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SHOPPING FOR A CAUSE: SOCIAL INFLUENCERS, PERFORMATIVE ALLYSHIP, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACTIVISM

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SHOPPING FOR A CAUSE: SOCIAL INFLUENCERS, PERFORMATIVE

ALLYSHIP, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACTIVISM

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A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition and Literature

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by

Emily Ashley McKellar

December 2021

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2010s, social media has been a powerful tool for

protestors and activists throughout the world. In times of crisis and political

uprisings, users have pulled out their phones and taken to platforms like Twitter,

Facebook, and, more recently, Instagram, to capture "the revolution" in real time.

Although originally intended for networking purposes, social media has provided

people with a digital space to share their stories, disseminate resources, and

broadcast live, allowing them to share their efforts with millions.

While social media has helped assemble protests, amplify marginalized

voices, and educate the public, it has also become a heavily monetized space.

Rhetorical work on social media emphasizes how these apps are, above

everything else, "corporate spaces" that were designed to promote "capitalist

values." This can be seen throughout social media today, especially with

Instagram's most recent addition of a "shopping tab," which now allows users to

shop for products without even having to leave the app. An article published on

salon.com criticizes the update, arguing that the app capitalizes on users when

they're feeling most vulnerable.

This brings me to my research question: Can we effectively use social

media to create systemic change, or do these apps only further embed us into

the very system we're trying to dismantle? My thesis focuses on Leah Thomas,

an "eco-communicator" who previously used her platform to write and speak

about the environment. After she designed and posted a simple graphic,

"Environmentalists for Black Lives Matter," her modest following on Instagram skyrocketed overnight and attracted the attention of corporate brands looking to further promote their sustainability initiatives. Thomas's social media used to not be monetized – it used to be filled with personal posts about her experiences as a black woman, and informational posts about the environment and what actions she's taking to lessen her impact. But now, almost half of her posts are advertisements, many of them for companies with questionable motives and manufacturing histories. Her partnerships with certain companies have made many of her followers uncomfortable, and rightly so, because it emphasizes "commodity activism" – shopping to create change, or to support certain causes. By buying from any one of the brands Thomas promotes, consumers can feel like they're doing their part.

Although Thomas is doing important work forwarding conversations about race and the environment, I argue that these brands have ultimately commodified Thomas's identity as a black activist and are using her to sell consumers a certain lifestyle. These brands are not true allies of the Black Lives Matter movement, or any social justice cause in general – they're practicing "performative allyship," which means they're showing support in ways that really only benefit them. Social media users walk away from Thomas's feed not necessarily thinking about the environment, or social equity, but rather, what Thomas wears, where she shops, and more. I argue that we can't create

sustainable change through shopping, because it keeps us embedded in the

system we're fighting against.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

JOURNAL ARTICLE:

SHOPPING FOR A CAUSE: SOCIAL INFLUENCERS, PERFORMATIVE

ALLYSHIP, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ACTIVISM

Introduction

Santa Barbara local Leah Thomas, aptly named @greengirlleah on social media, is more than just an environmental activist – she's her own aesthetic.

Her Instagram feed is filled with moments of "black girl joy" and her adventures in fighting eco injustices. With her hair in braids or twists, hoops in her ears, and a smile on her face, Thomas looks one with nature wherever she's placed. Whether she's wandering through empty fields, going for a bike ride, or pumping her fist during a protest, Thomas has a way of making activism seem effortlessly cool.

In other words, Thomas is marketable, and advertisers have taken notice. Since 2020, she's worked with a variety of beauty, lifestyle, and clothing brands. She's even partnered with giant corporations like Unilever and has helped promote sustainability initiatives for United Airlines.

Witnessing Thomas work with these brands brings into question her vision for a more equitable and sustainable world, especially considering how these companies are using her identity as a black activist to promote their own agendas. In this article, I question if we can effectively use social media to carry

out activist work while considering the complexities of social media's role in activism in the age of neoliberalism. To do so, I first review literature on how social media has been used in the activist movements of Arab Spring and Occupy. I also review literature on how social media has become increasingly used for shopping. I then look closely at @greengirlleah's account, where her identity as a BIPOC environmental activist has been appropriated by corporations looking to market their sustainability initiatives. I will perform a case study analysis specifically looking at her creative content on Instagram and how her activist work, as well as her body, have been commodified by the very brands with whom she chooses to represent. Thomas's posts often come into conflict with her messages of environmentalism and social justice, bringing into question the plausibility of the kind of activism she often promotes – shopping to make change. Ultimately, I argue that we as social media users and consumers need to become more aware of how products and ideas are being sold to us, and I close with examples of where I see a "messiness" between consumerism and activism existing.

