The Potential for a 'Tiger King Effect': Analysis of Public and Media Response to the Netflix Series *Tiger King*

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Netflix aired the docuseries *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*. This aligned with the United States declaring a national emergency and the beginning of stay-at-home orders. Netflix experienced a significant increase in viewership and a large number of responses to *Tiger King's* content from viewers and media outlets (e.g., Stoll 2021). In this article, we present an analysis of social media responses on the Netflix official Facebook page and online news articles associated with *Tiger King* published between 20 March 2020 and 30 March 2020. This thematic analysis reveals that public response was mainly related to expressions of sentiment, characters featured in the docuseries, and references to the show's content (e.g., specific scenes). We also identified character references, series content descriptions, and real-life events as themes within media sources. We conclude this article by discussing the potential for a 'Tiger King Effect' in the U.S. and the media's role in distributing human-animal related materials to the general public.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 Pandemic, Exotic Animal Trade, Human-Animal Interactions, Tiger King Effect, Media Framing

Introduction

When, in 2020, a global pandemic led to a multitude of countries shutting down and implementing stay-at-home orders, television watching and social media use significantly increased (Hutchinson 2020; Perez 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020, and within two days the Trump administration declared a national emergency in the United States (AJMC Staff 2020). The United States began issuing the first stay-at-home orders between March and April, with California becoming the first to do so on 19 March (Kates, Michaud and Tolbert 2020). During the pandemic, Netflix released the true-crime docuseries *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, which centres on individuals with eccentric personalities who were, and/or continue to be, involved in the exotic animal trade. According to several media outlets (e.g., Clark 2020; Pallotta 2020), *Tiger King* reached 34.3 million unique viewers and 19.0 million views per minute among U.S. audiences within its first ten days of streaming. *Tiger King* represents an interesting case study in relation to increased viewership of TV streaming services, media coverage, and social media use during a global pandemic.

Tiger King engaged the general public and media outlets in issues surrounding the private ownership of 'big cats' - those belonging to the genus *Panthera* - in the U.S., and how people and businesses utilise these animals for personal gain. Animal experts have long advocated for the discontinuation of the use of wild species in social entertainment venues due to welfare concerns (Brando 2016). Media characterisations of animal-related issues have tremendous impact on how the general public views animal welfare and advocacy (Molloy 2011). Shannon Grugan's media analysis of animal cruelty reporting in the U.S. found considerable variation in subjective reporting techniques (2019, 97). While the majority of their results revealed neutral framing by the media, other themes of condemnation, sympathy, and drama were also present.

Despite animal experts warning about the dangers of keeping large carnivores as pets, and the public becoming increasingly aware of animal welfare (e.g., Hampton and Teh-White 2019), the media does not necessarily highlight these problems when big cats are portrayed in popular culture. For example, Mike Tyson, a famous retired boxer, previously owned a tiger, and this relationship was publicised in the hit film *The Hangover* (2009). Other films with tiger-human interactions include *A Tiger's Tale* (2014), a children's movie about a child caring for a tiger cub, and *Life of Pi* (2012), in which a man forms a connection with a tiger. Depictions of big cats out of context (i.e., *ex situ*), and confined to a profoundly anthropocentric environment, may influence people's perceptions about the private ownership of nontraditional exotic animals and the cultural acceptance of their use in entertainment without animal welfare considerations.

Tiger King is not the first true-crime docuseries by Netflix to present real-life events using serial drama techniques (Dams 2019). Moreover, it is not the only Netflix docuseries to spark national attention from the general public and media outlets. Michael Krieger examined the Netflix docuseries, *Making A Murderer*, to evaluate Netflix's use of aesthetic interventions and streaming distribution in creating true-crime documentaries that stimulate public response to the featured content (2019, 107). According to Krieger, aesthetic interventions involve film creators assuming an active role, manipulating how a particular topic is presented (e.g., strategically placed footage), and promoting alternative narratives to instill reasonable doubt in the audience (2019, 108-110). In turn, what was once a small-scale problem (e.g., a local crime) quickly becomes a global phenomenon. Even further, Netflix users are no longer limited to a television set, and can essentially access the streaming platform anywhere with a mobile smart device such as a mobile phone or tablet. These multiple modes of Netflix consumption coupled with numerous social media platforms allow for larger audiences, and facilitate extensive discussions and participations by users (Krieger 2019, 114). Considering these findings altogether, one can speculate about *Tiger King's* potential for a domino effect leading to a societal shift in the perception of treatment of big cats in America - what we call the 'Tiger King Effect'.

