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**The Role of Thematic Design in Communicating Development Outcomes: An Analysis
of Sisters' Blended Value Project Documentaries**

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examined how thematic design enhances the communication of development outcomes. Guided by Framing Theory, the study used analytical lenses to examine how themes in development documentaries are selected, made salient, or excluded.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was adopted. Data were generated through qualitative content and visual analyses of ten purposively selected SBVP documentaries, in-depth interviews with SBVP personnel and technical experts involved in documentary production, and Focus Group Discussions with SBVP beneficiaries. Data were analysed thematically using manual qualitative procedures and presented through narrative descriptions.

Findings: The documentaries effectively communicated development outcomes by deliberately selecting and emphasising certain themes while downplaying others. Overall, the findings demonstrate that documentary storytelling enhanced audience understanding of the project's objectives, implementation processes, and development outcomes, while shaping perceptions of its impact and increasing the visibility of the programme and its implementing partners.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:

The study recommends that development communication practitioners deliberately adopt a more comprehensive thematic approach when producing documentaries that communicate development outcomes. They should carefully design themes that clearly demonstrate impact.

Keywords: *Development Communication, Documentary Storytelling, Framing Theory, Sisters' Blended Value Project, Development Projects, Development Studies*

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INTRODUCTION

Development interventions are increasingly expected to communicate not only what they do but also the outcomes, experiences and changes associated with them to diverse stakeholders (Joshi et al., 2024; Katunga et al., 2023; Amakye, 2024). Consequently, communication is increasingly recognised as an integral component of development practice (Dikeocha, 2024; Wilkins, 2024). Effective communication can shape stakeholders' understanding of beneficiaries' experiences, institutions' achievements, and broader societal changes (Katunga et al., 2023; Achmad et al., 2025; Ademolu, 2025). However, development outcomes are often complex, gradual and multidimensional (Wilkins, 2024; Dikeocha, 2024; Swinkels, 2025). Conventional information-oriented approaches may therefore be insufficient for conveying the human experiences and social meanings associated with development interventions. This insufficiency creates a need for communication strategies that combine evidence and information with accessible, engaging narratives (Joshi et al., 2024; Mbai, 2025). As a result, storytelling has attracted attention within development communication strategies (Mbai, 2025) because it can connect development issues with lived experiences (Nimiwerimi et al., 2025), strengthen audience engagement, and provide more contextually grounded accounts of social change.

Documentary film offers a valuable medium for communicating development outcomes. Documentaries combine visual imagery, interviews, sound and narrative structures to construct accounts of social change and translate complex development issues into accessible stories (Millington, 2025; Kashyap et al., 2025; Sakarang et al., 2025). Nimiwerimi et al. (2025) note that audiovisual storytelling is crucial in development projects. Similarly, Millington (2025) and Mbai (2025) demonstrate that documentary formats can provide audiences with more relatable and engaging ways of encountering development experiences than conventional information-based communication alone. Unlike purely textual approaches to reporting, documentary storytelling can foreground the voices and lived experiences of individuals and communities (Ademolu, 2025; Mbai, 2025; Nimiwerimi et al., 2025). This human-centred approach is particularly relevant to development communication because the representation of beneficiaries is not merely a question of visibility but also of whose experiences, perspectives, and interpretations are included in the development narrative (Ademolu, 2025; Mbai, 2025; Hudson et al., 2025). Consequently, documentary storytelling is not simply a process of presenting project activities or achievements; it involves communicative and narrative decisions about which experiences are selected, how they are organised, and which aspects of development are given prominence (Kashyap et al., 2025; Sakarang et al., 2025; Nimiwerimi et al., 2025).

For example, *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, 2012) represents a radical extension of John Grierson's notion of the documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality." The documentary shows how film can reframe lived realities to foster critical engagement and dialogue. Unlike observational approaches that privilege surface realism, Oppenheimer (2012) invited the perpetrators of the 1965–66 Indonesian mass killings to reenact their crimes in cinematic genres of their choice. This reenactment produced a disturbing hybrid of fantasy and testimony that unsettles conventional truth claims. The documentary exposed deeper psychological and political realities. In this way, *The Act of Killing* illustrates how documentaries, through their creative treatment of actuality, transcend passive recording to function as development communication tools.

In Africa, documentary storytelling has long been linked to struggles for independence, social justice, and cultural identity. Early African documentarians sought to challenge colonial narratives that portrayed the continent through exoticised and simplified lenses (Diawara, 1992). They reimagined the documentary form to reclaim African voices and articulate indigenous perspectives on development. One of the earliest examples is Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1963), widely regarded as the first African short film. Although fictional, the film drew heavily on documentary aesthetics to depict the daily struggles of a cart driver in Dakar, offering a sharp social critique of postcolonial poverty and inequality (Julie-Françoise, 2021).

In East Africa, documentaries have been used to translate abstract development data, successes, and outcomes into compelling, human-centred narratives (O'Byrne, 2019). The PBS documentary *The Crowd and the Cloud* (Episode 4: *Citizens4Earth*) is one example that brings data to life. It features World Bank survey teams in rural Uganda and vividly portrays the human stories behind statistics on poverty levels and living standards (Banerjee, 2017). *Life and Debt* (2001) is another documentary that explores the socioeconomic impacts of structural adjustment policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on Jamaica. Through this film, viewers can see how global financial systems directly influence everyday lives. People who watch development-focused documentaries are more likely to gain knowledge, foster social awareness, and even take action (Okoti, 2022)

In Kenya, documentaries have addressed issues such as refugee crises, environmental conservation, gender empowerment, security, and economic livelihoods. For example, films have highlighted security and governance gaps in Kenya, as in *Scarred: The Anatomy of a Massacre* (2015), which examined the Garissa University terror attack. This documentary amplifies survivor voices to push for accountability and reform.

