

A Study of the Organizing Process of the Thai Independent Documentary Film Festival

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Abstract

This creative research project examined strategies for developing and presenting Thai independent documentary films to Generation Z audiences (born 2000–2010) through the design and execution of a film festival, “Have You Seen Documentary Film Festival” (HYSDF), held at Cinema Oasis in Bangkok between December 2025 and April 2026. Grounded in the concept of a transmedia exhibition, the researchers curated four Thai independent documentaries—Somboon (2014), School Town King (2020), Boundary (2013), and Scala (2022)—under the unifying theme “Scenes of Silences,” and designed a set of interactive activities, including an exhibition board, a community whiteboard, a zine-making workshop, and two panel discussions, intended to transform attendees from passive viewers into active participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with festival attendees and a structured questionnaire completed by 73 respondents. Findings indicate that the festival attracted a substantial proportion of first-time viewers of Thai independent documentaries (26 of 73 respondents) and generated consistently high satisfaction across all festival components ($M = 4.67\text{--}4.89$ on a five-point scale). Attendees reported markedly more positive attitudes toward Thai independent documentary film following the festival, particularly regarding its perceived social value. Instagram and word-of-mouth communication emerged as the most influential channels shaping audience awareness. However, the study also identified a substantial gap between advance seat reservations and actual attendance (50 percent), pointing to the need for stronger commitment mechanisms in future festival design. Overall, the findings suggest that integrating conventional screening formats with participatory, transmedia-based experience design constitutes a viable strategy for expanding the reach of Thai independent documentary film among Generation Z audiences and for advancing the broader visibility of the genre within Thai society.

Keywords: Thai independent documentary film, film festival, Generation Z, transmedia exhibition, audience engagement

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Introduction

The film industry constitutes a multidimensional creative system that reflects a society's economic structures, cultural values, and social dynamics. Within this system, a persistent divide exists between mainstream commercial cinema and independent film production. Independent, or “off-mainstream,” films typically embody the director's personal ideology and are oriented toward a niche audience, occupying a particularly distinct position within the broader category of documentary film. Documentaries possess a unique capacity to record truth and reflect social issues; however, within the Thai film landscape, they remain frequently overlooked and continue to face limited distribution opportunities (Louiyapong, 2023).

This challenge is compounded by structural problems within the Thai film industry, including a quasi-monopoly in the cinema exhibition business that produces a distribution “bottleneck” for smaller and independent productions (Sukkhapisit & Plitpholkarnpim, 2016). As a consequence, independent documentary filmmakers in Thailand often depend on alternative screening spaces or must first seek recognition through international film festivals as a precondition for establishing legitimacy and visibility within Thai society (Suksawat, 2016).

In light of these structural limitations, the present researchers identify the film festival as a strategic communication tool—one capable of providing not only a promotional platform but also a physical and symbolic space for visibility and interaction between filmmakers and audiences (Chotirosseranee, 2002). This recognition informed the development of a practice-based research project: the design and execution of a Thai independent documentary film festival intended to reach a “new generation” of viewers and to contribute to the long-term sustainability and value of the Thai documentary film industry.

This paper reports on the conceptual rationale, implementation process, and outcomes of that project—“Have You Seen Documentary Film Festival” (HYSDF)—conducted between December 2025 and April 2026. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the conceptual literature underpinning the project. Sections 3 and 4 present the research objectives and scope of the study. Section 5 outlines the research methodology. Section 6 details the festival's design and implementation. Section 7 presents the qualitative and quantitative findings. Sections 8 through 10 discuss the study's implications, limitations, and conclusions.

Literature Review

Independent and Documentary Film in the Thai Context

Independent films, or “off-mainstream” works, are produced outside the commercial mainstream system and are typically free from the ideological and commercial constraints that shape studio productions. Such works are often self-funded and are used to communicate ideologies or to reflect social issues that are otherwise obscured—including the experiences of marginalized groups, gender minorities, and ethnic communities—aimed primarily at a niche audience that shares the filmmaker's interests and concerns (Suksawat, 2016).

