

# Capturing Authenticity:

An exploration in brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling to define brand values, further social impact and uncover the implications on the journalism industry

**Industry Analysis + Process  
+ Findings + Conclusions**

Completed as part of UNC-Chapel Hill  
Graduate Thesis by Alicia M. Carter



**“AS REALITY IS QUALIFIED, ALTERED, AND COMMERCIALIZED,  
CONSUMERS RESPOND TO WHAT IS ENGAGING, PERSONAL, MEMORABLE  
AND ABOVE ALL, WHAT THEY PERCEIVE AS AUTHENTIC.”**

Joseph B. Pine II

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis committee, Laura Ruel, Chad Heartwood, and Dalia Burde, for generously giving your time and expertise.

Thank you to the Filmmakers, Journalists, CEOs, Producers, Strategists, and every person who engaged with me as I asked daring questions about the work we all do.

Thank you to my story partners and collaborators for granting me the privilege and trust to share your story and brand.

To my peers Hadley Green, Michael Gawlik, Giulia Heyward, Amari Pollard, and Caroline Almy, whose support and friendship I am forever grateful for.

And, finally, to my mom, Diana Carter, who always answers the phone and helps me rationalize my wild mind.

## Foreword

This year exemplified that it is not the destination but the journey that teaches us. Completing a thesis project in the middle of a pandemic and economic recession was a journey about pivoting, taking pause, shifting perspective, and answering questions that, in the beginning, I didn't even think to ask.

My analysis explores the emergence of brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling in brand advertising content and marketing strategies and seeks to identify trends, ethical challenges, and lessons learned. From October 2020 to February 2021, I spoke with 19 experts in creative agencies, in-house brand content teams, production companies, independent journalists, and nonprofits.

Although Patagonia Inc. is the most well-known for documentary video, my research found that dozens of brands create brand-sponsored documentary video stories. The time for understanding this large emerging influential industry is now before it runs away from its creators. My findings cannot be conclusive in this short time, but instead, I ask pertinent questions to develop greater understanding. Like, are brands actually cutting through the content noise and making deeper connections with consumers? Or, how do you uphold journalistic principles in marketing content?

My analysis informed my approach to working with two companies, S'well and Burt's Bees, in creating a short documentary and a mini-documentary storytelling workshop series. The obstacles and conversations that I uncovered brought up new questions. For example, what does brand transparency mean today? Or, how do we value storytellers?

I believe in a slow, thoughtful, and brave journalistic approach to create stories that transcend geographical, socio-economic, and cultural differences. My previous work in nonprofit organizations, federal agencies, and marketing teams is unconventional for an aspiring visual journalist, but it is why I found myself on this journey. A journey in question.

Sincerely,

*Alicia M. Carter*

## Not your typical book

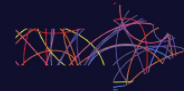
Capturing Authenticity is an analysis, an explorative approach to documentary storytelling, a journal to ask questions, a workshop to complete activities, and a story.

It is read in color-coded chapters with symbols that promote engagement.



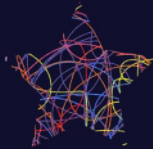
### **“Pause” Symbol**

Discussion or question addressing a concern on a specific topic



### **“Activity” Symbol**

Complete a ‘documentary storytelling workshop’ workshop activity



### **“Snapshot” Symbol**

A deeper look at how a brand-sponsored documentary video was made

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## What is brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling?

The real content that drives cultural conversations is real content –content about real people, places, struggles, and triumphs. In 2020, we witnessed a global pandemic, environmental disasters, an economic recession, a movement for Black lives, and a U.S. election. The public applauded brands that engaged in current events such as Nike Inc., Patagonia Inc., or Ben & Jerry's Homemade Holdings Inc., while brands who stayed silent or posted performative press statements, like L'Oreal S.A., were criticized. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic increased smartphone advertising and flooded platforms, such as YouTube or Instagram's IGTV, with new, documentary-style content.

But, the world is in a state of content overload. On average, a person in 2020 sees between 6,000 and 10,000 ads per day from pop-ups, influencer advertisements, blogs, paid ads on search results to social media sponsored posts. Given all this content, the human attention span is at its lowest of eight seconds, and research from Jampp found that attention span decreases by 88 percent every year. The brand advertising and marketing team's primary challenge is to figure out what medium will capture attention span, and authentic videos prove highly successful.

Research from Biteable shows that 70% of online consumers will watch a video before reading text, and video has the highest click-through rate of any form of digital advertising. Brands are harnessing the power of video content and ditching expensive traditional commercial or editorial advertising to pursue more affordable documentary video stories displayed on their own platforms. The result is a faster market entrance, more significant social impact, and greater brand transparency and authenticity.

In one of my first interview conversations for this project, Director at Avocados and Coconuts Christopher Newman said, "I'm not sure what I'm doing is documentary. It's like unscripted television because you're really planning what is going to happen, but it's still about a person's real life."

Brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling is not product or content marketing, branded film, or brand journalism. It's a brand supporting the process of documenting reality through authentic, real video stories integrated into their marketing and social impact strategy. So, let's dig deeper.





## A changing industry

When I embarked on this topic, I began by interviewing my professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media. Advertising and marketing professional and UNC-Chapel Hill Professor of the Practice Dana McMahan cautioned me, “Don’t be fooled into thinking this is new,” referencing the forever-changing nature of creative agencies.

Gone are the two-million-dollar scripted Superbowl commercials. In 2021, brands like Budweisers and Audi opted out. When technology transitioned to our fingertips and cable T.V. viewership decreased companies changed their advertising priorities to capture and sustain viewers where they spend their time – on streaming and social platforms. Perhaps the most critical change in commercial content is who is featured. While DoorDash partnered with David Diggs and Sesame Street for its six million dollar 2021 Super Bowl spot, they also successfully entered the brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling industry by producing and funding ‘Southside Magnolia’ in October 2020.

The digital technological revolution along with the influence of social, economic, and environmental justice movements has created a new industry where creative agencies, production teams, and journalists are a brand’s most valuable, or dispensable, resource.

In this process, I asked questions and researched who and how brand-sponsored documentary videos are made. The simple answer is –It’s complicated. Sometimes a corporate marketing team directly hires a production company made up of Freelance Directors, Videographers, Producers, and more. Some corporations, like REI Inc., created 25-person in-house teams with Editorial Managers, Producers, and Photographers. A filmmaker could also pitch a documentary proof-of-concept to a brand for further sponsorship. What I found most often is that a corporate marketing team will hire a creative agency who then hires production teams to partner in creating work within a campaign. While some people believe the agency model is dying, new agencies, like EP + CO, based in Greenville, South Carolina, and New York City, is expanding their production capacity.

