Activism in the digital age: the rise of the Performative Activist
Let's make sure our efforts don't begin and end with a hashtag.

The concept of activism in an ever-increasingly digital age comes with unique challenges, and remains difficult to navigate. Compounded by Covid-19 restrictions and our heightened reliance on technology, the political turmoil of 2020 saw the question become even more important to reflect upon: how do we prevent our digital engagement from exemplifying performative activism, and ensure we effect real change?

"Performative allyship", "virtue signalling", "slacktivism" - all are pejorative terms describing activism done to advance one's social image, rather than due to any true devotion to the cause. Whilst the concept of performative activism dates back to a 1998 text by Barber Green, the phrase became more widely understood after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. The consequent swell of the Black Lives Matter movement saw an eruption of political engagement on social media – infographics, links and petitions were shared and reshared on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, amongst other platforms. Largely this reemphasised the premise of social media as an opportunity for education - by forging virtual networks we can draw awareness to issues that a 'follower' might otherwise remain unaware of. Anirban Baishya, Professor of Media Studies at Fordham Lincoln Centre remarks that "Social media is pervasive, and people can [find it] annoying, but because of this pervasiveness itself it's rife with political potential."

This potential for it to facilitate meaningful change is removed, however, when one does not follow their online activity with tangible action to lobby for the cause. Adding to the volume of information in circulation is positive, but without following this with acts of allyship beyond the digital sphere, it can fall short. This was exemplified when amidst the 2020 wave of virtual activism, a large portion of online engagement was labelled as performative. Trends emerged that seemed to promote a capitalisation on the BLM movement for social clout and praise, rather than any real support for the cause. Chains began to appear on Instagram. Posts encouraged the people tagged to reshare graphics and 'not break the chain', to show solidarity with George Floyd. Such tagging sequences became reminiscent of the #untiltomorrow embarrassing photo challenge, #downapint challenge, and #run5nominate5 that inundated our feeds at the beginning of lockdown. Certain patterns of response to Floyd's death began to locate themselves within the realm of trending culture - posting content merely for the sake of participating in something. With social distancing guidelines causing people to crave social interaction, such 'awareness' posts started to feel nothing more than superficial and hollow.

Some social media users began to exhibit more insidious patterns of "virtue signalling" behaviour, 'supporting' the BLM movement purely for engagement on their accounts. Student Fiona Moriarty-McLaughlin was captured in Santa Monica, California, pretending to aid a protest clean-up before returning to her car and driving away.

Image taken from Twitter

Not only do McLaughlin's actions exude insincerity but also emblemise the problems unique to activism in a digital age. At a time where everything is documented, recorded, and posted, it remains all too possible to present something false purely for social admiration and increased profile engagement. In McLaughlin's case there remains no excuse - such hollow and performative actions do nothing but insult the plight of Black and BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Colour) by reducing it to a trivial photo opportunity. As allies, we must take our endeavours far out of the digital sphere if real and meaningful change is to be effected.

Recent displays of performative allyship have extended past the Instagram-conscious individual, however. International Women's Day in 2021 reemphasised the capitalist reduction of feminism from an important social justice mission to easily palatable merchandise marketed under the guise of activism. This year, PrettyLittleThing released various items in honour of International Women's Day – clothes bearing "uplifting" and "motivational" quotes and a t-shirt with all of its proceeds going to the charity Girls Inc. However, many swiftly called them out for their irony in marketing feminist ideals when the brand's legacy paints an entirely different picture.

One search on the gov.uk website reveals that the median hourly wage of PLT female employees is 29% lower than that of their male counterparts. Moreover, women occupy only 6.5% of the company's highest paid positions, but 54% of the lowest. In a 2020 report conducted for the Daily Mail, Harbhajan Kaur, factory worker for PLT's parent company Boohoo, noted that whilst her payslip states she receives £8.72 an hour she is only paid £5. "Anyone saying they are paying all their employees the minimum wage in the garment industry is a fraud," franchise owner Mahmud Kamani declared. "It's a lie because it's not possible." Under the guise of taking an activist stance, for PLT International Women's Day became a profitable opportunity to signal they care about supporting women. It would appear, however, that this care only extends to the women they are able to sell to, not the ones working for them.

What's more, back in December 2020 allegations of unacceptably poor working conditions coincided with PLT's controversial sale that saw items listed for as little as 10p. There was uproar as the brand so unashamedly perpetuated the problematic nature of the fast fashion industry and the underpaying of their factory workers.

Instances such as these only make apparent the company's true priorities. Brands are aware that the guise of "woke-ness" and political consciousness is appealing to consumers. Yet what change does this effect if their efforts go no further than reducing the cause to a superficial commercial product?

Image taken from Twitter

In a society where discrimination remains prevalent it is critical for businesses to utilise their platform to advocate for equality, and this begins by looking inward. How can one claim to push back against modes of systemic oppression yet not eradicate this from their own company ethos? Messages of solidarity cannot stand empty.

For corporations and individuals alike, it is more important now than ever to reflect on how we navigate the realm of activism in a digital age. Intention behind all action is imperative– the intention to carry our activism beyond the digital sphere and become a better ally in the real world. Stopping your efforts at posting an infographic, or merely hopping on a trend for social admiration is pointless. Social media has proven an invaluable political tool for amplifying voices and resources, forming part of a larger movement that strives to dismantle the systems of corruption our society is built upon. Yet it is important to remember exactly this – being politically vocal online is only part of navigating that space as an ally. "It's important that individuals and communities learn how to be effective allies all year round […] going from being bystanders to upstanders," states Raphael Sofoluke, CEO and founder of the UK Black Business Show. Our allied digital efforts need to be supplemented - engaging in conversations with misinformed peers, constant self-education, donating and protesting, and shopping from minority-owned businesses, amongst other measures. Daily practices such as these are what takes any activism past being merely performative. Let's make sure our efforts don't just begin and end with a hashtag.