https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2026.084

A Study on the Popular Production Mechanism of AI-generated Xia-ren Animated Shorts from the Perspective of Participatory Culture

Kexin Wang*

School of English (Internet Television), Beijing International Studies University, China

***Corresponding author E-mail: 3196372403@qq.com**

Abstract:

This study takes the mass creation phenomenon of AI Xiaren Short Dramas as the research object. Drawing on Participatory Culture Theory, it investigates three major questions: whether AI Technology can reduce short drama creation costs and improve production efficiency, how Ordinary Netizens participate in AI Short Drama production, and how Creators obtain revenue to sustain long-term creation. The research finds that AI Tools can boost efficiency in asset production, yet cost reduction and efficiency improvement have clear boundaries constrained by computing power investment and Creators' narrative capabilities. AI Tools lower barriers to animation creation and enable non-professional netizens to produce works, while factors such as time, energy and narrative aesthetics still hinder individual creation. The industry currently has diversified Monetization Paths. Top Creators achieve sustainable creation through derivative commercial income, whereas emerging Creators struggle with long-term operation due to low playback revenue. This study confirms that while Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC) Technological Empowerment reduces creation thresholds, it also triggers issues including the Matthew Effect in traffic distribution. This paper supplements empirical findings of Participatory Culture within AIGC audiovisual creation and offers references for examining opportunities and dilemmas of mass media production in the intelligent era.

Keywords:

AIGC; Participatory Culture; AI Xiaren Short Dramas; UGC; Technological Empowerment

1 Introduction

1.1 Background Introduction

In November 2022, OpenAI released Chat GPT. It unveiled its texttovideo largemodel Sora for technical preview in February 2024, and rolled out official public access to Sora in December 2024. AIGC has gradually shifted from simple text and image generation to more complex audio-visual content creation. Against this backdrop, the development of artificial intelligence is profoundly influencing the logic of video content production. Artificial intelligence can now be involved in the entire process of video production. According to data from the National Radio and Television Administration, from January to July 2024, the number of key

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

micro-dramas planned for review across the country reached 1 848.Among them, 58 were works related to AI technology, and 16 were online works related to AI. Currently, AI short dramas have become a new trend in the industry development.

We have observed the emergence of a new genre of "campstyle animated short dramas" within the AI short-video landscape. Characterized by rough production styles, mechanical voiceovers, distinctive art designs and relatively inexpensive special effects, these dramas have quickly attracted large audiences. This observation arouses our curiosity: In the field of short dramas, can AI technology reduce production costs and boost production efficiency? From the perspective of production, how do ordinary netizens participate in the creation of AIgenerated short dramas? How can ordinary netizens obtain revenue during production to sustain their longterm creation?

2 Literature Review

2.1Literature Review on Participatory Culture

Participatory Culture has attracted multi-perspective academic research. In Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture, foreign scholar Henry Jenkins conducts a comprehensive analysis of television fan groups. He defines Participatory Culture as fans' active construction of their own culture through the secondary creation of official media materials.

Foreign scholar Colin Porlezza, in From Participatory Culture to Participatory Fatigue: The Problem With the Public, offers a comprehensive analysis of publicparticipation dilemmas confronting traditional news media amid internet development from the perspective of participatoryculture practices. He points out that the evolution of Web 2.0 was supposed to foster participatory transformation within traditional journalism, yet "participatory fatigue" prevails in most traditional newsediting workflows. In Alternative Social Media and the Complexities of a More Participatory Culture: A View From Scuttlebutt, Kate Mannell and Eden T. Smith conduct an overall analysis of the Scuttlebutt platform from the lens of alternative social media. They argue that the platform builds multiscenario, reflexive Participatory Culture via design features such as decentralized architecture, though it also faces challenges including high technical barriers to entry.

Domestic scholars Chen Junjun and Li Yuanlan, in their article From "Cocreation of Short Dramas" to "Fan Diffusion": Logic and Paths of ParticipatoryCultural Practices by Actors in CulturalTourism Microdramas, conduct an indepth study on Chinese culturaltourism microdramas from the perspective of Network Theory. Their research reveals that with the assistance of AI, participants' production efficiency is improved and targeted communication is achieved. Scholar Wang Zhiyang carries out a detailed investigation into UGC edited videos in China in Textual Reproduction and Media Communication of UGC Edited Videos from the Perspective of Participatory Culture from the dimension of textual reproduction. His findings indicate that the intervention of AI has lowered the barriers to video production and dismantled the oneway structure and stereotyped biases that existed in previous media communication. Nevertheless, issues such as intellectual property rights still remain. Scholars Fu Jia and Zhao Shuwang provide a further detailed study on the construction of cultural space concerning participatory creation of online short dramas in China within the newmedia context in their paper From Textual Poaching to Textual Encirclement: The Construction of Participatory Cultural

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Space. Their research demonstrates that both the breadth and depth of audience participation have expanded under the newmedia context, while a balance between users and platforms needs to be struck.