EP + CO CEO and Founder Allen Bosworth said, “It’s very powerful. You don’t have to buy five minutes on NBC to get your voice heard. In some ways, it’s back to the old days. We can actually tell our stories in a much more interesting way. In other ways, companies also want projects that are good, fast, and cheap, but you can never have all those things.”

Most everyone I interviewed agreed that when you incorporate production companies or agencies with brand marketing and advertising, it allows for a cross-pollination of ideas and is an effective

way to connect brand values to broader issues. Many interviewees also emphasized that strategic pre-production collaboration and clear campaign objectives are vital. James Dean, Level Films UK Director and Co-Founder said, "You have to know the brand's audience to be successful. Such as, who is the story about and who is the story for?"

Dalia Burde, the Founder and Executive Producer of San Francisco-based production company Avocados and Coconuts noticed early that production companies weren't keeping up with the changing landscape of content creation. In our interview, Dalia said, "You can come up with concepts, or write stories and hire actors, or you can go out and find stories that exist at a better price point. Sure, everyone suddenly became filmmakers, but out of that came something really beautiful where we started telling more real stories and finding true character."

As traditional media legacies collapse, we are coming to terms with our obsession with old norms. When I was 12-years-old, I wanted to be a Photojournalist, and society told me that the industry was dying. Now, I want to be a Video Producer, and I am told, "Content is too complicated."

UNC-Chapel Hill Assistant Professor Joseph Czabovsky summarized it well. "It's about looking at the industry through a new lens. Jobs will continue to go away, but the opportunities for the growth of media will increase. It changes and innovates."

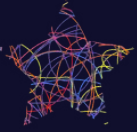
## Industry leaders

In 2020, the impact and popularity of this style of storytelling were evident. REI Inc.'s Co-Op journal had grown to an editorial team of 25 people, including Videographers, Writers, and Producers. YETI, who started making films to remain authentic and connected to their audience in 2015, premiered their work at international film festivals. Nike Inc., a retail clothing company, crafted videos to highlight social movements and bring power to the Black Lives Matter movement. And Patagonia Inc., the most widely known brand for its brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling, used its content to further a social impact strategy and push environmental legislation through Congress.

Over a century earlier, Michelin and John Deere paved the way for brand journalism's modern existence with print publications *The Michelin Guide* and *The Furrow*.

### Notable brands participating in brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling:

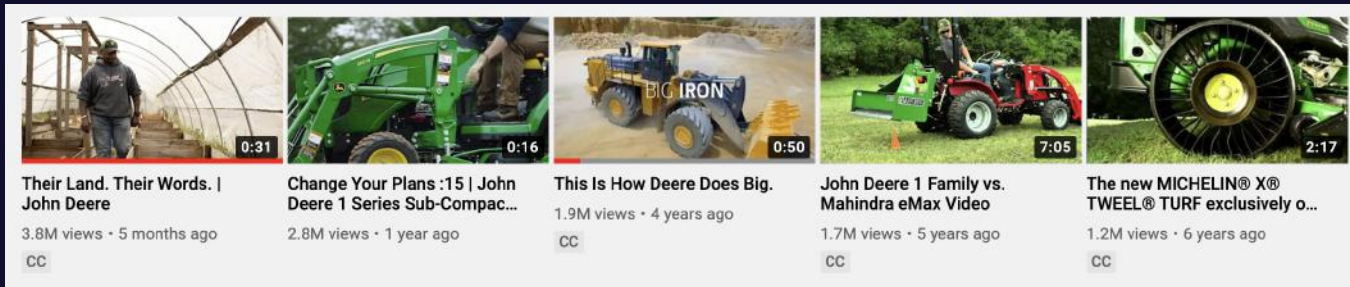
- Patagonia
- YETI
- REI
- Nike
- John Deere
- Vans
- Volvo
- Uber Eats
- DoorDash
- Stella Artois
- Slack
- LUSH
- Starbucks
- Airbnb
- Adobe
- Disney
- Red Bull
- Merrill
- The North Face
- Coors Light
- Ben & Jerry's
- HP
- HipCamp
- Quickbooks
- Citibank
- Men's Wearhouse
- Google
- Zen Desk
- Lyft
- Indeed
- O'Neil
- Quicksilver
- Volcom
- Land Rover
- Ford
- Volkswagen
- Merrill



## Snapshot: John Deere's 'Run Together'

John Deere started brand journalism through *The Furrow* over a century ago. Today, they create digital and print publications *The Furrow*, *The Direct The Furrow*, *The Dirt*, *The Landing*, *Power Source*, and *Worksite Journal* and various visual and audio stories on their web content hub, 'The John Deere Journal.' Their YouTube displays "John Deere Presents" before documentary-style campaign-oriented stories of people "who are connected to the land." Their style incorporates more obvious product placement as they seek out real farmers who use their equipment.

Their production includes an in-house team managing content as well as directly working with an advertising agency, EP + CO, who ideates and executes campaigns. A successful example of this were the campaigns, 'Run Together,' and 'Run with Us,' that invite people to join a community of 'doers' showcasing winemakers, horse trainers, and Olympic hopefuls and share their stories on IGTV and other media. Of all their YouTube videos, this campaign garnered the most views, and they partnered with the non-profit organization Interfaith Food Shuttle to further their social impact.



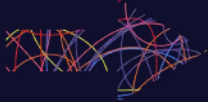
I interviewed Daniel Miller, Director of Content Production, and Allen Bosworth, CEO and Founder, from EP + CO about their work.

"When you see someone else in that category it looks fake, so we said, 'we don't want to do actors on tractors; we want to work with real people.' The story is better if the equipment isn't pristine...someone who grew up on a farm in Montana on John Deere equipment. He can't fake it. He walks the walk and talks the talk, right?"

Consumers will see themselves in that person and want to use the product. That can't be scripted," said Bosworth.



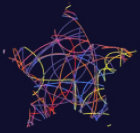
“We didn’t have to put words in anyone’s mouth. We just had interview questions, but the real work comes with the pre-production. The video has to include interesting people and be visually intriguing. A lot of work goes into interviewing people before, planning around the seasons for harvesting, and campaign planning for social impact. Then we end up on the farms with giant pieces of agricultural equipment, a big family, and animals all over the place,” said Daniel Miller.



