

Celebrity Activism and Climate Change: Amplifying Environmental Advocacy in Nigeria

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Abstract

Celebrities have a unique ability to transform complex issues into relatable and accessible narratives, and their influence extends into the realm of environmental activism. This paper explores how Nigerian celebrities are using their platforms to advocate for climate change awareness, mobilize support, and drive environmental action. By participating in climate conferences, promoting green initiatives, and fundraising for environmental causes, these public figures make climate change more tangible and relevant to everyday audiences. The analysis highlights how celebrities can inspire their followers to adopt sustainable behaviours and advocate for policies that prioritize environmental conservation. The paper concludes that through social media, public appearances, and collaborations with environmental organizations, celebrities play a critical role in amplifying the urgency of climate action, encouraging communities to take meaningful steps toward mitigating climate change.

Keywords: Celebrity Activism, Climate Change Awareness, Environmental Advocacy, Sustainable Behaviour, Social Media Influence

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of celebrities in climate change advocacy has become increasingly significant, with many well-known individuals leveraging their public platforms to raise awareness about environmental issues and promote sustainable practices (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009; Goodman et al., 2016; Nisbet, 2021). The urgency of global climate change and the need for public engagement have prompted various social actors, including celebrities, to take a prominent role in mobilizing action (Park, 2016; Abidin et al., 2018). Celebrities hold a unique position, capable of reaching large and diverse audiences, which makes them crucial allies in the campaign against environmental degradation (Gamson, 1994; Anderson, 2011; Brockington, 2015).

The scope of celebrity involvement has broadened to include actors, musicians, entertainers, politicians, business leaders, and even religious figures (Anderson, 2010; Abidin et al., 2018). Research by Kamel (2020) highlights how climate change communication has evolved, with celebrities now playing a prominent role in raising awareness for environmental causes. Celebrities are also essential in promoting brands, companies, and social causes, utilizing their visibility to enhance public engagement (Richey & Ponte, 2011; Turner, 2016). These individuals stand out in their respective fields and influence public sentiment, making otherwise distant or complex issues more relatable to everyday life (Anderson, 2013). By

presenting climate change in emotionally engaging ways, they help shape how the public perceives and responds to this global crisis (Doyle et al., 2017; Jeffreys, 2010).

The ability of celebrities to connect with their audiences on an emotional level is critical, especially for climate change, which may otherwise seem abstract or disconnected from everyday concerns. Studies demonstrate the strong role of celebrities, including actors, athletes, influencers, musicians, and artists, in fostering emotional and visceral connections to environmental issues (Anderson, 2011; Doyle et al., 2018). This analysis aims to explore the influence of celebrity engagement on public awareness of climate change and the implications for shaping attitudes and behaviours toward environmental issues. Celebrities are increasingly acting as environmental advocates, not just amplifying the message but also providing testimony that informs and influences public understanding of nature and what actions are necessary to address environmental challenges.

Conceptual Analysis

Climate Change and Celebrity

Climate change is one of the most devastating environmental issues in the modern world and is projected to worsen in the future (Ozor et al., 2015; Ahmed et al., 2020). Its impacts cut across all areas of life, from the economy to agriculture, education, and health (Solomon & Edet, 2018; Ebele & Emodi, 2016; Victory et al., 2022). Although climate change is not a new phenomenon, its effects have become increasingly severe, particularly due to human activities such as transportation, energy consumption, and livestock farming (Akande et al., 2017; Ahmed et al., 2020).

Anthropogenic climate change, as defined by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992), is driven by human actions that alter the global atmosphere, beyond natural climate variability. Current research shows that over 3.6 billion people live in areas highly vulnerable to climate change. Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause an additional 250,000 deaths annually from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea, and heat stress (World Health Organization, 2023).

A celebrity is an individual who has attained fame and public recognition through achievements, talent, or media exposure, often working in entertainment, sports, politics, or other high-visibility areas (Jeffreys, 2010; Driessens, 2013; Abidin, 2018). Their prominence in popular culture enables them to influence public opinion and advocate for causes such as climate change. As Abidin et al. (2020) argue, celebrity status can be leveraged as an economic asset through endorsements and brand-building, which can also extend to promoting environmental causes. Celebrities help frame climate change as a marketable issue, increasing its visibility and public engagement (Turner, 2004; Boykoff & Goodman, 2009).

Since the mid-2000s, celebrities have become central figures in the cultural politics of climate change, using their platforms to deliver speeches at UN climate conferences and participate in documentaries aimed at a global audience (Doyle et al., 2018; Anderson, 2013). The unique access that celebrities have to key figures and industries allows them to act as strategic assets for environmental NGOs, promoting causes in ways that scientists and environmentalists may not be able to (Turner, 2016; Brockington, 2015).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory provides a valuable lens through which to understand the collaboration between celebrities and climate change advocacy. The theory suggests that individuals define themselves based on their affiliations with groups and social categories, and celebrities often embody certain values and beliefs that resonate with their fans (Rabinovich & Morton, 2011; Postmes, 2015). When celebrities champion environmental causes, they can influence their audiences' perceptions and inspire pro-environmental behaviours by appealing to shared social identities and values (Reynolds et al., 2015).

Through this lens, celebrity involvement in climate change advocacy becomes a process of identity construction and social influence. Celebrities act as role models, fostering a sense of collective identity and responsibility among their audiences (Haslam et al., 2015). This creates a shared environmental identity that encourages collective action and solidarity in addressing climate challenges (Platow et al., 2015). Social identity theory helps explain how celebrity engagement can mobilize public support for environmental initiatives by aligning climate action with social identities and values (Branscombe & Reynolds, 2015).