Nevertheless, although these studies have explored theoretical frameworks, creation logics and communication mechanisms, they overlook ethical norms, production workflows and other issues related to AI generation from the producer's perspective.

2.2Literature Review on Short Dramas

After the China Media Group launched China's first AI-driven full-process micro-drama titled Chinese Mythology in 2024, it received significant attention from scholars both at home and abroad, and achieved a number of research results.

Foreign scholars Mercy Agbo et al., in An Empirical Investigation into how Nigerian Skit Makers Portray Cross Dressing on Facebook and Its Impact on Public Perception, supplement the Theory within entertainmentrelated contexts by examining crossdressing performances and public perception created by shortdrama creators on Facebook in the field of socialmedia entertainment. In Too hot to handle? Short form plays are underfunded and undervalued, foreign scholar Cressida Brown supplements the Theory concerning expressions on controversial issues by investigating shortform plays' rapid responses to sensitive political topics such as the Palestinian genocide within the realm of British political theatre. In the article Health literacy development using a short drama programme for dengue fever control in Thailand, foreign scholar Natnapa Heebkaew Padchasuwan supplements the Theory with applications in specific publichealth scenarios by researching how short dramas help improve public health knowledge in Thailand.

Domestic scholars Fu Yuxiao and Hou Zongping, in AIGCEmpowered Microdrama Innovative Development and Crossborder Application: Taking CCTV's AI Microdramas as an Example, integrate the realworld practice of Chinese AIGC microdramas with fine traditional Chinese culture. They propose that AI technology empowers the development of microdramas from three dimensions: creation paradigm, transformation of traditional culture, and crossborder application. Xu Wenguang and Yang Na, in New Pathways for AI Microdramas to Empower the Dissemination of Fine Traditional Chinese Culture: Taking Chinese Myths and AI Reading Classics as Examples, combine the practical phenomenon of Chinese AI microdramas promoting the spread of fine traditional Chinese culture with the Innovative Narrative Theory. They argue that AI microdramas realize the creative transformation and innovative development of fine traditional Chinese culture through the "ScreenwriterAIImplied Screenwriter" model. Man Shengchong and Xu Xinle, in HumanMachine Collaboration, Narrative Divide and Potential Interaction: "Industrial Aesthetics" Narrative Strategies of Chinese AIAnimated Microdramas, connect the realworld practices of Chinese AIanimated microdramas with the Theory of Film Industrial Aesthetics. They put forward that the "IndustrialAestheticsstyle" narrative has become a "newquality productive force" for the animation industry.

Nevertheless, these studies have not examined the popular creation phenomenon of short dramas from the producer's perspective. Accordingly, they fail to address the research questions concerning AIgenerated Xiaren animated shorts under the perspective of Participatory Culture.

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

2.3Raising Research Questions

Scholars have paid limited attention to the deconstruction and quantitative analysis of the production workflows, costbenefit structures of AIgenerated short dramas, and systematic research findings have not yet been formed. Therefore, grounded in the theory of Participatory Culture production, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions: Why does the particularity of AIgenerated Xiaren animated shorts emerge? In the field of short dramas, can AI technology reduce shortdrama production costs and improve production efficiency? From the production perspective, how do ordinary netizens participate in the production of AIgenerated short dramas? How can ordinary netizens obtain revenue in the production process to sustain longterm creation?

3Method

3.1Indepth Interview Method

This paper adopts the research method of interviews to address the above-mentioned research questions.

3.1.1Construction of the Interview Outline

The interview questions are mainly divided into three sections.

The first section focuses on the basic information of the interviewees, including their years of creation, follower scale, creation platforms, professional identities, academic backgrounds and so on.

The second section transforms the core research questions into interview guiding questions. It covers interviewees' opinions on whether AI tools help reduce costs and improve efficiency in creating Xiaren silly short dramas, specific strategies for the entire short drama production workflow, as well as their understanding of monetization channels for silly short dramas and ways to sustain longterm creation.

The third section consists of followup probing questions, mainly involving bottlenecks in creation, pain points of industrial development, and prospects for future development.

Throughout the interview and research process, the researcher strove to avoid the four ethical concerns and misconduct highlighted by Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to research participants; (2) failing to obtain informed consent documents and materials; (3) violating the privacy of research participants; (4) deceiving research participants.

