

Technology and Narrative: A Study on the Narrative Structure and Rhythm of Online Mini-Dramas (Postprint)

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Abstract

With the development of intelligent information technology, short-form video content has continued to evolve, giving rise to micro-dramas, which have exerted a notable impact on the traditional television drama market. Set against the backdrop of economic recovery and the accelerating pace of life in the post-pandemic era, this study employs questionnaire surveys and interviews as primary research methods, supplemented by Propp's narrative theory, to conduct a comprehensive investigation into three key aspects: the internal factors driving the impact of micro-dramas on the television drama market, the relationship between these two formats, and strategies for their optimal co-development. The findings reveal that the competitive advantage of micro-dramas stems from their significantly reduced duration and accelerated pacing—adaptations that align with contemporary fast-paced lifestyles—while maintaining a complete narrative structure. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that the relationship between micro-dramas and traditional television dramas is not one of mutual substitution, but rather one of mutual promotion.

Full Text

Preamble

Technology and Narrative: A Study on the Narrative Structure and Rhythm of Online Micro-Dramas

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Abstract: With the advancement of intelligent information technology, short videos have continued to evolve, giving rise to micro-dramas that have begun

to impact the traditional television drama market. Against the backdrop of economic recovery and accelerating life pace in the post-pandemic era, this study employs questionnaire surveys and interviews as primary research methods, supplemented by Propp’s narrative theory, to conduct a detailed investigation into the internal factors driving micro-dramas’ impact on the TV drama market, the relationship between these two forms, and strategies for their healthier development. Our research reveals that micro-dramas can affect the TV drama market because they significantly reduce duration and accelerate pacing to align with contemporary fast-paced lifestyles, while maintaining a complete narrative structure. Simultaneously, we find that the relationship between the two is not one of mutual substitution but rather mutual promotion.

Keywords: network micro-drama; narrative characteristics; relationship between TV series and micro-dramas; Propp

1. Introduction

With the development of intelligent information technology, short videos have flourished, capturing the market rapidly with their unique “internet-savvy” media language. Micro-dramas (short videos less than three minutes per episode that follow a continuous storyline) have emerged as a new form, creating a notable impact on the television market. The phrase “TV dramas are too watered-down, might as well be short plays” became a common refrain for a time. Although the TV drama market has shown some recovery in recent years—due to pandemic effects and policies controlling the number of TV series produced—this recovery remains limited. For instance, slow-paced light comedies such as *Qing Qing Daily* precisely meet audience needs in the post-pandemic era. Now that pandemic restrictions have been fully lifted and life is gradually returning to normal, short videos continue to exert pressure on TV series. A prime example is the micro-drama *Donglan Snow*, which garnered 530 million views after its release on February 24, 2023, and was designated a “hot” short video by the Kuaishou platform.

We observe that micro-dramas differ from the mixed clip compilations commonly found on Bilibili, which typically repurpose existing film and television materials or create collaborative effects by stitching together characters from different productions. Such secondary creations rely on deep understanding of the original works and substantial film literacy. Excellent secondary videos can indeed spark audience interest in the original productions and generally promote the TV drama industry’s development. However, micro-dramas compete directly with TV series, and watching micro-dramas during leisure time has become the preferred choice for many viewers.

This phenomenon raises critical questions: Why can micro-dramas successfully penetrate the TV market? What are the underlying causes of this trend?

2.1 Literature Review of Micro-Dramas

Domestic scholars researching the popularity of micro-dramas have primarily focused on their development and audience phenomena. For example, in 2020, scholar Zhao Lirong examined micro-drama development through the lens of uses and gratifications theory; in 2022, Wu Anyang analyzed audience aesthetic trends through online micro-dramas; and Gu Xiaoxiao explored user psychology through narrative plot features of micro-dramas. To date, however, few studies have investigated the impact of micro-dramas on the TV drama market itself.

