

A Rhetorical Analysis of  
*Fix My Life by Iyanla Vanzant:*  
*How Counselors Carry Out Rhetorical Actions*

Tracy Davis

Longwood University

Dr. Guler

, ENG-400

10/18/2018

Iyanla Vanzant is a motivational speaker, author, lawyer, spiritual teacher, and well-known life coach. Vanzant, Iyanla is most famous today for her show called *Iyanla: Fix My Life* that airs on the Oprah Winfrey Network on Saturday's and takes place in rental homes throughout the client's community. In this show, Iyanla is a life coach for all individuals including celebrities, which as well take place in rental homes. Iyanla does this by making sure she is doing her job as a counselor and giving advice to her clients through her prior knowledge. This paper will go over a rhetorical analysis of how Iyanla provides counseling services as a rhetorical action and how rhetorical strategies play a role during counseling services. Iyanla builds her credibility by going over her personal/business characteristics stated above, in her opening credits, using her own knowledge of prior history, continuously engaging emotional appeals, and using terms with examples for logical appeals. Towards the end of episode 505, Iyanla gives feedback on whether her services were effective for the couple and if they continued to use her strategies. Next, I will be describing the episode I will be analyzing.

### **Description of Artifact**

Episode 505 season 5 of *Iyanla Fix My Life* is titled "*Basketball Lies: Brandi and Jason Maxiell*"; this episode is about a former NBA star and his reality star wife. The goal for Iyanla in this episode is to examine if their toxic relationship can be rebuilt or if it is time to end their marriage. Iyanla carried out her goals by being firm and in detail about herself and what her job

is for those individuals “I am here for you” (Vanzant, 2018). Throughout this episode, Iyanla is questioning the couple about why they need her services; she does this by asking questions about past and present issues. Iyanla identifies a key thing during her counseling services, which state she is there because you need her (Vanzant, 2018). If you do not want to cooperate with her services, she is more than happy to leave (Vanzant, 2018). Brandi and Jason have a hard time expressing themselves to Iyanla, but as the show goes on by the end they are able to have a mutual relationship.

### Methods

This section will describe the framework that will be used in analyzing the artifact. Heinrich’s described the big three appeals as “arguments by character, logic, and emotion and gave them three terms *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*” (2017, p. 39). Argument by character (*ethos*) can appear to the persuader’s look’s, credentials, and behavior; learning to be persuasive. For example, students are more likely to take advice from a professional (teacher, supervisor, ETC.) before taking advice from their peers. Why? Because those people have *ethos* over their peers; they are more likely to give a knowledgeable argument versus peers. Argument by (*logos*) is taking what the audience is thinking and making the argument using credible sources; the brainy one (Heinrichs, 2017, p. 39). For example, an individual’s son wants to wear an all-black outfit with a long sleeve shirt during the summer time. The parents explain to the son it is summer and if the child decides to wear all black, they are going to get hot. The son than changes his outfit idea because his parents made him think logical. Lastly, argument by emotion (*pathos*), which is making sure the emotion of the individual is read clearly by the persuader. For example, a friend is feeling down because she has no plans for Labor Day. The persuader sympathizes with her by

saying “I know the feeling, but it is safer to be at home”. The persuader has tried to change her emotion by making her mind think in a different direction.

Killingsworth revised *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* by going into more detail with the definitions based on James Kinneavy communication triangle. Kinneavy described *ethos* “as a cultural outlook or worldview that characterizes a community, *the position of the author* (Killingsworth, 2005). *Logos* as “*the position of values*, the triangulating point that defines (or reestablishes) the relationship, the common ground, of the other two positions” (Killingsworth, 2005). *Pathos* as “*the position of the audience*, which Kinneavy associates provocatively with Aristotelian *pathos*” (Killingsworth, 2005). With those three appeals, there still are many other rhetorical notions that go under each of these.

