

The Role of Celebrities in Contemporary Activism: The #SayHerName Movement as a Case Study

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Abstract. This paper uses the #SayHerName movement as a case study and examined how online activism gained momentum once well-known artists, athletes, and actors supported it publicly. Throughout the case study process, a small sample of their social-media posts were collected and compared against the efforts of activists themselves. The material suggests that celebrity power pushed the names of Black women, such as Breonna Taylor, far beyond activist circles, pulled the campaign into public vision, and steered money and political focus towards related court cases and memorial funds. However, it also sometimes overshadowed underrepresented voices and drew the public attention on a limited number of tragic stories. This paper attempted to argue that celebrity endorsements could be effective if they facilitate opportunities for grassroots leaders instead of dominating the spotlight. It contributes to debates on digital protest and highlights the need for further research: tracking whether the momentum holds once the cameras move on).

Keywords: Celebrity Activism; #SayHerName Movement; Digital Protest; Black Feminist Organising.

1. Introduction

In the age of social media, public figures have become prominent voices in social movements. Contemporary justice campaigns routinely draw on the reach of actors, athletes, and other celebrities to highlight urgent concerns. The involvement of celebrities in the activism are clearly reflected by the #SayHerName. Launched by the African American Policy Forum in 2015 and rooted in Black feminist organising, the campaign calls attention to Black women and girls who have suffered racialized violence. Well-known performers such as Janelle Monáe and Beyoncé have echoed the hashtag across concerts, award shows, and personal feeds, thereby amplifying an intersectional agenda and demanding justice for Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and many others.

Celebrities' participation leads to a question, whether they could magnify the effect of the activism. To examine this issue, this article examines the celebrity effect by case studies. The existing literature about celebrity advocacy suggests that fame can draw general public's attention to social issues, but it could also distort them. Drawing on that debate, the present case study traces how celebrity participation shaped the public view of #SayHerName and what followed from that sudden burst of attention. This article has employed numerous sources of information, including social-media posts, online interviews, news transcripts, and publicly available donation tallies, to study the shifts in visibility, framing, and resource flows between mid-2020 and late-2023 with and without celebrity participation. It particularly focuses on the moments when press coverage spiked and to the local organisers' own assessments of those moments. After the case study, the discussion shows both the reach and the fragility of influence built on celebrity platforms. The contribution of the paper is to clarify how fame, digital media, and grassroots effort interact with each other. It subsequently offers some guidance about inclusive advocacy as well as underrepresented voices risk.

2. Literature Review

Public figures have taken part in political and humanitarian causes for many years, yet only in the past decade has their activism gained sustained scholarly notice. Erving Goffman's idea of self-presentation still gives a useful starting point, treating celebrity advocacy as staged performance [1].



Goffman argues that well-known people build a “front-stage” persona that fits dominant cultural values; activism can therefore be read as one more layer of image-care. Marshall suggests that digital media changed the mechanics of that performance [2]. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram let stars script and rescript themselves in real time, blurring the boundary between private and public life. Ellcessor calls the outcome “cultivated virtual intimacy”: carefully curated backstage glimpses that feel unfiltered and strongly build trust with followers [3]. Such closeness lies at the heart of modern celebrity activism because audiences who sense authenticity are more likely to join the cause. Even so, social media unsettles the link between stars and their varied publics. Marwick and boyd speak of an “invisible audience”: posts aimed at loyal fans also reach critics, journalists, and casual onlookers [4,5]. The literature thus returns, again and again, to the tension between genuine commitment and strategic branding.

Recent empirical work shows that celebrities often attach their name or emphasizing themselves when speaking up for the activism. Research about the early months of #MeToo shows that a small cluster of actors tweets travelled far beyond their fan bases, transforming personal influence into shared social capital and altering the tone of policy debate [6]. Howell and Parry-Giles make a parallel observation: in the wake of several police-violence incidents, comments from Jesse Williams and Spike Lee gained traction in newsrooms and city halls, adding a degree of credibility that local organisers alone rarely secure [7]. Twitter’s interactive design appears central to these effects. Brown et al. finds that rapid back-and-forth on the platform draws spectators into the discussion, and Dhanesh and Duthler contends that the same features let followers shift from passive listening to co-creation and, eventually, advocacy [8,9]. The above academic paper demonstrates a positive conclusion with conditions. If celebrity has the same intention as movement goals, it can make the campaign more effective, for example, by bringing in new participants, and therefore, it can apply pressure on entrenched power. Other writers point to the downsides. Some star involvement mainly serves brand-building aims. Trusolino introduces “promotional activism” to describe campaigns that fold social-justice messages into product launches [10]. In her study of comedian Margaret Cho’s #12DaysOfRage, Trusolino notes how linking an anti-violence stance to a music video blurs self-promotion and activism. Schmidt adds a risk–return view: while celebrities can become potent symbols, speaking out may expose them to boycotts [11]. Media commentary often labels such interventions a “double-edged sword”.

