
AN ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIA ZOO'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: THE IRWINS' INVOLVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Australia Zoo, a privately owned establishment in Beerwah, Queensland, Australia, initially founded in 1970 as the 'Beerwah Reptile Park' by the family of Steve Irwin, a renowned Australian Wildlife Conservationist, serves as the focus of this research. The study aims to explore the communication strategies employed by Australia Zoo from 2020 to 2023. The primary objective is to examine these strategies with a particular emphasis on the involvement of The Irwins family. This research utilizes analysis and evaluation methods to identify the communication tactics implemented by the zoo, assess the impact and effectiveness of The Irwins' participation, and appraise the utilization of The Irwins family branding in attracting and retaining visitors. The research findings reveal the significant role of The Irwins family in enhancing the zoo's public image and visitor engagement. The study also highlights the effectiveness of various communication strategies in reinforcing Australia Zoo's unique identity. The outcomes of this evaluation furnish recommendations to enhance future communication strategies, thereby reinforcing Australia Zoo's image and allure as a distinctive tourist destination influenced by the enduring legacy of Steve Irwin and his family. These implications underscore the importance of strategic communication in maintaining and growing a wildlife conservation establishment's public profile and visitor base.

Keyword: Australia Zoo's, Communication Strategies, Irwins' Involvement Beerwah Reptile Park.

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INTRODUCTION

Australia Zoo, located in Beerwah, Queensland, Australia, is a privately owned zoo that began in 1970 under the name 'Beerwah Reptile Park,' founded by Steve Irwin's family. Steve Irwin, a renowned Australian wildlife conservationist, assumed ownership in 1991. Shortly thereafter, he married Theresa Penelope Raines (Terri), and together they rebranded the park as Australia Zoo in 1998. The zoo's core mission, inspired by Steve Irwin, emphasizes 'Conservation Through Exciting Education,' driving its daily activities and initiatives (Zoo, 2023a).

This study examines and assesses the communication strategies employed by Australia Zoo during the period from 2020 to 2023, utilizing pertinent theories and concepts in the field of communication. It begins with an overview of Australia Zoo and a situational analysis, followed by a comprehensive examination of their communication strategies centered around The Irwins, the family overseeing the zoo. The primary focus is on how family branding serves as a prominent communication strategy aimed at attracting visitors. Additionally, the study discusses the channels, tools, and target audience utilized by the zoo. Finally, an evaluation of the effectiveness of these communication strategies is provided, along with recommendations for their enhancement.



Figure 1. Infographic of the History of Australia Zoo

Created by Raissa Almira using Canva. Source: Australia Zoo, 2023.

About Australia Zoo

Australia Zoo, the residence of the late Steve Irwin and his family, accommodates over 1200 diverse animals (Coast, 2023). Australia Zoo stands apart from other Australian zoos primarily due to The Irwins' active role in its management and promotion. The family gained global recognition starting in 1992 when Steve and Terri starred in the internationally broadcast documentary series, *The Crocodile Hunter*, aired on Animal Planet. This series significantly boosted the zoo's popularity, drawing increasing numbers of visitors. As the zoo expanded, so did the Irwin family. Steve and Terri welcomed their children, Bindi and Robert, who developed a deep passion for wildlife akin to their parents (Zoo, 2023b).

This research aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the communication strategies used by Australia Zoo from 2020 to 2023, focusing on the involvement of The Irwins family. This research aims to identify the communication strategies implemented by the zoo, analyze the impact and effectiveness of The Irwins' involvement in these strategies, and evaluate how The Irwins family branding is used to attract and retain visitors. This evaluation will provide recommendations for improving future communications strategies, thereby strengthening the image and appeal of Australia Zoo as a unique tourist destination influenced by the legacy of Steve Irwin and his family.

METHOD

In this research, the method used is an analysis and evaluation of the communication strategies used by Australia Zoo from 2020 to 2023. The research begins with a brief background about Australia Zoo and its situational analysis. Next, an in-depth analysis of their communication strategy was carried out, with the main focus on The Irwin family branding, which is one of the main strategies for attracting visitors. Apart from that, it also discusses communication channels, tools used, and the target audience of the zoo. Finally, this research evaluates the effectiveness of the communication strategies and provides recommendations for improving them.

In the context of communication research, this research may use a qualitative approach to analyze relevant theories and concepts in the field of communication applied by Australia Zoo. Analysis may include interviews with stakeholders, direct observation, or content analysis of communication materials produced by the zoo.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Porter's Five Forces Analysis (Porter, 2008) The analysis focuses on The Irwins' role at Australia Zoo, examining competitive dynamics in the industry. This framework assesses five key factors: the risk posed by new competitors, supplier and buyer bargaining power, the threat of substitute products or services, and the level of competitive rivalry (Porter, 2008).

