

From “Virtual Maze” to “Real Life”: The Spatiotemporal Logic of Adolescent Short Video Addiction and Governance Pathways (Postprint)

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Abstract

Amidst the deep integration of mobile internet technology, short video discourse has become infused into the daily life practices of adolescents, emerging as a defining characteristic of their mediated existence. Whether for study or entertainment, numerous aspects of teenage daily routines have become embedded within the representational structure of short videos, extending the threshold of “time” through continuous performative engagement. Problems such as “can’t stop scrolling on Douyin,” ”ki...

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Amidst the deep integration of mobile internet technology, short video discourse has become infused into the daily life practices of adolescents, emerging as a defining characteristic of their mediated existence. Whether for study or entertainment, numerous aspects of teenage daily routines have become embedded within the representational structure of short videos, extending the threshold of “time” through continuous performative engagement. Problems such as “can’t stop scrolling on Douyin,” “kids become irritable when parents limit video watching,” and “short videos cause poor concentration in studies” all reflect teens’ excessive addiction to short videos. This addiction is both an immersion process in the dimension of “long duration” and a perceptual dependency projected across “multiple spaces,” whose essence is intertwined with a spatiotemporal logic. How, then, does the spatiotemporal logic of teen short video addiction manifest? And how might it be governed?

1. The Disorder of Order: Temporal Immersion in Teen Short Video Practices

In an era of accelerating social transformation, the development of media technology manifests as changes in temporal experience, with “de-temporalized” time fragmentation plunging social order into a state of 失控 (loss of control). Short videos embedded with algorithmic logic lure adolescents into immersive media experiences, where rich audio-visual content stimulates sensory engagement, thereby increasing the frequency of their repetitive finger operations and ultimately trapping them in a virtual maze through “long-duration” short video immersion.

First, the technical hybridization of digital media achieves temporal embedding. In the computational turn of the digital media era, algorithmic recommendation has become the underlying technical logic for short video content recombination and temporal sequencing. Through personalized profiles constructed via interest preferences and social background differences, 推送 (push notifications) achieve users’ temporal embedding within vast video repositories. Current short video content is divided into numerous categories, from game commentaries to comedy skits, all becoming inevitable choices for media immersion. In the overlapping process of “scrolling” and “watching” short videos, adolescents are swept up by data units orchestrated by algorithmic technology, continuously activating their own viewing desires to the point of falling into an endless vortex of personalized short video content. Over time, flowing time seems to enter a state of eternal stasis, with temporal perception gradually lost beneath the order of content recommendation. Teens have already formed automated embodied operations of “video scrolling,” alienating their free time or time obtained without parental supervision into productive time for short video platform value augmentation, finding it difficult to escape media influence even after exiting short video viewing. Consequently, teens remain unaware of the multiple structures hidden beneath the platform’s commercial logic, instead becoming “digital laborers” in an unconscious, one-way relationship of video scrolling, passively shuttling across multiple platforms and consuming their own time through viewing. For instance, when teens dwell on game commentary short videos pushed by platform algorithms, their gaze does not merely focus on such videos but rather stems from gaming habits, which then spread from previous game immersion to short video addiction through the platform’s algorithmic recommendation technology, completing the investment of self-time through viewing.

Second, the repeated bouncing between clock time and media time. Alongside the digital revolution and networked transformation, media technology has accelerated to break traditional linear temporal experiences in the information society, with entertainment-oriented audio-visual landscapes stored as information flows within video content. Users seek visual pleasure through the action process of swiping up and down with their fingers. Clock time outside media time is gradually eroded by hyper-immersive viewing experiences, leaving users with sighs about time’s fleeting nature upon disengaging from short video im-

agery. Thus, short videos imperceptibly steal people's time, revealing regret over time's passage and expressing a sense of loss after "scrolling short videos" [1]. However, clock time has not been completely replaced by media time. As a special group, adolescents face certain time restrictions when scrolling short videos, manifesting more in external factors compared to adults. Specifically, the Douyin platform sets a "Youth Mode" for minors, limiting daily usage to no more than 40 minutes, with automatic pop-up reminders once the predetermined time is exceeded. Additionally, parents set flexible restrictions as temporal weights to intervene in teen short video addiction. Yet confined within digital cages, audio-visual satisfaction relies on time accumulation, and brief abstinence instead stimulates more intense compensatory psychology, manifesting as time revenge consumption. When excessive media immersion causes addiction, external temporal prompts repeatedly urge teens, causing them to establish spiritual barriers to short video scrolling through self-regret and objective limitations, and to fall into 迷失 (disorientation) within disordered short video practices. The complex bouncing interaction between media time and clock time thus collectively constitutes the temporal ecosystem of short video scrolling.

2. The Loss of Self: Spatial Immersion in Teen Short Video Practices

Teen short video addiction is not only intertwined with temporal discourse but also closely connected to the scenographic meanings shaped by space. In the theoretical discourse of spatial production, space is no longer a fixed physical location but has incorporated various social relations. Consequently, space involves not only material space but also social space and spiritual space. The spatial immersion of teen short video addiction manifests specifically in physical bonding and relational dependency.