One important dimension of this process is thematic design. Thematic design can be understood as the deliberate organisation of recurring ideas, experiences, issues or messages that give coherence and meaning to a narrative (Kashyap et al., 2025; Sakarang et al., 2025; Şahin Çeken & Türk, 2025). Through thematic organisation, particular experiences and issues can be connected into broader narrative patterns, enabling audiences to interpret individual experiences in relation to wider social or development objectives (Sakarang et al., 2025; Errey et al., 2025; Mbai, 2025). Themes can consequently influence how beneficiaries, interventions, challenges and outcomes are represented by determining which aspects of an issue receive narrative attention and how different elements of a story are connected (Ademolu, 2025; Kashyap et al., 2025; Nimiwerimi et al., 2025). Examining thematic design can therefore provide insight into how development documentaries move beyond documenting project activities to construct meanings around change, transformation and development outcomes (Millington, 2025; Mbai, 2025; Sakarang et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing use of storytelling and audiovisual media in development communication, there remains a need to examine more closely how specific narrative and thematic choices shape the communication of development outcomes (Nimiwerimi et al., 2025; Mbai, 2025; Millington, 2025). Existing scholarship has examined development communication in relation to storytelling, representation, framing, audience engagement and narrative construction, but the specific role of thematic organisation within project-based documentaries remains comparatively underexplored. This presents an important area of inquiry because development

communication is not neutral: the narratives through which projects and beneficiaries are represented can influence which forms of change become visible, whose voices are prioritised and how development outcomes are interpreted.

Development organisations are also increasingly incorporating audiovisual and visual storytelling into their communication practices to document results, communicate impact and engage stakeholders through more accessible narrative formats (Millington, 2025; Nimiwerimi et al., 2025; Sakarang et al., 2025). Understanding how thematic design contributes to these communication processes can therefore strengthen theoretical understanding of development storytelling while offering practical insights into how development organisations can construct more coherent, meaningful and audience-oriented representations of development outcomes

Objective of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to examine how the thematic design of Strathmore University's Sisters' Blended Value Project (SBVP) documentaries enhances the communication of development outcomes. The SBVP is a regional initiative that supports Catholic Sisters in transforming their social ministries into sustainable social enterprises that generate social and economic value. Its documentaries communicate development outcomes by presenting stories of enterprise development, community transformation, leadership, resilience and sustainability. As audiovisual texts, these documentaries convey themes not only through verbal narratives but also through the deliberate organization of visual, auditory and editing elements.

In this study, thematic design refers to the deliberate construction and organization of recurring ideas and meanings within a documentary through the interaction of audiovisual modalities. This includes the selection and repetition of visual motifs, the development of recurring character narratives, the use of locations and symbols, the sequencing of interviews and events, the relationship between image and sound, and editing patterns that establish connections, contrasts, and emphasis. Thematic design, therefore, extends beyond identifying the subjects or topics presented in a documentary; it concerns how audiovisual choices organize, emphasize, and sometimes omit particular aspects of development experiences to construct coherent themes and communicate intended meanings.

The study draws on Framing Theory, particularly the framing processes of selection, salience and exclusion, to examine how these thematic choices shape the communication of development outcomes. Selection determines which people, experiences, events, and aspects of development are included in the documentaries; salience gives particular ideas, characters, events, or visual elements greater prominence and meaning; while exclusion determines which perspectives, experiences, or aspects of development are omitted or given less attention. Examining these processes within the thematic design of SBVP documentaries provides a basis for understanding how development outcomes are constructed and communicated through audiovisual storytelling.

Accordingly, the study seeks to move beyond a descriptive identification of themes to examine how thematic design functions as a framing process in development documentaries. The research is guided by the following question:

How do selection, salience and exclusion operate within the thematic design of Strathmore University's Sisters' Blended Value Project (SBVP) documentaries to convey development outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory: Framing theory offers a robust framework for understanding how social meanings are constructed. Its roots lie in sociology and were first proposed by Goffman in his influential work, *Frame Analysis* (1974). In this pioneering work, Goffman introduced the idea of “schemata of interpretation.” He explained that people use these schemata to organise and interpret their experiences. He further argued that people do not experience raw realities. Instead, realities are shaped by these main frameworks that set the stage for understanding situations (Goffman, 1974)

The first concept in framing theory, as advanced by Gitlin (1980) and Goffman (1974) is selection. Selection is a fundamental mechanism by which meaning is constructed in mediated communication. It involves communicators deliberately selecting specific elements from a vast array of possible images, facts, or interpretations and foregrounding them to shape the audience's understanding of an issue (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020). Framing entails selecting aspects of perceived reality and making them more prominent within a communicative text to advance problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, or treatment recommendations. Entman (1993) positions selection as the initial step in the frame construction process. In the context of the SBVP documentaries, the researcher sought to understand how selection functions as an active, strategic process that organises information into thematic schemas, guiding interpretation while privileging certain themes over others. The study aims to determine whether the careful, deliberate selection of themes in the SBVP documentaries is critical to communicating value-laden development outcomes and ensuring that intended messages resonate with audiences.

Salience is the second key tenet of framing theory. According to Goffman (1974), salience is the process of making selected elements more meaningful, noticeable, and memorable to the audience. While selection determines what is included in the frame (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020), salience dictates the emphasis given to those selected elements (McKeever et al., 2022). Sharma and Pokharel (2025) note that salience guides audience attention and interpretation. For a frame to be effective, Entman (1993) emphasises that the selected aspects must stand out and shape viewers' cognitive and emotional responses. In this study, the researcher sought to understand how SBVP documentaries highlighted key themes that align with the project's objectives. By investigating how thematic salience is employed in the SBVP documentaries, this study proposed that deliberate emphasis on elements enhances the clarity, impact, and overall effectiveness of development communication.

The third concept in framing theory, as identified by Entman (1993) and Reese (2001), is exclusion. Reese (2001) defines exclusion as the deliberate omission of certain themes from mediated communication. Exclusion is not a spatial phenomenon. Tagle (2025) posits that exclusion operates in tandem with selection and salience to shape the audience's understanding. Audience interpretation depends not only on what is highlighted but also on what has been left out (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In the context of the SBVP documentaries, exclusion is understood as the deliberate backgrounding of certain themes. This omission influenced how viewers perceived and interpreted the overall message. Investigating exclusion in these documentaries enabled the researcher to identify which themes were systematically omitted.

The researcher also understood the rationale behind these omissions and assessed how such absences affected the communication of development outcomes.

