

## **Influencer Activism: Visibility, Strategy, and Postrace Discourse on Food Instagram**

In June 2020, mainstream attention to the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd's murder led to #BlackOutTuesday, a digital action that attracted widespread engagement from celebrities and digital influencers on Instagram. Devised by Brianna Agyemang and Jamila Thomas, two Black women working in the music industry, #BlackOutTuesday was a call for the music industry to pause and reflect on their participation in structural racism (an affiliate hashtag that was circulated was #TheShowMusBePaused) (Donoughue, 2020). This action was widely represented on Instagram by posting a black square and was incredibly popular, with estimates that 14.6 million #BlackOutTuesday posts were published on June 2, the designated day of action (Bursztynsky & Whitten, 2020).

Black Lives Matter as a social movement and political ideology was formed in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza, 2016, p. 23). While built on a history of using audiovisual evidence to rally against State-sanctioned violence towards Black people, the unprecedented capacity for recording and circulating such evidence in the digital age has supported the sustained growth of the movement (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020; Lebron, 2017). #BlackLivesMatter, as a widely circulated hashtag on social media, has also facilitated the spread of information required to sustain the movement, and has been used in recruitment for the movement by offering opportunities for sustained reflection and engagement around racial issues and movement ideologies (de Choudhury et al., 2017), providing a sense of collective identity for disparately-located activists across a sustained time period (Mundt et. al., 2018) and creating a digital counter-public to mobilize identity-based political action (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, 2020). While #BlackOutTuesday was

related to the use of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter, the way it was made hypervisible through the accounts of celebrities and influencers on Instagram led to widespread criticism of ‘performative activism’ and ‘optical allyship,’ where non-minority influencers participate in trending digital actions primarily to boost their own social and financial capital (Ashe, 2020; Mercado, 2020).

I explore this perception of influencer activism as optical allyship through an analysis of the food blogging community’s engagement with #BlackOutTuesday on Instagram. Food bloggers are digital influencers who build online brands through the performance of stylized, hegemonic femininity and high quality food content. As influencers whose brands and livelihoods are often predicated upon the production of aspirational, commercially-aligned lifestyle content, the food blogging community has historically adopted a strictly apolitical and artificially cheerful tone that has been described as “no serious conflict, no controversy, no cynicism, no snark” (Fortini, 2011). However, #BlackOutTuesday offers a moment to explore how the conventions of this digital food culture are negotiated to allow for social activism, and the tensions inherent to such challenges. Drawing on a sample of Instagram accounts by prominent food bloggers, I perform a qualitative discourse analysis of the caption text produced in posts affiliated with #BlackOutTuesday and Black Lives Matter to explore the characteristics of influencer activism. In my analysis, I explore the efficacy of this action by asking: What actions were recommended by the community? What language around race and racism was used? How did food influencers portray themselves and their roles within this movement? How did they negotiate the language of activism within the cultivated performances of their brands and digital identities?

In my findings, I note a conflation of protest with the brand strategies of the attention economy, as well as a tendency to rely on neoliberal individualism and consumer politics as

activist strategies. Additionally, I point out the ways that the visibility of this action was determined by the pre-established hierarchies and algorithms of Instagram and the food blogosphere, which worked to reproduce situational, rather than structural, understandings of racism. At the same time, I reject accusations of optical allyship within this influencer community, drawing on evidence of a high degree of self-reflexivity amongst the bloggers in this sample and the use of this action to challenge the expectations of apoliticism within the food blogosphere. In turn, this response demonstrates the malleability of the food blogosphere, which has the capacity to both reproduce and rupture hegemonic norms as an expression of user-generated digital food politics.

### **Food Bloggers, Instagram and Self-Branding Strategies**

Food blogs are digital food media that feature the narratives, photographs and recipes of food that is produced in the home of an individual, typically female, blogger. As food blogs have become established as a digital genre, they have built a reputation for high production values as well as for publishing intimate and stylized performances of feminine domesticity (Dejmanee, 2015; Matchar, 2015; Presswood, 2019), and these qualities have developed hand-in-hand with the food blogosphere's rise as a particularly lucrative site for marketers. As such, while food blogs mimic performances of casual and effortless domestic labor, content is strategic and carefully calculated within self-branding logics that require food bloggers to consciously construct their digital identities, content and overarching narratives as commodities that cohere with commercial logics (Hearn, 2008).

