

Media Students, Climate Change and YouTube Celebrities: Readings of *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* video clip.

Pat Brereton (DCU, Irlanda) and Victoria Gómez (Universidad de Montevideo, Uruguay)

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to advance understanding of the use of media by young audiences, as they become informed and in turn develop a clear judgment about climate change as part of a process of developing environmental literacy. The paper explores the under-researched question around what kind of role do online videos play in the perception and evaluation of these issues, while focusing on university Media students as a specific group equipped to identify media's multiple dimensions and processes. Insights on how such influence might work are obtained through both an eco-critical expert reading of Prince Ea's rap-music video *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* and a report of what is perceived and recalled by the students. This will be illustrated using textual and focus group analysis of this YouTube video that has been highlighted as an emergent environmental text in previous surveys of students, offering an alternative genre and a formally distinct approach to climate change from the well-known Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio's viral media productions. The methodological design merges the traditional analytical tools of eco-criticism, alongside social science techniques aimed at adding empirical value to the research.

Running title for article: Media Students, Climate Change and YouTube Celebrities

Notes on contributors:

PhD Pat Brereton teaches and researches on all aspects of new media and environmental communication at Dublin City University. He is chair of a new Master's program on Climate Change.

Ms. Victoria Gómez Márquez is a PhD candidate at the School of Communications in Dublin City University (Ireland), who works as a teacher and researcher at University of Montevideo (Uruguay).

Introduction

A conventional textual approach from an eco-critical point-of-view focuses on narratives and semiotics to arrive at tentative conclusions about its potential effects on spectators, drawing on a rich tradition where literature and film have been privileged as sources of knowledge. If such media remain central towards understanding the culture we are immersed in, the exponential diversification of new media narratives available for new generational and connected audiences requires a diversified approach that includes consideration of online video and other forms of media summarised in a 2019 overview article by Michelle Seelig. On the one hand, more online textual analytical tools are needed to explore environmental themes, while those used primarily across literature and film might have to be reformulated towards capturing and understanding the growth of new media texts which are being consumed by contemporary audiences (*see* Rust et al.; Weik von Mossner). On the other hand, with the growth of narrowcasting and media convergence, different types of audience measurements and more specific enquiries can be used to gauge how public responses can help identify meaningful textual investigation (*see* Metag and Schafer). As environmental and media scholar Sean Cubitt asserts, a good start has been made in linking environmental textual analysis and audience research through journals like Martin Barker's online *Participations* journal (www.participations.org), alongside more recently *Interactions: Studies in Communications and Culture*, which had a special issue on this specific area edited by Pietari Kääpä. Several of the papers in this issue (2014) helped lay the ground rules for a “more systematic approach to studying both hypothetical and actual audience responses to environmental communications” (Cubitt).

Certainly, the circumstances of reception have diversified and grown exponentially and the many new consumer encounters with media deserve detailed analysis. An empirical eco-criticism approach could help to assess which, within the many simultaneous stories available for consumption, should be privileged and deeply analyzed and, furthermore, how could we be assured that expert readings are concurrent with first-hand interpretations by new generational audiences (*see* Hansen and Cox; Parham). Far from undercutting the discipline, new media affordances and technology provide more scope for ecocriticism, especially alongside empirical audience studies (*see* Hakemulder et al; Malecki 2016, 2018; Schneider-Mayerson), as this paper attempts.

Young audiences in particular are likely to be choosing their viewing content more actively than a decade ago, turning to the internet as a massive archive or streaming platform to watch their favorite shows, independently of when they were aired in the first place (*see* Brereton and Hong 2013). YouTube has become recognized as the dominant audio visual platform or database and young audiences are particularly drawn to this new mode of media consumption. By far the most popular

online video sharing platform since its launch in 2005, YouTube is the preferred port-of-call for people aged 18-34 (*see* Brereton 172-189). It is the third most visited website worldwide, hosting more than 4-billion video views a day. Having more than 72 hours of video uploaded every minute, it outperforms traditional media by being both a vast source of information, as well as a creator of visual memes (Pew Research Centre cited in Shapiro and Park 116). Television's long established 'bardic function' (Fiske and Hartley) has been reconstituted online within this new media age and YouTube has become the first large-scale answer to the apparent loss of a so-called Public Sphere - usually ascribed to the notion of Public Service Broadcasting, where audiences are both educated, informed and entertained (*see* Curran and Seaton) - while helping to re-imagine and re-formulate mass audio-visual connectivity.

