Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Economic Management and Green Development
DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

Analysis of the Current State and Countermeasures for Micro-dramas for Middle-Aged and Elderly People in China

Hoiman Tsoi

School of Economics, Xiamen University, Xiamen, 361005, China
15220232201455@stu.xmu.edu.cn

Abstract. As the digital economy continues to expand, the silver generation has been increasingly integrated into its online entertainment ecosystem through the new rapid growth micro-drama market. As such, these short-form videos provide unprecedented access and immediate emotional reward to the middle-aged and elderly user group-but having run unchecked also pose monumental digital addiction and aggressive monetization-related socio-economic issues. This study systematically examines the behavioral characteristics, psychological vulnerabilities, and algorithmic risks of the elderly users when they engage with micro-dramas. Using a mixed-methods approach to analyze industry data and viewing habits, the findings of this article indicate that while micro-dramas provide an online refuge targeting off-line social isolation, they also entrap older viewers into algorithmic labor exploitation, false micro-transaction traps for bogus self-improvement products, and toxic echo chambers of hyped family turmoil. This research, therefore, contributes to the theory of digital aging and media empowerment in the algorithm age. In addition, it provides targeted policy measures for creating an age-friendly digital infrastructure with the intention of helping both policymakers and streaming platforms to foster a safer and more sustainable digital entertainment landscape for older adults.

Keywords: Micro-dramas, Silver Economy, Algorithmic Exploitation, Digital Addiction

1. Introduction

The digital economies of China have grown rapidly in recent years. At the same time, novel types of web entertainment keep coming to light. Micro-dramas, which are characterized by their 'fragmented' storytelling and a strong plot-driven narrative, have rapidly gained popularity via many channels including mini-programmes and standalone apps and thus become an essential element of the digital entertainment market. It is worth mentioning that in recent years, the middle-aged and older audience has gradually transitioned from traditional media to digital platforms and they have become a key segment of the micro-dramas' audience, which cannot be ignored. Driven by the popularity of smartphones and evolution of algorithms, micro-dramas provide virtual experiences with low entry barriers and high engagement, and gained a significant amount of traffic through its conflictual narrative. However, a number of issues that warrant attention lie behind this rapid development: firstly, some context are overly dramatized, show ambiguous values, or even involve fake advertising and misleading marketing campaigns; secondly, relevant platforms often make use

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

of deceptive user interfaces, leading to severe economic loss; thirdly, due to the flaws of algorithms, the elderly are trapped in negative information cocoons, resulting in severe psychological problems. Therefore, this necessitates a comprehensive investigation into the nature, mechanisms and social implications of short-dramas when consumed by middle-aged and older audiences.

However, the intersection field between digital ageing and short-talk video consumption has gradually attracted more scholars during the past three years with certain research value of the silver economy. Li et al. investigated the effects of digital micro-dramas on active ageing and showed that the mediators, emotional engagement and social connectedness were responsible for linking video content to older adults' mental health [1]. Similarly, Wang et al. reflect how older people incorporate short videos into their daily lives for entertainment and social interaction, alleviating social isolation through domestication theory [2]. However, these favorable benefits were, however, accompanied with a lot of obnoxious risks. Xu et al. investigated the role of algorithms in social media dependence, illustrating that flow experiences/algorithms were the biggest predictors of short-video addiction among older adult users [3]. Furthermore, Li et al. carry out an extra evaluation of algorithm-associated virtual dependence, draw attention to it being a shape danger for public health low and healthful growing older [4]. In addition, Wang et al. focusing on the working patterns of business operations of these platforms, through highlighting how algorithms enforce high engaging, attention grabbing sensational content till lures audience (especially older population) [5]. Despite this, these studies have set a solid foundation and to date, research that ties effectively micro-dramas as content homogenization, algorithmic exploitation (not automatic) and targeted policy regulation together is missing.

