AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS
IN CHINESE DOCUMENTARIES

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ABSTRACT

Media companies are more aware today than ever before of the impact of visual products. How audiences cognitively and emotionally connect with documentary content has become an area worth studying.

With scholars' perspectives moving from passive audience exposure to active audience reception, this study hoped to bring insights into how audiences emotionally and cognitively relate to female characters. Using two Chinese independent documentaries, *Still Tomorrow* and *Small Talk*, the study employs a between-subjects factorial experimental design to examine audiences' perceptions of female characters. The purpose of this research is to examine audience perceptions within a cross-cultural context, as the researcher compared audience perceptions of female characters based on the audience members' cultural backgrounds.

This study supports that the documentary viewing experience evokes audiences' concerns about gender equality issues. Building on the theoretical concept of identification, the study finds that empathizing with media characters could increase audiences' awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary.

From a pragmatic perspective, the researcher provided some insights for media producers and documentary filmmakers in terms of documentary character construction and documentary narratives, with a comparison between two characters' narratives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout the history of documentary studies, most have been concerned about the representation of reality. But a film is also a way to convey a social issue and have a social impact (Corner, 2002). Media scholars also started to pay attention to how audiences connect with documentary content cognitively and emotionally (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968; Luecking et al., 2017, Perrott, 2002).

Lightweight digital video cameras provide the capability to document everyday life and give filmmakers the power to promote self-expression and self-reflection in documentary film. The intimate emotions and interpersonal relationships portrayed in documentaries also establish universal connections with broad social realities (Arthur, 2007). Thus, independent cinema generally welcomes films that focus on ethnic minority groups and women's issues (Yu, 2014).

With the rise of independent Chinese documentaries, several filmmakers have focused their lenses on female characters. In the documentary *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016), the filmmaker Hui-chen Huang turns the camera to her mother, who is burdened by familial roles and domestic responsibilities required in Taiwan's patriarchal society. In *Still Tomorrow* directed by Jian Fan (Fan, 2016), the central character, Yu Xiuhua, struggles to escape her toxic relationship with her husband while her family believes a woman should stay married so that society views her as having a wholesome family.

Both documentaries portray women suffering from patriarchal restrictions. However, in *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016), the central character is too afraid to speak up

and essentially becomes a victim of the patriarchal society. In *Still Tomorrow* (Fan, 2016), Yu actively seeks solutions and finally divorces her husband. As two kinds of character narratives are presented—the victim narrative in *Small Talk* and the survivor narrative in *Still Tomorrow*—they may induce different perceptions of these two female characters, which offers the perfect comparison for this study.

China ranked 106 out of 153 countries in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, while the United States ranked 53 (World Economic Forum, 2020). The Global Gender Gap Index measures the gender gap based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In China, gender roles are largely influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Confucian ethics requires the intra-familial roles of women, which include the beliefs that a woman belongs to a family and that her primary roles are those of mother and wife (Wang et al., 2019). Intra-familial roles may impede women's economic participation.

Some research has delved into how media construct masculinity and femininity. Those studies have suggested that women are underrepresented in media, affecting how media users perceive women's occupational, social, and political roles (Rudy et al., 2010; Schwartz, 2011;). However, little research has focused on documentary audiences and how they perceive women's images in documentary films. As more scholars pay attention to the media's role in influencing audience perceptions about certain cultures, researchers have started to study how audiences from different cultural backgrounds relate to documentary content emotionally, politically and

socially: Audiences resonate with the subject matter based on their personal experiences and embedded memories in the cognitive process and raise concerns about related social issues (Ellis, 2011; Hill, Askanius et al., 2019).

Several studies have concluded that there is a marked difference between men and women when perceiving media characters (Azeez, 2010; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Jones & Greer, 2011). Participants reported identifying with characters of the same gender (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Another leading factor that affects how audiences make meaning out of cross-cultural media content is their cultural backgrounds (Xiang, 2018; Yoo & Buzinde, 2012).

In this study, the researcher proposes cultural background and gender as main factors that influence audiences' perceptions and sets other factors—like educational background, marital status, and age—as control variables.

The study uses the between-subjects factorial experimental design to examine whether people of different genders or cultural backgrounds perceive female characters differently. This research further examines possible correlations between audiences' perceptions of female characters and their awareness of the gender equality issues behind documentary stories. It also explores how different characters' narratives affect the persuasive effects of documentary content.

The research focuses on two Chinese documentaries, *Still Tomorrow* (Fan, 2016) and *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016), both of which have female main characters. *Still Tomorrow*, directed by Jian Fan, was the winner of the 2016 International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam Special Jury Award for Feature-Length

Documentary. *Small Talk* was awarded the Teddy Award for Best Documentary Film at the Berlin Film Festival in 2017. This study uses *Small Talk* because it is deeply connected to some broader issues in Taiwan's patriarchal society. According to the Teddy Award jury statement, "*Small Talk* is the director's courageous portrayal of her family story, which gives the audience an inside look at a culture we might not be familiar with" (Taiwan Today, 2017). It helps audiences take a deep look at female images in a different cultural context. *Still Tomorrow* is a typical film that portrays a female character, intimately and closely showing audiences what obstacles a woman has to overcome to gain independence even though she has gained fame as a poet. According to the filmmaker's statement, this film speaks from a female perspective and focuses on gender issues (POV, n.d.). And the filmmaker included women as members of his team to help build female perspectives into the film.

The study uses clips from these two documentaries as stimuli for participants. The researcher uses the pre-post experimental design to measure audience perceptions of the female characters in the documentaries and whether their concerns about gender equality issues increase after viewing.

The purpose of this research is to examine audience perceptions by putting them into multicultural contexts. Through documentary representation, viewers can experience characters' political or social surroundings and make sense of the documentaries' social meanings. The study aims to examine whether viewers' cultural backgrounds affect their meaning-making processes and whether different narratives affect audiences' perceptions.

Even though some cross-cultural studies exist about how audiences make meaning out of media content and how audiences perceive media characters, most studies have focused on fictional films or TV programs (Azeez, 2010; Cohen & Ribak, 2003; Yoo & Buzinde, 2012). Grierson (1971) defined documentary as a “creative treatment of actuality” (p. 13). A documentary essentially reflects a sense of reality and serves to convey social issues (Corner, 2002; Grierson, 1971). So, this research hopes to find out the correlation between audience members’ perceptions of female characters and awareness of gender issues as a way to understand how documentary viewing raises social awareness and delivers social impact. This research also provides new insights into how different characters’ narratives may induce different audience perceptions and builds a foundation for further research on documentary character construction and documentary narratives.

Past research has suggested that when audiences emotionally and cognitively relate to media characters, that connection increases the media’s persuasive effects on audiences (Cohen, 2001). Based on this study of two Chinese independent documentaries, this research examines whether different narratives of female characters bring out different levels of gender issue awareness.

The study is grounded in audience reception and audience engagement theory (Hall, 1973; Roscoe et al., 1995). With scholars’ perspectives moving from passive audience exposure to active audience reception, scholars have broadened the definition of audience reception to become *audience engagement*, defined as cognitive, emotional, or affective involvement with media content (Broersma, 2019).

Emotional interaction refers to how audiences show emotional attachment to media characters, celebrities, or programs (Kim, 2012; Sood, 2006). *Affect* is a dimension that includes audiences' emotional responses but also incorporates audiences' physiological or biological responses (Lambert, 2016). Related to audience engagement theory, *audience attitude* can influence audiences' issue awareness and increase the persuasive effect of media (Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968). *Identification* is a mechanism through which audiences empathize with media characters, emotionally and cognitively; it thus increases media's persuasive effects on audiences (Cohen, 2001). Defining it as "being in the character's shoes" when watching a television program (Livingstone, 1998, p. 25), identification further allows audiences to experience social reality from others' perspectives and helps shape their attitudes about social issues (Erikson, 1968). Recent research has also suggested that documentaries can elicit affective and cognitive engagement and, therefore, raise concerns for an underlying social issue (Ellis, 2011; Hill et al., 2019). This study uses the between-subjects factorial experiment to produce insights into how audiences make sense of media characters and whether the audience members' perceptions are related to their awareness of gender equality issues.

Through looking at audience reception studies within multicultural contexts, Hall (1973) suggested that audiences' cultures, beliefs, and life experiences will affect how they decode media messages. Other researchers have also suggested that the process of meaning-making is related to viewers' cultural positioning (Cohen & Ribak, 2003). In the current study, the researcher tried to add a new perspective to the

cross-cultural perception of gender images.

The next chapter reviews the research literature on audience engagement theory and the literature on how audiences engage with media content within multicultural contexts. The literature review then addresses how audiences engage with visual media products and, more specifically, with documentaries, including how they identify with media characters and how the visual medium impacts their attitudes toward the characters. Finally, the next chapter explores research findings on the media effects of exposure to under-represented women.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Beginning with audience engagement theory (Hall, 1973; Roscoe et al., 1995), this chapter addresses how audiences engage with media content within multicultural contexts. The second section focuses on audience engagement with visual media products and documentary films. Finally, it examines female images in media products and the media effects of exposure to those images.

Audience Engagement

Audience reception theory begins with a binary conceptualization of the active/passive audience theory. Biocca (1985) suggested that the active audience position is overstated. Biocca argued that audiences cannot be viewed as cognitively independent individuals and that the premise that audiences are unpersuaded by media influence is untenable. However, some researchers have proposed viewing audiences as active recipients who can produce active interpretations of media content (Hall, 1973; Roscoe et al., 1995). Hall (1973) suggested that the *meaning-making process*, as it relates to media texts, is a process of encoding and decoding in which audience members take three different positions when decoding: a dominant or preferred reading, where audience members easily accept what the media want to produce; an oppositional reading, where members reject the original media messages and produce their own meanings; and a negotiated reading, where members accept part of the media message. Audience members' cultures, beliefs, genders, and life experiences affect how they decode a media message (Hall, 1973).

Roscoe et al. (1995) also divided audience activities into three dimensions:

social, active, and critical. In the social dimension, audiences incorporate their social position into their viewing process—an audience member brings knowledge to the viewing process that is related not only to the individual's experience but also class, race, occupation, and position in cultural communities. As active viewers, audience members compare the screening message to their existing knowledge base to produce meaningful interpretations; in the critical dimension, audiences produce oppositional readings out of the media producer's intended meaning (Roscoe et al., 1995).

