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Research on the new mechanism for the use and satisfaction of network microplay under the background of algorithm

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Abstract:
Since 2020, network miniseries have been officially defined, and its market scale has expanded rapidly, occupying an important position in the film and television industry. Under this background, the situation of audience's demand satisfaction and the use and satisfaction mechanism of network mini-series have become the focus of research. Based on the theory of balancing demand from new media, this study makes an in-depth analysis of the new mechanism of using and satisfying network mini-plays through questionnaire survey and in-depth interview. The findings are as follows: Due to "time poverty" , low-income groups are more dependent on the "fragmented entertainment" function of mini-series; The more the audience relies on the algorithm, the more they prefer the fast-paced "cool drama"; The viewing time of the short drama was negatively correlated with the change of aesthetic standards, but the audience's perception of whether the scene switching was smooth and the character image design was reasonable was still keen.

Keywords:
network miniseries, Use and satisfaction theory, New media tradeoff demand theory, Algorithm recommendation

1 Introduction

On December 8, 2020, the State Radio and Television Administration issued the Notice on Issues Related to the Content Review of Micro-miniseries in Online Films and TV Dramas, which officially defined micro-miniseries as online films and TV dramas with a single episode duration of less than 10 minutes. Micro-miniseries are the fourth officially recognized form of online films and TV dramas after online films and TV dramas, online films and online cartoons. Therefore, 2020 is also known as "the first year of network mini-series".

In this context, short video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, as well as long-form video platforms such as iQiyi, Youku, Tencent and Mango TV have entered the micro short series market. According to the "2023-2024 China Micro short play Market Research Report", the market size of domestic micro short play in 2023 will be 37.39 billion yuan, and it is expected that the market size of Chinese micro short play will exceed 100 billion yuan by 2027. We have observed that some crudely-produced network mini-plays lack

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depth and connotation, as well as high-quality mini-plays with well-produced and compact rhythms, are also favored by the market. This makes us curious: Can online mini-plays meet the needs of the audience? What is the mechanism of the use and satisfaction of the network miniseries? Compared with the traditional use and satisfaction mechanism, what are the new changes?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research on demand for new media trade-offs

Since the theory of use and satisfaction was put forward by Katz et al in 1974[1], it has attracted great attention from scholars at home and abroad and achieved more research results. According to this theory, driven by social and personal psychological needs, people will actively seek mass media or other tools to meet these needs. The use and satisfaction study is the first to study the mass communication process from the perspective of the audience, and it holds that the audience is dynamic and can use the media according to their own needs. However, the shortcoming of this theory is that it does not explain how "social and individual psychological needs" arise as the first step of the whole process.

The demand balancing theory of new media was proposed by Jianhua Zhu in his study on the diffusion and use of the Internet, which is a further development of the use and gratification theory.According to the tradeoff demand theory, there are two potential mechanisms for users' adoption and use of new media, namely, the contrast between traditional media and new media, and the tradeoff between audiences' various demands for media.[2] The demand balancing theory of new media has attracted much attention from domestic scholars since it was put forward, and more research results have been achieved.

Domestic scholar Wu Li et al. combined the phenomenon of Chinese college students' adoption and use of socialized reading apps with the new media tradeoff demand theory, and put forward the conclusion that "the tradeoff demand of news information, useful information and entertainment can effectively predict and explain whether college students will adopt mobile news clients".[3] Domestic scholars Ying Liu and Peishan Li combined the social mode of "acquaintance + anonymity" represented by "secret-free" APP with the balancing demand theory, and proposed that users' adoption of the social mode of "acquaintance + anonymity" originates from the dual psychology of "performance" and "voyeurism".[4] Chinese scholars Xiaohua Wang and Lina Yan combined the survival and development of newspapers in the Internet era with the demand balancing theory of new media, and proposed that in the balance between the Internet and newspaper media, the demand balancing is not a pure factor in media selection, and individual differences will also affect media selection.[5]

To sum up, these studies did not study the phenomenon of network mini-plays from the perspective of balancing demands of new media, so they did not answer the question whether some inferior network mini-plays can meet the needs of the audience.

2.2 Research perspectives on network micro-miniseries

The phenomenon of the popularity of network micro-miniseries has caused the research from multiple perspectives in the academic circle. There are relatively few researches by foreign scholars, while the researches

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on online mini-plays by domestic scholars have gradually increased since 2019.