The threat of new entrants (Porter, 2008) is relatively low. This is illustrated by the fact that The Irwins are the face of the Australia Zoo, and their involvement in communication shows a family brand's power in attracting visitors. The family has a long history in the entertainment industry, beginning with Steve and Terry's involvement in The Crocodile Hunter documentary, which reached over 500 million people in 160 countries (Brown, 2010). The emotional narratives created by the documentary helped connect with audiences and convey the message of conservation (Salmon, 2017). Steve's death during the filming of Ocean's Deadliest (McKay, 2019) has also become a crucial part of the Australia Zoo's mission to "continue his legacy" and promote conservation. Therefore, these narratives owned by Australia Zoo weaken the threat of new entrants.

Due to Irwin's influence and Australia Zoo's reputation, the zoo has negotiation power to secure good deals and maintain high-quality operating standards; hence, this leads to its suppliers' low to moderate bargaining power (Porter, 2008), which are feed providers and maintenance contractors. As for the bargaining power of buyers (Porter, 2008), the buyers primarily consist of visitors of the zoo, who are The Irwins' fans, tourists, and wildlife enthusiasts. The bargaining power of buyers of the zoo depends on various factors, such as the pricing and the experience that Australia Zoo offers. Although the ticket price is above average, around \$65 for adults, whereas other zoos are around \$40, the Australia Zoo provides unique value due to The Irwins' ongoing mission and reputation. The zoo's appeal to visitors has also increased because many scenes from The Irwins' documentaries, including those before Steve's death, took place in Australia Zoo. This sets Australia Zoo apart from other zoos and increases its bargaining power.

The threat of substitutes (Porter, 2008) from other zoos and wildlife sanctuaries poses a threat; however, the documentaries involving The Irwins have helped reduce the substitutes' attractiveness. These documentaries showcased the Australia Zoo's assets and conservation mission established by Steve Irwin. Visiting the zoo means visiting the shooting locations of the documentaries, providing an offline experience for online audiences (Initiative, 2018). Lastly, the intensity of competitive rivalry (Porter, 2008) is considered moderate. As previously mentioned, Australia Zoo has a distinct advantage due to its association with the Irwins and their global reputation. The unique selling point of the Australia Zoo is clear; however, the zoo still has to adapt to the continual changing of customer preferences (Trade, 2020) in the future to maintain its standing in the industry.

The statistics below show the popularity of one of Australia Zoo's communication channels, the YouTube channel, solidifying the fact that Australia Zoo is in a strong position regarding reputation and popularity (Statista, 2023).

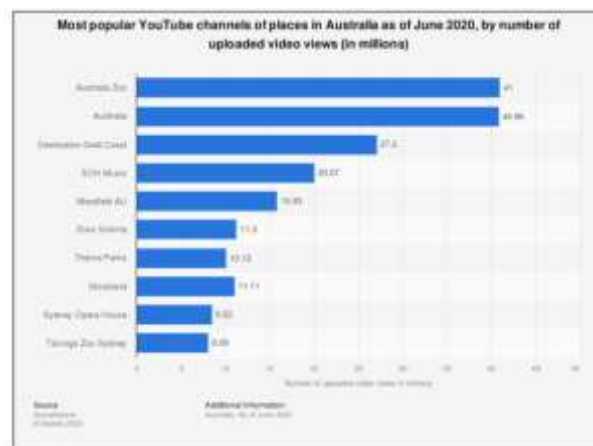


Figure 2. Statistics of the Most Popular YouTube channels of places in Australia as of June 2020 by number of uploaded video views (in millions)

Note. From Statista, 2023.

Based on the data from Zoominfo, the competitors of Australia Zoo in Australia are Taronga Zoo, Koala Hospital, and Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, judging by the approximate annual income of each zoo. Being the second highest is a good number, as there are more than 200 captive wildlife facilities in Australia (Tribe, 2001).

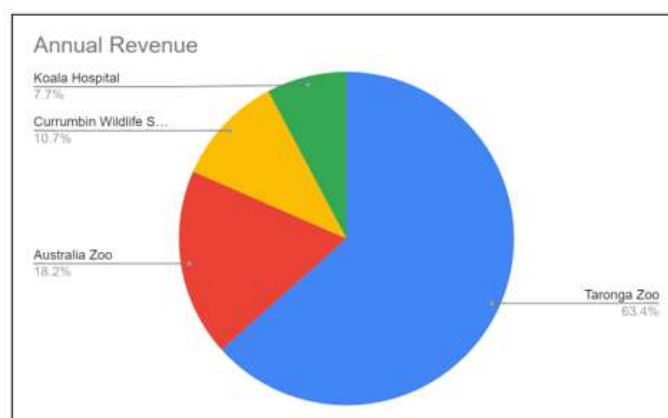


Figure 3. Pie Chart of Annual Revenue of the Highest Earned Wildlife Sanctuary in Australia

Note. From Zoominfo, 2022.