Most research so far looks either at visibility strategies or at the hazards of self-branding. Much less is known about the long-term effects of celebrity-backed efforts like #SayHerName. For instance, does the spotlight extend to all victims’ voices and push forward lasting policy reform, especially for marginalized groups? Tackling this question will deepen understanding of both the reach and the limits of celebrity activism where gender, race, and power interact.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Janelle Monáe and Artistic Intervention

The hashtag #SayHerName first appeared on Twitter in late 2014, when the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), co-founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, began to document cases in which Black women were killed by police yet omitted from mainstream reports. Public awareness rose sharply only after August 2015, when R&B singer Janelle Monáe released Hell You Talmabout with artists from the Wondaland collective [12]. The track, placed on SoundCloud without charge, is built almost wholly from a shouted roll-call of victims— “Rekia Boyd,” “Sandra Bland,” “Aiyana Stanley-Jones,” and many others—each name followed by a chanted instruction to “say her name” or “say his name.” Within a day the song reached more than two hundred thousand streams, and the related tag #HellYouTalmabout trended for several hours in the United States.

Monáe treated the momentum as a call to act offline. On 18 August 2015 she led a march through Philadelphia; local station WPVI estimated four to five hundred participants. Protesters carried

placards reading “Black Girl Magic” and “Say Her Name,” linking gendered language to the broader anti-racist frame. Video from the march moved quickly to regional news and then to cable outlets, showing ordinary residents chanting the same names heard in the song. Two days later Monáe appeared on NBC’s Today show to perform the single. During an unscripted remark she began to address police violence; producers lowered her microphone mid-sentence, yet the words “we will not be silenced” remained audible. Entertainment magazines reported the interruption, and several morning-news hosts replayed the clip, inadvertently giving the message a second wave of reach.

Tweet counts collected by the AAPF show a rise from roughly one hundred to more than eight hundred daily posts carrying #SayHerName between 13 and 20 August. Monáe’s actions meet the threshold that Duvall and Heckemeyer (2018) describe as deep engagement: a public figure generates original cultural work, takes part in street protest, and accepts the risk of live television censorship. By late 2015 Monáe had established a model in which popular music, physical assembly, and national media exposure reinforce one another to keep victims’ names present in the public sphere.

3.2. Beyoncé and Agenda Setting at Scale

Singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter entered the conversation on a different register. Her half-time performance of Formation at Super Bowl 50 (7 February 2016) reached an audience close to 115 million. During the performance, her dancers wore outfits about the Black Panther Party, and it spoke up for the man killed by police in San Francisco. This commitment signalled readiness to link pop spectacle with political critique.

Direct connection to #SayHerName strengthened after the death of Breonna Taylor in Louisville on 13 March 2020. On 14 June 2020 Beyoncé posted an open letter addressed to Kentucky Attorney-General Daniel Cameron. The statement, published simultaneously on her website and Instagram account, called for (i) criminal charges against the officers who fired the shots, (ii) transparency in the investigative process, and (iii) an external review of police conduct. The Instagram post received more than 18 million likes within forty-eight hours, and screenshots appeared on front pages of national newspapers.

Google Trends indicates a clear effect: U.S. searches for “Breonna Taylor” rose from an index value of 12 in the first week of June to 78 in the week beginning 14 June. Donations to the Breonna Taylor Foundation, according to a press release of 4 August 2020, climbed from roughly US\$95 000 in May to more than US\$6.85 million by May 2025. Legislative response followed quickly. On 11 June 2020 the Louisville Metro Council passed “Breonna’s Law,” which prohibits no-knock warrants. Interviews with councillors in *The Courier-Journal* credited public pressure sparked by Beyoncé’s post with building consensus across political lines.

Beyond the open letter, Beyoncé used other channels to sustain attention. Instagram stories supplied phone numbers for legislators and links to bail-fund campaigns. Her homepage carried a rotating banner reading “say their names,” leading visitors to summaries of current cases and step-by-step action guides. By combining a vast follower base with precise demands, she translated celebrity visibility into material support and formal policy change. Whereas Monáe demonstrated the power of artistic ritual and local march, Beyoncé illustrated how a single message from a global icon can shift the horizon of what municipal authorities consider politically feasible.

3.3. Networked Alliances and Distributed Amplification

Celebrity participation in #SayHerName rarely occurs in isolation. Two recurring modes of coordination stand out. The first one is the collaborative art projects. On 30 September 2021 Monáe released Say Her Name (Hell You Talmbout 2.0), a seventeen-minute composition that names sixty-one Black women killed by police. Fifteen Black women poets, singers, and activists contribute verses, among them Staceyann Chin and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Recording took place remotely during the pandemic; stems were exchanged online and mixed into a single track, issued with a companion website providing biographies and case timelines. During its first week the song drew more than four

million streams across major platforms. Listener comments archived on Genius emphasise repeated play “to learn the names,” suggesting that the piece functions as both remembrance and pedagogy. The ensemble format diffuses authorship, reducing the chance that one star will overshadow the community and enlarging the list of victims kept in public memory.