Prior to *Tiger King*, the U.S. had already begun to experience changes in policy about, and public reception of, captive wildlife. For example, *Ringling Brothers Circus* closed in 2017 due to declining ticket sales which were reflective of the general public's disapproval of wild animal performances (e.g., Ellis-Petersen 2017). Another example is what has been termed the 'Blackfish

Effect'. CNN's documentary *Blackfish* (2013) exposed the challenges of keeping captive marine mammals and their use in human entertainment. Like *Tiger King*, the public responded to *Blackfish* via social media, and the film attracted considerable media coverage (e.g., Chattoo 2016).

Since its release in 2013, *Blackfish* has led to corporate, legislative, and regulatory changes of captive marine mammal management (Parsons and Rose 2018, 75). For example, Southwest Airlines discontinued its partnership with SeaWorld in 2014 (Kumar 2014). Following suit, National Football Leagues (e.g., Miami Dolphins) also ended their associations with SeaWorld (Joseph 2015; Koerner 2014). Due to declining ticket sales and social pressures, SeaWorld ended its captive orca breeding program in 2016 (Jamieson 2016). In 2017, the Orca Responsibility and Care Advancement Act amended the Marine Mammal Protection Act by prohibiting orca breeding for public consumption, and phasing out captive orca populations throughout the U.S.. While *Blackfish* and *Tiger King* are documentaries portraying a human-animal conflict, *Blackfish* strictly focused on the animal welfare issue (i.e., the animal's perspective), while *Tiger King* focused on the human characters (i.e., followed human narratives). Thus, *Tiger King* may not have the same outcomes as *Blackfish*.

We define the 'Tiger King Effect' as an observable cultural change, in which consumption of the *Tiger King* series leads to shifts in public perception of how captive big cats are to be managed. Due to this change in perception, agencies involved with captive big cats will have to adapt their operations to meet public expectations, and government agencies will be pressured to change legislation about big cat private ownership. At the time of writing, a 'Tiger King Effect' has yet to be observed, and our goal is to document and explore initial responses to *Tiger King's* content. We focused on three research objectives to determine: (1) how the public responded to the docuseries *Tiger King*, (2) how the media framed content from *Tiger King*, and (3) whether public and media reactions aligned. To evaluate these questions, we conducted a thematic analysis of social media comments on Netflix posts advertising *Tiger King,* and a review of news articles about *Tiger King*.

Inductive thematic analysis approach

This study used an applied thematic analytic process with an exploratory and grounded theory methodology (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012a, 8) to address our objectives. A passive analysis was used to collect publicly available data from the Netflix Facebook page to evaluate public responses to the docuseries *Tiger King*. The official Netflix Facebook page was selected as social media outlets provide a plethora of information from a diverse population (Franz et al. 2019). More specifically, Facebook is the most popular social media in the U.S. with approximately 69% of adults and 51% of teens regularly using the platform (Gramlich 2019).

Tiger King was reportedly the most watched show on Netflix in its first ten days (Pallotta 2020). Netflix posted two *Tiger King*-focused posts during this timeframe: 20 March 2020 (the day it aired) and 30 March 2020. The 20 March 2020 post advertised the docuseries' trailer, and was captioned 'you have never met anyone quite like Joe Exotic and you've never heard a story quite like Tiger King'. Comments from this post were retrieved for analysis on 12 December 2020, by

which time the post had attracted 1900 comments, 1061 of them publicly viewable. The post on 30 March 2020 was titled 'Tiger King's 5 Biggest WTF Moments', and included a compilation video using selected scenes from the series. Comment data were retrieved on 22 October 2020, when the post had 4500 comments, 3237 of these publicly viewable. For both posts, 'Most Relevant' comments were selected to retrieve data, and the 'View More Comments' link was selected until Facebook gave the warning 'Most Relevant is selected, so some comments have been filtered out'. The 'Most Relevant' comments option is a Facebook algorithm that ranks user comments based on popularity (e.g., user reactions such as 'liking' the comment) and its relevance to the post (e.g., automatic removal of spam). This option is useful for viewing comments on popular Facebook pages, like Netflix, that have large followers (see Facebook support 2021 for further explanation). In addition, these algorithms are unpassable (see 'Data collection limitations' section below). Collectively, we were able to use 486 social media comments for analysis.

To accomplish our second objective, news articles published in English and by U.S.-based sources between 20 March 2020 and 30 March 2020 were collected by searching the phrase 'Tiger King' using the Google News tab. Sources outside the U.S. were excluded - as *Tiger King* follows U.S. citizens operating within U.S. jurisdiction, our theoretical framework relies on U.S. studies, and algorithms used by social media and search engines are based on user location. The results included a sample of forty-seven news articles that mentioned the docuseries *Tiger King*. Table 1 lists news articles reviewed for analysis, their source, and the extent to which *Tiger King* was discussed in the article.

