

Short-Drama Viewing, Egocentric Narrative Perception, and Dual-Path Narcissistic Tendencies: A Cultivation-Based Explanation

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Abstract. In recent years, short dramas have rapidly become embedded in everyday life through frequent updates, intense reversals, and mobile-first distribution. Drawing on cultivation theory, this study examines the potential influence of short dramas on self-cognition, conceptualizing short-drama viewing as an ongoing process of constructing cognitive schemas about reality. Egocentric narrative perception refers to viewers' tendency to interpret narratives as prioritizing the protagonist's desires, agency, and exceptional opportunities. Among 178 short-drama viewers, short-drama viewing intensity was positively associated with egocentric narrative perception ($r = 0.700$, $p < 0.01$). Egocentric narrative perception was associated with grandiose narcissistic tendencies ($\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$) and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$). Bootstrap analyses (5,000 resamples) indicated that egocentric narrative perception partially mediated the relationships between short-drama viewing intensity and both grandiose narcissistic tendencies (indirect effect = 0.274, 95% CI [0.175, 0.376], 48.07% of total effect) and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies (indirect effect = 0.214, 95% CI [0.087, 0.347], 41.76% of total effect). These findings suggest that repeated short-drama viewing may be associated with narcissistic tendencies partly through egocentric narrative perception.

Keywords: short dramas, cultivation theory, narrative transportation, social comparison, narcissistic tendencies

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of micro short dramas has transformed them from a marginal entertainment format into a highly engaging, everyday media form. Industry reports indicate that by mid-2025, the number of short-drama users in China had approached 700 million, with increasing daily usage time and strong patterns of repeated viewing and deep engagement. This suggests that short dramas are no longer merely fragmented entertainment but function as a continuously embedded narrative environment. Compared with general short videos, short dramas, despite their brevity, offer sustained character relationships, stable emotional rewards, and serialized structures, resembling a compressed yet continuous media world.

The case of ReelShort demonstrates that the Chinese short-drama industry has developed a platform-based and standardized production model, establishing a distinctive global commercial system rather than simply exporting cultural content [1]. As short dramas become increasingly embedded in everyday media consumption, prior research suggests that frequent viewers may reconstruct their self-understanding, express emotional needs, redefine social roles, and explore personal meaning [2]. These findings suggest that repeated exposure to protagonist-centered narratives may shape individuals' understanding of social reality.

Current studies on short dramas primarily focus on industrial logic, platform distribution, emotional gratification, and "pleasure-oriented narratives." However, the long-term psychological and cognitive consequences of short dramas remain underexplored. Notably, short dramas often emphasize the protagonist's desires, rapidly eliminate obstacles, and repeatedly construct "successful reversal" and compensatory scenarios. Under prolonged exposure, audiences may not merely consume stories but internalize implicit models of how reality should respond to individual desires.

From this perspective, cultivation theory provides an appropriate theoretical foundation because it explains how repeated exposure to a stable media environment gradually shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality [3, 4]. Compared with general short-video content, short dramas present relatively consistent narrative patterns, including strong protagonist centrality, rapid wish fulfillment, and simplified causal logic. As viewers are repeatedly exposed to these recurring narrative rules, they may gradually internalize them as implicit expectations regarding how the real world operates. In the present study, this internalized interpretation is conceptualized as egocentric narrative perception, defined as the extent to which audiences perceive the narrative world as prioritizing the protagonist's desires, individual agency, and exceptional opportunities.

To examine this process empirically, a questionnaire survey of adult short-drama viewers was conducted. Building on this framework, the present study proposes that short-drama viewing may foster egocentric narrative perception, which in turn is associated with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies. By identifying egocentric narrative perception as a key cognitive mechanism, this study extends cultivation theory to fictional short-form video and clarifies how short dramas may influence adults' self-cognition and expectations of reality.

2. Literature review and theoretical foundation

2.1. Cultivation theory as the core framework

Cultivation theory posits that long-term exposure to consistent media environments shapes individuals' perceptions of social reality [3, 4]. Originally proposed by Gerbner, the theory emphasizes cumulative and repetitive media exposure rather than one-time persuasion effects [3]. For this study, short-drama viewing should be understood as repeated immersion in a narrative system characterized by simplified rules, immediate emotional feedback, and strong protagonist centrality. Over time, audiences may internalize implicit beliefs that reality should reward effort more quickly, validate personal feelings more strongly, and involve less complex negotiation.