This allegiance to commercial logics leads to the celebration and reproduction of hegemonic identity discourses, notably postfeminism as food bloggers “exacerbate distinctions

between men and women and provok[ing] middle-class anxieties about having children, finding a husband, and securing the comforts of home” (Salvio, 2002, p. 35) and postrace discourse, as the dominant whiteness of the food blogosphere is unremarked upon and race is often articulated only through practices of commoditization, appropriation, and colonization. The resulting ambivalence, which is characteristic of ‘post-’ ideologies, is further amplified through the digital affordances which shape and constrain meaning on food blogs. For instance, as food influencers become micro-celebrities who “accumulate a following on blogs and social media through textual and visual narrations of their personal, everyday lives” (Abidin 2016a) and perform ‘relational labor’ through “regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work” (Baym, 2015, p. 16), digital intimacies become inseparable from profit-accumulation strategies. It is such ambivalence that has undoubtedly produced polarized responses to the food blogosphere, with many trivializing the genre and its emphasis on personal narratives or disparaging the content produced as self-promotional and inauthentic. Echoes of this denigration of food bloggers and their work became prominent in the wake of the community’s response to #BlackOutTuesday on Instagram.

While my focus is on food influencers who have attained digital visibility through the production of food blogs, Instagram accounts are an increasingly important cross-promotional platform for food bloggers, and Instagram is used strategically and deliberately by influencers as an extension of their brand management practices (Cotter, 2019). Due to the labor-intensive process of food blogging, many bloggers use the Instagram platform not only to cross-publicize new posts and recipes that are published to their blogs, but also during moments when they are unable to regularly update their blogs. Moreover, Instagram is increasingly attracting US users, with Pew Research hailing it as the country’s third most popular social media platform after

YouTube and Facebook, and it is particularly popular amongst young people, with 71% of 18-29 year olds claiming to use the platform (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

A growing body of research has explored Instagram as a platform for activism, particularly in regard to issues of gender, representation and embodiment (e.g. Ging and Garvey, 2018; Butkowski, Dixon, Weeks et. al., 2020; Baker and Walsh, 2018; Mahoney, 2020; Caldeira and De Ridder, 2017) which are well suited to the platform's demographics and visual emphasis. A further strand of work has explored how influencers utilize Instagram to disseminate activist and social justice messaging, such as 'realfooders' who post content on nutrition and dietary patterns on Instagram (Gil-Quintana, Santovena-Casal & Riano, 2021) and female environmental influencers who post about veganism and the zero-waste movement (Quintana Ramos and Cownie, 2020). However, the current study builds on this discussion by focusing on food bloggers who are participating in Black Lives Matter discourse which typically falls outside the purview of their brand's content focus. It is this emergence of race-based activism and protest from a community which is predominantly non-Black and has historically been understood as apolitical that attracted criticisms of optical allyship. In this study, I seek to complicate this claim, while simultaneously acknowledging some of the limitations of the #BlackOutTuesday action and influencer activism.

### **The Saveur Food Blog Awards**

The sample for this study was derived from the Instagram accounts associated with food blogs that were finalists for the Saveur Blog Awards between 2009 and 2019. The Saveur Blog Awards, organized annually by *Saveur* magazine, are one of the highest forms of recognition for food bloggers with tens of thousands of nominations received for these awards each year (Saveur, 2019). From the complete list of award finalists over the past decade, I removed entries

whose blogs were no longer active or publicly accessible, were not written in English, or did not reflect the definition of food blogs set out in the opening of this chapter (for instance, blogs which included food photography but no narratives, or were focused predominantly on travel or interior decorating). While the resulting sample is not necessarily representative of the food blogosphere as a whole, it is relevant to understand the blogosphere not as an index of blogs, but as a site structured by flows of power that are governed by the rules of visibility and profits in a digital attention economy. In this hierarchy, the more visible blogs attract an exponential amount of influence and thus, due to the publicity generated from being Savuer award finalists, I would regard this as a highly influential sample of food bloggers.

From this sample of award-winning food blogs, I viewed the corresponding Instagram accounts that were active over the time period of May-June 2020, resulting in a sample of 126 Instagram accounts which had between 84 and 1.7 million followers. I viewed and collected posts relating to #BlackOutTuesday and Black Lives Matter in this sample that were published between 30 May and 16 June 2020, a time period that incorporated the designated date for #BlackOutTuesday, 2 June and the week of 1-7 June during which many influencers opted to mute their social media feeds/amplify the work of black bloggers. This date range was designed to capture not only #BlackOutTuesday posts but also some of the ongoing reflections on this action, and these search parameters resulted in 167 posts published from 96 unique Instagram accounts, reflecting the fact that the majority (76%) of food bloggers in this sample actively signaled their participation in this action.

