

# Is Slacktivism Slack? A Case Study of #blackouttuesday

Activism has changed the world. From shifting laws, rights, and paradigms, mass audiences have been able to shape the cultural context we live in. Now, with the digital convergence of traditional media and the active use of Social Networking Sites (SNS) mass media audiences have had more opportunity to increase the volume of their powerful voices. This power exists in the form of co-creation and the decoding (Hall, 1973) of key messages, as audiences actively participate in political narratives. The function and communication of online activism and traditional activism are vastly different (Chon & Park, 2019, pp. 96-97). So, how sincere are online activists? Blumer and Katz's (1974) Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) offers an analysis framework to understand how these mass audiences create viral online activism such as the SNS blackout that was #blackouttuesday (BOT) amidst the heightened Black Live Matter protests in 2020 that were sparked by the death of George Floyd in police custody.

For the case study of BOT to be analysed through the UGT (Katz et al., 1974) framework, the theory must first be broken down. UGT attempts to explain the use and function of mass media in society on an individual level; what do people do with the media to gratify their needs, and what are their motives? (University of Twente, 2019) The theory assumes the audience is active in its role, seeking out mass media to "satisfy individual needs" (University of Twente, 2019, pp.21), and analyses subsequent positive and negative outcomes of this use. As McQuail et al. states, "an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed" (McQuail, Blumler, and Brown, 1972, in Katz et al., 1974, pp.510).

Katz et al. outline five social factors contributing to the need of mass media active use:

- 1. Social situation produces tensions and conflicts, leading to pressure for their easement via mass media consumption (Katz and Foulkes, 1962).*
- 2. Social situation creates an awareness of problems that demand attention, information about which may be sought in the media (Edelstein, 1973).*
- 3. Social situation offers impoverished real-life opportunities to satisfy certain needs, which are then directed to the mass media for complementary, supplementary, or substitute servicing (Rosengren and Windahl, 1972).*
- 4. Social situation gives rise to certain values, the affirmation and reinforcement of which is facilitated by the consumption of congruent media materials (Dembo, 1972).*
- 5. Social situation provides a field of expectations of familiarity with certain media materials, which must then be monitored in order to sustain membership of valued social groupings (Atkins, 1972).*

(Katz et al., 1974, pp.516)

However, does performative activism, colloquially named “slackivism”, fall under traditional activism, or is it more self-serving? Activism relative to public relations is defined by Smith as “process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Smith, 2005, p. 5). Chon and Park’s definition states that activism often features “(a) contentious issues, (b) collective action, (c) solidarity or collective identity, and (d) an effort to solve problems using communication.” (Chon & Park, 2019, pp. 74).

Analysing BLM on social media through Chon and Park’s features it is understood as a) recognition of police brutality predominantly affecting people of colour (POC) internationally, b) drawing attention to these issues through viral media and stories c) uniting POC communities with non-POC standing in solidarity, and d) marching to end police brutality, fighting online and in person to defund the police (not abolish) and redistribute those funds into separate organisations that are better equipped to support POC, domestic violence and rape victims, mental health, and other social services. Although race movements have been prevalent throughout the world’s history, digital convergence, or the datafication of media, facilitated the spread of more accurate and up to date information has been through instantaneous mass media online, and subsequent user gratification and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has made and subsequent user gratification of performative activism trendy. “Social media platforms have become an important resource for successful activism by activating individual participation” (Chon & Park, 2019, pp.75), this is especially true for the BLM movement since the initial creation of the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter on Twitter in July 2013. It has since been used by active audiences on Facebook, Instagram, and all other popular SNS to share information related to BLM activism, most notably during the 2020 BLM protests after the public death of George Floyd went viral on social media (“Video: How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” 2021).