2.2. Egocentric narrative perception

In media psychology, individuals actively interpret media content, so the influence of short-drama narratives depends on audience interpretation. Existing research indicates that media exposure not only affects emotional experiences but may also lead to deeper changes in cognitive structures. In highly repetitive and narratively dense environments, continuous exposure to specific narrative

patterns may lead individuals to develop relatively stable frameworks for understanding how the social world operates. This process can be understood as a form of cognitive reconstruction. For instance, Yu found that short-drama viewing among older adults not only satisfies emotional needs but is also accompanied by active adjustments and reconstruction of self-cognition, including reinterpretations of emotional needs, social roles, and life meaning [2].

Previous studies have also shown that exposure to narrative content can influence how individuals understand social situations and process social information. Exposure to fictional narratives can affect attributional complexity and modes of social perception. Under certain conditions, fictional narratives may reduce egocentric bias, leading individuals to consider multiple situational factors when interpreting others' behavior. However, this effect is not unidirectional; it depends on both the characteristics of the narrative content and how individuals process such information [5].

This study conceptualizes egocentric narrative perception as audiences' subjective interpretation of narrative logic. This construct captures the extent to which viewers internalize protagonist-centered narrative rules and is proposed to serve as the cognitive mechanism linking short-drama viewing with narcissistic tendencies. In contrast to general fictional narratives that may reduce egocentric bias, short dramas often present highly simplified causal relationships and strongly protagonist-centered structures. In narratives organized around "wish fulfillment," viewers may be more likely to attribute social outcomes to personal traits and effort while neglecting structural or contextual factors. As a result, a more egocentric narrative understanding of social reality may gradually emerge.

2.3. Narrative transportation and grandiose narcissism

Narrative transportation theory posits that when individuals enter a story world, they become cognitively, emotionally, and imaginatively absorbed into the narrative, which increases the likelihood that they will adopt the perspectives and value frameworks embedded in the story [6]. In short dramas, this process is particularly salient because narratives are typically organized around a highly centralized protagonist whose desires, efforts, and emotional experiences drive the development of the plot.

Busselle and Bilandzic argue that narrative engagement involves emotional involvement, attentional focus, cognitive processing, and identification with story characters [7]. Under strong narrative transportation, viewers are more likely to experience events from the protagonist's point of view and to accept the story's causal logic as a plausible representation of how the world works. Repeated exposure to this protagonist-centered narrative perspective may gradually strengthen egocentric narrative perception. According to Aaron L. Pincus and colleagues, grandiose narcissism is characterized by superiority, entitlement, exaggerated self-importance, and expectations of special treatment [8]. When audiences repeatedly internalize a narrative logic in which the protagonist is consistently validated, rewarded, and placed at the center of social interactions, they may become more likely to endorse similarly inflated beliefs about their own importance and deservingness. Thus, narrative transportation provides a theoretical basis for expecting egocentric narrative perception to predict grandiose narcissistic tendencies.

2.4. Social comparison and vulnerable narcissism

Social comparison theory, originally proposed by Festinger, suggests that individuals evaluate their own conditions by comparing themselves with others. When individuals engage in upward

comparison, they may become aware of the gap between themselves and more advantaged or idealized targets.

In digital media environments, upward social comparison has been shown to reduce self-concept clarity and further influence subjective well-being and negative emotional experiences [9, 10]. In particular, passive media use, such as browsing, is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes, including increased loneliness, negative emotions, and envy, which ultimately affect life satisfaction [11]. Applied to short dramas, this logic makes the protagonist a highly idealized comparison target.

A meta-analysis focusing on social media contexts found that exposure to idealized upward comparison targets significantly lowers individuals' self-evaluations and induces negative emotional responses such as dissatisfaction and envy [12]. Protagonists in short dramas are often constructed as intensified upward comparison targets, possessing idealized resources, relationships, and social opportunities. When viewers compare their own lives with those of such characters, they are more likely to perceive a pronounced gap between reality and narrative representations, leading to negative evaluations of their own abilities and life circumstances.

According to Aaron L. Pincus and colleagues, vulnerable narcissistic tendencies are characterized by fragile self-esteem, emotional sensitivity, and an intensified experience of discrepancy between expectations and reality. Individuals often rely on fantasy or compensatory behaviors to maintain their sense of self-worth [8]. Self-concept clarity is defined as the extent to which individuals' beliefs about themselves are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable over time [13]. Individuals with low self-concept clarity are more susceptible to upward social comparison, increasing the likelihood that perceived reality gaps will lead to negative emotional responses and instability in self-evaluation.

Under such conditions, some individuals may resort to fantasy or idealized imagination as a way to compensate for perceived deficiencies in reality, thereby exhibiting vulnerable narcissistic tendencies. These processes are treated as explanatory mechanisms rather than separately tested variables.

