

Social Media as a Stage: A Behind the Scenes Analysis of Performative Activism, “Cancel Culture,” and Effective Allyship

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Abstract

Activism on social media has become increasingly significant, with individuals sharing content online to advocate for various social issues and marginalized groups. Social media has become a prominent tool for global outreach and has also led to the emergence of social processes such as performative activism and “cancel culture” (Saint-Louis, 2021). These social processes warrant further examination in order to gauge their effectiveness, and to gain insight into online and offline activism. This study explores the motivations that individuals hold for engaging in activism online, and how external and internal factors might influence their decisions. Both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches were employed in an anonymous online survey to gain insight into individual narratives regarding these social phenomena. Within the research, participants positioned online activism as the least effective in enacting meaningful change, yet they reported consistently engaging in this form of activism. Further, most participants believed that others advocated for social movements in order to gain approval from others, but stated other reasons when asked about their own motivations to post online. While the research found that the fear of “cancel culture” led to increases in online activism, the majority of participants suggested education as an alternative to this process. This research demonstrates the importance of reflecting on personal motives when engaging online and considering the meaning of effective allyship in order to enact progressive and long-lasting change.

Introduction

Activism on social media has become increasingly prominent, with individuals sharing content online to advocate for various social issues and marginalized groups. This form of activism can lead to the blurring of lines between effective allyship and posting with other motives in mind. Some individuals might feel pressured to engage in activism on social media, in order to avoid social alienation. Consequently, this may motivate them to engage in performative activism. Individuals participate in performative activism by advocating solely for the purpose of maintaining a social image, rather than providing meaningful and progressive support for a social cause (Lucie, 2021). Performative

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activism is often driven by the fear of social reprimands, primarily in the form of “cancel culture” (Petray, 2015). This phenomenon has become increasingly prevalent in society as a new way to publicly shame those who deviate from social norms. “Cancel culture” involves calling someone out, often on social media, for socially unfavourable behaviours (Petray, 2015). Through “cancel culture,” individuals are held accountable for their actions, either past or present (Saint-Louis, 2021). However, it is unclear whether this method of accountability is actually effective and serves the best interests of all the parties involved. Although social media has become a significant tool for global outreach, it has also brought about new social processes, such as performative activism and “cancel culture,” which warrant further examination in order to gauge their effectiveness.

Overview of Final Paper

Within this paper, we introduce our topic of study, our purpose for conducting this research, and our guiding research questions. We then discuss the existing literature in relation to the topics within our study and acknowledge gaps in the field that directed our own research. Next, we identify the theoretical frameworks we have chosen to apply to the various social phenomena, including Goffman’s Dramaturgy, Social Desirability Bias and Social Identity Theory. Following the theories, we outline the steps we took throughout the research process, ethical considerations and the necessary actions to combat them, along with any challenges we faced. We also discuss our methodology, in which we describe the steps in the research process, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. We then expand on the ethical considerations regarding the methodology and explain how we maintained proper ethical conduct throughout the research process. Next, we present the results of our research using the appropriate charts, graphs, tables, and figures. Additionally, in the discussion section, we analyze and interpret the results we distinguished, and connect them to existing literature and our theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, we address the limitations of our study and any significant insights our research provided. Finally, we summarize the content of our research paper and provide some concluding thoughts.

Purpose of the Research

Within our research, we investigated the increasing prevalence of social media activism and the related phenomena surrounding performative activism and “cancel culture.” We explored the motivations that individuals hold to engage in these practices, as well as how external and internal factors might influence their decisions online. Throughout the research process, we gained a better understanding of the effectiveness of performative activism in enacting change and the use of “cancel culture” to encourage accountability (Bouvier, 2020). Examining the effectiveness of these phenomena provided us with significant insights about the most meaningful ways to advocate for ourselves and others. As well, this research allowed us to be more educated about the experiences of marginalized communities in order to be more informed and active allies. We hope that this research will provoke readers to critically reflect on how they engage in activism, both online and offline. In addition, we hope this will encourage individuals to consider the motivations that guide their engagement in activism and whether they believe their actions are truly effective. Ultimately, we are hopeful that this research can

incite introspection within ourselves and others to consider the impact of our actions in creating productive change.

Research Questions

Our research study was guided by two overarching questions. Our first question states, “how effective is performative activism (i.e., advocating for a social cause solely to maintain a positive social image) as a method of advocacy and what motivation do individuals hold for engaging in this type of advocacy online?” The purpose of this question was to understand what influences individuals to engage in performative activism and whether it helps or hinders social movements online. This question is relevant as performative activism has grown in prevalence and existing research does not adequately address its effectiveness. Thus, we wanted to gain insight into whether it serves the purpose of enacting real social change. The second question poses, “how does the fear of social alienation, or fear of being “cancelled” (i.e., when individuals who deviate from social norms are called out by others, often on social media), alter individuals’ attitudes and behaviours in relation to online activism?” With this question, we explored the role that “cancel culture” plays in driving individuals to advocate for social issues online. As well, this question allowed for an examination of how individuals might conform to social norms, in order to avoid being rejected. We constructed this question as “cancel culture” has emerged as a new form of social ostracization and we wanted to investigate how effective it is in holding individuals accountable for their actions.

Literature Review

Social Media Activism

With its increasing prevalence, social media plays a pivotal role in facilitating the spread of information and organizational action within social movements (Murthy, 2018). Scholars have conceptualized social media activism as, “a fundamentally communicative process that involves individuals’ communicative actions to collectively solve problems” (Chon & Park, 2019, p. 75). Social media provides a space for individuals to relay their opinions and stories, as well as organize collective action (Chon & Park, 2019). It has rippling effects which can impact various components of social movements, from the mobilization of resources to actual interventions (Murthy, 2018). Beyond acting as a form of communication, social media platforms such as Twitter have been described as dominant organizing mechanisms which frame the foundation of a social movement’s structure (Murthy, 2018). Ultimately, social media acts as a tool to assist in the swift development of social movements that occasionally translate from online to offline (Murthy, 2018).

The phenomenon of online activism is accompanied by contrasting perspectives which either considers it to be effective or ineffective (Murthy, 2018). Particularly when it was a new and unfamiliar concept, online activism was disregarded and labeled as “slacktivism” (Greijdanus et al., 2020). This term depicted online activism as effort-free, unproductive, and a concept that inhibited more effective and effortful offline protests (Greijdanus et al., 2020). A trade-off hypothesis was considered which argued that online activism was substituting offline activism in a negative correlation (Greijdanus et al., 2020). A number of studies were conducted that tested this hypothesis, keeping several factors in mind (Greijdanus et al., 2020). For example, it was found that activism taking place online does

not inhibit offline activism if those partaking in it believe their actions are effective (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Factors such as age were also addressed as studies found that older individuals did not perceive online engagement as sufficient (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Overall, while a minimal number of isolated studies suggested that offline activism is sometimes replaced by online activism, it is relatively rare, as the relationship between the two seems to be more complicated than that (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

The evidence suggests a positive correlation between online and offline activism occurring through a number of intrapersonal and interpersonal effects (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Engagement in activism online can prompt people to also partake in offline activism, as small-scale actions online may facilitate their participation in more costly action offline (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Furthermore, activism on social media may lead to the emergence of social identity within individuals, formed based on similar interests, morality, solidarity, shared beliefs about the given issue, self-efficacy, and injustice (Greijdanus et al., 2020). The development of this social identity may serve as a precursor to encourage these individuals to participate in offline protests (Greijdanus et al., 2020). A reverse effect may also occur in which offline activism prompts online action (Greijdanus et al., 2020). In addition, interpersonal effects are present as a result of individuals coordinating, recruiting, and developing social identities, along with sharing information online prior to, during, and following the initiation of a movement (Greijdanus et al., 2020). In such effects, social media acts as a crucial tool for assembling new participants for offline protests (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Intrapersonal and interpersonal effects relating to online and offline activism illustrate the strong positive correlation that exists between the two (Greijdanus et al., 2020).

Performative Activism

Performative activism refers to the fundamental shift of engagement when bringing about social change (Lucie, 2021). Petray (2015) explains that “online activism could be done well, but often is not” (p. 25). More often, those who engage in online activism treat it as a trend and fail to enact real and positive changes in regard to social causes (Lucie, 2021). Looking at the indistinct line between performative activism and genuine allyship, Petray (2015) exemplifies how individuals engage in activism for the wrong reasons. For one, simple actions such as “clicking the like button,” or merely using hashtags, demonstrates minimal effort, labelling such individuals as “slacktivists” (Petray, 2015, p. 27). These ineffective actions divert attention to the individual self rather than a larger movement, preventing their voices from being heard. In a study examining the effectiveness of online activism, Dookhoo (2019) found that most individuals who participate in online activism were not optimistic that their actions would bring about real social change. If engagement on social media is perceived as ineffective or silent, the public is quick to denigrate the morals of that individual, regardless of whether they have sustained interest in the issue (Velasquez & LaRose, 2015). Therefore, with this fear of ostracism, the motivation of those who engage in performative activism is merely to gain social capital and satisfy the audience, even if that means amplifying silence rather than uplifting oppressed voices (Strother, 2021). Bobel (2007) suggests that the motivation behind online activism can be difficult to determine without delving deep into one’s individual identity. Thus, if it is vividly seen that people are petitioning, protesting,

donating, or doing more than the bare minimum, many would consider them to be genuine activists (Sullivan & Esmail, 2007).

On Tuesday June 2nd, 2020, what was intended to be a day of reflection for the Black community quickly became yet another example of performative activism; this day was referred to as 'Black Out Tuesday' (Strother, 2021). On this day, many individuals changed their profile pictures and posted black squares on their social media in hopes to 'black out' digital platforms. The goal was to pause and acknowledge the systemic racism taking place within society, in regard to the unjust treatment of the Black community (Strother, 2021). Unfortunately, many individuals used this silent protest as a way to gain social capital and bolster their public image. This raised concerns as skeptics began to question individuals' true intentions behind posting these empty black squares, whilst remaining silent on social inequalities that exist in one's day-to-day life (Strother, 2021). During this time, there was a group consensus that those who did not wish to participate by posting a black square would be ostracized and rejected by their peers, as well as society at large. This pressured individuals to engage in performative activism in order to maintain their public image and avoid social condemnation. The awareness of social capital ultimately creates cynicism about whether individuals are actively trying to pursue change or if they are doing it out of fear or to gain social standing (Lucie, 2021).

“Cancel Culture”

The increased connectivity individuals experience due to advancements in technology has created a culture of cancellation (Velasco, 2020). “Cancel culture” occurs when individuals who transgress societal norms are called out or ostracized, often on social media (Saint-Louis, 2021). Within “cancel culture,” individuals withdraw their support of someone who they consider to be acting in an unacceptable or problematic manner, such as being accused of bullying, racism, sexism, or homophobia (Mueller, 2021). The collective action of “cancel culture” can be directed towards public figures, corporations, or any individual who deviates from prescribed norms (Mueller, 2021). “Cancel culture” can have long-lasting consequences for the individual being called out, such as being fired from their job, publicly shamed, or having their personal information shared (Saint-Louis, 2021). Public shaming and forced apologies are not a new phenomenon, as this has occurred for centuries in various forms. However, digital technology has created an environment in which an individual's behaviour is constantly documented and accessible at any time (Mueller, 2021). This constant surveillance of online activity has contributed to the growing prevalence of “cancel culture,” and as Velasco (2020) states, “anyone, therefore, can be subjected to the culture of cancellation” (p. 6).