This paper systematically addresses the gap by highlighting the operation logic and central problems (namely, the mechanisms of underlying algorithmic exploitation, content homogenization and consumer vulnerability) in midlife-and-older-aged micro-dramas market. Adopting a mixed-methods approach that unites the analysis of user behavior with a media ecology perspective, this study aims to thoroughly describe the processes through which middle-aged and older adults are affected-from exposure to algorithmic recommendations and content effects to downstream psychological and economic consequences. Theoretically, this study aims to offer the particular expressions of digital inequality from the new media format context by providing an analysis of the algorithmic logic and cognitive as well as emotional traits of senior citizens. The research, mainly conducted through a deep exploration and assessment of the present state of affairs in the industry, investigates potential governance mechanisms and avenues towards sustainable industrial transformation.

2. Case description

The Chinese micro-drama industry has experienced an explosive growth, turning from a niche subculture into one of the mainstream digital cultural. As illustrated in the Market Size and Forecast of Chinese Micro-dramas (2020-2030) (see Figure 1), the market size soar dramatically during these years, from only 9.4 billion CNY in 2020 to 504.4 billion CNY in 2024, and is predicted to reach 1006.8 billion CNY in 2027.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

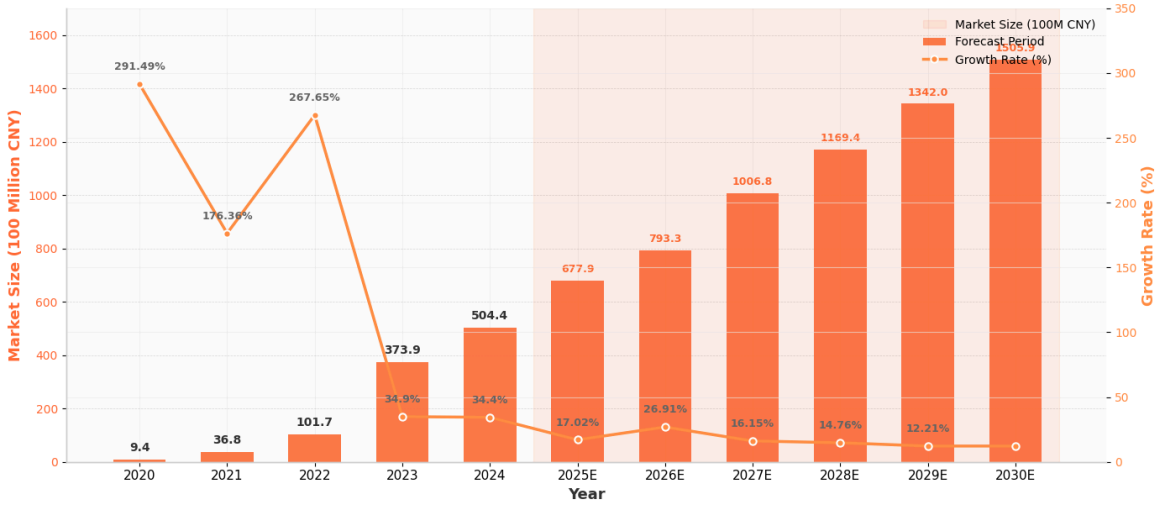

Figure 1. Market size and forecast of Chinese micro-dramas (2020-2030)

Data Source: iiMedia Research center (data. iimedia.cn)

Note: Market size includes user payments, advertising, and copyright transactions

Against the backdrop of a continuously expanding market, this micro- drama market is undergoing a significant shift in audience demographics, the mid-aged and elderly population is gradually becoming an unignored target audience.