Data collection limitations

A limitation that should be acknowledged is the sampling techniques used for data collection. As previously mentioned, search engines (e.g., Google) and social media companies (e.g., Facebook) use algorithms to select the 'most relevant' materials to a given user (Brake 2017, 26). This technique may have allowed selection bias. However, this strategy is reflective of how the general public is exposed to the content we are analysing. Moreover, there are no methods to by-pass these 'gate-keepers' of information (Brake 2017, 27).

Table 1. News articles, date of publications, source, and relevance to 'Tiger King' docuseries content used for media analysis.

Article Title and Author	Date Published	News Source	Relevance
'Tiger King, now on Netflix, is 7 scattered but engrossing episodes of WTF' (Wilkinson 2020)	20/03/20	Vox	Main Topic
'"Tiger King," about failed murder plot involving Florida's Big Cat Rescue, is now on Netflix' (Roa 2020)	20/03/20	Orlando Weekly	Main Topic
'How the Tiger King Filmmakers Infiltrated the Seedy Underbelly of America's Sketchiest Zoos' (Bruney 2020a)	21/03/20	Esquire	Main Topic

Article Title and Author	Date Published	News Source	Relevance
'"Tiger King": Joe Exotic's journey from big cats to the Big House after murder for hire' (Jensen 2020)	24/03/20	USA Today	Main Topic
'Your Guide to Netflix's Absolutely Wild New Docuseries *The Tiger King'* (Vaynshteyn 2020a)	24/03/20	Refinery29	Main Topic
'OKC zoo issues statement after Netflix release of "Tiger King"' (Butler 2020)	24/03/20	News Channel 8 Tulsa	Main Topic
'What to Watch After You've Seen "Tiger King" on Netflix' (Saperstain 2020)	25/03/20	Variety	Sub-topic
'Tiger King: Murder, mayhem and madness | Official Trailer | Netflix' (The News-Herald 2020)	25/03/20	The News-Herald	Main Topic
'Here's What Happened to Kelci Saffery after "Tiger King"' (Freedman 2020)	25/03/20	Men's Health	Main Topic
'What is "Tiger King" and why is everybody watching it right now?' (Kacala 2020)	26/03/20	Today	Main Topic
'"Tiger King" star Joe Exotic files $94M lawsuit, wants presidential pardon' (Denney 2020)	26/03/20	New York Post	Main Topic
'Netflix "Tiger King": Joe Exotic loves new fame even in prison' (Kaufman 2020)	26/03/20	Los Angeles Times	Main Topic
'I Clicked and Seven Hours Passed: Netflix's "Tiger King"' (Syme 2020)	26/03/20	The New Yorker	Main Topic
'Big Cats, Fragile Egos: How Southern Patriarchy Creates Netflix's Tiger King Chaos' (Adams 2020)	26/03/20	Consequence of Sound	Main Topic
'Carole Baskin Responded to Netflix's *Tiger King* – She's Not Happy' (Vaynshteyn 2020b)	26/03/20	Refinery29	Main Topic
'The Private Zoos on Netflix's Tiger King Exist Because of These U.S. Exotic Pet Ownership Laws' (Bender 2020)	26/03/20	People	Main Topic
'Jared Huffman enjoys '30 seconds of fame' in Netflix's "Tiger King"' (Schneider 2020)	26/03/20	Times Standard	Main Topic
'Who Is Former Drug Trafficker Mario Tabraue From Joe Exotic Docuseries And Where Is He Now?' (Brogle 2020)	26/03/20	Oxygen	Main Topic
'Netflix's "Tiger King" is the show that's getting us through quarantine' (Daley 2020)	27/03/20	Boston Globe	Main Topic
'Joe Exotic's Homemade Zoo Had 90 Tigers Before He Was Brought Down By a Murder Plot' (Bruney 2020b)	27/03/20	Esquire	Main Topic
'Double Feature: "Tiger King": What the Hell Did We Just Watch?!' (Truong 2020)	27/03/20	Our Community Now	Main Topic
'Eagles' Lane Johnson talks social distancing workout recovery, Netflix's "Tiger King"' (NBC Sports 2020a)	27/03/20	NBC Sports	Sub-topic
'5 things to know about Netflix's 'Tiger King'' (Buffa 2020)	27/03/20	WKYC Studios	Main Topic
'17 iconic lines from Netflix's bonkers "Tiger King" that'll soon be on t-shirts' (Berkowitz 2020)	28/03/20	Fast Company	Main Topic

