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#SayHerName: a case study of intersectional social media activism

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ABSTRACT
Social media activism presents sociologists with the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how groups form and sustain collective identities around political issues throughout the course of a social movement. This paper contributes to a growing body of sociological literature on social media by applying an intersectional framework to a content analysis of over 400,000 tweets related to #SayHerName. Our findings demonstrate that Twitter users who identified with #SayHerName engage in intersectional mobilization by highlighting Black women victims of police violence and giving attention to intersections with gender identity. #SayHerName is a dialogue that centres Black cisgender and transgender women victims of state-sanctioned violence. Additionally, #SayHerName is a space for highlighting Black women victims of non-police violence. Therefore, we propose that future research on social media activism should incorporate intersectionality as a basis for understanding the symbols and language of twenty-first century social movements.

Social media activism – the use of social network technology to organize and coordinate real-world action – shapes how people engage in political protest and how researchers come to understand social movements (Ems 2014; Markham 2014; Peuchaud 2014; Tremayne 2014; Gerbaudo and Treré 2015; Bell 2016; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016; Ray et al., 2017). To date, few sociologists have examined intersectional social media activism, defined as intersectional mobilization (Terriquez 2015) through consciousness raising via social networking sites. Using Twitter data, we build on concepts grounded in intersectionality, social media, and social movement research to examine #SayHerName, a campaign against violence toward Black women (Crenshaw et al. 2015). We analyse intersectionality in social media activism and suggest directions for future research.

Social movements and intersectionality

Gamson (1992) argues four social psychological processes are relevant to social movements. Micromobilization includes interactions that link individual and sociocultural factors to the other three processes. Consciousness refers to how individuals construct a shared definition for a social situation that implies collective action. Solidarity refers to how individuals develop and reinforce loyalty and commitment to the groups and organizations that act on behalf of the social movement. Lastly, collective identity involves connection between the self and cultural systems as individuals develop a sense of self relative to the definition of co-participants in an effort toward social change. We extend the literature on the social psychology of collective action using intersectionality as a theoretical framework.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1991), interrogates the interrelations of power in social identities and structures. Structural intersectionality refers to where systems of domination converge; political intersectionality addresses the way conflicting agendas of political discourse exclude individuals who identify with multiple subordinate groups, impeding social progress; and representational intersectionality involves a political discourse that acknowledges the significance of the power relations that both challenge and strengthen other discourses.

Terriquez (2015) examines how intersectionality and collective identity lead to social movement spillover. Additionally, Terriquez (2015) highlights how members of disadvantaged subgroups within a movement use intersectionality as a basis for mobilization. Terriquez (2015) tests intersectional mobilization[1] in a mixed-methods study of two networks of immigrant rights activists based in California. The participants were undocumented youth who identified as either queer or heterosexual. An online survey of 503 activists showed queer respondents were more likely to engage in protests or online activism. In follow-up interviews, they described an intersectional consciousness by which they understood how they experienced discrimination in multiple and different ways.

We argue #SayHerName serves as a case study of intersectional social media activism through social psychological analysis. We build on Gamson (1992) and Terriquez (2015) to use intersectionality as a theoretical framework that we link with the social psychology on collective action. In the next section, we provide background about #SayHerName, highlighting how race, gender, and other social factors relate to social media activism about violence against Black women. Accordingly, our study addresses the following question: How does intersectional mobilization emerge in social media activism? To answer this question, we use data from the social networking site Twitter. Specifically, we examine tweets that contain the phrase #SayHerName

to determine how race and gender are deployed in the context of activism against violence toward Black women.

#Sayhername: Black women and intersectional social media activism

This article centres on how Black women use intersectional consciousness (Terriquez 2015; Tounsel 2015) and social media activism to raise awareness about violence toward Black women. #SayHerName combines social media activism, political education, and protests to inform bring attention to violence against Black women.