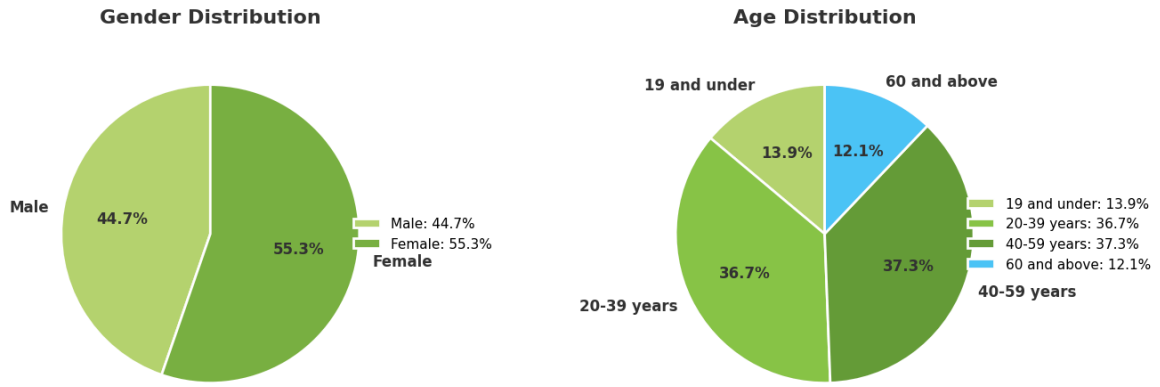

Figure 2. Micro-drama user demographics (May 2024)

Data Source: iResearch Inc. (June 2024)

As shown in the micro-drama demographics (see Figure 2), the gender distribution is comparatively balanced, with slight inclination towards females, representing 55.3%. Notable, the most conspicuous factor is the age distribution. Audience between 40-59 account for 37.3% of the total users and those aged 60 and over occupies 12.1%. In sum, the population of users aged 40 and elder constitutes nearly a half (49.4%), which break the stereotype that the young people are the main users.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

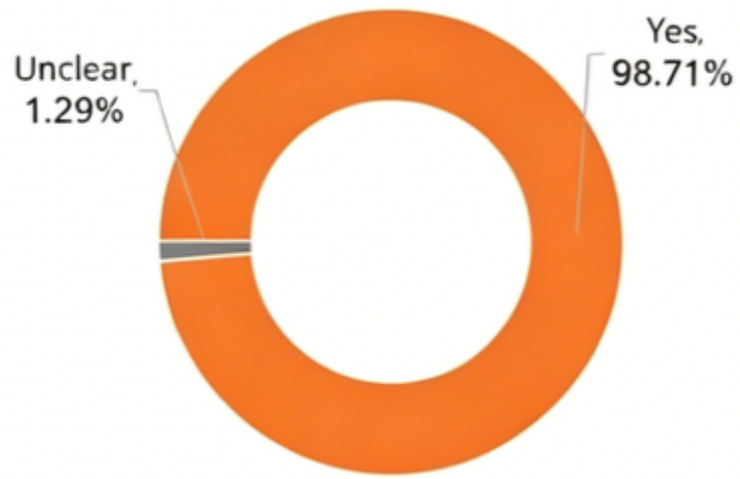

Figure 3. The access status of Chinese users to online micro-short dramas

Data Source: iiMedia Data center (data. iimedia.cn)