Moreover, if interviewees encounter any questions they are unwilling to answer or feel dissatisfied during the interview, they may remain silent or withdraw midway. Any interview materials that interviewees have declared confidential will not be included or cited in this study.

3.1.2Selection of Interviewees

This study conducts semistructured indepth interviews with 22 eligible participants, each lasting 30 to 60 minutes. The interview period runs from June 2026 to August 2026. The participants include six creators of AIgenerated Xiaren animated shorts and campstyle animated shorts on Douyin and Xiaohongshu platforms.

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Another 16 audience samples of Xiaren animated shorts are recruited through shortvideo fan communities and snowball sampling. Following the principle of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research, data collection ceases upon recruiting the 22nd participant, as the collected interview data are sufficient to address the research questions. The interviewees vary in age, occupation, educational background, geographic location, shortvideo viewing platforms, and creative professional identities, with a low degree of sample homogenization. Interviews are carried out via phone calls, text interviews on WeChat, and oneonone facetoface conversations. Interview recordings are transcribed verbatim, yielding over 40 000 words of transcripts. The processing of interview data is completed independently by the researcher. Basic information about the interviewees is shown in the table.

Table 1 Basic Information of Interviewees

No.	Audience Type	Age	Viewing Platform	Viewing Frequency	Preferred Genres
S1	Xiaren Animated Shorts	20	iQIYI	3 times a week	Camp style comedy, system immortal cultivation
S2	Xiaren Animated Shorts	29	Bilibili	2–3 times a week	2–3 times a week
S3	Xiaren Animated Shorts	27	Hongguo	During meals, tidying up and bathing every day	Timetravel & history, camp style comedy, philosophy
S4	Xiaren Animated ShortsXiaren Animated Shorts	26	Bilibili	Encounter randomly while browsing	System stories
S5	Xiaren Animated Shorts	26	Fanqie	Play randomly	Urban speculative fiction
S6	Xiaren Animated Shorts	25	Bilibili	Watch occasionally when recommended Watch occasionally when recommended	Timetravel & history Time travel & history
S7	Xiaren Animated Shorts	16	Hongguo	Daily	Timetravel & history, system immortal cultivation
S8	Xiaren Animated Shorts	55	Douyin	Watch occasionally	Time travel & history
S9	Xiaren Animated Shorts	20	Douyin	Random viewing	Immortal cultivation
S10	Campstyle Animated Shorts	21	Douyin	Daily	Timetravel, horror Time travel, horror
S11	Xiaren Animated Shorts	24	Douyin	Watch Douyin recommendations	Urban stories
S12	Xiaren Animated Shorts	21	Douyin	Watch randomly based on personal preference	Suspense, wish fulfillment narratives
S13	Xiaren Animated Shorts	18	Douyin & Hongguo	Daily or every one to two days	History, urban speculative fiction, camp style comedy, immortal cultivation, suspense
S14	Xiaren Animated Shorts	30+	Douyin	Watch immediately if recommended and interesting	Ming Dynasty time travel dramas Ming Dynasty time travel dramas
S15	Xiaren Animated Shorts	19	Hongguo	Daily	History, supernatural stories History, supernatural stories
S16	Campstyle Animated Shorts	20	Bilibili	3–4 times a week	Comedy

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Table 2 Basic Information of Creators

No.	Creator Type	Platform	Likes & Collection	Follower Count
B1	Xia ren Animated Shorts	Douyin	1 691 000	128 000
B2	Xia ren Animated Shorts	Douyin	1 000 000	12 000
B3	Xia ren Animated Shorts & Camp style Animated	Xiaohongshu, Douyin	83 000	11 000
B4	Camp style Animated Shorts	Xiaohongshu	9 894	7 738
B5	AIGC Creator	Xiaohongshu	54 000	6 307

4 Results

4.1 Technological Empowerment and Production Revolution: Cost Collapse and Efficiency Leap of AI-Generated Short Dramas

Based on interviews with Short Drama creators, creators generally agree that AI Tools can optimize production links such as Visuals, Scenes and Character Poses, thereby reducing the workload of Manual Drawing. Meanwhile, AI enables the parallel creation of Storyboards and Visuals, substantially boosting Production Efficiency in Short Drama development. In terms of overall Creative Costs, major investments cover AI Software Subscriptions, Computing Credits, Hardware Equipment and Packaged Assets. Economic input varies significantly across different Production Models.

"The cost of one episode is roughly 200–600 RMB. As for improved Production Speed, it used to take several days to finish one episode, but now it can be done within an hour (B5)."