Selection, salience and exclusion form a unified framing matrix through which this study analyses the thematic design of SBVP documentaries. Selection addresses what is included, salience examines what is emphasised and how that emphasis is achieved audiovisually, while exclusion considers what is omitted or backgrounded. Applying this matrix to documentary film enables the study to move beyond identifying the themes presented in SBVP documentaries to examining how those themes are deliberately constructed through the interaction of visual, auditory, narrative and editing choices. Framing Theory, therefore, provides the analytical basis for understanding how the documentaries organise development experiences into thematic narratives and communicate the social, economic and institutional outcomes of SBVP interventions.

Conceptual Framework

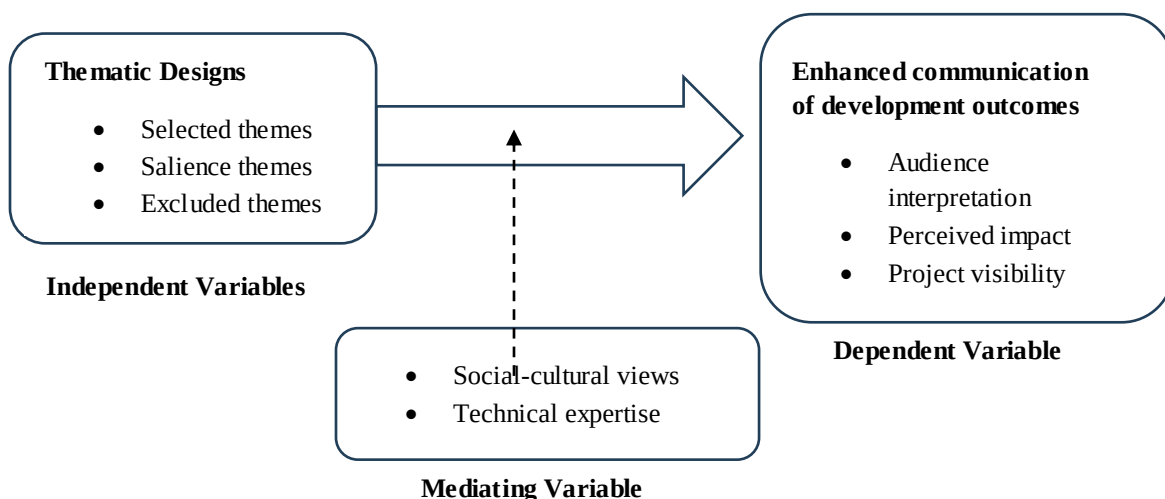


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The foundational layer of the documentary framing process is the thematic design. Themes determine which messages to highlight, the direction of storytelling, and which priorities to amplify. In development communication, themes serve as anchors, ensuring that content aligns with the project's objectives. As illustrated in Figure 1, effective thematic design enhances understanding by providing a coherent structure that enables audiences to interpret development outcomes.

The first pathway operates through selected themes. The deliberate selection of specific development-related themes determines the issues, experiences, achievements, challenges, and outcomes incorporated into the documentary narrative. By determining what information is presented to audiences, thematic selection establishes the substantive basis through which development outcomes are communicated. When themes are closely aligned with the intended development outcomes, they provide audiences with the information and contextual cues necessary to understand the significance of the intervention and its outcomes.

The second pathway operates through salient themes. Once themes are selected, their prominence within the documentary determines the extent to which particular aspects of

development outcomes attract audience attention. Salience may be created through the frequency, positioning, sequencing, visual emphasis, or narrative prominence given to particular themes. Themes that receive greater prominence are more likely to become central to the audience's understanding of what the development intervention achieved and why those outcomes are significant.

The third pathway operates through excluded themes. Decisions about what is omitted from a documentary establish the boundaries of the development story presented to audiences. Exclusion affects the range of perspectives, experiences, challenges, or outcomes available for audience interpretation. Consequently, the communication of development outcomes is influenced not only by what the documentary presents and emphasises, but also by what it leaves out of the narrative.

The three pathways interact to produce the documentary's overall thematic structures. Within this framework, socio-cultural views and technical expertise provide the contextual conditions through which thematic design is constructed and received. Socio-cultural views can influence how audiences interpret the themes presented, while technical expertise can influence how effectively the selected and salient themes are translated into documentary form. However, the central relationship proposed by the framework remains that between Thematic Design Elements and Enhanced Communication of Development Outcomes. The framework, therefore, assumes that differences in the selection, salience, and exclusion of themes shape how development outcomes are interpreted, perceived, and made visible to audiences.

Empirical Review

Nash and Corner (2016) empirically examined the emergence of strategic impact documentaries as instruments of social intervention. They analysed contemporary documentary production and its integration with strategic communication practices. Drawing on documentary case studies and evidence from impact campaigns, Nash and Corner (2016) found that documentary producers deliberately select themes aligned with specific social change objectives rather than simply documenting reality. The study concluded that thematic selection enables documentaries to present coherent narratives that guide audience attention towards intended development outcomes and desired behavioural change. However, the study focused primarily on strategic documentaries in Western contexts and did not examine how thematic selection enhances the communication of development outcomes in African development programmes. This presents a contextual gap that the current study seeks to address.

A study by Chattoo (2020) investigated how social-issue documentaries influence public understanding. Using multiple documentary case studies, including *13th*, *Heroin(e)*, and *Charm City*, the Chattoo demonstrated that filmmakers deliberately increase the salience of selected themes by giving them greater narrative prominence through intimate storytelling, emotional testimonies, visual symbolism, and sustained screen time. The findings showed that making certain themes more prominent enables audiences to connect emotionally with development issues. Salient themes allow the audience to transform abstract policy debates into relatable human experiences. According to Chattoo, thematic salience is a critical storytelling strategy that strengthens audience engagement and facilitates social learning. Nevertheless, the study focused on issue documentaries in the United States and did not investigate how thematic salience communicates development outcomes in development projects implemented by Catholic sisters, leaving an important empirical gap.

Stover (2013) examined the role of documentary films in framing social movements. The study sought to understand how filmmakers influence public understanding through production, distribution, and outreach strategies. It found that documentary producers shape social change narratives not only by what they include but also by what they exclude. Editorial decisions about omitted voices, competing explanations, or peripheral issues helped maintain narrative coherence. According to Stover, this reinforced the documentary's intended message. Stover argues that such thematic exclusion is a deliberate framing strategy that directs audience attention towards specific social problems and proposed solutions. Documentary filmmakers use this strategy to enhance the communication of social change objectives. Stover (2013) warns that the selective exclusion of themes may also limit audience exposure to alternative perspectives or the contextual complexities surrounding development interventions. The study focused on social movement documentaries rather than on documentaries that communicate development outcomes. The present study addresses this gap by examining how the exclusion of themes in documentary production influences the communication of development outcomes.

