

# All the World's a Stage: The Rise of Transnational Celebrity Advocacy for Human Rights

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# 1 Introduction

The role of celebrities in promoting human rights causes has grown steadily over the past thirty years. Thanks to the rise of entertainment news, the fragmentation of the mass audience, and the increasing diffusion of digital communications, celebrities have become important new gatekeepers of a transformed global public sphere. Their dominant position on social media platforms and the Web, in particular, gives celebrities greater potential for generating exposure for political issues than ever before. At the same time, globalization and the redistribution of power since the end of the Cold War have disrupted traditional diplomatic strategies and invigorated efforts by individuals, groups, and movements to play critical roles in transnational agenda setting and persuasion.

The literature on celebrity humanitarianism is relatively young but diverse and expanding rapidly (Jon 2014). Important contributions have been made from scholars working in history, critical studies, anthropology, geography, as well as political science. As with any new field of inquiry, especially an interdisciplinary one, the literature on humanitarian celebrity advocacy is somewhat disjointed and lacks systematic empirical grounding, especially when it comes to quantitative studies.

Nonetheless, we can readily identify four important areas of focus in the existing literature and our essay is organized accordingly. The following section describes the emergence and evolution of humanitarian celebrity advocacy as well as its institutionalization among NGOs. We then examine how NGOs help celebrities transform into credible humanitarian advocates and harness their "star power." The third section reviews research on the impact of celebrity advocacy. We conclude with an assessment of the vigorous debate over the consequences of celebrity advocacy for democratic politics.

## 2 The Rise and Institutionalization of Humanitarian Celebrity Advocacy

The evolution of humanitarian celebrity advocacy has seen celebrities move from occasional props used by the United Nations, to fully institutionalized elements of U.N. and NGO strategies, to the emergence of a small group of entrepreneurial celebrities who have become powerful advocates in their own rights. At this point most scholars agree that celebrity advocates have

become central figures in transnational advocacy networks in the human rights arena and beyond (Marsh, 't Hart, and Tindall 2010).

Most scholars mark the start of modern humanitarian celebrity advocacy in 1953 when the United Nations asked the American actor Danny Kaye to become the first Goodwill Ambassador of the U.N. "Mr. UNICEF," as Kaye came to be known, made two very popular documentaries that highlighted the role of UNICEF in improving the health and welfare of children in many of the poorest countries of the world. Kaye received a special Academy Award for the first, which reached an estimated 100 million people (Cooper 2008; Wilson 2014).

Two fundamental trends in the late 1960s and 1970s helped drive the rise of celebrity humanitarian advocacy. The first was the evolution of the public sphere. By elevating the role of the image and through its vast reach, television helped position celebrities as potentially important political resources. By fragmenting the media market, the Internet made generating attention an ever more difficult task, but by enabling inexpensive new ways to reach global audiences without going through traditional gatekeepers, the Internet also made possible new celebrity-fueled strategies for capturing global attention and winning support from the public (Boorstin 1971; McLagen 2003).

The second critical trend was the explosive growth in the human rights arena, which led to the establishment of hundreds of new NGOs around the world and the rapid expansion of existing NGOs such as Amnesty International and Oxfam. With more attention to human rights came more competition for funding and attention. The competition, along with emerging technologies, in turn spurred NGOs to adopt new communication and campaign strategies including a greater reliance on celebrities (Cmiel 1999; Goodman and Barnes 2011).

Thanks to these forces the use of celebrities emerged as a consistent organizational strategy in the 1980s. This period is typically demarcated by the Live Aid concert in 1985 ("the day the music changed the world"), organized by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure to raise funds for Ethiopian famine relief. The event, held simultaneously in the United States and in England, involved dozens of musicians and other celebrities and was viewed by almost two billion people on television in 150 nations, raising millions of dollars in donations (Cooper 2008). As the first effort of its kind, Live Aid established a template for large-scale celebrity advocacy on global issues that persists today, visible through mega concerts like Live Earth in 2007 and Hope for Haiti Now in 2010.

