

Study on the Aesthetic Deformation of Micro Short Drama Audience from the Perspective of Media Ecology

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Micro short drama is a new form of fictional narrative in the environment of digital intelligent media, which attracts the attention of the audience in the era of fragmentation and forms an explosive growth of the industrial market with the characteristics of short content, concentrated dramatic conflict and quick plot reversal. However, the “viral” dissemination of micro short drama makes the audience’s aesthetics show the aesthetic deformation characteristics of earthy, ugly and non-reality. The article applies media ecology Neil Postman’s theories of “entertainment to death” and “technological monopoly” to observe the impact of micro short dramas on audience aesthetics in order to optimize the market of micro short dramas and guide the healthy development of audience aesthetics.

Keywords: micro short drama, media ecology, aesthetic deformation

Introduction

As of December 2022, the number of short video users reached 1.012 billion, of which more than half of the users watched micro short dramas with a duration of less than 3 minutes. Micro short drama has become an important form of consumption of fictional narrative works in the era of fragmentation. Stimulated by the demand, market players have entered the game. However, in the hot market of micro short drama, the aesthetics of the audience has been deformed, gradually tending to be earthy, ugly and non-realistic. This phenomenon coincides with the relationship between media and human society and culture, which is the concern of the media ecology. This paper applies the relevant theories of Neil Postman, the founder of the media ecology, to analyze the performance and causes of the aesthetic deformation of the audience of the current micro short dramas, with a view to guiding the healthy development of the market of micro short dramas.

Neil Postman’s *Entertainment to Death and Technological Monopoly* Metaphors for Micro Short Drama

Neil Postman, a world-renowned researcher and critic of media culture, and a representative of the media ecology of thought, whose consistent idea is to review the impact of technology on the life, culture, and

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institutions of human society, is an important revelation for contemporary society to observe the relationship between technology and culture.

Living in the latter half of the 20th century, when television entertainment culture flourished in the United States, Postman became profoundly concerned about the social phenomenon of the rapid development of the television medium at that time, which was gradually changing the content and meaning of public discourse, so that politics, religion, education, sports, business, and any other public sphere were increasingly presented as entertainment. In *Entertainment to Death*, he warns that humanity is becoming silently and uncomplainingly, even willingly, subservient to entertainment, with the result that we are becoming an entertainment-to-die-for species, and warns of the even greater impact that electronic media will have on people's minds and lifestyles in the future. His other book, *Technological Monopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, analyzes in depth the impact of technology on culture. He divides culture into three forms, and in the last stage, the Technopoly of Culture, technology floods the world with information and makes the traditional worldview disappear without a trace, ultimately destroying the culture itself.

With the maturity of the Internet and mobile terminal technology, the mobile terminal medium has a tendency to gradually replace the television medium. At the same time, the rapid iterative development of artificial intelligence, big data algorithms, 5G and other technologies has accelerated the formation of the trend of technological monopoly. Micro short drama, this kind of fictional narrative form generated in the digital intelligent media technology environment, is in a sense a new variant of TV drama at the stage of TV media technology, which is a new form of entertainment culture. Micro short drama seems to become the product of Postman's metaphor of the above two works.

Portrait of Micro Short Drama Audience Groups

In the complex and complicated digital intelligent media environment, people are difficult to read static text and are gradually attracted by dynamic micro skits. To a certain extent, micro short dramas stimulate people's emotional engagement and produce emotional resonance, bringing about a two-way visual and auditory communication. According to the data of AiMedia Consulting, 59.89% of Chinese netizens watching online micro short dramas are women and 40.11% are men. Women have become the main audience group of micro short dramas, and men are also gradually becoming fans of micro short dramas. The age group watching micro drama is mainly concentrated in 25-44 years old, which has a higher frequency of using cell phone to surf the Internet and has more chances to come into contact with micro short drama. Due to the jumping and reversing plots of micro dramas, it is easy for the audience to fall into them for a long time and watch them episode by episode until they follow the whole drama. Data from Spike Marketing Academy shows that the average daily length of audience watching micro-drama is concentrated in 15-30 minutes and 30 minutes-1 hour, accounting for 30.20% and 29.70% respectively. 59.33% of online micro short drama audience have paid behavior, and 54.37% of audience said that they spend an average of 10-30 RMB per month to watch micro short drama, 10-30 RMB per month to watch short dramas, most of the audience of micro short dramas can accept small cost to pay for watching episodes.