Collectively, the studies examined above demonstrate that selection, salience and exclusion are key framing processes in documentary storytelling. However, existing research has largely focused on Western social-issue and strategic-impact documentaries, with limited attention to institutional, faith-based and locally grounded African development projects. It remains unclear how these framing processes operate in documentaries produced to communicate development outcomes in these contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how selection, salience and exclusion shape the thematic design of SBVP documentaries and enhance the communication of development outcomes.

Research Gaps

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides breadth, but several critical gaps remain that the present study aims to address. For example, the Framing Theory has been extensively applied in crisis communication, news media, and political discourse (Almahallawi & Abdul Rahim, 2022; Lee, 2021). This theory remains under-theorised in systematic applications to development-oriented documentary films, especially in projects that are implemented at learning institutions, such as universities. The existing literature analyses framing at the ideological and textual levels, with limited empirical attention to the framing process. Moreover, studies focused on film framing have always prioritised audience reception or ideological critique. This type of analysis has created a gap in understanding how filmmakers deliberately construct frames to communicate development outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design. This is because it sought to offer an in-depth understanding of how framing operates in documentary production as a meaning-making process, especially in communicating development outcomes. For this study, the researcher examined the themes within the documentaries of Strathmore University's Sisters' Blended Value Project (SBVP). This study was conducted at Strathmore University and focused on the Sisters' Blended Value Project (SBVP). SBVP, hosted at Strathmore University, supports Catholic Sisters in transitioning from ministry-based initiatives to sustainable social enterprises.

The study population comprised three interrelated units aligned with the documentary thematic design process outlined in the conceptual framework. The first population consisted of documentary videos produced by Strathmore University for SBVP. The second population included documentary filmmakers and the SBVP team involved in the conception, production, and dissemination of the SBVP documentaries. The third population consisted of SBVP beneficiaries, particularly Catholic Sisters, who participated in the SBVP programmes. See Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Selected SBVP Documentaries

Video	The Documentary Title on YouTube	Congregation	Country
Video 1	The Little Servants of The Sacred Heart Embu, Kenya	The Little Servants of The Sacred Heart	Kenya
Video 2	Transforming Communities - Nazareth Sisters of the Annunciation (Kenya)	Nazareth Sisters of the Annunciation	Kenya
Video 3	Sisters Transforming Lives Through Holistic Education & Compassion in Nebbi,	Sisters of St. Charles Borromeo	Uganda
Video 4	SBVP Transformation in Uganda	General SBVP Documentary	Uganda
Video 5	Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood SBVP Impact Story	Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood	Tanzania
Video 6	TZ Sisters of Divine Saviour	Sisters of Divine Saviour	Tanzania
Video 7	Transforming Communities - Dominican Missionary Sisters (Zambia)	Dominican Missionary Sisters	Zambia
Video 8	SBVP Impact Stories Daughters of the Redeemer Sister	Daughters of the Redeemer Sister	Zambia
Video 9	SBVP Documentary	General SBVP Documentary	Region
Video 10	SBVP Social Enterprise Development Programme (SEDP)	General SBVP Documentary	Region

Table 2: Demographic Profile of In-depth Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Role in SBVP Country	Country
Interviewee 1	Female	Country Manager	Uganda
Interviewee 2	Female	Country Manager	Kenya
Interviewee 3	Male	Country Manager	Tanzania
Interviewee 4	Male	Country Manager	Zambia
Interviewee 5	Female	Regional Programme Manager	Kenya
Interviewee 6	Female	Project Manager	Kenya
Interviewee 7	Male	Documentary Filmmakers	Kenya
Interviewee 8	Male	Documentary Filmmakers	Uganda
Interviewee 9	Male	Documentary Filmmakers	Tanzania

Table 3: FGD Demographics Table

Participant	Congregation	Country
Participant 1	Franciscan Missionary Sisters for Africa	Kenya
Participant 2	Social Missionary Sisters of the Church	Kenya
Participant 3	Medical Mission Sisters	Uganda
Participant 4	Sisters of Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary	Uganda
Participant 5	Carmelite Missionary Sisters of STCJ	Tanzania
Participant 6	Sisters of St John the Baptist	Zambia
Participant 7	Little Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary Conceived Immaculate	Zambia
Participant 8	Little Servants of The Sacred Heart	Uganda
Participant 9	Sisters of the Holy Cross	Uganda
Participant 10	Capuchin Sisters of Mother Rubatto	Kenya
Participant 11	Franciscan sisters of St. Ann	Kenya
Participant 12	Franciscan Sisters of Charity	Tanzania
Participant 13	St. Gemma Sisters	Tanzania

The sampling frame for this study was the registry file of all the documentary videos produced by Strathmore University under the Sisters' Blended Value Project. This record is available for the researcher to access at their head office. Most of the SBVP documentary films are also available on the official SBS YouTube channel. Secondly, the human resource register of the employees was used to select those who participated in the interview. Thirdly, the researcher used the SBVP WhatsApp community membership to identify FGD participants. This study used purposive sampling to select 10 documentaries for analysis, 10 key informants and 16 participants for two online focus group discussions.

This study employed three qualitative data collection methods to enable a comprehensive examination of documentary framing. The methods include qualitative content analysis, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with the SBVP team and documentary filmmakers, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the beneficiaries.

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure participants' rights were protected and intellectual property respected. The researcher followed established institutional protocols by obtaining permission from Multimedia University to conduct the research. Additionally, a research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), which is required for any study conducted in Kenya.

RESULTS

Based on qualitative data collected through analysis of ten (10) SBVP documentaries, in-depth interviews with nine (9) study participants, and two (2) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the following is a comprehensive content analysis of how the thematic design in Strathmore University's Sisters' Blended Value Project documentaries enhances the communication of development outcomes. To do this, the researcher examined three attributes, i.e., salient themes, selected themes, and excluded themes, in the 10 sampled SBVP documentaries and collected data from interviewees and FGD participants. The study had various findings as discussed in the subsections that follow.

