'Bring Back Our Girls': Social Celebrity, Digital Activism and New Femininity

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In April 2014, 276 female students, aged 16-18 years, were kidnapped from an all-girls secondary school in Chibok in north-Eastern Nigeria by Boko Haram Islamist militants. Boko Haram targeted schools for supposedly teaching 'sinful' Western values and diverting students from traditional Islamic life and teachings. Girls in particular were targeted because, according to Boko Haram Islamic militants, girls and women should be married and not educated. The kidnapped girls were, according to the group's spokesperson, sold into sexual slavery or forced 'marriages' with Boko Haram soldiers (BBC News 2014).

Although Chibok was not the first or last Nigerian school to be attacked, burnt and raided, the scale of the kidnapping of girls there was unprecedented and attracted international attention (see BBC News, 2014; Chandler, 2015; Cleven and Curtis, 2015; ABC News 2016). Protests demanding government action were held in Nigeria, and later around the world, including in Western cities such as London and Los Angeles. At this point, the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls had begun to trend worldwide on the social media platform Twitter. Through the digital campaign, activists demanded the Nigerian government do more to recover the kidnapped girls, and ensure access to education and freedom from violence for women and girls in Nigeria. While the first tweet using the #BringBackOurGirls (BBOG) hashtag was posted by Ibrahim Abdullahi, a Nigerian lawyer based in Abuja, it took Twitter and Instagram postings by key Western public figures, such as US First Lady Michelle Obama, and supermodels and actors, such as Cara Delevinge, Emma Watson, Julia Roberts and Keira Knightley, to raise global awareness of the kidnappings and influence national governments (Britain, the US, France and China) to send advisers, including hostage negotiators, and logistical support to Nigeria to assist in the recovery of the missing girls.

The initial rapid rise of the BBOG digital campaign can be explained in part by contemporary political and cultural preoccupations with terrorism around the world, and particularly in the United States. The terms 'Islamic terrorism' or 'jihadist militants' appeared in almost all media accounts of the Chibok kidnappings – a process which, as Newman (2005, p. 100) explains, 'immediately brings into play a whole discursive apparatus and a series of moral assumptions which have concrete political effects.' As Said (1981) observed some time ago, in the Western mediated consensus, Islam has come to represent barbarism, medieval theocracy and threats to the Western way of life. While the Chibok events do of course deserve widespread moral condemnation, another means of accounting for the rise of the BBOG digital campaign was its familiar juxtaposition of American heroism and Islamic barbarism, with the former being embodied by Western female celebrities. Indeed, in the postmodern media age, the female pop culture celebrity is frequently celebrated as the ultimate (Western) hero; a symbol of modern, empowered, individual strength and progress who stands in distinction from oppressed, weaker or unenlightened others (see Hopkins 2002; see McRobbie 2009).

The BBOG digital campaign was celebrated at the time in women's magazines, such as *Marie Clare*, for demonstrating, 'how powerful and positive social media can be' (Webster 2014, p. 8). 'Led mainly by high-profile women the world over,' #BringBackOurGirls was supposedly, 'a global hashtag activism

movement,' which 'created an international push for action that had never been seen before' (Frank 2014, p.10). The digital BBOG campaign appeared to be an example of the 'clicktivism' of hashtag activism movements, or social movements which use social media to generate publicity for social justice causes. Unfortunately, however, two years later, it appears the BBOG digital campaign has had little impact on the position of girls and women in Nigeria. As American academics, Cleven and Curtis (2015) have observed, the efforts of the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaigners, 'went mostly for naught' and the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls have 'slowly slipped from the radar of major American media outlets.' Tragically, at the time of writing, most of the kidnapped Chibok girls (219) are either missing or still held captive by Boko Haram (ABC News 2016; Motlaugh 2016). Despite a change of government, and the current president Muhammadu Buhari promising to crush Boko Haram, the Nigerian leadership has thus far been unable to find or recover the Chibok girls, prompting activists to maintain that Nigeria is still not doing enough (ABC News 2016; Motlaugh 2016).

Since the BBOG digital campaign, thousands more girls and women have been kidnapped, treated as sexual objects and sold into sexual slavery in Nigeria. In its more recent and less optimistic updates on the BBOG digital campaign, *Marie Clare* has reported that at least 2,000 girls have been abducted since 2014 and millions more displaced as Boko Haram's 'campaign of terror continues' (Motlaugh 2016, p. 98). As Chandler (2015) observes in *The Atlantic* magazine, BBOG was ultimately unable to meet its primary objectives, joining Kony 2012 and other hashtag campaigns, 'in the junkyard of digital activism.' The rise and fall of the BBOG digital campaign on the Western media landscape seemed to illustrate the limitations of ultimately ephemeral and superficial contemporary social media campaigns and their individuated, micro-political approaches to social issues. On another level, the campaign also unearths some very deep-rooted and unanswered questions about who has the right to represent and speak on behalf of the Subaltern 'other' in the distant Global South (see Spivak 1993).