Documentary film, meanwhile, is grounded in factual representation while employing cinematic techniques to construct emotional engagement and social awareness through the filmmaker's interpretive lens. As Grierson (1933), regarded as the father of the documentary tradition, famously defined it, a documentary constitutes the “creative treatment of actuality”—

not a neutral recording of events but a deliberate interpretation and arrangement of material guided by artistic and social intent. This dual character of documentary truth, encompassing both objective fact and subjective interpretation, positions the central creative challenge for documentary filmmakers as one of balancing factual accuracy with meaningful, affecting communication.

Beyond its artistic function, documentary film also performs an important social role. Renov (1993) identifies four defining functions of documentary: to record, to persuade, to express, and to enlighten. Through these functions, documentary film operates as a medium capable of translating complex structural and social problems into narratives that are accessible and relatable to everyday audiences.

Synthesizing these perspectives, this study defines “Thai independent documentary film” as cinematic work produced outside Thailand’s mainstream commercial system that applies Grierson’s (1933) “creative treatment of actuality” to interpret and present social realities, with the aim of conveying ideologies, perspectives, or social issues frequently neglected or obscured within Thai society. Freed from commercial obligations, such works retain the creative latitude to record truth, to persuade, and to enlighten—ultimately encouraging critical reflection, interrogating existing social structures, and fostering genuine cultural exchange.

Generation Z and Documentary Film Consumption

Generation Z—broadly defined as individuals born between 2000 and 2010—represents a demographic cohort that has come of age within a fully digital media environment and is correspondingly characterized by rapid technological adaptation and extensive time spent in online spaces. Their media consumption patterns differ markedly from those of preceding generations, particularly in their preference for two-way communication and their inclination to document and share personal experiences through social media platforms such as Instagram. With respect to consumption decision-making, Generation Z audiences tend to conduct extensive independent research and comparison prior to engagement, with word-of-mouth recommendations, peer endorsement, and influencer credibility exerting substantial influence over their choices (Techapongsatorn, 2025).

With specific reference to off-mainstream and independent film consumption, Baikhloy (2002) identifies three primary motivational factors shaping audience decision-making: receiver factors, referring to a viewer’s personal interest in independent film; film factors, referring to the content of the film and the individuals associated with its production; and interpersonal factors, referring to reviews and recommendations received from others. These motivational categories informed the present study’s approach to audience segmentation and engagement design.

Special Event Organization and Transmedia Exhibition Design

A “special event” is understood within the marketing communication and public relations literature as a purposefully constructed occasion designed to build audience awareness and cultivate a favorable public image for a brand, organization, or cause. Chotirosseranee (2002) outlines a ten-stage process for organizing a special event, encompassing (1) objective-setting, (2) target audience definition, (3) budgeting, (4) event-type selection, (5) determination of date, time, and venue, (6) team formation, (7) advance publicity, (8) attendee invitation, (9) team

rehearsal, and (10) post-event monitoring and evaluation. This framework provided the operational scaffold for the present project's execution.

Complementing this operational framework, the concept of a transmedia exhibition offers a design logic for translating a unifying narrative across multiple communicative platforms and physical spaces. Tharchindawong (2022) describes transmedia exhibition design as requiring systematic narrative planning that spans the selection of exhibits and media, the design of interactive activities, and the arrangement of physical display space, such that all components cohere within a single “narrative universe” (p. 58). This integrated approach enhances the distinctiveness and perceived value of the exhibition experience while facilitating dialogue both between the audience and the exhibited content and among audience members themselves.

Taken together, these three bodies of literature—on the characteristics of Thai independent documentary film, on Generation Z media behavior, and on special event and transmedia exhibition design—informed the conceptual framework guiding the present study. The researchers hypothesized that combining curated, socially engaged documentary content with a transmedia-based, participatory event structure would be more effective in engaging Generation Z audiences than conventional, screening-only festival formats, and would more successfully convert passive viewers into active participants and advocates for the genre.

Research Objectives

This study pursued two primary objectives: (1) to explore guidelines for developing and presenting Thai independent documentary films in ways that more effectively reach the new generation of viewers; and (2) to raise awareness of, and promote the value of, Thai independent documentary films among the new generation through the design and execution of a film festival.