Although “cancel culture” has rapidly increased in prominence within the digital world, there has been some debate about the morality and effectiveness of “cancellation” as an active practice. The strategy of “cancel culture” can be a tool that helps marginalized communities achieve social change, especially those who might be unable to obtain a public apology or any legal amends otherwise (Norris, 2021). In addition to this, the process of “cancellation” can highlight abuses of power and hold public figures accountable for their words and actions (Norris, 2021). “Cancel culture” also creates a space for open debate and examination of the shared values within a community (Mueller, 2021). However, some believe that “cancel culture” is divisive and polarizing, and that it can be considered a form of extortion or intimidation (Mueller, 2021). Within this practice,

language is weaponized to call attention to those who are acting in a way that defies societal expectations, creating an environment in which “everyone is empowered to sanction bad behaviour” (Mueller, 2021, p. 10). For example, when the controversial view of transgender women was brought forward by J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, people felt entitled to come forward on social media and condemn her opinion (Saint-Louis, 2021). These actions prompted Daniel Radcliffe, who plays the main character in the film adaptation of her novels, to publicly disassociate himself from her view (Saint-Louis, 2021).

As a result, “cancel culture” also intensifies self-censorship, as individuals fear being “cancelled” if they express an idea that contradicts the dominant socially acceptable norms (Velasco, 2020). “Cancel culture” can also be damaging through the practices that it leads to, such as doxing. Doxing takes place when an individual’s private information is shared on the internet to bring harm to them as part of their “cancellation” (Saint-Louis, 2021). These practices not only deeply impact the life of the individual being “cancelled,” but also the lives of those close to them.

Allyship

With the rise of social media activism, allyship is a term which has garnered significant attention (Bourke, 2020). The concept of allyship “reflects a state of being connected to the expression of an ally identity” (Bourke, 2020, p. 179). Possessing the identity of an ally often involves belonging to the dominant group and working to end oppression by supporting and advocating for marginalized groups (Bourke, 2020). Furthermore, to be an ally means to make a conscious commitment to impede and diminish cycles of injustice (Bourke, 2020). Effective allyship occurs when individuals recognize the power and privilege they possess, and intentionally transfer these benefits to marginalized communities (Clark, 2019). Jenkins (2009) situates the concept of allyship into three separate categories. Firstly, an ally aims to provide a sense of support and solidarity towards oppressed populations (Jenkins, 2009). The second aspect of an ally’s role is to use their voice to be an advocate for change and speak out against issues such as injustice (Jenkins, 2009). Lastly, allies are agents who take an action-oriented approach to create changes in systems that may have major power imbalances (Jenkins, 2009).

Implications and Limitations of Existing Literature

Although there is extensive literature discussing social media activism, performative activism, “cancel culture,” and allyship, there are still gaps that can be further examined. As well, more research is needed to describe the intersection of these social phenomena, and how they influence one another. Firstly, social media has played a pivotal role in altering the landscape of activism, and its influence exists on a large scale. However, existing research does not adequately grasp the important role social media plays in shaping and mobilizing social movement organizations (Murthy, 2018). In addition to this, more research is needed to decipher the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations individuals may hold for engaging in online activism, in order to fully understand its effectiveness. Moreover, many researchers often fail to understand the psychological reasoning that leads individuals to engage in performative activism. Dookhoo (2019) argues that the driving force behind this inclination to maintain social appearance is a direct cause of humans' emotional, social, habitual, and cognitive needs.

There is insignificant research regarding the motivations and intentions of activists, and how they contribute to online and offline action (Strother, 2021). As well, not enough research has been conducted on the social repercussions of disengagement in online activism, and what these reprimands, such as “cancel culture,” might look like. “Cancellation” often focuses on demonizing the individual, rather than discussing their actions (Bouvier, 2020). Thus, more research is needed in this field to find alternative ways to approach individuals who deviate from societal norms, rather than publicly shaming or intimidating them on social media. In addition, there should be more research carried out to understand people's thoughts on “cancel culture,” and how the idea of being “cancelled” makes them feel. This is lacking in current research as most take on an objective stance through the observation of past celebrity or citizen “cancellations,” or through the collection and analysis of pre-existing social media posts. In addition, more research is needed in the realm of allyship, specifically digital allyship, as it is a relatively recent concept.

The existing literature forms the foundation of our own research as we examine the ways in which social media activism, performative activism, “cancel culture,” and allyship interact with one another. The limitations identified in the existing literature will guide our own research as we explore how an individual's motivation to engage in performative activism on social media might be fueled by the potential consequences, such as “cancel culture,” and the effectiveness of this kind of advocacy.

Theories

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgical theory was coined by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman was interested in studying human interactions at a micro-level and found that individuals interact with one another in a form that is similar to a grand play (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Goffman makes these connections within his theory in order to explain how people either consciously or subconsciously portray themselves using theatre as a trope (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Goffman describes individuals as “actors,” and the world is represented as a stage that they perform on (Goffman, 1959). The individuals whom we interact with are considered to be our “audience” (Goffman, 1959). Audience characteristics and the size of the audience plays a large role in how we behave, which is referred to as “region behaviour” (Goffman, 1959). Goffman suggests that region behaviour is a mechanism used to manipulate our audience's perception of reality, which ties into another key part of this theory called impression management (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). Impression management is the effort to influence the perceptions that our “audience” has of us, even if it is to provide an insincere or false reality (Goffman, 1959). Goffman wanted to understand how and why people engage in this insincerity, as well as what happens when we are unsuccessful with it (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kivisto & Pittman, 2007). In order to manage the impressions of others, “actors” may use certain dialogue or “costumes,” which refer to the clothes or accessories we wear and select based on our audience at the time (Goffman, 1959).

Within Goffman's dramaturgy, actors construct an identity that they choose to project in social settings, and they might adopt different personas depending on the expectations of the audience (Goffman, 1959). Goffman describes the “front stage,” as the impression

that an individual has formed of themselves, with their performance incorporating socially accepted values (Goffman, 1959). The “front stage” is public and includes an audience, thus individuals put on ‘a show’ that aligns with the expected image people might have of them (Goffman, 1959). As long as they remain within the “front stage,” individual actors attempt to ‘keep up appearances’ in order to manage their impression (Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, the “back stage” is a private domain in which individuals can “step out of character” (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Robinson & Schulz, 2016, p. 57). Within the “back stage,” individuals do not need to maintain a certain impression, and can be more honest, avoiding any threats to their identity (Goffman, 1959). Goffman suggests that “front stage” and “back stage” performances are separate from one another, however, virtual stages that now exist due to the increasing prominence of social media platforms have blurred the line between these two stages (Goffman, 1959, as cited in Kilvington, 2020).

Within the virtual “front stage,” individuals attempt to display an idealized version of themselves, while the virtual “back stage” offers individuals a more relaxed performance that can take place through private messaging platforms (Kilvington, 2020). However, the boundaries between these virtual stages are blurred as virtual “front stages” often feel very personalized and private, even though they are visible to the public (Kilvington, 2020). Thus, individuals might feel more comfortable sharing their true opinions, even if they are harmful to others, in the virtual “front stage” that would normally be shared within their “back stage” during an in-person social interaction. The ambiguous boundaries between these virtual stages are evident through online hate speech that has become more prominent, as individuals are less fearful of its consequences within the virtual stage (Kilvington, 2020). For example, there have been many instances where public figures have been exposed for harmful actions within their virtual “back stage” that eventually seeped into their virtual “front stage” (Kilvington, 2020).

We used Goffman’s dramaturgy to analyze why individuals decide to post or share certain content on social media, and how the content they share differs between their virtual “front stage” and virtual “back stage.” We also used dramaturgy to examine the motivation behind an individual’s decision to advocate for particular issues or movements on social media platforms, and how their actions in these spaces contribute to their overall impression. Goffman’s dramaturgy was also useful as we investigated the impacts of “cancel culture” on an individual’s performance and identity, and how the fear of being “cancelled” may fuel their actions within the virtual stage.

Social Desirability Bias

Allen L. Edwards introduced the notion of social desirability, looking at individuals who strive to avoid repercussions by rejecting socially undesirable behaviours, and admitting to the desirable ones (Edwards & Diers, 1962, as cited in Chung et al., 2003). Social Desirability Bias (SDB) focuses on respondents’ propensity to respond to questions in a form that others perceive as favourable (Chung & Monroe, 2003). A major theory of SDB by Delroy L. Paluhus provides two dimensions for response bias that explain participant motives: impression-management and self-deception (Chung et al., 2003). Those who attempt impression management strategies tend to sway people’s perceptions of their social identity, impacting how others regard them, as well as potential consequences (Chung et al., 2003). Meanwhile, self-deception looks at the unconscious tendencies that individuals hold to view themselves as favourable, by maintaining a positive self-concept

(Chung et al., 2003). This dimension differs from person-to-person through psychological elements that construct how one discerns the world. Thus, social desirability can be conceived through the motivation to maintain social approval, or through a personality construct (Phillips & Clancy, 1972).

However, Graeff (2005) states that the results of SDB vary based on the nature of data collection, such as the degree to which an individual seeks to present themselves in a positive light, as well as whether the respondent's answers will be publicized or anonymous (Graeff, 2005). Anonymous surveys allow individuals to feel that their opinions are being valued equally, without fear of their identity being exposed to others. Thus, if there is a fear of social approval, individuals are more likely to provide favoured answers with the anticipation of receiving positive appraisal from others, rather than expressing their genuine beliefs. Furthermore, if respondents are able to predict the types of responses that would gratify the researchers, it may also have an impact on the SDB outcome (Graeff, 2005).

Moreover, individuals tend to hold contradictory beliefs about themselves and those around them, making them more likely to disprove of their own undesirable behaviours, rather than others (Chung et al., 2003). When Social Desirability Bias occurs, participants anticipate their responses to look good in the eyes of others by providing socially accepted answers (Chung et al., 2003). For example, after an influencer is "cancelled" or "called-out," the public's criticism vastly affects their reputation and their public image. In such a circumstance, influencers often feel obligated to combat the allegations with an apology video acknowledging their mistakes. With an increasingly prominent internet culture, public figures tend to present themselves as desirable to others through a form of apology, in order to avoid being ostracized.

Using Social Desirability Bias to form our research and analyze the topics being studied benefitted us when we examined the intentions and motivations behind those who engage in performative activism, and whether they fear expressing beliefs that could have a negative impact on certain groups. In addition, through participant experiences and opinions, we came to understand whether there was a fear of being "cancelled" within those who engage in performative activism, merely because they feel obligated to present themselves in a desirable light. Fisher (1993) states that if respondents feel discomfort with reporting their genuine views and experiences, they are more probable to act contrary to the expectations of others in order to achieve a social purpose. Ultimately, this could motivate individuals to engage in performative activism online for a desirable and positive outcome from others. Lastly, we used this theory to investigate if conscious false beliefs coexist with opposing unconscious genuine beliefs, where individuals may act upon objectives that are contrary to their actual interests.

Social Identity Theory

Originally proposed by European psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, Social Identity Theory refers to the intersection between one's self and perceived group affiliation (Tajfel et al., 1979, as cited in Trepte, 2006). It is the self-categorization of individuals aligning themselves with social groups, in search of belongingness; this is the product of a person's self-esteem being derived from their perceived membership within a group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Social Identity Theory emphasizes how social groups guide individual and collective behaviours, thus enticing positive perceptions of one's self in

relation to their disposed group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). In order to maintain a positive self-concept, social groups tend to hold ethnocentric values. This is done whilst engaging in a downwards comparison and undermining those affiliated with other groups to boost their own morale, consequently leading to the formation of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Out-group members are typically those who do not share the same attitudes and beliefs as the in-group, nor do they conform to social norms, and they are not afraid to voice their own opinions (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Those who choose to deviate from prescribed social norms are commonly devalued as members within society, rejected by peers, and receive major backlash from the community (Greijdanus et al., 2020). By subjecting those with divergent values to scrutiny and negative biases, the in-group is able to maintain a positive social identification with its members. Thus, this leads to the devotion of more individuals and increased access to resources, consequently furthering the divide between the two groups (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

With the emergence of media in today's society, it has become easier for the in-group to broaden their hold on society as there is a high demand for social acceptance, as well as a desire to be part of something greater than oneself. Further, through a close analysis of an individual's perceived group status, Social Identity Theory is able to predict behaviours and aptitude for social mobility between groups (Trepte, 2006). Essentially, if an individual engages in something even remotely outside of the in-group's ideals, they will be rejected and pushed to the out-group.