Through critical analysis of the recent appropriation of the BBOG digital campaign by white Western female celebrities, this chapter explores some of the contradictions in postfeminist celebrity activism, which advocates for global gender equality through a celebrity performativity intimately linked to Westernised consumerism, economic inequality and sexualised patriarchal culture. The chapter draws on feminist analysis of popular culture which questions the contemporary 'postfeminist phenomena' of linking discourses of celebrity with sexualisation and empowerment (see Gill 2009; McRobbie, 2000; McRobbie 2004). Particularly important, is feminist intersectional analysis which draws attention to the role of race, class and age in sexualisation processes in popular culture texts featuring and targeting women (see Crenshaw 1995; see Gill 2009). This critical and intersectional reading of the BBOG digital campaign also follows Repo and Yrjola (2011, p. 44) in questioning the class-specific, 'privileged, neo-colonial position' from which Western celebrities speak, often on behalf of less privileged others. The chapter interrogates the connections between neoliberal narratives of successful 'new femininity' and female celebrity performances of transnational activism and global humanitarianism (see McRobbie, 2000; see Gill and Arthurs, 2006; see Repo and Yrjola, 2011) that are evident in the BBOG digital campaign. It explores the multi-layered objectification at the heart of celebrity focused gender equality campaigns, as female celebrities, who profit from their own sexual objectification, reinvent themselves as empowered 'white saviours' (see Cole, 2012) by speaking on the behalf of less powerful women in the Global South. As the attractive face of neoliberal globalisation, female celebrity activists frequently represent and call for female agency and power, without adequately acknowledging their own investment in the practice architectures of global exploitation and inequality. The celebritisation of feminist politics, with feminine beauty and sexiness

at its heart, transforms political issues into (pseudo)political personalities, through staged performances that reduces social complexity to simplistic morality tales (see Louw, 2005). Increasingly, it is the female celebrity who purports to teach girls and women how to be a 'good,' successful and valuable global citizen. Moreover, the performance of global justice activism becomes part of the online construction and circulation of branded celebrity on Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms. This is often the case for female celebrities in particular, who are typically rewarded for fitting in with contemporary gender norms of being a strong and successful but caring and compassionate woman. This chapter argues that, in the name of self-actualisation through postfeminist digital activism, female celebrities frequently privatise politics by absorbing the complex stories of distant others into their own mediated identity narratives of self-growth and 'making a difference'. In digital campaigns, like BBOG, it is frequently the celebrity herself, and all she represents, that takes centre-stage.

The Female Celebrity and her Mirror

As writers such as Marshall (1997), Turner (2004) and Redmond (2006) have pointed out, contemporary culture is often defined and determined by celebrity power. This is exemplified, among other things, by the frequent intertwining of celebrity and politics, as celebrities increasingly take an interest in global causes (Street, 2004; Louw 2005; Drake and Higgins, 2006; Repo and Yrjola, 2011; Farrell, 2012). In addition, 'ordinary people' often interpret their experiences of everyday life through the lens of multi-mediated fame (Hopkins, 2002; Redmond, 2006; Evans and Riley, 2013), particularly as significant media attention is paid to the private and personal lives of celebrities. Typically, it is female celebrities, more often than men, to whom this type of media attention is paid and who are more likely to be defined through their personal lives (see Geraghty, 2002). As such, the influence of celebrity in the construction of meanings and identities is particularly evident in the editorials and advertisements found in women's magazines. In these spaces, female celebrities are often celebrated as exemplars of successful, cosmopolitan and enlightened femininity (Hopkins, 2002; Evans and Riley, 2013; LaWare and Moutsatsos, 2013).

Social media has also accelerated and reproduced celebrity culture, and the image-making potential of female celebrities; particularly, as celebrities and celebrity marketers are increasingly using social media to (re)position the personal brand of celebrities, to connect with fans, and to maximise potential sales (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos and Huliaras, 2011; Johns and English, 2016). As Marshall (2010) points out, celebrity discourses of the self are not only a key element of new media, they are also a tool which ordinary people use to express and mediate themselves online. Building on Marshall's (2010) insights, it appears female celebrity discourses on Twitter and Instagram not only visualise what is considered important and significant to the modern woman, they also teach girls and women how to produce the modern gendered self. The female celebrity social media feed may be a tangle of both feminist and postfeminist discourses which offer implicit and explicit moral lessons to her followers. Social media provides a new platform to both perform 'private' lives and to privatise politics. Thanks to these new digital networks, the celebrity and her followers may enjoy more immediate and 'personal' relationships, in an imagined global village of connectivity, which is supposedly outside more traditional institutions and structures of power. In recent years, female film

actors and female fashion supermodels (or 'social supers') have extended their media exposure, found their 'voice' and built their global celebrity brands via personal posts on social networking sites. Although they also exuded the power and sexuality of ideal or hegemonic femininity, the original supermodels of the 1980s and 1990s were mostly seen, but not heard, on the pages of women's magazines. Today, as the female celebrity is strategically staged through multiple layers of digital mediation, 'personality is arguably the trump card for a model right now' (Rippon 2016, p.136). As Rippon (2016, p. 136) points out, thanks to Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram, fans can now follow the 'social supers' of celebrity femininity 24/7, or 'the full 360 degrees.' This type of ubiquitous presence on social media, which is more intimate, constant and content-hungry than traditional broadcast media, rewards celebrities for staging multiple sides to their intertwined public/private 'personality'.

In 2014, using the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, several female film actors, fashion supermodels and other celebrities shared photographs of themselves on social media holding up hand written signs reading 'Bring Back our Girls,' referring to the kidnapping of 276 female students from a secondary school in Chibok, in north-Eastern Nigeria on April 14th . Celebrities (such as Cara Delevinge, Emma Watson, Julia Roberts and Keira Knightley) were joining a social media campaign which originally apparently aimed to raise awareness of the tragedy, put pressure on the Nigerian government and encourage Western intervention to recover the kidnapped girls. As these images were shared or retweeted across social media websites like Twitter and Instagram they also received significant attention in the traditional broadcast media, television news and women's magazines. Along the way, as the BBOG digital campaign became increasingly celebritised, these images picked up and produced meanings and messages about new politics and new femininities. As Gill and Arthurs (2006, p. 443) have explained, 'new femininities' refers to, 'the ways in which representations and lived experienced of femininity are changing in a cultural context marked by extraordinary rapid technological change, unprecedented globalisation and the increasing hegemony of a neo-liberal form of governance.' In terms of political economy, this neoliberal age is marked by a global Western hegemony, a resexualisation of women's bodies, intense focus on women's appearance, economic inequality and empowerment through attractive femininity as a kind of moral obligation (Gill and Arthurs, 2006). All these convergent trends are evident to some extent in the celebrity appropriation or celebritisation of the BBOG digital campaign.