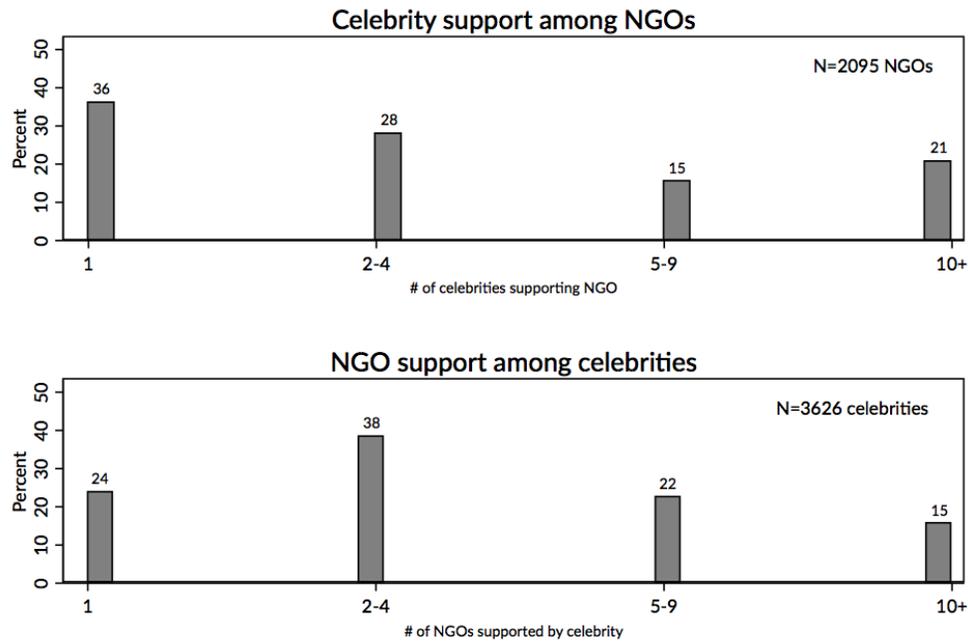
After several decades of somewhat irregular efforts to make use of its Goodwill Ambassadors program, the United Nations took organized celebrity advocacy to new levels in the late 1990s. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan took office in 1997 with a strong desire to revive the U.Ns image, which had been battered by polarizing fights over U.N. action (and inaction) in Somalia, Rwanda, and the Balkans. Annan led a massive expansion of the Goodwill Ambassador program. Soon fifteen different U.N. agencies had named roughly 400 celebrity Goodwill Ambassadors (Alleyne 2005; Wheeler 2011; Lim 2014). The United Nations was not alone in its efforts to harness the power of the stars. By the early 21st century a majority of the largest human rights NGOs were partnering with celebrities in a variety of ways, with groups like Oxfam and Amnesty International going so far as to create celebrity liaison offices to manage such efforts (Goodman and Barnes 2011).

Most recently we have seen the emergence of the entrepreneurial celebrity advocate. Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, and Huliaris (2011) note that globalization has radically altered the distribution of power in the international arena, shifting power away from nation states toward non-state actors, leading to what Thomas Friedman (2002) has called "super-empowered individuals." In Friedmans words, "Some of these super-empowered individuals are quite angry, some of them quite wonderful but all of them are now able to act much more directly and much more powerfully on the world stage." The most famous celebrity humanitarians certainly fall into this category. Bono, Angelina Jolie, and George Clooney, for example, have each leveraged their fame and wealth to launch new organizations in response to their concerns and priorities, mobilizing significant transnational collective action outside their partnerships with existing NGOs (Busby 2007; Cooper 2008).

Though few studies exist to document the growth of celebrity involvement in political advocacy over time, scholars are in consensus about its rapid expansion. The data we do have indeed suggest that celebrity advocacy is widespread and has become more common over time (Thrall et al 2008). To provide a bit more context we have gathered some new data for this essay that illuminates the breadth and growth of celebrity humanitarianism. As Figure One indicates, the web site Look to the Stars, which tracks celebrity advocacy, currently identifies 3626 celebrities active on a vast array of issues, supporting an average of five NGOs, while each of the 2095 non-profit organizations identified by the site is associated with an average of 8.6 celebrity supporters. Some of the largest organizations work with hundreds of celebrities; 298 celebrities support UNICEF, for example, and 246 support the Red

Cross.

