



The Criminal Justice Activism of Naomi Osaka: A Case Study in the Criminology of Celebrity Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines the criminal justice activism of tennis star Naomi Osaka as it evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding matters of police violence and racial justice. Calls to reform and defund the police received much attention in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020. The Floyd killing also motivated Naomi Osaka to begin her criminal justice activism, which has generally been very well received. Adopting a constructionist perspective, I investigate how Osaka's criminal justice activism has, in the broader context of the development of celebrity culture, been subjectively motivated and inter-subjectively received by the public and in the news media. Theoretically this paper has the two-fold objective of developing a model of the conditions favorable to the successful reception of celebrity activism and, additionally, of suggesting how such criminologically relevant activism can be understood in terms of a process of celebritization of criminal justice and police reform as causes worthy of attention. This case study of Osaka's criminal justice activism reveals the important role a celebrity can play in influencing public sentiments about key aspects of policing and crime control as an important element of criminal justice culture.

Keywords Celebrity activism · Celebrity culture · Criminal justice culture · Naomi Osaka · Police violence · Popular culture

Introduction

I analyze the criminal justice activism of tennis star Naomi Osaka in terms of its criminological relevance as an element of celebrity culture. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, celebrity activism was primarily concerned with relief efforts in view of the health impact of the coronavirus

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SARS-CoV-2 first diagnosed in Wuhan, China in December 2019, but the focus subsequently turned to issues related to criminal justice. This transformation in celebrity activism during COVID-19 particularly took a turn towards matters of policing and police violence in the wake of the societal disturbances and unrest following the video-taped police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota on May 25, 2020. It is within this context of the evolving state of celebrity culture that I offer a case study of Naomi Osaka's criminal justice activism, especially regarding charges of racially motivated police violence. An effort in cultural criminology, this paper thereby seeks to merge a focus on popular culture and celebrity with the study of important dimensions of policing and criminal justice.

Focusing on the case of a Japanese-born celebrity athlete who resides in the United States and has attained global fame as a highly successful tennis player on the world stage, the theme of this study has both a domestic and a comparative-transnational component. Naomi Osaka was born in Chūō-ku, Osaka in 1997 as the daughter of a (Black) Haitian father and a Japanese mother (Cheng, 2020; Lock, 2021; Natividad, 2022; O'Malley, 2021). At age three, she moved with her family to the United States to live with her father's parents. Her father was inspired by the success of Serena and Venus Williams to guide his two daughters, Naomi and one-year older sister Mari, towards a successful tennis career. In 2006, the family moved to Florida so that the two sisters could have access to better training opportunities. Naomi became a professional player in 2013, and gradually rose in the world rankings. Her breakout year was 2018, when she won the U.S. Open tournament, becoming the first Japanese woman to win a grand slam. While sister Mari retired from tennis in March 2021, Naomi Osaka has continued to gain world-wide fame and recognition as one of the most successful tennis stars and one of the richest women athletes in the world today (Badenhausen, 2020, 2021; Fendrich, 2020; Natividad, 2022).

Although the focus of this paper is situated within a distinctly American framework, especially concerning the racial dimensions of criminal justice, the impact of Osaka's criminal justice activism is transnational in scope. To some extent, the wide reach of celebrity activism goes hand in hand with the spread of celebrity culture as a global phenomenon, but in the case of Naomi Osaka it also relates to the tennis player's unique background as a bi-national athlete. Although Osaka has lived most of her life in the United States, in tennis she officially represents Japan, in which country she also holds sole citizenship since 2019 (Lock, 2021). As such, the tennis sensation culturally reflects an intrinsic measure of duality and interconnectedness between American and Japanese society. It is in the United States that Osaka has been most prolific in her activism on matters of criminal justice, but her appeal, as will be shown, extends well beyond the country's borders. While celebrities in Japan and in other Asian nations have generally not been as involved in activism, the differences across cultures are remarkably reflected in the case of Osaka, because, as the biracial daughter of a Haitian father and a Japanese mother, she has attained success and fame in a global context.

Besides its transnational reach, Osaka's activism has also been peculiarly successful, not so much in bringing about effective change, as in being widely discussed and favorably received among the public at large and in the news media that shape

popular opinion (Gomez, 2020; Lawrence, 2020; Maine, 2020; O'Malley, 2021). Along with an appreciation of her athletic prowess, Osaka is today widely embraced as one of the key figures in the world of celebrity (and sports) activism, even though her advocacy has started only recently. As part of the recognition of Osaka's activism and standing as a celebrity, several scholarly contributions have already been devoted to the tennis star, particularly concerning her racial identity and advocacy on racial justice, both in the form of short commentaries (Allen & Brown, 2021; Montez de Oca, 2021) and in-depth analyses (Calow, 2021; Deflem, 2022; Razack & Joseph, 2021).

Centered on Osaka's criminal justice activism, I will adopt a constructionist framework to investigate the interplay between the (subjective) motives and objectives and the (inter-subjective) reception of her efforts. This inquiry should demonstrate the criminological value of the study of celebrity as an important element of contemporary culture. The specialty area of cultural criminology has advanced very well in recent decades as a valued field of theorizing and research (Ferrell, 1999, 2013; Ilan, 2019). Moreover, celebrity and fame have for some years now become topics of considerable scholarly attention (Ferris, 2007; van Krieken, 2019). However, the relevance of celebrity culture for the study of crime, deviance, and social control has not yet received due attention in the field of criminology. There exists a body of literature on celebrity culture and crime, but it focuses mostly on famous criminals and cops in lore and legend (Penfold-Mounce, 2009; Steenberg, 2017). Similarly, with respect to celebrities in the world of sports, a small but interesting specialty area of sports criminology focuses largely on crime and social control in sports (Atkinson & Young, 2008; Groombridge, 2016) rather than on sports as an arena for activism on matters of crime and criminal justice. This paper seeks to fill the void in the criminology of celebrity culture by examining the activism of Naomi Osaka on matters of police and criminal justice.

I will investigate Osaka's criminal justice activism from the viewpoint of the development and criminological relevance of contemporary celebrity culture during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a first section, I will explain my theoretical perspective to conceive of celebrity as a cultural phenomenon and clarify the data and methodology used in this paper to investigate the case of Osaka. Next, I provide a brief descriptive account of the development of celebrity culture during COVID-19, in which context I will subsequently present a detailed overview of Osaka's activism and its focus on police and criminal justice. Thereafter, I will separately analyze the dynamics of this activism in terms of its motives and objectives, on the one hand, and the impact and public reception thereof, on the other. The relationship between these subjective and inter-subjective dimensions is important to consider given the intrinsically mediated nature of celebrity. Theoretically this study will lead me to substantiate two related arguments. First, grounded in the case of Osaka's criminal justice activism, I will develop a model on the conditions for celebrity activism to be positively embraced. Second, with respect to the implications of celebrity activism, I will argue that the case of Osaka shows that her (and other celebrities') activism has brought about that critical dimensions of criminal justice, specifically police reform and charges of racial inequity, have themselves become subject to a process of celebritization. More broadly, these findings suggest the value of treating

celebrity activism on matters of criminal justice as an exponent of a celebrity culture that is intruding in on, rather than emanating from within, ongoing debates in the wider culture of criminal justice.

