

Fragmented Art or Language Games: Cultural Reflections on Online Micro-short Dramas (Post-print)

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Abstract

Online micro-short dramas are the result of dual empowerment by technology and platforms, as well as a product adapted to contextualized consumption demands. They not only “de-obscure” elite culture through the democratization of production entities, employing civilian perspectives, miniaturized events, and internalized expressions, but also evoke emotional resonance among audiences through densely arranged conflicts and profound care for and insight into human nature. Online micro-short dramas constitute an art of fragmentation and simultaneously a game of language. Content producers, advertisers, and target users operate according to mutually acceptable rules, thereby establishing intrinsic social connections; this complex cultural tension epitomizes the heterogeneous quality of online micro-short drama creation.

Full Text

Fragmented Art or Language Game: A Cultural Reflection on Online Micro-Short Dramas

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Abstract: Online micro-short dramas represent the dual empowerment of technology and platforms, as well as a product adapted to contextual consumption demands. They not only “unconceal” elite culture through the popularization of production subjects, employing civilian perspectives, miniaturized events, and internalized expression, but also evoke emotional resonance through densely arranged conflicts and attentive insight into human nature. Micro-short dramas constitute both a fragmented art and a language game. Content producers, advertisers, and target users operate according to mutually acceptable rules, thereby establishing intrinsic social connections. This complex cultural tension epitomizes the mixed quality of micro-short drama creation.

Keywords: online micro-short drama; algorithm; platform; social currency; language game

Since the concept of the “short video inaugural year” was proposed in 2016, short videos have become the mainstream format in the audio-visual market. They serve not only as tools for entertainment but also as a means for ordinary individuals to express themselves, evolving into a microcosm of people’s digital existence. Concurrently, major video platforms have explored the verticalization and segmentation of short videos, with online micro-short dramas emerging as an iterative product of this evolution. Particularly after the National Radio and Television Administration officially incorporated micro-short dramas into its regulatory framework in August 2020, granting them official recognition, these dramas have increasingly captured public attention. This paper examines micro-short dramas primarily from the perspective of cyber culture, addressing the following question within this analytical framework: Are online micro-short dramas a fragmented art or a language game? The paper responds to this question through three main sections: the first outlines the social context of micro-short dramas’ rise, while the second and third discuss their cultural manifestations as fragmented art and language game, respectively, leading to the research conclusions.

1. Micro-Short Dramas: Technological Empowerment, Platform Empowerment, and Contextual Consumption

What exactly are online micro-short dramas? They can be characterized along several dimensions: each episode runs under 10 minutes; they feature relatively clear themes and narrative arcs; their subject matter spans diverse genres including campus, workplace, urban, and fantasy; and their production involves grassroots creators, video platforms, film companies, and MCN agencies. The rise of micro-short dramas results from both technological and platform empowerment and from contextual consumption.

1.1 Technological Empowerment: Lowered Technical Barriers and Evolving Distribution Technologies

As media ecology scholar Marshall McLuhan observed: “All technologies have an alchemical character. Whenever a society develops technologies that extend itself, all other functions in society must change to adapt to the form of that technology. Once a new technology penetrates society, it immediately permeates all its institutions; thus, new technology is a revolutionary agent” [1]. The emergence of micro-short dramas validates McLuhan’s assertion: the popularization of technology and the democratization of equipment have driven previously expensive filming gear into ordinary households. Communication technology iterations including 4G, 5G, and Wi-Fi have placed people in a state of constant connectivity, enabling anytime-anywhere video production and consumption.

Technical operation thresholds have also declined, particularly as smartphones have “subsumed” filming and post-production technologies, granting people the ability to shoot and upload instantly while also providing “foolproof” software for video editing and special effects, helping transform individual creative concepts into tangible visual products.

The evolution of distribution technologies helps micro-short dramas locate potential audiences. Common distribution technologies include but are not limited to keyword-based information search and targeted positioning, “relationship stream + information stream,” and intelligent distribution. Keyword search relies primarily on search engines, which serve as intermediaries connecting video content with user demands, gaining the power to rank content and thereby influencing the likelihood of individual micro-short dramas being clicked. “Relationship stream + information stream” widely exists on social platforms; although the relationship circles carried by various platforms inevitably overlap, they can still reflect different facets of individual social connections to a considerable extent. Different relationship streams carry different information streams, and the closeness of relationships has evolved into a key factor affecting video distribution effectiveness. Intelligent distribution achieves personalized matching between information production and consumption through algorithmic models. These distribution technologies are not mutually exclusive but rather permeate each other, jointly constructing pathways connecting micro-short drama production and consumption ends.