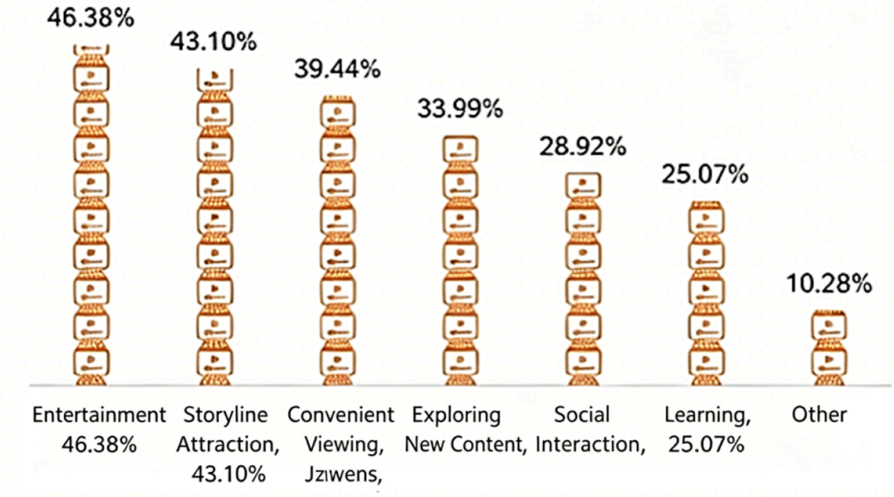

Figure 4. Chinese users watch online micro-short dramas

Sample Source: Strawberry Pie Data Survey and System (survey. iimedia.cn)

To further understand the potential reason for this increase, it is necessary to analyze their viewing motivations and whether there is a disparity between distinct regions. Regarding user research (see Figures 3-4) data, 98.71% of surveyed users show that the two main reasons to watch micro-media is for 'entertainment' (46.38%) and 'convenient viewing' (39.44%). Focusing on middle-aged and older users, the reasons are similar. A related survey points that a significant 85.76% of respondents cited the 'low operational barrier (e.g., simple vertical swiping)' as their primary reason [6]. Furthermore, the role of emotional compensation is also paramount. 67.31% of elderly users gained 'relaxation and emotional value' from micro-media and 48.87% of them are satisfied with its function of fulfill their need for emotional companionship and resonance. Academic research suggests that short videos are a crucial tool for social reintegration of the elderly [7]. To be specific, in some particular regions like the third-tier cities, rural areas, and central and western regions of China, the 'empty nest' phenomenon is particularly acute due to the exodus of young workers. For these elderly people, who find themselves geographically and socially isolated,

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

micro-dramas (a subset of short videos), with their low barrier to entry (including vertical scrolling and fast-paced storytelling), have become an easily accessible 'digital refuge'. They have actually alleviated the loneliness they experience in the real world, compensated for their marginalized social status, and fulfilled their need for deep emotional companionship, which they are unable to find in everyday life [8].

3. Problem analysis

Although the economic potentials cannot be ignored, there are profound negative effect for the elder people driven by the unrestricted expansion.

3.1. Financial vulnerability and deceptive algorithmic exploitation

The primary issue is the systematic financial exploitation of elderly users who generally have low digital literacy. They are manipulated by platform algorithm to a large extent, turning from passive viewing to active purchasing [9]. Lacking of related regulations and laws, micro-media generally employ a deceptive split payment pattern, charging per episode using virtual currency (such as 'K-coins'). In addition, platforms usually implement frictionless but predatory interface (UI) designs to mislead the elder people [10]. For example, these platforms tend to conceal the total cost of the subscription, use a tiny print to indicate the 'auto-renewal' agreement, and enable password-free biometric payments. Driven by the emotional and attracting plots at the end of each one-minute episode, elderly users are unconsciously induced to carry out a high-frequent trading with only small amount, but consequently thousands of hidden costs have been accumulated each month, leading to a sever family dispute and infringing upon their fundamental consumer rights.

3.2. Content homogenization and emotional manipulation

The everlasting pursuits of rapid monetization of traffic leads to a homogenization in the contexts. As for Figure 5, the market is dominated by 'Comeback' theme, representing a heat value of 2,280,000 million, followed by 'costume', 'CEO' (romances involving the wealthy) and 'face-slapping" (exaggerated acts of revenge) themes. To attract audience, production companies mainly manufacture family series that rely heavily on fierce conflicts—such as unfilial children abandoning their parents, malicious mothers-in-law, or destitute elderly people being revealed to be billionaires [11]. Although these intense emotional scenes may provide an immediate dopamine rush, they are inherently toxic. Critics point out that these episodes offer emotional value to some extent, they are severely lacking in genuine spiritual resonance and fail to address the true psychological complexities of the ageing process [12].

