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The politics of #diversifyyourfeed in the context of Black Lives Matter

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, the idiom “diversify your feed” (DYF) has emerged concurrently with the rise of social media and communicates the idea that “following” accounts presenting a range of bodies and identities online creates inclusive digital environments and enhances wellbeing. In May of 2020, the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minnesota police has led to a surge of momentum for the Black Lives Matter movement, which has been highly visible on social media as well as in public life. As online communities grapple with how best to engage with anti-racism via the digital, a number of strategies have taken hold as methods through which individuals can actively challenge racism in their own lives and in the lives of others. Among the various strategies advocated is the idea that social media users “diversify their feed” by following Black influencers, activists, businesses, and creatives. In this short essay, we move beyond prevailing understandings of DYF as a practice to improve body image, to critically examine the ethics associated with this social media practice as a method of engagement with anti-racism.

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In the past decade, the negative effects associated with viewing images of idealised bodies online has been widely documented by psychologists and media researchers. Specifically, academic research on the topic argues that women’s interaction with social media platforms predicts body dissatisfaction, poor self-esteem, increased self-objectification and a heightened risk of developing eating disorder symptomology (G. Holland and M. Tiggemann 2016). Increasingly, scholars within this field have turned to the productive role that social media users occupy in choosing the kind of content they consume (H. Monks et al. 2020). This is significant, as emerging research demonstrates that viewing images of a diversity of body types can have a positive impact on wellbeing, as well as protect against some of the harms associated with viewing images of idealised bodies (J. Ogden et al. 2020). By designing their online environments, individuals can establish new norms around what bodies look like, leading to engagement in more health-promoting behaviours.

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Within body positive and fat activist communities on Instagram,¹ this agentic and curated approach to social media is captured by the idiom “diversify your feed” (DYF) and is operationalised by individuals as a strategy for engagement with a set of norms that subvert dominant body and beauty narratives (E. Hadley 2018). In an effort to DYF, social media users may “follow” Instagram accounts that post images of people of varying sizes, ethnicities, gender presentations, abilities and so on, in order to disrupt the steady flow of media images of white, thin, cis-gender and able-bodied individuals. Algorithms embedded within social media platforms’ internal structures, which are designed to learn an individual user’s tastes and interests in order to maximise engagement, create feedback loops which reinforce these acts of agency by showing similar kinds of content. From the user perspective, subsequent casual engagement with the platform may be more supportive of wellbeing, as users are more likely to encounter images that promote positive body image. Thus, a dual and mutually reinforcing process of calibration occurs, at the site of the platform and the user, in service of establishing new norms. This is a highly simplified description of this process. It is noteworthy to add that platforms are not neutral tools that merely “reflect back” or retrieve information, as S. U. Noble (2018) work demonstrates.

The words Black Lives Matter (BLM) first emerged on Facebook following the acquittance of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin. Since then, BLM has become a rallying cry for challenging racism in law enforcement and beyond, as well as a “ubiquitous presence in American culture” (J. Ince, F. Rojas and C. A. Davis 2017, 1814). In May 2020, the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minnesota police led to a resurgence of momentum for the BLM movement, which has been highly visible on social media as well as in public life (Ince et al. 2017). As online communities grapple with how best to engage with anti-racism via the digital, a number of strategies have been advocated through which individuals may actively challenge racism in their own lives and in broader society. Among these strategies is the idea that social media users “diversify their feed” by following Black influencers, educators, activists, businesses, and creatives (Insider 2020). In this short essay, we move beyond prevailing understandings of DYF as a self-selected body image intervention, to critically examine the ethics associated with this social media practice as a method of engagement with anti-racism.

First, it is important to note our positionality, as white female academics, in relation to this topic. Here, we draw on the work of A. Phipps (2020) who, as a white woman critiquing white feminism, acknowledges that much of her analysis is not an original addition to or departure from Black feminist thought. The following discussion explores DYF which, to our knowledge, has not been explored elsewhere within scholarship. However, much like Phipps, our analysis is underpinned by the extant work within Black digital scholarship, which has explored uses of the digital to engage with anti-racism in much greater depth elsewhere (M. D. Clark 2019; S. J. Jackson, M. Bailey and B. Foucault Welles 2020; Noble 2018).

Moreover, while we are both health researchers, with interests in body image, social media and structural inequalities, our ideas are informed by a commitment to challenging racial inequality, rather than a personal understanding of how it is manifested in the everyday lives of those affected. This essay cannot act as a substitute for the lived experiences of Black Instagram users, which is integral to understanding this topic in any depth. Instead, this commentary is intended as a starting point for future research

which must incorporate empirical data on Black individuals' (potentially activists/educators) perspectives on this method of online engagement.

DYF is an emergent practice that sits within a broader tradition of online civic engagement, often called clicktivism. The archetypal act of online activism is the signing of online petitions or letters, often sent to elected representatives, but clicktivism can also include sharing content on Twitter or Facebook (M. Halupka 2014). Existing scholarship has considered how these clicktivism practices have been mobilised as part of anti-racism movements (e.g. Clark 2019; Jackson et al. 2020). DYF differs from these more traditional clicktivism practices in that, by engaging in it, users create an environment which facilitates routine exposure to a diversity of views, experiences, identities and aesthetics. In what follows, we highlight some of the potential benefits and pitfalls of DYF in the context of BLM, with reference to how the idea might operate differently in terms of racial diversity and body type diversity.