The Culture of Celebrity

Celebrity and fame can be conceptualized in terms of a relationship that is mediated in various ways between the public and the object(s) of its attention. Fame (being well-known) and celebrity (being known or celebrated for being well-known) are therefore relational terms rather than qualities of a person or persons. These conceptual clarifications are uncontested as the subject matter in the sociology of celebrity (and the interdisciplinary field of celebrity studies), but disagreements exist concerning the nature and role of celebrity (Deflem, 2017, pp. 17–23; Rojek, 2012; Turner, 2014; van Krieken, 2019). Broadly, two competing theoretical perspectives divide the scholarly study of celebrity. One, a political economy approach emphasizes the political and economic functions of celebrity culture in capitalist societies to appease the public and divert attention from market contradictions and potential political conflicts. Rooted in C. Wright Mills' (1956) famous study of the power elite, this perspective understands celebrity as being “created from above” in order to provide entertainment as a “shadow of money and power” (Mills, 1956, pp. 71, 83). In this sense, some contemporary scholars argue that celebrity culture serves a mechanism “for mobilizing abstract desire” to serve capitalist goals (Rojek, 2001, p. 189).

Two, a constructionist perspective, within which my work is situated, critiques political-economic theories of celebrity as reductionist and instead focuses on the study of celebrity as culture, comprised of the whole of meaningful beliefs and corresponding practices surrounding the spectacle of fame in society (Deflem, 2017, pp. 19–22). This perspective understands celebrity as a form of cultural esteem or prestige that is constructed between the public, as the onlookers, and a society's celebrities, as the focal points of the public's attention. As such, celebrity relates intimately to the media through which it is established. In today's age, these media have greatly diversified and become ever-present in social life, especially because of the expansion of the internet and the popularity of social media. Operated on handheld devices, a wide range of media now allow for a multitude of ways to create celebrity, whether by embracing or critiquing the stars of fame and infamy.

Among its sociologically relevant characteristics, celebrity is associated with various forms of privilege (Kurzman et al., 2007). Celebrities typically enjoy a measure of economic privilege (to garner monetary wealth), legal privilege (to protect their acquired status), interpersonal privilege (to engage, horizontally, with other celebrities, as well as vertically, with the public), and normative privilege (to function as role models). As part of the latter form of privilege, celebrities can rely on their elevated position in the cultural sphere to take on various advocacy causes. The activism of celebrities has an inevitably unique feature in readily relying on special access to the media through which their fame is constituted, which can be used to promote their causes with great visibility towards a large audience. The consequences of celebrity activism on the part of the public, however, cannot be predetermined on

the basis of media access or any self-stated motives and objectives, but need to be examined from case to case. In this paper, I will therefore investigate the criminal justice activism of Naomi Osaka in terms of the tennis star's proclaimed motives and objectives, on the one hand, and the impact and reception thereof in the news media and among the public at large, on the other.

A clarification is in order about the methodology adopted in this paper and what this study accordingly can and cannot accomplish. Conceived as a case study, this paper cannot make strong claims to generalize from Osaka's criminal justice activism to cases of advocacy undertaken by other celebrities in sports and elsewhere. Such an inquiry would have to be made on the basis of a systematic study of the whole of celebrity activism or a sample thereof. Suffice it to say that the case of Osaka does not stand alone and that it can be situated within a broader trend towards the adoption of activism among celebrities that developed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. While not claiming Osaka's activism to be representative of the whole of celebrity culture, the adopted case study approach allows for an in-depth analysis of Osaka's activism as illustrative of a peculiarly successful case against which other cases can be measured in further research. Thus, the methodology used in this paper does not seek to test a proposition of specifically interrelated variables but, instead, will develop a well-grounded proposition on the factors that promote the reception of celebrity activism.

In no small part because of her activism, Naomi Osaka is today widely embraced and placed at the center of celebrity culture, both as an accomplished athlete as well as with respect to activist causes, especially on matters of race and criminal justice (Dator, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). To make sense of this success of Osaka's activism, this inquiry relies on an interpretive strategy, communicated in narrative form, which further research can examine more systematically on a large number of cases. This approach does not adopt the hypothesis-testing strategy of the quantitative method of Content Analysis as introduced by Klaus Krippendorff (2004), but instead relies on the theory-generating qualities which a thick description, to use Clifford Geertz' (1973) term, can provide. This approach is not merely descriptive, however, as it is theoretically guided and centered on specific questions of research. Guiding this examination of the roots and trajectory of Osaka's criminal justice activism from May 2020 onwards will be the following three questions: 1) (Objective) Actions: Which kinds of activist conduct on which thematic issues has Osaka engaged in?; 2) (Subjective) Motives and Objectives: How has Osaka defined and justified these actions in her own terms and by her own understanding?; and 3) (Inter-Subjective) Response: How has Osaka's advocacy been responded to in the news media and among the public?

Given the centrality of media in the construction of celebrity, the analysis in this paper will rely on sources available on the internet, specifically news articles and social media posts. These data were retrieved through targeted searches conducted in Google News. This method not only allowed to retrieve a multitude of news sources but also relevant social media posts as the latter are typically discussed and linked into the former. When judged useful in terms of the research objectives, more targeted internet searches were conducted, specifically concerning Osaka's criminal justice activism, its actions, and reactions. This study's reliance on internet sources

is all the more appropriate because of conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the limits that were placed on face-to-face gatherings because of social-distancing policies and the resulting increased reliance on virtual means of communications. During the pandemic, indeed, celebrity activism has predominantly taken place, and has been reported on, in the virtual world of the internet. The news sources relied upon in this paper, it should be noted, are primary sources of analysis because it is through these media that the fame between the public and its celebrities is constituted.

Data were analyzed to retrieve the motives and objectives of Osaka's activism in matters of criminal justice as well as the reception thereof. Importantly, the reactions to Osaka's activism are not measured instrumentally in terms of whatever changes it may have brought about in the criminal justice system, but in terms of the effects it has had on public perceptions about criminal justice. As such, the focus will be on the culture of criminal justice as referring to the whole of popular beliefs and associated practices relating to the administration of justice. In view of certain high-profile events in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, the sentiments and actions of contemporary criminal justice culture have largely revolved around policing and police violence as well as alleged problems of racial (in)justice associated therewith. As explained in the next section, it is in the context of this broader move towards celebrity activism over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic that Naomi Osaka's criminal justice activism can be situated.