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

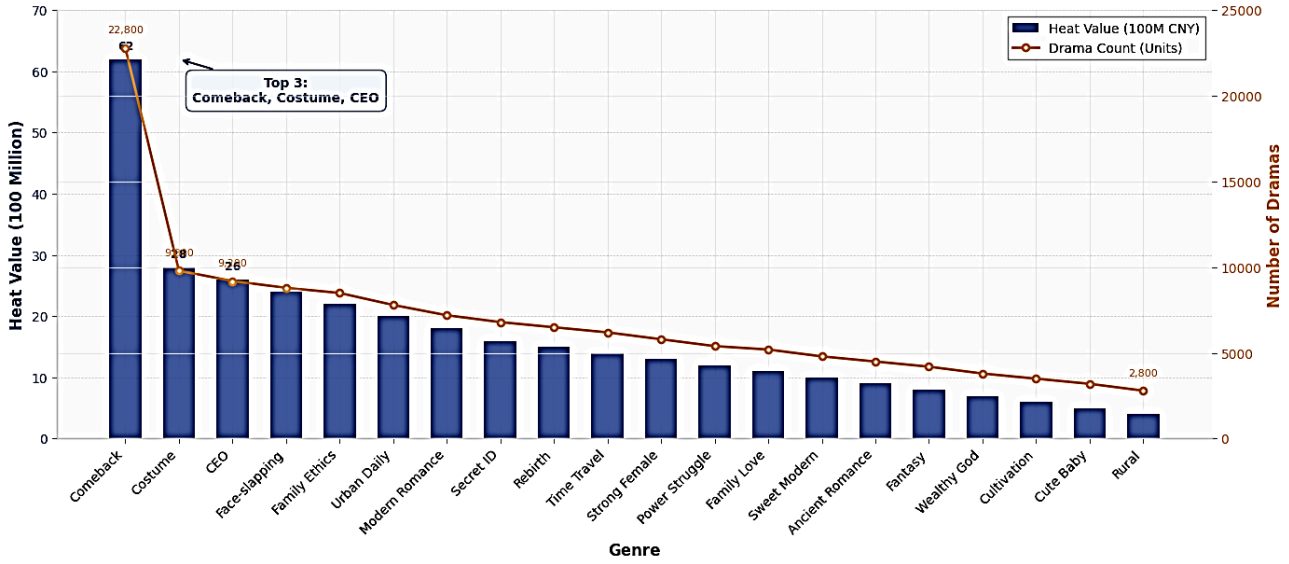

Figure 5. Investment analysis: genre segmentation (H1 2025)

Data Source: ADX Short Drama Platform

3.3. Information cocoon alienation

The Algorithmic Information Cocoon cannot be overlooked; the reality is that big data are a strong risk factor for mental illness in older people [13]. Modern Algorithms: The main goal of all modern algorithms is to automate the curation of content, so it resonates with audience preferences and maximizes user retention for a long time to make profits. Sure, this mechanism does lend itself to a degree of convenience. But, after that these old people hitting the same tags like 'CEO' and 'face-slapping" of micro-media repeatedly, a long time in the future, it is inevitable that related topics update is sure to go homogeneous. Today, the hot topics are 'comeback', 'CEO' and 'face-slapping', but the costs enormously outweigh its benefits. Specifically, spending long period immersed in such a virtual world filled with conflicts, the elderly users would be misguided and deeply influenced by the negative information, generating the idea of taking their own life. This hazard is not out pf thin air, a report by Xinhua Network highlighted that online information like superstitious information not only economically exploits the elderly but also Causing psychological trauma through intimidation (such as fabricating stories of family tragedies) [14]. This immense psychological strain has led some elderly victims, unable to cope with the burden, to take their own lives.

4. Suggestions

Some of these measures are essential to get rid of the possible damages happening inside the silver economy and promote a green digital environment targeted at the elderly population.

