

# ROCKING THE VOTE: A PILOT STUDY EXPLORING CELEBRITY INFLUENCE IN MODERN POLITICS

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## Abstract

Star power can sometimes disrupt traditional democratic leadership by prioritizing fame and dramaturgy over election and accountability. Nevertheless, when electoral and star power align, they can synergistically bolster each other, granting significant political leverage to celebrity aspirants, often surpassing the achievements of conventional politicians. However, it remains uncertain whether celebrity or political experience better predicts national leadership potential. To address this question, 251 UK undergraduate students participated in an online study, rating the leadership potential and personality traits of 40 images of UK/European politicians, US politicians, and celebrities that were shown in rapid presentation or a 'thin slice' paradigm. Of the faces shown only six were recognised, including experienced politicians like Barack Obama, Boris Johnson, Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and one celebrity, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, whose perceived leadership potential equalled that of Biden and Obama. Hierarchical regression analysis identified certain personality traits as common predictors of leadership potential across all six individuals. Notably, Dwayne Johnson exhibited greater positive traits and leadership potential than seasoned politicians, highlighting the study's significance in understanding the interplay between celebrity and effective leadership perception among potential voters.

## Introduction

In modern times, elections have become heavily televised events, integral to the celebration of democracy. Political parties capitalize on the opportunities provided by television to connect with voters. However, the overuse of celebrity status nowadays often overshadows traditional leadership traits, romanticizing fame and theatrics as alternatives to the electoral process. Still, the convergence of star power and electoral influence can be beneficial. Being a celebrity opens significant opportunities in politics for individuals who seek unconventional paths to leadership positions. Thus, celebrity status grants candidate's powerful tools to achieve success in public leadership through non-traditional means (Wheeler, 2013). The concept of 'leadership' and identifying how different cues, specifically faces, influence perception of leadership is the focus of this study. By focusing on the role that facial displays of both celebrities and politicians have in influencing the perceptions of their leadership potential, further insight into the reciprocal impacts of celebrity on politics and politics on celebrity can be made.

The impact of celebrity on politics can best be seen with its influence on mobilizing followers through actions like verbal support or even financial contributions (e.g., Street, 2019). Boris Johnson exemplified this approach during the 2019 UK general election, effectively engaging audiences with his performative style (Senior et al., 2021). However, to influence politics the celebrity activist must balance factual knowledge with public image to garner the credibility needed for effective persuasion and mobilization. Their paths to fame vary, with some earning recognition through genuine achievements and using such visibility to attain significant positions of political influence as seen in examples like Jesse Ventura (Governor of Minnesota 1999-2003, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Governor of California 2003-2011).

An alternate view proposes that power may derive from sheer popularity rather than cultural influence alone. While US Actor, Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson boasts global recognition as a movie star, Jesse Ventura, a former celebrity comparable to Johnson, achieved political prominence but lacked the same ongoing ubiquity. Thus, Johnson would likely hold a distinct advantage over Ventura in the realm of celebrity activism purely due to his polished public image and continued widespread fame (e.g., Ward, 2019).

Not all celebrities venturing into politics rely solely on their fame, but all encounter challenges without the direct mandate of an election. To address this gap celebrities employ diverse tactics that leverage their status to ensure alignment with established organizations or policy (Farrell, 2020). Some, like Irish singer, Bono gain legitimacy through awards alternatively,

figures like Bob Geldof adopt more confrontational approaches, sparking debate about the effectiveness of their strategies in engaging the public (Hague, Street & Savigny, 2008). As mainstream politics increasingly adopts these strategies, a new brand of populism blurs the line between politics and celebrity, thriving in today's heavily televised political sphere (Wood, Corbett & Flinders, 2016). Figures like Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, despite contrasting with more traditional politicians like Michel Barnier or Joe Biden, achieve global fame through controversial actions, that may be reminiscent of celebrities like Bob Geldof and others (James, 2021).

However, politicians aiming to harness celebrity influence must go beyond mere fame and cultivate the perception of authenticity in their actions – a skill that experienced actors would be able to convey with ease (Fieschi, 2019). The belief that a politician is authentic in their campaign behaviour can have a significant impact on the eventual outcome of a subsequent election (Luebke, 2021). Yet despite the benefits of perceived authenticity there remains a gap in understanding how performative behaviours of politicians can convey the root personality markers like consistency, competence, credibility, and imperfection, shaping voter perceptions and political communication (see e.g., Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019).