### Activity: Branding Branded Content UX/UI

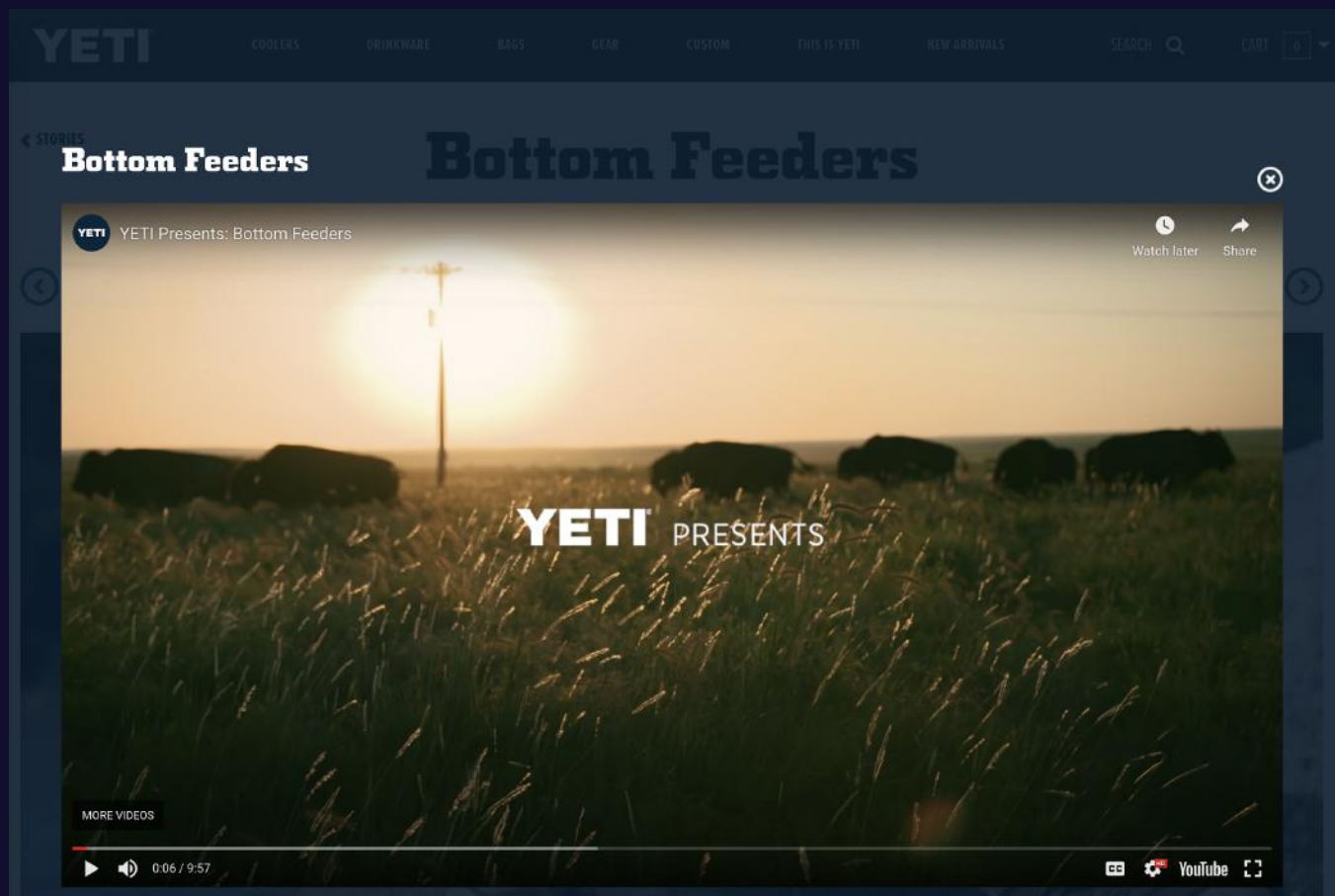
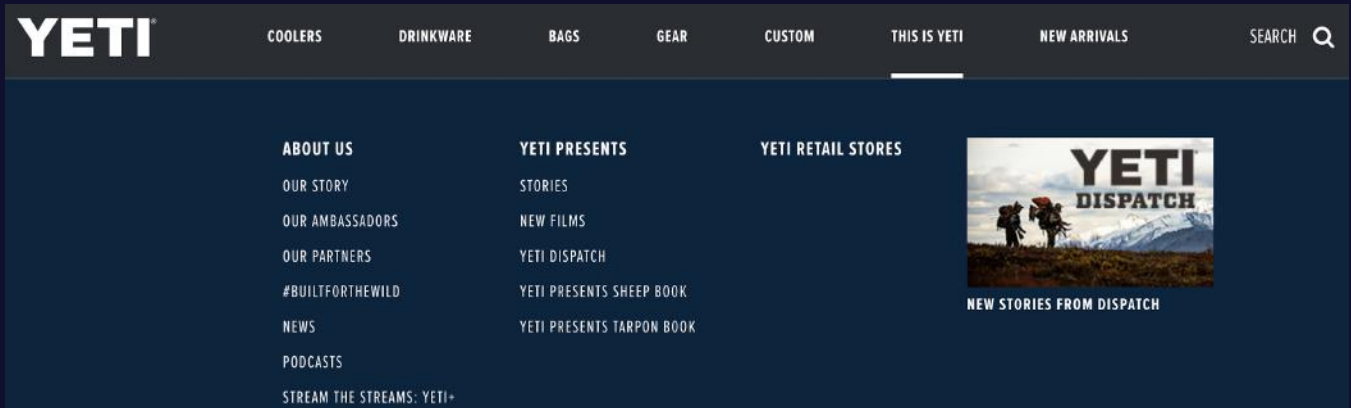
Plan how to brand your branded content. What is the user experience? See the example below.