Salient Themes in the SBVP Documentaries

To start with, the salient theme emerging from the analysis of the ten selected SBVP documentaries is the promotion of sustainable development, articulated through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A prominent Sustainable Development Goal reflected throughout the selected SBVP documentaries is SDG 4: Quality Education. SDG 4 seeks to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education. It promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. In Video 1, one of the characters portrays education as a pathway to individual empowerment and community transformation. She explained:

In the Gachoka area, the main challenge is miraa. The children, very often, drop out of school. They do not complete their education because they are attracted by the miraa. So, through this social enterprise (providing education), we aim to offer them holistic formation to become good Christians and good citizens of tomorrow.

Video 7 reiterates that education is a key to community transformation. In the documentary, the congregation seeks to establish a boys' secondary school to address the community's educational needs. The congregations noted a significant educational gap between girls and boys. One of the characters in the video, a sister who participated in the SBVP training, explains:

As Dominican sisters, we picked a boys' school as our social enterprise. For us, this was timely. This is because we have seen the gap and the need in our society, and it is more urgent.

A community member, who is also on the school project development board, agrees to the call, stating that it is a move that will "benefit the community to a greater extent."

In line with this, participants in the in-depth interviews also confirmed the observation. Interviewee 5 noted that:

The documentaries continue to portray schools as sustainable social enterprises that improve educational access. By consistently foregrounding educational transformations, the documentaries communicate SBVP's contribution to SDG 4.

Similarly, Interviewee 6 agrees that the documentary positions quality education as tangible evidence of SBVP's broader development impact. She says:

Education, then, is a topic through which audiences understand the outcomes of SBVP in terms of institutional sustainability, community empowerment, and inclusive development.

This framing is intentional, participant 1 of the FGD explains that:

For us in the education sector, we have seen and now believe that quality education is achievable. I know we have been struggling to get students at our school, and I like what I saw in Video 1. We might apply it to our schools.

Another theme foregrounded in the SBVP documentaries is SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being). The documentaries frame sister-led social enterprises as interventions that improve community health, prevent disease and strengthen access to healthcare services. In Video 2, health is framed in terms of preventive nutrition and disease reduction. A character in the video, a sister who oversees the farming activities, explains that the congregation deliberately chose dragon fruit farming for its perceived health benefits, stating, "The dragon fruit itself is very rich in vitamins, it promotes immunity." She further contextualises this choice by linking it to a local public health concern:

We realise that in our country, Kenya, and especially in Meru, we have so many cancer cases. We need to start farming the dragon fruit, so that we can improve the nutritional value, and then we will have fewer cancer cases in Meru and in Kenya.

Through this framing, the enterprise is presented as extending beyond agricultural production. The activity has become a preventive health intervention to improve nutrition. The documentary also highlights how the economic returns of the enterprises support access to healthcare, with the sister explaining that:

Even our own sisters in this congregation are going to benefit from this fruit, and also after we sell the fruit, we are going to assist the sisters to buy and to pay the medical bills, which are very high.

Here, the documentary links entrepreneurship to improved health financing. The video demonstrates how sustainable enterprises can directly contribute to healthcare access. Similarly, Interviewee 1 notes that Video 5 foregrounds SDG 3 by documenting how a sisters-led health facility addresses maternal and child health challenges within an underserved community. She notes that the “documentary begins by establishing the severity of the local health problem”, noting that:

The sisters experienced a lot of mortality in their locality because of the traditional and cultural beliefs and the way of traditional midwife practices. Many women were coming with complications during delivery... Many women would die, as well as the infants.

This depiction frames the health facility as a response to a critical health care gap. The narrative then presents the intervention undertaken by the congregation. FGD’s Participant 3 acknowledges this by stating that:

The training ensured that sisters were enlightened to establish an operating theatre where they would handle those complicated deliveries. The urgency of this intervention, I guess, is the fact that some of the expectant women in the community would lose their lives on the way to the facility and this illustrates the consequences of limited access to emergency obstetric care.

Other themes foregrounded in the videos are SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy). The documentaries frame renewable energy and efficient water management as interconnected pathways to environmental sustainability. This narrative is reflected in Video 2, where one of the characters identifies water scarcity as a major challenge, stating, “*We have a very serious challenge because we are using a well with very little water.*”

The documentary then presents renewable energy as the solution: “*With the seed grant, we are going to benefit from having the solar panels.*” She further explains that “*These solar panels will assist us to pump the water from the well.*” The use of solar energy is further linked to sustainable water use through the adoption of drip irrigation: “*From there we’ll also have the drip irrigation,*” which, according to the sister, will make the work easier.

These framings are not merely technological improvements but evidence of responsible environmental stewardship. They demonstrate how sister-led social enterprises integrate clean energy and efficient water management to enhance agricultural productivity while caring for the planet. As Interviewee 5 explains, environmental stewardship is an integral component of the project’s sustainability agenda:

I like to see how catholic sisters are doing their own activities back at the social enterprise, how are they taking care of the planet? Because remember, for them to be sustainable, then they have to take care of the planet... like, for example, using the solar energy. So, the documentaries are able to communicate how have they been able to save the planet in their activities.

In line with this, Participant 2 of the FGD confirms that:

Against the backdrop of the challenges we face as Catholic sisters and the communities we serve, these documentaries present an encouraging narrative of hope and transformation. They portray sisters embracing environmental stewardship through innovative, sustainable practices that protect natural resources and improve livelihoods.

The documentaries also foreground the themes of decent work and economic growth, as well as industry, innovation, and infrastructure. The framings reflect the aspirations of SDGs 8 and 9, respectively. Video 7 presents the sisters' social enterprise as a catalyst for skills development, sustainable enterprise management, and strategic infrastructure planning. The documentary demonstrates SDG 8 through its emphasis on vocational training and economic inclusion, with a character in the documentary explaining:

We engaged a college that is providing training for young people... About 80 of those have been enrolled since February. Most of these young people's profiles indicated they had been doing nothing prior to enrolment. Most of them are boys who dropped out of school... but they can upskill themselves now."

Alongside this, the documentary foregrounds SDG 9 by presenting the planned boys' school as an innovative infrastructure project. The sisters explain that "We have a place which was bought, and that's where the school is going to be housed," adding that, "Some drawings have been done," and describing it as "an ultra-modern school" whose "teaching concept will be so high, it will change the scope of education for Zambia."

