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Correction of failure: Research on the use and satisfaction of new mechanisms of network micro-short dramas

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Abstract:
With the development of the market for online literary works, 2024 has ushered in a golden stage of the vigorous development of network micro-dramas. The continuous growth of the number of micro dramas has brought a vast network user market, but at the same time, in the process of watching micro drama, the psychology of users to the medium is also changing. Under the dual action of micro-drama and algorithm recommendation mechanism, compared with the traditional use and satisfaction theory, the user's use and satisfaction mechanism has undergone new changes. First, the initiative of users' media contact motivation is weakened; second, the "correction" of users' media impression is "ineffective" due to the intervention of the algorithm recommendation technology, resulting in the process of "the contact result does not meet the psychological appeal of the media contact and the algorithm mechanism denies the correction and continuous contact". At the same time, the dominance and privacy of this new use and satisfaction mechanism are also affecting the development of the drama market towards the direction of improving the quality and reducing the quantity. Analyze the market demand of users from three aspects of plot optimization, investment optimization and value chain building, so as to help the continuous high-quality development of the short drama.

Keywords:
algorithmic push, media contact, network micro-drama, use and satisfaction theory

1 Introduction

With the popularization of Internet technology, the user base for online cultural and artistic works continues to expand. According to the *China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report (2024)* by December 2023, the number of online audio-visual users in China had reached 1.074 billion, with a netizen usage rate of 98.3%. As short video platforms become more widespread, the audience base for micro-series has also grown significantly. Data shows that the user base for short video platforms has exceeded hundreds of millions, including a large number of loyal viewers of micro-series. These audiences are young and active, full of curiosity about new things, providing ample space for the creation and dissemination of micro-series.

Nowadays, micro-series have formed an industrialized operational model. From scriptwriting, actor selection, production to promotion and marketing, every link has formed a complete industrial chain. At the same

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time, micro-series have closely linked with industries such as advertising and e-commerce, achieving profitability through methods like product placement and live-streaming sales. This industrialized operational model not only enhances the economic benefits of micro-series but also promotes the diversified development of the cultural industry. From an international perspective, the global influence of micro-series is growing steadily. Some excellent micro-series works have been translated into multiple languages and are being spread and promoted worldwide. These works not only showcase Chinese cultural appeal and creative strength but also facilitate exchanges and mutual learning between different cultures. Therefore, as a new form of art in the internet era, micro-series have developed into a significant cultural phenomenon and industrial force that cannot be ignored.

On the contrary, some micro-dramas are poorly made, with shallow plots that lack depth and substance, making it hard for them to resonate with viewers. Many micro-dramas blindly follow trends, featuring repetitive themes and lacking innovation and uniqueness. Some even resort to excessive violence and pornography to grab attention, spreading negative values and having a detrimental impact on social morals. This inevitably leads to an important contradiction: how do these populist, non-refined, and homogenized micro-dramas gain favor in the market? Can they meet the needs of their audience?

2 Literature review

2.1 The use and satisfaction theory

"*Uses and Gratifications*" study, as the name suggests, views audience members as individuals with specific needs, and their media consumption activities as a process of "*using*" media to satisfy these needs. The *Uses and Gratifications* study originated in the 1940s when Hertzog, Berelson, and McQuail separately studied the "uses and gratifications" of radio, print, and television media, attributing peoples media consumption behavior to the pursuit of fulfilling their basic needs. In 1974, Katz published "*The Uses of Mass Communication*," which summarized media consumption behavior as a causal chain process: "social factors + psychological factors → media expectations → media consumption → need satisfaction." This proposed the basic model of the "*Uses and Gratifications*" process. In 1977, Takeuchi Yukio added several supplements to this model, suggesting that the outcome of such media consumption behavior could be either that the needs were met or not. Regardless of whether they were met, this outcome would influence subsequent media consumption behavior, as people would adjust their existing media impressions based on the satisfaction results, thereby affecting future media consumption behavior.

Professor Yiqing Hu from Nanjing University proposed four main purposes of audiences' use of the Internet in his empirical study "*On the Theory of Use and Satisfaction in Internet Space*": one is to improve cognition, two is to vent emotions, three is social needs, and four is entertainment needs, which further develops users' needs for media contact behavior in the Internet era.

