#GaysOverCOVID: The Social Drama of LGBTQ Representation on Instagram

TYLER QUICK
University of Southern California, USA

This article provides a descriptive, multiperspectival account of #GaysOverCOVID, what the late anthropologist Victor Turner termed a "social drama" featuring gay Instagram influencers behaving in a manner that, according to their critics, poorly represents the gay community. Building on other social media scholars' theorization of the influencer as a kind of representational laborer, this article examines the various "representational imperatives" to which Instagays, Instagram influencers who specialize in homoerotic self-portraiture, were subjected from various publics during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from two large data sets, collected during a lengthy participant observation of "gay Instagram," I endeavor to describe in visual and empirical terms the discursive construction of a public figure. I conclude by examining the impact this "social drama" has on LGBTQ representational politics.

Keywords: Instagram, social media influencer, representation, digital ethnography, social drama, COVID-19, identity politics

Far from the days of suffering under regimes of invisibilization (Gross, 2001), LGBTQ people from the industrialized West are now permitted, and even expected, to incorporate their identities into their "personal brand" on social media (Abidin, 2019; Abidin & Cover, 2018; Chen & Kanai, 2021; Duguay, 2019; Li, 2021). Such a development might seem like a boon for a community whose political emancipation has been frequently articulated as a consequence of "coming out" (i.e., making ourselves more visible; Saguy, 2020). However, the same cultural norms and technological affordances that have provided LGBTQ people with newfound visibility have also moved the onus for positively representing sexual minorities to the minorities themselves, and as such have only increased anxieties about LGBTQ people's media representation. The LGBTQ people most successful at winning visibility or influence on social media platforms are, more likely than not, cisgender, Eurocentrically attractive, the beneficiaries of social media audiences' (and algorithms'; see Noble, 2018) racist and classist, biases, and driven for whatever reason to compete in the "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997). And yet, when circumstances have demanded that social media's gay elite wield their "influence" for the betterment of their community, critics have decried their failure to do so as evidence of gay culture's shallowness, but never the limits of social media platforms as venues for "positive" LGBTQ representation, let alone the politics of representation itself.

Tyler Quick: tylerqui@usc.edu

Consider the media frenzy and moral panic that came to be known by gays and straights alike as #GaysOverCOVID. In July of 2020, an anonymous, gay twentysomething living in Southern California began posting photos to an Instagram page (@GaysOverCovid) of young, gay men caught in flagrante delicto violating COVID-19 social norms and public health protocols. Debate surrounding the page was largely limited at the time to gay Californians who personally knew the figures involved. But as the page picked up more followers and began documenting gay men's COVID-unsafe partying across the world, it began to attract international media attention and contentious discourse about its mission. The account manager and his supporters attempted to justify the campaign as a project oriented toward "accountability." Activist and writer Zack Ford (2021) summarized this position in the following tweet: "I think it's reasonable to hold people accountable for needlessly endangering others, but perhaps especially when their capital is attention, admiration, and popularity." Through this, he lends words to a prevalent and potent criticism of gay social media influencers that undergirds #GaysOverCOVID's quest to hold them "accountable": Given their prominent role and visible privilege, LGBTQ public figures are especially responsible for modeling ideal ethical and political behavior (Brostoff, 2017).

The representational anxieties surrounding LGBTQ public figures are made especially acute when combined with the representational anxieties surrounding social media influencers, an "anxiety surrounding the transformation . . . between responsible and irresponsible forms of relationality" (Goldberg, 2018, p. 81). From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, medical professionals, activists, and nonprofits invoked social media influencers' responsibilities as "opinion leaders"[1] to call on them to promote public health and mutual aid. Jerome Adams, Surgeon General of the United States, told *Good Morning America*, "the more I tell them"—his teenage children—"to do something, the less they want to do it. . . . We need to get our social-media influencers out there in helping folks understand that, look, [the pandemic] is serious" (Leskin, 2020, para. 3). In juxtaposing himself with "influencers," Adams repeats a common trope regarding young people, authority figures, and involvement in civic life: Celebrities and social media stars are more effective messengers than parents, politicians, or medical professionals and other experts.[2] His call-to-action reflects a common belief inherent to the very notion of the term "influencer"—that those with large followings on social media have greater capacity than us "regular folks" to affect public discourse and thereby create political or cultural change.

#GaysOverCOVID thus only exacerbated and publicized representational anxieties that many have long had concerning Instagays—gay influencers who specialize in homoerotic self-representation and are among the most followed LGBTQ people on Instagram. They have long been fretted about in LGBTQ people's public fora as poor representatives of "the community," with especially acute anxieties surrounding their ability to be good role models for LGBTQ youth—for example, "What happens when a new queer generation looks to them as role models and idols, people whose lives are their proof that it gets (much, much) better? Is the superficiality of Instagay culture really something they should look up to?" (El Khatib, 2018, para. 9).

