

A Rhetorical Criticism of
Blackfish: Making Waves in
Orca Activism

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

By

Lindsay Beisheim

Dr. Lauren Kolodziejski
Senior Project Advisor

Signature

Date

Dr. Bernard Duffy
Department Chair

Signature

Date

INTRODUCTION

Since the grand opening of its San Diego park in 1964, SeaWorld has attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors per year (“History”). This is when Shamu, the original performing orca featured in the SeaWorld park, was captured, making her the fourth killer whale ever taken to captivity from the wild. When one imagines an orca, a smart, friendly, astonishingly large animal performing tricks with a trainer in a tank filled with crystal-clear water may be one of the first images that comes to mind. The other picture that one may envision is that of the predator, or the image often portrayed of killer whales in wildlife documentaries. Photographers have captured them teaming up to prey on seals, dolphins, and even perhaps one of the traditionally most-feared creatures in the ocean—great white sharks. When these two polar images come together, it hardly seems logical to blame the whale, but rather serves as an instance of an animal acting in captivity just as it would in the wild. Prior to the release of the documentary *Blackfish*, however, people did not seem to see the situation in this way.

SeaWorld’s orcas first made major headlines when Keltie Byrne, a trainer at Sealand of the Pacific in British Columbia, Canada, drowned in a killer whale enclosure. Immediately following a show in February of 1991, Byrne fell into the enclosure where the park’s three whales were kept. Tilikum, the largest orca in captivity at the time at a staggering weight of 12,000 pounds, dragged Byrne to the bottom of the tank, and managed to keep her there until she drowned. While many viewed this as a malicious act on the part of the orca, one of Byrne’s fellow trainers, Colin Baird, sees things differently. “As best as I can understand it, the three orcas were a little surprised that one of their trainers had seemingly jumped into the pool,” he said, “This wasn’t a malicious attack; it was an accident” (qtd. in Kuo). Unfortunately, Byrne’s

death did not mark the one-and-only-accident in regards to the death of a trainer working with killer whales.

Tilikum went on to kill two more people—one park visitor who jumped into the tank after hours, as well as one more trainer. Furthermore, Tilikum is not the only killer whale in captivity to have exhibited these aggressive behaviors. SeaWorld's records contain incident reports for more than 100 instances in which orcas have demonstrated violence towards trainers ("Over 30 Years and Three Deaths: Tilikum's Tragic Story"). On the other hand, there has not been a single reported incident of an orca causing harm to a human in the wild. It has since been argued by many that the cause of these instances of violence was due to the poor treatment of orcas in captivity. David Kirby, a journalist who typically covers pieces about the controversy with SeaWorld's killer whales and other animal rights movements, quotes scientist (and orca-enthusiast) Dr. Ingrid Visser, stating "fifty-six orca currently are held in 14 parks throughout the world. At least 160 have died in captivity or during captures" ("Meet the Scientist Who Is Standing Up To SeaWorld to Save Orcas From Captivity"). The high number of deaths of killer whales who are removed from their natural habitats speaks towards the biological and psychological harm of placing these animals in captivity.

According to Kirby, in July of 2013, the one-two-punch releases of director and producer Gabriela Cowperthwaite's documentary *Blackfish* and his book titled *Death at SeaWorld: Shamu and the Dark Side of Killer Whales in Captivity* made waves in activism efforts against the captivity of killer whales ("Activists to Orca Enslavers: Thanks, but No Tanks"). At this time, the filmmakers and authors were joined by scientists who took a stance against the captivity of killer whales. More so than Kirby's novel, *Blackfish* had a notable viral impact, getting viewers on

board with the cause seemingly overnight. Almost immediately after its release, numerous SeaWorld locations were hit with lawsuits, and protests around the globe sparked a public controversy in regards to the ethical and legal standards around keeping killer whales in captivity. Following the protests, the California Coastal Commission took a stand against SeaWorld in the courts. In April of 2015, an everyday citizen filed a lawsuit against the SeaWorld location in Florida that could total up to \$2 billion (Winchester). These legal actions centered mainly around accusations that SeaWorld has marketed incorrect information about the treatment of its orcas, and in actuality provides inhumane training and habitats to its captive animals.

As of October of 2015, SeaWorld was granted a request for a \$100 million plan to expand the size of their killer whale habitat. Since doing so would act in favor of restoring SeaWorld's tarnished image as a corporation, the request was only approved under the condition that they no longer capture any new animals or breed the animals that they currently have in captivity (Vibes). In March of 2016, the company officially announced that the parks' current animals will be the last generation of orcas at SeaWorld. Additionally, their shows will shift to being focused on natural and educational encounters of orcas, rather than theatrics, and they have partnered with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) to further their mission of protecting the health of marine mammals and the ocean they call home ("SeaWorld Cares"). Seemingly, in just over two years, the activism that *Blackfish* sparked was able to put an end to the continuation of putting killer whales in captivity—which, for an activist agenda, is a very short amount of time. Branching off of this, this paper will focus on a rhetorical criticism of the documentary *Blackfish* in order to understand the strong impact it had on its audience, as well as the widespread activism it spurred.

