Black Squares for Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram

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Abstract
In June 2020, millions of Instagram users shared black squares along with hashtags including #BlackOutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter before pausing their social media content for the day. At first in solidarity with the music industry, the black squares were co-opted by uninformed users hoping to show their support of Black Lives Matter in the wake of the murder of George Floyd while in police custody. Through 20 interviews with social media influencers about the #BlackLivesMatter discourse occurring on Instagram in the summer of 2020, I argue that for many influencers, the posting of black squares was performative allyship utilized strategically to build and maintain credibility with followers. Influencers were unable to genuinely merge their existing brand image with the Black Lives Matter movement long-term, resulting in the memeification of social justice activism and no substantial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion within the wellness creator industry on Instagram.

Keywords
Black Lives Matter, Instagram, performative allyship, social media influencer

Introduction
During the summer of 2020, protests were ongoing in response to police violence, spurred by the murder of George Floyd and other Black Americans in months prior. Discussions of human rights, racism, white privilege, and police violence were simultaneously occurring online, offline, and in the popular press. Commercial industries and brands were encouraged to address diversity, equity, and inclusion plans for their corporations and employees, and many took to social media to share their pledges and avoid criticism (Frier, 2021; Wingard, 2020; Yuan, 2020). On the first Tuesday in June, Instagram users were encouraged to take a break from posting content and instead participate in #TheShowMustBePaused, a mission started by two Black women in the music industry, Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang. The idea was to hold the music industry accountable for their benefiting off the “effort, struggles and successes of Black people” (Haylock, 2020). However, on 2 June 2020, the movement to support Black folks in music shifted, involving not only other industries within the United States, but other races and ethnicities as well. Rules circulated on Twitter for white allies interested in participating in the movement, but confusion ensued, and the guidelines for participating became disconnected from the original mission of supporting Black folks in music. As the movement made its way back to Instagram with little to no contextual information of its beginnings, users started sharing black squares and using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to show support of Black lives. Many white users, among others, believed this day was designed to show their support during a time of protest.

However, white allies’ show of support backfired due to the lack of knowledge of the movement and understanding of their role. Posting black squares and utilizing a hashtag that had since been employed as a way of information sharing ultimately pushed down valuable information for Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors and suppressed images of those in the
streets protesting police violence. Users’ feeds were full of black squares for hours, and if one selected the hashtag, it became very difficult to find the necessary information about protests, supplies folks needed, and links to non-profits collecting donations. Several activists and Black celebrities spoke out against the use of #BlackLivesMatter, attempting to get Instagram users to instead use #BlackOutTuesday when posting black squares, but by mid-day most of the useful information was lost to the algorithm and a discussion began of how white Instagram users co-opted this movement and perpetuated harm. White allies were called out for their lack of contextual knowledge surrounding the hashtags and the performative aspects of the black squares which did little for Black folks and other protestors. In the coming days, activists would discuss the black squares in detail, calling for those wanting to be allies to instead amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), share protest information, donate money and goods to organizations, and urge your Instagram following to do the same (Malone Kircher, 2020).

Black squares overtaking Instagram is a prime example of performative allyship, as noted by Kalina (2020). Sometimes referred to as performative activism or optical allyship, performative allyship “refers to someone from a nonmarginalized group professing support and solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful” (Kalina, 2020, p. 478). While online participation is not inherently unhelpful and there have been many examples of online activism that has spurred offline action (see Bode, 2017; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), this type of performative allyship is harmful toward the cause. The black squares transcended the music industry into other niche topic areas, including wellness, an inherently political industry with its focus on bodies, autonomy, and the focus on health equity (McBain, 2020). While creators of color offered resources for protestors and those desiring to help, white wellness influencers posted black squares, a response deemed performative by many in the industry. Through an analysis of interviews with influencers about the discourse on Instagram during 2020, I argue many creators posted black squares as an act of performative allyship to build and maintain credibility with followers. Following that day in June, many influencers were unable to genuinely merge their existing brand image with the BLM movement, resulting in further memefication of social justice activism and no substantial progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion within the wellness industry on Instagram.

