

# Effectiveness Of Contemporary American Documentary as The Media to Promote Female Empowerment

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**Abstract.** Nowadays, with the development of the women's rights movement and raised awareness of the importance of gender equality, feminist documentaries have more diversified forms of expression and more inclusive themes, focusing more on the living conditions and spiritual world of women groups. It is of great research value and significance to see how contemporary documentaries portray the image of women and reflect the current state of women's spirits and social status. The main objective of this research is to analyze how contemporary feminist documentaries convey their messages of empowering women and dissect some social issues that women are confronting. Examples of documentary types analyzed in this study include expository, observational, and biographical documentaries, and the analysis involves three aspects of documentary which are persona construction, narrative style, and audiovisual language. By comparing and contrasting the different techniques and perspectives used in different documentaries based on existing theories and case studies, it is concluded that showing the female speaker as authoritative and unbiased, as well as presenting the story from the first-person perspective, paired with an omniscient narrative style, can effectively represent the modern documentary's advocacy of women's independence and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Feminist documentary; female image; women empowerment.

## 1. Introduction

Mass media portrayals have a crucial socialization function in educating people about the categories of men and women, masculinity and femininity, and such category work also allows popular culture media to promote societal change [1]. This audio-visual form of art has a hybrid nature that makes it easier to create new storylines and formats and to invite the audience to engage with the story in a variety of ways in addition to feeling connected to it [2]. The image in the documentary is the concrete reflection of the character's personality, thought, and other abstract elements in other people's mind through the presentation of appearance, speech, behavior, and other elements, which are shown to the public through the creators' creative methods [3].

With the development of new media, women's voice has been gradually changed and increased, and women's social and family status has been gradually improved, which also promotes the awakening of women's self-awareness [3]. At present, most of the research on the image of women and their portrayal has gradually expanded from literature, TV dramas, movies, and other film works to the field of documentaries. Despite their marginalization in many worldwide cinema and television sectors, women have been able to participate in the field of documentary filmmaking at a reasonably high rate when compared to other areas of the industry [4].

In the 1970s, feminist consciousness-raising and collective action influenced early applications in international development. Women's empowerment became articulated in the 1980s and 1990s as a radical approach aimed at changing power dynamics in favor of women's rights and more equality between men and women [5]. The coupling of documentary and feminism from 1970 to the present emerged as a result of the 1960s feminist movement's encouragement of recording women's lives and female agency [2]. Feminist documentaries, which challenged the stereotype of the lonesome and disgruntled middle-class housewife, began as both an activist activity and a well-known work of art [6]. One of the fundamental goals and intentions of feminist documentary films is to highlight the patriarchal systemic oppression of women [7]. Since the 21st century, a series of documentaries focusing on female characters have emerged from scratch, and the survival and fate of women have

gradually become a social issue of concern and discussion. Researchers who study documentaries that focus on female characters or are filmed by female directors have started to emerge as well. French's study on female documentary filmmakers' role as transnational advocates shows that there are several instances of how women have successfully acted as global change agents through documentary film, advocating for important social, cultural, political, and legal reforms [4]. Some studies look into a specific perspective of documentary filming techniques. For example, from a narrative perspective, multiple narrative viewpoints were used to enhance the audiovisual components of Chinese documentaries on female characters, resulting in a more fluid and thorough narrative framework [8]. Some of the current scholars' research aimed at the study of women's consciousness in feminist documentaries at a content level. For example, Yuan's research on female consciousness in Chinese female documentaries pointed out that there were problems such as the lack of theory and the loss of creativity in feminist documentaries in China and argued that women's documentaries and women's consciousness complement each other, influence each other, and promote each other [9].

The creation of the image of women in documentaries has gradually gained importance and maturity, resulting in the academic research on the portrayal of the image of women in documentaries has gradually become more popular. However, not much research has been done on the techniques of contemporary feminist documentaries at a comparative level. In particular, in what ways character construction, narrative style, and shooting techniques can best express the intention of some feminist documentaries that have an international influence are not well studied. Considering both facts that documentary is a powerful medium to raise societal change and the concept of women's empowerment is expressed in all areas of arts, it is therefore a meaningful act to analyze how feminist documentaries can serve as a new means to promote women empowerment. Hence, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of contemporary American feminist documentaries in advocating women's empowerment and raising people's the awareness of current identity crisis that women are going through. Specifically, this study will look into three aspects of documentary filming: persona construction, narrative style, and audiovisual language. The innovative application path of narrative perspective in the process of female character documentary creation will be explored by comparing and analyzing the application of different techniques and perspectives in different feminist documentaries.