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[1] A theoretical rendering that has proven useful in the field of marketing. See Casaló, Flavian, and Ibáñez-Sánches (2018), Iyengar, van den Bulte, and Valente (2011), and Thakur, Angriawan, and Summey (2016).
[2] A wealth of research suggests that celebrities and other "influentials" are not recognized as opinion leaders in regard to every conceivable subject (e.g., politics, by their fans and followers; Friedrich & Nitsch, 2019; Inthorn & Street, 2011; Nesbitt & DeWalt, 2016; Wood & Herbst, 2007).

As a gay man myself, it is hard not to share these frustrations. I am disturbed by the Instagay's symbolism—an uncomfortable reminder that a politics focused on "inclusion" and "representation" in elite circles has produced little more than a depoliticized LGBTQ bourgeoisie whose accumulation of capital is sold to gullible LGBTQ consumers as evidence that "it gets better"[3] (Duggan, 2003). However, the prominence and ubiquity of Instagays is theoretically and methodologically useful for social media studies, as their controversiality illustrates a contradiction in prevailing theories of representation and "influence" on social media inside and outside of the academy. If these figures are so frequently criticized from within the community as ineffective and/or harmful representatives of gay men and LGBTQ society, then why are they broadly considered and accepted as our representatives? Moreover, why then would anyone expect them to model ideal ethical and political behavior?

In what remains of this article, I juxtapose the controversy that #GaysOverCOVID presents against Instagays' quotidian content production during the pandemic. By figuring #GaysOverCOVID as what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1957, 1987) termed a "social drama" (i.e., an event that clarifies social norms through providing an example par excellence of their violation), this article provides an account of how Instagays' status is elaborated, performed, and contested on Instagram. By examining allegations of Instagays' representational shortcoming against the backdrop of their uncontroversial, "regular" content production during the pandemic, I clarify how the role Instagays play in producing gay men's public culture is imagined by this culture's various stakeholders. Even to those who they do not "influence," Instagays provide the contested, discursive terrain on which battles over representation are waged.

Influencer Theory

Influencers are undoubtedly "role models" in that their lives are widely considered enviable. Data on social media influencers' public perception suggests that being an influencer is a highly desirable career. A 2017 survey of 1,000 children conducted by the British travel company First Choice found that a combined majority (52.3%) of British youth ranked "YouTuber" or "blogger/vlogger" as their number one choice for a future career (Dirnhuber, 2017). According to another survey by *Business Insider,* 86% of Americans between the ages of 13 and 38 similarly would pursue an influencer career given the opportunity (Elliott, 2020). Such statistics illustrate the desirability and esteem of influencer status in the 21st-century West's cultural imaginary, which results, in large part, because of its framing in the neoliberal imaginary as "getting paid to do what you love" (Duffy, 2017). However, research on social media influencers has made clear that while their status results from the promise that what they represent is "authentic," this "authenticity" seldomly inheres in just "being yourself." Duffy and Pooley (2019) write that because "the individual-account format on Instagram" postulates its "stars . . . as author-producers of their own careers," Instagram influencers are best generically conceptualized as what they term "idols of promotion" (p. 41)—or perhaps more accurately idols of self-promotion, in that their primary function in their followers' lives is to provide

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[3] "It gets better" is the tagline of an eponymous 501c3 nonprofit founded by gay media personality Dan Savage. Its initiative, started in 2010, is mostly known for a series of YouTube videos in which LGBTQ celebrities reassure LGBTQ youth, particularly those experiencing bullying, that their emotional and material lives will improve as they age, most often through the familiar trope (see Weston, 1995) of moving to a big city, finding romantic love, and starting a creative career.

"parables for success amid the sprawling market of independent and piecemeal employment" (p. 42). Here, we encounter the first set of paradoxical *representational imperatives* to which influencers must conform. They must appear as both "regular, hardworking people," who are "relatable" to their followers, but also deserving of their exalted status in the "leisure class" (Bonneau & Aroles, 2021; Veblen, 2007).

The competing representational imperatives placed on Instagram influencers, far from freeing them to luxuriate in merely "being themselves," necessitate what other scholars have correctly called "labor" to supply audiences' demand for an authentic and aspirational personage (see Baym, 2015, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Homant & Sender, 2019). Moreover, influencers must compete with one another to provide ever-exemplary representations of their paradoxical status. Because "social media applications encourage people to compete for social benefits by gaining visibility and attention" (Marwick, 2013, p. 5), and the supply of potential influencers is as inexhaustible as the number of people with access to camera phones, those who wish to become influencers are incentivized into a relatively homogenous performance of "authenticity" that challenges all conventional understandings of the term (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Such authenticity, described aptly by Crystal Abidin (2016) as "contrived," is a co-production through which influencers and other online performers attempt to supply a believable, aspirational personage to social media fans and followers, thereby reifying the meritocratic mythos that undergirds their status. In summary, a prerequisite to influencer status is a "felicitous" (Austin, 1962) performance of an aspirational, yet "authentic," selfhood within the milieu of a competitive "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997).