We have previously argued that the performative dimension of political discourse has been overlooked and warrants further scholarly inquiry (Bucy et al., 2020). Additionally, despite its importance, research on the impact of politicians' celebrity status on voter perceptions of leadership suitability remains surprisingly scant, yet this is a crucial aspect that drives perceived authenticity in electoral decision-making (Enli, 2024). Contemporary political effectiveness is depicted as a performance, positioning populist leaders as performers, voters as the audience, and media platforms as the stage (Moffitt, 2016). If Moffitt's conceptualization holds true amidst the intricacies of modern politics, individual's adept at crafting media personas may outshine traditional counterparts with equivalent experience in politics.

In this pilot study the broader question is also explored and that is to what degree does celebrity impact the perception of national leadership, if at all? Can we distinguish celebrity from perceptions of leadership, and vice versa? Celebrity status alone can indeed sway electoral outcomes but it is not known how such political success is achieved (Grbeša, Vuković, & Šalaj, 2024). This study delves into how the perception of images of both politicians and celebrities influence assessments of their leadership potential at the national scale.

Perceiving complex social traits like leadership potential is vital, given its impact on social dynamics. Research shows us that we are adept at swiftly assessing leadership effectiveness

through a person's facial display so much so that young children who have had no direct experience with the political system can readily identify successful leaders from a single snapshot of a person's face (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009). Despite the significance of the face in conveying leadership, questions linger regarding universal facial displays of leadership and the role of different facial components in driving its perception (Wang, Li & Praino, 2024). Does a familiar face signal leadership potential more effectively than prior leadership experience, or is a successful track record more persuasive to voters? Is there a universally recognized facial display of leadership, or does culture influence perception? The idea that recognition of these traits might be innate raises the intriguing possibility of a universally understood signal for leadership.

From fleeting glimpses of individuals, observers can discern intricate social traits, making nuanced judgments with remarkable ease. Even silent video clips enable swift assessments of traits like leadership competence (Rule & Ambady, 2010). These quick judgments predict real-world outcomes such as increased sales revenue or student grades etc (Hall, Ahearne & Sujan, 2015; Begrich, Kuger, Klieme & Kunter, 2021). Our ability at making precise judgments in these so called 'thin-slice' scenarios enables swift assessment of social situations based on others' behaviours and traits. Consequently, such judgments serve as a potent mechanism for understanding the social landscape, being rapidly and automatically deployed (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992).

The literature above prompts a number of questions that would ideally be addressed by a 'thin-slice' paradigm. Firstly, what is the extent of the relationship between celebrity status and leadership abilities? Is there a distinct link between leadership qualities and leadership potential based solely on celebrity status? Additionally, does celebrity status impact perceptions of leadership? The following experiment was carried out to address two competing hypotheses. If leadership competence predominantly influences leadership assessments, experienced political leaders would be considered to possess high leadership potential, with personality traits playing a significant role in predicting such leadership judgments. However, if celebrity status primarily shapes perceptions of leadership, individuals who are famous, irrespective of political experience, would likely receive higher ratings in terms of leadership potential compared to individuals with political experience.

## **METHODS**

**Participants:** Two hundred and fifty-one participants were recruited from the undergraduate population at a major UK University. All indicated that they were right-handed and a majority

indicated they were female (21=male, 2=other). The participant ages ranged from 18-52 yrs with an average of 19yrs. All participants were enrolled as first year undergraduates on a B.Sc (Hons) Degree programme, took part for course credit and provided informed consent prior to engaging with the procedures. All procedures described here received institutional IRB approval (Ref 1441).