Scope of the Study

Content Scope

The study focuses on raising awareness of, and promoting the value of, Thai independent documentary films through the organization of a film festival. This directly supports the realization of the films' social and artistic value and provides a platform for experts to exchange concepts and perspectives, with the aim of establishing guidelines for developing the Thai independent documentary film industry and enabling the new generation to genuinely recognize and access the value of these works.

Time Scope

The total duration of the study was five months, from December 2025 to April 2026.

Target Audience Scope

The study targeted the Generation Z population, including high school students, university students, and early-career adults born between 2000 and 2010.

Methodology

This practice-based research project employed a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore strategies for promoting Thai independent documentary film among Generation Z audiences. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with festival attendees and through systematic documentation of the project's operational and discussion processes. Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered to festival attendees following the screenings. This mixed-methods approach allowed the researchers to triangulate attendees' subjective experiences and attitude shifts against descriptive statistical patterns observed across the broader attendee population.

The research and production process was organized into four sequential stages.

Stage 1: Preparation and Planning

This stage involved collecting background data and theoretical literature, studying target audience behavior, selecting documentary films and defining the festival's core thematic concept, coordinating with venue partners and sponsors, and designing the attendee experience and on-site activities.

Stage 2: Public Relations and Visual Identity Design

This stage involved designing the project's visual identity and strategically planning and executing public relations activities across both online and offline communication channels.

Stage 3: Festival Execution

This stage involved preparing and decorating the festival venue, screening the curated films and facilitating associated activities, and systematically collecting attendee feedback.

Stage 4: Conclusion and Discussion

In this final stage, data collected across all operational phases were synthesized and analyzed to generate the study's findings and recommendations.

Festival Design and Implementation

Naming, Thematic Concept, and Film Curation

Thai independent documentary films play a crucial role in presenting social issues that are often neglected, comparable to "silences" that Thai society has rarely acknowledged. The researchers adopted this concept as the provocation underlying the festival's name, "Have You Seen Documentary Film Festival," and expanded it into the festival's central theme, "Scenes of Silences," communicating that Thai independent documentaries constitute a space that accommodates hidden truths and unresolved social problems. This theme served as the organizing axis for all event components. In the curation process, the researchers selected four documentary films—Somboon (2014), School Town King (2020), Boundary (2013), and Scala (2022)—to represent different dimensions of "silence" in a comprehensive and diverse manner, and designed interactive activities intended to transform the festival space into an amplifier through which neglected social issues could resonate back into broader public awareness.

Venue Selection

The researchers treated venue selection as a critical variable in constructing a shared audience experience rather than a matter of physical convenience alone. Vision alignment was prioritized above atmosphere and accessibility. A comparative analysis of three candidate venues—Galileoasis, Bangkok Kunsthalle, and Cinema Oasis—was conducted across the dimensions of transportation access, budget, and space management. Cinema Oasis was ultimately selected as the most suitable venue owing to its established commitment to supporting marginalized independent films, which aligned closely with the festival’s objective of amplifying “silences.” Cinema Oasis also offered logistical advantages, including walking-distance access from the BTS Phrom Phong station and physical infrastructure combining a standard cinema with a multipurpose hall, enabling a cohesive transmedia experience for attendees.

Interactive Activity Design

Activity and experience design was organized around the concept of a transmedia exhibition, structured to construct a “user journey” derived from the researchers’ own experience of moving from passive viewers of Thai independent documentary to active researchers and, ultimately, advocates for the genre. Five interactive activities were distributed throughout the venue to shift attendees from passive recipients to active participants.

“Have You Scene” Exhibition Board

An information display styled as a detective board, transforming academic data on the Thai documentary film circle—definitions, values, awards, and current screening spaces—into investigative “clues” that stimulated curiosity and invited attendees to piece together the narrative themselves.

“Have You Screen” Community Board

A large whiteboard, symbolizing an empty cinema screen, on which attendees wrote short reflections or named their own “life documentaries,” reinforcing the idea that every individual life holds value and narrative worth.

“Have You Zine” Activity

A handmade booklet-making activity in which attendees, using provided art supplies, interpreted prompts connected to the four curated films, producing personalized souvenirs that shifted their role from passive audience to active “truth recorder.”

