

The "Big World" in the "Vertical Screen": A Study of the Types of Chinese Online Short Dramas

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Abstract: With the ubiquity of smartphones and short-video platforms, “vertical” micro-dramas-serialized episodes under 15 minutes-have emerged as a novel narrative form between short clips and full-length web dramas. Drawing on textual analysis, this paper examines representative micro-dramas on platforms such as TikTok (Douyin), Kuaishou, and WeChat Channels. It first defines the concept and evolution of vertical micro-dramas, then identifies four main genres-urban romance, historical/fantasy romance, suspense/thriller, and workplace dramas-highlighting their narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and emotional appeal. The study also explores the production-consumption ecosystem shaped by platform algorithms, fragmented viewing habits, and hybrid monetization (subscription plus advertising). Finally, it addresses challenges of content homogenization and audience fatigue, proposing deeper thematic exploration, strengthened creative governance, and a shift toward high-quality production. The findings underscore how “vertical” micro-dramas, though brief, offer a “big world” of narrative potential, enriching contemporary media ecology and storytelling practice.

Keywords: Vertical Screen Short Drama; Genre Research; Narrative Strategy; Algorithm Recommendation; Content Homogeneity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of mobile internet and 5G technology has made smartphones the primary content consumption device for the public. According to iiMedia Research (2023), the number of short video users in China has surpassed one billion, making fragmented viewing a normalized behavior. Against this backdrop, micro-dramas have rapidly grown on short-video platforms due to

their short, efficient, and fast-paced narrative style. The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) initially defined micro-dramas as web-based videos under 10 minutes per episode in 2020. However, by 2022, this threshold was extended to 15 minutes. This change reflected industry feedback regarding narrative limitations under the 10-minute cap, as well as growing viewer tolerance for slightly longer short-form content. The revised regulation aimed to provide creators with more flexibility for character development and plot expansion while maintaining a compact narrative structure. This adjustment significantly influenced genre evolution-allowing suspense and historical crossover dramas, in particular, to incorporate more layered storytelling and thematic complexity without departing from the micro-drama format.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

- (1) How can the concept and development of “vertical-screen micro-dramas” be clearly defined?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and emotional mobilization among the four major genres (urban romance, historical/fantasy crossover, suspense/thriller, and workplace/entrepreneurship)?
- (3) How do platform algorithms, user habits, and commercial models shape the production-consumption ecosystem of micro-dramas?
- (4) How can the issues of content homogenization and aesthetic fatigue caused by genre-based production be addressed?

2.2 Research Methods

- (1) Textual Analysis:

Sample Selection Criteria

This study selected a total of 20 vertical-screen micro-dramas as research samples. These were

drawn from top-ranked lists on Douyin, Kuaishou, and WeChat Channels between 2022 and 2024. Selection criteria included:

Popularity (as measured by views, likes, and reposts)

Platform recommendation frequency

Genre representativeness based on prior academic categorization (urban romance, historical/fantasy crossover, suspense/thriller, and workplace/entrepreneurship).

The sample set aimed to cover a balanced distribution across the four dominant genres to ensure comprehensive typological analysis and validity of narrative comparison.

The focus lies in deconstructing narrative patterns (e.g., “instant conflict” in urban dramas), visual expressions (e.g., close-ups optimized for vertical screens), and connections with real-life topics.

Industry Ecosystem Analysis:

This includes the study of regulatory policies (e.g., duration guidelines from NRTA) and platform mechanisms (e.g., algorithmic recommendation, monetization through subscription and ads). Industry reports (such as user data from iiMedia) are used to validate the trend of fragmented consumption.

Critical Reflection:

Drawing on cross-sector case studies (e.g., idol talent shows, tourism product fatigue) to demonstrate genre-related challenges and proposing solutions such as “creative governance” and deeper cultural exploration.

Genre Studies Consensus

Current genre research largely agrees on the four dominant types of vertical micro-dramas:

(1) Urban Romance - characterized by real-life themes and compact storylines [6-7];

(2) Historical/Fantasy Crossover - defined by logically closed-loop narratives that merge past and present [8];

(3) Suspense/Thriller - optimized for vertical attention and fragmented dissemination [9];

(4) Workplace/Entrepreneurship - marked by standardized character types aligned with audience psychology [10-11].

At the same time, the field has identified several critical industry issues. For instance, content homogenization has caused aesthetic fatigue, as observed in cases such as idol talent shows and tourism content [12-13]. This creates a contradiction between fast-paced consumer demands and the sameness of available content [15].

To address this, scholars propose several innovation paths: cross-genre fusion, user-centered customization, and deeper integration of cultural elements are seen as key strategies for breaking the cycle of sameness and revitalizing the genre ecosystem [16].

3. Domestic Research

With the evolution of mobile communication technology and the shift in media consumption habits, vertical videos have emerged to accommodate user preferences for fragmented content. In May 2020, Tencent WeSee released Mo Yu Xuan Qi, the first vertical interactive costume micro-drama in China. Combining "interaction + vertical screen + short video," it marked a creative step in the production of interactive web dramas and provided a reference model for future development[1].