**Figure 1. Celebrity Support of NGOs and NGO Use of Celebrity Advocates**



Data retrieved from [looktothestars.org](http://looktothestars.org)

Meanwhile, as Figure Two illustrates, a majority of the most-followed celebrities on Twitter<sup>1</sup> promote the organizations in their tweets.<sup>2</sup> That engagement, however, varies significantly from person to person. Most celebrities mention NGOs very infrequently and 14% have not mentioned a single NGO in their previous 3200 tweets.<sup>3</sup>

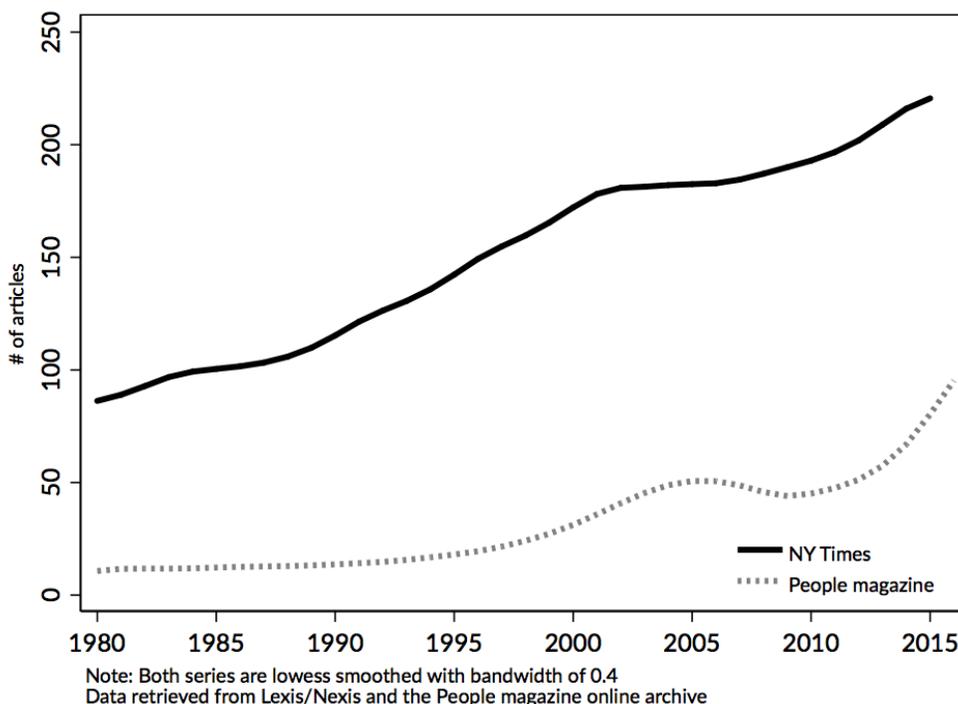
<sup>1</sup>These are made up of the most followed Twitter celebrity non-politicians, according to [twittercounter.com](http://twittercounter.com), supplemented by the celebrities most recognized for their charity work in the recent years as *Celebs Gone Good* by [dosomething.org](http://dosomething.org).

<sup>2</sup>These are the top 100 organizations with most celebrity supporters according to [looktothestars](http://looktothestars.org) website.

<sup>3</sup>Tweets were extracted using <http://dd-css.com/>, developed by Talha Oz of George Mason University. Tweets were downloaded on January 31, 2016. The maximum number allowed (3200) was requested, though the number retrieved varied depending on the celebrity. Some, such as Beyonce, barely tweet, which results in a number of tweets fewer than 3200 for those inactive celebrities.



Figure 3. Media Visibility of Celebrity Humanitarianism, 1980 - 2015



Taken together these figures, though merely suggestive, support the general argument that celebrities play a bigger and more visible role in the global politics of human rights than ever before.

### 3 Creating & Harnessing Star Power

Scholars have spent a great deal of time trying to explain how celebrities with no background in politics or policy can become effective champions of human rights causes. The consistent theme of this work confirms the wisdom that "stars are not born; they are made." As the broader literature on celebrities has documented, a great number of institutional structures and processes are at work to construct and maintain celebrity status (Marshall 1997; Cooper 2008; Van Zoonen 2005). With respect to political advocacy, as Meyer and Gamson (1995) first noted, since celebrities are neither elected officials nor subject matter experts they lack the authority to speak credibly on social

and political issues. As such, most celebrities rely on NGOs to structure and support their advocacy efforts (Huliaris and Tzifakis 2015).