#BlackLivesMatter and Performative Allyship on Social Media

Social and digital media researchers have contextualized BLM through the spread of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter (Gallagher et al., 2018; Mundt et al., 2018; Yang, 2016). Following Clark (2019), I refer to BLM as the movement itself and #BlackLivesMatter as a signifier to the "movement’s online and offline information campaigns" (p. 521). As BLM gained momentum once again on social media in June 2020, popular press articles detailed the performative nature of the black squares on Instagram (Jennings, 2020; Lee, 2020; Malone Kircher, 2020; Phillips, 2020; Wingard, 2020; Yuan, 2020). The posting of black squares is a recent example in the lineage of “hashtag activism” on social media (Jackson et al., 2020).

“Hashtag activism” occurs when a would-be ally, in this case, a wellness creator, changes her social media profile to support #BlackLivesMatter by creating or re-producing content including the specific hashtag while not participating in any other forms of advocacy on behalf of the cause and does not speak up when people she knows are affected (Cheeks, 2018). Recent research has argued for greater nuance in the discussion of hashtag activism, arguing this type of allyship toward particular causes can still function positively, where every meme and post works toward the goal (Jackson et al., 2020). However, as a performance of allyship, it can be perceived as “empty activism” from a “position of privilege and motivated by a desire for increased social capital” (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019, p. 329). Performative allies are driven by the need for validation and acceptance and may intellectually understand the issues at hand, yet not sacrifice their social or economic capital to challenge the systems they benefit from. Their brand of allyship may be perceived as cosmetic, superficial, and transitory, rather than as facilitating structural change (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Sometimes a consequence of white guilt (Iyer et al., 2003; Leach et al., 2002; Montada & Schneider, 1989), performative allyship is often predicted by a self-focused emotional reaction to racial inequality and white privilege.

Anti-racist white allyship requires constant vigilance and self-reflection of both overt forms and covert forms of privilege (Case, 2012). Performative allyship rarely results in concrete change, as performative allies do not participate in the self-reflection of their privilege and power or do the work to become an “accomplice” (Schafranek, 2021). When white folks attempt to be allies, for example, they may position themselves instead as white saviors, and white men may even participate in white knighting (Liu & Baker, 2016). A would-be ally may offer a solution to a Black woman or solve their problem for them through performances of protection or defense in ways that deny their agency and autonomy (Ruiz, 2017). This action conveys superiority over Black women and does nothing to challenge white supremacist structures or systems of power (Endres & Gould, 2009; Liu & Baker, 2016; Spanierman & Smith, 2017; Trepagnier, 2010). Manifestations of performative allyship are common across social media platforms and can be utilized as various means to an end. For example, wellness creators are a type of social media influencer, influential online users who build large followings and promote products, services, beliefs, and ideologies (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2017; Wellman, 2021). Their influence hinges on their ability to communicate to
their audiences, especially during times of social and political unrest. Therefore, they may use specific types of communication like the sharing of a black square to support #BlackLivesMatter and to present themselves as allies, mitigate white guilt, and most importantly, maintain their credibility as prominent creators with a viable brand.

**Social Media Influencers and Credibility Maintenance**

Research exploring the roles of social media influencers, users who amass followings on social media through the presentation of their daily lives while promoting products and services (Abidin, 2014, 2015, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Wellman, 2021; Wellman et al., 2020) has grown in recent years. Literature on social media influencers is frequently centered in the genres of fashion and beauty (Abidin, 2014, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015), travel (Stoldt et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020), and more recently, health and wellness (Wellman, 2021). Scholars have explored the gendered aspects of this digital labor (Abidin, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015), but an intersectional approach to the study of the influencer industry is lacking.

Scholars have argued the two core norms of the influencer industry are authenticity and credibility (Abidin & Ots, 2016), perceptions that may be at least partially determined by one’s societal position and privileges. And while research exploring the authenticity of social media influencers—or content creators—has boomed, literature on how they build and maintain credibility is lacking. Source credibility is an under-utilized theory within digital media studies that may be applied to dissect the attributes central to an influencer’s brand image. Source credibility theory has an established history in sociology and communication, among other disciplines, and details the construct a source must have to be deemed credible by their audience. Scholars argue source credibility is largely made up of perceived trustworthiness and expertise (Maddux & Rogers, 1980; McCracken, 1989), and sometimes, attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). For creators, trustworthiness might be achieved through perceptions of transparency, while expertise translates to knowledge in a specific area (Maddux & Rogers, 1980). While these are the most common constructs that make someone a credible source of information, attractiveness has also been theorized as a primary factor (Joseph, 1982; Kahl & Homer, 1985; Ohanian, 1990), especially in research analyzing celebrities and credibility.