Aligning with Katz et al.’s social factors, factor two states “social situation creates an awareness of problems that demand attention, information about which may be sought in the media”. BOT occurred for several reasons, and subsequently snowballed into the social media blackout it was never intended to be. On 30 May 2020 ex-Senior Director of Marketing at Atlantic Records and Council Member of the Black Music Collective, Brianna Agyemang, posted on Instagram a black graphic with white text asking her fellow music industry community to take a pause on social media and work to reconnect with their families and communities during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. She coined the day “Music Industry Black Out Tuesday” and hashtagged #theshowmustbepaused. This was the only hashtag included in the post (Figure 1).

What Agyemang had not accurately predicted in her Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) action of BOT was how her key publics (POC, BLM allies, and other key opinion leaders in the music industry) would decode her #theshowmustbepaused encoded message. On Tuesday 2 June, these active audiences decoded the message of standing in solidarity and were mobilized as a collective (Chon & Park, 2019, pp. 75) in the social media blackout by posting plain black squares predominantly on Instagram (Samuelsson & Schoultz, 2021, pp. 30), and additionally hashtagging #BLM, #blacklivesmatter, and #blackouttuesday in their posts (Figure 2). “Cultural narratives provide a template for framing and representing socio-historical activity and for guiding individual and collective behaviour” (Dawson, 2020, pp. 979). Through the uses of these hashtags, the audience was aligning the BOT movement with the BLM social issue. This is a typical function of a hashtag, referring to an event while simultaneously responding to the event (Dawson, 2020, pp.981). However, while the online public were active in their social justice discourse supporting the BLM

movement, they were simultaneously flooding the hashtag feeds with black squares and ultimately drowning out critical information for audiences participating in on the ground BLM protests. "Individuals in the social media environment not only are easily exposed to social issues, but also engage in the issues by creating and transmitting information," (Chon & Park, 2019, pp. 97) and said information was informing protestors of police movements, key opinion leader's voices, protest violence, and relevant COVID-19 information circulating the protest locations worldwide. During an international pandemic, and an international race movement, was not the time to be kept in the dark.

The 'virality' of this activism case study can be attributed to a few factors; the political environment, the ability for digital natives to express themselves online, and the miscommunication decoded from the original message. Social media as a function of activism is a beast yet to be understood fully, Ytre-Arne & Das state "...algorithmic media and datafication (Boyd & Crawford 2012; van Dijck 2014; Veltri 2017) further challenge understandings of technological, economic, cultural, and political power relations in society," (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2018, pp. 185) The political environment surrounding #blackouttuesday affected the related tags surrounding BLM, and therefore caused the misuse of other BLM hashtags.

Zizi Papacharissi categorised the #metoo movement as an 'affective public'. She defined 'affective public's as "public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds" (Papacharissi, 2015, pp.14), and what is more emotive to mass audiences than heated politics? Rho and Mazmanian state, "those who use political hashtags do so to denote alignment with an issue, demonstrate why a particular social cause is personally important to them, and raise support around the issues embodied by the hashtag." (Rho & Mazmanian, 2020, pp.2). Not only does the hyper-political #blacklivesmatter movement fall under Papacharissi's category of affective publics, but the contagion of the #blackouttuesday movement does also.

Katz suggests "...the use of fictional (and other) media materials for "personal reference" may spring from a need for self-esteem; social utility functions may be traced to the need for affiliation..." (Katz et al., 1973, pp.514). Amidst COVID-19 loneliness would have affected many individual's self-esteem, and during a time of unprecedented isolation the desire to be affiliated with a greater community would have also been at a peak. Their reward/gratification is community. However, despite how well intended the mass support for the cause was perceived, the explosion of support for this 'trending' could possibly be due to the underlying need for individuals to find a 'low risk, high reward' social justice issue to align themselves with to boost their social capital. As SNS is highly accessible and public, Shoa states that an easy-to-use platform "enables users to input very little, but the output for users may come in abundance" (Shoa, 2008, pp. 17).