Moreover, there has been a recent societal shift in which certain attitudes and behaviours are now deemed unacceptable, despite previously being considered the norm, such as homophobia. Further, those whose beliefs do not align with the in-group's values are considered deviant beings and are subjected to social scrutiny, in addition to being alienated by their community (Trepte & Loy, 2017). In turn, this lessens or completely diminishes one's social capital, thus making them part of the out-group. In addition, on social media, there has been an emergence of online activism to shed light on pressing social issues. Individuals are constantly pressured by others to engage in online activism, in order to maintain their social capital. Thus, those individuals who do not wish to participate in advocacy demonstrations are subjected to social condemnation. In order to avoid social reprimands, individuals may engage in performative acts, as well as alter their attitudes and beliefs, in order to be socially accepted.

The first core tenet of Social Identity Theory, which sets its foundation, is the process of social categorization. In order to make sense of the world, individuals create categories and schemas in their mind that assist them in processing information (Trepte, 2006). Likewise, individuals categorize other people into groups and shape social interaction based on those perceived groups (Trepte, 2006). Similarly, individuals engage in self-categorization, in which they establish their own social group memberships (Trepte & Loy, 2017). These memberships may become integrated into one's own social identity if their values align, and as a result, they internalize them as a part of their self-concept (Trepte & Loy, 2017). In addition to the process of social categorization, the "accentuation principle" plays a role in emphasizing group memberships, as individuals tend to accentuate the similarities of their in-group, along with the differences of the out-group (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Social categorization relates to our research topic surrounding performative activism and "cancel culture" as it outlines the way in which individuals distinguish themselves and

their in-group, as well as outliers who they consider to be part of the out-group. In terms of our research, individuals categorize others on the basis of shared beliefs. They create a dichotomy between people who have the same beliefs as them, which they consider to be right, and those who have alternate views, which they perceive as wrong. By distinguishing their perception of right and wrong, they choose to solely associate with those they perceive to be part of their in-group.

Another key component of Social Identity Theory is social identification. This principle refers to the process through which individuals identify with a group, invest their emotions into it, and alter their behaviour in accordance with their membership (Trepte, 2006). The concept of social identification can be applied to this research as individuals choose to identify with certain groups on the basis of shared beliefs and separate themselves from others whom they place in the out-group. Individuals go as far to disassociate themselves entirely from anyone or anything that has opposing beliefs to their own. For example, in order to emphasize their identity with their in-group, individuals often boycott certain companies and brands that do not comply with their morals. By doing so, they amplify their position on the side of the dichotomy, while emphasizing their disengagement with the other side.

Furthermore, the process of group membership influencing behaviour relates to our topic as social identification with one's in-group can motivate individuals to continue engaging in online and offline activism (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Activism on social media tends to create an online community, which can lead to the emergence of a new social identity within participants (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Social identification within these online communities has been found to facilitate participation in continued online activism, along with a drive to engage in offline action as well (Greijdanus et al., 2020). The concept of social identification is highly relevant in terms of our research topic as it highlights the way that individuals define themselves and others, as well as influencing their drive to engage in activism.

The final key tenant of Social Identity Theory is the cross-comparison between social groups in order to gain self-esteem, reinforce membership, and further the divide between groups (Trepte, 2006). In relation to performative activism, one underlying force behind engaging in online advocacy is to gain social capital and, in turn, increase self-esteem (Strother, 2021). This is exemplified through individuals who passively post about social issues on their social media platforms with little to no background knowledge on the issue at hand. Through performative activism, people are able to unite and stand together for a cause, thus strengthening ties between members within the in-group. Finally, the in-group furthers the divide between 'us' and 'them' by collectively and publicly ostracizing individuals, as a means to push their values onto society, and alienate those who fail to accept their ideals (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Summary of Theories

Within the context of this research, the theories discussed have worked simultaneously to offer us a deeper understanding of social media activism and the related phenomena of performative activism, "cancel culture," and allyship. Dramaturgy theory, Social Desirability Bias and Social Identity Theory have allowed us to examine the internal processes of our participants, such as their intentions and motivation to engage in activism.

Dramaturgy theory was helpful in analyzing participants' responses about their primary motivations for engaging in online activism, and how their presentation differed between their virtual "front stage" and "back stage." It also allowed us to investigate any indicators of performative activism and how participants may have engaged in it to appear desirable to a certain audience. The second theoretical framework, Social Desirability Bias, helped us grasp an understanding of the motivation individuals hold for engaging in performative activism when participants were asked if they have ever felt obligated to post about social issues online. In addition, this framework allowed us to explore how individuals often act in a certain way to attain a social purpose. The third theory, Social Identity Theory, prompted us to recognize how individuals may engage in performative activism and alter their attitudes, solely to avoid backlash or being called out by others in the community (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Overall, each theoretical framework was able to provide us with meaningful findings and insights on public perceptions regarding online and offline activism.

Methodology

Research Methodology

In our study, both quantitative (i.e., online anonymous survey) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended questions as part of our online, anonymous survey) methodological approaches were used to answer our research questions. Our first research question stated, "how effective is performative activism as a method of advocacy and what motivation do individuals hold for engaging in this type of advocacy online," while our second research question asked, "how does the fear of social alienation, or the fear of being "cancelled," alter individuals' attitudes and behaviours in relation to online activism?" The survey was conducted through an anonymous online questionnaire created on LimeSurvey, the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) approved platform. The research was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB#: 0327). The recruitment of our participants was completed through a third-party, the McMaster Student Union (MSU) and its affiliated clubs, committees, and societies, who distributed information regarding our survey to potential participants on our behalf. Convenience sampling was used, as the population being advertised to during the recruitment process was undergraduate students at McMaster University, who were 18 years of age and older in any program or level of study.

We believe that this method of research was the most effective for our study because of the flexibility it allowed us to have in developing survey questions and the design process. It also had minimal risks in regard to COVID-19 as no in-person contact was necessary for the completion of this study. Participants were able to take the survey from any location of their choice, which was beneficial as on-campus presence was not mandatory at the time.

Our research methodology allowed us sufficient freedom in the development of our survey questions. Additionally, we were able to incorporate a variety of question types into our survey. Excluding the demographic questions, 7 out of our 17 questions used the Likert Scale, two were dichotomous (e.g., yes or no questions), four were multiple-choice questions, and the remaining four were open-ended short answer questions. The diversity of question types provided us with several avenues for the way that we asked or phrased questions, as well as how we analyzed, compared, and generalized our results once the

study was complete. Finally, using an online survey as a means of data collection not only helped us to reach a large sample population, but also helped us to eliminate the potential for the Hawthorne effect. This occurs when the researcher is present during the experimental portion of the study, which may influence how the participants behave or respond (McCambridge et al., 2014).

Research Process

In order to conduct our research, we first came up with our topic of interest and narrowed it down to the concepts and areas we were most keen to investigate further. We then created research questions to guide us throughout the research process. We examined the existing literature surrounding our topic, in order to find any gaps in the research that could inform our own study. In addition to this, we investigated different theories that we could apply to our topic to help us gain a better understanding of the various concepts we were studying. These theories were especially valuable when analyzing the patterns and trends that were present in our survey results. Once we constructed a foundation upon which to build our own research study, we created both open-ended and closed-ended questions to be used in our survey. These questions helped us gain insight into student opinions about performative activism, “cancel culture,” and effective advocacy. While generating these questions, we also considered the ethical implications and potential risks that participants might face, in order to find ways to curb any negative effects they may experience.

Once we received ethics approval, we created our 10-minute anonymous online survey using the McMaster Ethics Research Board approved platform, LimeSurvey. Next, we began the recruitment process by reaching out to several student-run groups and organizations to ask them to advertise the survey for us on their social media platforms using our approved email recruitment scripts. We ensured that any group member with a conflict of interest was not contacting the student-run club or group they were part of. The following is a complete list of all the student-run groups and clubs we recruited from:

Public Health Association	Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Student Union (ACSSU)	Social Psychology Society	McMaster Social Sciences Society	McMaster Engineering Society
McMaster Indian Association	McMaster Humanities Society	MacKin Society	Black Students Association	Girl Up McMaster
Hispanic and Portuguese Club	Muslim Students Association	Middle Eastern Students Association	Jack.org McMaster	McMaster Gujarati Students Association

Humanity First McMaster	Queer and Trans Colour Club	McMaster Pass on Positivity	Financial Marauder	World Vision McMaster
McMaster Hindu Students Association	McMaster Anthropology Society	Communicatio ns and Multi- Media Society	McMaster Sociology Society	McMaster Linguistics Society
Health, Aging and Society Student Association (HASSA)	COPE: A Student Mental Health Initiative	McMaster Philosopher's Society	McMaster Social Work Student Collective	Psychology Neuroscience and Behaviour Society

Once the survey was advertised through these student-run groups, participants who were McMaster University undergraduate students 18 years of age and older in any program or year of study encountered the link and accessed it. They were able to view the letter of information and give us implied consent by clicking “Yes, I agree to participate in the study.” The participants went through the survey and completed the questions they felt comfortable answering before submitting it. We collected the data in the form of computer responses from LimeSurvey and the participants were free to complete the survey in whichever location they chose within the designated time frame. We kept the survey open from our start date of November 12th, 2021 until the end of the data collection period on February 18th, 2022 and we were able to collect a total of 51 full responses. Following this, we closed the survey and began the process of data analysis. We analyzed both our quantitative and qualitative data to look for significant results, including common trends or patterns. In addition to this, we drew connections among our quantitative and qualitative data to generate a clear picture of our survey results. Once the data analysis stage concluded, we condensed our significant findings in order to discuss them during our poster presentation in March 2022 and our final paper. Once we successfully submitted our final paper, we ensured that all participant data was deleted.

Ethical Issues and Actions for Proper Conduct

With any research project, numerous ethical concerns must be taken into consideration. To start, it is important to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of our participants and their information. As researchers, we employed a number of methods to guarantee the safekeeping of this information, such as storing documents on password-protected devices and sharing information solely through our McMaster emails, encrypted files and a secure network. Further, all participant information remained anonymous to our research team, and we did not recruit participants ourselves, but rather through student-run groups. Finally, once we concluded our research, we deleted all saved data by April 30th, 2022.

First, to uphold ethical practices within our research, we ensured that participants were properly informed of their rights in the letter of information before taking the survey. It was vital that they understood these rights in order to minimize any potential risks. Participants had the right to refuse to partake in the study at any given point in time. This included the right to withdraw from the study, without explanation, once participation began.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary in order to protect the autonomy of participants. We also ensured that respondents were aware of the lack of consequences for withdrawing or refusing to participate in the study, to avoid potential social risks. However, once participants submitted their survey answers, they were not able to have their responses removed from the study. Due to the anonymous nature of this survey, it would be impossible to tell which answers the participant had submitted in order for them to be removed, therefore, we could not allow participants to withdraw post-submission.

Additionally, research participants had the right to not answer every question on the survey. This minimized potential psychological risks and avoided hostility bias. Participants were not required to answer all the survey questions, as this might have unintentionally subjected them to reflect on unpleasant experiences and memories, especially given that our research focuses on controversial and sensitive social topics. Finally, by commencing the survey, participants indicated that they have read the letter of information, which provided them with details of the study, thus giving us implied consent.

Moreover, participants may have experienced social and psychological risks when taking part in our research. Our aim was to minimize the implications of these risks to the greatest extent. Potential social risks included a lack of privacy to those completing our survey. When taking part in a survey, having the ability to express one's own thoughts without the fear of publicity is vital in receiving genuine responses. Participants were unrestricted as to where they could take our online survey. Therefore, instead of taking the survey in a public setting, participants were able to take it in a more private or secure environment. Anonymity is substantial in ensuring respondents' privacy, thus, all of the responses were made strictly anonymous throughout data collection, data storage, and dissemination of our research findings. In addition, we provided the contact information for student support services if participants needed support because of any uncomfortable feelings that arose during or after our survey.

