

Performative Activism Is Still Activism

By Erin Yoo

With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and other social justice movements, the idea of “performative activism” has also become prominent. Performative activism is defined as [“activism that is done to increase one’s social capital rather than because of one’s devotion to a cause”](#) (1). It’s characterized as a substitute for “real” action and thus has a negative connotation. One example is Blackout Tuesday in 2020 where millions of Instagram users, from everyday teens to world-famous celebrities, posted a black square to “show solidarity” for the Black Lives Matter movement. Although this was popular in the moment, actions like this became known as “slacktivism,” which is digital activism through liking, retweeting, and or posting social media posts online, and later received much criticism. This is understandable — it’s reasonable to feel frustrated when people post one graphic to show support for a movement and then pat themselves on the back for doing such important work. However, I argue that performative activism has a real, important value. It is not just a cop-out.

The most important component of a movement gaining traction is visibility. Without widespread knowledge and awareness of the movement, there is no hope for creating change in a democratic society like the United States. So, although many may argue that performative activism is not real activism because it’s simply a “trend,” it’s important to remember that the very idea of activism itself is a trend. It may seem distasteful, but I’d argue that when a movement becomes “trendy,” *that’s a good thing*. It means the movement has entered mainstream attention and media, gaining more of the spotlight that it deserves. The whole point of activism is to get people to jump onto your bandwagon. Of course, all trends end. But, the time a movement spends in the limelight can be vital to sustaining it. Hopefully, it spends enough time being a trend to attract new supporters and hardworking activists to continue the cause and push for change.

In fact, concerning the longevity of social justice causes, I would argue against the age-old mantra “quality over quantity.” For a movement to become successful, action steps must regard quantity over quality. Numbers count. The more likes, posts, infographics, posters, flyers, and emails, the more people know about a movement, even if not all the activists or “slacktivists” are genuine in their motivations. Does it matter that a fifteen-year-old posted an infographic about remembering Breonna Taylor just to look like an activist if it teaches her friends about no-knock raids? As long as the word gets spread, the movement gains recognition and validity. Also, note that spreading awareness to the masses through performative activism is not the end-all-be-all method of achieving justice or equality in society. It is simply a useful tool for getting a movement started, because, again, what matters most in the beginning is mass knowledge and public exposure. The real action afterward will come from legislative and policy change in communities which requires more than just a retweet or like. This is where the most dedicated advocates and activists have to do the “quality over quantity” work.

I believe the real danger of performative activism comes from its potential for misinformation rather than its disingenuity or performative-ness. The accessibility of media and limited attention span on the Internet facilitates rapid exchange of information, which is not always guaranteed to be true. It’s easy to see a post or video and quickly share it without checking its sources or fact-checking the content. Thus, unintentional misinformation can result

from careless “slacktivism.” This is the real threat to a movement. As such, the solution should be improving media literacy, not criticizing well-intentioned performative activists for being fake. This could mean implementing media literacy education in school, regulating social media content in a way where it can still retain its instantaneous qualities, and more.

Even if there is no real substance to posting a black square on Blackout Tuesday, there is at least one effect: exposure, which is critical for the longevity and success of social justice movements in a democratic society. At the same time, not posting that black square doesn’t mean you’re not an activist or someone who cares. There are plenty of other ways to contribute towards a cause including donating, volunteering, or doing advocacy work. It just so happens that for the majority of financially dependent high school students with busy lives, slacktivism fits best into their schedule and for the resources available to them. No, it may not be the most impactful way to make change. But it’s something, and something is better than nothing.