

The Mechanism of "Pleasure Production" under Platform Logic: A Study on the Narrative Structure of Vertical Micro-Dramas — A Case Study of I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s

Yueyan Liu

Stirling College, Chengdu University, Chengdu, China
liuyueyan@cdu.edu.cn

Abstract. With the rapid development of mobile internet and short-video platforms, vertical micro-dramas have gradually become an important form within the digital content industry. Compared with traditional film and television works, micro-dramas are typically characterized by extremely short duration, high-density plots, and intense emotional stimulation, with their narrative structures exhibiting a clear tendency toward "pleasure-oriented" storytelling. This study takes the micro-drama *I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s* as a case study to explore the production mechanism of "pleasure-oriented narrative" in vertical micro-dramas. Adopting a combination of textual analysis and literature review, the study systematically examines the plot structure, character construction, and emotional rhythm of the series. It further interprets the formation of its narrative structure by incorporating platform logic, including algorithmic recommendation systems, user retention metrics, and monetization models. The findings indicate that micro-dramas construct high-density emotional stimulation through narrative strategies such as plot compression, frequent conflicts, and continuous reversals. Meanwhile, platform recommendation mechanisms and commercial models further reinforce such narrative forms, leading to increasingly standardized content production. This paper argues that the "pleasure-oriented narrative" of vertical micro-dramas represents a key manifestation of content production logic within the platform economy, shaped jointly by platform affordances and algorithmic logic.

Keywords: Micro-drama, Platform logic, Narrative structure, Pleasure production, Vertical video

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid advancement of mobile internet technologies, short-video platforms have become a dominant medium for digital content dissemination. Platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou have transformed traditional modes of audiovisual production and distribution, making fragmented content consumption the mainstream viewing pattern. Riles et al. argue that in social media environments, media fragmentation has intensified significantly, dividing user attention into

short temporal units, which provides important conditions for the emergence of short-form content such as micro-dramas [1].

Within this media environment, vertical micro-dramas have gradually emerged as a prominent content form on short-video platforms. Typically lasting 1–3 minutes per episode, micro-dramas rely on serialized storytelling to sustain user engagement. Zhu Tian and Wen Yi point out that micro-dramas have developed a distinctive narrative system within short-video platforms, characterized by a fast-paced structure and high emotional density [2]. Meanwhile, the development of media convergence has further transformed content production modes. Jenkins notes that in a convergent media environment, the flow of content across different platforms has intensified, leading to transformations in narrative forms [3].

Simultaneously, content production in the digital media environment is increasingly shaped by platform algorithms, user behavior, and commercial logic. The theory of "platformization" proposed by Nieborg and Poell suggests that digital platforms restructure the value chain of cultural production through data collection, algorithmic recommendation, and resource integration [4]. From the perspective of "affordance," Ronzhyn et al. argue that the technological features of social media platforms shape both user behavior and content production patterns [5]. In addition, Tang and Wang demonstrate that short-drama platforms, through template-based narratives and platformized operations, have developed new models for global dissemination in the digital cultural industry [6].

Although existing studies have examined short-video content production from the perspectives of platform ecology and algorithmic recommendation, systematic analyses of the "pleasure mechanism" of micro-dramas from a narrative structural perspective remain relatively limited. Therefore, this study takes the micro-drama *I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s* as a case study. By combining textual analysis with literature review, it analyzes the narrative characteristics of vertical micro-dramas in terms of plot structure, conflict design, and emotional rhythm, and further explores how platform logic shapes these narrative mechanisms. By examining the influence of platform logic on narrative structure, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of narrative transformations in the short-video era and to provide insights for the sustainable development and cultural value enhancement of the micro-drama industry.

2. Narrative structural characteristics of micro-dramas

2.1. Plot compression and rhythm control

One of the most prominent features of micro-drama narrative structure is the highly compressed design of plot progression. In an environment characterized by fragmented attention, short-duration content is more adaptable to users' viewing habits [1]. Consequently, micro-dramas typically adopt a "high-density narrative" strategy, completing background exposition, character introduction, and the establishment of core conflicts within a very limited timeframe.

