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When Enemies Go Viral (or Not)—A Real-Time Experiment During the “Stop Kony” Campaign

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In March–April 2012, using 2 online videos, nonprofit organization Invisible Children initiated a “Stop Kony” campaign to turn Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony into an international enemy. Although the first video was the fastest viral video of all time, interest in the campaign eventually faded away. Might individual-level psychological processes help explain why the campaign was initially successful, and ultimately failed? To test this possibility, we used a combination of experimental manipulations and real-time data tracking responses to the “Stop Kony” videos as they appeared. Integrating and advancing beyond prior theory on enemyship and idea contagion, our findings suggest that when a complex adverse situation is reduced to the actions of a clear enemy, this inspires moral outrage against the enemy. However, if the complexity of the situation becomes clearer, the enemy inspires less moral outrage and determination to act.

Keywords: Joseph Kony, media, idea contagion, enemyship, moral outrage

On March 5, 2012, the nonprofit organization Invisible Children posted an online video called *Kony 2012* about the human rights abuses of Joseph Kony, a Ugandan warlord and head of the terrorist group the Lord’s Resistance Army. Focusing on his enslavement of children, the video portrayed Kony as an enemy of human ideals everywhere, and called out for participation in a global campaign to bring him to justice. Director Jason Russell implored viewers to take part in a “Cover the Night” event on April 20, 2012, when people in cities everywhere

would place Kony’s image on every street corner. The message of the video apparently appealed to viewers: Within 6 days of its posting, it had been viewed more than 100 million times, the fastest spread of a “viral video” in history (Huffington Post, 2012).

Nearly as remarkable as the campaign’s meteoric rise to popularity was its subsequent fall from public consciousness. A mere month later (April 5), when Invisible Children posted a second video entitled *Kony 2012—Part II: Beyond Famous*, the response was markedly underwhelming (Falkenthal, 2012). Two months later, the date of the planned “Cover the Night” event passed with little fanfare (Carroll, 2012). Today, two years later, Kony’s name has virtually vanished from the mainstream media, and he remains at large.

The “Stop Kony” campaign may be considered a failed experiment in enemyship: An ultimately ineffective attempt to transform a little-known figure into a symbol of evil. Why was the campaign initially successful, and why did it fail in the long term? These questions connect to the more general issue of why some ideas become “viral” in the public sphere and others do not. We believe that the answer to these ques-

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tions lies partly in the psychology of enemyship, and specifically those factors that contribute to an enemy figure's ability to inspire moral outrage in individuals, and thus drive them to social action. We therefore propose to situate these questions in the context of contemporary theory on enemyship (Sullivan, Landau, & Rothschild, 2010), moral outrage (van Zomeren, Spears, Leach, & Fischer, 2004), and idea contagion (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Heath & Heath, 2008).

Building on this prior work, we conducted a real-time experiment examining changing attitudes toward and effects of Invisible Children's videos in vivo, collecting data at intervals starting the first week *Kony 2012* appeared online, until shortly after the "Cover the Night" date. Our study represents the first investigation of the potential for an enemy to inspire moral outrage in the context of an unfolding real-time event. The findings suggest that although *Kony 2012* may have achieved initial popularity owing to its depiction of a clear enemy figure who elicited moral outrage, *Kony 2012—Part II* acknowledged too much of the situational complexity surrounding this issue, and therefore failed to present Kony in simple terms as the root of evil.

Enemyship and Moral Outrage

An existential perspective on enemyship (Landau, Sullivan, Rothschild, & Keefer, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2010) posits that perceiving the self as having powerful political and personal enemies, although superficially disagreeable, actually enables the self to maintain a sense of personal efficacy. To specify, most people realize that multifarious potential threats to their well-being are randomly distributed throughout their environment in the form of nonagentic factors that are difficult to understand and control. One strategy for sustaining perceived control is tracing all likely misfortunes to the machinations of one or a few clearly defined agentic enemies.

How does reducing a complex situation to the actions of an identifiable enemy enhance personal control? One possibility that has yet to be explored in the literature is that identifying a clear enemy induces feelings of moral outrage, inspiring a desire to take efficacious action against the enemy. Moral outrage is an other-

focused emotion that involves anger toward a particular individual or group for an injustice they have committed against a third party (Rothschild, Landau, Molina, Branscombe, & Sullivan, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2004). The link between enemyship and moral outrage has been suggested by many prior studies. A range of theorists and researchers (e.g., Schmitt, 1932/2007; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Sullivan, Landau, Rothschild, & Keefer, 2014) have proposed that people's attachment to their political identities is largely reinforced by the outrage they feel against enemy figures who represent conflicting value systems. For example, Haidt and Algor (2004) proposed that people may artificially amplify the immorality of collective enemy figures to attain a clear sense of their in-group's virtuous nature and identity. This process of moral amplification typically invokes feelings of moral outrage against a clear enemy target.

