

The Impact of Documentary Films on Digital Media in Raising Awareness of Environmental Issues

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Abstract

As environmental concerns such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution become increasingly pressing, the role of media in educating the public is pivotal. Documentaries, particularly those available through digital platforms, have emerged as influential tools for disseminating information and motivating pro-environmental behavior. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and in-depth interviews, this research investigates how Thai audiences engage with environmental documentaries and the extent to which these films influence their understanding of and actions toward environmental issues. The findings reveal that locally relevant content, combined with emotional and visual appeal, significantly increases awareness and inspires behavioral change. Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of digital media platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Thai streaming services in enhancing the reach of environmental documentaries. Despite the positive influence of documentaries on viewers' environmental attitudes, practical barriers such as limited access to sustainable alternatives were identified as factors that hinder broader behavior change. The study concludes by offering recommendations for future documentary production, distribution, and policy initiatives aimed at furthering environmental advocacy in Thailand, emphasizing the importance of creating accessible, actionable solutions alongside powerful narratives.

Keywords: Digital platforms, Documentary films, Digital media, Environmental awareness

1. Introduction

1.1 Principles and Rationale

In recent years, environmental issues have become one of the most urgent global concerns, with challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion threatening ecosystems and human societies worldwide. In this context, the role of media in shaping public awareness and fostering pro-environmental behaviors has grown increasingly important. Among the various forms of media, documentary films have emerged as a powerful tool for educating audiences about environmental issues. Through compelling narratives, emotional storytelling, and visually striking imagery, documentaries can highlight the urgency of environmental crises while motivating individuals to take actions. The rise of digital media platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and local streaming services in Thailand has provided an accessible and widespread avenue for disseminating environmental documentaries to a broader audience (Bunlue, 2023).

This study focuses on the impact of documentary films available on digital media platforms in raising awareness of environmental issues in Thailand. Thailand, like many other countries,

faces significant environmental challenges, including air and water pollution, deforestation, and the effects of climate change. While traditional media have long played a role in environmental advocacy, digital media offers new opportunities for reaching diverse audiences and amplifying the messages of environmental documentaries. The proliferation of digital platforms allows for on-demand viewing and easy sharing of content, which can increase the potential for documentaries to create lasting impact.

Given the growing influence of digital media and the increasing need for effective environmental communication, this study seeks to explore how documentary films on digital platforms contribute to public awareness, engagement, and behavioral change regarding environmental issues in Thailand. The research examines the ways in which Thai audiences engage with these films, how documentaries influence their understanding of environmental challenges, and what role digital media plays in the effectiveness of these films. By investigating the intersection of documentary filmmaking, digital media, and environmental advocacy, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the potential of documentary films as a catalyst for environmental change in the Thai context.

1.2 Research Objective

This study aims to investigate the role that documentary films, distributed through digital platforms, play in shaping public perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes toward environmental conservation in Thailand. The following specific objectives will guide the research:

1. To assess the effectiveness of environmental documentaries on digital media in raising awareness of environmental issues in Thailand.
2. To examine the impact of digital media distribution on the accessibility and reach of environmental documentaries in Thailand.
3. To analyze the public response to environmental documentaries and their influence on attitudes and behaviors toward environmental conservation in Thailand.

2. Literature Review

This literature review explores key research that addresses the role of documentary films in raising awareness of environmental issues, focusing on how these films utilize digital platforms to engage audiences, influence perceptions, and inspire action.

2.1 Documentary Films as Tools for Environmental Awareness

Documentary films have long been recognized as powerful tools for raising awareness of environmental issues. These films combine factual information with compelling narratives, making complex environmental challenges more accessible and emotionally engaging for audiences (Joffe & Staerkle, 2019). These films often provide firsthand accounts from affected communities, making the issues more relatable and emotionally resonant, which in turn increases the likelihood of audience engagement and support for environmental causes.

2.2 The Role of Digital Media in Expanding Documentary Reach

The advent of digital media has significantly transformed the way documentaries are distributed and consumed. Platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Vimeo have expanded the global reach of environmental documentaries, allowing filmmakers to bypass traditional media gatekeepers such as television networks and cinema distributors. This has made it possible for these films to engage a broader and more diverse audience, including individuals who may not

otherwise have access to information on pressing environmental issues (Rosenberg & Karl, 2019).

2.3 Impact of Documentaries on Public Awareness and Behavior

Several studies have explored the impact of documentaries on viewers' environmental attitudes and behaviors. Through these emotional connections, documentaries can foster a sense of urgency about environmental issues and drive individuals to take actions. However, while documentaries are effective in raising awareness, their ability to inspire long-term behavioral change is debated. Some researchers, such as Meyer (2017), suggest that documentaries can increase environmental knowledge and prompt immediate behavioral shifts.

