

Infographic Activism: The Good, The Bad and The Flowery Instagram Posts

By Abby Schirmacher

I'm always fretting over my Instagram account. As an aspiring journalist on a campus that so wishes it was "woke," I see the frilly pink posts of my peers seeking to fight racism. Good ideas, of course, but so often they come with the question of whether they are sincere or simply hopping on board the moral exhibitionism bandwagon.

Therefore, I hesitate to post my opinion on social media and tend to stick to a monthly profile picture update. Mostly because social issues and activism feel more politicized than ever.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, social media and its performative nature is terrorizing the digital world. By performative, I mean partaking in activism to elevate social status rather than contribute to the movement.

Shallow, attention-seeking Instagram posts can corrupt and hurt the overall cause. Take the quickly circulating black squares on June 2, 2020. This trend referred to as #BlackOutTuesday sparked controversy due to the performative nature in presenting a black square to stand up to systemic racism. All the white people slept soundly after sharing their black squares that day. "Phew, everyone knows I'm not racist," they thought.

But the response from the activist and Black communities was different. Michelle Taylor, a social worker and writer known as "[Feminista Jones](#)" on social media, challenged the #BlackOutTuesday trend.

"This performative ally stuff is not helping, and this really catered to the people who want to show that they care," she said. "They thought this little black box was going to be a sign of solidarity. I'm like, 'This is not how movements work. This is not how we're supposed to be using social media.' And people fell for it because it takes minimal work and minimal effort."

I fell for it myself. I remember waking up that morning, logging onto Instagram and seeing the black squares all over my feed. I had spent the past few days working tirelessly with members of my predominantly white sorority to discuss diversity and inclusion and holding each other accountable. I had attended two local protests at this point alongside my younger brother to teach him the importance of standing up for what's right by serving as an ally. I posted a black square. I scrolled through Instagram and thought that re-sharing that little black square was the right thing to do. Does that make me a bad person?

Third year student at the University of Colorado Boulder, Chyna Varner, often feels frustrated with the performative nature of online activism recently. "In the age of misinformation, I really

do believe we need to help each other get proper information,” she told me. “But the other edge of that sword is there are so many people who could put ‘BLM’ or ‘ACAB,’ all of those types of abbreviations in their bios and then the next minute they’re calling somebody a racial slur.”

Varner introduced an important point: education. While social media posts may be counterproductive, they also inform users who may not go out of their way to educate themselves otherwise.

For many young people in society, social media is informative on political, social and cultural topics. Though the frilly Instagram posts seem counterproductive, they serve as a starting point for users to understand an issue before initiating the conversation in their daily lives.

That conversation is crucial, because becoming anti-racist doesn’t end when one clicks “repost.” Social media activism doesn’t do social movements any justice if individuals sharing and seeing these posts don’t take direct action to be anti-racist within their own lives.

Whether that means calling out our aggressively racist parents or being a bystander online, we could all benefit from powering off our phones and acting like good humans in the real world. At work, at school, at home. Our actions in these settings will make all the difference.

I’m still learning – we all are. Posting a black square wasn’t my best moment, but it helped me understand the importance of doing instead of showing when it comes to activism. While the dilemma journalists face remains, taking action in our own lives to be anti-racist is a solid start.