Aiming at the explosive popularity of online micro-miniseries, Wang Fang and Jiesing Zhu conducted research from the perspective of production, and their research showed that network culture, algorithms and the "strong social relationship" of short video platforms promoted the development of online micro-miniseries.[6] Tianyue Shi and Jinhua Huang conducted their research from the perspective of narrative, and their research showed that the network mini-series subverted the narrative of traditional TV series, thus bringing the audience a unique "sense of enjoyment".[7] Tiantian Tang and Manlu Wen conducted research from the perspective of emotional communication, and their research showed that network miniseries guide audiences to complete multi-level emotional experience through specific themes, perspectives, narratives and performances, and thus are favored by audiences.[8]

Tianyue Shi and Jinhua Huang, aiming at the multiple problems behind the boom of online mini-plays, reveal the narrative law of "fast forward" of mini-plays from a narrative perspective, at the expense of realistic logic, character integrity and the strength of main body expression. From the perspective of industry development, Tian Zhu and Yi Wen pointed out that there are problems such as unclear attributes, low content quality and immature business models of network mini-dramas.[9]

In view of development strategies of network microminiseries, Xiao Hu et al. think that we can take advantage of the unique advantage of virtual digital person playing network microminiseries, to promote our country's international dissemination of microminiseries. [10] Tian Zhu, Yi Wen believes that network micro-miniseries want long-term development, need to pay attention to content quality, value guidance and platform differences.

However, these studies did not study the phenomenon of the popularity of online micro-miniseries from the perspective of algorithm recommendation, so they did not answer the question of what new changes it has compared with the traditional usage and satisfaction mechanism.

3 Research Questions and Methods

3.1 Research questions

Starting from the demand theory of new media trade-offs, this paper tries to answer the following questions:

Q1: Can the network mini-drama meet the needs of the audience?

Q2: What is the mechanism of using and satisfying network mini-plays?

Q3: What new changes have algorithm recommendation made to the use and satisfaction mechanism of network mini-plays?

3.2 Research methods

This paper adopts the research methods of questionnaire survey and in-depth interview to try to answer the

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above questions.

3.2.1 Questionnaire survey method

3.2.1.1 Hypothesis establishment

Based on the above questions, corresponding hypotheses are proposed here:

H1: The degree of fragmented needs of the audience is related to gender, age, income and occupation.

H2: The higher the user's dependence on algorithm recommendation, the stronger the preference for fast-paced "cool drama", and the lower the requirement for logic.

H3: The longer the skit is watched, the lower the aesthetic level.

3.2.1.2 Sampling method

In this study, convenience sampling method was adopted to recruit users with mini-short play watching experience through XiaoHongshu platform, and the participation threshold was set as "watching ≥2 mini-plays within half a year". Text links were used to trigger the target group to voluntarily fill in the questionnaire. Because XiaoHongshu users are diverse, covering different age, gender and interest groups, they can reflect diversified viewpoints to a certain extent. However, this method cannot guarantee the randomness and comprehensive representativeness of the sample. In order to reduce the bias, investigators actively promoted the questionnaire in the comments section of notes of different types and popularity, expanded the scope of questionnaire exposure, and obtained as rich and diverse sample data as possible.

3.2.1.3 Summary of questionnaire data

H1 (Influencing Factors of fragmented demand) : The significant impact of monthly income on fragmented demand for entertainment ($F=4.36$, $p=0.01$) reveals the class attribute of short plays, which is in essence a convenient choice for the "time poor" in the digital age, while the irrelevance of gender, age and occupation proves that it has broken through the traditional demographic boundaries and become a universal media consumption phenomenon.

H2 (Algorithm dependence and preference) : The strong correlation between viewing time and preference ($r=0.88$) verifies the existence of "algorithm domestication". However, the questionnaire did not directly show that users lowered their requirements for story logic because they liked fun dramas, which may be because they unconsciously took the fast pace of short dramas as a reasonable expression of the story.

