Research on the Impact of Content Miniaturization in the Film and Television Industry on Traditional Capital Operations

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Abstract. In the media environment where mobile internet has deeply penetrated and fragmented content consumption by the audience has become the mainstream, short dramas have achieved explosive growth thanks to their characteristic of "micro-sized content" (single episode duration ranging from 1 to 10 minutes, highly condensed narrative, and production cycle compressed to within several months). In 2024, the total online viewership exceeded 10 billion times. Their "short, simple, and fast" content production logic and multi-channel dissemination form are in stark contrast to the traditional film and long drama-based media and entertainment industry. For a long time, traditional film and television capital operations have followed a slow-paced model of "large-scale capital investment, long production and polishing period, and single copyright/box office channel recovery". This model not only has limitations such as high capital threshold and low turnover efficiency, but also faces the industry pain point of weak risk resistance. Meanwhile, the rapid development of short dramas not only strongly impacts this traditional model but also forces traditional film and television capital to actively adapt - by adjusting the investment layout of "light and heavy assets combination", optimizing the fast-paced content production process, innovating the profit mechanism of platform sharing and e-commerce linkage, and introducing data-driven precise decision-making methods to adapt to the new trend. This transformation not only injects new vitality into traditional film and television capital but also promotes the capital logic of the film and television industry to shift from "scale priority" to "efficiency priority", opening up efficient and diverse high-quality development paths for the industry in the media transformation.

Keywords: short plays, film and television industry, traditional capital operation

1. Introduction

The mobile internet has deeply permeated daily life, from morning commutes to midday breaks, and into evening relaxation. Fragmented scenarios have become the main scenes for audiences to access media [1]. This change has completely reshaped content consumption habits: in the past, audiences were willing to spend several hours watching movies or following longer series; now, they prefer to obtain complete and attractive content within 10 minutes. Whether it's during students' breaks, after office workers' afternoon tea, or after mothers' bedtime stories, people's demand for efficient time utilization, quick emotional resonance or entertainment experience has become increasingly strong. Against this backdrop, short dramas emerged due to their highly condensed content and rapid plot development, quickly accumulating a large number of viewers, and "content miniaturization" has become an undeniable trend in the film and television industry [2]. This trend contrasts sharply with the production and capital operation models of traditional long dramas and films: traditional film and television capital investment is large and the cycle is long, relying on box office or copyright for slow capital recovery; short dramas focus on the main plot, are produced quickly, have low costs, and recover capital quickly, promoting the adjustment of the industry's landscape. This study focuses on the impact of "content miniaturization" (single episode duration of 1-10 minutes, short production cycle, controllable capital investment) on the traditional film and television capital operation model (with long dramas and films as the core, relying on large-scale upfront investment, long production cycle and box office distribution or copyright sale for capital recovery). Following the logical chain of "pre-production capital preparation - content production and capital collaboration during filming - post-production capital recovery and benefit assessment", it analyzes the impact of "content miniaturization" and the adaptation strategies of traditional capital, providing theoretical references for industry capital operation innovation and promoting efficient and diversified development of the industry.

2. Relevant concepts

2.1. Short drama

The duration of a single episode usually ranges from 1 to 10 minutes. The mainstream hit dramas typically last between 3 and 5 minutes, capable of clearly presenting a complete minor conflict and conveying the core message within a short period of time [2]. Its content is highly condensed. It immediately presents the conflict at the beginning to capture the audience's attention. The production cycle is short (approximately 2 months in total, and some can be compressed to 45 days), and it mostly focuses on a single core storyline. The creative process is efficient and focused, requiring the audience to spend no effort in sorting out the complex character relationships.

2.2. Capital operation model

This covers various forms of capital operations in the film and television industry. Among them, traditional film and television capital operations are mainly led by large film and television companies. For long-form dramas and films, the process follows "large-scale capital investment - long-term shooting and production - relying on box office revenue or copyright sales to recover capital and make profits"; for short-form dramas, the capital operation has the characteristics of low investment (medium-scale 2-5 million), short recovery period (1-2 months), and flexible channels (platform sharing, advertising insertion, paid unlocking, etc.) [3].

3. Capital operation models in the traditional film and television industry

The capital operation in the traditional film and television industry has long focused on long dramas and films as its core carriers, forming a fixed model deeply integrated with the characteristics of content production. Its core features can be summarized as four dimensions: "heavy investment, long cycle, strong dependence, and narrow channels" [4]. These features are not only the accumulation of the industry's development over the years but also become significant limitations when it responds to market changes.