<p align="center">Social Media: A Tool for Activism?</p>

Since the early 2010s, social media has been a powerful tool for protestors and activists throughout the world. In times of crisis and political uprisings, users have pulled out their phones and taken to platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and, more recently, Instagram, to capture "the revolution" in real time. Although originally intended for networking purposes, social media has provided

people with a digital space to share their stories, disseminate resources, and broadcast live, allowing them to share their efforts with millions. In their essay analyzing Twitter conversations during the Arab Spring in 2011, Bruns et al. (2013) discuss how social media use went beyond mere documentation. The authors describe how various apps essentially functioned as "tools" to help protestors organize and disseminate footage (Bruns et al., 872). During this time, Twitter posts that were tagged with #egypt or #libya attracted a global audience and allowed users to engage in "practices of political participation," such as re-tweeting important resources, sharing their experiences, and coordinating protests (Bruns et al., 872). The authors' characterization of social media as a political tool demonstrates the capabilities apps provides users outside of its original purposes.

Similarly, during the Occupy movement which took place the same year, participants utilized social media to assemble protests, document their activism, and connect with larger audiences (Boler et al., 438). In their research about women's involvement in Occupy, Boler et al. (2014) found that female participants often held important positions in the movement that revolved around social media use. Female leaders in the movement relied on apps like Facebook and Twitter and would also use livestreaming services during various events, all of which would help broaden their activist engagement (Boler et al., 438). The female participants interviewed in the authors' article felt that "sharing" and "friending" through social media was a part of their "civic responsibility" and that it

became their "personal responsibility to educate others and update one's network on unfolding events" (Boler et al., 448). The authors also discuss how these social technologies allowed Occupiers to share their "lived experiences," which were often misconstrued in mainstream coverage of the movement (Boler et al., 447). The study conducted by Boler et al. highlights how social media is not only used for "work," but more importantly, they reveal how users often feel compelled to post their political activity because they believe it's become a part of their civic duty.

App features like the hashtag were also prolific in 2020 during Black Lives Matter (BLM). In their article, "Anti-racist Activism and the Transformational Principles of Hashtag Publics," McVey et al. (2016) discuss how certain hashtags for BLM made it easier for users to quickly learn about, follow, and participate in the social justice movement. McVey et al. explain how hashtags help organize the "chaos of online conversation" through the employment of "catchy, repeatable" phrases (McVey et al., 2). These phrases, the authors point out, must be "abstract," but still clear enough to keep users focused on the issue at hand (McVey et al., 2). Similar to other features of social media, the hashtag allows activists and protestors to "mobilize" their responses to movements as they unfold (McVey et al., 1). The authors take a particularly close look at how #HandsUpDontShoot functioned throughout the movement, arguing that it helped create "visibility and solidarity in the geographically dispersed by publicly connected struggles of [BLM]" (McVey et al., 4). The authors' analysis further

reflects the usefulness of social media for activist causes because of how it can bring people together.

In his article, "Technologies of Self-Mediation: Affordances and Constraints of Social Media for Protest Movements," Bart Cammaerts (2015) provides a framework for how social media is utilized during protests, and he breaks down how contemporary activists use various apps to their advantage. He explains:

[M]ovements use technologies . . . to construct and sustain collective identities, to articulate a set of demands and ideas and in effect to become self-conscious as a movement . . . their asynchronous nature also enables the capturing and recording of movement discourses, protest events, slogans, and the subsequent memorization of them . . . here [they] play a crucial role in archiving the past . . . these disclosures and remembrances are amplified through as many channels and platforms as there are at a given moment, with a view to garnering support, recruiting new sympathizers and mobilizing for action . . . [these] processes are also neither bounded by national boundaries anymore; they can gain global attention and bypass national censorship strategies. (Cammaerts 92)

In this excerpt from his article, Cammaerts' description of social media activism emphasizes the fluidity that technology grants users today, allowing them to organize, share resources, document their engagement, and connect with others throughout the world. He also touches on the accessibility of social

media activism, noting how movements function asynchronously on these platforms which make it easier for individuals to participate on their own time (Cammaerts 94). Cammaerts' writing captures what social movements like Arab Spring, Occupy, and BLM have managed to achieve with the help of digital technologies, demonstrating how it actually has many affordances.

While social media has helped assemble protests, amplify marginalized voices, and educate the public, it has also made it incredibly easy for users to support causes all from the comfort of their own homes. Scholars like Morozov (2012) have been more critical of the effectiveness of "digital activism." In his book, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, he writes:

"The unthinking glorification of digital activism makes its practitioners confuse priorities with capabilities. Getting people onto the streets, which may indeed become easier with modern communication tools, is usually the last stage of a protest movement . . . One cannot start with protests and think of political demands and further steps later on. There are real dangers to substituting strategic and long-term action with spontaneous street marches." (Morozov 196)

In this excerpt from Morozov's chapter, "Why Kierkegaard Hates Slacktivism," he takes issue with how social media activism has been romanticized by the media as being "world-changing," despite the fact that it hasn't changed all that much. While digital activism has increased our awareness of ongoing injustices around the globe, Morozov points out that the efforts usually

end there. Once awareness is raised movements may solicit donations from supporters, and although this may be helpful in certain situations, Morozov warns that our readiness to give monetary donations can actually "undermine one's efforts to engage [supporters] in more meaningful real-life activities" (Morozov 191). He also brings attention to how little effort is required to "do" digital activism, which for most users means liking, following, or joining a group that's in support of a cause (Morozov 186). If an individual is only required to click a button, share a resource, and (perchance) pull out their credit card, Morozov wonders how impactful these actions will be in the long run, writing, "it's hard to imagine how it could . . . cultivate a deep commitment to serious causes" (Morozov 189). While Morozov's critique seems to stall the "mobilizing" efforts of social media, his critique brings into question the effectiveness of digital activism.