Related theorizing (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009) suggests that outrage toward an enemy can transform apathy into feelings of inspiration and determination to restore moral justice by defeating the enemy. Supporting this claim, Pagano and Huo (2007) found that feelings of moral outrage directed specifically against Saddam Hussein and his regime for injustices perpetrated against the Iraqi people predicted positive attitudes toward political actions intended to punish Hussein and prevent future human rights abuses in Iraq. These findings from the moral outrage literature, combined with the aforementioned findings of Sullivan et al. (2010), suggest that the identification of a clear enemy figure increases feelings of moral outrage and determination to defeat the enemy.

When Invisible Children created the *Kony 2012* video, they were attempting to portray complex problems—civil war, widespread injustice, and structural imbalance in central Africa, as well as between Africa and the rest of the world—in simple terms as the product of one man's misdeeds. As Russell, the video's director, explicitly stated in an interview: "Because of the zeitgeist of the culture and the world, we need an enemy . . . We need to know what the worst is" (CNN Wire Staff, 2012). A qualitative analysis of *Kony 2012* (Kouveld, 2012) suggested that the most common themes in the video were (1) the in-group (U.S. view-

ers); (2) the possibility of the in-group taking collective action; and (3) the identification of Kony as an enemy. This lends strong support to our prediction that watching *Kony 2012* should elicit an increase in moral outrage, an emotion which combines hatred of an enemy with desire to take collective action.

Idea Contagion and the Problem of Complexity

Almost immediately after the appearance of *Kony 2012*, criticism of the campaign emerged from various quarters, suggesting that the issues involved were more complex than the video had acknowledged, and that Kony was not as powerful as the filmmakers had claimed. In their second video, *Invisible Children* acknowledged the criticism and the complexity that it implied. The video's message was more nuanced, suggesting that apprehending Kony was only one (however important) step in improving the lives of people in the central African regions where he has operated. Other steps would include, for example, rehabilitating both the region and conflict survivors by supplying educational and financial resources.

Why did the second *Kony* video fail to go viral? According to contemporary theory and research on the psychology of social transmission and idea contagion, some of the most important characteristics of ideas that "stick" (i.e., that become popular through social transmission) are simplicity, concreteness, and ability to inspire emotions (Heath & Heath, 2008). Although the second *Kony* video may have been more comprehensive and accurate than the first *Kony* video in its presentation of the facts, its relative complexity may have rendered it less memorable, vivid, and immediately appealing to the public.

This perspective fits our existential view of enemyship, which suggests that people prefer the simple message that apparently chaotic hazards in their environment stem from a single concrete, powerful enemy. On this view, the first *Kony* video went viral because it simplified a complex issue by presenting people with a focal enemy who inspired feelings of moral outrage and determination to act.

Also supporting this view is evidence that online content is more likely to go viral if it elicits strong emotions, even if those emo-

tions—such as moral outrage—are negative in valence (Berger & Milkman, 2012). A large field study of sharing patterns for 800 videos found that videos that elicited high emotional arousal were twice as likely to be shared as low-arousal videos (Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead, 2013). Although videos with positive emotional content are more likely to be shared than those with negative content, the effect is much smaller than that for overall arousal. Given that moral outrage is a high-arousal emotion combining both negative and positive elements (a hatred of an enemy, but also a positive motivation to take action; Thomas et al., 2009), it stands to reason that videos that elicit moral outrage should be more popular than those that do not. In the current study, therefore, we tracked feelings of moral outrage in response to the *Kony* videos as they appeared.

Our guiding analysis further suggests that the decline of the "Stop Kony" campaign was due in large part to the second video's acknowledgment of the complexity of the issues in the region, as well as the possibility that Kony was not as powerful or central a force as he seemed in the first video, which undermined the likelihood that Kony could serve as a psychologically satisfying enemy. By focusing less on a concrete enemy, the second *Kony* video lost the ability to inspire emotional outrage.

A Real-Time Study Tracking Responses to "Stop Kony"

To track the course of an international experiment in enemyship processes, we collected data on reactions to "Stop Kony" beginning the week of *Kony 2012*'s release. In the first month of data collection, we asked participants to watch the video online. Shortly after the release of the second *Kony* video, we modified the design such that participants watched this video instead of the first. In addition to this real-time tracking data, we included an experimental manipulation to better determine how participants were responding to the videos and the ideas about them circulating in contemporary media. Specifically, after watching one of the two videos, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two actual articles representing the diverging responses to "Stop Kony" proliferating in the media at that time. One article was

supportive of the idea that Kony was a powerful enemy; the other criticized this notion and portrayed the situation as far more complex. We assessed reactions to these articles as well as feelings of moral outrage and determination prior to and after exposure to the videos and our article manipulation.