H3 (aesthetic degradation) : The significant negative correlation ($r=-0.27$) of changes in aesthetic criteria reveals the hidden cost of algorithm recommendation, but users' perception of smooth scene switching and reasonable character design is still keen, indicating that users still retain aesthetic potential. If the diversity of content is improved, it can activate deeper aesthetic needs. (Note: The questionnaire measures the relationship between viewing time of short plays and aesthetic level from three dimensions: changes in aesthetic standards, perception and critical aesthetic awareness)

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3.2.2 In-depth interview method

This study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews of 21 minutes, 18 minutes, 13 minutes and 15 minutes respectively with 4 interviewees who were keen on watching network mini-dramas. The interviews started on February 15, 2025 and ended on February 16, 2025. The interviewees first included a 26-year-old fan of online miniseries, and then collected more research samples by means of snowballing.

According to the principle of maximum sampling in qualitative research method, all the interview contents were enough to answer the research questions when the fourth respondent was recruited, and sample collection was closed. The interviewees had differences in gender, age, income, occupation, education level and other aspects, and the degree of homogeneity was low. The interviews were conducted by telephone, and the interview results were compiled into verbatim manuscripts with a total of 6 247 words. The basic information of the interviewees is shown in Table 1 below

Table 1 Basic information of respondents

Number	Gender	Age	Income (yuan)	Occupation	Education
S1	female	26	<3000	Clerk	Undergrad
S2	female	24	<3000	Freelancing	Undergraduate
S3	female	51	3001-8000.	Cleaning	Junior high
S4	male	48	3001-8000.	Driver	Elementary school

4 Research Findings

4.1 The complex satisfaction of network mini-plays to audience needs

4.1.1 Efficient adaptation of fragmented entertainment needs

In the process of rapid social development, as pointed out by Jian Jiao et al. [11], Chinese residents are faced with increasing pressure from work, family and commuting, and their disposable time is gradually decreasing. In this context, people are more inclined to choose entertainment with low time cost and high timely satisfaction. With its “lightweight” feature (each episode lasts less than 10 minutes and the plot is compact), online mini-series accurately meet the needs of time-poor groups, enabling them to relax in scattered time such as commuting and queuing.

When people use mini-series to relax, the media’s acculturation effect gradually emerges[12]. Through high-density narration (3 seconds to attract the eye +30 seconds to reverse), the miniseries reconstruct the user’s attention pattern. According to the questionnaire, 47.34% of users are becoming impatient with long dramas that require delicate emotional foreshadows, which indicates that while meeting users’ demands for fragmented entertainment, micro-short dramas have also changed users’ entertainment habits. This efficient adaptation is not accidental, but the result of the combined effect of social structural pressure, user needs and technological domestication.

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4.1.2 Instrumental satisfaction of superficial emotional needs

The emotional satisfaction mechanism of micro short plays presents a paradox of “high acceptance and low stickiness”. Users’ acceptance of repetitive routines (such as “revenge" and "counterattack”) was high (mean 3.3/5, 50.73% agreed), because it provided instant pleasure through high-intensity emotional stimulation (S2: watching the short series does not need to think, mainly relax and feel “good”). For example, in many “revenge” miniseries, the main character often goes from being bullied to an instant reversal, and successfully counterattacks with various adventures or hidden identities. Such strong plot conflicts can quickly ignite the audience's emotions and make the audience obtain great psychological satisfaction in a short time. Take “Deadly Housewife” as an example, the heroine in the seemingly happy marriage is actually subjected to all kinds of difficulties by her husband and mother-in-law, and her life is miserable. However, the plot suddenly turns around, and she fights back with her wisdom and courage, exposing her husband’s ugly face step by step and taking back everything that belongs to her. While watching, the audience is attracted by the heroine’s transformation from weak to powerful, and the strong revenge plot satisfies their inner desire for justice, obtaining great emotional catharsis in a short time.

However, this kind of satisfaction is essentially a typical manifestation of the theory of anesthesia[13]. The platform uses algorithms to push homogenized content in batch (for example, “the platform automatically plays the same type of mini-miniseries after watching the popular miniseries” as stated in S1), which indulges users in superficial entertainment and weakens the reflection on narrative rationality and social issues. As a result, although users rely on short dramas to release pressure in the short term, they fall into what Sunstein called “information cocoon” in the long term[14], and their deep narrative understanding is dissolved (47.34% of users lose patience with the delicate emotional bedding of long dramas).Zillmann and Vorderer[15] further confirmed that there are specific psychological mechanisms for audiences to obtain emotional experience from media content, and the way of emotional satisfaction in micro-short plays is precisely the use of these mechanisms.