Overview of Australia Zoo's Communication Strategies

Australia Zoo maintains an official website and is active on four social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Additionally, The Irwins, including Chandler Powell, Bindi's husband, have integrated Australia Zoo into their online presence.

The communication strategies utilized the principles of credibility, emotional appeal, and logical reasoning (Aristotle Bartlett, 2019). Irwin's reputation in conservation showcases the ethos (Aristotle Bartlett, 2019) that persuades through credibility. Pathos uses emotions (Aristotle Bartlett, 2019), one communication strategy showcased through Steve Irwin's death story and continued legacy. Lastly, logos that use logical appeal (Aristotle Bartlett, 2019) are showcased through Irwin's explanation of conservation and the facts of the animals conserved throughout their communication strategies.

Communication Strategies (2020-2023)/Results

Channels and Tools

There are three categories of media: owned, paid, and earned. Owned media are controlled internally, paid media involve payment for promotion, and earned media occurs when others share awareness, news, or information (Advancement, 2023).

Owned Media

Channel A: The Irwins' Instagram Accounts and Channel B: Australia Zoo Official Communication Channels: Website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube

The symbolic interactionism theory (Blumer, 1986) The analysis examines two channels of Australia Zoo's internal media: the Irwins' Instagram account and Australia Zoo's official accounts. This theory views society as a product of daily human interactions, where individuals attribute meanings to their surroundings through these interactions. Meaning is exchanged through symbols and languages; symbols encompass objects, images, words, or gestures that convey shared meanings within specific contexts (Blumer, 1986). For instance, a 'crocodile' symbolizes a dangerous predator. Languages facilitate communication that articulates these meanings.

Channel A and Channel B show various symbols (Blumer, 1986) used by The Irwins to convey and engage with their audience. Firstly, The Irwins are symbols (Blumer, 1986) broadly known for their global following and reputation. Another symbol (Blumer, 1986) is their signature khaki uniforms (Herald, 2007), as Steve would wear khakis because they are water resistant and suitable for outdoor activities (Today, 2021). As seen on Channels A and B, The Irwins usually wear their khakis when promoting the zoo. These two symbols (Blumer, 1986) carry meanings associated with wildlife conservation and their dedication to Steve Irwin's legacy.

As for languages, the verbal and nonverbal communication (Blumer, 1986) of The Irwins are shown clearly when associated with the zoo. They would convey their passion for wildlife in interviews and social media posts. The iconic term 'Crikey' is also highly associated with The Irwins, as Steve used that term often. Their nonverbal communication (body language and facial expression) (Blumer, 1986) could evoke emotional responses and create connections and trust with their audience. However, actual interaction may be lacking, considering their high number of followers, which is expected of any celebrity.



Figure 4. The comment section on Australia Zoo's post discusses the meaning behind the word 'Crikey!'

Note. In the comment section on Australia Zoo's comment, the highlighted comment is made by Blanch-Maher, 2016. (Blanch-Maher, 2016)



Figure 5. A Crikey sign at the welcome gate of Australia Zoo

Note. From image owned by Raissa Almira, 2023.

Channel A: The Irwins' Instagram Accounts

Bindi Irwin

Bindi Irwin often connects her family-related content to promoting the zoo; for example, as seen in one of the screenshots from Figure 6, in celebration of Grace (her daughter)'s birthday, kids 14 and under received free entry to the zoo and there were also celebratory events at the zoo on that day. The language (Blumer, 1986) conveyed in her captions is aligned with the Irwin family's branding of being enthusiastic about wildlife conservation.

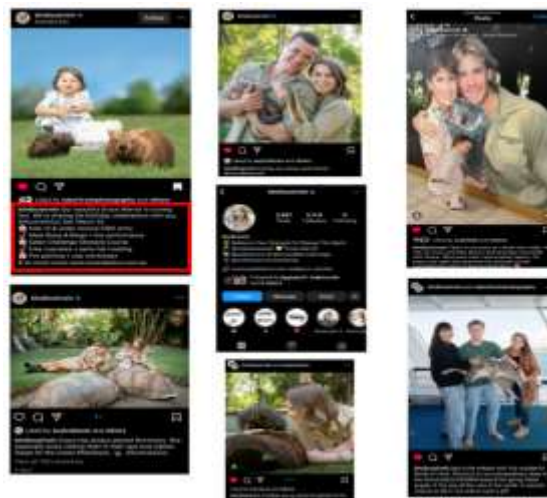


Figure 6. Screenshots of Bindi Irwin's (@bindisueirwin) Instagram account content

Note. From Bindi Irwin's Instagram account (@bindisueirwin), 2022 and 2023.

