Editorial: The privilege to be socially active

In January, the cosmetics company L’Oreal Paris signed on Amena Khan, a British blogger with over half a million followers on Instagram, for a hair product advertisement. This move made a big statement among not just the beauty community, but social activists too — Khan wears a hijab, and is credited as being the first woman to wear one in a major mainstream beauty ad. This decision by L’Oreal spoke to the global push for more representation in media, giving hope to other hijab-wearing women that their voices are relevant, important and beautiful.

But the celebration was cut short. The reason: tweets from 2014, in which Khan expressed her views on Israel’s military actions in Gaza. Khan’s tweets strongly denounce Israel’s actions and the harm brought upon the large number of civilians. News outlet Al Jazeera reported that the tweets were brought to attention by right-wing U.S. media outlet, The Daily Caller.

In the span of one week, Khan became an image of expanding diversity and acceptance, faced the fire of angry and supportive social media users alike, then ultimately stepped down from her deal with L’Oreal. To many social activists, this ordeal turned out to be one step forward, two steps back. Khan stepped down voluntarily from her deal with L’Oreal, and the company agreed with her decision. “We appreciate that Amena has since apologized for the content of these tweets and the offense they have caused. L’Oréal Paris is committed to tolerance and respect towards all people,” L’Oreal said in a statement to Huffington Post.

L’Oreal has experience with situations like these — in 2017, they also ended their business relationship with Munroe Bergdorf, the first transgender model for the company, over her discussions of systemic racism in America. Bergdorf’s comments were made in direct response to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. This Facebook post was later deleted by Facebook for “breaching its terms on hate speech,” according to The Guardian, though racist and transphobic comments made about Bergdorf weren’t deleted. To Bergdorf, being vocal with her politics is not a choice, as her very existence is a catalyzing issue that leaves her open to ridicule and violence.

This situation raises questions over who has the privilege to discuss social issues without risking their employment and reputation. Similar situations have had very different results. In 2014, Israeli model and actress Gal Gadot came under fire for a post supporting Israel’s actions in Gaza — the same subject that Khan discussed. While Khan ended up stepping down from L’Oreal, Gadot faced only social repercussions. She continued with the production of 2017’s “Wonder Woman” film, and hasn’t faced further backlash.

In the fast-paced culture of global news, it’s easy to gloss over these stories and move on to the next controversy or debate. But think about the implications of these particular incidents. Who are we allowing to discuss social issues, and who are we silencing? Though Khan and Gadot operate under different companies, their remarks were on the same topic, just from different sides. Khan was reprimanded and pushed from her business deal. Gadot, someone with more flexibility in her status as a
famous actress, sustained no lasting impacts on her employment. Bergdorf’s work with L’Oreal ended following one Facebook post around issues that personally impact her life as a black woman. Followers of these controversies have pointed out that Gadot is “white-passing,” while Khan, Bergdorf, and countless others are not — therefore, Gadot’s safe navigation around these controversies can be explained by her ability to access white privilege.

For Khan, a proud hijab-wearing woman, and Bergdorf, a black trans woman, they cannot hide their identity. Their messages are always complicated by who they are and what they look like. These events represent a larger societal issue — we allow popular, powerful individuals to comment on social issues, and shut down any comments made by marginalized communities.