Celebrity Culture and the (Pandemic) Move Towards Activism

In the present era, celebrities are everywhere, and everybody is exposed to the interventions of celebrities via the privileged access they enjoy in the media. Today's celebrities have increasingly been involved in a multitude of activist causes, bringing about the development of celebrity activism as a central component within the broader sphere of celebrity culture (Atkinson & DeWitt, 2019; Katayama, 2021). In recent years, celebrity activism has greatly expanded quantitatively and has also qualitatively broadened in scope to become more diverse in its orientation towards a wide variety of advocacy issues (Deflem, 2019). Whether celebrities are sincere in these efforts or not should not preclude a scholarly examination of their actions and how these are received by the public in more or less favorable ways.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, celebrity activism initially concentrated on relief efforts in the fight against the coronavirus (Billboard, 2020). As the pandemic went on, however, celebrity involvements in activist causes diversified well beyond COVID-19 towards other social and political issues, including matters of racial justice, especially in response to certain high-profile incidents (Deflem, 2022). Most important in this transformation was the video-taped police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, which led to widespread protests and social unrest. Throughout June 2020, celebrities accordingly shifted their attention from virus-related concerns to discussions on

policing and racial justice under the heading of the Black Lives Matter movement (Crawford, 2020). Originally formed as an organization with a specific political intent, Black Lives Matter has since propelled a broad movement with global appeal and representation that focuses on racial justice concerns, especially regarding criminal justice and police violence.

Throughout the pandemic in 2020 and the first half of 2021, celebrity activism continued and further expanded to include an increasing number of justice causes and political issues. Concentrating on the police killing of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, celebrity activism additionally focused on gender inequality, particularly after September 23, 2020 when a grand jury decided not to bring charges against the police officers involved in the shooting of the Black woman (Musumeci, 2020). Celebrity activism eventually turned towards politics in the leadup towards the U.S. Presidential elections in November 2020. However, since the victory of Democratic candidate Joe Biden, which was widely applauded by the largely left-leaning American celebrity elite (Long, 2020), celebrity activism has diminished considerably, as shown from a sharp decline in news reports (retrieved through Google News) about celebrity activism and celebrity reactions to the ongoing pandemic. When media attention focused on incidents of anti-Asian violence across the United States in the spring of 2021, celebrities stayed noticeably silent, some exceptions notwithstanding (Carras, 2021). Following the conviction of Derek Chauvin, one of the police officers involved in the killing of George Floyd, on second-degree murder on April 20, 2021, celebrities took to social media to express their satisfaction with the verdict. Since then, however, celebrities have mostly returned to a 'new normal' that began with the growing availability of the COVID-19 vaccines in the summer of 2021 (Chatterjee, 2021). Although the appearance of later variants of the coronavirus, especially Delta (in the summer and fall of 2021) and Omicron (in the fall and winter of 2021), subsequently extended the pandemic, celebrities did by and large not return to the activism they had engaged in during the first year of the pandemic. Celebrity activism has since then not completely disappeared but has again become one of the routine elements characterizing contemporary celebrity culture.

Osaka's Criminal Justice Activism: Pathways and Turning Points

The activism Naomi Osaka engaged in over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic generally fits the turn towards the adoption of advocacy causes among celebrities at large. Remarkable about Osaka's activism is that it has already gone through various stages despite the relative short time since both the tennis star's athletic career and her celebrity status have been unfolding. In the following pages, I will provide an overview of this development, before examining its dynamics in the subsequent section. In line with the criminological focus of this paper, attention particularly goes to Osaka's activism in matters concerning

policing, police violence, and other aspects of criminal justice, issues that have indeed been at the forefront of tennis star's activities and reception as an activist.

The Rise of a Tennis Champion

Naomi Osaka's athletic career began blossoming from 2016 onwards when she entered the ranks of the world's best women's tennis players (Cheng, 2020; Maine, 2020; O'Malley, 2021). After a relatively stagnant period in 2017, Osaka steadily improved her game over the course of 2018, leading to her first grand-slam victory at the U.S. Open. In the months that followed, she continued to be successful on the court. By the summer of 2020, Osaka had won an additional grand slam (the Australian Open) among other tournaments, was for some time ranked No. 1 by the Women's Tennis Association, and had become the highest-paid woman athlete of all time (Badenhausen, 2020). Having garnered a large fan base in a sport where fans tend to have relatively high levels of income and in which women players, unlike many other sports, are closer to being as popular as their men counterparts, Osaka was particularly attractive for brand sponsorship. Most all of the \$37 million earnings she had amassed in the 12-month period before May 2020 came from endorsement deals (Badenhausen, 2020).

It was very soon after Osaka had attained financial success and her newfound status as a global tennis star that she also began to engage in activism. Osaka's earliest forms of activism included using social media concerning matters of police violence and, especially, its impact on people of color in the United States. On May 29, 2020, Osaka first posted a tweet reacting to the George Floyd killing, albeit indirectly, stating "Just because it isn't happening to you doesn't mean it isn't happening at all" (Osaka, 2020a). She thereafter continued to use social media to express her concerns, posting images on Instagram showing her in Minneapolis participating at protests related to the killing of George Floyd (Carayol, 2020).

With respect to the motives of her advocacy, Osaka spoke to media outlets and on her social media platforms why she felt that it was important for her to engage in criminal justice activism and, more generally, why it would be appropriate for athletes to engage in advocacy. Osaka said she believed that her voice could reach and persuade many people who might otherwise not hear or care about events like George Floyd's murder and, ultimately, she hoped to bring about change (Tarrant, 2020). She further stated that she found it telling that people who are successful in other careers, such as music, literature, and the arts, are more readily accepted, even expected, to speak out, while she and other athletes "are often met with criticism for expressing our opinions" (Osaka, 2020d).

Osaka's earliest expressions of activism generally met with a positive reception, but there was some resistance against her actions as well. When a fan commented negatively on Osaka's Instagram post, claiming "Martin Luther King would be disappointed in you people," Osaka reacted by calling out the racially insensitive tone of the comment, remarking "You people? Who is you people? Just for clarification" (Carayol, 2020). She responded to other criticisms in a

similar rebuking fashion (Tarrant, 2020). Although her statements calling out racism in Japan, in particular, met with some resistance from the Japanese public, reactions in the country of her birth were generally nonetheless mostly favorable as well (The Japan Times, 2020b).