3.1. The scale of capital investment is large and concentrated

The capital investment in traditional film and television projects usually exhibits the characteristics of "high threshold and large scale". In film projects, the average medium production cost is generally above 100 million, and the leading projects often involve investments of tens of billions. Taking science fiction films as an example, the pre-production stage requires a large amount of funds for script refinement and special effect technology research and development. The shooting stage involves scene construction and the leasing of professional equipment, and in the post-production process, special effect rendering, editing, and color grading also require continuous capital investment. A leading science fiction film had an initial investment of over 1 billion, involving more than ten investors, and the post-production costs accounted for 30% of the total investment [4]. The investment in long-running drama projects is also considerable. A 30-episode long-running drama usually has a production cost of 3-5 billion. Among them, actor salaries, scene construction, and costume and makeup design are the main expenditures. A certain ancient drama set up a 3,000-square-meter film and television base specifically to restore historical scenes, and this single expense alone reached 50 million; modern urban long-running dramas do not require large-scale scene construction, but to ensure the production quality, the single shooting cost per episode often exceeds one million, and the total investment for 30 episodes easily exceeds 3 billion [5].

3.2. The investment period is long and the turnover is slow

The investment cycle of traditional film and television projects, from project initiation to capital recovery, generally lasts for more than one year, and for some leading projects, it can even reach 2-3 years. This cycle is directly related to the production characteristics of long dramas and films [4]. In the production process, the script refinement for long dramas often takes 6 months to 1 year. The screenwriter needs to repeatedly adjust character relationships and clarify the plot logic to ensure the integrity of multi-branch narratives. The shooting period is usually 6-8 months. If there is outdoor shooting or seasonal scenes, one needs to wait for the appropriate shooting time. A certain historical drama, due to the need to shoot snow scenes, specifically waited until winter to move to the north and the shooting period was extended to 10 months. The post-production requires 4-6 months, including editing, dubbing, and special effects synthesis. For complex themes, the post-production time will be longer. The production cycle of films is more uncertain. From script preparation to completion of shooting, it usually takes an average of 8-12 months. The post-production time varies depending on the special effects requirements, ranging from 6 months to over 1 year. A war-themed film, due to the pandemic during shooting, had to stop multiple times for adjustments, and the overall production cycle was extended from the original 10 months to 18 months. The capital recovery cycle is further prolonged. Films need to wait for the screening schedule at cinemas, and the distribution and recovery period after release lasts for 3-6 months. For complex copyrights, the recovery period often lasts for 6-12 months. If there is a delay in scheduling, the recovery period will double [6]. A certain historical drama, after completion, due to the tight platform schedule, the film was held for 1 year before being released. The capital recovery from investment to the start of recovery took more than 2 years, seriously affecting the efficiency of capital turnover.

3.3. Excessive reliance on popular celebrities

In the traditional logic of capital operation, popular stars are regarded as "guarantees of box office and viewership". The capital's reliance on popular stars has penetrated every aspect of project operation. To invite top stars to participate, the capital is willing to pay high salaries. The single episode salary of some top stars can reach 800,000 yuan, and the total salary for a 30-episode long drama exceeds 20 million yuan, accounting for more than 40% of the production cost. In film projects, the total salary of two top stars exceeding 150 million yuan is not uncommon [6]. This reliance has even led to a distorted operation model where "stars take precedence over content": at the project initiation stage, the capital first determines the popular stars to invite, and then adjusts the script according to the star's personality. A certain urban drama originally set the female lead as an independent career woman, but due to the star's expertise in the "sweet girl" personality, the scriptwriter was forced to modify the plot, changing the female lead to a "naive and foolish" character who relies on the male lead all the time, resulting in a logical break in the plot and ultimately the viewership falling short of expectations. More seriously, the high salaries have squeezed the budgets of key sections such as production and special effects. A certain film, due to the excessive proportion of star salaries, lacked funds for later special effects, resulting in rough picture quality. After its release, the film received poor reviews and its box office was only half of the expected amount.