<p style="text-align: center;">Social Media and Shopping</p>

Morozov's point about how social media affects individual participation in social justice movements is important, yet it's an issue that is seldom discussed by other scholars. If providing monetary support can "undermine" one's further involvement in a cause, this raises concerns for how we view and understand activism today. Morozov writes that since the internet has made raising money so "easy," it often becomes the main focus of activist causes (Morozov 191). For example, during the BLM movement of 2020, social media users shared and re-posted links where people could donate money to various causes supporting black communities and the fight for racial justice. Donating money was also the

primary way corporations supported BLM, although many didn't disclose how much funding would go where (Wellemeyer, 2020). Once an individual (or corporation) donates, they usually feel like they've done their part, despite the fact that many organizations solicit funds from the public "without having any meaningful impact on the situation" (Morozov 191). Morozov points out that although money helps, it definitely doesn't solve everything and can often diminish possibly more effective forms of activism that might actually generate systemic change.

The ease of soliciting donations online brings attention to how social media functions within the system of capitalism. In his discussion on the constraints of digital activism, Cammaerts touches on the implicit ideologies programmed into social media, pointing out how these apps are, above everything else, "corporate spaces" that were designed to promote "capitalist values" (Cammaerts 100). Cammaerts reminds users that social media was originally designed to "add value," and not necessarily assist in fights for change (Cammaerts 100). Despite this, users continue to rely on various platforms for activist causes without taking into consideration how social media is situated within capitalism.

Matthew Vetter digs deeper into the relationship between social media, capitalism, and consumerism but suggests there are ways users can "talk back" to these dominant regimes. In his essay, "Queer-the-Tech: Genderfucking and Anti-Consumer Activism in Social Media," Vetter (2014) sheds light on how app

interfaces often reinforce heteronormative ideals and promote consumerism. Vetter analyzes Pinterest, a "pinboard-style photo sharing website," looking specifically at how it influences gender identity and consumer behavior (Vetter). He then discusses how users can "subvert" the ideologies implicit in Pinterest by pinning "queer and anti-consumer images, links, and videos . . . [that] disrupts the normative discourse produced on the network" (Vetter). By "queering" Pinterest, Vetter not only interrogates the values perpetuated by social media apps, but also demonstrates the importance of critiquing these apps that have "naturalized" gender norms, heterosexuality, and shopping (Vetter). Building off of Morozov and Cammaerts, Vetter's work brings further awareness to how social media shapes our lives and behavior.

Though possibilities for transgressive usage of social media platforms exist, these apps work hard to integrate and perpetuate more mainstream engagements with capitalism from their users. The perpetuation of capitalism can be seen throughout social media today, especially with the recent addition of Instagram's "Shop tab," which now allows users to shop for products without having to leave the app (Andalibi, 2020). In her article regarding Instagram's redesign, Nazanin Andalibi, who studies social media, people, and society, says this change in the app is potentially dangerous. She explains that by changing their notification button to a shopping tote, Instagram is letting its users know, "This platform is a business, and interactions on this platform are going to be commodified" (Andalibi). Previous scholarship on digital activism shows how

making connections with people is integral to furthering social justice causes, so Andalibi's statement about the commodification of user interactions is very concerning. She believes this move is manipulative and that it will ultimately lead users to make "fewer personal connections and less personal, meaningful content" (Andalibi). She further explains that Instagram's shift to online commerce makes users "vulnerable to advertising that exploits their emotional experiences" (Andalibi). Considering how social media has been used by activists as a platform to share their personal stories and circulate resources relevant to their fight, it's worrisome that apps may try to profit off users when they're upset and seeking information to make sense of current and ongoing events. Like Cammaerts and Vetter, Andilibi's work makes more visible the connections between social media and capitalism, as well as how digital platforms continue to influence our behaviors. More importantly, her discussion should lead us to consider the effects of using social media to further activist causes and what happens if/when activism is commodified within these digital spaces.