**Trait selection:** Prior to this study a separate group of 91 individuals (71 females/20 males) were shown the labels of the key personality traits and asked to indicate which of the traits best corresponded to being a 'great *national* leader'. Here participants were shown ten labels i.e., Competent, Familiar, Generous, Intelligent, Credible, Strong, Caring, Trustworthy, Aggressive and Dominant and asked to indicate (from 0 to 100 the extent to which they believe a great national leader should possess such traits. To ascertain responses from a representative age range participants were recruited via a snowball sampling technique which resulted in approximately an equal spread of ages (40 individuals were aged <20 yrs and 47 were aged >21 of which 21 indicated that they were older than 30 yrs). Of these trait judgments only five scored above 80% concordance these being Competence (86%), Intelligence (86), Credibility (85%) and Trustworthiness (90%) and Caring or Consideration (82%) and achieved a reliability score ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

**Stimuli:** Photographic material was collected from the public domain and edited to remove all background information. Images were grey scaled and presented on an isoluminant background. Celebrities such as actors Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham as well celebrities who subsequently became politicians, Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger were included. A further group of American politicians were also included consisting of Donald Trump, Michael Bennet, Marianne Williamson, Pete Buttigieg, Tulsi Gabbard, Tim Ryan, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, Eric Swalwell, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Julian Castro, John Delaney, John Hickenlooper, Jay Insley, Kirsten Gillibrand, Kamala Harris, Andrew Yang, Bill DeBlasio, Amy Klobuchar, Barack Obama. Finally a third group of non US politicians consisting of Michel Barnier, Ian Blackford, Jair Bolsonaro, Nigel Farage, Theresa May, Jessica Phillips, Vladimir Putin, Keir Starmer, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn and Joanna Swinson. All the individuals selected to form the stimulus set were identified as they were currently heavily featured on the broadcast media at the time of testing and represented a cross mix of individuals who would be recognisable to the UK based cohort as they featured significantly on TV at the time of testing with the US politicians serving as control group of material. The celebrity non-politicians were selected randomly and consisted of individuals who had political experience (Ventura, Schwarzenegger) and those who didn't (Statham, Johnson).

**Procedure:** Following the collection of consent each participant was sent a unique URL to an online study where all the images were presented. Prior to the presentation of the stimuli all participants took part in a practice trial in which an image of the former Australian premier, Malcolm Turnbull, was centrally displayed for 4 seconds that was preceded by a fixation cross displayed for 1 second. Following the presentation of the image participants were asked to indicate the measure for leadership potential (i.e., to what extent do you think that the person on the screen would be a good leader?) here they were asked to make their response for 1 (not likely at all) - 10 (very likely). Immediately after the completion of this question they were then asked to judge the image on the ten personality traits as described above. Again response was made on a ten-point scale 1 (not at all) – 10 (extremely) in response to the question 'I think the person in the picture is: Competent, Familiar, Generous, Credible, Strong, Caring, Trustworthy, Aggressive or Dominant). Both leadership potential and the personality traits question sets appeared centrally on the screen and participants progressed only when they had completed each item. Upon completion of the practice trial each participant was then asked if they would like to proceed to the main trial or to repeat the practice trial again.

On initiating the main trial, they were informed that they were about to be shown 40 faces on the screen. Participants were asked to respond to the leadership potential and personality trait

questions after each face. They were told that while each of the faces will be displayed for a very short period of time the completion of the questions were not timed and will only progress after they had submitted a response. All participants were instructed to take part in the study with a full screen view on their monitors.

Each face was shown in a single trial that consisted of a centrally displayed fixation cross and then the single grey scaled facial image (see Fig.1). After making a response on each of the 40 faces the participants were then informed that they would be shown each face again and then asked to indicate how well they felt they recognised each of the individuals i.e., 1.(not at all) to 10 (very much). To ensure task compliance at this stage they were also invited to write the person's name. Participants could progress through this stage in their own time and were informed that response durations were not recorded.

### **Analysis:**

So as to control for potential differences in browser refresh rates that may effect the presentation duration of the images all image durations that occurred before 500 ms and after 1500 msec were rejected (< 5 %). Average scores for the leadership potential items were collated across the three main stimuli groups (non US and US politicians as well as celebrities). Leadership potential was calculated as the average score of this single question across the trials for each of the three stimuli categories. Differences across the groups were examined with a repeated measures ANOVA and the relationships between the perceived personality traits and leadership potential was considered with multiple regression where appropriate. Throughout the analysis alpha was 5% and effect sizes are reported throughout as are Durbin-Watson values (DW).