The student audience cohort under examination in this paper remain digitally-literate (Eshet) because of their training as Media students, acting within an expanded network society (Castells), as well as being seen as reflecting a new form of digital connectivity (Boyd and Ellison). In parallel, young adults are sometimes considered a critical public for (re-)education, especially towards foregrounding the relationship between human and non-human nature (Ôstman), which makes them a strategic focus and challenge for an emergent youth focused mode of eco-criticism and in developing new modes of critical environmental literacy (Brereton 1-19). The key objective of this paper is to advance understanding of the use of media by young audiences - as encapsulated by the YouTube platform - as they become informed and in turn develop a clear judgment about climate change as part of a process of developing environmental literacy. While much more empirical research is required to help tease out these core objectives, with some studies focused on pedagogical strategies and practice (*see* Milstein et al.), at the very outset this paper strives to foreground the under-researched question around what kind of role do online videos play in the perception and evaluation of these issues, while focusing on university Media students as a specific group equipped to identify media's multiple dimensions and processes.

Audience Engagement with Climate Change

Despite the scientific community's agreement on the anthropogenic roots of the current environmental state, in more recent times, explicit manifestations of climate denial appears to have grown stronger. In this context, Science Communications scholar Suzanna Priest states, "climate change is something of a communication emergency" (9). She observes that the field is at a crossroads, characterized by a move from an information deficit model, which involves a topdown transmission of information, which was thought to persuade individuals to change their behavior, to a dialogical model

of communication that emphasizes effective and more long-term public engagement between scientists and non-scientists (the public). This paradigm shift from simple information provision and persuasion, to more active engagement, is especially important while taking into account the affordances of new media platforms like YouTube.

Social psychologist Per Espen Stoknes signals five major barriers to effective climate change communication which affect the general public.¹ Internet consumption most especially increases what he describes as user ‘iDentity’, where audiences filter news through their professional and cultural identity, looking for information that confirms their existing values and filters what challenges them.

Meanwhile, Sebastian Bamberg and Guido Moser have usefully completed a meta-analysis of 46 academic studies that examined the relationship between pro-environmental behavior and its determinants. They found that the three most substantial predictors of intent to take action were: perceived locus of control (or individual efficacy), general attitudes and finally group norms. A lack of individual or collective efficacy will act as a barrier to action, even when people are knowledgeable about climate science (Kahan et al.). Likewise, social norms are believed to be a powerful influence on individual decision-making, because of the ever-

expanding power of identity within a group (Kahan et al.). In fact, experiments have shown that using frames that are considered directly relevant to people’s social groups, together with their identity, can greatly increase pro-environmental behavior (Bain et al.).

As constantly asserted across much ecocinema scholarship, including primary eco-readers like Rust et al.; Parham; Hansen and Cox etc., alongside more specific filmic and textual readings in Ivakhiv; Moore; Taylor etc., we need to tell stories with the power of a new form of creative imagery to help break many preconceptions and provoke strong emotions associated with such investment. To be truly radical today is to make hope possible, not despair convincing, as Raymond Williams is often quoted as affirming. By going one step further and speaking to the perennial ‘good life’, while exposing the unique attributes of human behavior thriving within a benevolent environment and actively promoting new forms of green growth and long-term stewardship of the earth for example; much more can be achieved in the struggle towards promoting pro-active environmental communications and most especially developing robust forms of eco-criticism. For instance, as a very crude and simplistic rule-of-thumb for eco-filmmaking - even if in danger of succumbing to a utopian ideal - Stoknes and other communication scholars assert; when telling stories, make them personal and concrete, vivid and extraordinary, centered on showing instead of telling, and be humorous and witty, using a strong plot and drama.²

Nonetheless there remains a huge gap between young people's (especially University level students) view of the global future, including problems such as climate change that is often recognized as quite bleak and pessimistic, and a corresponding view of their own personal future, which is often quite optimistic (Eckersley; Threadgold). Consequently, climate change is frequently perceived as distant and separate from their own lives. This form of dissonance or distance - recalling Stoknes' nomenclature - makes it important to identify which media content helps bridge that gap involved in engaging them with such global environmental problems in a personally relevant way. Furthermore, this approach can be used to tease out what features makesuch media relevant for young people, while starting to explore if these responses might differ across two very different regions like Ireland and Uruguay, or across Media and Non-Media students, as explored in this case study.

