More like Unseen: A study of accessibility and representation in documentary film

*Learnings from Groundbreaking Research*

*An Audience Study of the film “Unseen”*

**This 10-page document is a “summary overview” of the full report (the full report PDF is currently being revised to ensure greater accessibility, it will be published by the Center for Media & Social Impact in Summer 2025)**

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**Inclusive Research Design Commitments:**

This study’s design involved a commitment to centering considerations of accessibility and representation in each stage of the research, including working with a research team inclusive of people with lived experience with a disability and being undocumented. A report of learnings from this research design and approach will be forthcoming. Please contact David Conrad-Perez, at dconrad@american.edu, for more information.

# Abstract Summary

*Unseen*

A broad lack of attention paid to communities with disabilities and undocumented audiences in film and media means that their experiences are being overlooked by a genre of media that has a unique history of catalyzing social reform. This can contribute to a persistent lack of public understanding and exclusion from the policies and conversations that affect them.

To address this gap, this groundbreaking audience study of the documentary film *Unseen* centers communities with disabilities and undocumented people in its design and primary interests, and it endeavors to help filmmakers and advocates better understand the potential of highlighting the stories of underrepresented and misrepresented communities in media and public discussion to create positive social change.

Through an unprecedented survey of more than **350 audience members** who attended a screening of the film *Unseen*, one of the only films in the last decade which centers an openly undocumented person with a disability as its main protagonist, and in-depth interviews with

12 partners who screened the film, this study highlights several insights and experiences around the importance of films like *Unseen* for/to a range of diverse audiences. The survey was co-designed by and distributed to audiences who identify with a disability and/or who are undocumented, and it benefited from partnerships with several student groups, Universities and organizations across the country. The survey was distributed to audiences who either participated in a screening that took place in the United States or who joined a virtual screening led by a US-based organization, during the summer and fall of 2024.

This study raises several important findings on the power of film and the importance of documentaries that center underrepresented protagonists, and which are made

by underrepresented filmmakers, who are mindful of accessible filming practices.

While this report’s “Executive Summary of Key Findings” section outlines the top findings of this report, some of its insights include highlighting how the film inspired a significant majority of people with disabilities and undocumented audiences to want to improve their situation, improve things for others, and feel more hopeful about the future. The study also reveals how the film increased confidence among a large majority of audiences to want to share their experience with others, especially among undocumented audiences and those who identify with a disability; the significance of this finding can’t be understated as a notably high percentage of both of these communities also shared that they “rarely” or “never” spoke to people who are not immediate friends or family about their experience before the film.

On issues of representation, the study reveals how audiences who identified as undocumented were significantly more likely to say that they could “imagine themselves” in the events of the film when compared to audiences who did not identify with this community. Similarly, underscoring the importance of representation, while less than half of respondents said they felt the film was relevant to their everyday life, the majority of audiences who identified as undocumented or with a disability felt that the content was relevant to their everyday life. Impact of the film for communities who identified as undocumented or with a disability is revealing, especially when it came to inspiring emotions of optimism, hope and happiness – all of which were among the most felt emotions experienced by these communities. While a significant number of audience members experienced the emotion of “happiness” during the film, for instance, this emotion was experienced by every participant who identified as undocumented.

Among its most significant findings, this study also offers several revealing insights around how the film changed perceptions and thinking on important social issues, especially for audiences who did not have shared life experience in the events and circumstances of the film’s main protagonist.

Beyond these revealing discoveries, this study challenges dominant understandings of interest among people with disabilities – including blind and low-vision audiences – in film. Not only does this study find that almost 8 in 10 people with disabilities believe that “many people with disabilities enjoy movies”, it also finds that almost twice as many people with disabilities “strongly” believe this when compared to people without disabilities. This suggests that people without disabilities severely underestimate the interest of the disability community in documentaries and film.

