

Narrative and aesthetic features of micro-short plays on short video platforms: -A case study of Douyin micro-short plays

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Abstract. With the trend of decentralization, fragmentation and popularization of media communication, “micro-short plays”, which integrate the characteristics of short videos and TV dramas, emerge at the opportune moment. They have since developed a unique narrative system and aesthetic style. With the Douyin platform as an example, the narrative characteristics of micro-short plays are closely related to the platform and media characteristics of short videos. As for narrative objects, micro-short plays present a weakening of the environment and the focus of characters. They pursue a “fast-paced” and “refreshing” structure and plot, themed by both topicality and network IP.

Keywords: Micro-short plays; Features; Aesthetic; Narrative.

1. The Development of Micro-short Plays

With the new trend of decentralization, fragmentation and popularization of media communication in recent years, new media, represented by short videos, have emerged and flourished. According to the 52nd Statistical Report on the Development of China’s Internet Network released by CNNIC, as of June 2022, the number of short video users in China has reached 1.026 billion, accounting for 95.1 % of the total Internet users[1]. On the other hand, many film and television industry production units artificially lengthen the TV series for commercial profits, which gives rise to the proliferation of “poor dramas” with protracted plots and empty lines. In such an environment, “micro-short plays” that integrate the characteristics of short videos and TV series have come into being at the right moment. They are a new type derived from scenarios of short video applications, and their characteristics, such as shortness and conciseness, also meet consumers’ demand for the “reduction” of film and television dramas. This has a boom with the help of short video platforms.

In 2020, the State Administration of Radio and Television introduced a rapid registration and filing module for online micro-short plays into the “Key Network Film and Television Information Recording System,” clarifying that the standard for “micro-short plays” is a single episode with less than 10 minutes in duration.” Since then, micro-short plays have been officially recognized by radio and television authorities. With the backdrop of policy supervision and support, joint efforts from platform institutions, technological innovation and shifts in user consumption habits, micro-short plays have ushered in a new phase of development. From the perspective of platform strategy, leading short video platforms represented by Douyin and Kuaishou have made efforts one after another to enhance their support plans for the micro-short dramas from the perspective of capital, IP, and click rate. In 2021, Douyin launched a “new plan for short videos” to lend targeted support to creators of different levels to quickly increase the volume of content; From the perspective of content form, data from 2021 reveals that 75.5% of micro-short episodes consisted of less than 30 episodes, with nearly 70% under 3 minutes in duration[2]. Compared with 2018, there is a tendency towards a more moderate number of episodes and the duration of single episodes has been shortened, which indicates an ever-optimization process in the creation of micro-short dramas, considering multi-dimensional factors such as narrative integrity, user habits, and completion rate.

2. Research Significance

As a new form of network film and television works produced under the trend of media convergence, micro-short plays have evolved to present a unique narrative system and aesthetic style. "It is difficult to analyze the text of any media product without considering its media characteristics[3]." Taking "drama" as the core, micro-short plays were born out of short video platforms with the characteristics of "short", "refresh", and "explosive." They are closely related to keywords such as online IP, online celebrities, daily life, and traffic passwords. In contrast to ordinary dramas, micro-short plays exhibit a clearer audience-oriented idea as they prioritize click rate over professionalism and artistry. Therefore, the analysis of micro-short plays requires more than simply a commendatory and derogatory definition of their content; it involves an understanding of the boundary of content and channel and their outstanding characteristics in the media landscape. This paper, with micro-short plays on the Douyin platform as a case study, combines the characteristics of platform and short video media. It also delves into the narrative characteristics of micro-short plays from the perspective of narrative object, narrative structure and plot, and narrative theme. At the same time, it explores the influence of audience thoughts on micro-play creation and reflects on emerging aesthetic trends.

3. Narrative Object Features

3.1 Environmental Blurring

In traditional film and television series, "environment" serves as a universally symbolic and indicative element, playing an important role in influencing narrative. In Roland Barthes' narrative theory, the horizontally dispersed levels of combination and vertically aggregated levels of integration collectively constitute the two basic levels of narrative function. The former, as functional narrative units, directly propel the plot, while the latter contains "indicative symbols" aimed at shaping characters and expressing atmosphere[4]. The "indications" at the integration level do not directly drive the story but revolve around the main characters and their states, depicting and setting off scenes, personal perceptions, temporal and spatial environments, etc. It can be observed that many film and television dramas not only depict a large number of "scenery + characters" but also extensively use "scenery shots" and "wide shots" to pursue artistic conception and express emotions.