We initially designed the experiment to test whether exposure to criticism of “Stop Kony” would affect participants’ feelings of moral outrage and determination to act. Although theory suggests that reducing a complex issue to the actions of a clear enemy should facilitate feelings of outrage and determination to act, this hypothesis has not received empirical scrutiny. The current study fills this gap in the context of an unfolding real-time event. The introduction of the second *Kony* video—which acknowledged more of the complexity regarding the situation in central Africa—was a fortuitous happenstance, because it gave us the opportunity to modify our design to test additional untested hypotheses about enmity’s effects on emotions and behavioral intentions. On the basis of idea contagion research, we hypothesized that the second video would be less compelling to participants than the first due its relative level of complexity, and that participants would therefore be more likely to endorse criticism of the “Stop Kony” campaign after watching the second video than the first. On the basis of enemyship research, we hypothesized that the second video’s acknowledgment of complex factors beyond Kony himself would render it less effective than the first video at inspiring feelings of moral outrage and determination to act.

Method

Two hundred seventeen U.S. citizens (98 female) participated. Of these, 179 were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and participated in exchange for US\$7.00. The remaining 38 were undergraduates recruited through the University of Kansas participant pool who participated in exchange for course credit.¹

Moral Outrage and Determination to Act

Participants rated the extent to which they were currently feeling each of several emotions (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Extremely*). Embedded in

several filler items were five items assessing feelings of moral outrage and determination: “I feel morally outraged about something or toward someone; I feel angry about something or someone; I feel hostile about something or toward someone; I feel inspired to do something; I feel determined to do something.” These items were designed based on theory and research (Thomas et al., 2009) suggesting that feelings of moral outrage toward an enemy generally co-occur with determination to take action. We collected responses on these items at the beginning of the study to provide a baseline measure (“Pre Measure”); responses to the same items were collected again after the video induction and article manipulation to test for change in this construct (“Post Measure”). Importantly, we designed the items to *not* refer to a specific target of moral outrage (Joseph Kony being the implied target in this case). We did this to measure baseline feelings of outrage/determination—collected prior to the administration of our experimental manipulations and thus prior to introducing “Stop Kony” as a context—and

¹ Different samples were recruited not for any a priori reason, but simply to increase power and collect as much data as possible in the midst of a real-world, unfolding event. As expected the samples differed in age, such that MTurk users were older overall ($M = 32$ years) than undergraduates ($M = 20$ years), $t(213) = 6.70, p < .001$. It is impossible to draw definitive conclusions regarding the possible influence of sample characteristics on our outcomes of interest, however, because sample was confounded with the video variable (not by a priori design, all undergraduates participated later in the study, and therefore all saw *Kony 2012—Part II*). In addition (once more not by design), the disproportionate number of MTurk users relative to undergraduates makes it difficult to interpret any group differences. However, what analyses we can perform suggest that sample characteristics did not have an important influence on our outcomes of interest. First, although undergraduates were more likely to have seen *Kony 2012* prior to the study, we controlled for this variable in our analyses, so the sample difference in this aspect is not likely to account for our findings. Further, the only significant interaction or main effect involving sample was a main effect of the variable on Pre Measure feelings of moral outrage and determination, $t(215) = 2.06, p = .04$. Somewhat interestingly, undergraduates showed higher baseline levels of moral outrage and determination to act ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.08$) compared with MTurk users ($M = 3.00, SD = 1.10$). Again, however, this finding is difficult to interpret; it might simply be the result of a more accurate estimate of the population value among MTurk users resulting from the larger sample. Furthermore, all of our effects of interest remained significant when controlling for sample in our models.

to compare these baseline rates with postmanipulation feelings. Interitem reliability for all five items was acceptably high at both the beginning and end of the study session (Pre Measure: $\alpha = .67$; Post Measure: $\alpha = .87$).² Given prior theory and high interitem reliability, we combined scores on all five items into a composite measure of felt moral outrage/determination assessed both “Pre” and “Post” exposure to our independent variables.

The filler items in which the moral outrage measure was embedded were included to avoid arousing suspicion and alerting participants to the true nature of the study. The items were similar in wording to the moral outrage/determination items, but assessed other unrelated emotions, including feeling “interested; irritable; excited; ashamed; upset; guilty; sad; enthusiastic; regretful; and proud.”

“Stop Kony” Videos

Participants were then told some basic information about the video *Kony 2012*. They were instructed that, regardless of whether they had already seen the video, they would be asked to watch the video in full before completing additional measures. Prior to watching the video, participants responded to the single item, “Have you already seen *Kony 2012*?” (yes or no). About half the undergraduates (58%) had seen *Kony 2012* prior to the study, whereas only a minority of MTurk users had previously seen the video (22%; for further information on sample differences, see Footnote 1). To account for any influence of prior exposure to the video, we controlled for this variable in our analyses.

Kony 2012

Participants whose data were collected during the period of March 10 to April 11, 2012, watched the first video posted by Invisible Children, *Kony 2012* (approx. 30 min). *Kony 2012* is an edited series of news and Internet clips, footage shot by its director Jason Russell in Africa and with his family in the United States, and other material specially prepared or previously recorded by Invisible Children. The images are accompanied by Russell’s narration.

