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In the Era of Fragmentation: How Does the Rise of Micro-Short Dramas Reshape the Narrative Structure, Narrative Content, and Audience of Traditional Long Dramas?

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Abstract. The rise of micro-short dramas is changing the way audiences access and watch film and television content. This study explores how the development of micro-short dramas has reshaped traditional long dramas and in what aspects this change is mainly reflected. The research adopts a comparative analysis of Chinese TV drama cases and combines relevant studies on the narrative rhythm, platform dissemination, and audience viewing behaviour of micro-short dramas. By comparison, it is found that micro-short dramas mainly influence long dramas in three aspects: narrative structure, narrative content, and audience. In terms of narrative, micro-short dramas usually adopt shorter episode durations, faster plot development, earlier conflict settings, and more direct emotional feedback, which also puts pressure on long dramas to increase their narrative pace. In terms of the audience, fragmented viewing and short-video consumption are becoming increasingly common, but viewers still tend to watch long dramas to experience character development, emotional accumulation, and more complete stories. These findings indicate that micro-short dramas are not simply replacing long dramas, but rather have formed a relationship of competition, influence, and coexistence with them. This research helps to understand how the fragmented media environment changes the narrative and viewing methods of film and television, and can also provide practical references for film and television creators, production companies, and platforms to understand the needs of contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Micro-short Dramas, Traditional Long Dramas, Narrative, Audience Viewing Habits, Fragmented Media

1. Introduction

With the development of mobile Internet and short-video platforms, the production and viewing methods of film and television content are changing. Audiences are increasingly accustomed to using fragmented time to watch content through mobile phones, and short-video platforms also allow audiences to quickly access and switch between different types of content. Against this background, micro-short dramas have developed rapidly. Compared with traditional long dramas, micro-short dramas usually have the characteristics of shorter episodes, faster plot development, and

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more intense conflicts, which can quickly establish conflicts and attract audiences in a limited time [1, 2].

In contrast, traditional long dramas have a larger narrative space, which can develop more complex characters and relationships and build emotional accumulation through continuous story development [3]. Micro-short dramas rely more on quickly establishing conflicts, setting up suspense, and creating reversals to maintain the audience's interest. The comparative study of micro-short dramas and traditional online dramas also found that important twists and climaxes in micro-short dramas usually occur earlier, and the overall narrative rhythm is faster [4]. Therefore, the difference between the two forms is not only reflected in the length of the drama, but also in how the story is organised and how the audience's attention is maintained.

This difference is also related to changes in the audience's viewing habits. Short-video platforms make audiences more accustomed to obtaining content quickly, constantly switching between different videos, while continuous viewing and watching TV series are still important ways of viewing [5, 6]. Research on the viewing habits of young audiences also shows that short-video platforms and mobile devices have become an important part of contemporary video consumption [7]. These changes raise a question that is worthy of attention: when audiences are increasingly accustomed to fast content and instant feedback, are they still willing to wait for slower plot development, characterisation, and emotional accumulation? At the same time, the popularity of micro-short dramas does not mean that audiences have stopped watching long dramas, but that different forms may meet different viewing needs.

The development of micro-short dramas has also brought a new industrial environment to traditional long dramas. The relatively flexible production mode of micro-short dramas and their platform-based dissemination provide different options for the production and dissemination of film and television content [2, 8]. At the same time, traditional dramas still have a longer narrative space, which can develop more complex and complete stories [3]. Therefore, the relationship between micro-short dramas and long dramas is not a simple substitution relationship, but gradually forms a relationship of competition, reference, and coexistence.

At present, there have been studies discussing the narrative characteristics, communication modes, and audience behaviour of micro-short dramas, and some studies have focused on changes in traditional long dramas in the digital media environment. However, few studies have placed micro-short dramas and traditional long dramas in the same framework to analyse how the development of micro-short dramas affects traditional long dramas. Especially in the connection between narrative styles, industrial models, and audience viewing habits, there is still room for further research.

Based on this research gap, this paper raises the following core research questions: In a fragmented media environment, how does the rise of micro-short dramas reshape traditional long dramas? In what aspects is this reshaping mainly reflected? To answer these questions, this article will analyse the relationship between micro-short dramas and traditional long dramas from three aspects: narrative structure, narrative content, and audience experience. At the narrative level, it discusses how a faster pace and more intense conflicts affect the story creation of long dramas; at the content level, it examines how narrative elements commonly used in micro-short dramas appear in long dramas; at the audience level, the focus is on the impact of fragmented viewing on viewers' attention and viewing habits. Through these three aspects, this article further discusses the constantly changing relationship between micro-short dramas and traditional long dramas in the contemporary media environment.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Micro-short dramas and short video platforms

The development of micro-short dramas is closely related to short-video platforms, so their narrative style is also influenced by the communication mode of these platforms. Li believes that Douyin micro-short dramas combine the characteristics of short videos and TV series, while also forming a faster-paced and more concentrated narrative style [2]. This narrative feature is directly related to the fragmented viewing environment of digital media.

