LABELING ACTIVISM "PERFORMATIVE" IS ANTI-ACTIVISM

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It takes a few seconds to repost something. A video about an ongoing conflict, a graphic calling attention to discrimination or a fundraiser for people thousands of miles away can be shared with hundreds of followers at the press of a button. Just as quickly, someone dismisses the entire gesture as "performative activism."

For some reason, merely expressing support for a cause has become an invitation for others to scrutinize just how much you actually care about it. It is not okay to just share or repost something; you must provide empirical evidence that you have donated, attended protests, thoroughly educated yourself and presumably done enough to convince complete strangers that your support is genuine. Otherwise, you must be performing for some audience.

The "performative" label comes from the idea that people somehow gain social standing or are suddenly viewed as better people just for speaking out. For many people, activism in any form gets more backlash than praise depending on the cause, platform and audience.

If someone reposts a pro-Palestine post on social media, they may receive more hate and criticism from people opposed to the cause than praise from those who support it (speaking from personal experience). Expressing political support online is hardly a guaranteed way to gain anyone's approval — depending on the cause and the audience, it can just as easily achieve the opposite. Even for more widely supported causes, like Black Lives Matter or supporting Ukraine, it's not as if anyone is suddenly lauded for as simple an act as reposting on social media.

Even if something is "performative" because the person supporting it is either not as educated as they could be or they are not concerned about physical protests, why is that a bad thing? Though people should be informed and do more, is the normalization of ideas and messages not dependent on the layman's support? A seventh grader posting an Instagram story about BLM without being intimately familiar with the civil rights movement is still good because support is still valuable, "performative" though it may be.

Obviously, reposting an infographic is not comparable to organizing a protest or donating hundreds of dollars. And let me clarify: people should do more. As much as people need to be informed politically, they also need to be politically active, and everyone should advocate for the causes they believe in — if and when they can. Someone who spends their time organizing, educating others and actively working toward change is contributing more than someone who occasionally shares a post. But why does that make the latter's contribution worthless?

Not everybody has the knowledge, resources or opportunity to participate in activism to the same extent. Some people cannot afford to donate money; others may not be able to attend protests in their area or have perfectly reasonable safety concerns. Social media provides an accessible way for everyone to participate, however little that participation may seem to amount to on an individual scale.

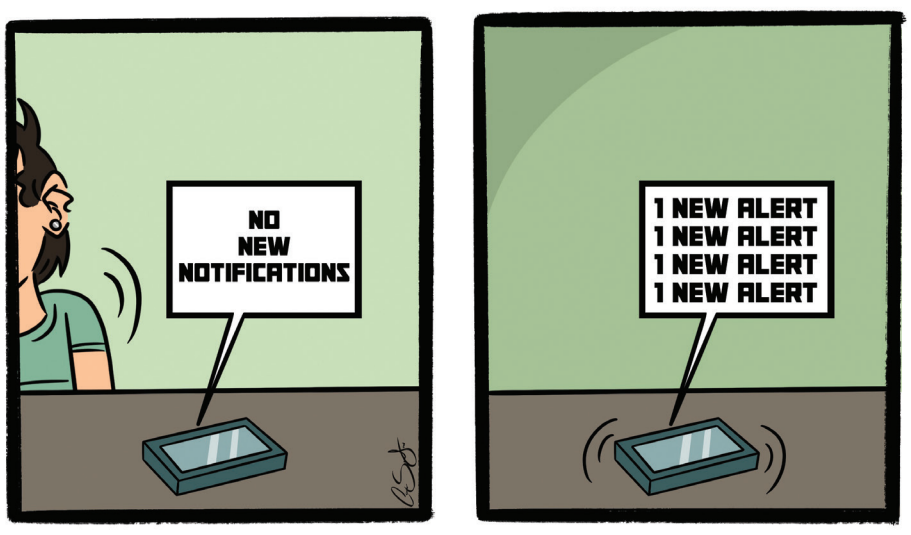
In the first place, there is no way for people online, where activism is most commonly labeled performative, to know how much someone has done for any cause. If you see someone reposting a pro-Palestine TikTok, you cannot know they haven't gone to physical protests, participated in encampments or informed others. You only know what they've posted in that moment. But somehow, that is enough to judge not only the extent of someone's activism, but their motivations for doing it in the first place.