Navigation pathway (How do viewers get to your content? Where is it hosted?)	
Relevant “Sections”	
Language & Symbols (i.e. “John Deere Presents:”)	
When and where will the logo appear?	
Product placement/Brand awareness	
Production method (How many people are on the team? Who is leading it? Editorial principles? Agency? Production company? Lists of freelancers? Ambassadors?)	
Upcoming campaigns	



## Snapshot: YETI Presents

Navigation pathway (How do viewers get to your content? Where is it hosted?)	Main header menu "This is Yeti" > "Yeti Presents" Stories (Digital Content Hub - Written + Photo, Video) New Films (Video) YETI Dispatch (Print publication - Written + Photo) YETI Presents Sheep Book & Tarpon Book (Photo Book - Product)
Relevant "Sections"	Access to Nature (Environmental Consciousness), Sport (Human Experiences), Food & Innovative Ideas
Language & Symbols (i.e. "John Deere Presents:")	"YETI Presents: _____" appears at the beginning of the film, and at the end, no credits are given to filmmakers, etc., hosted on YouTube "We celebrate stories from the wild. From the off-road tracks of Baja Peninsula to the BBQ pits of Giddings, TX, we capture stories that speak to the wild side of life. If adventure and grit is at the heart of the story, then it's a story that YETI will tell."
When/where will the logo appear?	Logo appears early on in all videos and at the end
Product placement/Brand awareness	Stories are often done about athletes/ambassadors YETI sponsors at some point (fishers, rodeo, skiers, etc.) In the photo stories, natural, ad-worthy shots come about
Production method (How many people are on the team? Who is leading it? Editorial principles? Agency? Production company? Lists of freelancers? Ambassadors?)	Yes, team made up of "Mountain Manager," "Rodeo Manager," and so on. Production is done by lead, and they utilize nearby production teams for videography
Upcoming campaigns	#BuiltfortheWild (overall hashtag), Some are series



## What are a brand's values, and how do they connect to society?

"A corporation is a collection of people under a shared value system," said UNC-Chapel Hill Professor of the Practice Dana McMahan, who teaches classes like Art Direction and Experiential Marketing while running a creative agency and multiple businesses. "It's essential to figure out what you want to say as an individual, storyteller, and brand. It influences the lives we led and the world we create."

The public is calling out toxic workplaces, asking what we are doing for frontline workers, reckoning with racist pasts and present that force companies to tell stories they haven't found within themselves to tell before. It's an era where consumers are demanding that brands own up to their disparities and whether they are responsible for what drives specific societal issues. Recent social movements like the fight for climate justice, #MeToo, March for Our Lives, and Black Lives Matter and how they unfolded through video online propelled this shift into the mainstream. Conscious consumerism is no longer a social media trend—it is driving which brands thrive and which brands fade into mediocrity.

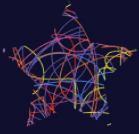
Reputation Institute, a management consultancy, found that people's willingness to buy, recommend, work for, or invest in a company is significantly influenced by their perceptions of its corporate social responsibility practices. A 2020 globalwebindex.com survey identified that 84% of respondents would stop buying from a brand because of a poor environmental track record. This contrasts prior years when consumers prioritized value and ease of purchase. These studies suggest that without shared values and engaging storytelling, brands lose essential consumers.

"This process is not telling your brand's story, but attaching your social cause or view of the world as a brand to a real character story. And standing back and seeing the interest and brand recognition it creates," said Dalia Burde.

"In this business, you have to uncover what the brand is about—their mission, vision, purpose, all that, and understand how it influences the decisions they make. Sure, everyone wants to be the Patagonia, who is a walking set of values, but if a brand doesn't know theirs yet, uncovering that is part of your job," said Allen Bosworth.

"It's essential to REI's business that people go outside. When I work with them, the films we decide to make encourage people to get outdoors more by making it something fun. We were influenced by narrative stories like Captain Fantastic and Peanut Butter Falcon, showing the positive results of being outside." said Brian Newman.





## Snapshot: Patagonia's "DamNation"

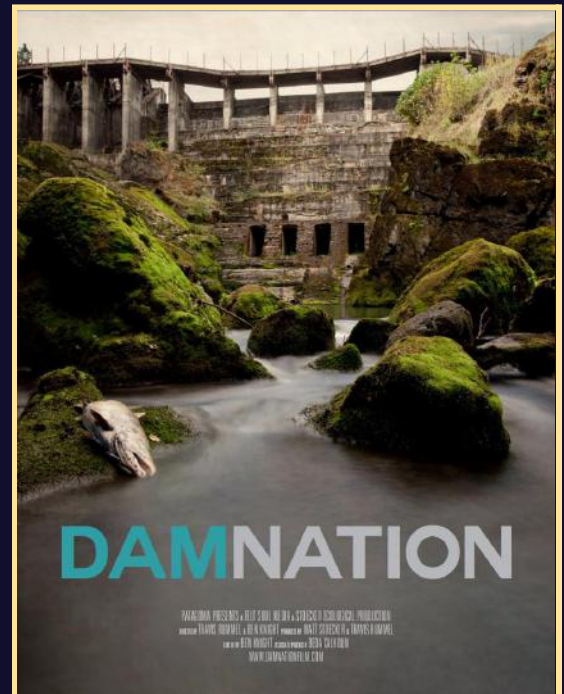
It was no surprise every single person I interviewed mentioned Patagonia Inc. Patagonia Inc. entered the documentary industry in 2014 with the release of *DamNation*, a film about the U.S.'s obsolete dam system and their impact on river health and water quality. Years later, Patagonia creates a handful of short documentaries monthly highlighting rock climbing, fishing, or environmental legislation on capitol hill.

Patagonia brought Brian Newman, the founder of film consulting firm Subgenre, onto the project as the marketing and distribution consultant to make the most significant social impact. "It wasn't enough just to get it seen. We wanted people to sign petitions to specifically take the time to get the Obama administration to remove what they called deadbeat dams," he said. Deadbeat dams no longer produce energy and block waterways, salmon streams, and contribute to climate change.

*DamNation* shaped Newman's direction in the film industry where he continues to help brands find the issues they are aligned with and the right filmmakers to create projects with an overarching focus on social impact. "I could see that if you're working with the right brands on the right type of content, you can have a bigger impact, perhaps than you could with independent projects. You have to ask, why does this strategy work for Patagonia?" he said. This is a question I, and many others, seek to answer.

Most filmmakers pitch brands their ideas, but Newman proposes an alternative, more strategic vision that aligns closely with the goals of my thesis. "A lot of my job is working with the brands to figure out what their goals are and what they want people to do after they see the film," said Newman.

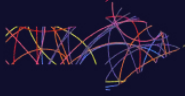
Today, the first video on Patagonia's YouTube channel is a captivating one-minute documentary film trailer titled "Stone Cold: Rediscovering the Soul of Climbing," which transports viewers to vast landscapes and inside the minds of the rock climbing community. Below are video playlists titled



“Activism” and “Our Footprint: Stories from the Supply Chain,” highlighting Patagonia’s sizable content library and unique advertising and marketing strategy. It is an approach that defines the modern brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling industry with an emphasis on social impact. Since the goals of this approach are not directly profit-oriented but value-oriented, the storyteller can authentically position the people, not the brand, as the centerpiece. By harnessing their point of view, Patagonia taps into their true purpose of creating outdoor gear for people who love nature. It is a deeply felt and passionate brand story upheld in the earnest and authentic content they create.