Robert Irwin

Robert Irwin is often called the spitting image of his late father. He has taken over his dad's legacy of feeding crocodiles in a show at the zoo during special occasions such as school holidays (Wolski, 2019). He shares his zoo activities and his love for photography on his Instagram account. Robert takes wildlife pictures, and many are made into merchandise, such as shirts and postcards sold physically at the zoo and online at the Australia Zoo's website (Australia Zoo, 2023). Like his sister, he shows great enthusiasm for wildlife conservation in his online persona. Usually, he wears khakis, showcasing the symbols (Blumer, 1986) of Australia Zoo.

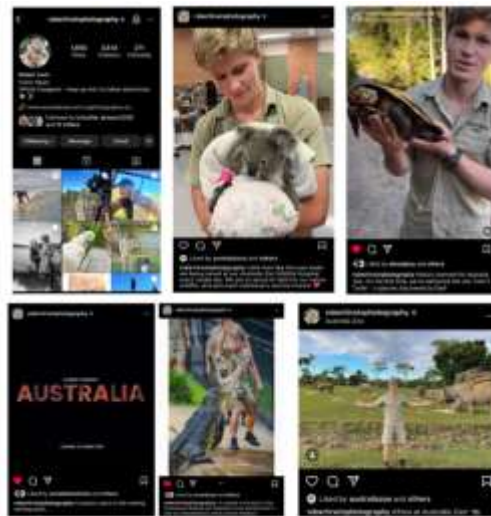


Figure 7. Screenshots of Robert Irwin's (@robertirwinphotography) Instagram account content

Note. From Robert Irwin's Instagram account (@robertirwinphotography), 2021, 2022 & 2023.

Chandler Powell

Even before getting married to Bindi, Chandler was already actively embodying the Australia Zoo as a part of his identity and posting about it on social media (Petak, 2022). After marriage, he has become more involved in the zoo, including promoting it on social media, using the same symbols and language (Blumer, 1986) the other Irwins use, as seen from his Instagram account

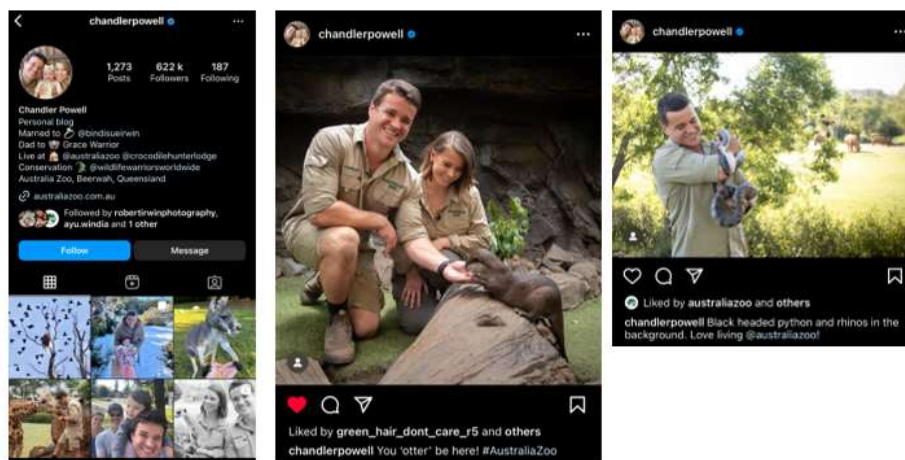


Figure 8. Screenshots of Chandler Powell's (@chandlerpowell) Instagram account content

Note. From Chandler Powell (@chandlerpowell)'s Instagram account, 2023.

Channel B: Australia Zoo Official Communication Channels: Website, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube

Besides the animals being cared for at the Australia Zoo, the zoo's social media accounts are full of The Irwins, conveying the symbols and languages (Blumer, 1986) employed throughout the communication channels in the zoo promotion.