Some scholars have tested these ideas with empirical research methods (Azeez, 2010; Ukonu et al., 2020). Azeez (2010) studied how Nigerians interpret the representations of women in Nigerian films: whether, for example, individuals with different religions, ethnicities, or educational backgrounds express different interpretations. Based on focus groups, the study found less-educated women (conservative, rural/local) were more likely to conform to dominant interpretations of the films' meanings, whereas more-educated women (progressive, urban) produced oppositional interpretations (Azeez, 2010).

Based on audience reception theory, Ukonu et al. (2020) delved into how international news shapes Nigerian readers' opinions on major political candidates in the United States. By utilizing the quantitative method, the researchers concluded that readers' opinions are strongly related to their age, region, and religious affiliation. These findings further support Hall's (1973) audience reception model, which suggests the decoding process is affected by audiences' culture, social positions, and life experiences.

The research of Ukonu et al. (2020) also supported the idea that even though Hall's (1973) audience reception theory is largely applied in qualitative research, it can still provide insights into quantitative research. As this research delves into whether American audiences accept characters' narratives in Chinese documentaries, Hall's study will help this study explain how American audiences evaluated characters' personality attributes and how their evaluations differed from Chinese audiences.

Scholars' perspectives have shifted from passive audience exposure to active audience reception. Consequently, they have broadened the definition of audience reception to audience engagement, and they have defined audience engagement as cognitive, emotional, and affective involvement with media content (Broersma, 2019). Cognitive attachment refers to how audiences relate media texts to existing knowledge to help them understand issues (Broersma, 2019; Burke et al., 2018). Emotional interaction refers to how audiences show emotional attachment to media characters, celebrities, or programs, including how audiences identify with, empathize with, and relate to individual characters, storylines, and other production elements (Kim, 2012; Sood, 2006). Affect is a dimension that includes audience members' emotional responses but also incorporates audiences' physiological or biological responses, which include the bodily capacity to negotiate, make decisions, evaluate, and relate (Lambert, 2016).

A final aspect of engagement is the behavioral dimension, which leads to audiences "building upon the provided information to take political action in their

personal life” (Broersma, 2019, p. 1). Chan-Olmsted and Wolter (2018) also proposed the cognitive-affective-behavioral model and suggested the most valuable media effect is the behavioral outcome. In this study of audience perceptions and media engagement practices, the researchers defined the affective level as an emotional connection with the brand examined (Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018).

Some research has confirmed that incorporating visual material in the news can bring about emotional involvement (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006; Joffe, 2008; Smith & Joffe, 2009). For example, the people who were shown photographs during the 2004 kidnapping of British citizen Kenneth Bigley exhibited more fear than those not shown any images (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006). Participants also showed strong emotional reactions when presented the images of climate change risks in British newspapers (Smith & Joffe, 2009). Höijer (2004) suggested that depicting the visual impacts of wars, genocides, and massacres helps construct a sense of collective global compassion. Focus group participants who saw such visual images reported feelings of pity, sadness, and anger during the discussion.

All these studies have provided a theoretical framework to understand how audience engagement can help construct social meaning out of media content, how audiences relate media content to their personal experiences and induce further social behaviors.

Audience Engagement Within Multicultural Contexts

Building on the audience reception theory, Hall (1973) suggested that the meaning-making process is related to audiences’ cultures. And more scholars started

to focus on audience reception within multicultural contexts (Hall, 1973; Xiang, 2018; Yoo & Buzinde, 2012). Van Dijk (2009) suggested that audience members' ideological frameworks shape their attitudes on abstract and general social issues, affecting how they interpret media content and produce meaning out of media messages.

Based on audience reception theory, Xiang (2018) delved into how African audiences perceive media content from CCTV-Africa, which portrays China's positive economic influence in Africa. In-depth interviews showed that audiences in Africa produced oppositional decoding of media messages as they became skeptical about China's positive influence and concerned about its economic penetration.

Yoo and Buzinde (2012) focused their research on the televised travelogue *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, examining how participants from Saudi Arabia and the United States decoded the media messages differently under the influence of post-9/11 discourses. Produced by the Travel Channel and originally airing from 2005 to 2012, *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* featured the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia, among other areas of the world. Yoo and Buzinde concluded that American participants accepted the travelogue's portrayal of the Saudi Arabian world, which could lead to intercultural understanding. However, Saudi Arabian participants thought that the Western portrayal did not accurately reflect the Saudi Arabian identity. Still, they appreciated how the portrayal differed from mainstream news media's typically negative coverage, which they considered less accurate and more biased.

These two different studies concluded that audiences tend to produce oppositional readings when the media inserts a different cultural background: Audiences in Africa engaged in oppositional decoding when mainstream Chinese media created the media content. Saudi Arabian participants rejected the Western portrayal of Saudi Arabia. Building on previous research findings, the researcher raised one research question in this research:

Does cultural background affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?

Audience Engagement in Documentary Films

Documentaries are essentially products that combine visual and audio, using sound recordings and photographic images to capture reality (Plantinga, 2005). Grierson (1971, p. 13) defined a documentary as a “creative treatment of actuality,” helping distinguish documentaries from fictional films and television news. Fictional films are not based on actuality, and television news is not allowed creative or dramatic treatment (Grierson, 1971).

One of the first studies to examine the impact of documentaries concluded that documentary content affects audience attitudes and therefore informs audience members’ understanding of a documentary’s social meaning and stimulates social action (Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968). The study explored the relationships between exposure to broadcasts about current social issues and public affairs, audiences’ attitudes toward the issues, and their potential behavior changes. Through an experimental, quantitative method, audience attitudes were measured by the intensity

of audience members' feelings, how interested the audiences were in the issues, how much they were willing to vote to address the social problems, and how strongly they felt the issues were important. Potential behaviors were measured by how much time audience members said they were willing to devote to further learning about social issues. Five films related to different social issues were shown to audiences. The results showed that when audiences were exposed to broadcasts about social issues and public affairs, their attitude shifts were related to what was learned, whereas stimulation for potential change of behavior was limited (Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968). This study provided a foundation for how to examine audience attitudes toward media content and public awareness, as well as the relationship between audiences' attitudes and social awareness.

Building on this research, Luecking et al. (2017) studied *The Weight of the Nation*, a 15-episode HBO documentary that aired in 2012 and related to a health campaign addressing obesity. Asking participants to complete a survey before and after screening the program, Luecking et al. concluded that audiences were more willing to take action to maintain a healthy weight and support policies to change the current food systems after watching the show.

Perrott (2002) added a visceral dimension to the rational and intellectual modes of engagement: audiences' strong emotional responses to the documentary medium. Perrott studied the documentary *The New Zealand Wars* within the context of New Zealand decolonization and its potential function of facilitating the decolonization movement. He suggested that audiences incorporate emotional resources, like strong

feelings of disgust, pride, and anger, into their original knowledge bases to make meaning out of documentary content, contributing to the emergence of political activity—the decolonization movement. But the limitations of the research raise questions about whether its findings can be generalized to other documentaries.

More recent research by Hill et al. (2019) also suggested that documentaries can provoke audiences' affective and cognitive engagement. Through studying two films related to the 1965 genocide in Indonesia, the researchers concluded that the films' audiences intensely engaged with the documentary style and subject matter, reflecting their personal experiences and embodied memories in the cognitive process. Hill et al. called the process “provocative engagement” (2019, p. 666). They showed the film to Scandinavian, Japanese, and Colombian audiences and conducted in-depth interviews. Scandinavian audiences exhibited a self-reflexive response; they reflected on the political climate in their own country and made moral judgments based on the political context. Japanese audiences displayed moral ambiguity because of Japan's World War II history and postwar culture. Colombian audiences related to the film based on their country's political climate, as they had been through 52 years of conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Hill et al., 2019).

Borum Chattoo and Feldman (2017) utilized the quantitative method to examine the relationship between narrative engagement, emotions, and audience engagement with global development and poverty issues. Participants viewed two documentaries, *Stand Up Planet* and *The End Game*. After the viewings, audience members' emotions and the films' perceived entertainment value were measured, as

well as variables such as support for government aid, intended action, and perceived awareness. The results demonstrated that documentary storytelling can elicit positive emotions and promote concerns for the underlying social issues. To further find out whether documentary viewing could promote audiences' concerns for gender equality, the researcher posed the following question:

Will participants' level of gender equality awareness increase after viewing either documentary?

All these studies (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017; Hill et al., 2019; Perrott, 2002) have added to our knowledge about audiences' emotional engagement with the documentary medium. However, the films shown mainly featured a specific event or social issue. Few studies have delved into the portrayal of central characters and audiences' emotional responses and attitudes toward the central characters. Thus, two hypotheses are proposed in this study:

H3a: Participants who perceive female characters more positively after viewing will report higher awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary.

H3b: Participants who perceive female characters more positively after viewing be more likely to increase their overall gender equality awareness.

Media Effect of Identification

Researchers use the concept of identification to explain the emotional response. Identification is a mechanism through which audiences share feelings with media characters, emotionally and cognitively; thus, it increases media's persuasive effects on audiences (Cohen, 2001). Identifying with mediated others allows audiences to

experience social reality from the others' perspectives, helping to shape audience attitudes about social issues (Erikson, 1968). The media effect of identification has been well-explored in research. For example, audiences are more likely to accept what the media want to produce if they identify with the media characters (Fiske, 1989). Basil (1996) utilized a survey to test whether young adults' identification with Magic Johnson would lead to an increase in AIDS-related concern, perceived risk, and behavior changes. Basil concluded that identification can increase the likelihood of forming a lasting attitude that leads to behavior change. Zillmann (1994) suggested that even if audiences' knowledge base is not similar to that of the media characters, audiences can still share the characters' perspectives and have empathetic feelings.

Other researchers used the game-based documentary *Inside the Haiti Earthquake* as a stimulus to test whether identification would lead to empathy and greater interest in learning (Bachen et al., 2016). In the game, audiences could take on the role of an American journalist or a Haiti earthquake survivor, the latter of which was culturally different from the personal backgrounds of the study participants, who were U.S. college students. The researchers concluded that players could identify with both characters and produce sympathetic feelings and interests in learning. Research has also suggested that attitude similarity between viewers and characters can be used as an indicator to predict identification (Cohen, 2001).

Identification has been used in gender studies, as well. Cohen and Ribak (2003) asked the viewers of the television program *Ally McBeal* to fill out a questionnaire to measure their identification with the central character, a young, independent female

attorney. The character portrayal contradicted the traditional image of female characters, who are shown to emotionally rely on a male partner. The results showed that young, educated female viewers were more likely than male audience members to identify with Ally McBeal and find the image of the character appealing.

Based on the studies on the media effect of identification and how the mechanism of identification has been applied in gender studies, the following research question and hypotheses are raised:

RQ3: Does gender affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?