The video is divided into roughly three parts, which each seem strategically planned to induce feelings of moral outrage and determination to act. The first 10 min of the video include a short

prologue emphasizing the importance of the Internet and youth culture in the modern world. The majority of the first part, however, presents the suffering of a Ugandan boy named Jacob whom Russell met in 2003. Jacob is afraid for his life and has seen his brother murdered; however, very little context is given to explain his suffering. This context is given in the second part of the video, which also lasts about 10 min. In this section, Russell explains to his young son that Joseph Kony is direct cause of the suffering of Jacob and 30,000 other children in central Africa. The video portrays Kony as a vicious and enigmatically powerful enemy, comparable with Hitler and Osama bin Laden, who has committed unforgivable crimes against children and who is capable of eluding foreign peacekeeping forces. It also proposes that capturing Kony is a simple solution for improving life in Uganda. As a representative of the International Criminal Court says in the video: “The criminal here is Kony. Stop him . . .” before adding, as an aside, “. . . and then, solve other problems.” The final 10 min of the video explain how Kony will be stopped through a uniting of Democratic and Republican politicians against a common enemy, and through massive public participation in campaign events like “Cover the Night.” The viewer is encouraged to take part in the “Stop Kony” campaign.

Kony 2012 Part II

Participants whose data were collected during the period of April 12 to May 4, 2012, watched the second video, *Kony 2012 Part II—Beyond Famous* (approx. 20 min). This video is also an edited compilation of news clips, interviews, and other forms of footage accompanied

² There is a noted increase in the reliability of our moral outrage and determination measure from Pre to Post. It is likely that this is a test–retest effect, with interitem reliability of the measure increasing as a function of increased familiarity with the items. However, it should also be kept in mind that, prior to the administration of our independent variables (the “Stop Kony” videos and related articles), participants did not have a particular target on which to focus feelings of moral outrage, nor a particular goal or issue about which to feel determination. It is therefore also likely that exposure to a concrete target (Joseph Kony) on which to focus these emotions not only elevated their intensity, but also reduced variability between items assessing these emotions.

by narration. It begins with a 7-min section primarily about *Kony 2012* and the response to the video. Although some of the criticism of the video is acknowledged, this section primarily focuses on the role of the video in raising awareness and generating attempts to stop Kony. This section is followed by a short 3-min section arguing that Kony and his army remain a threat in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and central Africa. In the second half of the video, however, the narrative of *Kony 2012 Part II* becomes more complex. Invisible Children presents a “Comprehensive Approach” to resolving issues in the regions where Kony has operated, including four steps: (1) protecting civilians by establishing a radio network to alert them of raids by hostile forces; (2) ensuring that members of the Lord’s Resistance Army who want to surrender can do so peacefully; (3) rehabilitating and reconstructing the regions by repairing infrastructure (e.g., building schools); and (4) capturing Kony and those closest to him. It should be noted that the first video focused almost exclusively on step 4. As a member of Invisible Children interviewed in the second video states, “Everyone across the board will agree [the problem] is a complex one, and it requires a multipronged approach.” The video concludes with a short section encouraging viewers to participate in the “Cover the Night” event on April 20th, and instructing them how to do so. As of writing, both *Kony 2012* and *Kony 2012 Part II* were still available on YouTube; we refer readers to the videos for further information.

Article Manipulation

After watching one of the two videos, participants were randomly assigned to read an excerpt from one of two articles that were posted (or modified in the case of a Wikipedia article) online in the week that *Kony 2012* was released. Participants in the *supporting article* condition read an excerpt from the contemporary Wikipedia (2012) article on Kony, which provided information corroborating the potential hazard he posed and the strength of his forces. Participants in the *critical article* condition read an excerpt from an article posted on NPR.org (Mémott, 2012), which criticized *Kony 2012*’s oversimplifications and suggested that

Kony was not in fact a serious threat (see Appendix for full text of each article).

After reading one of these two articles, participants completed a single manipulation check item: “The information in the article suggests that Joseph Kony is a serious threat” (1 = *Definitely no*, 7 = *Definitely yes*). Participants then responded to three items assessing their agreement with the critical or supportive article (1 = *Definitely no*, 7 = *Definitely yes*): “I agree with the perspective presented in the article; I think the information presented in the article is accurate; I think the author of this article is mistaken in their view on the issue.” We reverse-scored the last item and formed composite article agreement scores ($\alpha = .91$).

Finally, participants responded to the same five-item measure used to assess feelings of moral outrage and determination at the beginning of the session to provide a “Post Measure.”

Results

Manipulation Check

To test whether the article manipulation effectively created diverging perceptions of the threat posed by Kony, we submitted manipulation check responses to a 2 (Article) \times 2 (Video) ANOVA. We found only the expected main effect of article, $F(1, 213) = 216.52, p < .001$. A t test indicated that participants in the supporting article condition agreed that the article portrayed Kony as more of a threat ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.38$) compared with participants in the critical article condition ($M = 2.60, SD = 1.72$), $t(215) = 14.68, p < .001, d = 2.00$.

