The March for Our Lives: From High School Students to Empowering Performers

February 14, 2018 began as a normal day for the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. However, at around 2:20 in the afternoon, their whole lives changed. A student began firing shots in the building with an AR-15, making Stoneman Douglas High School one of the most recent mass shooting victims. The student left 17 dead and many more injured (Sanchez). Following this tragic event was an outpouring of support for gun control in the United States, lead by the students and survivors of the shooting themselves, which culminated in the March for Our Lives on March 24, 2018. The ability of the March for Our Lives to create meaning can be better understood by first examining it through the lenses of scripting, staging, and performing, in order to fully grasp the positive and negative ways its meaning was interpreted by its audience.

It could be argued that one of the most impactful elements of the March for Our Lives was the cast of characters. The protagonists of this performance were also the victims of the shooting. Emma Gonzalez, David Hogg, Cameron Kasky, and Jaclyn Corin were four of the students who spearheaded the March and became the “charismatic figures” (Benford and Hunt 40) of the movement. They also established the antagonists of the performance as the National Rifle Association and any politicians who receive money from them. Their message was to
empower the audience that they can affect change through doing something that’s relatively easy-- voting for leaders who represent their beliefs toward gun control in upcoming elections.

The March for Our Lives was timed incredibly well, just a little over a month after the shooting, to allow its impact to radiate across the country because of its relevance. Leading up to the March the students received television coverage to promote the March, as well as effectively used social media to spread their message. The March for Our Lives effectively tailored its content to its audience, using popular culture icons such as Miley Cyrus, Kim Kardashian, and Lin-Manuel Miranda, who sang, spoke, and marched along with the Parkland students.

The March enacted power through having dramaturgical loyalty, with the leaders always presenting themselves as a strong group of friends. Even amidst criticism from conservative adults (Bromwich), the movement remained positive and disciplined, focused on their message of enacting gun control. They were firm, and did not sugar coat the message they were trying to get across, but they still come off as polite and politically correct, so not to hurt their public image. The leaders and performers transformed through their participation in the March for Our Lives. It served as a way to mourn the loss of their friends and heal by taking action to make the situation better. Through being a performer, they themselves were empowered.

The overall success of the March for Our Lives could be attributed to its ability to send a cohesive message to those who were in the audience, and watching all around the world. A study by Dr. Dana R. Fisher from the University of Maryland found that the majority of those in attendance at the March were not students. It is estimated that 70 percent of participants were adult women, and most were highly educated women. Though it may initially seem like the differing ages between the performers and the audience would cause a misinterpretation of
meaning, it may have actually allowed the audience to connect more with the performers. Much of the dialogue from adults surrounding the March for Our Lives was from the perspective of parents who were angered at the thought of sending their children to school everyday and not being able to know if they would come home alive. These women in the audience were watching the students on stage and putting themselves into the shoes of being a parent of one of these students, likely because many of them were already parents. They connected and believed in the message of the March-- no one else should ever experience gun violence, and this can only happen through enacting gun control laws in our country. They also believed through the March’s message that they had the ability to make these changes happen, by flocking to the polls to vote in every election they could from then on out.

However, some audience members’ backgrounds as conservatives or gun owners may have caused a misinterpretation of the March’s meaning. These people were afraid that the messages the March was sending were that it wanted to repeal the Second Amendment and take their guns away completely, which was not the case (Bowden). Though these kinds of people were audience members, they were counter-protesters, and would not interpret the message of the March for Our Lives as making a good change for society. The media can also affect interpretation. An at-home audience member watching coverage of the march on Fox News would most likely interpret it as un-American, while someone else watching it on CNN would see it as inspirational, and may even convince them to become more active in the gun control movement.

The March for Our Lives is a prime example of a social movement serving the same role as a performance in society. Typical students were transformed overnight into social rights
advocates and leaders. The March’s ability to send the message that anyone has the power to improve gun control in the United States, allowed it to gain an empowered audience that would continue to support the movement, even after the March was over. The students of Stoneman Douglas High School, though young, were able to orchestrate an event with a positive and cohesive message that also provided a clear and understandable call to action for its spectators.
Works Cited


