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Noelle Batalla Miller

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, N1BATALLAMILLER@CSBSJU.EDU*

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**Celebrity Advocacy: Leonardo DiCaprio's Development of  
Iconographic Persona as a Climate Activist**

Noelle Batalla Miller  
Independent Learning Project  
College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University  
Moderated by Dr. Terence Check  
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Celebrities have over time gained power and influence to advocate for social and political topics. Leonardo DiCaprio is an influential celebrity who has devoted much of his private life to help combat an increasing threat to humanity – climate change. In order to successfully advocate for a certain issue a celebrity needs credibility and public approval. DiCaprio's stardom gives him a unique ability to be influential, different from a "regular" politician or advocate. To effectively advocate a celebrity should stay congruent to their established iconographic persona. This paper will examine how Leonardo DiCaprio has developed and used his iconographic person, specifically in his address at the United Nations Climate Summit in 2014, and his Oscar's acceptance speech in 2016.

Before attempting to understand the ways in which celebrities develop means to persuade the general public, it is important to distinguish what constitutes as being a "celebrity." Celebrity is defined in many ways. Turner has described celebrities "as those whose private lives attract more attention than their professional lives" (D. Brockington, 90). Rojek has created a more defined characteristics of celebrity with three different concepts; *ascribed greatness* established by royalty, *achieved renowned* won by great athletes, and *attributed glory* afforded by the media to reality TV stars (D. Brockington, 90). Leonardo DiCaprio would constitute as a celebrity with attributed glory from acting in large movie roles.

It does not only take celebrity to be a successful celebrity advocate, speaker including celebrity, must establish ethos (*credibility*) in order to be effectively be persuasive. Therefore, in order for a celebrity to advocate about a certain issue, it is necessary to pre-establish credibility in the public sphere. When it comes to celebrity

advocates, most successful ones are those who have previously earned “fame” through another source in popular culture like; acting, singing, TV- shows, and much more (Meister, 284). Leonardo DiCaprio is an established environmentalist who has earned his fame through many Hollywood film productions.

Some other well known environmentalists who have previous earned fame are; Harrison Ford, George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey, James Cronwell, Ed Begley Jr, Betty White, and Robert Redford.

Celebrities have a certain unique power to affect the general public. It can therefor be very effective to use a celebrity to gain social momentum to a certain issue. This is an approach that many NGO’s have taken to promote its social cause. One example would be *Plant for the Planet*, who primarily use celebrities and world known politicians to raise awareness about their organization.

How affective is it really to use celebrity for social advocacy? In a study conducted on celebrity advocacy in 2008, they found that celebrities often don’t make the big main stream news but, “Where celebrities do play a growing role, however, is as part of an emerging strategy for political advocacy spawned by the difficulty of making news and made possible by the evolution of technology. Though it does not make mainstream news, celebrity advocacy does not go unnoticed. Millions of Americans encounter celebrity causes as a result” (Trevor Thrall, 381). Even though DiCaprio is not considered a politician of authority, he is a well-known celebrity and by having him make this address the environmental message is spread.

Another study conducted on the effect of celebrity support for political parties suggested that celebrities affect people’s opinion about political parties. For example, they found that people who dislike Jennifer Aniston and were exposed to her support

for the Democrats, reported liking the Democratic Party less. And when people who like Peyton Manning were exposed to her support for the Republicans, they reported liking the Republican Party more (Nownes, 497). The data may be reversed; people who do not like the Republican Party were averse to Peyton Manning (Nownes, 497). The study made examples of different political parties as “brands”; “If we think of the political parties as “brands,” these results suggest that information about which celebrity use each brand can affect people’s attitudes about the brands” (Nownes, 497). If we think climate change as a brand, the way DiCaprio advocates for it in his public appearances will have an effect on people. We can conclude that most people who like DiCaprio will be affected by his messages in a positive manner, while people who do not like DiCaprio are more likely to have a negative affect to his message. To DiCaprio’s advantage people who are concerned with climate change might positively change their view of DiCaprio.