Thus, in order to make the most of a celebrity's star power, human rights NGOs must first help celebrities burnish their humanitarian credentials (Cooper 2008; Chouliakri 2013). As Chris Martin, the lead singer of Coldplay, admitted at the beginning of his visit to Haiti, "I felt like a fourth-rate Bono. Later on I felt like a third-rate Bono, and hopefully it'll escalate until I feel like a full-on Bono" (Goodman and Barnes 2011: 79). A rare few celebrities like Bono do wind up investing the time and energy necessary to become experts on policy (Busby 2007). More typically, however, celebrities develop humanitarian credentials by creating what Goodman and Barnes (2011: 76) call "materialities of authenticity" as they engage with the targets of their advocacy. The effort begins by associating with well-known and trusted NGOs and traveling to meet with the poor and needy, but it depends most critically on documenting those visits through photos, videos, diaries, and other personal testimonials and then circulating them through various media. In so doing celebrities are able to illustrate their own personal growth and education about the issue, to document their efforts to understand and bear witness to the suffering of others, and to "seem genuinely concerned and knowledgeable about the cause they are promoting" (Goodman and Barnes 2011: 80)

The case study literature has grown rapidly in recent years, documenting important examples of celebrity advocacy and revealing that NGOs use celebrities in a wide number of roles. NGOs have, of course, relied on celebrities to put a famous face on a campaign, as seen in the cases of Danny Kaye and Audrey Hepburn working with UNICEF, or to gain national and global attention as in the cases of the Live 8 concert or the International Year of Tibet (McLagen 2002; Alleyne 2005; Cooper 2008; Nash 2008; Marsh, t' Hart, and Tindall 2010; Wheeler 2011; Wilson 2011; Street 2012). Celebrities often provide support as fundraisers, as in the aftermath of the earthquakes in Haiti and Japan or the tsunami in Asia (Huliaris and Tzifakis 2011). NGOs have also used celebrities as pitchmen for new consumer goods, as in the cases of Bonos Product (RED) campaign, or the Fair Trade movement (Brockington 2008; Richey and Ponte 2008, 2011; Goodman and Barnes 2011). But celebrities have also operated in the role of diplomats and lobbyists; Bono, Clooney, and Angelina Jolie to name a few have helped NGOs to gain access to and put pressure on world leaders, both in the West and in nations where human rights violations are occurring (Alleyne 2005; Avlon 2011). Finally,

NGOs have used celebrities to help change peoples minds, whether in support of specific arguments, such as Mia Farrow's effort to recast the Beijing Olympics as the "Genocide Games" (Huliaris and Tzifakis 2012; Budabin 2009) or as part of efforts to change peoples thinking about the world more broadly as in the case of Bono's efforts in Africa or the Make Poverty History campaign (West 2008).

## 4 Sound and Fury Signifying? Measuring Humanitarian Celebrity Impact

The literature to date has made very clear that there is a good deal of celebrity engagement in human rights campaigns. There is less evidence so far, however, about the nature and extent of celebrity advocacys impact.

Most writing on celebrity advocacy starts from the central assumption that celebrity advocacy helps issues, victims, and NGOs get attention (e.g. West and Orman 2003). As deeply entrenched as this conventional wisdom is, there is surprisingly little data beyond anecdotes to support it. And though there are certainly some individual examples where celebrities were able to make themselves heard, the existing quantitative research suggests that those vivid cases are the exception. Thrall et al (2008), for example, studied the advocacy efforts and outcomes of hundreds of celebrities and found that in fact the overwhelming majority of celebrities do not appear in mainstream news media at all in their advocacy capacity, despite the fact that many of them enjoyed very high levels of news coverage of their entertainment, music, or sports related endeavors. Virgil Hawkins (2011) studied news coverage of celebrity advocates in the cases of Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo and concluded similarly that "the impact of celebrities in drawing attention to foreign conflicts is not as powerful as is often assumed" (p. 101).

But just because celebrities' ability to make mainstream news may have been oversold does not mean that celebrities cannot generate attention for their causes. Work to date suggests that celebrity advocacy likely has its greatest impact elsewhere in the evolving global public sphere such as social media (where celebrities account for 76 of the top 100 Twitter accounts, e.g.), partisan media (NGO web sites, blogs), entertainment media (daytime television shows, concerts, sporting events), and commercial media (advertising campaigns, corporate marketing) (Baum and Jamison 2006; Nash 2008;

Thrall et al 2008; Huliaris and Tzifakis 2010; Click, Lee, and Holladay 2015).