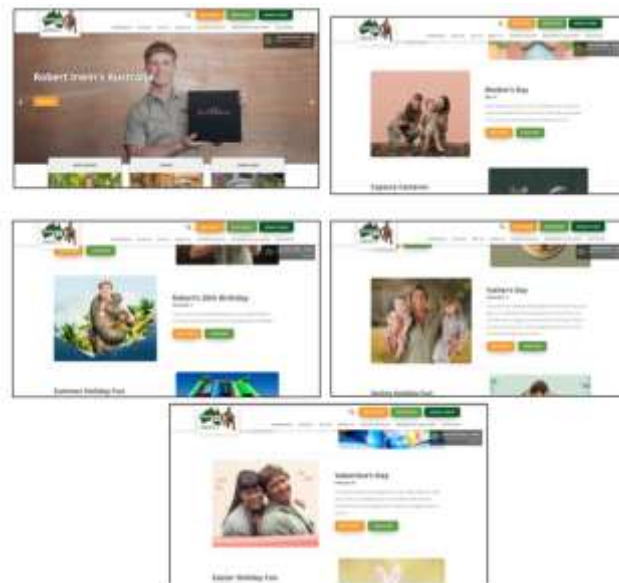


Figure 9. Screenshot of Australia Zoo websites featuring pictures of The Irwins, especially on various special day celebrations at the zoo

Note. From Australia Zoo Website, 2023

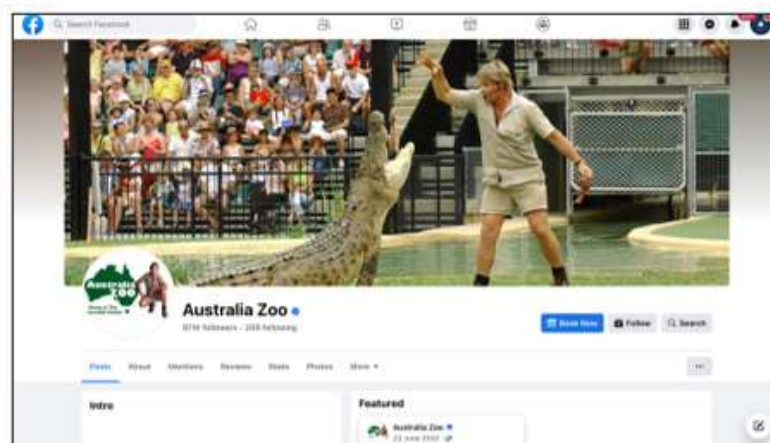


Figure 10. Screenshot of Australia Zoo Facebook Page, featuring an iconic photograph of the late Steve Irwin feeding the crocodile

Note. From Australia Zoo Facebook Page, 2023

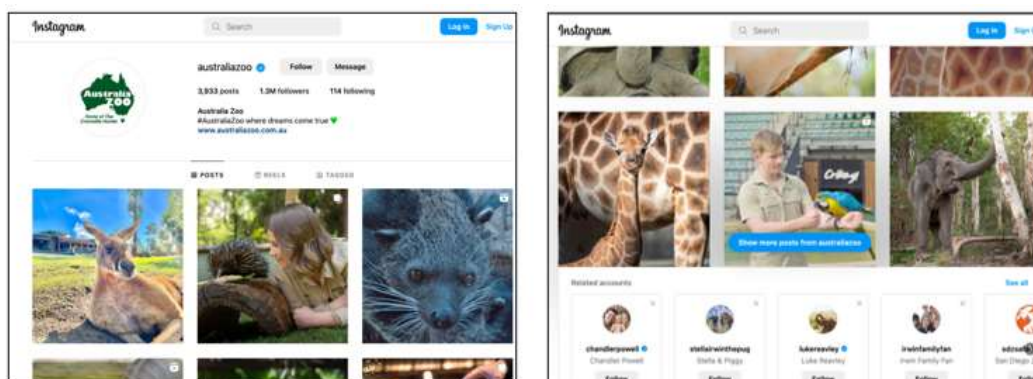


Figure 11. Screenshot of Australia Zoo (@australiazoo) Instagram account

Note. From Australia Zoo (@australiazoo) Instagram account, 2023.

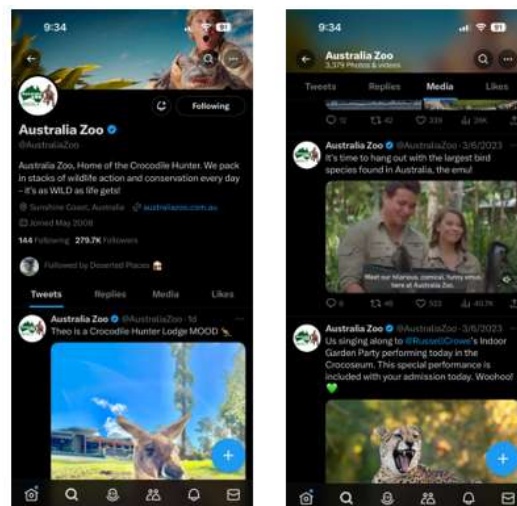


Figure 12. Screenshot of Australia Zoo (@australiazoo) Twitter account

Note. From Australia Zoo (@australiazoo) Twitter account, 2023.