African American Policy Forum (AAPF) released a report entitled "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women" in July 2015 following the death of Sandra Bland who died in police custody in Waller County, Texas. Sandra Bland became a representative of many Black women whose mistreatment and exploitation in the criminal justice system is overlooked by the wider public:

> The erasure of Black women is not purely a matter of missing facts. Even where women and girls are present in the data, narratives framing police profiling and lethal force as exclusively male experiences lead researchers, the media, and advocates to exclude them. (Crenshaw et al. 2015, 4)

#SayHerName makes intersectional mobilization part of its agenda with affirmations of commitment to issues of members of many subgroups within Black identity including women, LGTBQ, disabled, and trans groups. Supporters of #SayHerName use social media to document, organize, and inform as they seek justice for Black women victims of violence. In May 2016, The AAPF joined with the Black Youth Project, #BlackLivesMatter, Ferguson Action, and Project South for the National Day of Action to End State Violence Against Black Women, Girls, and Femmes in May 2016. In August 2016, Crenshaw presented on #SayHerName at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association for a plenary titled Protesting Racism.

Centering on Black women serves as both an anti-sexist and anti-racist effort to illuminate how social issues such as police violence and the school-to-prison pipeline impact more than just "straight cis Black men" (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2007; Black Lives Matter 2015; Crenshaw et al. 2015). The guiding principles of this campaign aim to "meet the locational standard of intersectionality by which the perspectives of the oppressed move from margin to center" (Choo and Ferree 2010, 138). Intersectionality as critical praxis has shaped Black feminist activism since the colonial era. Historically, Black women have started and participated in social movements for the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and other civil rights. Indeed, intersectionality as a sociological concept emerges from Black feminist thought and is

applied across a wide range of disciplines (Collins 2000, 2015a; White 2001). Thus, #SayHerName is not an aberration, but a continuation of the Black feminist tradition in the United States.

#SayHerName as a form of activism does not represent a uniquely intersectional movement. Rather, this activism includes intersectional strategies and mobilization overlooked by movements like #BlackLivesMatter, which focuses primarily on Black men despite being founded by three Black queer women (Guynn 2015). The erasure of Black women in #BlackLivesMatter indicates that intersectional activism comes with challenges as some find it difficult to envision more than a monolithic identity such as race or gender compared to race and gender.

Methods

Gamson (1992) argues that the construction of collective identities begins with the public expression of symbols and language intended to challenge the cultural domination of a group. Sociologists measure collective identity through the empirical observation and interrogation of cultural labels and symbols. In this study, we treat content from the social networking site Twitter as data through empirical observation for social media activism. The inferences drawn from the data in this article are grounded in intersectionality and social movement theory. We conduct a quantitative content analysis in line with several studies that analyse how people use tweets as data (Clark 2014; Ems 2014; Theocharis et al. 2015; Brock 2016; Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016).

Data

Our data set includes 463,957 tweets collected between 19 January and 14 October 2016 that included the phrase "#SayHerName". Twitter allows users on its platform to engage in the exchange of 140-character messages known as tweets. In addition to words, tweets can allow users to share images, videos, and URLs to off-platform sites and geocodes that provide their location. Exchanging messages on Twitter includes the use of actions known as mentions, hashtags, and retweets. All users on Twitter create their own usernames for their profiles and place an "@" before usernames to direct messages to themselves or a user. A hashtag is symbolized with "#" and placed before a word in a tweet. Hashtags link to tweets with the exact same phrase. Users can also share the messages of other users through an action known as a retweet. Twitter is accessible in a web browser or through software apps on mobile, internet-connected devices in a format. Users may also choose to follow users whose tweets will be delivered directly to their timeline.

Twitter as a social networking is a social structure within itself. For instance, the Twitter API restricts the amount of tweets a researcher can access at any given time. Outside of the constraints of Twitter, people who do not choose to use Twitter do not contribute to the data. Thus, Twitter provides a unique community of users that fit a certain demographic profile. According to Duggan (2015), Twitter represents twenty-three per cent of Internet users (eighty-five per cent of adults over eighteen). Most Twitter users (fifty-six per cent) identify as Black or Latino while twenty per cent identify as White. Thus, people of colour are overrepresented compared to their White counterparts.

We collected the data from Twitter through the application programming interface (API). We use a software called Twarc developed by Edward Summers at the Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland that communicates with Twitter's API to create databases of tweets. In addition to the words in these tweets, the dataset includes information on the top ten retweeted users per day, number of hashtags used per day, and number of media files (URLs and images) used per day. The dataset was saved to a digital repository on GitHub and later transferred to Excel for content analysis.