**“FOR US, IT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO GET THE ENVIRONMENTAL STORY OUT THAN PATAGONIA THE BRAND. BEFORE ALL, WE EMPHASIZE STORYTELLING AND SPOTLIGHT THE ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES WE CARE ABOUT.”**

Corly Kenna, Patagonia, Inc. Director of Global Communications and Public Relations



### Activity: Finish the Statements

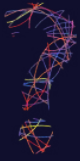
"We envision a world where..."

"We believe..."

### Activity: Words That Define Us (Select 6)

- |               |               |                    |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Rational      | Trustworthy   | Tough              |
| Beautiful     | Diversity     | Future Generations |
| Adventurous   | Personal      | Integrity          |
| Imaginative   | Reliable      | Bold               |
| Conservative  | Singular      | Unconventional     |
| Innovative    | Freedom       | Growth             |
| Caring        | Energetic     | Inspirational      |
| Laid-back     | Sophisticated | Collaboration      |
| Authenticity  | Committed     | Harmony            |
| Justice       | Traditional   | Inclusion          |
| Courageous    | Creativity    | Connection         |
| Serious       | Intellectual  | Vulnerability      |
| Risk-taking   | Cutting-edge  | Resourcefulness    |
| Intentional   | Joyful        | Efficiency         |
| Trend-setting | Rebellious    | Sustainable        |

*Write their definitions to you!*



## Pause: The blurry lines of selling stories

In writing and creating this thesis project, I have often become stuck on the meaning of words. To be authentic is to be real, unpolished, natural, in the moment, unrestrained, relatable, or true. To be journalistic is to share information and news with the general public. And, marketing is the promotion of goods and services. The terms “brand journalism” inherently have a conflict of interest in the way they are known, but if there is one thing the last few years have taught us, it is that everything is not what it may seem.

According to standard definitions, a brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or feature that identifies a seller’s goods or services as distinct from others. The New York Times and the concept of telling journalistic stories once stood alone as a public service, but since the monetization of news and media, society has paid for this service, forcing publications into the same capitalistic branding arena as every other company. Promoting journalism is the same as promoting the brand. As a journalist, I long to work for people –The public. But that’s not the case because the people don’t write my paycheck.

We are taught that we can be in advertising or journalism, but we can’t be both. We learned the principles of journalism –objectivity, truth, and independence. And in the last few years, we witnessed those principles debated as public trust in journalism weakened and misinformation skyrocketed. There is a lack of clarity on what journalism is and what it could or should be. *The View from Somewhere*, a book by Lewis Raven Wallace, discusses that a commitment to objectivity portrayed the appearance of fairness and neutrality and suggested the avoidance of words like “racism” because it could be seen as biased. In turn, our society did not receive the information they needed or the point of view essential to understanding our world and experiences.

And then there’s native advertising and the speculation of whether the promotional videos on platforms such as The Atlantic’s Re:Think are much different from their editorial videos. Brian Newman, CUNY Professor and Subgenre Founder, teaches a course on branded content and native advertising. He shows his class how over time, *The New York Times* and its advertising partner’s logo becomes smaller and smaller in paid content hiding their corporate identity and funding. The same content, in which, Newman notes, won a Cannes Lions specifically for branded content. “The New York Times then congratulates their journalists for winning a Cannes Lion. They were your advertisers, not your journalists. It’s like they consciously blur the lines continuously,” Newman said.

Capitalism confounds me. I asked myself, compelled by the journalistic power of truth and passion for story, how is *The New York Times* different from Netflix? What do Patagonia and Burt's Bees have in common? The more content is made, the lines separating these companies become more blurred.

I asked interviewees who balance the identity of creating content for journalistic outlets as well as brands, "do you identify as a journalist?" James Dean, Director at Level Films UK, said, "It's funny; I think I've started to feel like I should, more recently. It just occurred to me that I am." Journalist and Story Researcher Madeline Moitozo said, "If I say I am a journalist, I am. This is not the life I imagined for myself. I reframed possibilities. I do want to make a difference through media. That's how I found myself here. When I first started working for brands. I felt like a sellout. I'm a journalist first, and I identify as a journalist first."

When power shifts to documentarians, potentially the most powerful storytellers society has, the principles that guide the story in remaining authentic and real, and without an advertising spin are the priorities. Brands need to buy into this for it to be successful and journalistic. But editorial independence to serve the public is one of journalism's most cherished values. Can the interests of viewers still be prioritized? Can journalism even exist in the absence of editorial independence?

Since this type of content breaks traditional marketing and journalism practices, it feels incredibly relevant to talk about, and research in academia before society runs away with it. As we break down our identities, perspectives, and biases and then harness them, we realize we also have a point of view and a mission. Bringing that into our stories is essential to envisioning and creating the world we want to live in.

## Hey Brand X, this isn't about you!

Finding a brand that is open to communicating ideas about society is difficult. It implores them to think about content for everyone, not content for themselves. Brand-sponsored documentary video has two objectives –First, to pass the test of quality journalism, and second, to in some way tell a brand story.

A brand will inevitably want to know their return on investment (ROI). However, in creating and sharing video, value and impact won't be seen immediately. In brand-sponsored documentary video, the outcome is increased brand engagement, loyalty, recognition and awareness. Daniel Miller, from EP + CO said, "Now someone can associate an interesting piece of information or story to your brand, as opposed to a product advertisement. That is more important. It will pay dividends in the long run."

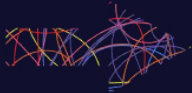
With transparency in brand-sponsored documentary video, sponsorship is clear, but not that it becomes advertising. According to many studies, when people see advertisements, you lose their attention rather than draw them in. Advertising is self-serving and what makes this impactful is that it is relatable. If the social cause is the ultimate goal, highlighting products should not come first.

Dalia Burde said, "When we have conversations with clients about their brand image centering in the story, I understand their view, and why they feel that way when they're spending money, but it's going to take the viewer out of the story and make it less genuine. You have to ask yourself, 'Can we make this number one a great story and number two great filmmaking so that the brand falls away in the background. You'll get more eyes and appreciation for it.'"

On EP + CO and John Deere's Campaign "Run Together" Allen Bosworth said, "It's not just John Deere. It's also economic empowerment in rural areas and food security."