Duffy and Hund (2019) write that influencers thus experience what they call a "visibility mandate"—that is, an imperative to "put oneself out there" to a "heightened degree," and to subject oneself to a definition of "success [that] is directly hitched to data-driven metrics (i.e., likes, followers, and comments) that make influence and status legible to both advertisers and audiences" (p. 4986). The labor that produces "contrived authenticity" is thus oriented toward achieving a quantifiable popularity and includes "scrutinizing styling decisions and brand partnerships to ensure alignment with their personal brands, and reflecting carefully on their selfhood and what personal information they were willing to share" (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 28), manifesting variably as intentional vulnerability and disclosure (Hall, 2015; Mardon, Molesworth, & Grigore, 2018) on the one hand, and self-misrepresentation on the other (Shtern, Hill, & Chan, 2019). Furthermore, "aspiring influencers must conform, at least in part, to the calculative protocols by which gatekeepers"—for example, potential advertising sponsors, "evaluate profit potential and grant or deny [opportunities]" (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 26) to acquire the prerequisite visibility and quantified popularity that define influencer status. So, not only is an influencer's "authentic" self-representation warped by the imperative to meet the representational expectations of (potential) follower audiences, but also accountable to the whims of advertising partners and algorithms, among others.

Those who believe in the mythos of "getting paid to 'be yourself,'" including influencers themselves, are thus victims of what the late queer theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) termed "cruel optimism," or "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility" (p. 24). "Cruel optimism" is conceptually reminiscent of many gay men's critiques of Instagays, encapsulated in the following response to the #GaysOverCOVID controversy by artist and activist Leo Herrera (2021) on Instagram: "It's a confirmation that our worship of a sun-kissed Adonis, that flesh-industrial complex of parties and porn has always hidden a culture of nihilism and death" (para. 1). In other words, the reduction of public homoeroticism to Instagram advertorials both

represents and manifests neoliberal technocapitalism's alleged colonization of queerness. However, through reading Berlant alongside this controversy, I am led to question just how "hidden" any of this is and just how many of "us" are actually willing and enthusiastic worshippers in this implied cult. "In a relation of cruel optimism our activity is revealed as a vehicle for attaining a kind of passivity, as evidence of the desire to find forms in relation to which we can sustain a coasting sentience" (Berlant, 2011, p. 43)—less, in this case, an endorsement of Instagay culture and more like an acquiescence to the "status order" (Green, 2011) it represents. Influencers, their fans, and even their haters are evidently moved by ideological and market forces far greater than themselves, a priori complicating any calls for influencers' "responsibility" or "accountability."

Methodological Approach

An empirical account of the representational anxieties surrounding social media influencers must include descriptions of the discursive formations and social environments in which they are articulated as public personages, the manner by which they are appraised by social media audiences and other stakeholders as sufficiently or insufficiently authentic, and the generic characteristics of this authenticity's performance. The method I devised to provide all of this is inspired by Rob Kozinets' (2020) "netnography" and relies on thousands of data points—Instagram images, news coverage of Instagays, social media metric reports, fieldnotes, and so on—collected throughout an informal participant observation period lasting three years (September 2017–October 2020). During this time, I also collected more than 2,000 Instagram posts in a "folder" that functioned as an auxiliary set of "fieldnotes."[4]

A data set as large as this required "immersive operations [that] evaluate and filter . . . from the vast amount of social media information flowing" (Kozinets, 2020, p. 194). One such operation I performed was designed initially as an investigation into how pandemic conditions might alter my research subjects' Instagram content. I selected 100 "case studies" from the 227 Instagay accounts that I had identified as possessing more than 100,000 followers, with a handful of exceptions. Gay men's sexual racism (Han & Choi, 2018; Ro, Ayala, Paul, & Choi, 2013), along with the disproportionate allocation of LGBTQ community resources to the industrialized West (Alexander, 2005; Puar, 2017), manifests a hierarchical "status order" stratified along class, national, and racial lines (Green, 2011). This unfortunately means that the majority of my potential case studies, including all but one Instagay with more than 500,000 followers, are White and from the United States. I included oversamples of African American Instagays ($n = 10$), American Instagays of Latin American descent ($n = 10$), Instagays from East Asia ($n = 10$), from Latin America ($n = $

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[4] Kozinets (2020) describes the field journal's purpose in digital ethnography as "accurately [representing . . .] the doing of the research" (p. 290) such that I can clearly describe not only what I did but also what I felt, saw, and thought. As such, the digital ethnographer's ideal field journal—or as Kozinets calls it, an "immersion journal"—is an empirical and textual rendering of the digital ethnographer, in the words of Tom Boellstorff (2012), "treating the digital not as an object of study, but as a methodological approach, founded in participant observation, for investigating the virtual and its relationship to the actual" (p. 39). To this end, Kozinets recommends including screen captures in such a journal, which I also highly recommend when working with a visual medium like Instagram. As you will note later in the article, many of the posts that are cited here have been since removed or otherwise made invisible. This method ensures that I can cite and analyze such works even under such circumstances.