"Me-Centric" Social Media

Aside from shopping, the system of capitalism encourages an increased focus on the self, which is only further fueled by social media. Scholars like Cammaerts and Morozov bring into question this element of narcissism on digital platforms and how it may affect our involvement in social justice work. Although users may feel like they're a part of a movement when participating on social

media, Cammaerts observes the irony of online networking, highlighting how social media is "all rather 'Me-centric'" (Cammaerts 99). He argues this emphasis on individualism, as well as our constant reliance on screens, make it more difficult for us to see the connections between the individual and society, which in turn makes it more challenging for us to gather collectively for action (Cammaerts 99). Similarly, Morozov notes how narcissistic social media use can be and believes most users support various causes online due to "peer pressure" or "to impress one's friends" (Morozov 186). Considering how many social justice issues are documented online, both Cammaerts and Morozov question the authenticity of users' commitment to various movements. For Morozov, it seems unlikely that most social media users "would be able to develop true feelings of empathy or be prepared to make sacrifices that political life . . . requires" (Morozov 187).

Social media is also the perfect venue for corporations and brands to connect with their customers and speak to them directly through a variety of approaches. "Like" buttons, comments, and partnerships with social influencers help create an illusion of intimacy between brands and their followers, allowing them to further exploit users through affective posts. In 2020 during Black Lives Matter protests, corporations were pressured by consumers to respond to ongoing violence against BIPOC communities. In highly monetized, shopping-based spaces like social media apps, many users viewed corporate messages of support as being "performative allyship," or disingenuous for the sake of keeping

their sales. According to Peter Kalina, performative allyship is "a performance put on by an individual from a nonmarginalized group to show solidarity with a marginalized group, but in a way that is not helpful" (478). These performances aren't helpful because they usually only benefit the performer, who pretends to be an ally only to save their image, or to receive recognition. So even when users feel like their concerns are being met by corporate brands, they're only being further manipulated.

Shopping for a Cause: How @greengirlleah Sells Sustainability

Leah Thomas's social media platform, @greengirlleah, took off last year after she created a simple, text-based graphic that stated, "Environmentalists for Black Lives Matter." Her graphic not only caught the attention of thousands of new followers but also attracted media outlets and brands who were intrigued by her intersectional approach to environmentalism.

Since then Thomas has given countless interviews on her work, has been featured on magazine covers and news articles, and has served as a spokesperson for anti-racism and environmentalism in online discussions. She was the first activist to be featured in #FoodDiaries, a Harper's Bazaar miniseries on YouTube that usually stars celebrity chefs, actors, and musicians. Titled "Everything Environmental Activist Leah Thomas Eats in a Day," Thomas shared what she typically consumes "to keep her energy and momentum going to fight for justice and change."

Thomas was even featured in two commercials that aired during this year's Superbowl – one for Logitech, and the other for Instagram Reels. Both ads show young artists and creative "changemakers" who went viral around the same time Thomas did, and both commercials end similarly with powerful, activist-y slogans: "Defy Logic" and "We Make Today."

Like most of Thomas's social media content, her own #DefyLogic commercial that aired on TV elsewhere places her in locations that romanticize the outdoors: at the beach during sunset, and in front of a hiking trail viewpoint that overlooks the city of Los Angeles. Thomas is shown working at home, too, where she is surrounded by her plants and bright sunlight streaming through her windows. Throughout the commercial, Thomas is shown using several Logitech products that have helped make her work as an activist possible during a worldwide pandemic.

"Nature is for everyone!" she scribbles in the opening scene, using the Logitech stylus pen to doodle on her tablet. Later, working at her desktop computer, she tilts her Logitech webcam towards her before she welcomes everyone to her podcast on intersectional environmentalism. The ad comes to a close with Thomas in a power stance, the LA skyline and city in the distance behind her. Clad in a black turtleneck with her arms folded across her chest, Thomas tilts her head to the side and looks directly into the camera, as if to confront the system that routinely excludes people of color, like her, from being

heard. As she explains in her commercial, Logitech's technology has helped "amplify" her voice as a black activist.

Companies like Logitech may be elevating marginalized voices, but in the commercial created for Thomas, they're also commodifying her work as an activist. This is evident in how the camera always pans to focus on the technology Thomas uses, zooming in on Logitech's logo every time. As viewers, we become aware of the tools Thomas may or may not use to carry out her activist efforts, but we don't exactly understand her message of why environmentalism needs to be intersectional. Advertisements like these are problematic in the way they highlight products consumers can purchase rather than promote the subject's actual purpose.

For Thomas, who actively uses her platform to engage in critical discussions about environmental injustices and racism, it is worth noting that almost half of the content she creates for her Instagram are advertisements. While these #ads are for more sustainable brands and companies that Thomas supports, her growing list of partnerships has the potential to put her overall message at risk.

Scrolling through Thomas's Instagram feed, viewers can learn more about the often hidden aspects of a young activist's life: what music she listens to, how she does her hair and makeup, the kinds of products she uses on her body, and how she cares for herself.

Take for example this random sampling of her creative content:

"Rest is radical," Thomas reminds her followers in an ad for hemp bedding.