“Curious Talk” Panel Discussion

Held under the topic “The Art of Meddling in Others’ Business to Change the World,” this session brought directors and film subjects together to discuss behind-the-scenes experiences and the continuing real-world impact of the featured social issues.

“Different Perspectives Session”

An open-space discussion for personnel from within and outside the documentary film industry, intended to foster cross-disciplinary dialogue and generate ideas for advancing the Thai documentary film industry.

Visual Identity and Public Relations Strategy

The project’s visual identity adopted mixed media as its primary art direction, reflecting the “Scenes of Silences” theme through the overlapping and juxtaposition of diverse materials, textures, and visual elements—symbolically paralleling the festival’s goal of integrating disparate social issues into a cohesive whole. For public relations, the researchers applied transmedia storytelling as the organizing communication strategy, treating each public relations output not merely as promotional material but as a substantive component of the festival’s core message. Content strategy across all channels centered on questioning and articulating the value of Thai independent documentary film, laying a foundation of understanding and stimulating dialogue with the target audience prior to the festival itself. To extend this storytelling beyond the event, the researchers additionally produced a short behind-the-scenes documentary film, intended to archive the project and sustain audience engagement after the physical festival concluded.

Results

Qualitative Findings From In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with randomly selected attendees representing the target audience, focused on their awareness, interests, satisfaction, and shifting attitudes toward Thai independent documentary film. Analysis revealed that attendees learned about the festival through three primary channels: direct communication from the researchers, the project’s public relations channels, and—notably—networks of industry experts who assisted in promoting the event. Regarding motivations for attendance, respondents fell into two groups: those with prior experience watching Thai independent documentaries, who were motivated to compare the festival’s content against their existing perceptions of the genre; and those without prior experience, who were motivated by openness to new experiences and specific interest in the curated films.

Attendees generally expressed positive feedback regarding the film screenings and the panel discussion activities, reporting that these components lowered barriers to access and facilitated greater openness toward Thai independent documentary film. Evaluating post-attendance outcomes, the group without prior viewing experience demonstrated a significantly more positive shift in attitude toward the genre. Attendees with prior viewing experience, meanwhile, reported that while the activities may not have substantially expanded their existing knowledge of documentary film, they nonetheless provided a meaningful stimulus encouraging renewed and more frequent engagement with the genre.

Quantitative Findings From the Attendee Questionnaire

Following the festival, questionnaire data were collected from 73 attendees. Descriptive results are presented in Tables 1 through 6.

Table 1*Number of Respondents by Age Group*

Age	Number of Respondents (n)
Under 18 years	2
19–22 years	43
23–30 years	15
Over 30 years	13

The majority of respondents fell within the 19–22-year age range, corresponding directly to the festival’s intended target demographic and reflecting the effectiveness of the public relations strategy in reaching this audience segment.

Table 2*Number of Respondents With Prior Experience Watching Documentary Films*

Prior viewing experience	Number of Respondents (n)
Yes	47
No	26

Although the majority of attendees (n = 47) had prior experience watching Thai independent documentaries, the festival also attracted a substantial group of 26 first-time viewers, indicating initial success in expanding the audience base beyond the existing documentary-viewing community.

Table 3*Number of Respondents by Channel of Festival Awareness*

Channel	Number of Respondents (n)
Instagram	50
From acquaintances	48
Word-of-mouth recommendation	23
Facebook	10
TikTok	8
Other	2

Instagram remained the primary communication channel with the greatest influence among Generation Z respondents. Word-of-mouth communication from acquaintances demonstrated a comparably strong influence, underscoring the continued importance of interpersonal recommendation identified by Baikhloy (2002) in audience decision-making.

Table 4*Number of Respondents Expressing Interest in Festival Activities*

Activity	Number of Respondents (n)
Documentary film screenings	66
“Curious Talk” panel discussion	27
“Different Perspectives Session”	11
“Have You Scene” exhibition board	7
“Have You Zine” activity	14
“Have You Screen” activity	15

Beyond the film screenings themselves, attendees expressed considerable interest in the panel discussion activities. The researchers attribute this to the strategy of scheduling the discussion immediately following each screening, while inviting directors and film subjects to converse directly—a sequencing that appears to have sustained audience interest and emotional continuity.