H1a: Chinese participants are more likely to empathize with the victim narrative than the survivor narrative.

H1b: Female participants are more likely to empathize with the victim narrative than the survivor narrative.

H2a: Participants who exhibit a higher level of empathy with female characters after viewing will report higher awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary.

H2b: Participants who exhibit a higher level of empathy with female characters after viewing will be more likely to increase their overall gender equality awareness.

Female Images in Media Content

Marketing and advertising researchers have examined gender images well (e.g., Branthwaite, 2002; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Milner & Higgs, 2004). Hochschild (1989) presented two gender role ideologies. Traditionalists

believe that men should focus on paid work and provide financial support for the family while women shoulder the caregiving and homemaking roles. By contrast, egalitarians believe men and women should share the work–home responsibilities equally. Using content analysis, scholars determined a large portion of advertisements shows men in outdoor settings and engaging in business or sports, while women are shown indoors carrying on household activities (Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Milner & Higgs, 2004). Empirical evidence has also shown that television advertising images influence viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Branthwaite, 2002; Perloff, 2002). Baxter et al. (2016) examined advertisements that portray men as caregivers and found that nontraditional advertising can challenge gender role stereotypes. Consumers who support the egalitarian gender role ideology expressed positive attitudes toward these advertisements, while traditionalists did acknowledge gender roles were changing.

Some studies have focused on gender images in television programs. Through content analyses, scholars have found that female characters are shown in the context of romantic relationships and family, while male characters are more likely to be shown in the workplace and portrayed as dominant and competent in their area (Liao et al., 2020; Perloff, 2002). Using survey methodology with a nationwide sample of 420 young adults, Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) reported that increased television viewing reinforces audiences' perceptions and endorsement of traditional masculine gender roles, which are measured by attributes like dominance, toughness, and restrictive emotionality.

But research on gender images and gender roles in documentaries is rare. One study (King et al., 2019) focused on the documentary *Man Up*, which was developed by the researchers and examines the relationship between masculinity and mental health problems for Australian men. Pretests and posttests were conducted to measure attitude changes after seeing the documentary. Survey respondents reported that viewing the documentary helped them reconsider traditionally masculine roles. However, the survey did not define the gender roles, instead simply asking, “Did watching the documentary change the way you view the term ‘man up’?” (King et al., 2019). This research will work to include gender roles and measure audience awareness of gender equality issues.

In China, gender roles are influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Confucian ethics requires women’s subservience to their husbands, and women usually stay home and maintain the household while men work outside the home (Wang et al., 2019). Even though society has progressed in recent years, women in rural areas still struggle for independence and self-rule (Wang et al., 2019).

Studies about Chinese and Western gender roles share some conclusions. Still, the profound influence of Confucian ethics puts another layer of patriarchal restrictions on women in China.

Both the *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016) and *Still Tomorrow* (Fan, 2016) documentaries portray women burdened by patriarchal restrictions. Might they engage audiences and facilitate audience interpretations? This research gauged whether audiences with different cultural backgrounds shared understandings of women’s

roles and status in Chinese society.

Research Questions

This research tried to add a new perspective to the cross-cultural perception of images in documentary film since few existing studies have focused on audience perceptions of documentary content within a cross-cultural context (Hill et al., 2019; Perrott, 2002). Previous studies have mainly focused on how audiences emotionally relate to the impact of wars. By contrast, this research focused on how audiences understand and interpret specific central characters.

Although many studies have focused on audience engagement in the documentary field, most have focused on audiences' emotional responses toward the story and audiences' attitudes toward social issues (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017; Hill et al., 2019; Perrott, 2002). Few studies have focused on the relationship between audience perceptions of documentary characters and their awareness of social issues.

As the media effect of identification has been well demonstrated in prior research, the concept of identification with the two films chosen for this study and their media characters can be used as the theoretical approach. To be more specific, the media effect of identification relates to the following question: Are audience members' perceptions of gender issues in films related to their empathy with the characters and the documentaries' potential persuasive effects on social issue awareness?

This study examines whether gender representation in documentaries can help audiences realize the patriarchal oppression against women and raise awareness about

gender equality issues reflected in documentaries' stories. To be more specific, this study seeks answers to the following research questions (RQs) and related hypotheses (Hs):

RQ1: Will participants' level of gender equality awareness increase after viewing either documentary?

RQ2: Does cultural background affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?

RQ3: Does gender affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?

H1a: Chinese participants are more likely to empathize with the victim narrative than the survivor narrative.

H1b: Female participants are more likely to empathize with the victim narrative than the survivor narrative.

H2a: Participants who exhibit a higher level of empathy with female characters after viewing will report higher awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary.

H2b: Participants who exhibit a higher level of empathy with female characters after viewing will be more likely to increase their overall gender equality awareness.

H3a: Participants who perceive female characters more positively after viewing will report higher awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary.

H3b: Participants who perceive female characters more positively after viewing will be more likely to increase their overall gender equality awareness.

*H4: Female participants are more likely to evoke awareness of gender equality
in response to the victim narrative.*

Chapter 3: Methods

The main purpose of this research is to find out whether audience perceptions of female characters vary by gender and cultural background. The study investigated how audiences engage with two kinds of character narratives—the victim narrative and the survivor narrative—and the relationship between audience members’ perceptions of female characters and awareness of gender issues.

The study used a between-subjects factorial experimental design, supplemented by qualitative data from one open-ended question, to examine audiences’ perceptions of female characters, using a pre–post experimental design and clips from two documentaries as stimuli.

In *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016), participants watched a clip comprising three scenes (including the documentary’s time ranges of 00:07:46–00:25:02, 00:29:59–00:34:56, and 00:58:18–01:00:02). The clip gives a brief introduction to the central character A-nu. She identifies as a lesbian, but her family members believe a woman needs to have a marriage. The clip also focuses on the family members’ opinions about A-nu’s sexual orientation and her marriage. In the final scene of the clip, the filmmaker, Huang, finally has an in-depth conversation with her mother about her painful past as a domestic violence victim. The film portrays a wordless woman whose struggles are related to the deeper social issues of homophobia and patriarchal restrictions.

In *Still Tomorrow* (Fan, 2016), the participants viewed three scenes (including the time ranges of 00:15:26–00:24:32, 01:01:20–01:05:31, and 01:09:15–01:14:42).

The first scene shows how Yu Xiuhua gained fame after her poems went viral on social media. The second and third scenes portray Yu's struggles to pursue her happiness, as her family members strongly oppose her decision to divorce her husband and gain personal independence.

Both documentaries portray women suffering from patriarchal restrictions. However, in *Small Talk* (Huang, 2016), the central character is burdened by her past and too afraid to fight against the patriarchal society. In *Still Tomorrow* (Fan, 2016), Yu actively seeks solutions to break up with her husband. As two kinds of character narratives are presented—the victim narrative in *Small Talk* and the survivor narrative in *Still Tomorrow*—they draw a perfect comparison for this study of documentary narratives.

Procedures

For this study, participants completed a posttest questionnaire using the online survey platform Qualtrics after viewing the documentaries' selected scenes. Before completing this posttest questionnaire and watching the film clips, they filled out a pretest questionnaire to collect information about their gender identity and cultural background and to measure their general understanding of gender equality issues. The pretest questionnaire also collected information about participants' educational background, marital status, and age, but the researcher posited that cultural background and gender are the main factors that influence audiences' perceptions. Other factors would be used as control variables.

The pretest questionnaire presented four statements measuring participants'

general understanding of gender equality issues by asking them to indicate the degree to which they agree with the given statements using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree). The statements were inspired by the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (Barker et al., 2011), and the reliability of test yielded $\alpha = .77$:

- (1) Men and women should share work–home responsibilities equally.
- (2) Men and women should get equal job opportunities.
- (3) Today’s society has not achieved gender equality.
- (4) There are some places in the world where women do not have the same opportunities as men (job opportunities, education opportunities, etc.).

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the two documentary clips. A brief written summary of the film was provided before participants viewed their clip to help them better understand its background. After viewing, they were asked to complete the posttest questionnaire that measures their perceptions of female characters and their levels of gender issue awareness.

Researchers have suggested that the term “audience perception” is related to how audiences evaluate a character’s personality attributes and how audiences identify with, empathize with, and relate to individual characters (Hoffner & Cantor, 2013; Cohen, 2001; Kim, 2012; Sood, 2006). The posttest questionnaire measured the participants’ perceptions just as the pretest questionnaire did, by asking the participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with various statements using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree).

The researcher measured participants' perceptions of female characters using two dimensions: *empathy with media characters* and *character attributes*. Inspired by previous research (Escalas & Stern, 2003; Hong, 2015), the participants' level of agreement with three statements will measure empathy:

- (1) I related to the situation that the central character found herself in.
- (2) I understood what the central character was feeling.
- (3) I could recognize the difficulties that the central character faced.

After running a reliability test, the first statement was removed from the model, which yielded $\alpha = .74$.

Previous research used character attributes to measure audiences' perceptions of fictional television characters (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005)—these past studies served as inspiration for measuring how audiences perceive documentary characters. Ten statements were presented in the posttest questionnaire to measure ten character attributes:

- (1) I think the central character is strong.
- (2) I think the central character is irritating.
- (3) I think the central character is sincere.
- (4) I think the central character is likable.
- (5) I think the central character is persistent.
- (6) I think the central character is successful.
- (7) I think the central character is pathetic.
- (8) I think the central character is straightforward.

(9) I think the central character is independent.

(10) I think the central character is optimistic.

The level of gender issue awareness was measured in two dimensions: the awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary and the overall awareness of society's gender equality issues in the whole society. The first dimension was measured using four questionnaire statements, and the reliability test yielded $\alpha = .74$:

(1) The film presents a situation that needs to be changed in today's society.

(2) I can see gender issues are reflected in this film.

(3) There are still some obstacles in Chinese society that prevent women from achieving independence.

(4) Patriarchal restrictions are the main cause of women's oppression.

The second dimension was measured by three statements, and the reliability test yielded $\alpha = .70$. It was inspired by the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (Barker et al., 2011) and two other studies that used surveys to measure gender equality awareness (Chen, 2017; Ifegbesan, 2010):

(1) I realize gender equality has not been achieved.

(2) I know some aspects need to be improved to ensure women have the same opportunities as men (job opportunities, education opportunities, etc.).

(3) I am willing to show support for women's equal rights and opportunities.