"Single use plastics aren't cute, but sustainability sure is," she says in a photo of her holding up a pink Brita water bottle with a built-in filter.

"Sustainability is sexy and I love finding brands that mix comfort, style, and sustainability" she writes, striking a pose in her eco-friendly swimwear.

"This 'Changemaker' foundation has been my daily go-to," Thomas shares, using her fingers to spread makeup on her face. (Notice the activist-y name of the product.)

"Just a green girl, trying to create a greener world. One way I do this is with my fashion choices," she writes, modeling a dress made from sustainable cotton.

"Shine bright like a *sustainably and ethically sourced* diamond," reads her caption for a jewelry ad.

"You shouldn't have to pick and choose between sustainable materials and style," she states, showing off her eco-friendly puffer jacket that's "currently all the rage."

"This [car] made me feel like I was being transported to the future, a future where sustainability + style are top of mind," she writes, posing in front of a red electric car she test drove in Malibu.

"I like my hiking boots to look like they were delivered straight from the future," Thomas writes, crouching down to show off her unusually colorful hiking boot made with recycled textiles.

"Do what feels natural to you," she urges her followers, wearing an athleisure outfit from Smartwool.

Thomas has even filmed her "self-care routine" with ettitude, a sustainable bedding and bath store, as well as a makeup tutorial for Bite Beauty, a "clean" cosmetic company. She's also partnered with companies for their sustainability initiatives, creating informational videos for Love Beauty and Planet, Dove, Tommy Hilfiger, and United Airlines.

One campaign she discusses in particular was for Allbirds, an apparel company that uses all natural materials. Thomas, who was featured alongside other BIPOC activists in the commercial, is shown painting signs for a protest and running through the streets of Los Angeles.

In her social media post sharing the advert, Thomas explains:

This is my first time on a set where all the models are BIPOC and are also fighting for social justice and environmental justice . . . Never in my life did I think my environmental science degree would lead me to being able to "model" or that brands would consciously choose to spotlight BIPOC organizers with the launch of their new collection.

Each of these advertisements not only captures how "stylish" Thomas is, but more importantly, they reveal how good she and other "bodies" are at selling

products. By appropriating her activist role, BIPOC identity, and the intimate relationship she shares with her followers, her sponsors gain access to untapped markets of consumers. In turn, Thomas shapes her message to fit the brands who support her activist efforts.

The issue here is that her followers aren't necessarily left thinking about environmental issues or the racism that plagues our society. Instead, they're left thinking about the products Thomas uses on her body, how she does her makeup, what she wears, and where she goes shopping. Similar to her Logitech commercial, which commodified her work as an activist, much of Thomas's social media content commodifies her entire life. In her ongoing efforts to "dismantle systems of oppression," Thomas only ends up keeping her followers trapped within the confines of capitalism.

The main way social media platforms make money is through advertisements. To put it more bluntly, these apps are essentially "renting [our] eyeballs" to their advertisers (McFarlane, 2021). But much of what attracts users (as well as corporations) to social media platforms is user-generated content (UGC), or content created by users themselves in promotion of products. UGC can be an image, a video, a review, or even just a social media update, and posts are usually tagged as part of larger marketing campaigns, or linked directly to a brand's website (Vrountas, 2021). UGC allows brands to "connect with users in a fun, engaging and trustworthy way" that will also boost sales (Urrutia, 2019). This kind of content is a more "effective strategy to build deeper emotional

connections" with audiences because it's reminiscent of a friend or family member recommending a product to someone (Urrutia). While UGC are still ads, they don't have the same look or feel to them. Each form of UGC is unique to the individual creating the work, and each post helps to bring the brand closer to their consumers. In this way, user-generated content not only serves to help brands promote products on a more intimate level, but it also further commodifies our bodies, actions, and day-to-day lives.

Through social media, consumers get to see individuals who are "just like them," using various products that fit their lifestyles, belief systems, and aesthetics. The opportunity to align with consumers and their values is why brands especially enjoy working with social influencers. These individuals, who gain popularity by going viral at some point in their social media careers, amass large followings and are therefore more likely to reach audiences that brands have more difficulty targeting through traditional advertising. Even if influencers have smaller followings, their style usually targets what advertisers would call a "niche market" of loyal followers. Social influencers are powerful in this way because they can "influence" or persuade their audience to carry out or aspire to certain actions, which makes them perfect for selling products.

Advertisements like Allbirds that feature Thomas also serve to interpellate viewers and call them to action. By looking directly into the camera, Thomas entices consumers to "get involved" and "do" something – to shop for the greater good. Furthermore, Allbirds's message to "Tread Lighter" tells consumers that

they (YOU) need to lighten your environmental impact, ultimately placing the responsibility of change onto the individual.