"The cost per episode is about 1 500 RMB, mainly covering Subscriptions to AI Tools and consumption of Generation Credits. This price is acceptable for Individual Creators. Moreover, output quality per Unit Cost keeps improving with accumulated experience, leading to higher Cost Performance. The Traditional Workflow requires finishing all Storyboards before production, while AI allows Parallel Operations. I can generate Visuals while drafting Storyboards instead of waiting idly. Generated Footage lets me instantly check whether my Storyboard Concepts work, and I can adjust on the fly by identifying missing Shots or Angles that need supplementation, which delivers extremely high Efficiency (B6)."

"The economic cost so far should be around 20 000 RMB. AI has greatly improved Creative Efficiency. Some diverse Scenes were unavailable and had to be manually drawn in the past; AI saves a great deal of work (B1)."

"If we only count Asset Purchases, the cost is just over 10,000 RMB. If Hardware such as Computers is included, the total will be much higher. Some Visuals cannot be produced or are hard to make in AN Software, so AI Software is adopted (B2)."

It can be seen that the Empowerment of AI Technology has broken Technical Barriers in Traditional Animation Production Workflows, granting Ordinary Individuals who were previously excluded from Professional Production Systems access to Cultural Production. The Technical Empowerment of AI Tools dismantles Professional Barriers and greatly lowers Creative Thresholds. Within Traditional Animation Workflows, drawing Scenes and Special Character Poses demands massive time and energy for Manual Drawing, forming a major

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

barrier for Beginners. As interviewees B1 and B2 mentioned, AI can generate technically demanding Scenes and Complex Character Poses, saving substantial time and Financial Costs. For creators such as B5 and B6 adopting the Full AIGC Production Model, parallel work on Storyboarding and Image Generation is achievable, breaking the linear Traditional Workflow of "completing all Storyboards before Visual Production" and drastically shortening Animation Production Cycles.

However, data from this study also proves that Technological Empowerment does not bring unconditional Cost Reduction and Efficiency Improvement. Efficiency Gains brought by AI concentrate on Material Production, while Cost Changes are closely tied to Production Modes and Hardware Investment. First, Efficiency Improvements from AI focus on Visual Asset Generation. Core components of what Henry Jenkins terms Textual Poaching and Secondary Creative Reproduction, including Script Polishing, Shot Rhythm Control and Rendering of Character Emotions, still rely heavily on Human Subjective Judgment. B1 explicitly states that he does not use AI to generate Scripts or Storyboards, and works from peers adopting AI for these tasks show poor Traffic Performance. The fundamental reason is that AI built on the Transformer Architecture can only generate Assets through Probabilistic Calculation and cannot genuinely understand Human Emotions or Value Judgments.

Second, Costs show obvious Differentiation, and there is no absolute conclusion that "AI equals Low Cost". For Full AIGC Creators who rely entirely on AI for Visuals and do not purchase large Traditional Animation Asset Packs, direct Material Costs per episode can be controlled within the range of several hundred to 1,500 RMB, eliminating Labor Costs for Traditional Hand-Drawing. Nevertheless, for traditional Xiaren Campstyle Animation Creators such as B1 and B2, AI serves only as a Supplementary Tool. They still need High-Performance Computer Hardware, Packaged Character and Scene Asset Libraries, and Subscriptions to various Software, resulting in cumulative long-term investment of 10,000 to 20,000 RMB. Continuous Expenses are also incurred by AI Tools themselves, including Credit Consumption and Subscription Fees. Generating High-Quality Complex Visuals further raises Costs through higher Computing Power Consumption. Therefore, AI can cut Hand-Drawing Labor Costs yet introduce new expenses for Computing Resources and Hardware. The final Total Cost depends on which Production Route the creator chooses.

Finally, even with AI support, creators struggle to achieve Stable High-Quality Mass Production. Multiple creators noted in interviews that producing AI Xiaren Animated Shorts cannot simply depend on Tools; creators must act as Gatekeepers for Value Alignment. Although AI rapidly generates Visual Materials, considerable time is still required to fix Flaws in AI-Generated Footage, adjust Shot Rhythms and polish Storylines. Time Cost is repeatedly emphasized by interviewees. Money can buy Subscriptions and Computing Power, but time invested in Story Refinement and Animation Debugging cannot be directly replaced by Tools.

In short, AI improves Short Drama Production Efficiency in partial links such as Asset Drawing, yet Cost Reduction is conditional. The Full AIGC Pipeline can lower direct Material Costs per episode, while Mixed Production Models may bring additional expenses. Core Narrative Links including Scriptwriting and Emotional Expression cannot be automatically completed by AI and require Manual Adjustment.