In lifting up these findings – and many more – on the influence that *Unseen* had on the hopes, beliefs and actions of diverse audiences (including those who did and did not identify with the experiences of the main protagonist), this study provides a spotlight on both the interest in documentaries among audiences and on the significant positive impact that films which center under-represented protagonists – and which are made by under-represented filmmakers (the makers of the Unseen film team were predominantly disabled, undocumented, and LGBTQIA) – can have on audiences regardless of their background.

# Executive Summary of Key Findings

This section spotlights a selection of this study’s findings. See the “Full Report on Findings: A Closer Look” for a comprehensive analysis and reporting of the study’s results.

## On ‘Taking Actions’

* **The film inspired a significant majority of people who identified with a disability to want to improve their situation,** especially when compared to other audiences. A far greater percentage of surveyed participants who identified with a disability (83%) said they were “very likely”, “likely”, or “already did” take action to “improve their situation” because of the film – compared to just 67% of participants who did not identify with a disability. Similarly, 88% of participants who identified as undocumented said they were “very likely”, “likely”, or “already did” take action to improve their situation because of the film – compared to just 70% of participants who did not identify as undocumented.
* **The film increased confidence among audiences to share their experience with others, especially among undocumented audiences.** While 68% of participants said they had already shared their experience or were “very likely” or “likely” to share their own experiences with other people after the film, this was especially true for people who identified with disabilities (72%) or as undocumented (74%). This finding is particularly revealing since this study also found that 58% of undocumented respondents said they “rarely” or “never” speak to people who are not immediate friends or family about their experience.
* Every person who identified as undocumented (100%) said they either had already taken action or were ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ **to take action to improve things for others** because of the film, as did 87 percent of all audience members (89% of LGBTQIA+ and 91% of participants who identified with a disability indicated interest improving things for others because of the film).
* **The majority of audiences (52%) felt that the film was life changing.** Audiences with disabilities felt similarly as those without disabilities (54% and 52%). Undocumented audiences (86%), however, were twice as likely as those who were not undocumented (48%) to say they could see the film changing their lives.
* Across all types of screenings, interviews with screening partners revealed several examples of direct impact. Several interview participants noted how audience members shared an interest in creating meaningful action after the screenings. At one university in Philadelphia, for instance, a professor was approached by students who wanted to start an organization for students with disabilities on campus, as a direct result of a film screening. In another screening, in Washington DC, an audience member approached the organizer to say that she felt that she could “advocate for herself more by seeing so many people being around so many people that had disabilities and were in community

in that way.” After a screening in Southern California, another organizer noted how an undocumented audience member with a disability approached her after one screening and said that the film brought him “hope that I can exist and thrive in this country.”

* The majority of participants, across identities of race and ethnicity, expressed an interest in taking “action” to improve things for themselves (72%) and others (87%) after the film.

## On Changing Perspectives and Raising Awareness on Important Issues

* **The film helped change the perspectives of audiences who did not have shared lived experience with the events and identities featured in the film and those who did have shared lived experience.** This study found that a majority of audience members (83%), regardless of their background, felt that the film “made me think differently about an important issue”. More than three-quarters of people with no lived experience being undocumented (77%) and those with experience being undocumented (84%) feel that the film made them “think differently about an important issue. Similarly, large percentages of people who did not identify with a disability and those who did identify with a disability feel that the film made them think differently (84% and 82%, respectively).
* A notable majority of audience members (92%) felt that the film “made me more aware of an important issue.”
* Roughly half of respondents (48%) said they felt the film was relevant to their everyday life. These percentages were similar for those who identified with a disability (54%) and those who did not (46%). Those who identified as undocumented were significantly more likely to say the content was relevant to their everyday life (81% vs. 44%).
* **The majority of audience participants (85%) felt that the film “made them care more about an important issue,”** with no significant difference between those who identify with a disability (84%) and those who did not (86%).