A rhetorical tool under *ethos* includes decorum, which states that “your audience finds you agreeable when you meet their expectations” (Heinrichs, 2017, p. 47). For example, this is done a lot in fraternities and sororities when individuals are going through the initiating process. They want to make themselves seem as though they fit into the sorority, so that they may likely be picked. Another notion under *ethos* is the commonplace, which means you are starting from your audience's position (Heinrichs, 2017, p. 112). For example, a person’s grandmother asks, “what kind of music is that”? By her asking that, she set the tone for the individual to know that she did not understand the music and no longer wanted to listen to it. Under *logos*, there is inductive logic, which is taking a specific case and using it to prove a premise (Heinrichs, 2017, p. 139). There are three kinds of examples you can use for induction; fact, comparison, and story. For example, most African Americans have dark hair. Mary is African American. Therefore, Mary has dark hair. You are having an argument but providing examples to prove your point to

be true; this example would be considered comparison using inductive logic. Next is analyzing how Iyanla used those rhetorical action terms to counsel Brandi and Maxiell.

### **Analysis**

Iyanla's introduction to her show builds on her credentials to counsel individuals in a home setting. During Iyanla's opening credits she mentions all her credentials. Iyanla does this to make sure that her audience knows she is well qualified to administer the counseling services they are about to watch "my name is Iyanla Vanzant and I am here to help you do your work" (Vanzant, 2018). That is using *ethos* and specifically bringing forth decorum. When individuals watch shows where a life coach/counselor of any kind provides services where they try to fix an individual's life, they expect them to be knowledgeable and have the credentials to be giving those services to clients. Iyanla builds her character when she asks, "why are you here" and what is your background story; she is building her commonplace for the situation (Vanzant, 2018). She states, "she is there to interrupt the pattern and she is not a commitment to if they stay together or not, but there is a possibility that could happen" (Vanzant, 2018).

Throughout this episode, Iyanla is questioning the couple about why they need her services. Emotional appeal is something that is used the most throughout her counseling by playing to her *pathos*. She does this by asking questions about past and present issues, while still adding humor to the equation. The humor is added by using different materials and objects as symbols for something that is bothering the couple (See Figure 1). During Iyanla counseling session with Brandi, she was asked her why she decided to still stay with her husband after cheating while wrapping Brandi with bandages. Iyanla did this to show self-inflicting wounds and the security of feeling safe. This brought in humor because even though this is not a laughable situation for Brandi, Iyanla used those symbols to make Brandi smile while Iyanla was making

her argument. As the episode continues humor changes to strictly emotion when Brandi mentions she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer early on in the relationship, before their marriage.

Iyanla also used the cursing trope, also known as profanity to show her emotion of how she feels when Brandi tells her that she continuously goes back to her husband after he has cheated. The cursing trope “brings the Voldemorts and social divisions and angry gods down on the people and things we hate” (Heinrichs, 2017, p. 249). Iyanla said “WELL DAMN. You just married what you grew up with; SOMEONE WHO REPEATEDLY AND REPEATEDLY DISRESPECT YOU, DISHONOR YOU, VIOLATE YOU, and you come back for more” (Vanzant, 2018). Using this tone allowed Brandi to really consider the consequences behind the decisions she has made.

Iyanla also used logic when she gives examples, terms, and definitions of how she portrays the couple circumstances. Maxiell asked Iyanla “as a man, who do you see”? Iyanla said, “I see a man who’s never given himself permission to acknowledge his sadness” (Vanzant, 2018). Iyanla also goes into detail of her notion of a man “my notion is, a man is who his mother makes him to be because she controls the heart. Now he will demonstrate what his father did, but who he becomes from his mother” (Vanzant, 2018). Iyanla used a situation where Brandi used her concerns about her husband drinking to control her husband and not allow her son to spend alone time with him “I am starting to wonder if perhaps Mrs. Brandi is using the guilt that Mr. Jason feels as a way to control him by not allowing her husband to see his grandfather” (Vanzant, 2018). Iyanla used the term emasculating (See figure 3) as a fatal mistake Brandi was making in “beginning the process of emasculating their son and that is saying “my son” in the presence of “his father” when really, she should be saying “our son” (Vanzant,2018). The term detachment was used based on examples given by Maxiell stating he never knew his father and

never tried to connect with his father. Iyanla explained that those holes in Maxiell life caused him to bring other women in the marriage because he was not happy with himself.