2.2 Research perspectives on network micro-dramas

Online micro-series have been active on internet platforms since 2019, alongside the continuous expansion of the short video market. After five years of market development, they entered a period of vigorous growth

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in 2024. In 2024, while the number of registered Chinese TV series increased, the number of distributed ones decreased, leading to explosive growth in online micro-series. Various genres and types of micro-series emerged one after another, achieving prosperity in quantity. A search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure reveals that research on online micro-series has shown a steady upward trend since 2019. Currently, domestic research on online micro-series primarily focuses on four aspects.

The first is the analysis of content production in online micro-series. In "*Production Models and Aesthetic Trends of Online Micro-Series*", Miaomiao Gu points out that compared to traditional film and television content production, micro-series primarily use simple narrative logic and directional expression. However, this fast-paced lifestyle adaptation also erodes the aesthetic experience of traditional films and TV shows, creating a low-latency satisfaction akin to light novels. Xueyi Chen, in "*Research on the Quality Creation of Online Micro-Series Content under the Background of Cultural Tourism Integration*", analyzes the current development status of micro-series and explores new ideas for the creation of micro-series content themes under the backdrop of cultural tourism integration.

Secondly, research on the driving forces and future prospects of online micro-series. In her article "*Breaking Out, Hidden Concerns, and Prospects: An Analysis of Online Micro-Series in the Short Video Era*", Shiyuan Sun argues that the breakout of online micro-series is caused by multiple factors such as accelerated emotional release in society, technological empowerment, and platform economics. However, these factors also lead to issues like a lack of artistic appeal and an excessive pursuit of commercial interests. Therefore, it is essential to delve deeper into cultural content, improve social systems, explore international dissemination channels, and transform short-term gains into long-term benefits.

The third is the narrative study of online micro-short dramas. Haixia Liu selected 50 micro-short drama works as samples to study their narrative content and discourse, and provided relevant suggestions for the innovation and development of online micro-short drama narrative.

The fourth study focuses on the dissemination methods of online micro-series. Xue Wang used a questionnaire survey to investigate the effectiveness of micro-series on *Kuaishou*, summarizing the dissemination mechanisms and issues of micro-series on the platform, as well as analyzing optimization strategies. Lei Liu pointed out that efforts should be made to create high-quality and localized micro-series, striving for their international reach, collaborating with all parties to map out a new landscape for the international dissemination of micro-series.

In general, the current research on online micro-short dramas mainly focuses on their content creation, development history, narrative analysis and communication research, and pays less attention to the changes in users media contact behavior mechanism.

2.3 Use and satisfaction mechanism in network micro-drama

Current research on the use and satisfaction of online micro-series often focuses on explaining their popularity under the theory of use and satisfaction, attributing their success to meeting the fragmented needs and psychological demands of short video media users. However, scholars have paid less attention to how user expectations for micro-series are revised and the significant impact of algorithmic recommendation mech-

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anisms within micro-series on subsequent media consumption behavior. Therefore, this paper starts from the perspective of users' psychological engagement with online micro-series, focusing on the influence of micro-series on subsequent media consumption behavior, aiming to analyze the new changes in the use and satisfaction mechanism in the era of micro-series.

3. Research method: In-depth interview

3.1 The interview outline design

The research questions of this study mainly include: Does the network micro-drama meet the needs of the audience? What is the use and satisfaction mechanism of the network micro-drama? What are the new changes compared with the traditional use and satisfaction mechanism?

During the communication process with the respondents, the interview questions mainly include three parts. The first part is about the respondents' age, occupation, interests, network use and other basic information.

The second part is mainly to reduce the dimension of the research problem. Convert into specific interview questions, Including: ① The total number of short plays seen; ② Which short play did I see for the first time, Why do you choose to watch short plays, It was recommended by a friend, Platform push or their own interest; ③ Usually at what time, The location will choose to watch micro-dramas, How often to watch it, How long the average time takes each time; ④ What is your impression of the short play, How to view the endless emergence of various types of short series; ⑤ What type of miniseries am I prefer, What kind of experience it gives you; ⑥ Watch long plays and short plays, Which one can give you more spiritual satisfaction; ⑦ What is your impression of online microplays before you have never watched them? After seeing a few and then have what impression of it; ⑧ Do you take the initiative to choose a micro drama to watch more or by algorithm recommendation more; ⑨ Do your friends around you love short plays, Do you usually share it with my friends, Discuss a short play; ⑩ Whether it will replace the long play, Are you willing to watch long plays after watching short them, Look at the long play when there is any impact.

