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Research on the Low-Cost, High-Profit Business Practice Path of Online Micro-Dramas from the Perspective of Art Management

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Abstract:
In recent years, micro-dramas have emerged as a fusion of the film industry and short videos, as a product of the convergence between the film and television industry and the short video sector, captivating audiences with their concise narratives and emotionally satisfying plots. However, alongside their explosive growth, there have been criticisms regarding their homogeneity, stereotypical characters, and low production quality. Despite these issues, the micro-drama industry continues to maintain its market presence, boasting a substantial audience, and its industrial chain and market are continuously expanding and the payment model has also undergone transformation. Behind this trend, why have less refined micro-dramas gradually become a focal point in the film and television industry? This paper explores the paradox by examining the audiovisual creation of online micro-dramas. From the perspective of cost-benefit theory, it investigates how the profit logic of micro-dramas influences their audiovisual creation and explores the low-cost, high-profit business practice path of online micro-dramas from the perspective of art management. The innovation of this paper lies in its application of Propp's narrative analysis method and cost-benefit calculation method for research. It analyzes the audiovisual production of online micro-dramas from the perspective of cost-benefit and examines how such audiovisual production meets the psychological needs of the audience.

Keywords:
Micro-dramas, Narrative, Emotional Satisfaction, Cost-Benefit, Audiovisual Creation

1 Introduction

In recent years, micro-dramas have become a new form of film and television, catering to the fragmented entertainment habits of modern audiences with their short duration, fast pace, and compact plots. According to the "2023-2024 China Micro-Drama Market Research Report" released by iiMedia Research, the market size of online micro-dramas in China reached 37.39 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 267.65%. It is projected that by 2027, the market size will exceed 100 billion yuan, indicating the continued attractiveness of the micro-drama market. Platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, Tencent, Youku, iQiyi, and social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat have all contributed to the widespread influence of micro-dramas.

The micro-drama industry has developed a standardized operational model, forming a complete industrial

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chain from script creation, casting, production, to promotion. Additionally, micro-dramas have established strong connections with industries such as advertising and e-commerce, achieving profitability through product placements and live-streaming sales. This industrial model not only enhances the economic benefits of micro-dramas but also promotes the diversified development of the cultural industry.

Internationally, the influence of micro-dramas is also growing. Some high-quality micro-drama works have been translated into multiple languages and distributed globally, showcasing China's cultural charm and creative strength while fostering cross-cultural exchanges. As a new form of art in the internet era, micro-dramas have become a cultural phenomenon and industrial force that cannot be ignored.

However, the rapid growth of online micro-dramas has been accompanied by criticisms of their low quality. Many micro-dramas are criticized for being homogeneous, vulgar, and lacking depth, with only a few high-quality productions. Some micro-dramas are poorly made, with clichéd plots and shallow content, failing to resonate with audiences. Many micro-dramas blindly follow trends, lacking innovation and originality. Some even resort to excessive violence and sexual content to attract attention, spreading negative values and harming social morals.

Despite the prevalence of low-quality micro-dramas, audiences have shown a surprising preference for them: "low-IQ micro-dramas do not watch, but low to this level of micro-dramas I love to watch", leading to the booming development of the micro-drama industry. This raises an important question: How do these low-budget, non-refined, and homogeneous micro-dramas gain market favor? How do they meet audience demands? This paper will explore the low-cost, high-profit business practice path of online micro-dramas from the perspective of cost-benefit theory, focusing on how their profit logic influences audiovisual creation.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Review of cost-benefit theory

In 1939, American economists Hicks and Kaldor summarized the concept of cost-benefit, laying the foundation for the development of cost-benefit theory, which has since been studied from multiple perspectives in academia. Domestic scholar Xiaoxu Cui applied this theory from the perspective of educational theory and management in the social sciences to analyze the relationship between the cost of children's education and fertility decisions in China. She pointed out that increasing education costs affect fertility decisions and proposed maximizing the benefits of education costs.