Li F. further points out that Chinese online micro-short dramas are positioned between short videos and longer online dramas, and can be disseminated through platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and WeChat Channels [9]. Although different types of online micro-short dramas have different content, many works use short durations and high-density plots to attract audiences [9]. Chen and Gu believe that micro-short dramas have gradually developed from a subsidiary form of traditional film and television to a more independent form of art and media [1].

When comparing micro-short dramas and traditional online dramas, the difference in narrative rhythm between the two is more obvious. Wu and Zhou found that compared with traditional online dramas, the important twists and climaxes in micro-short dramas usually appear earlier, and the plot progresses faster [4]. Therefore, the fast pace of micro-short dramas is not only the personal choice of the creator, but also related to the platform environment and limited viewing time.

2.2. Narrative rhythm and viewing habits

The rhythm of the narrative affects how the audience receives information and experiences the story. Traditional long dramas have a longer duration, which allows them to slowly develop relationships between characters and gradually present their emotional changes. García believes that TV series are suitable for long and complex stories because their continuous structure allows the story to develop over a longer period of time [3].

The conditions faced by micro-short dramas are different. Due to the limited time of each episode, conflicts, suspense, and emotional changes often need to appear earlier. The research of Wu and Zhou also shows that the narrative climax of micro-short dramas usually occurs earlier than that of traditional online dramas [4].

The audience's way of watching is also changing. Rubenking and Bracken compared viewing habits from different years, pointing out that continuous viewing and watching TV series have become common ways of viewing in the new media environment [6]. Ćitić's research on young people's video viewing habits also involves streaming media platforms, short videos, different viewing devices, and different lengths of video content [7]. Bao's research focuses on how short videos can keep audiences watching, even when the viewing time may exceed their original plan [5].

Judging from the theory of "Uses and Gratifications," audiences do not passively accept media content, but actively choose media according to their own needs and viewing situations [10]. This can explain why micro-short dramas are more suitable for fragmented viewing: they can provide entertainment, emotional stimulation, and a more complete story experience in a relatively short time.

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3. Research method

This article adopts a comparative case study method to analyse the impact of micro-short dramas on traditional Chinese long dramas from three aspects: narrative structure, narrative content, and audience experience.

This article selects three Chinese TV series as comparative cases: The Eighteen-Year-Old Grandmother Arrives and Reorganises the Family's Glory, Blossom, and The Story of Minglan. These works are not all regarded as direct representatives of micro-short dramas, but are used to observe whether some narrative methods common in micro-short dramas, such as rapid conflict, revenge, identity change, reversal, and strong emotional payoff, also appear in long dramas.

At the same time, this article analyses case observations in combination with existing research on micro-short drama production, narrative rhythm, streaming media, and audience viewing behaviour, so as to discuss the broader relationship between micro-short dramas and long dramas.

4. Discussion

4.1. Changes in narrative structure

One of the obvious changes is that the narrative rhythm of film and television dramas is changing. Due to the limited duration of individual episodes and the overall length of micro-short dramas, they must complete information delivery, establish conflicts, and develop the plot within a relatively short time. Li pointed out that Douyin micro-short dramas have the characteristics of a fast pace and concentrated content [2]. Wu and Zhou's comparison of micro-short dramas and traditional online dramas also found that important twists and climaxes in micro-short dramas usually appear earlier, and the plot is more concentrated [4].

This structural difference also means that long dramas face different narrative requirements. Traditional long dramas can use a longer time to develop character relationships and establish the story background, but in the viewing environment shaped by short-video platforms, audiences can more easily exit or switch content in the middle of a drama. Therefore, some long dramas have also begun to pay more attention to conflicts at the beginning and the speed of plot development. However, this does not mean that long dramas need to completely adopt the rhythm of micro-short dramas, but rather that long dramas need to find a more effective rhythm within a longer story structure.

The Story of Minglan can be used as a relatively obvious contrast. It has a long duration, so it can gradually develop character relationships, family conflicts, and story information, and many elements do not need to be resolved at the beginning. Compared with micro-short dramas, this narrative style requires the audience to invest more time and can also provide more space for character development. It can be seen that the development of micro-short dramas has not eliminated the slower pace of long dramas, but has made "how to allocate narrative time" a more obvious issue in the creation of long dramas.