The Coming Out of a Criminal Justice Activist

In the period leading up to and during the U.S. Open in the fall of 2020, Osaka more resolutely took on her newly acquired role as a criminal justice activist, extending her efforts to more media outlets and bringing them to the tennis court as well. She chose to be explicit and publicly communicate about what she was advocating and why. In an op-ed published in *Esquire* Magazine on July 1, 2020, Osaka explained that she decided to speak publicly after seeing the video of police killing George Floyd. “When I saw the horrific video of George Floyd’s murder and torture at the hands of a cop and his three colleagues,” she wrote, “my heart ached. I felt a call to action. Enough was finally enough. I flew to Minneapolis with my boyfriend days after the murder to pay our respects and have our voices heard on the streets. When I came back to Los Angeles, I signed petitions, I protested, and I donated, like many of us. But I kept asking myself what can I do to make this world a better place for my children? I decided it was time to speak up” (Osaka, 2020b). Osaka framed her actions explicitly in terms of her identity as a multi-ethnic woman, who answered the question if she is “Japanese,” “American,” “Haitian,” “Black,” or “Asian” by stating she considers herself “all of these things together at the same time” (Osaka, 2020b). In relation to criminal justice, Osaka therefore drew attention to alleged Black victimization by police and voiced support for the idea to defund the police. “By that, I don’t necessarily mean to eradicate them altogether,” she explained, adding instead that “Some of their funding —like payment plans to cops who have been convicted of crimes— should be re-allocated to social measures within the community: Education, housing and youth programs, which are so often neglected” (Osaka, 2020b).

In protest against the (non-lethal) police shooting of 29-year-old Black man Jacob Blake on August 23, 2020, Osaka took a next action in her burgeoning activism by announcing she would withdraw from her upcoming semifinal match at the Western & Southern Open tennis tournament in Cincinnati (Harvey, 2020). Although Osaka was the only tennis player at the tournament who had decided not to play, athletes in other professional sports such as basketball, soccer, and baseball that day also withdrew from their athletic events (Dator, 2020). Osaka again took to social media to explain her decision, posting a statement on Twitter written in both English and Japanese (Osaka, 2020c) in which she argued that her racial and gender identity superseded her standing as a tennis player. “Before I am an athlete,” Osaka wrote, “I am a black woman. And as a black woman I feel as though there are much more important matters at hand that need immediate attention, rather than watching me play tennis” (Osaka, 2020c). As to the objectives of her actions, Osaka hoped that her decision not to play would turn the public’s attention on the problem of police violence. “I don’t expect anything drastic to happen with me not playing,”

she explained, “but if I can get a conversation started in a majority-white sport, I consider that a step in the right direction” (Osaka, 2020c). Following Osaka’s decision not to play, the Cincinnati tournament organizers postponed all matches scheduled for that day. When the semifinal eventually took place, Osaka entered the court wearing a ‘Black Lives Matter’ t-shirt. She would go on to win the match, but later had to exit the tournament because of an injury (Srikanth, 2020). The reactions to Osaka’s decision to withdraw were mostly positive, but a few commentators criticized her. A reporter writing in the *National Review*, for instance, accused Osaka of being “misguided” and making “irresponsible claims” concerning racism and police violence (Seminara, 2020).

Taking advantage of the popularity of the U.S. Open that began on August 31, 2020, Osaka intensified her activism against police violence. In a very visible fashion, Osaka participated at the New York tennis tournament wearing facemasks, mandated in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, that carried the names of Black victims of police violence and other alleged injustices. Having prepared seven different masks, each carrying the name of a Black victim of police and vigilante violence (Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin, George Floyd, Philando Castile, and Tamir Rice), Osaka planned to wear a different mask for every day she could play at the tournament (Black Voice News, 2020; Lampen, 2020). Using the facemasks as an additional motivation to play well, Osaka eventually wore all seven masks as she made it to finals and also won the tournament. Asked during a post-game interview what message she was meaning to send wearing the facemasks, Osaka said that she hoped that people who were unfamiliar with displayed names would go on to find out more about them and become more concerned about racism and police violence (Lampen, 2020). Osaka further reiterated that she aspired more people to talk about the issue as a result of her actions (Black Voice News, 2020; Srikanth, 2020).

As with many of Osaka’s activities on and off the court, Osaka’s actions and statements at the U.S. Open garnered a lot of media coverage and public reactions, mostly praising the tennis star for her willingness to speak out (Dator, 2020; Lampen, 2020; The Japan Times, 2020b). The parents of Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery posted videos thanking Osaka for publicly displaying their respective son’s names (Tucker, 2020). Osaka’s Coach, Wim Fissette from Belgium, also supported the tennis star’s activism, noting that she had a “great attitude on court” and also was a “role model off court” (The Japan Times, 2020a). While Osaka herself reiterated that her primary goal was to bring awareness about the unjustified killings and offered to help the families if they needed anything (Lampen, 2020), her family came out in support of her actions as well (The Japan Times, 2020b). At the finals, Osaka had also been cheered on by her boyfriend, Black rap musician Cordae, who sat in the stands in a t-shirt that read ‘Defund the Police’ (Bryant, 2020). Cordae had been among the 87 people arrested in Louisville, Kentucky, in July 2020 while protesting at the home of attorney general Daniel Cameron to pressure him to arrest the police officers who had killed Breonna Taylor (McDonald, 2020). The rap star’s opinions and conduct did not stand alone as several celebrities, in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd, expressed support to defund the police (Willen, 2020) and some were arrested while engaging in protest (Gonzales, 2020).

Global Celebrity Status

Following the U.S. Open, the increasing media coverage about Osaka, as the newest star of women's world tennis, began to more broadly reflect on her role and standing as an activist, positioning the tennis champion in the tradition of sports activism, especially among Black athletes (Lawrence, 2020; Sawyer, 2020). The vast majority of this coverage was positive, with commentators lauding Osaka for her justice advocacy and comparing her to other famous sports activists, such as LeBron James, Serena Williams, and Billie Jean King (Gomez, 2020; Reyes, 2020). In December 2020, Osaka was named Female Athlete of the Year by the Associated Press (Fendrich, 2020). With LeBron James having been chosen as Male Athlete of the Year, the two sports stars received the honor not only because of their athletic achievements, but also and explicitly because of their activism (Sawyer, 2020). Osaka had thus reached not only the top of tennis, but the top of activism among celebrity athletes as well.

By the beginning of 2021, Osaka had acquired global success and fame both in and beyond the world of sports, leading her once again to step up her activism. Similar to how she had justified the beginning of her activism in an op-ed in *Esquire*, in December of 2020 Osaka clarified her continued actions in the form of an op-ed published in *The New York Times* under the title "Athletes, Speak Up" (Osaka, 2020d). In it, she countered the idea that athletes should not speak about social issues and injustices. Lauding the activism of other athletes, such as LeBron James, Colin Kaepernick, and fellow tennis players Venus Williams, Coco Gauff, and Billie Jean King, Osaka argued that athletes not only have a right to publicly express opinions they deem important, but, in fact, "have a greater responsibility to speak up" (Osaka, 2020d).