## **RESULTS**

Repeated measures ANOVA carried out to examine the differences in leadership potential revealed a significant main effect of facial category  $F(2,500)=97.51$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.28$  with celebrities receiving the highest judgements of leadership potential  $MN=6.5$ ,  $SE= 0.18$  then followed by US politicians  $MN=5.82$ ,  $SE=0.73$  and then the politicians in the non US category  $MN=5.31$ ,  $SE=0.80$ , (all pairwise contrasts  $p<0.001$ ). The recognition data was then used to restrict the analysis to those individuals who were most recognisable (those who scored  $>8/10$  in response to the question 'how well do you think you recognise this person?'). The imposition of this criteria resulted in six individuals being recognised i.e., Former US Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson as well as US Actor, Dwayne Johnson (all  $> 90\%$  recognisability) the current US and Russian Presidents Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin (both at 80%). The judgments for leadership potential differed across these

individuals with Obama being ranked the highest (87%) followed by Dwayne Johnson (72%), Biden (64%), Putin (56%) with Trump and Boris Johnson both receiving (42%). Here all differences were significant at  $p=0.001$  except the contrast between Trump and Boris Johnson ( $p=n/s$ ).

Differences in trait judgments were examined again with a repeated measures ANOVA and revealed a subsequent main effect of the individuals  $F(5, 1105)=233.22$ ,  $P<0.001$   $\eta^2=0.5$  and the traits  $F(4,884)=128.36$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.36$  as well as a significant interaction between these two factors  $F(20, 4420)=42.75$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta^2=0.16$ .

Interrogation of the main effect of the individual faces revealed that Obama secured the highest ratings of all personality traits combined ( $MN=72$ ,  $SE=1.54$ ) followed by Dwayne Johnson ( $MN=66.35$ ,  $SE=1.38$ ) and then Biden ( $MN=47.87$ ,  $SE=1.5$ ) Putin ( $MN=36.45$ ,  $SE=1.45$ ) followed by Boris Johnson ( $MN=29.14$ ,  $SE=1.45$ ) and Trump ( $MN=26.03$ ,  $SE=1.41$ ). Here all pairings were significant at  $p<0.001$  except Trump vs Boris Johnson whose traits judgments were again equivalent ( $p=n/s$ ).

When interrogating the interaction between the facial categories and traits the analysis of Dwayne Johnson's traits revealed that he was judged to be more considerate than each of the other traits. Judgments of competency and trustworthiness were equivalent ( $p=n/s$ ) but greater than judgements of credibility and intelligence (all  $p<0.001$ ). Credibility and intelligence were also equivalent to each other ( $p=n/s$ ).

Trait judgments for competence and intelligence for Obama were equivalent to each other ( $p=n/s$ ) and higher than judgments of intelligence ( $p=0.03$ ). While judgments of trustworthiness and consideration were equivalent ( $p=n/s$ ) they were also significantly lower than the other traits ( $p=0.001$ ). All individual trait judgments for Putin were significantly different from each other ( $p<0.002$ ) except for judgments of consideration and trustworthiness ( $p=n/s$ ).

Boris Johnson's trait judgments for competency and intelligence were equivalent to each other ( $p=n/s$ ). While credibility and consideration were also equivalent ( $p=n/s$ ) and greater than trustworthiness. While Trump's traits judgments of trustworthiness and consideration were equivalent to each other they were also significantly less than all other traits ( $p=0.001$ ). Judgments of competency and intelligence were also equivalent to each other and greater than judgments of the other traits (all  $p<0.02$ ). Finally, Biden's trait judgments of competency and intelligence were equivalent ( $p=n/s$ ) and greater than all other traits scores (all  $p<0.01$ ).



## Leadership traits and Leadership Potential

A forward stepwise linear regression was used to explore the outcome of each trait as a potential predictor of leadership potential for each of the six individuals who achieved >80% recognizably. At each step a threshold criterion of alpha at 5% was applied to set the total number of variables entered each model.