Furthermore, when individuals were given the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions regarding our topic, they may have felt uncomfortable to engage in critical self-reflection when answering some of our questions, ultimately creating possible psychological risks. When questions addressed sensitive topics, respondents might have felt hesitant with their involvement, thus discouraging them from completing our survey. In order to manage these risks, participants were informed that they will be sharing their experiences without being identified, as well as not being required to answer questions if they were uncomfortable in doing so. Participants were also provided with support services, as mentioned above, as a way to manage any potential psychological risks. Additionally, all questions asked were minimal risk, posing no greater risk than everyday life. The anonymous nature of the survey also reduced the potential psychological, and social risks associated with the study as participants were not identifiable. Finally, participants were able to withdraw from the survey anytime until submitting the survey.

Lastly, it was crucial to manage potential conflicts of interest in our research in order to avoid harmful misperceptions. In such circumstances, if the researchers have multiple roles in common with the participants, these conflicts of interests may lead to undue influences that could affect the decision-making processes of the respondents. As researchers, we were all McMaster University students who sampled a population of undergraduate students at the same institution. In addition, one of the members of our

research team was a teaching assistant for a first-year undergraduate course. As well, two of our group members were involved in multiple clubs and societies within the school. Therefore, there were perceived conflict, since we were students and volunteers of the community we sampled from. To avoid these conflicts of interest, while recruiting from student-run clubs, non-members were the ones to reach out, rather than those who were a part of the club. In addition, we surveyed students in an online environment, therefore, they were able to take it in any space they felt comfortable.

Finally, this research aimed to remain impartial and unbiased, especially through the administration of our survey questionnaire. This was done by carefully devising our survey questions in a way that did not sway the participants into providing answers desired by the research team. By remaining conscious of these potential risks and through proper engagement in ethical conduct, we aimed to refrain from causing potential harm to participants that could have led to ethical impropriety.

Challenges: Data Collection and Analysis

We encountered several challenges within the process of data collection. Firstly, we ran into issues with participant recruitment, as our only method of advertising the survey was through third-party, student-run groups. This was problematic as an insufficient number of groups agreed to promote it for us, which reduced the number of students we were able to reach. This may have also been influenced by the specific social media platforms that the student-run groups used to post our survey, as younger generations gravitate towards certain platforms over others. In addition, there was no way for us to ensure that our sample was representative of our target population which is comprised of individuals with various life experiences influenced by factors such as race, socioeconomic status, sex, etcetera.

Another challenge we encountered is that the responses we received from participants may have been skewed due to the effects of response bias. It is possible that only individuals who were knowledgeable on, and interested in, the topic responded to the survey. This could have led to issues within data analysis, as the results may not have been fully generalizable to our target population. Furthermore, respondents may have answered in a manner that portrays them as socially desirable rather than in an honest way. They may have also provided calculated responses to align with the answers that they thought we hoped to receive. Potential response bias might have led to issues in the data analysis process, as it could have impacted any patterns and conclusions we distinguished.

The last challenge we faced within the data analysis process was our lack of experience in conducting and analyzing our own research. As this was a fairly new experience for us, our skills regarding data analysis were limited. Furthermore, we had minimal experience using the software necessary for this step of the research process, which proved to be a challenge. This was a learning experience for us, and required us to develop and strengthen various skills, as we inevitably encountered a number of challenges throughout the process.

Plans for Data Analysis

We used the software Jamovi to analyze our quantitative data that we collected from the survey. We started by organizing the data from our 13 quantitative questions and five

socio-demographic questions into frequency tables and examined the descriptive statistics so that we could assess the common patterns and trends amongst the data. Once we organized the data, we made note of any significant trends that were present. We then converted our relevant data into percentages to allow for effective comprehension and analysis. We investigated the variables that influenced the data patterns we discovered, in order to draw specific conclusions in relation to our research questions. We used Microsoft Excel to create various charts and figures to represent our data and allow for a better understanding of our results.

We analyzed our qualitative data by reading through the responses for each of our four qualitative questions and making detailed notes on each one. This allowed us to discern any common themes or key words between them that could be coded to easily distinguish their similarities. These similarities were used to identify major themes present within the data that related to our research topic. We also made note of participant responses that were significant to our overall findings and contributed personal insight to our topics of interest. In addition to this, we drew connections between the qualitative and quantitative data to further examine the common trends and patterns within the results.

Timeline for Data Collection & Analysis

Task	Start Date	End Date
Participant Recruitment	November 12th, 2021	February 18th, 2022
Data Collection	November 12th, 2021	February 18th, 2022
Data Analysis	February 19th, 2022	March 1st, 2022
Poster Creation	February 1 st , 2022	March 8 th , 2022
Final Thesis Paper	January 17 th , 2022	April 1 st , 2022
Deletion of Data	-	April 30th, 2022

Results

Sociodemographics

The sample size within our research study included 51 McMaster undergraduate students (n=51). The demographic questions participants were asked in our survey included their year of study, faculty, ethnicity, gender, and age.

Year of Study

Our first demographic question asked participants what year of undergraduate studies they were in. Responses included first year, second year, third year, fourth year and other. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of participants were in their fourth year, representing a total of 49.0%. We had 25.5% of individuals who stated that they were in their third year, 17.6% who were in their second year, 5.9% in their first year, and one individual (2.0%) who selected 'other.'

Figure 1

Frequencies of Year of Study

Levels	Counts	% of Total
1st year	3	5.9%
2nd year	9	17.6%
3rd year	13	25.5%
4th year	25	49.0%
Other	1	2.0%

(The jamovi project, 2022)

Faculty

Our next demographic question asked which faculty participants were part of at McMaster University. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the majority of participants in our study were in the Faculty of Science (38.0%), followed by the Faculty of Social Sciences (32.0%), Faculty of Engineering (14.0%), Faculty of Health Sciences (8.0%), DeGroot School of Business (6.0%) and the least selected response being the Faculty of Humanities (2.0%).

Figure 2

Frequencies of Faculty

Levels	Counts	% of Total
DeGroot School of Business	3	6.0%
Faculty of Engineering	7	14.0%
Faculty of Health Sciences	4	8.0%
Faculty of Humanities	1	2.0%
Faculty of Science	19	38.0%
Faculty of Social Sciences	16	32.0%

(The jamovi project, 2022)

Ethnicity

With the space provided, we asked participants, if comfortable, to write the ethnicity they self-identify with. Our participants identified with the following ethnicities as indicated in Figure 3: White / European / Caucasian (37.3%), South Asian (21.6%), Middle Eastern (15.7%), No Answer (13.7%), East Asian / South East Asian (5.9%), Black / African /

Caribbean (3.9%) and Hispanic / Latin American (2.0%). There were 7 participants who chose not to answer, leading to a total of 44 respondents to this question.

Figure 3

Frequencies of Ethnicity

Levels	Counts	% of Total
White, European, Caucasian	19	37.3%
Black, African, Caribbean	2	3.9%
Middle Eastern	8	15.7%
South Asian	11	21.6%
Hispanic, Latin American	1	2.0%
East Asian, South East Asian	3	5.9%
No Answer	7	13.7%

(The jamovi project, 2022)

Gender

Participants were also asked which gender they self-identified with, if they were comfortable sharing. Based on the results, 30 participants identified as female (66.7%), 13 participants identified as male (28.9%) and 2 participants identified as non-binary (4.4%). There were 6 participants who chose not to answer, leading to a total of 45 respondents to this question. From these results, we can conclude that more than half of our survey participants identified as female.

Figure 4

Frequencies of Gender

Levels	Counts	% of Total
Female	30	66.7%
Male	13	28.9%
Non-binary	2	4.4%

(The jamovi project, 2022)

Age

Our last demographic question asked participants to indicate their current age in the space provided, if comfortable doing so. There were 4 participants who chose not to answer, leading to a total of 47 respondents to this question. As seen in Figure 5, responses ranged from ages 18 to 28. 2.1% of participants were 18 years old, followed by 14.9% who were 19, 21.3% who were 20, 48.9% who were 21, 6.4% who were 22, 4.3% who were 23, and lastly 2.1% who were 28 years old.

Figure 5
Frequencies of Age

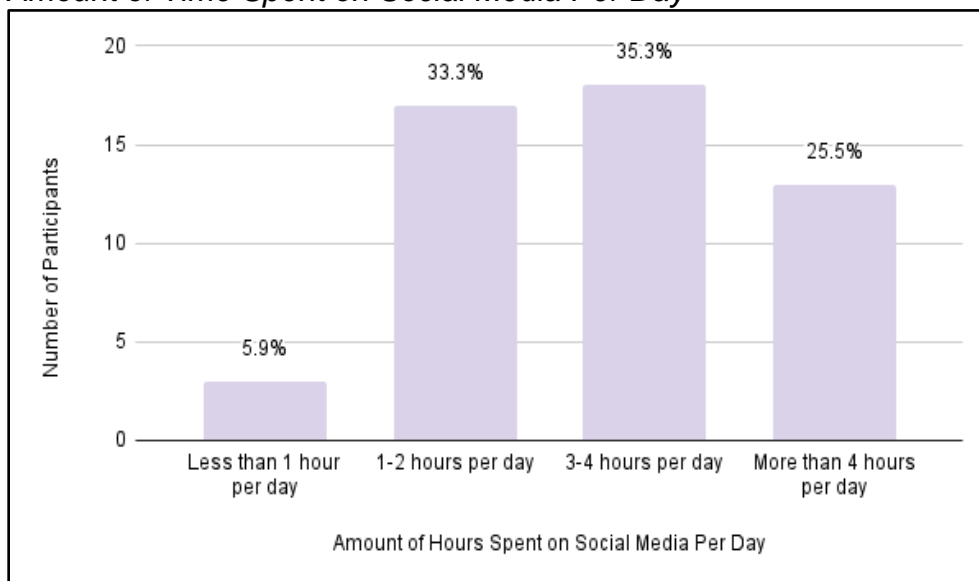
Levels	Counts	% of Total
18	1	2.1%
19	7	14.9%
20	10	21.3%
21	23	48.9%
22	3	6.4%
23	2	4.3%
28	1	2.1%

(The jamovi project, 2022)

Social Media Use

The first survey question asked participants how many hours they spend per day on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook. As seen in Figure 6, 5.9% of respondents reported less than 1 hour spent per day using social media; 33.3% stated that 1-2 hours of their day are spent on social media; and 35.3% indicated that they spend 3-4 hours using social media daily, which was also the most commonly chosen response. Finally, 25.5% of participants reported spending over 4 hours every day on social media platforms. As seen in Figure 6, the majority of participants spend either 3 hours or more on social media per day.

Figure 6
Amount of Time Spent on Social Media Per Day



The second question in our survey asked participants which social media platform they use most often, with options including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, or other. The most common response was Instagram with a total of 47.1% of respondents saying they use it the most. Following Instagram, 31.4% of participants reported TikTok as their most used social media platform. After TikTok was Snapchat, selected by 9.8% of respondents. Next, 5.9% reported using Twitter the most often. Finally, 3.9% selected the use of “other” social platforms, and 1.9% stated they use Facebook the most often. The results demonstrated that participants used Instagram the most, while Facebook was the least used social media platform.