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

4.2 From "Audience" to "Creator": The Practical Barriers for Ordinary Netizens to Engage in AI Short Drama Production

Regarding the survey on Ordinary Netizens' Willingness to participate in the Production of AI Xiaren Animated Shorts, Short Drama Practitioners and Audiences from different Platforms shared their real experiences and opinions respectively. Each Interviewee demonstrated differentiated characteristics in terms of entry motivation, practical capabilities and personal willingness. Notably, most Creators reached a consensus that AI Tools and Animation Asset Packs have substantially eliminated the rigid Professional Thresholds of traditional animation related to Fine Arts, Screenwriting and Directing. According to Interviewees, ninety percent of Creators in the industry are Ordinary Beginners, and the core driving force for them to enter the industry is pure passion for Campstyle and Xiaren short drama content. In sharp contrast, although most Audiences generally enjoy this type of short drama content, constrained by time and production capabilities, the majority only remain at the viewing stage without attempting independent production.

"My university major is Electrical Engineering. This is mainly my personal hobby. If you are genuinely passionate about it, you will be willing to learn (B1)."

"I had no prior academic training or professional experience in Fine Arts, Animation, Directing or related fields. I am quite interested in this field. At that time, I was most exposed to content about the history of the Ming Dynasty. I personally love Ming history and find many unresolved regrets in this historical period. Many animation Creators have rewritten these regrets through adapted works, which inspired me to create Xiaren animations. Besides, as a college student, I also hoped to earn some pocket money through my own efforts (B2)."

"I had no relevant work experience before. It was quite accidental. I happened to browse related content on Douyin and then learned relevant skills step by step (B3)."

"I want to create works myself, yet I have no time. I think these works are fascinating. I am willing to produce similar interesting short dramas. If the works can be widely disseminated and gain more views and play counts, it will also be a great entertainment option (S8)."

"I lack the capability to make animations, but I am attempting to write novels (S12)."

"Approximately ninety percent of new entrants join to learn. To be precise, most of them, around ninety percent, have no foundational experience and are driven simply by their affection for animation (B1)."

In accordance with Henry Jenkins' Participatory Culture Theory, Media Audiences inherently possess the internal desire to transform from Text Consumers to Text Reproducers. In Textual Poachers, Jenkins emphasizes that Audience Participatory Practices are not limited to shallow interpretive behaviors such as comments and bullet screens. Instead, they are embodied in secondary creation by appropriating Media Symbols. Audiences take Media Texts as raw materials, project their own imagination, emotions and values, and complete Cultural Production within the subcultural community. The Audience Interview materials of this study also verify this psychological trait. After watching Xiaren Campstyle short dramas for a long time, some Audiences develop the idea of independent creation. For instance, S8 expresses the willingness to produce similar

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

interesting short dramas, and S12 has begun attempting to write novel Scripts. Nevertheless, when it comes to specific creative practices, soft Creative Thresholds and constraints of objective realistic conditions still form substantial barriers, creating an Identity Gap between Audiences and Producers.

First, AIGC brings technical convenience to Film and Television Creation, yet capabilities such as Film and Television Narration cannot be mastered quickly. Jenkins' fan secondary creation mainly covers fan fiction and image adaptation with relatively low Creative Thresholds, while AI Xiaren Animated Shorts belong to Audiovisual Comprehensive Media Production. Although AI Software Tools are user-friendly and greatly reduce the difficulty of image production, Script Creation still tests Creators' literary foundation and basic Audiovisual Language skills. Multiple beginner Creators pointed out in interviews that the biggest bottleneck for inexperienced practitioners is not mastering AI operation, but Shot Logic, Script Adaptation capability and the ability to tell complete stories with Audiovisual Language. AI Tools can generate images, yet they cannot teach Ordinary Netizens how to narrate stories and arrange Shots. Many Ordinary Netizens can download AI Tools and purchase Asset Packs, but they lack accumulated narrative aesthetics. Even with these tools, they struggle to produce complete and qualified finished works. Tools solve the problem of "how to create visuals", but cannot address the core creative proposition of "how to tell a good story".

Second, the cost of Time and Energy constitutes a realistic barrier preventing ordinary people from entering the industry. In Jenkins' early research on Fan Subcultures, fan communities were usually willing to devote abundant spare time to unpaid hobby creation. However, most Audiences of Xiaren Animated Shorts in this study are students and working Ordinary Netizens with highly fragmented leisure time. Most potential Creators, namely the broad Audience group, have academic tasks or full-time jobs. Even with AI assistance, producing one episode of Xiaren Animated Shorts still requires several hours to several days of continuous investment. Interviewee S8 directly stated, "I want to create works myself, yet I have no time". This fully indicates that for Ordinary Netizens, Time and Energy are scarcer resources than capital. Even with creative intentions, many people do not have sufficient spare time to complete the whole Production Workflow.