An open-ended question was added to the posttest questionnaire to further inquire about how audiences interpret these two female characters based on their personal identity. The researcher utilized the inductive thematic analysis and

developed a tentative list for emergent themes reflected in the participants' comments (Alhojailan, 2012). The researcher invited another individual to read and code the response based on the tentative list, in which the thematic framework was determined after the researcher read all comments. Both researchers further discussed the disagreements and finalized the thematic framework shown in Table 8 and Table 9.

Sample

This study relied on a sample population comprising student participants in the United States and China. For the American sample, in the first phase, the researcher contacted five departments at the University of Missouri to help distribute a recruitment message via each department's distribution list. The departments were Journalism, Communication, Digital Storytelling, Information Technology and Political Science. The research also used MU Info, a weekly announcement distributed to students at the University of Missouri, to reach out more student participants (Division of Information Technology, n.d.). Initially, 82 samples were collected from the University of Missouri. Due to the low participation rate, the researcher further used social media to distribute the recruitment message. In the recruitment letter, the eligibility requirement as a student was highlighted to avoid confounding factors. The final population is not limited to the central Missouri area, but also included the nationwide population.

As the research was attempting to find out whether cultural background affects audience perceptions of female characters, the researcher also partnered with three universities in Beijing: Renmin University of China, Communication University of

China, and China University of Political Science and Law, to include participants from China. Questions were translated into Chinese for the Chinese sample. As WeChat, a messaging and social media app, is a more common communication tool than email in China, those faculty members in three departments at each university helped distribute the survey link in their courses' WeChat groups. The total student number combined together in all WeChat groups was 594. The response rate for the Chinese sample was 27.9%.

All participants were asked in the posttest if they have seen their assigned documentary before taking part in this study. Those who have seen the film were excluded from the sample.

Cohen's guideline of effect size parameter says that $f^2 = 0.02$, 0.15, or 0.35 to interpret effect sizes as small, medium, or large, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Based on this guideline, the study would be able to detect a medium effect size with a sample size of 106, with a desired statistical power level of .80 (Soper, 2020). To detect a large effect size, the researcher finally collected 166 samples from Chinese participants, and 165 samples from American participants.

Chapter 4: Results

Sample Demographic

The study was distributed between February 1 to March 15, 2021 and generated 166 Chinese responses and 165 responses from American participants. As this research utilized an experimental design to test out two documentaries' treatment effect on audiences, only those who completed both pretest and posttest questionnaires were included in the study. To ensure all participants received documentary treatment before filling out the posttest questionnaire, the researcher excluded those samples where participants took fewer than 20 minutes to complete the whole experiment. All data were downloaded and imported into SPSS software for statistical analysis. A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to understand the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Participants from both countries comprised students from undergraduate programs, master's programs, and doctoral programs. The researcher only recruited student participants to avoid age as a confounding factor and ensure the age range of participants settled between 18 to 40 years old, which comprised adults of Millennials and Generation Z. In the first phase of recruiting, more females participated in the study than males. As the study is to find out how gender as a main factor influences audiences' perceptions, the researcher tried to ensure the gender distribution is equal. In the second phase of sampling, the researcher highlighted that more male participants were needed for this study in the recruitment message. Finally, the researcher ensured the gender distribution of the sample was comparable.

As shown in Table 1, participants ($N = 166$) from China were between 18 to 39 years old ($M = 25.96$, $SD = 5.60$), with females making up 48.8% of the sample and males making up 51.2%; 74.7% of them were single, 24.1% of them were married, and 1.2% of them were divorced; 86 of them viewed the documentary *Still Tomorrow* and 80 of them watched *Small Talk*. Participants from American ($N = 165$) were between 18 to 40 years old ($M = 25.87$, $SD = 5.57$). 50.9% of them were females, and 49.1% of them were males; 66.7% of them were single, 30.3% were married, 1.8% of them were divorced, and 1.2% of them were separated; participants were predominantly white (70.3%), and 4.8% identified as Black or African American, 3.6% as Hispanic or Latino, 16.4% as Native American or American Indian, 3.0% as Native Hawaiian or other pacific islander, and the rest as “other;” 80 of them watched *Still Tomorrow* and 85 of them were assigned to view *Small Talk* as treatment.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Chinese		American	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Gender				
Males	85	51.2	81	49.1
Females	81	48.8	84	50.9
Marital status				
Single	124	74.7	110	66.7
Married	40	24.1	50	30.3
Divorced	2	1.2	3	1.8
Separated	0	0	2	1.2
Race/Ethnicity				
White			116	70.3
Black or African American			8	4.8
Hispanic or Latino			6	3.6
Native American or American Indian			27	16.4
Native Hawaiian or other pacific islander			5	3.0
Other			3	1.8

Quantitative results

To address the first question *RQ1*: “Will participants’ level of gender equality awareness increase after viewing either documentary?”, the researcher used paired t-tests to measure whether participants’ levels of gender equality awareness were significantly different between pretest and posttest. As shown in Table 2, audiences’ gender equality awareness significantly increased after viewing either documentary (*Still Tomorrow*, $t(165) = 5.02, p < .001$, *Small Talk*, $t(164) = 4.00, p < .001$).

However, when the researcher used repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test out whether the increase was significantly larger for *Still Tomorrow* or *Small Talk*, the result was insignificant ($F(1, 329) = .064, p = .800$).

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Treatment Effects of Two Documentary Treatments

Still Tomorrow				Small Talk			
Pretest	Posttest	Mean change	Effect	Pretest	Posttest	Mean change	Effect
<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Cohen’s d	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Cohen’s d
6.14 (.96)	6.45 (.65)	.31 (.80)***	.39	5.94 (1.00)	6.23 (.79)	.29 (.92)***	.31

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Audience perception of female characters

In this study, the researcher proposed ten character attributes to measure how audiences perceived characters’ personalities. Overall, the female character in *Still Tomorrow*, Xiuhua Yu, was rated as stronger, more sincere, likeable, persistent, successful, straightforward, and optimistic than the character A-nu in *Small Talk*. And audience perceived A-nu as more irritating and pathetic than Yu.

In terms of *RQ2*: “Does cultural background affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?” the researcher used two-way ANOVA,

where cultural background (Chinese/American) and two documentary treatments (*Still Tomorrow/Small Talk*) are two between-subject factors. As shown in *Table 3*, Chinese audiences ($M = 5.80$) were more likely to empathize with either of the characters than American audiences ($M = 5.53$), $F(1, 329) = 8.13, p < .05, \eta^2 = .024$. For strongness, the main effect was also shown in different cultural backgrounds. Chinese audiences ($M = 6.02$) perceived female characters as stronger than Americans ($M = 5.65$), $F(1, 329) = 8.40, p < .01, \eta^2 = .025$. For persistence, Chinese audiences viewed female characters as more persistent (Chinese, $M = 5.84$, American, $M = 5.29$), $F(1, 329) = 16.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .049$. Independence was rated significantly higher by Chinese audiences (Chinese, $M = 5.75$, American, $M = 5.22$), $F(1, 329) = 16.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .048$, as well as optimism (Chinese, $M = 5.43$, American, $M = 4.80$), $F(1, 329) = 17.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .051$. However, female characters were also rated as more pathetic by Chinese audiences (Chinese, $M = 3.47$, American, $M = 2.66$), $F(1, 329) = 23.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .068$.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Audience Perception as a Function of Cultural Background and Film Narratives

	Still Tomorrow				Small Talk				Effects		
	Chinese		American		Chinese		American		Cultural background	Film Narratives	Cultural background *Film Narratives
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Empathy	5.83	.79	5.63	.91	5.77	.76	5.44	.87	.005**	.178	.467
Perceived attributes											
Strong	6.16	1.04	5.80	1.16	5.86	.84	5.51	1.36	.017*	.004**	.961
Irritating	2.13	1.04	2.19	1.01	2.26	1.12	2.55	1.34	0.165	.048*	.355
Sincere	5.80	1.02	5.85	.90	5.65	.87	5.49	1.11	.598	.018*	.334
Likeable	5.29	1.19	5.12	1.43	4.98	1.14	4.65	1.28	.076	.004**	.559

Persistent	6.01	1.07	5.44	1.45	5.66	.99	5.15	1.25	<.001***	.017*	.807
Success	5.41	1.13	5.31	1.37	3.59	.95	4.00	1.16	.213	<.001***	.048*
Pathetic	3.07	1.63	2.48	1.48	3.90	1.46	2.84	1.61	<.001***	.001**	.168
Straightforward	5.78	.10	4.66	1.72	3.59	.92	3.13	.81	<.001***	<.001***	.010*
Independent	5.80	1.00	5.21	1.39	5.69	.96	5.21	1.34	<.001***	.666	.670
Optimistic	5.67	1.08	5.18	1.47	5.17	1.21	4.45	1.54	<.001***	<.001***	.438

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

For success and straightforwardness, the main effects were qualified by the interaction of cultural background and film narratives. The female character in *Still Tomorrow* was rated as more successful by Chinese audiences (Chinese, $M = 5.41$, American, $M = 5.31$). However, the character in *Small Talk* was viewed as more successful by American audiences (Chinese, $M = 3.59$, American, $M = 4.00$), $F(1, 329) = 3.953$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .012$. Straightforwardness was rated higher by Chinese audiences in both *Still Tomorrow* and *Small Tomorrow*, $F(1, 329) = 3.95$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .012$.

These results show that Chinese audiences overall perceived the female characters more positively than American audiences, as five positive character attributes: strongness, persistence, independence, optimism, success, were rated higher by the Chinese audience. Chinese audiences were more likely to empathize with the female characters.