12), and from Europe (*n* = 20) to look for any potential variations in their performance of the Instagay. However, I would note that this that this project is still as methodologically limited as any other inquiry into gay men's mainstream media representation, as it interrogates a medium in which Whiteness is often conflated with gayness—a conflation that has long vexed representations of LGBTQ people and their interests', including in the academy (Ferguson, 2004, 2019; Logie & Rwigema, 2014).

After making these selections, I then categorized the content that these accounts produced during the earliest possible monthlong observation period during the pandemic (March 9, 2020–April 9, 2020) according to a simple schema meant to give an empirical character to content's potential "templates" (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020, pp. 214–216) I considered only three variables: (1) the state of dress that the influencer was in—totally nude, "seminude" (i.e., in underwear or Speedo-style swim briefs), "shirtless" (with pants on), or completely clothed; (2) whether or not the content qualified as a "sponsored post" (i.e., advertising for a third party); and (3) whether or not the content directly invoked the COVID-19 pandemic through image or text. Ultimately, this effort produced nothing of scholarly value. Both before and during #GaysOverCOVID, what I have found most remarkable about my Instagays' content is its near absolute uniformity. Were I to provide an account only of this operation, there would be little to report beyond what most gay men with Instagram accounts already know: An Instagay is an "algorithmically-calibrated . . . social media star whose fame is predicated on a heady combination of sculpted abs and the lavish trappings of 'influencer' culture" (El Khatib, 2018, para. 9).

However, Kozinets (2020) suggests that "while we are sorting, categorizing and classifying, we must remember and be attuned to exceptions to the rule, expressed in the uniqueness of individuals, interactions, experiences," (p. 289) and so on. I therefore took the appearance of #GaysOverCOVID and the controversies that birthed it as methodological opportunities to seek further conclusions from useful data originating outside of the inconclusions of my pandemic data set. What Kozinets terms a "black swan event," (p. 289)—that is, a data point whose implications are different from those originating in the bulk of one's data, often inheres in social media environments in "canceling" events like #GaysOverCOVID. I understand "cancel culture," empirically speaking, to mark a phenomenon by which "elite public figures fall victim to their own worst fears: a realization that the social capital they've worked so hard for is hyperinflated currency in the attention economy" (Clark, 2020, p. 4). To cancel means to attempt to hold someone accountable, and thus serves as what Turner (1987) termed a "social drama"—"an objectively isolable sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type" (p. 33), through which "we are enabled to observe the crucial principles of the social structure in their operation, and their relative dominance in successive points in time" (p. 93).

In the next two sections, I juxtapose the "social drama" that #GaysOverCOVID marks, that is the specific representational transgressions with which its "canceled" influencers involved were charged, with the flow of uncontroversial content that comprises the majority of the data I collected on Instagays' coronavirus content production. Through this juxtaposition, the representational imperatives to which Instagays must conform are given a more empirical texture, and we can resultantly clarify the muddled role that Instagays play in the competing cultural imaginaries of their fans and critics within the community they are purported to represent.

Making It Fit

In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, influencer marketing professional Emily Tabor asserted that because "of the COVID-19 outbreak we see influencers pausing to . . . see how their followers and even they as individuals are feeling . . . .They won't be capitalizing on this moment, but rather using it as an opportunity to connect" (Bradley, 2020, para. 21). However, per a *Forbes* survey of social media influencers, the "opportunity to connect" frequently presented itself with "73.6% of those surveyed [having] already addressed COVID-19 and the current 'stay home economy' with their audiences, while only 26.6% focused on their regular content in spite of the crisis" within the first month of the pandemic alone (Lewinski, 2020, para. 6). From my own observations, those who "addressed" the pandemic almost only ever produced "regular content" that vaguely or tangentially referred to it. The content produced by Instagays during the pandemic largely followed the same "templates" as these influencers' prepandemic content.

The prevailing "template" produced by Instagays is what is colloquially called a "thirst trap," a term describing erotic self-portraiture whose aim is to solicit attention in the form of quantifiable metrics from their followers. During my one-month observation period, more than two-thirds of the content produced by Instagays was unambiguously composed of "thirst traps"—46% of posts featured their creator in some state of seminudity, usually in Speedo-style swimwear or underwear, and a further 21% were photos of the influencer with his shirt off. Among the thirst traps I collected during the coronavirus crisis, most do not mention the pandemic, and those that do address it only through captions.