1.2 Platform Empowerment: Capital and Traffic

Platform intervention provides the capital and traffic essential for micro-short drama marketization and industrialization. It should be noted that short-video platforms and long-video platforms embody different driving logics and operational mechanisms in opening up this emerging track. According to the 48th “Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development” released by the China Internet Network Information Center on September 15, 2021, as of June 2021, China’s short-video user base reached 888 million, accounting for 87.8% of all internet users. Under these circumstances, short-video platforms have pinned their hopes on micro-short dramas to create the next traffic boom. Conversely, long-video platforms have faced the erosion of their market share by short videos as an established fact. In response to the rising prominence of short videos, long-video platforms have continuously explored the possibility of transforming into comprehensive video platforms, with micro-short dramas providing a point of compatibility with short videos.

Even within the same camp, different platforms adopt different strategies. In the short-video domain, Kuaishou early on utilized Kuaishou Theater and web literature IP to layout its market; Douyin has made collaboration with professional film companies to produce urban-style dramas its “ultimate weapon” for staking territory in the still “blue ocean” market. In the long-video domain, iQiyi emphasizes script originality; Youku follows an “investment cooperation + customized

model” approach; Tencent Video has launched a “Hot Pot Drama” incentive program to provide resource support for high-quality short-video creators. In the process of building their own moats, all platforms share the common choice of “doubling down” on premium micro-short drama construction. To this end, they are also establishing business models compatible with micro-short drama characteristics based on their own positioning (for example, Youku proposes a revenue-sharing model of “member payment + advertising + sponsorship”), aiming to form positive incentive mechanisms for high-quality content output.

1.3 Contextual Consumption: Vertical Screens Triggering Interface Language Revolution

Micro-short dramas are essentially fast-moving consumer goods targeting specific contextual consumption needs. In this paper’s context, “context” refers to a combination of four elements: time, space, and the psychology and behavior of people within them. Specifically, micro-short dramas satisfy people’s needs for entertainment, killing time, and even socializing across screens in fragmented spatiotemporal combinations (such as “before sleep–bedroom,” “commuting–public transport,” “mealtime–restaurant”). Particularly within the social framework, micro-short dramas provide “topics” and “conversation material,” evolving into “social currency.” This social currency “exists both in virtual networks and offline reality, granting individuals the ability to obtain more positive evaluations from others in interpersonal communication” [2].

To match people’s consumption habits of “swiping with fingertips” in these contexts, vertical screens have become the main direction of micro-short drama evolution. As the interface for human-computer interaction, screens can be regarded as the “sensory organs” of media systems. Changes in interface form inevitably trigger revolutions in interface language, amounting to nothing less than a lens revolution. Further, scholars have proposed a “horizontal/vertical screen video communication perception effect detection model” based on a “content–function–context” analytical framework. Based on empirical research data, this model indicates: “For videos suitable for vertical composition or with simple plots and fewer objects, videos requiring human-computer interaction, and videos occupying smaller spatiotemporal volumes, vertical screen presentation yields better effects; conversely, horizontal screen effects are superior” [3]. This research conclusion provides reference for micro-short dramas to precisely adapt to interface language.

2. Micro-Short Dramas as a Fragmented Art

This emerging video format represents a fragmented art, whose artistic charm derives from its “micro-volume,” fast-paced yet dramatically tense narrative mode. It is a civilian art, an emotional art, and a humanistic art.