Third, in terms of Creative Motivation, interest serves as the primary driving force, while profit is only a secondary demand. Interview samples of Creators show that the vast majority of beginner bloggers enter the industry out of pure hobbies, with extra side income only as an additional expectation. This also explains why numerous Audiences merely watch relevant content rather than rashly engaging in production.

In summary, the development of relevant technologies opens up channels for Ordinary Netizens to participate in the production of AI Xiaren Campstyle animations. Interest acts as the core driving force for Ordinary Netizens to participate in creation, realizing the possibility of Audience Text Reproduction proposed by Jenkins' Participatory Culture Theory. However, the large-scale transformation from "Audience to Producer" envisioned by Participatory Culture still faces realistic gaps. Narrative aesthetic capabilities and the cost of Time and Energy prevent most Audiences from completing Identity Transformation, and the majority of Audiences remain Text Consumers.

4.3 Economic Foundation for Sustainable Creation: The Incentive Ecosystem of Mass Production of AI Short Dramas

Regarding the long-term revenue sources of Xiaren Short Drama Creators, Creators put forward different

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

answers based on their own operational experience. Since each blogger differs in Follower Scale and Production Model, there are obvious distinctions in their Monetization Paths and actual income levels. However, it is worth noting that all Interviewees reached a consensus on the revenue performance of Platform Traffic Sharing. The unit price of play revenue sharing on various short-video and short drama platforms is generally low, and it is difficult to cover creative input costs solely by video playback revenue. In contrast, Creators with stable Commercial Order Resources who can take Brand Customized Short Films are able to obtain substantial derivative income to support Sustainable Creation. Ordinary New and Small-Scale Creators lack opportunities for Commercial Cooperation. Most of them can only gain modest income through small platform tasks and Mini-Program Embedding. They sustain creation merely by personal interest and remain in the state of "creating for passion" for a long time.

"Direct playback revenue is basically non-existent, and traffic sharing for independent short dramas was never the primary source of income. However, the derivative value brought by works is considerable- I have received many commercial order invitations. I mainly take commissions for Brand Customized AI Short Films, meaning clients entrust me to produce a brand-new short film from scratch. The quotation is roughly 10,000 RMB per minute. Order frequency is not fixed; I cooperate on matching projects, prioritizing content quality and refusing to disrupt my own creative rhythm for extra commissions (B6)."

"If a work reaches one million views, the payout is only around 100 RMB, sometimes even less. But creating purely for passion is unsustainable; no one can survive without income (B3)."

"In Hongguo Short Dramas, the payout for ten thousand views ranges from 5 to 10 RMB this year. There is also the Douyin Creator Program, income from embedded Mini-Programs, advertisement sharing, and related revenue streams (B2)."

"A few RMB for ten thousand views. A single commissioned advertisement pays 600–1000 RMB, with multiple orders per month (B5)."

In Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins points out that the core motivations for fans to rewrite original works and create fan fiction derive from Community Identity, emotional catharsis and self-expression. The entire production process is separated from Commercial Capital and platform profit systems, and economic gains are not regarded as a prerequisite for creation. Fans are willing to invest time and energy without material rewards to complete Text Appropriation and Reproduction. The value of Participatory Culture lies in spiritual cultural co-construction rather than the acquisition of material compensation. Nevertheless, Jenkins' theory took shape during the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Fan creation at that time was mostly limited to niche communities such as forums and fan fiction websites, instead of being embedded in the complete short-video commercial ecosystem consisting of algorithmic traffic, commercial commissions and platform revenue sharing. The mass production of AI Xiaren Campstyle Short Dramas observed in this research occurs within commercial short-video platforms dominated by algorithms. Mass UGC Production has been deeply embedded in the capital logic of platforms, which creates practical tensions for the practice logic of traditional fan-based Participatory Culture.

In other words, Participatory Culture in the digital platform environment is no longer merely a non-remunerative spiritual hobby practiced within niche communities. When Ordinary Netizens publish their creations

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

publicly on short-video platforms, the works will be incorporated into the platform's traffic monetization system. Creative activities thus carry dual attributes: "community cultural expression" and "potential livelihood". While completing Text Reproduction and expressing personal ideas, ordinary Creators inevitably face practical pressures including livelihood maintenance and cost consumption. Participatory Culture Theory explains "why ordinary people want to create", yet fails to answer the practical question of "what enables ordinary people to persist in creation over the long term". Sustainable mass media cultural practice cannot fully depend on continuous individual emotional passion; it requires matching economic incentive mechanisms as a practical foundation. Economic returns directly determine whether Participatory Cultural Practice can endure long-term.

