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Low-Cost Experimentation in the Attention Market: Evidence from Short-Drama Platforms

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Abstract. With the development of micro-short dramas, new forms of content creation and market experiments for digital entertainment have emerged. Micro-short dramas generally have a lower production cost than traditional television programs and a shorter production cycle, and thus can be quickly promoted by the platform. Therefore, the producer can test various content ideas and adapt to changes in the audience's desires. However, a more efficient market learning may also lead to the repeated production of successful genres and narrative patterns, thereby reducing content diversity. This paper studies the relationship among low-cost experimentation, platform feedback, attention concentration and content diversity in the Chinese market for micro-short dramas. Using the publicly available Top 20 recommendation ranking data from the Hongguo platform, a descriptive analysis of production formats, narrative genres, Recommendation Values, Heat Values, and new-release status was conducted in this study. Based on the above data, animated and AI-generated dramas have achieved remarkable results and are now popular entries in the ranking list. At the same time, the attention of the audience is not even, and some genres and narrative patterns appear repeatedly in the rankings. The results show that low-cost experimentation can enhance the efficiency of content testing and market learning, but the speed of platform feedback may also lead to a concentration of attention on already successful content models. A potential conflict exists between the efficiency of market learning and content diversity in the platform-based entertainment market.

Keywords: Micro-short dramas, Low-cost experimentation, Attention economy, Platform feedback, Content diversity

1. Introduction

In recent years, micro-short dramas have developed rapidly in the digital entertainment industry and become an important type of content. The Chinese short-drama market will be more than 100 billion yuan by around 2027 [1]. In the first half of 2026 alone, the domestic market for AI-generated short dramas had exceeded 22 billion yuan and continued to expand rapidly, as shown in [2]. In recent years, due to many reasons, the development of short dramas has accelerated: their concise content, flexible production teams, numerous topics, and convenient dissemination on existing online platforms are all conducive to their popularity [3]. These characteristics can meet the demands of

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consumers more easily and create a production model that is different from that of traditional long-form television.

Short dramas have some advantages over traditional television programmes in terms of production cost, production cycle and speed to market. Traditional television shows are usually more costly to produce and take longer; thus, if the market forecast is wrong, these costs will be wasted. On the other hand, short dramas can generally be produced at a lower cost and in a shorter time, and digital platforms can offer quick feedback after release [4, 5]. Click-through rates, view counts, completion rates, likes and collections can be used to assess the market performance of different types of content by producers, and then adjust themes, narrative strategies and resource allocation accordingly. Lower costs can also be afforded to produce more versions of the content, and prompt feedback will allow for a quicker selection of a successful work.

This production model is particularly suitable for the creative industry due to fluctuating demand from consumers. Before a work is produced, producers are unable to know what the public wants or which projects will be popular hits. At the same time, the supply of digital content continues to increase, and consumers have limited time and attention for multiple types of content; thus, attention has become a scarce resource [4]. Users can find various materials on this platform, and the data they produce can also inform the producers about changes in consumer demands. Producers can use this information to allocate more resources to better-performing works and form a cycle of "production-feedback-learning-reproduction".

However, more efficient market learning may also lead to another result. More control over the content of interest for the public at platforms and producers has made several successful themes and story models easily reproducible. Although this way can increase the efficiency of content selection for consumers, it may also lead to a market dominated by a few popular genres and thus reduce content diversity. Low-cost experiments will thus enhance the efficiency of market exploration and potentially give rise to risks of content concentration and imitation.

Based on the above observations, this paper raises the following question: Can short-drama producers quickly gather consumer demand information through low-cost production and platform feedback to build a high-efficiency model of market learning that leads to content genre concentration and possibly a reduction in content diversity? According to the public short-drama ranking data available on digital platforms, this paper will conduct a short quantitative analysis of genre distribution, content concentration and diversity. It hopes to offer more information on the function and possible effects of low-cost trials in the digital entertainment industry.

2. Literature review

2.1. Attention economy and platform competition

Competition among digital entertainment platforms for users' attention makes attention a scarce resource in the content market. Platform algorithms can learn which content has gained the attention of users through clicks, views, likes and collections, etc. Therefore, platforms can continuously adjust content recommendations and increase the exposure of popular content to more users. Research on digital platforms indicates that the Design of platforms can affect users' attention allocation and engagement, and thus the mechanism of a platform modifies consumption behaviour [6]. The mechanisms of the short-drama market have formed a feedback loop, and audience responses are now visible market signals. Producers will be able to learn about changes in consumer demand more quickly than before.