2.1 Civilian Art: The “Unconcealment” of Elite Culture

If film and television dramas represent elite culture, then micro-short dramas embody civilian culture. They abandon the complex processes of film and television production—where projects require rigorous 论证 before approval, are filmed by professional teams consuming substantial human, material, and financial resources, and must undergo layer-by-layer examination by state authorities before release—transforming into a new form of grassroots video producers’ digital expression. As previously mentioned, thanks to the popularization of filming equipment and the increasing intelligence of post-production software, everyone has the opportunity to form teams based on personal interests, even integrating different roles such as director, screenwriter, and actor into one person, concretizing thoughts and ideas into visual images. On the one hand, micro-short drama production costs are low and production cycles short. According to industry conventions, the production cost for a single episode is approximately 5,000 RMB; a complete micro-short drama can finish the entire process from script creation and polishing to filming and post-production within 3-4 weeks. On the other hand, micro-short drama review is relatively lenient. The National Radio and Television Administration divides micro-short dramas into two categories: platform-supported key network micro-short dramas and user-generated content. For the former, “they must first obtain a filing number through provincial-level radio and television administrative departments before going online” [4]; for the latter, platforms are only required to conduct review, and they can be broadcast after self-numbering and registration.

Micro-short dramas vividly interpret the concept that “everyone is a director of life,” representing a victory of technological empowerment in “unconcealing” elite culture. The concept of “unconcealment” was proposed by German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who understood it as revealing and presenting, that is, “by removing the illusions attached to the event itself, returning to the original source, making it what it is” [5]. Due to the elite perspective of production subjects and the constraints of built-in ideology, film and television dramas mostly follow grand narrative paths in their narrative modes, filtering out many facets of reality and constructing a pseudo-environment of an ideal world through lens language. Micro-short dramas “unconceal” this pseudo-environment through the popularization of production subjects, employing civilian perspectives, miniaturized events, and internalized expression. They shift the camera from the growth and transformation of heroic figures to the trivial daily lives of ordinary people, from caring for society’s compassionate sentiments to emphasizing self-expression, restoring multiple dimensions of reality while achieving the dissolution of social authority.

2.2 Emotional Art: Dense Conflict Arrangement

Since the rise of structuralist narratology, narrative studies have been an important dimension of theoretical research. As narrative is always associated with specific media, narrative theory has continuously enriched its dimensions

in response to different media biases. With the evolution from time-biased media represented by literary texts to space-biased media represented by video, the center of narrative has completed a shift from text-dominance to image-dominance, deriving a divergence between abstract textual logic and visual image logic. Nevertheless, logic remains a crucial element of narrative, with film being an excellent illustration. Within approximately 90 to 120 minutes, through layered construction of story background, character relationships, plot development, and emotional accumulation, it leads to a preset ending. In this process, characters serve as the key to connecting past, present, and future, and the symbolic representation of individual fates also reflects the creators' contemplation of life.

This also applies to micro-short dramas. However, due to volume limitations, they cannot unfold along the “cause—development—climax—ending” storyline like film narratives. Instead, they densely arrange conflicts and resolve them in a mythological manner. The resulting paradox is that while these micro-short dramas appear to tell complete stories, deconstructing the narrative 套路 reveals that the internal connections between stories are not tight. To cover the “cracks” in the logical chain, micro-short dramas can only resort to dreamy visuals, idealized characters, and visual spectacles created through montage editing to move audiences, dissolving the deep meaning of narrative and replacing it with emotional resonance triggered by sensory stimulation.

2.3 Humanistic Art: Attention to and Insight into Gray Aspects of Humanity

Attention to and insight into humanity constitute important weights for attracting viewers to click on micro-short dramas and should be the direction of script creation. Take the first episode of the first season of *Life Got Me* launched by iQiyi in 2018 as an example. This video is only 2 minutes and 52 seconds long, telling the entire process of how internet celebrity streamer “Chuchu Baby” is kidnapped, negotiated with, and rescued by a fanatical fan “Poison Horn SHOW.” At the beginning, “Poison Horn SHOW” removes the hood on the tied-up “Chuchu Baby,” discovering she looks vastly different from the goddess image in his mind (referring to “Chuchu Baby” in the livestream). Thinking he kidnapped the wrong person, “Poison Horn SHOW” becomes furious, continuously beating and questioning “Chuchu Baby”: “Who are you? Where is Chuchu Baby?” To prove her identity, “Chuchu Baby” has “Poison Horn SHOW” bring over her phone, “open the livestream, turn on beauty mode, turn on filters, and set the big-eyes and face-slimming functions to maximum,” instantly transforming into the glamorous “Chuchu Baby” in the livestream lens. What’s more amusing is that after “Poison Horn SHOW” is captured, the “news reporter” announces: “An ordinary citizen has been rescued; regrettably, the whereabouts of famous streamer Chuchu Baby remain unknown.”