Within these bubbles and audience group dynamics, celebrities play a pivotal role nowadays. Studies by Dan Brockington and Spensor Henson confirms that celebrity is now “part of the way that most major charities and particularly environmental development charities go about raising funds, raising awareness and lobbying for their causes” (in Hunting and Hinks 432). All the while acknowledging, as Chris Rojek asserts, that one particular “tension in celebrity is that the arousal of strong emotion is [often] attained despite the absence of direct, personal reciprocity” (12). Fan studies scholars incidentally call these extensive feelings of intimacy, emotional investment and commitment ‘affective identification’ (Hills; Van Zoonen; Yockey). Critics of celebrity activism nonetheless assert that it often lacks substance and alternatively does a better job of strengthening fans' commitment to celebrities than promoting their commitments to complex public issues. By all accounts Internet studies and celebrity scholars have demonstrated that social media has intensified celebrities' performances and fans' expectations for intimacy with their online heroes.³

Research by Kyra Hunting and Ashley Hinks examines how such celebrities invite fans to use feelings of intimacy to engage in civic action, which in turn can promote active environmental engagement. They also draw on the work of other scholars (Bennett and Chouliaraki) to argue that celebrity activism uses feelings for celebrities to mobilize fans in powerful ways. Hunting and Hinks further suggest there are core elements that can be used in this process, namely ‘on-screen characters' personas and narratives coupled with their real selves which can be knitted together in ways that not only make a particular celebrity culturally meaningful, but “in ways that can drive civic action through celebrity activism” (433).

If worldwide famous names such as DiCaprio fall easily into the category of celebrity, this label also reaches lower profile performers whose ‘fame’ is mostly built and enjoyed in the digital world, where their YouTube videos reach massive numbers of views, while probably encapsulated by

niche audiences spread worldwide. A wide range of YouTuber’s including musicians, along with all kind of artists and creators who are sometimes considered micro celebrities (Jerslev; Marwick) help to make up this evolving landscape and deserves close attention.

Methodology

This paper conveys the findings of two complementary methods: an expert close reading of *Dear Future Generations, Sorry* (Ea), and two focus groups with Irish Media students exposed to this YouTube video-clip released in 2015 that remains the first result when searching ‘climate change’ in YouTube trends, with 13 million views recorded over three years (checked November 10th. 2018).

Empirical explorations of young students’ audiences were both the point of departure and the closing evaluation of the selected eco-media text, as the choice of Prince Ea’s YouTube video follows evidence collected through annual student’s surveys and focus groups conducted by the authors in Ireland and Uruguay (2017, 2018, 2019), feeding both the monographic on *Environmental Literacy and New Digital Audiences* (Brereton) and Gómez’ PhD Dissertation in process.

In the 2017 round of an exploratory survey conducted by Brereton among Irish Media students (180 respondents), Leonardo Di Caprio remains the most recognized pro-environmental voice (43% of student’s references to influential eco-media texts) mainly through both his 2016 Oscar speech and his documentary *Before the Flood*, and the second most important name mentioned is the celebrity politician (Wheeler) Al Gore’s (10%), with either his Ted Talk, or the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Prince Ea’s eco-video *Dear Future Generations, Sorry* belongs to a group of online media texts obtaining around 5% of students’ references each, within a context of low recalling of YouTube contents related to Climate Change or any other environmental issue, and where it provides the only example taking distance from scientific and documentary genre approaches, towards an artistic approach to climate change.

In order to provide a more grounded understanding of students’ self-reported media consumption highlighting climate change, and also taking into consideration their preoccupation with celebrities, we honed in on the phenomenon of artistic microcelebrity endorsement particularly. The mediation of YouTube celebrity Prince Ea and his music video *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* (Ea) became the focus of an eco-reading by the researchers, aiming at providing complementary perspectives to the widely researched cases of Di Caprio and Al Gore (Alcíbar; Olson; Jacobsen; Partzsch; Brereton). The close textual reading uses content and discourse analysis, to cover the descriptive and critical level of meaning, including applying diverse academic tools such as semiotics,

rhetorical and audience identification, alongside various other aspects of narrative examination.

Besides the specific purpose of exploring the centrality of ‘creative imaginaries’ instead of ‘reality’ reporting’ accounts within students’ choices, Prince Ea certainly deserves special attention as an emerging artist who is also mentioned when recalling non-specific environmental videos in the 2017 survey reported above, belonging to a trend followed in 2018 and 2019 pointing to other rappers, who are referred as influencers both in subsequent media students’ survey rounds and in the focus groups reported in this paper (IDK, Kanye West).⁴

As a third stage, two classic focus groups (Morgan) were conducted with the same target population of the original survey in February 2019, namely Media students at Dublin City University. The 19 participants who took part in these focus groups, replicated within each group the age and gender balance of the students’ surveys conducted between 2017 and 2019 by the authors, with most students being 19-20 years old and presenting a majority of women (2/3).