In terms of narrative technique, vertical-screen micro-dramas often emphasize a sense of "immediate satisfaction" with highly patterned or formulaic mini-narratives. For example, in romantic micro-dramas, rapid plot advancement and strong conflict are often used to capture the audience's attention in a short time. The vertical format itself also changes how information is visually composed and presented. Frequent use of close-up shots highlights facial expressions and details, enhancing emotional expression and accelerating narrative rhythm[2].

In terms of platform support, major video platforms have successively launched development plans for vertical micro-dramas, such as Tencent WeSee's "Mars Mini Drama." These initiatives offer funding and traffic incentives to encourage the creation of high-quality content and promote a refined content ecosystem [3].

4. International Research

Although international research on vertical-screen micro-dramas began later than in China, growing global interest in vertical video content has led to increased scholarly attention. In terms of communication effects, vertical micro-dramas have demonstrated strong reach and influence. Not only do they attract large viewership, but they also have the capacity to guide audience values and behaviors. Some works promote positive social values and have been effective in enhancing brand awareness through narrative-based marketing campaigns [4].

In terms of audience characteristics, the international audience for vertical-screen micro-dramas is diverse in age, gender, and location. Younger viewers-particularly teenagers-show higher acceptance of this content form, as it fits their preference for mobile-first, short-form media. Gender-based differences are also notable: female audiences tend to prefer romantic or lifestyle genres, while male audiences lean toward action or sci-fi content[5].

5. Genre Analysis of Vertical-Screen Micro-Dramas

(1) Urban Romance

Urban romance vertical-screen micro-dramas are characterized by a compact and efficient narrative structure. Due to time constraints, these dramas often skip lengthy exposition and quickly introduce conflicts to capture the audience's attention. As Liu Chuanxi and Gao Hongbo note, micro-dramas must cater to audiences' fragmented viewing habits by delivering emotional depth within a short runtime. For instance, an episode may open with immediate misunderstandings between protagonists, establishing emotional stakes without delay. This format satisfies the fast-paced entertainment needs of modern urban audiences [6].

Moreover, urban romance dramas often incorporate real-life elements to enhance authenticity and relatability. As Feng Yingfei points out, vertical micro-dramas frequently mirror everyday struggles such as workplace stress, relationship challenges, and housing difficulties. Viewers can empathize with characters who face dual pressures in both love and career, which fosters emotional resonance and prompts reflection on real-life experiences[7].

(2) Historical/Fantasy Crossover

A clear and coherent logic of time travel is essential for historical or fantasy crossover dramas. These narratives usually begin with a defined mechanism-such as a mysterious heirloom, ancient rituals, or rare cosmic phenomena-that initiates the time leap. Once established, the story must maintain internal consistency. For example, in *Scarlet Heart*, the protagonist travels to the Qing Dynasty due to a car accident combined with a mystical jade pendant, and the subsequent plot revolves around this origin. Similarly, vertical micro-dramas in this genre must clearly explain

how the crossover occurs, ensuring that elements like ancient texts or research settings are introduced early to maintain narrative credibility [8].

Additionally, the integration of ancient and modern storylines must be tightly woven. The protagonist's actions in the past should reflect modern values and knowledge, while experiences in the ancient context should reshape their present worldview. For instance, a modern architect who time travels to a historical period might use contemporary design knowledge to solve local issues, while simultaneously gaining inspiration from traditional aesthetics that influences their modern work. This bidirectional linkage strengthens the narrative's logic and thematic cohesion.

(3) Suspense/Thriller

From a promotional perspective, production companies and platforms adopt precise targeting strategies to reach suspense enthusiasts. Some platforms have even launched dedicated channels or curated playlists for suspense-themed micro-dramas. These works often highlight dramatic tension and key mystery elements in previews and teasers to maximize viewer intrigue. Additionally, social media campaigns spark discussions and viewer engagement, thereby expanding reach. As noted by Hu Yun and Zhang Ping, the integration of behind-the-scenes footage, trailers, and user comments into Douyin's ecosystem helps generate momentum for full-episode viewership[9].

The vertical screen format reconfigures the narrative space in suspense micro-dramas. By focusing on individual characters and confined settings, it emphasizes key visual details and clues. Given that mobile users often watch during fragmented time slots, this concentrated spatial narrative style allows vital plot points to be delivered effectively within short attention spans, enhancing suspense and immersive tension.