To address RQ3: “How gender affect audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries?” the researcher also used two-way ANOVA to test out how males and females perceive the characters differently. As shown in Table 4, the main effect was exhibited significantly in different gender in regard of character attribute strongness, as female participants ($M = 5.96$) rated female characters as stronger compared to males ($M = 5.71$), $F(1, 329) = 4.10$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .012$.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Audience Perception as a Function of Gender and Film Narratives

	Still Tomorrow				Small Talk						
	Females		Males		Females		Males		Effects		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Gender	Film Narratives	Gender*Film Narratives
Empathy	5.85	.836	5.62	.855	5.60	.842	5.60	.82	.220	.158	.210
Perceived attributes											
Strong	6.12	1.13	5.85	1.08	5.80	1.13	5.57	1.15	.044*	.015*	.906
Irritating	1.96	.90	2.36	1.11	2.47	1.39	2.36	1.09	.260	.044*	.044*
Sincere	5.96	.94	5.68	.97	5.56	.98	5.57	1.03	.208	.018*	.179
Likeable	5.25	1.33	5.17	1.28	4.54	1.33	5.06	1.05	.114	.003**	.031*
Persistent	5.80	1.35	5.67	1.24	5.41	1.24	5.39	1.08	.602	.014*	.678
Successful	5.37	1.29	5.35	1.21	3.94	1.16	3.67	.99	.263	<.001***	.318
Pathetic	2.65	1.64	2.91	1.52	3.21	1.51	3.49	1.73	.127	.001**	.958
Straightforward	5.60	1.28	4.88	1.62	3.40	.92	3.31	.88	.003**	<.001***	.018*
Independent	5.64	1.24	5.38	1.24	5.52	1.24	5.37	1.15	.127	.607	.680
Optimistic	5.52	1.29	5.34	1.33	4.46	1.48	5.13	1.31	.099	<.001***	.004**

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

For character attributes “irritating,” “likeable,” “straightforward,” and

“optimistic,” the main effects were qualified by the interaction of gender and film

narratives. Male audiences viewed the female character in *Still Tomorrow* as more

irritating ($M = 2.36$), compared to female audiences ($M = 1.96$); female audiences

perceived the main character in *Small Talk* as more irritating (Females, $M = 2.47$,

Males, $M = 2.36$), $F(1, 329) = 4.10$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .012$. In *Still Tomorrow*, the main

character was rated as more likeable by female audiences (Females, $M = 5.25$, Males,

$M = 5.17$); in *Small Talk*, the main character was more liked by male audiences

(Females, $M = 4.54$, Males, $M = 5.06$), $F(1, 329) = 4.67$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .014$.

Straightforward was rated higher by female participants in both *Still Tomorrow*

(Females, $M = 5.60$, Males, $M = 4.88$) and *Small Talk* (Females, $M = 3.40$, Males, M

= 3.31), $F(1, 329) = 5.62, p < .001, \eta^2 = .017$. The female character in *Still Tomorrow* was rated as more optimistic by female audiences (Females, $M = 5.52$, Males, $M = 5.34$); the character in *Small Talk* was viewed as more optimistic by males (Females, $M = 4.46$, Males, $M = 5.13$), $F(1, 329) = 8.31, p < .01, \eta^2 = .025$.

As shown from the results, how males or females perceived these two characters could not conclude the general pattern, as two film narratives induced different perceptions from different gender groups. But still, the results displayed some patterns: Female participants were more likely to perceive the female character in *Still Tomorrow* as positive compared to males, as the main character was rated as more likeable, more straightforward, and more optimistic by female participants. Female participants also viewed the character in *Still Tomorrow* as less irritating.

As shown in Table 3 and Table 4, *H1a* and *H1b* were rejected. Neither the interaction effect of cultural background and film narratives on empathy ($p = .467$) or the interaction effect of gender and film narratives on empathy ($p = .210$) was significant. Therefore, the two types of narratives did not induce different levels of empathy from different gender groups. Two types of narratives did not induce different levels of empathy from participants of different cultural backgrounds.

H2a indicated that audiences' higher level of empathy with female characters would be a positive predictor of evoking gender issues awareness portrayed in the documentary. A regression analysis was used to examine this hypothesis ($\beta = .36, R^2 = .13$), $F(11, 314) = 48.89, p < .001$. The data showed an association between audiences' empathy level and awareness of gender issues portrayed in the

documentary.

H3a suggested that positive evaluations of character attributes would predict higher awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary, and negative evaluations of character attributes would be a negative predictor of awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary. As shown in Table 5, perceiving the female characters as irritating had a negative association with awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary, $\beta = -.11$, $R^2 = .17$, perceiving the female characters as sincere had a positive association with awareness of gender issues shown in the documentary, $\beta = .12$, $R^2 = .17$, $F(11,314) = 6.38$, $p < .005$.

Table 5

Regression Analyses Predicting Audience Awareness on Gender Issues in Films

	Beta	R ² Change
Empathy	.36***	.13***
Perceived attributes		.17***
Strong	.08	
Irritating	-.11**	
Sincere	.12*	
Likeable	.02	
Persistent	.04	
Successful	-.02	
Pathetic	-.02	
Straightforward	.03	
Independent	.06	
Optimistic	-.03	

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

H2b suggested that audiences' higher level of empathy would be a positive predictor of gender equality awareness increase between pretest and posttest, and *H3b* suggested that positive perceptions of character attributes would predict a higher level of gender equality awareness increase between pretest and posttest. However, as shown in Table 6, both regression analyses did not yield statistically significant results

($p > .05$). Therefore, there was no correlation between participants' level of empathy and their overall gender equality awareness. The result also displayed a lack of an association between audience perceptions of character attributes and their overall gender equality awareness.

Table 6

Regression Analyses Predicting Audiences' Gender Equality Awareness Increases

	Beta	R² Change
Empathy	-.092	.008
Perceived attributes		.034
Strong	.044	
Irritating	-.002	
Sincere	-.058	
Likeable	-.047	
Persistent	.041	
Successful	.012	
Pathetic	-.001	
Straightforward	-.064	
Independent	-.005	
Optimistic	.075	

H4 suggested that female participants are more likely to evoke awareness of gender equality in response to the victim narrative. Using two-way ANOVA, the researcher found the interaction effect of gender and film narratives was significant, as female participants' awareness of gender equality increased larger in response to the victim narrative (*Still Tomorrow*, $M = .12$, *Small Talk*, $M = .29$), $F(1, 329) = 4.27$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .013$. The data was in support of *H4*. In the meantime, the researcher also found out that male participants were more likely to evoke awareness of gender equality in response to the survivor narrative (*Still Tomorrow*, $M = .31$, *Small Talk*, $M = .29$), $F(1, 329) = 4.27$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .013$.

Table 7

Means and Standard Deviations for Audiences' Gender Equality Awareness Increases as a Function of Gender and Film Narratives

	Females				Males				Effects		
	Still		Small		Still		Small				
	Tomorrow		Talk		Tomorrow		Talk		Gender	Film Narratives	Gender* Film Narratives
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Gender	Narratives	Narratives
Gender awareness	.12	.56	.29	.98	.50	.94	.28	.86	.044*	.780	.040*

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Qualitative Results

An open-ended question was added to the posttest questionnaire to further inquire about how audiences perceive these two female characters, which added to the knowledge of *RQ2*. As shown in Table 8 and Table 9, several emergent themes were reflected in the participants' comments.

Table 8

Still Tomorrow: Thematic Framework and Sample Quote

Theme	Sample quote
Character attributes	
Independent (Chinese, N=3, American, N=2)	A woman with independent spirit
	Modern independent women.
Optimistic (Chinese, N=8, American, N=3)	Her life experience did not make her lose her pursuit of love and beauty
	She's optimistic.
Brave (Chinese, N=7, American, N=3)	She's brave
	Face her own difficulties bravely
Clear mind/Independent thinking (Chinese, N=6)	I feel she is a person with independent thinking ability.
Tough (Chinese, N=4, American, N=5)	She's tough and strives for her own life.
Persistent (Chinese, N=3, American, N=4)	She's great. She keeps pursuing her own happiness.
Resistant (Chinese, N=1, American, N=1)	Her resistance to life was positive.
Reflecting the reasons that shapes her personality	
Her experiences shape her personality (Chinese, N=7, American, N=7)	Her character attribute was shaped by her experience, her literature was endowed by her talent, and her poetry was created by her talent and experience.
	Her disability did not defeat her, her unhappy marriage did not defeat her, so her thoughts were deeper than many others.

	She is stronger than most people, especially those that talks about her behind her back. As a disabled she is already facing backlash from society, so the fact that she doesn't let that stop her from trying to gain happiness is truly inspiring.
Identification with the central character	
Recognize the difficulties that the central character faced (Chinese, N=6, American, N=8)	She's been through a lot and I feel bad that her parents weren't being supportive.
Feel for the central character (Chinese, N=3)	Not being treated fairly and autonomously I feel for her. I was crying the whole time. I know she had no choice, but she shouldn't have given money to her ex-husband.
Imitation (Chinese, N=2, American, N=2)	I admired Xiuhua Yu. I find it admirable that she refuses to give in to her fate and pursues her own ideals.
Reflecting the broader social issues that caused her current situation	
Her socioeconomic background (Chinese, N=3)	An idealist who grew up in the rural area is a very sad thing.
It reflected the Chinese culture and the status quo of Chinese society (American, N=4)	I think she is an innovator in her current culture and that scares people It reflects the current situation of women in China It seems like divorce is considered a taboo thing in China and she went forward with it despite how her parents (mom especially) felt.

Table 9

Small Talk: Thematic Framework and Sample Quote

Theme	Sample quote
Character attributes	
Strong (Chinese, N=15 American, N=9)	Very strong, her experience was tragic, but she still carries on for her children.
Resilient (Chinese, N=1, American, N=4)	That she was very resilient in the face of hardships she had to reconcile with so much later on in her life.
Brave (Chinese, N=4, American, N=6)	She is brave and a great mom for doing what she thought was best for her kids and herself by getting out of that domestic violence relationship.
Reserved/Detached (Chinese, N=6, American, N=5)	She's brave but rather detached (probably due to trauma). I felt that she is holding on to a lot of emotions (anger, resentment, sadness, confusion, regret).

Independent (Chinese, N=2, American, N=2)	Independent and strong
Caring (Chinese, N=2, American, N=3)	She's reserved but she cares a lot
Reflecting the reasons that shapes her personality	
Her experiences shape her personality (Chinese, N=5, American, N=6)	She married a gambler and was abused by her husband, which is tragic. But after suffering a lot from domestic violence, she runs away with her daughter. At this time, she is brave and resolute. Her reserved personality is caused by her experience. Even though you can tell that she's still deeply affected by her past (and who wouldn't be, in her circumstances), she is resilient and strong for having made it through.
Identification with the central character	
Recognize the difficulties that the central character faced (Chinese, N=11, American, N=15)	She's been through a lot that many people haven't been through, and she's lived her life with pain She has gone through an immense amount of trauma and pain.
Feel for the central character (Chinese, N=2, American=1)	It makes me feel empathetic.
Feel sorry for the central character (American=5)	I feel sorry for the heroine
Reflecting the broader social issues that caused her current situation	
The generation she's been at (Chinese, N=4)	She is a representative of the oppressed women of that generation The generation she has been in and her background growing up in a small village make her unable to come out of the closet.
Social prejudices and oppressions against women (Chinese, N=1, American, N=4)	Social prejudices caused her unhappiness, and later the unfortunate marriage. Life is not easy, more so for women Domestic violence is terrible. It is worse in the US
Her socioeconomic background (American, N=1)	She is in powerless group.
It reflected the status quo of Chinese society (American, N=1)	Women in China have no freedom

---

The first theme was character attributes. Besides character attributes proposed by the researcher, some participants described the central character in *Still Tomorrow* as brave (Chinese, N=7, American, N=3). Six Chinese participants thought the central

character had independent thinking ability, and two audiences (Chinese, N=1, American, N=1) also perceived her as resistant, as “her resistance to life was positive.” In *Small Talk*, participants also felt the central character as a brave woman (Chinese, N=4, American, N=6). Other emergent character attributes were “reserved/detached,” “resilient,” “caring.” Several comments repeatedly mentioned that “the central character is not a very talkative person,” “I felt that she is holding on to a lot of emotions (anger, resentment, sadness, confusion, regret).”

