

# Committed to the Cause or Performative Posting?: Developing a Measure of Internal and External Motivations for Online Activism

Kathrina Durante; Faculty Mentor: Kristjen Lundberg Department of Psychology, University of Richmond  
[kathrina.durante@richmond.edu](mailto:kathrina.durante@richmond.edu); [klundber@richmond.edu](mailto:klundber@richmond.edu)



## Introduction

Anyone who glanced at social media in the summer of 2020 inevitably viewed posts supporting racial justice movements (e.g., #BLM, #BlackoutTuesday). Though such actions on social media may function to educate, influence, and support others, some have questions whether such behaviors are merely *optical* or *performative allyship* (e.g., Harper, 2020; Jennings, 2020), designed to benefit the poster's reputation and social standing more than affect social change. Researchers, too, have begun to formalize this inquiry into the motivations of outgroup (potentially advantaged group) members for engaging in actions on behalf of a disadvantaged or stigmatized group (e.g., Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Kutlaca et al., 2020; Radke et al., 2020), noting that an individual may hold multiple motivations simultaneously.

In this study, we wanted to develop a measure for assessing individual differences in internal (i.e., aligned with personal values) and external (i.e., derived from social pressures) motivations for engaging in social media activism and to examine whether those differences in motivations are linked to differences in the frequency and type of informed action.

## Methods

$N = 117$  UR undergraduates, White and non-Black People of Color (i.e., potential allies). More complete information on the sample and study items can be found by accessing the QR code provided.

### Scale Development

- **Internal Motivations for Online Activism** (5 items), e.g., *If I stayed silent on social media, I would be concerned that others would be angry with me.* 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree.  $\alpha = .873$
- **External Motivations for Online Activism** (5 items), e.g., *According to my personal values, staying silent on social media is not OK.* 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree.  $\alpha = .787$
- Internal and external motivations were positively but weakly related to each other,  $r = .160$ ,  $p = .084$ , suggesting that they are distinct constructs.

### Informed Action

- **Objective Action** (12 items) – Over the course of the summer, have you...e.g., *signed a petition about a racial (in)justice issue?* 0 = no, 1 = yes, once, 2 = yes, more than once.  $\alpha = .829$
- **Subjective Action** (5 items) – Over the course of the summer,...e.g., *I have been having conversations about the current events and racial (in)justice.* 1 = very untrue of me, 6 = very true of me.  $\alpha = .809$
- **Online Activism** (3 items) – e.g., *I have been consistently engaging in “visible activism” on my social media accounts.* 1 = very untrue of me, 6 = very true of me.  $\alpha = .957$

## Key Findings

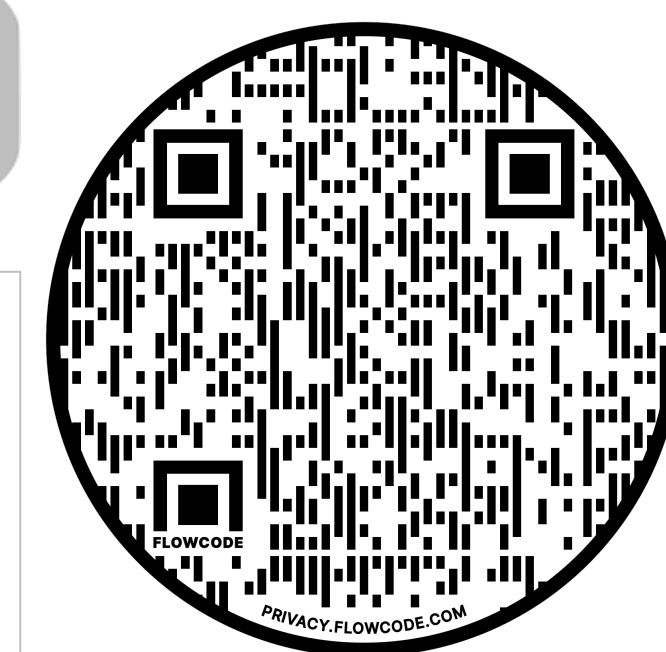
Participants reported stronger internal (than external) motivations for online activism, suggesting that they were more compelled to post because of their personal values than social pressures.

Internal motivations were strongly associated with both objective real-world behaviors and subjective self-assessments, whether online or off. External motivations, in contrast, were weakly associated with more frequent social media posting, but not with other outcomes, suggesting that internal motivations were the primary driver of behavior.