2.4 Challenges in Using Digital Media for Environmental Advocacy

While digital platforms offer many opportunities for documentary filmmakers, there are also significant challenges. The sheer volume of content on platforms like YouTube and Netflix means that documentaries must compete for attention in a crowded space (Rosenberg & Karl, 2019). Additionally, environmental issues often involve complex scientific and technical information that may be difficult to communicate in a visually compelling yet accurate manner. Filmmakers must balance the need for emotional appeal with the requirement for factual accuracy, which can sometimes be a difficult task (Meyer, 2017).

2.5 Local Context: Thailand and Environmental Documentaries

In Thailand, environmental documentaries have gained attention as a means of addressing local environmental challenges, such as deforestation, air pollution, and the effects of industrialization on natural resources. Studies on Thai media consumption suggest that digital platforms are increasingly popular for accessing documentary films, particularly among younger, more urbanized audiences (Liu, 2018). Thai environmental documentaries, such as *The Last Elephant* (2018), which explores issues of wildlife conservation, have gained traction in raising awareness of both local and global environmental issues (Chaiyong, 2019).

The literature suggests that documentary films, particularly those distributed through digital media platforms, have a significant role in raising awareness about environmental issues. By engaging audiences emotionally and intellectually, these films have the potential to shift public attitudes and inspire action. In the context of Thailand, digital media has allowed local environmental documentaries to reach a broader audience, enhancing their impact. However, challenges remain in ensuring these documentaries achieve long-term behavioral change and overcome barriers such as political resistance and content oversaturation.

3. Research Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, a mixed-methods approach will be employed, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how environmental documentaries influence public awareness, engagement, and behaviors, as well as how digital media platforms contribute to the reach and effectiveness of these films in the context of Thailand.

3.1 Quantitative Methods

The survey will be distributed to a random sample of Thai citizens, aged 18 and above, who have watched environmental documentaries within the last six months. The sample will be stratified to ensure a diverse representation based on age, gender, educational background, and

geographic location. The questionnaire will include Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.

The survey data will be analyzed using statistical methods. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize demographic data and responses to questions about documentary viewership, awareness, and behavior change. Additionally, inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and correlation analysis, will be employed to explore relationships between variables such as the frequency of documentary viewing and changes in environmental behavior.

3.2 Quantitative Methods

To complement the survey, qualitative data will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. These methods will provide richer insights into how viewers perceive the content, the emotional and cognitive impacts of environmental documentaries, and the types of behaviors they may have changed as a result. Specifically, the research will explore:

- Viewers' personal experiences with the documentaries and how these films resonated with them emotionally.
- The perceived relevance of the documentary's message to Thai environmental challenges, such as air pollution, deforestation, or water pollution.
- The social media discussions and engagement that have followed the release of certain documentaries in Thailand.
- The motivations for engaging in environmental behavior change after viewing the documentaries (e.g., reducing plastic use, supporting environmental NGOs).

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 10-15 participants, including documentary filmmakers, environmental advocates, and media professionals, to explore the challenges and opportunities in using digital media for environmental advocacy in Thailand. Additionally, 2-3 focus group sessions will be organized with groups of 6-8 viewers to gather collective insights into their views on the impact of environmental documentaries and how these films influence their attitudes towards sustainability.

The content analysis of the selected documentaries will be conducted using a coding framework to identify key themes, such as the framing of environmental crises, the use of persuasive techniques, and the representation of local environmental issues. The results will provide insights into how Thai documentaries engage with local environmental concerns and how these films are tailored to resonate with the Thai audience.

4. Results

The results are drawn from the analysis of survey data, qualitative interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of environmental documentaries. The findings offer valuable insights into how documentary films on digital media platforms influence environmental awareness, engagement, and behavior in the Thai context.

4.1 Quantitative Survey Results

A total of 500 survey responses were collected from Thai citizens aged 18 and above who have watched at least one environmental documentary in the past six months. The results breakdown of the sample is as follows:

4.1.1 Frequency of Documentary Viewing: 45% of respondents reported watching environmental documentaries at least once a month, while 30% watched them weekly. 25% of respondents watched these documentaries occasionally (once every 2–3 months).

4.1.2 Impact on Environmental Awareness: 78% of respondents stated that environmental documentaries have increased their understanding of key environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and air pollution. 63% reported that these documentaries made them more aware of environmental challenges specific to Thailand, such as water pollution in rivers and the impact of deforestation in national parks. 85% of respondents indicated that the documentaries they watched provided them with new knowledge about environmental solutions, such as sustainable agriculture practices, renewable energy, and waste management.

4.1.3 Changes in Attitudes and Behaviors: 53% of respondents said that watching environmental documentaries inspired them to adopt more environmentally friendly behaviors, such as reducing plastic use (43%) and conserving energy (39%). 45% of respondents indicated that they became more involved in environmental advocacy, including following environmental organizations on social media and participating in local clean-up campaigns. 30% of respondents expressed an interest in joining environmental policy movements or engaging in public protests related to environmental issues.