Xueying Yuan and Maohua Jie applied cost-benefit theory from the perspective of enterprise management to analyze the choice between two methods of earnings management. Additionally, scholars Yingen Hu, Yiyun Yu, Cong Wang, and Xin Wu applied the theory to scientifically determine the effective threshold for voluntary compensation in rural homestead exits under different models, emphasizing the importance of reasonable compensation. Jiaqi Zhang and Shuo Liu applied the theory to study the governance of telecom fraud from the perspective of public security and social governance, suggesting that optimizing investigative measures and enhancing public self-protection awareness are key to safeguarding people's rights.

While these studies have applied cost-benefit theory in fields such as social sciences, economics, manage-

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ment, and agriculture, they have overlooked its application in the film and television industry.

2.2 Review of the explosive growth of online micro-dramas

The explosive growth of micro-dramas in the online market has attracted multi-perspective research in academia. Ziang Liu analyzed the current state of micro-drama growth, noting that the rise of vertical screen viewing has driven the emergence of micro-dramas, transforming them from a phase of rapid growth into a new force in audiovisual media, showing trends of scale, diversification, and standardization. Yujie Wu and Hongzhen Huang studied the audience motivations behind the micro-drama boom, suggesting that consumer habits have driven creators and platforms to invest in micro-drama production and distribution. Zheng Hu explored the emotional motivations of audiences, arguing that micro-dramas satisfy viewers' emotional needs in visual, aesthetic, and social aspects, turning viewers into "emotional laborers" and explaining the audience-driven growth of micro-dramas. Regarding the issues and impacts of micro-drama growth, Zhe Shen and Le Yin discussed the governance and value re-creation of micro-dramas, pointing out problems such as poor production quality, vulgar content, and homogeneity, and calling for calm reflection and rational exploration in the industry.

While these studies have examined the current state, audience motivations, and issues of the micro-drama industry, there is still a gap in research analyzing micro-drama creation and audience engagement from a cost-benefit perspective.

2.3 Research questions

Based on the cost-benefit theory, this paper mainly solves the following problems:

Q1:How do micro-dramas meet audience demands?

Q2:How does the profit logic of micro-drama growth influence their creation?

3 Discussion

3.1 Low attention cost and high emotional satisfaction

Online micro-dramas, as a medium combining short videos and film, share characteristics with short video and its platforms, such as brevity, conciseness, and sinking, which align with the demands of both the short video market and micro-drama audiences. The overlap in audience demographics makes short video platforms the primary promotional channels for micro-dramas. Like short videos, micro-dramas, with episodes lasting less than two minutes and fast-paced plots, allow audiences to experience the effect of "watching a drama while scrolling through short videos," enabling them to quickly grasp the main plot, key turning points, emotional highs, and the style of the series. This rapid engagement leads to a more "template-driven" and "formulaic" content presentation. Common tropes such as "reincarnation", "stepmother literature," and domineering boss romances feature similar conflicts, character archetypes, and plot twists. These labels on plot setting and cultural relics role setting can allow audiences quickly identify the selling points of a drama and match it with their preferences, thereby capturing and retaining their attention.

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Moreover, the vertical screen format of micro-dramas is more suitable for mobile viewing during fragmented time. This format often focuses on close-ups and medium shots, emphasizing dialogue and action details, which directly convey the characters' words, actions, and emotions to the audience without the need for using shots or wide angles to show the overall atmosphere and the relationship between the characters. This reduces the audience's cognitive load and keeps their attention focused on the characters and plot.

While reducing attention costs, audiences also derive high emotional satisfaction from the concise and short plots. From a narrative perspective, micro-dramas exhibit rapid plot reversals. According to Propp's narrative analysis, which examines the structure and function of stories, micro-dramas often feature exaggerated conflicts where the protagonist is initially oppressed by an antagonist but quickly gains the upper hand through the help of allies, resources, or plot devices, leading to a satisfying reversal. In his book *Folktale Morphology*, Propp analyzed samples of Russian folktales and found that there are common story elements and functional structure rules in different stories. This "oppression-assistance-reversal" structure is typically completed within 2-4 minutes, minimizing the audience's attention cost while maximizing emotional satisfaction.