By the beginning of 2021, Osaka had become not only a global tennis star and widely respected activist, she had also greatly expanded her wealth by continuing to secure a multitude of brand partnerships (Fendrich, 2021; Uwumarogie, 2021). Among the lucrative deals were endorsements for watchmaker Tag Heuer and fashion brand Louis Vuitton (O'Malley, 2021) and participation in Levi's campaign 'Beauty of Becoming' to produce advertisements that were designed as both marketing tools and inspirational videos (Rivas, 2021). In preparation of the Australian Open tournament in February 2021, there had been some negative reaction against the fact that Osaka and a select number of other tennis players could practice in a location with fewer COVID-19 restrictions than other tennis players (Zaczek, 2021). Yet, most of this criticism was targeted at the organizers of the tournament, not at Osaka, who would go on to win the tournament, making her only the 9th woman to win at least one grand slam in four consecutive years (Fendrich, 2021; Gaillot, 2021).

Following her success at the Australian Open, Osaka again broadened the scope of her activism, specifically by adding an attention to gender inequality. When the tennis star became part owner of the professional women's soccer team North Carolina Courage, for instance, she justified the decision because of her self-understanding as a role model for women to seek leadership positions and work towards closing the gender pay gap in sports (Gaillot, 2021). Considering her reasons for taking up

various roles besides playing tennis, Osaka stated that part of what inspires her to play well is that she seeks to inspire others, especially young women, in the same way that the Williams sisters had been an inspiration to her (Fendrich, 2021). In a February 2021 interview, Osaka reiterated the personal motive of her activism as a person who is “not half anything” but feels “both Japanese and Haitian fully” (Gaillot, 2021). She clarified her objectives to end police violence and racial injustice by contributing to raise awareness among her fans “about what was going on in America and encourage them to have those hard conversations” (Gaillot, 2021).

The Return to Tennis (and Celebrity Activism)

Throughout the spring of 2021, Osaka continued to receive endorsement deals and win awards, while her activism expanded as well. Taking her activism to Japan, Osaka launched a project called “Play Academy with Naomi Osaka” aimed at helping girls get involved in tennis. Justifying the initiative, she stated that she seeks to be a role model for other young women to also take on both athletics as well as activism (Warner, 2021). Osaka also continued using social media to share her concerns. Following a violent attack involving Asian-American women in late March of 2021, she lamented how people who enjoy Asian culture can have so little respect for Asian lives (Goodwin, 2021), echoing a concern she had earlier raised about Black cultural appropriation without regard for Black lives and the Black experience (Carayol, 2020). Osaka’s fans and followers on Twitter overwhelmingly expressed approval of her actions (Ciotti, 2021). Criminal justice concerns continued to motivate Osaka as well. On April 20, 2021, the day when former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was found guilty of the (second-degree unintentional) murder of George Floyd, Osaka was one among many celebrities and athletes to express her thoughts. She stated that although she was glad that Chauvin was convicted, she was upset that his fate had been in doubt at all (Kyodo News, 2021). Osaka’s comments, like those of other celebrities, received widespread and favorable media attention (Hatzipanagos, 2021; Lawrence, 2020; Lutz, 2021; Tarrant, 2020; The Japan Times, 2021).

Over the summer of 2021, Osaka’s career and standing as a successful celebrity activist continued on. On May 2, 2021, Osaka was announced as the winner of the Sportswoman of the Year award from the Laureus World Sports Awards (Harris, 2021). Again, she received the award not only for her athletic skills but also for her role as an activist. Tweeting the announcement of the award, the Laureus organization mentioned Osaka winning two US. Open titles and that off the court “she demonstrated incredible activism and support for the Black Lives Matter movement” (Laureus Sport, 2021). For the same combined reasons of athletics and activism, Osaka was also included in Time magazine’s 2020 list of most influential people in the world and was featured among the athletes gracing the cover of Sports Illustrated when the magazine chose ‘The Activist Athlete’ as the 2020 Sports person of the Year (Fendrich, 2020). On a commercial level, Osaka continued to be very successful as well. Among other ventures, she began a partnership with Bodyarmor sports drink (Uwumarogie, 2021), invested in restaurant chain Sweetgreen (Harris, 2021),

and created a swimwear line and skincare products company geared towards people of color (Badenhausen, 2021; Trinh, 2022).

On May 25, 2021, the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd was commemorated with public demonstrations across the United States. However, most celebrities remained silent, and Osaka was no exception (Yasharoff, 2021). Instead of commenting on the Floyd killing, Osaka that day tweeted a funny video of her falling on her behind during tennis practice for the upcoming French Open (Osaka, 2021a). On the same day, it was reported that Osaka was the year's highest-earning woman athlete, having earned \$55 million in the prior 12 months (Badenhausen, 2021). The next day, Osaka tweeted that she would not hold press conferences at the French Open (Osaka, 2021b), soon followed by her decision, posted on Twitter on May 31, to withdraw from the tournament altogether (Osaka, 2021c). Citing "long bouts of depression" and "social anxiety" (Osaka, 2021c), the singular tweet brought about an avalanche of attention and support, thereby almost instantly turning Osaka into a mental health advocate (Mitchell, 2021), a position she has been able to retain and strengthen since (Gillen, 2022).

Celebrity Activism and the Culture of Criminal Justice

The sociological study of culture, including popular culture and celebrity, should always examine relevant structures and processes as part of the broader social order in which they are situated. This comprehensive focus should at the same time also allow for an examination of the relationship between celebrity culture and other social institutions. One immediate observation on the relevance of Naomi Osaka's criminal justice activism for criminology and the study of criminal justice is that her fame and popularity readily imply that her activism, no matter its validity, is relevant to criminal justice and how it is perceived. The criminal justice activism practiced among celebrities is criminologically relevant inasmuch as it can and does affect criminal justice culture by influencing popular beliefs and attitudes concerning crime and criminal justice. This influence can be analyzed in terms of the interplay between the celebrity's motives and objectives, on the one hand, and its impact and public reception, on the other.

Motives and Objectives: Osaka as Criminologist

What is readily noticeable about Osaka's criminal justice activism is that she defines her actions not primarily in terms directly associated with crime or policing, but on the basis of her racial identity as a Black woman. As recent discussions on police violence in the United States have primarily been framed in racial terms, Osaka could successfully rely on her minority status, which she also visibly amplifies by means of dress and style (Midkiff, 2020). Contemporary popular sentiments are generally also respectful of people's racial identity, so that Osaka's (subjective) presentation of self has generally also been (inter-subjectively) well received among the public at large (Nayak, 2020). The sincerity of Osaka's motives and objectives,

“to make people start talking” (Osei, 2020), need not be questioned to observe that she has in this respect been successful in fostering awareness by bringing matters of policing and police violence to people’s attention. In an August 2020 interview, Osaka explained that she initially thought her opinion would not matter, but she changed her mind upon visiting Minneapolis after the George Floyd killing. “Just going there and seeing how the whole city was at that moment,” she said, “I just started thinking, ‘Even if one person cares about what I say, then maybe that person will show another person’” (Cheng, 2020).