The second theme is how audiences reflect the reasons that shape the central characters’ personalities. And it helps us understand why participants perceive characters’ personalities in such ways. The participants predominantly acknowledged that the central characters’ life experiences shape their personalities. In *Still Tomorrow*, several participants’ responses talked about Yu’s disability, unfortunate marriage and her family’s misunderstanding, and associated those experiences with her strongness and her independent thinking. As one wrote, “I think her experience and her family’s misunderstanding, her unsuccessful marriage are parts of her. But it is all these things that let her think and write out words that people empathize with.” In *Small Talk*, Anu’s tragic past was reflected in the comments, which contributed to her reserved and detached personality, but also made her strong and resilient: “Even though you can tell that she’s still deeply affected by her past (and who wouldn’t be, in her circumstances), she is resilient and strong for having made it through.” “She seems to be suffering from post-traumatic stress. It was disturbing that she seemed to lack the capability of interacting with the granddaughter in an affectionate and loving

manner.”

The third theme is identification with media characters. As proposed by Cohen (2001), one dimension of identification is that audiences understand what characters have been through. In *Still Tomorrow*, participants (Chinese, $N=6$, American, $N=8$) cited Yu's experiences, as “her parents weren't being supportive,” and she's “not being treated fairly and autonomously.” In *Small Talk*, audiences (Chinese, $N=11$, American, $N=15$) were more likely to acknowledge A-nu's pain and suffering as a domestic violence victim: “She married a gambler and was abused by her husband, which is tragic.” The other dimension is feeling joy/sadness for the characters' encountered situation, and its basis is showing understanding and empathy for the central characters (Cohen, 2001). Comments reflected empathetic feelings for both female characters: “I feel for her. I was crying the whole time.” “It makes me feel empathetic.” Another dimension reflected in the comments in *Still Tomorrow* is imitation. Wollheim (1974) distinguishes identification as an internal component, and its nature of process involves cognitive and emotional awareness (Cohen, 2001). Imitation is an external and behavioral component, and its basis is role modeling, as audiences position themselves as a learner and want to learn from the character (Wollheim, 1974; Cohen, 2001; Over & Carpenter, 2013). As one participant put it: “I want to be more like her.” Imitation will further lead audiences to express admiration (Over & Carpenter, 2013). Several audiences indicated the admiration for Yu: “I find it admirable that she refuses to give in to her fate and pursues her own ideals. ” “I admire Xiuhua Yu.”

The last theme is how participants associated characters' life experiences and situations with broader social issues. In *Still Tomorrow*, some Chinese participants ($N=3$) associated Yu's situation with her socioeconomic background, as Yu is from the underclass and rural area in China, while American audiences ($N=4$) associated Yu's struggles with her cultural background. As one put it, "it reflects the current situation of women in China." Another also wrote, "It seems like divorce is considered a taboo thing in China." In *Small Talk*, Chinese participants ($N=4$) contributed A-nu's unfortunate marriage to the generation she has been through and her socioeconomic status: "The generation she has been in and her background growing up in a small village make her unable to come out of the closet." More American participants realized that her tragic experiences were caused by social prejudices and oppression against women: "social prejudices caused her unhappiness, and later the unfortunate marriage." And domestic violence as a form of oppression could persist in every society: "Domestic violence is terrible. It is worse in the US."

Chapter 5: Discussion

The study found out there was a significant difference between pretest and posttest responses in terms of audiences' awareness of gender issues. This finding further supports the previous findings that documentary could convey social meaning and bring in social impact (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968; Corner, 2002). In line with Borum Chattoo and Feldman's research (2017), as they utilized the quantitative method and found out viewing experience elicited audiences' perceived awareness of global poverty, this study also found out that after viewing either documentary, audiences' concerns for the underlying gender issues increased.

Media Effect of Empathy with the female characters

Even though both Chinese and American audiences showed a high level of empathy with the female characters (Chinese audiences, $M=5.798$, American audiences, $M=5.533$), Chinese participants' empathy level was significantly higher than Americans. Identifying with media characters allows audiences to share the characters' experiences and perspectives, and therefore induces empathetic feelings (Erikson, 1968; Zillmann, 1994; Bachen et al., 2016). As proposed by Cohen (2001), identification with media characters is mediated by audiences' similarity with characters, which includes demographic similarity like gender or race. It could explain why Chinese participants showed higher level of empathy with the female characters. The study found out there was a positive correlation between audiences' empathy level and their awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary, in line with the previous studies' conclusions that empathizing and identifying with

media characters could increase the persuasive effects of media messages, as audiences are more likely to accept media producers' intended meaning and perceive the underlying social issues (Cohen, 2001; Fiske, 1989; Basil, 1996).

Audience perceptions of character attributes

Chinese audiences, in general, perceived the female characters more positively than American audiences, as they rated several positive character attributes in higher scores. However, one negative character attribute was also rated higher by Chinese audiences, as Chinese audiences more intensely viewed the central characters as pathetic. There was no general rule in terms of whether males or females perceived these two characters as more positively, but the results still showed some patterns. Female participants perceived the female characters more positively than males in response to the survivor narrative, as they rated Xiuhua Yu in *Still Tomorrow* as more likeable, more straightforward, more optimistic, and less irritating.

As audiences judged, evaluated, and expressed attitudes towards these characters based on their perceptions, they engaged with media characters in the affective dimension (Cohen, 2001; Lambert, 2016). As previous studies (e.g., Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968; Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017) mostly focused on audiences' attitudes and emotional engagement with a specific event or issue featured in documentaries, this study tried to determine how audiences' perceptions and engagement with characters could evoke their social awareness. Of all these ten character attributes, the researcher tested out that one positive character attribute (perceiving the character as sincere) was associated with higher level of gender issue

awareness in films, and one negative perception (irritating) was negatively associated with awareness of gender issues. It could provide some statistical supports for our previous hypothesis that audiences' positive perceptions could raise their social concerns for gender issues.

Even though the sample size of qualitative data was small, as the question was set as optional, it could provide some insights for our understanding of how audiences from different countries perceived the female characters and how they interpreted the characters' experiences and associated them with broader social issues.

Audiences recognized the difficulties that the central character faced and expressed their empathy with the characters, which are two important dimensions of identification (Cohen, 2001). However, audiences' comments still reflected distance from the characters psychologically and ideologically. For American audiences who viewed *Still Tomorrow*, they contributed Yu's struggles to her cultural background. And Chinese participants, comprised of college students in Beijing, related her struggles with her socioeconomic status, as Yu grew up in a rural area and from the underclass.

In *Still Tomorrow*, the filmmaker presented Yu's struggles as she was burdened by the social pressure and tried to pursue her happiness. According to the filmmaker's statement (POV, n.d.), the main theme of the film is to present how a woman gains personal freedom and independence and fights for her right to pursue love and happiness. It delivers a message that subverts the hegemonic values of patriarchal society. However, the participants from both countries produced negotiated readings

in which members partially accepted what the filmmaker wanted to deliver, as they recognized that the central character faced difficulties and social pressure as a woman, but they also distanced themselves from the situation presented in the film based on their social position (Hall, 1973; Roscoe et al., 1995). In *Small Talk*, several audiences produced the dominant readings based on their life experiences, as they realized that domestic violence, as a form of oppression, remained pervasive in society.

Identifying with mediated others requires audiences positing themselves as characters, and it involves a process of losing self-awareness, which leads audiences to adopt a dominant reading (Cohen, 2001; Fiske, 1989). Audiences perceiving the differences between themselves and the characters reduces the likelihood of identification, which increases the likelihood of negotiated readings or critical reading. As shown in the qualitative results, participants incorporated their social position into the viewing process. American participants contributed the central characters' difficulties to their cultural background. And Chinese participants who mainly from middle-class families and received education in Beijing also perceived the differences between themselves and the characters, as both characters grew up in rural areas and from relatively disadvantaged groups. Participants in both countries recognized the differences between themselves and the characters, and it could lead them to feel the situation portrayed in films was unrelated to their current social situation – this could partially explain why even though audiences expressed empathy with the character, their overall gender equality did not increase after the documentary treatment.

In this research, the researcher used the pretest score of participants' general understanding of gender equality issues as a baseline measurement and used gain scores (posttest-pretest) as dependent variable. There are some controversies over gain scores' reliability, as those who score lower in pretest tend to move up, and those who score higher in pretest will induce smaller changes, which results in regression toward the mean (Allison, 1990; Smolkowski, 2019). However, several researchers concluded that it's still viable to use gain scores in analysis (Allison, 1990; Huck & McLean, 1975; Yin & Brennan, 2002). Analysis of gain scores is equivalent to repeated measures ANOVA and a paired t-test (Smolkowski, 2019). The researcher used the paired t-test to address whether audiences' gender equality awareness was increased after the documentary treatment. For the purpose of consistency, the researcher used gain score as dependent variable to examine the relationship between audiences' empathy level and the increases of audiences' gender equality awareness.

This research has some practical implications. With a comparison between two characters' narratives, the study concluded that audiences overall perceived the character in the survivor narrative more positively, as Yu actively fought against the restrictions she faced in daily life and strived for her independence and happiness, which participants found "truly inspiring" and were more likely to perceive her as strong and independent. The study further tested out different gender evoked awareness of gender equality differently in responses to two kinds of film narratives.

In the open-ended question, another dimension of engagement – imitation – emerged in audiences' answers. As audiences set the central character as a role model

and expressed the intention to behave or act like her, it essentially brings audiences' engagement with media characters to a potential behavioral dimension, which is the most desirable media effect on audiences (Chan-Olmsted and Wolter, 2018).

However, due to the small sample size of qualitative data, the researcher cannot generalize that audiences are more likely to induce behavioral motivation in response to the survivor narrative. Further research could use a large sample to test the relationship between different narratives and their effects on audiences' behavioral changes.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that its sample population only came from university participants. This sample limited the insights that can be gleaned from older people or less-educated people and how they perceive gender issues. However, recruiting from university students was an efficient way to control other variables since this research only focused on cultural background and gender.