Specific to all kinds of popular mainstream types of micro short plays, although the content is different, but the low attention cost in exchange for a high sense of benefits of short play management mechanism has not changed.

The first category is the revenge drama featuring a strong female lead. This genre often employs themes of "rebirth" or "time travel" as the backdrop, thereby pre-establishing an "antagonist." Within the romanticized setting of "rebirth," the protagonist is endowed with special abilities or accumulated experiences. However, this "rebirth" encompasses not only time-travel rebirth but also scenarios where the protagonist assumes a new identity to approach the target of revenge and complete the narrative of vengeance. For instance, in *Provoke*, the female protagonist survives a childhood massacre, changes her name, and gets close to the murderer who killed her entire family. Alongside her childhood friend, who poses as the murderer's son, she investigates the truth of the past, using her dual identity to gradually achieve revenge. Additionally, scripts like *The Fat Wife's Revenge: Xiao Lv Cha Buy One, Get One Free* set the protagonist's mission as "avenging personal dignity after being humiliated and ultimately losing her life." By endowing the protagonist with past-life experiences as a unique form of "accumulation," the story unfolds with the help of six children, overcoming adversaries who insulted the protagonist's "personal dignity" to fulfill her mission. This drama, consisting of 65 episodes, each approximately 2 minutes long, incorporates a total of 32 plot twists, averaging one major twist every 4 minutes. Compared to traditional TV dramas, which typically feature a plot twist or climax every 10 minutes, micro-dramas increase the attention cost by 2.5 times.

The second category is the "treasure acquisition" drama. The mainstream narrative of this type of micro-drama involves the protagonist gaining abilities or wealth beyond the current era through "time travel" or "accidentally obtaining a treasure." Others fail to recognize or "are blind to" the protagonist's capabilities, leading to conflicts. This plotline is predominantly found in male-oriented micro-dramas, following a pattern of "first suppression"-facing distrust and scorn-and then "later elevation"-proving one's abilities through a "golden finger" or "superpower." As the story progresses, the protagonist gradually reveals their true identity, achieves a comeback, and ultimately overcomes adversaries who insulted their "personal dignity," vividly embodying the ideology of "overcoming the superior from an inferior position." In the horizontal-screen mi-

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cro-drama *Jian Hao Jiu Shou*, the male protagonist, Jianhao Wei , rises from an underestimated rural boy to become the jade consultant for the Gao Group, leveraging his extraordinary ability to identify jade. He teaches a lesson to all who doubted him, completing the narrative of "overcoming the superior from an inferior position." Another representative work, *Da Xia Shen Zhu*, tells the story of Lin Zhao, a modern war hero who, after battling enemies on the border, time-travels to ancient times and becomes a foolish young master. His ability is "mind reading," which he uses to suppress opponents, revive his family, and become the Great Xia Divine Lord. This drama, comprising 99 episodes, each about 2 minutes long, features 109 plot twists within its 212-minute runtime.

There are also hybrid-narrative "wish-fulfillment" dramas, where the protagonist, equipped with external abilities or wealth, achieves revenge and upholds personal dignity. This narrative is often seen in "domineering boss sweet romance" short dramas, where the CEO's wealth and power assist the female lead in achieving revenge or "overcoming the superior from an inferior position." The underlying ideology here is to gradually ascend from a lower position to a higher one, realizing the "overcoming the superior from an inferior position" trope. Each drama adheres to the principle of low attention cost in exchange for high emotional payoff, earning them the title of "wish-fulfillment dramas."

