have made an initial public (vs. private) display of token support are asked to focus on how their own values are misaligned with those of the cause, no increase in value alignment would be experienced because their token support would be viewable by others, thus replicating the results of studies 1–3. As such, we propose that whether or not the individual is focused on value alignment at the time of token support will moderate the relationship between social observability and meaningful subsequent support.

**H3:** Those who provide public token support while focusing on the alignment (misalignment) of values between self and cause will show an equiv-

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alent (lower) willingness to provide meaningful support compared to those who provide private token support.

In study 4, we extend the generalizability of our findings by investigating an additional medium as our initial act of token support: joining a Facebook group. The act of joining a group on Facebook allows us to examine if the observed effects emerge not only in public contexts where strangers will view the initial act of support (as in studies 1 and 2), but also in contexts where the initial act is made public to one's friends and acquaintances (Wilcox and Stephen 2013).

## Procedure

One hundred and one English-speaking undergraduates (ages 17–26,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.8$ , 58.7% female) from the University of British Columbia completed this study in exchange for course credit and were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (nature of context: public, private)  $\times$  2 (value alignment focus: values aligned, values misaligned) between-participants design.

Upon arrival to the lab, participants were told that two recently formed local charitable organizations were requesting feedback regarding the effectiveness of their online communication tools. Specifically, feedback was desired regarding their Facebook groups. The two charitable organizations were the same as those used in studies 2 and 3. We constructed two Facebook groups based on the written and graphical content previously used in studies 2 and 3.

After the introduction, participants were directed to log into their personal Facebook accounts to view the Facebook group pages of the two charitable organizations and to then choose to join one of the groups. The joining of the Facebook group served as our initial token support for the organization. We manipulated the public versus private nature of the task through Facebook group structure. In the public (private) condition, the groups were set up as "public" ("closed") groups. Joining this type of group appears (does not appear) on the public personal feed of each user. Moreover, any posts or messages sent out from the group appear (do not appear) on the public personal feed of each user. In addition, we included a public (private) statement within the mission statement. Participants in the public (private) condition read the following message in the mission statement section of the Facebook group description:

This Facebook Group is a public (private) group dedicated to our friends and supporters. Information posted here will (only) be viewable to you, and will (not) appear on your Facebook feed, so your actions here will (not) be viewed by your friends.

After joining one of the Facebook groups, participants were presented with the values manipulation. They were given a newspaper article ostensibly written by a local reporter about the recent activities undertaken by the organization that participants chose to support. The specific activities the article discussed were ambiguous in nature; that is, participants

could interpret them as positive or negative (e.g., lobbying the federal government for special status to join a fund, publicly protesting the appointment of a federal official who had been linked to fraud accusations with previous charities). After reading the article, participants in the values-aligned (misaligned) condition were given the following instructions:

Before you move on to the specific questions, please take 1–2 minutes and reflect on how this cause's values are similar to (different than) your values. Once you've thought about this, please describe in the space provided this value (mis)alignment in as much detail as possible.

Participants then completed the same cover-story questions, nature-of-context-manipulation check questions from previous studies, and the following value-alignment manipulation check questions on 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scales: "This cause reflects my values"; "My personal values are aligned with this organization's values"; and "I feel a personal connection to this cause." Then, participants moved on to an unrelated study for the rest of the session before being presented with our dependent variable at the end. Similar to previous studies, the subsequent request was programmed to be from the charitable organization whose group the participant chose to join at the beginning of the session.

*Dependent Variable.* We asked participants if they would be willing to help by stuffing envelopes for an upcoming mail campaign (0 = no, 1 = yes).

## Results

*Participants.* One participant was not able to join the Facebook group due to experimenter error (did not see join group request), and 25 participants chose not to join either Facebook group (NS across groups,  $p > .20$ ) and were excluded from this analysis. Therefore, the analysis is based on 74 cases.