Previously, source credibility literature engaged with traditional celebrities’ ad sharing (Jin & Phua, 2014) as well as celebrity endorsement deals (Bhatt et al., 2013; Kahl & Homer, 1985; McCracken, 1989; Ohanian, 1990). More recently, qualitative studies (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019) have drawn on source credibility to investigate how creators are perceived by their followers. Through interviews and discussion groups, the studies engage with European teens and young women and ask for their perspective on influencers’ self-presentation and credibility. Djafarova and Trofimenko’s (2019) study found followers deem attractiveness and expertise to be important characteristics of creators; however, these two attributes alone are not enough to hold on to followers. Furthermore, the scholars noted many interview respondents referred to an influencer’s expertise as competence, as they believed it was not necessary for creators to be experts with certain qualifications, but instead should possess relevant experience of any type.

For wellness creators with little expertise on the BLM movement, police brutality, white privilege, and anti-racism, summer 2020 was a season of deciding if, when, and how to address these topics on Instagram. Creators were asked to reflect on both their own actions during this time and the actions of others. This study diverges from current research detailing performative activism within the BLM movement both topically and methodologically, as little work has examined wellness influencers and BLM on Instagram. In addition, the field of digital media needs more research studies utilizing interview-based methods to discuss not only how performative activism is being perceived by marginalized groups, but also by those in nonmarginalized groups as they are called to “lean in” and do more from their racially privileged position to maintain their status.

**Method**

Between January and May 2021, I interviewed 20 US-based wellness influencers, all identifying as women, as part of a larger project interrogating the credibility of wellness influencers and the industry itself. The influencers were contacted via the public email address listed on their Instagram account soliciting their participation. The participant pool is over-representative as compared to the creator industry itself, which is overwhelmingly filled with white women, especially within the wellness niche (O’Neill, 2020). Of the 20 participants, eight were Black, seven were white, four were Asian, and one was of mixed race and ethnicity, Black and Thai. Participants were between the ages of 21 and 52. The participant pool showcased the variety of the wellness industry and the claim that wellness can be anything one claims it to be (Derkatch, 2018). Each creator published what they determined to be wellness content including exercise, nutrition, mental, emotional, spiritual, and sexual wellness, LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and others) wellness, living with chronic illness, and how to build strong and healthy marriage and family relationships. Many influencers in this study published content on more than one of the previously mentioned categories.
Interviews were conducted virtually over video conference and audio recorded for accuracy. Interviews averaged 56 min and the complete transcripts were uploaded to NVivo and analyzed by constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to generate themes within the data. Constant comparative analysis categorizes content through rounds of open, axial, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2014). The method encourages researchers to stay actively engaged with the data throughout collection and analysis and is especially helpful when data collection occurs over several months.

In the interviews, participants were asked what they knew about the #BlackLivesMatter black squares on Instagram, how they felt about that day on social media, their experiences online following that day, and the connections that may or may not exist between racism, allyship, and the wellness industry specifically on Instagram. To maintain participant privacy due to the nature of this topic, all interviewees are anonymized throughout the manuscript. Participants were not given numbers or pseudonyms to further protect their identity, and therefore, quotes in the findings sections are not numbered. Rather, identity markers such as age, race, and ethnicity are provided to contextualize the participants’ thoughts.

Findings

Waking Up to the BLM Movement

During 2020, many wellness creators were exposed to the BLM movement for the first time. Some influencers took part in #BLM and posted a black square along with other graphics, memes, and informational posts. For many white creators, this was the first time they had participated in activism related to race violence, and followers called their motives into question. While white creators may have posted in an attempt to build toward anti-racist action leading to long-term offline activism (Clark, 2019), that was not the case for all, and it became difficult to decipher intention. A 29-year-old Black creator from Maryland said,

There was a lot of people posting the black squares, and then there were people who were not acknowledging it at all. And for me it’s so tough because you never want anyone doing something just because it’s the thing to do. But you also want to know that people care, that they’re invested, and that this does matter to them.