## 2. Persona Analysis

A persona is a specific perspective an author takes when creating literary works. In this study, first persona analysis and second persona analysis are utilized to investigate how contemporary feminist documentaries establish their credibility and enact a persuasive force towards their target audience, therefore gaining insights into the effectiveness of those documentaries in promoting the message of female empowerment.

### 2.1. First Persona Analysis

In the field of documentary filming, first persona analysis explores the presentation of first-person pronouns such as "I" "we" and "me", as well as the effects of the way the implied "I" is constructed [10]. The different representations of the first persona, like authoritative, credible, feminine, and rational, show various levels of effectiveness in transmitting directors' intentions. Instead of simply filming the daily lives of women under the oppression of a patriarchal society, some of the approaches that contemporary filmmakers take are autobiographical projects, historical reworking, or lecture recordings [7]. To achieve the purpose of educating people, many documentaries adopted a way to present the narrators as authorities and experts in the field. When taking a "top-down" approach to presenting information, the audience is more prone to be convinced of what the authorities said about a certain phenomenon, thereby having a better effect of conveying a transformative message or spirit. One typical example can be the 2011 documentary "Miss Representation". This interview-led

documentary invited leaders of social feminism organizations, female actresses, and to discuss how the mainstream media contributes to the underrepresentation of women in positions of influence by spreading limited and often demeaning images of women.

Among all the categories of documentaries, those in lecture format display a good adoption of characteristics of a credible and persuasive first persona construction. In a 2022 documentary called "Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power", Nina Menkes, the director and lecturer, explored the persistent sexist portrayal of young women as objects of desire in Hollywood, as well as the industry's obsession with the female body. While Menkes relied heavily on video footage of past Hollywood movies to persuade her viewers, she also shared her struggles working as a female director in the industry. The video's lecture style itself also played a part in creating the distant, intellectual persona of the piece. These traits all contribute to an effective appeal to the public about the crisis females are facing in the film industry, which makes this documentary a good example of a relatively successful construction of the first persona.

The construction of a first persona that tries to combine aspects of the stereotypical masculine and feminine styles of rhetoric, shows the intention of filmmakers to present the narrators as credible make people take their opinions seriously and meet the challenging rhetorical situation of persuading and raising the consciousness of people about a certain crisis that women are facing in the present society.

## 2.2. Second Persona

The second persona analysis explores who the text invites the viewers to be, such as passive spectators and active respondents [10]. This section will discuss how contemporary documentaries present the implied "you" or second persona of the video to serve as an inspiration for the audience. A voice-over narration style is frequently seen in documentaries that intend to provide context to scenes or give the audience additional information about a sequence. In many contemporary feminist documentaries that apply this strategy, the narration "asks" the audience to approach the particular incident or phenomenon about women's circumstances with the narrator's critical and academic mindset, therefore achieving the effect of making the audience believe in the urgent necessity of fighting for women's rights and empowerment. One specific approach the narrators often take is to use pronouns like "we" and "us" to create a sense of inclusivity among the narrator and the audience. In this case, the audience, regardless of gender, is addressed to be a part of the analysis, thus fostering them to share a common sense toward the issues the narrator is discussing. Additionally, a voice-over narration often adopts a matter-of-fact tone. The narrator would offer an explicitly feminist message that invites the audience to take this ideology for granted by combining overtly ideological claims with a matter of fact, low-key delivery [10]. This strategy often occurs when the narrator tries to call on the audience to change their mind and become outspoken activists in improving women's plight by using phrases like "of course", "we must", and "we have to". This would effectively invite the audience to simply accept what the narrator is saying even when the narrator is expressing a relatively controversial statement.

In the documentary "Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Video", the male narrator Sut Jhally presented highly sexualized images of women in music videos accompanied by music and his narration, which provides an analytical framework for stories about female sexuality and their potential impact on the relationships between male and female in contemporary society. Jhally constructed the second persona in an interesting way that he gave the audience the ideology of a man who understands the power dynamics and enjoyment of watching pictures of women in music videos by encouraging the audience to identify with the narrator as the perfect male viewer. Combined with his sense of humor and sarcasm in discussing how women were portrayed under the male gaze severely, he invited the male audience to share his disdainful attitude toward objectifying women, thus achieving the purpose of advocating for female rights in the media industry as well as in the general society.

The need to empower its audience, which comprised mostly of women with such poor self-images that it is difficult to enable these women to establish a feminist awareness and bond of sisterhood, was a major difficulty encountered by the women's liberation movement of the 1970s [11]. Therefore, in contemporary documentary filming, a voice-over narration could be an effective solution to improve the way the target audience is invited to become empowered and capable of revolutionizing things.