Table 5*Mean and Standard Deviation of Satisfaction With Festival Activities*

Activity	M	SD
Documentary film screenings	4.89	0.35
“Curious Talk” panel discussion	4.72	0.51
“Different Perspectives Session”	4.67	0.62
“Have You Scene” exhibition board	4.72	0.52
“Have You Zine” activity	4.72	0.57
“Have You Screen” activity	4.78	0.47

Overall satisfaction with the festival—encompassing both the film screenings and the interactive activities—was rated at the highest level across all components. This finding directly supports the study’s first objective, suggesting that expanding access to Thai independent documentary film among Generation Z requires more than conventional screening formats alone, and instead benefits from transmedia-based experience design that shifts audiences from passive recipients to active participants.

Table 6*Mean and Standard Deviation of Attitudes and Perceptions Following Festival Attendance*

Post-festival attitude statement	M	SD
Increased familiarity with documentary films	4.75	0.52
Increased interest in documentary films	4.71	0.63
Enhanced recognition of documentary films' importance to the film industry	4.78	0.42
Enhanced recognition of documentary films' importance to society	4.81	0.46
Increased intention to recommend documentary films to others	4.79	0.47

Attitudes and perceptions following participation concretely fulfilled the study's second objective: attendees reported the most positive shifts at the highest level across all measured dimensions. Notably, the highest-rated item concerned attendees' recognition of documentary film's importance to society, reflecting the effectiveness of the festival as a space for disseminating the films' core social messages to a broader public.

Notable Operational Observations

Seat Reservation and Attendance Behavior

Although all screening rounds achieved fully booked advance reservations (192 seats in total), on-site data collection revealed that only 96 individuals (50 percent) actually attended. The researchers attribute this gap to the absence of any binding condition attached to free seat reservations, which allowed attendees to cancel with minimal cost when motivation waned prior to the event.

Factors Influencing Viewing Decisions

Seat reservation data indicated that *Somboon* was the first film to reach full capacity, attributed by attendees to its accessible, low-tension content. By contrast, *School Town King* received the most positive post-screening feedback, attributed to its distinctive art direction, narrative approach, and pacing—suggesting that formal and stylistic qualities, not only subject matter, shape audience reception.

Structural and Industry-Level Observations

The “Different Perspectives Session” surfaced broader structural concerns, including the continued scarcity of alternative screening spaces for small-scale independent filmmakers, the constraining influence of algorithmic content curation on audience discovery, and limited institutional or governmental support for the sector. Participants also proposed adaptive directions for the genre, including faster-paced editing and experimentation with vertical video formats to align with contemporary consumption habits.

Discussion

The findings of this study lend support to the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2. Consistent with Techapongsatorn's (2025) characterization of Generation Z media behavior, Instagram and interpersonal word-of-mouth communication proved to be the two most influential channels shaping festival awareness (Table 3), reinforcing the centrality of peer-driven and platform-native communication in reaching this demographic. Similarly, the high satisfaction ratings across both screenings and interactive activities (Table 5) corroborate Baikhloy's (2002) framework of receiver, film, and interpersonal motivational factors: attendees appear to have been drawn not solely by the films themselves but by the surrounding social and participatory experience.

The particularly strong positive attitude shift observed among first-time viewers (Table 2; Section 7.1) suggests that the transmedia exhibition format was especially effective as an entry point for audiences without pre-existing engagement with the genre, supporting the study's underlying hypothesis that participatory, multi-platform design can lower the barriers to entry that conventional single-format screenings may present. At the same time, the finding that experienced viewers reported comparatively modest gains in new knowledge—while still expressing renewed motivation to engage with the genre—indicates that the festival format may serve distinct functions depending on an attendee's prior familiarity: an onboarding function for newcomers, and a re-engagement function for existing audiences.