It is worth noting that, of the 31 accounts that did not explicitly acknowledge the movement, 7 muted their content during the week of 1-7 June; 11 were accounts based outside of the US; 2 were more personal Instagram accounts with content unrelated to their food blog

brands; 2 offered very perfunctory references to sad or difficult times that were not counted as references to Black Lives Matter for the purposes of this study; and, 1 account posted then deleted a #BlackOutTuesday post. These numbers indicate the dominant trend for food-based digital influencers to explicitly engage with Black Lives Matter discourse on Instagram, particularly for accounts that were US-based.

It is also relevant to note that, confirming the dominant whiteness of the wider food blogging community, Black food bloggers were a significant minority in this sample, authoring only 7 of the 96 (7.3%) Instagram accounts and producing 20 of the 167 (11.9%) posts. Race was determined through exploring the profile pictures and content of Instagram accounts, as well as the images and content posted to corresponding blogs. While this was not a perfect method for determining race, due to the intimate and confessional tone of the genre as well as the subject matter at hand many bloggers made clear statements about their racial self-identification.

I performed a qualitative thematic analysis of the 167 posts related to #BlackOutTuesday that were produced by this sample. Informed by a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), I performed open-coding of Instagram caption text, identifying the recurrent, salient themes that emerged across all posts and then using a process of clustering to determine the dominant thematic categories, with a focus on discourses around activism and race. This process resulted in the identification of six themes, 1) education 2) personal experience 3) amplifying and muting content 4) self-reflexivity 5) empty statements and 6) anger, self-promotion and self-care for Black food bloggers.

### **Themes of #BlackOutTuesday on Food Instagram**

*Education: Learning, Listening and “Doing the Work”*

References to learning and education appeared extensively across this sample, supporting the idea that a key contributor to racism is ignorance and that this could or should be combatted through taking personal responsibility for learning about racism, its history and the perspectives of Black Americans. This framing – where overcoming racism is expressed as a personal journey for self-betterment – aligns with the ethos of neoliberal individual responsibility, also demonstrated through the widespread circulation of the phrase ‘doing the work,’ which suggests the difficult and arduous process of anti-racism as a moral imperative, as well as analogizing activism with entrepreneurialism, where the agency, creativity and gumption on the individual is critical to producing a successful outcome.

This focus on education was supported through sharing links to books, resources and the accounts of anti-racism educators. It is likely that this emphasis on information-seeking as action may have been particularly resonant within the food blogging community as it maps onto dominant food and health discourses that moralize personal investments in food research, particularly for women and mothers, as compulsory to the performance of contemporary food work (Cairns, Johnston & MacKendrick, 2013). As food blogs are key sites for disseminating food knowledge and pedagogies, the same infrastructures for knowledge exchange are readily used to accommodate a shift in focus from food to racism.

### *Personal Experience*

It is unsurprising, given the intimate tone cultivated by food blogs and the personal storytelling promoted by the Instagram platform, that #BlackOutTuesday posts were often articulated through highly personal language and experiences. This was evident in the use of the highly emotional language that is prevalent across the food blogosphere – many bloggers

confessed that they felt heartbroken, disgusted, sad, horrified, and overwhelmed while also suggesting that love, joy, and hope were routes to overcoming racism. The personal experiences shared by this group also included confessions of their privilege and ignorance, as well as their personal pledges to take specific actions to overcome racism. A small number of posts also documented attendance at or observation of protests as part of their personal experiences. The fact that the majority of influencers in this sample were non-Black highlighted the clear disjunct between sharing personal experiences and the issue of racism, which many bloggers had not personally experienced.

The influence of postrace discourse – in which the myth of a colorblind and meritocratic society leads to the taboo of acknowledging or discussing race (Bonilla Silva, 2003; Joseph, 2018) – was evident as many bloggers expressed feelings of uncertainty, discomfort and hesitation when talking about racism. However, some bloggers also drew on these feelings to note the necessity in this moment to overcome their discomfort to speak up and use their platforms to take a public stand against racism.