### **3. Narrative Style**

Narrative perspective implies not only the question of the way the narrator talks about events and characters but also the question of how the viewer experiences, judges, and interprets them [12]. The first consideration a documentary filmmaker has is how to convey the narrative they have chosen: from what angle, how to shoot, and how to tell it. The choice of narrative viewpoint is an unavoidable issue for filmmakers hoping to depict certain events through the lens. Narrative perspective selection can play an important role in the expression of the theme of the feminist documentary, and the different narrative perspectives chosen by the creators in the shooting will be extended to the narrative structure of the documentary, to play a unique effect in the female image presentation.

#### **3.1. Omniscient Perspective**

Most documentary filmmakers choose to detach themselves from the recording subject and record the development of the story from a completely objective perspective [13].

A documentary is a type of film where the real world serves as the inspiration, actual people and events are the subjects of creative interpretation, and reality is presented as the central idea, stimulating viewers' thoughts in the process. Therefore, authenticity is at the center of a documentary. Zero-focus narrative is an omniscient perspective model, which refers to the adoption of a dispassionate and objective God's perspective to storytelling, where the narrator is hidden from the story and adopts an unfixed narrative perspective. Compared to expository feminist documentaries that use voice-over narration, observational feminist documentaries forego voice-over narration and other typical tactics in favor of observing and treating its topic in a more open-ended and ambiguous manner and are often recognized to allow more freedom of interpretation for the viewers [14]. This is accomplished by the use of the omniscient perspective of narration. The narrator's understanding of the event only comes from the information under the limited visual threshold through the lens, and the audience is unable to grasp the inner psychology of the characters within the camera's visual threshold or get an explanation of the subject's psychological motivation in the key events. Such a perspective will arouse the audience's curiosity about the subject and its behavioral motives, and fully mobilize the audience's expectant vision to interpret the text [8].

One example can be the 2018 observational documentary "RBG". It chose to use the zero-focus narrative to focus on the life and career of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the second female Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. The director placed the camera among the audience when following Ginsburg's appearances, listening to the exchanges and dialogues between the questioners and her in the capacity of an ordinary audience member, and recording her most realistic state in the face of the public's questions without any embellishments. To conclude, by adopting the strategy of omniscient perspective of narration, the meaning of feminism becomes open and polysemantic, further inspiring the audience to develop their conception of female empowerment.

#### **3.2. First-Person Narrative Perspective**

In feminist documentaries, the use of first-person narrative can get closer to the psychological activities of the main characters and attract the audience to the story using the characters' consciousness and perception. By showing the actual feelings of the characters' emotions, these documentaries bring the audience closer to the distance between the characters. Most internal-focus documentaries on women are told in the first person by the directors, who are themselves the main

characters and lead the story. Female autobiographical documentary as one of the mainstream documentary categories often performs good practices of first-person narrative perspective. Autobiography can be used as a method of inquiry that provides the director as well as the heroine a unique way to view one's past stories in a new light, to apply this understanding as a practical means of self-growth and change, and to enlighten and set a role model for people who share similar experience [7].

The 2020 documentary "Becoming" is an autobiography of the former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama. In terms of narrative perspective, the documentary abandons the voice-over narration, and through the inward-focused narration and self-representation, it gets close to the real feelings of Michelle Obama. At the same time, it combines the memories and interviews of the friends around Michelle Obama and the group workshops she had with ordinary females to introduce the "first-person" perspectives of different subjects into the video from the identities of multiple narrators, and these supplementary details intertwine and collide with each other to form a complete narrative chain, which builds up the sides of the characters from the different perspectives of the protagonist.

The first-person narrative perspective enhances the effect of the autobiography on the entire society by making the audience view events through the eyes of the heroine, thus developing a sense of identification. Overall, the in-focus perspective of narration, which requires sensitivity and emotional expressions, is an excellent way for female directors to showcase themselves and fully embody the authenticity of documentaries.

## 4. Audiovisual Language

As a fundamental creative element in character development, audiovisual language in documentaries provides information to the audience through the appropriate arrangement of pictures and sound, evokes emotion, transmits ideas, and then builds distinct and three-dimensional character representations [3]. In contrast to the traditional language form carried by words and narrations, audiovisual language is a figurative display of pictures and images expressed by abstract words. As a result, audiovisual language in feminist documentaries is more intuitive, three-dimensional, and rich in characterization, and it also gives the documentaries more aesthetic significance and function.

### 4.1. Visual Language

It is one of the most critical goals of feminist documentary filmmakers to strive for creative creation and characterization, imbuing women's images with the aesthetic connotations of modern society through visual language and imbuing the images and people with ideological qualities. Different uses of filmmaking shots have various effects on the construction of characters. The long shot, as the most commonly used form of footage in documentaries, can show the storyline in a real and complete way. Many female autobiographical documentaries use long shots to show the entire process or a segment of life to show the heroine in their natural conditions. Scenery shot refers to having no characters appear in the lens. Although it is the portrayal and description of the scenery, the development of the story has a very good role in promoting the development of the documentary, the empty lens on the characters' emotions, rendering the environmental atmosphere has an irreplaceable role.