Because of the flexibility and convenience of access and viewing, micro short drama becomes a way for people to spend their leisure and entertainment in fragmented time. However, as the competition in the market

of micro short drama becomes more and more intense, the micro short drama on the market shows the phenomenon of good and bad quality, the audience has not been able to distinguish and judge among the complicated works of micro short drama, and they are easily influenced by the aesthetic concepts of earthy flavors conveyed by the micro short drama, and their aesthetics tend to be earthy, ugly and non-realistic gradually.

The Aesthetic Tendency of Micro Short Drama Audience Deformation Performance

Audience Aesthetics Tends to Be Earthy

Micro short drama is a product of the development of short video to a certain stage. The dissemination platform of micro short drama is different from the mainstream media, and it is deeply influenced by the Internet. As a new product carrying the gene of short video media, online micro short drama has inherited the Internet gene of the user platform since its creation, and the earthy culture, as a popular culture in the Internet field, has become the first choice of material for young netizen groups to create a terrier through the rapid dissemination of Internet user-produced content in the early days, which is quite popular. At the same time, the creative elements of micro short dramas are mostly based on popular novels or imitated from network novels, and the narrative techniques of micro short dramas are different from the narrative routines of network literature. Therefore, under the influence of Internet culture, short video development and network literature, the kernel of micro short drama gradually shows the characteristics of earthy flavor.

Micro short drama is full of earthy elements, the early TV drama's car accident amnesia, penalty kneeling in the rain, enemy kidnapping, heroes to save the beauty of the fixed, routine plot once again staged in the micro short drama, the audience rekindled the earthy plot micro short drama watching interest, and even issued a "so earthy I love to watch"! "One day I caught up with the drama on Kwai" and "Quickly update it! It's too short to watch" and other comments.

The vertical screen micro short drama *The Princess is on*, co-produced by Kwai and Zhizhu Studio, The drama is different from the previous micro short dramas with strong male and weak female in its characterization, as it elaborates on the story of the main female character, but the shadow of traditional micro short dramas can be seen in the interpretation of specific plots. For example, the Princess was nearly injured in an assassination attempt, and the male protagonist, who is a guard, stepped forward to save the Princess in a moment of crisis and was injured by an arrow. The audience in the comment section, knowing the premise of the subsequent plot, still have novelty fantasies about the plot, and continue to watch, and then issued "short drama formula are the same" "again is the hero to save the beauty of the formula" and other comments. One of the lines, "Only I can move my people, what are you." It is also very domineering and earthy. The drama has been online since the beginning of February 2022 and has had a staggering 430 million plays, "the more you watch it, the better it looks", "I haven't watched it enough" and "I'm begging for extras" are the audience's real evaluation of it. The sharp lines and fast-developing plots in the micro-skit satisfy the psychological state of pure entertainment pleasure pursued by people nowadays, and also map out the pursuit of earthy entertainment in today's era.

Audience Aesthetics Tends to Be Ugly

Micro short drama grows in the soil of short video, which is very easy to be influenced by ugly elements. At present, micro short drama producers gradually realize that “ugly” things are easy to attract audiences, and “ugly” gradually becomes a funny and lovely existence in people’s eyes, and then add “ugly” elements in the production of short drama. and thus add “ugly” elements to the production of short dramas. At the same time, compared with traditional film and television dramas, the small capital investment, low threshold and other characteristics gradually establish the status quo of the poor quality of micro short drama production and shooting, which also constantly breeds the development of various types of vulgar and vulgar culture, making some of the contents of the popular earthy culture in micro short dramas alienated, and the phenomenon of ugly appears.