This study only showed a particular clip from one documentary to each of the participants due to the limitation of the online experimental study. The researcher chose the selected scenes because they well represented the characters' personality attributes and the social restrictions they face. Still, not showing the full storyline may influence how audiences perceive these female characters and evaluate their personality attributes.

Another limitation of the research is that, even though the quantitative method provides some statistical evidence to determine whether viewers' cultural

backgrounds affect their meaning-making process, these two documentaries could be two unique cases. Further research can be built on the conclusions herein and provide more supportive evidence on how audiences interpret documentary content within a cross-cultural context. Also, even though the research tried to use qualitative data to add to the knowledge of how audiences decoded media message based on their cultural position and personal identity, the sample size and words written in the space provided was quite limited. Further studies could include focus groups or in-depth interviews to bring in more qualitative data for analysis.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

More media companies and media scholars started to realize visual media products as a way to engage audiences and deliver social meaning (e.g., Corner, 2002; Höijer, 2004). How audiences cognitively and emotionally involve with documentary content becomes an area worth studying, as it examines the potential social impact of documentary (Fitzsimmons & Osburn, 1968; Broersma, 2019).

This study supported that gender representation in documentaries could help viewers realize the patriarchal societal values and oppression against women still persist in current society. And documentary viewing experience further evoked audiences' concerns about gender equality issues.

With scholars' perspectives moving from passive audience exposure to active audience reception, this study hoped to bring insights into how audiences emotionally and cognitively relate to the female characters. In this research design, audiences were offered opportunities to evaluate characters' attributes based on their perceptions. As this researcher tried to examine audience perceptions within a cross-cultural context, the researcher compared audience perceptions of female characters based on their cultural background. The finding suggested that Chinese audiences, in general, perceived the female characters more positively than American audiences.

Building on the theoretical concept of identification, the study found out that empathizing with media characters could increase audiences' awareness of gender issues portrayed in the documentary. The researcher further found out that positive perceptions of character attributes could predict higher awareness of gender issues

shown in the documentary, and negative perceptions of character attributes would be a negative predictor of gender issues awareness. However, only two character attributes were tested in accordance with this prediction. More supportive evidence is needed in the future on how audience engagement with media characters relates to their awareness of social issues reflected in films.

From a pragmatic perspective, the researcher hoped to provide insights for media producers and documentary filmmakers in terms of documentary character construction and documentary narratives. With a comparison between two characters' narratives, audiences tended to express positive feelings more intensely with the female character in the survivor narrative. And the survivor narrative also induced another dimension of audience engagement, as audiences expressed the intentions to imitate the media character. In the production of documentary stories, the survivor narrative has the potential to serve as an audience engagement strategy to leverage public participation in women's issues.

Areas for Further Research

Only two documentaries focusing on female characters was shown to this study's participants. More documentaries could be shown in further research and could relate to various social issues, such as racial, sexual identity, or immigrant issues.

In this experimental study, audience awareness of gender equality was measured right after the viewing treatments. The long-term effect of documentary viewing worth further exploring. The researchers suggest that the media effect of

identification is associated with the length and repetition of media exposure (Basil, 1996; Rubin & McHugh, 1987), so a documentary serial could be used in the future study on long-term effect of documentary viewing.

Other questions to explore would be how documentary filmmakers construct central characters' images and what messages and issues they want to convey. To test whether their intended meanings are in line with audiences' perceptions would add to the knowledge about documentaries' persuasive effects on audiences.

Appendix A

Pretest questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
  - A. Female
  - B. Male
  - C. Other
  - D. Prefer not to say
2. In what year were you born?
3. Are you a U.S. citizen?
4. What's your race or ethnicity?
  - A. White
  - B. Hispanic or Latino
  - C. Black or African American
  - D. Native American or American Indian
  - E. Asian

Please specify a. Chinese b. non-Chinese

  - F. Native Hawaiian or other pacific islander
  - G. Other
5. What is your marital status?
  - A. Married
  - B. Widowed
  - C. Divorced
  - D. Separated
  - E. Single
4. What is your highest degree or level of school you have ever completed?
  - A. Less than a high school diploma
  - B. High school degree or equivalent
  - C. Bachelor's degree
  - D. Master's degree
  - E. Doctorate
  - F. Other

Age

5. Do you agree with the following statements?
  - Men and women should share work-home responsibilities equally.
  - Men and women should get equal job opportunities.
  - Today's society has not achieved gender equality.
  - There are some places in the world where women do not have the same opportunities as men (job opportunities, education opportunities, etc.)

Posttest questionnaire

1. Have you seen this clip before we showed it to you?
2. Do you agree with the following statements about the clip you just watched?
  - I related to the situation that the central character found herself in.
  - I understood what the central character was feeling.

- I could recognize the difficulties that the central character faced.
  - I think the central character is strong.
  - I think the central character is irritating.
  - I think the central character is sincere.
  - I think the central character is likable.
  - I think the central character is persistent.
  - I think the central character is successful.
  - I think the central character is pathetic.
  - I think the central character is straightforward.
  - I think the central character is independent.
  - I think the central character is optimistic.
2. Do you agree with the following statements about gender equality issues?
- The film presents a situation that needs to be changed in today's society.
  - I can see gender issues are reflected in this film.
  - There are still some obstacles in Chinese society that prevent women from achieving independence.
  - Patriarchal restrictions are the main cause of women's oppression.
  - I realize gender equality has not been achieved.
  - I know some aspects need to be improved to ensure women have the same opportunities as men (job opportunities, education opportunities, etc.).
  - I'm willing to show support for women's equal rights and opportunities.

Chinese version of questionnaires

观看前问卷

1. 您的性别是？

- A. 女性
- B. 男性
- C. 其他
- D. 不愿透露

2. 您于哪一年出生？

3. 您是什么种族？

- A. 白人
- B. 西班牙裔或拉丁裔
- C. 黑人或非洲裔美国人
- D. 美洲原住民或美洲印第安人
- E. 亚裔

是否是中国入？ 是/否

F. 夏威夷原住民/其他太平洋岛屿人

G. 其他

4. 您的婚姻状况是？

A. 已婚

B. 丧偶

C. 离婚

D. 分居

E. 未婚

4. 您的学历是？

A. 高中以下

B. 高中

C. 大学本科

D. 研究生

E. 博士

F. 其他

5. 您是否赞同以下说法？

- 男女应平等地承担家庭及工作责任。
- 男女应获得平等的工作机会。
- 在现今社会，男女平等仍未被实现。
- 在世界上某些地方，女性仍未拥有与男性一样的计划（工作计划、教育机会等）。

观看后问卷

1. 在播放该电影片段之前，您是否观看过该片段？

2. 基于您刚刚所看的纪录片片段，您是否赞同以下说法？

- 我对于主角所经历的情况感同身受。
- 我能理解主角的感受。
- 我能认识到主角所面对的困难。
- 我认为主角很坚强。
- 我认为主角让人厌烦。
- 我认为主角很真诚。
- 我认为主角让人喜爱。

- 我认为主角是个坚持不懈的人。
- 我认为主角很成功。
- 我认为主角很可悲。
- 我认为主角很率直。
- 我认为主角很独立。
- 我认为主角很乐观。

3. 您是否赞同关于性别平等议题的以下说法：

- 电影展现了现今社会需要改变的一种情况。
- 我可以感受到电影反映了性别议题。
- 在当今中国社会，妇女获得自主权仍受到某些阻碍。
- 父权制度的约束是妇女压迫的主要来源。
- 我意识到性别平等还未被实现。
- 我知道某些方面仍需改进以保障女性拥有与男性一样的计划（工作计划、教育机会等）。
- 我愿意支持女性追求平等权利和计划。

Appendix B

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Chinese		American	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Gender				
Males	85	51.2	81	49.1
Females	81	48.8	84	50.9
Marital status				
Single	124	74.7	110	66.7
Married	40	24.1	50	30.3
Divorced	2	1.2	3	1.8
Separated	0	0	2	1.2
Race/Ethnicity				
White			116	70.3
Black or African American			8	4.8
Hispanic or Latino			6	3.6
Native American or American Indian			27	16.4
Native Hawaiian or other pacific islander			5	3.0
Other			3	1.8

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Treatment Effects of Two Documentary Treatments

Still Tomorrow				Small Talk			
Pretest	Posttest	Mean change	Effect	Pretest	Posttest	Mean change	Effect
<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Cohen's d	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	Cohen's d
6.14 (.96)	6.45 (.65)	.31 (.80)***	.39	5.94 (1.00)	6.23 (.79)	.29 (.92)***	.31

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Audience Perception as a Function of Cultural Background and Film Narratives

	Still Tomorrow				Small Talk				Effects		
	Chinese		American		Chinese		American		Cultural background	Film Narratives	Cultural background *Film Narratives
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Empathy	5.83	.79	5.63	.91	5.77	.76	5.44	.87	.005**	.178	.467
Perceived attributes											
Strong	6.16	1.04	5.80	1.16	5.86	.84	5.51	1.36	.017*	.004**	.961
Irritating	2.13	1.04	2.19	1.01	2.26	1.12	2.55	1.34	0.165	.048*	.355
Sincere	5.80	1.02	5.85	.90	5.65	.87	5.49	1.11	.598	.018*	.334
Likeable	5.29	1.19	5.12	1.43	4.98	1.14	4.65	1.28	.076	.004**	.559
Persistent	6.01	1.07	5.44	1.45	5.66	.99	5.15	1.25	<.001***	.017*	.807
Success	5.41	1.13	5.31	1.37	3.59	.95	4.00	1.16	.213	<.001***	.048*
Pathetic	3.07	1.63	2.48	1.48	3.90	1.46	2.84	1.61	<.001***	.001**	.168
Straightforward	5.78	.10	4.66	1.72	3.59	.92	3.13	.81	<.001***	<.001***	.010*
Independent	5.80	1.00	5.21	1.39	5.69	.96	5.21	1.34	<.001***	.666	.670
Optimistic	5.67	1.08	5.18	1.47	5.17	1.21	4.45	1.54	<.001***	<.001***	.438

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Audience Perception as a Function of Gender and Film Narratives