In regards to comments that criticize her ads and accuse her of promoting "greenwashing" (i.e., making something look eco-friendly when it really isn't), Thomas tells her followers that they should prioritize "progress over perfection." She emphasizes how her numerous partnerships have helped further her work as an activist, allowing her to create and fund her organization, Intersectional Environmentalism. She also reminds critics that people of color have been largely excluded from being able to represent companies. Thomas says she hopes to use her platform to encourage brands to feature more people that look like her.

Thomas's list of partnerships continues to grow, but at what cost? Popular platforms like hers that forward important conversations, but are also monetized, bring into question the plausibility of social media activism.

Is it possible to "do" activism on social media? If so, what happens when activist messages are co-opted by capitalistic ventures? While most scholarship that focuses on social media activism discusses how the hashtag has helped revolutionize the sharing of resources online, it doesn't acknowledge or critique the system of neoliberal capitalism in which these social movements are taking place. As apps like Instagram update their interfaces to make shopping even easier, it becomes crucial to consider if activist platforms like Thomas's are genuinely helping people and the planet, or only making corporations wealthier.

Since Thomas often conflates shopping with environmentalism, it becomes challenging for her followers to differentiate her advertisements from her actual activism. In one of her most recent #ads for Hunter Boots, Thomas lounges in a field of wild grass against a white cloth backdrop. She uses whimsical language to caption a photo series showing off her new shoes, writing:

> Creativity and environmentalism often collide in my life . . . From biology labs to film sets, I also find that bit of creativity in what I wear . . . Just got these cute Play Clogs by @hunterboots that are waterproof, certified vegan and playfully quirky + colorful that I can bring along for any adventure: be it scientific, creative or just for funzies.

While Thomas uses this comment to discuss how her creativity and love for the environment usually come together, she also touches on the less noticeable "collision" of capitalism and activism. Since she prefaces her plug for Hunter Boots with a story of how fortunate she feels to be able to merge all of her interests, it isn't immediately obvious to her followers that this is an advertisement for a pair of clogs.

Through casual prose and colorful images, Thomas is able to craft a stylish ad for the formerly unfashionable comfort shoe, taking them out of the garden and into a wide open world of possibilities. Although their name "Play Clogs" evokes childhood memories of playing in the yard, Thomas elevates the shoes by sharing how she uses them in her adult work life: she can wear them in a science lab to protect her feet, but they're also still "cute" enough for her to

travel in and wear on a film set. These clogs have no boundaries, and in wearing

them, Thomas is able to be the best, most authentic versions of herself – the

biologist, the artist, and the girl who just wants to have fun.

"I need these for my garden," a family member leaves in her comment

section.

"Vegan clogs are so hard to find!" exclaims one of her followers.

"Making clogs look so good. Loving it!" another follower observes.

"I need this entire outfit," a commenter states with the heart eyes emoji.

So, if it's essentially an advertisement, what happens to Thomas's story?

Creative content like her Hunter Boots ad blur the line between her work,

personal life, and consumerism, intertwining her activist journey with a $75

purchase of designer rubber clogs.

Thomas may be an activist (although she prefers the title "eco-

communicator," which allows her to disseminate information about sustainability

and create content for brands), and she certainly is her own aesthetic. Above all

else, though, it has become abundantly clear that Thomas is a social influencer.

Like other social media influencers with smaller, yet still profitable

followings, Thomas exists in a liminal space between celebrity status and

"regular" person. She perpetually teeters on the threshold of fame, but occupies

a space of normalcy with her approachable manner and willingness to

communicate with followers in her comments and Instagram Lives. Thomas

gains the trust of her followers through intimacy, sharing aspects of her life that

are usually hidden from the public eye. Thomas also incorporates a discourse of self-empowerment in her content, using her platform to inspire individuals to take action against environmental and racial injustices.

The above analysis serves as a perfect example of how Thomas embodies neoliberal capitalism and ideology. In his book, David Harvey identifies neoliberalism as being a theory of political economic practices characterized by "strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2). More importantly, though, he writes that neoliberalism has become a guiding set of beliefs about "human well-being," arguing that our happiness can best be achieved through "liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills" (Harvey 2). When we break down Harvey's work and apply it to what's going on in social media, the forces of neoliberalism become more visible.

Integral to the entrepreneur identity described here are the elements of "taking risks" in order to "make money." Millionaire social influencers, many of whom share how they "quit their fulltime jobs to pursue YouTube," are idolized for the very real financial risks they took to make their dreams come true. Freed from the nine-to-five grind and raking in cash from advertisers, product launches, and book deals, social influencers appear to be living the "good life," having finally achieved "happiness."

Being a "risk taker" has a similar ring to becoming a "changemaker," a label that has been romanticized and placed on activists like Thomas. Furthermore, in relation to neoliberalism's "entrepreneurial freedom," it's worth

noting that Thomas was unemployed when her platform suddenly took off last year. In an Instagram post about her overnight success, she shares that during her unemployment:

> I felt lost and not very confident in myself . . . but with that stillness I was forced to really listen to my heart . . . I was nervous and afraid, but I made a graphic in support of BLM, posted it and put my phone down. When I checked back my following had almost doubled and over the next month it grew by 120k . . . that response made me realize that I do have an important voice, as do all of you, and that I deserve a seat at the table or to create my own elsewhere if needed.