In recent years, ancient style micro drama has become popular in long and short video platforms, and behind its popularity is the phenomenon of clowning. At present, the more popular ancient style micro short drama exists in the use of modern props, the actors wear cheap costumes to pretend to be ugly and other phenomena, which is not in line with the excellent traditional aesthetic concepts of ancient China, and it is easy to mislead the audience’s aesthetics. For example, the micro short drama *Lock Loulan* tells the story of the Loulan nation, but in the drama, the actors’ dresses belong to the Han Chinese dresses in the ancient Central Plains, and there is a deviation from the strictness and aesthetics of the Loulan nation’s characteristic dresses. From the observation of the comment area and viewing volume of the drama, the audience is not affected by the costume styling, nor pay too much attention to the simplicity of the actors’ costumes and props, and they are eager to see eye-catching plots and extreme plot routines, thus ignoring the aesthetic significance of the costume styling. The pompous performance is also a side of the aesthetic ugly phenomenon. Funny performance operations are common in the drama, the male lead’s eyes flutter when he is interpreting, the crying scene is even more lacking in emotional support, and the overall acting is relatively raw. The audience chooses to watch this type of short drama because on the one hand, they like the nonsense, high intensity and multiple reversals of the plot, and gradually forget whether it is in line with the logic of history and reality, and on the other hand, the plot is set to continuously satisfy their own lack of spiritual aspirations, and they get temporary emotional satisfaction from low-production micro short dramas.

The earthy is the micro short drama in the production and interpretation process has long been influenced by the subtle influence of the Internet cultural genes, while the ugliness is added under the premise of commercialization in order to win the audience’s attention, but also does not exclude the producer’s financial problems. The combination of earthy and ugly has become an important tool to attract audiences, and has gradually become synonymous with micro drama.

Audience Aesthetic Tends to Be Non-reality

Data from Detawin shows that in the first half of 2023, a total of 481 new micro dramas were released, of which 319 were released in the urban genre, accounting for more than 60%, far more than other types of micro dramas. Boss novels adapted micro short drama is most likely to bring the audience into the world of non-realism, boss a series of exaggerated operation in real life is unusual. The majority of the audience of micro-series are young and middle-aged women, who, after experiencing the unsatisfactory life in reality, are

easily attracted by the transcendent reality and beautiful images, so that they can substitute the storyline into themselves, and think about the subsequent plot content for the short drama, and experience the virtual life. For example, the micro short drama *Mr. Pei wants to be a father to his son every day* since January 2024 on-line, three consecutive days of heat value ranked first, and since then all the way up, continuous domination of the list. The micro short drama tells the story of Pei Yi, a second-generation rich man who meets various difficulties and misunderstandings after getting married to Lin Jiajia with the help of his children. Many female audiences have expressed that they often show smile during the process of following the drama. Comments such as “I couldn’t stop watching it at first” and “the actors’ acting skills are on the line” appeared one after another.

Popular aesthetics are no longer limited to a specific range, and diversified themes satisfy the aesthetic needs of different audiences. Empty reality themes such as crossing over, rebirth and metaphysical fantasy can also easily bring audiences into the world of non-realism. Non-realistic micro short drama works to a certain extent for the ordinary people to create a daydream fantasy, but also for the suffering people to bring emotional resonance and spiritual solace.

Table 1

Seething Value List of Popular Non-realistic Micro Short Dramas on Applet, January-March 2024

Name of the work	Type	Episode length	Seething value
Sister’s splendor, young master’s return as a hidden dragon	Costume, Fantasy	2 minutes	47.806 million
Mr. Knight, you’ve got the wrong lady	Urban, Love	2 minutes	44.712 million
Mr. Pei wants to be a father to his son every day	Overbearing, Cute	2 minutes	43.350 million
One Hundred Thousand Years of Gas Refining	Costume, Fantasy	2 minutes	38.039 million
The Commander spoils his concubine and destroys his wife, I’ll go out and marry the Commander-in-Chief	Republic of China	2 minutes	32.878 million
The Emperor of the Nine Dragons	God of War	2 minutes	25.698 million
I was a stepmother in the 1980s	Crossing, Love	2 minutes	25.482 million
If I Were a Rich Kid	Revenge, Reversal	2 minutes	25.413 million
Rebirth from the ex-girlfriend’s wedding scene	Rebirth, Reversal	2 minutes	20.277 million
The Magic Cell Phone Against the World	Magic	2 minutes	17.210 million