Article Title and Author	Date Published	News Source	Relevance
'Corn Nation True Crime Series Night: Tiger King' (Gerhart 2020)	28/03/20	Corn Nation	Main Topic
'"Tiger King" Ranks as TV's Most Popular Show Right Now, According to Rotten Tomatoes' (Spangler 2020)	29/03/20	Variety	Main Topic
'Gardner Minshew posted the perfect "Tiger King" joke on Instagram' (McKenna 2020)	29/03/20	USA Today Sports	Sub-topic
'Jeff Lowe of "Tiger King" wanted attraction in downtown Las Vegas' (Katsilometes 2020)	29/03/20	Las Vegas Review-Journal	Main Topic
'Christian Yelich posted a mashup of his face with Joe Exotic's, and . . . it will haunt you' (Radcliffe 2020)	29/03/20	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	Main Topic
'"Tiger King" is the weird docu-series distraction we can use right now' (Lowry 2020)	29/03/20	KSL News Radio	Main Topic
'Yes, a "Tiger King" personality shared the stage with Britney Spears at the 2001 VMAs' (Trepany 2020)	30/03/20	USA Today	Main Topic
'Saturday Night Live's Kate McKinnon to star as Carole Baskin in new series based on "Tiger King"' (ALT Producer (2020)	30/03/20	Radio.com	Main Topic
'Tiger King star Jeff Lowe hires Instagram model as nanny' (Jankens 2020)	30/03/20	Radio.com	Main Topic
'Netflix Docuseries 'Tiger King' Reigns Supreme in Era of Social Distancing' (CBS Los Angeles 2020)	30/03/20	CBS Los Angeles	Main Topic
'"Tiger King" subject Joe Exotic files $94-million lawsuit over his prosecution' (Associated Press 2020)	30/03/20	Los Angeles Times	Main Topic
'Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge speaks out regarding 'Tiger King' series on Netflix' (Higgs 2020)	30/03/20	KNWA Fox 24	Main Topic
'Act 3 Podcast: Tiger King, the Platform, and Furiosa Casting News' (3 WTKR 2020)	30/03/20	3 WTKR	Main Topic
'Bob Thompson: "Tiger King" is First Pop Culture Masterpiece in the Age of Coronavirus' (Thompson 2020)	30/03/20	WGBH	Main Topic
'Tiger King' Joe Exotic files $94 million federal lawsuit' (News 5 Cleveland 2020)	30/03/20	News 5 Cleveland	Main Topic
'Tiger King's Joe Exotic Files $94 Million Lawsuit Against US Government' (Kaye 2020)	30/03/20	Consequence of Sound	Main Topic
'Former Blackhawk Daniel Carcillo has a question for Netflix's 'Tiger King' Star' (NBC Sports 2020)	30/03/20	NBC Sports	Main Topic
'"Tiger King" Has an Unexpected Connection to "Uncut Gems" Directors Josh and Benny Safdie' (Levine 2020)	30/03/20	Pop Culture	Sub-topic
'Morning brief: Tiger King star has solar installed, 260 MW on a fishery in China' (Sylvia 2020)	30/03/20	PV Magazine	Sub-topic

Article Title and Author	Date Published	News Source	Relevance
'Pittsburgh has a "Tiger King" mural' (Limberg 2020)	30/03/20	Radio.com	Main Topic
'A journal, day 13: 'Tiger King' and feeling better' (Kolker 2020)	30/03/20	Wood TV	Small Mention
'Detroit Red Wings' Dylan Larkin doing fine during NHL break; yes, he's seen "Tiger King"' (St. James 2020)	30/03/20	Detroit Free Press	Sub-topic
'Petros Papadakis talks college football, Tiger King documentary and broadcasting' (Canzano 2020)	30/03/20	The Oregonian	Sub-topic

Data analysis

Social media comments and webpages were saved as reader view PDF documents. Data content was imported and reviewed using ATLAS.ti 9 for iOS operating system. Data analysis was completed following an inductive approach in which all social media comments and news articles were coded based on the content alone and not using predetermined themes (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012b, 89) and was completed as follows:

Initial Analysis: The entire dataset was reviewed to develop a comprehensive understanding of its content and to generate broad themes. During this step, social media comments and quotations from news articles related to *Tiger King* were highlighted for further analysis. Then, one author applied broad themes to the data set for the other author to review. Both authors collaboratively discussed themes, associated quotations, and how to split themes into narrower codes.