### *Amplifying and Muting Content*

The language of muting or pausing content, and inversely, amplifying the content and voices of Black and minority influencers, was widely used across this sample. Such language was central to the articulation of #BlackOutTuesday, and was practiced by pausing content but also tagging and publicizing Black content creators and their accounts. While amplifying the accounts and content of Black food bloggers was a practice that was enthusiastically taken up by non-Black bloggers, some of the Black bloggers whose accounts were suddenly made hypervisible often alluded to being overwhelmed by deluges of new followers and some

expressed skepticism about the lasting impacts of this fleeting surge in visibility as a result of the movement.

There was also a tendency for this action to perpetuate a myopic understanding of racism, for instance suggesting that the lack of representation within the food blogging community was the problem rather than a symptom of larger structural problems, including the bias encoded into algorithms, Silicon Valley, Instagram, and the commercial sponsorship model through which success and visibility is granted. That is, when the problem was framed simply as the ‘lack of visibility’ of Black content creators, it became easy to address this problem through taking action – by tagging, following, and amplifying Black creatives – without further interrogation into the structure of racism itself. Moreover, the structure of this digital action also meant that when non-Black account holders participated in this action by amplifying or muting content, they also potentially generated greater visibility and value for their own brands, making it difficult to distinguish philanthropy from self-promotional strategy.

*Self-reflexivity: ‘Instagram is not real life’*

Discourse in this sample demonstrated a high degree of self-reflexivity about the action. This included explaining the purpose and intent of the movement, circulating information about protests and practices for participating, and noting that actions, phrasing or comments had been influenced by dialogue with Black individuals and activists.

Bloggers also referenced the criticism and loss of followers that resulted from their participation in #BlackOutTuesday. This made clear the considered calculation of participation as part of a broader brand strategy, which sometimes resulted in defiance – as one blogger exclaimed they wouldn’t just ‘stick to food,’ a common refrain used to denigrate or silence political discussion in the lifestyle blogosphere, but were fighting for their rights to use their

influencer platforms for social activism – and other times resulted in meeker reassurances that bloggers would ‘get back to food soon.’

In a similar fashion, bloggers demonstrated self-reflexivity about perceived criticisms of their participation as optical allyship, or as superficial and fleeting. While this was sometimes evidenced in the language used – for instance, through acknowledging their own complicity with structural racism, and documenting plans for structural change within their own brands and work – it was signaled most pertinently through the length of captions – which averaged 137 words per post, an unusually lengthy average for the Instagram platform – and the number of bloggers who posted more than once on the topic of racism or Black Lives Matter. These patterns of posting suggest that bloggers were eager to demonstrate their participation was part of an ongoing commitment to racial justice, and was genuine and thoughtful rather than simply motivated by the desire to join a trend.

### *Empty Statements*

A small number of posts in the sample engaged in empty statements, which were short posts either just employing the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, or phrases that were commonly circulated on social media during this time, including phrases reflecting the notion of solidarity, support, listening, and that racism is bad. There was little substance or controversy to these posts, and their primary goal was to signal participation in the movement.

### *Anger, Self-Promotion and Self-Care for Black Food Bloggers*

The data produced by Black-identified food bloggers within this sample was comparatively small, featuring only 20 posts and further skewed by the fact that two bloggers were responsible for publishing 65% of these 20 posts. However, while this sample was small,

their response to the #BlackOutTuesday action was significant as Black-identified bloggers were often spotlighted, having their accounts tagged and amplified by others within the community and meaning they were often compelled to use this moment to publicize their brands, cookbooks and blog labor. Additional themes present within this sample included an attention to the mental health and self-care of Black activists and the Black community in light of George Floyd's killing; the expression of grief; and, using this moment to call out racism within the food blogging community.

### **Protest Language as Brand Strategy**

The dominant discursive themes and practices from this sample of food bloggers reflect the tensions inherent to influencer activism, as social movement messages take place within an influencer culture that is popularly understood to be driven by self-promotional interests and commercialized communication practices. It is clear that Instagram's platform vernacular had a distinct influence on #BlackOutTuesday. This was most salient in the use of language in this sample, with the words 'amplify' and 'mute' prominently circulated and emphasizing the spreadability of digital content as, in and of itself, central to the success of protest actions. The reliance on such language and actions reflects the conflation of online activism with digital brand strategy within an attention economy in which likes, shares and retweets typically serve as measures of success (van Dijck, 2013) and in which cross-promotional activity that highlights other creatives' work and profiles is commonly used to engender goodwill within a digital community (Ryan, 2016). However, when this same logic is applied to social movement action frames, such language fails to offer a barometer for distinguishing between more or less valuable or accurate content, and tends to portray civil rights as an individual project of education and/or communication, both of which elide an understanding of the necessity for structural reforms and

collective action in the fight for racial equality. Moreover, this discourse demonstrates a continuing reliance on neoliberal logics whereby individuals and their choices – including where to allocate their money or which accounts are worthy of amplification – are viewed as the key drivers of social change.