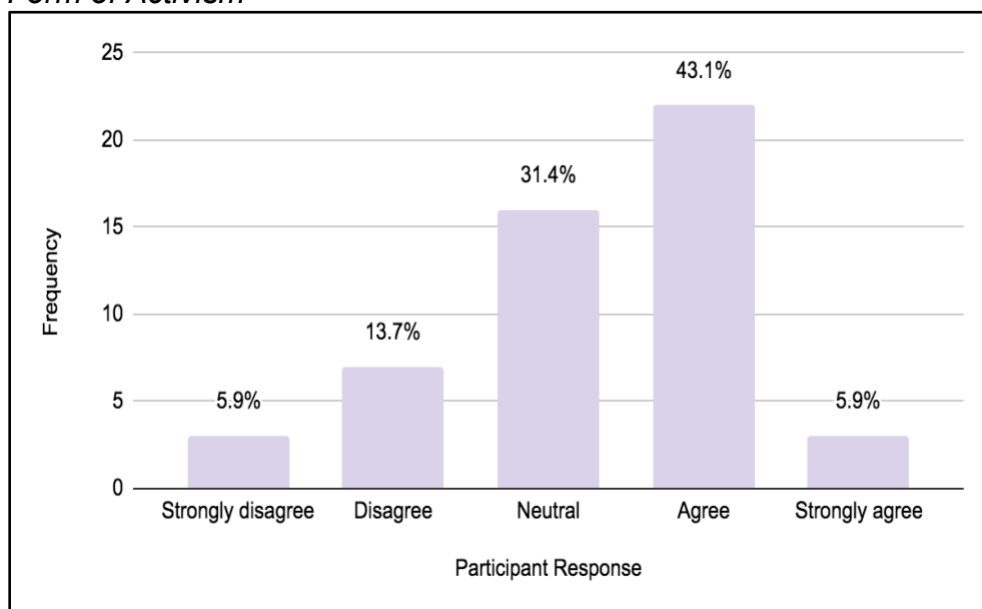
The third question in the survey asked participants how they would describe their use of social media from options including passive, active, or both. 27.5% of respondents described their use of social media as passive, which includes scrolling without engaging with or posting content. 1.9% of respondents described their social media use as active, which includes scrolling and regularly engaging with and posting content. The most commonly chosen description of social media use was both passive and active, as 70.6% of participants selected this answer.

Perceived Effectiveness of Different Forms of Activism

Participants were presented with the statement “I believe that posting or sharing information about a social movement or issue on social media is an effective form of activism,” and were asked how strongly their values aligned with the given statement. As shown in Figure 7 below, 5.9% of respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, while 13.7% disagreed and 31.4% of participants had neutral feelings towards it. 43.1% of the individuals who took the survey agreed with the statement and 5.9% of respondents strongly agreed with it. The majority of participants either agreed with this statement or had neutral feelings towards it.

Figure 7

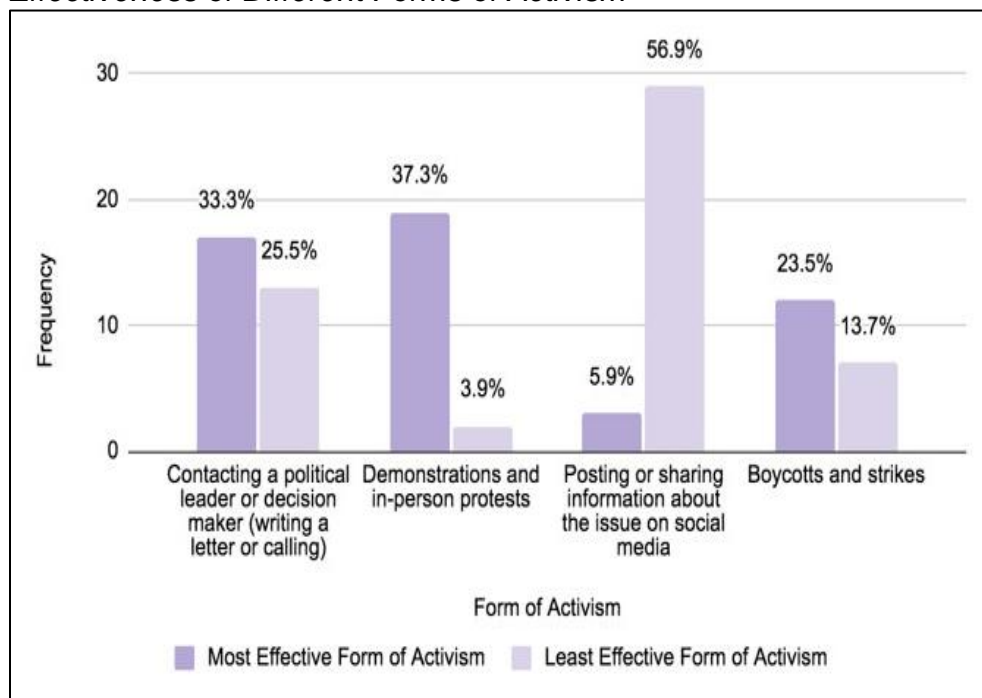
“Posting or Sharing Information about Social Movements on Social Media is an Effective Form of Activism”



Participants were then asked to contemplate which method of activism they felt was the most effective in enacting meaningful change from a list of four options: demonstrations and in-person protests, contacting a political leader or decision maker, posting or sharing information about the issue on social media and boycotts and strikes. As indicated in Figure 8, 37.3% of individuals felt that demonstrations and in-person protests were the most effective, while 33.3% of respondents believed that contacting a political leader or decision maker is more productive. In addition to this, 23.5% of participants thought that boycotts and strikes are most beneficial and 5.9% indicated that posting or sharing information about issues on social media is the most effective form of advocacy. The data displayed that individuals participating in this survey believed that demonstrations and in-person protests are the most effective in enacting change.

Subsequently, from the same list, respondents had to rank which form of activism they would consider to be the least effective in enacting meaningful change. Figure 8 exhibits that 3.9% of participants positioned demonstrations and in-person protests as least effective, while 13.7% selected the option of boycotts and strikes. 25.5% indicated that boycotts or strikes are ineffective, while 56.9% of participants believed that posting or sharing information on social media is the least effective. Overall, respondents indicated that posting or sharing information on social media is the least effective method to enact change.

Figure 8
Effectiveness of Different Forms of Activism



Following these questions, respondents were asked a qualitative question about desensitization (less likely to feel shock or distress due to repetitive exposure to global issues) that could result from the extensive amounts of information about social problems available on social media. Majority of the participants indicated that there is a possibility

of desensitization due to an “over-saturation of global issues on social media.” A recurring theme among the responses was that bad news is not as shock-inducing anymore. Many respondents explained feeling overwhelmed due to the repetitive exposure to various issues on social media. The inevitability of viewing the same stories in several spaces online can lead individuals to become habituated to the severity of the given social issues. One of our respondents commented:

“...When an issue receives attention on social media, it is often shared by a multitude of people simultaneously, and the sheer quantity of information can be overwhelming and desensitizing. In addition, consistent exposure to different social issues can create a perception of inevitability, especially if there appears to be no progress on these issues.”

Respondents also described the repeated exposure to tragic events on social media as becoming “normalized” and “commonplace.” Several participants mentioned that regularly viewing this content on social media reduces any passion to take action and engage in the process of change. This lack of motivation to engage in activism is believed to be a result of the desensitization that people experience on social media. Several respondents noted that the more often individuals post about a particular issue on social media, the less real and applicable it feels to each person, thus not sparking an emotional and empathetic response. Respondents also indicated that many individuals might post about these issues simply because they see others doing it. This has led to what survey participants have called a “trend-like pattern of activism posts.” One participant explained their belief regarding this pattern, stating:

“...I think this is why people tend to post on social media because it’s the easiest form of activism. I think at times it’s not just that the person doesn’t care, but it’s because they see other’s posting which makes them also want to post to prove they are aware of the issue and to avoid being called out.”

Participants also mentioned that when a message about an issue is shared many times on social media, it becomes less meaningful. As well, one respondent stated that viewing several posts about the same issue “decreases our perception of the severity and true impact these issues have on people.” Another survey participant summed up the majority of the responses we received by declaring that “if you are told about 100 bad things going on in the world at once, it is hard to care about just 1 issue enough to make a change.” Thus, respondents believed that desensitization is very prominent within social media, due to the repeated exposure to posts about various social issues that individuals continue to share, resulting in a reduced willingness to engage in activism.

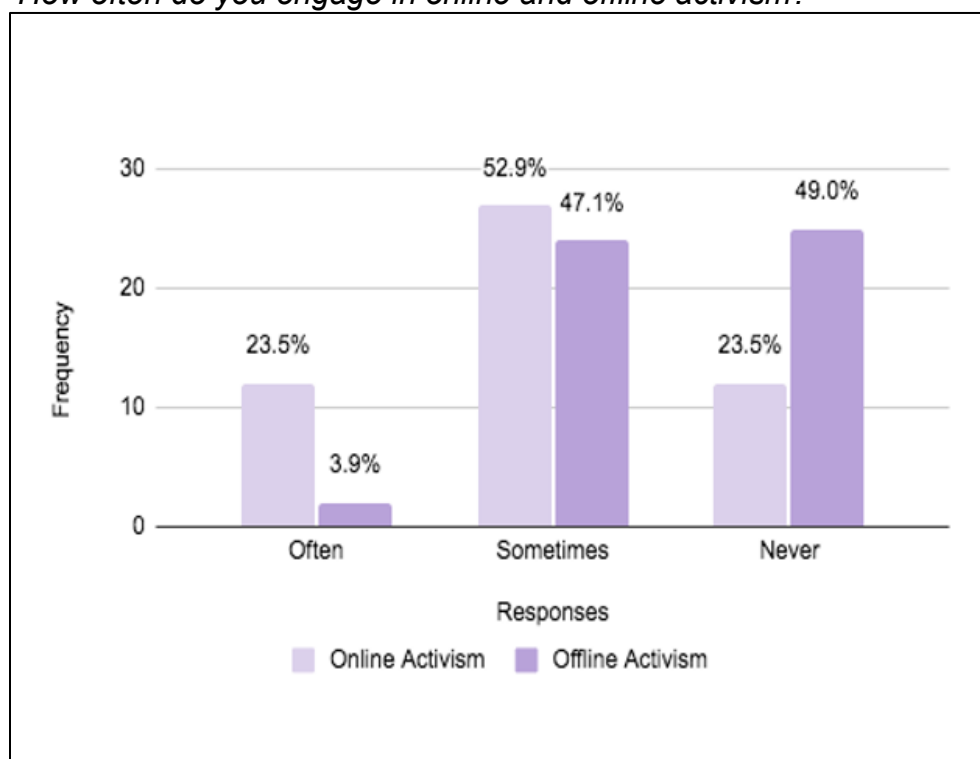
Participant Engagement in Online and Offline Activism

A double bar graph is used in Figure 9 to illustrate the results of two quantitative questions regarding participant engagement in online and offline activism. The first question asked how often participants engage in online activism, for example, posting or sharing information about an issue, signing petitions, etc. The second question asked respondents how often they engage in offline activism, which includes attending in-person

protests, boycotts, contacting political leaders, etc. Combining the two questions into a double bar graph allowed us to compare responses for both categories. Using a Likert scale, participants were provided with the following options: never, sometimes, often, and always. Within both questions, we did not have any participants select the option always, and thus it is not displayed on the x-axis of the graph. For engagement in online activism, 52.9% of participants selected sometimes, followed by 23.5% who selected often and 23.5% who selected never. For engagement in offline activism, 49.0% of participants reported that they never engage in it, followed by 47.1% who reported sometimes engaging in it, and lastly, 3.9% who stated that they often engage in it. Thus, the majority of participants indicated that they never engage in offline activism, and the majority of participants for the question about online activism stated that they do sometimes engage in it.

Figure 9

“How often do you engage in online and offline activism?”