Blackfish served as a starting point for social activism that ultimately stopped SeaWorld's orca breeding program and capture of killer whales. However, the film never explicitly called for this action. Rather, the film presented the story it told in such a way that it motivated audience members to present their own texts on the issue, specifically on Twitter, which created a tenacious push for a change in SeaWorld's policies. For the purpose of this paper, I will begin by reviewing the literature that is necessary to understanding the context of *Blackfish* and the realm of documentary films in relation to social activism. I will then describe the rhetorical situation under which this text is found, as well as the method of reception criticism that I employ in my analysis of *Blackfish*. Finally, I will discuss the film's release on Netflix, its personification of the whales, and the technique by which it dissociates its narrators and the way these tactics relate to the film's treatment on Twitter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have already recognized the unique effect of *Blackfish* on orca activism. One writer in particular focuses on the role of social media in the documentary's quick success. In her article "Activism and Antagonism: The 'Blackfish' Effect," Rebekah Brammer begins by referencing two popular documentaries, *The Thin Blue Line* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, both of which aimed to put global issues into the national spotlight in order to generate support towards a movement of sort. She then compares the reach of these documentaries to the reach of *Blackfish*, referencing specifically the important role that social media holds in extending the audience that can be reached as well as strengthening the impact of the message at hand. Brammer brings up the fact that, due to the large role played by social media in the extension of the message of *Blackfish*, a portion of the audience receiving the message may not have even been viewers of

the actual documentary, themselves, but rather were exposed to the shorthand versions visible through various social media platforms.

Stemming off of Brammer's analysis of the power of social media, Nicholas E. Marek's article evaluates the responses that SeaWorld posted on their Twitter account upon the release of *Blackfish*. He uses both an inductive and a deductive approach. For the inductive approach, he applies a method of coding that identifies common themes among the tweets. For the deductive approach, Marek applies Image Repair Theory to decipher how, exactly, SeaWorld uses their tweets as a tool to attempt to restore their damaged image following the negative press that *Blackfish* unleashed. The findings of this research indicate that SeaWorld used its tweets mainly to clear up misconceptions that it claims the documentary perpetuated, and to avoid any fault in the situation. Tweets that suggested an attempt at image restoration did not appear until far after the controversy, which goes against research indicating that image restoration should happen immediately. Additionally, SeaWorld did not assume fault or apologize, which is contrary to a central idea in Image Repair Theory that suggests corporations rarely successfully exit a controversy without fault. Since this paper will focus on all spectrums of reception to *Blackfish*, SeaWorld's response will be an important response to research and consider rhetorically.

A periodical released in a 2013 issue of *Advertising Age* critiques SeaWorld's marketing and public relations tactics more broadly following the release of *Blackfish*. This periodical specifically discusses SeaWorld's decision to submit their own "detailed critique" of the movie to around 50 film critics prior to the critics releasing reviews, even though SeaWorld recognized the riskiness of this maneuver. The author criticizes the technique and points out a number of ways in which it simply drew more attention to the negative press of the film. This article brings the

agenda-setting role of the media into the frame of the conversation about *Blackfish*, as it speaks to how the way an artifact is framed by journalists in popular media affects how the artifact is received by the public. Although SeaWorld attempted to take advantage of the media and change the way that critics wrote about the film, the ultimate positive portrayal of *Blackfish* and their public rejection of SeaWorld's rebuttal plays a major role in the way the documentary was received by the public.

While media coverage and its relationship to activism has long been recognized, one scholar recognized the need for more researching in regards to the art of documentary specifically and its relation to social activism. John Abraham Stover did a field study with New Day Fields, with whom he spent two years conducting interviews, fieldwork, media analysis, and online surveys. Through his research, Stover identified the important role of narrative in documentary films with social movement goals, wherein the film maker must focus more so on painting a compelling story than listing facts or realities. Considering one of the most notable features of *Blackfish* is the compelling narrative that it builds from start to finish, Stover's work stands relevant and helps explain the success of the film's goal for social change in the treatment of captive orcas.

RHETORICAL SITUATION

Animal activism groups who protest the use of animals for entertainment purposes is by no means a new concept. In fact, according to journalist Stephen Messenger, when Wanda, the first killer whale taken into captivity, was captured by a crew from the California-based aquarium Marineland of the Pacific in 1961, many disapproved. Wanda was alone, sick, and disoriented in Newport Harbor when the marine park decided to capture her for display in their

facility, and dozens of people gathered to watch a crew detain her. Whenever she managed to break free from a net or escape a lasso, many members from the crowd would cheer in her favor. International animal activism group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (more widely known as PETA) states that they are against the use of animals for entertainment purposes as a part of their mission statement (“About PETA”). In October of 2011, PETA, along with three marine mammal experts and two former orca trainers, filed a lawsuit against SeaWorld claiming that its treatment of captive killer whales violates the thirteen amendment of the Constitution. The plaintiffs listed on the case were the marine parks’ five captive killer whales (two in Orlando, three in San Diego), and the filing was the first to apply the thirteenth amendment to non-human animals (“PETA Sues SeaWorld for Violating Orcas’ Constitutional Rights”). Although this happened before the release of *Blackfish* and the case was dismissed (Zelman), it did not receive overwhelming public attention or rally a tremendous amount of support for the cause.

In contrast to the numerous and bold previous attempts to end orca captivity, breeding, and training at SeaWorld parks that were ultimately unsuccessful, *Blackfish* reached crowds and spurred widespread discussion about the issue that caused an immense amount of change. However, *Blackfish* is not the first documentary film to successfully stimulate social change. In 2004, the film *Super Size Me* hit theaters, which chronicles the story of director Morgan Spurlock, who ate only McDonald’s food for 30 days as a social experiment to demonstrate the lack of nutritional value in fast food. In the film, Spurlock experienced a number of both physical and psychological changes due to his diet. This compelled him to examine the tendency for fast food restaurants to accept the poor nutritional value of their food in exchange for higher profits.

A mere six weeks following the documentary's release, McDonald's discontinued its super size option and added healthier sides for Happy Meals (*Super Size Me*). Similarly to *Blackfish*, *Super Size Me* is a documentary that captivated an expansive audience and in turn created quick social change.