The substantial gap between seat reservations and actual attendance (Section 7.3) is a notable operational finding with implications extending beyond this specific festival. It suggests that awareness and interest, as reflected in high reservation volumes, do not necessarily translate into behavioral commitment absent some cost or obligation attached to the reservation itself—a pattern consistent with broader event-management literature on free-registration formats. This finding, considered alongside Chotirosseranee's (2002) ten-stage special event framework, points to a need for greater attention to stages seven through nine (advance publicity, attendee invitation, and rehearsal or reminder communication) in future festival planning, potentially through the introduction of modest commitment devices such as bundled ticket-and-refreshment reservations or a controlled overbooking margin.

Finally, the structural observations raised during the “Different Perspectives Session”—concerning the scarcity of alternative screening spaces and the constraining effect of algorithmic curation on content discovery—echo the distribution “bottleneck” identified by Sukkhapisit and Plitpholkarnpim (2016) at the industry level. This suggests that while a single festival can meaningfully expand access for a defined audience over a limited time period, it addresses only one node within a wider structural constraint that continues to limit the reach of Thai independent documentary film.

Practical and Theoretical Implications

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the developing body of knowledge on Thai independent documentary film and film festival organization, particularly regarding the relationship between transmedia-based creative processes and audience-development strategies aimed at new-generation viewers. It offers an empirically grounded illustration of how theoretical constructs—Grierson's (1933) creative treatment of actuality, Renov's (1993) social functions of

documentary, and Tharchindawong's (2022) transmedia exhibition design—can be operationalized within a single, integrated event.

Practical Contribution

The findings offer actionable guidance for Thai independent documentary filmmakers and festival organizers seeking to design more effective screening formats. These include: sequencing post-screening panel discussions immediately after film content to sustain emotional continuity; curating a diversity of documentary content spanning both accessible and formally ambitious works; leveraging Instagram and interpersonal networks as primary promotional channels; and introducing commitment-oriented reservation mechanisms to reduce the gap between reserved and actual attendance.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the questionnaire sample ($n = 73$) was drawn from a single festival event held at a single venue over a short time scope (December 2025–April 2026), which limits the generalizability of the findings to other festival contexts, venues, or audience populations. Second, respondents were self-selected attendees who chose to complete the questionnaire, which may introduce a positive response bias not fully accounted for in the descriptive statistics reported here. Third, the substantial discrepancy between advance reservations and actual attendance means that the questionnaire and interview data reflect only the subset of reserving individuals who ultimately attended, and may not capture the perspectives or motivations of those who did not.

Future research would benefit from replicating this festival model across multiple venues, cities, or time periods to assess the consistency of the observed effects, and from incorporating a comparison condition—such as a conventional, screening-only festival format—to more directly test the added value of the transmedia exhibition approach. Further investigation of the seat-reservation-to-attendance gap, potentially through controlled experimentation with commitment devices such as bundled ticketing or modest deposit systems, would also help translate the present study's operational observations into generalizable event-management guidance. Finally, given the structural concerns raised by participants regarding algorithmic curation and the scarcity of alternative screening spaces, future work might examine how individual festival interventions interact with, and are constrained by, these broader industry-level structures.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore strategies for developing and presenting Thai independent documentary film to Generation Z audiences, and to raise awareness of the genre's value through the organization of a film festival. The resulting project, "Have You Seen Documentary Film Festival," applied a transmedia exhibition framework to curate four Thai independent documentaries under the theme "Scenes of Silences" and to design a set of interactive activities intended to convert passive viewers into active participants. The findings indicate that this approach was successful in attracting audiences with no prior experience of Thai independent documentary, in generating high levels of satisfaction with both the screenings and the interactive activities, and in producing measurable positive shifts in attendees' attitudes toward the genre—particularly their recognition of its social importance.

At the same time, the study surfaced an operationally significant gap between advance reservations and actual attendance, together with broader structural constraints on the Thai independent documentary sector that a single festival cannot resolve on its own. Taken together, these findings suggest that integrating conventional screening formats with participatory, transmedia-based experience design constitutes a viable and valuable strategy for expanding the reach of Thai independent documentary film among Generation Z audiences, while also pointing to concrete directions—commitment-oriented reservation design and continued attention to distribution infrastructure—for strengthening the sustainability of such efforts in the future.

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