Iyanla used inductive logic, specifically story, in her opening credits when she stated “This is not a story about a famous NBA player and his reality star wife. This is not a story about fame, the money, or the impact. This is a story about two high school sweethearts whose story has lost its sweetness. This is a story about a man who cheats and lies, and his wife allows him to get away with it” (Vanzant, 2018).

Iyanla used comparison when she compared adult Brandi and Maxiell to being children “This is a story about a little boy and a little girl playing a grown-up game when they don’t know the rules” (Vanzant, 2018).

Towards the end of the episode she uses *pathos* and *ethos* in showing the couple she is there for both of their comforts (See figure 2). Iyanla tells Maxiell

“I am going to support you to be in conversation with her without allowing yourself to get beat up. I’m going to support her about how to be in conversation with you without beating you up so that you two would leave here with new behavior” (Vanzant, 2018).

Iyanla uses this to appeal to her audience’s emotion and mind but continues to strengthen her argument by giving them knowledge and personal skills in a home setting. The ending credits showed how well Iyanla was able to carry out rhetorical terms even while being unaware.

Feedback from Brandi and Maxiell stated “since meeting Iyanla, they have continued to work on their marriage. Jason says they have been using the tools Iyanla has given to them in order to move forward” (Vanzant, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

In short, *Iyanla Fix My Life* series is a great way to show how life coaches and counselors can use rhetorical appeals *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* during their services. Using rhetorical appeals is a great way to counsel people because you must find a way to help the clients listen and understand. Zsembery stated that

“Overall, the goal of a rhetorician is to help society best live what cognitive philosopher Solomon referred to as “the good life,” whatever “a good life” means to that particular society (266). Rhetoricians seek to use language to help people live better, acting from the belief that language has direct access to an impact on core thinking, emotions, and resultant behaviors. The key difficulty rhetoricians often face is how to put their theory into practical application. As it happens, some clinical practitioners are already taking principles of rhetoric and teaching them as skills—these are cognitive therapists” (Zsembery, 2012).

Iyanla view is similar when she stated “when people get stuck into a way of thinking, being, and living; it becomes so natural. It’s like water to the fish” (Vanzant, 2018). Iyanla was able to put those rhetorical actions into practical application with Brandi and Maxiell based on the feedback stated in earlier the paragraph. *Iyanla Fix My Life* has great effects on the audience due to her ratings for her show and is a great implication for society “Vanzant delivers charismatic one liners and engages the audience like a preacher delivering a sermon” (Dozier, 2018). When people can look at her and compare her to a different career based on how she delivers is a great outcome for Iyanla. Iyanla continues to be passionate and well-driven in her craft.



**Figure 1-** photo of Iyanla and Brandi using Humor.



Retrieved from Google Images

**Figure 2** – Iyanla using *pathos* and *ethos* to show the couple she is there for both their comfort.



Retrieved from Google Images

**Figure 3** – Iyanla using the term emasculating.

<https://youtu.be/Xd5ujmTbxic>

## References:

Dozier, R. (2018, April 30). *The beguiling appeal of Iyanla Vanzant's TV therapy*. Retrieved from <https://theoutline.com/post/4329/ianla-vanzant-appeal?zd=1&zi=wf74ypms>

Killingsworth, M. (2005). Rhetorical Appeals: A Revision. *Rhetoric Review*, 24(3), 249-263. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20176660>

Vanzant, I. (2018). *Basketball Lies: Brandi and Jason Maxiell*. Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/own-ianla-fix-my-life/basketball-lies-brandi-and-jason-maxiell>

Vanzant, I. (2018). *Iyanla Says Brandi Maxiell Is Making a "Fatal Mistake" with Her Son*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/Xd5ujmTbxi>

Zsembery, C. (2012). *Rhetoric in Dialectical Behavior Therapy: Healing Minds Through Argumentation*. Retrieved from <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=4092&context=etd>