The documentary also highlights responsible infrastructure planning through the seed grant. A sister interviewed in the video frames infrastructure development as both innovative and environmentally sustainable.

For the seed grant that we've received, we hope to do an environmental impact assessment to ensure compliance with the regulations of the land, while assessing whether we have enough space, whether the community is supporting the needs, whether there is "enough water supply," and "sufficient waste disposal facility." "So far, we've already done the geological survey that has shown us that we can put up this facility."

Interviewee 4 further links enterprise sustainability to sound financial management, stating:

One of the things we remind sisters is that they need to track their finances very, very closely so that the social enterprises they run not only save the communities they work in but also help those communities become sustainable.

This is further reiterated with FGD Participant 13 who submitted that some of the documentaries have shown the benefits of innovation, especially in research.

These documentaries have shown us the value and impact of research. The SBVP team has been conducting research and developing case studies that are now being used to train sisters and other social entrepreneurs. This is truly amazing. I look forward to reading the research papers and case studies to learn more.

In addition, the documentaries foreground themes aligned with SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The goal emphasises strengthening the means of implementation through collaboration. This can be done by mobilising knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources to advance sustainable development. This emphasis on partnership is consistently communicated throughout the documentaries. All ten videos analysed for this study have a character recognising the role of these partnerships in building their entrepreneurial capacity. One sister remarked in Video 1, "We are so grateful to Conrad N. Hilton Foundation because of their input. Another sister in Video 5 notes that "What we have learned at Strathmore University Business School has really broadened my understanding of being a businessperson. Also, in Video 10, one of the project implementers appreciates ACWECA's efforts in ensuring the project's success.

The significance of partnerships is further emphasised by Interviewee 7, who identifies collaboration as one of the project's core pillars:

One of the SBVP's strategic pillars is access to markets, partnerships, and collaboration. So, maybe the sisters who have come to our conferences, or who have attended different networking events, you'll hear them talking about the benefits they were able to get during the conference. Some didn't know how to exhibit their products. Now they know how to showcase their products by attending the conferences.

Apart from just stating and identifying partnership and collaboration as a strategic pillar, Participant 12 of the FGD observes that SBVP has been intentional in the partners they bring on board.

In Tanzania, we know the Tanzania Catholic Association of Sisters (TCAS) very well. It is our umbrella body for religious sisters, and the moment you mention TCAS, your credibility is assured. I really like that the project is working with TCAS in Tanzania to ensure sisters are trained.

This study found that documentary filmmakers make other themes more salient by giving them greater visual, emotional and narrative prominence (Geise & Maubach, 2024; Geise & Xu, 2025). This research has noted that SBVP documentaries place greater emphasis on the SDGs to make them stand out and shape viewers' emotional responses (Sharma and Pokharel, 2025). This selection of themes and foregrounding of SDGs enabled the SBVP team to present coherent narratives linking project activities to measurable development outcomes. Making some themes more salient strengthens the connections between documentary narratives and broader development objectives (Chattoo, 2020).

Selected Themes in the SBVP Documentaries

The overarching analytical inquiry driving this section centres on whether the analysed documentaries seek to make certain themes more prominent than others. A comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data confirms that SBVP documentaries function as an intentional, rhetorically structured communications vehicle. The videos systematically emphasise SBVP's operational pillars.

Capacity Building serves as the story arc of the SBVP documentaries. The videos heavily focus on capacity building and training among religious sisters. This theme has been noted for disrupting the historical stereotype that religious ministries operate purely on goodwill, without technical or structural efficiency.

In *Video 10*, a character in the video, one of the project leaders, explains how SBVP started. She goes on to state that SBVP was intended to build the sisters' skills through training in leadership, finance, and social entrepreneurship, while strengthening their congregations' structures. She confirms that SBVP offers mentorship, coaching and support to transform the sisters-led ministries into sustainable social enterprises. The benefits of the training are clearly stated by a sister in *video 2* as follows:

When we were learning about the social enterprise, we were encouraged to start small so we could grow into a larger project. Before I joined the Strathmore University social enterprise program, I didn't have skills in social enterprise or in sustaining it. But now, I am better.

The documentary highlights this to prove that capacity building dismantles systemic intimidation, replacing it with absolute entrepreneurial autonomy. This sentiment is echoed by another character in *Video 5*, who connects skill acquisition directly to structural survival:

Before the Sister Blended Value programme, we didn't have the skills to run our health facility and make it more sustainable. But after this programme, we had a significant shift in how we ran it, moving to a more sustainable model and having a greater impact on society. The Social Enterprise Programme was very empowering. To me, as an individual and to our congregation. I felt empowered. It has really helped me look at myself as a leader.

Another character in *Video 8* reinforces this argument by explaining how she applied the skills acquired through the training to agricultural value addition:

As a congregation, we felt we needed some capacity building in farming because. You cannot just farm. You need to add value to what you are doing and so on. So, the training the sisters received really added to their knowledge of how to run a farming business. Strathmore University came on board and has been accompanying us, showing us how to manage farm planting, soil preparation, and crops once they germinate. Even though we who are not farmers didn't go for that training. We are getting that knowledge from them. They are sharing their knowledge. They do the calculations from the time they get their seedlings, how long it will take, and when they sell, the amount of money they are going to get.

The documentaries then deepen this narrative on technical competencies. In explaining, Interviewee 4 stated that:

We have really helped sisters through the course they have attended. We train them in financial analysis, budget preparation, prioritisation, and determining whether we are making a profit or a loss.

Consequently, Participant 8 observes that capacity building transcends internal management to foster outward market confidence. She observes that:

I have seen that Strathmore University Business School, through SBVP, is doing an important thing by ensuring that sisters and their congregations are capacity-built. They get the right training and skills that will help them remain sustainable.

The study also found that the SBVP documentaries foregrounded research as a salient theme. Research is the second pillar of SBVP. In Video 9, the voice-over explains what the strategic pillar entails. The narrator states that:

The research pillar is meant to help sisters conduct research, design, develop and incorporate innovative social entrepreneurship models and generate case studies that provide insights to inform best practices.

