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A Qualitative Study on College Students' Short Video Consumption Experience-A Grounded Analysis Based on In-depth Interviews

Hanshuo Li
Tourism English Major, Zaozhuang University, Zaozhuang, China

Abstract: With the rapid development of mobile internet technology and the full popularization of smart phones, short videos have become an indispensable way for college students to obtain information and seek entertainment in daily life. Adopting qualitative research methods, this study conducted in-depth interviews with 15 college students to collect first-hand interview data, and carried out systematic analysis by using the three-level coding method of grounded theory, including open coding, axial coding and selective coding. This research aims to reveal the main contents, core characteristics and influencing factors of college students' short video consumption experience. The findings show that college students' short video consumption experience presents a multi-dimensional and multi-level structural feature, which mainly includes five core dimensions: sensory pleasure experience, emotional resonance experience, cognitive enlightenment experience, social interaction experience and immersion and loss-of-control experience. Further analysis indicates that individual factors (usage motivation, media literacy), content factors (content quality, type matching), platform factors (algorithm recommendation, interactive design) and environmental factors (social atmosphere, life rhythm) jointly affect the process of college students' short video consumption experience. This study not only enriches the theoretical connotation in the field of short video user research, but also provides practical references for college students to use short videos rationally, for universities to carry out media literacy education, and for the optimized development of short video platforms.

Keywords: Short Videos; College Students; Consumption Experience; Qualitative Research; Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the current digital era, short videos have become one of the most influential media forms. According to the statistical report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of short video users in China exceeded 1 billion in 2024, and the average daily usage duration of users keeps increasing [1]. Among all user groups, college students are the most active users of short videos. Featuring rich content, relaxed forms and easy access, short videos have been deeply embedded in college students' daily life scenarios, and become an important channel for them to relax, kill fragmented time, acquire information and carry out social interaction [6].

However, while short videos exert a profound influence on college students' lives, they have also triggered a series of noteworthy problems. Excessive indulgence in short videos commonly leads to decreased learning efficiency, distracted attention and out-of-control time management among college students. Meanwhile, the uneven quality of short video content and the "filter bubble" effect brought by algorithm recommendations also pose challenges to college students' media literacy and value judgment ability. Against this background, an in-depth understanding of college students' real experience in using short videos and an exploration of the internal mechanism behind the formation of such experience are of great practical significance for guiding college students to use short videos rationally and improving their media literacy.

1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

Based on the above research background, this study adopts qualitative research methods to deeply explore the content structure, core characteristics and influencing factors of college

students' short video consumption experience. Specifically, this research intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What kind of consumption experience do college students generate in the process of using short videos?

RQ2: What are the main characteristics of these experiences?

RQ3: What factors affect college students' short video consumption experience?

The theoretical significance of this study lies in the following aspects. Firstly, it conducts research on short videos from the perspective of consumption experience, making up for the deficiency that existing studies mostly focus on behavioral level while ignoring users' experience. Secondly, this research adopts qualitative methods and obtains college students' subjective accounts through in-depth interviews, providing a new research perspective for understanding the relationship between short videos and college students. Thirdly, it constructs a theoretical framework of college students' short video consumption experience based on grounded theory, which enriches the theoretical achievements in the field of short video user research.

In terms of practical significance: First, it helps college students clearly understand their own status of using short videos and the relationship between experience and behavior, so as to arrange the time spent on short videos more rationally. Second, it provides reference based on students' real experience for universities to carry out media literacy education and mental health education. Third, it offers user-oriented suggestions for the content optimization and ecological construction of short video platforms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research on Short Videos

Short videos refer to video content that usually lasts from several seconds to several minutes, takes mobile intelligent terminals as the main communication carrier, and spreads relying on social media platforms. In recent years, research on short videos has become an important topic in the field of new media research. Existing research achievements are mainly carried out from the following dimensions.

In terms of content form, researchers focus on the fragmented narration and visual presentation characteristics of short videos, as well as their mechanism of competing for users' attention [2]. The short and concise form of short videos caters to users' fragmented information acquisition habits in the mobile internet era and lowers the threshold of content consumption. In terms of algorithm recommendation, a large number of studies have discussed how the intelligent recommendation algorithms of short video platforms affect users' content selection and behavioral decisions [3]. While algorithm recommendations improve user experience, they also raise concerns about "filter bubbles" and algorithm dependence [4]. From the perspective of user behavior, most existing studies adopt quantitative methods such as questionnaires to investigate users' usage duration, usage frequency, usage motivation and other behavioral characteristics [5]. Previous studies have found that entertainment, information acquisition and social interaction are the main motivations for users to use short videos [7].

Nevertheless, most existing studies on short videos stay at the behavioral level, and rarely explore users' subjective experience in the process of using short videos. User behavior and user experience are two related but different concepts: behavior is an observable and measurable external manifestation, while experience refers to users' inner feelings, cognition and emotional reactions. To understand the real impact of short videos on college students, it is necessary to deepen the research from behavioral research to experiential research.