4.2 Algorithm recommendation reconstruction use and satisfaction mechanism: from “people finding content” to “content domesticating people”

4.2.1 Power transfer in information selection

In the process of information acquisition in network mini-plays, the subject initiative of the audience has changed significantly. The questionnaire shows that only 15.46% of users actively search for short plays with specific themes, actors or directors, while 76.81% of users passively accept the push from the platform’s home page. This shows that under the influence of the attention economy, the platform uses algorithms to build detailed user portraits based on users’ past browsing, clicking and other behavioral data. For example, when a user frequently watches a skit in a certain genre, the algorithm prioritizes similar skits to the home page.

Over time, users get used to this pattern and rely more and more on the algorithm for information selection. In the click-feedback-rerecommendation cycle, users are limited to a specific content pool, forming an "information bias". Just as S1 mentioned in the interview, “After watching a popular short play, the platform

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has been pushing me similar plot, and gradually I rarely find other types of short plays to watch." This fully shows that while users enjoy the convenience of algorithm recommendation, their right to choose information is gradually ceded to the algorithm, and their autonomy is constantly reduced.

4.2.2 Data alienation at the content production end

The creative logic of the skit market is being deeply reconstructed by algorithmic preferences. From the perspective of user behavior, 43.74% of the audience are becoming impatient with long dramas with delicate emotional bedding. This forces the producers to compress the narration and pile up the inversion; From the supply side, although the standardized production template of short plays has improved the production efficiency, it has also triggered the vicious competition of "high play volume = high creation priority", resulting in "bad money driving out good money", and the "hot plays" screened by the algorithm are actually products that cater to data indicators rather than artistic value.

From the perspective of content viewers, they are gradually domesticated after long-term exposure to such algorithm-driven skits. On the one hand, audiences are accustomed to fast-paced, multi-inversion story patterns, and their requirements for story logic are gradually reduced. According to the questionnaire, 43.48 percent of users agreed that "fast plot pace and many twists are more important than reasonable plot". On the other hand, the audience's aesthetic perception was also affected. The viewing time of the short play was significantly negatively correlated with the change of aesthetic standards ($r = -0.27$), but the audience still had a keen perception of whether the scene switching was smooth and the character image design was reasonable. This means that although the audience's aesthetic is partially distorted, there is still room for improvement, but the current algorithm-led content production hinders the improvement of audience's aesthetic level to a certain extent.

4.3 Analysis of pros and cons of algorithm-led mechanism

4.3.1 The dual impact of technical efficiency and data alienation

Algorithm recommendation has brought significant technical advantages to network mini-plays. It can accurately fit the fragmented time of the audience, meet their demand for high-density entertainment content, and effectively reduce the cost of users to obtain their favorite short plays. However, algorithmic recommendation also leads to a "cycle of alienation" of data. The user's click behavior becomes the basis for algorithm optimization, prompting the production side of the short play to over-rely on fixed templates such as "revenge and counterattack", and the content is seriously homogenized. When a micro short play with the theme of "revenge" exploded, a large number of similar short plays flooded into the market, with highly similar plots and character Settings, which seriously affected the audience's viewing experience.

4.3.2 Splitting and narrowing of aesthetic perception

Users' aesthetic level presents a contradictory evolution in algorithm recommendation. The data show that the viewing time of short dramas is significantly negatively correlated with the change of aesthetic standards, while the audience's perception of whether the scene switching is smooth and the character image design is reasonable is still keen. According to the questionnaire, 58.45% of users noticed whether the rhythm of scene

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switching in the skit was smooth and natural, and 52.17% of users could feel whether the character image design (shape and action) in the drama was in line with the plot atmosphere, which further explained the split and narrowing of aesthetic perception.

This separation indicates that the algorithm has strengthened the selectivity of users' aesthetic perception: due to long-term exposure to high-density visual stimuli, users are more sensitive to surface aesthetic elements (such as editing rhythm and clothing path), but reduce their expectations for narrative depth and emotional authenticity. Therefore, on the surface, watching the short play seems to "improve" the audience's aesthetic appreciation, but in fact, it only improves the sensory stimulation, not the real aesthetic value.