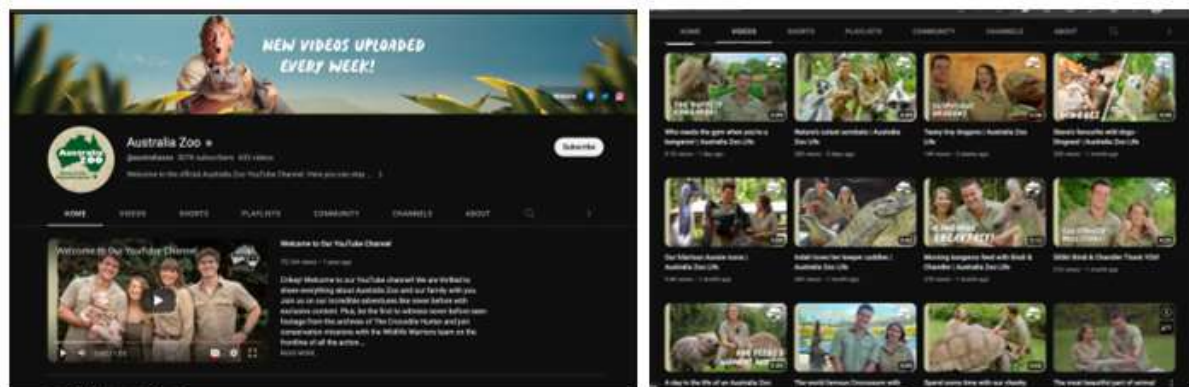


Figure 13. Screenshot of Australia Zoo YouTube channel,

Note. From Australia Zoo YouTube channel, 2023.

Channel C: Documentary

The documentary 'Crikey! It's The Irwins' is analyzed using the uses and gratification theory. This theory discusses how people use media for personal purposes and gratification, highlighting motives and the audience's self-perceived needs. The audience seeks media to fulfil particular needs (Katz et al., 1973).



Figure 14. Official poster of the 'Crikey! It's The Irwins' documentary

Note. From IMDB, 2018.

The intimate conversations in the documentary and tribute to Steve Irwin give off an emotional connection to the audience (Katz et al., 1973). Another example of emotional gratification (Katz et al., 1973) is the interaction between the Irwins and the animals. This documentary receives an 8.4 score out of 10 from IMDB (IMDB, 2018a) and 4 out of 5 stars from Common Sense Media (Media, 2023). Moreover, it receives only five-star ratings on Crikey! It's The Irwins' is a documentary streamed on Animal Planet from 2018-2022 about the lives of The Irwins, running the Australia Zoo, and spreading the conservation message to the world (IMDB, 2018b). This documentary will likely be categorized as owned media (Advancement, 2023), as most scenes are taken at the zoo, and the actors are The Irwins. The Irwins may have partnered with a production company to create it and sold the distribution rights to Animal Planet. The Irwins' branding through this documentary effectively meets the audience's entertainment, education, inspiration, and emotional connection needs. This documentary showcases education about protecting wildlife with a touch of personalization from the Irwins. The audience may be motivated (Katz et al., 1973) to watch the show to learn about the Irwins' work and their lives. Google Reviews (Google Review, 2023). The documentary ran for five years, showing that many people were interested in watching it, hence its longevity.

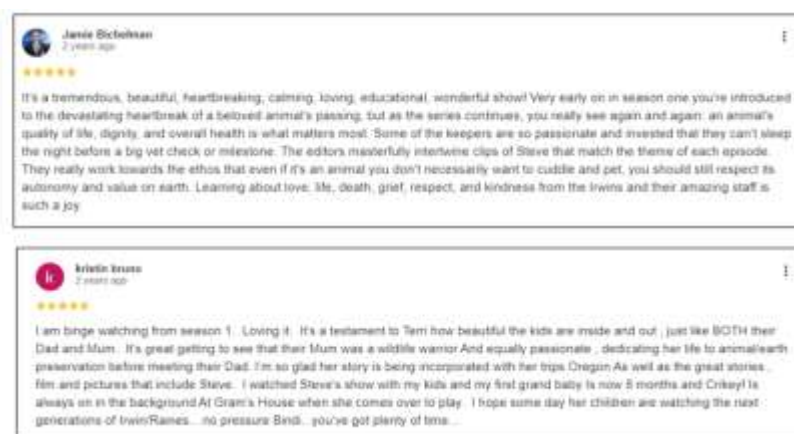


Figure 15. Audience Review on Google Review for 'Crikey! It is Irwin's show.

Note. From Google Review, 2021.