Examining *Life Got Me* from a script theme perspective, it uses the character symbol “Chuchu Baby” to explore people’s obsession with excessively beautified

“digital appearance,” pointing to a new interpretation of the “body” image in the digital age. The body can refer to the physical flesh-and-blood existence or the social body shaped by power and culture. In the latter context, the body is endowed with symbolic identification and class distinction functions, reflecting a person’s living conditions. Furthermore, the body can also become a means for individuals to acquire social capital—a concept originating from Pierre Bourdieu that describes a set of resources, explicit or implicit, connected to institutionalized social networks. In the video, “Chuchu Baby’s” monetization based on “appearance” exemplifies the “capitalization of the body.”

If in the pre-digital era, a good body image required both excellent innate genes and strict self-management, in the digital era, the “leap” in body image can be easily achieved through “digital beautification.” However, the “digital appearance” in cyberspace brought by “digital beautification” is ultimately a pipe dream, and the contrast between the real body and the virtual body also maps certain gray aspects of human nature.

3. Micro-Short Dramas as a Language Game

While micro-short dramas exhibit characteristics of fragmented art, they have a short history, lack sufficient premium content output, and a considerable proportion remain in the crude production stage, bearing features of a language game. The concept of “language game” originates from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who argued that language should not be regarded as isolated and static descriptive symbols. To explore language meaning, one must trace back to the context and manner in which language is used. The overall process of language itself forming this entirety constitutes a language game [6]. As a core concept in his later philosophical thought, Wittgenstein’s study of language games was primarily confined to the philosophy of language. It was Jean-François Lyotard who truly introduced this concept to sociology and endowed it with critical significance, first elaborating in detail on the considerations of language games: “First, the ambiguity of rules: the rules of (language games) exist more or less explicitly among players, resembling contracts yet lacking recognized legitimacy. Second, the importance of rules: rules are the premise for the game’s existence; without rules, the game loses meaning; subtle changes in rules lead to changes in the game’s nature; a move (or statement) that does not conform to the rules inevitably does not belong to the game defined by those rules. Following from this, in the game, any statement is a move” [7]. Further, Lyotard extended two principles of language games: “To speak is to fight (meaning to join the game); language behavior can be regarded as a universal competition; linguistic moves constitute observable social relations” [8]. The analysis of “language game” theory provides a perspective for understanding the aesthetic culture of micro-short dramas.

3.1 Object-Centeredness

From a structuralist narratology perspective, narrative is completed within 套路 (or formulas). Regardless of plot complexity, traditional narrative works always follow the writing path of “plain opening—conflict intensification—problem resolution.” The reason is that a story with ups and downs itself signifies the breaking and restoration of balance. Setting aside micro-short dramas’ narrative approach of skipping 铺垫 and confronting conflicts directly, one major difference from traditional narrative modes lies in the subject of conflict resolution. In traditional narrative works, humans are endowed with subject status. He/she (or they) serves as the key to moving events from complete imbalance to restored balance at the moment when conflict intensification reaches its peak. Micro-short dramas differ in that they place commodities at key nodes driving event development, reducing all other elements to supporting roles.

Take the micro-short drama *Workplace Trio* created by Douyin blogger “First Secretary” as an example. Each episode tells a workplace story, documenting the “split-personality” daily life of workplace “veteran” Taozi, workplace “smooth operator” Xiaolan, and workplace “rookie” Xiaobai. In the latest episode (Season 4, Episode 2: *Contemporary Workplace Honeyed Words and Hidden Daggers*), Taozi promises to nominate Xiaobai and Xiaolan as outstanding individuals within the group to trick them into working overtime. Unlike the easily manipulated Xiaobai, Xiaolan not only sees through Taozi’ s sophisticated rhetoric immediately but also uses “my face has been oily lately, going out to meet clients might affect the company’ s image” as an excuse to politely decline Taozi’ s request. The more skillful Taozi then takes out a certain brand of cosmetics from her bag to help Xiaolan solve her skin problem. Having tasted the benefit, Xiaolan takes the hint and expresses that she will live up to the company’ s expectations.