(4) Workplace/Entrepreneurship

In workplace and entrepreneurship micro-dramas, character construction is distinct and often highly representative. Protagonists are typically individuals with strong entrepreneurial aspirations, resilience, and strategic thinking. According to Li Jie and Chen Xuguang, standardized character types-such as the self-made innovator or the underdog who defies

the odds-are frequently used to foster identification and emotional investment. A common trope features protagonists from humble backgrounds who leverage their professional skills and perseverance to succeed in highly competitive environments[10]

This genre also reflects diverse audience psychology. It appeals to young professionals, aspiring entrepreneurs, and those interested in commercial narratives. For entry-level workers, such stories may offer practical knowledge and motivational cues. For experienced professionals, they provide emotional resonance and strategic insight[11]

6. Typological Challenges and Content Reflection

6.1 Aesthetic Fatigue Under Genre Constraints

In the media content landscape, the oversaturation of similar formats and narratives often leads to declining audience interest. Idol talent shows are a prime example. Shi Qianping points out that although these shows initially gained massive popularity after being imported from South Korea, their excessive replication and formulaic content have triggered widespread audience fatigue. Viewers have criticized such programs for lacking cultural substance and being overly commercialized [12]

A similar pattern is seen in the tourism sector. As Wang Meiqin, Yang Xiaozhong, and Peng Min note, with the popularization and routinization of tourism, many products can no longer meet the evolving aesthetic expectations of tourists. Signs of aesthetic fatigue include diminished interest in participation and even psychological rejection of certain travel activities[13]. The same issue affects online variety shows. Gu Shubo explains that many programs face homogeneity-driven fatigue, which hinders their progression toward high-quality development.

From a content perspective, genre-based overproduction leads to creative stagnation. In genre fiction, for instance, predictable plots and character tropes can exhaust reader interest. As society evolves, audience tastes become increasingly sophisticated, and single-genre content often fails to meet diverse expectations.

6.2 The Contradiction Between Content Homogenization and Rapid Consumption

(1) Current Situation of Content Homogenization

A large number of media content products show striking similarities in theme, form, and aesthetic style. In the context of new consumer brands, Xiang Yuanzhi observes that as online traffic dividends decline, brand differentiation becomes more difficult. Many emerging brands are losing visibility and falling behind due to excessive sameness [15] Likewise, traditional garden tourism destinations have begun to show signs of visual fatigue, as tourists become desensitized to repeated scenery.

(2) Characteristics of Fast-Paced Consumption

In modern society, people live and consume at an accelerated pace. They seek fresh, high-quality content that can be consumed in short bursts. On short video platforms, users often scroll through dozens of clips in quick succession, abandoning any video that fails to capture their interest within the first few seconds.

(3) Consequences of the Contradiction

When content becomes too homogeneous to meet the novelty demands of fast-paced consumers, platforms risk losing their audiences. On music streaming platforms, for example, if recommendations become repetitive, users may migrate to competitors offering more diverse selections. This trend not only threatens the growth of individual products or platforms but also endangers the health of the broader media ecosystem.

6.3 Innovation Strategies and Development Potential

(1) Innovation Pathways

Cross-Genre Integration: Blending elements from different genres can generate new and engaging formats. For example, mixing suspense with comedy creates a hybrid form that satisfies viewers' curiosity while relieving narrative tension through humor. Such genre fusion is increasingly common in film and has been well-received by audiences.

User-Centered Innovation: Understanding audience needs through data analytics allows creators to tailor content more precisely. Platforms can recommend personalized content based on watch history and search behavior, while creators can use this data to inform topic selection and narrative direction.

Cultural Depth Exploration: Tapping into traditional or regional culture adds richness to

genre innovation. In the luxury branding industry, Bai Shizhen, Yin Yue, and Lü Shuang suggest that aligning with cultural narratives can help decouple consumer perceptions of luxury from purely Western imagery. This illustrates how cultural mining can support both creativity and identity[14]

(2) Innovation Potential

The potential for genre innovation is vast. From a market perspective, fresh content formats attract broader audiences and open up new commercial opportunities. For example, interactive storytelling has gained traction among younger users and revitalized interest in digital media. From a cultural perspective, incorporating traditional motifs into new genres promotes cultural dissemination and enhances cultural soft power. By embedding heritage into innovative formats, creators can foster appreciation of local traditions while staying relevant.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Through textual analysis and industry research, this study systematically explores the genre framework and the production-consumption ecosystem of Chinese vertical-screen micro-dramas. The findings reveal that, under the logic of “short, fast, and engaging” storytelling, four dominant genres have emerged—urban romance, historical/fantasy crossover, suspense/thriller, and workplace/entrepreneurship. These genres often blend with diverse thematic elements to cater to a wide range of audience preferences. Simultaneously, platform algorithms, fragmented viewing contexts, and monetization models based on both subscriptions and advertisements collectively form the foundation of distribution and profitability for micro-dramas. However, the rise of genre-based production has also brought about significant challenges. Content homogenization and aesthetic fatigue are increasingly threatening the sustainable growth of the industry. To address these issues, this study recommends strategies such as deepening thematic content, strengthening creative governance, and steering production toward refinement and high quality. Looking forward, future research could focus on audience reception studies and cross-platform interaction mechanisms to assess how different ecosystem variables influence the performance of micro-dramas. In addition, further examination

of the long-term impact of policy changes and platform-driven funding initiatives could offer deeper insights into the structural evolution of the industry. In conclusion, although vertical-screen micro-dramas are brief in duration, they offer expansive potential in both storytelling and commercial innovation. As a compact yet dynamic narrative form, they provide valuable insights into the development of contemporary media ecologies and deserve continued scholarly and professional attention.

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