**"TELL ME THE FACTS AND I'LL LEARN. TELL ME THE TRUTH AND I'LL BELIEVE. BUT TELL ME A STORY AND IT WILL LIVE IN MY HEART FOREVER."**

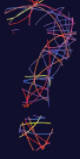
Native American proverb



### Activity: The 5-step Process

Miro UX Sticky Notes, Washington Posts Sections + Tags

Beat	Connection	Human	Partners	Brand Value
"Bigger picture."	"Why does it matter to everyone?"	"Put a face to it."	"Who will we work with?"	"What is the company doing?"
Environmental Science	COVID-19's Impact on High School Science Fairs	Students competing in the first-ever virtual science fair	North Carolina State Science Fair Foundation	S'well: Hydrate EDU, UNICEF USA Clubs, Lonely Whale



## Pause: What is the worth of a story?

The unpaid internship isn't just harmful to students; it's detrimental to society. When employers, multi-million dollar companies full of full-time staff, are looking for low-cost work, they create a market. It is not the intern's responsibility to say no, but the employer's responsibility to take a stand and create a more equitable workspace. It is also the responsibility of working professionals to advocate for a more just and fair industry.

Now, employers are eagerly looking for content and the people who create it. Young journalists and creators need to place their work at a low cost to "get clips" and "build their portfolio" to secure a full-time position. Still, they devalue their education, skill, talent, and equipment used to capture and create valuable pieces of content for society. I, nor anyone, can afford to work for free. My education was unreasonably expensive, and my equipment costs are in the thousands. I need insurance and software. And most of all, I have essential skills, talent, and experiences.

Yet, in this project, I completed work for two multi-million dollar brands for free. Thus, it was pertinent to understand my value and help the company's I work with and those reading this book to understand the worth of a story.

Low wages devalue creative work and lead to higher turnover. A well-known economic principle is that "people value what they pay for." In my research, I have found it hard to communicate the value of content with data. Although content is integral in marketing strategy, if it is created at a low cost, it appears inherently less valuable. The industry norm is "how cheap can we make this?"

Brands should want high-quality work from experienced and talented professionals who are willing to work with them ongoing because they understand the brand's values and point of view.

Journalist and brand story researcher Madeline Moitozo said, "Everyone is grateful for the work; it's hard to be a freelancer. This is definitely more lucrative."

After completing his Master's degree in Documentary Studies at The University of California at Santa Cruz, *Avocados and Coconuts* Director Christopher Newman said, "In school you have an amazing community of advisors, students and get a great boost into the documentary world and then you're like, 'Oh wait, I also need to figure out how to make money and survive and pay my bills.'"



Many of the people I interviewed, including freelancers, production companies, and advertising agencies, taught me of the high dollar spent on productions from \$200,000 a day to \$200,000 per project. I also learned that many companies are taking their capabilities internally, lowering the cost of production but potentially compromising the story. When a 30-second commercial costs half a million dollars to sit in a kitchen and eat a toaster strudel, you ask yourself, "What are we doing with all this money?" But how much should it cost to film the real world?

"If you can make a living where this is what you're doing and honing in your skills doing so, then it's all worth it, you know? Because doing this kind of filmmaking as a side hustle is hard. So why not make a living doing what you love doing. And every once in a while, if you can hit it right where a brand pays for a piece that fully aligns with your kind of social justice messaging, or whatever it is that you want to get out in the world? That's like the greatest, isn't it? It's all worth the waiting and biding time for that," said Dalia Burde.

It is crucial to think not only how you will compensate story partners and when or what is appropriate but also how you will compensate storytellers. And there are more people involved in a documentary project than you think: lighting, audio, talent, equipment, a brand agency, production company, strategy positions, location scouts, and more.

"You can ask yourself, what's the final product? Is it impact, raising awareness, education, or to help build something for a community? If the end product is to make money for a brand, and you're exploiting someone's life just for that, and you're not completely upfront about that, then you probably owe them something," said Christopher Newman.

"There's a race to the bottom in our industry. There are old school people who made commercials for a million dollars and production companies who charge around \$200,00 per project, and then there are newer filmmakers who might charge 10% of that, and brands think that's great. But those filmmakers quickly realize after three months of work and all the expenses, resources, and lack of support that they can't make a living this way. But that person has eliminated their chances of making it as a filmmaker, and they've made brands think they can charge that little. In the end, it's going to be the filmmakers, craftspeople, and the crew who miss out the most and aren't going to be able to sustain a decent living income off of this kind of work, you know?" said Dalia Burde.

## Budget Analysis

What can you budget for, and how is it integrated into your marketing strategy? What are some other forms of compensation? When are they appropriate?

- Small project: Pre-production strategy (location, story partners, equipment needs, timeline, etc.) videographer and assistant, day expenses, audio, post-production editing, motion graphics, marketing strategy.
- Large project: Involves more people, bigger and better equipment, licenses, insurance, creative fees, talent, editorial, etc.

SUMMARY OF ESTIMATED PRODUCTION COSTS			ESTIMATED
1	Pre-production & Wrap Costs	Totals A & C	20,853
2	Shooting Labor	Total B	19,467
3	Location & Travel Expenses	Total D	21,700
4	Props, Wardrobe, and Animals	Total E	750
5	Studio & Set Construction Costs	Totals F, G, & H	
6	Equipment Costs	Total I	5,100
7	Filmstock, Develop and Print	Total J	1,200
8	Miscellaneous	Total K	
9	<b>Sub-total A to K</b>		69,070
10	Director / Creative Fees (not included in Direct Costs)	Total L	17,000
11	Insurance		
12	<b>Sub-total Direct Costs</b>		69,070
13	Production Fee		21,012
14	Talent Costs & Expenses	Totals M & N	1,080
15	Editorial and Finishing	Totals O & P	17,740
16			
17	Other		
18	Other		
19			
Contracted Total		125,902	<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>
Contingency/Weather Day			
<b>COMMENTS</b>			
This is for all pre-production including scouting			
This is for a small crew travelling to Wisconsin - Director/DP/Producer/AC/Grip/PM - LOCAL - Sound			
This includes all gear rental and location fees			
This includes post production, editorial, music, mix and color			
This includes light graphics			
This includes script writing			

## Transparency is the new objectivity

If independence is compromised and perhaps never even existed, we must emphasize the importance of transparency for the viewers' sake. Could transparency, visibility, and clear motivation be enough to offset a sense of independence? Transparency is harnessing a point of view in a way that can be used for good while still being journalistic. In the absence of objectivity, Patagonia influenced environmental legislation on capitol hill, and Nike advocated for Black lives. Will people care who is paying for it, if it is meaningful true storytelling that changes the world for the better?

"With transparency you know a brand's value and can say, 'I feel better about buying a Patagonia jacket now that I know they made this movie, and I never cared about dams before but now I do.' You're not under any illusion that it was made by an independent Salmon Research Council or something. It's coming from the brand and their perspective," said Brian Newman.