Contemporary Western female celebrities are uniquely well positioned to profit from the postmodern cultural trend of presenting young women as the ultimate metaphors of progress, hope and social change (see McRobbie, 2000, p. 198; McRobbie 2004; McRobbie 2009). Moreover, as McRobbie (2000, p. 198) has pointed out, the increasing visibility of young women in our visual culture is defined and delimited by a 'slim blondeness' which perpetuates 'violent exclusions' of the non-white. In postfeminist times, girls and women are celebrated for their business savvy and career success, so long as they do not challenge hegemonic masculinities and the dominant, westernised ideal of sexy femininity promoted by women's magazines and the fashion, beauty and cosmetics industries (McRobbie 2009; Evans & Riley 2013). Like any hierarchical system in a competitive neoliberal economy, the system of celebrity sexiness richly rewards those who meet the ideal, while disciplining and penalizing those who fail to measure up (see Evans & Riley 2013). In a postfeminist age, glamourous celebrities appear to have obtained the strong, powerful, perfect but likeable selves that women and girls are encouraged to perpetually pursue (LaWare & Moutsatsos, 2013). Contemporary female celebrities, who fit within the confines of racial and class specific 'slim blondeness' (McRobbie 2000, p. 198), now learn to speak the language of 'empowerment,' 'equality,' 'compassion' and

'solidarity,' while simultaneously profiting immensely from the reality of persistent inequality in both local and global contexts. Moreover, new ways of being a successful young woman in neoliberal times (see McRobbie 2000; see Gill and Arthurs 2006), which prioritise wealth, fame and individualism, are influencing the terrain of digital activism, in the name of global gender justice.

Feminist celebrity politics, in the postfeminist, mobile and global media age, embodies a number of contemporary cultural contradictions. On the one hand, it appears fame has never been more democratic and celebrities have never been more open, accessible and cosmopolitan. On the other hand, celebrity culture exemplifies the gendered, individualistic, competitive, hierarchical and exploitative processes of late global capitalism. Most women and girls, even in the wealthy West, will never have access to the elite brand of empowered self-actualisation glamourous models, pop stars and actresses promote on social media. The female pop icon becomes wealthy in the first place by embodying what her mostly female followers desire, but cannot reach. Such issues of admiration and envy, power and inequality pose difficult moral and political questions, for both the female celebrities themselves, and for the social justice campaigns which enlist them to attract attention. Ironically, the new style digital or social celebrity activist promises social connection and deploys social capital through social media platforms, while simultaneously embodying and profiting from the hyper-individualisation of neoliberal modernity. Without deep knowledge and some experience of the different forms of oppression suffered by different groups of women, celebrity digital activism may appear patronising, staged and hollow, if not actually harmful. As social media campaigns absorb various forms of feminism, the line between 'authentic' activism and artful self-promotion is increasingly blurred. These ephemeral images morph and merge, through narcissistic 'selfies' and strategic statements, which enlist exotic others as mirrors to reflect back the fame, power and moral righteousness of the modern celebrity activist.

The Model Citizen: Politics as Fashion

One of the world's richest and most famous fashion models, Cara Delevinge, is an interesting and contemporary case in point of celebrity activism and new femininity (see *Cleo* 2015; *Elle* 2015; Rippon 2016). Part of the growing pack of fashion supermodels who also have enormous social media followings, Delevinge was one of the first celebrities to present with the Bring Back Our Girls sign on her Instagram account in 2014. The image caught all the visual characteristics the fashion model celebrity is most well-known and celebrated for (the long blonde hair, the supermodel stare, the heavy eye make-up, the hand tattoo) above the caption: 'Everyone help and raise awareness #regram #repost or make your own! Let's @bringbackourgirls #bringbackourgirls.' Of all the BBOG celebrity portraits subsequently re-posted or circulated in women's magazines, girl culture websites and blogs, the picture of striking 'it-girl' Cara Delevinge received much of the screen time.

With over 21 million Instagram followers, online feeds filled with celebrity feminist friends (her 'girl squad') and multiple collaborations with luxury designer brand-labels, Cara Delevinge is the kind type of individual which girls' and women's magazines now celebrate as a 'successful' and 'empowered' woman (see for example, *Cleo* 2015, p. 25; *Elle* 2015, p.80). *Cleo* (2015, p.25) declares that 'queen Cara' has 'Instagirl power' representing, 'a new wave of celebrity who take control of their own public image through social media, and reeling in the dollars' (*Cleo* 2015, p. 25). Rippon (2016, p. 136) also enthuses that 'rebellious Brit Cara Delevinge' is one of the new breed of fashion industry 'Insta-girls'

or 'social supers,' who have superseded the iconic 1990s supermodels, such as Crawford and Schiffer, who are now apparently, 'beyond their glory years'.