2.2 Literature Review of Propp's Narrative Theory

Since its inception, Propp's narrative theory has attracted significant attention and generated abundant research. Recent applications have primarily targeted film, television, or literary works. For instance, scholars Rong Yu and Tang Haidong used this theory to analyze the narrative characteristics of *Legend of Zhen Huan* in 2018, while Du Jiayue explored the narrative features of *Beauty and the Beast* in 2020. These studies all focus on conventional written or regular film and television works, with Propp's theory rarely applied to micro-drama research.

2.3 Problem Statement

Propp's theory represents a morphological narrative framework summarized by the pioneering structuralist narratologist Vladimir Propp. It is applicable not only to literary studies but also possesses the capacity to summarize plot patterns in micro-dramas. This paper employs Propp's narrative structure analysis theory to examine micro-dramas, aiming to identify the narrative characteristics of short-form content. The objective is to investigate the internal factors behind micro-dramas' impact on the TV drama market and explore the relationship between these two formats, thereby fostering healthy development for both.

3. Research Methods

This study utilizes questionnaire surveys and interviews to address the aforementioned research questions.

3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the research questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The more frequent and intense the plot reversals and conflicts, the higher the audience interest.

H2: Audience praise for micro-dramas creates pressure on TV series to improve quality.

To test these hypotheses, this study employs questionnaire surveys to sample the target population.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

The target population for this study comprises fans of TV series and micro-dramas. We conducted representative sampling of this group, collecting a total of 202 questionnaires. With a 95% confidence interval and 3% sampling error, questionnaires were distributed to 210 TV drama enthusiasts on Weibo over a 24-hour period. If participants refused to complete the questionnaire, another TV drama fan was recruited through private messages from influential users.

Data collection, sorting, and analysis were completed on April 20, 2023. The survey covered: (1) basic demographic information including age, gender, and occupation; (2) dimension reduction statements for independent variable X; and (3) dimension reduction statements for dependent variable Y. The questionnaire contained 15 questions: 8 single-choice, 6 multiple-choice, and 1 scale question. The survey was published online through a star-designed questionnaire targeting fans of TV series bloggers and entertainment star bloggers.

3.2.1 Interview Protocol Development

Interview questions were divided into three sections. The first section covered basic interviewee information including gender, age, and occupation. The second section translated research question dimensions into interview topics, including perspectives on TV series development, views on micro-drama videos, comparative advantages and disadvantages versus traditional TV series, and perceptions of micro-dramas' influence on TV series. The third section prepared for potential follow-up questions.

During interviews, researchers avoided the four ethical issues highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) harm to participants; (2) lack of informed consent; (3) violation of participant privacy; and (4) deception of participants. Additionally, interviewees could remain silent or withdraw midway if they encountered uncomfortable questions or dissatisfaction. Interview materials that respondents requested not be published were excluded from this study.

3.2.2 Selection of Interviewees

This study conducted 12-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 TV drama lovers aged 16 to 45. Interviews took place from April 15 to April 20, 2023. Respondents initially included screenwriters, students, teachers, and other professionals, with additional samples recruited online. Following the principle of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research, interview content was deemed sufficient to answer research questions after the 10th respondent, at which point sampling was limited. Respondents varied across age, occupation, education level, and location, resulting in low homogeneity.

Interviews were conducted by telephone and transcribed verbatim, producing a total of 9,818 words.

4.1 Questionnaire Sample Characteristics

The survey revealed that over 80% of respondents were female and 10.4% were male. More than 30% were under 22 years old, over 60% were between 22 and 45, and less than 10% were over 45. Most respondents watched one or two TV shows annually. Additionally, 104 respondents indicated they typically could not complete a full series, frequently dropping shows or only watching select episodes of interest.

Regarding viewing habits, 51.49% of respondents reported watching complete series, while 48.51% only watched clips, commentaries, or secondary creations—representing the inherent potential audience for micro-dramas. Regarding TV series preferences, 73.27% were attracted by stars or IP, 15.35% preferred the presentation style of TV series, and 11.39% disliked watching TV dramas altogether.