The logic behind DYF in both contexts is that it has the potential to change social norms through continuous low-level engagement with social media platforms. Following an agentic process of self-selecting what one is "exposed" to online (such as Black influencers, educators and creators), one becomes routinely exposed to Black thought and experience. This has the potential to challenge and disrupt conscious or subconscious embedded norms and values that privilege whiteness. This strategy sits in contrast to the recent influx of anti-racism reading lists shared on social media, intended to educate white individuals on the history of colonialism and Black oppression (Saad 2020b). It could be argued that DYF, while a less active method of engagement than, for example, attending protests, may be more effective in challenging internalised racism, due to the more inter-personal and affective experience of "getting to know" individuals through social media.

However, the immediate impacts of the flow of online traffic resulting from DYF requires attention. In the recent surge of on- and offline support for BLM, numerous Black Instagram account holders posted about their experience of a sudden influx of new, predominantly white, followers. The experience appeared to be ambivalent for many. To some extent, the new following was welcomed as an expression of interest in anti-racist ideas and work, and Instagram hashtags such as #amplifymelanatedvoices and #share-themicnow (T.J. Burke 2020) served to accelerate the flow of traffic and attention towards Black accounts. As well as amplifying marginalized voices as a form of "allyship praxis" (Clark 2019), this could lead to direct positive impacts for accounts that are an important source of income for account holders. However, more negative aspects of the experience noted by influencers included feelings of being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new followers; the derailing of conversations being had in spaces which were principally created and held for Black users, whether through antagonistic comments and messages or a "back to basics" shift of the conversation by followers who were new to anti-racist ideas; and the demands for one-on-one attention and advice in the form of comments and direct messages (e.g. Saad 2020a; J. Wilson 2020). While most of these negative impacts could be mitigated by a behaviour change from white followers, with an emphasis on listening to the conversations being had and accessing the resources that have already been made available, the question of how to provoke this change remains.

Jackson et al. (2020) argue that hashtags relating to race and gender justice serve multiple important functions. Some of these functions are more inward-facing, providing moments of collective catharsis or remembering within online communities, while others look outward, aiming to build momentum, draw attention and effect policy or social

change. With this in mind, the value of DYF for Black account holders, even where white followers learn to emphasise listening and learning, may depend on which of these functions their content serves. While outward-facing content may benefit from amplification and engagement by white followers, in other contexts the white gaze may be unwelcome or detrimental.

Despite its potential drawbacks, DYF, like other clicktivism practices, has the benefit of being a relatively accessible form of engagement that does not rely on the financial or physical ability to attend protests or donate funds, nor on social connections to activist groups. As a result, individuals who may be unable or unwilling to engage in other forms of activism may participate in clicktivism, provided they have an internet connection and a smartphone. However, while many may have the material ability to engage in DYF, age-based differences in social media use may mean that older people in particular are excluded from these conversations and practices. This may be further exacerbated if engaged social media users are having conversations around anti-racism online at the expense of offline conversations with, for example, older relatives.

As DYF shares some of the advantages of clicktivism, it also shares a key pitfall: ease of participation may lead to superficial engagement with political and moral problems. Critics of clicktivism have contended that it is “feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact” (E. Morozov 2009). From this perspective, acts of clicktivism serve to assuage the clicktivist’s need to take action, and be seen to take action, without having any of the real-world impacts of offline activist acts. In the context of BLM, while DYF may address some internalised racist views, simply “following” Black individuals online could be viewed as a tokenistic and superficial form of engagement, providing social media users with the reassurance that they have effectively “done their part”. In addition, there is a risk that this practice will give social media users a false sense that real change has occurred: greater visibility of Black individuals does not necessarily indicate the dismantling of power structures that sustain racial inequality.

Further, it is sometimes argued that engaging in clicktivism may make participants less likely to perform future acts of civic engagement, although evidence of this remains equivocal and focuses on practices such as signing online petitions (Y.-H. Lee and G. Hsieh 2013; S. Schumann and O. Klein 2015). Further research could explore the impact of DYF on “IRL” civic engagement. Meanwhile, in contrast to other forms of clicktivism, DYF has the potential to change norms and internalised ideas through routine exposure to a new set of thoughts and experiences. This creates another plausible pathway for impact by potentially changing how individuals participate in more routine acts of civic engagement, for example by altering their voting tendencies.

In summary, interpretations of the effectiveness of DYF are equivocal and require further attention from scholarship concerned with the relationship between social media use and political participation. In the context of both body positivity and BLM, DYF may represent a significant first step in addressing individual norms and values. However, in both contexts, it is unclear whether healing the internal (conscious/unconscious bias) leads to direct engagement with the external (structural inequalities and everyday discrimination). In this regard, the question remains: does DYF lead to greater engagement with issues of inequality outside of social media? More research is needed to understand DYF as an online strategy for civic engagement, particularly from the perspective of Black activists and educators.

Note

1. Body positivity is a movement which encourages individuals to feel good about their bodies, while fat activism is a more explicitly political movement aiming to address, in particular, institutional and structural forms of weight-based discrimination.

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