In the same year, Delevinge also lead the simulated 'feminist street protest,' (carrying signs such as 'history is her story') orchestrated by designer Karl Lagerfeld as part of Paris fashion week. When wealthy supermodels literally and figuratively carry the signs of feminism, as part of a publicity pseudo-event designed to sell luxury clothes, it is another indication of, 'how far a version of feminism can be pulled in the direction of the political right' (see McRobbie 2000, p. 211). Moreover, it is exemplary of the new wave of celebrity postfeminist activists, and their army of minders, marketers and managers, mastering the art of 'pseudo-politics' (see Louw 2005). Delevinge, or perhaps her publicist, has built a media presence which extends beyond the role of fashion model to make political statements and to construct a public/private personality (or personal 'brand') as an anti-establishment rebel. As the 'face' of multiple beauty/fashion/cosmetics companies, she loans this star power and its associations to other elite brands, particularly those which wish to be seen as 'edgy' as well as exclusive. In both sexy advertisements and reverential editorials, women's magazines, such as *Vogue, Cleo* and *Elle* have also celebrated Delevinge's style, attitude, body art and sexual relationships for 'breaking the rules' – except, of course, the unspoken rule which decrees that powerful young women must also be sexually desirable objects.

The 'hot' activist and the beauty myth

Of course, not all fashion model celebrities succeed in their performances of 'good girl' global citizen and 'correct' or authentic, feminist inspired digital activism. Some staged performances fail in the sense that they generate more negative than positive meanings and interpretations of the aspiring celebrity gender justice activist. One telling incident during the Bring Back Our Girls digital campaign demonstrates what happens when the celebrity sexiness of the 'hot activist' is apparently pushed too far. Irina Shayk, *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit* model, 'brand ambassador' for elite designers and actor in music videos, contributed to the cause by posting pictures of herself pouting and topless with only the Bring Back our Girls sign covering her semi-naked body. Shayk's own Twitter followers were offended by this, criticising the supermodel for being 'tasteless' and 'disrespectful' while reminding her that BBOG was meant to be about global activism, not just another magazine photoshoot (Marcus 2014). As a model and idealized sex object, Shayk was simply doing what she was famous for, but apparently without releasing the marketing of intense sexuality was unsavoury in a campaign against sexual violence. This celebrity 'fail' reveals the hypocrisy and shallowness of those celebrity activists, who make moral claims for female equality and freedom, while at the same time profiting as a symbol of material success and ideal femininity within an inherently unequal and exploitative system. It is also a perverse manifestation of the underlying postfeminist pressures on the modern, empowered woman to prove that she is 'hot' enough to be heard and to be valued in visual culture, even when she is performing traditional women's work of caring for others (see Levy cited in Gill 2009).

The minor media scandal that Irina Shayk created alongside the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, suggested this particular female celebrity was not subtle or 'classy' enough in her performance of the sexualised or 'hot' new femininity (see McRobbie 2009; Evans & Riley 2013). It is worth noting however, that almost every film/fashion celebrity who posted for Bring Back Our Girls, is also complicit in promoting sexualised hyper femininity through her role as spokesperson for potentially exploitative and oppressive beauty and fashion industries. Cara Delevinge, for example, appeared in sexualised

poses alongside veteran supermodel provocateur Kate Moss, in her modelling work for Burberry fragrance in the same timeframe. In that staged and mediated performance, however, Delevinge was apparently playing the role of the 'hot lesbian' (see Gill 2009) rather than the 'hot activist'. In a visual and postfeminist culture, the commercial representations of the 'hot' sex object merge with celebrity discourses of global humanitarianism. Of course, in contemporary postfeminist times, the modern empowered woman may be expected to perpetually self-monitor and carefully manage multiple, contradictory roles. Model Irina Shayk embarrassed the digital Bring Back Our Girls campaign not because she is a professional sex object *per se*, but because she presented herself as a sex object and a gender justice activist *in the same picture*, thereby revealing contradictions in celebrity-focused feminist activism. The resexualisation of women's bodies in contemporary popular culture and advertising, like the expansion of celebrity activism, is part of, not opposed to, the processes of neoliberalism, globalisation and inequality. Despite her calls to female solidarity, the 'hot activist' is bound up with 'new femininities' which remain profoundly divided along lines of class, race, age and appearance.

Partly due to the focus in new femininities on female power and agency, the female celebrity is rarely referred to as an employee of fashion/beauty industries. She is reimagined instead, in contemporary celebrity discourse, as a "collaborator" or "brand ambassador." Hence, some female celebrities may promote gender justice as a United Nations Goodwill ambassador, while also selling cosmetics, for example, as a corporate brand ambassador – in both roles, looking attractive and attracting attention is apparently highly valued. Moreover, celebrities may call for global equality, while also representing and celebrating, the luxury, wealth, elitism and exclusivity of global designer brands. Julie Roberts for example represents Lancome, Kiera Knightly appears for Chanel, Emma Watson has represented Burberry and Lancome. Currently, and significantly, model Cara Delevinge has replaced female sports stars as the face of TagHeuer. In the promotional rhetoric of postfeminist advertising, beauty is equated with strength, celebrity is equated with feminist rebellion: 'Cara Delevinge challenges rules. Being free-minded is her motto. Like Tag Heuer, she defies convention and never cracks under pressure.'