3. Research model and hypotheses

Based on the above literature, this study proposes that short-drama viewing intensity positively predicts audiences' egocentric narrative perception, which in turn is associated with both grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies.

H1: Short-drama viewing intensity positively predicts egocentric narrative perception.

H2: Egocentric narrative perception positively predicts grandiose narcissistic tendencies.

H3: Egocentric narrative perception positively predicts vulnerable narcissistic tendencies.

H4: Egocentric narrative perception mediates the relationship between short-drama viewing intensity and grandiose narcissistic tendencies.

H5: Egocentric narrative perception mediates the relationship between short-drama viewing intensity and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies

4. Methodology

This study employed a questionnaire survey targeting adult short-drama viewers. After excluding respondents who had never watched short dramas and those who failed the attention-check item, a total of 178 valid responses were retained. Demographic and control variables included age, gender, education level, and life satisfaction in real life.

4.1. Measures

Short-drama viewing intensity was measured using media usage scales. Egocentric narrative perception was measured as audience cognition rather than inferred from narrative content. Because short-drama narratives cannot be assumed to be inherently egocentric, survey items included statements such as "In these short dramas, the protagonist's desires tend to override everything else," "The world in short dramas often revolves around the protagonist," and "Short dramas make one feel that personal feelings are more important than complex realities." These items assessed whether audiences interpret short dramas as embodying egocentric narrative logic. Narcissistic tendencies included grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies. The questionnaire employed a Likert-type scale.

4.2. Data analysis

SPSS was used for reliability and validity testing as well as descriptive statistical analysis. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships among the major variables. Bootstrap methods with 5,000 resamples were applied to test the mediating effects of egocentric narrative perception.

5. Results

5.1. Sample characteristics

After excluding respondents who had never watched short dramas and those who failed the attention-check item, a total of 178 valid responses were retained for analysis. Among them, 110 respondents were aged 33 years or above, accounting for 61.80% of the total sample. Respondents aged 18-22 years accounted for 22.47% ($n = 40$), while those aged 28-32 and 23-27 accounted for 8.99% and 6.74%, respectively. The sample was therefore predominantly composed of middle-aged and older adult viewers, followed by younger participants.

In terms of daily viewing duration, more than half of the respondents ($n = 90$, 50.56%) reported watching short dramas for no more than 30 minutes per day. A further 36 respondents (20.22%) reported daily viewing of 30 minutes to 1 hour, 31 respondents (17.42%) reported 1-2 hours, and 21 respondents (11.80%) reported more than 2 hours per day. Overall, approximately 70% of respondents watched short dramas for no more than one hour per day.

With respect to the duration of short-drama use, 90 respondents (50.56%) had watched short dramas for less than six months, while 58 respondents (32.58%) had watched them for six months to one year. These two groups together accounted for 83.14% of the sample. In comparison, 21 respondents (11.80%) had watched short dramas for one to three years, and only 9 respondents (5.06%) had watched them for more than three years. Most participants had begun watching short dramas within the previous year, which is broadly consistent with the rapid expansion of short dramas as an emerging media format in recent years.

5.2. Reliability and correlation analysis

Cronbach's α was used to assess the internal consistency of the overall scale. The results showed that the Cronbach's α coefficient for the overall scale was 0.864, indicating good internal consistency.

Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships among the major variables, as presented in Table 1. Short-drama viewing intensity was significantly and positively correlated with egocentric narrative perception ($r = 0.700$, $p < 0.01$), grandiose narcissistic tendencies ($r = 0.630$, $p < 0.01$), and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($r = 0.495$, $p < 0.01$). Egocentric narrative perception was significantly and positively correlated with both grandiose narcissistic tendencies ($r = 0.662$, $p < 0.01$) and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($r = 0.497$, $p < 0.01$). The strongest correlation was observed between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($r = 0.738$, $p < 0.01$). Overall, all major variables were significantly positively correlated.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	M	SD	Short-Drama Viewing Intensity	Egocentric narrative perception	grandiose narcissistic tendencies	vulnerable narcissistic tendencies
Short-Drama Viewing Intensity	2.909	1.182	1			
Egocentric narrative perception	3.148	1.204	0.700**	1		
grandiose narcissistic tendencies	2.543	1.067	0.630**	0.662**	1	
Vulnerable narcissistic tendencies	2.590	1.221	0.495**	0.497**	0.738**	1

Note. ** $p < 0.01$.

5.3. Mediation analysis

To examine the mediating role of egocentric narrative perception in the relationships between short-drama viewing intensity and the two forms of narcissistic tendencies, a Bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples was conducted. The 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of the indirect effects were used to determine the significance of the mediation effects. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant when its 95% CI did not include zero.