The third part is to ask the respondents about the impact of online micro-dramas on their daily work, study and life, and can dig into the points that the respondents are interested in or want to complain about.

During the interview and research process, researchers made every effort to avoid the four ethical issues and misconduct emphasized by scholar Al-anBryman: ① causing harm to research participants; ② failing to use informed consent documents or materials; ③ infringing on the privacy of research participants; ④ deceiving research participants. If interviewees have any questions they do not wish to answer or are dissatisfied during the interview, they can remain silent or withdraw midway. Interview materials that respondents stated they did not wish to be made public were not included or cited in this study.

3.2 Interview subject selection

This study selected 20 micro-film viewers aged between 10 and 60 for semi-structured interviews lasting about 20 minutes each. The interviews began in January 2025 and ended in February 2025.

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The participants were mainly sourced through online mining, community recruitment, and a snowball sampling method. Their occupations ranged from students, teachers, employees of private companies, nurses, fitness trainers, to full-time housewives. First, active user comments on popular micro-films were selected for follow-up discussions to explore specific plot content. After gaining their trust, they were contacted via private messages to obtain their contact information. Second, interviews were solicited within the relevant social media circles of micro-films to find viewers willing to participate. Third, based on introductions from already interviewed individuals, friends who frequently watch micro-films were also interviewed. According to the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research, when the 20th participant was recruited, all interview content was sufficient to address the research questions, marking the end of sample collection. The participants showed differences in age, occupation, education level, and region, with low homogeneity.

The interview was conducted by telephone and *WeChat* , and the results were sorted into a transcript of more than 12 000 words. The interview content was completed independently by the author, and the basic information of the interviewees is shown in the table.

Table 1 Interviewer information

Number	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	28	woman	staff
2	56	woman	retire
3	21	woman	college student
4	24	woman	free-lancer
5	25	woman	mechanical designer
6	22	man	college student
7	46	woman	stay-at-home mom
8	23	woman	teacher
9	22	woman	nurse
10	20	woman	college student
11	24	man	scriptwriter
12	11	woman	pupil
13	30	man	electronic designer
14	43	man	private sector employee
15	22	man	college student
16	46	woman	teacher
17	32	man	employees
18	16	man	senior high school student
19	32	woman	be in motion and do business
20	23	man	fitness trainer

4. Research findings and discussion points

4.1 Micro-drama: A new turn in film and television dramas in the "speed" era

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Online micro-series sprouted in 2019 and gained significant influence in society. After sustained development during the pandemic, they finally entered a thriving era of "*universal viewing*" in 2024. In an age where life is increasingly fast-paced, users demand for media consumption has shifted towards fragmented, quick, and concise content. Micro-series emerged under this backdrop, quickly gaining widespread impact across society through short video platforms. The user base they reach has expanded compared to previous mediums like books and television.

Pilot research and interviews have found that the online audience for micro-series not only comes from fixed groups such as novel readers and TV drama viewers but has also attracted a broader audience among middle-aged and elderly people. Almost all interviewees stated that "more than half of their family and friends have watched or continue to watch micro-series." Moreover, in the use of short series by this broad group, users' psychological responses to media exposure and satisfaction with media have undergone new changes compared to book media and television media.

4.2 Use satisfaction: the mechanism changes in the micro-short drama trend

"*Uses and Gratifications*" theory has had a significant impact on the history of mass communication studies. It marks a major shift in the perspective of communication research towards audience satisfaction. Through the development by scholars such as Yujiro Takeuchi, it summarizes the complete mechanism through which audiences gain satisfaction during media exposure and use: "social and psychological needs → media expectations → media exposure → whether the exposure results in satisfaction or dissatisfaction → modification of psychological demands for media exposure → rejection/re-exposure". This shows that in the process of media use, audiences can be divided into two stages: initial and re-exposure. In the initial stage, audience use of media is achieved under the combined influence of social and psychological needs; in the re-exposure stage, audiences will modify their media expectations based on whether they experienced psychological satisfaction during the initial exposure. These modified expectations will directly affect the audience subsequent media exposure.

However, the investigation found that in the contact and use of online micro-short dramas, users use of micro-short dramas and their satisfaction mechanism have undergone new changes, mainly in the two stages of initial contact and re-contact.

First, in the initial encounter, users mainly come into contact with micro-series through the platforms push mechanism. Users either have little to no knowledge of short dramas or only a faint understanding of them, which does not constitute media anticipation. That is, during their first media encounter, users complete the process of using and satisfying themselves through passive media anticipation. The following responses from interviewees confirm this "passive" process of media anticipation regarding how they first encountered micro-series:

"I saw it on TikTok, basically I would watch it for a while if I brushed it."