Essentially, female celebrity activists may mean well, but they operate within the confines of what bell hooks (cited in LaWare & Moutsatsos 2013, p. 191) has termed a 'white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy,' which may be ultimately painful and damaging for many girls and women. Picking up on the signs of the times, where neoliberal or 'corporate' postfeminism meets neo-imperial humanitarianism, model Irina Shayk apparently sought to present herself on #BringBackOurGirls as a successful sex object and a celebrity saviour *at the same time*. These tensions in constructions of gender and power in the mediated, visual performances of female celebrity activism, deserve further critical investigation. Although the social media postings of the Bring Back our Girls celebrities have since moved on (and some have been deleted), it is important to, as Gill (2009. P.155) suggests, 'freeze the frame' to consider the social currency of the hot activist and what she communicates about the intersection of new femininity and new media activism. Selfie activism and supermodel humanitarianism lives on (in the Pink Hope Pinky Promise health campaign for example) because 'nothing exists unless it's on social media' and 'your next selfie could help save your (and your bestie's) life (Elle 2016).' At the time of writing, the supermodels and celebrated 'hot girls' Rosie Huntington-Whiteley and Lily Aldridge were being celebrated as women's health ambassadors for their 'looks, bodies, personalities, social-media sense, hearts and #girlsquad to match.' (Elle 2016). As Wolf (1991) pointed out some time ago, the health of women and girls may actually be undermined by such

dominant ideals or models of white, slender, youthful beauty. The kind of power and agency embodied by female celebrity activism is often realised, not as a global 'sisterhood,' but as a woman's freedom to pursue material self-interest and self-promotion, at the expense of (and even in the name of) less 'empowered' women.

Emma Watson and the business of being a feminist activist in neoliberal times

Similar to the fashion model Cara Delevinge, the young model and film actor Emma Watson, with over twenty million Twitter followers, was one of the most visible and re-tweeted (or re-posted) faces of the BBOG digital campaign. Like Delevinge, Watson has also appeared on the cover of *Cleo* and *Vogue* magazines and served as the 'face' of elite, luxury designer label campaigns directed at female consumers. Although best known for her roles in films, such as the *Harry Potter* franchise and *The Bling Ring*, Watson has recently expanded her multi-media profile to include social media humanitarian, celebrity diplomat and United Nations Women Goodwill Ambassador. Watson has been applauded in women's magazines and websites for speaking on behalf of girls and other women in her 2014 *HeforShe* campaign and speech (which went viral) and in the Bring Back Our Girls digital campaign in the same year (*Cleo* 2015b). *Cleo* (2015b, p. 24 – emphasis added) young women's magazine, for example, applauds Emma Watson for being both a 'passionate feminist and stylish babe': 'This talented A-lister and activist has found a dual purpose – starring in critically acclaimed films and *being the voice of a generation*.' Due in part to her effective promotion and presentation of herself in new media spaces as a celebrity activist, Emma Watson has emerged as a kind of global gender equality spokesmodel for the digital age (see *Cleo* 2015 b, p. 26). As Roxane Gay (2014) pointed out: 'The feminist movement found a new brand, even though Emma Watson wasn't saying anything feminists haven't already said for more than 40 years.' The recent reinvention of model/actress Emma Watson as global activist, raises questions about what, aside from celebrity power, qualifies a twenty something, white, Western celebrity, reportedly worth over $32 million (Lee 2010), to speak on behalf of poor women and girls in rural northeast Nigeria.

The image of Emma Watson posted on Twitter holding her handwritten sign in support of Bring Back Our Girls speaks also to the image of a new kind of feminine ideal which aims to strike the right balance between attractiveness and intelligence. As Jackson and Lyons (2013) have pointed out, postfeminist culture presents a moral lesson to girls and women that they must be sexy enough to be successful, valuable and modern, but not so sexualised as to appear 'skanky,' 'cheap' or aggressive. The BBOG twitter image of Watson as a headshot, with sombre expression and understated makeup, in front of a bookcase, presented a celebrity 'selfie' which, unlike the photo Irina Shayk took of herself, seemed to hit the 'right' note of sobriety and sincerity. As a successful feminist celebrity spokesperson, Watson is able to bring attention to global issues while accumulating further value and public admiration of her celebrity brand. In digital and broadcast media Watson is frequently held up as an example to all women, for her ethics of hard work, gender equality and heroic individualism. The self-mediation and commercial construction of Watson as celebrity humanitarian and goodwill ambassador works because it fits within the 'empowered' ideal of middle class, educated, youthful, intelligent but attractive femininity. Successful model femininity is expected to make a claim to agency and power, without being seen as too strident, too old, too angry or 'wild' (Jackson & Lyons 2013). While claiming to advocate for gender equality, Watson simultaneously plays to the attractive, well groomed 'good girl' role which reasserts hegemonic meanings about gender, class and power. As a self-identified

feminist, celebrity activist and film star, she produces meanings which are both progressive and oppressive for other women and girls.

It is important to note that social media followers will not always read celebrity messages in the preferred way, even in the case of legitimated 'good girl' activist Emma Watson. Hence under the Bring Back our Girls 'selfie' on Emma Watson's twitter feed, comments appear such as: 'Oh please. We don't need fake media and fake people getting on a cause' and the satirical, 'how can Boko Haram keep these girls now Emma Watson is involved.' Such is the nature of postmodern popular culture that the contemporary cliché of celebrity humanitarianism will of course also be satirised and reflected back upon itself in intertextual art forms. The satirical 'White Saviour Barbie' Instagram site, for example, pokes fun at narcissistic Western activists in Africa posting selfies, with the catch-phrase, 'It's not about me... but it kind of is' (*The Huffington Post* 2016). At the time of writing, Emma Watson had gone back to tweeting about her latest film, *Beauty and the Beast*, promoting both her primary product and cultural fairytales which reassert ideal, 'attractive' femininity.