While viewers of *Super Size Me* may have had to rent the documentary or see it in theaters, a unique aspect of *Blackfish* is that it was released almost immediately to a platform that made it available to a vast and broad audience. Following its original screening at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2013, the documentary was picked up by CNN Films and Magnolia Pictures for a wider release. Magnolia released the documentary in theaters that summer, while CNN did a cable television screening of the film in late October of 2013. Following this exposure, the documentary began streaming just a month later (CNN). In 2015, the number of paying subscribers to Netflix neared 70 million ("Statistics and Facts About Netflix"). However, the potential audience is even larger than this, as a single Netflix account may be shared by multiple users. While releasing the film on the streaming service so early on may have had financial repercussions for the film itself, it presented an opportunity for *Blackfish* and its agenda to be readily available to a large audience in a way that filmmakers did not have access to previous to the widespread popularity and obtainability of Netflix.

METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

In order to examine the quick success of *Blackfish* in regards to its ultimate goal for an end to orca captivity at SeaWorld parks, I will employ reception criticism, which is aimed at using responses to a rhetorical artifact to aid or confirm a critics' analysis and interpretation. Reception criticism, which is also known as reception theory, was originally developed by

cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, and as such, the method used to practice reception theory is often referred to as Hall's theory. In his book entitled *Culture, Media, Language*, Hall plays into the traditional sender/message/receiver model of communication, and highlights the importance of social context on the way we encode and decode messages. He emphasizes the fact that different audiences have different experiences, and therefore may extract a different message from the same piece of media. In the specific instance of television, Hall argues that production and reception are equally important in the whole of a television message. In order to understand the full picture of why *Blackfish* was successful in causing social change, it is important to consider how the way the message was built and the way the audience receives the message come together to create the overarching effect of the documentary.

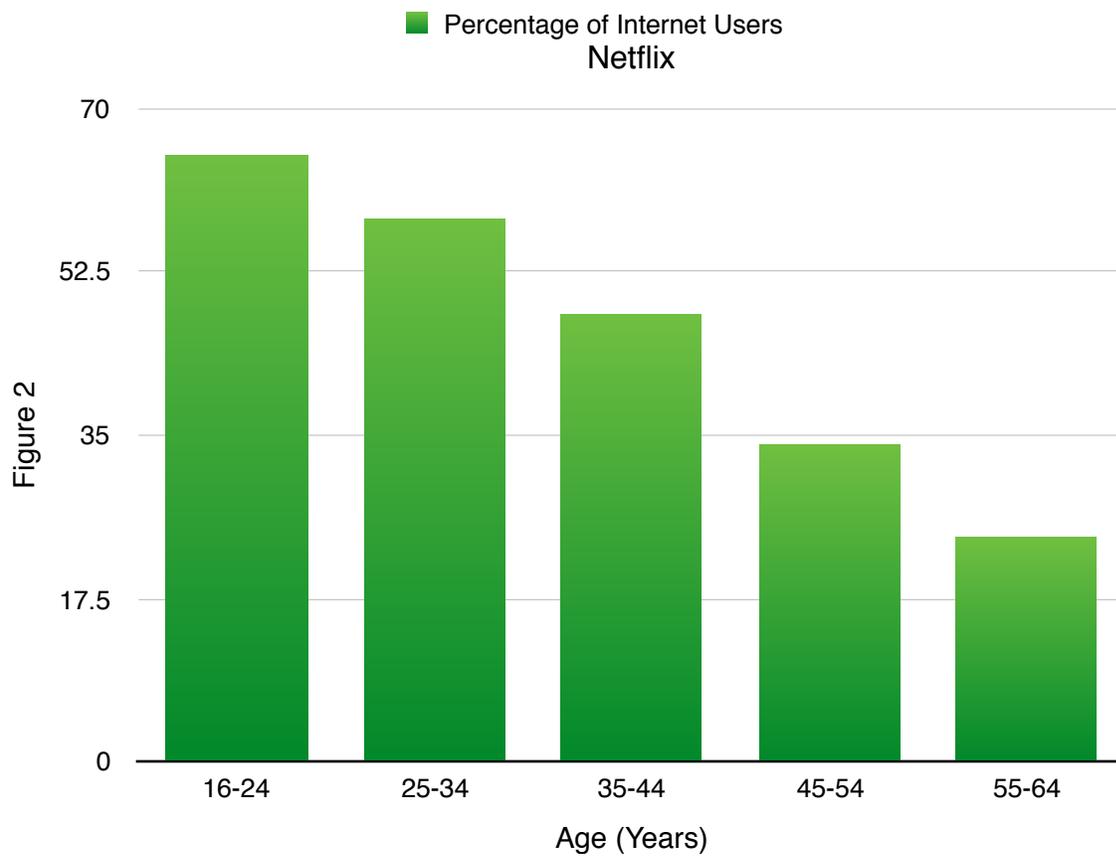
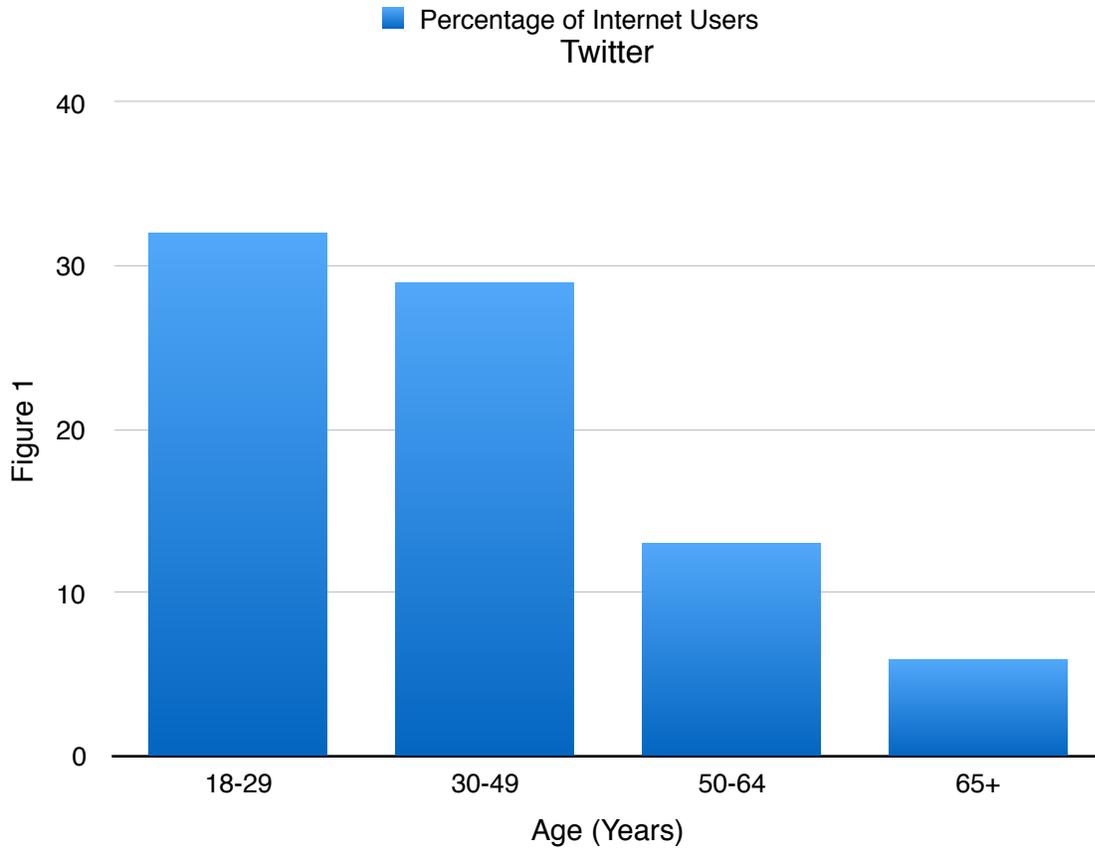
Intertextuality, most simply defined by *Merriam-Webster* as the relationship between texts ("Intertextuality"), is an important concept when it comes to reception criticism. Historically, rhetorical scholars have focused mainly on analyzing a text in itself, looking closely at its significance as an artifact. However, rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli believes that in order for rhetorical criticism to dive deeper into an artifact's significance, critics must "explore all available evidence of the reception to a work; we should conduct a close textual analysis not only of the primary text, but also of the intertextual material produced by audience members who were responding to it" (Ceccarelli 8). By studying a text's intertextuality, one is able to receive a deeper analysis of the affect it has on its audience—it cultivates an understanding not just of the message behind an artifact, but of the message an audience actually received. For the purpose of this paper, I will use reception theory and the concept of intertextuality as a framework for understanding what, exactly, it is about *Blackfish* that made it rhetorically effective. Reception