In the video, one of the characters, who is also a research coordinator with SBVP, explains that:

In this Sisters' Blended Value Project, we have produced a total of 43 research outputs. These 43 research outputs comprise research papers to be published in various journals. We have also documented a total of 13 technical papers and white papers.

In her explanation, Interviewee 1 notes that “research is one of the explicit pillars of the SBVP that the documentaries emphasise.” Interviewee 5 provides additional context, explaining that under the research pillar, “the documentaries can also highlight how many papers we have generated.” This is a critical narrative choice because, as Interviewee 5 further explains, “awareness isn't just about social media. We need to create awareness even through research.”

To add to these explanations, Participant 10 of the FGD notes that:

Through the documentaries, we have seen how to use research components and outputs, lessons learned from failures, and best practices to help us transform our ministries.

Another theme that has attracted broad attention in the SBVP documentaries is access to markets and collaborative networks. This is the third strategic pillar of the SBVP. The pillar, in essence, provides sisters with a platform to connect through conferences, communities of practice, partnerships, and alumni engagements, thereby widening their reach and expanding access to learning opportunities. This pillar has been widely discussed in most of the documentaries analysed for this study:

The third pillar is access to markets. We do this through conferences, where we organise a platform for sisters to meet other like-minded social entrepreneurs with whom they can connect, learn, and collaborate (Video 10).

Interviewee 1 notes that “collaborative networks” are explicitly elevated as a core pillar in the documentaries. This is further reinforced by Interviewee 4, who explains that the “webinars that have been incorporated into the training given to the sisters” are a primary element highlighted to demonstrate enterprise sustainability. This further explains what Interviewee 5 noted:

In pillar 3, the documentary directly highlights the experiences of the sisters who have attended the annual conferences and the different networking events organised by SBVP.

The interviewee 5 adds that these conferences have provided the catholic sisters with the opportunity to learn, “Some didn't know how to exhibit them (their products and services). Now they know how to exhibit their products through attending our conferences.

The same analogy is expounded by Participant 7 of the FGD, who stated that:

Yes, the collaborative network as a theme was highly visible and kept coming up in the documentaries. The documentaries made a big point of showing that the sisters were not left to figure things out on their own.

One of the salient themes in the SBVP documentaries is a shift from conceptual education to practical financial implementation. This highlighted the deployment of seed grants, capital investments, and expanded market access. This is pillar 4 of the SBVP's strategic objectives. The practical application of this financial and market solution can be clearly identified through the choices made by a sister in video 5, who emphasises:

After the training, we were awarded with seed grants. The money we received from the seed grant was used to improve service delivery in the hospital. We bought beds and new screens to separate the beds.

This testimony demonstrates how the integrated financial model works by combining internal resource mobilisation with external institutional support. The documentary highlights this financial strategy to teach the audience that the SBVP does not promote a culture of complete dependency on handouts. Instead, it teaches an integrated approach in which seed capital serves as a leverage tool, encouraging congregations to pool their own resources, manage risks, and physically market their income-generating structures. This has also been well explained by Interviewee 4, who states that:

The documentaries showcase how the seed grant given to the sisters... and all these different areas of help we give to the sisters... help to make their enterprises more sustainable.

This financial pillar works in tandem with market integration. Listening to FGD responses, a participant noted that the repetition of pillar 4 across the documentaries made it seem like a practical engine for making these ministries sustainable.

What stood out was how the documentary connected classroom training to real-world financial deployment. We repeatedly saw and heard about the impact of 'seed grants' and how funding allowed them to scale up

Based on the analysis, theme selection played an important role in SBVP documentaries. Research has established that theme selection is a strategic element of documentary production used by filmmakers to align communication with specific project objectives (Chatoo, 2020; Smith & Pegoraro, 2020; Wang et al., 2024). In this study, we have observed that, the producer of the SBVP documentaries decided to give the project's strategic pillars greater prominence through storytelling, emotional testimony, symbolism, and sustained screen time. Such emphasis makes themes more memorable, persuasive, and meaningful to audiences.

Excluded Themes in the SBVP Documentaries

One of the most noticeable exclusions is the limited discussion of project failures, setbacks, or unsuccessful enterprises. Although a few documentaries briefly acknowledge challenges such as water scarcity (*video 1*), inadequate skills (*video 3*), or limited infrastructure (*video 5*), these obstacles are almost always immediately followed by solutions made possible by the SBVP intervention.

The producers and directors of the documentaries gave limited attention to the complexities, failures, and structural barriers that accompany the implementation of social enterprises. Interviewee 4:

In the documentary, if you watch and listen keenly, there are some specific issues you will not hear from them. For instance, let's say some of our congregations have a problem with their mother superior. Sisters will not say they faced this challenge. Maybe their mother superior was uncooperative.

Also, most of our documentaries are shared in the open space, such as YouTube. So, putting that negative message on that sort of platform sometimes prevents further participation in the project in the future. This might make other sisters fear nominating other sisters for the project.

As a result of such avoidance of negative messaging, audiences are presented with an overwhelmingly positive narrative that celebrates achievements. In-depth Interviewee 8 confirmed this by saying:

From what I recall, we produced many documentaries, and most of them reflected positive outcomes. One of the key aspects we examined was whether training had taken place. In most cases, it had, and participants spoke positively about it, highlighting its fundamental importance.

The focus was on economic and social value. We were interested in whether new practices or changes were adopted because of the training, particularly in enterprise development, rather than in the challenges or problems the participants faced.

The documentaries give little attention to enterprises that failed to achieve their objectives. Projects that did not generate the expected social or financial outcomes, were given time for implementation before they could be visited for documentation. According to interviewee 9:

If the project did not show tangible results, we would rather skip it and give it time. For example, there was this situation where sisters were doing dairy farming. There were no results to document when we visited them. We never recorded anything in that congregation.

The documentaries also pay relatively little attention to the broader structural and policy environments that shape the sisters' work. While they highlight the commitment, innovation, and resilience of individual congregations, they rarely explore systemic issues such as government policy, regulatory constraints, market instability, inflation, and climate variability that influence the sustainability of social enterprises. Interviewee 3 confirms this by saying:

Not everything about the government can be explained. Even though sometimes the government may be a hindrance to the sisters. For instance, most sisters sometimes complain about over taxation. We cannot capture this in the documentaries; we cut them off during editing.