*Manipulation Checks.* Participants in the public condition rated the context of the task as significantly more public than did participants in the private condition ( $M_{\text{public}} = 5.77$  vs.  $M_{\text{private}} = 4.23$ ;  $t(72) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, participants in the values-aligned condition viewed their values as more in line with the cause than did participants in the values-misaligned condition ( $M_{\text{values aligned}} = 5.37$  vs.  $M_{\text{values misaligned}} = 4.90$ ;  $t(72) = 2.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

*Dependent Variable.* In order to perform our analysis on agreement to the second request, we contrast-coded both nature of context (private =  $-1$ , public =  $+1$ ) and value alignment (values aligned =  $-1$ , values misaligned =  $+1$ ) independent variables. We entered nature of context, value alignment, and their interaction term into a logistic regression to predict agreement to provide subsequent support. Results revealed no effect of nature of context ( $b = -.23$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = .63$ ,  $p > .40$ ), but a significant main effect of value alignment ( $b = -.78$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 6.93$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants in the values-aligned condition were signifi-

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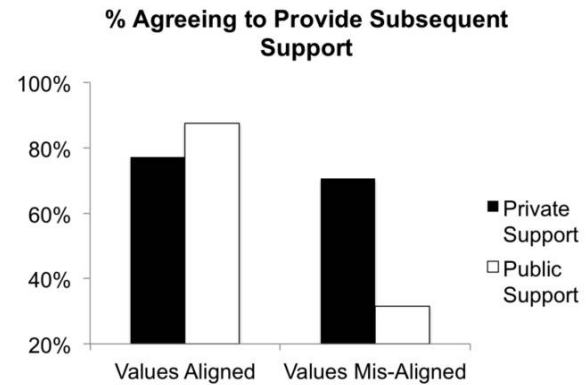
cantly more likely to agree to the subsequent request than were participants in the values-misaligned condition. Importantly, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction with the nature of the context ( $b = -.59$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 4.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). When participants thought about how their values were misaligned with those of the charitable organization, the previous effects were replicated. In particular, participants providing an initial act of public token support were significantly less likely to agree to the subsequent support request than were participants providing initial private token support ( $M_{\text{public}} = 31.6\%$  (6/19) vs.  $M_{\text{private}} = 70.6\%$  (12/17);  $\chi^2(1) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, when participants thought about how their values were aligned with those of the charitable organization, participants providing public support were equally as likely to agree to the follow-up request as those providing private initial support ( $M_{\text{private}} = 77.3\%$  (17/22) vs.  $M_{\text{public}} = 87.5\%$  (14/16);  $\chi^2(1) = .65$ ,  $p > .40$ , NS; see fig. 4).

## Discussion

The results of study 4 highlight how charitable organizations can use value alignment to combat slacktivism, turning initial acts of public token support into more meaningful subsequent support. We show that by focusing those who engage in an initial act of token support in public on the value alignment between self and cause, we can increase helping on a subsequent, more meaningful task. Indeed, when participants first thought about value alignment, those who made an initial public display of support became just as likely as private supporters to agree to a subsequent, more substantial contribution to the cause. Moreover, replicating the results of studies 1–3, participants who provided private token support but focused on the misalignment of values exhibited higher meaningful support for the cause did than participants providing public token support. One question that may arise, then, is why a focus on misalignment under private conditions did not lead to a decrease in subsequent support. One possibility is that this is due to individuals inferring that because they freely and privately chose to support the cause via an initial token act, their values are aligned with those of the cause, and they were more motivated to behave consistently with these values. In other words, the value alignment from freely choosing to support the cause in private appears to be more impactful than the misalignment manipulation.

By manipulating value alignment, we further support our proposed process of value alignment and consistency motives underlying the greater willingness to agree to subsequent support among private versus public token supporters. We conducted one additional follow-up study that conceptualized value alignment as a mediator through measurement. Using an online sample ( $n = 138$ ), online petitions as the token support medium, and poaching of the African tiger as the cause, participants were randomly assigned to public or private token-support conditions and told that the study was investigating the effectiveness of online communication tools used by charitable organizations. We con-

**FIGURE 4**  
PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS AGREEING TO SUBSEQUENT SUPPORT REQUEST (TO STUFF ENVELOPES FOR MAIL CAMPAIGN) AS A FUNCTION OF VALUE ALIGNMENT (STUDY 4)



structed two identical petition websites under the charitable organization name *Save Our Tigers*, which were used to manipulate the public (i.e., donor names would be publicly displayed) or private (i.e., names would be kept confidential) nature of the token support. After signing the petition and answering cover-story questions, participants completed the same value-alignment questions used in study 4. Participants were then presented with the dependent variable: willingness to donate their MTurk payment (0 = no, 1 = yes). Ratings of value alignment significantly mediated the effect of social observability on monetary donations, supporting our attitudinal consistency process claim (hypothesis 2b).