Taking *I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s* as an example, the opening sequence rapidly constructs the narrative framework through a chain of events—"exposition of the protagonist's death through dialogue, "revival from the deathbed," and "break with the original family." Within only a few episodes, the protagonist enters the male lead's household, while key characters such as Liu Shen and the two children are quickly introduced, allowing the primary conflict structure to take shape almost immediately. This "multi-event compressed progression" enables audiences to engage with the narrative core without prolonged exposition.

Tang and Wang argue that short-drama platforms compress traditional television storytelling into high-frequency narrative units through a structure of "short duration × multiple episodes," forming a

cyclical pattern of "stimulation—release—restimulation" [6]. This design not only aligns with mobile viewing scenarios but also conforms to platform algorithms' preference for maximizing user retention time.

2.2. High-frequency conflict and reversal mechanisms

Another core feature is the frequent deployment of conflicts and continuous reversals. Within a platformized production environment, creators tend to intensify conflict density to sustain audience attention, thereby adapting to algorithmic demands for user engagement [4].

In *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s, conflicts are persistently embedded in everyday situations. After the protagonist enters the male lead's household, Liu Shen repeatedly instigates familial tensions, leading the children to distrust the protagonist. This tension is temporarily alleviated through sequences such as "cooking for the children—rejection—gradual acceptance," only to be quickly replaced by new conflicts, including theft accusations and framing incidents. Additionally, the moment when the young girl speaks up to defend the protagonist serves as a crucial narrative reversal.

This cyclical structure of "conflict—relief—renewed conflict—reversal" keeps audiences in a continuous state of anticipation and emotional fluctuation. From the perspective of platform mechanisms, such high-frequency conflict stimulates emotional responses, thereby increasing interaction rates and completion rates, and ultimately enhancing the likelihood of algorithmic recommendation [7].

3. The mechanism of "pleasure production"

3.1. Emotional peak design

The core of "pleasure" in micro-dramas lies in the dense distribution of emotional peaks. Short-video platforms, through fragmented content and rapid feedback mechanisms, make emotional stimulation a crucial means of maintaining user attention [8].

In *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s, emotional peaks are typically realized through moments of "successful retaliation" or "identity transformation." For instance, the young girl's transition from muteness to speaking in defense of the protagonist constitutes a key moment of emotional release. Similarly, the exposure of Liu Shen's theft and her subsequent arrest represents a classic "justice-served" climax. In urban narrative segments, the protagonist's mistreatment followed by intervention from the male lead further reinforces emotional gratification.

Through these successive emotional stimuli, audiences experience repeated cycles of emotional release within a short timeframe. From a platform logic perspective, the high frequency of emotional peaks enhances users' emotional investment, thereby increasing user stickiness and improving the content's competitiveness within recommendation systems.

3.2. Character typification and labeling

Characters in micro-dramas are typically constructed through highly typified and labeled designs. This approach primarily serves to meet the efficiency requirements of short-duration storytelling while aligning with the communicative logic of social media platforms. As Ronzhyn et al. argue, the affordances of social media platforms shape how users perceive content, and labeled characters can rapidly trigger emotional resonance by presenting clear and recognizable traits [5].

In *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s, the protagonist is constructed as a typical "rising female protagonist," following a clear developmental trajectory of "initial marginalization—capability demonstration—successful retaliation." Upon entering the male lead's household, she faces exclusion, gradually establishes authority through caregiving and household contributions, and ultimately achieves economic independence through entrepreneurial success in food production. In contrast, antagonistic characters such as Liu Shen and Liu Guifang are assigned "obstructive" roles, continuously generating conflicts that drive the narrative forward.