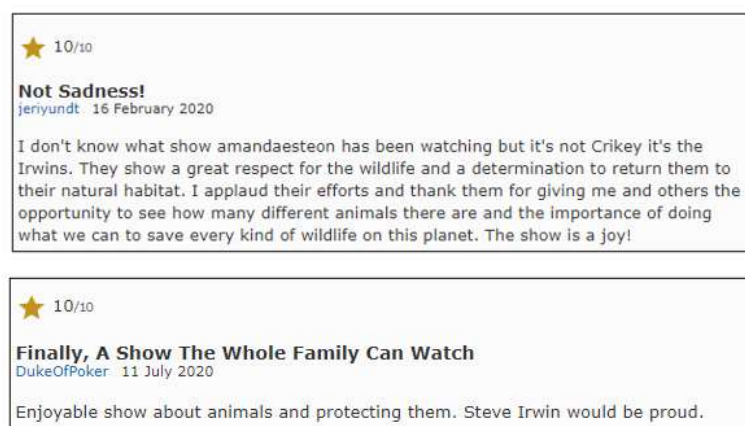


Figure 16. Audience Review on IMDB for 'Crikey! It is The Irwins' show

Note. From IMDB, 2020.

Bought Media

Channel: Google Ads

Australia Zoo employs Google Ads to display advertisements for the zoo across different platforms. Particularly, when someone conducts a basic search using a search engine like Google by typing 'Australia Zoo,' the zoo's advertisement appears through Google Ads. This strategy helps Australia Zoo broaden its audience reach and maintain visibility against competing zoos in search engine results (Google, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these Google Ads can only be assessed by Australia Zoo's internal team, who have access to the relevant data.

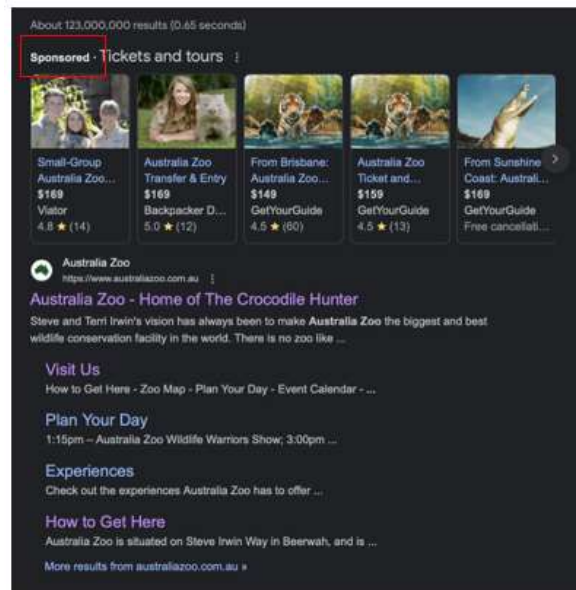


Figure 17. Australia Zoo's Google Ads

Note. From Google, 2023.

Earned Media

Channel: Media Coverage and Reviews

Agenda-setting theory is used to analyze the earned media of Australia Zoo, which is the media coverage for the Irwins. Agenda-setting theory explains how the influence of media affects the public's mind and opinions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Due to Irwin's fame, they have gained much-earned media attention and reached a broad audience. The media often focuses on the personal lives of The Irwins, for example, Robert Irwin's alleged new girlfriend (Walsh-cotton, 2023), Bindi's family holiday to Tasmania (Hobart, 2023), and Bindi and Chandler's first meeting at Australia Zoo (Petak, 2022), but they do briefly mention the zoo since it is associated with them. Agenda-setting theory explores the influence of the media in shaping public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Earned media has influenced public priorities concerning wildlife conservation and perceptions of Australia Zoo. This is evidenced by the substantial following of Australia Zoo and The Irwins on social media platforms (Bindi with 5.4 million followers, Robert with 3.8 million followers, and Chandler with 622k followers). These numbers illustrate public interest in their efforts towards animal conservation.

Reviews are also considered earned media (Advancement, 2023), and some of the reviews of the documentary 'Crikey! The Irwins are shown in the previous section (Figures 15 and 16), showing

great feedback from the audience; this fact is considered because the documentary represents The Irwins and Australia Zoo as interconnected brands.



Figure 18. Screenshot of The Irwin's news search on Google

Note. From Google, 2023.

The Irwins' personal lives lead back to the conservation program at Australia Zoo; hence, this suggests that news coverage will increase awareness of the zoo's mission. However, the news' main topic is not on the mission but more on Irwin's personal life.

Beloved wildlife conservationist Bindi Irwin has embarked on a memorable snow day adventure with her family in Tassie, taking her millions of social media followers along for the ride.