Mainly, the documentaries focus on the sisters' success and the support provided through SBVP. The videos underrepresent the external economic and institutional conditions that can enable or constrain the development of social enterprises. Participant 10 of the FGD observes that:

In these documentaries, everything is rosy, and I don't think so. I am a sister, and I know that at times, sisters are relocated to other workstations. Because of the vow of obedience, you will move, and this might affect the project.

Something that we learned during our SBVP training is how to manage and live with others. This is also a problem we observe in our congregation, and most projects fail due to poor relationships. I believe there are questions that were never asked during the filming or ignored completely.

Based on the analysis, the exclusion of certain themes was equally significant in shaping how SBVP documentaries communicated development outcomes. The documentaries largely omitted failures, challenges, competing perspectives, and structural barriers. This exclusion helped maintain narrative coherence and direct audience attention towards positive project achievements. This finding supports Wang et al. (2024) and Gurning et al. (2024) argument that selective omission helps filmmakers maintain focus on priority messages. It also aligns with Geise and Xu's (2025) view that exclusion influences audience interpretation. Stover (2013) similarly found that omitted voices and alternative explanations can reinforce intended narratives of social change. The study, therefore, demonstrates that thematic exclusion is a deliberate framing strategy with both communicative benefits and limitations.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The SBVP documentaries presented several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as salient themes. This presentation enhanced communication about the development outcomes of the sister-led social enterprises. The documentaries foregrounded SDG 4 (Quality Education) by portraying education as a pathway to community transformation (Bumaca & Kintanar, 2025; Gunawan, 2025; Nogueiro & Saraiva, 2025), institutional sustainability (Malik et al., 2025), and inclusive development through expanded access to learning opportunities (Edwards et al., 20249). The documentaries also highlighted SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by demonstrating how sustainable enterprises improve nutrition, strengthen access to healthcare (Mathews et al., 2025; Imo & Ekechukwu, 2024; Mutisya, 2024), and generate resources to support quality health services (Queye et al., 2024). Furthermore, SDG 6 and SDG 7 (Clean Water and Sanitation, Affordable and Clean Energy) emerged as interconnected themes that conveyed environmental stewardship through the adoption of renewable energy and sustainable water management practices (United Nations, 2015; Sachs et al., 2022; IEA et al., 2023). In addition, SDG 8 and SDG 9 (United Nations, 2015) were presented as themes that emphasised vocational skills development, enterprise sustainability, economic inclusion, and strategic infrastructure planning. Finally, the documentaries foregrounded SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by illustrating how collaboration among development partners, academic institutions, faith-based organisations, and local communities strengthens entrepreneurial capacity, expands market opportunities, and enhances the long-term sustainability of sister-led social enterprises. Collectively, these SDG themes conveyed the multidimensional development outcomes of the SBVP and demonstrated its contribution to sustainable and inclusive development.

The analysed (10) documentaries foregrounded the four strategic pillars of the Sisters' Blended Value Project as the selected themes that enhanced the communication of development outcomes through sister-led social enterprises. The selected themes in the documentaries included capacity building, demonstrating how training empowered sisters to strengthen individual and institutional sustainability. The documentaries also highlighted research and innovation. The videos portrayed evidence-based decision-making and knowledge generation as essential to developing sustainable social entrepreneurship enterprises. Furthermore, access

to markets and collaborative networks emerged as a prominent theme. The videos illustrated how conferences and partnerships created opportunities for continuous learning, professional support, and the diffusion of skills across congregations. Finally, the documentaries emphasised integrated financial inclusion by showcasing how a seed grant is a practical mechanism that enabled ministries to transition to financially sustainable social enterprises. These four thematic pillars conveyed the SBVP's holistic approach to institutional transformation. The documentaries demonstrated how capacity development, research, market access, collaboration, and financial sustainability contribute to long-term social and economic development outcomes.

The In-depth interviews and FGDs also revealed several excluded themes that shaped the communication of development outcomes. While the documentaries consistently foregrounded positive transformation, they largely omitted project failures and unsuccessful social enterprises. In most cases, the videos presented enterprise development as a predominantly linear process. They also gave limited attention to internal organisational challenges, such as leadership conflicts, institutional resistance, and governance issues. These internal organisational challenges could influence the implementation of sister-led social enterprises. Furthermore, the documentaries underrepresented broader structural and policy constraints, such as government regulations, taxation, market instability, inflation, and climate variability, despite their influence on the sustainability of social enterprises. Positive narratives give less attention to contextual challenges that may constrain the realisation of long-term development outcomes.

It is therefore clear that the study's findings align with Framing Theory. The SBVP documentaries effectively communicated development outcomes by deliberately selecting and emphasising certain themes while downplaying others. The documentaries foregrounding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the four operational pillars of the SBVP. In doing so, the filmmakers framed SBVP as a vehicle for quality education, improved health and well-being, environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, innovation, partnerships, capacity building, research, collaborative networks, and financial inclusion. At the same time, the exclusion of potential challenges reinforced a predominantly successful story. These stories highlight the achievements and transformative impact of SBVP. This selective emphasis shaped audience perceptions by presenting the SBVP as an effective and sustainable model for social enterprise development. As such, the documentaries appear to focus on the project's intended development outcomes. These findings demonstrate that the documentaries employed framing as a strategic communication tool to construct a compelling narrative of development. As such, the documentaries influenced the audience's interpretation of the project's impact. The videos also reinforced the SBVP's contribution to sustainable development.

Conclusion

Thematic design in documentaries enhances the communication of development outcomes. In the case of Strathmore University's Sisters' Blended Value Project, this was achieved through carefully designed themes; deliberately selecting and making certain themes more salient while downplaying others. This strategy shaped audiences' understanding of sister-led social enterprises, reinforced the credibility of the project's achievements by communicating the SBVP's contribution, and improved its visibility across various platforms and to different stakeholders.

Recommendations

Therefore, development communication practitioners should deliberately adopt a more comprehensive thematic approach when producing documentaries that communicate development outcomes. They should carefully design themes that clearly demonstrate impact. Documentaries for development communication should incorporate carefully framed themes on implementation challenges and broader policy and socioeconomic contexts. Presenting both achievements and contextual realities provides audiences with a more holistic understanding of the project. This also facilitates learning and replication of successful interventions without undermining confidence in the programme.

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