Analysis plan

We echo research that treats social media data as ethnography (Murthy 2008; Bonilla and Rosa 2015) or as documents for close reading (Morrison 2014; Brock 2016; Steele 2016). IRB protocol and previous studies treat Twitter data as public. Nevertheless, we discuss aggregate rather than individual findings wherever possible. We use the methodological approach in Ray et al. (2017) to examine social media activism including collective identity formation (Gamson 1992). We expand this approach by using intersectionality to guide the formation of analytical categories. In doing so we identify and compare the dynamic processes of intersectionality within social media activism.

First, we assess the number of tweets per day in each time. Second, we categorize several measures in the data. To determine which groups and organizations used #SayHerName, we quantified top ten users retweeted per day and the number of retweets they accrued daily. We also categorized users by how they identified themselves on their profile page. We excluded users whose account no longer exists or did not provide any information in their biography. Third, we compare the percentage of top retweeted users in each category to the percentage of retweets each category received over the entire period. Lastly, we categorize the hashtags and quantify the frequency associated with #SayHerName over this period.

Results

Results indicated that users mostly utilize intersectional micromobilization and intersectional consciousness as strategies when using the hashtag #SayHerName. #SayHerName increased in frequency during specific time periods, which indicated that users deployed the hashtag in response to, in conjunction with, or as orchestrators of specific events. This micromobilization facilitated consciousness raising that illuminated when incidents of violence against Black women occurred. Users shared names of victims, links to news articles, images, and calls for action. The victims named Black trans and non-Black victims of violence as well as women who resided outside the United States.

Intersectional micromobilization in social media activism

Figure 1 provides a summary of the number of tweets per day for the period.[2] Approximately 2,090 tweets were sent daily that included the phrase "#SayHerName". Tweets occurred most frequently between July and early August. These time periods coincided with events that occurred offline. For instance, the highest frequency of tweets per day in our dataset occurred on 2 August 2016 with 30,716 tweets. The tweet with the most retweets ($N = 8,491$) on
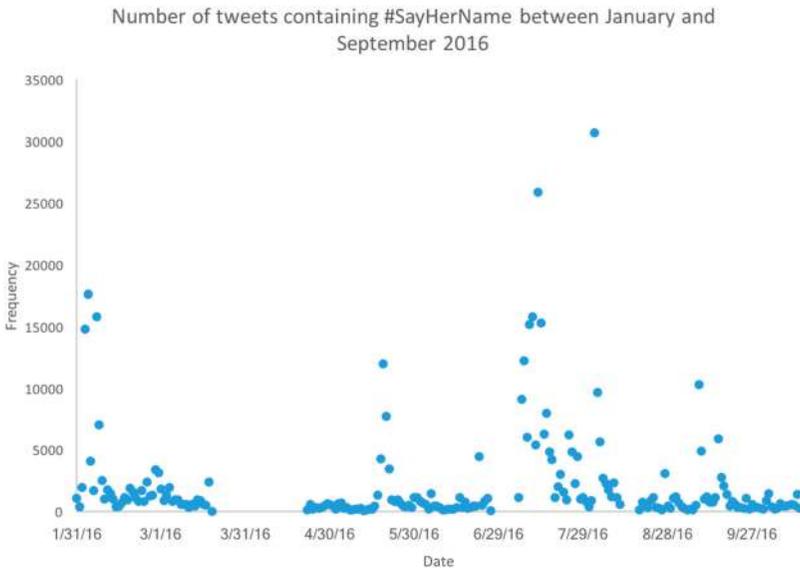

Number of tweets containing #SayHerName between January and September 2016

Figure 1. Tweets containing #SayHerName collected between 19 January 2016 and 14 October 2016. Excludes data between the following periods: 3/20/16–4/21/16; 6/27/16–7/5/16; and 8/12/16–8/17/16.

Note: $N = 463, 957$.

this day contained a reference to Korryn Gaines, a Black woman shot and killed by police officers in Baltimore, Maryland the prior day (Figure A1).

The second highest frequency of tweets per day in our dataset includes 25,888 tweets on 23 July 2016. The tweet with the most retweets came from Huffington Post Black Voices (@blackvoices). Their tweet stated "Today marks one year since #SandraBland died in a Texas jail cell. Let us never forget to #Say-HerName." The message included an image of Bland with two captions. The one above the image reads "Rest in Power, Sandra Bland", while the one below it contains her birth and death date as well as the phrase "#BlackLives-Matter" (Figure A2). Users of #SayHerName utilized this hashtag to engage in an immediate and sustained dialogue about violence against Black women. This dialogue occurs across platforms as people on social media react to blogs and internet news about the deaths of Black women. Frequency of tweets indicate how often and when users engaged with #SayHerName.