As the reigning 'it girl' of celebrity humanitarianism, Emma Watson seems to have mastered the arts of new media and new femininity. If Watson wishes to be the flag bearer of global gender equality however, her own privileged positioning within the Western celebrity 'hero' narrative is relevant. Her empowered white 'goddess' status (and its claim to moral high ground) comes in part from positioning herself in opposition to less fortunate 'backward' others; ultimately sustaining simplistic neo-imperial narratives which are circulated, not just in girl culture, but in mainstream news as well. While presumably well intended, Western celebrity activists speaking on behalf of girls in the Global South frequently fall back on the duality of empowered and oppressed, coloniser and colonised, subject and object. What they are really speaking to is their own power. These commercial representations of model/actress celebrities such as Delevinge and Watson, are indicative of what McRobbie (2000) identified some time ago as the new dominant ways of being young and female in postmodern, postfeminist times. The contemporary political and cultural push toward privatisation and individualisation means the pursuit of individual wealth and fame becomes the new measure of success in girl culture (see McRobbie 2000; Hopkins 2002). Moreover, in this context even activism, charity and humanitarianism comes to be seen in individualised, privatised terms as part of the new strategic practice of feminine 'celebrityhood.'

'Insta-girl Power': The celebrity sex object does global diplomacy

From Angelina Jolie and Madonna, to Cara Delevinge and Emma Watson, celebrity approaches to activism in the Global South, while variable in approach, commonly provide a new layer of meaning to the celebrity personality or brand (see Huliaras and Tzifakis 2011; Finlay 2011). In postfeminist times, when the ideal woman (like Angelina Jolie) is required to be simultaneously many things to many people (mother, sex object, career woman, role model, activist), ambitious female celebrities cannot afford to be dismissed as superficial or self-serving. Celebrity appropriation of feminist discourses delivers them some claim to a commodity that is increasingly rare and valuable in the postmodern media age: authenticity (see LaWare and Moutsatsos 2013).

As more model/actress celebrities, take a turn with the role of UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, global gender issues are increasingly framed through the intersection of celebrity culture, corporate culture and postfeminism. In turn, this means even complex issues of gender violence come to be

explained through the 'compassion' of 'caring' celebrity elites, filtered through the pages of women's magazines and websites alongside the seamless promotion of fashion, beauty and glamour industries (see *Marie Clare* 2016; see *Daily Mail Australia* 2014). In sycophantic interviews and profiles, female celebrities are now praised as much for being a 'voice of compassion' and 'global advocate' as for their beauty and business success (see *Marie Clare* 2016; see *Daily Mail Australia* 2014). Hence, even events designed to 'raise awareness of global gender inequality' may be reported in terms of the 'right' celebrity femininity narrative; 'formal yet stunning…locks swept into a center-parting….make-up understated and natural…conservative black pumps (see *Daily Mail Australia* 2014).' Celebrity culture, beauty industries and glossy women's magazines are intricately linked in their promotion of virtually unattainable standards of perpetual youth, beauty and wealth, which may in the long term be damaging to women and girls as a group (see Wolf 1991; Evans and Riley 2013; LaWare and Moutsatsos 2013). Moreover, the female celebrity's 'calculated quasi-godlike' persona (Evans and Riley 2013) is now lent a moral dimension through the performance of 'compassionate' activism for 'good' causes wherein; 'it's easy to forget they're goddesses and you're a mere mortal…until you get a selfie with them (*Elle* 2016, p. 96).'

Celebrity humanitarianism, however, does not necessarily challenge the structures of the global economic system. As Huliaras and Tzifakis (2011, p. 38) observe, '[c]elebrity campaigners' real message to policy-makers is a call for "more attention" to Africa, rather than a demand for radically changed policies'. This, they suggest, explains why Western celebrities often sign up for humanitarian causes in war-torn Africa, rather than to more controversial issues closer to home, because it is less risky to their brand image, marketability and long term career strategy.' Such an approach relegates campaigns such as BBOG to the domain of what Huliaras and Tzifakis (2011, p. 39) term 'soft' news, which covers international events through the lens of celebrity involvement, rather than through highlighting the root causes of particular social problems. As such, while these platforms do often succeed in improving public awareness of global issues, they do not necessarily improve public knowledge or understanding of the events. While Western celebrities acting as transnational activists have effectively publicised some global gender atrocities and made Western governments more attentive (especially where Islamic militants are to blame), 'they cannot equally claim that they have persuaded rich states to do more for the poor countries of the world. (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2011, p. 39).'

Indeed, the very moral and social authority female celebrity activists rely upon to bring attention to gender justice issues, derives from their privileged 'goddess' position over and above other 'ordinary' women. Most Western female celebrities became wealthy 'stars' in the first place by trading in the currency of female objectification, in industries which demand youth, beauty and sexual desirability above education, and all else. Female celebrity activism certainly does not operate outside the machinery of sexist and ageist mainstream media representation. Although the fashion industry likes to flirt with the possibility of being rebellious and transgressive, it rarely challenges the rules of the game of patriarchal capitalism and neoliberal globalisation.

Aside from enabling the individual celebrity to 'evolve' or 'actualise', the performance of (pseudo) politics also inevitably generates more press and allows fans, journalists and media scholars alike to drape new meanings on the angular shoulders of the femininity model. The Hollywood actor and even fashion supermodel may now be celebrated in women's magazines and in the mainstream press, not just for her wealth and fame, but for 'raising her voice' (*Cleo*. 2015b) and 'making her mark as an advocate for ending inequalities for women around the world.' (Carrillo 2016). In particular, the

performance of digital activism, especially in the area of global gender equality, is a relatively low risk form of engaging politics, which costs relatively little in time and effort while avoiding the hazards of overt political action.