3.2 Low production cost and high emotional payoff

At first glance, the logic behind these emotionally satisfying dramas may seem contradictory, but their narrative patterns are relatively consistent, often revolving around themes of personal dignity. Therefore, the personal characteristics of these short plays are extremely obvious. The fast-paced narrative and frequent plot reversals, built on revenge tropes, strongly stimulate the audience's desire for personal vindication. To enhance emotional satisfaction, micro-dramas often exaggerate the antagonist's villainy and the protagonist's suffering. Exaggerated performances, such as verbal abuse and humiliating actions, are commonly used to heighten the emotional stakes, including words such as "waste" and "ants" , which are typical manifestations of this performance technique. Characters are often portrayed in a stereotypical manner, with clear-cut roles and functions, making the narrative straightforward and the reversals more impactful.

The vertical screen format of micro-dramas often uses close-ups and medium shots to focus on facial expressions and actions, effectively conveying the antagonist's dominance and the protagonist's humiliation. The music in micro-dramas, rooted in the short video format, often borrows popular or viral tracks from short video platforms, emphasizing atmosphere and emotional resonance rather than originality. For example, the micro-drama *Qing Qi Yu Long Gui* features an original theme song, *Hua Ci*, which integrates traditional ceramic art and cultural heritage into the plot, but such cases are rare and often tied to specific themes or funding. At the same time, the short play will use more intensive and exaggerated sound effects to reflect the fun and rhythm of the short play.

Despite their emotional intensity, micro-dramas are typically low-budget productions. The exaggerated effects are achieved not through high-cost sets, star actors, or special effects, but through low-cost methods such as exaggerated dialogue, facial expressions, and simple set designs. The limited number of scenes and the use of basic lighting and effects create a sense of "affordable luxury," satisfying audience expectations while significantly reducing production costs.

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The low production costs of micro-dramas translate into lower viewing costs for audiences. For example, the micro-drama *Gong Qiang Xue* offers multiple payment options, and the price list is as follows:

Table 1 Revenue Model of the Micro Short Drama Gong Qiang Xue

Gong Qiang Xue	How prices are calculated	Total expenditure
Pay-to-watch model	0.38 yuan /100 points/episode	37 yuan /99 episodes /200 minutes
Daily membership model	Per day	9.9 yuan/day/unlimited episodes
30-day membership model	Monthly	15.9 yuan/month/unlimited episodes
Quarterly membership model	Based on 90 days	29.9 yuan /90 days/unlimited episodes

With the most expensive option costing 37 yuan for 200 minutes of content, averaging 0.185 yuan per minute. However, the micro short drama theater Maitian Theater, which is listed on the platform, also offers daily membership, 30-day membership and quarterly membership models, which can realize unlimited episode viewing, so that the micro drama *Gong Qiang Xue* can be as low as 0.01 yuan/minute or less. In contrast, a mainstream movie like *YOLO*, according to the average ticket price of 42 yuan /129 minutes to calculate the cost, its consumer price is 0.325 yuan/minute, is the micro short play *Gong Qiang Xue* the most expensive payment method of 1.75 times.

However, the whole plot of *YOLO* has a total of 26 burdens and reversals, with an average of 1 reversal or burden in 5 minutes. Its frequency is also lower than the short drama 3-4 minutes. Therefore, the benefits of emotional catharsis are lower. Therefore, through the analysis, it can be seen that the low shooting cost of the mini-series translates into the low cost expenditure of the viewers, and obtains a higher benefit of emotional catharsis, so the cost-benefit ratio is higher.

3.3 Fragmented time cost and continuous engagement

Micro-dramas cater to the emotional needs of modern workers, and make profits from this traffic. To sustain profitability, micro-drama creators employ cost-effective audiovisual techniques. For instance, at the end of each episode, a preview of the next episode's conflict or resolution is shown to hook viewers and encourage continued viewing or payment. The first payment node is typically set around episodes 8-12, where the most exciting and dramatic moments are revealed to build anticipation. Then the plot at this stage is mainly to attract the interest of the audience, mobilize their emotions, and pave the way for the subsequent paid viewing, so the plot at this time will show the most direct, thrilling and exciting plot attraction points, exaggeration and attention is the main purpose.