Moreover, while action to amplify Black content is intended to highlight the lack of diversity within digital influencer spaces, it also tends to mistake the symptoms of structural racism with structural racism itself. To this end, while temporarily and artificially boosting the circulation of creative content and the accounts of some Black individuals may serve a purpose within the influencer community, it does not encourage reflection on the deeper flaws of the attention economy which systematically benefits white content creators who amplify hegemonic lifestyle and identity discourses. Many Black food bloggers appeared to be overwhelmed by the instant surge in attention their accounts and brands received, and some expressed discomfort and skepticism at the value of such action even where it brought much attention to their work. One Black food blogger explicitly described the temporary amplification of her account as performative activism. It is possible to see from these reactions that Black food bloggers who are the supposed beneficiaries of this action had very little control over or buy-in from such amplification strategies.

Finally, the language of amplifying and muting had the effect of highlighting the trend-based nature of information spread on social media. Many of the same phrases, resources and words were highly circulated and repeated as part of the action, notably the statement “I understand that I will never understand, but still I stand”, quotes by antiracism activist Rachel Cargle and links to her account, and the digital infographic produced by @ohhappydani. This structuring of #BlackOutTuesday as a trend guarantees a rapid surge in visibility and attention to

an issue across a wide range of media, which was reflected in the broad coverage and participation in this action. However, trends are also transient and fleeting, embedding a guaranteed obsolescence into this action that is antithetical to the long term commitment to structural change that the Black Live Matter movement is advocating.

These criticisms of #BlackOutTuesday certainly give context to the claims of optical allyship as it is clear that influencer activism tends to fall within hegemonic discourses around neoliberal individualism and consumer politics. However, it is also somewhat unreasonable to expect the food blogosphere to be a site of radical challenge to hegemonic ideologies around race. It is important to attend to the realities of ambivalence which structure the possibilities for food bloggers' visibility and identity performance and, on this note, I would generally reject the accusations of optical allyship for this particular influencer community. Instead, I argue that food bloggers overwhelmingly demonstrated an awareness of their role within the limits of their platforms and the genre of food blogging, and sought to challenge these limits and expectations in the course of their participation in #BlackOutTuesday.

Many bloggers used #BlackOutTuesday to vocalize and denounce the expected apoliticism of the food blogosphere, and in particular the expectation that food bloggers' visibility and influence was predicated on their tacit agreement to refrain from voicing political opinions and that they should 'just stick to food', in the same ways that the visibility of the postfeminist subject is predicated upon her silence on feminism (McRobbie, 2008) and that discussion about race is stifled through postrace discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Food bloggers pointed out the privilege inherent to designating racism a 'political' topic rather than a lived reality and challenging the expectation that bloggers refrain from using their vast platforms to discuss social issues. Several bloggers also used this discussion to relate these conventions

directly back to the commercialization of the blogosphere, evidencing a self-reflexivity of the ways that branding strategies are often at odds with social justice imperatives. While such criticisms did not necessarily facilitate a better response to Black Lives Matter, they demonstrated a critical awareness of the commercial logics and algorithms that reproduce political silencing and the invisibilization of Black digital content, and self-reflexivity about the limits food influencers inherently faced when trying to participate in this movement. #BlackOutTuesday thus served as a collective awakening of and challenge to the ways the genre of food blogging has worked to dampen political discussion.

Admittedly, at times the incorporation of Black Lives Matter content within the pre-existing commercial tenor of digital food content sometimes revealed an awkward fit. Discussion of the serious and fatal topic of structural racism within the determinedly cheerful and capricious tone of digital food blogs involved an abrupt and sometimes awkward shift in tone. In a few instances, this was navigated through flippant or fleeting references to Black Lives Matter that were offensive to the topic matter at hand. However, the vast majority of Black Lives Matter posts were thoughtful and action-oriented, and either demonstrated or incited multiple forms of action, including learning and seeking further educational resources; muting one's social media feed or listening to others and reflecting on events; amplifying the work and platforms of Black content creators; as well as financially supporting the cause through donations to social organizations or Black businesses. Additionally, food bloggers often drew on the established brand strategies of professional blogging to demonstrate their commitment to social justice with tactics such as donation matching, fundraising and giveaways of food, cookbook and cooking classes used to raise money for various social justice organizations. This discussion reveals that while food bloggers are not activists and predominantly not Black, their potential contributions

to the Black Lives Matter movement are material, while also working to challenge some of the structural flaws which contribute to apoliticism within the food blogosphere and drawing attention to the disjunct that arises from their engagement with activism within this commercialized environment.