Cultural Theory

Cultural theory further explains the collaboration between celebrities and climate change advocacy by analysing how cultural symbols and values influence public perceptions of environmental issues. Celebrities, as cultural icons, use their status to communicate messages about climate change in ways that resonate with their audiences (Turner, 2004; Boykoff & Goodman, 2009). They act as cultural intermediaries, simplifying complex climate concepts and shaping societal norms around environmental responsibility. Through their public platforms, celebrities promote pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, influencing social norms and fostering a culture of environmental stewardship.

Media Effects Theory

Media effects theory offers another perspective on the role of celebrities in climate change advocacy by examining how media messages shape public attitudes and behaviours (Arlt et al., 2011; Zhao, 2009). Celebrities use various media platforms to communicate about climate change, leveraging their visibility to raise awareness and mobilize support for environmental initiatives. Media effects theory suggests that the framing of climate change by celebrities can significantly impact public understanding and action (Taddicken, 2013; Stamm et al., 2000). Through their media presence, celebrities can amplify climate change messages, influence public discourse, and promote sustainable behaviours on a global scale.

By applying these theoretical frameworks, this analysis explores the influence of celebrity engagement on public awareness of climate change and its potential to inspire meaningful environmental action.

Celebrity Environmentalism: An In-Depth Analysis

Celebrity environmentalists are influential figures who leverage their fame to promote environmental causes and sustainability initiatives. By using their public platform, these

individuals can raise awareness about pressing environmental issues, advocate for conservation efforts, and inspire sustainable behaviours among their followers and the general public. Through their interventions—ranging from “enviro-tainment” and protests to campaigns—they attract media attention, shaping public discourse, influencing policies, and advocating for environmentally responsible actions (Abidin et al., 2020; Anderson, 2013).

The Role of Celebrity Environmentalists

Celebrity environmentalists help spotlight critical environmental issues that might otherwise receive limited media coverage. Their involvement can lead to widespread public engagement, encouraging eco-friendly practices and support for conservation efforts. In the age of social media, celebrities have used platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to further amplify their voices. For example, climate change activists frequently use hashtags like #ClimateAction and #COP26 to promote global discussions (WildAid, 2018; Briti et al., 2023).

In Africa, musicians such as Petty Preacher from Togo raise awareness through music, reflecting a blend of entertainment and advocacy. Moreover, celebrities such as the K-pop group BlackPink significantly impacted climate communication during the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) through social media marketing (Briti et al., 2023).

Categories of Celebrity Activists

Boykoff and Goodman (2009) identified six key types of celebrity environmentalists: business people, actors, politicians, public intellectuals, musicians, and athletes. In Nigeria, for instance, these roles are filled by figures such as Aliko Dangote (business), Desmond Elliot (politics), Davido (music), Wole Soyinka (intellectual), and Kelechi Iheanacho (sports). While their advocacy can drive positive environmental change, some critics argue that their involvement may trivialize complex issues or overshadow grassroots activism (Boykoff & Goodman, 2009).

Celebrity Environmentalism in Action

Since the 1990s, celebrities have been increasingly vocal in environmental conservation efforts. High-profile figures like Leonardo DiCaprio, who spoke at the UN Climate Change Summit, have helped elevate environmental issues to a global stage (Doyle et al., 2017). Celebrities not only raise awareness but also contribute to policy debates and climate initiatives through their widespread influence (Richey, 2016).

In Nigeria, individuals like Nnimmo Bassey and Desmond Majekodunmi have been prominent environmental activists. Their work ranges from mobilizing communities to addressing climate challenges through artistic platforms like music and film. Bassey's advocacy emphasizes environmental justice, while Majekodunmi, also known as "Majek Fashek," used his music to address climate change and conservation (Ebele & Emodi, 2016).

Celebrities and Extension Agents

The collaboration between extension agents—who are essential in educating and supporting sustainable practices in agriculture—and celebrities can create powerful synergies. While extension agents provide technical knowledge, celebrities amplify messages to a broader audience, promoting sustainable development and environmental stewardship. This collaboration can significantly influence grassroots initiatives and public opinion on climate change (Anderson, 2010; Arlt et al., 2011).

Social Media's Role

In the digital age, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) are crucial tools for celebrity environmentalists. These platforms enable celebrities to engage with global audiences, campaign for climate justice, and organize protests or awareness events. For instance, celebrities like Madonna and Greta Thunberg have effectively used social media to mobilize public support for environmental causes (Anderson, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Climate change is a global issue that demands collective action, and celebrities can play an essential role in raising awareness and advocating for solutions through their influence and platforms. Celebrities have a unique ability to shine a spotlight on the urgency of addressing climate change and its impacts, both in Nigeria and globally. Their efforts not only educate the public but also inspire individuals to take action and advocate for policy changes. For example, during the summers of 2016 and 2017, both environmentalists and implicated industries used celebrities to promote their respective positions regarding the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), illustrating the power of celebrity involvement in environmental advocacy (Anderson, 2011).

Our review of research findings shows that new celebrities have been endorsed to take part in climate change movements, helping to capture people's attention through various forms of media such as rap songs, poems, chants, musical concerts, and traditional music in rural areas. This approach is crucial for raising awareness among rural dwellers in Nigeria, Africa, and across the world. Music, in particular, plays a critical role in memory retention of content, facts, and details, as it uses rhyme, rhythm, and melody to engage audiences (Ahmed et al., 2020). Therefore, the contribution of local musicians and artists in the fight against climate change cannot be underestimated.

Given this, it is recommended that stakeholders, including governments, environmental organizations, and international bodies, officially employ celebrities as climate change ambassadors. Funding should be allocated to support their climate change-related programs, as their platforms have the potential to reach large audiences and create lasting impacts. Additionally, collaboration with extension agents can enhance their efforts by providing specialized knowledge and connecting celebrities with local communities to address specific environmental challenges.

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