In one example, the Milanese Instagay Leonardo Ursini (2020) is seen lying face-down on his bed in his underwear, his post captioned "quarantine in a nutshell." While I did not categorize or code the thousands of comments posted in response to the pictures I collected, I did note that most of them referenced the desirability of the poster's body. Audiences and algorithms alike seem to privilege physicality, especially that which conforms to the Eurocentric, muscle-obsessed, hegemonic gay beauty standard—and such is hardly news (e.g., Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Tsai, 2010). That "thirst traps" comprise both the bulk of content produced by Instagays, as well as the best performing content is just confirmation that approximation and acquiescence to this beauty standard is one of (if not *the*) most demanded quality in gay men's self-representation on Instagram by social media audiences. Although, as we will shortly see, homoerotic self-representation can also very quickly be reconfigured as evidence of poor character when influencers fail to meet their other representational imperatives.

Given that an enviable life, or rather life as it is represented, is a prerequisite to influencer status, images depicting the consumption of luxury goods and services are equally as essential as thirst traps to the self-representation and social production of the Instagay. They have thus also been surreptitiously transformed into COVID-relevant content. For example, gay influencer Everett Williams, who has 175,000 followers, in one since-deleted video post instructs for his followers on how to make a DIY facemask out of a "reusable" tote bag from Calvin Klein, a frequent commercial partner of his. Meanwhile, gay couple P. J. and Thomas (2020)—a.k.a. "the Property Lovers"—posted a "throwback" photo of a previous trip to the Dominican Republic on April 9, 2020, and appended a vaguely COVID-relevant caption to the image:

Remember when going to the beach was a thing? We had a beach trip planned for May to celebrate PJ's birthday, but we realized a few weeks back that's most likely not going to happen now. There are no beach trips in our near future, but we're feeling grateful today for our health and for our family's health. Hope you're doing well, friends, #TBT

The picture depicts both men as shirtless, nubile, sun-tanned, and blissfully in love (see Figure 1), and fulfills influencers' representational imperative to represent "what many young people dream of having and the lifestyle they dream of living" (Marwick, 2015, p. 155).

Figure 1. Thomas and PJ, standing together on the beach (The Property Lovers, 2020).

As for the marketing function of an influencer's work, Tabor suggests, "If a brand fits authentically into that story, then it works" (Bradley, 2020, para. 21). Of course, her claim elides the temptation to *make* a brand fit "authentically" into one's coronavirus "story," especially under the coronavirus crisis' economic conditions. Many influencers who create content as a full-time job survive off of "gig economy" incomes (Pardes, 2020; i.e., "[remain] tucked in the folds of a busy production loop hidden from sight and impossible

to fully credit or value" (Gray & Suri, 2019, p. 59), where they "absorb the costs of searching for work, learning how to do tasks, and communicating when things fall apart" (Gray & Suri, 2019, p. 68). Even those whose high status alleviates competitive pressure still tend to be disposed both toward competitive behavior and aspirational wealth. I thus observed an unchanged commercial paradigm regarding influencer marketing during and after the pandemic. One hilariously lazy example of an influencer finding a way to "make it fit" from features Belgian Instagay Anthony Pecoraro (2020) writing "stay home, stay safe" in a caption that accompanies a black and white photo of him in a pair of briefs in a post sponsored by Aronik, an underwear and swimwear manufacturer (see Figure 2). But aside from the caption, it is almost completely, visually identical to similar posts he made in both 2018 and 2019 also promoting the brand.

Figure 2. Instagay Anthony Pecoraro (2020).

Others were certainly more creative at making their commercial content "fit" into the corona-zeitgeist's master narrative. For example, in a selfie posted by Will Taylor (2020), he buries the "advertorial" character of his post deep within a COVID-conscious caption:

> I feel so grateful to have the privilege of being safe at home during this time. While I've been able to make a few charity and food bank donations since the pandemic hit, I've still felt a sense of helplessness when watching the news and seeing how horrendously the virus is upending lives across the world.

> Being able to team up with some of my long-term brand partners to get the resources to help more has been awesome. Seeing them step up and offer to help gives me hope for our future. In my stories last week, I asked you guys to share with me your personal stories of how you've been impacted by Covid-19. I was so moved by the responses, and I'm delighted that @HyundaiUSA and I partnered together to help some of you. (para. 1)

In the rest of the caption, Taylor (2020) provides instances of his (and Hyundai's) good Samaritanship. Intimate disclosures such as these stories and his vulnerability about pandemic-related anxieties comprise a common influencer strategy to mitigate the brand-damaging effects of posting sponsored content. Here, Taylor's "self-conscious emotional labor . . . enables [him] to pursue commercial opportunities whilst maintaining existing emotional bonds" (Mardon et al., 2018, p. 450) *and* while appearing to answer the surgeon general's call-to-action with an act of charity and expression of solidarity.

