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Changes in Young People's Film-Consumption Habits Brought about by Short-Video Film Commentaries

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Abstract. The popularisation of the Internet has given rise to short-video film commentary, a form of secondary-content creation. The format of "watching a film in ten minutes" has greatly transformed how young generations born in the 2000s and 2010s engage with and understand cinema. Some audiences have adopted the consumer perception that "watching a commentary counts as having watched the film". This phenomenon calls into question the traditional immersive aesthetic experience valued by theatrical film viewing. This paper sorts out the logic behind the emergence of short-video film commentary within fragmented-viewing environments, and analyses the dual impacts of commentary content on young people's film-consumption behaviours and aesthetic perceptions from three dimensions: media environment, audience psychology and narrative reconstruction. The study finds that while short-video film commentaries lower barriers to accessing film culture and expand its boundaries of dissemination, they also create problems such as narrative distortion, diminished aesthetic perception and cognitive bias formed by audiences' preconceived notions. Based on local Chinese-media phenomena, this paper reflects on the survival of cinematic art in the digital-image era and offers suggestions for fostering young people's media literacy and optimising the short-video-content ecosystem.

Keywords: fragmented viewing, short-video film commentary, post-cinema, attention economy, youth film consumption

1. Introduction

Advances in digital-media technologies have profoundly transformed the pathways through which people engage with audiovisual works. Traditional film consumption was anchored to the enclosed, dark space of the cinema: audiences would allocate substantial blocks of time to follow linear narratives and gain immersive aesthetic experiences. Since the emergence of short-video platforms, however, cinema no longer exists solely as finished works screened in movie theatres. It also manifests as several-minute short-video clips edited and narrated by content bloggers.

For Generation-Z youth, their first encounter with a film may not stem from watching the complete feature work but rather from algorithm-recommended film-commentary videos. This media reality raises a core research question for digital-era audiovisual-culture studies: does watching a film-commentary video equal watching the original feature-length film? This issue

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extends beyond individual viewing experiences and reflects broader transformations in audiovisual culture within the digital age.

Existing scholarship highlights industry-level changes due to fragmented viewing. Wang notes that this trend forces filmmakers to adapt narrative styles to cater to audiences' dispersed attention [1]. Zhang suggests mobile devices have transformed film reception from "contemplative viewing" in cinemas to "tactile viewing" on smartphones, allowing audience interaction through gestures [2]. Deng et al. critique short-video commentaries for distorting narratives and diminishing emotional depth [3]. However, previous studies mainly focus on textual analysis, neglecting a comprehensive look at young audiences' consumer psychology and changing aesthetic perceptions.

Employing a literature-review methodology, this paper synthesises theoretical insights from post-cinema studies, the attention-economy perspective and participatory-culture theory. Drawing on China's short-video-media ecosystem, this paper analyses how short-video film commentaries reconstruct young people's film-consumption behaviours, examining media-viewing transformations, audience psychology, and platform-algorithmic influences.

2. Transformation of the media paradigm

The theory of post-cinema provides a framework for understanding contemporary-media environments. Post-cinema describes a new cultural condition where moving-image content is freed from the physical constraints of film stock and theatrical venues and circulates across diverse digital terminals [2]. Film viewing required audiences to be present at specific times and locations, adhering to a predetermined rhythm of the work [4].

The proliferation of mobile internet and smartphones has led to the phenomenon of fragmented viewing. Fragmented viewing refers to the consumption of audiovisual content on smartphones or tablets during fragmented intervals such as commutes or rest breaks, unshackled from cinemas or household televisions [1]. Streaming services enable video consumption anytime, and features like variable-speed playback enhance viewer control [4]. Short-video commentary has emerged, condensing full-length films into 3-8 minute clips that focus on high-conflict moments, allowing young audiences to engage with films without needing lengthy time commitments.