I am not denying that some activism is genuinely performative. If a company publicly speaks of equality and then contradicts itself through discriminatory practices, criticizing its supposed commitment to equality is entirely justified. Likewise, someone who openly supports a cause for appearances while acting against it deserves to have their sincerity questioned in light of hypocrisy.

But most people are labeled performative because of limited activism: genuine support that doesn't extend beyond small actions, whether because of limited knowledge, resources or opportunity. There is a difference between criticizing someone for not doing enough and accusing them of not caring at all.

Again, we should encourage and expect more from people. Activism should not begin and end with reposting Instagram stories, and spreading awareness alone is not going to resolve systemic injustice or end wars. But complaining about any amount of support by hastily labeling it performative only discourages people from becoming invested in a cause, causes infighting and detracts from the actual cause.

People are expected to speak out, but speaking out insufficiently invites accusations of performativity and staying silent invites accusations of indifference. You cannot ascertain if someone is an activist, organizer or expert just from their visible participation, and we cannot keep diminishing other's support by requiring them to prove their sentiments to strangers.



COMIC BY CONNOR SZREJNA, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

IS GEN-Z FULL OF PEOPLE PLEASERS OR ARE WE AFRAID OF REJECTION?

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"Oh, it's ok."

"I can figure it out myself."

"You don't have to go through all the trouble."

"I don't want you spending all that time on me."

For years, mine and many other Gen-Z friend groups have been infected with displays of individualism and rejections of help for the sake of not wanting to inconvenience and bother. But what if Gen Z's habit of not asking for help is based on a fear of rejection, not actual consideration for others?

I cannot tell you the number of times a particular friend of mine has told us after or during a hangout that she walked five miles to get there, despite the fact that the rest of us have cars and have offered to drive her. After years of hearing her say she didn't want to bother anybody, I felt something fishy. She knew she wasn't bothering us, but she never asked for help. To prevent her from walking through dangerous neighborhoods at night, we had to go out of our way to make sure she wasn't lying when she said someone was going to pick her up and dissuade her when she said she didn't want to inconvenience us.

Her "not wanting to bother" was becoming a bigger bother than any five-to-ten-minute detour could. At that point I realized, she did not really care about bothering us. Her concern was a protective shield against rejection. She didn't overvalue our time; she thought that we would deny her if she asked for help. This was later confirmed after a long, heartfelt conversation. She still doesn't ask for rides, and we still must ask if we can drive her home.

Individualism is not new. In fact, it is a part of the national myth: the American dream. It sells us the idea that we can through rugged individuum, and that we can get everything that we've ever wanted if we march into the frontier alone with only the clothes on our back. But individualism hidden under the veil of selflessness is on the rise, and it makes sense.

Rejection is commonplace for Gen-Z. It is not a surprise that we are afraid of it and have come up with ways to avoid it. According to a poll by the UK Office for National Statistics, people aged 16 to 24 years were the loneliest of any age group. Gen-Z is often described as the most isolated generation; compared to millennials, we are less likely to be in romantic relationships and we reportedly have fewer friendships.

The average college student applies to 30–100 jobs before receiving a single offer. These numbers don't prove why my friend won't ask for a ride, but they paint a picture of a generation that has learned to expect a 'no.'

A 2023 study in the Journal of College Student Mental Health found that students with the greatest need "were less likely to seek help for personal or emotional problems." The study doesn't say why, but it is reasonable to suggest that the same motivations that prevented my friend from letting down her walls may be applied to others in similar circumstances.

If one can avoid asking for help, they cannot be rejected. As a large swath of us fear rejection is around every corner, why risk asking for help?

It's genius. By saying that you don't want to bother someone, you are protecting yourself from potential rejection, giving yourself a moral desert and in some sense, are virtue signaling humility, but like the titular Tartuffe of Molière, it is false.

It is my opinion that instead of keeping our problems to ourselves, we ought to unburden ourselves — at least to our close friends.

To the people pleasers: don't think of what you need as a burden: It may be a gift to the person offering you help.

According to Mental Health America, our brain releases serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin when we help others. Though one must take care of themselves, do not let that prevent you from helping others when they need it. Maybe then, no one will fear rejection and need to put up these walls.

But in the meantime, keep offering to drive your friends home, even if they say, "you don't have to."



A man buries his face in shame as he is pointed at. The average college student applied to 30–100 jobs before receiving a single offer.
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