“Waking up” to the #BLM movement and presenting as an ally was desirable for many white creators, as it increased their credibility. But as one Black creator said below, it actually proved white creators were not allies to begin with, as it took a major event for them to advocate for Black individuals. White creators’ ignorance to years of injustice within the Black community showed their lack of allyship in practice:

Police brutality has been happening for a very long time now. So that’s the only reason why it doesn’t feel genuine. But who knows, maybe they are . . . maybe that’s their way to process and maybe that’s their way of thinking they’re helping. I’ve seen a lot of white women attacked for not speaking out. I don’t think that’s fair. Because who knows? Maybe this is the first time they’re reflecting on it. I don’t think we’re going anywhere by attacking.

All white and non-Black creators included in this study posted a black square on that day in June. However, influencers said many other creators never posted about BLM. Creators interviewed said it was hard to believe others felt they could remain silent after Floyd’s murder and the subsequent protests, as if they were unaware. One said, “That’s so hard for me to fathom. Like there’s no way after all this you can say you’re not aware of something. So to put that veil on and ignore it is tough.”

Awareness seemed to dictate the ways in which #BLM was discussed on Instagram during the summer of 2020. The wellness industry on Instagram is not inclusive, as noted by all influencers in this study, as white women follow each other and amplify their voices while ignoring others, never allowing women of color to reach the same levels of success. This was also supported by wellness brands who only collaborate with white women. This results in a lack of awareness among white creators about the issues Black wellness creators faced on Instagram and in society at large. One Black creator said,

When I pay attention to who (white creators) hang out with, you know, it’s not diverse. It’s all women that look like them. So it doesn’t surprise me. But it just seems like when it (the BLM movement) happened, it was like, now there’s a shift like, “I have to focus on diversity, I have to have Black women on my products.” Where was this before?

Some white creators realized their gatekeeping practices within the wellness space and attempted to remedy their actions. A white woman in her 30s from Iowa shared a story where she discussed the #BLM movement with other white creators to gauge the best way to move forward and become a better ally. She guided a friend of hers toward posting more in support of BLM, and in the process, realized she also could do more:

And so, after kinda like talking to her through it, I feel like again, I was like talking to myself in a way. And I did start to speak up for Black lives and for the Black community, my Black friends and other Black creators. I definitely did make it a point to diversify my feed as well because I did also realize, “oh my gosh, I feel like everybody I follow is white.”

This was a common discussion among those in the wellness space, even among women of color. An Asian American creator from Seattle had similar discussions with her friends:
One of my wellness creator friends actually called me because she was so conflicted about what to do. Yeah, she was like, okay, well, everybody’s posting about this, what are you gonna do? Like, I feel like I’m so pressured to talk about it, and I don’t even know what to say, you know, and I was like, honor that. You don’t have to say anything that you don’t feel like saying just because other people are saying it, you know. Take your time to process it.

Not every interviewee agreed with the guidance above. Some believed white influencers should be listening to and learning from Black people while also publicly showing their support of the movement through posting on Instagram and donating their money and time. Others believed uneducated white creators would do more harm than good, especially if they were only posting to maintain credibility, so they should not post until they were educated enough to reduce the risk of harm. Some requested white women first reflect on their intentions, as performativity was common during this time, and be sure of their goals before taking action.

A few creators mentioned the performative aspects of not only allyship, but the specific “waking up” process. For some, waking up was perceived as performance in line with current trends. A Black woman from the East Coast said, “I don’t know, everyone’s heart. But I would say for some people, yeah, I’m sure you know, you kept up with the trend.” The #BLM movement on Instagram did not necessarily change the minds of people who are racist, nor was that the goal. Rather, this movement awakened white allies to realize they were not, in fact, doing enough with their privilege to support Black creators and other creators of color in the industry and they needed to decide if and how they were going to move forward while maintaining relationships with their audiences.