The analysis of *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* served as a textual reference for examining the reactions of students taking part in the focus groups, from which evaluations of content and form was obtained and integrated in the qualitative analysis, through paraphrasing of discourses and illustrative quotations, while maintaining integrity and accounting for the context of the focus group (Krippendorf). Focusing on this audio-visual stimulus, the focus groups concentrate on trying to uncover what might be perceived as influential or alternatively teasing out what resonates with this student population.

If the original quantitative empirical assessment provided by surveys was crucial in identifying recurrent media texts considered meaningful by the selected audience, the qualitative approach, using both textual reading and focus groups provided in-depth explanations of the reported impact of specific media in gaining knowledge and awareness of climate change. The relevance of linking qualitative and quantitative research has been largely acknowledged (*see* Uwe 92), including the procedures of clearing issues from a standardized survey through qualitative techniques, which is also mentioned as a useful model for a communicative validation (Kluge 64 in Uwe 97). Following Fiske (Television culture; Audiencing: A cultural studies approach to watching television.), meaning “is considered to emerge from the context-dependent interaction between a polysemic text and an interpretative reader” (Livingstone and Das 2), which invites to go beyond a literary criticism approach to the text, without substituting it with audience motivations by themselves. However, a limitation of the specific triangulation developed in the present paper, which might be overcome with further studies is the potential researchers bias when analyzing audience interpretations that might challenge the authors own expert reading of a media text.

Another feature of this study that necessitates caution, corresponds with the surprising generalization around students' apparent low capacity or willingness to recall specific examples of online video consumption linked to climate change. Precedent students' surveys by the authors (2017, 2018) revealed that the overexposure and the mode of consumption of YouTube videos often caused difficulties in remembering references to specific eco-media texts viewed in the online platform.⁵ Consequently, examples provided by students' reports, even with the limitation of low salience considering the entire sample, could be considered as memorable 'viral' pieces that are worthy objects of study. In turn, further systematic research considering improvements in the sampling strategy and the questionnaire design could help to better contextualize the importance of this kind of eco-videos within university students' choices.

Finally, while university students are not necessarily representative of the young population, Ireland has the highest proportion of young people with third-level qualifications across the EU, accounting for 60% of the total age profile (HEA). In any case, using a student population can be considered at least as representative as other commonly used sampling techniques, such as AMT (Schneider-Mayerson 477). Moreover, Media students in particular receive a disciplinary training that potentially enable a differential process of media reception, which must be also considered when positioning this study.⁶

Close reading of Prince Ea's *Dear Future Generations: Sorry*

This emotional direct-address to the audience begins with the image of a washed-out desert, as the celebrity black poet/rapper, dressed in a conservative well-cut suit, walks into frame and recounts his oral story, totally unadorned and enunciating direct to camera.

“Dear Future Generation

I think I speak for the rest of us when I say Sorry,
sorry that we left you our mess of a planet

Sorry that we were too caught up in our own doings to do something
Sorry, we listened to people who made excuses

To do nothing” (Ea).

He goes on to assert how his generation does not place enough value to the Earth – reinforcing the popular cliché of not valuing something until its gone - and explaining the origin and importance of forests for the global eco-system. A simple botany lesson is provided on how incredible such natural phenomena are in helping to produce breathable air and control pollution, store water, provide medicines and even food. Deforestation appears as the first action for which human's should apologize, especially when the reason is revealed as money, symbolized by a close-up of a hundred dollar bill. This form of greed is contrasted with the Native American attitude of stewardship of the land and making sure they leave it healthy for the next seven generations.

Animal extinction is raised as another consequence of giving priority to profit over life and the rapper performs emotional expressions of pity for such endangered species. Enjoyment of nature is also ruined by ocean pollution and other forms of destruction; a phenomenon which is paradoxically perceived as progress. Following pot-shots at Fox News as a leading denier of climate change, he challenged them to interview members of the displaced population in Bangladesh because of rising sea levels, or recalling politicians like Sarah Palin and her apparent love of the smells from fossil fuels, while inviting her to talk to kids in Beijing wearing pollution masks to go to schools. Overall, Prince Ea places the blame on audiences as well for not focusing on the major issue of our time.

All the time Prince Ea emphasizes the intergenerational angst and disappointment felt in not facing up to dealing with climate change, constantly repeating the mantra, “sorry that we left you our mess of a place”. Such a rhetorical strategy plays off the emotive power of invoking the ethics of climate injustice, used to emphasize how most older generations appear to do nothing, essentially because it will *only* affect future generations, which resonates with the ongoing student environmental protests movements' claims. Of course, new generational audiences and their group identity are most keenly targeted by such provocative sentiments, as the celebrity rapper reinforces this strategy, while

directly calling attention to the long-term fall-out, if such global environmental concerns are not urgently addressed.⁷

While it would be relatively easy as a result to reinforce a totally fatalistic message of despair to close this emotional plea for environmental transformation, instead the audience is afforded real hope and a clear direction for change. By changing the rap beat (at minute 3.36), Prince Ea reveals that this hopelessly devastated future is a fiction and we are still capable of changing that destiny. He reverts back to the present to pronounce with total conviction, “we can do something”. The appealing and hypnotic aural back-beat is silenced, as the rapper makes his evocative and emotional appeal. “We need to face up to the root of the problem... We should change”.