Getting people's attention, of course, is just a first step. The next goal is to convince people to think in new ways about human rights and other issues in order to build public support for change. On this score, celebrity humanitarian advocacy shares a fundamental assumption with corporate marketing efforts: that a celebrity will be able to change how people think about a given product or cause simply by being associated with it and approving of it (Jackson and Darrow 2005). Writing about celebrity diplomacy, Cooper argues that (2008: 7) "Celebrities have the power to frame issues in a manner that attracts visibility and new channels of communication at the mass as well as the elite levels."

Evidence from experiments in the United States and Canada illustrates that celebrity messages and endorsements exercise at least some influence over intentions to vote, vote choice, candidate appraisals, and support for causes (Jackson 2008; Jackson and Darrow 2005; Austin et al 2008; Pease and Brewer 2008; Garthwaite and Moore 2008; Lindenberg, Joly, Stapel 2011; Becker 2013). Fowler (2008) even found evidence to support Stephen Colbert's claims that candidates who appeared on the *The Colbert Show* received a "Colbert bump." Relying on in depth interviews with young people in the U.K., Inthorn and Street (2011) argue that celebrities can help the public identify with causes, but that this influence depends heavily on people's perception of the authenticity of the celebrities doing the selling. Similarly, Becker (2013) finds that celebrity endorsements are effective but that they are seen by the public as more appropriate when restricted to less important issues. Survey data from Couldry and Markham (2007) and Brockington and Henson (2014), on the other hand, suggest two factors that may significantly limit the influence of celebrity messages. First, people do not tend to think about celebrities when they think about politics very often. Second, the people who follow celebrities most closely are also the least likely to be engaged in the political realm.

Finally, scholars have also described the ways in which celebrity advocacy is shaping public behavior, especially in the realm of humanitarian-oriented consumption (Richey and Ponte 2008). Thanks to the emergence of the "celebrity-compassion-consumption complex," Goodman and Barnes (2011: 81) conclude that, "Marketing and selling development and relief aid has never been easier through the rise and spread of the development celebrity."

## 5 Substituting Spectacle for Substance? The Implications of Humanitarian Celebrity Advocacy

For optimistic observers, rising celebrity engagement is mostly a good thing, reflecting a new sort of pluralism adapted to the politics of post-modern democracies in which celebrities are uniquely positioned to operate as "moral entrepreneurs" (Street 2004; Huliaris and Tzifakis 2008; Budabin 2015). From this perspective, humanitarian celebrity advocacy represents a relatively healthy even necessary response to the rise of the Internet and the other major trends affecting global politics in the 21st century.

Some scholars believe that, thanks to their more personal and emotional approach to human rights issues, celebrities operate effectively as interpreters and intermediaries between their audiences and distant victims and tragedies (de Waal 2008; Chouliakri 2013). Further, by virtue of the fact that they are not politicians and generally do not take overtly ideological positions, celebrities may reach and mobilize a broader audience than traditional party politics does (Street 2004; Littler 2008; Wheeler 2012, 2013; Brockington and Henson 2014). Finally, because they are not confined by traditional roles or positions, celebrities are free to experiment with innovative approaches to human rights. Efforts like Live Aid, Product (RED), Make Poverty History and the Save Darfur Coalition, for example, all provide evidence of the ability of celebrities to create new forms of humanitarian activism.

At the global level, many argue that in their role as highly visible and charismatic faces of various issues and campaigns, celebrities are now critical elements of the broader transnational advocacy networks (Cooper 2008; Hawkins 2011; Stohl, Stohl, Stohl 2011; Njoroge 2011). Celebrities are also able to take action and have impact when traditional modes of diplomacy hit a wall. As Wheeler (2005: 10) writes, "[c]elebrity diplomacy should be understood as an increasingly important form of intervention that can transcend the traditional roles of state-centric power." Celebrities, as scholars have also noted, are clearly central to the financial strategies of NGOs. As Huliaris and Tzifakis (2011: 39) report, for example, after George Clooney's appearance on Oprah Winfrey's show to talk about his trip to Africa, donations to UNICEF spiked by 20 percent. In that camp we must also include mega events such as Live Aid, Band Aid, Farm Aid, Live Earth, and the like, each of which raised millions of dollars thanks to massive celebrity engagement.