2.2 Research on Consumption Experience

Research on consumption experience originates from the Experience Economy theory. In the book The Experience Economy, Pine and Gilmore pointed out [8] that experience is the fourth economic offering after products, commodities and services. It takes services as the stage and commodities as props to immerse consumers and leave them unique memories. This theory provides a new perspective for understanding the consumption process of products or services.

In terms of the division of consumption experience dimensions, Schmitt divided consumption experience into five types from the perspective of strategic experiential modules: sense experience, feel experience, think experience, act experience and relate experience [9]. This classification framework lays a

theoretical foundation for analyzing users' multi-dimensional experience. In the field of media consumption experience, researchers have begun to pay attention to the unique experiential characteristics of users in the digital media environment. Concepts such as immersion experience, flow experience and usage satisfaction have been widely applied in the research on internet usage behavior.

In general, existing research on consumption experience mainly focuses on traditional fields such as commodity shopping and tourism services. There are relatively few studies applying it to new media scenarios such as short videos, especially in-depth qualitative analysis targeting college students.

2.3 Research on Short Video Consumption Experience

Academic research directly themed on short video consumption experience is relatively scarce. Most existing relevant studies adopt quantitative methods such as questionnaires to investigate users' satisfaction, usage attitude or emotional response towards short videos. Some studies point out that users have both positive and negative emotional experiences when using short videos: positive experiences include relaxation, pleasure and pastime; negative experiences include boredom, tiredness, anxiety and remorse.

To sum up, existing researches have the following deficiencies. First, quantitative researches are dominant, and qualitative researches that obtain users' real accounts through in-depth interviews are insufficient. Second, the underlying causes, processes and individual differences behind experience are not explored thoroughly. Third, few studies adopt systematic theoretical frameworks to carry out structural analysis on short video consumption experience. On this basis, this study adopts qualitative research methods and uses grounded theory to systematically analyze in-depth interview data, so as to understand the essence and structure of college students' short video consumption experience more comprehensively and profoundly.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Method and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts qualitative research methods and takes grounded theory as the core analytical framework. Grounded theory was first proposed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967[10]. It emphasizes that theories should be generated from field data rather than deduced through hypothesis. The analytical process of grounded theory mainly includes three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding [11]. Open coding decomposes, compares and conceptualizes raw data to extract initial concepts and categories. Axial coding identifies logical relationships among categorized concepts. Selective coding locates the core category, connects it with other categories, and forms a complete theoretical system.

This methodology is highly suitable for the present research. This study aims to explore college students' subjective and implicit consumption experience, which lacks mature theoretical hypotheses in advance. Different from quantitative research that verifies preset assumptions, grounded theory generates theories bottom-up from original interview data, which perfectly matches the exploratory nature of this research. It helps sort out the internal structure and formation mechanism of users' experience from rich first-hand information.

3.2 Research Participants and Interview Design

This study selects interviewees by combining purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The selection criteria are as follows: First, the interviewees are full-time college students, including undergraduates and postgraduates; Second, they have certain experience in using short videos (at least once a week); Third, they are willing and able to clearly express their feelings about usage. To ensure the richness and representativeness of samples, diversity in gender, major, grade and usage frequency is fully considered during sampling.

Finally, a total of 15 college students were interviewed, including 8 males and 7 females, 10 undergraduates and 5 postgraduates, covering liberal arts, science, engineering and other majors. The age of the interviewees ranges from 19 to 25 years old, with an average age of about 22. One-on-one interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted about 45 to 90 minutes. The interview outline mainly includes the following themes: basic situation of daily short video usage, specific scenarios and feelings in usage, experiential differences of different types

of short videos, positive and negative experiences brought by short videos, the impact of short videos on study, life and emotions, and reflections on personal short video usage behavior.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Process

With the consent of the interviewees, all interviews were recorded. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed into verbatim texts and carefully proofread to ensure the accuracy of transcription. Approximately 180,000 words of interview text data were obtained in the end.

The constant comparative method was adopted for data analysis. Firstly, open coding was conducted to analyze the interview data sentence by sentence, extract initial concepts and form preliminary categories. Secondly, axial coding was implemented to further summarize and integrate on the basis of preliminary categories, form main categories and subcategories, and clarify the logical relationships among categories. Finally, selective coding was carried out to identify the core category, establish systematic connections among all categories and form an integrated theoretical framework.

To ensure the reliability and validity of this research, the following measures were adopted [12]: collecting abundant first-hand data through in-depth interviews; conducting theoretical sampling and data supplement throughout the analysis process; inviting peers to independently test the coding results; and feeding back the research results to the interviewees for verification.