On multiple levels, the feminist celebrity activist presents politics as a kind of fashion, where women can shop for new empowered identities, covet celebrity lifestyles and 'make a difference,' all while staying perpetually modern and mobile. Celebrity fans and followers are encouraged to express gender solidarity via consumerism, for example by purchasing an 'exclusive' purple scarf for international women's day (see *Marie Clare* 2016). The process recalls the kind of political consumerism campaigns fronted by celebrities, which Farrell (2012 & 2014) has critically investigated in the context of philanthrocapitalism (or the assumption that market methods can address social and environmental problems). While white celebrity feminists have also had some success in raising awareness and funding for global gender issues, they do so in a manner which reproduces the ideological underpinnings of global neoliberal capitalism.

Simplistic calls to global gender equality fronted by race and class privileged elites ignore differences in gender discrimination experienced by different groups of women around the world. As a result, Western celebrity feminists run the risk of ultimately reproducing and legitimating the systems of gender inequality they intend to remedy. Where postfeminist celebrity activism mirrors the experiences of extremely wealthy white women, it is limited, even on its own narrow terms of gender solidarity (see Crenshaw 1995). The problem is particularly acute in the context of violence against women, because the violence that many women experience is so often shaped by dimensions of race and class as well as gender (see Crenshaw 1995) – a fact that is often overlooked in celebrity focused digital campaigns. Feminist intersectional analysis (see Crenshaw 1995; see Gill 2009) calls for recognition of the differences between women's experiences. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine a more radical contradiction between the lived experiences of poor Nigerian girls growing up in rural African villages (with no internet access) and the experiences of the obscenely wealthy American supermodels and Hollywood stars who claim to speak for them on Instagram and Twitter.

Unlike activists in the West (see Scott 2016), poor communities in rural Africa, with no internet connection, are typically not in position to 'call out' or 'speak back' to Western celebrities who claim to speak on their behalf. As Spivak (1993, p. 91) suggests, in assuming the right to narrate the story of 'the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman,' Western elites and experts leave 'no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak.' (Spivak 1993, p.103). As Engle (2012) observed in her critical examination of the 2007 UN Action Against Sexual Violence campaign: 'while the campaign imagines new global citizens who can take action simply by promoting their own images (assuming they speak English and have access to the internet, a camera, and equipment for uploading photographs), it denies even that thin form of citizenship to those whom it aims to save.'

White Celebrity Saviours

Female pop culture celebrities frequently replace other female public figures as the arbiter of all that is desirable, good and even 'heroic' in contemporary postfeminist culture (see Hopkins 2002). Indeed, it is a short step from increasingly pervasive 'hero worship' of celebrities, to the emergence of white celebrity 'saviours' in global gender equality campaigns. The BBOG digital campaign made visible the cultural trend of privileged and powerful female American celebrities intervening in African problems (see Repo and Yrjola 2011). Emma Watson for example, is emblematic of a new kind of post-racial,

transnational ideal global citizen who uses celebrity power to pressure states and hold them to account at a distance. The Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole (2012) suggests the misguided 'fresh faced young Americans using the power of YouTube' may actually legitimate a 'White Saviour Industrial Complex' which draws attention away from the root causes of poverty and conflict in Africa. While presumably well-intended, the egotism and exhibitionism of white celebrity 'saviors' has also been interpreted as patronising and offensive to some African commentators and to those they purport to 'save' (see Cole 2012; Mwenda 2013; Ogunlesi 2014). The increasingly ubiquitous figure of the white celebrity 'saviour' nonetheless requires her backward 'other' in need of modernisation and empowerment. As Cole (2012) suggests, 'Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism' and 'a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected.' These narcissistic fantasises, reasserted in new ways in digital culture, position celebrity activists, like Emma Watson, as magical or heroic individuals capable of doing what nation states cannot. Yet as Finlay (2011, p. 206) points out, celebrity activism with its focus on 'personality' and 'charismatic leadership' may actually be fundamentally incompatible with democratic processes and it leaves them democratically accountable to no one when intervention fails to bring about real change. The Bring Back our Girls digital campaign, for example, seems to have been more successful thus far in constructing female celebrities as ideal global citizens than in bringing about lasting change for women and girls in Nigeria.

In contrast to Western celebrities, who loom ubiquitous on multiple media platforms, 'our girls' remained mostly nameless and faceless in the BBOG digital campaign. While the parents and activists on the ground in Nigeria, were mostly ignored, images of Western celebrities holding up hand written BBOG signs were shared and retweeted thousands of times around the world. Understandably, the fact that the most visible women in the Bring Back Our Girls global digital campaign were actually privileged, white, Western celebrities touched a nerve with some post-colonial critics. By appropriating the Bring Back Our Girls movement, the white celebrity activists were, in effect, preventing other local and / or more credible voices from being heard on the same issues. Nigerian journalist and author, Tolu Ogunlesi (2014), for example, criticised the BBOG campaign for (mis)representing the Chibok tragedy as a Twitter hot topic, or 'global flavour of the moment,' hijacked in the interests of 'celebrity-feel-gooding.' Moreover, Ogunlesi (2014) suggested the BBOG hashtag had been appropriated by Western elites in a new virtual or neo-imperial 'scramble for Africa,' which recalled the history, traditions and prejudices of European colonialism. Tolu Ogunlesi (2014) also pointed out, the fact that the Chibok kidnappings featured 'a group of young women seeking an education arrayed against a band of turbaned, bearded, women-oppressing extremists' meant the tragedy had 'all the right elements to capture the world's imagination.' As Haideh Moghissi (1999, p. 20) suggests, the struggle between modernism and Islamic fundamentalism is often perceived as essentially a struggle over the rights and bodies of women. Yet in both the Global South *and in the West*, women and girls are subjected to harmful cultural practices which exert painful control over their bodies (see Bartky 1990). The control, use and exploitation of female bodies is constant across the East/West, North/South divide (see Eisenstein 2004) and female celebrities, no matter how well meaning, well-groomed or well-spoken, are by no means innocent or outside this process. By adding 'global humanitarian' to 'model/actress' on her celebrity CV, the celebrity activist reflects and reasserts postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies which draw attention away from the structural and historical causes of inequality.