(Note: The seething value is calculated based on micro short drama’s indicators such as Tik Tok burst volume material, number of associated material and number of associated plans during the statistical time according to DataEye’s own algorithmic model, reflecting the degree of its hotness in media placement consumption. Source: DataEye data, Tik Tok, Kwai)

Analysis of the Causes of Aesthetic Deformation of Micro Short Drama Audience

Self-needed in the face of the Death of Entertainment

Postman has separately elaborated on Orwell’s and Huxley’s prophecies about the future, while he argues that it is Huxley’s prophecy in *A Beautiful New World* that can become a reality, and suggests that it is not what we hate that destroys us, but precisely what we love. “Humanity has become silently and uncomplainingly, even willingly, subservient to entertainment, and the result is that we have become a species that entertains to death” (Postman, 2015, p. II).

Micro short drama is a kind of simple and efficient entertainment in a fast pace, directly giving people emotional value. Its emergence coincides with the spiritual needs of the Internet masses. At the same time, micro short drama is good at setting up suspense, in the most exciting stage of the abrupt end, which is just

right for people's psychology of curiosity, instantly stimulate people's desire to watch the play. The result of this "entertainment to death" is what Postman resolutely resisted, and what worries Postman more is that when entertainment culture is taken for granted in people's lives, people will easily become intoxicated and addicted to it. This attitude can cause people to lose their rational judgment, and thus become the followers of technological power, accepting this technological domination and reveling in it.

According to Postman, in a mediatised society, people's ideas are formed not from the objective real world, but from the media world around them. Being in a complex media environment, people are often influenced by a variety of media, and at the same time, they may think that the content phenomena shown on the media are objective phenomena, and people are thus misled by the media. In such an environment, people's outlook on life, worldview, morality and aesthetics are likely to be taught and assimilated by the media. People tend to be more entertained in today's society, and electronic products such as smart phones and tablet computers are important channels for people to enjoy entertainment and spiritual enjoyment. The contents they convey and display are so rich and varied that whether the contents themselves are true, healthy and beneficial has been neglected. Micro short drama's bloodshed and brainless plots are popular among contemporary people who are held hostage by pressure, and it is a unique way of injecting entertainment into contemporary society, which gradually makes people's aesthetic concepts tend to be deformed.

Passive Acceptance Under Technological Monopoly

Nowadays, mobile Internet content and audiovisual methods are constantly being renovated, and digital smart media have become the most important channel for people to receive information. The information stored in digital smart media is not limited by time and space, the amount of information increases dramatically and gets out of control, the flood of information creates a large amount of information garbage, and the accumulation and dissemination of information gradually dazzles people and makes them unable to distinguish. According to Postman, in the environment where technological monopoly prevails, the bond between information and human intention has been cut off, and information appears haphazardly and does not point to specific people, the quantity is unpredictable, and the speed is amazing, but it is fractured and divided in terms of theory, meaning or purpose. The last few years have been an explosive year for the development of micro short dramas, with long and short video platforms increasing the production of micro short dramas as they always have, while MCN organizations, traditional film and television companies and online text enterprises have also joined the ranks of the market for filming micro short dramas, and the number of micro short dramas has climbed dramatically. Homogenized and low-quality works appear one after another, resulting in the proliferation of micro short dramas for a while. The audience has no way to tell the difference in the complex environment and is deeply affected.

Postman has complained that the monopoly of technology has deprived people of their medieval traditions of thinking and rationality, because technology imposes its values on us, changing the most basic modes of thinking in our culture, and at the same time changing the traditions of the human spirit in which we are placed to think: rationality and history. The micro short drama platform is good at utilizing big data and accurate algorithms to quickly capture users' interests and preferences, record and push micro short dramas with high popularity and viewership, so that users can easily enter the world of earthy and fast-paced micro short dramas

without thinking. The rapid development of technical means and iteration, so that the dissemination of micro short drama tends to directional trend, from the original “people looking for works” to “works looking for people” dissemination mode, and then the formation of the user’s information cocoon. The emergence of information cocoon is the result of technical monopoly, but also the result of people’s own choice.