Thomas shows vulnerability in sharing how she took a risk, but more importantly, she captures the nature of social media algorithms. With the click of a button Thomas was catapulted into recognition, ultimately because she happened to post the right thing at the right time. Her Instagram success story is the stuff of dreams, and, perhaps less noticeably, it's also inherently neoliberal.

In her essay "Brand Me 'Activist'," Alison Hearn (2011) interrogates "the self" in calls for activism, and outlines how this marketing template stems from neoliberalism (Hearn 30). Although Hearn doesn't explicitly discuss social media in her work, her Marxist analyses of celebrity activism can be applied to how we look at activist work on apps like Instagram. In her essay, Hearn shows how neoliberal capitalism, in tandem with post-Fordism, has emphasized the creation of "symbolic" products, which include "packaging, image design, branding, and

marketing, over concrete material production" (qtd. in Hearn 25). Rather than

channeling energy into the manufacturing of products, Hearn explains that our

shift to post-Fordism has placed greater importance on the "ephemeral image"

(Hearn 25). While the image itself may not last long, its power resides in its ability

to create affect and leave an impression on viewers. Hearn analyzes the

"celebrity image" to demonstrate its effectiveness in promoting activist causes,

describing how their visibility in the public eye is a form of "currency" (Hearn 31).

By referring to the celebrity image as a form of capital, her discussion becomes

reminiscent of how the image of the social influencer is also used in a similar way

in for-profit digital spaces.

In a later article about self-branding in reality television, Hearn (2011) uses

Marxist scholarship to describe how the post-Fordist processes of marketing and

branding make up "immaterial labor" – labor that isn't "traditional work," but is

instead used to "[define] and [fix] cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes,

consumer norms, and . . . public opinion" (Lazzarato in Hearn, 316). Part of this

immaterial labor is "affective labor," which "produces and manipulates affects,

such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion" (Hardt

& Negri in Hearn, 316). Hearn argues that these forms of labor naturally led to

the idea of "self-branding," or the practice of perpetuating images that maintain

particular narratives about oneself, and she explores this phenomenon in the

advent of reality television. In her analysis, she explains how reality TV stars

"model[ed] the monetization of 'being'" by accepting money to "play themselves"

in shows that, through the support of product placement and promotions, were "blurring traditional boundaries between entertainment and advertising" (Hearn 315). Hearn demonstrates how the popularity of reality television continued to break down barriers between work and life, thereby generating value from the "social," "communicative," and "lived experiences of individuals," as well as cultural and monetary capital (Hearn 316). Like reality television stars, social influencers help sell certain lifestyles to their followers by "being themselves" and creating sponsored content.

Hearn's work in bridging Marxism with media studies, critical political economy, and cultural studies provides a theoretical framework that isn't currently being utilized in rhetorical analyses of social media. If we apply her framework to influencers and how they "brand" themselves, we can see more clearly how their images are used to sell their followers certain lifestyles.

Conclusion: Social Activism in the Age of Social Media

So, is it possible to "do" activism on social media? The answer isn't quite clear, but perhaps there can be more authentic opportunities for activism if we as social media users work together to create small, intimate, and supportive spaces where we can learn together. There are glimpses and pieces of these kinds of spaces throughout activist movements documented on social media, and even within Leah Thomas's work as a black creator and environmentalist. These spaces are only brief moments, subject to commodification, so it's important that we participate in them while we can. Below I discuss a couple of examples of

where I see possibilities for digital activism within neoliberalism, and how I think we can nurture more spaces like these if we become more mindful of our social media habits. These instances are not perfect, and although we may never know the original intent behind their creation, these "nudges" for activism may lead to bigger and better change.

Moments of digital activism are often "messy" because of how they take place within consumer-based spaces. This "messiness" can be seen in a video posted by Kackie Reviews Beauty on her YouTube channel in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the withdrawal of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan. The video, tagged as a fundraiser, was titled "Get Ready With Me and Donate To Afghan Refugees." This nearly fifty-minute video features Kackie applying makeup and answering questions from her followers in order to distract herself (and her followers) from the news. As a fundraiser, the video allows viewers to donate to a charity for Afghan refugees that Kackie herself researched, but she also states that all of the money she makes from ads on the video will be donated, too. Kackie doesn't identify herself as an activist, but with this video, she uses her platform to promote a cause. On a regular basis, Kackie is a beauty YouTuber who's known for providing viewers with product demonstrations and honest reviews so that they can make more informed choices while shopping. Her purpose is to help consumers navigate the overwhelming amount of cosmetic products that hit the market every week, which is why a video like this may seem out of place for some of her audience. In the

midst of shopping, playing with makeup, and participating in "girl-talk," Kackie confronts her audiences with the not-so-beautiful reality of the world. Although the video didn't really focus on the humanitarian crisis, but instead on Kackie and the products she was using, the comments left by her subscribers helped facilitate some discussion about Afghanistan and America's involvement in the war. Users also left resources where people could donate, or shared how they were donating their time to organize care packages for refugees. While Kackie's video was still predominantly about makeup, it was still an effort to acknowledge what was happening in the world, and provide a space for users to process it.