Maintaining Followers During Social Unrest

While it was common for white wellness influencers to share how they had “woken up” to police brutality and racism, creators of color said they frequently saw white women only posting about white privilege, continuing to center themselves and focus on their brand while presenting a certain level of “wokeness” to aid in credibility maintenance. To maintain followers during this time, creators had to navigate their audiences’ expectations, political leanings, and the constant barrage of direct messages (DMs) with varying opinions on what they should be sharing. A 29-year-old Asian creator from New York explained how audience perceptions of creators caused conflict during the summer of 2020 as they made choices on where to focus their content:

As humans we want to be liked, and we don’t want people to be disappointed in us . . . And I think when you strip everything back, it’s that you present who you are online, people take who you are, and subconsciously, or very consciously, put you into buckets. Whether it’s “oh, she looks like me. So she must believe in this. Oh, she talks about this and dresses like this, then that means she must believe in that.” And I think this is where the discrepancy comes from because you feel like you really know this person and that you trust them and that you know, because you trust them, they must believe in what you believe in. So the moment they don’t, or the moment they do something that’s out of line according to what you think it’s correct and not correct, that’s where the tension comes from. And that’s where disappointment comes from. Because you’ve projected this version of this person on the internet in your mind and then if and when this person doesn’t live up to these projections, there’s conflict.

Because of audience expectations and the larger society’s shift in discussions related to #BLM, influencers felt pressure to talk about the topics their followers requested in specific ways. Black wellness influencers said they saw white creators posting during this time as a response to appease their own followers, rather than as a response to the police violence and white supremacy. A 21-year-old Black woman from Massachusetts said, “I think there’s an increasing amount of white guilt. . .and you can see it. You can see it in how they post, you can see it in how they’ve changed their content and how they just talk about issues.”

As noted above, the “issue” many white influencers discussed during this time was white privilege. Creators mentioned the popularity of Robin DiAngelo’s 2018 book, white Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for white People to Talk About Racism, as it circulated within the wellness industry on Instagram as a learning tool. Some designed aesthetically pleasing graphics aligned with their Instagram feed themes, sometimes even taking content created by others and redesigning the graphic to make it fit with their content. This act allowed white women to perform the role of a credible ally while actually centering themselves and maintaining relationships with followers by falling in line with their expectations. “It did seem like a bad ‘hop on the bandwagon’ thing. Like, you know, ‘I’m not going to share (any valuable information) but I also don’t want you to think I’m a racist.’” This Black wellness influencer mentioned she felt the over-aesthetic designs often provided little to no resources or information in regard to the issues that “truly mattered” during the summer of 2020.

Some influencers posted aesthetic graphics to avoid alienating those whose beliefs did not align with their own. One creator mentioned how sometimes graphics with easily digestible information in light-hearted designs might keep audiences engaged longer, educating them “gently.” Others did not post at all for fear of losing followers. One white woman from Minnesota said she participated in blackout Tuesday and voiced her opinion on Floyd’s murder, but she did not talk about her political beliefs or the protesting that occurred shortly after:
I just think maintaining what people came for, and just sharing what I love . . . I would never want somebody to come to my page and be hurt by what I have to say, or to be offended by what I have to say.

This woman was not the only one who shared their fear of offending people or discouraging people from continuing to follow by posting about particular topics; however, at the same time, many others began to dissect why they post and for whom. The Asian creator from New York asked herself questions to decide how and what she should post. “I asked, ‘what do I stand for’? And do I exist to, you know, be liked. . .and do I exist to, like, not disappoint the people who follow me? And not to be judged by people who follow me?”

After reflecting, some influencers began posting about #BLM and police brutality in ways that felt authentic to them without regard for follower expectations. After she began posting about her political beliefs in connection to BLM, one creator from Iowa received a DM from a follower. “Her argument was she didn’t sign up for this. Which, my response was actually ‘I’m a person and so you can’t really sign up for me.’” White women struggled more heavily with the idea of posting whatever they wanted, especially if it did not align with the brand image, but many eventually came to the conclusion that they did not care if followers left their page, as long as they felt they were doing the right thing. One woman in her 30s shared a feeling commonly felt among creators:

I had a lot of people unfollow me. I probably had thousands of people unfollow me to be honest. But I realized I don’t care. And then when I started to lose even more from talking about Black Lives Matter, I was like, wow, I don’t care. Yeah. So at this point, I’m just gonna keep talking about whatever I want to and I don’t care anymore, whether I’m going to gain or lose.