studies is the best tool to use to achieve this goal, as the texts created by the audience following the release of the film are what ultimately brought it into the political sphere. It is necessary to analyze the message the audience received that compelled them to insist on social change. To begin with, I will investigate the reception of the documentary from those who supported it, specifically looking at responses on Twitter. In doing so, I will point out the key rhetorical strategies that *Blackfish* utilizes to influence the Twitter responses produced by audience members. Finally, I will evaluate the actual effectiveness of *Blackfish* by diving deeper into its widespread consequences.

ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

Presence On Netflix. From its original release at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013, *SeaWorld* captivated the attention of many film critics. It was described as “emotionally powerful” (Rooney), a “searing take on the theme park’s mistreatment of killer whales” (Kohn), and as a film that makes audiences “think twice about going to see the Shamu shows at SeaWorld” (Peterson). While these reviews gave *Blackfish* a presence amongst avid independent film followers and existing animal rights activists, it did not originally captivate an audience beyond those select few. Even following its small theatrical release, the documentary was not widely talked about, and large activist movements based on the film’s agenda had not yet been organized. As previously discussed, the release of the film on the popular streaming service Netflix gave a much larger audience access to *Blackfish* and ultimately to its agenda, which notably spurred an uproar in activism against the treatment of orcas in SeaWorld’s parks. This sharp increase may be due to the demographic of social media users that correlates with Netflix’s typical subscribers.

As demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2, although more Americans tend to use Netflix than Twitter, the age range of Netflix subscribers in comparison to the age range of Twitter users correlate strongly. For each of the platforms, the largest percentage of users are in an age range under thirty. Sixty-five percent of Internet users between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four are on Netflix (“Share of Internet Users Who Use Netflix”), while thirty-two percent of Internet users aged eighteen through twenty-nine are on Twitter (“The Demographics of Social Media Users”). Although these two age ranges vary slightly, they provide a similar breakdown between the two platforms. By making *Blackfish* available on Netflix, it was not only available to a large audience, but also to a very young audience, which build up the majority of people using social media. In fact, long-term Netflix users are 25% more likely to spend 1-4 hours on average each day using social media in comparison to the average American adult (CivicScience). By almost immediately releasing the film on Netflix, the producers of *Blackfish* targeted an audience much more likely to go on social media and tweet about what they saw, which caused the further promotion of the film and a rhetorical amplification their message. The reactions to the documentary that audience members posted on social media, with an emphasis on Twitter, serve as important artifacts to consider in relation to understanding the reason behind the documentary’s quick success.