4.1.4 Platforms for Viewing Documentaries: YouTube was the most popular platform for viewing environmental documentaries, with 70% of respondents reporting that they accessed documentaries through this platform. Netflix followed with 45%, while 35% watched environmental documentaries on local Thai streaming services such as LINE TV and True ID.

4.1.5 Statistical Analysis: A chi-square test revealed a significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between the frequency of watching environmental documentaries and the likelihood of engaging in environmentally friendly behaviors. Respondents who watched documentaries more frequently were more likely to report adopting sustainable practices. Correlation analysis showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.73$) between viewers' increased environmental knowledge and their attitudes toward supporting environmental policies.

4.2 Qualitative Interview and Focus Group Findings

In-depth interviews with 10 environmental filmmakers, advocates, and media professionals, and three focus group discussions with 15 viewers, revealed several key themes:

4.2.1 Emotional Engagement and Perception: Interviewees and focus group participants emphasized the emotional power of documentaries in motivating change. Participants in both groups expressed a heightened sense of urgency and concern, with several noting that visual representations of environmental degradation, such as deforestation and pollution, deeply impacted them. One participant in a focus group stated, "Seeing the destruction of nature made me feel like I need to do something now to help."

4.2.2 Local Relevance: A significant number of respondents emphasized the importance of documentaries addressing issues specific to Thailand. Thai-produced documentaries, such as *The Last Elephant* (2018) and *The Chao Phraya River Crisis* (2017), were particularly noted for their local relevance and ability to resonate with Thai audiences. One interviewee remarked, "When a documentary talks about a problem in my own country, it feels more real, and I'm more likely to take action."

4.2.3 Barriers to Behavioral Change: While many participants expressed motivation to adopt more sustainable behaviors, some noted practical barriers such as the high cost of eco-

friendly products or lack of infrastructure for waste management. A participant in a rural focus group mentioned, "Even though I want to reduce plastic, it's not always easy to find alternatives, and in some places, recycling is not available."

4.2.4 Role of Digital Media Platforms: Social media and streaming platforms were highlighted as key tools in amplifying the impact of documentaries. Participants frequently mentioned sharing the documentaries with friends and family on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, increasing the documentaries' reach. One participant shared, "After watching a documentary about climate change, I posted it on Facebook to let others know how serious the issue is."

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the impact of documentary films on digital media in raising awareness of environmental issues in Thailand. The findings reveal that documentary films, particularly those available on digital media platforms, play a crucial role in educating the public about environmental challenges and encouraging behavioral change. The combination of compelling visuals, emotionally engaging narratives, and practical solutions presented in the documentaries has proven to be effective in raising awareness and motivating Thai audiences to take action in favor of the environment. Key findings are:

1. Increased Awareness: The survey results showed that the majority of Thai viewers reported an increase in their understanding of environmental issues, especially those impacting Thailand, such as deforestation, water pollution, and climate change. Documentaries focusing on local environmental issues were found to resonate more deeply with viewers, highlighting the importance of addressing these topics in culturally relevant ways.

2. Behavioral Change: The study found that watching environmental documentaries motivated many viewers to adopt more sustainable behaviors, such as reducing plastic use and conserving energy. However, the adoption of these behaviors was sometimes hindered by economic constraints and a lack of infrastructure to support sustainable practices.

3. Role of Digital Media: The study also highlighted the vital role of digital media platforms, such as YouTube, Netflix, and Thai local streaming services, in increasing the reach of environmental documentaries. Social media platforms were particularly significant in amplifying the impact, with many participants sharing documentaries and discussing environmental issues with their networks, thereby extending the educational effect.

4. Emotional and Visual Impact: The emotional power of environmental documentaries was consistently highlighted across both the survey and qualitative interviews. Participants indicated that the visual representations of environmental degradation, such as images of polluted rivers and destroyed forests, played a major role in evoking empathy and a sense of urgency for environmental preservation.

The findings of this study suggest several implications for future research and practice in the field of environmental media:

1. Local Relevance: Future documentaries should continue to emphasize local environmental issues that are relatable to Thai audiences, using local languages and addressing specific concerns like air pollution, waste management, and biodiversity loss. By tailoring content to local contexts, these films will likely have a stronger emotional and cognitive impact.

2. Practical Solutions: While documentaries effectively raise awareness, it is crucial that they also provide actionable, practical solutions that viewers can implement in their daily lives.

Documentaries should focus on not only highlighting environmental problems but also on showcasing accessible and sustainable alternatives.

3. *Leveraging Digital Media*: The study underscores the importance of digital platforms in amplifying the impact of environmental documentaries. Further research could explore how digital platforms and social media can be leveraged to facilitate wider engagement and mobilize collective action on environmental issues.

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