Interview data demonstrates that the incentive effect of native Platform Playback Sharing is extremely limited. For works with one million views, the total income from playback sharing is often less than 100 RMB, and revenue for ten thousand views falls between several RMB and ten RMB. Reliance purely on playback revenue rarely offsets the overall investment including computer hardware purchases, AI subscriptions, Asset Pack procurement, and substantial time and labor input from Creators. B3 explicitly states that producing free short dramas alone cannot sustain livelihoods. The traffic sharing model essentially uses traffic metrics as the distribution benchmark and exhibits a strong Matthew Effect. It favors established accounts with a large existing Follower Scale and stable view volume, and offers limited benefits to New and Small-Scale Creators. Even if new creators produce high-quality content, they struggle to recover creative investment through basic playback sharing.

Revenue capable of supporting stable production for Creators mainly comes from derivative commercial value such as Brand Customized Short Films and Commercial Advertising Cooperation. However, commercial resources are subject to a notable Matthew Effect. Commercial clients prioritize past work portfolios, account Follower Scale and historical view data, so business opportunities tend to flow toward top Creators with proven track records. New Creators lack representative works as credentials and rarely secure stable commercial commissions. Beyond that, platform tasks and Mini-Program Embedding serve as supplementary income. Platform campaign tasks are not supplied steadily over time, and algorithm-driven traffic fluctuations directly cause income volatility. Such revenue lacks reliable continuity and can only function as a subsidy rather than the core income sustaining production.

Consequently, a small number of top Creators in the industry earn considerable income through commercial customization and advertising cooperation. They can balance self-expression and material compensation, achieving truly sustainable participatory production. In contrast, numerous New and Small-Scale Creators lack stable commercial channels and must return to the traditional fan production logic described by Jenkins, relying on personal interests and community hobbies to keep producing — the "creating for passion" referenced in interviews. This phenomenon reflects an inherent contradiction of Participatory Culture in the AIGC Era: platform technologies lower creative entry barriers and equip more ordinary people with the capacity for Text Reproduction, yet platform distribution mechanisms fail to build a sustainable economic foundation for large numbers of ordinary UGC Producers. Technological Empowerment enables "the ability to create", but does not resolve the practical dilemma of "creating sustainably".

To sum up, AI Xiaren Short Dramas support diversified revenue channels including traffic sharing, live

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

streaming gifts and Mini-Program widgets. Some Creators can rely on derivative commercial income to sustain long-term production. However, the industry features prominent income stratification: native platform playback sharing offers modest incentives, commercial resources concentrate among top bloggers, and numerous Ordinary Netizen Creators still lack stable monetization channels. Participatory Creation remains largely sustained by personal interest.

5 Conclusion and Reflection

This study adopts the Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview Method and applies Participatory Culture Theory to conduct theoretical research on the mass creation phenomenon of AI Xia-ren Short Dramas. It attempts to address three research questions: whether AI Technology can reduce costs and improve production efficiency within the short drama sector; how Ordinary Netizens participate in AI Short Drama production from the production perspective; and how Ordinary Netizens obtain revenue during production to support long-term production practices. The research finds that AI Tools can boost short drama production efficiency in partial links such as asset drawing, yet the effect of cost reduction and efficiency improvement is conditional and constrained by Production Modes, hardware and computing power investment, as well as Creators' narrative capabilities. AI Tools and Asset Packs greatly lower professional animation thresholds, offering a feasible pathway for Ordinary Netizens without professional backgrounds in Fine Arts, Screenwriting or Directing to engage in the production of AI Xia-ren Short Dramas. Nevertheless, due to constraints from objective conditions, the vision of large-scale transformation from Audiences to Producers cannot be fully realized. AI Xia-ren Camp-style Short Dramas support diversified Monetization Paths. Some Creators can sustain long-term creation via derivative commercial income, yet the industry shows prominent income stratification, and numerous Ordinary Netizen Creators lack stable Monetization Channels. Meanwhile, the idealized assumptions that AI can unconditionally realize low-cost, high-efficiency mass production, and that popularized tools can drive massive transformation from Audiences to Producers, are not valid. The primary reason lies in the clear boundaries of Technological Empowerment brought by AIGC Tools. Tools only reshape material production links, and multiple practical factors including narrative competence, time cost and platform commercial distribution mechanisms still impose constraints on mass media participation.