4.3.3 Algorithmic noise reduction of public discourse

The traffic logic of the network mini-drama is squeezing its social value. According to the questionnaire data, some users reported that the proportion of microskits involving social issues was relatively low. At the same time, most interviewees believe that micro miniseries should enrich their own themes and constantly innovate the plot. The problem stems from algorithms' risk-aversion to controversial themes, which means platforms tend to recommend "safe but mediocre" entertainment content in order to maintain user retention.

In the long run, this tendency to "de-publicise" will weaken the media's culture-building function and transform mini-dramas into pure "digital FMCG". According to the questionnaire, 4.83% of users can't remember the number, but they often watch miniseries. This viewing habit is the result of the algorithm recommendation. After long-term exposure to homogenized and entertaining skits, these users gradually ignore the potential of skits in expressing social values, which is not conducive to the healthy development of the skits industry.

5. Summary and Reflection

5.1 Future development direction: balance technical rationality and humanistic value

5.1.1 Technical optimization: building a "Responsible recommendation System"

In order to reduce the negative impact brought by the algorithm, it is necessary to build a "responsible recommendation system" from the technical level. Firstly, the algorithm should be transparent, the recommendation weight rules should be made public, and the "story innovation degree" and "social value" should be included in the algorithm parameters to break the trust crisis caused by the algorithm. Secondly, establish a diversity protection mechanism, learn from the "long tail recommendation" strategy, and set a minimum traffic guarantee threshold for niche high-quality content to avoid the content uniformity caused by the Matthew effect[16]. In addition, more rights should be given to users, and "anti-domestication tools" should be developed, such as allowing users to block keywords and adjust the diversity level of the recommendation pool independently.

5.1.2 Content creation: promote in-depth creation and cross-border integration

In terms of content creation, in-depth creation and cross-border integration need to be encouraged. First,

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the government and industry should provide policy support and set up a skit innovation fund to reward works with groundbreaking themes, such as skits on intangible cultural heritage and science and technology ethics. Second, it should promote the integration of skits with other media forms such as literature and documentaries to expand the narrative depth of skits. Last but not least, we should set up a workshop on short play scriptwriting in cooperation with universities to enhance the story rationality and human insight of creators, and improve the quality of short plays from the source.

5.1.3 Audience cultivation: improve critical media literacy

It is very important to improve the critical media literacy of the audience. At the educational level, "algorithmic cognition modules" should be added to media courses in primary and secondary schools to cultivate users' critical awareness of recommended content. At the same time, a user-led short play evaluation community should be established through community co-governance, and the collective scoring system should be used to hedge the algorithm bias. In addition, the industry should also strengthen self-discipline, promote the platform to release "annual content diversity report", take the initiative to accept public supervision, and promote the healthy development of the skit industry.

5.2 Research limitations and follow-up research suggestions

5.2.1 Shortcomings of this study

There are some limitations in this study. In terms of sample selection, the research objects are mainly concentrated in low-income groups (60.87%), and the logic of using skits by highly educated and high-income users is insufficient, which may lead to bias in the research results. In terms of data collection, the questionnaire only captured static behavior data, and could not track the long-term impact of algorithm recommendation, such as the dynamic process of aesthetic change. In addition, due to the inability to obtain internal data of the platform, such as recommendation model parameters, the interpretation of the algorithm's operation mechanism mainly relies on indirect inference, which affects the accuracy of the research.

5.2.2 Future research direction

Future research can be deepened and expanded from multiple directions. The first is to combine the computational communication method, climb the short play platform review data, and explore the potential needs of users through emotion analysis. The second is to use longitudinal tracking design to track the same user group for 1-3 years to reveal the phased characteristics of algorithm domestication. The third is to strengthen cooperation with platforms, such as Bytedance and Tencent, to obtain the correlation data between the recommendation algorithm and user behavior, and to better understand the impact of the algorithm on users.

The algorithmic development of network mini-plays is an inevitable trend in the era of technological capital, and it is also a test ground for exploring the harmonious coexistence of human beings and technology. Its future development should not be limited to the dilemma between efficiency and quality, but should seek the development path of "science and technology humanism", so that the algorithm can serve the spiritual needs of people. This study is only a preliminary exploration in this field, and it is expected that academia and industry will work together to explore an effective path of harmonious coexistence between technology and

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humanity.

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