Other researchers have concluded that celebrities have little power to produce change themselves, they only have means to “rally or shame those in the power to do so” (Markham, 469). Celebrities also have a limited dedicated audience of followers. According to a study by Couldry from 2007, one in seven people can be defined as dedicated followers of celebrity. However this crowd is to a majority young females, who do not yet have developed or appropriated social responsibility and ability to vote (Markham, 470). With that being said, young females usually do not have the social ability to act on the issue a celebrity is advocating for, yet their message is likely to be engrained in the individual, and as they grow up they are likely to obtain a positive image about this specific individual. This can be a means to grow a strong pool of dedicated followers, who have the ability to act on the speakers message in the future with an already established positive perception and ethos of the speaker.

With the growing climate change debate celebrities have become more apparent as advocates for this cause. Using celebrities to create a stronger news impact has had a positive outcome. Journalists often have difficulty creating persuasive articles about climate change as it is a “futuristic” issue. Not to claim that climate change has not already affected the earth, however most dramatic impacts are ‘likely’ to happen in the next 50 years. It is therefore at times hard to convince the public, and some politicians that climate change is a ‘hot topic’ that deserved immediate attention and action. Celebrities have the ability to change the dialogue. They have the ability to create a compelling news hook and mobilize news coverage (Weisner, 283).

Celebrities advocates should not be chosen for a particular issue at random. In order to gain successful public approval of a specific message a celebrity is advocating for, the celebrity spokes person should be chosen carefully, and have personal congruence with the message they are advocating for. Casey Schmitt, in 2016 tackles the use of celebrity advocacy and iconographic persona in his paper; *A tale of two Eastwood's: Iconographic persona and rhetorical ethos in Clint Eastwood's "half time in America" and RNC 2012 address*. Schmitt analyzes Clint Eastwood's iconographic persona and whether or not it is consistent with his super bowl advertisement for the Chrysler Group, and his performance during an address at the Republican National Convention. Schmitt suggests that “the celebrity orator speaks not only with an embodiment of Aristotelian or contemporary ethos but also with an embodiment of *iconographic persona*.” His essay demonstrates that celebrities must seek congruence with their iconographic persona and rhetorical ethos, in order to advocate effectively (Schmitt, 41). A celebrities’ ethos is different from the classic Aristotelian model

because “the ethos of massively popular figures is often already pre-judged when their public images have achieved media saturation and their public personas ascribed iconic or symbolic status” (Schmitt, 43). A celebrity develops an image to the public eye over time through their public presentation that can be created in different media such as films, public speaking, music, and performance arts. Celebrities have to keep in mind that if their iconographic persona does to stay true to the message they are advocating for the inconsistency may lead to dissonance, which can result in communication failure (Schmitt, 52). Therefore, it can be difficult for a celebrity to advocate for a cause different from their ascribed public image (Schmitt, 43).

I will now further I will demonstrate how Leonardo DiCaprio has established iconographic persona as an environmental activist, and if Leonardo DiCaprio stays congruent with his iconographic persona in his two public addresses; The UN Climate Summit in 2014, and his Oscar’s acceptance speech in 2016. Leonardo DiCaprio has established public persona through a variety of works. He is according IMDB “one of the most respected actors in the world.” He has acted in a diverse range of films such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Titanic*, *Catch me if you can*, *The Departed*, *Inception*, *Django Unchained*, and *The Revenant*. His major contribution to the world of film has built up his credibility and respect as a person and an actor. During his private time DiCaprio has contributed significantly trying to combat climate change. These personal contributions has built up his iconographic persona as an environmental activist, and built up his credibility to address climate change in the public sphere. DiCaprio started his advocating for climate change in 1998 when he initiated *Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation* with the mission to “protect the world’s last wild places.” Since 1998 the foundation has worked on four core areas; protecting biodiversity, ocean conservation,

