

Research Proposal

Overview

In recent years, documentaries have done more than just entertain, they have shifted public debates, exposed hidden problems, and even inspired political or corporate change. Films like *Blackfish* and *The Social Dilemma* captured the public's attention not only because of the issues they explored but also because of the emotions they brought out of people. At the center of both films lies one of the most powerful rhetorical strategies: fear. Fear appeals grab audience attention, make issues feel urgent, and push viewers to reconsider their prior knowledge, from the ethics of animal captivity to the technology used daily.

This proposal examines how fear-based appeals are used in documentaries, with particular attention to the strategies used in *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish*. By analyzing the ways these films use language, imagery, narrative, and structure to instill fear, I plan to uncover the rhetorical techniques that make fear such a persuasive tool in documentary filmmaking.

Research Question

How do documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish* use fear-based appeals to emphasize issues such as social media ethics and animal welfare?

Critical Conversation

The conversation I am hoping my research contributes to is the role of persuasion in documentary filmmaking, especially through fear-based appeals. Documentaries have a unique role in the media landscape since they are often viewed as sources of truth or as an educational resource rather than as a form of entertainment. However, they are constructed texts that use rhetorical and visual strategies to shift the public views, encourage activism, or inspire social changes. When filmmakers want to motivate viewers to care about an issue, one of the most powerful tools at their disposal is fear. By instilling fear in the audience, they make problems feel urgent, dangerous, or even unavoidable, often pushing viewers to take the filmmaker's perspective more seriously.

In recent years films such as *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish* started widespread debates about the ethics of social media and the treatment of animals in captivity. These films demonstrate the power documentaries have to change public perception and influence debates. My project enters the larger critical conversation about how media instills fear to make viewers more receptive to issues about morality, ethics, or responsibility. Instead of asking whether their strategies are effective in persuading the public's views and actions, my project focuses on how these strategies are built and communicated through words, images, and narrative structures.

This is an important and useful area of study because documentaries are often consumed as “truth-telling” media. Audiences tend to trust them more than fictional films and believe everything said in them is true, although the persuasive strategies used to persuade the audience are often overlooked and not noticed. Understanding the techniques behind fear appeals can help us evaluate the power media has to shape attitudes and behavior of the public. Exploring how writing, imagery, and communication work together to create fear can provide insight into the rhetorical strategies that make many documentaries especially effective at skewing public opinion.

genres/artifacts

For my research, I have chosen two documentaries that provide valuable examples of fear-based persuasion: *The Social Dilemma* (2020) and *Blackfish* (2013).

The Social Dilemma: Explores how social media platforms can manipulate users and contribute to societal harm, including addiction, misinformation, polarization, and mental health crises. The film includes interviews with former insiders who warn about the dangers of the technologies they helped create. The documentary uses warnings, hypothetical scenarios, and ominous imagery to show viewers the invisible dangers of social media often, which makes it a prime example of a fear-based approach.

Blackfish: Tells the story of Tilikum, an orca involved in the deaths of three people while in captivity at SeaWorld. The film critiques the ethics of keeping orcas in captivity and shows the danger to both the animals and the trainers who work with them. It uses emotional interviews, graphic footage, and urgent narration to cause outrage and fear about corporate practices that put both human and animal lives at risk.

These films are well-suited for comparative study because they represent different issues but rely on similar persuasive strategies. By examining both, I will be able to analyze how fear-based appeals work within a single context as well as how filmmakers use the same strategies and apply them to very different subject matters. This comparison will provide a

richer understanding of how fear functions as a universal rhetorical device in documentaries.

Research Methods

Context analysis- I plan on examining recurring themes, language, and structures used in documentaries *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish*. I will concentrate on how often ideas are repeated, such as danger, urgency, or harm, and how they use these ideas to support the overall message of the film and how they reinforce fear appeals.

Textual analysis- I will look closely at the narration, interviews, or written text used in different documentaries. This will help me portray how word choice, tone, and phrasing are used to change the viewer's emotions and thoughts on certain topics.

Visual analysis- I will study the imagery, editing, color, and music used within different documentaries to create mood and emotion. Since creating fear relies heavily on how something is shown or portrayed, not just what's explicitly said, this method will be very useful.

Comparative analysis- I will look at the similarities and differences between both *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish*, using methods such as content, textual, and visual analysis. By comparing documentaries through these approaches, I can identify how different filmmakers use fear to get their message across, even when the subjects are very different.

Choice of method explanation

These methods are appropriate because my research question focuses on how fear is constructed, not on whether audiences find it effective. Using these approaches will allow me to stay objective while analyzing films' rhetorical strategies.

Data Organization

I will take detailed notes during multiple viewings of each film, selecting examples of language, imagery, or narrative devices that correspond with fear appeals. I plan to use spreadsheets and thematic charts to categorize repeated elements, as well as screenshots or time-stamped notes to document specific examples.

This structured approach will allow me to keep my data organized, making it easier to identify patterns across the films.

Timeline

Week 4- Finalize research proposal, confirm research question, and take peer review into account

Week 5- Conduct first viewing of *The Social Dilemma* and *Blackfish*, taking general notes on themes and fear-based strategies.

Week 6- Rewatch *The Social Dilemma*, focusing specifically on content analysis such as recurring ideas, word choice, and narrative structures. Begin organizing notes into themes.

Week 7- Rewatch *Blackfish*, focusing on textual and visual analysis such as tone, interviews, color, music, imagery. Begin organizing into comparative categories.

Week 8- Conduct comparative analysis, identifying shared and differing fear-based strategies between the two films. Create charts/spreadsheets of recurring themes.

Week 9 - Draft findings section of paper, explaining how filmmakers use fear appeals across the documentaries.

Week 10- Continue drafting paper, focusing on analysis and synthesis of evidence.

Week 11- Revise and polish draft, ensuring clarity of argument and proper integration of research methods.

Week 12- Take all peer review comments and fix any issues my peer found.

Week 13- make any last-minute changes and make sure everything is cohesive.