Study 4 also casts doubt upon a potential alternative explanation for our findings. It is possible that participants in previous studies perceived the cost of the token support task to be higher in public versus private. In this case, the reduced subsequent support in the public-support conditions could be due to the perception that one has already given enough to the cause through previous time and effort. Study 4 rules out this explanation because both initial support tasks were equivalent in both required time and effort (one mouse click).

## STUDY 5

Studies 1–4 provide a thorough test of our conceptual framework. The goal of study 5 is to examine one final boundary condition for the observed effects. In particular, we examine the role of connection to the cause as a moderator of the observed effects. We define connection to the cause as the level of affective involvement and identification an individual has with a social cause's mission and goal (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). This can be contrasted with the construct of value alignment, which we define as

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the cognitive perception of congruency between one's own values and an organization's values (see Posner [1992] for a similar conceptualization in the organizational domain). It is reasonable to propose that those highly connected to a cause are more likely to engage in public forms of token support, and that this might also spur more meaningful contributions to the cause. Research examining citizenship behaviors in organizations supports this proposition, showing that when both prosocial and impression-management motives are high, individuals are more willing to engage in costly organizational citizenship behaviors such as verbally disagreeing with the opinion of the group (Grant and Mayer 2009). Displaying public token support may in fact validate the affect of those who are highly connected to the cause and motivate these individuals to support further. Conversely, displaying private support could actually generate dissonance within these individuals because it limits their ability to communicate this important cause's need for support to others (Festinger 1957). Specifically, we predict that individuals highly connected to the cause will be more likely to agree to subsequent meaningful support after providing public (vs. private) token support; and for individuals less connected to the cause, we expect to replicate the results of earlier studies such that providing private (vs. public) token support will lead to higher consent to a subsequent request. Formally:

**H4a:** Consumers highly connected to a cause will show a higher willingness to provide meaningful subsequent support when the token support is public as opposed to private.

**H4b:** Consumers less connected to a cause will show a higher willingness to provide meaningful support when the token support is private as opposed to public.

We chose to test our hypotheses by conducting a second field study. Moreover, to extend the generalizability of our framework beyond charitable causes, we chose to investigate a cause that is a positively viewed for-profit organization: the local National Hockey League team, the Vancouver Canucks.

## Procedure

The field study was conducted on a busy sidewalk in downtown Vancouver in the early afternoon on two separate days. Eighty-eight individuals (estimated age 18–65,  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.9$ , 37.5% female) walking alone were intercepted by a research assistant and randomly assigned to one of three conditions: private token support, public token support, and no support. One possible critique of our study 1 manipulation is that although participants in the private-support condition received their poppy in an envelope, the poppy might eventually be displayed to others. In this second field study, we manipulated the public versus private nature of token support by varying the social observability of the product accepted as the token act. Specifically, in the public

(private) condition, participants were asked to accept a pin (fridge magnet) of the Canucks team logo. The magnet and pin were of identical size and depicted the same logo. However, the pin is higher in public observability, while the magnet is lower in observability. Participants in the public (private) support condition were greeted with the following line: "Good afternoon. Would you accept this free pin to wear right now (magnet to take with you) to show your support for the Vancouver Canucks?" Upon acceptance of this request by the respondent in the public condition, the research assistant ensured that the pin was visibly displayed on the participant's jacket or shirt. After the participant's acceptance of the pin or magnet, the research assistant asked the connection-to-cause measure. Specifically, participants were asked, "On a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high), how big of a Canucks fan are you?" We positioned a second research assistant on the sidewalk at the end of the block who intercepted the participant approximately 1 minute later with the larger request: a 5-minute survey on behalf of the Vancouver Canucks. Although this is a smaller subsequent task than those employed in the previous studies, this dependent variable is of significant inconvenience to these individuals who were predominantly in a hurry. Participants in the control condition were randomly selected to receive only the larger request, and the connection-to-cause measure was asked by the second research assistant. After responding to the larger request, participants were fully debriefed and informed that this study was conducted by UBC researchers and was in no way affiliated with the Vancouver Canucks. Finally, we unobtrusively positioned a third research assistant between the two others to record gender and approximate age. Thirty-one participants (16 private, 15 public) did not accept the magnet/pin and did not receive the larger request, and six participants did not provide a connection-to-cause score. As such, analyses were performed using 82 participants.