Creating symbolic identification centered on objects is a necessary condition for micro-short dramas built upon the culture industry to gain capital support. Years ago, Baudrillard already revealed through his theory of the consumer society the discipline of people by objects and their symbolization. On the surface, people can independently choose consumption patterns according to their ideal selves, but ultimately, all consumption has been preset by producers; what people do is merely select from limited models. Times have changed, but what remains constant is the critical thinking embedded in Baudrillard’ s theory. The loss of humans’ central position and the prominence of objects’ central position in micro-short dramas clearly demonstrate that “as subjects, people participate in the sending and receiving of symbols in the process of universal consumption, and thus only live as terminals of multiple networks; individual existence is canceled in this combination and calculation of symbols, just as what they obtain is no longer reality but ‘the vertigo produced by reality’ ” [9].

In short, content producers, advertisers, and target users all participate in this language game. They operate according to mutually acceptable rules, thereby

establishing intrinsic social connections. This means that although language games may be difficult for outsiders to understand, they are essentially strategic choices made by content producers and advertisers based on coordinating product tonality with user acceptance, and are the product of tripartite collusion.

3.2 Aesthetic Sensationalism in Language Games

From a Saussurean linguistics perspective, any symbolic text unfolds along two axes: the syntagmatic axis and the paradigmatic axis [10]. The syntagmatic axis plays a role in adjacent bonding, determining how symbols combine into meaningful texts; the paradigmatic axis performs comparative selection, focusing on why creators choose one symbol over another in a specific text. These two axes are not completely equal in status, with different eras emphasizing different aspects.

Specifically, in the era of print culture, the paradigmatic axis was the focus. People tended to polish symbolic elements in texts through historical perspectives and comparative methods, with word choice exemplifying print text creators' painstaking efforts. In the internet era, the pursuit of batch production of drama series has driven micro-short dramas to abandon careful polishing of the paradigmatic axis, instead using simple 拼凑 on the syntagmatic axis to meet the entertainment demands of the fast-consumption era. The main manifestation is the visual adaptation and narrative 套路 borrowing from "feel-good fiction" in web literature, resulting in language games characterized by aesthetic sensationalism.

Aesthetic sensationalism can be divided into three types: character sensationalism, plot sensationalism, and language sensationalism. Character sensationalism commonly involves endowing protagonists with extraordinary abilities while simultaneously adding civilian characteristics, attempting to shape multi-dimensional characters through repeated "alienation" and deconstruction. Plot sensationalism manifests not only in numerous plots that depart from reality and feature wild imagination, but also in the fact that even plots describing real life cannot do without dramatic design. Language sensationalism is also common, exhibiting hybridization (combining internet language, dialects, foreign languages, etc.), deconstruction (dismantling the complete logical chain between signifier and signified in meta-narratives), and inflation (incessant discourse accumulation without temporal or logical connections), even repeatedly hovering on the edge of violence and pornography.

Sensationalism is rooted in human genes and is harmless when limited to a certain range. However, because micro-short dramas and their underlying web literature lack self-correction capabilities, blind development along the dual paths of sensationalization and curiosity-pandering driven by profit will lead to disastrous consequences. By laying out an intoxicating entertainment atmosphere and products full of sensory stimulation, they imperceptibly deprive people of

their ability to think deeply, creating a nationwide, ambivalent, logically inverted, and vulgar carnival scene.

Conclusion

Online micro-short dramas are both a fragmented art and a language game. This complex cultural tension epitomizes the mixed quality of micro-short drama creation. Whether the “windfall” proclaimed by the industry has truly arrived perhaps requires cautious judgment. However, regardless of whether this “windfall” has come or not, the attention micro-short dramas have received from government, industry, and users is an undeniable fact. Yet the focus of attention will eventually shift. For micro-short dramas to gain sufficient and lasting attention, they must “eliminate the crude and retain the refined,” moving from “wild growth” to premium output. This requires both government regulation and platform guidance. Cracking down on vulgar, kitschy, and tasteless content while empowering high-quality content through technological means such as algorithms will be viable paths for micro-short dramas to purify their content ecology and achieve a situation where good content drives out bad.

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