## Results



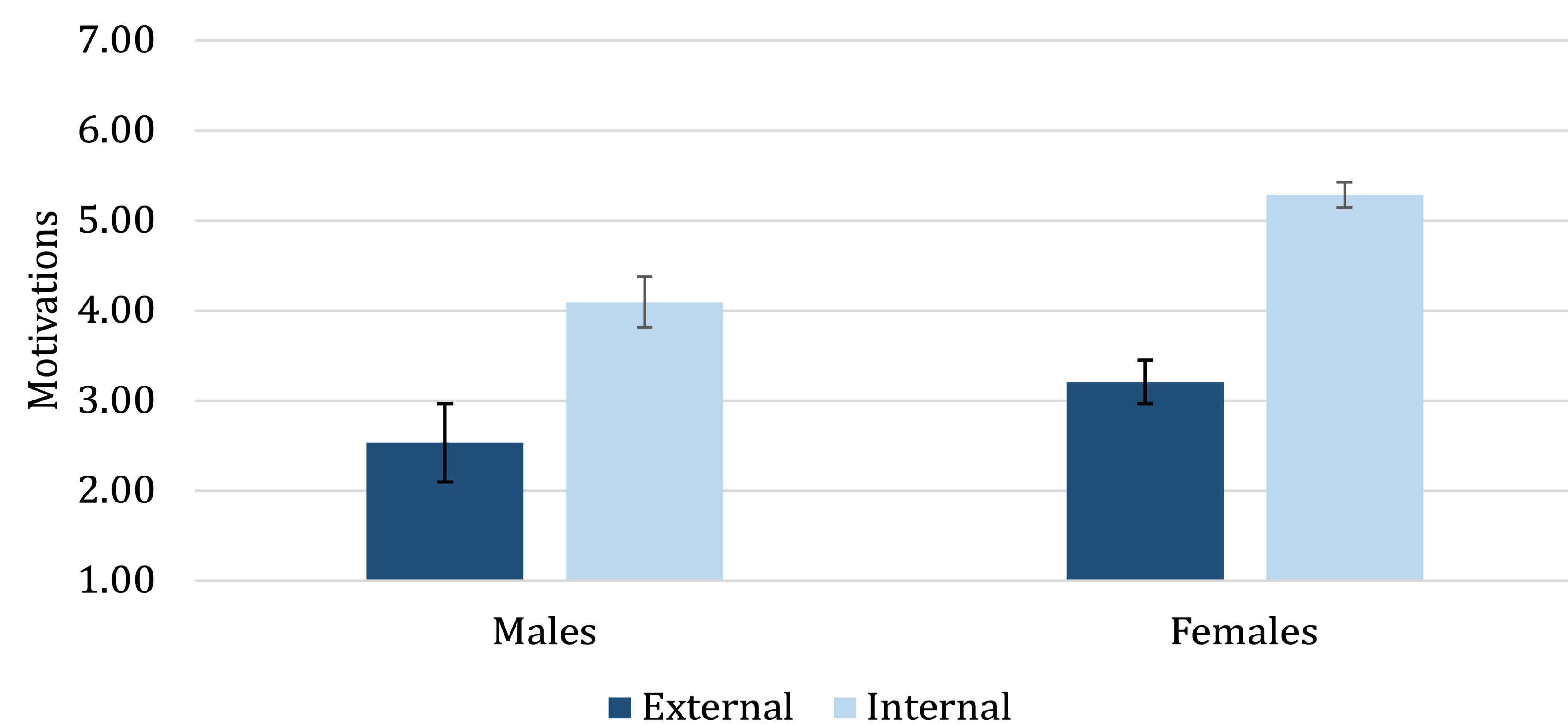
**QR Code:**  
Sample and Item Information