The pattern of top retweeted users of #SayHerName also provided insights about intersectional micromobilization. Figure 2 provides a summary of top retweeted users by category during this ten month period. We restricted our analysis to users who received at least 100 retweets during the period ($N = 252,215$). Activists made up most users at 27.2 per cent. "@ImBlackIMatter" had the most retweets in this category ($N = 8,626$). According to the profile, three Black women share the page which routinely updates with information about victims of police violence. The category "Other"[3] featured the second most retweets by user (19.5 per cent). This

Number of Users by Category

■ Activist ■ Celebrity/Entertainer ■ Media/News ■ Politicians ■ Scholars/Professionals ■ Organizations ■ Other
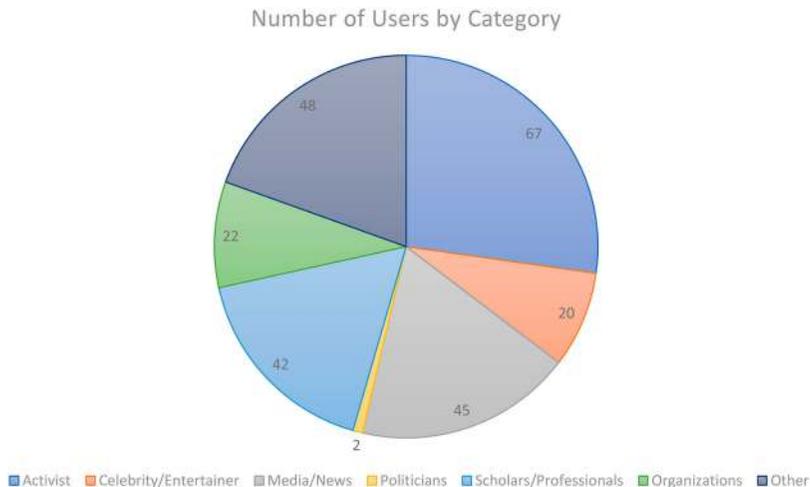
Figure 2. Tweets containing #SayHerName collected between 19 January 2016 and 14 October 2016. Excludes data between the following periods: 3/20/16–4/21/16; 6/27/16–7/5/16; and 8/12/16–8/17/16.

Note: $N = 246$.

category includes individuals who either did not provide a biography or used their Twitter as an individual user rather than one affiliated directly with their professional life. The most retweeted user in this category also identified as a Black woman ($N = 10,898$).

Media/news accounted for 18.3 per cent of the retweeted users associated with #SayHerName. Huffington Post's Black Voices dominated the narrative ($N = 10,005$). Besides BET ($N = 4,439$), no other major news outlets appeared in the top ten retweeted users per day. Instead, independent publications like Rolling Out, Mic, and Global Grind dominated the top retweeted users, receiving between 4,000 and 6,000 retweets. Blogs headed by Black women like Blavity and BlackGirlTragic.com also received over 1,000 retweets during the period. Black women are instrumental in using digital media to create and share content about victims of police violence (Tounsel 2015).

People who identified as scholars or professionals made up 17.1 per cent of top retweeted users. A Black woman scholar of Black feminism and hip hop received the most retweets ($N = 2,093$) in this category. Nonprofit organizations and universities received 8.9 per cent of the retweets during the 10-month period led by the AAPF with 765 retweets. Celebrities and entertainers accounted for 8.1 per cent of the retweets. However, the White male entertainer who used the hashtag received the most retweets of all users in the dataset ($N = 31,104$), a finding that contrasts with the patterns of other categories led by Black women. Lastly, politicians received less than one per cent of the retweets as only Jill Stein ($N = 719$) and Bernie Sanders ($N = 4,015$) used the hashtag during the month of July. This was the same month as the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Black women led most of the categories with entertainment and politics being led by Twitter users who identify as White.

Figure 3 reveals insights about how the percentage of retweets per period compared to the percentage of users in each category. While activists compromised most top retweeted users throughout the period, they received 16.7 per cent of all retweets. Those categorized as Other received 24.8 per cent of retweets during the period, while media/news received 23 per cent, celebrity/entertainers received 16.3 per cent, scholars/professionals received 9.4 per cent, organizations received 7.9, and politicians received 1.88 per cent.