wild land conservation and climate change. DiCaprio also serves on the board for; World Wild Life Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, National Geographic's Pristine Seas, the funders' collaborative Oceans 5, and International Fund for Animal Welfare (leonardodicaprio.org). DiCaprio has personally donated "\$30m in funding - to help advance the United Nations climate negotiations, protect coral reefs and tigers, and spread public awareness about the dangers of climate change" (The Guardian, 2016). In 2007 he narrated the environmental documentary *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour*. He marched in *The People's Climate March* in NYC 2014. That same year he spoke at the United Nations Climate Summit, and was appointed *UN Messenger of Peace* by former UN secretary Ban Ki-moon. Messengers of Peace are individuals who possess widely recognized talents in the fields of art, film, literature, music and sports, helping to raise worldwide awareness of the UN's ideals and activities. He was the executive producer of *Cowspiracy*, a documentary about the dangers of the meat industry released in 2014. Last year, 2016, was a hot year for DiCaprio's environmentalism. It was the release of *Before the Flood*, produced by DiCaprio himself and directed by Martin Scorsese. He made an additional address at the UN for the *Signature Ceremony for the Paris Agreement* April 2016. DiCaprio was also personally invited to The White House in October, 2016 to have a public conversation about climate change with former president Barack Obama. Finally, he was awarded his first Oscar for his role in *The Revenant*, and made fine remarks to the importance of climate change in his acceptance speech for millions to watch around the world. The majority of the movie shows DiCaprio moving through nature, trying to use his survival skills to move forward. It shows many images connecting man to nature. For example, there were beautiful scenes of DiCaprio crawling through snow and ice, climbing tree's, and swimming through icy water. The movie also has many scenes showing DiCaprio with animals, like fighting off a Grisly

bear, eating Bison liver, and wrapping himself in a horse. These scenes are all related to man and the environment. All of these public appearances are contributing to Leonardo DiCaprio's iconographic persona and credibility as climate activist.

I will now analyze how iconographic persona was used in Leonardo DiCaprio's address at the Climate Summit and the Oscar's gala. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 Leonardo DiCaprio addressed the United Nations Climate Summit. He spoke in front of 120 world leaders, to try and persuade them to take further action on climate change. Leonardo DiCaprio's speech is a persuasive, and motivational speech. The focus of the Climate Summit was to raise political momentum for a meaningful universal climate agreement in Paris, this December 2015. Ban Ki-moon invited several world leaders to speak at the summit. DiCaprio spoke during the opening ceremony along with mayor of New York City Bill de Blasio, chair of IPC DR Rajenda Pachauri, Al Gore, and UN goodwill ambassador Li Bingbing. The world leaders spoke during the national action ambition section, following these speeches topics such as; finance, forests, industry, transport, agriculture, energy, resilience, and cities were discussed. The UN's website describes the event as; "Climate Summit 2014 provides a unique opportunity for leaders to champion an ambitious vision, anchored in action that will enable a meaningful global agreement in 2015.

The summit was especially important to raise awareness for Paris, since the last summit in Copenhagen was such a disaster. The guardian quoted; "The so-called Copenhagen accord "recognizes" the scientific case for keeping temperature rises to no more than 2C but does not contain commitments to emissions reductions to achieve that goal" (The Guardian, 2009). Obama hinted that China was to blame for the lack of a substantial deal, because the developing countries were looking back to previous

climate deals; “developing countries need to get out of that mindset, and be moving towards the position where everybody recognizes that we all need to move together” (The Guardian, 2009). The climate summit in September was considered successful. National Geographic said; “The biggest tangible result of the summit was a commitment by nearly 40 companies, including many big multinational corporations, to do their part to slow and eventually stop the loss of forests.” They also recognized that the summit brought about a growing pressure for world leaders to help the worlds’ most vulnerable countries.

There was a lot of heat leading up to the Climate Summit. Just two days before this event “People Climate March” took place in central park, New York City. It is considered the largest climate march in history. The march had a much greater turnout than expected, 100’000 was anticipated, 400’000 people showed up, marching the streets of Manhattan, expressing their concern for global climate change (Huffington Post, 2014). Leonardo DiCaprio among several high profile leaders joined the march; Bill McKibben, Leonardo DiCaprio, Jane Goodall and Vandana Shiva, they marched alongside policymakers such as; Sheldon Whitehouse, Bernie Sanders, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and former Vice President Al Gore.

Speaking at an event like the climate summit, DiCaprio faced some challenges. He is speaking in front of highly educated world political leaders, to tell them what they should be doing about climate change. DiCaprio is not a scientist, he is not an expert or a politician. As Markham said, “celebrities only have the power to rally or shame those in power to produce change” which DiCaprio is set to do in this event. The question is; does he use iconographic persona in an affective manner to his previously ascribed public image?