However, in the narrative system of micro short films, the environment is often blurred, replaced by a focus on characters in the visual layout, and even the widespread use of close-up shots of characters, emphasizing "functional units" over "indicative symbols." This is closely related to the characteristics of short video media and constitutes a major feature of the narrative object of micro-short films.

Taking Douyin as an example, the vertical screen play mode is a significant factor limiting environmental presentation. Compared to the horizontal screen, the vertical field of view is difficult to present extensive backgrounds and depth under parallel perspectives. Meanwhile, characters, also in a vertical orientation, occupy the majority of the screen proportionately, forming the focus on characters under such objective conditions.

3.2 Character Focus

The characteristic of "character focus" is an important change made in the narrative features of micro-short plays, relying on the playback platform. When the environment is abandoned, replaced by close-up shots, audiences are forced to focus their attention on the main characters in the frame, thus facilitating the conveyance of actors' emotions and focusing on plot conflicts. "Similar to the stage setting of theater, the role of environmental presentation in vertical screen dramas mainly lies in providing actors with a performance space setting[5]". This also requires actors to attract audience's attention through language expression and emotional display—on short video platforms,

audience attention and engagement are the most concentrated and precious resources. Not every actor has sufficient charisma, especially for "internet celebrity actors" on short video platforms. Therefore, creators of micro-short films need to put more effort into character handling to present characters with some relatively typical traits.

3.2.1 The "internet celebrity" phenomenon in appearance

Taking "Mo Ye's Winter" and "Unfamiliar Lovers" as examples, the protagonists Mo Ye and Jiang Shiqi, both boasting 30 million fans on Douyin, a popular short video platform in China, signed contracts with MCN companies to create around ten micro-dramas, with considerable viewership reaching as high as 240 million and 790 million respectively. Although they play different roles in various episodes, their makeup, including fair skin, rosy lips, and striking eye makeup, is quite exquisite, aligning more with the audience's perception of the female internet celebrity image compared to conventional drama actors. Relying on the internet celebrity appearance of the protagonists to attract traffic is a major strategy in the operation of Douyin micro-dramas.

3.2.2 Character flattening

British novelist Foster in "Aspects of the Novel" distinguishes narrative characters into "flat characters" and "round characters"[6], where the former is "created around a single concept or quality," while the latter "is not confined to a single quality" and possesses more rounded and complex characteristics. Traditional drama narratives tend to prefer "round characters" as protagonists. However, in micro-dramas, due to time constraints and the limited emotional connection with the audience, often focus on expressing a single trait of the narrative object to the fullest extent, attaching a "label" to a character, and continuing this setup in subsequent episodes to achieve fan retention. For example, Douyin internet celebrity Yan'er, who embodies the image of a confident and powerful woman, consistently maintains this label in short dramas regardless of the setting, whether in a novel atmosphere, on campus, or within a wealthy family theme.

4. Plot Design Features

To cater to the fragmented nature of short video platforms, micro-short plays exhibit stronger characteristics of plot-driven narratives and theatricality compared to traditional television series. In order to capture and retain audience attention within a limited timeframe, micro-short plays employ a narrative structure characterized by explosive plot points, maximizing information capacity, and creating dramatic contrasts to achieve an overall "high-energy" viewing experience. Specifically, this can be outlined as follows:

4.1 Condensation of Plotlines and Handling of Twists and Turns

Micro-short plays significantly differ from traditional television dramas in terms of duration and plot complexity. While traditional dramas typically feature numerous characters and intricate storylines, often employing parallel main and subplot narratives with strong continuity between episodes, micro-short plays usually revolve around 2-3 core characters and do not pursue the complexity of relationships and logic in plot twists.