Agreement With the Article

Analysis by condition. To test whether the second Kony video was less effective than the first at reducing complex international problems to a single, simple source, we submitted article agreement scores to a similar ANOVA. There was a main effect of article, $F(1, 213) = 42.26, p < .001$, such that participants tended to agree more with the supporting article ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.21$) overall compared with the critical article, $M = 3.75, SD = 1.85$. This effect was qualified by a significant interaction, $F(1, 213) = 6.24, p = .01$. Pairwise comparisons (Fisher’s LSD) revealed that participants were

no more likely to agree with the supporting article after watching *Kony 2012* ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.24$) than after watching *Kony 2012—Part II* ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.16$), $p = .23$. However, consistent with predictions, participants were more likely to agree with the critical article after watching *Kony 2012—Part II* ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.71$) than after watching *Kony 2012* ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.93$), $p = .02$, $d = .38$. That is, after watching the second video, participants were more likely to acknowledge that the problems identified in the initial video were complex and could not be traced to Kony alone.

Analysis by timepoint. To take advantage of the longitudinal nature of our real-time data, we also analyzed reactions to the articles as a function of time of data collection. We classified participants into six groups based on the timepoint at which their data were collected: 1 = March 10, 2 = March 17 to March 25, 3 = April 11 (the first three arbitrarily chosen periods of data collection), 4 = April 12 to April 17 (the first timepoint at which participants were shown *Kony 2012—Part II*), 5 = April 19 (the eve of the “Cover the Night” event), 6 = April 23 to May 4 (the last period of data collection, after “Cover the Night”). We analyzed the effect

of timepoint on reactions to the article separately within each article condition. In the critical article condition, timepoint was positively correlated with article agreement, $r_s = .24$, $p < .01$, and polynomial contrasts yielded significant evidence of a linear trend, 95% CI (0.08, 1.72), $p = .03$. The effect of time on reactions to the critical article is presented in Figure 1. Our findings suggest that, as time passed since the first posting of *Kony 2012*, participants became more likely to agree that the situation in central Africa is more complex than the sole actions of Joseph Kony.

Although there were no significant trend effects in the supporting article condition, reactions to this article were negatively correlated with time at a marginal significance level, $r_s = -.18$, $p = .06$, suggesting that reactions to the article endorsing *Kony 2012*'s message became less positive as time passed.

Somewhat expectedly, timepoint played a role in the likelihood of participants having seen *Kony 2012*. At Timepoint 1, only 22% of participants had already seen the video; Timepoint 2: 19%; Timepoint 3: 10%; Timepoint 4: 38%; Timepoint 5: 28%. While these numbers were fairly consistent, with a general increase for

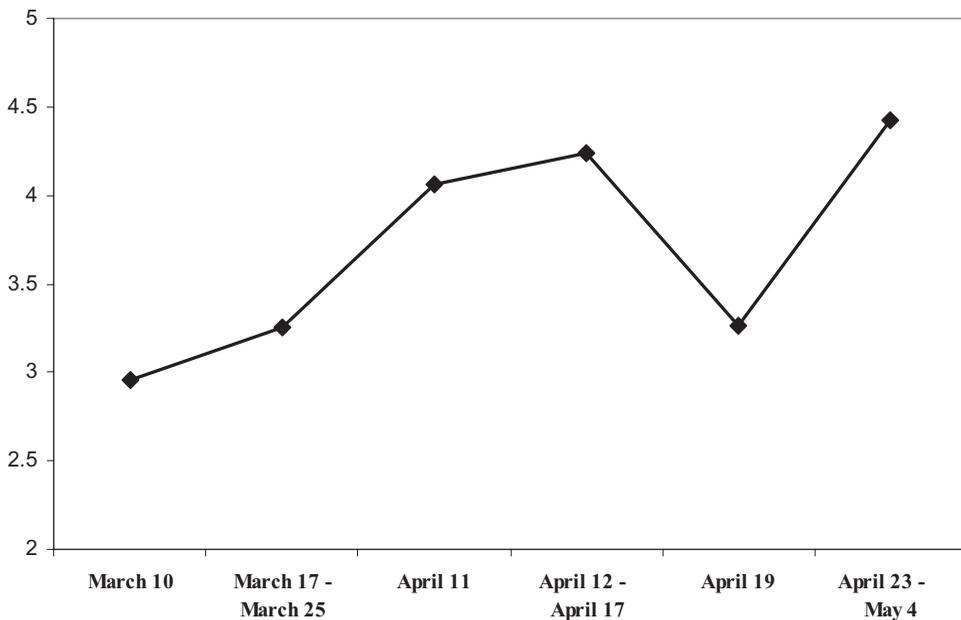


Figure 1. Agreement with the critical article as a function of timepoint. Note. Higher scores indicate greater agreement with the critical article. Scale ranged from 1 to 7.