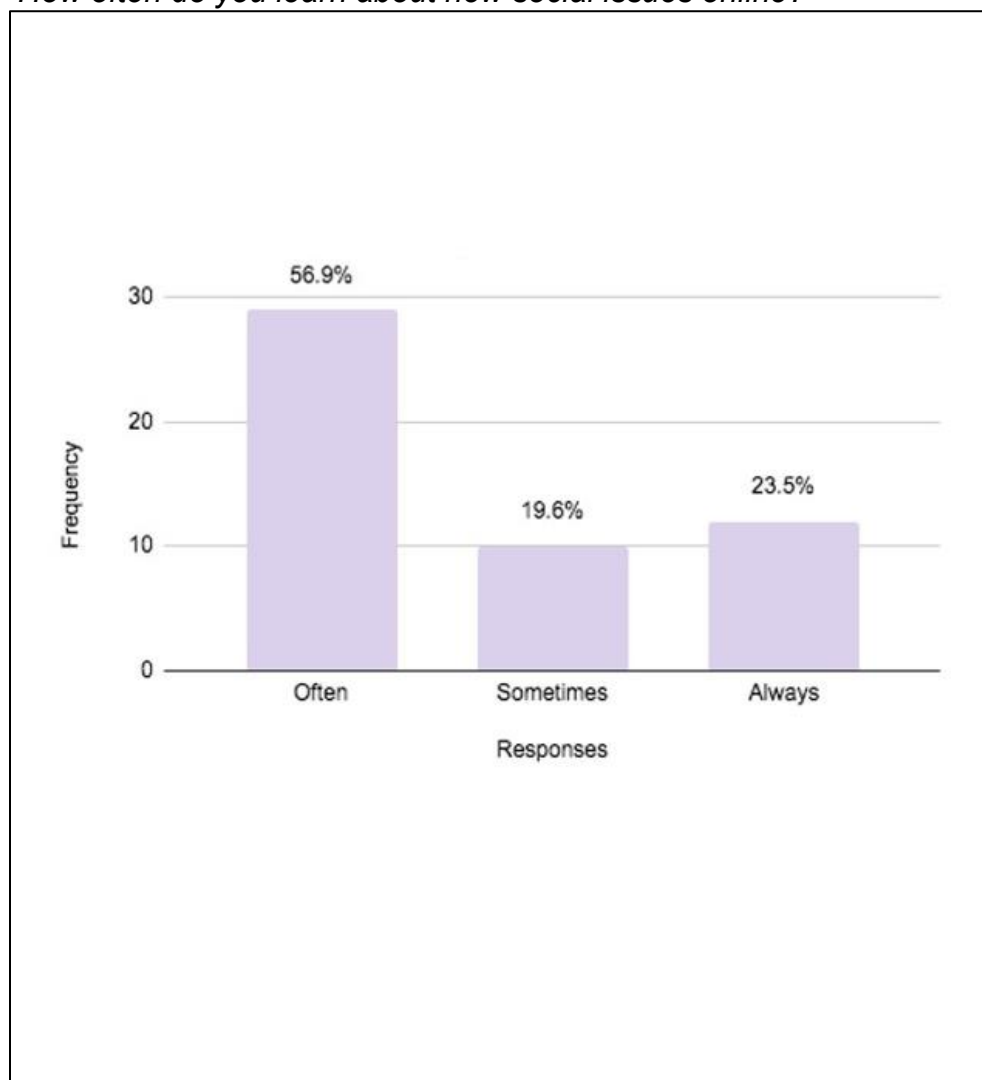


Learning about Social Issues

We asked participants how often they learn about new social issues or movements through the posts they see on social media. Using a Likert scale, participants were given the following options to choose from: never, sometimes, often, and always. We did not have any participants indicating that they never learn about social issues online. For that reason, ‘never’ is not displayed on the x-axis of our graph. Based on the results shown in Figure 10, 56.9% of participants often learn about social issues on social media, followed by 23.5% who always learn about them online, and 19.6% who sometimes do. These results demonstrate that to varying degrees, participants learn about social issues and movements through social media platforms.

Figure 10

“How often do you learn about new social issues online?”



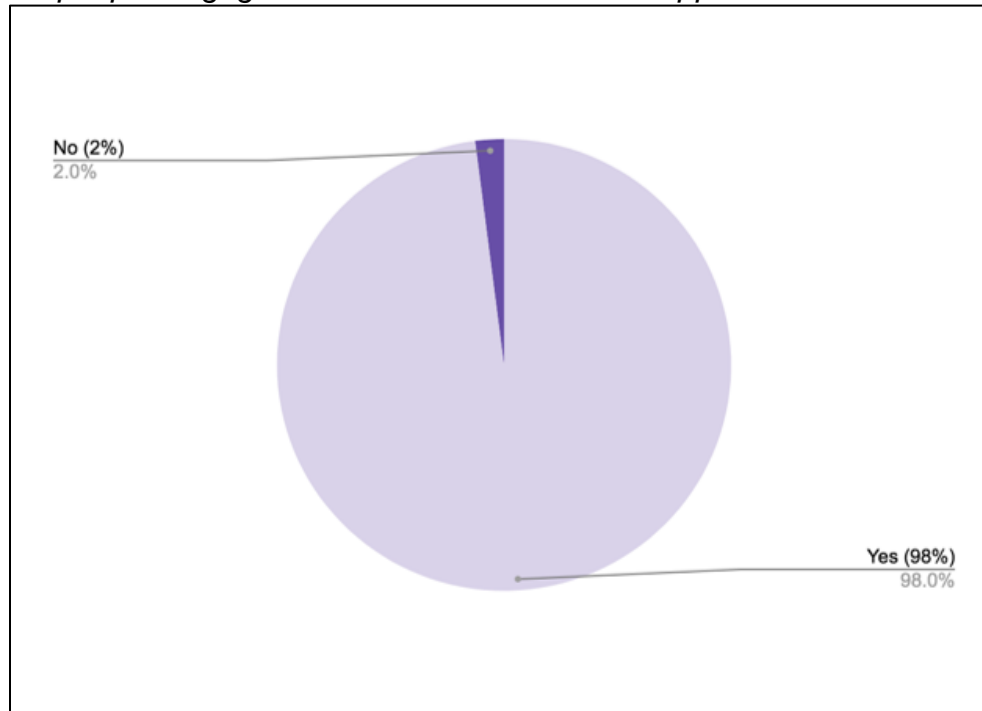
Performative Activism

Participants were presented with the following question: “Have you ever felt obligated to post or share content on social media to advocate for social issues?” Participants had the option to select either yes or no in response to this question. Participants were split in their answers with 51% of our respondents indicating that they have felt obligated to post about social issues, while the remaining 49% of individuals involved in the study shared that they have not felt obligated to do so.

Participants were then asked if they think other individuals post or share content on social media about social issues in order to gain approval from others. Again, they had the option of selecting either yes or no in response to this question. As seen in Figure 11, 98% of participants answered yes with the remaining 2% voting in opposition. It is clearly demonstrated through the data that the overwhelming majority of participants believe gaining approval from others is a factor in posting about social issues online.

Figure 11

Do people Engage in Online Activism to Gain Approval from Others?



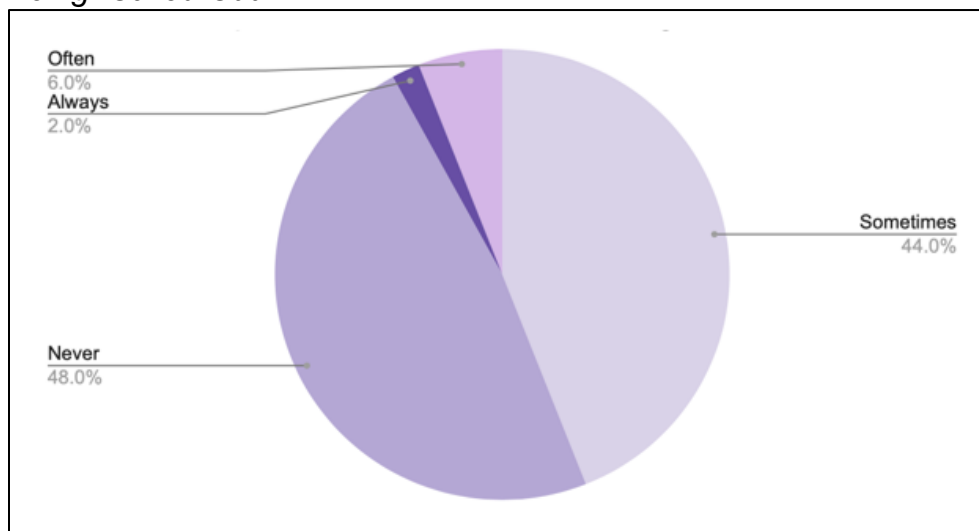
Following these questions, participants were then asked to provide a qualitative response to the following statement: "If you ever posted or shared content on social media to advocate for social issues, what was your primary motivation? Please explain in a few words in the space below." The majority of our participants (77.5%) indicated that they have shared content on social media to advocate for social issues in the past. Out of that 77.5%, two main motivations for posting arose. The first was to raise or spread awareness for a social issue, and the second was based on passion for a particular social issue. Very few participants reported being motivated by social approval, however, some did acknowledge this as a reason for posting. One respondent commented that they posted "so others don't think I'm ignoring the issue or opposed to it." 22.5% of our participants shared that they never posted about social issues and provided us with some insight. One participant shared: "I don't since I don't believe posting about an issue...is going to help anybody." This indicated that some participants believe posting on social media about social issues does not make a difference when it comes to aiding in a problem.

"Cancel Culture"

Through the use of a four-point Likert scale, ranging from never to always, participants were asked to denote how often they refrain from sharing their true opinions on social media in fear of being "called out." As demonstrated in Figure 12, it was found that 44.0% of respondents sometimes refrained, 6.0% often refrained, and 2.0% of respondents always refrained from speaking their minds. With that being said, 48.0% of participants indicated that they have never refrained from sharing their unfiltered opinions on social platforms. Overall, the majority of participants have, to some extent, withheld sharing their true opinions online in order to avoid social altercations and reprimands.

Figure 12

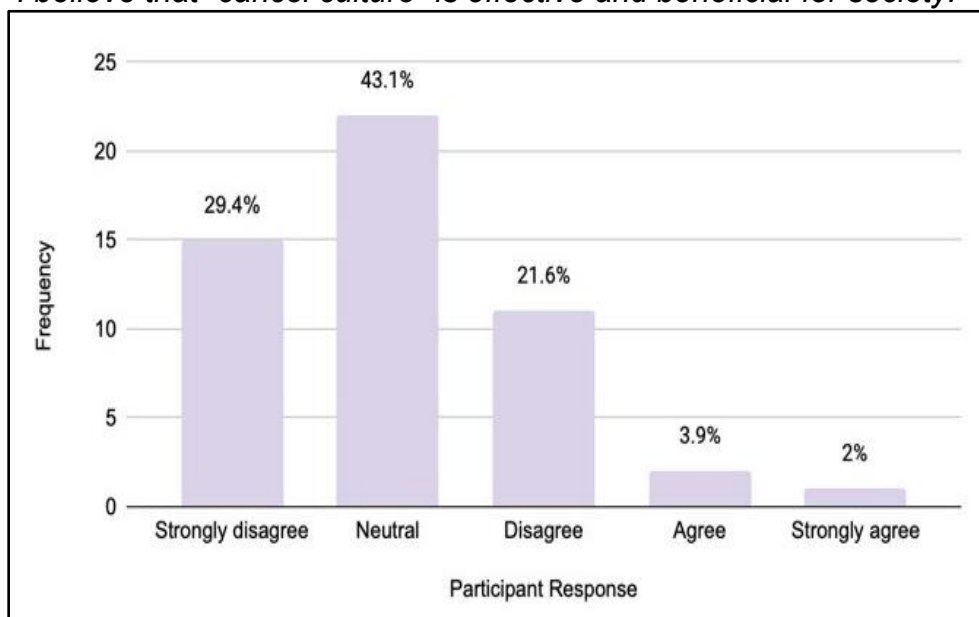
Frequency in Which Individuals Refrain from Sharing True Opinions Online in Fear of Being “Called Out.”



Moreover, participants were asked to consider the following statement: "I believe that "cancel culture" (when individuals who deviate from social norms are called out by others, often on social media) is effective and beneficial for society." Using a five-point Likert scale, participants were asked to report how strongly they agree or disagree with the given statement. As shown in Figure 13, It was found that 29.4% of participants strongly disagreed, 21.6% disagreed, 43.1% were neutral, 3.9% agreed, and 2.0% of participants strongly agreed with the statement. In sum, the majority of participants felt that "cancel culture" is ineffective and not beneficial for the progression of society.