4.1. Mandating transparent interface design and enhancing digital literacy

Regarding financial exploitation, a possible and practical solution is to launch a 60 years old and older senior version of "Youth Anti-Addiction Mode" [15]. In this system, the user interface design must be elderly-friendly. For example, the price should be exactly bolded. Further, the default tick boxes for 'auto-renewal' must be considered as legally prohibited. Also based on this logic, when the

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

immediate temptation exceeds a specific quantity, heated alert would be colonized to the other family members to further prohibit spur-of-the-moment expense near consumer instinct. At the same time, it is also important to increase the capacity of identification digital consumer traps for seniors. Communities must then encourage the older adults to attend training to know how to delineate consumption traps [16].

4.2. Incentivizing diverse content production and reforming algorithmic ethics

As for micro-media-related themes, the NRTA has begun to issue regulation measures of television dramas aimed at the elderly, yet still requires detailed and mandatory legal regulations on "short-form video and audio content targeted at the elderly [17]. The framework should be used to define what constitutes inappropriate content of micro-media rather than banning easy listening and the spread of financial scam, or insignificant health information disguised as news. The authorities should also investigate and penalize industry malpractices, as well as impose high dissuasive fines on companies or businesses that frequently violate the rules to guide the sector in a better way. Finally, Create an innovation incentive program. The government should not deter this innovation nor sacrifice the diversity of genres that it allows; instead, work with these companies and platforms to produce unique content through guiding incentives, rather than mandating uniformity, to enrich the range of choices available to viewers and avoid overwhelming distribution of genres.

4.3. Establishing regulatory frameworks and industry oversight

To interrupt the information cocoon and lessen adverse effects from content material homogenization, the industry should reject the marginalization and stereotypical portrayal of older people, and instead adopt a 'de-stereotyping narrative' [18]. These must include alternative depictions of older people which will not merely buffer but rather bolster their self-esteem and contractors in an attempt to actualize possibilities for human flourishing. Moreover, tech firms need to switch to diversity index for algorithms which is more complex than the old and simple ones. It also provides a platform to enable the people to modify the weight of content diversity according to their need, or savor niche content randomly that can protect mental health for users [19].

5. Conclusion

In summary, this research systematically talks about how micro-drama industry targeting middle-aged and elderly audiences under the background of China digital economy taking off towards rapid development can achieve explosive growth. This paper carefully indicates how the phenomenon of passive digital viewers can be turned into active content consumers for the 'silver generation' by drawing on demographic changes, viewing motivations and regional differences. The consequence exposes a paradoxical reality: micro-dramas provide an easily-accessible 'digital solace' that is capable of relieving loneliness and social isolation woes in the real-world—especially for vacant-nest old people in lower-tier cities and rural areas; they also provoke severe socio-economic issues. In fact, this research points out three key issues. Not least through the systemic financial abuse thanks to duplicitous microtransactions and predatory UI. Second, older people are influenced by pseudo-scientific and sensationalist family conflict stories which distort the social reality. Thirdly, the aggressive recommendation algorithms snare the old ages in apathetic 'information cocoon' and worsen digital addiction and psychological pain. This paper proposed a multilayered framework to tackle these issues and called for transparent, elder-geared interface standards (senior mode), an

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

algorithmic diverse index, and thorough industry regulation ensuring a conducive digital entertainment ecosystem promoting active ageing.

There is certainly a methodological limitation to this paper. To begin with, the analysis is mainly based on secondary industry reports and cross-sectional data; fundamentally failing to longitudinally track middle-aged and older users which cannot reflect accumulate psychological and behavioral changes across a long period of time. Second, as commercial short-video algorithms are both proprietary and change quickly, the mechanisms used to determine the disseminated content are challenging and often impossible to identify. Future work should include longitudinal studies in the form of original studies and use algorithmic auditing. This will allow for a more thorough investigation of the long-term effects of micro-series use on subjective well-being and provide empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of the policy measures proposed.

References

[1] Li, W., Cheng, S., Ling, S., & Zheng, C. (2025). Impact of content features of digital micro-dramas on active aging: The serial mediation effect of emotional engagement and social connectedness. *Frontiers in Psychology, 16*, 1711672.