Personification of Killer Whales. From the beginning of the documentary and consistently throughout, *Blackfish* works to personify captive killer whales. Within the first few minutes of the film, the numerous trainers recall some of their first experiences with the whales, from being in awe of their massive size and beauty, to the excitement of their first physical interactions with them in the water. The filmmakers employ a number of different techniques to highlight the whales' human-like characteristics, some of which seem to be firmly planted in scientific research. However, it is also important to note that a scientist does not appear in the film until 10 minutes in. Prior to this, the film exclusively features narrative, which contributes to the personification of the whales. By initially removing the whales from the idea of science, it also removes attention from the fact that they are wild animals. The first scientific professional who discusses the tendencies of killer whales a species in the film is Howard Garrett, a renowned orca researcher. He discusses many aspects of killer whales' lives that are similar to humans, specifically their close family ties, their long life spans, and what he confidently claims is their use of language, despite the reluctancy of the general scientific community in associating the use of language with any non-human animals.

Lori Marino, a neuroscientist, also discusses the findings of research in which she placed an orca's brain in a Magnetic Resonance Imaging scanner. "The orca brain just screams out intelligence and awareness," she gushes prior to stating that the results indicated that killer whales have a part of the brain that humans do not have. She explains that they have an extended version of the limbic system, which gives them highly developed emotional lives that may even be more complex than those of humans. Rather than having scientists explain the complexities of orcas and the detrimental effects on the animals when they are held in captivity, the filmmakers

chose specifically to have the scientists highlight research on the characteristics that most closely align orcas to humans, which works in turn to personify the whales in the eyes of the audience.

The chilling picture the filmmakers paint of mother orcas being separated from their children is another instance that builds association between the human audience and the whales. Up until this point in the film, it has been established multiple times that killer whales in the wild remain in their family units for the entirety of their lives, and the children never leave the side of their mother. In one instance, when a four and a half year old whale is taken from its mother to be moved to a different SeaWorld park, former trainer Carol Ray describes the usually-quiet mother whale as shaking, screaming, screeching, and crying following the removal of her offspring. “There is nothing you can call that except for grief,” she says. John Hargrove, another former trainer, describes a similar experience with a different mother and baby pair who were separated. He explains that upon the analysis of the mother whale’s vocals, the senior research scientist confirmed that the sounds were long range vocals, and concluded that those vocals were for the purpose of searching for her offspring. The bond between mother and child is one of the few values that holds constant across all cultures in humankind, to the point where it is extremely difficult for American courts to justify separating mothers from their children. When the film depicts the mothers and their children as experiencing grief and despair, the audience is invited to identify with them by sympathizing with what they are feeling.

One whale in particular, Tilikum, is portrayed as the main character of the film due to the fact that he was related to all three of the human deaths that were discussed in the narrative of the film. The film takes the audience through Tilikum’s journey from the time he was captured as a large calf, to his time at Marineland of the Pacific in British Columbia, and then to his transfer to

the SeaWorld park in Florida. Interlaced with the stories of Tilikum harming humans are stories of his horrifying experience in captivity. For example, employees from both Marineland of the Pacific and SeaWorld recall him being bullied by the other female whales in the tank, which consequently caused him to constantly have bloody rake marks from their teeth covering his body. Many trainers also describe their favorable relationships with Tilikum, describing his character as “sweet” and “eager to please.” These images cause the audience to identify and sympathize with Tilikum despite the instances of his aggressiveness towards humans. Putting the spotlight on Tilikum also cause him to become a face for the treatment of all killer whales.

In her article which focuses on the ways that humans align with nature, specifically in the case of orcas and whale tours in the Northern waters of the Pacific Ocean between the United States and Canada, Tema Milstein discusses the idea of animalcentric anthropomorphism. This concept refers to “a powerful discursive tool for creating identification. Animalcentric anthropomorphism emphasizes both continuities and discontinuities with humans” (5). This tool is present in the above examples of *Blackfish*'s work to personify killer whales, especially in the example of the relationships between mothers and their children. While the film highlights the mother/child bond between orcas as similar to that of humans, it also emphasizes that this bond may be even stronger than that of humans, creating an air of both identification and respect. Additionally, Milstein often refers to the work of Sowards, a rhetorician who examines similar work with a focus on orangutans and their natural habitat. Milstein explains that Sowards “argues identification with orangutans can provide strong motivation for protecting orangutan forests in Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as other environmental causes” (5). The feeling of identification is likely to motivate an audience to surpass a feeling of sympathy and instead feel empathy,

which is a strong motivator for action. In the case of the killer whales at SeaWorld and the agenda of *Blackfish*, identification with the animals drives the audience to fight not for the preservation of their natural environment, but their return to this environment and their overall ethical treatment in day-to-day life.

According to Twitter blogger Simon Rogers, the Twitter response to *Blackfish* is among one of the most expansive responses to a non-sports related broadcast in history. The night it aired on CNN, there were a total of 67,673 tweets that were viewed by 7.3 million people about the show. To spur this discussion, CNN portrayed a graphic with “#blackfish” in the corner of the screen during the viewing. Not surprisingly, many trending hashtags that paired with “#blackfish” communicate identification with the whales, particularly with Tilikum. The most popular of these were “#IAmTilikum” and “#FreeTilikum” or “#FreeTilly” (“Popular Twitter Hashtags For Tilikum”). “IAmTilikum” communicates a strong sense of identification with Tilikum in particular, as users equate themselves with the whale. As discussed earlier, this identification may come as a response to the personification of the whales in *Blackfish*. The use of Tilikum’s name as well as the intertextual ties with a hashtag that is often related to freeing humans who have been wrongfully imprisoned serve as evidence that the audience strongly identified with a personified view of Tilikum, who serves as a face for and exemplification of all captive killer whales. This hashtag also may have intertextual ties with the 1993 movie *Free Willy*, which portrays the relationship between a captive whale and a boy who works in the park, and his consequent actions to free the whale before he is killed by the aquarium owners.

