

Analysis of the Audience's Psychological Motivation for Consuming Micro-dramas During Meal Time

Yitong Shang

*International College Beijing, China Agricultural University, Beijing, China
yitong.shang@ucdenver.edu*

Abstract. The scale of the contemporary group of young people living alone continues to expand. This group generally faces a high-intensity rhythm of life, and watching digital media content during meals has become a normal behavior. This study aims to explore the intrinsic motives for the audience to watch micro-skits in the scene of individual dining alone, and to clarify the correlation mechanism between the consumption behavior of the media and the perception of loneliness of dining alone. The research integrates the three theoretical perspectives of attention economy, quasi-social relations and cognitive load, and adopts the qualitative research paradigm to carry out empirical research. The empirical results show that the core reason why the subject group prefers micro-skits is that such content can provide a moderate degree of cognitive involvement for the dining process; the subjects regard the screen narrative character as a companion carrier in a single-person dining scene, and this one-way emotional connection can temporarily dispel the loneliness derived from being alone. At the same time, research data confirms that digital content platforms can accurately capture the emotional needs of the audience and continuously push media content that adapts to dining scenes and has an attention retention effect. This research clarifies the coupling mechanism of media use behavior, audience emotional needs and platform operation logic in daily dining scenarios and can also provide theoretical reference and empirical ideas for follow-up research in the field of digital media use, micro-skit communication and youth mental health.

Keywords: Quasi-social relations, cognitive load, attention economy, digital dining, fragmented dining media consumption

1. Introduction

The scale of young people living alone continues to expand, superimposed on the normalized fast-paced lifestyle, and watching digital media content during mealtime has evolved into the daily media practice of the masses. This behavior refers to watching and listening to various digital media products during mealtime. Typical content forms include micro-skits, short videos, live broadcasts, audiobooks, etc.

Micro-skits have become one of the most popular dining accompanying media content. The duration of a single episode of this kind of work is short, and the time scale is highly matched with the duration of a single meal of the public; the narrative structure is simple, the narrative rhythm is

compact, and the cognitive resources required for content reception are low. Compared with long dramas and high cognitive load media content, micro-short dramas are more suitable for media consumption scenarios during dining hours.

The existing literature has carried out empirical discussions on digital media use behavior, loneliness and media consumption respectively, and some studies have completed independent arguments on the three theories of attention economy, quasi-social relations and cognitive load. However, there are few existing studies that integrate the three types of theories into the unified analysis framework to explain the behavioral logic of watching micro-dramas during mealtimes by groups living alone. At the same time, the academic community lacks special discussion on the daily media practice of "taking micro-dramas as dining companions".

This study conducts an empirical analysis of the above research gaps. The core explains the formation mechanism of micro-skits as a single-person dining emotional companion carrier, and sets up two core research issues: first, the intrinsic motives for the audience to choose micro-short dramas rather than other digital media content in the dining scene; second, the viewing behavior of micro-skits The shaping path of people's dining experience.

This research has the dual value of theory and practice. At the theoretical level, the study integrates the theory of attention economy, quasi-social relations and cognitive load into a unified analysis framework to clarify the linkage logic of media content form, audience psychological needs and attention distribution in daily dining scenarios; at the practical level, the study can improve the relevant cognition of the daily loneliness relief path of young people. At the same time, it provides an empirical basis for the content producer to accurately grasp the audience's needs under the fragmented dining scene.

The study adopts qualitative research paradigm. The subjects need to complete a week-long diary of eating behavior, participate in 60-90 minutes of structured interviews, and rely on thematic analysis to complete the interview data processing. The following is to sort out the context of relevant literature, explain the research design and implementation process, present the results of empirical analysis, and discuss the theoretical contribution and research limitations of this study.