"I first saw the short play on Weibo and thought it was interesting, so I continued to watch it."

"The first short drama I watched was called Before Dawn. It was pushed to me when I was watching videos on TikTok. I just watched it to kill time."

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"At first, I didn't know much about short dramas. I thought this kind of drama must be some kind of melodramatic plot, shoddy and brainless. Later, I accidentally found it in the browser and felt that it was just an ordinary exciting plot."

Secondly, in the process of re-engaging with micro-series, even if users are not satisfied with their initial experience, they do not "reject further engagement" according to traditional *usage and satisfaction mechanisms*; instead, they continue to engage. During this continuous engagement with micro-series, interviewees frequently mentioned keywords such as "platform recommendations", "tight plots and simple content", "able to predict plot developments", and "not very interesting". This indicates that a significant number of users, despite not finding satisfaction from watching short series, have adjusted their media expectations for micro-series and do not "reject" further engagement. Instead, they submit to algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and complete subsequent continuous media engagement. Regarding the issue of "channels for daily viewing of short series", all 20 interviewees answered that it is through platform recommendations, while a few also said they would actively seek out online resources after being recommended.

In summary, the new usage and satisfaction process has undergone new changes under the intervention of media. It is mainly manifested in that the powerful algorithm recommendation mechanism changes the user's psychological appeal of media, changes the results after contact, and leads to the "failure" of media expectation. It becomes a new use and satisfaction mechanism: "social and psychological needs → media expectations → media exposure → whether the exposure result satisfies or not → modifying the psychological demands for media exposure → the algorithmic mechanism negates this adjustment → continued exposure".

4.3 Algorithmic push: dominant private satisfaction under low thinking

In the process of using micro-series, algorithmic recommendation technology has become a powerful dominant factor in users' media consumption. On one hand, as data collectors and analysts, algorithms leverage their strong capabilities in data collection and integration to provide customized and personalized content recommendations for each user, ensuring that the content matches the interests of target users. Therefore, users tend to rely heavily on algorithmic technology to filter their viewing content. On the other hand, algorithmic recommendations act as content distributors, setting the viewing "*agenda*" for platform users through the distribution mechanism of created content, reducing users' initiative in choosing what to watch in short series. Additionally, this recommendation mechanism also affects the completeness of users viewing experience. For example, in this interview survey, the total number of short series watched by respondents ranged from 5 to 20, but most were not completed. Thus, the dominance of algorithmic recommendations is primarily reflected in its computational nature and its impact on peoples' initiative and completeness in watching short series.

Under the algorithm recommendation mechanism, users use and satisfaction with short dramas not only exhibit dominant characteristics but also possess privacy features, serving as a relaxation method for users to alleviate work, study, and life pressures, reduce social consumption, and accumulate personal energy. When asked why they still immerse themselves in watching such short dramas every day, respondents typically replied that "the academic pressure is too much; there's no outlet to release stress during the intense final week of exams" or "daily work is monotonous, doing almost the same tasks at fixed times every day, and being isolated in a different place makes it hard to socialize, so I can only pass the time through short dramas." Among

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the interviewees, apart from one who was retired and living at home, the rest were students or working professionals. When asked about their motivations for using short dramas, "stress" was a frequent response. For students, stress mainly stems from daily studies and the pressure of the final week. During periods of high-intensity learning, they often seek a low-energy-consuming, low-thinking, relatively private way to relieve stress. The fragmented nature, simple and understandable plots, and fast pace of short dramas have become effective means for students to flexibly utilize fragmented time to ease stress. Respondents noted, "The stress during the final week is immense, and since I'm studying alone, I want to relax but fear watching TV. Addiction wastes too much time; watch short dramas instead. Each episode is brief, and the plot twists are easy to predict, allowing you to stop at any moment." Working respondents often find themselves in different places, either without a stable social network or with a narrow circle of friends. Day-to-day work, even overtime, makes it hard to balance work and life. During breaks or after work, they most desire some personal space, which can reduce the energy spent on socializing and help them heal and recover. The thrilling plots in short dramas naturally become their best way to vent work stress and enjoy solitude.