In terms of credibility (Ethos), let's start by looking at how DiCaprio faced his credibility challenges. Ethos is defined in Hendry as; "function of attributes such as moral character, trustworthiness, and intelligence" (Henry, 85). DiCaprio has established credibility with his major work in the film industry and for climate change, along with being appointed *UN Messenger of Peace*. He addresses the issue well at the beginning of his speech when he says "I stand before you not as an expert but as a concerned citizen", he immediately takes on the role as just another person who is concerned for our planet, he automatically represents the people; highlighting that the opinions of people matter to the world. DiCaprio makes his strongest connection to his iconographic person at the beginning of the speech "As an actor I pretend for a living. I play fictitious characters often solving fictitious problems. I believe humankind has looked at climate change in that same way: as if it were a fiction, happening to someone else's planet, as if pretending that climate change wasn't real would somehow make it go away." He makes an excellent analogy to his pre-established iconographic persona playing different fictitious character's solving fictitious problems. This general statement works well with DiCaprio's wide range of movie characters. It can be connected to most of his movie roles, they are all in some way trying to solve a problem; Teddy trying to solve the mystery of *Shutter Island* or Cobb trying to solve the dream hitch in *Inception*. In using his celebrity status and ability to "rally" political leaders, he uses his persona to his best advantage by saying politicians have looked at climate change in the same fictitious way as his movie characters. This angle both supports his established credibility from acting and his iconographic persona as a respected actor and climate activist.

DiCaprio makes several comments in the speech that can be connected to the film industry. In the middle he refers to climate change saying; “none of this is rhetoric, and none of it is hysteria.” Rhetoric and hysteria sound very dramatic, much like what the film industry is based of, dramatic movie plots. Hysteria could be referred to climate hysteria. Another film connection to be made from this speech is his comment about national security; “the chief of the US navy’s Pacific command, admiral Samuel Locklear, recently said that climate change is our single greatest security threat.” Many Hollywood blockbusters often have plots about a threat to national security. One action movie representing this is; *The Day After Tomorrow*, an action movie based on futuristic extreme weather events that ultimately lead to the world freezing over. Although DiCaprio has not starred in many these types of movies, his comments can be connected to his previous statement about playing fictitious characters in the fiction world of film. Finally DiCaprio concludes his speech with; “honored delegates, leaders of the world, I pretend for a living. But you do not.” Again, referencing his acting career to the lack of real world effort political leaders have made to climate change so far. He uses his established iconographic persona as a credible actor to try and persuade these leaders to take action on climate change.

The outcome of the Climate Summit was generally very positive, The World resources Institute said it; “Leaders clearly demonstrated their understanding that the impacts of climate change are real and costly, and that they no longer have to choose between economic growth and climate action – they go hand-in-hand. Momentum for action took a massive leap forward in the last three days – with cities, companies from many sectors, and national governments announcing new actions to shift away from fossil fuels to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy. Marches around the world

provided a clear mandate for leaders to stay engaged all the way to the Paris Summit in December 2015” (World Resources Institute, 2014). In terms of DiCaprio credibility and whether he was successful in persuading the audience is harder to conclude.

Zignallabs.com who analyze social media statistics said; “if ever there was doubt of the power of celebrity”, DiCaprio received 73,523 mentions on social media, and Obama’s speech 68,126 – about 8 percent fewer than the Academy Award nominee, (Zignallabs, 2014). This does support the previous mentioned studies on celebrity advocacy and their power to influence people.

In addition to the Climate Summit, and many other speeches, DiCaprio made a significant address to climate change in his acceptance speech at the Oscars in February 2016. After six Oscar nominations DiCaprio finally won his first Oscar for best actor in *The Revenant*. DiCaprio plays the role of a frontiersman who has to suffer a bear attack and is left for dead by his hunting team. As a result he has use survival skills to make it through nature alone. His address can be seen as the climax for DiCaprio’s iconographic persona as a climate activist. He starts off his speech by saying “Making *The Revenant* was about man's relationship to the natural world.” His connotation can easily be interpreted to DiCaprio’s own relationship to the natural world, and how he cares for it. Using the word “man” can also be applied to people’s overall relationship to the natural world. He then continues “a world that we collectively felt in 2015 as the hottest year in recorded history. Our production needed to move to the southern tip of this planet just to be able to find snow.” Emphasizing how hard it was for the production team to find snow for this movie, he both shares how our world is warming up, affecting our the real world, and the fiction world of film. He continues advocating for climate change by saying; “Climate change is real, it is happening right now. It is the most urgent

threat facing our entire species, and we need to work collectively together and stop procrastinating.” He further emphasizes that climate change is real and that it is an important issue to address. He concludes his speech with “I thank you all for this amazing award tonight. Let us not take this planet for granted. I do not take tonight for granted.” He finished strong by saying that he does not take our world for granted, and neither should the rest of the world.