Bindi, along with her daughter Grace, mum Terri Irwin and husband Chandler Powell shared their adventures at Tasmania's Cradle Mountain in an [Instagram reel](#) on Saturday.

Figure 19. Screenshot of a media coverage titled "Bindi Irwin visits snow-covered Cradle Mountain in Tasmania with family."

Note. From Pulse Hobart, 2023.

On July 7, the *Crikey!* *It's the Irwins* star shared a heart-melting compilation video of her, Powell, their daughter Grace Warrior, and the rest of the Irwin family on their latest adventure in Tasmania. She shared the viral video with the caption reading, "Snow #adventures in Tasmania..."

Figure 20. Screenshot of a media coverage titled "Bindi Irwin's Daughter Grace Warrior Is Already Leading Her Family Through This Daring Adventure."

Note. From Gray, 2023

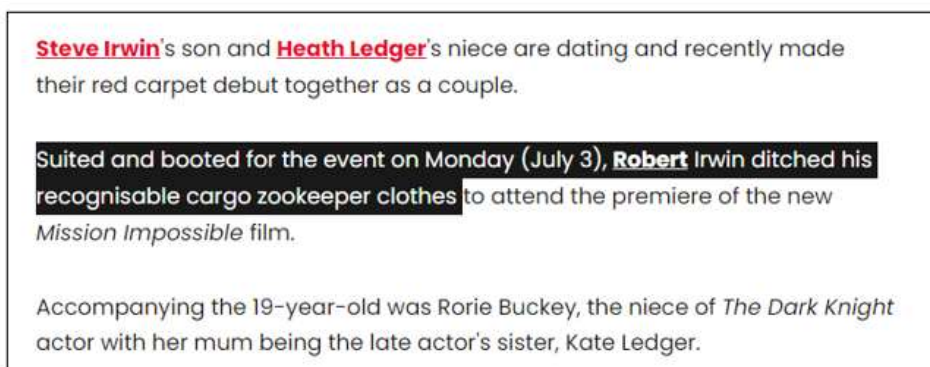


Figure 21. Screenshot of a media coverage titled "Steve Irwin's son is dating Heath Ledger's niece."

Note: (Butler, 2023).



Figure 22. Screenshot of a media coverage titled "Bindi Irwin and Chandler Powell's Relationship Timeline."

Note. From Petak, 2023.

Target Audience

Australia Zoo is universally appealing to a wide audience, particularly families (Play, 2022). However, the primary target audience for the zoo includes the diverse fan base of The Irwins, which spans multiple demographics. For example, The Irwins themselves symbolize a happy family unit. Steve Irwin and Terri Irwin attract long-time fans of their documentaries from Steve's lifetime. Bindi Irwin and Chandler Powell resonate with couples and new families. Robert Irwin appeals to teenagers interested in charismatic celebrities. Grace Irwin-Powell, the daughter of Bindi and Chandler, represents children. Despite these different segments, the core message conveyed remains consistent: animal conservation. The zoo effectively utilizes various communication channels to reach these diverse segments, ensuring the unified message of conservation is consistently communicated and appreciated.

SWOT Analysis and Recommendations

Australia Zoo's overall communications strategy concerning The Irwins' involvement is evaluated through a SWOT analysis, which assesses strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Gomer & Hille, 2015). Internal strengths and weaknesses (Gomer & Hille, 2015) are identified, including Irwin's reputation, consistent message delivery, and media exposure as

strengths and the zoo's dependence on their presence as a weakness. External opportunities and threats (Gomer & Hille, 2015) are also considered, with potential collaborations with other stakeholders identified as an opportunity and negative publicity as a threat.

The zoo must mitigate these risks (weakness and threat) and protect its reputation. To maintain a positive perception of Australia Zoo, it is essential to have a contingency plan in case of any scandal or if the Irwin family decides not to continue with the zoo. Based on media scanning, the family currently handles PR independently. However, as they become more famous, hiring Celebrity Public Relations Representatives may be necessary to handle any negative publicity (Milano, 2021). Preventive measures are always a good idea when encountering unwanted circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Australia Zoo's effective communications strategy heavily centres around the Irwin family, drawing on their extraordinary narrative and passion for wildlife conservation. The Irwins actively engage with the public through their personal social media accounts and appearances on the Australia Zoo social media channels, not to mention their starring role in 'Crikey! The Irwins' documentary showcases their work closely to the public. However, it is worth noting that The Irwins are closely associated with the zoo brand, and any scandal could impact the zoo's image. The Australia Zoo team needs to be prepared and have a plan to protect the zoo's reputation; one of them is hiring Celebrity Public Relations Representatives.

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