According to broadcasting standards, micro-short plays are limited to under 10 minutes in length. However, in practice, such as on Douyin, most episodes are typically between 2-5 minutes long, catering to the fragmented reading habits of the audience. Creators need to condense their works while still providing sufficiently captivating plotlines to retain audience engagement. As director Wu Qiang stated, "Each episode must offer enough plot density for viewers to feel satisfied and reluctant to stop watching.[7]" The intricacy of the plot is a key factor in attracting audiences to micro-short plays. Through rapid scene transitions and swift storytelling, coupled with multiple plot twists, audience emotions fluctuate along with the ups and downs of the narrative. This approach also addresses viewers' aversion to the phenomenon of "filler content" in television dramas,

providing ample sensory stimulation and emotional experiences, akin to a modern form of "electronic snack food."

4.2 "Climax"-Style Opening

The term "climax" was first proposed by John Howard Lawson, who defined it as "the basis and peak of action." In film and television drama, when the movement or plot reaches a necessary peak, it triggers a crucial "emotional node." According to Lawson's explanation, it is "the crisis anticipated and expected by the audience, the purpose of the developing trend. It is the tangible peak of the conflict.[8]" Traditional TV dramas, to ensure the coherence of the plot, often indulge in exposition before entering the climax, explaining causal logic and completing the narrative. However, with the transition from television and long video platforms to short video playback apps, users now have unprecedented autonomy. Considering the brief duration available to capture audience attention, micro-short plays on short video platforms often choose to shift conflicts and tensions to the beginning to attract user attention. For instance, in the micro-short play "Legal Beauty," within the first 30 seconds, exaggerated language and actions depict the female lead witnessing the male lead trafficking children on a bus, only for the child's mother to appear and resolve the misunderstanding, placing the dramatic conflict at the beginning. Despite the rough production evident in the performances of the main characters, it effectively arouses audience interest.

4.3 The Pursuit of "Explosive Point"

Micro-short play creation requires balancing narrative and audience engagement within a few minutes. However, excessively dense plot twists can burden viewers with memory overload. In such cases, creators need to craft "explosive points" capable of igniting the audience emotions. "After a considerable amount of story time and events are omitted, what needs to be highlighted in the narrative is often presented in a 'moment,' giving rise to the 'aesthetics of the moment' in terms of time expression.[9]" Technically, short videos have certain advantages in creating "explosive points" through the use of cinematographic language—slowing down and repeating footage in sync with music changes is a common technique in popular short videos. In higher-quality series production, the use of multiple camera angles can enhance this advantage. In terms of content, the core of an explosive point lies in emotional resonance, whether it involves strong contrasts, tearful moments, or exhilarating scenes. Micro-short play creators particularly focus on exploring visual elements that cater to popular aesthetics, magnifying them into instant aesthetics.

For example, in the micro-short play "Don't Call Me Boss," at the moment when the male and female leads, with a significant status difference, transition from a phone call to meeting in person, vertical framing is employed, making full use of the upstairs-downstairs setting. Multiple angles and reverse shots, coupled with music changes, portray the dreamy scene of their gaze meeting, creating an emotional climax within an idealized scenario.

5. Reflection

5.1 Fragmented Scenes

The emergence of micro-short plays aligns with the fragmented ecosystem of platforms, a phenomenon fundamentally driven by the increasingly significant fragmented needs of individuals.

The concept of "high scene density" stands out as a prominent feature in the current information dissemination order. "Scenes become another core element of media, following content, form, and social interaction.[10]" With the progress of technology and the widespread use of network terminals, we are able to make better use of fragmented time, simultaneously accessing more real-time information. In the field of communication, the previous large-scale content production no longer meets the current demands of individuals. Our information reception scenes have

transitioned from shared to private, from fixed to mobile. Correspondingly, fragmentation and immediacy have led to the trend of "shallow reading." While pursuing immediate gratification, our attention is facing the dilemma of decline or even imbalance. Hence, the threshold for accepting communication content is rising, becoming a significant driving force behind the increasingly stimulating sensory experiences in short videos and related content creation forms.

Returning to the micro-short play, the transition from long serial dramas to short plays and then to micro-short plays adapts to the changing levels of audience acceptance. Users often engage with short video platforms during commuting, waiting, or other idle times. In line with this scenario, the scripts of micro-short plays usually do not require continuity between episodes, each episode tells a self-contained story. Moreover, micro-short plays, equipped with functions such as likes, favorites, and "swiping," closely align with daily life scenarios. Also, compared to short videos, they possess a certain level of aesthetic significance and narrative features. In this sense, the rise of micro-short plays can be seen as a further extension of the aesthetic integration into daily life.