This typified character structure not only efficiently establishes emotional oppositions and enhances narrative clarity but also allows audiences to quickly identify and align with characters. From a theoretical perspective, this approach corresponds to the "Individuality" dimension of the 4I marketing model, which emphasizes distinctive character construction to strengthen memorability and reduce cognitive barriers [9]. This dual adaptability—to narrative efficiency and platform dissemination logic—explains why character labeling has become a dominant strategy in micro-drama production.

4. The influence of platform logic on narrative structure

4.1. Algorithmic recommendation mechanisms

Algorithmic recommendation systems exert a profound influence on the narrative structure of micro-dramas. They function not merely as technical tools but as mechanisms of power that shape content visibility and production logic [7]. Nieborg and Poell further argue that platforms restructure cultural production through data collection and algorithmic optimization, compelling content creation to conform to platform-specific technical and operational logics [4].

Platform algorithms prioritize metrics such as user retention time, completion rates, and interaction levels. These indicators directly determine content visibility, thereby pressuring creators to adjust narrative strategies accordingly. Tang and Wang reveal through interview-based research that short-drama platforms dynamically modify narrative pacing based on real-time user data; when completion rates fall below expectations, production teams shorten exposition and intensify core conflicts to prevent user drop-off [6].

This "data-driven production" model is clearly reflected in *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s. The series rapidly introduces familial and external conflicts within continuous narrative segments, while deliberately placing suspenseful elements, such as misunderstandings and relational tensions, at the end of episodes to encourage continued viewing. Plot points such as "the male lead unexpectedly entering a room" or "the theft of a recipe" create strong, immediate stimuli that minimize the risk of audience disengagement.

Thus, the narrative structure of micro-dramas is not solely the result of creative choices but also an adaptive response to algorithmic mechanisms. By embedding high-density conflicts and compelling suspense into each narrative unit, creators construct a content logic oriented toward maximizing completion rates and exposure, illustrating the deep structural influence of algorithms on cultural production.

4.2. Commercialization models

The dominant commercial model of micro-dramas is the "free + paid unlocking" system. Tang and Wang note that short-drama platforms typically offer the first 5–10 episodes for free before

introducing paywalls, requiring narratives to establish strong suspense early on to motivate users to pay for subsequent content [6].

The narrative structure of *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s clearly reflects this model. Early episodes rapidly accumulate conflicts and embed suspense, encouraging audiences to continue watching or purchase access to later episodes. While this "hook—accumulation—release" structure enhances monetization efficiency, it also leads to a form of narrative distortion in which suspense is artificially intensified for commercial purposes. This phenomenon exemplifies the deep penetration of commercial logic into content production, as discussed in platformization theory [4].

Xie Pengcheng and Zhao Liying further suggest that this model reflects the "Interests" dimension of the 4I framework, transforming users' emotional investment into economic value through the strategic placement of paywalls [10].

5. Critical reflections and developmental challenges

Under the influence of platform logic, vertical micro-dramas have developed an efficient mechanism of "pleasure production." However, this model also reveals a series of structural problems in practice.

5.1. Narrative homogenization and standardization

Driven by algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and commercial monetization models, micro-dramas have gradually formed highly standardized narrative structures. A large number of works repeatedly employ the narrative pattern of "time travel—rise—revenge—emotional fulfillment," resulting in increasing homogenization of plot design.

Taking *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s as an example, its narrative revolves around a "female empowerment through reversal" framework, constructing a pleasure-oriented experience through family conflicts, identity reversals, and eventual economic success. While this structure is effective, it is also highly replaceable among similar productions, reflecting a broader tendency toward industrialized narrative templates in micro-drama production.

To some extent, this trend of homogenization limits narrative innovation, encouraging creators to replicate proven formulas rather than explore alternative storytelling possibilities. At a deeper level, such homogenization is not merely a result of limited creative capacity but is structurally shaped by platform incentive mechanisms that narrow the space of narrative choice.

5.2. Intensified emotional stimulation and weakening of value expression

Micro-dramas rely heavily on emotional peaks and dense conflicts to capture user attention. However, this "pleasure-oriented" narrative strategy may lead to a weakening of value expression.