At the end of the music video, the performer stands facing his audiences – with no animated features now in view, but in a realistic wild nature setting – humbly appealing for active engagement to save the trees. After experiencing this very evocative and direct mini-narrative, the audience is afforded ‘behind the scenes’ footage of the artist’s (anthropological) journey to Africa. Here Prince Ea witnessed first-hand the results of human misuse of the landscape and especially the destruction of natural forests. He urges us all to join the global environmental struggle and support the website www.Standfortrees.org - set up to protect the rights of animals/humans.⁸ Unlike the artificiality of an actor on a stage, he uses his celebrity status to speak up for what needs to be done, without any obfuscation or the application of political rhetoric. Prince Ea speaks of the next (and hopefully better) ‘phase of humanity’, recalling political demands for top-down systemic transformation and rethinking of our actions and priorities *en masse*. Rather than politically spelling out such demands however, he simply foregrounds an emotional ‘call to arms’, while asking for a monetary contribution to save the trees.⁹

This simple storyline structure, which begins by calling out the problem and then clearly laying out the need to take responsibility and find pragmatic solutions, remains a core universal narrative structure and shows how new forms of spoken poetry like rap can help provoke such discursive engagement - even for the ‘casual reader’. Prince Ea uses all his communication and musical skills to make his video both appealing and engaging for his online audience. Recalling the need for good story-telling strategies discussed above (Stoknes), Prince Ea certainly makes his story personal, concrete, vivid, even extraordinary, while adopting a very engaging if simple use of rap beats and movements.

After an initial moment of concern, the strong and disempowering barrier of doom identified by Stoknes (*see also Moser; O’Neill; Nicholson Cole*) is reformulated and re-energized in this music video, as Morgan Freeman’s *Our Future* (2014) for example also dramatizes. Audiences need

environmental stories that do more than simply tell them what is wrong and further highlight the need to change behavior, while striving to provide workable solutions. By providing such a concrete ‘take away’ message and action point, audiences can immediately become active in their response - beyond a Pavlovian form of clicktivism - by further checking out the website and other related material to improve awareness of the issues under consideration. A geographically distant environmental project for most of the audience gets closer global attention through this on-line action.

All the while directly speaking to camera, his message is reinforced by words appearing on screen, coupled with animated images of trees and landscape. Such clear semiotic signifiers are consciously used to underpin and deepen the overall layering of the learning process, while helping to cohere the overall narrative structure of the environmental message. Recalling the storytelling nature of mass media and the bardic function of television, coupled with the hypnotic power of simple direct address communication, this YouTube video has co-opted a seemingly unsophisticated style to great effect. Furthermore, in spite of the sparse *mise-en-scene*, written words act as visual highlights to reinforce what is being vocalized and to dramatize its importance, both as rap poetry and towards underpinning its clear environmental agenda.

Across a number of his videos, the use of white papier-mâché images of trees¹⁰ remain a short-hand signifier and effective barometer of the precariousness of environmental health, as real organic and healthy trees are needlessly destroyed; all the while remaining the (creative imaginative) focus for life on the planet. Furthermore, the precarious future of polar bears and images of factories spewing out toxic fumes are re-presented in an artistic way, all providing fresh re-imagining of these well-worn environmental tropes. For example, as already signaled above, calling attention to a close-up image of a hundred-dollar bill, serves as a short-hand if crude signifier of the dangers of rampant consumer capitalism that is destroying the planet. Within the format of an elemental music video, the combined narrative trajectory of the story constantly symbolizes the commodification of everything of real value on the planet. Simply and most effectively speaking to his young audience using repetition, the rapper emotes how we can’t eat money and it will not sustain us.

This close textual reading uses well-honed critical media strategies mentioned above, calling on a full exploration of the audio-visual aesthetic tropes and strategies involving in creating the final music video text. But of course like all textual readings, what is emphasized or not can greatly affect the overall tenor of the analysis. Whether the viewer actually follows through with this form of active engagement and environmental learning is another matter that our subsequent focus groups will explore, noting our questionnaire responses are at best inconclusive in this regard.