Dissociation of Trainers. The majority of the narrative in *Blackfish* is told from the perspective of a handful of former SeaWorld trainers who previously worked with Tilikum, all of whom except for one are disturbed by their experiences at the park and now condemn the parks' treatment of the animals. While the fact that they are former (not current) trainers creates an immediate and literal dissociation, in order for this to be an entirely successful ploy, the filmmakers had to remove any feel of hypocrisy from the witnesses at hand while also maintaining their credibility their experiences with the whales give them as experts in the subject. To do so, the portrayal of the former trainers dissociates them from any of the wrongdoing toward the animals. The most obvious way this is done is through painting a thorough picture of the trainers' positive relationships with the whales. Since the audience has already been primed to identify with the whales, aligning the former trainers with the whales encourages the audience to identify with them as well, which deters the audience from holding them accountable. This tactic is two-fold in the sense that it works both to personify the whales, as discussed in the previous section, as well as to dissociate the trainers from having played a role in harming the orcas.

From the very beginning of the film, the trainers express in detail their unique and personal relationships with the animals they train. "When you look into their eyes, you know somebody is home," states former trainer John Jett, "somebody is looking back. You form a very personal relationship with your animal." Other trainers even describe their relationship with the killer whales as an instance of teamwork and mutual understanding. Not only do the trainers always refer to the whales by their names, rather than just as "a whale" or "an animal," they often even use nicknames in reference to whales that they claim to have a personal relationship

with. Terms of endearment paint the orcas as friends of the trainers, rather than animals whom the trainers must discipline and praise to perform behaviors. At one point in the film, a home video of an anonymous trainer next to a whale in the pool shows her stating, “I’ve seen her have all her babies. We’ve grown up together.” The trainers portray themselves as equals to the whales, who hope to have relationships that go beyond just the fact that they feed them and provide them with the care they need to survive.

A final tactic that the trainers use to dissociate themselves from the wrongdoing of the whales is consistently pointing out that they were being told to act by their superiors. One trainer recalls a time when she expressed her sympathy for a mother and infant whale that were being separated, and was consequently mocked by the supervisors, which “shut her up.” Another remarks that Tilikum’s history before coming to SeaWorld was kept quiet by the superiors. Perhaps one of the most powerful anecdotes describes a time where one of the trainers filmed a nearly-perfect performance, which was not a common occurrence at the park. Since there was one part of the film where a whale appears to lunge at one of the trainers, the trainer filming the show was told by management that the tape was unusable, even after he attempted to edit out apparently-aggressive instance of behavior. Although the trainers ultimately choosing to abide by the orders from their employers, the trainers blame their superiors as the source of the actions, which in turn encourages the audience to hold them accountable instead of the narrators.

Anonymity of SeaWorld. When referencing those who, in fact, have done wrong to the whales, the trainers never use names or even specific pronouns. Instead, they consistently refer to those in charge at SeaWorld vaguely as “they” or “them”. The other terms that are thrown around are “the supervisor” or “the supervisors.” It is never made clear whether they are talking about senior

trainers, management, the owners of the parks, or the CEO of the SeaWorld corporation. Instead, SeaWorld is not only built up as the enemy, but also as an establishment without a name, a face, or an attached person or group of people. At the end of *Blackfish*, the filmmakers state that SeaWorld representatives declined comment or participation in the film. The only time when specific people are mentioned are during the brief interludes showing text conversations from the court, but these instances only show images of the culprits with no audio attached. Their lack of a voice, both literally and metaphorically, adds to the anonymity of SeaWorld in the film.

As previously discussed, *Blackfish* spurred a historical response on social media, particularly on Twitter. In response to the cries for help and freedom for Tilikum and the other captive whales, SeaWorld launched a campaign using the hashtag “#AskSeaWorld,” which drastically backfired. Rather than establishing a space for SeaWorld to address concern and rebuild parts of their brand, the hashtag fueled the already passionate fire against the captivity of the parks’ killer whales. Many users tweeted questions with anger and frustration that were never met with an answer from the corporation, and hashtags that trended along with “#AskSeaWorld” included “#Blackfish” and “#EmptyTheTanks” (Johnstonbaugh). In a sense, by making the hashtag for their campaign “#AskSeaWorld,” the company made the mistake of perpetuating themselves as a faceless entity, which is a major rhetorical factor that played a role in the success of the film. Rather than giving SeaWorld a persona or humanizing it, they summoned feedback from a nondescript Twitter handle, making it easier for users to continue to attack an entity without true identity. The phenomenon of cyberbullying relates closely to this type of online behavior. Psychologist Raychelle Lohmann, who studies teen angst, argues that cyberbullying is easier for teens to perpetuate due to the lack of face-to-face contact. Similarly, in the case of

Twitter, people have an easier time psychologically when they can hide behind anonymity in the instance of an attack, which may speak to the principle behind SeaWorld's public relations failure.