Zhang notes that viewing practices for new-media images have shifted from "contemplative viewing" toward "tactile viewing" [2]. Inside cinemas, audiences merely observe the screen and cannot interfere with playback progression. By contrast, finger-swiping gestures constitute core bodily practice when watching short videos on mobile phones. If a clip fails to hold one's interest, a simple upward swipe immediately switches to subsequent content. This tactile-viewing model reshapes power dynamics between images and audiences: cinema ceases to function as high-art texts to which viewers must adapt and becomes an information stream selected through user gestures. This demonstrates the decentralised characteristics of post-cinema moving-image culture. Original feature films are torn from their coherent narrative contexts, disassembled into fragments and reassembled as commentary-driven short videos. Completion rates and stimulus intensity of short-video content become primary production criteria.

Transformations in media paradigms are not merely shifts in technological tools, they simultaneously restructure audience-perception mechanisms. Wu's research reveal that digital-era post-cinema moving images follow an embodied multi-modal perceptual logic, where corporeal sensory-emotional responses take precedence over rational textual interpretation [5]. Short-video film commentaries discard much of cinema's expressive cinematographic language. Voice-over narration becomes central, directly delivering plots and emotions and replacing cinematic metaphors with plain verbal formulations. What audiences receive is not the atmosphere constructed by film

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shots, but pre-digested conclusions formulated by content bloggers. Prolonged engagement with this form of content imperceptibly alters mechanisms of image perception, which in turn directly shapes young people's film-consumption psychology.

3. Inner motivations of young audiences

The rise of short-video film commentary among youth is fueled by technological advances and the underlying life circumstances of modern young people. Modern society's fast pace creates "time poverty" for students and urban white-collar workers, limiting their ability to dedicate two uninterrupted hours for watching full-length films [3]. Three groups of motives drive young people to consume short-video film commentaries: pursuit of informational efficiency, demand for emotional compensation and social-conversation-oriented needs.

First is the pursuit of informational efficiency. Watching complete films entails substantial time costs. Given the sheer volume of cinematic output, young people cannot physically view every production. Short-video film commentaries serve as an efficient content-filtering tool. Within several minutes, a commentary conveys plot summaries, character profiles and key narrative twists, helping audiences judge whether investing time in the original feature is worthwhile [3]. For many young people, commentaries function as pre-viewing tools, mitigating selection dilemmas amid massive cinematic output. Furthermore, as most commentaries are free, they align well with young people's consumption habits, enabling them to skip unappealing content and avoid wasted time and money on films that may not engage them.

Second is the psychological need for emotional compensation and empathy. Academic work-related stress demands emotional compensation and empathy, particularly among young people. Short-video film commentaries — particularly first-person-monologue-style ones — extract highly conflict-charged, emotionally intense episodes and instantly evoke feelings such as compassion, suspense, anger and sorrow [6]. Certain first-person commentaries employ internally focalised narration: stories are recounted from character perspectives, timelines are reorganised, and emphasis is placed on characters' inner feelings. Young audiences achieve cathartic emotional release via characters' fates without enduring lengthy narrative build-ups, attaining vicarious experiential gratification. The rise of AI voice-over technology has reduced production barriers, and platform algorithms favor videos with high empathy, creating positive feedback loops between content and audience engagement [6].

Third are social-interaction-oriented needs, the desire for conversational topics. Wang notes that they serve as important social currency, allowing youth to engage in discussions about popular films without needing to invest significant time in watching them [7]. Commentary videos enable young people to understand key plotlines, iconic scenes, and memes, thus facilitating their participation in film-related conversations within their communities.

Nevertheless, this convenient consumption format entails cognitive risks. The first information audiences receive establishes a preconceived cognitive framework for interpreting a work [8]. When young people watch a commentary short video first, bloggers' interpretations and value judgements become embedded in their minds. Even when subsequently viewing the original film, they struggle to shed pre-established viewpoints and develop independent interpretations. The convenience afforded by commentaries risks depriving audiences of opportunities to interpret audiovisual texts autonomously.

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4. Digital-platform algorithms

Short-video platforms leverage platform-recommendation algorithms to influence viewer expectations, while youth psychology reflects internal motivations. The attention-economy theory highlights that user attention is a limited resource in information-rich environments, driving content creators to engage viewers quickly [3]. The "three-second-hook rule" prevalent on short-video platforms materialises this logic: a video must present conflict or intrigue within its opening three seconds, otherwise users will swipe away, and algorithms withhold further content distribution.