Coding: Following the initial analysis, one of the authors split broad themes into narrower code groups and coded the entire dataset. Then, the other author reviewed the initial code assignment. When each author had reviewed the dataset and initial code assignments, notes were compared, and code assignments were finalised. Codes and their definitions are reported in Table 2.

Interpretation: Collectively, both authors identified themes and patterns and the results section presents these joint interpretations. This assessment was done within the context of this study's objectives. Social media comments and news articles were reviewed to determine their respective themes. Then, public response and media framing were compared to identify similarities and/or differences.

Table 2. Thematic codes, sub-codes, and associated definitions applied to social media comments and news articles.

Theme	Sub-code	Definition
Animal Organisation	N/A	Reference made to any animal related organisation such as Big Cat Rescue, PETA, or other agencies. This can be in the form of directly stating the organisation's name or indirectly referring to it (e.g., Joe's zoo).

Theme	Sub-code	Definition
Animal Reference	N/A	Reference made to any animal such as tiger when Animal Organisation, Animal Trade or Animal Welfare was not used.
Animal Trade	N/A	Any reference to the exotic wildlife trade and practices associated with the industry. This can be in the form of a direct reference or indirect (e.g., breeding for fur).
Animal Welfare	Negative	Theme related to unfavourable conditions, treatment, and care to animals.
Animal Welfare	Positive	Theme related to favourable conditions, treatment, and care to animals.
Character Reference	Ambiguous	Sentiment directed towards a human character that could have more than one interpretation of being positive or negative.
Character Reference	Animal Relationship	Reference to a human character and their relationship with an animal. This can be in the form of a description (e.g., cat-lover) and/or as an expression of self-identity (e.g., animals as status symbols).
Character Reference	Description	Detailed information about a human character.
Character Reference	Negative	Unfavourable sentiment expressed towards a human character.
Character Reference	Pop Culture	Reference to a human character and their likeness to a real-life pop culture icon. This can be in the form of comparing a *Tiger King* character to an actor or casting recommendations for future *Tiger King* productions.
Character Reference	Positive	Favourable sentiment expressed towards a human character.
Character Reference	Sympathy	An expression of sensitivity, pity, and/or empathy towards a human character.
Content	Reference	A reference to or a description of a specific scene, line, or sub-story within the docuseries.
Content	Series Summary	A general overview, summary, or description about the docuseries. These themes are related to what the series is about, not its purpose.
Content	Underlying Message	Statements made about the docuseries' ultimate purpose, take-away message, and what the series does. These are references to the show's purpose and are not statements referring to what the show is about.
COVID-19	N/A	Comments made directly or indirectly about the COVID-19 pandemic. Direct references are those in which the article or commenter state words like 'COVID' or 'pandemic'. Indirect references are statements about events related to the pandemic. Examples include 'being stuck at home', 'toilet paper shortage', or any other circumstances that are related to the pandemic.
Illegal Activity	N/A	Reference made to illegal activities such as murder, drug use, etc. This can also be in the form of insinuating a human character was a part of illegal activities.
N/A	N/A	Content unrelated to *Tiger King*
Other Source	N/A	A social media user and/or news article providing another source for others to learn about *Tiger King* or related topics. Examples include podcasts, websites, or other documentaries.
Real Life Event	N/A	References made to events that occurred in reality but may or may not have been covered in the series. These can be personal accounts from social media users (e.g., 'I met Joe') or additional information provided

Theme	Sub-code	Definition
		about the series' characters, content, or related materials (e.g., update on lawsuits, legislation passed since show aired).
Sentiment	Ambiguous	An expression of an opinion that could have more than one interpretation of being positive or negative.
Sentiment	Negative	Unfavourable reviews by those who have watched or have not watched a portion or all the series.
Sentiment	Positive	Favourable reviews by those who have watched or have not watched a portion or all the series.
Sentiment	Unreal, Crazy, Shock	Any expression of an opinion that reviewed the docuseries or related content as being unrealistic, unbelievable, crazy, insane, or any other metaphoric expression (e.g., train wreck).
Tagged Friend	N/A	Social media users tagging friends in a comment to draw their attention to the Netflix post.
Watching	N/A	Comments indicating the user or author was still in the process of watching the docuseries.

Results and discussion

Public response

Collectively, public responses on Netflix posts about *Tiger King* reflect a positive reception of the docuseries. Many Facebook comments were related to sentiment (56%), in which users voiced various opinions about the docuseries. Of these, most expressed favourable reviews (31%) or made ambiguous statements that could be interpreted as either positive or negative (27%). Ambiguous statements often co-occurred with another theme, as in the following statement:

> Watching it now, as a veterinary technician who often works with wildlife and exotics it's infuriating to watch. But also a whirlwind of characters and stories.