## On Narrative Transportation, Representation and Personal Experience of Film

* **More than 9 in 10 audience participants (94%) felt “transported” into the film (across identities).**
* **The film was particularly immersive for audiences that identified with the experiences of the main protagonist, but it was also immersive for the majority of audiences of all backgrounds.** Audiences who identified with a disability were as likely as those who did not identify with a disability to say that they could “imagine themselves” in the film (59% vs 58%). Those identifying as undocumented were significantly more likely to say that they could “imagine themselves” in the events of the film than audiences who did not identify with the undocumented community (89% vs 55%).
* While exactly half of all audience members (50%) identified with Pedro in some way, undocumented audiences (89%), audiences with a disability (67%), and LGBTQIA+ audiences (60%) disproportionately shared identifying with Pedro.
* Another statistically significant finding in this research is revealed when looking at which audiences shared the feeling that they have similar challenges to Pedro. While less than half of all audience members (48%) said they face similar challenges to Pedro in their own life, about 83% of all undocumented audiences (vs. 44% documented) and 61% of audiences with disabilities (vs. 43% without disabilities) said they face similar challenges; the majority of LGBTQIA+ audiences (55% vs. 43% non-LGBTQIA+) also said they face similar challenges to Pedro.
* Slightly more than half (53%) of all participants identified with a character in the film. Participants who identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander (59%) or Latinx (63%) were significantly more likely to identify with a character in the film than other participant groups. Similarly, participants who identified as Latinx (58%) were significantly more likely than any other participant group to identify with Pedro. White/caucasian audiences were significantly less likely than participants who did not identify as white/caucasian to say they “identified with a character in this film” (38% vs. 61%), “can identify with Pedro” (37% vs. 56%), and “face some of the same challenges as Pedro” (32% vs. 55%).

## On Overcoming Challenges and Modeling Positive Changemakers

* The majority of all audiences liked how Pedro handled challenges (86%), with no significant difference between undocumented (92%) and documented (86%) audiences.
* The majority of all audiences shared that they wanted to be more like Pedro (70%). There appeared to be a tendency for audiences who identified as undocumented (83%) to say they wanted to be more like Pedro (compared to 68% for documented audiences).

## On Emotional Experience During Film

* **The film *Unseen* inspired a significantly greater emotional experience for audiences who identified as undocumented**. While the study found that these groups were the most likely to strongly feel both “positive” and “negative” emotions, the most felt emotions across groups were among the positive emotions. For instance, a majority of audiences (97%) experienced the emotion of “happiness” to some degree during the film, but this emotion was experienced more “deeply” and by a greater percentage of audiences who identified as undocumented compared to any other participant group. And, by contrast, while the majority of audiences (95%) also reported feeling “sadness” to some degree during the film, there appeared to be a tendency for this emotion to be experienced more by undocumented audiences than those with no experience being undocumented in the U.S.
* **Across audiences, “optimism” was the most commonly and strongly experienced emotion** (with 62% of audience participants reporting strongly experiencing optimism during the film), but it was particularly felt in audiences that identified as undocumented. Audience participants were almost twice as likely to report feeling optimism “deeply” during the film if they identified as undocumented (42% vs 23%), and they were significantly more likely to report experiencing this emotion in some way during the film if they identified as undocumented (86% vs 59%).
* **A significant majority of audiences (83%) felt that the film made them feel more hopeful about an important issue,** with 94% of undocumented audiences feeling that the film made them “more hopeful”.
* **About 91% of audiences reported experiencing a sense of “pride” during the film**. Of all the emotions, “pride” was the emotion experienced most “deeply” by audiences who identified as undocumented (51% vs 17%).
* **Catharsis was an emotion experienced strongly by nearly half of all audiences** (45%).

## On Additional Audience Perspectives on Documentaries

* **There is significant interest in documentaries and film among audiences with disabilities, and people who do not identify with a disability grossly underestimate the interest of people with disabilities in film.** While almost 1 in 2 people who identified with a disability (45%) said that “they strongly agree” that “many people with disability enjoy movies”, only about 1 in 4 people (29%) without a disability strongly believe this to be true. Similarly, while 72% of all respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” that “many people with disabilities enjoy movies”, significantly more people who identify with a disability (79%) believe this than people who do not (69%).
* **Nearly every audience participant (94%) said they felt it was meaningful to know that the filmmaker and main character had real life experience with a disability or being undocumented.**
* Screening partners felt that the film was most successful when a screening was organized in close coordination with an organization working in an immigration or disability-related space. On college campuses, the film was most successful when organized with student groups (especially with those who work in related spaces) and other centers and faculty. When the film was part of a general conference and not coordinated by an organization engaged in the issues of the film then attendance was lower.
* Small group discussions after the film – where the filmmaker and main protagonist could engage with student groups on issues of mental health, disability, and the undocumented experience – were among the most meaningful public engagements some interview participants recalled ever participating in.