Meanwhile, back in Africa: #BringBackOurGirls and Bringing Back Imperialism

Due in part to the time/space compression afforded by new networked communication technologies (Harvey 1990), a tweet from a Nigerian lawyer on the Chibok abductions in 2014 was picked up by celebrities in the West and quickly became one of Twitters most posted hashtags. Despite the solidarity and inclusion implied by the message of bringing back 'our' girls, the experiences of celebrity activists in the Global North were still a world away from the lived realities of girls and women in the Global South. Even when powered by new media activism, distance is still a significant issue, on a number of different levels, in global gender equality campaigns fronted by celebrities. As Radley (2016) discovered in his investigation of 'conflict minerals' campaigns, such as 'Stand with Congo,' advocacy movements headquartered in Western cities may have only a tenuous relationship and little real engagement with the most disadvantaged groups most directly affected by these campaigns. Radley (2016) suggests, Western advocates should 'reorient their efforts to working with, not just for, the non-elites they use to promote their public image and in whose name they justify their external interventions.' Radley (2016) criticises Western campaigns that position Western consumers as the solution to African problems, also acknowledging that it is difficult to mobilise funding and celebrities around multifaceted and long term goals.

Certainly in the case of Bring Back Our Girls, the quick and frequent flashes of celebrity photos and short text messages (less than 140 characters) on social media websites, did not encourage deep understandings of complex global issues. Although it did briefly raise awareness of the Chibok kidnappings, celebrity intervention in the campaign has not been sustained. Part of the reason celebrity digital campaigns like Bring Back Our Girls frequently fade from view is because, as Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole (2012) puts it, 'there is no single villain to topple' and hence no simple solution to state failure in Africa. The Nigerian government is well known for its rampant corruption and poor governance track record (Fagbadebo, 2001; Khakee, 2010; Agbiboa, 2012; Cole 2012). As a country with huge oil reserves, Nigeria has the assets to pay for good government, but is known instead for its inability to maintain functioning statist structures; an inability to end warlordism, violence, crime and a poor track record in listening to its *own* citizens and running democratic institutions (Herbst, 1997; Khakee, 2010; Fagbadebo, 2001; Agbiboa, 2012). Hence, even if the Nigerian government of the time (led by Goodluck Jonathan) wanted to respond to celebrity pressure and Bring Back Our Girls, it had no demonstrated ability or military/police capacity to do so (Maiangwa, et al, 2012; Herbst, 1997; Onapajo&Uzodike, 2012).

The BBOG activists were also sending messages to Western governments suggesting that the West should intervene. What is troubling about this message however is that it recalls imperialist narratives about Africa as the problem continent that needs the West to 'fix' or 'save' it. This neo-imperial conceptualisation of Africa as the land of barbarism and despair, and the West as the only solution to Africa's numerous political and economic difficulties, has been described as 'Afropessisim' by de B'beri and Louw (2011). Presumably, few of the liberal BBOG activists realised that by proposing Western intervention they were inadvertently and ironically aligning themselves with the Afropessimists, who believe the recolonisation of Africa may be the only way to re-establish effective governance on the continent (see de B'beri and Louw 2011). Nonetheless, the campaign makes visible the (neo)imperial discourses,and assumptions of cultural superiority,which sustain much white Western celebrity activism (see Cole 2012; Mwenda 2013; Ogunlesi 2014; Zakaria 2014). While increased publicity is the oxygen that sustains celebrity, it is rarely a magical solution to complex challenges in the Global South. In the case of BBOG, the campaign was effectively pulled away from its African political context as Western hashtag activists came to dominate the flows of communication. In the process, the campaign became a lesson in the limitations of celebrity digital activism, which often provides a simplistic, individualistic and decontextualized view to complex economic, political and historical problems.

As Farrell (2012, p. 405) points out, to appreciate the complexities of such issues it is necessary to 'navigate a path between celebratory populism and laments regarding a cultural decline.' Where

celebrity activism meets corporate postfeminism, extremes of gendered violence are rightly opposed, but the norms of sexual objectification that underpin Western culture and celebrity culture in particular, remain unchallenged. Female celebrities are right to express moral outrage at gender atrocities in the Global South. However, they are also morally obliged to acknowledge their own class and race specific, privileged, speaking position, their lack of in-depth expertise on the African crisis and their own investment, closer to home, in the commercial sexual objectification of girls and women. Female celebrity activists are not just loaning their names, faces and popularity to global causes. They are also redefining interconnections between celebrity power, global humanitarianism, new media and new femininity. As powerful symbols of limitless mobility, wealthy female celebrities have the luxury of 'moving on' in their multi-mediated lives - and it appears most have done so. But, what of the outcome of the Bring Back Our Girls digital campaign for the most powerless women and girls involved? Despite raised global awareness, despite a change of government in Nigeria, despite the assistance of Western advisers, hostage negotiators and logistical support, and despite the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign, most of the Chibok victims are still missing or captive. Tragically, 'our' girls, are still lost.

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