"Transparency, I think, is being very clear with a name and logo in the beginning and end of the film that a brand is involved or funded the project. And even as the filmmakers have creative control and final cut, but it wouldn't be made if a brand didn't put the money behind it. Whereas, if you look at a film like Food Inc, which is a good film, but it was funded by a lot of corporate interests, who hid their corporate interest and buried their involvement. It feels like lying," said Brian Newman.

"In brand work, we aren't pretending to be impartial; we are partial. Our job is to persuade and tell a story. Now we might try to persuade you by looking like we're not trying to persuade you but when a company says 'our mission is to save the world...' Yes, their mission is to save the world but they're a commercial company and they have stockholders and products. So the real mission is to sell more stuff. It's all storytelling at the end of the day, it's just the lens through which you're telling the story is a little bit different." said Allen Bosworth

One outcome to increase transparency is sponsor disclosure requirements. Traditional outlets that broadcast documentaries, such as Netflix, PBS or film festivals, have strict sponsor disclosure requirements, but social platforms do not.



### Activity: Define Your Transparency

- How are you transparent?
- What are some ways you could be more transparent?
- List five challenges that 'keep you up at night' as a company?

## Working with non-profit organizations and integrated campaigns

Inherently, there is a problem to solution approach engrained in this form of storytelling. It asks that brands become directly involved in a social issue and that they do something about it. Since corporate social responsibility has changed significantly over the past decade from just spending money to being actionable, what are the next steps?

“Brands need to know their values and the vision they have for the world. They aren’t saving the day with these initiatives. They’re simply supporting society and non-profits, too. The need for tangible ROI is a problem. Too many corporations are concerned with ‘what’s in it for me?’ when the real goal is social change. Today, the brands that do this well are unafraid to let their audience see a behind-the-scenes look. “If they are moving toward a good outcome, they may be able to check their ego at the door,” said UNC-Chapel Hill Associate Professor Lois Boynton.

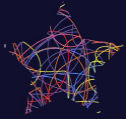
Brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling can be integrated into a marketing campaign that leads to impact. Its creation and visibility inherently raise awareness.

Impact is more than just visibility. It means working with activists on the ground and doing community organizing screenings and getting as many eyes on the film as possible. Then, motivating an audience to do something.

## Performative Activism

While being neutral on social issues is not an option, being performative is, and society is watching. Thoughtfulness and informed strategy can make all the difference. The rainbow flag effect is often discussed in marketing that brands stick a rainbow flag on their logo during pride and say that makes them an ally or a black square during Black Lives Matter. To avoid being performative, brands need to put money into the causes and people in their words and content initiatives. It needs to be marketing that is well-rounded, engaged, and reckons with the brands’ shortcomings.

“Strategy and conversations help frame and define the story to what you need it to be. Sometimes you have to look at it from another angle just to make sure you’re doing it the right way. You can see it in advertising or documentary stories–The stories that rise to the top are so well executed and thoughtful,” said Daniel Miller.

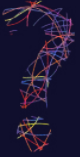


## Snapshot: DoorDash's "Southside Magnolia"

While DoorDash partnered with David Diggs and Sesame Street for its 2021 Super Bowl spot, which cost over six million dollars, it also successfully entered the brand-sponsored documentary video storytelling industry producing and funding 'Southside Magnolia' in October 2020. Southside Magnolia is a six-minute short documentary about Vic and Dana Cooksey, Black restaurant owners of Krazy Hog BBQ in Chicago's south side neighborhood. When COVID-19 closed their doors, the Cooksey's and local community fought to reopen. In just one month, it reached over three million views on YouTube. Southside Magnolia's website highlights DoorDash's mission to support restaurants through the COVID-19 pandemic and effort to be a social impact-focused and community-engaged company. This new approach, a short documentary video paired with company values and social impact, highlights a new way of creating commercial-like content. And its authenticity connects with consumers. DoorDash does not have a large in-house content team and hired EvenOdd films/The Martin Agency to create Southside Magnolia.

Public YouTube comments applaud DoorDash, and Wendy Henry states, "Until today, I had no idea what DoorDash was, other than one more brand of goods and services movers...DoorDash, Uber, Lyft, one more link in the chain. Until today. You people are on a mission, and I applaud you wholeheartedly. Thank you so much for sharing your skills, ideas, and heart. See you soon."





## How can documentary video impact the world?

“Documentary content brings more perspectives to stories that need to be told and can bring people's attention to issues in a more meaningful way. They can open their eyes to things they hadn't thought of before. And it shouldn't just be a feel-good documentary; it should also start moving into things that are a little bit more hard-hitting. I think if we can get to where there are more brands working on global issues, that'll be a sign of progress,” said Brian Newman.

“Filmmaking is a visual medium where there are very few things with sight and sound that are so incredibly powerful. Documentary brings us closer, and we can learn more about a person and gain understanding. It's the best medium we have to transport other people's stories into your life and into your home in a way that is close to your emotions,” said Dalia Burde.

“It's my greatest passion. Documentary film opens up so much of the world to so many people and gives you a window into people's lives that you can't get anywhere else. It's powerful and so impactful. It connects people to other human beings and their experiences. And today, empathy is everything. And just to be able to connect to another human's point of view and way of life, even if they're the opposite of your ideology or political spectrum, it's so important to at least understand where someone is coming from and documentaries give us that opportunity,” said Christopher Newman.

## My Project Background

When I first sought out a brand partnership I had an in-class connection to the luxury fashion brand Chanel. While I believe Chanel can engage in brand-sponsored documentary storytelling, in order to communicate brand values and further social impact, brands need to be prepared to let go of a curated, celebrity-focused image and reckon with their past in an honest way. Chanel declined to work on a project.

I then identified brands that align most closely with my own storytelling principles. These are some of the factors I considered:

- Created with purpose and sustainability in mind
- Has a dedicated Brand Stewardship and Social Impact Manager
- Fully engaged in their social impact strategy
- Open and honest about their influence and potential negative impact

I found a partnership with Kendra Peavy, the Vice President of Global Communication and Impact at reusable packaging company S'well to create a short documentary video and integrated campaign. I also worked with Gabrielle Laurent, Brand Stewardship and Influence Manager at Burt's Bees, to develop a 'Documentary Storytelling Workshop.'