**[Not included in this summary brief: The “Full Report” section, which include about 70 pages of graphs and the “full findings” from the study]**

## Research design: On Methodology and Inclusive Design

By centering undocumented immigrants with disabilities, this research endeavors to bring overdue attention to a community that is too often overlooked by research and to advocate for additional work and attention to be given to this community of filmmakers and audiences. To do this, the study investigates the influence of a recent film, *Unseen*, which features an openly undocumented migrant with a disability as its main protagonist.

# Inclusive Research Design Process

There are four considerations of inclusive research design, informed by preliminary interviews and a review of the literature around conducting research with people with disabilities, that serve as the formative values and starting point for this research study’s design:

* Recruit a diverse research team of people with lived experience with a disability and/or being undocumented.
* Ensure accessibility considerations are central to the design and implementation of the survey and research instruments.
* Ensure appropriate language and translation is used throughout the process by working with a diverse research team that is mindful of these considerations.
* Properly pay/compensate research team members who contribute to this research and work on responsive timelines that serve the needs and priorities of the research team in order to ensure as full participation as possible.

With these considerations motivating the design process of this research, the research design process can be explored through six steps.

First, preliminary interviews were conducted with the *Unseen* film team, to learn of any early concerns and priorities of the film team and its impact planning. This step was central to ensuring that the research was responsive to both the needs and interests of the film team, alongside the independent research team behind this study. These early conversations also established open communication with the film team so that their expertise and experience could inform the research at every step of its journey.

Second, the research team spoke with relevant organizations that work in the space of disability and immigrant rights in order to gain a preliminary perspective of their interests in the film and in the issues it centers. These early conversations helped the researchers to identify keywords and issues for further exploration in a literature review.

Third, an experienced research team with lived experience and expertise in being undocumented and/or having a disability was recruited. These accomplished researchers were identified through referrals from the *Unseen* film team and following interviews with each researcher. Each researcher who was recruited for the research team had demonstrated track-records of publishing academic and/or public-facing work in the areas of this research.

Fourth, an extensive literature review was conducted by the research team using the following key words and intersections of interest:

### Intersections/Broad Categories of interest

* + Intersection of undocumented and disabled experiences
  + Inclusive of most recent research about the issues, challenges, and experiences concerning these intersecting communities
  + Special attention to social determinants of health issues and of health access/services
  + Special attention to policy issues
  + Special attention to social work and social program services and issues
  + Intersection of Documentary and Media research with Undocumented audiences - i.e. any studies on films/media focused on undocumented issues and people? Any studies on how undocumented people are experiencing media and documentaries about them?
  + Intersection of documentary and media research with audiences with disabilities
  + Same questions as above – with special attention to blind and low-vision audiences
  + Research on best practices for conducting research with undocumented audiences
  + Research on best practices for conducting research with people with disabilities (special focus on blind and low vision communities)

### Select Keywords (inclusive of but not limited to these words)

* + Audience Research
  + Disability audience(s)
  + Undocumented audience(s)
  + Media
  + Documentary
  + Disability
  + Blind
  + Low-vision
  + Health Access
  + Undocumented
  + Accessibility

Fifth, following the literature review and preliminary interviews, a set of key questions (including overall research, survey, and focus group questions) were identified.

Finally, before data collection began, a process of question prioritization and accessible survey design ensured that the survey was pre-tested and reviewed for accessibility considerations by the research and unseen film teams.

# Research methods:

* Post-screening survey with audience members (in select screenings)
* In-depth interviews with film team and participating organizations