Osaka also understood that her success as a tennis champion had brought about a measure of celebrity status that gave her a powerful platform from which to voice her opinions. “Today, given the television coverage we receive and our prominence on social media,” she wrote, “athletes have platforms that are larger and more visible than ever before” (Osaka, 2020d). Relying on her acquired status as a successful athlete, Osaka thus realized that she, like many other (minority) athletes before her, was uniquely placed to speak on activist causes. In an age of generally increased concern over discriminatory practices, moreover, Osaka’s explicit presentation as a woman athlete made her advocacy work be as respected as, if not even more so than, that of the successful men in sports among whom activism has historically been more prevalent (Gomez, 2020; The Japan Times, 2020c).

In line with her self-understanding (as a Black woman) and her acquired position (as a star athlete), Osaka has framed her criminal justice activism as part of a broader racial justice activism (Deflem, 2022). In her *Esquire* op-ed, Osaka especially highlighted and criticized the racial injustices she claimed to exist in the United States as “oppression” against which, she wrote, “Being ‘not racist’ is not enough. We have to be anti-racist” (Osaka, 2020b). Likewise, Osaka critiqued the silence of (non-Black) people who, she said, can be fond of engaging with Black culture while refusing to take a stand against racism (Carayol, 2020). Following the video-taped police shooting of Jacob Blake, Osaka went as far as to speak of “the continued genocide of Black people at the hands of the police” (Osaka, 2020c). In her *New York Times* op-ed, she similarly framed the matter in terms of the nexus between “systemic racism, inequality and police brutality” (Osaka, 2020d).

Thus, rather than relying on considerations related to crime control and methods of policing, Osaka focuses on the Black victims of police violence and other incidents that have via their media exposure, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, attained great symbolic significance. In this sense, Osaka practices what could be called a ‘Black liberation criminology’ inasmuch as she understands the problems associated with criminal justice in terms of racial identity and racial (in) justice affecting Black life and seeks to contribute to an emancipation from these conditions. To be sure, the tennis star does not construct her ideas systematically as a criminologist would, but justifies her thoughts and actions on the basis of her (minority) standing as a Black woman who takes advantage of the opportunities afforded to her to speak out because of her (elevated) standing as a tennis champion.

Impact and Public Reception

In terms of the consequences of criminal justice activism, it is of course too soon to say if any ongoing or future changes in policing and other aspects of criminal justice might be attributed to, or at least said to have been aided by, the activism of Osaka and other athletes and celebrities. Such instrumental considerations need also not be the sole focus of a scholarly examination. Instead, Osaka's criminal justice activism can also be examined in terms of the impact it has had on her career and social standing as well as its reception by others. In this respect it can be straightforwardly observed that the tennis star has been able to establish a highly successful career and garner enormous wealth, especially by means of endorsements (Badenhausen, 2021; Natividad, 2022). Endorsements are an important and concrete sign of success and impact as companies interested in profit will choose to work with athletes who have great public appeal.

In terms of its impact on Osaka's standing as a celebrated athlete and cultural icon, the tennis player's activism on criminal justice (and other matters, especially mental health) has generally been very well received in the news media and by the public (Black Voice News, 2020; Lawrence, 2020). Osaka's activist efforts directly contributed to her receiving numerous awards and positively influenced her financial standing by means of endorsements. Her success as a tennis player has gone hand in hand with, and has at times even been superseded by, her success as an activist and a brand, to wit her continued high earnings and positive standing as an activist throughout 2021 despite a decline in success on the tennis court (Mitchell, 2021). When Osaka plays (or refuses to play) tennis and when she wins (or loses) tournaments, she always makes sure to place a spotlight on advocacy issues. When she is given awards, both her activism and her athletics are explicitly noted. And whenever Osaka is discussed in the media, she is routinely placed at the center of sports activism. Strikingly, even when the primary topic of a news story is Osaka's tennis, her activism and ideas about policing, race, and criminal justice are often also discussed (Maine, 2020; Osei, 2020).

In today's lucrative world of professional sports, it is useful to examine the financial and other effects of activism on athletes who express opinions in matters that resonate strongly with public sentiments, such as crime and policing. Most (in) famous in this respect is the career of former NFL football player Colin Kaepernick (Nugent, 2020). During the 2016 NFL season, Kaepernick sought to draw attention to alleged racist police violence by taking a knee while the national anthem was being played before games. The following year, he was released from his contract, presumably for athletic reasons, although he and others have claimed he was let go (and remained unsigned) because of his actions against police violence. Regardless of differing opinions about his conduct, Kaepernick has become an important test case to measure the impact of sports activism (Allen & Williams, 2021). Some observers have argued that athletes who engage in advocacy have typically been in danger of losing money and other rewards as a result of their actions (Bryant, 2020). However, following several much publicized high-profile incidents of police violence (most notably, the video-taped police killing of George Floyd), indications are

that the situation today has reversed as justice advocacy goals and company profit objectives now tend to go hand in hand.

Among the beneficiaries of changing attitudes concerning criminal justice in the post-Floyd era has been Colin Kaepernick himself, whose actions have most recently become more readily accepted, especially in the media and in the corporate world (Boykoff & Carrington, 2020). Although the former NFL quarterback has not been re-instated as a professional athlete, he has in the meantime acquired the status of a civil-rights advocate, contributed to making protest against police violence almost routine, and been able to profit from various lucrative sponsorship deals (Marston, 2021). In March 2022, Kaepernick teamed up with Naomi Osaka by joining the board of directors for the tennis star's skincare brand Kinl6 (Trinh, 2022). In the post-Floyd era, the changed atmosphere of collective sentiments in criminal justice culture, readily expressing concerns about racial injustice and other assumed inequities in criminal justice, also contributed positively to the reception of Osaka's activism. "Now, everybody talks about brands taking a stand," as a sports marketing expert explains, so that Osaka's activist efforts are more readily perceived as reasonable and her speaking out publicly "comes across as very real" (Badenhausen, 2021). With additional credence given because of her identity as a young biracial Black Japanese woman, Osaka has thus benefited from the post-Kaepernick climate of public opinion that implied a sharp reversal of the skepticism traditionally voiced against athlete activism towards a ready embrace thereof.