More skeptical observers, on the other hand, provide a wide range of critiques of the optimists' position. For starters, many critics question whether celebrities, unelected and untrained elites of society, should be the ones deciding which human rights issues get attention and which do not (Drezner 2007; Dieter and Kumar 2008). Additionally, some wonder about the extent to which celebrities' choices to engage issues reflect their constant concerns about their own status, reputation, and image, rather than the severity of the issues involved (Brockington 2009; Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, Huliaris 2011). On this view, rather than reflecting robust pluralism celebrity advocacy reflects yet another way for the rich to shape politics and influence the masses (Littler 2008).

Beyond this, many argue that celebrity advocacy does more to obscure and oversimplify than to illuminate the issues involved (Weiskel 2005; Kellner 2009; 2010). As West and Orman (2003: 118) complain, "Serious political issues become trivialized in the attempt to elevate celebrities to philosopher-celebrities." Though this criticism is certainly not uniquely applicable to celebrities, the typical celebrity's lack of knowledge and experience with the issues may come with a price. As many scholars have observed, with celebrities there is always the danger that the spectacle of their personal stories and drama will divert the story from the issues they are attempting to champion (Kellner 2009). As a result, some have concluded, building on the arguments of Daniel Boorstin (1971) and Neil Postman (1987), that the celebritization of politics represents a sad triumph of style over substance (West and Orman 2003; Wheeler 2012).

A third, and even more fundamental criticism, is that rather than producing real social change, celebrity advocacy is in fact turning human rights into a shopping experience. As Goodman (2009; 3) argues, for example, "The growing celebritization of environment and development has reached an almost fever pitch in the U.K.s fair trade movement." Celebrities like Bono, thanks to their popularity and privileged ability to endorse consumption goods, have played a significant role in creating what Richey and Ponte (2008; 2011) have called "Brand Aid" and what Goodman and Barnes (2011) have insightfully called the compassion-consumption-celebrity complex. The danger, critics say, is that such a strategy lulls people into thinking their responsibility ends at the cash register. As long as we buy our fair trade coffee and stay away from conflict diamonds, everything will be just fine (Boykoff and Goodman 2009; Tait 2011; Chouliakri 2013).

Meanwhile, critics argue, celebrity advocacy has done little to address the

underlying causes of human rights issues (Richey and Ponte 2011; Goodman 2010; Huliaris and Tzifakis 2011; Tait 2011; Richey 2016). Some go as far as to conclude that celebrity advocacy in the form of efforts like Bono's Project (RED) is making things worse (Easterly 2006; Moyo 2009). Dieter and Kumar (2008: 259), for example, argue "While these remedies may look seductive, unfortunately the reality is far more complex. Grand ideas for development are a dangerous recipe and may in fact worsen the situation of the poor." In the long run, as scholars like Yrjola (2011) and Kapoor (2012) argue, celebrity advocacy simply reinforces the hierarchy between the North and the South rather than alleviating it.

## 6 Conclusion

Like them or not, celebrity humanitarians are clearly a vital and growing part of global human rights networks. Given this, research should press ahead in three critical areas. First, though there has been a great deal of case study work outlining the various ways NGOs have attempted to engage celebrities, there has been much less work attempting to provide a systematic accounting of the scope and scale of such efforts. There are thousands of human rights NGOs and thousands of celebrities worldwide, but we lack to date a sufficient accounting of how many of each is engaged with the other, especially outside the United States and the United Kingdom, where most of the research has focused. Without such an effort, all attempts to develop theory are ultimately built on a foundation of sand. Second, and relatedly, researchers must continue to develop empirical work - both qualitative and quantitative - to describe and explain the impact that celebrity advocacy has at various levels (individual, organizational, national, global). Finally, despite a few notable exceptions (Street 2004; Goodman and Barnes 2011, Chouliaraki 2013 e.g.), the literature on humanitarian celebrity advocacy relies too heavily on single case studies and remains undertheorized. There is clearly room for future work that combines theory and empirical work in ways that provides rigorous tests of rival claims about the roles and impacts of celebrity advocacy and helps us create generalizable arguments about this important phenomenon.

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