For the analysis of Obama's leadership potential perceived traits of intelligence ( $\beta=0.27$ ,  $t=3.21$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) competence ( $\beta=0.32$ ,  $t=4.03$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and trustworthiness ( $\beta=0.01$ ,  $t=0.17$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) significantly predicted his leadership potential  $F(3, 249)=89.65$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\text{adj } R^2=0.51$ ,  $DW = 2.21$ . Biden's leadership potential was also significantly predicted  $F(3,246)=116.45$ ,  $p<0.001$   $\text{adj } R^2=0.58$ ,  $DW=2.00$  by the same perceived traits of intelligence ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $t=4.68$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), competence ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $t=4.99$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and trustworthiness ( $\beta=0.11$ ,  $t=2.01$ ,  $p=0.05$ ). While Trump's leadership potential was predicted by perceived traits of competence ( $\beta=0.65$ ,  $t=12.09$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and consideration ( $\beta=0.14$ ,  $t=2.65$ ,  $p=0.008$ )  $F(2,231)=142.44$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\text{adj } R^2=0.55$ ,  $DW=1.74$ .

The perceived traits of competency ( $\beta=0.64$ ,  $t=11.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and trustworthiness also predicted Boris Johnson's leadership potential  $F(2,238)=140.39$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\text{adj } R^2=0.53$ ,  $DW=1.96$ . While judgments of Putin's leadership potential were significantly predicted  $F(2,235)=131.01$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\text{adj } R^2=0.52$ ,  $DW=2.07$  by perceived traits of competency ( $\beta=0.57$ ,  $t=9.16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and credibility ( $\beta=0.20$ ,  $t=3.29$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Finally, US Actor Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson's perceived traits of competency ( $\beta=0.50$ ,  $t=8.04$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and credibility ( $\beta=0.21$ ,  $t=3.47$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) significantly predicted his perceived potential as a leader  $F(2, 250)=99.37$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\text{adj } R^2=0.44$ ,  $DW=1.71$ .

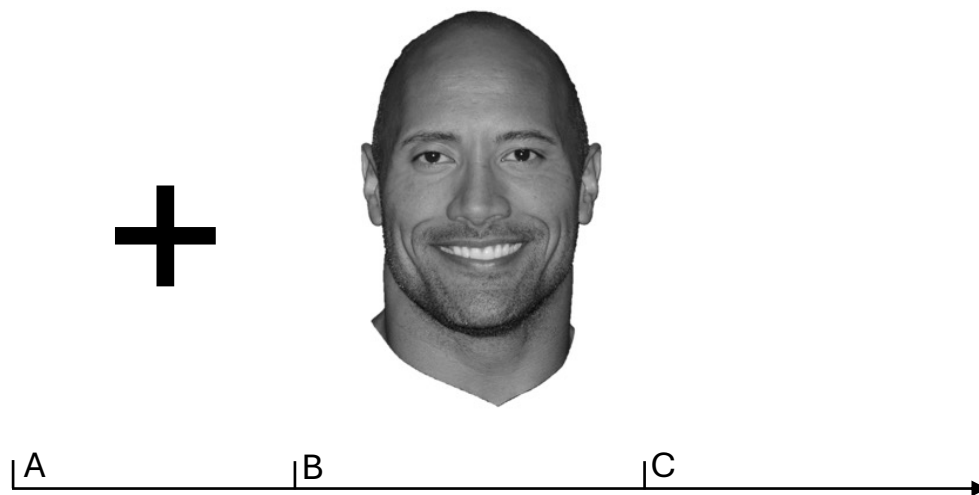


Figure 1: A single thin slice trial. A fixation cross was first presented for 1 sec (A) which was followed immediately by a single grey scaled facial image for 1 second (B). Following this the questions on leadership potential and personality traits were shown and remained on the screen until a response was made (C).

## DISCUSSION

In this pilot study, we explored the relationship between celebrity and leadership, testing competing hypotheses centered on the role that perceived authenticity may have on judgements of leadership potential. This area of study is salient as within the modern political landscape, both politicians and celebrities experience comparable media exposure, yet the precise connection between celebrity and leadership remains ambiguous.

To investigate this relationship, an online thin-slice paradigm was devised, displaying faces to participants for brief durations. While such paradigms are common in cognitive psychology, this online delivery method represents a novel approach. Any variations in browser display rates were addressed by restricting responses to facial stimuli within a 1-second window, consistent with previous laboratory studies (e.g., Senior et al, 2020). The flexibility of online delivery allows for future exploration of presentation time effects on facial stimuli, facilitating a deeper understanding of the nuanced signal properties of the human face.