## Results

*Hypothesis Tests.* To test hypothesis 4, connection to cause was mean-centered at 5.11 ( $SD = 3.23$ ), and condition was contrast-coded. We entered condition variables, connection to cause, and their interactions in a logistic regression to predict agreement to the larger request. We entered day as a covariate because the team lost a playoff game in between experimental days. The covariate was not significant ( $p > .60$ ), and results and significance levels remain unchanged if it is excluded. Results revealed no main effect of either condition ( $C1_{\text{pri-pub}}: b = .91$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 2.63$ ,  $p > .10$ ;  $C2_{\text{pri-ctrl}}: b = .10$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = .06$ ,  $p > .80$ ) or connection-to-cause independent variables ( $b = .21$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 1.74$ ,  $p > .15$ ). However, the expected interactions between each condition variable and connection to the cause were significant ( $C1$  interaction:  $b = -.67$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 9.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $C2$  interaction:  $b = -.59$ , Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 12.1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We analyzed each interaction using the Johnson-Neyman floodlight analysis technique following Spiller et al. (2013), which allowed us to probe inter-

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actions to identify the ranges of connection to cause where the predicted simple effects of token support reach significance. Replicating studies 1–4, provision of private (vs. public) token support led to higher agreement to the larger request among those less connected to the cause, or .21 SD below the mean value of connection to cause ( $B_{JN} = 1.29$ ,  $SE = .66$ ,  $p = .05$ ). However, providing public (vs. private) token support led to higher agreement to the larger request among participants highly connected to the cause, or .75 SD above the mean value of connection to cause ( $B_{JN} = -.78$ ,  $SE = .40$ ,  $p = .05$ ). The interaction between private token support and no token support exhibited the identical pattern (low connection to cause:  $-.54$  SD; high connection to cause:  $+.47$  SD; see table 1).

## Discussion

Using a real-world field setting, study 5 highlights a boundary condition of the previously documented effects. Among individuals less connected to the cause, we replicate our previous findings such that providing private token support leads to a higher likelihood of meaningful support than does providing public token support, or no support. Conversely, among those highly connected to the cause, providing public token support leads to higher meaningful support than initially providing private support. This suggests that the reinforcement charitable organizations receive for their token-support campaigns may reside among the champion supporters of the respective cause, and not among average consumers. Finally, by examining a positively viewed for-profit organization, study 5 also demonstrates that our framework extends beyond charitable organizations and may be applicable to for-profit brands or firms, a potentially provocative opportunity for future research to investigate.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Using multiple field and experimental settings, different operationalizations of initial acts of token support, and varied measures of more meaningful subsequent contributions, we provide an empirical investigation of slacktivism and when it is most likely to emerge. Across five studies, we demonstrate the existence of slacktivism, wherein an initial act of token support does not lead to an increased willingness to provide more substantial contributions to the cause. We propose a conceptual framework to outline when and why an initial act of token support may or may not lead to an

increased contribution on a subsequent, more meaningful helping task.

In study 1, we show that individuals who engage in an initial act of private token support (privately accepting a poppy pin) for a cause donated more money to the cause than did those who engaged in an initial act of public support (publicly wearing a pin), or those who did not engage in an initial act of support. In study 2, we replicate this effect in a controlled environment using the signing of a petition as the token act of support for the cause. Study 3 provides a more complete test of our full conceptual framework and demonstrates support for our proposed processes. We find that providing public token support satisfies impression-management motives, leading to a lower likelihood to provide meaningful support for a cause. In addition, study 3 shows that engaging in private token support leads to higher consistency motives, and a subsequent increase in meaningful support for the cause. In study 4, we make an important substantive contribution by identifying a tool that charitable organizations can use to combat slacktivism and garner meaningful support from public token-support campaigns: value alignment between supporter and cause. Finally, in a second field experiment, study 5 identifies an additional moderator of the observed effects; specifically, our findings are reversed among those who feel strongly connected to the organization.

## Theoretical Contributions

The present research makes a number of theoretical contributions. First, we provide initial evidence for when slacktivism will emerge and identify the social observability of the token support as a key moderator in predicting when token support does or does not lead to meaningful support. We introduce a conceptual framework proposing that while in public settings the resolution of impression-management concerns becomes central, in private settings the consistency of one's own privately held values becomes paramount. Importantly, we identify the social observability of the support (operationalized as public vs. private) as a key moderator in predicting which motive will be active; this moderator predicts when an initial act of token support will lead consumers to subsequently give more meaningful support to the cause.