When asked about satisfaction with the current TV drama market, only 3.47% expressed satisfaction, while the remainder offered suggestions regarding plot, acting, styling, and attention to detail. A striking 94.06% identified plot as the most important element of quality work. Respondents rated the overall current TV drama market an average of only 2.68 out of 5, with 60% giving a score of 3 and zero respondents awarding full marks. This widespread dissatisfaction has clearly fueled the emergence and development of micro-dramas.

Furthermore, 70% of respondents believed micro-dramas impact or exert pressure on the TV drama market, while 15.35% maintained that TV series remain superior and micro-dramas cannot affect the market. An overwhelming 87.62% identified slow pacing and overly long plots as disadvantages of TV series compared to micro-dramas, with only 3.96% seeing no disadvantages in TV dramas.

Regarding micro-drama advantages, over 80% selected “short and concise format that makes full use of fragmented time,” while “more plot reversals and emotional intensity” ranked as the secondary reason for audience preference. When selecting video apps, more than half chose Douyin, Kuaishou, and similar short-video platforms, indicating these occupy a significant position in audience preferences. Most respondents spent less than two hours daily watching videos. These findings demonstrate that micro-dramas have won audience favor through compact plotting, small format, and time efficiency.

4.2 Interview Findings

During in-depth interviews exploring the proportion of TV dramas versus micro-dramas consumed, perceptions of micro-dramas’ impact, and comparative advantages, we were surprised to find unanimous agreement among respondents

that micro-dramas do impact the TV drama market. Two-thirds identified short, concise format with frequent climaxes as the primary advantages.

Interviewee responses confirmed our hypotheses: “Due to my professional background as an industry insider, I believe micro-dramas impact the TV drama market, but more as a reverse-promotion effect. Micro-dramas can never achieve the same level of integrity as traditional dramas.” (S1) “As a Hanfu producer, I pay special attention to costume culture. Current TV series have homogeneous styling and even contain obvious historical inaccuracies. In contrast, some micro-dramas pay greater attention to these details, with some even produced by Hanfu enthusiasts.” (S2) “Work is usually exhausting and rest time is limited. Micro-dramas satisfy my desire for stories while saving time.” (S3) “TV dramas have become formulaic and simplified in recent years, like they’ve seized a certain traffic password and mass-produced it. Take Xianxia dramas—eight out of ten involve falling in love with one’s master, the other two with demons. Early Xianxia dramas featured groups upgrading through monster battles with themes of friendship, love, family, and justice, but now it’s all about romance. Since the formulas are identical, why not save time with micro-dramas?” (S4) “I watch both micro-dramas and TV series. Micro-dramas are more for entertainment and relaxation, while TV series pursue story integrity. The purposes differ before opening each format—TV dramas provide experiential depth, while micro-dramas offer instant emotional value for relaxation.” (S5)

4.2.1 Narrative Completeness in Micro-Dramas

Micro-dramas achieve relative narrative completeness in a format significantly shorter than TV series. Although less elaborate than traditional dramas, they maintain a relatively complete narrative structure, making them similar enough to TV series to satisfy audiences’ storytelling desires and thereby impact the TV drama market.

Using the micro-drama *Donglan Snow* as an example, Propp’s narrative structure analysis helps explain how micro-dramas achieve narrative completeness. Characters in micro-dramas possess complete spheres of action. In *Morphology of the Folktale*, Propp explained functional arrangement according to roles, arguing that most functions connect logically within certain spheres of action. In micro-dramas, despite limited duration, characters’ behaviors and motivations connect to form complete narratives, with character functions unrestricted by spatial reduction. This paper analyzes characters in *Donglan Snow* as examples of their narrative roles .

Propp identified six narrative stages in his morphological theory: preparation, complication, transference, struggle, return, and recognition—comprising 31 functions. Applying this to *Donglan Snow* reveals basic conformity to Propp’s narrative units . Propp’s morphological narrative theory, though simple, offers profound guidance for contemporary film and television creation and appreciation. Without a relatively complete narrative structure, no matter how many

plot points exist, only temporary effects can be achieved; only through coherent continuation can micro-dramas create the “long-tail effect” of sustained audience engagement.