The six individuals who were recognized i.e., Barack Obama, Dwayne Johnson, Boris Johnson, and Donald Trump all achieved the highest recognizability scores at 90%. Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin had slightly lower scores, each with 80% recognizability. Here it is clear that despite the prevalence of modern politics in global media, not all politicians or even celebrities enjoy universal recognition. This was further exemplified in the findings from the study where the British cohort failed to recognize the former British prime minister, Theresa

May, more than Boris Johnson. Scholarly analyses of Johnson's media persona consistently highlight his deliberate and distinct performative style as being carefully constructed and highly effective in ensuring media coverage (Senior et al., 2021). The results of our pilot work would reinforce this observation, suggesting that Johnson's media persona effectively aids in garnering voter recognition.

Effective media campaigning can also be evidenced by the recognition disparity between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. Despite both figures being prominently featured, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Zelensky received less recognition. The conflict in Ukraine had global ramifications, increasing the cost of household goods worldwide. Consequently, Putin, portrayed as responsible for the rise in living costs, may have inadvertently gained more media exposure due to this, rather than through his unique performative style (Liadze et al., 2023). It is worth comparing the potential media value of such exposure to that of the current incumbent of The Whitehouse, President Joe Biden who was recognised at an equivalent level to that of Putin.

The most intriguing result from this pilot study is that Dwayne Johnson was the only celebrity to achieve recognizability on par with experienced politicians like Barack Obama and Boris Johnson. In contrast, globally familiar individuals like Arnold Schwarzenegger and the UK-known actor Jason Statham did not reach the same level of recognizability as Johnson. Additionally, Johnson's recognizability surpassed that of current US President Biden and Russian President Putin. Not only does this highlight Johnson's unique status in popular culture they underscore the significant impact of his public presence compared to other celebrities and politicians.

Dwayne Johnson's recognizability may be attributed to his meticulously constructed media persona, rooted in his wrestling career. As "The Rock," Johnson engaged in "Kayfabe," a wrestling style that dramatizes events, storylines, feuds, and rivalries as authentic (Barthes, 2005). This form of professional wrestling involves creating and maintaining wrestler personas and character motivations both inside and outside the ring (Warden, 2013). The consistency and authenticity of this portrayal have significantly enhanced his public image. Johnson's success demonstrates the powerful impact of a well-crafted and sustained media presence (Ward, 2013).

Given that "The Rock" shares recognizability with Barack Obama and Boris Johnson, one could argue that his early experience in Kayfabe wrestling provided a unique training ground for contemporary celebrity, leading to his global recognition as a movie star. However, The Rock is notable for more than just his recognizability. Analysis of personality traits revealed

that Dwayne Johnson and Barack Obama received equally high overall judgments. Despite their high recognizability, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump received the lowest trait scores overall. Biden and Putin ranked below Obama and The Rock but above Boris Johnson and Donald Trump.

The analysis of leadership potential showed that Obama and Dwayne Johnson were judged to be equally capable leaders. While Obama's high ratings in this aspect were expected given his two-term presidency and Nobel Prize, it's notable that "The Rock" received comparable judgments. This suggests a significant level of public perception regarding his potential for leadership, that may indicate broader societal attitudes towards celebrity influence.

Dwayne Johnson's philanthropic activities and his cultivated "nice guy" image could have also contributed to his perception as an effective leader (Eells, 2018). Successful politicians have historically recognized the importance of maintaining a positive reputation and have endeavoured to craft such personas (Bell, 2013). Even Boris Johnson's distinctive performative style might be interpreted as an effort to foster an amiable and congenial image (Beck, 2023). This suggests that public perception of leadership effectiveness may be influenced not only by policy positions but also by personal demeanour and public persona.

This explanation partially aligns with Moffitt's theory of mediated authenticity, suggesting that positive observer accounts result when the audience perceives a person in a positive light. However, according to Moffitt, this theory would only apply if the audience indeed perceived the individual positively; Boris Johnson, as previously discussed, did not evoke such perceptions (Curtice, 2020). Authenticity is the cornerstone of 'The Rock's' wrestling persona and central to his celebrity image. Kayfabe performance wrestling nurtures a believable and genuine personality that resonates with the audience, fostering a strong connection (Dyer, 1991). 'The Rocks' expertise in generating such authenticity contributed significantly to his enduring popularity and success in both wrestling and entertainment and now highlights his potential as a national leader.

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