This study argues that AI Tools indeed open a practical gateway for Ordinary Netizens to participate in animated short drama production, embodying the emerging form of Participatory Culture under the AIGC environment. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence from grassroots short drama producers for the localized application of Jenkins' Participatory Culture Theory within China's media context, focusing on UGC audiovisual production of domestic animated short dramas. Technology lowers operational barriers for hardware, granting numerous non-professional Ordinary People the possibility of media reproduction, which verifies Participatory Culture Theory's judgment on the productive potential of Audiences. However, Technological Empowerment does not equate to high-quality and sustainable mass cultural production. Audiovisual narrative competence, time and energy input, and economic incentives jointly determine the final implementation effect of participatory practices.

It is worth noting that this study also identifies corresponding negative impacts accompanying the decline of technical barriers. A large number of Ordinary Creators lacking narrative training enter the industry, and

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

without supporting guidance, they tend to produce formulaic and homogenized content. Meanwhile, the Matthew Effect stands out in traffic allocation on short-video platforms. Creation opportunities are opened to the public, yet monetization opportunities remain concentrated among a small number of top accounts. A great many New and Small-Scale Creators can only rely on personal interest to keep producing, forming a huge gap between“being able to create” and “being able to make a living from creation”, which deserves vigilance and reflection. When examining Participatory Culture, researchers should not only focus on the technical phenomenon that “the public can create”, but also confront the dilemmas of content quality and platform economic structure behind grassroots creation.

Nevertheless, subject to the objective limitation of sample size, this study has certain deficiencies. A total of 22 interview samples are collected, among which only six are Creator samples. The samples are mainly distributed on Douyin and Xiaohongshu, with few Creator samples from platforms such as Hongguo. Thus the representativeness of samples is limited, and the samples cannot fully stand for all Creators across the whole industry. For future research, scholars in media studies may pay more attention to the living conditions of grassroots AIGC short drama producers under diverse platform ecosystems, expand longitudinal tracking research, and further observe the evolution and practice of Participatory Culture in the audiovisual UGC field amid continuous AIGC technological iteration.

References

[1].Henry Jenkins. (1992).Textual Poachers.Taylor and Francis,

[2].Colin Porlezza.(2019).From Participatory Culture to Participatory Fatigue: The Problem With the Public. Social Media + Society,5 (3), 2056305119856684-2056305119856684.

[3].Mannell Kate & Smith Eden T..(2022).Alternative Social Media and the Complexities of a More Participatory Culture: A View From Scuttlebutt.Social Media + Society,8 (3).

[4].Chen Junjun & Li Yuanlan. (2025). From “Cocreation of Short Dramas” to “Fan Diffusion”: Logic and Path of Actorbased Participatory Cultural Practice in Culturaltourism Microdramas. Journal of Southwest Minzu University (Humanities and Social Sciences), 46(8), 125138. (in Chinese)

[5].Wang Zhiyang. (2022). Text Reproduction and Media Communication of UGC Edited Videos From the Perspective of Participatory Culture. National Arts Research, 35(6), 3138. (in Chinese)

[6].Fu Jia & Zhao Shuwang. (2022). From Textual Poaching to Textual Hunting: The Construction of Participatory Cultural Space. Academic Journal of Zhongzhou, (5), 167172. (in Chinese)

[7].Amadi, Mercy Agbo, Macaulay, Samuel Uche & Fatima Ijeoma Emetumah.(2024).An Empirical Investigation into how Nigerian Skit Makers Portray Cross Dressing on Facebook and ItsImpact on Public Perception.Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports,18 (4),14-23.

[8].Cressida Brown.(2025).Too hot to handle? Short form plays are underfunded and undervalued.The Stage, (27),12.

[9].Natnapa Heebkaew Padchasuwan, Rittirong Junggoth, Naowarat Maneenin, Surachai Phimha, Jinthapa Benchamas & Krittiyanee Thammasarn.(2024).Health literacy development using a short drama programme for dengue fever control in Thailand.Health Education Journal,83 (7),720-731.

[10].Fu Yuxiao & Hou Zongping. (2025). Innovative Development and Crossborder Application of AIGCempowered Microdramas-Taking CCTV AI Microdramas as an Example. Media, (5), 3941. (in Chinese)

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[11].Xu Wenguang & Yang Na. (2024). New Paths for AI Microdramas to Empower the Communication of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture-Taking Chinese Myths and AI Reading Classics as Examples. TV Research, (5), 1618+25. (in Chinese)
[12].Man Shengchong & Xu Xinyue. (2025). Humanmachine Collaboration, Narrative Division and Potential Interaction: “Industrial Aesthetics” Narrative Strategy of Chinese AI Animated Microdramas. Future Communication, 32(4), 122129. (in Chinese)

© 2026 by the author(s); licensee Mason Publish Group, this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)