2. Literature review

This study focuses on the intrinsic motives of micro-dramas consumption during meal time of groups living alone, and the mechanism of this behavior that gives rise to companion perception. The literature review revolves around the three core theoretical systems of attention economy theory, cognitive load theory and quasi-social relationship theory. The three theories explain the different dimensions of the media behavior respectively: attention economy explains the underlying business logic of media platforms competing for users' attention; cognitive load theory analyzes the audience's dining scene. Content selection preference; the quasi-social relationship theory explains the intrinsic mechanism of the audience and the narrative role of the screen to build emotional connection. The three types of theories together constitute the theoretical analysis basis of this study.

2.1. Theory of attention economy

The theory of attention economy proposes that human attention is a scarce resource in the digital media environment. Massive information achieves coverage of the whole area, and various media platforms continue to compete for and retain users' attention; media institutions rely on advertising and personalized recommendation algorithms to convert users' media stay time into commercial value [1].

Existing empirical research confirms that the audience does not passively receive digital media content but independently completes the allocation of attention resources in combination with their own emotional demands and real scenarios. In the dining scene, some audiences can get short emotional relaxation and fill the gap alone by watching micro-dramas. At the same time, the platform's personalized recommendation algorithm captures the audience's stable viewing behavior and continues to push similar media content. The audience's emotional needs and the commercial interests of the media platform form a deep binding relationship.

Studies have confirmed that the state of attention distribution directly changes the individual's perception of eating. The empirical results of Razzaghi-Asl and other scholars show that after the attention is diverted by the audio-visual media, the individual's sensory perception of the food itself will be significantly shifted [2]. Robinson and other scholars proposed that the content of low cognitive load media is more suitable for the accompanying dining scene, and the demand for high concentration. The content is not suitable for media consumption during mealtime [3]. The above conclusion provides theoretical support for this study to explain that micro-skits become the mainstream media selection of dining scenes.

2.2. Cognitive load theory

Cognitive load theory points out that there is a fixed threshold for cognitive resources in the human brain. When multiple tasks simultaneously seize cognitive resources, the cognitive resources that can be allocated for a single task will be reduced synchronously. In the dining scene, eating behavior and media content receiving behavior consume cognitive resources synchronously, so the cognitive load level of media content will directly affect the individual dining experience.

Razzaghi-Asl and others carried out experiments related to distracted eating with the help of functional magnetic resonance imaging technology. The results confirmed that audio-visual media will change the brain's taste information processing pathway [4]. Van Meer and other scholars found that cognitive load can regulate the brain's neural feedback on food, and this effect. It is especially noticeable when the audience is exposed to high-calorie food-related content [5]. The above studies all confirm that attention allocation plays a key role in the subjective perception of dining.

Moderate cognitive distance can also produce positive psychological effects. Nichols proposed that low-intensity background media will not completely interrupt the core behavior of the subject, and at the same time, it can fine-tune the individual's current subjective experience [6]. For single-person dining groups, mild cognitive distraction can divert the individual's excessive attention to loneliness without interfering with normal eating behavior. This view supports the core hypothesis of this study: the core logic of the audience's choice of micro-skits lies in the fact that such content can provide an appropriate cognitive intensity adapted to the dining scene.

2.3. Quasi-social relations and digital dining together

The theory of quasi-social relations is used to explain the complete process of building a one-way emotional connection between the audience and the narrative characters on the screen. Horton and Wohl first proposed the concept to describe the psychological state of familiarity and closeness of the audience under the premise of not being able to interact with the media characters [1].

Empirical research in recent years has shown that quasi-social relationships can provide stable emotional support for the audience. The research results of Lotun and other scholars show that after experiencing social exclusion, quasi-social connection can effectively alleviate individual negative

emotions [7]. Although such virtual emotional connections cannot be equivalent to real social interactions, they can effectively weaken the perception of loneliness in specific scenarios.

Many existing empirical studies have discussed the perception of companionship in the dining process: Mathmann and other scholars have confirmed through control experiments that continuous receipt of vocal information during the dining process can improve the subjective evaluation of food by individuals and increase the total amount of food eaten [8]. Lemke and Schiff Erstein's research shows that a large number of single dining groups choose electronic devices as dining companions. This kind of medium can relieve boredom and loneliness and will only divert the individual's sensory attention to food [9].