Clearly, this user is expressing a negative sentiment regarding the animal-related content. However, it is difficult to determine if they are unhappy with the content portrayed, as compared to the quality of the docuseries itself.

Public comments also articulated feelings of shock and made metaphorical statements about these sentiments (28%). For example, one comment read:

> One of the most amazing train wrecks of humanity I have ever seen! It was shocking, disgusting, and strangely delicious. The sheer amount of What The Fuckery in this docuseries was fantastic!

This type of statement is reflected in other user comments, in which they referred to *Tiger King* as a 'train wreck' or 'dumpster fire'. While these types of statements may be interpreted as unfavourable, as the previous example shows, other contexts indicate the commenter enjoyed watching the documentary.

While positive, ambiguous, and shock-related themes were most frequent, other users shared negative sentiments about the *Tiger King* content too (13%). When people made adverse

statements about the series, it often occurred alongside other themes related to a character, animal welfare, or illegal activity. One comment encompassed multiple themes:

> Gross documentary and sad. All this media and no one helped the 'big cat industry'.. [sic] it's all focused on a hillbilly. It's sad. Don't think it deserves the hype. Next!

The second most common theme found in Facebook comments was character references (34%). When users were referring to someone depicted in *Tiger King*, they were largely doing so to express a negative attitude towards the character (57%). As previously shown, unfavourable opinions were often accompanied by other themes. However, others succinctly stated a distaste towards a particular character such as, 'Why did I come away disliking self righteous [sic] Carole the most', while others shared longer comments:

> Carol [sic] Baskin is the most unlikable person in this show and that's saying a lot because every single person in this docuseries is shady as [emoji] and gross as well. Her husband better watch his back and stay away from those tiger cages.

Other character references came in the form of Facebook users comparing characters to famous people (15%) or were ambiguous in this sense (14%). Some examples include 'So Joe Dirt became Joe Exotic.', 'What the hell happened to Kid Rock?', and 'Brett Michaels has come a long way'.

The third major theme found on the Netflix Facebook posts was people referencing specific content from the *Tiger King* docuseries (22%). The overwhelming majority of these statements were indicative of a specific scene (85%). For example, several comments referenced a jet-ski scene (e.g., 'That jet ski scene was the best part of my weekend. Don't judge it.') and others referenced songs performed by a character within the docuseries (e.g., 'So good. The song "her [sic] kitty kitty" had me rolling.'). Others were Facebook users asking others about the content. One user asked, 'How in gods [sic] name can someone own 227 tigers?!', and another inquired, 'Can someone explain to me how Jeff Lowe just came in and took over?'.

Media response

As shown in Table 3, news articles centering on Netflix's docuseries *Tiger King* most often discussed the people depicted (94%). Of these, 86% were providing character descriptions, 47% used unfavourable language towards or about the characters, and 45% were describing the character's relationship to animals. The following quote demonstrates a character reference that is both descriptive and negative:

> Carole Baskin is a shady character I can't trust. While Joe is painted as both the protagonist and antagonist at times through this series (for good reasons), it's Baskin who seems to be hiding something [….] Baskin was the park owner who used to breed young tigers and engage in activities that she deems criminal practice from Exotic, but now has turned over a new leaf. (Buffa 2020)

In addition, most character descriptions referred to Joe Exotic as being the main character of the show:

> Tiger King follows the rise and fall of an eccentric Oklahoma zoo entrepreneur
> known as Joe Exotic [....] a gay, polygamous, gun-toting libertarian with a
> platinum-blond mullet [...]. (Syme 2020)

Character-related themes that discussed a human-animal relationship were either made in the
context of the character as a 'big-cat lover' or, of course, as the 'Tiger King'. Interestingly, some
character-related human-animal references articulated the big cats as a status symbol:

> I would say the big cat people see tigers as sort of a status symbol, as you would a
> Ferrari or fancy car collection. They have the animals to elevate their position. It
> makes them special. (Kaufman 2020)

The second major theme present in the reviewed news articles was content (87%). Of the 41
articles that discussed the content of *Tiger King*, 88% provided a summary of the series, 59%
referenced a specific scene, and 37% discussed the docuseries' purpose (i.e., the underlying
message). Statements related to series summary ranged from short statements (e.g., 'Exotic
animals. Conartists. Killers. Country singers.', Buffa 2020) to more detailed summaries such as
the following:

> It's about an [sic] guy from Oklahoma who likes tigers. He has some pretty fun
> adventures from what I've heard so this should be enjoyable for all. Also, murder
> for hire which isn't good but adds to the story line. (Gerhart 2020)

Articles that discussed specific scenes also did so to provide a more detailed series summary (e.g.,
'Exotic, who was starting to unravel at this point, allegedly tried to pay several hit men to kill
Baskin.' Vaynshteyn 2020b). Content references were also used to convey *Tiger King's* purpose:

> While there is plenty to unpack [...] including a murder-for-hire plot, the series
> begins with a startling figure: there are more captive tigers in the United States than
> wild ones left in the world. Public zoos [...] account for some of the captive tigers
> [...] but thousands of others, as Tiger King shows, are kept by individuals as exotic
> pets or are living in privately-owned zoos (also known as roadside zoos). (Bender
> 2020)

The third dominant theme was news articles discussing real life events (74%) that were not a part
of the docuseries. As defined in the codebook (see methods), these themes either provided an
update to the characters like Joe Exotic (e.g., '"Tiger King" star Joe Exotic files $94M lawsuit,
wants presidential pardon', Denney 2020) or Carole Baskin (e.g., 'Carole Baskin Responded To
Netflix's Tiger King - She's Not Happy', Vaynshteyn 2020b). News articles also provided
celebrity responses to the docuseries, such as Dylan Larkin of the Red Wings hockey team saying:

> I'm not a big fan of big captivity [sic] and some of the behind-the-scenes stuff. I'm
> glad it's not my place to be as vocal about it as some people are on the show. It's
> just interesting, that's all I'm going to say. I wouldn't say cool. (St. James 2020)

Table 3. Frequency of coding themes and sub-themes in news article.

Theme	Total Documents with Theme	Sub-Theme	Total Documents with Sub-Theme
Animal Organisation	30	N/A	N/A
Animal Reference	14	N/A	N/A
Animal Trade	30	N/A	N/A
Animal Welfare	20	Negative	17
Animal Welfare	20	Positive	9
Character Reference	44	Ambiguous	15
Character Reference	44	Animal Relationship	21
Character Reference	44	Description	38
Character Reference	44	Negative	22
Character Reference	44	Pop Culture	9
Character Reference	44	Positive	3
Character Reference	44	Sympathy	3
Content	41	Reference	24
Content	41	Summary	36
Content	41	Underlying Message	15
COVID-19	23	N/A	N/A
Illegal Activity	33	N/A	N/A
N/A	6	N/A	N/A
Other Source	20	N/A	N/A
Real Life Event	35	N/A	N/A
Sentiment	33	Ambiguous	20
Sentiment	33	Negative	5
Sentiment	33	Positive	24
Sentiment	33	Unreal, Crazy, Shock	25
Watching	3	N/A	N/A

Comparative Analysis

Our thematic analysis revealed overlapping and differing themes expressed in social media comments and news articles about *Tiger King*. While the major theme present in Facebook comments was sentiment-related, 70% of the news articles also expressed an opinion or used language that was telling of the author's review about the series (Table 3). Both public and media

responses were mainly to express a sentiment of shock and/or to provide a positive review about the series' content. The shock value of *Tiger King* coupled with high approval could be indicative of the series' content having a lasting impression. As discussed above, unlike *Blackfish*, whose success is attributed to how the documentary framed its content (Waller and Iluzada 2020), *Tiger King* has entertainment value, which may or may not achieve similar outcomes as *Blackfish* (Yakimchuk 2020).

This analysis indicated the alluring narratives about the people portrayed in the docuseries as the source of *Tiger King's* entertainment value - and other themes implied popular culture surrounding them. This judgment is based on three observations. First, character references were major themes in both public and media responses. Second, Facebook comments referring to characters often compared characters to famous people. Third, both social media comments and news articles postulated what celebrity should star as those documented in *Tiger King* to the extent of one news article confirming a follow-up movie or show casting celebrities (see ALT Producer 2020).

Another subject prominent in both analyses, but in different forms, was references to *Tiger King's* content. When Facebook users mentioned *Tiger King* content, they were most often citing a specific scene. News articles referring to *Tiger King* often did so to frame the summary of the docuseries, with the use of scene references to support their summary. One glaring difference between public responses and media framing was related to *Tiger King's* objective. 32% of the news articles discussed an underlying motive, while only 2% of Facebook users referenced the docuseries' purpose. In the *Los Angeles Times* article, one reporter addressed the possibility that audiences are misunderstanding the series and asked *Tiger King* directors about viewers 'only focusing on the show's outsized characters' and if 'they are walking away with the wrong message?' (Kaufman 2020). Co-director Eric Goode responded by saying:

> We really struggled [...] trying to fit everything into this series [...] But it was hard with the tone and the direction the series ended up going in to put it all in. Of course, ideally, we want people to understand the themes without us spoon-feeding them.