In *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s, a significant portion of the narrative centers on conflict resolution and emotional release, such as confrontations between characters and the defeat of antagonists. While these elements enhance viewing satisfaction, they leave limited space for the development of character complexity or in-depth engagement with broader social issues.

In the long term, a content production model centered on emotional stimulation may result in a decline in narrative depth and reduce the cultural value of the work. In this process, emotional efficiency gradually replaces narrative depth as an implicit evaluation criterion for content.

5.3. Platform dependency and constraints on creative autonomy

The dominant role of platform algorithms in content distribution compels creators to increasingly cater to platform metrics such as completion rates and interaction levels. While this "data-driven production" model enhances dissemination efficiency, it also constrains creative autonomy to a certain extent. For example, in micro-drama production, narrative pacing is often adjusted according to real-time user data, leading to a "feedback-oriented" creative logic. Although this approach improves alignment between content and audience preferences, it may also push creators to prioritize short-term performance over long-term narrative value.

5.4. Optimization paths and future development

In response to the above challenges, the future development of micro-dramas may be improved in several ways. At the narrative level, creators should maintain pacing efficiency while enhancing character complexity and diversifying plot structures in order to break through homogenization. At the level of content value, greater emphasis should be placed on integrating social issues and meaningful themes alongside emotional expression, thereby improving narrative depth. At the platform level, recommendation mechanisms could be optimized to provide greater visibility for diverse forms of content, fostering a healthier and more sustainable content ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

This study takes the micro-drama *I Became a Stepmother* in the 1980s as a case study to analyze the narrative structural characteristics of vertical micro-dramas and their mechanisms of "pleasure production." The findings suggest that micro-dramas construct high-density emotional stimulation within a short timeframe through strategies such as plot compression, frequent conflicts, and continuous reversals, thereby effectively enhancing user engagement. At the same time, platform recommendation systems and commercialization models further reinforce these narrative patterns, contributing to the increasing standardization of content production.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the literature review is primarily based on existing academic research and may not fully capture the most recent developments in the micro-drama industry. Second, the study relies mainly on textual analysis and lacks empirical investigation of user behavior and audience feedback. Future research could expand the sample scope to include cross-platform and cross-cultural comparisons.

Overall, the narrative model of micro-dramas is not only a textual strategy but also reflects broader transformations in cultural production under platformization. Future studies may incorporate user research and data analysis to further examine the dissemination effects and audience reception of micro-dramas. From a broader perspective, the "pleasure production" mechanism of micro-dramas exemplifies a shift in cultural production in the platform era—from narrative-driven logic to data-driven logic.

References

- [1] Riles, J. M., Pilny, A., & Tewksbury, D. (2018). Media fragmentation in the context of bounded social networks: How far can it go? *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1415-1432. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817696242>
- [2] Zhu, T., & Wen, Y. (2021). The upsurge and future breakthrough of online micro-dramas under the demand of multiple subjects. *China Television*, (11), 63-68. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1002-4751.2021.11.013>
- [3] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814743683.001.0001>

- [4] Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4275-4292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817716539>
- [5] Ronzhyn, A., Cardenal, A. S., & Batlle Rubio, A. (2023). Defining affordances in social media research: A literature review. *New Media & Society*, 25(11), 3165-3188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221148216>
- [6] Tang, W., & Wang, Y. (2025). ReelShort as a new template of international short-drama business: Platformisation, glocalisation, and de-Westernised practices. *Global Media and China*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364251366414>
- [7] Bucher, T. (2018). *If...then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190625562.001.0001>
- [8] Kaye, D. B. V., Chen, X., & Zeng, J. (2021). The co-evolution of two Chinese mobile short video apps: Parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(2), 229-253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920978598>
- [9] Li, D. J. (2022). *New media marketing and operation* (in Chinese). Posts & Telecom Press.
- [10] Xie, P. C., & Zhao, L. Y. (2022). *New media marketing* (in Chinese). Posts & Telecom Press.