Tabor (as cited in Bradley, 2020) was thus correct in her sly prediction that influencers would find a way to make their content relevant to the coronavirus pandemic. All content produced by Instagays that I determined to be COVID-relevant featured one of the following representational features or a mix thereof: thirst trapping, luxurious consumption, and/or some degree of salesmanship. Very often, all three were present. However, Tabor was incorrect in suggesting that they would not capitalize off it.

During my investigation, I encountered only three potential instances of gay influencers hawking bogus coronavirus treatments or preventative measures. In a since-deleted Instagram post,[5] influencer Sam Cushing (@sam.cushing) wrote to his nearly half-a-million followers:

> 💡Did you know 80% of your immunity starts with a healthy gut? And you guys know by now that I'm always on the hunt for ways to keep my gut strong. But finding supplements that enhance rather than aggravate my system isn't easy. Let's arm our bodies with probiotics and nutrients to stay healthy.

This advertorial is reminiscent of another post, also since-deleted, by Tommy Didario (@tommydidario), a former reality TV star and Instagay with 194,000 followers:

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[5] It is standard practice for many Instagram influencers to delete "sponsored" posts as soon as their contract allows them.

Health Talk ❚I've been sharing insight into my (all natural) vitamin routine quite a lot given what's going on in the world, because keeping our immune systems IN CHECK is especially important. Another daily go-to of mine for 💥 incredible💥 immune system support is raw zinc from @gardenoflife. Zinc is also great for skin and eye health support & this brand uses NO synthetic ingredients, artificial flavors or sweeteners. 👩 Head to www.amazon.com/shop/tommydidario to shop this (& some of my other immune system powerhouses like turmeric gummies, once daily multi vitamin, & the vitamin C, B12 & D3 sprays). Let's stay on TOP of our health game, friends. 👌 *NOTE—the zinc has sold out! But don't stress, the once daily multi vitamin for men & women (listed as the first and second thing on my page) are the next best things to grab to help keep your immune system healthy)! #gamechanging #sponsored

Of course, in neither post did claims about "immunity" transcend innuendo.

The only explicit example I could find of an LGBTQ influencer peddling (and profiting off from) coronavirus misinformation was posted to YouTube by gay influencer Bryan Hawn, who had contracted COVID-19 in March and documented his experience on social media. By April, Hawn had parlayed the attention he received for his well-publicized struggle into a YouTube video-cum-advertisement for an herbal health supplement, which he claimed was effective at treating COVID-19. Gay news outlet *Queerty* reported that their analysis of the comments under the video uncovered very little criticism from his fans (Gremore, 2020). My fieldnotes on the video (since removed by YouTube) also documented very little backlash. In fact, what I noted instead was that many fans thanked Hawn and implied that they would purchase the advertised product (see Figure 3). Here, we see a tension between social media influencers' audiences and "responsibility" advocates' understanding of what influencers should seek to accomplish with their self-representation. But to understand this tension more clearly, we need to move on to a moment in which it ruptured into conflict.
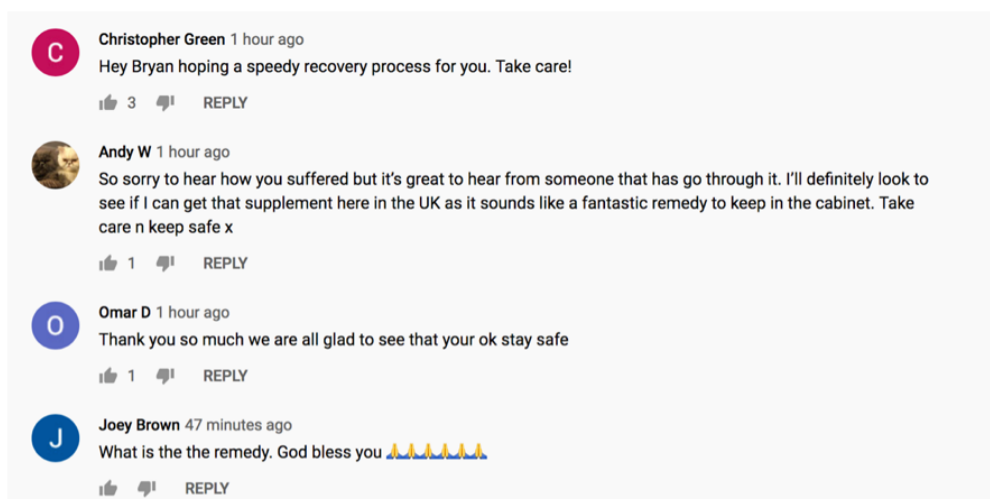

Christopher Green 1 hour ago
Hey Bryan hoping a speedy recovery process for you. Take care!
👍 3 👎   REPLY

Andy W 1 hour ago
So sorry to hear how you suffered but it's great to hear from someone that has go through it. I'll definitely look to see if I can get that supplement here in the UK as it sounds like a fantastic remedy to keep in the cabinet. Take care n keep safe x
👍 1 👎   REPLY

Omar D 1 hour ago
Thank you so much we are all glad to see that your ok stay safe
👍 1 👎   REPLY

Joey Brown 47 minutes ago
What is the the remedy. God bless you 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏
👍 👎   REPLY

Figure 3. YouTube commenters thank influencer Bryan Hawn for COVID-19 misinformation.