The way Kackie uses her platform in this example is also reminiscent of how consumers receive world news from brands they follow. In August, natural skincare company cocokind used their Instagram to show support for Afghanistan with a simple, text-based image that stated, "skip the skincare." In their caption they wrote:

> Now that we have you, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan requires all of our attention [broken heart emoji]. Today, we encourage you to skip the skincare and donate to peace building organizations that are actively on the ground trying to keep Afghans safe. If you do buy from us, we will be donating 100% of our profits today (8/17) to @womenforwomen, an organization that helps women survivors of war and conflict rebuild their lives. This is a crucial time for them to continue their work, scale their program and provide the Afghan women with the peace and prosperity

that they deserve. Additionally, it's important to educate yourself on what

is happening. We found @theafghan very helpful in providing useful

information and details. We also urge you to listen, follow and share the

stories of Afghan women . . . Please continue to share resources and

organizations in the comments as we are all learning right now from each

other.

There is something interesting about receiving world news from companies that

are simultaneously trying to sell you products. It's a marketing technique that is

increasingly becoming the norm, because consumers today love a "woke"

company that is informed and shows support for marginalized communities.

While we as customers don't know their intent, or how much "100% of profits"

ultimately ends up being, the brand has still created a space that acknowledges

something isn't right. Similar to Kackie's video, this post creates tension and

clashes with their other content, which features images and videos of their

customers happily applying and using their products. Their caption interpellates

readers and asks them to do more, just like other commodified calls to action, but

the difference is the space this call exists in. Users can comment, share

resources, and even question the brand's motives, all of which creates

possibilities for us to do more, even in commodified spaces.

What's more interesting is that cocokind encouraged their customers to

"educate themselves" on what's happening in Afghanistan. By sharing various

social media profiles their followers can check out, the company makes learning

about these issues accessible, and amplifies the voices of those who are closer to these crises. The brand also makes themselves vulnerable by demonstrating to their customers that they're still learning, too, and creates a space where the brand and customers can learn together. This gives their followers the opportunity to take it further and do more research and visit profiles that are not commodified. Many of the comments left on cocokind's post praised the leaders of the company, writing, "This is how businesses should lead in 2021," and "Love that you guys took attention away from your brand to talk about something we need to know about." Most of the comments, though, focused on the products themselves and the aspect of being rewarded for getting involved: "Just stocked up on my favorite items," writes one commenter. "Best company. Checking out my cart today," a customer states, needing a reason to justify her purchases. While this is still a form of "shopping for a cause," cocokind's referral to activist profiles who are not sponsored by them or other companies demonstrates how there are possibilities for activism on social media – we just need to change our habits regarding how we use these apps.

Social media platforms like Instagram allow users to create their own spaces, and if they wish, they can use these apps in ways that resist or go around consumerism. Although apps function within neoliberalism and are capitalistic spaces, we as users can "reclaim" these spaces and make them our own, as Shari Sternberg discusses (2015) in her book on "feminist repurposing," *Repurposing Composition*. According to Sternberg, feminist repurposing is "a

practice of locating and enacting imaginative possibilities for change and agency within . . . prohibitive, and even damaging, cultural conditions" (Sternberg 2). She brings awareness to our habits and practices that uphold neoliberalism and asks us to rethink them in order to affect actual change. By changing how we do things, she argues that this opens up "opportunity for conversation, sharpened awareness, and seeds for further change" (Sternberg, 11). Although Sternberg focuses on the composition classroom, we can see this happening on social media in the examples above, and even in some of Leah Thomas's own work. Many of those who leave comments on her social media posts don't always agree with her or the companies she chooses to work with, but Thomas leaves her comments open for discussion. Although they're not always productive, this is the "opportunity for conversation" that Sternberg writes about being integral to affecting change. By reading through Thomas's discussions with her commenters, users can actively participate and get a fuller picture of the issue at hand.

The commodification of trending individuals, activists, and artists is becoming increasingly unavoidable, but as Sternberg acknowledges, we must try to enact change within our existing conditions. In other words, we must find resourceful and creative ways to make the most out of what we have. This can be as simple as using social media comment threads to ask questions to facilitate discussion or following activist accounts that are not supported by capital interests. These examples aren't perfect, and they're often quite messy,

but they matter because of how they create tension when they come into conflict with the kinds of social media practices that often bring us pleasure: to like, share, and shop. If we repurpose our habits to do more, we can (briefly) disrupt the flow of capitalism in these consumer-based spaces and make room for other possibilities.

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