3.4. The profit channels are limited and the ability to withstand risks is weak

The profit channels of traditional film and television capital are highly concentrated. Movies mainly rely on the box office revenue sharing with cinemas, while long-running dramas mainly rely on copyright sales and advertising placements. The singleity of these channels results in extremely weak risk-resistance capabilities [7]. The distribution model for films is fixed, and the production companies usually only receive about 33% of the box office revenue. Regardless of the market performance of the film, the distribution ratio has almost no elastic adjustment space. A top-tier film with a box office of 4 billion only received 1.32 billion in distribution revenue, with the rest being shared by the distributors, cinemas, and other links. If the film's box office fails to meet expectations, the production companies are highly likely to suffer losses. For a medium-cost film with an investment of 300 million, the final box office was only 150 million, and the production company's distribution revenue was less than 50 million, resulting in a loss of over 250 million. The core of the profit for long-running dramas lies in copyright sales. The copyright fees sold to video platforms or TV stations account for more than 70% of the total revenue. The second income is from pre-credits advertisements and in-episode placements, and the other income accounts for less than 5%. A certain urban long-running drama had a total revenue of 800 million, of which the copyright income was 560 million, the advertising income was 200 million, and the second-round broadcast copyright was only 40 million. Once the copyright sales are blocked, the capital recovery becomes a problem. A certain ancient-style long-running drama invested 400 million, due to the severe homogeneity of the theme, the copyright was only sold for 250 million, the advertising income was 50 million, and the final loss was 100 million. This single profit structure makes traditional film and television capital highly vulnerable to market environment, policy adjustments, and other factors, and its risk-resistance ability is much lower than that of the multi-channel model.

4. Core advantages of the short play

Compared with traditional films and television programs, short dramas have gained a significant advantage in the field of capital operation due to their unique attribute of "content miniaturization" [2]. These advantages are not only the key to their rapid rise but also directly hit the pain points of traditional film and television capital operation, promoting the reconfiguration of the industry's capital logic.

4.1. Light asset investment lowers the capital threshold

The capital investment for short dramas exhibits the characteristics of "lightweight" and "low threshold", completely breaking the traditional high investment barriers of film and television [8]. The production cost of medium-sized short dramas usually ranges from 2 million to 5 million yuan, which is less than 20% of that of long dramas. The investment for leading short dramas rarely exceeds 10 million yuan. The cost control mainly stems from three aspects: First, the cost of actors is low. Short dramas do not rely on popular stars, but rather choose new actors or amateurs. The total remuneration is usually no more than 1 million yuan, which is only 1/8 of the single-episode remuneration of traditional long dramas for stars. Second, the production process is simplified. There is no need to build large-scale real scenes, and more often, real shooting or small studio sets are used. The shooting equipment is mainly lightweight, and the pre-production and shooting costs are significantly reduced. Third, the post-production is simple. Since the plot focuses on a single main line, complex special effects are not needed, and the post-editing and color grading cycle is short, with the cost being only 1/10 of that of traditional films. This light asset investment enables medium and small capital to independently participate in short drama projects, and even individual investors can enter the market through joint investment. For example, a sweet and cute short drama produced by a film and television studio with an investment of only 3 million yuan, after its release, the revenue sharing exceeded 8 million yuan, and the investment return rate far exceeded that of traditional long dramas. The combination of low threshold and high return has attracted a large amount of capital to flood into the short drama field.

4.2. Rapid cycle operation enhances capital efficiency

The "fast pace" of short dramas runs through the entire process from production to recycling, significantly enhancing the efficiency of capital turnover. In the production stage, the script refinement period for short dramas is usually 1-2 weeks. Due to the focus on a single storyline, the screenwriter doesn't need to spend a lot of time sorting out subplots. The shooting period is as short as 10-15 days. Some short dramas adopt multi-camera shooting, and 10 episodes can be completed in one day, which is three times more efficient than traditional long dramas. The post-production only takes 20-30 days, without the need for complex special effects synthesis, and the editing process is simplified. A platform's customized short drama took only 45 days from determining the theme to going online. Among them, script refinement took 15 days, shooting 10 days, and post-production 20 days. This quickly responded to the market hotspots of "job hunting during graduation season". The capital recovery cycle is even more advantageous. After the short drama is launched, it usually generates distribution revenue within 3-7 days, and the capital recovery is completed within 1-2 months [8]. A suspense short drama launched in May, started distributing in mid-May, and its distribution revenue exceeded 5 million by the end of May, recovering 3 million of the initial investment in just 10 days; a platform's "short drama competition" requires completing from script to launch within 1 month. The winning works have a distribution revenue of over 3 million within 7 days of going online. This "fast production, fast launch, fast return" characteristic enables capital to achieve turnover in a short period and invest in new projects. The capital utilization rate is 3-4 times that of traditional film and television.