Ultimately, creators seemed to agree posting just to appease followers, while common during this time, is not the best way to move forward. Many understood posting without proper knowledge on the topics of anti-racism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and police brutality could possibly do more harm than good long term. One white wellness influencer from California said harm reduction should be the focus, rather than credibility maintenance:

(Creators) can cause harm by not being credible. What prevents me from sharing certain things? I’m very cognizant of making sure that I don’t cause harm, even when I speak up about racism. I let the draft of the post sit for a day. I don’t jump to things. I’m very thoughtful. That’s one of the big goals of this conversation actually is ‘what’s the harm that’s being caused’? And how do we prevent that? How do we regulate that? What are we doing to fix that?

Wellness as Political

A focus on harm reduction rather than credibility maintenance places attention on the knowledge building process central to the practice of anti-racism, rather than on the presentation of “wokeness” and allyship. While influencers agreed learning about racial privilege and anti-racism was and is central to their lives as women, they were concerned about whether Instagram, and wellness Instagram specifically, was an appropriate space for topics of race, racism, and whiteness. As noted in the section above, some women struggled with the “political” nature of #BLM and other social justice and human rights topics, noting their lack of knowledge and exposure. One white creator from the Midwest said, “I don’t really follow a ton of people who do talk about politics and who do bring up Black Lives Matter.” Therefore, she wasn’t sure if and how to address these topics with her followers.

Some influencers suggested wellness as a topic was not “inherently political,” as the creator above alludes. Therefore, avoiding events like the BLM movement was not uncommon. Some mentioned the murder of Floyd and other Black Americans, along with protests around the country, were being covered extensively by the news and they did not need to add to the conversation because “that’s not why people are on Instagram.” The content felt like news rather than wellness entertainment, so influencers avoided posting about the events and connected topics like race, white privilege, and police brutality. Creators believed their followers did not expect them to discuss these topics on Instagram because it was “off brand” and followers came to their page to “escape reality.”

However, as a Black woman from the south mentioned, “Everything is political. (Wellness creators) who say they aren’t political live in a bubble.” In 2020, this “bubble” kept white creators from acknowledging their privilege and gave them the opportunity to continue posting their everyday content without race becoming a focal point, a common experience for creators of color. Black wellness creators can never avoid the discussion of the skin, especially as wellness is often personified through the physical body on social media platforms. As a 28-year-old queer, Black creator mentioned,

No one benefits from the system that we currently know. So for you just say that you shouldn’t have to speak out about human rights issues, that this is not the space for it . . . How can you when, you know, this is my lived experience? This is something that I struggle with daily. This is something that I see my community struggle with. And on and on and on. This affects my wellbeing, which in turn affects my health and generationally has affected communities. So I think everything is connected and activism belongs in every industry, because white supremacy affects everything.

Wellness is inherently political, especially for Black women. As another influencer shared, “I will say, for a Black woman, practicing self-care is a radical act. It is a political act to actually see a Black woman that’s actually taking care of herself.”

Historically, the wellness industry has lacked diversity, equity, and inclusivity. The advent of social media, creators, and collaborations with brands has further divided white
wellness creators with creators of color, especially Black women. As a Black creator explained, “The wellness industry has made some strides and come a long way, but originally was sort of promoting this message that only certain people deserve to be well.” These “certain people” were often white, upper class women with free time to participate in and spend money on wellness trends.

For some, their upbringing rather than audience, played in role in their public response to the black squares and the BLM movement. An influencer from Seattle said,

As an Asian woman, um, I grew up being very . . . we don’t talk about politics. We don’t. We stay under the radar . . . stay quiet. My mom didn’t teach me to speak up for anybody . . . to even speak up for myself, you know, so I had to grow a backbone and like, learn to like stand up for myself and for others. And I feel like that was really tested with the rise of BLM and 2020.