The results showed that short-drama viewing intensity significantly and positively predicted egocentric narrative perception ($a = 0.713$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Egocentric narrative perception significantly and positively predicted both grandiose narcissistic tendencies ($b = 0.384$, $\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$) and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($b = 0.300$, $\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 and H3, respectively. The predictive effect of egocentric narrative perception was stronger for grandiose narcissistic tendencies than for vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($\beta = 0.433$ vs. $\beta = 0.296$). In addition, the direct effects of short-drama viewing intensity on grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies were both significant ($c' = 0.296$ and 0.298 , respectively, $p < 0.001$), indicating that both relationships involved partial rather than full mediation.

As shown in Table 2, the indirect effect of short-drama viewing intensity on grandiose narcissistic tendencies through egocentric narrative perception was 0.274, with a 95% CI of [0.175, 0.376], accounting for 48.07% of the total effect. The indirect effect on vulnerable narcissistic tendencies was 0.214, with a 95% CI of [0.087, 0.347], accounting for 41.76% of the total effect. Neither confidence interval included zero, indicating that egocentric narrative perception partially mediated the relationships between short-drama viewing intensity and both forms of narcissistic tendencies. Therefore, H4 and H5 were supported.

Table 2. Mediation analysis results (n = 178)

Path	Total Effect	Direct Effect (c')	Indirect Effect	Proportion of Total Effect	95%CI
Viewing Intensity → Narrative Perception → Grandiose Narcissistic Tendencies	0.569***	0.296***	0.274	48.07%	[0.175, 0.376]
Viewing Intensity → Narrative Perception → Vulnerable Narcissistic Tendencies	0.511***	0.298***	0.214	41.76%	[0.087, 0.347]

Note. *** $p < 0.001$. Bootstrap procedure based on 5,000 resamples.

6. Discussion

6.1. Main findings

This difference may reflect distinct mechanisms underlying the two forms of narcissism. All five hypotheses were supported. Egocentric narrative perception positively predicted both grandiose narcissistic tendencies ($\beta = 0.433$) and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies ($\beta = 0.296$), with a stronger effect on the former. This difference may reflect distinct mechanisms: grandiose narcissism may be more readily influenced by identification with protagonists and internalization of self-centered narrative patterns, whereas vulnerable narcissism may additionally involve social comparison and perceived discrepancies between the self and reality.

The correlation between grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies was relatively high ($r = 0.738$), suggesting that they are different but not mutually exclusive manifestations of narcissism, consistent with theoretical expectations. Both mediation models demonstrated partial rather than full mediation, indicating that short-drama viewing intensity may exert direct effects on narcissistic tendencies beyond egocentric narrative perception. Other mechanisms, such as emotional arousal and social interaction, were not included and warrant further investigation.

6.2. Theoretical implications

The model has three main theoretical implications. First, it places cultivation theory at the center of short-drama research, treating short dramas not as isolated texts but as a system of narrative rules routinely consumed in everyday life. Second, it distinguishes grandiose from vulnerable narcissistic tendencies, avoiding a single-dimension view of self-aggrandizement and better aligning with real psychological experiences. Third, it integrates narrative transportation and social comparison within one framework, showing that the same media content may produce different psychological outcomes through distinct mechanisms.

6.3. Practical implications

Platform governance and media literacy education should not focus solely on whether short dramas are "low-quality" or overly addictive. Greater attention should be paid to whether such content continuously amplifies self-centered expectations about how reality should function. For audiences, recognizing the difference between the "reward logic of narratives" and the "negotiation logic of reality" may be more important than merely reducing viewing time..

7. Conclusion

This study dual-path model in which short-drama viewing influences grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic tendencies through egocentric narrative perception. Grounded in cultivation theory, the model specifies two mechanisms: social comparison with protagonists may lead to vulnerable narcissism through perceived reality gaps and compensatory fantasies, whereas identification with protagonists may lead to grandiose narcissism through the internalization of protagonist-centered traits. By extending media effects research to fictional short-drama content, this study contributes to theoretical understanding and offers practical implications for media literacy and healthy viewing practices. As short dramas gain global popularity, understanding their potential cognitive implications becomes increasingly important.

The study has several limitations. The sample was concentrated at the two ends of the age distribution, which may have affected the stability of the mediation models. Both models showed partial mediation, suggesting additional direct effects and unmeasured mechanisms. Future research could use stratified or quota sampling, construct separate models for specific age groups, and conduct age-stratified analyses.

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