	Still Tomorrow				Small Talk						
	Females		Males		Females		Males		Effects		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Gender	Film Narratives	Gender*Film Narratives
Empathy	5.85	.836	5.62	.855	5.60	.842	5.60	.82	.220	.158	.210
Perceived attributes											
Strong	6.12	1.13	5.85	1.08	5.80	1.13	5.57	1.15	.044*	.015*	.906
Irritating	1.96	.90	2.36	1.11	2.47	1.39	2.36	1.09	.260	.044*	.044*
Sincere	5.96	.94	5.68	.97	5.56	.98	5.57	1.03	.208	.018*	.179
Likeable	5.25	1.33	5.17	1.28	4.54	1.33	5.06	1.05	.114	.003**	.031*
Persistent	5.80	1.35	5.67	1.24	5.41	1.24	5.39	1.08	.602	.014*	.678
Successful	5.37	1.29	5.35	1.21	3.94	1.16	3.67	.99	.263	<.001***	.318
Pathetic	2.65	1.64	2.91	1.52	3.21	1.51	3.49	1.73	.127	.001**	.958
Straightforward	5.60	1.28	4.88	1.62	3.40	.92	3.31	.88	.003**	<.001***	.018*
Independent	5.64	1.24	5.38	1.24	5.52	1.24	5.37	1.15	.127	.607	.680
Optimistic	5.52	1.29	5.34	1.33	4.46	1.48	5.13	1.31	.099	<.001***	.004**

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Table 5

Regression Analyses Predicting Audience Awareness on Gender Issues in Films

	Beta	R ² Change
Empathy	.36***	.13***
Perceived attributes		.17***
Strong	.08	
Irritating	-.11**	
Sincere	.12*	
Likeable	.02	
Persistent	.04	
Successful	-.02	
Pathetic	-.02	
Straightforward	.03	
Independent	.06	
Optimistic	-.03	

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Table 6*Regression Analyses Predicting Audiences' Gender Equality Awareness Increases*

	Beta	R² Change
Empathy	-.092	.008
Perceived attributes		.034
Strong	.044	
Irritating	-.002	
Sincere	-.058	
Likeable	-.047	
Persistent	.041	
Successful	.012	
Pathetic	-.001	
Straightforward	-.064	
Independent	-.005	
Optimistic	.075	

Table 7*Means and Standard Deviations for Audiences' Gender Equality Awareness Increases as a Function of Gender and Film Narratives*

	Females				Males						
	Still		Small		Still		Small				
	Tomorrow		Talk		Tomorrow		Talk		Effects		
											Gender*
										Film	Film
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Gender	Narratives	Narratives
Gender awareness	.12	.56	.29	.98	.50	.94	.28	.86	.044*	.780	.040*

Note. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$

Table 8*Still Tomorrow: Thematic Framework and Sample Quote*

Theme	Sample quote
Character attributes	
Independent (Chinese, N=3, American, N=2)	A woman with independent spirit Modern independent women.
Optimistic (Chinese, N=8, American, N=3)	Her life experience did not make her lose her pursuit of love and beauty She's optimistic.
Brave (Chinese, N=7, American, N=3)	She's brave Face her own difficulties bravely
Clear mind/Independent thinking (Chinese, N=6)	I feel she is a person with independent thinking ability.
Tough (Chinese, N=4, American, N=5)	She's tough and strives for her own life.
Persistent (Chinese, N=3, American, N=4)	She's great. She keeps pursuing her own happiness.
Resistant (Chinese, N=1, American, N=1)	Her resistance to life was positive.
Reflecting the reasons that shapes her personality	
Her experiences shape her personality (Chinese, N=7, American, N=7)	Her character attribute was shaped by her experience, her literature was endowed by her talent, and her poetry was created by her talent and experience. Her disability did not defeat her, her unhappy marriage did not defeat her, so her thoughts were deeper than many others. She is stronger than most people, especially those that talks about her behind her back. As a disabled she is already facing backlash from society, so the fact that she doesn't let that stop her from trying to gain happiness is truly inspiring.
Identification with the central character	
Recognize the difficulties that the central character faced (Chinese, N=6, American, N=8)	She's been through a lot and I feel bad that her parents weren't being supportive. Not being treated fairly and autonomously
Feel for the central character (Chinese, N=3)	I feel for her. I was crying the whole time. I know she had no choice, but she shouldn't have given money to her ex-husband.
Imitation (Chinese, N=2, American, N=2)	I admired Xiuhua Yu. I find it admirable that she refuses to give in to her fate and pursues her own ideals.
Reflecting the broader social issues that caused her current situation	
Her socioeconomic background (Chinese, N=3)	An idealist who grew up in the rural area is a very sad thing.
It reflected the Chinese culture and the status quo of Chinese society (American, N=4)	I think she is an innovator in her current culture and that scares people It reflects the current situation of women in China It seems like divorce is considered a taboo thing in China and she went forward with it despite how her parents (mom especially) felt.

Table 9
Small Talk: Thematic Framework and Sample Quote

Theme	Sample quote
Character attributes	
Strong (Chinese, N=15 American, N=9)	Very strong, her experience was tragic, but she still carries on for her children.
Resilient (Chinese, N=1, American, N=4)	That she was very resilient in the face of hardships she had to reconcile with so much later on in her life.
Brave (Chinese, N=4, American, N=6)	She is brave and a great mom for doing what she thought was best for her kids and herself by getting out of that domestic violence relationship.
Reserved/Detached (Chinese, N=6, American, N=5)	She's brave but rather detached (probably due to trauma). I felt that she is holding on to a lot of emotions (anger, resentment, sadness, confusion, regret).
Independent (Chinese, N=2, American, N=2)	Independent and strong
Caring (Chinese, N=2, American, N=3)	She's reserved but she cares a lot
Reflecting the reasons that shapes her personality	
Her experiences shape her personality (Chinese, N=5, American, N=6)	She married a gambler and was abused by her husband, which is tragic. But after suffering a lot from domestic violence, she runs away with her daughter. At this time, she is brave and resolute. Her reserved personality is caused by her experience. Even though you can tell that she's still deeply affected by her past (and who wouldn't be, in her circumstances), she is resilient and strong for having made it through.
Identification with the central character	
Recognize the difficulties that the central character faced (Chinese, N=11, American, N=15)	She's been through a lot that many people haven't been through, and she's lived her life with pain She has gone through an immense amount of trauma and pain.
Feel for the central character (Chinese, N=2, American=1)	It makes me feel empathetic.
Feel sorry for the central character (American=5)	I feel sorry for the heroine
Reflecting the broader social issues that caused her current situation	
The generation she's been at (Chinese, N=4)	She is a representative of the oppressed women of that generation The generation she has been in and her background growing up in a small village make her unable to come out of the closet.
Social prejudices and oppressions against women (Chinese, N=1, American, N=4)	Social prejudices caused her unhappiness, and later the unfortunate marriage. Life is not easy, more so for women Domestic violence is terrible. It is worse in the US
Her socioeconomic background (American, N=1)	She is in powerless group.
It reflected the status quo of Chinese society (American, N=1)	Women in China have no freedom

Appendix C

Research Participant Consent Form

Researcher's Name(s): Tianting Zhang

Project Number: 2043603 MU

Project Title: Audience perception of female character in Chinese documentaries

INTRODUCTION

This consent may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the investigator or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This research is being conducted for understanding whether people of different genders or cultural backgrounds perceive female characters differently. This research will further examine possible correlations between audiences' perceptions of female characters and their awareness of the gender equality issues behind documentary stories. When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participation. This form may contain words that you do not know. Please ask the researcher to explain any words or information that you do not understand.

You have the right to know what you will be asked to do so that you can decide whether or not to be in the study. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. You may refuse to be in the study and nothing will happen. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

Media companies are more aware today than ever before of the impact of visual products. Throughout the history of documentary studies, most have been concerned about the representation of reality. But a film is also a way to convey a social issue and have a social impact.

With the rise of independent Chinese documentaries, several filmmakers have focused their lenses on female characters. China ranked 106 out of 153 countries in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index, while the United States ranked 53 (World Economic Forum, 2020). The Global Gender Gap Index measures the gender gap based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In China, gender roles are largely influenced by traditional Chinese culture. Confucian ethics requires the intra-familial roles of women. It includes the beliefs that a woman belongs to a family and that her primary

roles are those of mother and wife (Wang et al., 2019). Intra-familial roles may impede women's economic participation.

The purpose of this research is to examine audience perceptions by putting them into multicultural contexts. Through documentary representation, viewers can experience characters' political or social surroundings and make sense of the documentaries' social meanings. This study aims to examine whether viewers' cultural backgrounds affect their meaning-making processes and whether different narratives affect audiences' perceptions.

This study hopes to find out the correlation between audience members' perceptions of female characters and awareness of gender issues as a way to understand how documentary viewing raises social awareness and delivers social impact. This research will also provide new insights into how different characters' narratives may induce different audience perceptions and build a foundation for further research on documentary character construction and documentary narratives.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?

You will be shown a video clip from one Chinese documentary. Before viewing, you will fill out a questionnaire collecting your demographic information. After viewing, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire that measures your perception of female characters and the level of gender issue awareness.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

One video will be shown to you, which will last about 30 minutes. Two questionnaires will take about 10 minutes to complete. The total duration will be a maximum of 45 minutes.

The study will be finished in March 2021. You can stop participating at any time without penalty.

WILL I BE COMPENSATED FOR PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY?

You will have a chance to win 1 of 10 \$15 Amazon gift cards.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF BEING IN THE STUDY?

There are no risks foreseen to the participants of the study. You can complete the survey anywhere you want. The video materials will not include violent or distressing images, but you can stop anytime you want if you do not feel comfortable watching.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your answers will remain anonymous. Please do not put your name on this survey. The results will be reported for the group of respondents as a whole.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?

Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study.

WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Please contact a researcher Tianting Zhang, a master student, at tzg3d@mail.missouri.edu or her thesis advisor, Dr. Stacey Woelfel at woelfels@missouri.edu if you have questions about the research.

WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants' rights) at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

A copy of this Informed Consent form will be given to you before you participate in the research.

Appendix D

Recruitment Letter for the Study

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Tianting Zhang. I am a student from the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. I am conducting an anonymous survey about audience perceptions of female characters in Chinese documentaries. The survey is voluntary.

You will be shown a video clip from one Chinese documentary. Before viewing, you will fill out a questionnaire collecting your demographic information. After viewing, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire that measures your perception of female characters and the level of gender issue awareness.

The survey will take about 40 minutes. Please answer the questions to your comfort level. If you are interested in participating, please click this link: https://missouri.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8qOktVupP2GPBe6

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be placed in a drawing to win 1 of 10 \$15 Amazon gift cards.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Tianting Zhang at tzg3d@mail.missouri.edu.

The results will be reported for the group of respondents as a whole. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Tianting Zhang
tzg3d@mail.missouri.edu

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