4.3. Content-driven instead of relying on stars

The short drama completely discards the traditional film and television logic of "star priority", instead building its core competitiveness based on "content supremacy" [8]. Its content creation focuses on the real-life scenarios of the audience, with plots that are down-to-earth and have strong emotional resonance. It does not rely on popular stars to attract attention. For instance, a short drama about a neighborhood theme, whose leading actors are all newcomers who have just debuted, with a total salary of less than 1 million yuan, gained 120 million views by presenting a real plot of "neighborhood members helping each other to solve daily conflicts"; a short drama about the workplace, through the plot of "newcomers relying on professional abilities to resolve crises", triggered the resonance of workplace people, with a playback volume of over 300 million, and although the leading actors were just graduates, they received a large number of favorable comments due to the high degree of role relevance. The content creation of short dramas pays more attention to "grabbing attention from the very beginning", usually presenting a conflict in the first 30 seconds, such as "the heroine being embezzled the plan by a colleague" or "the male lead losing an important contract", quickly attracting viewers to continue watching; at the same time, the plot progresses tightly, with clear small climaxes in each episode, avoiding redundant padding. This logic centered on content quality not only reduces the cost of actors but also enables capital to get rid of excessive reliance on popular stars, reducing risks caused by the collapse of star personas or excessive salaries.

4.4. Diversified profit structure enhances the ability to withstand risks

The short drama has established a diversified revenue model of "platform sharing + advertising integration + paid unlocking + e-commerce collaboration", completely breaking the limitations of the traditional single-channel distribution. In terms of platform sharing, the short drama has introduced a "stepwise sharing" model. The higher the viewership, the higher the share for the producers. A certain platform stipulates that for a viewing volume of less than 100 million, the share is 40%; for 1-300 million, it is 45%; and for over 300 million, it is 50%. This is to motivate the producers to improve the quality of their content. The form of advertising integration is flexible. Besides the traditional opening ads and in-episode ads, it can also deeply integrate with the content through "plot integration" and "prop integration". A beauty short drama, for example, earns commission based on the click-through rate when the protagonist uses a certain brand of skincare products. The single ad revenue is 500,000 yuan. Paid unlocking provides new paths for genres such as suspense and sweet romance. A suspense short drama sets up a model of "free viewing of 5 episodes, unlocking each subsequent episode at 1 yuan", and 800,000 users unlocked all 20 episodes. The revenue from this item alone is 1.6 million yuan. E-commerce collaboration directly links the content with consumption. In a sports-themed short drama, the fitness equipment used by the protagonist and the sportswear he wears all have purchase links added. The producer earns a 10% commission based on sales volume. Ultimately, the e-commerce commission income is 3 million yuan, exceeding the advertising revenue. The diversified revenue structure enables short dramas to still achieve profitability through other channels when encountering obstacles in a single channel, making their anti-risk ability much stronger than that of traditional films and television [9].

A short drama, due to the platform sharing not meeting expectations, still achieved profitability by relying on e-commerce collaboration and advertising integration. It avoided losses caused by poor box office or copyright issues in traditional films and television.

5. Transformation and adaptation of traditional capital

In response to the impact of short dramas, traditional film and television capital did not react passively. Instead, they adopted measures such as adjusting investment strategies, optimizing operation processes, and innovating cooperation models to actively adapt to the trend of "content miniaturization" [9]. While maintaining their own advantages, they absorbed the efficient characteristics of short drama production and achieved an upgrade in their capital operation model.

5.1. Adjust the allocation of funds and balance the short-term and long-term periods

Traditional film and television companies began to change their capital allocation strategy from "fully investing in long-form dramas and films" to a "light-heavy" approach. They now allocate funds in a balanced manner. Most leading companies invest 70% of their funds in long-form dramas and films to ensure stable returns, and 30% in short dramas to seek quick returns. One traditional film and television company previously focused solely on investing in billion-dollar film projects. In 2024, it first set aside 5 million yuan to establish a short drama investment fund and invested in 10 short drama projects in batches. Among them, 3 projects achieved a payout of over 5 million yuan within one month after their release, with an investment return rate of 60%. Some companies have also attempted a combined model of "testing short dramas first and then expanding into long dramas", by investing a small amount of funds to produce short dramas to test market reactions. If a short drama of a certain theme achieves a billion views and has a good reputation, it will be expanded into a long drama. One film and television company first produced the short drama "Newcomer's Rise", which had over 200 million views. Based on the same IP, it developed a long drama. Before the long drama was released, it gained a lot of attention by leveraging the popularity of the short drama, and the copyright sale price was 20% higher than similar projects.