It should be noted not all white creators believed wellness should be separate from #BLM. In fact, many of them expressed they believed they were provided a platform so they could draw connections between wellness and race for their followers, explain white privilege in a way that made sense, and detail how they were practicing allyship both publicly and in the privacy of their own homes and communities. One white influencer in her 30s said,

I’ve never been afraid to talk about things that matter to me ever. So it was not a question of whether to post about it. And then as 2020 just continued to get worse and worse politically, I felt a responsibility to talk about it. It was my responsibility as a white woman and as someone with a platform.

**Performative Acts on a Performative Platform**

As noted earlier, feelings of white guilt resulted in more social media posts about #BLM and police brutality among wellness influencers during the summer of 2020. White creators, and some non-Black creators of color, discussed feelings of incompetence and ignorance when it came to recognizing racism and white supremacy, and even discussing race within the wellness industry and society. It became clear some influencers did not understand the purpose of the black squares, nor did they understand their positionality as privileged creators with highly impressionable audiences. Followers and other creators noticed, as many questioned how the presentation of one’s allyship may or may not extend beyond Instagram.

The most popular call to action creators experienced during this time was to diversify their own Instagram feeds:

I’d say in June there was a lot of reposting of a specific Black fitness person (to) diversify your feed. Which, on the one hand, I could see where the intention was good. But I think ultimately that’s more problematic than it is helpful.

This influencer said she noticed white wellness creators sharing Instagram accounts run by creators of color on Instagram stories, an ephemeral element of the platform. Stories were aesthetically designed and typically in the influencer’s color scheme. These tactics utilized primarily by white women were surface-level attempts at allyship to maintain their credibility as socially aware public figures. A Black wellness creator in her early 20s said, “I’d say for the majority, it was just another fad. It was another ‘I’m not racist . . . I posted a black square.' And then it was literally, on Monday, back to your random squats and green smoothies.”

The performative nature of wellness creators’ content was evident through their unbalanced posting schedules, as noted above. Some influencers would post about #BLM and police brutality all day long, and then go 2 or 3 days without posting anything at all. Creators also frequently shared posts made by others, usually women of color, and while it may be a step toward allyship (Clark, 2019), one Black LGBTQ+ wellness influencer said it was pretty clear when a creator is blindly re-posting without engaging with the content:

We see it . . . we see people posting stuff, but then they’re not actually doing the work. And I don’t know if it’s just ignorance, like, they’re not sure how to do the work. But there’s so many resources out there. So it always leads me back to like, (they) just don’t want to or don’t feel like (they) have to . . . or don’t feel like it’s (their) place to do it.

Black influencers said all they wanted was to know people care about their wellbeing and that those beyond the Black community were invested in their livelihood and safety. However, Instagram encourages a certain amount of performativity, especially within the creator industry, to be successful.

Not only did interview participants mention the performative allyship of wellness creators in 2020, they also talked about the public performances of allyship among commercial brands within the industry, and even social media platforms. One influencer said the call to diversify on Instagram was not only geared toward encouraging individual social media users to start following more creators of color, but also a call to brands and organizations to start publicly showing diversity in the curation of their branded feeds:

I do think that some changes are being made (in relation to social media platforms) but then at the same time they’re notorious for silencing Black creators. TikTok pulling down videos saying that this is hate speech while bigots literally will have their videos put on the for you page, for example.

Influencers mentioned the same thing happening on Instagram, particularly on the “Explore” page. This page shares accounts with users who follow similar content; however, creators of color mentioned they do not believe their content is shared on the Explore page nearly as often as white creators within the same niche. In 2020, platforms,
marketers, and intermediary companies who connect influencers with brands on social media were called out for not supporting communities and underpaying creators of color while promoting BLM (Frier, 2021). Social media platforms like Instagram saw younger consumers’ interest in social justice and started campaigns to increase the visibility of Black influencers, and while brands say they have attempted to remedy the overwhelming whiteness present in their social media campaigns, they still miss the mark. As Frier (2021) notes, even as brands “speak the language of empowerment,” (para. 29) Black influencers are still ignored, undervalued, and underpaid.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