For example, the short play *Ai Mei Shi Wen* set the first paid node in the relationship between the man and woman is about to be discovered, and part of the suspense setting in the short play also comes from the function of setting paid nodes. In the middle of the skit, a second payment node is often set around episodes 26-30, where the plot further develops, introducing more conflicts and suspense. Therefore, in the creative process, the scriptwriter will set relevant plots according to the Settings of paid nodes, arrange the plot reasonably according to the paid nodes, plan the number of suspense and plot reversal Settings and plot rhythm.

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The placement of these payment nodes influences the pacing and structure of the narrative, ensuring that the plot serves the goal of maximizing revenue. For example, the short drama *You Wei Li Ren Zhao Luo Hua* has a total of 60 episodes, and at the end of a single episode, a total of 25 surprise features and 14 action features suggesting upcoming conflicts are set respectively. These attractive features successfully attracted Internet users to continue to watch the sequel and generate payment behavior, becoming the "explosive point" of continued consumption behavior.

Additionally, the crew operator set up a matrix in multiple Douyin accounts, micro-drama producers use multiple social media accounts to share free clips of paid episodes, enticing viewers to pay for full access. This strategy leverages the algorithmic and fragmented nature of short video platforms to reach target audiences effectively. Cost control is achieved through standardized production processes and innovative techniques that shorten production cycles. Common settings, such as auctions or weddings, are reused to centralize conflicts and reduce costs.

Compared with paid apps and short play mini-programs, according to the "2024 Micro-Drama Industry Ecological Insight Report" by the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA), the expansion of the micro-drama market in 2024 is largely driven by the IAA (In-App Advertising) model, exemplified by the rise of the Hongguo app. While the IAP (In-App Purchase) model saw rapid growth in 2023, it stabilized in 2024, whereas the IAA model continued to grow, becoming a key driver of market expansion. From the perspective of daily active users, the development trend of Hongguo app skits shows a positive trend. From the perspective of user composition, the audience with medium consumption level is more inclined to the free model, while the group with high consumption level constitutes the main user group of the paid model. The introduction of free models caters to different consumer preferences and has significantly expanded the micro-drama market and user base.

According to the "2024 Micro-Drama Industry Ecological Insight Report" by the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA), the micro-drama industry has created 648 000 jobs, optimizing the film and television industry chain. By adopting cost-effective production methods, micro-dramas effectively reduce costs and minimize losses, which have lowered barriers to entry, increased the number of productions, and extended the lifespan of individual projects. Multiple revenue streams, including advertising, pay-per-view, brand collaborations, and copyright sales, have diversified income sources and improved financial stability.

4 Conclusion

Under the pressures of modern life, online micro-dramas have become a space for emotional release. The viewing of the mini-play based on cognitive surplus intersperses the heavy work and painful life, serving as a "lubricant" in the daily grind. The logical coherence and aesthetic quality of micro-dramas are not necessarily priorities; instead, their ability to provide quick emotional satisfaction has become the primary goal of consumption. This shift has diminished the importance of grand narratives in micro-dramas, with the focus now on quickly delivering plot highlights, capturing audience attention, and maximizing emotional payoff through rapid reversals and suspense. The strategic placement of payment nodes and the use of cost-effective production techniques have become key considerations in micro-drama creation.

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While many micro-dramas currently exhibit rough production quality, the expansion of the micro-drama market and the optimization of the film and television industry chain have significantly improved production efficiency and income structures. The industry is also providing a platform for young creators, fostering new directors, screenwriters, and actors. The emergence of micro-drama awards and festivals reflects the industry's progression towards a new stage. In 2024, initiatives such as the *Travel with Micro-Dramas* creation plan and the variety show Kai Bo Ba: Short Drama Season highlight the industry's integration with tourism, law, and other fields, as well as its exploration of new market opportunities through cross-industry collaborations, including e-commerce, beauty and other industries. As online micro-dramas move towards higher quality, future developments in revenue models, viewing platforms, and policy support will inevitably influence their creative direction and the pace of their refinement.

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