5.2 Emotional Engagement and Individual Activation

Another "popularity code" of micro-short plays caters to the audience's emotional experiences of "immersion" and "empathy." Freud proposed the concept of "substitutive satisfaction" in psychoanalysis, where the psyche regulates tensions and suppressions of the "id" without violating reality principles and moral norms, specifically through the process of "displacement," redirecting instinctual desires "from one object to another." The allure of "refresh culture" to the masses lies in the key element to substitutive satisfaction, sense of involvement and pleasure.[11]. Various real-life suppressions and anxieties make audiences more willing to resort to emotional expression in an idealized quasi-state world, investing their personal will. Themes such as rebirth to fill regrets, confronting villains, time-traveling to ancient times for a reversal of life, encountering sweet love during adolescence, or unexpectedly meeting a boyfriend who turns out to be a dominant CEO... These seemingly mundane and absurd plots consistently top the hot charts and are favored by hundreds of millions of viewers, demonstrating the outcome of mobilizing emotional engagement. Featuring universally recognizable character archetypes as protagonists and narrating stories set in utopias also allow people outside the story to dream, seeking solace and comfort in brief moments.

Individual activation in the era of new media forms is also a significant factor in mobilizing emotional engagement. In the age of interconnectedness, the horizontal distribution and bidirectional flow of information increase the participation of each individual in the information flow, enabling the activation of personal control over social communication resources and previously latent information needs and preferences. Therefore, each participant is more likely and willing to influence the order and practice space of communication.

5.3 Homogenization Trap

"Concentrating on refreshing moments might indeed be a popularity code, but excessive reliance on it will only lead creators to become addicted to piling up melodramatic plots and forced twists, ultimately depleting the vitality of the entire industry." Every era has its own way of storytelling. The "short" and "fast-paced" narrative style of micro-short plays undoubtedly constitutes a major advantage in attracting audiences today. However, most micro-short plays, stemming from online literary intellectual property (IP) with a "refresh culture," despite having different specific plot designs and character performances, exhibit extreme similarity in overall aesthetics. The repetition of melodramatic plots will eventually wear down the audience's enthusiasm, thereby causing the industry to fall into the trap of homogenization.

There is a certain tendency towards homogenization in the themes of micro-short plays. Research from CMB Securities in 2020 revealed that sweet and affectionate micro-short plays dominated the industry, accounting for 60% to 70% of the total volume[12]. This type of theme primarily caters to young female audiences and is characterized by a strong "refresh culture" attribute, with typical routinized and minimalist features.

Various major multi-channel networks (MCNs) are engaged in intense competition for traffic on short video platforms. The "popularity-first" attitude towards creation is understandable for individuals. However, looking at the entire micro-short play market, there is an urgent need for more diversified value outputs. "Refreshing moments" should not be limited to online literature but should also be drawn from reality, closely capturing the daily lives of everyone, innovating with the changing times, and thereby driving continuous advancement in the industry's content creativity. Therefore, creators need to appropriately abandon mass-produced content, refine epochal masterpieces, break free from the constraints of online literature, and open up new horizons in narrative themes, plot settings, and artistic presentations, allowing micro-short plays to truly become an artistic form that carries aesthetic value while being closely connected to life.

Epilogue

Although micro-short plays have experienced rapid development, they still exhibit a trend of "barbaric growth," with numerous problems in content, production, and regulation. The fundamental reason behind these issues is the pure commercialization and entertainment-oriented direction of the current micro-short play market, lacking ideological guidance and social responsibility. "For micro-short plays to further develop and break through barriers, they need to attract users with high-quality production, rich spiritual content, and more profound contemporary values.[13]" In this era where popularity reigns supreme, although micro-short plays have hitched a ride on the fast train of media iteration, as a part of popular culture, they still require concerted efforts from relevant authorities, platforms, and creators to promote the transmission of more positive energy, create epoch-making works, and achieve high-quality development.

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