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2.2. Uncertainty and search in creative industries

A typical feature of the creative industries is uncertainty in consumer demand. Producers do not know in advance which stories, themes or characters will be popular after investing considerable resources in production. Thus, there is a search problem for the firm to find a good alternative and to limit the cost of searching for it. Weitzman's search model and Pandora's rule indicate that when the values of the alternatives are unknown, one should consider both the possible value of an option and the cost of exploration [7]. This way is suitable for short-drama production because the reduced production costs lower the cost of testing various content options. Therefore, producers can explore more themes before investing a large sum of money in a particular format.

2.3. Experimentation, learning and digital content creation

Development of digital platforms has further changed the way creative works are created and disseminated. Research on webtoon startups shows how digital platforms can connect content creation, distribution, and the extension of stories into other media [7]. Digital Environments have been used to shorten the cycle of production and feedback for content. A similar mechanism is used for short dramas to observe the market's reaction to the content after release and adjust future production plans based on this data.

Together, these studies provide a theoretical basis for exploring low-cost experimentation in digital entertainment. The search framework explains why a lower exploration cost may lead firms to explore more options [6], and research on digital storytelling has shown that platforms are used to connect content creation and distribution with audience feedback [7]. Platform research has also shown that attention and engagement are required to foster digital consumption [8]. However, the current studies have not addressed a potential outcome of more efficient market learning: whether the rapid discovery of successful content will lead to a concentration of genres and a reduction in content diversity. Therefore, a study of the ranking data for short dramas will be conducted to investigate how attention concentration relates to genre diversity.

3. Data and methodology

This paper uses the public short-drama ranking data from the Hongguo platform. The dataset includes information on the top 20 popular short dramas in terms of recommendation rank, production type, narrative genre, recommendation value, heat value and new-release status. The above attributes help the research understand both the features of popular works and how attention is distributed among viewers.

The results are only in-depth. First, the distribution of production forms is analysed to determine whether there are any animated, AI-generated or live-action dramas in the ranking. Second, the frequency and distribution of narrative genres in the Top 20 titles are compared. Thirdly, Recommendation Values and Heat Values are used to find the difference in platform exposure and accumulated audience attention. Finally, the new-release status of ranked dramas will be used to determine whether the newly added content can quickly gain attention on the platform. Based on the above attributes, this study will investigate whether the development of low-cost production models and rapid content creation is accompanied by concentrated audience attention and repetitive genre patterns. It is unknown whether the production cost has led to a reduction in the diversity of content; at the same time, some patterns have been observed that may help explain the relationship between low-cost experimentation, platform feedback, and content concentration.

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4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Format diversity and the emergence of non-traditional content

Empirical studies on the Hongguo Recommendation List show that there are many types of short-drama productions. Among the top 20 ranked dramas, animated and AI-generated dramas make up a considerable number of the highest-ranked spots, and live-action dramas appear less frequently in the upper part of the ranking [9]. The first four places are taken by animated or AI-generated dramas, and the first live-action title is at Rank 5. Therefore, non-traditional forms of production have gradually attracted more attention from the recommendation system of the platform. Given the relatively low production costs of animation and AI-generated content, more new stories and forms can be tested by producers.

Table 1. Top 20 short dramas on the Hongguo recommendation list [9]

Rank	Format	Genre	Recommendation Value (M)	Heat Value (M)	New Release
1	Animated	Plot	9.94	60.14	No
2	Animated	Plot	9.88	52.67	No
3	Animated	Romance	9.79	62.06	No
4	AI-generated	Plot	9.7	52.58	No
5	Live-action	Plot	9.58	42.62	Yes
...	...	...	...	...	...
18	Live-action	Family	8.42	57.87	Yes
19	Live-action	Growth	8.35	59.35	Yes
20	Live-action	Family	8.26	49.45	Yes

Note: Recommendation Value and Heat Value are reported by the Hongguo platform. "New Release" indicates whether a drama was identified as newly released in the ranking data.

Table 1 shows the main features of the Top 20 dramas used in the analysis, such as production type, story genre, recommendation value, popularity index and new-release status. The data show that the three types of production forms are: animated, AI-generated and live-action. Animated and AI-generated dramas account for most of the higher-ranked positions, and live-action dramas are more concentrated in the middle and lower parts of the ranking. The table shows some fluctuations in the Heat Value of the titles as well. Although the drop in Recommendation Value after increasing the rank is relatively small, Heat Value does not follow the same trend and is thus less likely to be recommended by the platform and accumulate audience attention.