#GaysOverCOVID: A Social Drama

Before #GaysOverCOVID became international news, the seeds of its controversy were planted on a Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, beach by a group of White(-passing) Instagays. On the morning of April 15, 2020, Aaron Schock, a former Republican Congressman, recently out homosexual, and perennial object of gay men's media's fascination and disgust, was trending on Twitter. He had been tagged in a photo on Instagram featuring a group of Instagays partying at a villa without masks or social distancing during the early weeks of the pandemic. By the time I found it, the photo had been reshared by several gay journalists and social media influencers, alongside criticism of those depicted in the photo. Journalist and fellow Instagay Sam Stryker (2020; see Figure 4) wrote, "This group of Instagays 'quarantining' at a resort in Mexico—WITH Aaron Schock— seem to have a very different definition of 'social distancing' than the rest of us!" following up in another tweet, "I don't know who needs to hear this but fucking a disgraced former GOP congressman is not 'essential business.'" In two tweets, Stryker illuminates the Janus-like representational function of the Instagay. To their supporters, they are "idols of promotion," representing sexual fulfillment and gay men's ascension into the leisure class. But to their critics, they are a symbol of contemporary gay culture's purported shallowness, offering nothing but "body insecurity" and nihilistic consumerism (Scher, 2019).

Figure 4. Sam Stryker (2020) accuses Aaron Schock of violating COVID-19 protocol.

It is difficult to parse out to what extent the outrage directed at these men, as well as the subjects of #GaysOverCOVID, pertained to their violation of public health guidelines and how much pertained to their

committing these violations publicly. In an interview with journalist Taylor Lorenz (2021), the anonymous administrator of @GaysOverCOVID stated that he "just [wants] people to stay home," (para. 12) implying that his goals were ultimately pragmatic and oriented toward changing behavior. And yet, when asked about what motivated him, he told Lorenz that "he was especially disturbed at how flagrant people are with sharing content about their escapades" (para. 12).

Many who agreed with @GaysOverCOVID's politics disagreed with his tactics. Summarizing this critique, HIV activist Alex Garner (2021) writes in *The Advocate* that @GaysOverCOVID's were liable to play into a long-standing stereotype about gay men's sexual immorality and deviant nature, reminiscent of the kind of demonization gay men faced during the AIDS epidemic:

> I am not defending the actions of people who organize or attend these parties. I am calling out the strategy of shame and stigma as a response to the ongoing COVID pandemic. You can be angry and annoyed but stigmatizing gay men is not helpful; in fact, it is a distraction. The largest issues are structural—lack of health equity, racial injustice, poverty, and government incompetence and corruption. We need to devote our time and energy to these urgent issues if we really want to make a positive impact on the COVID pandemic. It's easy to hide behind an IG account but it takes hard work to tackle structural racism, a botched vaccine rollout, and a broken health care system. (para. 9)

While the admin of @GaysOverCOVID was receptive to some critiques—for example, acknowledging that some drag queens were forced by economic necessity to perform at parties and thus not deserving of "shaming"—when it came Instagram influencers, he was less sympathetic.

He suggested that because of the "privilege" these influencers hold and represent, they must be held to a higher ethical standard. "There is privilege to a White man, no matter if he's gay or straight," (Lorenz, 2021, para. 13). Here, he invokes the noumenal Instagay, who I can confirm is normatively a White man. However, it is important to note that his campaign began with an effort to hold a Black, gay man "accountable." His inaugural post, on July 15, 2020, features the man in question, a socially prominent Angeleno with just upward of 10,000 Instagram followers, along with a White friend posing for a selfie against the backdrop of a Fourth of July party on the beach. In the caption, he notes that the man is a nurse at a prominent hospital, and even goes so far as to tag the man's employer in the post. This same man is also the subject of his second post, as well as the subject of five of all 75 of his posts on Instagram as of August 2021. Additionally, many of photos and stories he posted throughout the summer and early autumn of gay men partying in large groups on Fire Island featured predominantly gay men of color. Sadly, but predictably, these images also elicited some of the harshest feedback, with observers on Twitter and Instagram referring to the Fire Island images as depicting a "meth orgy."

His shift of focus to the most popular, predominantly White, gay influencer accounts only came about when opportunity knocked at the end of 2020 when many of these elite Instagays converged on Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to celebrate New Year's Eve. Friends of some of the biggest name Instagays (e.g., Cushing) provided the account with meticulously collected "receipts," including Venmo receipts and locations on Grindr, documenting their presence in Puerto Vallarta. It was only at this point that @GaysOverCOVID's

"accountability campaign" became a household name, framed in the cisgender-heterosexual public sphere as a gay "civil war" (Greenfield, 2021) and a "rift within [the] LGBTQ community" (Douglas, Radnofsky, Avery, & Rosenblatt, 2021).