The academic community further put forward the concept of "digital dining together". Spence and other scholars pointed out that digital media equipment has evolved into a new dining companion carrier, reshaping the traditional offline dining experience [10]. Wang and other scholars compared different types of digital dining media practices to confirm that various media forms can shape differentiated social perception and physiological health results [11]. The above literature supports that digital media can build companion perception in dining scenarios, but there are obvious differences in the psychological effects of different media categories.

2.4. Existing research gaps

Past literature has carried out independent discussions on attention distribution, cognitive processing, and media emotional companionship, but most studies have separated the three major theoretical systems and have not included attention economy, cognitive load and quasi-social relations into the unified analysis framework.

At the same time, the existing mainstream research relies mostly on laboratory control experiments and standardized questionnaire research to carry out data collection. This kind of method can produce quantitative data, but it is difficult to restore the audience's real daily media practice scene; the tracking research on the complete behavior chain of watching micro-dramas during the audience's daily meal time is relatively scarce.

This research supplements the above research limitations, integrates the three theoretical perspectives and adopts the qualitative research paradigm, and systematically analyzes the intrinsic motives of the audience's dining scene to choose micro-skits, the virtual companionship experience, and the intrinsic relationship between the media practice and the attention economic operation system.

3. Research method

This study adopts qualitative research design. This paradigm is adapted to the core topics of this study: the core of the research focuses on the subjective experience, emotional state and long-term media usage habits of the subject. Subjective psychological indicators such as loneliness perception, companionship experience, and attention distribution of meals cannot be fully explained by quantitative data alone. Qualitative research can rely on the original expression of the subject to restore the inner psychological process.

Research sets up two types of data collection channels: a week-long dining behavior log and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. All subjects need to fill in the standardized dining log for seven consecutive days to record the type of media content, viewing time, real-time emotional state, degree of companion perception, and attention distribution status of a single meal. After the logging cycle, a single interview will be conducted, and the duration of a single interview will be controlled

at 60 to 90 minutes. The interview outline focuses on the use habits of the test media, the motives for the selection of micro-skits content, the difference in dining experience under the condition of media accompaniment, the loneliness perception of being alone, and the setting of accompanying demand in dining scenes.

The research combines the purpose of sampling and snowball sampling to complete the recruitment of subjects, and it is planned to recruit 8 to 10 subjects. The age range of the test subjects is 20 to 35 years old. They live alone daily or eat alone at high frequency and have formed a stable habit of watching micro-dramas during mealtime, which lasts for no less than three months. The sampling work takes into account the test groups of different genders, occupations and living conditions to ensure the heterogeneity of the sample.

All interview recordings complete text transcription and rely on the six-step thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke to carry out text data analysis: familiarize yourself with the original text materials, refine the initial coding, form the core theme based on coding clustering, complete the topic validity review, define the connotation boundaries of each theme, write Complete analysis report. The whole process adopts manual coding operation to realize in-depth mining of text information.

This research strictly follows the ethical norms of humanities and social science research: before the start of data collection, all subjects sign an informed consent form; the researcher fully informs the core objectives of the research and the specifications for the use of audio recording; the subjects have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without reason; all the interview text excludes the privacy information that can identify individuals; all The original recording file will be destroyed after the end of the research.

4. Findings

Through text coding and analysis, three core analysis themes are studied and refined: first, micro-skits can provide a moderate level of cognitive involution adapted to the dining scene and become the priority choice of the audience; second, the audience and the screen narrative characters build a stable emotional connection, and the media characters undertake the virtual companionship function under the single dining scene; third The media practice of the audience watching micro-short dramas during mealtime is the result of the two-way effect of individual emotional needs and the attention economic operation system.

4.1. Micro-strits provide moderate cognitive interception for adapted scenes

Most test subjects feedback that two types of extreme experiences in the dining scene will cause discomfort: one is the media content with excessive cognitive load, and the other is a pure quiet dining environment without any media. Some subjects mentioned that documentary content requires continuous and high concentration, and the dining environment alone without media intervention will continue to amplify individual loneliness.