Our work adds to the current understanding of impression management by showing that when given the opportunity to provide token support for a social cause, consumers ac-

TABLE 1  
STUDY 5 RESULTS

Token-support condition	Connection to cause (CC)		Significance limit (SD)	
	Low effect	High effect	Low CC	High CC
Private vs. public	$B_{JN} = 1.29$ , $SE = .66$ , $p = .05$	$B_{JN} = -.78$ , $SE = .40$ , $p = .05$	-.21	.75
Private vs. control	$B_{JN} = 1.07$ , $SE = .54$ , $p = .05$	$B_{JN} = -.85$ , $SE = .44$ , $p = .05$	-.54	.47

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tivate both consistency and impression-management motives. However, when given the opportunity to make larger contributions to the cause, satisfaction of impression-management concerns after providing public (vs. private) support reduces inclinations to provide subsequent meaningful support. Our findings add to previous impression-management research by identifying consistency as an additional motive that consumers are willing to trade off in favor of displaying a positive image to others (Ashworth et al. 2005; Sengupta et al. 2002). Interestingly, the current research also suggests that impression-management concerns can become relevant even in the context of friends. Ashworth et al. (2005) show that impression-management concerns are significantly lessened when in the presence of a close friend (vs. on a first date). However, by utilizing participants' personal Facebook accounts to provide support for a cause in study 4, our findings suggest that impression-management motives are active even among close friends. One explanation of this deviation from prior research could be that Facebook accounts are composed of both strong ties (family, close friends) and weak ties (acquaintances; Gladwell 2010). Recently, Wilcox and Stephen (2013) showed that consumers do in fact seek to self-enhance even among close ties. Our results lend support for their findings. Finally, we also add to the impression-management literature methodologically by directly measuring changes in impression-management motives over time. Our results are notable given that past research has suggested that it is often difficult to assess impression management motives through measurement in experimental settings (Bolino 1999). The repeated-measures impression-management task employed in study 3 suggests that the measurement of these motives over time might be one fruitful way to assess changes in the desire to present a positive image to others.

Our research also helps to elucidate the nature of opposing predictions from two established literatures by introducing a moderator not previously investigated: the observable nature of the initial task. In doing so, we contribute to both FITD and moral-licensing literatures by empirically demonstrating the importance of this variable to both research streams. We also add to economic models of prosocial-behavior literature by qualifying previous findings and conclusions regarding consumer repercussions of engaging in costless prosocial support (Bénabou and Tirole 2004; Gneezy et al. 2011). Previous research shows that costly prosocial behavior signals to individuals that they are "moral" and, as such, leads to increased subsequent prosocial behavior. Conversely, costless prosocial behavior has been shown to signal nothing regarding the morality of supporters, and leads to subsequent licensing behavior. We show that costless token support can in fact lead to subsequent prosocial behavior, but via a different route—perceived value alignment between self and cause and a desire for self-consistency. Our findings reveal that by limiting the impression-management motive behind public token support, or by focusing token supporters on the value alignment between self and cause, meaningful prosocial behavior can result.

## Managerial Implications and Directions for Future Research

Our research makes a number of important substantive contributions for charitable and other nonprofit organizations. First, we empirically demonstrate that public token support does not lead to increased meaningful support for social causes. We also show that this behavior is not limited to the online realms but occurs also with physical symbols of support. We acknowledge that many of the symbols used by charitable organizations are utilized to generate awareness, and that awareness is a critical first step to the success of many charities and social causes. However, it is also hoped by charitable and other organizations that promote these acts that such token displays will serve as stepping stones to more meaningful support for the respective causes. Intuitively, both consumers and charitable organizations believe that public displays of support may lead to greater future support than when initial support is not publicly displayed. Importantly, however, our findings demonstrate that this may not always be the case.

The inability of small public displays of token support to motivate subsequent helping behavior is a prevalent issue facing our society given that many charities and social causes have come to rely heavily on such tactics. For example, the ubiquity of "pink" paraphernalia displayed by those who wish to publicly support a cure for breast cancer has come under scrutiny. Many fear that "pink-washing" has detracted the public focus from cancer research and support programs, instead creating a trendy and high-profile way to present a positive image for both individuals and firms (King 2006). Our results suggest that under certain conditions, this concern is warranted. Specifically, we find that engaging in these forms of public support activates a desire to present the self in a positive light, and once this desire is satisfied the token act may not lead to increased support for the cause. Importantly, however, our findings offer insight to charitable organizations on how to counteract this behavior, and to better harness the power of small token acts to generate meaningful support for the cause. Our findings from study 4 show that focusing consumers on the value alignment between self and cause at the time of public support leads to increased meaningful support for the cause. Charitable organizations can do this in numerous ways. For example, social media content could draw attention to the values the organization stands for, and how these values are congruent with the consumer's own values. This value-alignment focus can also be directly communicated through face-to-face interaction when consumers accept physical tokens of support (e.g., ribbons, pins) from organizational volunteers. Our work can provide guidance to charitable organizations planning to undertake a public token-support campaign. We find that this form of support is most effective in garnering subsequent meaningful support among those already highly connected to the cause.