In the short term, @GaysOverCOVID's strategy appeared to be very successful. Many of the figures featured on @GaysOverCOVID scrambled to release responses in which they promised "accountability." Cushing told his followers in an Instagram story:

> To those who were upset—I hear you, I really do. I apologize, and take full accountability.
> I'll continue to take matters seriously, and promote mitigation measures as I always have
> (i.e., sanitation, masks, testing). . . . Yes, I've felt the repercussions of my mistake and
> I'll continue taking this time to reflect and learn.

He then, however, made his account temporarily private. Over the next month, he lost more than 10,000 followers. However, by the time of this article's publication he had regained them all plus more. He now has more than 600,000 followers. Most accounts featured on @GaysOverCOVID gained followers in the aftermath, as did Schock and his Instagay companions after getting canceled on Twitter.

Conclusion

In a telling quote, gay journalist Yashar Ali (2020) tweeted that he was inspired to "cancel" Instagays caught partying with Aaron Schock as part of a quest to "get rid of toxic [sic] in the community." #GaysOverCOVID is an exemplary social media ritual because of its overimagined stake, and framing as a "social drama" or "sequential momentum in human agonistic behavior which moves from unruly contestation through ritualized procedures to the restoration of order expressed in purified and recharged symbols of unity" (Turner, 1987, p. 36). Less a "civil war" than an attempted purification ritual, #GaysOverCOVID serves as an illustration of the stakes that social media representation has in the gay public imagination, despite such representation's obvious limits. #GaysOverCOVID thus also affords an aperture into the discursive juncture where social media figures are popularly theorized as responsible and accountable agents of minority media (self-)representation. But what are we to conclude about Instagays when they are algorithmically calculated, proven-popular, living representations of the gay good life, who are also the subject of a campaign of disavowal and disassociation lead by gay men themselves?

I am ultimately sympathetic to critics like @GaysOverCOVID. Given our relatively small numbers and persistent lack of visibility in quotidian life, LGBTQ people are disproportionately reliant on media representation to develop a sense of identity (Bond, 2015; Gomillion & Giuiliano, 2011), especially for those of us who do not encounter many or any other LGBTQ people in our daily lives (Bond, 2018). Furthermore, LGBTQ people are more likely to use social media, especially Instagram (Miller-Bakewell, 2016), in part because the supply of positive representations of LGBTQ people in traditional media still cannot meet the LGBTQ public's demand for representation beyond shallow, superficial, and stereotypical personages (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2016). We have long invested dreams of community redemption in "positive representation" in media, and these dreams are easily lent to social media because of the myth that what its stars represent is some kind of "authentic" reality.

#GaysOverCOVID makes clear that the framing in the popular imagination of the influencer as a necessarily "responsible" figure exacerbates long- standing representational anxieties affecting LGBTQ people. Such rhetoric externalizes the burden of "responsibly" representing LGBTQ people to figures whose generic function is to represent a leisurely, luxurious, and, indeed, lusty lifestyle. The irony, however, is that by accepting this premise, those who purport to reject the Instagay's status instead confirm and reify it. In lieu of a like, they invest their cruel optimism in him.

Cisgender-heterosexual influencers also partied during the pandemic, and even received negative press coverage for partying. For example, Tik-Tokers Bryce Hall, Noah Beck, and Blake Gray partied so hard, so frequently, and so publicly that the Los Angeles mayor ordered their house's water and electricity turned off in August of 2020. Cultural studies scholar Nick Holm (2021) reports that partying was the source of many public controversies during the pandemic. And yet, none of these incidences incepted public discourse about the shallowness or inauthenticity of heterosexual culture.

Ultimately, a project like this provides questions in equal measure with answers. The clearest research finding from this project is that a social media studies that limits itself methodologically to a narrow scope of analysis is one that will disregard the potential utility of the seemingly petty "social drama" to clarify the politics of representation as they play out on social media, as well as their shortcomings. Mirroring this finding is another: the "social drama" on social media is imagined by its participants as an event with cosmological repercussions. That even those who reject social media influencers like Instagays as deficient representatives of their community still, nonetheless, seek to sway their self-representation reveals that influencers are actually more than "idols of promotion"—although the fact that almost every account featured on @GaysOverCOVID saw their following grow leads me to wonder to what extent controversy could constitute viable self-promotional strategies on social media. Influencers like Instagays are the text and image on which novel forms of LGBTQ representational activism perform critique, and as such mark a new challenge for the "homonormative" (see Duggan, 2003) politics that animates quests for more, and more accurate, representation. However, as living beings with clearly defined social roles, they post a challenge to that politics: How do you continue the fight for more ethical representations of gay men on a platform on which we ourselves provide the representations?

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