

Was #EndSpeciesism a Fumble? An Investigation of the Public's Perceptions of PETA's Message Framing Strategy During Super Bowl LIV

Authors

Rexanna Powers, *Louisiana State University*
Richie Roberts, Ph.D., *Louisiana State University*
Taylor K. Ruth, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Recently the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has advanced a new ideology, called *speciesism*, in which they have argued that human dominance and power have led to the exploitation of animals for financial gain (Horta, 2010). As such, PETA framed speciesism as a social justice issue and called for action through a coordinated media campaign, called #EndSpeciesism, in which they have advocated for legislative changes at the local, state, and federal levels (PETA, 2020a). To investigate PETA's #EndSpeciesism campaign, we used framing theory to guide this study (Gitlin, 1980). Media campaigns have used frames to make particular issues more salient than others for the public while also employing a unique angle (Entman, 1993). Framing analysis also allows researchers to better understand how an issue has been communicated, which results in a deeper understanding of how the public might view the phenomenon (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Background of the Study

Two days before the National Football League's (NFL's) Super Bowl LIV in 2020, PETA released a 60-second animated video (see <https://youtu.be/2XbCoOIEJ7s>) that promoted the #EndSpeciesism campaign on their YouTube account. PETA also shared the video across their various other social media platforms. However, in the weeks prior, PETA was denied a television airtime release of the video during commercial breaks of Super Bowl LIV (PETA, 2020b). As a result, PETA altered its plan and aimed to create a social media campaign by framing the video through a social justice lens to suggest parallels between the #EndSpeciesism campaign and the #BlackLivesMatter movement (PETA, 2020b). Once released, the video garnered 3.9 million views, across all social media platforms in three weeks (PETA, 2020a).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the public's perceptions of PETA's message framing strategy during Super Bowl LIV.

Methodology

For this investigation, we used an interpretive, qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To achieve this, we used purposive sampling to collect written narrative responses from 1,027 participants who were representative of the U.S. population. A web-based survey sampling company was used to achieve the non-probability sampling frame. The web-based survey sampling company also emphasized representativeness regarding age, sex, race, and geographic

location based on U.S. Census data. The participants were paid for participation to achieve quality, thought-provoking responses. To collect data, we distributed a link that allowed the participants to view the PETA video promoting *#EndSpeciesism* and provide a narrative of their perspectives using a thought listing approach. The writing prompt for this investigation was, “*We are interested in the thoughts and feelings that you experienced as you watched the video above. Please list your thoughts in the textbox below.*” Additional data sources triangulated the findings for this investigation. They included: (a) a demographic questionnaire and (b) a quantitative instrument that used a Likert-type scale. However, we only featured the qualitative data in this report. To analyze the data, we used Saldaña’s (2021) procedures, by which we coded the data using two coding cycles. In our first analytic cycle, we employed descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2021). Then, in the second coding cycle, we used axial coding to examine the relationships among the descriptive codes and reduce the data into distinct categories (Saldaña, 2021). After this process, we met as a research team to negotiate categories and discuss existing discrepancies in our analysis. Finally, we scrutinized our categories through the lens of framing theory (Gitlin, 1980). As a result of this process, four themes emerged.

Findings

Through our analysis of the data, four themes emerged: (1) animal rights, (2) visceral response, (3) questioning assumptions, and (4) context collision. In the first theme, the most prominent concept articulated by participants was how PETA’s framing of the video was designed to motivate changes to laws and regulations to ensure that animals obtained rights similar to humans. In particular, Participant #919 suggested that the video opened her eyes to how humans have “contributed to animal suffering” throughout history. The second theme described the range of emotions participants articulated while viewing PETA’s *#EndSpeciesism* video. For instance, participants submitted polarized statements about human’s mistreatment of animals and the emotional connection they felt after watching the video. Participant #864 explained: “I felt very sad after watching this video; we should care for other living things in this environment.” In the third theme, participants described how the video made them question its underlying political agenda. For example, Participant #334 said: “I liked the images [in the video], and I was amused to a certain degree with the idea of animals kneeling in protest, but at the same time I experienced some rejection or disgust with the idea because, considering the timing, it seems too political for animal rights.” Context collision, the final theme, represented the intentional collapse, blurring, and flattening of contexts in the framing of PETA’s *#EndSpeciesism* video. As a result, this theme primarily consisted of what participants described as an inappropriate overlapping of contexts that the video perpetuated. The most prominent examples of context collision were the conflation of the *#EndSpeciesism* campaign and the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement. On this point, Participant #167 described how the video made him uncomfortable. He expanded: “I thought that this ad was very political and did not need to copy a politicized movement. I felt a bit irritated by the message since I agree with it, but not with how it was presented and making the animals, especially the bald eagle, kneeling.”

Conclusions, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

This investigation examined the public’s perceptions of PETA’s message framing strategy during Super Bowl LIV. The findings of this study suggested that PETA’s video promoting its *#EndSpeciesism* campaign was primarily mixed regarding how it was perceived – a finding that

does not appear to have been reported in the broader literature. While the video did succeed in gaining views and attention (PETA, 2020b), the strong emotional responses to the imagery was not necessarily positive. For example, participants perceived that PETA had inappropriately blurred contexts by conflating the #EndSpeciesism campaign and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which resulted in a lack of trust in the organization. Therefore, as social injustices and human inequalities continue to be explored and potentially exploited in the media, it is critical to understand the public will likely approach this communication strategy with skepticism. Therefore, we recommend that when framing video content, agricultural communicators should attempt to humanize the topic by using visual symbols and cues that align with the public lived experience, which could help them connect with the issue more intimately.

References

- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification in a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Gitlin, T. (1980). *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the new left*. University of California Press.
- Horta, O. (2010). What is speciesism? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 23(3), 243-266. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10806-009-9205-2>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA]. (2020a). *All about PETA*. Author. <https://www.peta.org/about-peta/learn-about-peta/>
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [PETA]. (2020b). NFL squashes PETA's Colin Kaepernick inspired Super Bowl ad. Author. <https://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/nfl-squashes-petas-colin-kaepernick-inspired-super-bowl-ad/>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 9-20. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326_5.x