4.2.2 Fast Pace and High Density as Primary Advantages

Both questionnaire and interview data consistently identified fast pace and high density as micro-dramas’ greatest advantages over traditional TV series. With economic recovery and development, life pace accelerates while leisure and entertainment time decreases. In some cases, work fatigue prevents audiences from engaging with complete stories. Over 80% of questionnaire respondents selected “short and concise format that makes full use of fragmented time,” while interviewees noted sometimes falling asleep mid-episode, contrasting with micro-dramas that fill time gaps and capture the attention of exhausted workers as an ideal pastime.

Analysis of Episode 14 from *Donglan Snow* using general micro-drama narrative theory reveals seven progressive features occurring within just 2 minutes and 25 seconds—averaging one plot point every 20 seconds. This clearly demonstrates micro-dramas’ characteristics of fast pace and dense climaxes. Focusing on high-intensity plot points constitutes an internal factor driving their impact on the TV drama market.

4.2.3 Micro-Dramas Promote TV Industry Development

Micro-drama development actually promotes TV series advancement. TV series maintain irreplaceable qualities, and audience criticism of current TV drama quality alongside exaggerated praise for micro-dramas primarily stimulates improvement in TV series production. Two-thirds of respondents understood that no reciprocal substitution exists between TV dramas and micro-dramas. Even when praising micro-dramas, audiences still return to TV series that interest them, thereby promoting industry development.

5. Summary and Reflection

The coordinated development of TV series and micro-dramas represents the current state of the industry. Both forms develop based on film aesthetics—TV dramas as established players and micro-dramas as emerging forces. In today’s fast-paced social environment, audiences increasingly prefer micro-dramas’ accelerated narrative rhythm over traditional film and television pacing. Simultaneously, micro-dramas compensate for shortcomings created by current social conditions. The relationship is not antagonistic but rather one of mutual growth through development—the “reverse promotion effect” mentioned earlier, where success in one format stimulates improvement in the other. Audience selection is not entirely oppositional; substantial crossover exists between the two audience groups.

Even as new forces inevitably divert some attention, fundamental differences prevent complete substitution. What truly determines market share is whether each format can maintain its distinctive characteristics. TV dramas should continue deepening connotation, plot, and texture, while micro-dramas should focus on plot points and emotional value.

Notably, TV series development must combat “low-intelligence routine hollowing-out.” Current productions blindly pursue stability, copying successful formulas within comfort zones. After several iterations, subjects and characters become boring, often deconstructing multi-core rich popular dramas to extract and divergently replicate their most attractive features. Such watered-down productions lose their core appeal and become tedious. Most current TV series are opportunistic, producing mindless romance dramas to capture the most active audience demographic (ages 15-30), distributing infinite “sugar” to satisfy this group’s preferences. This “selling dog meat under the guise of sheep’s head” approach—claiming to be investigative or suspenseful while ultimately serving romance plots—cannot retain audiences.

Unlike micro-dramas, TV series possess longer narrative space. If they fail to provide proper plot development within this space, instead diluting content through repetitive dialogue, editing, or inserted advertisements to expand “watered-down” episodes, they will inevitably lose audiences. Therefore, to stabilize the TV drama market, domestic productions must transition from “water injection” to “dehydration.”

While TV series can meet certain spiritual and cultural needs, they are not the sole source of people’s spiritual world. When TV drama values fall below average audience aesthetic appreciation, they cannot succeed. Public vision and aesthetic standards improve daily, creating higher demands for literary and artistic works. This means formulaic productions cannot meet increasing cultural needs—only ruthless innovation and refinement can win audience favor.

Micro-drama development should not be limited to plot alone but should combine its characteristics with the principle of “content is king” for multi-field collaboration. For example, Kuaishou creator Zhizhu zZ operates an account featuring ancient romance stories. After identifying its audience, it expands step-by-step—Hanfu brands, beauty products, shopping apps, and related field content creators can become collaboration partners. This creates a content matrix, generates continuous novelty, and broadens audience reach. Currently, micro-dramas face issues such as simplistic and vulgar content that require timely responses to ensure better development.

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