In terms of the impact of Osaka's criminal justice activism, Osaka herself has expressed that, while she realizes that drastic changes are needed to "take on systemic racism head-on, that the police protect us and don't kill us," to bring about such change, she said, "I am proud, too, of the small part I have played in changing perceptions and opinions" (Osaka, 2020a). While Osaka understands that organizational changes are needed for her activism to be truly consequential, she thus conceives of her impact on public opinion as a first step in that direction. "Watching the police injustices like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake (to name just a few)," Osaka stated in an interview, "broke my heart. I am proud of my U.S. Open victory, but more so that I got people talking about the real issues" (Fendrich, 2020).

Given the nature of contemporary celebrity being constituted primarily through social network sites and news outlets, any impact of celebrity activism on a societal level must take place via the media. Shaping public opinion about Osaka, the role of professional news media cannot be overstated as they function as a powerful vehicle through which both her career and her criminal justice activism are known to the public. In that respect, a first observation is that the news media have not only spent a lot of attention to Osaka's activism, on criminal justice as well as other issues, but also that they have generally treated it very positively (e.g., Lawrence, 2020; Maine, 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Reyes, 2020; Warner, 2021). Osaka is now routinely referred to, not as just a tennis player, but as an 'activist-athlete,' right alongside of other influential athletes who took many years to acquire that status (Fendrich, 2020). Remarkable indeed has been the ease and swiftness for Osaka's activism to be (inter-subjectively) very well received when it (objectively) consisted of relatively few concrete actions, mostly tweets, opinion pieces, and an expression of sentiments in interviews.

From the United States to Japan (and the World)

The widespread favorable attention that has been given to Osaka's activism in the media and by the public extends well beyond the borders of the United States to include her native Japan and many other parts of the world. Osaka is among the few biracial Japanese athletes to have publicly addressed issues of racial diversity and social justice, topics that are not as commonly discussed in Japan as they are in the United States, and she has done so with a measure of success that has fostered debate in the country of her birth (Henson, 2021; The Japan Times, 2020c). This transnational reach of Osaka's activism is not altogether obvious inasmuch as her activism is largely focused on conditions pertaining to the United States. The criminal justice issues addressed by Osaka might even be said to be distinctly American because of their relationship with racial conditions, guns, and the dynamics of U.S. law enforcement. However, apart from the fact that tennis is an essentially global sport with tournaments in many parts of the world, Osaka was able to draw attention to problems of police violence and racial injustice on a geographically larger scale than many other athletes before her because of the manner in which she framed the issues of her advocacy.

Osaka is not only a biracial woman with Japanese and American nationality and self-identity, she also deliberately sought to have an international impact, taking advantage of the growing awareness of the issues she addressed across the world. As Osaka wrote in her *Esquire* op-ed, she observed that the protest movement against police brutality and racial injustice had "gone global—from Oslo to Osaka, from Tallahassee to Tokyo... There were even Black Lives Matter marches in Japan—something many of us would never have expected or imagined possible" (Osaka, 2020b). Osaka's agent Stuart Duguid also explained the tennis star's global aspirations, noting that his client "has appeal in every continent—Asia obviously as her home nation; America as the place she was born and raised and probably most identifies with the culture; Europe where they are tennis-mad; and Australia where she is a recent grand slam champion" (Chammas, 2021).

Osaka herself has commented that her identification as a biracial athlete and her activism have also been favorably received in Japan. Although she noted an "ignorance of a few," she stated that she and other Black-Japanese athletes "have been embraced by the majority of the public, fans, sponsors, and media" (Osaka, 2020b). When she retweeted a post about a Black Lives Matter demonstration in the city of Osaka, the tennis star commented, "that was cool, because I've never seen a Black Lives Matter protest anywhere in Japan" (Cheng, 2020). Osaka also argued such protest efforts to be necessary in Japan, because the country would have its own problems with racism, which she claimed to have experienced herself in the form of alleged racist attitudes from the Japanese media (Nugent, 2020). Although she understood that the ethnic homogeneity of Japanese society makes the country different from the United States, she also found that the vast majority of Japanese people have embraced her along with other biracial Japanese athletes (Osaka, 2020b).

While more in-depth research would be needed to examine the public response to Osaka's activism in different nations, there are reasons to understand her claim about its positive reception in Japan (and possibly elsewhere) as more aspirational than

realized. Celebrity activism is in Japanese society not nearly as developed as it is in the United States. It is also not as acceptable nor accepted for celebrities and athletes to speak out on public matters. Osaka realized that in Japan there “were some people really upset with me” (Cheng, 2020). Looking at the reception of Osaka’s criminal justice activism in Japan, some reactions have indeed been very negative. Especially some of the Japanese-language comments in response to the (otherwise favorably received) tweets by the tennis player in May 2020 harshly condemned her activism. Among the negative posts were claims that Osaka “isn’t really Japanese,” that “Boycotting the matches doesn’t do anything,” and even that “The guy who got shot by police deserved it” (Thompson, 2020). Offsetting the occasionally harsh negativity, other people in Japan have shown their support for Osaka, including several notable positive comments from Japanese politicians who have said to stand “in solidarity with the protest against all structural racism” (Thompson, 2020). Compared to the United States, the reaction to Osaka’s activism in Japan can be said to be more ambivalent. As a Black Japanese woman, Osaka is in Japanese public opinion caught between a measure of pride over her tennis success (as the first grand slam-winning Japanese) and a reluctance to accept her racially motivated criminal justice advocacy (or, at best, to understand it as an issue that pertains to the United States).

Conditions and Implications: Towards a Theory of Celebrity Activism

Over the course of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic since the spring of 2020, celebrity culture has witnessed an increasing intensification and diversification of celebrity activism that had been going on for some years (Deflem, 2019). In this relative short period time, as this paper has shown, Naomi Osaka emerged as a much admired activist addressing problems in criminal justice. Osaka framed her criminal justice activism as part of a broader focus on social justice, especially in matters of racial inequality and oppression. In terms of its impact, Osaka’s activism has received a lot of attention in the form of news coverage and social media engagements. Her statements on criminal justice, police, and race are favorably received and have even been described in terms of a “racial reckoning” to which she is said to have contributed (Gunia et al., 2021). Osaka won numerous prestigious awards explicitly because of her combined efforts in tennis and activism, including her efforts on matters of criminal justice which she has undertaken with a more effective global appeal than any comparative criminologist could hope to achieve.

Irrespective of whether Osaka’s motives are sincere and whether her positions are valid, her criminal justice activism plays a role in shaping public perceptions because, as a celebrity, the tennis star enjoys a high measure of visibility that commands attention. Celebrities represent a category of privileged people who have taken advantage of existing societal institutions, including those which are argued to have contributed to injustice, for which reason the public can turn against them when it is thought that they lack sensitivity or are unaware of their elevated position. Yet, Osaka has managed to avoid such unintended consequences by relating her criminal justice activism to racial justice issues on the basis of her biracial background and identity as a Black Japanese woman. Noteworthy from the viewpoint of celebrity

culture, moreover, is that Osaka's success in tennis and her acquired celebrity not only facilitated her activism, but that it, in turn, has also contributed to her continued standing as a celebrity icon.