4.2. Attention concentration across top ranks

Ranked data can show how the platform recommends and distributes the attention of users. Recommendation Values are relatively high at Rank 1 (9.94 million) and gradually decrease to 8.26 million by Rank 20. The heat values of all the listed items are between 42.62 million and more than 62 million. For example, the Rank 3 title record has a Heat Value of 62.06 million, and although it is still in the top five, the Rank 5 title only has a Heat Value of 42.62 million. Therefore, exposure to recommendations alone is not sufficient to gain the attention of the audience. A relatively small number of highly successful dramas can attract a large number of people.

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4.3. Genre distribution and content concentration

The top 20 places include many types of narrative, such as Plot, Romance, Brain-hole, Imperial Court, Doomsday, Growth, Fantasy and Family. However, it is not uniform. Plot-oriented dramas have been released in large numbers recently and have done well among animated and AI-generated works. Brain-hole and Imperial Court narratives also appear a few times; however, some other genres are only shown once or twice. Based on the above data, although the platform has introduced various types of stories, most of the attention from top-tier users still goes to a few popular story models. Such concentration may be the result of platform feedback in identifying and strengthening the impact of already popular content forms on users.

4.4. New entries and platform feedback

The New Release indicator shows that the market for short dramas is also developing rapidly. Some of the new dramas have already reached the top 20, such as those at positions 5, 18, 19 and 20. Their existence shows that the new content will be popular on the platform quite rapidly after release. At the same time, most of the top-ranked positions are already taken by existing dramas with accumulated Heat Values. Therefore, a competition exists among new content to gain the attention of the public; only the most popular programmes will attract sustained interest from the audience. Frequent new entries and focused attention suggest that, for now, experimentation and content diversity may be in conflict in the platform economy for entertainment.

5. Discussion

The results show that low-cost experimentation has both enabling and concentrating effects in the short-drama market. With the growing number of animated and AI-generated dramas, lower production barriers are now available to promote the trial and introduction of new content forms. In line with the search hypothesis, thus a lower exploration cost will motivate decision-makers to choose from a larger number of options [7]. Therefore, with the development of technology, producers of short dramas have been able to experiment with many forms and stories.

More experiments do not guarantee that there will be a wider spread of audience attention. Uneven heat values and frequent occurrences of some narrative genres indicate that the attention of the audience is still concentrated on a small number of successful content patterns. This is in line with recent research on micro-drama production that shows fast genre recycling and feedback-responsive production in mobile storytelling [4]. Algorithmic systems at the platform level determine how users' attention is distributed, and due to the scarcity of consumer attention, competition among platforms for this attention has intensified [5, 6].

Together, the results show that experimentation and content concentration may be in conflict. Lower production costs can help producers try out new ideas and enter the market more easily, and at the same time, rapid feedback from the platform may encourage the reproduction of formats and genres that have already gained popularity. Low-cost experiments may thus increase the speed of content discovery but do not necessarily lead to greater diversity in the content that captures people's attention long-term.

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6. Conclusion

This paper studies the connection among low-cost experimentation, platform feedback and content concentration in the Chinese micro-short-drama market. Based on the above analysis, with lower production barriers, many production models have emerged, and animated and AI-generated dramas have rapidly achieved popularity on the platforms. At the same time, based on the distribution of Heat Values and genres, audience attention is still uneven; several recurring genres and content patterns have achieved substantial success among the top-ranked works. Based on the above, low-cost experiments can improve the speed and flexibility of content production and market testing, but more experiments are not always necessary to create diverse content. Rapid feedback may lead to the repetition of content patterns that have already been popular with the audience.

Therefore, this study suggests a possible trade-off between the market-learning efficiency and content diversity of the platform-based entertainment industry. Low-cost production and rapid feedback can reduce the risk of experimentation and improve the efficiency of discovering popular content; however, repeated use of successful patterns may lead to content homogeneity. Only the top 20 rankings and descriptive statistics are used in the current study; thus, it is unknown whether a higher production cost or platform feedback is responsible for the reduction in diversity. In the future, researchers will be able to use more extensive datasets from all sides for a longer period and apply systematic metrics of genre concentration and content diversity to explore further how platform-based market learning affects the development of digital entertainment content.

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