And co-director Rebecca Chaiklin stated:

> We hope that people enjoy it, but we did want them to have a serious takeaway, and it is a bummer if they don't come away understanding that this is not the right way to treat these animals.

Some Facebook responses indicated there is a possibility this message resonated with viewers, with one commenter describing it as 'A great documentary exposing the crooks of the tiger trade'. In addition, other comments indicated an unfavourable review of the docuseries and criticised Netflix, saying 'Netflix could you please highlight the massive amount of animal cruelty that occurs? It seems the world has missed this important theme.' Another commenter directed their dissatisfaction towards the producers and stated:

> I'm still trying to work out what the producer hoped to achieve because instead of opening up people [sic] minds to the very oblivious [sic] animal abuse most viewer seems [sic] like the idea of a 20+ witch hunt and the chance to make crappy gifs.

The same *LA Times* article (Kaufman 2020) suggests a possible explanation as to why the characters themselves may have overshadowed the underlying message. When responding to Carole Baskin's criticism of the show as 'being salacious and sensational as possible to draw viewers', Goode said:

> Carole talked about her personal life, her childhood, abuse from her first and second husband, the disappearance of her ex [...]. She knew that this was not just about [...] it's not a 'Blackfish' because of the things she spoke about. She certainly wasn't coerced. The other thing I would say about all these people is that there was a lack of intellectual curiosity to really go and understand or even see these animals in the wild. Certainly, Carole really had no interest in seeing an animal in the wild [...]. The lack of education, frankly, was really interesting - how they had built their own little utopias and really were only interested in that world and the rules they had created.

Concluding remarks and future directions

At the time of writing, statistics reveal *Tiger King* as being among the top five most watched shows in Netflix's history (Bjornson 2021). Moreover, as alluded to in our results, reports outside of this analysis' timeline have confirmed more *Tiger King* material is to come (e.g., Day 2020). Although it is not yet clear if a 'Tiger King Effect' is to follow the release of the Netflix docuseries, recent events indicate the show may be influencing change in how people interact with big cats in the U.S. (Cohen 2020).

The Big Cat Public Safety Act was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives on 26 February 2019 and did not pass until recently, on 3 December 2020 (see *Big Cat Public Safety Act H.R. 1380 (116th Congress) 2019-2020* for more legislative detail). The intentions of the Act are to limit those who can privately own big cats, such as African lions and tigers, in the U.S. It will also ban operations from allowing open contact between the general public and big cats (e.g., 'cub-petting'), a practice featured in the *Tiger King* series. It is speculated that *Tiger King* may have stimulated renewed interest in the bill (e.g., Rosane 2020). However, the Big Cat Public Safety Act is not the first of its kind as it, like the Captive Wildlife Safety Act of 2003, is meant to amend the Lacey Act which has been faced with numerous challenges (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service 2007).

As with any research, there are limitations to this study that we must acknowledge. This paper cannot be used to make generalisations about the lasting impact *Tiger King* may have on society. Current research into events that stimulate changes in human-animal interactions (e.g., *Blackfish*) primarily focus on the result of the domino effect. This research, instead, has presented a snapshot to document the initial reactions to a documentary that tracks a true-crime event and demonstrates a problem with laws related to exotic pet ownership in the U.S.. Moreover, and as mentioned in our methods, our analysis was challenged with finding all relevant news articles and being able to use social media comments from Facebook. Future works may consider expanding the timeline of this analysis to allow for a larger sample size and incorporation of other social media platforms.

Follow-up methods may also consider a more active investigation in which people are surveyed about their attitudes and perceptions towards *Tiger King* and its content.

Netflix's docuseries techniques and streaming platform are paving the way for new trends in entertainment consumption and how the general public is learning about real-world occurrences. At present, research has acknowledged Netflix as a game changer in the entertainment industry (Krieger 2019). However, empirical research has yet to adapt media theory to streaming services' techniques. Our literature review and results indicate an important phenomenon is occurring in contemporary society and in how people are learning about appropriate human-animal interactions. Therefore, and especially considering the way that COVID-19 has contributed to increased social media use and more and more people turning to the media for factual information, we caution all media outlets to be mindful of how they are educating their audiences about appropriate human-animal relationships.

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