During the summer of 2020, wellness influencers had to decide if, when, and how to discuss the BLM movement, racism, white privilege, and police brutality. Many did not know where to start talking about these topics and were concerned about the response they would get from their followers. It was clear many creators, white women specifically, had never thought much about or discussed these topics. However, many felt they had a responsibility to do something, whether they educated themselves privately or shared their thoughts publicly. Those who chose to discuss these topics on Instagram were subjected to both positive and critical feedback, as it was obvious that while many creators wanted to support #BLM, they also knew taking an active role might increase their credibility and help maintain followers who were deeply invested in social justice. However, those who did not do the necessary work were called out on their performative allyship. As one influencer said, “If your foundation is just black squares, you’re going to come crashing down.”

To not be accused of performative allyship, creators had to build and then maintain their credibility within a space they had rarely entered before. Credibility is often presumed through the presence of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness or aesthetics (Ohanian, 1990). Influencers manifested expertise through the circulation of historical information, news articles, and resources for others. However, the expertise was perceived as performative when influencers only shared others’ posts without creating their own content or when they did not personally engage with the content they were sharing. To mitigate feelings of performativity when sharing resources, some creators focused on transparency. Transparency can be considered another component of trustworthiness within the source credibility model. Influencers practiced transparency when sharing that they were not sure if and how to post about #BLM, for example. Some were more confident posting about whiteness-centered topics like white privilege and struggled when discussing police brutality and racial violence but were willing to let their audience know they were still learning and would most likely make mistakes in how they approached these topics.

The third component of credibility, attractiveness and aesthetics, was the most frequently used tactic during the summer of 2020. As mentioned, wellness influencers utilized aesthetically pleasing graphics both on their Instagram feeds and within their Stories to engage with #BLM, police brutality, racism, and white privilege (Ables, 2020; Nguyen, 2020). Even when creators shared links to Instagram accounts run by Black women, they created attractive backgrounds with fonts and colors matching their style, again centering themselves and their aesthetic, only publicizing others’ accounts when it did not take away from their own personal branding. These “social justice slideshows” (Nguyen, 2020), or presentations of “Powerpoint Activism” as Ables (2020) argues, became increasingly popular and widespread, supporting the growth of Instagram platforms like So You Want to Talk About, a progressive political account run by a white woman who has since been called out for her lack of transparency in addressing her own positionality and lived experience (Nguyen, 2020).

The memeification of social justice puts the short-term and long-term impacts of the black squares in tension. While not inherently negative, in this case, posting allowed white creators and their followers to feel as though they were participating in something larger than themselves without becoming uncomfortable, and even could have been a step toward anti-racism for some white influencers. While research argues these actions can serve a long-term function in shifting narratives of social justice (Jackson et al., 2020), and it is possible these influencers served as peripheral supporters of #BLM (Barberá et al., 2015), the tactics used to build or maintain credibility often fell flat as the performative nature of the influencer’s activities shown through over time. Ultimately, influencers participated in performative allyship on an already performative platform, within an industry thriving through performativity. These layers of expectations regarding one’s brand and oneself led to a focus on the public presentation of “wokeness” almost overnight. Months later, little has changed in the wellness industry on Instagram as many influencers have returned to their original posting habits.

There were many influencers in the wellness industry on Instagram who chose not to post about #BLM, Floyd, or the subsequent protests and this study was limited by not including those who did not share any content in relation to #BLM. It can be assumed there are some wellness creators who do not support #BLM and did not attempt to merge their brand with the movement, and a future study might ask why some influencers did not attempt to engage during this time or other times of political and social unrest. As noted in the findings, some influencers struggled with whether the wellness industry on Instagram is a place for politicized conversations, and future studies might explore these ideas in-depth as more creators not only promote products and services, but beliefs and ideologies (Wellman, 2021). Future research should continue to analyze the overwhelming whiteness of
the wellness influencer industry and how the niche is impacted by social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and consider engaging with audiences on their perceptions of influencers participating in social justice activism. Studies involving creators may benefit from a focus on the racial and ethnic dynamics of the industry and how positionality dictates the popularity and subsequent growth of influencers and their brands.

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