Audience Perspectives on *Dear Future Generations: Sorry*

When asked to discuss this music video, the students clearly distinguish two sections of the online video: the spoken word video *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* (minutes 0:00 to 4:47) and the documentary epilogue (minutes 4:48 to 6:02) where Prince Ea makes a call to action to protect forests through contributions to the non-profit organisation ‘Stands for Trees’. Incidentally, some in our focus groups appreciated both sections, while many preferred one over the other, as being the most effective in communicating an environmental message, a combination that could explain why it has reached such large audiences.

The value of the futuristic first performance section is found in the centrality of visuals being “eye-catching”.¹¹ Several mention how “this delivers the message that is more digestible,”¹² especially by highlighting an “entirely barren place”¹³ which helped make “it very powerful”.¹⁴

Furthermore, instead of lyrics and even music, which is kept low-key in the background, audiences are encouraged to appreciate the undiluted message. Some highlight the apologizing approach that involves a *mea culpa*, along with the inclusion of the audience directly, by constantly mentioning ‘we’; it’s more like a “meditation”¹⁵ - both recalling the problem and the solution, which in turn recalls “a positive message”.¹⁶ In other words the narrative trajectory presents a direct address to humanity, instead of “beating about the bush”¹⁷ or just describing facts and data. According to several members of the focus groups, this provides “a strong message”¹⁸ emphasising how “we all need to act”.¹⁹ One member went so far as to suggest “it reminded me of a good Obama speech”²⁰ with its very evocative word choice and “trying to relate to you as a viewer”²¹ while calling on your sympathetic and empathetic nature. Otherwise, nobody alluded to the ethnicity of the performer, but rather focused on the intergenerational justice approach of Prince Ea, suggesting this “needs to be framed as the ‘older generations’ did this, and we need to solve it”.²²

The value of this final call to action was explained by several contributors as the fundamental importance of environmental communication in offering solutions, along with naming the problem and especially suggesting affordable steps in this process towards creating effective solutions. “Start small and then build up”²³ is considered an effective opening strategy, alongside an opportunity to check that “the celebrity is actually doing something and not only talking”²⁴ - while situated the debate in a realistic setting “made of real images of what is going on”²⁵ instead of being set-up within a fictional artifice, it is by all accounts most effectively “anchored in reality”.²⁶

Regarding the role of celebrities, when it comes to climate change the majority in the focus groups suggest that they should talk about it, since they have a large platform to reach global on line

audiences, including themselves (the students) and acknowledging that “celebrities are opinion leaders”.²⁷ They also function as gatekeeping along with friends on social media. “For our generation celebrities are influencers, like social media people, that’s what we look at and listen to. We don’t tend to watch the news or listen to radio, or read informed articles. Celebrities talking about climate change can make a difference”²⁸, emerged as a truism believed by most of the group in spite of being media students. This broad assertion was recognised as a given, by a consensus of both focus group members. Celebrities can certainly introduce the general topic of climate change into the conversation at least, as suggested by even the most sceptical contributors: “If 8 of the top 10 videos are all about climate change – this may not change a lot, but will get people talking about it”.²⁹

Probably not surprisingly, the media tend to influence young people’s behaviors, alongside (off-line) communication with parents and friends (Östman). Certainly, both focus groups unilaterally appeared to accept that celebrities have the potential power to influence behaviour beyond friends and family. But their influence depends on how feasible is the action they request, how trustworthy they are, (several students mentioned the importance of *trust* in engaging with online media celebrities); how gullible individuals might be and eventually the alliances they could build with other celebrities to eventually make a stronger or more salient message (like the Me2 movement).

Regarding the contradiction between being a central part of the consumer capitalist culture and presenting themselves as climate activists and celebrities; no student in the focus groups apparently considered this is a problem or a major constraint. Being pragmatic, the end goal justifies the means and as one student asserted - albeit somewhat off the research agenda of this paper - “we can’t expect people to leave every pleasure”.³⁰ In many ways the focus groups empirically validated a common sense, pragmatic approach concerning the intrinsic power of YouTube celebrities, in assisting with the broad agenda of climate change communication through their online media texts.

Conclusions

This exploration of influential online videos with regards to climate change from the perspective of undergraduate university students confirms the power of celebrities as influencers or opinion leaders, from worldwide stars such as DiCaprio to microcelebrities like Prince Ea. Some in our focus groups even highlighted how politicians, much less scientists, do not even come into the picture as effective influencers on their overall perceptions. Media, in their various manifestations are the channel through which influence is exerted and in promoting ‘affective identification’ on bigger audiences. Each YouTube celebrity creates a community of followers or fans where the collective

factor is present, even though the media consumption act is basically individual, thanks to new ubiquitous digital technologies. The ethnographic approach to the observation of guided conversation confirmed this naturalization of celebrity culture and the growing power of online social platforms on students' knowledge and emotions regarding environmental issues in particular.