4.4 Improve quality and reduce quantity: the future expectation of the series market

In the current thriving market for short dramas, an increasing number of people are being drawn into the production industry, leading to a period of explosive growth in the volume of short dramas. However, it is also evident that short dramas characterized by simple content, exaggerated acting, and basic costumes have given way to productions with higher quality content, more mature performances, attractive leads, and superior production values. These new short dramas have received positive reviews from users, providing them with greater aesthetic enjoyment and visual satisfaction during their viewing experience. This suggests that the future of the short drama market may enter a phase focused on pursuing quality, meeting both the demand for fragmented viewing and visual fulfillment. Nevertheless, the demand for short dramas has not diminished users' expectations for TV series. In interviews, half of the respondents stated they do not usually watch TV series, while the other half, who do, expressed a stronger desire for high-quality productions. For example, "There are many genres that can't be captured in short dramas; I love suspenseful shows, but this genre isn't suitable for fast-paced short dramas. So, I usually look for suspenseful TV series and hope to see more high-quality productions." "Although I often watch short dramas, their content is generally too rough. I still hope to see some higher-quality, more substantial content. Rich and full TV series." This shows that the vigorous growth of short dramas not only causes the differentiation within short dramas, but also puts forward higher requirements for the production of TV series.

4.4.1 Plot optimization

Despite respondents generally agreeing that the simplicity and fast pace of web micro-dramas are its strengths when describing their media impressions, the ease of understanding and tightness of the plot do not imply a lack of quality. A large portion of the short dramas currently flooding the market are hastily produced in a short time, with inconsistencies and poor craftsmanship not only lowering the standards of these dramas but also losing a significant number of users. Respondents commonly stated that one important reason they continue to watch a particular short drama is that its content is richer and more complete compared to some TV series. While mindless thrilling plots may attract viewers temporarily, deepening the plot content is essential to retain them.

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4.4.2 Investment optimization

Online micro-dramas attract users' attention with their exaggerated performances and simple props, but as the number of short dramas surges, respondents noted that these shows "not only have tight plots and save time, but their costumes, makeup, and set design even surpass some domestic TV series, so sometimes they are more willing to continue watching." "Many actors are very professional, and their performances are spot-on," among other comments. This indicates that the development of short dramas has begun to focus on increasing investment in actors and production quality. A good plot is just the first step in attracting users; to sustain user interest, more investment should be made in visual aesthetics, optimizing resource allocation, and intensifying efforts where improvements are needed.

4.4.3 Value chain building

The future development trend of online micro-series is to improve quality and relatively reduce quantity. The industry should concentrate its funds, talent, and efforts on optimizing the production process from storylines, shooting and production, promotion and distribution, to user feedback, aiming to create a complete and high-quality value chain. Specifically, this involves first diversifying content themes based on user and market demands, producing high-quality scripts; secondly, optimizing investments to enhance shooting quality; thirdly, formulating promotional strategies for the short series market; and finally, paying attention to audience feedback to optimize the value chain of short series according to market responses.

5 Summary and reflection

This study conducted a theoretical investigation into the use and satisfaction mechanisms of online micro-series through in-depth interviews. The author found that due to their fragmented, short, and fast-paced nature, online micro-series have indeed triggered new changes in users' usage and satisfaction mechanisms for these series. Specifically, the traditional process of "social and psychological needs → media expectations → media exposure → whether the exposure results in satisfaction or dissatisfaction → modifying psychological demands for media exposure → refusal/re-engagement" has shifted to "social and psychological needs → media expectations → media exposure → whether the exposure results in satisfaction or dissatisfaction → modifying psychological demands for media exposure → algorithmic mechanisms negating such modifications → continued engagement." In this process, the initial sense of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction generated by users after their first media exposure, along with the modified media expectations, becomes ineffective due to the influence of algorithmic recommendation mechanisms.

However, online micro-dramas can partially meet users lower-level needs but fail to satisfy the demand for high-quality TV series and films. On one hand, internet users do not enjoy watching them, referring to them as "Sinovac dramas." On the other hand, due to the algorithmic click mechanism, users are constantly exposed to these shows, satisfying their lower-level desires repeatedly. This leaves netizens in a dilemma, feeling that watching these shows is a waste of time, yet they still watch after being pushed.

This study also found that if such phenomena continue to develop, users will have to submit to the domination of powerful algorithmic push mechanism and gradually become accustomed to low-quality micro-short

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dramas. In the passive satisfaction of using and "satisfying" micro-short dramas, they will become "one-dimensional people" who are difficult to think about. This is worth warning and reflection.

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