Besides those two types of shots, close-up shot is even more important and effective in character construction. Close-ups are typically utilized to show a character's face and convey their feelings. They are also frequently employed to depict certain actions, such as a hand grasping a knife [3]. The new documentary movement took the focus away from the grand narrative model and began to focus on the individual. The meticulous and sensitive inner workings of the director and the female heroine, expressed in close-ups, make the documentaries gentler and more refreshing, which is memorable for the audience. In the documentary "Becoming", when filming Michelle Obama's meetings and interviews with ordinary young women, the director often pulled the camera in close to capture her facial expressions and movements, thereby highlighting the affinity infectious look, and natural

emotion of this role model of the times as she interacts with ordinary people. By using a series of close-up shots in the feminist documentary, the image of a strong female who is brave and confident, who adheres to her dream, who dares to speak out for women, and who is not content with the current situation, can become incredibly vivid. Therefore, close-up shot is an important visual art element of the visual language to shape the character image, but also to strengthen the external characteristics of the female image as well as the inner psychology, and thus increase the ideological function and aesthetic value of the documentary, so that the image of the female role models in the documentary are more expressive and infectious.

#### 4.2. Audio Language

Visual elements can't exist without the audio elements, and the two complements intertwine to complete the documentary's presentation. In the creative production of feminist documentary artists, sound and picture should be naturally merged and harmoniously incorporated into the work to create rich contagious documentary works [3]. In the making of documentaries related to specific female figures, the function of sound as one of the crucial factors in molding the image of women in modern society shouldn't be overstated.

There are mainly two types of audio elements in filmmaking, which are synchronous sound and music. Synchronous sound includes not only the human voice during the shooting but also the sound of the character's action and the background sound. It records the most real emotional state, action characteristics, language dialogue, and on-site spatial environment sound of female figures in different life situations, and thus shapes the most real and three-dimensional image of women with multiple identities and close to the characteristics of females' lives in different situations [3].

The music can be divided into music with a sound source and music without a sound source. Music with sound sources is also known as objective music, and as a real form of musical expression in humanistic documentaries, it also has aesthetic characteristics while being realistic [13]. Silent source music, also known as subjective music, is a music art form with a high rate of use in the music creation of humanistic documentaries. Though not real, the soundless source music is infinitely close to the real and has an important artistic effect in stimulating the audience's emotional resonance with the new-age women in humanistic documentaries [8]. "Miss Americana" is a 2020 documentary film that follows singer and songwriter Taylor Swift and her life over several years of her career. There are parts in this documentary that record the entire process of Taylor Swift's journey from getting inspiration to songwriting, where the raw music conveys the authenticity of the story, which is an essential element of documentary filmmaking, while at the same time allowing the viewer to feel as if they are participating Taylor's song creating process. The clips that do not utilize the original soundtracks use Taylor's songs, downtuned to fit the mood of the situation, such as sadness and stress. Through the sense of rhythm and atmosphere conveyed by the music, the image of the female is emphasized, and the emotional changes and behavioral characteristics are displayed, so that the piece can have an aesthetic expression of art and character construction at the same time, which enhances the overall aesthetic connotation of feminist documentaries.

#### 5. Conclusions

This study focuses on analyzing the narrative techniques and filming techniques used by contemporary feminist documentaries in expressing women's empowerment. With the development and progress of the times, society has become more inclusive, and the status of women has been enhanced. Specifically, at the persona level, portraying the female speaker as authoritative and neutral, as well as inviting the audience to become empathetic will effectively convey the modern documentary's promotion of women's independence and empowerment. In terms of narrative style and audio-visual language, the best approach is to present different aspects of a female image while presenting the story from the first point of view to show authenticity. The selection and presentation of multiple narrative perspectives can take many different forms, and how to select and design the

application of perspectives is a challenge for filmmakers. Modern directors have stepped out of the stereotypical image of traditional women in the creation of contemporary documentaries and vividly displayed the different emotional changes within different women, making the image of modern females more diversified. In addition, more narrative techniques and audio-visual ideograms that are different from those of previous documentaries have been discovered, which have also greatly enriched the form and connotation of documentaries with female images as the central theme. By adopting different filming means and creative methods, feminist documentary filmmakers shape the image of women that meet the audience's aesthetic standards, trigger the audience's emotional resonance, and have the connotation of women's spirit in modern society, which will, in turn, highlight the social significance of the feminist documentaries in advocating female empowerment.

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