According to the interview text data, the narrative form of micro-skits is highly adapted to the daily dining rhythm of the masses: the single episode is relatively short, the narrative logic is simple and easy to understand, and the audience will not have a plot disconnection when watching synchronously during eating; the coherent audio-visual narrative can fill the blank period of the dining process and weaken the feeling of lonely environment brought about by the being alone.

Many subjects said that the choice of media content will be dynamically adjusted according to the state of the scene: when the body and mind are in a state of fatigue on weekdays, they are more

inclined to choose micro-dramas with minimalist narrative logic; during the weekend leisure period, they can accept drama content with higher narrative complexity. This phenomenon shows that the audience will adjust the media consumption choices according to their own remaining cognitive resources.

The results of this analysis form mutual evidence with the cognitive load theory: the subjects actively screen the medium content with moderate cognitive load to achieve a balance of attention between eating behavior and media reception behavior.

4.2. Screen narrative characters build virtual dining companion carriers

After a large number of test feedback, after long-term continuous viewing, the fixed narrative characters on the screen will become the companion carrier in the process of single dining. The test subjects clearly recognize that this kind of emotional connection has one-way virtual attributes, but they can still gain a stable sense of familiarity and security from it. Some subjects mentioned that following up the same episode every day and contacting the narrative of fixed characters has been solidified as a daily behavioral process; at the end of the episode, individuals will have a slight sense of loss.

The interview text summarizes three types of intrinsic mechanisms that give rise to virtual companionship perception: first, long-term repeated viewing strengthens the familiarity of the characters, and the audience at the beginning of the new drama can quickly identify the character image and vocal lines; second, continuous follow up the complete narrative line, and follow the character's life experience to form the psychological illusion of synchronous coexistence; third, receive The crowd only needs the "sense of presence" of the media characters, and does not need to bear the communication consumption brought about by real socialization - this group has the need for dining companionship, but rejects the psychological burden brought by real interpersonal interaction.

The above study found that the interpretation effectiveness of the theory of quasi-social relations is verified: the audience relies on the one-way emotional connection formed with the media characters to obtain a temporary companionship experience in the single dining scene.

4.3. Two-way coupling of emotional demand and attention economic system

According to the interview data, the audience exchanged their own attention resources for emotional comfort. The subjects clearly know that the narrative of micro-skits is routine and the plot is predictable, but it is still the preferred medium for mealtime. The core reason is that the content is simple and suitable for the needs of emotional regulation.

One subject said as follows: "I know that the narrative mode of this kind of drama is highly convergent, but only low-burden content is needed during the mealtime, and the platform will continue to watch what kind of content the platform pushes." This statement proves that convenience is the core consideration dimension of audience media selection.

The personalized recommendation mechanism of the platform continues to consolidate the habits of using this kind of media: after the audience completes the viewing of a kind of micro-short drama, the system continues to push the same kind of narrative content to extend the audience's stay on the platform. This study did not carry out a special disassembly for the operation logic of the recommended algorithm, but the oral data of the test was sufficient to confirm that the algorithm recommendation will continue to strengthen the audience's fixed drama-watching behavior during mealtime.

The practical logic of the media can be interpreted by relying on the theory of attention economy: the audience releases their own attention resources to dispel loneliness and obtain psychological comfort. The media platform relies on the user's stay time to realize commercial realization, and the individual emotional needs and the business media operation system form a two-way coupling relationship in the daily dining scene.

5. Conclusion

This study conducts empirical analysis on the intrinsic motives of watching micro-dramas in the single dining scene of young people living alone, and the intrinsic mechanism of accompanying perception derived from the media behavior. It integrates attention economy, cognitive load theory and quasi-social relationship theory into a unified qualitative analysis framework, relying on dining behavior logs and semi-structured interviews. Restore the audience's real daily media experience.