Within this celebrity phenomenon, one could probably conclude that the use of persuasive rap-poetry in *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* straddles both trajectories mentioned by Priest in her assessment of environmental communication. Prince Ea is certainly not afraid to provide information in a persuasive and convincing manner, while always attempting to convince audiences using a range of cognitive, emotional and aesthetic strategies, (yet incidentally as we found in our focus groups, this is not always fully appreciated by audiences) around the need to actively engage with environmental problems. The need for concrete solutions that many students demand is addressed as well in his epilogue, almost as if the video was designed to suit all expectations. What is clear, as in the most recurrent influential videos referenced by the students, is the position of the (celebrity) speaker with regards to the primary importance of addressing the global challenge of climate change, which of course has to be faced up to head on.

The huge appeal of celebrity culture online, coupled with its very direct storytelling strategies needs to be deployed in innovative ways, as new media formats are co-opted towards addressing climate change. All the while acknowledging the sometimes-contractionary nature of conventional and stereotypical environmental images that continue to have a place in communicating such global problems. Incidentally, there also remains a place for dramatic apocalyptic narratives to help warn against future disaster.

Long established and innovative strategies are always needed to speak to audiences, while also calling upon progressive aesthetic formats and alternate creative voices. Some research suggests that we need more creative imaginaries to get the message(s) across, beyond the clichés of polar bears on ice-flows and factories emitting toxic fumes, while others suggest that this can possibly be counter-productive. Somewhat surprisingly, it was suggested by some in the focus groups that Prince Ea's animated washed out images of a tree-less landscape, coupled with close-up papier-mâché representations, appear to work best for a much younger audience. Maybe together with a broad range of audio-visual media, such creative and emotive stimuli could usefully be integrated as a bank of audio-visual stimuli across formal (second as well as third-level) environmental educational curricula.

One could suggest that it is incumbent on artists, alongside educators at all levels, to both question reality, but also to try and posit alternative solutions that inspire audiences and citizens to become active in this environmental struggle themselves and hopefully take back control. This remains

a key factor embedded in the literature (Bamberg & Moser et al, etc.), while at the same time, providing a coherent environmental world-view remains the primary objective connecting such popular videos in helping to overcome some of the various communication barriers discussed earlier (Stoknes). Well-worn signifiers like tress and money can also be re-purposed at a basic semiotic and allegorical level to call attention to a broad range of environmental issues and appeal to audiences who are not well versed within such discourses. What more can a music video do – or any work of art for that matter – than hopefully suggest personal or political responses, or at least actively engage with our cognitive, emotional and empathetic nature in responding to such dilemmas. This especially applies to the complex multi-faceted problems of climate change, while recognizing the power of speaking directly and using emotive language.

All the while investigation should recognize the pervasive ideological criticism of popular cultural and media studies approaches to generic music video and even platforms like YouTube, as simply promoting a ‘business as usual’ consumption model that coincidentally induces a more subtle forms of greenwashing (*see* Moore, Miller). Speaking across so many contradictory agendas and paradoxes, what audiences choose to view through an often anti-environmental media landscape needs to be constantly recognized and such dangers called out. As part of the main video, one might become somewhat cynical for instance on discovering that this apparent radical critique is funded by a number of paid-for advertisements, which no doubt supports that pro-business mindset. But then commerce is often necessary to enable such powerful media artefacts gain a global platform in the first place. This commercially-driven media paradox is incidentally mentioned by a number of respondents in our focus groups discussed later.

When it comes to the complexity of environmental agendas, cultural artefacts and mediated texts have historically reflected and shaped the contested existing visions around human-nature relationships (Hiltner; Parham). However, neither textual analysis by itself, nor audience motivations can fully explain the phenomenon of reception and meaning construction. Far greater understanding of the power of mediated texts is demanded through further research and scholarship, coupled with an empirical appreciation of how audiences consume such texts; alongside evaluating their granular interaction with an ever-changing society and global community. The iteration between the empirical audience exploration, the expert eco-reading, and the most insightful explanations of the students interviewed are helpful in supporting both nuanced and triangulated interpretations.

Together with more comparative analysis of opinion formation driven by media stimuli, a longitudinal examination of students relationship with climate change online, while exploring their use of audiovisual media might further help to explain their fascination with the viral YouTube

video/celebrity culture and in turn help to tease out more medium and long term educative possibilities and processes for effective environmental literacy development. At least using the readily available affordances of a music video format and YouTube as an open platform, encourages potential dialogue and also provides a practical means for interactive engagement, which remains a useful first step towards developing new modes of environmental literacy. As some respondents in our focus groups suggest, such a video might potentially work well as part of a formal environmental education program, while helping to develop a corpus of new media texts for fruitful analysis and discussion.