While activists and scholars made up the largest categories of users, they received about half as many retweets relative to the number of tweets they sent. Organizations represented a similar percentage of retweets to users. Entertainers, media, politicians, and those without organizational or activist affiliations received more retweets than users represented in the data. These findings suggest that while some groups are among the most engaged in this type social media activism, this engagement does not necessarily translate into having the most impact. Thus, the voices that dominate the
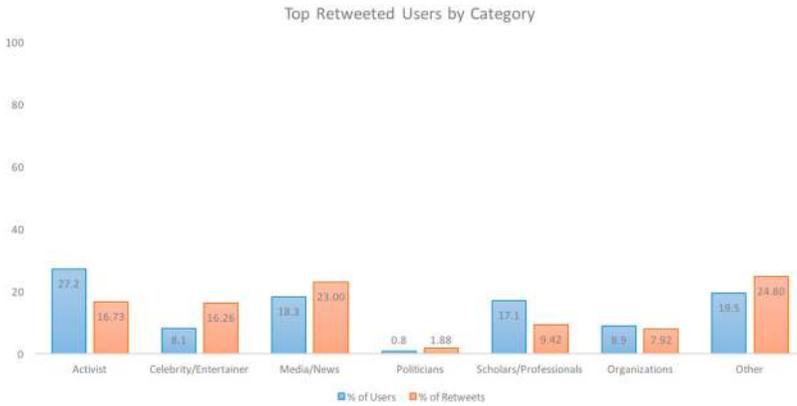
Figure 3. Tweets containing #SayHerName collected between 19 January 2016 and 14 October 2016. Excludes data between the following periods: 3/20/16–4/21/16; 6/27/16–7/5/16; and 8/12/16–8/17/16.

Note: $N = 252,215$.

narrative of intersectional social media activism may get restricted by echo chambers, segregation, and polarization.

Intersectional consciousness through hashtag activism

Our results yielded thirteen themes for the hashtags associated with #SayHerName. These hashtags function as what Gamson (1992) describes as collective action frames. These collective beliefs inspire action based on several dimensions. First, collective action frames describe and identify the cause of an injustice. Second, they inspire others to political action against these injustices. Lastly, the frames provide a basis for a collective or shared identity among social actors (Gamson 1992; Swank and Fahs 2012). Table 1 provides examples of each of the categories. While many tweets contain URLs and images associated with their text, we do not analyse the entirety of these aspects of Twitter use now, but provide access to the full dataset online.

Table 1 shows the categories hashtags observed in the dataset. People on Twitter use #SayHerName as a place to practice intersectional consciousness (Terriquez 2015). Nearly sixty-five per cent of all tweets were considered consciousness raising. Nearly ninety-eight per cent of all tweets about consciousness raising were considered affirmations, which primarily served to reaffirm the lives of Black women victims. The five most used affirmations during the period included: #SayHerName ($N = 426,013$), #BlackLivesMatter ($N = 50,690$), #blackwomenmatter ($N = 6,772$), #blacktranslivesmatter, ($N = 4,779$), and #BLM ($N = 3,551$). The remaining 2.2 per cent of consciousness raising tweets were considered demands for political intervention. Most of these demands centred on the refrain that victims needed justice and the system

Table 1. Number of tweets with hashtags associated with #SayHerName by category.

Category	Total tweets	(%)	Example
Consciousness raising	513,474	64.37	#SayHerName
Name of victim	237,448	29.77	#korryngaines
Honoring victim in death	15,114	1.89	#neverforget
Grassroots organizing	10,714	1.34	#mlksitinpgh
Political or legal reference	6,687	0.84	#vets4bernie
Location	4,284	0.54	#lemonade
Unknown	3,227	0.40	#civil
Nonprofit organizing	2,445	0.31	#aawlc2016
Race or gender	2,030	0.25	#blackwomen
Name of perpetrator	1,299	0.16	#Holtzclaw
Event	707	0.09	#Blackhistorymonth
University	120	0.02	#savecsu
Humor	116	0.01	#trumpdrseuss
Total	797,665	100	

Notes: Excludes hashtags categorized as Unknown ($N = 3,227$). Total exceeds $N = 463,957$ because some tweets contain more than one hashtag.

should not obstruct. #Justice4gynnya ($N = 1,934$) was the most used.[4] This differed from political or legal references, which tended to revolve around political support for democratic presidential candidates.