Timepoints 4 and 5, by Timepoint 6 50% of participants had seen *Kony 2012*. However, controlling for this variable in our timepoint analyses did not change the pattern of results.

Feelings of Moral Outrage and Determination to Act

Analysis by condition. We submitted moral outrage/determination scores at the beginning and end of the session to a mixed-model 2 (Article) \times 2 (Video) \times 2 (Measure: Pre vs. Post) ANOVA. This analysis yielded a main effect of measure, $F(1, 213) = 113.87, p < .001$, such that Post Measure moral outrage and determination scores were higher overall ($M = 4.25, SD = 1.57$) compared with Pre Measure scores ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.10$). This was not unexpected, given that at the beginning of the study participants had no particular target against which they might direct feelings of moral outrage. However, the main effect of measure was qualified by the Measure \times Video interaction, $F(1, 213) = 10.61, p < .01$. No other significant main effects or interactions emerged, $F_s < 1, p_s > .30$.

Pairwise comparisons (Fisher's LSD) revealed that moral outrage/determination increased Pre ($M = 3.04, SD = 1.14$) to Post ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.54$) among participants who watched *Kony 2012*, $F(1, 213) = 98.58, p < .001, d = 1.13$. Moral outrage/determination also increased Pre ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.06$) to Post ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.54$) among participants who watched *Kony 2012—Part II*, $F(1, 213) = 27.04, p < .001, d = .62$. Supporting predictions, the magnitude of the effect was considerably larger for the first video (a large effect size) than for the second video (a medium effect size; Cohen, 1992). Also supporting predictions, focusing only on the Post Measure, participants who watched *Kony 2012* reported more moral outrage/determination than those who watched *Kony 2012—Part II*, $F(1, 213) = 9.82, p < .01, d = .42$. Consistent with these findings, submitting a difference score (Post Measure scores minus Pre Measure scores) to the same analysis also yielded a main effect of Video, such that the amount of change in moral outrage/determination was higher among participants who watched *Kony 2012* ($M = 1.53, SD = 1.70$) compared with those who watched *Kony 2012—Part II* ($M = .83, SD = 1.50$), $F(1, 220) = 11.08, p < .01$.

Analysis by timepoint. Additional analyses for effects of time revealed a significant quartic trend in feelings of moral outrage/determination Post Measure, 95% CI ($-1.05, -.005$), $p = .05$. This trend is depicted in Figure 2. These data suggest that *Kony 2012* was most able to inspire moral outrage in mid-March (Timepoint 2); that feelings of outrage reached a nadir at Timepoint 4 with the introduction of the second video; and that outrage briefly increased once more at Timepoint 5 on the eve of the "Cover the Night" event. There were no effects of timepoint on Pre Measure scores.

We hypothesized that, at least among participants in the critical article condition, declining feelings of moral outrage as a function of time may have occurred owing to increased acknowledgment of complexity regarding the situation in Uganda (and a decreased sense that Kony alone could be blamed). To test this mediational hypothesis, we used Preacher and Hayes' (2008) bootstrapping approach (Footnote 3 describes this approach in more detail).³

For those participants who read the critical article, we regressed moral outrage/determination scores (Post Measure) onto timepoint, with agreement with the article (i.e., acknowledgment of complexity) entered as the proposed mediator. Five thousand bootstrapping resamples were performed. The 95% CI for the effect of timepoint on outrage/determination via the mediator of agreement with the critical article did not contain zero ($-.24, -.03$). Also, the significant effect of timepoint on outrage/determination ($\beta = -.19, SE = .09, t(110) = -1.98, p = .05$) became nonsignificant when controlling for reactions to the article, $t(109) = -.56, p = .58$. This suggests that, as time

³ This approach to testing mediational hypotheses is recommended over more traditional regression methods. Evidence for mediation can be obtained by testing the significance of the multiplicative parameter $a \times b$ (where a represents the IV's effect on the mediator and b represents the mediator's effect on the DV controlling for the IV). However, this interactive parameter is highly unlikely to have a normal distribution in most cases (owing to multicollinearity and other issues). Therefore, a bootstrapping approach is most appropriate for testing this parameter, because it does not make assumptions about the shape of the distribution, but rather samples multiple times from the data (with replacement) to create an approximate distribution based on the data (in order to test for the significance of parameters in terms of this distribution).