Aesthetic Optimization Path of Micro Short Drama Audience

Breakthrough “Entertainment to Death”

The ecological competition in the micro short drama industry is fierce, and the crude production mode has not yet been improved. Once a popular hit short drama appeared in the market, followed by many production companies according to the trend of remake and second creation, a large number of patterned assembly line works appeared in the market, homogenization, over-commercialization has gradually become the new label of micro short drama.

At present, a small number of high-quality realism micro short dramas have also appeared in the market, such as *Twenty-nine*, *Master*, *Escape from the British Museum* and other works, these fine short dramas are good at extracting stories from life, and realistically interpret the reality of the marital betrayal, the menacing and tragic anti-narcotics operations and overseas cultural relics longing to go home, these short dramas allow people to deeply feel the truth of life, so as to correctly look at the reality of life, and to set up the right. These short dramas make people deeply feel the truth of life, so that they can correctly look at real life and set up correct values of truth, goodness and beauty. As an emerging and popular audiovisual method, micro short drama not only shoulders the important responsibility of transmitting correct social mainstream values, but also bears the historical responsibility of displaying the spirit of the times. In the future, micro short dramas should actively respond to the needs of the times in the selection of topics, seize the pain points in society, reflect the real face of ordinary people’s lives, and dig out the unusual stories in real life with a realistic creative attitude, so as to resonate the spirit of ego with the spirit of the times, and express the good life together.

Breaking the Technology Monopoly Trap

With the development of mobile Internet technology, the power of technology is more significant in the dissemination of micro short plays. The producers of micro short dramas are good at utilizing the platform’s big data algorithmic recommendation mechanism as well as the platform’s streaming channels to push the micro short dramas to different users, so that the micro short dramas can obtain a high number of viewings and recharges in a short period of time. Although this kind of technical operation facilitates users to search for content, the active pushing of the technology gradually makes people fall into specific content from which they cannot escape, and what they get in the end is one-sided and short content.

Technology platforms should change their functional attributes and actively adopt a moderated operational approach. On the one hand, technology platforms should increase the function of user content differentiation, weaken the function of user demand tracking, and continuously increase the screening of content instead of pushing it according to the amount of traffic, so as to give users more space for browsing and creation. On the other hand, the technology platform will increase the quality of the content, and firmly resist the emergence of vulgar and kitschy micro-skit content, so as to provide people with a safer and healthier network environment.

Fostering Value Rationality in The Age of Fragmentation

Nowadays, in the era of fragmentation, people's aesthetic concepts tend to be more mixed, and aesthetic and ugly are mixed and intertwined. The emergence of micro-drama gradually makes people's aesthetics tend to be earthy, ugly and non-realistic, further weakening people's appreciation and pursuit of beauty. Some of the values conveyed by micro short dramas are not conducive to the cultivation of truth, goodness and beauty and the formation of excellent aesthetic concepts, and easily lead people into the situation of "entertainment to death". In the future, people in the network environment to enhance the ability to identify the content of information and independent thinking, rational thinking to judge things, and actively draw positive energy information. At the same time, the cultivation of excellent aesthetic concepts requires the irrigation of beauty, people should continue to improve their own aesthetic standards, select some high-quality movies and television works on the network to watch, nourish people's aesthetics with excellent works, and learn to deeply feel the changes of the times, instead of indulging in the beauty of the dream constructed by the network world.

Conclusion

Today, people are deeply affected by the accelerated society, and the pressure of hostage makes people enhance their desire for entertainment. Micro drama is a product of entertainment, and its emergence is extremely in line with people's emotional demands and emotional consumption, people rekindle their interest in ancient romance, cross life, domineering president and other mundane and fixed plots, and people are affected by the cool content conveyed by the micro drama, and the aesthetic concept tends to be earthy, ugly, and non-realistic. The optimization of the aesthetics of the audience of short micro-dramas requires the cooperation of many parties, not only in the high-quality production of short micro short dramas and breaking the trap of technological monopoly, but also in the cultivation of the value of rationality in the era of fragmentation, and the enhancement of the concept of good aesthetics.

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