5.2. Embrace dataization and make precise investment decisions

Traditional capital has abandoned the past investment methods of "experience-based judgment" and "network connections recommendation", and has begun to attach importance to platform algorithms and data analysis. It guides investment decisions based on data [10]. Many traditional film and television companies have established "data analysis teams", extracting short drama viewing data from video platforms every day, and analyzing information such as popular themes, audience preferences, and plot highlights. One company analyzed and found that the playback volume of the "sweet romance + comeback" theme was 50% higher than other themes in the past three months, and the completion rate of "having conflicts in the first 30 seconds" of the plot was 60% higher. Based on this analysis, the "Sweet Romance and Comeback Story" was launched and its playback volume exceeded 300 million. Traditional capital has also actively cooperated with platforms to obtain precise user profile data and develop targeted content. By understanding the age, gender, region, and interest tags of the target audience, they produce short dramas that meet the needs. For example, based on the user profile of "20-28-year-old men who like suspense + family themes", the company produced "Family Suspense Diary", with a playback volume of over 200 million, precisely reaching the target group.

5.3. Optimize operation procedures to adapt to the fast-paced demands

To adapt to the fast-paced nature of short dramas, traditional capital has broken away from the traditional fixed production process of film and television, simplifying redundant steps and enhancing operational efficiency [10]. In the pre-production stage, the "project approval - script review" process was shortened from the traditional 3 months to 1 week. After the script was completed, communication and review with the platform were conducted on the same day, without the need for lengthy internal procedures. During the shooting stage, the "multiple camera positions shooting simultaneously + priority of real scenes" approach was adopted to reduce the time for scene setup. For a short drama, 3 camera positions were used to shoot the office scene simultaneously, and 10 episodes were completed in 1 day. In the post-production stage, the "shoot and edit simultaneously" mode was employed, with the editing process starting within 24 hours after the shooting, shortening the overall cycle. In terms of distribution strategies, traditional capital abandoned the traditional method of "spreading resources across all platforms" and adopted a "data-driven, precise placement" strategy. In the early stage of the short drama's launch, small-scale distribution testing was conducted to collect audience feedback. If it was found that the "20-30-year-old women in first-tier cities" had the highest viewing rate, the distribution focus was placed on the "career women" topics on Xiaohongshu and Douyin, and joint promotion with career bloggers was carried out. The distribution efficiency was increased by 50%, and the viewership rose from 1 million per day to 3 million.

5.4. Innovate the distribution mechanism to enhance capital returns

The traditional capital joint platform and other investors jointly innovated the short drama distribution mechanism, breaking the limitation of fixed proportions. Besides the "stepwise distribution", a "layered distribution rule" was also introduced: the production team received 60% of the basic distribution, while the investors received 40% according to their investment ratio; if the playback volume exceeded expectations (such as exceeding 300 million), an additional 10% of the distribution would be given as a reward to the production team. For a short drama with a playback volume of 350 million, the production team thus received an additional 500,000 yuan in bonuses, which not only motivated the production team to improve the quality of the content but also strengthened the confidence of the investors. Some traditional capital also explored the "customized distribution" model, cooperating with e-commerce platforms and brand owners, and distributing according to "product sales" and "advertising click-through rates" [11]. A company collaborated with an e-commerce platform to produce a short drama, embedding platform products in the drama, and distributing the revenue based on product sales. Eventually, the e-commerce platform's distribution income accounted for 40% of the total revenue, achieving a diversified increase in capital returns.

6. Conclusion

The advantages brought by the "miniaturization" of short dramas, such as low capital investment, short production cycle, content-driven approach, and diversified revenue generation, have fundamentally challenged the traditional film and television capital operation model that emphasizes "heavy investment, long cycle, reliance on stars, and single channel". This has pushed the industry's capital logic to shift from "scale priority" to "efficiency priority". Traditional film and television capital has not been disrupted but has actively adapted to the new trend by adjusting capital allocation, embracing dataization, optimizing processes, and innovating distribution mechanisms, achieving an upgrade in operation mode. In the future, the capital operation of the film and television industry will present a pattern of "integration of traditional and emerging models": short dramas will continue to play the role of "fast turnover and high flexibility", providing efficient return channels for capital; long dramas and films will assume the role of enhancing the long-term value of the industry, relying on IP accumulation, production quality, etc. They will form a linkage mechanism of "short dramas testing themes + long dramas expanding IPs" and "long dramas splitting IPs to preheat short dramas". For example, traditional capital can test the popularity of new themes through short dramas and then expand them into long dramas; or before the launch of long dramas, they can create exciting segments as short dramas to attract traffic. With the development of technology and changes in audience demands, the capital operation models of short dramas and traditional film and television will continue to innovate. AI scriptwriting, virtual shooting will further shorten the production cycle of short dramas and reduce costs, and interactive short dramas may give rise to a new way of "interactive distribution". "Content miniaturization" is not a negation of traditional capital but an opportunity to promote its upgrade, which will help the film and television industry achieve efficient capital circulation and appreciation in the new media environment and move towards a more diverse and dynamic high-quality development stage.

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