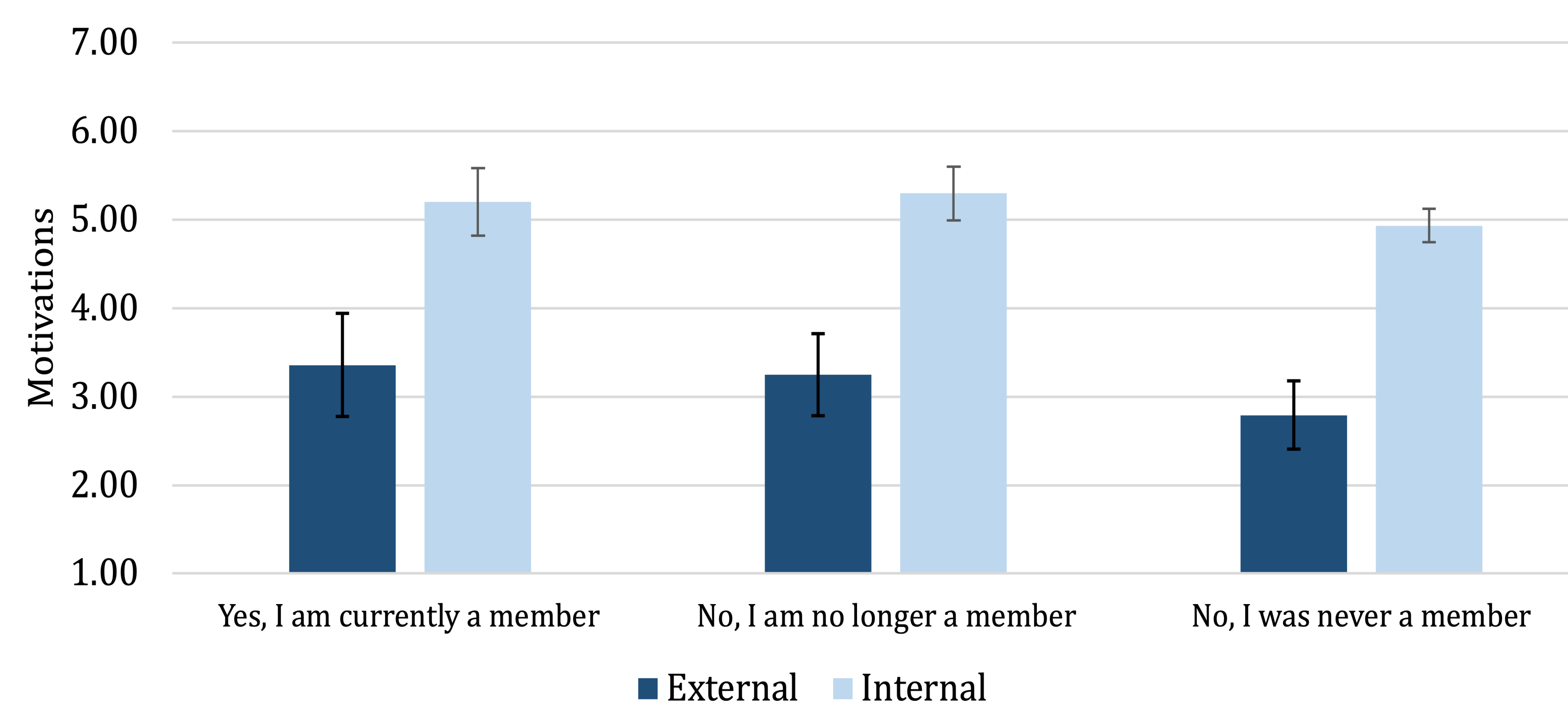
### Performative or not?

On average, people reported stronger internal than external motivations,  $t(116) = -13.055$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and females reported higher motivations than males, external:  $t(109) = -2.471$ ,  $p = .015$ , internal:  $t(110) = -3.573$ ,  $p = .001$ . Motivations did not differ based on Greek affiliation, external:  $F(2, 86) = 1.768$ ,  $p = .177$ , internal:  $F(2, 87) = .733$ ,  $p = .483$ .

Gender as a Predictor of External and Internal Motivations



Greek Affiliation as a Predictor of External and Internal Motivations



**Table 1**

*Correlations Between Motivations and Informed Action Measures*

|                   | External Motivations | Internal Motivations |
|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Objective Action  | .042                 | .507**               |
| Subjective Action | -.002                | .569**               |
| Online Activism   | .185*                | .773**               |

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

## Limitations & Future Directions

### Limitations

The sample is not representative of traditional UR undergraduates (e.g., more females), and findings may not generalize to the entire student body, other campuses or populations, and different time periods (e.g., beyond August 2020).

### Future Directions

- Examining how Black-identified individuals (i.e., the presumed targets of this “helping” behavior) perceive various forms of social media activism
- Observing longitudinal changes, if any, in motivations or actions