His address at the Oscar’s made huge media impact. A study conducted by San Diego State University in 2016 found that based on tweets about climate change set a record from past analysis from 2011. The study also found that “tweets mentioning climate change or global warming were 636 percent higher than expected the day DiCaprio spoke” (Washington Post, 2016). Tweets about climate change were about 400% higher after his address at the Oscar’s than during COP21, which is argued to be one of the most significant climate change conferences in history.

It becomes apparent how much climate change means to DiCaprio after this address. Winning an Oscar is something he and the rest of the world have been waiting for, ever since the Titanic was released back in the 90s. It was a huge moment for many in the acting career. The fact that DiCaprio chooses one of his biggest moments in life to talk about climate change only further emphasizes how much he cares about the environment, and his iconographic persona as an environmentalist. It is a part of him, as much as acting is. If people did not know it before, they now know how important climate change is to Leonardo DiCaprio.

Iconographic persona is established in the public sphere, through an individual's different appearances in the public. In DiCaprio's case this would be through his roles as

an actor, public addresses, and private life activities that make the media. Although DiCaprio has well established his iconographic persona as a climate change activist in his private life, his roles as an actor are not strongly related to climate change. DiCaprio is a well-known and respected actor, however his roles have such a wide range of themes, ranging from romantic, to action, economical, political, and much more. This lowers the strength and intensity of his iconographic persona as a climate activist. Iconographic persona for actors is highly developed through their movie roles, because that is what most of the public know them for. People who are not specifically interested in Leonardo DiCaprio or climate change, might not pay attention or register the work DiCaprio has done for climate change. If DiCaprio wanted to intensify his persona as an environmentalist in the future, taking on more roles relating to climate change could be a solution.

Another factor important to address involving iconographic persona is DiCaprio's own personal steps taken for sustainability. Does DiCaprio practice what he preach? Although the majority of the general public may not pay attention to this, some of the strongly involved in climate change pay close attention to whether or not climate activists actually engage in a sustainable lifestyle. For example an article published in May 2016 critiqued DiCaprio's lack of environmental commitment. The article discussed the actor's use of private jets and luxury yachts, that produce large carbon footprints. DiCaprio himself says he offsets his 11ton carbon footprint by donating to an organization that builds trees. However, Clean energy analyst Robert Rapier tallied up the actor's carbon footprint in a recent Forbes op-ed, he said "DiCaprio's six-week, six-flight binge in 2014 would have added up to 44 tons alone" private jets typically emit 37 times the personal carbon emissions of commercial flights (Forbes, 2016). Comments

about the actor's use of private jets often pop up as critiques to his environmental action. For example in an article published by The Guardian in 2016 titled "How Leonardo DiCaprio became one of the world's top climate change champion, comments like "by flying lots and continuing to have a very large carbon footprint," were posted. These are factors that affect his persona as an environmentalist.

Iconographic persona is a different but important area to assess for celebrity advocates. Celebrities have the opportunity to be very influential with their highly established image in society. However, as Schmitt stated it is important for them to stay congruent "when the ethos of the moment fails to resemble, build from, or fully acknowledge the iconographic persona, the incongruence leads to dissonance and the dissonance opens the speech to potential communicative failure" (Schmitt, 52).

This paper has addressed Leonardo DiCaprio's use of iconographic persona. Iconographic persona is established through an individual's activity in the public's sphere. DiCaprio has established an environmental iconographic persona from his personal involvement with climate change, starting with his foundation, millions of donations, producing documentaries, his role in *The Revenant*, and public speeches in high political environments. DiCaprio has room for more environmentally connected movie roles in order to further establish his iconographic persona. He also has to pay attention to his own personal sustainable practices in order to be fully accepted as an environmentalist. DiCaprio has overall established high credibility from his acting career, and engagement to climate change in his private life, both of which have ascribed him an iconographic persona as an environmental activist.

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