## Burt's Bees: Documentary Storytelling Workshop

### Partnership Timeline

- Meeting 1 - Defining Brand Values (November 2020)
  - Access to nature equity, restoring native landscapes, and mental health and wellness
  - Community, Joyful, caring, trustworthy, connection, unconventional, intentional
- Meeting 2 - Story pitch ideas (November 2020)
  - Did not select story pitch idea
  - Talked to four nonprofits who asked new questions
  - Changed deliverable to workshop series (January 2020)
- Met 1x monthly January - April
  - Discussed compensation, branding UX/UI, diversity and inclusion, nonprofit partners, story ideas, and implementation
  - Workshop was created based on the 'Industry Analysis' activities above

## Results

With Burt's Bees I worked over 40 hours total developing documentary story strategy, ideating, and pitching over 20 story ideas. I had in-depth conversations on behalf of Burt's Bees with their foundational non-profit partners including Trees Durham, Extra Terrestrial, and RAFI USA to discuss story partners and their current activities. I communicated the findings and outcomes of these conversations with Burt's Bees such as editorial ownership, compensation, and marketing exposure. In the meetings, I presented and met twelve Burt's Bees staff members virtually.

The client experience of strategizing and teaching documentary storytelling to Burt's Bees was invaluable. Some of the primary lessons I learned are that larger businesses need to thoughtfully address parent ownership, compensation and story strategy including diversity and editorial principles. To mitigate obstacles we discussed implementing foundational story grants to partner with non-profit organizations and tell stories more easily, as well as working with freelancers to complete photo essays and written content due to budget constraints. One of my main takeaways is that it is hard for many brands to let go of their product and brand exposure through story and invest their marketing budget in documentary storytelling. Burt's Bees rated the workshop 4 out of 5.



## S'well: Curious by Nature

### Partnership Timeline

- Meeting 1 - Defining Brand Values (November 2020)
  - Environmental stewardship, science and innovation, and people empowerment
  - Committed, joyful, bold, inspirational, collaborative, and sustainable
- Meeting 2 - Story pitch ideas (November 2020)
  - Selected story on youth competing in the NC State Science Fair
- Meeting 3 - one-on-one with S'well's CEO Sarah Kauss (December 2020)
  - Established close relationship, conversation and investment in story
- Met 1x Weekly (January - April 2021)
  - Campaign and story development, editing and finalizations
  - Other conversations included: compensation, branding UX/UI, diversity and inclusion

### Results



## Film Overview

The 12-minute short documentary film created for S'well is hosted on their website.

"The 2021 North Carolina State Science and Engineering Fair went virtual amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. With reduced access to school resources, 65% fewer students entered the competition. Despite these challenges, four students completed impactful research that could earn them a spot at the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) and positively impact their local community."

## Integrated 'Earth Month' Campaign

- [Curious by Nature Webpage](#)
- [More Students in Action Blog Post](#)
- Trailer for video
- S'well Social Media - Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube
- Instagram Stories 'Get to Know the Filmmaker'
- S'well CEO shared to community
- Email distribution - 3 emails with link to film to reach consumers
- S'well utilizing partnership and social impact strategy
  - North Carolina Science and Engineering Foundation, UNICEF Clubs USA, Lonely Whale, B Corp USA, Girl Scouts and more
- Thought Discussion Kit
- Media relations and press

## S'well's Feedback

"As a brand, you have to have your finger on the pulse of what's happening. Documentary content allows you to engage in real-world conversations and make informed decisions on your social impact. In this case, we learned about the community's need to get outside, the impact COVID-19 has had on education, how important curiosity is, and the large gap in resource allocation in STEM activities for students from diverse backgrounds," said Kendra Peavy. Their biggest obstacle to creating a larger campaign and implementing more documentary content is a small marketing budget. Unfortunately, there were no big promotions and Kendra was often pulled in product-oriented directions or stretched thin while working on the project. S'well rated the experience 5/5.


 The S'well logo is written vertically in a large, bold, black sans-serif font. The apostrophe is positioned between the 'l' and 'l'. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located at the bottom right of the logo.


**S'WELL PRESENTS:**  
***CURIOUS BY NATURE***  
 Discussion Thought Starter

## DISCUSSION THOUGHT STARTERS

### THE FILM

- What is a key takeaway for you from the film?
- What do you find most compelling about the research of Zorabella? Kaitlyn and Lauren? Uma?
- All participants speak to the significance of science fair in their lives. What do you think is most interesting?
- How do these experiences seem different or similar to your own experiences?
- What are the environmental issues taken on in the film and how are they being solved?
- In the absence of community during the pandemic, in what ways did the film find community?

### COVID-19 + CLIMATE CHANGE

- How has Covid-19 impacted your advocacy work or ability to act over the last year?
- How do you think Covid-19 will impact your actions or advocacy focus in the future?
- How have programs like science fairs played a role in your thoughts/actions on advocacy?
- What are your thoughts on microplastics? Bioplastics? Or water pollution?
- In your opinion, what are the most pressing issues affecting our planet and communities today?

### INSPIRING ADVOCACY

- What more can we all do to engage and inspire others to take action for the planet? Our communities?
- Who or what has inspired you to take action for the planet? Your community?
- What actions have you taken?
- How can documentaries and content like *Curious by Nature* inspire change?
- How do science or inspiring stories impact your view on advocacy?

## CALLS TO ACTION

### ACTIVITY 1:

Tag @swellbottle or email [sustainchange@swellbottle.com](mailto:sustainchange@swellbottle.com) and tell us how this film inspires you to take action for the planet and your community?

### ACTIVITY 2:

Share the link to *Curious by Nature* with your community using the hashtag #CuriousByNature. Tag @swellbottle and answer the question: *What inspires you to stay curious?*

### ACTIVITY 3:

Start a discussion with your friends about what makes you #CuriousByNature and hungry for change? Share with us by tagging @swellbottle or emailing [sustainchange@swellbottle.com](mailto:sustainchange@swellbottle.com).

## Conclusions

This project was very difficult under the circumstances of COVID-19 and with a short timeline. In total, I completed over 350 hours of work for S'well. Our successes were finishing an impactful documentary and integrating it into a campaign. With our strong partnership and S'wells investment in purpose, they led the initiative to create the discussion thought starter above and calls to action. Some of the lessons I learned were that compensation of story partners is important, and S'well sent fifty bottles to story partners, but as a company, potentially this isn't enough. I also learned that it is important both I and the brand have editorial guidelines that we follow to establish a clear editing timeline and feedback. I would like to further distribute the film and I plan to submit to film festivals, media outlets and discuss the project and findings in Brand Storytelling groups and webinars. If given more time to research it would be valuable to further measure and analyze how brand-sponsored documentary video influences brand awareness with a screening and questionnaire.

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