Therefore, the impact of micro-short dramas on the narrative structure of long dramas is not mainly to make all long dramas shorter, but to change the audience's expectations for the speed of plot progression. Micro-short dramas tend to concentrate information and conflicts within a limited time, while long dramas can still use a longer duration to lay the groundwork and develop the story. The differences in narrative rhythm between the two forms still exist [4, 3].

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4.2. Changes in narrative content and emotional appeal

The influence of micro-short dramas on long dramas is not only a change in production methods, but can also be directly reflected in the content of the story. A more obvious example is the narrative of "rebirth" and "comeback." The short drama The Eighteen-Year-Old Grandmother Arrives and Reorganises the Family's Glory in 2025 is a typical case. The play is identified as a micro-short drama by the platform. The story begins in 1955. After the protagonist dies unexpectedly, she travels to the body of an 18-year-old girl 70 years later, and then begins to face a new family relationship and change her fate again. This setting of "getting a life again" gives the character a clear goal from the beginning, and can also quickly create conflicts and reversals. For micro-short dramas, this structure is particularly suitable for allowing the audience to quickly enter the story within a limited time and create obvious "satisfaction" through plots such as identity changes, comebacks, and reversals.

It is worth noting that this narrative style exists not only in micro-short dramas, but also begins to appear in longer TV series. Blossom is a very direct example. The play tells the story of Dou Zhao's unexpected rebirth, as she faces her fate with the experience of her previous life and then deals with family and political problems with Song Mo. Compared with The Eighteen-Year-Old Grandmother Arrives and Reorganises the Family's Glory, Blossom is longer, and the story also needs to develop character relationships and more complex plots, but "rebirth" is still an important starting point for the story. That is to say, the long drama does not fully adopt the length and production method of the short drama, but it can absorb narrative mechanisms from micro-short dramas that attract audience attention.

This change also indicates that the influence of micro-short dramas on long dramas does not necessarily manifest as "long dramas turning into short ones," but may first occur in terms of story structure and audience expectations. Elements such as rebirth, comeback, revenge, and identity reversal can enable characters to enter conflicts more quickly and also allow the audience to receive emotional rewards earlier. Micro-short dramas have made this viewing experience of "quickly entering conflict—constantly reversing—getting a sense of satisfaction" more concentrated, while long dramas have begun to incorporate some of these elements into a longer story structure. For the audience, this means that although long dramas still retain a relatively long narrative space, they also need to provide strong enough conflict and emotional appeal at an earlier stage. Therefore, the changes brought about by micro-short dramas are not simply about speeding up all long dramas, but about incorporating some narrative elements that were originally more common in micro-short dramas into long dramas.

From this, it can be seen that there is a specific narrative flow between micro-short dramas and long dramas. The viewing habits and expectations of "satisfaction" formed by micro-short dramas are also influencing how long dramas design the beginning and progression of their stories [1, 9, 4].

4.3. Changes in the audience's viewing style

The audience is another important part of this change. In the fragmented media environment, viewers can switch between different platforms, devices, and activities to watch content. Ćitić's study of young people's viewing habits shows that streaming platforms, different viewing devices, and short-video content have become part of contemporary video consumption [7].

This viewing environment may make audiences less willing to wait for a plot to develop. Micro-short dramas usually respond to this viewing habit through rapid conflicts and continuous changes.

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Bao's research also pointed out that short-video content may cause audiences to continue watching, making them move on to the next piece of content after watching one [5].

5. Conclusion

This article mainly discusses how the rise of micro-short dramas has reshaped traditional long dramas in the fragmented media environment and in which aspects this change is mainly reflected. Research has found that the influence of micro-short dramas on long dramas is mainly reflected in three aspects: narrative structure, narrative content, and audience experience. In terms of narrative, micro-short dramas place greater emphasis on rapid progression, concentrated conflicts, and immediate emotional feedback, which also places higher demands on the rhythm of long dramas. Meanwhile, narrative elements such as rebirth, comeback, and revenge, which can bring a sense of "satisfaction," are gradually appearing in long dramas. In terms of the audience, viewers' viewing time has become more fragmented, but this does not mean that long dramas will be completely replaced. Long dramas can still meet the audience's demands for character development and complete stories through their longer duration.

The significance of this study lies in understanding the relationship between micro-short dramas and long dramas from three aspects: narrative structure, narrative content, and audience experience, rather than simply regarding the two as a substitute relationship. This can also provide a reference for TV drama creators, production companies, and platforms to understand the viewing needs of contemporary audiences.

The research in this article mainly relies on existing studies and limited case analyses, so the discussion of differences among audiences of different ages, regions, and platforms is not sufficient. Future research can further analyse the impact of the long-term development of micro-short dramas on the creation of long dramas and the viewing habits of audiences through audience surveys, viewing data, and more cases of different types of TV dramas.

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