[2] Wang, Y., Samani, M. C., & Ahmad, A. L. (2025). The domestication of short videos: Experiences of the elderly users from Nanjing, China. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology, 9*(2), 1899-1913.

[3] Xu, J., Ramayah, T., Arshad, M. Z., Ismail, A., & Jamal, J. (2025). Decoding digital dependency: Flow experience and social belonging in short video addiction among middle-aged and elderly Chinese users. *Telematics and Informatics, 96*, 102222.

[4] Li, Z., Yu, X., & Tian, K. (2026). Algorithm-associated digital addiction among older adults: Mechanisms and public health implications for healthy aging. *Frontiers in Public Health, 13*, 1746304.

[5] Wang, C., Yan, J., Huang, L., & Cao, N. (2024). Helping middle-aged and elderly short-video creators attract followers: A mixed-methods study on Douyin users. *Information Technology & People, 37*(3), 1305-1333.

[6] Beijing News Think Tank. (2024, December 26). Older people are enthusiastically chasing micro-dramas: Trends that must be noticed. *The Beijing News*.

[7] Yan, Q., & Li, N. (2022). Connection, domestication and social promise: Research on short video use and social integration of rural elderly. *Journalism & Communication Review, 75*(6), 26-36.

[8] Shen, Y. (2026). Causes and intervention strategies for internet addiction among the rural elderly. *Aging Research, 13*(2).

[9] Yin, X., Li, Y., Gao, R., Li, J., & Wang, H. (2023). Understanding the purchase decisions of silver consumers in short-form video platforms from the perspective of existence, relatedness, and growth needs. *Behavioral Sciences, 13*(12), 1011.

[10] Verhalen, A. E. C., Baroni, L. A., Pereira, R., & da Hora Rodrigues, K. R. (2025, September). Deceptive patterns and older adults: A semiotic analysis of older adults' experiences with manipulative interface designs. In *IFIP Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 411-420). Springer Nature Switzerland.

[11] China Youth Daily. (2024). Melodramatic micro-dramas "hunt" middle-aged and elderly people. *China Youth Daily*. Retrieved from http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2024-04/11/nw.D110000zgqnb_20240411_1-05.htm

[12] Xinhua Net. (2024). Middle-aged and elderly themed micro-dramas: Providing emotional value and seeking spiritual resonance. *Xinhua News Agency*. Retrieved from http://www.news.cn/

[13] He, Y., Liu, D., Guo, R., & Guo, S. (2023). Information cocoons on short video platforms and its influence on depression among the elderly: A moderated mediation model. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 2469-2480*.

[14] Xinhua News Network. (2025). Facing the "siege" of toxic short videos: Who will add a "safety lock" for elderly internet access? *Xinhua News Network*. Retrieved from https://www.xhby.net/content/s67d94b59e4b0eff95f0e36cc.html

[15] Wu, X. (2024). Are micro-dramas "hunting" the silver group? Exploring "age-friendly" anti-addiction modes. *People's Daily App*. Retrieved from https://www.peopleapp.com/column/30047074494-500005854319

[16] Deng, M., & Zhang, Y. (2024). Social reintegration of the silver-haired group: An exploration of the causes and effects of older adults' micro-short drama viewing behavior. *Journal of News and Communication Studies, 12*(6), 1481–1488.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.37277

[17] People's Daily. (2025). Micro-dramas for the middle-aged and elderly: A new track for the aging cultural industry. *People's Daily Online*. Retrieved from http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0403/c40531-40442345.html
[18] Lu, T., Sun, Y., & Zhang, D. (2026). Empowering through micro-dramas: Investigating the mechanisms of counter-stereotypical narratives in stimulating elderly consumption vitality. *Aging Research, 13*(2).
[19] Lu, T., & Zhao, Q. (2025). Media empowerment and the well-being of older adults: Business model innovation in the silver economy through micro-dramas. *E-Commerce Letters, 14*(12).