User-generated content is another aspect of gratification one must consider. Younger generations, known as digital natives, are the largest demographic to use social media and find SNS safe places to express their views uncensored (Samuelsson & Schoultz, 2021, pp.4). "Social media offer a valuable window into youth (political) expression in naturally occurring contexts, where young people are interacting among themselves, for themselves, in their preferred modes of expression" (Lerat & Klinger-Vilenchik, 2021, pp.2). Some users of SNS do more than just regurgitate others' messages, especially the critical thinkers of Gen Z. Public relation scholars have said online activism publics must be recognised by organisations as active cocreators of key messages. This recognition assists the cultivation of mutually beneficial relationships through symmetrical communication (Chon & Park, 2019, pp. 74). Dawson describes his definition of emergent storytelling as "a non-narrative viral

process which operationalizes competing concepts of narrative at different levels in a complex system, but which nonetheless has value only in narrative terms” (Dawson, 2020, pp. 981). Dawson’s application of this concept was towards the #metoo movement, however for #blackouttuesday the narrative being told was symbolic, such as a minute of silence to respect fallen soldiers, or children lost in a bombing. The narrative is what is not being said, rather than what is. They are the messages mass audiences are decoding from the black squares that filled their Instagram feed; content generated by other users.

The Katz et al.’s (1974) Uses and Gratification Theory and Hall’s (1973) and Encoding/Decoding model of communication illustrate the different motivations and benefits mass media audiences can have and receive by participating in activism. Whether the #blackouttuesday online viral success was due to performative activism or not is up to the individuals that participated. The success can be measured in the conversations that are being had now surround POC worldwide, and in the taboos that have been broken in the online environment. Despite many forms of gratification one can received by presenting themselves as socially conscious online, pressing a button to share someone else’s narrative, or writing a hashtag online in solidarity is more accessible and less overwhelming than being sprayed by rubber bullets on the street. Yes, the saturation of ‘slackivism’ can be disruptive, as exhibited by the unintentional blackout of vital BLM information on social media. However, all protesting is disruptive and inconvenient for at least one party. If it is not, then it was not done properly.

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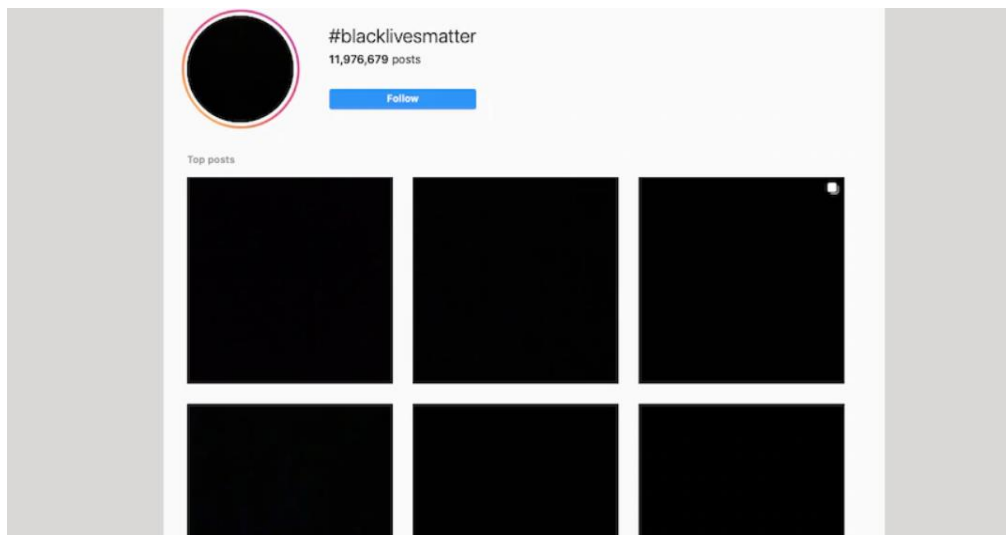
Appendices

Figure 1



Agyemang, B. [@bri\_anna] (2020, May 30) 'We are tired and can't change things alone...', Retrieved 4 June 2021 from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAyqPSxAHOT/>

Figure 2



How the #blacklivesmatter hashtag on Instagram appeared once people started posting black tiles. (Twitter: @sadeyoncee via abc.net.au)