Table 2 focuses on the nearly one-third of hashtags that contained names of victims, which exceeded over 100 names. Most victims named were Black (98.1 per cent), women (87.3 per cent), and victims of police violence (84.1 per cent). These results suggest that #SayHerName remained true to its intention of raising consciousness about Black women victims of police violence. The number of victims named reveals that users flock to the hashtag in several cases involving women and girls.

Table 2. Total number of tweets containing hashtags referencing name of victim.

Characteristics of victim	Total tweets	%
Race/ethnicity		
Black	232,946	98.1
White	2,508	1.1
Indigenous	338	0.1
Latinx	1,656	0.7
Total	237,448	100.0
Gender		
Male	1,623	0.7
Female	207,240	87.3
Transgender	28,585	12.0
Total	237,448	100.0
Type of Violence Against Victim		
Homicide	37,086	15.6
Police	199,759	84.1
Other	603	0.3
Total	237,448	100

Notes: Tweets containing #SayHerName collected between 19 January 2016 and 14 October 2016. Excludes data between the following periods: 3/20/16–4/21/16; 6/27/16–7/5/16; and 8/12/16–8/17/16.

At 55,434 tweets, users most frequently named Sarah Reed, a woman found dead in a jail in the UK in February 2016. Sandra Bland also featured prominently in this data ($N = 50{,}810$). This death resonated with the wider public, leading democratic politicians to invoke the importance of intersectionality during the 2016 presidential primaries. Sandra Bland's mother emerged on stage during the Democratic National Convention with "The Mothers of the Movement", a group of Black women whose children died through police or vigilante violence. On this date (7/26/16) users shared #sandrabland 2,138 times. Reference to Sarah Reed and Sandra Bland indicates the way #SayHerName occurs as a transnational, intersectional narrative about police brutality.

Conclusion

Our findings show that #SayHerName includes the use of hashtags and retweets to amplify messages about injustices against Black women (Figure 1). Most users using #SayHerName identified as activists. However, our data show that a diverse range of groups and organizations used #SayHerName (Figures 2 and 3). People on Twitter used hashtags to raise consciousness about the deaths of Black women through demands for action and affirmations to uplift victims of violence. Perhaps most notably, this study revealed #SayHerName as a space for Black transgender women (twelve per cent of tweets that mentioned a name), a hyper marginalized group underrepresented in mainstream media despite historically high rates of violence against them (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Glover 2016).

The innovations of information technology reveal new insight about social relations in contemporary activism and social movements. Our article connects literature on intersectionality and social movements to examine a case study of social media activism. We build on theories of collective action and intersectionality to study intersectional mobilization in #SayHerName. Our findings indicate that #SayHerName emerges as a form of Black feminist activism in the digital sphere (Cottom 2016; Noble 2016). Black feminist thought (Collins 2000) empowers Black women through new forms of knowledge and consciousness raising to push back against sexism, racism, and other oppressions (Collins 2000; White 2001; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Alexander-Floyd 2012; Collins 2015b).

According to Crenshaw (1991), mainstream feminism focuses on White women, while mainstream anti-racism centres on Black men. Consequently, both inadequately address the marginalization of Black women. Thus, intersectionality is critical to Black feminist politics because "the major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions" (Combahee River Collective 1978; Kalsem and Williams 2010).

Indeed, the users of #SayHerName indicate an awareness of the multiple jeopardies facing Black women (King 1988). Twitter helps users amplify their consciousness raising in the digital sphere through the network ties people form as they follow and interact with other users (Grabowicz et al. 2012). Future research should aim to explore how Black women use social media activism to engage in resistance to circumvent traditional channels of racialized and gendered oppression.

Notes

1. Defined as "high levels of activism and commitment among movement participants who represent a disadvantaged subgroup within a broader marginalized constituency" (Terriquez 2015, 345).
2. Technical difficulties prevented collection between the following periods: 3/20/16–4/21/16; 6/27/16–7/5/16; and 8/12/16–8/17/16.
3. We marked users as "other" on the basis that they do not include a biography within these categories.
4. Gynnya McMillen passed away in a Kentucky jail in January 2016 at the age of 16.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Figure A1. Twitter ID: 760309743575523329.

Figure A2. Twitter ID: 753208639662460929.