Two theoretical arguments emerge from this research. First, although based on a singular case study, this inquiry of the criminal justice activism of Naomi Osaka suggests a model of the conditions for celebrity activism to be successfully embraced. In the case of Osaka's criminal justice activism, the tennis player could rely on her athletic achievements as a champion, along with the wealth and opportunities it generated, as well as her identity as a young Japanese-American Black woman to authentically express her motives and goals of seeking to bring about racial justice and equity. She was thereby able to communicate her ideas through various media and become widely respected as an activist in a cultural climate that, in the post-Floyd era of Black Lives Matter, has been generally accepting of celebrity (sports) activism, especially when it involves minority athletes discussing racial justice concerns.

In sum, the case of Osaka thus suggests that celebrity activism is more likely to be successful when it is based on: 1) certain objective characteristics of celebrities' measure of acquired fame and aspects of their personal identity; 2) that can be relied upon, through various media, to subjectively present the motives and objectives of their activism as genuine within a given cultural climate; 3) in order to be inter-subjectively received as intended in the news media and by the public. Conceiving of celebrity in relational terms, this model differentiates objective, subjective, and inter-subjective conditions of celebrity activism. This theory suggests the value of a constructionist perspective while also acknowledging that certain objective conditions of self and society have to be present for any subjectively motivated actions to be intersubjectively well received (Deflem, 2022). Further research is needed to test this model more systematically on a larger number of cases of celebrity activism.

Second, the effectiveness of celebrity activism, as in the case of Osaka's advocacy on matters of criminal justice, cannot be narrowly understood solely, nor even primarily, in instrumental terms of bringing about changes in the criminal justice system. Instead of simply accepting its stated objectives to bring about certain changes, celebrity activism should always be situated in relation to its role and function vis-à-vis the development of celebrity culture itself. As such, it can be seen that the adoption of matters related to criminal justice as causes worthy of attention among celebrities ironically brings about a celebritization of those issues. Not to be confused with celebrification (as the transformation from obscurity to celebrity), celebritization is the process whereby certain events or issues become 'celebrated' in the sense of being subject to presentation and reception in the terms of celebrity culture (Driessens, 2012). Because of their treatment by celebrities, important societal phenomena and social problems, such as police violence and racial justice, then become slogans that are used by celebrities (and accordingly marketed by companies) at their convenience.

Celebritization can have ironic implications that are inherently counterproductive to the goals of activism. Irrespective of the sincerity of the motives with which celebrities present their advocacy and regardless of how celebrity activism is received, the celebritization of activist causes creates its own dynamics in a world

of celebrity that is far removed from the reality of the social problems it sought to address. In the case of criminal justice activism practiced by Osaka and other celebrities, statements about police violence and racial inequity in the criminal justice system are then discussed in terms that have little if any resemblances to how these problems are perceived by those who are directly involved, whether it be as alleged victims or accused perpetrators. These unintended implications of celebrityization are rooted in the fact that celebrities are by definition privileged, even when, as in the case of minority athletes such as Naomi Osaka, they are intersectionally positioned in complicated ways related to gender, race, class, culture, and nationality. As with the suggested model on the conditions of successful celebrity activism, the celebrityization of activist causes needs further examination and elaboration. The findings from the present study should at least have demonstrated that the theoretical arguments on the conditions and implications of celebrity activism are empirically substantiated in the case of Osaka's criminal justice activism.

Conclusion

In this paper I sought to defend the argument that the study of celebrity culture has criminological relevance inasmuch as celebrities such as Naomi Osaka, who have great public appeal, take on advocacy causes related to important matters of policing and criminal justice. Contemporary celebrity culture incorporates both entertainment as well as advocacy, the latter appearing as an intimate part or, at least, partner of the former (Deflem, 2019). Like many other celebrities, Osaka and other famous athletes today present themselves, and are also perceived, as activists, in which capacity they are also routinely heralded as a powerful force to be reckoned with (Frye, 2020). After a history of neglect or rejection of celebrity claims critical of the social order, especially from Black athletes in the United States, recent celebrity activism is so well received in the media and among large segments of the public that its concerns and allegations are now, more often than not, taken at face value. For instance, the manner in which Osaka has related criminal justice issues intimately to racial justice, particularly by framing the police use of force as racially motivated police brutality, has brought about that her opinions may all too readily be received as factually correct. Both because celebrity activism has wide public appeal and because such appeal may be misguided, its development and dynamics deserve our attention as scholars.

Studying celebrity activism from a scholarly viewpoint, however, does not mean accepting its claims and objectives as necessarily true and valuable. The dynamics of criminal justice and policing are often more complex than one would be led to believe from the self-assured activist opinions expressed by Osaka and other athletes and celebrities. By example, and perhaps most critically for Osaka's criminal justice activism, available data on police killings present a much different picture of lethal police force in the United States than can be gathered from celebrity opinions. Statistics show a complicated mix of variables, and interactions among them, to indicate: that the rate and number of police killings in the U.S. have decreased since the 1960s; that the vast majority of police killings receive very little if any media

attention; that the rate of police killings varies widely across U.S. cities and states; that annually about twice as many White than Black people are killed by U.S. police; and that the chance of being killed by the police, while higher for minority groups than for Whites, is always very small (Curry & Deflem, 2022). By far the most incontestable finding on police violence (and arguably the least discussed) is that the number and rate of people killed by police is much higher in the United States than in any comparable country in the world. The differences in police killings in the U.S. among racial groups are dwarfed by the differences that exist between the United States and other industrialized democracies. These findings suggest, contrary to the suspicions of Osaka and other celebrities, that the police use of lethal force is primarily a matter of violence rather than of race. Yet, in today's fame-obsessed age, the voices of celebrities are much better heard than those of criminologists and other experts.

As celebrity culture is a sign of our times and no doubt will endure for quite some time to come, it is imperative for social scientists to study and interrogate the advocacy roles celebrities play. The study of celebrity activism should sociologically be conceived, as in this paper, as part of a broader study of celebrity culture (itself part of a larger realm of popular culture) which potentially affects criminal justice by shaping criminal justice culture. Especially in the context of democratic societies, criminal justice culture plays an important role in the administration of criminal justice, most notably by providing, or failing to provide, legitimacy to the system in the form of citizen support and cooperation. For that reason, it would not only be unwise to exclude the study of celebrity culture and celebrity activism from the study of criminal justice, it becomes imperative for criminology to take celebrity culture seriously.

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Ethics Approval Ethics approval was not required for this study.

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