First, the physical bonding between short video media and teenage bodies. In traditional material spatial cognition, elements such as architecture, coordinates, and orientations occupy dominant positions, while bodies and media were once overlooked. Today, however, in the structural significance of materiality, bodies and media themselves are concretized spatial structures. In teen short video practices, the mobile terminal devices attached to short videos have undergone deep interembedding with teenage bodily structures. In other words, teens cannot do without short video media when using them. Since adolescents are at a critical stage of psychological and cognitive development, they exhibit states of deep attraction within limited attention windows of fragmented seconds. Whether at home or in external fluid fields, mobile devices become part of teens' real space. When usage thresholds are breached, viewers transform into digital field participants and attempt to construct associations with the materiality of short videos through virtual avatars. For example, when teens scroll short videos, fingers produce material-level contact with devices, bodily functions are edited by media into habitualized processes, and the self transforms into codes integrated into virtual situations, falling into media consumption cycles driven

by surface-level pleasure and forming possessive dependence on media devices.

Second, the dependency of teenage social relation linkages on short video media. In the meaning interpretation of spatial discourse, social relation space plays an extremely important role. Social relation space constitutes the spatial connections through which different subjects establish relational linkages. For teens, elements of their social relation space include parents, relatives, classmates, teachers, and others. In traditional social relation space construction, interpersonal communication played a dominant role. Under the continuous influence of short videos, however, social relation space construction has become more dependent on short video media. As a product of media technology, short videos construct sensory overload experience environments through immersive interaction design. When focus reaches its peak, the self enters a “disappearing” state, allowing users to enter immersive virtual horizons through screens and establish social presence in non-face-to-face interactions. This social presence can not only effectively avoid problems such as “contextual awkwardness” and “communication barriers” in real social space interactions (such as for teens with social impairments) but also become compensation for escaping reality and filling inner emptiness (such as introverted teens or those unhappy with real life compensating for real-life deficiencies through short video scrolling). It may also serve as a bonding agent for strengthening social relations (such as the “continuing sparks” practice on the Douyin platform strengthening virtual spatial linkages of social relations). However, once teens find a “reasonable excuse” for “scrolling short videos,” it intensifies their repetitive usage, creating over-dependency on the spatial relations shaped by short videos and affecting their normal social interactions.

3. Returning to Reality: Governance Paths for Teen Short Video Addiction

The phenomenon of teen short video addiction results from the combined effects of media technology and social ecology in the digital era. It is not merely a problem of individual behavior but also concerns platform algorithmic ethics and the absence of family-school education. Exploring its governance paths to escape the virtual maze and return to real life holds significant importance for teens’ value construction and society’s healthy development.

First, enhance anti-connection awareness to break the addiction pattern. As independent individuals, adolescents gradually free themselves from parental monitoring as they age and mature mentally. When using short videos, they need to establish self anti-connection awareness to seek dominance over media control. On the horizontal dimension, teens need to reduce short video usage duration and use timer apps to limit usage frequency beyond control. Reflecting on the vertical dimension, real space serves as another place to escape the virtual world, where teens can cultivate interpersonal relationships in daily life and attempt to actively balance passive media immersion.

Second, optimize anti-addiction systems to realize algorithm debiasing. The teen anti-addiction system is a unified standard for online platforms and an important countermeasure to prevent short video addiction from a technical tool perspective. Platforms can use short video usage process indicators to limit teens' login frequency and usage duration. However, teens have not responded positively to current time prompts, and the anti-addiction system constructed by platforms is in a state of failure. Therefore, transparency needs to be increased in algorithmic design, data nature should be classified at the content push level to achieve algorithm resistance, and the recommendation logic oriented purely toward user stickiness should be transformed into algorithm optimization centered on user health, with more educational meaning to reduce teen short video addiction.

Third, perfect the family-school co-governance mechanism to create a favorable atmosphere. Family and school serve as key fields for teen growth. Current teens' choice of short videos as a decompression method points to the absence of emotional companionship. Parents should enhance companionship with their children, and when psychological satisfaction accumulates to a certain degree, children will reduce their emotional dependency on short video virtual space. Additionally, schools should communicate well with parents, conduct rational media use education at school, play a leading guiding role at home, and timely conduct mental health courses and real entertainment activities based on teens' stress conditions to break the vicious cycle from stress relief needs to virtual immersion to media addiction.

The overload experience of media time erodes teens' temporal perception, and algorithmic recommendation technology induces time investment in short videos. Under 失控 (out-of-control) order, viewers create even more intense media immersion from objective limitations. Simultaneously, short videos shape virtual landscapes through digital technology, complete media device adsorption through visual design, and realize bodily presence. Over time, continuous flowing audiovisual images compensate for the emotional satisfaction of teens' flow experiences, material-level attraction rises to psychological-level infiltration, and the self gradually becomes lost in the virtual maze. However, understanding the phenomenon of teen short video addiction around spatiotemporal logic requires comprehensive relief from individuals, platforms, and family-school systems. By improving teens' media literacy and self-reflection capabilities, strengthening platform anti-addiction systems to achieve algorithm optimization, perfecting family-school co-governance mechanisms, and enhancing psychological education and emotional support, we can truly provide possibilities for adolescents to return to real life.

[1] Zhao Hongxun and Song Wenkai. "The Mediatization of Time: How Short Videos Reshape Temporal Discourse" [J]. *Journalism Lover*, 2024(11): 35-38.

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