Algorithms evaluate content quality according to metrics including completion rates, likes, comments and reposts. To gain reach, content producers adapt to algorithmic preferences, prioritising sensationalism and dynamism over fidelity to original-artistic intent. This gives rise to the phenomenon of narrative distortion described by Deng Huan, manifesting in three forms: extreme plot compression, narrative template-driven production and diminished audiovisual language [3].

First, extreme plot compression. To fit within multi-minute run-times, atmospheric details, metaphorical imagery and slow-burn psychological episodes are excised from source works, leaving only core plotlines and narrative turning points. For instance, Forrest Gump contains abundant historical symbols and metaphors concerning the contingency of human life, short-video commentaries strip away these layers, retaining only a simplistic inspirational plotline [3]. Many artistic merits of cinema precisely reside in atmospheric construction, narrative gaps and fine-grained details — elements discarded within fast-food-style commentaries.

Second, narrative templating. Successful video formats are imitated by numerous creators, producing assembly-line templates (the well-known catchphrase "Look, this man is named Xiao Shuai" serves as a typical example). Creators reuse identical textual frameworks while substituting film plots to secure stable completion-rate metrics. Mass deployment of uniform templates erases original-work artistic individuality, reducing cinema to replicable conflict-driven story schemas.

Third, diminished audiovisual language. As an audiovisual art form, cinema conveys much of its meaning through cinematography, lighting, editing and musical composition. Within short-video film commentaries, cinematographic footage becomes secondary illustrative material, while voice-over narration dominates plot exposition. The emotional weight embedded within camera work is displaced by verbal statements, weakening the inherent aesthetic value of moving-image footage itself.

Yun's research demonstrates that sustained exposure to high-emotion-intensity content raises audiences' sensory thresholds [4]. Having grown accustomed to fast-paced, twist-heavy short videos, some young viewers perceive slow-burn art-house films as dragging and tedious and struggle to engage with narrative details. Algorithmic ecosystems therefore not only produce film-commentary short videos but also reconstruct viewers' aesthetic expectations.

At the same time, secondary-creation ecosystems shaped by algorithms cannot be wholly dismissed. Research by Huang Min on TikTok-hosted secondary-edit content identifies positive dissemination potential for this category of work [9]. Complex, obscure art-house films can reach broader youth audiences via accessible commentaries. Short-video film commentaries function as a double-edged instrument: they may serve as a bridge toward original works or may substitute for them entirely. Outcomes depend upon a balance among content producers, platforms and audiences themselves.

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5. Dual impacts of short-video film commentaries on youth film consumption

5.1. Positive outcomes: expanding boundaries for the dissemination of cinematic art

First, barriers for accessing film culture are lowered. Many art-house and older films prove challenging for direct-viewing by general-youth audiences. High-quality short-video commentaries unpack plots, explain historical contexts, clarify complex texts and bring obscure films to wider youth audiences [3]. Shared across social media, cinematic content reaches demographic groups that would otherwise seldom engage with serious film art.

Second, commentaries operate as film-screening tools. Faced with massive cinematic output, young people lack time to view every production. Commentaries deliver rapid pre-view impressions, helping audiences judge whether a film aligns with personal tastes. Some viewers develop interest after watching a commentary and seek out the complete original work, in such cases, short videos act as gateways toward full-feature cinema.

Third, youth socio-cultural life is enriched. Short-video film commentaries lend themselves to reposting and discussion, furnishing conversational material about cinema. Secondary-creation itself constitutes a youth-cultural practice, users exchange film-related opinions within comment sections, forming public-discussion spaces centred on cinematic texts [6]. Experiences with secondary-edited content on TikTok likewise confirm that this form supports cross-cultural dissemination of film productions [9].