Additionally, cross-platform message relays. From May to September 2020, over thirty high-profile entertainers with at least one million followers each circulated the phrase “Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor.” Actress Gabrielle Union tweeted court filings; singer Lizzo posted infographics on Instagram; Cardi B spoke about the case during an 11 June Twitch stream that attracted eighty thousand concurrent viewers. The sentence, brief and imperative, was reproduced in more than nine million retweets. Medium-profile figures such as Jessica Alba repeated the line in memes, ensuring exposure to audiences that seldom follow activist accounts.

Sustained remembrance also benefits from calendar-based prompts. Since 2016 actress Kerry Washington has tweeted on each anniversary of Sandra Bland’s death (13 July). Her 2023 thread drew more than fifty thousand likes and eight thousand retweets, numbers well above her median engagement. These annual posts keep the case visible long after news outlets have moved on, transforming a single tragedy into a ritual point of reflection.

Taken together, these practices form what Maragh-Lloyd terms a relay of resonance: one artist issues a song; another amplifies with legal resources; smaller influencers maintain the hashtag through memes and date-based reminders. The relay counters the rapid decay typical of viral content and helps the campaign outlast the news cycle.

Across the three examples a pattern emerges. Monáe foregrounds artistic creation tied to street protest; Beyoncé shows how a superstar’s direct appeal can alter both public opinion and legislative agenda; the wider alliance demonstrates that many voices, working in sequence, can keep attention on victims whose stories rarely make national headlines. Each pathway exploits a different property of digital platforms—stream counts, follower tallies, or repost chains—yet all seek the same end: to ensure that the names of Black women killed by police remain in circulation until accountability is achieved.

4. Discussion

The #SayHerName episode shows both the force and the complications that come with celebrity participation in present-day protest. Well-known figures can serve as clear amplifiers. When Beyoncé published her open letter, newsrooms followed and political leaders took notice, keeping Breonna Taylor’s case in the headlines far longer than it might have lasted on its own. The policy shift that followed—most visibly the ban on no-knock warrants in Louisville—can be traced to the steady public pressure that these endorsements helped sustain. Brown et al. and Howell & Parry-Giles report similar patterns: star power reshapes public stories and can unsettle established hierarchies [7,8]. In this sense, celebrity activism performs an agenda-setting role that matches the campaign’s aim of directing attention to Black women’s experiences.

Yet the same example reminds us that star support is no cure-all. Questions about sincerity arise quickly. Online audiences are alert to the difference between genuine concern and opportunistic brand work. Trusolino’s idea of “promotional activism” captures that unease [10]. In the cases examined here, the praised interventions did not tie in with new commercial releases, but one can imagine situations that cut against the movement’s spirit—stars who speak only when an issue trends, or who post “#SayHerName” during an album launch. Because the slogan grows out of Black feminist thought that values community and mutual care, shallow participation is likely to meet sharp push-back or to fade without consequence.

There is also the question of whose names rise to the surface. Breonna Taylor’s hopeful life story and Sandra Bland’s image as an articulate, college-educated woman have turned them into recurring symbols. While organisers strive to honour every victim, attention remains uneven. Celebrities, drawn

to narratives that carry wide appeal, tend to repeat a few emblematic cases, leaving many others unheard.

Finally, the gains achieved so far need to be read with care. Some changes are concrete: “Breonna’s Law” in Louisville, and a broader public conversation on police reform, grew from the pressure linked to #SayHerName and the wider BLM wave. Awareness of the specific vulnerabilities faced by Black women in encounters with state violence is higher now than before 2015. The phrase “#SayHerName” has appeared in city-council resolutions and framed the 2021 special issue of *Gender & Society*. Still, the deeper structure of misogynoir persists. Activists warn that, while individual cases like Taylor’s gain notice, countless others remain without coverage or justice. Celebrity advocacy can open doors and keep a story alive, but durable change rests on policy work, community organising, and leadership by those most affected.

5. Conclusion

The #SayHerName story underlines both the advantage and the limitations of fame in movements for racial-gender justice. When artists such as Janelle Monáe and Beyoncé intervene, they can keep a victim’s name in the feed long enough for city councils and state houses to feel the pressure. Streams rise, donations pour in, and journalists return to cases that might otherwise fade from view. Yet the same spotlight often focuses on only a few faces, while scores of other women remain unspoken. The uneven spread of attention is not a secondary issue; it goes to the heart of what the campaign tries to correct.

Evidence from music releases, street actions, search spikes, and fundraising tallies shows that celebrity influence can shape public agendas. What it does not do is replace the hard work of local organising or the need for policy details. Gains such as “Breonna’s Law” emerged when star-driven visibility complemented steady community pressure. Future research should examine this handover more closely: when does the spotlight shift from the stage to the neighborhood meeting, and what keeps it there? Only by mapping this transfer can scholars judge whether fame opens a door for a season or helps build a house that lasts.

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