EVALUATION & CRITIQUE

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *Blackfish* is how quickly it affected SeaWorld's business and policies. Due to strong example it sets for the power of social media in politics, the enormous and fast-acting support gained by the online community is often referred to as the "Blackfish Effect" (SocialImpactOfTheMedia). Between the second quarter of 2014 and 2015, SeaWorld's profits dropped by a dramatic 84%, and they welcomed 100,000 fewer visitors than the year before. While the company attributed the decline in attendance in their Texas park with spring break aligning with Easter and record-setting wet weather, they did refer to "brand challenges" in their reasoning behind attendance decline to their park in California (Rhodan). Additionally, a year after the release of *Blackfish*, SeaWorld shares experienced a 33% decline as well (Beaumont-Thomas). However, the agenda behind the film was not to make a threat to the success of SeaWorld as a business, but ultimately to use this as a way to encourage SeaWorld to make policy changes in regards to the treatment of its animals in order to refurbish its brand and counter negative publicity.

In March of 2014, less than a year after the public release of *Blackfish*, bills inspired by the film were presented to the Senate in both California and New York. These bills proposed that orcas would no longer be used for entertainment purposes in amusement parks. In California, the legislation amassed over one million signatures online. In December of 2014, SeaWorld CEO Jim Atchison resigned due to growing pressures from activists and particularly from PETA

(“News”). In November of 2015, the SeaWorld location in San Diego announced its discontinuation of its current show, which would be replaced with a less theatrical show featuring advice as to how audience members can be mindful of protecting killer whales’ natural habitats (Gorman). Finally, in March of 2016, SeaWorld confirmed an end to its breeding program. Additionally, this triggered the green light on their multi-million dollar plan for renovations to the accommodations for current whales, which will stay in SeaWorld’s facilities for the remainder of their lives due to hazards posed by setting them free. SeaWorld claims that this is due to an unsuccessful history of attempting to reintroduce marine mammals to the ocean following extensive periods of human care (Jamieson).

In short, in just over two years following the public release of *Blackfish*, its agenda for the termination of SeaWorld’s breeding program and ceasefire of wild orca capture was fulfilled. Some smaller causes that fight for the rights of marine mammals have been doing so for dozens of years without success. This is the case for activists fighting for the closure of a popular beach called Children’s Pool in La Jolla, California, which has been inhabited by harbor seals since the mid-1980s and has been the scene of a battle between animal rights activists and beachgoers ever since (Glass). In doing what it set out to do, *Blackfish* was not only incredibly popular as a film, but quickly successful in its greater purpose. Its rhetorical strategies, including the use of Netflix and in turn social media to create a broad audience with an extensive political reaction, will likely hold strong significance and serve as exemplary for an array of activist causes to come.

One of the biggest complaints against *Blackfish* made by both SeaWorld and those who disagree is that it does not at all acknowledge the positive contributions the company has made towards marine environments. A former SeaWorld team member who knew Dawn Brancheau

(the most recent trainer killed by Tilikum), writes in a CNN special that the film “focuses on a handful of incidents over our history at the exclusion of everything else” (Scarpuzzi). He points out that the film does not have any interviews with participants whose lives were touched by the park, of which there are many. He also states that SeaWorld cares for injured, ill, and abandoned animals, as well as consistently makes conservation efforts for surrounding orphans, none of which was touched upon in the film. Ultimately, while this may be true, the media functions on the basis of gatekeeping. It is impossible to publish every detail of every story, and therefore, some details must be left out of every story. It is true that *Blackfish* as a whole had an agenda, and it included details relevant to pushing this agenda. However, no information has been published that any of the information presented in the documentary is false. While inclusion of SeaWorld’s positive contributions may have made for a more well-rounded documentary, it does not change the overarching message and truth behind the film’s greater purpose.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

My analysis throughout this paper did face limitations. Due to time constraints, it relied heavily on the research of others, rather than the gathering original data about Twitter responses. Additionally, it focused entirely on Twitter reactions. A study focusing on a more broadened sample of social media responses may be interesting for further consideration. A more well-rounded evaluation of the reception on both the positive and negative ends of the spectrum may also be of value to review in further research. Finally, research which focuses more specifically on all of SeaWorld’s rebuttal techniques and the reason for its ultimate failure may provide a more expansive understanding of the reception of *Blackfish*.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, numerous details set *Blackfish* apart from other documentaries with a political agenda. Its quick availability on Netflix made an impact on its popularity amongst a demographic of people who are avid users of social media. A strong identification between the audience and the orcas was created in response to the personification of the whales in the film. In turn, this identification probably made viewers more likely to act, which reflects in the expansive Twitter reaction. *Blackfish*'s tactic of dissociating its featured former trainers from SeaWorld and the wrongdoing of its animals allowed them to have credible and experienced narrators while also discouraging the audience from holding them accountable for any wrongdoing. Finally, the filmmakers portrayed SeaWorld as an establishment and a faceless enemy, which was in turn easier for Twitter users to attack.

It is difficult to refute the fact that *Blackfish* was extremely successful in setting an agenda and crowdsourcing to push the fulfillment of this agenda. In fact, the makers of *Blackfish* had nothing to do with the changes that occurred following the release of the film. They did not write the bill proposals or legislation that called for new policies to dictate the responsibilities of SeaWorld and similar institutions. Instead, they created an artifact which spurred hundreds of thousands of other texts, which ultimately came together to create social and political change. This is exemplary of the power and potential behind documentary films as a fuel for making differences in the world around us. When produced effectively, the visual and audio aspects of documentaries can come together to create a commanding narrative that multiplies the voice of a problem from few to many.

Works Cited

"About PETA." *PETA*. 2016. Web.

Blackfish. Dir. Gabriela Cowperthwaite. Magnolia Pictures, 2013. Film.

Beaumont-Thomas, Ben. "SeaWorld Shares Tumble 33% following Blackfish Documentary."

The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 14 Aug. 2014. Web.