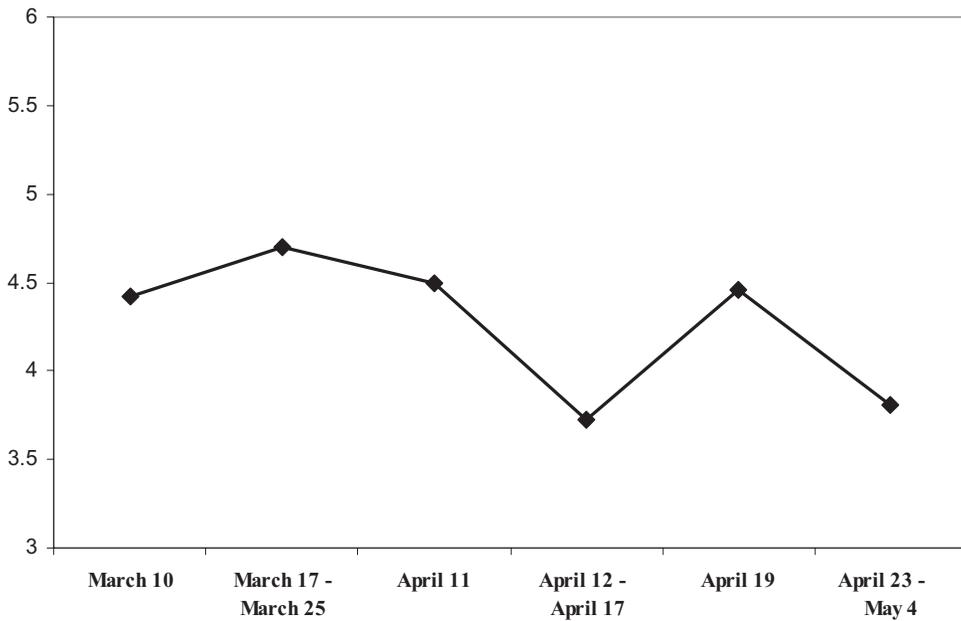


Figure 2. Feelings of moral outrage and determination to act (Post Measure) as a function of timepoint. Note. Higher scores indicate greater feelings of moral outrage and determination to act. Scale ranged from 1 to 7.

passed, participants became more convinced that suffering in Uganda is a complex issue that transcends Kony alone, which in turn led to decreased feelings of moral outrage and determination to take action.

Discussion

Our findings support the notion that *Kony 2012—Part II* was not as effective as the original *Kony 2012* video in casting Kony as a convincing enemy figure. They also generally suggest that the effectiveness of the videos in inspiring viewers and deflecting criticism declined as a function of passing time. First, we observed that although feelings of moral outrage and determination to act increased relative to baseline when participants watched either *Kony 2012* or *Kony 2012—Part II*, the magnitude of this effect was considerably larger among participants who watched the first video, and Post Measure levels of moral outrage were larger among these participants compared with those who watched the second video. Second, we observed an interaction between video and article, such that those participants who

watched the second video showed a more favorable response to an article criticizing the notion that Kony is a threat.

Finally, analyses of the data by timepoint further confirm that the release of *Kony 2012—Part II*, one month after the release of the first video, led to a major reduction in feelings of moral outrage against Kony. These feelings temporarily resurged in anticipation of the planned “Cover the Night” event, but then declined once more, presumably as a response to the failure of “Cover the Night” to materialize into a worldwide phenomenon. Also, as time passed and criticism of the “Stop Kony” campaign became more widespread, participants became more likely to endorse criticism of the videos, which directly contributed to the gradual decrease in the videos’ ability to inspire feelings of moral outrage.

A clear limitation of these data, resulting from their real-time nature, is that exposure to the second video is confounded with time. We cannot conclusively determine on the basis of these data whether the declining ability of the “Stop Kony” campaign to inspire feelings of determination and moral outrage was owing to

the second video's acknowledgment of problematic complexity surrounding the issue, or to increasing awareness of this complexity and criticism of the project as a function of time. We believe that *both* passing time and the campaign's inability to strategically maintain an idealized and simplistic image of Kony as an enemy figure contributed to the rapid diminishment of interest in the issue. It is very unlikely that the passage of time alone could explain our observed effects. Consider that although many news stories have a relatively short cycle, enemy figures like Osama bin Laden have stayed in the public eye for much longer periods of time. Indeed, our analyses suggest that the decrease in feelings of moral outrage toward Kony over time was a result of increased awareness of and agreement with criticisms of the campaign. In short, it is unlikely that mere passage of time caused our effects, but rather the increasing awareness of complexity surrounding Kony that happened over time.

As a real-world test of enemyship processes, this study is the first to demonstrate in the context of an unfolding political event that reducing a complex issue to the actions of a single enemy can inspire moral outrage and inspiration to take action. Clear enemies increase feelings of moral outrage, and this emotional impetus is probably why the first Kony video went viral at such intense speed. However, acknowledging complexity in connection with an enemy figure can diminish the potential for that enemy to galvanize outrage and determination to act.

The present findings contribute to the literature in multiple ways. First, they represent the first real-time documentation of increases (and decreases) in moral outrage in response to an enemy figure as he rose to attention in the online and news media. Accordingly, they also contribute to the growing literature on the transmission of ideas in an online society (e.g., Berger & Milkman, 2012), by documenting the fluctuating ability of an online video to elicit moral outrage at the same time that it was rising and declining in popularity in the online community.