4. Research Findings and Analysis

4.1 Dimensional Structure of College Students' Short Video Consumption Experience

Through grounded theory analysis of interview data, this study summarizes five core dimensions of college students' short video consumption experience: sensory pleasure experience, emotional resonance experience, cognitive enlightenment experience, social interaction experience and immersion and loss-of-control experience. These five dimensions jointly form the complete structure of college students' short video consumption experience.

4.1.1 Sensory pleasure experience

Sensory pleasure experience refers to the audiovisual satisfaction obtained by college students in the process of watching short videos. Interview data show that the visual presentation, music and sound effects, content rhythm and other factors of short videos jointly shape users' sensory pleasure experience. Many interviewees mentioned that the appealing visuals, pleasant sounds and comfortable rhythm of short videos are important reasons for them to keep watching. One interviewee said: "I like watching rhythm-cut videos very much. The perfect match of music and pictures is really attractive, which makes me feel excited." The sensory pleasure experience constitutes the basic layer of college students' short video consumption experience, and it is also the direct motivation to attract continuous usage.

4.1.2 Emotional resonance experience

Emotional resonance experience refers to the emotional identification and emotional infection generated by college students when watching short videos. The research finds that many college students tend to watch content that can arouse emotional resonance, such as inspirational stories, emotional clips and life records. When the content of short videos is consistent with the audience's life experience and values, it will trigger strong emotional resonance experience. An interviewee stated: "Sometimes I watch creators sharing their daily lives. Though these are ordinary things, I can totally relate to them and feel healed after watching." Beyond simple entertainment, emotional resonance experience makes short videos a way for college students to express emotions and adjust mentality.

4.1.3 Cognitive enlightenment experience

Cognitive enlightenment experience means the knowledge acquisition, skill improvement and ideological inspiration gained by college students while watching short videos. Many interviewees said that besides entertaining content, they also actively search for learning, skill and popular science short videos. One interviewee commented: "I follow some learning bloggers. I can master a small skill just by watching one short video, which is really practical." The research also finds that cognitive enlightenment experience is closely related to users' active learning behavior. Users with clear learning purposes are more likely to gain cognitive satisfaction. This experience meets college students' demand for knowledge and growth, and makes short videos a convenient

channel for knowledge acquisition.

4.1.4 Social interaction experience

Social interaction experience refers to the interpersonal connection and sense of participation established by college students through short videos. The research shows that college students' social interaction via short videos is mainly reflected in the following aspects: first, interacting with short video creators through likes, comments, rewards and follows; second, interacting with other users in comment areas such as replying to comments and participating in topic discussions; third, sharing interesting short videos with friends and classmates in real life. An interviewee said: "I often share interesting videos in group chats with classmates. We discuss and talk about them together, which gives me a strong sense of participation." Social interaction experience turns individual video-watching behavior into group social activities and meets college students' social needs.

4.1.5 Immersion and loss-of-control experience

Immersion and loss-of-control experience is a negative experience manifested as attention indulgence and time out of control when college students use short videos. The research finds that many interviewees have had the experience of "being unable to stop scrolling"-they intended to watch for a while, but spent two or three hours unconsciously. This kind of experience is often accompanied by negative emotions such as regret and self-blame. Interview data indicate that the continuous push mechanism of algorithm recommendation is an important cause of immersion and loss of control. Short video platforms continuously push content matching users' preferences through accurate algorithms, making users keep watching unconsciously. Immersion and loss-of-control experience reflects the negative impact in short video consumption, and also indicates the necessity of rational usage.

4.2 Factors Influencing College Students' Short Video Consumption Experience

Four categories of factors jointly shape consumption experience, organized in the factor-evidence-outcome structure as below.

4.2.1 Individual factors

Factor: Usage motivation and media literacy.

Evidence: Users with entertainment-oriented goals prioritize sensory enjoyment; learners focus on knowledge output. Students with higher media literacy hold rational attitudes towards online content.

Outcome: Usage motivation determines the dominant type of experience; media literacy reduces negative feelings caused by improper content or algorithm guidance.

4.2.2 Content factors

Factor: Content quality and matching degree between content types and user demands.

Evidence: Production quality, information authenticity and value orientation affect viewing feelings. Entertainment, popular science and life-related content are the most popular among college students.

Outcome: High-quality content brings positive experience, while vulgar or false content triggers dissatisfaction. Higher matching degree between content and personal demands improves overall satisfaction.

4.2.3 Platform factors

Factor: Algorithm recommendation and interactive design.

Evidence: Accurate algorithm push improves content matching, yet easily creates filter bubbles and prolonged viewing. Like, comment and collection functions enhance user participation.

Outcome: Recommendation systems exert dual effects on user experience; reasonable interactive design strengthens users' sense of belonging, while excessive interactive reminders disturb viewing rhythm.

4.2.4 Environmental factors

Factor: Social atmosphere and life rhythm.