Figure 13

"I believe that "cancel culture" is effective and beneficial for society."



To gain greater insight into why participants either agreed or disagreed with the belief that “cancel culture” is effective and beneficial for society, we integrated an open-ended question in which participants had the opportunity to provide a rationale for their given answer. For the most part, participants felt that “cancel culture” is effective to a certain degree in holding individuals accountable for their actions, as well as to publicly condemn immoral behaviour. With that being said, nearly all participants agreed that “cancel culture” has gone too far as it prevents people from speaking their minds, thus leaving no room for progressive thought and conversations to occur. One participant shared:

“There's the argument that "cancel culture" is seen as unproductive when everyone is called out in the same capacity, but it's important to still acknowledge and condemn inappropriate behaviour. It's just sometimes certain behaviours are given the same ire from social media when it's not warranted (i.e., "cancelling" someone who made insensitive tweets from 10 years versus current acts of violence/blackface/crimes).”

A recurring theme that emerged finds that excessive cancelling takes away from meaningful causes, does not give people a chance for redemption, and unlawfully ruins lives. Participants are especially concerned that “cancel culture” does not allow individuals to take accountability for their actions and learn from their mistakes, thus hindering long-term character growth and development. Participants emphasized the importance of this, given that young individuals are still developing their identities and constantly outgrow different stages of their lives. Some even believe that this is a form of online “bullying” and “defamation” as this phenomenon allows the public to degrade individuals without consequence as they hide behind a screen. Participants explained:

“Cancel culture does not allow for reconciliation, forgiveness, or second chances so that people can heal and grow as human beings. Particularly with younger individuals (like on social media) cancel culture can be unfair as they are still developing their identities,” and “... social media is a relatively unregulated platform, cancel culture, to a lesser extent, can resemble mob mindset, in the sense that anonymous people act as the judicial system and there is often little room for discussion on certain issues that may benefit from it. I also think that cancel culture can suppress certain negative viewpoints but it doesn't change them, and is therefore a short-term solution.”

Finally, participants also believe that the fear of being cancelled leads to performative actions: “the hostility that comes from cancel culture may cause individuals to lie about their true intentions to ensure their reputation remains stable.” Out of the fear of being cancelled, it is believed that many individuals engage in performative activism in order to maintain their social capital.

The next question in our survey was qualitative and asked participants how they believe society should react to and approach those who express beliefs that could negatively impact certain groups. Out of 51 participants, 43 responded to the question while the remainder chose not to provide an answer. Some key words that were

mentioned within responses included “education,” “conversation,” “discussion,” “debate,” and “change.”

Majority of answers expressed a general opposition to cancelling related reactions as a response to those who hold potentially harmful beliefs. The overarching consensus was that cancelling someone will not change their beliefs, and the process is generally too extreme. Respondents brought up issues with the online nature of “cancel culture,” as it allows individuals to potentially retaliate in a hostile manner since they have the comfort of being behind a screen. Furthermore, some respondents expressed disapproval of the process in virtue of the freedom of speech which everyone possesses. These respondents asserted that everyone has the right to have and express their own beliefs, as long as they do not harm others. As an alternate response, one participant suggested strengthening potential victims instead of trying to change the beliefs of such individuals. Another respondent suggested that community values that discourage discrimination should be emphasized as a reaction. Ultimately, even respondents who argued that everyone should be able to freely express their beliefs regardless of what they are, agreed that individuals should face reprimands if their beliefs harm others or if they resist change.

Within the responses to this question, an emphasis was placed on the importance of open conversation and discussion. When reacting to individuals who express potentially harmful beliefs, many respondents believed that it is important to treat them with respect by giving them the chance to explain their perspective. These respondents mentioned that the only way to change an individual’s mind is to respect their existing beliefs even if they do not personally agree with them, which one participant claimed is “easier said than done.” Respondents explained that civil discussions or debates with counter arguments would be productive in giving the individual a chance to change. One participant expresses:

“I think a neutral but fact based approach should be taken, this is so it can be more of a conversation and opportunity for the individuals to be able to recognize and see the things that they are not seeing or simply ignoring. Additionally, I think an educational approach should be taken because some of their views could be based on their upbringing or misinformation they have internalized. In conclusion, making it feel like a conversation and not an attack to allow a chance for the individuals to grow.”

This quote ties into the next prominent theme within the responses; education as the best reaction to individuals who express potentially detrimental opinions. One respondent stated, “society should first aim to not yell but educate.” Respondents mentioned that those who express such beliefs are often uneducated and have been exposed to misinformation or have internalized problematic perceptions presented to them since childhood. Thus, participants emphasized that individuals should be given the chance to become more cognizant of a perspective that they may have been previously ignorant to. Respondents stated that this could be done by presenting individuals with educational facts and explaining how their beliefs may negatively impact others. Participants indicated that education is more of a long-term and effective solution in comparison to simply cancelling someone. Participants stated:

“See what their reasoning is and correct them for their poor actions but not cancel them

as a whole. Canceling them won't change their beliefs but educating them or correcting them might" and "EDUCATION. To put it bluntly, most individuals with offensive/incorrect views are just uneducated (and stupid...). If we educate them, they might be more likely to understand the other side."

A minimal number of respondents expressed support for cancelling someone as a reaction to their expression of potentially harmful beliefs. One respondent mentioned that it "makes an example out of the individual," which they suggested may discourage others from having and expressing similar opinions. Furthermore, some respondents explained that the ideal reaction to such individuals depends on the situation at hand, and in some cases cancelling might be a reasonable response.

Discussion

Social Media Activism

When responding to questions about online activism and how it compares to offline activism, most participants indicated that posting about a social issue or movement on social media is the least effective form of advocacy. Participants mostly selected offline forms of activism, such as in-person protests and demonstrations, as the most effective in enacting meaningful change. However, when respondents were asked how often they engage in online forms of activism like posting or sharing information on social media, the majority indicated that they regularly engage in this behaviour. Thus, a contradiction exists in which individuals continue to participate in online activism, even though they do not believe their actions will be truly effective in enacting change. This discrepancy is suggestive of performative activism, in which individuals treat advocacy like a trend, posting simply to gain social approval or recognition, rather than actively trying to be an ally for marginalized communities (Lucie, 2021). This contradiction points to a need for further exploration of why individuals are motivated to engage in activism online, especially when they are wary of its potential to lead to meaningful change.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgy, individuals might be motivated to post online to advocate for particular movements as a way to manage their impression. Within their virtual "front stage," an individual might display an idealized version of themselves, one that is passionate about various issues and advocates for others, by posting or sharing information on social media. However, in their "back stage" (Goffman, 1959), individuals can be more honest about their actions and acknowledge that their activism on social media might not be effective. This process of posting on social media to maintain a performance for others is also indicative of performative activism, as individuals may be engaging in activism to gain social capital and appeal to a certain audience (Strother, 2021). This is supported by additional findings from this study, which reveal that most of the respondents believe offline forms of activism are more effective, yet half of the respondents indicated that they never engage in this type of advocacy. However, it is challenging to uncover a strong explanation for why individuals might refrain from engaging in offline activism even though they believe it is effective. There are several factors that could influence their decisions, including the increased health and safety restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic when this study took place.

The inconsistency between attitudes towards online and offline activism is evident within participant responses to the following statement: "I believe that posting or sharing

information about a social movement or issue on social media is an effective form of activism.” Many respondents indicated that this type of activism is effective, yet most of them later ranked it as the least effective when given a list of various methods of advocacy. Thus, there is a lack of consensus among the survey respondents that clarifies which forms of activism people believe are the most effective. These inconsistencies in the results demonstrate that individuals may have been engaging in performative behaviour and were attempting to manage their overall impression, which could lead to discrepancies between their attitudes and actions. More research is needed to investigate these contradictions between engaging in online or offline activism and their perceived effectiveness in enacting meaningful change.

Social Approval

It is evident that many individuals (51%) have felt obligated to post about social issues online. This is an indicator of performative activism, as participants may have taken part in surface-level activism by posting out of obligation, due to the desire to maintain their social image. When individuals revealed that they have posted out of said obligation, they implied that they may not have done so to genuinely support the cause. However, when participants were asked what their own primary motivation was to share content online for social issues, performative reasons were rarely mentioned. These responses were contradictory because although the majority of individuals felt obligated to post, it was not reported as a primary motivation. It is worth noting that there was a significant finding between an individual’s perceived obligation to post and their faculty of study ($p = 0.036$). A large portion of our respondents belonged to the faculties of social sciences or sciences, thus these students might feel relatively more obligated to post as their programs often place an emphasis on social issues, ethics, and being an advocate for others.

The findings in Figure 11 display that 98% of participants believe that others sometimes post about social issues online to gain approval from others. This suggests that the majority believe the motive of gaining approval does play a role in the engagement of online activism. Thus, it is possible that those who do post for approval may appear to be invested in advocacy for social injustices but do very little when it comes to truly enacting change with genuine intentions. This also relates to the qualitative question asking participants about their motivation behind online activism. While the strong consensus was that others engage in online activism to gain social approval, hardly any respondents admitted to having similar reasoning themselves. However, relating to perceived obligation to post, one participant did share that their primary motivation was “so others don’t think I’m ignoring the issue or opposed to it.” This answered a portion of this study’s research question where the motivation individuals hold for engaging in performative activism was investigated. This respondent’s motivation was to appear invested in the social issue and to present themselves positively in the eyes of others. However, having solely one qualitative response admitting to posting for performative reasons does not enable a deeper understanding nor provide sufficient insight behind this particular motivation. It is important to note that out of 51 respondents ($n=51$), 37 participants responded to the qualitative question looking at the primary motivation for engaging in activism, and three of those respondents admitted that they do not engage in it at all. This raises the question of whether Social Desirability Bias played a factor in the low number of responses admitting to performative behaviours.

Although participants were aware that their responses were anonymous, it is still possible that they chose to provide answers they believed were socially acceptable, rather than those that reflected their genuine beliefs. The overarching responses for primary motivations included spreading awareness and being passionate about social issues. It is important to acknowledge that some of these responses may have been grounded in Social Desirability Bias as while participants claim to be posting to raise awareness, it is possible that it is merely due to perceived obligation reported previously. On the other hand, it is possible that respondents could have been truly passionate about the social cause. The commonality of providing socially acceptable answers is supported through the findings of Demai (1984) who concludes that individuals tend to provide answers in a desirable manner so they may be perceived that way, and thus enhance their self-esteem. In addition, this finding suggests that those who respond desirably do not always agree with it, but do so anyway (Demai, 1984).

Another respondent admitted that they sometimes feel pressured to post about social issues on social media, stating: "I work very hard to avoid posting things just because others are, even though I feel the pressure to do so when I don't believe they are effective." This implies that although the participant does not view posting or sharing content online as effective, they still feel pressured to do so. This can be linked to the Social Identity Theory where the underlying force of engaging in advocacy online is to gain social capital and to be part of the in-group (Strother, 2021). Through performative activism, individuals are able to stand together for a social issue and become part of the in-group, as they do not claim to be posting just to gain social approval (Strother, 2021). However, individuals often believe that those who admit to posting to gain approval from others are considered part of the out-group, except this does not apply to themselves. We theorize that many individuals fear ostracization and do not truly reflect on why they post the content they choose to share. Further research is needed to recognize the personal objectives individuals hold for engaging in advocacy for social movements, as there are still blurred lines between the actions and intentions people have for this form of activism.

