

Moral Outrage Can Backfire When It Goes Viral

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Moral outrage feels good. If you see a social media post that you view as racist, sexist, or otherwise offensive, a stinging reply can be an irresistible temptation.

But if too many people take the bait, all that criticism can come across as piling on, which creates sympathy for the original transgressor.

It is “[the paradox of viral outrage](#),” in the words of Stanford University scholars [Takuya Sawaoka](#) and [Benoit Monin](#): “The same individual outrage that seems laudable and necessary in isolation may be viewed as excessive and bullying when echoed by multitudinous other users.”

In the journal *Psychological Science*, the researchers illustrate this by describing six studies with a total of more than 3,300 participants. The first featured 397 adults recruited online, all of whom viewed “an actual media post in which a white woman pictured herself with black tape on her face and joked about fitting into her historically black college.”