Brammer, Rebekah. "Activism and Antagonism: The "Blackfish" Effect." *Screen Education*: 72-79. Mar. 2015. Web.

Ceccarelli, Leah. "Chapter One." *Shaping Science with Rhetoric: The Cases of Dobzhansky, Schrödinger, and Wilson*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2001. 6-9. Web.

CivicScience. *Netflix's New Users*. Rep., 27 May 2015.

<<https://civicscience.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CivicScience-Netfixs-New-Users-May-2015-Final.pdf>>.

CNN. *CNN Films and Magnolia Pictures Acquire Documentary 'Blackfish' at Sundance*. 22 Jan. 2013. <<http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/01/22/magnolia-pictures-and-cnn-films-acquire-gabriela-cowperthwaite-documentary-blackfish-at-sundance-film-festival/>>.

"The Demographics of Social Media Users." *Mobile Messaging and Social Media*. Pew Research Center, 19 Aug. 2015. Web.

Glass, Ira. "When the Beasts Come Marching In." *This American Life*. WBEZ. Chicago, IL, 11 Mar. 2016. Web.

Gorman, Michele. "SeaWorld to End Killer Whale Shows in San Diego." *Newsweek*. 9 Nov. 2015. Web.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language*: 128-138. London: Unwin Hyman, 1980. Web.

"History." *SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment*. 2015. Web.

<http://seaworldentertainment.com/en/who-we-are/history/?from=Top_Nav>.

"Intertextuality." *Merriam-Webster*. 2016. Web.

Jamieson, Amber. "SeaWorld Decides to Stop Killer Whale Breeding Program." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 17 Mar. 2016. Web.

Johnstonbaugh, Morgan. "#AskSeaWorld Hashtag Discussion Does More Harm than Good." *Crimson Hexagon*. 31 Mar. 2015. Web.

Kirby, David. "Activists to Orca Enslavers: Thanks, but No Tanks." *TakePart*. N.p., 25 June 2013. Web.

Kirby, David. "Meet the Scientist Who Is Standing Up to SeaWorld to Save Orcas From Captivity." *TakePart*. 7 April 2015. Web.

Kohn, Eric. "Sundance Review: 'Blackfish' Ensures You'll Never Go to SeaWorld Again." *Indiewire*. 20 Jan. 2013. Web.

Kuo, Vivian. "Orca Trainer Saw Best of Keiko, Worst of Tilikum - CNN.com." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 28 Oct. 2013. Web.

Lohmann, Raychelle. "Taking On Cyberbullying." *Psychology Today*. 15 November 2010. Web.

Marek, Nicholas E. "Tourism in Crisis: A Qualitative Content Analysis of SeaWorld's Twitter Response to Blackfish." Diss. Eastern Michigan U, 2015. *ProQuest*. Web.

Messenger, Stephen. "Remembering Wanda, The First Killer Whale Taken Into Captivity." *The Dodo*. 5 Apr. 2014. Web.

Milstein, Tema. "Nature Identification: The Power of Pointing and Naming." *Environmental Communication* 5.1 (2011): 3-24. Web.

"News." *Blackfish*. 2016. Web. <<http://www.blackfishmovie.com/news/>>

"Over 30 Years and Three Deaths: Tilikum's Tragic Story." *SeaWorld of Hurt*. PETA, 2015. Web.

Peterson, Jeff. "Sundance Review: 'Blackfish' Is An Alarming Film." *Deseret News*. 24 Jan. 2013. Web.

"Popular Twitter Hashtags For Tilikum." *RiteTag*. 2016. Web.

Rhoda, Maya. "Seaworld's Profits Drop 84% After 'Blackfish' Documentary." *Time*. 6 Aug. 2015. Web.

Rogers, Simon. "The #Blackfish Phenomenon: A Whale of a Tale Takes Over Twitter." *Twitter Blog*. Twitter, 6 Nov. 2013. Web.

Rooney, David. "Blackfish: Sundance Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 21 Jan. 2013. Web.

"PETA Sues SeaWorld for Violating Orcas' Constitutional Rights." *PETA*. 25 Oct. 2011. Web.

Scarpuzzi, Michael. "'Blackfish' Film Ignores SeaWorld's Benefits to Conservation, Research." *CNN*. 28 Oct. 2013. Web.

"SeaWorld Cares." *SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment*. 2016. Web.

<<https://seaworldcares.com/Future/>>

"Share of Internet Users Who Use Netflix in the United States in 1st Quarter of 2015, By Age Group." *Statista*. 2016. Web.

"Smart PR Or Marketing Misfire? Seaworld Defends Against Film." *Advertising Age* 84.27 (2013): 5. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. Web.

SocialImpactOfTheMedia. "#Blackfish: How One Hashtag Helped to Create a Social Political Movement." *The Blackfish Effect*. Tumblr, 8 Dec. 2014. Web.

"Statistics and Facts About Netflix." *Statista*. 2016. Web. <<http://www.statista.com/topics/842/netflix/>>.

Stover, John A. "The Intersections of Social Activism, Collective Identity, and Artistic Expression in Documentary Filmmaking." *Loyola University Chicago*. 26 March 2013. Web. <http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/396>

Super Size Me. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. Cameo, 2005. Film.

Vibes, John. "Your Activism Worked! Sea World Can No Longer Breed Orcas." *The Free Thought Project*. 09 Oct. 2015. Web.

Winchester, Levi. "Orlando SeaWorld Lawsuit Alleges Killer Whales Are Drugged and Sunburnt." *Daily Express*. 11 Apr. 2015. Web.

Zelman, Joanna. "PETA's SeaWorld Slavery Case Dismissed By Judge." *Huffington Post*. 09 Feb. 2012. Web.