Finally, the results of study 5 potentially raise the question of who charitable organizations are attempting to target with

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token-support programs. As Obar et al. (2012) find, top NGOs believe that token-support campaigns succeed in generating meaningful support from individuals not currently engaged in the cause. Our results consistently find that public token support promotes slacktivism among all but those highly connected to the cause. If the goal of these programs is to generate new interest in and support for causes via a foot-in-the-door procedure, charitable organizations may be using their precious resources suboptimally. The results of study 5 suggest that token-support programs are effective only among those closely connected to their respective causes. While it is certainly vital to keep highly connected supporters motivated, charitable organizations must carefully consider if encouraging public token support is a successful strategy when trying to attract meaningful support from new donors.

We believe that our work provides consumer researchers with ample possibilities for future investigations. A natural extension of our work would be to directly examine the conceptual framework using brands and other for-profit organizations. Our results from study 5 provide a glimpse into what could be a very useful tool for brands to engage and generate relationships with potential consumers. Moreover, future research in the nonprofit sector could examine the social observability of the meaningful request. In our investigation, we deliberately kept our meaningful requests relatively private because we were interested in investigating the underlying motives of slacktivist behavior and the relationship between this behavior and token support. However, future research could vary the public nature of the meaningful request to examine whether it or its interaction with token support affects agreement rates. Similarly, future research could vary the cost of token and/or meaningful support. In the current studies, meaningful support was more costly to participants relative to token support. Our goal was to maximize the generalizability of our findings to important volunteer and donation-support behaviors, but future research could determine if an absolute cost ceiling of our effects exists.

A second factor outside the scope of the present research is the interaction of token prosocial behavior with moral identity. Aquino and Reed (2002) propose that an individual's moral identity may be represented as an associative network of related moral traits, goals, and behaviors, and this identity is composed of two components: internalization (private) and symbolization (public). Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino (2013) show that recognition of support, such as a receiving a thank-you card in the mail after making a donation, increases subsequent charitable behavior among individuals high in moral identity symbolization but low in moral identity internalization. Moreover, individuals high in moral identity internalization engaged in more efforts to uphold a moral self-image after being dishonest. An interesting direction for future research would be to examine the proposed relationship between token and subsequent support for a cause among consumers with different levels of the two moral-identity components.

In conclusion, we provide an empirical investigation into an important issue facing charitable organizations, consumers and consumer researchers: slacktivism. Not only do we provide a conceptual framework to understand when and why the behavior occurs and persists, we also provide tools that charitable organizations can use to combat this behavior and generate the meaningful support needed to achieve their missions.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author supervised the collection of data by research assistants for study 1 at the University of British Columbia in November 2012 and analyzed the data. The first author supervised the collection of data by research assistants for studies 2 through 4 at the University of British Columbia during the following times: study 2, fall 2012; study 3, spring 2013; study 3 follow-up, fall 2012; study 4, fall 2012; study 4 follow-up, summer 2012. The first and second authors jointly analyzed these data. The first author supervised the collection of data by research assistants for study 5 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, in spring 2013 and analyzed the data.

## APPENDIX

### Study 2 Instructions

*Token-Support Condition.* Both charitable organizations—Combating Poverty in Developing Nations and International Disaster Relief Support—are currently running campaigns to lobby the Canadian government to increase support for their causes. We would sincerely appreciate it if you would choose to sign one of the petitions.

Please choose to sign one of the petitions now. To sign the petition, please go to the front of the room and sign your name on the petition taped to the white board (sign your name on the paper provided and place your paper in the appropriate charity's private boxes located at the back of the room). After the session, the marketing department will forward the signatures to the charitable organizations.

*No-Support Condition.* Before you continue with the survey and feedback, we would like to take attendance to ensure proper documentation for your participation. We would sincerely appreciate it if you would choose to sign your name.

To record your attendance in this study, please go to the front of the room and sign the attendance sheet taped to the white board (sign your name on the paper provided and place your paper in the private box located at the back of the room).

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