Furthermore, this study advances beyond the extant psychological research on enemyship. Although past studies have focused on the capacity for enemy figures to boost perceptions of personal control (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2010), our data show that enemies—when simplistically portrayed—can also induce feelings of moral

outrage. These findings are almost certainly complementary; it is likely that exposure to a simplified enemy target gives people an enhanced sense of control, facilitating their sense that they could take action against this target and hence galvanizing moral outrage (in line with the analysis of Thomas & McGarty, 2009). This heightened sense of moral outrage and determination, experienced in the imagined presence of an enemy, likely further enhances perceptions of control and agency, a possibility suggested by research showing that anger induces greater confidence and certainty in information processing (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). The reciprocal interaction between control perceptions and feelings of outrage in reaction to clear enemy figures is a fruitful topic for further research.

The present study makes an important contribution to the moral outrage literature by demonstrating the key role of simplified presentations of an enemy in eliciting moral outrage. The observed differences in reactions to *Kony 2012* versus *Kony 2012—Part II* support contemporary theory concerning idea contagion (e.g., Heath & Heath, 2008). The first video presented a simple message portraying Kony as a concrete enemy figure, and dramatically increased moral outrage and determination relative to baseline levels, whereas the second video presented a more complex view of the situation, was less successful at deflecting criticism, and therefore produced a less substantial increase in moral outrage. Although prior studies on moral outrage suggest the importance of an enemy figure or third-party scapegoat in eliciting the emotion (e.g., Rothschild et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2009), there has not yet been a demonstration of the specific importance of *simplified*, clear representations of the enemy to induce moral outrage.

On the whole, our findings might have somewhat pessimistic implications. They suggest that the most popular political media content may be the sort that it is able to inspire strong emotional reactions, such as feelings of moral outrage. Furthermore, when media content attempts more nuanced or complex approaches to political issues, it seems that the ability to inspire outrage and determination is significantly lessened. "Stop Kony" largely failed as a collective experiment in enemyship because the leaders of the movement were unable to consistently defend a clear image of Joseph Kony as a powerful enemy. Kony's 15 min of infamy have

come and gone, and yet many people in central Africa continue to suffer, unaided, whether they are direct victims of Kony's actions or for other reasons. This highlights the importance of finding ways to maintain public emotional investment in political issues, despite the often complex realities that surround these topics.

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Appendix

Full Text of the Article Manipulation

Supporting Article Condition

Originally, Kony's group was called the United Holy Salvation Army (UHSA) and was not perceived as a threat by the National Resistance Army (NRA). By 1988, it had become a major player in Ugandan affairs: an agreement between the NRA and the Uganda People's Democratic Army left members of the latter group unsatisfied, and many joined the United Holy Salvation Army as a form of rebellion. One such person was Commander Odong Latek, who convinced Kony to use standard military tactics instead of attacking in cross-shaped formations and sprinkling holy water. The new tactics proved successful, and the UHSA delivered several small but stinging defeats against the NRA. After these victories, the NRA responded by significantly weakening Kony's group through political actions and a military campaign named Operation North. The operation was devastating to what would become the Lord's Resistance Army, and with their numbers reduced from thousands to hundreds, they engaged in retaliatory attacks on civilians and NRA collaborators. The LRA say that spirits have been sent to communicate this mission directly to Kony.

The bulk of Kony's foot soldiers were children. While estimates of the number of children conscripted since 1986 vary, some put the figure as high as 104,000. When abducting the children, Kony and his army often killed their family and neighbors, thus leaving the children with little choice but to fight for him.

By 1992 Kony had renamed the group the United Democratic Christian Army and it was at this time that they kidnapped 44 girls from the

Sacred Heart Secondary and St. Mary's girls schools.

For a decade starting in the mid-1990s, the LRA was strengthened by military support from the government of Sudan, which was retaliating against Ugandan government support for rebels in what would become South Sudan. Sudan withdrew its support for the LRA shortly after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for Kony's arrest, however.

Critical Article Condition

Foreign Policy has weighed in with a story headlined "Joseph Kony is not in Uganda (and other complicated things)." Among its points:

"It would be great to get rid of Kony. He and his forces have left a path of abductions and mass murder in their wake for over 20 years. But let's get two things straight: (1) Joseph Kony is not in Uganda and hasn't been for 6 years; (2) the LRA now numbers at most in the hundreds, and while it is still causing immense suffering, it is unclear how millions of well-meaning but misinformed people are going to help deal with the more complicated reality."

And *Time Magazine's* Global Spin Blog Adds that:

"Analysts agree that after concerted campaigns against the LRA, its numbers at this point have diminished, perhaps amounting to 250 to 300 fighters at most. Kony, shadowy and illusive, is a faded warlord on the run, with no allies or foreign friends."

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