

## **Abstract**

SeaWorld was faced with a major public relations crisis in 2013. The film *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013), a documentary questioning the ethics of SeaWorld's operations through the experiences of one of its orcas, was just released; at first, only to a limited audience at the Sundance Film Festival in January, and soon, to select theatres, the public on CNN's cable television channel, and streaming platforms like Netflix. Following this PR crisis, SeaWorld tackled significant financial struggles as a result of reduced attendance and SeaWorld's parks never returned to pre-*Blackfish* attendance rates (Boissat et al., 2021; Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019). SeaWorld's response was ineffective compared to the documentary's massive influence on the parks, failing to manage its reputation and combat public backlash (Duhon et al., 2016). Meanwhile, the documentary significantly influenced public attitudes, leading to widespread criticism of SeaWorld.

**Keywords:** *Blackfish, SeaWorld, Crisis Management, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory*

# **Applying Strategic Communication Theory to the ‘Blackfish Effect’**

## **Introduction**

An emotionally-charged film documenting the life of a captive orca in 2013 (*Blackfish*) was followed by major drops in attendance and financial consequences for SeaWorld, resulting in significant repercussions the parks still haven’t fully recovered from (Boissat et al., 2021). The film’s emotional framing and the public’s reaction to the content shown in the documentary, paired with the ineffectiveness of SeaWorld’s response to the film, are a clear example of a reputational crisis (Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019). To respond more effectively, SeaWorld could have used Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) in combination with Benoit’s Image Repair Theory to mend their relationship with the public and shareholders. With the methods proposed by these theories, SeaWorld could have employed a strategy centered on corrective action and mitigated both public backlash and financial loss (Duhon et al., 2016; Rodriguez, 2024).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: The Scenario in Context**

SeaWorld attendance and stocks fell following the release of the *Blackfish* documentary. The company reported a \$1 million decrease in profit in 2014, an 84% drop in income compared to the same time in the year prior in 2015, and a 33% drop in its share price on August 13, 2014 (Boissat et al., 2021). The film depicted a variety of seemingly unethical practices originating from their orca program, primarily through recordings of the killer whale Tilikum: a SeaWorld orca responsible for three deaths while captive (Cowperthwaite, 2013). Responding to this required tact on the part of SeaWorld’s PR team, which struggled to garner

support using defensive communication following the documentary's popularity (Duhon et al., 2016). The general public, SeaWorld attendees, animal rights activists like PETA, and many media outlets were exposed to a negative view of the parks' operations, strongly affecting the company's reputation (Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019). SeaWorld could not control the film's influential framing of their parks as unethical, and was unable to counter arguments of past harm inflicted on both the aquatic life and people.

The emotional messaging of the film contrasted with SeaWorld's technical defensive responses, which contributed to a greater sentiment of corporate disconnect and bias (Boissat et al., 2021). Internet users exacerbated the negative effects of the film on SeaWorld's reputation, disseminating incriminating information from *Blackfish* and demanding change (Duhon et al., 2016). SeaWorld had to address viewers' ethical worries, ensure that stakeholders and investors didn't leave, and tackle workers' safety concerns. This was an extensive set of challenges for SeaWorld's reputation to bounce back from (Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019).

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Repair Theory**

Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory identifies three organizational crisis types, which include the victim, accidental, and preventable clusters. The events depicted in *Blackfish* constituted a preventable crisis for SeaWorld, or one where an organization is perceived as responsible for the crisis. SeaWorld's orca breeding operations and its consequences on both aquatic life and workers were part of the company's practices; denial or rebuttal, according to SCCT, are the wrong choices in such a crisis, which is labeled a severe

reputational threat (Coombs, 2007).

The theory centers on different communication strategies depending on the crisis type and the organization's responsibility in the crisis. Once the type of crisis is classified, Image Repair Theory can be used to address it appropriately. The release of *Blackfish* and its detrimental impact on SeaWorld was an evident example of a PR crisis, which both SCCT and Image Repair Theory address (Duhon et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Application, Analysis, and Strategic Plan**

SeaWorld's reputational crisis in the years following 2014 would be labeled a severe preventable crisis by SCCT (Coombs, 2007). With this in mind, two Image Repair Theory responses could immediately be labeled inappropriate: denial and evading responsibility. Audiences were already convinced that the film's contents were true and the responsibility of SeaWorld (Boissat et al., 2021). Denial and reducing offensiveness, which SeaWorld partly engaged in when claiming *Blackfish* was misleading, led to heightened public opposition on social media platforms.

Instead, the proper response may have been to admit responsibility and immediately take action, labeled mortification and corrective action by Image Repair Theory (Rodriguez, 2024). Eventually, SeaWorld did take corrective action by putting an end to its orca breeding program, but its lack of apology and criticisms directed toward the film did not resonate with the public (Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019). The parts of the documentary SeaWorld considered propaganda could not have been addressed without likely fueling backlash.

Publicly apologizing for the widely accepted claims presented in the film (like the significantly smaller size of the living space for orcas compared to their natural habitats) and immediately stopping the killer whale program could have at least partly quelled audience distress and not have led to as drastic of a drop in parkgoers, also benefiting shareholders (Boissat et al., 2021).

Although these theories can be used in combination to address peoples' concerns, the framing of the film also led many to oppose captivity, which SeaWorld profits off of (Massey & Randriamarohaja, 2019). The orca breeding program may be a thing of the past, but aquatic life of all kinds still exists in SeaWorld's parks. Consequences of the film would likely still persist, regardless of any alternative theory application. The public's distaste after being emotionally moved by the film would be difficult to erase, even if the crisis was addressed as effectively as possible; by admitting to unethical practices after the film's release, critics may argue SeaWorld should have stopped its orca breeding operations years ago or never had them to begin with. Responding after the fact may be seen as inherently selfish by the public, since the unethical practices may have persisted if SeaWorld could still profit off of them. This was a severe crisis, and while the initial response of SeaWorld was ineffective, other responses would also fail in some regards. The aim with the approach described would be to minimize damage, not to completely eliminate it.

## **Conclusion**

The release of the documentary *Blackfish* in 2013 damaged SeaWorld's reputation and resulted in significant financial losses (Boissat et al., 2021). By implementing a strategy based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Repair Theory, SeaWorld could have cut some of its losses and retained part of its lost audience of parkgoers. By observing the consequences of SeaWorld's defensive messaging, future preventable reputational crises like the one faced by SeaWorld may be more effectively addressed through mortification and taking corrective action (Rodriguez, 2024).

## References

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