By all accounts, extensive and large scale cross-country audience analysis around new modes of understanding the effect (and affect) of new media is needed to test such assertions and uncover its implications for extending critical media engagement into new spheres of environmental literacy and promoting active engagement.

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¹ These factors include Distance - where stories remains remote for the majority of us; Doom - which can only be addressed by loss, cost and sacrifice and avoiding the topic; Dissonance - where style of living, including for instance flying and driving conflicts with environmental demands and consequently the message backfires; Denial - when we negate, ignore, or otherwise avoid acknowledging the unsettling facts about climate change, finding refuge from fear and guilt; and iDentity - where we filter news through our professional and cultural identity, looking for information that confirms our existing values and notions and filter what challenges them.

² Most usefully, Stoknes (2015) believes we should begin to talk about climate in terms of - insurance, health, security, preparedness, and most of all, ‘opportunity’, while making it part of everyday social and political discourse.

³ Somerhalder and the ISF draw on their environmental appeals are the same values Somerhalder enacts in his social media posts with fans and the same values he enacts in his performance of his on-screen character, which in turn can lead to and most certainly invite slippage (Hunting and Hinck 2017: 442).

⁴ Other eco-videos recalled as much as *Dear Future Generations*, *Sorry were: Bill Nye’s Climate Change 101*, a UN’ short film voiced by Morgan Freeman *Our Future*, the documentary *This Changes Everything* – sponsored by the well-known political analyst Naomi Klein, author of the book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. Climate* - and *Cowspiracy*, along with *The best speech you will ever hear*, a recorded - and multiply translated – dissertation by the animal rights American activist Gary Yourofsky who is linked to PETA.

⁵ In 2017 round, for instance, the references obtained surveying Irish and Uruguayan Media students pointed to the leading voice of the media content and the media channels which distribute such stories (25%), as much as to specific videos (26%), while another 49% of respondents could not provide any references to influential media messages regarding climate change.

⁶ The 2017’ responses from Irish Media students to the exploratory survey conducted by Brereton were tested a year later through a survey of Irish and Uruguayan undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines, who answered a revised 22-items survey questionnaire (see appendix). The randomized sample of 60 students included equal numbers of respondents across each of the following four groups: Irish Media Students, Uruguayan Media Students, Irish non-Media Students (Education, Business, Agriculture, Math, Engineering, Law and Government) and Uruguayan non-Media Students (Chemistry, Law, Design, Education, Accountancy, Medicine, Social Work). These 2018 responses suggest that the 2017 survey results for Irish Media Students were not necessarily just specific to this group, but remain consistent across other university students’ perceptions, in spite of diverse disciplinary, institutional, national or even regional contexts. Focus groups with young adults conducted by Gómez in Ireland and Uruguay during 2019, as part of her PhD fieldwork, also confirm the preference for *Dear Future Generations*, *Sorry* over a wide sample of eco-videos.

⁷ The global online environmental phenomenon of the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg is having a major impact at present on new generations of students.

⁸ A worrying bio-diversity report out at the end of October 2018, highlights the global scale of the problem, which of course is directly related to climate change.

⁹ ‘I have no solutions to (achieving resolution to climate change for instance) this problem faced in this way. Personally, I’m an artist looking to reach the hearts and minds of individuals. I believe that if we can change the individual then the culture will

follow. When individuals truly know themselves, they do not have to “try” and do or be good anymore. The only feature that we know is “good”. Exploitation becomes non-existent, racial, political and gender discrimination (and environmental harm) falls away as well’.

Prince Ea’s presence among the politically curious and young was resurrected again later (summer 2017) with the release of *Why I think this World Should End* – a poetic collection of observations – most, if not all of which will strike a nerve in anyone who has been paying attention to recent political events. His discussions range from economics to socio-economics to popular history and beyond, leveraging his life experience, self-teaching and honours degree in anthropology. His words lend depth and provide background to these issues, poking holes in the general consensus and offering productive methods of rethinking everything. He is urging each of us, on the most micro of levels, to simply rethink where we are at, which by all accounts is not a bad pedagogical strategy to embrace in itself.

¹⁰ Recalling the iconic imagery in the original *Blade Runner* and the paper images which displayed the replicants power of ‘creative imaginary’ (see environmental reading by Brereton 2005).

¹¹ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

¹² Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

¹³ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

¹⁴ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

¹⁵ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

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²⁷ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

²⁸ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

²⁹ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.

³⁰ Participant of focus group, February 13, 2019.