Evidence: Peer behaviors in dormitories and classes influence individual usage habits. Students tend to watch short videos for relaxation under heavy academic pressure, while excessive use often occurs in free time.

Outcome: Micro social environments shape usage habits; changes in life rhythm alter users' experience state and usage duration.

4.3 Theoretical Model of College Students' Short Video Consumption Experience

Based on the above analysis, this study constructs a theoretical model of college students' short video consumption experience. The model presents a three-layer structure of "influencing factors-experience dimensions-behavioral outcomes".

The first layer is the influencing factor layer, including individual factors (usage motivation, media literacy), content factors (content quality,

type matching), platform factors (algorithm recommendation, interactive design) and environmental factors (social atmosphere, life rhythm). These factors jointly act on the formation process of consumption experience.

The second layer is the experience dimension layer, namely the five-dimensional structure of college students' short video consumption experience: sensory pleasure experience, emotional resonance experience, cognitive enlightenment experience, social interaction experience and immersion and loss-of-control experience. These five dimensions reflect college students' subjective feelings in the process of using short videos from different aspects.

The third layer is the behavioral outcome layer, including positive behavioral outcomes (active learning, social sharing, emotion regulation) and negative behavioral outcomes (academic procrastination, time waste, mood fluctuation). There is a complex corresponding relationship between experience dimensions and behavioral outcomes: positive experiences such as sensory pleasure, emotional resonance, cognitive enlightenment and social interaction mainly lead to positive behavioral outcomes; while immersion and loss-of-control experience mainly results in negative behavioral outcomes.

5. Conclusions and Discussions

5.1 Research Conclusions

This study adopts qualitative research methods, conducts in-depth interviews with 15 college students and applies the three-level coding of grounded theory for analysis. Corresponding to the three research questions, the conclusions are presented as follows:

In response to RQ1: College students form five types of consumption experience when using short videos, including four positive dimensions (sensory pleasure, emotional resonance, cognitive enlightenment, social interaction) and one negative dimension (immersion and loss-of-control). The five dimensions build the complete system of users' subjective experience.

In response to RQ2: The overall experience presents multi-dimensional and multi-level characteristics. Different dimensions correspond to users' sensory, emotional, cognitive and social demands respectively, and positive and negative experiences often coexist in the whole usage process.

In response to RQ3: Consumption experience is affected by four interrelated factors: individual factors, content factors, platform factors and environmental factors. All factors interact with one another and jointly determine the quality and state of users' experience.

In addition, this study establishes a complete theoretical model with the logical chain of "influencing factors-experience dimensions-behavioral outcomes", which clarifies the whole formation process of short video consumption experience.

5.2 Practical Suggestions

Based on the research findings, this study puts forward the following practical suggestions:

For college students: Enhance self-awareness, consciously identify personal usage motivation and experience state, and avoid falling into the negative experience of immersion and loss of control. Formulate a reasonable schedule for short video usage, and balance short video watching with study, sports, social activities and other arrangements. At the same time, improve personal media literacy, view short video content critically, and avoid being influenced by algorithm recommendations.

For universities: Incorporate short video-related media literacy education into the student development education system. Carry out lectures, workshops, publicity activities and other forms of education to help students correctly understand the advantages and disadvantages of short videos and cultivate rational usage ability. Meanwhile, give play to the influence of peer groups, and encourage student leaders and opinion leaders to spread healthy media usage concepts in dormitories, classes and other scenarios.

For short video platforms: Undertake corresponding social responsibilities, and pay attention to users' physical and mental health while pursuing commercial interests. Optimize the algorithm recommendation mechanism to meet users' needs while avoiding excessive induction; add usage duration reminder functions; improve the protection functions such as youth mode, so as to create a healthier usage environment for young users including college students.

5.3 Research Limitations and Prospects

This study has the following limitations. First, the sample scope is limited. All interviewees are

selected from a single university, so the generalization of research conclusions needs further verification. Future research can expand the sample scope and include college students from different regions and different types of universities. Second, this study adopts a cross-sectional research design, which cannot capture the dynamic changes of college students' short video consumption experience. Longitudinal tracking research can be adopted in future studies to explore the evolution rules of experience. Third, this study mainly focuses on the common characteristics of college student groups, with relatively limited analysis on individual differences. Future research can further explore the experiential differences among different types of college students.

Future research can be further deepened in the following directions: First, combine qualitative research and quantitative research, develop measurement scales for college students' short video consumption experience, and conduct large-sample empirical tests. Second, introduce perspectives from psychology, management and other disciplines to enrich the theoretical connotation of short video related research. Third, pay attention to the impact of the development of short video technologies (such as the integration of short videos with e-commerce and live streaming) on consumption experience. Fourth, explore ways to improve college students' short video usage experience through educational intervention and platform design optimization.

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