Food bloggers have built their digital presence upon personalized lifestyle media, not activism centered around race and social justice. Yet, it is too easy to dismiss their contributions and I am wary of specific critiques of this participation in activism for several reasons. First, while it is always going to be a struggle to meaningfully incorporate allies into racial justice movements, particularly given the emphasis on sharing personal experiences on social media that has drawn such powerful responses to sustain hashtag activism over the past few years, it seems that accusations of optical allyship are often intertwined with criticisms of influencers and their content as being frivolous, narcissistic and superficial (Abidin, 2016b). Food bloggers in particular are routinely denounced and subjected to constant criticism from strangers while their content is exploited and appropriated for profit by mainstream media companies and platforms. My analysis suggests that on the whole, participation in #BlackOutTuesday was thoughtful and sustained, even though it necessarily took place within the parameters of the commercialization and self-branding strategies that make the blogosphere legible. Second, I would argue that it is more productive to acknowledge the role that allies and information dissemination have in the growth of digital activist movements, and to cultivate this relationship by guiding specific and thoughtful ways to develop meaningful responses. This inevitably leads to a dilution of the message, as the spreadability of social content is traded off against central control over message and collective action frames. Yet this process, described as ‘connective action’ by Bennett and Segerberg (2013, 2012), also demonstrates the rapid scaling up and widespread mobilization of

social movements through affinity coalitions that becomes possible through the communicative capacities of social media.

I suggest that as niche digital communities of influencers work together to challenge racism within the fields in which they have expertise that these networks of digital allies can generate impactful contributions to the Black Lives Matter movement through addressing structural racism as it is encountered in multiple spaces. For food influencers, this might involve a focus on the many ways in which race and food activism go hand-in-hand, for instance through a focus on the environmental impacts and working conditions around food production chains, the social structures that lead to food deserts, and the moralization of discourses around health and food work. Such work would build on one of the most enduring legacies of the food blogosphere, which is the vast gift economy that is generated by the community, performing everyday knowledge exchange of food cultures, food work and food pedagogies that has clearly provided tangible benefits for a very broad audience. This gift economy and its networks have been used in #BlackOutTuesday to circulate information about intersectionality, structural racism, white privilege, and allyship – cultural knowledges that, like much food knowledge, is not readily available through traditional social institutions and their communication mechanisms. I regard these as powerful and important forms of allyship that hold the potential for further benefits to digital social movements and demonstrate the political potential of the everyday, user-generated content of the food blogosphere.

## **Conclusion**

As influencer activism, like influencer marketing, undoubtedly begins to play an increasingly prominent role in social movement strategy, the relevant questions to ask are not

whether influencers should be taken seriously and whether or not their contribution is legitimate, but how to meaningfully incorporate and harness the visibility of this influence within growing digital activist movements. This involves accounting for the limitations of the platform, but also performing the kinds of self-reflexivity that are evidenced in this community – how to participate thoughtfully, meaningfully, and in dialogue with activists and social movements.

This study presents the findings on just one digital influencer community, but provides strong evidence that food influencers who participated in #BlackOutTuesday on the whole did so in ways that were thoughtful and self-reflexive. The willingness of a core group of food influencers to actively participate in the movement challenged norms within the food blogosphere for bloggers to refrain from using their digital influence to voice ‘controversial’ or ‘political’ opinions, as well as the expectation that idealized postfeminist subjects engage in political silencing in exchange for cultural visibility and influence. Bloggers engaged in multiple calls for action, and demonstrated a willingness to embark on consciousness raising around race and structural racism. While there were moments where the departure from the norms and logics of the food blogosphere resulted in awkward and limiting responses to and perspectives on racism, on the whole, there was not a lot of evidence that bloggers were engaging in this action solely for personal gain or individual acclaim.

While optical allyship and performative activism are undoubtedly real phenomena, it is relevant to distinguish between jumping onto the bandwagon of the criticism of female social media influencers as generally frivolous and narcissistic. Influencer activism operates by the same mechanisms that have given rise to large and profound hashtag movements and this inevitable expansion of activist messaging into mainstream and high visibility sectors should be encouraged.

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