The stark contrast between participants' perceptions about intentions others have for engaging in online activism compared to their own reasons could be explained by the possibility that individuals are not aware of the full scope of their motivation when advocating online. This points to the prospect that genuine intentions behind engaging in online activism may be partly subconscious and can only be acknowledged upon introspection. As the need for social approval is so deeply ingrained in humans (DeWall & Bushman, 2011), perhaps individuals do not even acknowledge it as a motive, and thus engage in performative activism without realizing it. Future research should explore this hypothesis as a potential reason behind individuals being unable to see performative actions within themselves but see them clearly in others. We hope that this study, as well as similar ones, continue to raise questions about the underlying factors which influence both online and offline activism.

"Cancel Culture"

Through the research findings, it has become evident that the habitual behaviours of individuals on social media are commonly influenced by fear of social rejection, often in the form of "cancel culture." To start, we asked participants to outline how frequently they

refrain from sharing their true opinions on social media in fear of being “called out.” Results indicated that the majority of participants have, to different degrees, concealed their true beliefs or remained silent on certain topics to avoid social reprimands. Further, it was made clear that individuals sometimes decrease social engagement due to fear of “cancel culture,” however, we wanted to further explore how this fear may also be a motive behind increasing online social engagement. For instance, if one does not demonstrate allyship on social media by reposting information on social causes, they may face backlash and alienation. Subsequently, as previously mentioned, individuals claim to engage in activism for all the right reasons, yet they believe that others engage in activism simply to boost their social capital.

It is important to consider the social structures in place that cause individuals to behave performatively. Social media often takes on an aggressive approach when confronting individuals with harmful beliefs that defy social norms and expectations. “Cancel culture” negatively impacts people as it often entails defamation, ostracization, loss of employment or academic status, and public condemnation (Petray, 2015). Given this phenomenon, participants were asked how they believe society should react to and approach those who express beliefs that could negatively impact certain groups. Overarching themes that emerged included educating individuals and having open conversations or debates, in order to allow for character growth and development. Avoidance of confrontation often plays a role in how individuals behave both subliminally and consciously. Whilst performative activism may not entirely be attributed to “cancel culture,” it does play a significant role in influencing one’s decisions.

Moreover, “cancel culture” may also hinder individuals from having open conversations and learning from one another. Participants have expressed that it is often frightening to approach certain conversations. Ultimately, unease of saying the wrong thing triumphs and hinders individuals from mentioning anything at all, causing them to steer clear of meaningful conversations. This avoidance then cultivates an environment that may lead one to partake in performative actions. “Cancel culture” suppresses ideas and further prevents learning opportunities and discussions that can empower individuals to become more informed and effective allies. As outlined when discussing alternative approaches to individuals who transgress social norms, findings indicated that education is often the best approach to further inform the masses. Through reframing this approach, there is a shift from punishing individuals for wrongdoings, to positively changing behaviours and life outcomes.

Performative Activism

As previously mentioned, there were some contradictions made by participants throughout the survey that were suggestive of performative action. However, there is room to consider whether or not performative activism is effective to some extent. The majority of our participants answered “often” or “always” in response to a question which asked how often they learn about social issues through posts on social media. However, they also stated that they believe individuals post or share content online to gain approval from others. This suggests that although the perceived motives for spreading information about social issues are performative, social media activism is still increasing the spread of information about these issues, which is also corroborated in the literature (Murthy, 2018). There is an evident positive correlation between engagement in online activism

and how often individuals learn about social issues online ($r = 0.35$, $p = 0.012$), indicating that social media does contribute to the spread of information. However, it is worth noting that there is no guarantee that this increase in social awareness will spark engagement in activism or enact active change.

Further consideration should be given to the idea of whether or not performative activism is an effective form of advocacy, as regardless of the intentions behind it, it successfully spreads awareness. However, definitions of what is regarded as 'effective' are also worth considering. Firstly, effectiveness can be measured by the translation from online to offline activism. If considering this definition, the results from our survey indicate that it is not effective as half of our participants stated that they do not take part in offline activism. On the other hand, perhaps effectiveness relates to allyship and whether or not performative activism is a legitimate step in the quest to becoming a productive ally. Our results would suggest that if effectiveness of performative activism was defined by worthy allyship, it would not be considered effective in this case either. Again, this is because the majority of our participants stated that people post on social media to gain approval from others. This perceived motive is not an indication of effective allyship as being an ally involves recognizing the power and privilege that one holds and purposefully working to shift the benefits that come with that position to marginalized populations (Clark, 2019). However, if the effectiveness of performative activism is defined by successfully spreading awareness and information on social issues, then this may be one of the few cases where performative activism is justified as effective. More research is needed to understand how performative activism and its ability to spread information can be used in a more positive way, as this is a popular form of activism according to our participants.

Desensitization

Injustices can unfortunately be found in every corner of the world, and activism plays a key role in raising awareness about these issues. This study holds real-life significance as it closely examines the emerging phenomena of online activism and the role it plays in either helping or hindering social movements. Since online activism has emerged more recently, it is vital that society approaches it with a strong sense of sensitivity and respect towards those who are affected by the social issues being shared. This sensitivity can become blurred by the issue of desensitization, which is a reduction in shock or distress among individuals upon repetitive exposure to information about social issues online (Choudhury et al., 2014). Individuals tend to become desensitized when faced with an overabundance of negative narratives; a process through which it is easy for one to lose empathy, compassion, and regard for others (Choudhury et al., 2014). This phenomenon is commonly addressed in research in regards to media violence, as studies have found that repetitive exposure to violent content leads to desensitization surrounding the concept among viewers (Berger et al., 2011). Many of our participants stated that desensitization is a possibility within online activism, and that the extensive exposure to social issues can lead to the purpose behind them seeming less meaningful, and rather being treated as a trend. The treatment of social issues as trends is problematic and needs to be addressed within research as individuals often capitalize on the issues which are the unfortunate reality of many people's lives, for the selfish motive of gaining social capital. Performative activism contributes to this potential desensitization and belittles the injustices of the world to something as trivial as posts on social media. Furthermore, it

harbours a sense of detachment between those that post about social issues and those who actually live in the reality of them. Rather than garnering empathy for those experiencing such issues, posting with selfish motives places the emphasis on individuals' personal goal of social approval. While activism is highly valuable, and the intentions of individuals engaging in it may be positive, it is important to examine the way in which online activism is managed. This is crucial as it ensures the integrity of social movements is respected and upheld, without undermining their severity and purpose.

Conclusion

Summary

Within this study, we investigated the various motivations that drive individuals to engage in activism both online and offline. Furthermore, we examined how individuals who deviate from arising social norms may be subjected to “cancel culture,” thus encouraging performative activism. Most respondents believed that online activism was the least effective in enacting meaningful change, yet the majority of participants reported engaging in it more frequently than offline activism. With that being said, there was no singular consensus regarding the effectiveness of social media activism, as some respondents contradicted themselves in subsequent questions that addressed similar topics. While the overwhelming majority of participants believed that others engage in online activism to gain social approval, they did not mention the same reason when asked about their own motivations for doing so. Rather, they cited reasons including feeling passionate about a cause or wanting to spread awareness as contributing factors to their engagement in online activism, potentially demonstrating Social Desirability Bias. Likewise, it was found that the fear of “cancel culture” plays a role in increasing online activism, as individuals want to avoid social ostracization and being subjected to the out-group if they do not advocate for a given social issue. Although this is indicative of performative activism, this method of spreading information can be effective, as participants reported that they often learn about social issues online. However, it also poses the risk of desensitization, as respondents agreed that repetitive exposure to social issues can lead to a decrease in empathy and meaningful action. Within the results, participants emphasized the importance of education when approaching those who might hold harmful beliefs, and in the quest for effective allyship. Overall, the correlations and discrepancies we uncovered within this study illustrate a necessity for further research regarding activism on social media.

Limitations

We encountered several limitations within the research process, particularly during participant recruitment. We heavily relied on student-run groups and organizations to advertise the survey on our behalf, which reduced the number of students we were able to reach. Additionally, the social media platforms that our survey was advertised on likely influenced the responses we received. For example, a lot of young undergraduate students rely on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Discord, rather than Facebook, to communicate with others. This may have contributed to the low number of respondents in their first year of university (5.9%). In addition, many first-year students might not have been as involved in various student-run clubs since they were just starting

their university experience, thus they potentially had less exposure to survey advertisements from MSU affiliated clubs.

Moreover, within our research we may have encountered response bias in several forms. Firstly, when completing the survey, individuals may have engaged in social response bias by responding in a way that made them look favourable or answered according to what they believed the research team wanted to hear. However, the anonymous nature of the survey may have played a role in decreasing the effects of response bias and might have encouraged individuals to be more honest. Satisficing bias might have also been present within our research, as participants may have chosen not to answer every question or simply put in minimal effort into the ones they did answer. This could have caused the results to be unrepresentative of the opinions our target population actually holds. In addition to this, it is likely that individuals who took this survey are mainly those who are interested in this topic and have strong opinions about it. This might have skewed the results and decreased their generalizability, as we did not hear from a variety of perspectives. Next, order effects, a bias that results from the order of questions within a survey, might have also influenced the responses we received. Specifically, assimilation effects, which occur when one question encourages a similar answer in the following question, may have been present within our survey as the questions built on one another. Furthermore, the way in which certain questions were phrased may have influenced how the respondents answered. For example, when asking participants about their motivations for engaging in online activism, the survey specifically asked for their “primary” motivation. This may have impacted the results and led participants to focus on one motivation, rather than the various factors that might influence their decisions online, including performative intentions.

The demographics of our survey respondents have also limited the generalizability of our results to a larger population. We mainly received responses from individuals self-identifying as female, with a much smaller sample of participants identifying as male or non-binary. Investigating the extent to which gender influences how individuals engage or participate in performative activism and “cancel culture” could have altered the results. In addition, our sample size was disproportionately Caucasian and does not adequately account for other ethnic groups, such as African Americans (3.9%) and Latin Americans (2.0%). This is significant because the ethnic groups that were less represented in the study are those who are often marginalized within society. It would have been beneficial to observe how individuals from these ethnic communities interact with and experience online activism and “cancel culture.” This disproportionate representation might have skewed our results and contributed to low generalizability within this study.

Significant Insights

Social media activism has become an increasingly prominent part of society that holds immense power in influencing people’s thoughts and actions. Studying this topic and its related phenomena is highly significant as it has recently emerged on a large scale and there is minimal existing research within this field. Our research delved into the ways that people engage online in order to advocate for various social movements. This research is important as it reflects on the intentions individuals hold when advocating online, and how they might contribute to potentially problematic processes such as performative activism and “cancel culture.” It is critical to address these processes as they can have a

significant impact on individuals' lived experiences. While engaging in online activism, it is vital to ensure that the individuals or groups being advocated for are kept at the forefront of activism and their integrity is prioritized over personal gain. In addition, our research created an opportunity to discover alternative methods to approach those who express beliefs that transgress societal norms, rather than relying solely on "cancel culture." This is important because "cancel culture" is highly divisive and can lead to negative outcomes for those who are subjected to it, instead of encouraging progressive change within society. Lastly, this research was significant as it provided insight into how genuine and effective allyship can be enacted, and why it is important to implement it within our everyday lives.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this research, we were interested in exploring the increased awareness of social issues within online platforms that have altered socially acceptable attitudes and behaviours. Our research provided insights on the motivations people hold for engaging in performative activism and how interactions with others might guide their behaviour on social media. Our research shed light on the growing phenomenon of online activism and its effectiveness as a form of advocacy. Furthermore, it highlighted the ability of online activism to translate into offline domains. In addition, our research created an opportunity to discover alternative methods to approach those who have beliefs that transgress societal norms, rather than relying solely on "cancel culture." The research also provided insight into what genuine and effective allyship looks like, and how we can implement it in our everyday lives. Social media activism has become increasingly intertwined with everyday life for individuals and it is integral to the spread of information, thus it is important for this area of study to continue to be explored. We hope that this study encourages its participants and readers to critically reflect on their motivations for engaging in activism, how they are fulfilling their roles as allies, and whether they believe their actions are truly effective. Social media has become an important stage for activism, in which some individuals may merely be putting on a performance, while others play their authentic selves. What role do you want to play within the world's stage?

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