The research results confirm that the narrative rhythm and cognitive load level of micro-skits are highly matched with the duration of public meals, which can provide the audience with moderate cognitive involvement; the audience can establish a one-way emotional connection with the screen narrative characters, so as to obtain temporary companionship perception in the single dining scene; at the same time, the audience's internal emotional needs and level The personalized recommendation mechanism of Taiwan interacts to continue to solidify the media habit of watching micro-dramas during mealtime. The above conclusion systematically explains the inherent logic of micro-short drama becoming the mainstream dining companion medium.

This research can provide a multi-layered theoretical supplement to the existing relevant research: first, integrate the three types of independently used theoretical systems into a unified analytical framework; second, focus on real daily media practice rather than laboratory control scenarios to carry out research; third, rely on qualitative native texts to explain the audience's subjective cognition of dining and watching dramas.

There are several limitations in this study: first, the sample capacity is limited, the subjects are mainly urban young people, and the research conclusion cannot be generalized to all media audiences; second, the research data relies on the self-reporting log and interview text collection of the subjects, and the subjects may forget some behavioral details, and it is difficult to fully perceive the algorithm. Recommend the implicit impact on one's own media choice; Third, the study is cross-sectional research, and it is impossible to track the long-term dynamic changes of audience media habits and companion perception.

Follow-up research can expand the research boundaries based on the conclusions of this study: recruiting test subjects of different age levels, regions and lifestyles; using vertical tracking research to observe the dynamic changes of media use habits and loneliness perception over time; integrating qualitative interviews and quantitative measurement methods to accurately measure cognitive load and loneliness The degree of correlation between mood and media consumption behavior; compare different media categories such as micro-dramas, short videos, live broadcasts, audiobooks, etc., and clarify the differentiated psychological experience brought by various digital dining media.

On the whole, watching micro-dramas during mealtime is not just entertainment. The interview text confirms that media practice is a comprehensive product of individual emotional needs, media consumption behavior, and platform business design in daily life scenarios. Clearing the mechanism of action can provide reference for follow-up research in digital media, daily media practice and youth mental health-related fields

References

- [1] Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229.
- [2] Razzaghi-Asl, S., Rahmani, S., & Vartanian, L. R. (2024). Distraction suppresses high-fat flavor perception. *Appetite*, 195, 107177.
- [3] Robinson, E., Ahmadyar, K., Finlay, I., Jones, A., Tapper, K., & Gough, T. (2026). Eating while distracted: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of distraction on concurrent and later energy intake in adults. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 123(6), 101315.
- [4] Razzaghi-Asl, S., Vartanian, L. R., & Spence, C. (2026). Engaging visual media shifts taste-related neural processing: An fMRI study on distracted eating. *Neuroimage Reports*, 6(2), 100350.
- [5] Van Meer, F., Van Steenbergen, H., & Van Dillen, L. F. (2023). The effect of cognitive load on preference and intensity processing of sweet taste in the brain. *Appetite*, 188, 106630.
- [6] Nichols, D. L. (2022). The context of background TV exposure and children's executive functioning. *Pediatric Research*. Advance online publication. <https://www.nature.com/articles/pr>
- [7] Lotun, S., Lamarche, V. M., Matran-Fernandez, A., & Sandstrom, G. M. (2024). People perceive parasocial relationships to be effective at fulfilling emotional needs. *Scientific Reports*, 14, 8185.
- [8] Mathmann, F., Higgins, M. J., & Wang, D. (2021). A human voice, but not human visual image makes people perceive food to taste better and to eat more: "Social" facilitation of eating in a digital media. *Appetite*, 167, 105645.
- [9] Lemke, M., & Schifferstein, H. N. J. (2021). The use of ICT devices as part of the solo eating experience. *Appetite*, 165, 105297.
- [10] Spence, C., Mancini, M., & Huisman, G. (2019). Digital commensality: Eating and drinking in the company of technology. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2252.
- [11] Wang, C., Peng, Y., & an, X. (2021). Cloud-based commensality: Enjoy the company of co-diners without social facilitation of eating. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 758966.