5.2. Tangible risks: aesthetic attenuation and cognitive simplification

First, the misconception emerges that "watching a commentary means having watched the film". Some young audiences settle for plot summaries supplied by short-video clips and never engage with source works. They receive only condensed synopses and forfeit aesthetic experiences generated by cinematography, sound design and narrative gaps. Cinema encompasses far more than bare plot events, cinematographic choices, atmosphere and gradual emotional build-ups constitute vital artistic value that cannot be communicated within several-minute commentaries.

Second, risks of simplification and misinterpretation of original-work meaning arise. To suit short-video formats, commentary producers simplify complex character motivations and socio-historical contexts, reducing multi-layered cinematic texts to simplistic inspirational or high-thrill theses. Some bloggers distort character motivations for dramatic effect, advancing one-sided interpretations. Viewers receive altered secondary narratives rather than the original filmmakers' intended messages [7]. Consistent with Gao Tong's pre-understanding framework, pre-established secondary interpretations hinder independent reception of source works even during subsequent original-film viewings [8].

Third, habitual consumption of fast-paced short-form content erodes capacities for immersive aesthetic engagement. As Zhang Dengfeng observes, habitual fragmented scrolling trains audiences to crave instant-emotional stimuli and diminishes capacities for deep reflective engagement with artworks [2]. Accustomed to frequent narrative twists, young audiences struggle to sustain focus on slow-burn art-house films that reward attentive detail-oriented viewing. Constant exposure to high-intensity content elevates sensory thresholds, fostering dismissive attitudes toward measured, gradual-paced narratives.

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6. Reflections and implications

Short-video film commentary represents an inevitable product of visual-cultural development within the post-cinema era. Neither blanket rejection nor uncritical celebration matches real-world complexities. The format itself is merely a media tool: it can function as a bridge toward original-film works or can substitute for them. Final outcomes hinge upon balance maintained among platforms, content creators and audiences.

Platforms ought to move beyond metrics-only evaluation prioritising likes and completion rates. Cultural-value evaluation criteria should be introduced, plot-condensed commentary clips ought to carry labelling warnings indicating they constitute abridged secondary retellings rather than original-film works. Platforms should also support in-depth analytical commentaries and grant reach to content that does not rely on viral-potential appeal [3].

Content producers must uphold interpretative respect for original films. Secondary creation permits analysis and commentary on cinema, yet arbitrary distortion of character motivations and core thematic meanings for dramatic effect must be avoided. A balance ought to be struck between commercial appeal and interpretative artistic integrity.

Media-literacy education proves vital for young audiences. Distinctions between secondary-creation commentary content and original-feature films must be internalised. Commentaries may serve as reference material or preliminary pre-views but should never fully substitute for complete-film viewing. Amid consumption of fast-food-style fragmented content, young people should consciously allocate time for complete-feature viewing, cultivating capacities for slow-paced immersive aesthetic reception and preserving faculties for independent textual interpretation [7].

7. Conclusion

Within the post-cinema era, cinema no longer belongs exclusively to darkened movie-theatre auditoriums. Short-video-platform-hosted film commentaries have restructured how Generation-Z youth encounter cinema. From a media perspective, touch-screen-mobile-device-enabled fragmented-viewing practices displace ritualised theatrical contemplative viewing with ubiquitous tactile scrolling-based consumption. From an audience standpoint, young people turn to short-video film commentaries to satisfy practical demands for efficiency, emotional compensation and conversational social topics. Platform algorithms rooted in attention-economy logics shape commentary-content output and retro-configure audiences' aesthetic expectations.

This novel consumption format carries positive merits: it lowers barriers to film-cultural access, supplies film-pre-selection tools and enriches youth socio-cultural exchange. Simultaneously, it generates substantial challenges: plot compression and simplification, cognitive bias originating from secondary interpretations, and diminished capacities for immersive aesthetic engagement.

However, this study relies entirely upon literature-review-based theoretical analysis and possesses no primary empirical data gathered via questionnaires or audience interviews. Future research could supplement theoretical inquiry with questionnaires and in-depth interviews to more precisely map young-audiences' real-world viewing practices and inner attitudes.

Technologies continue to evolve, and moving-image-delivery carriers will keep transforming. Nevertheless, questions concerning the balance between informational efficiency and immersive-aesthetic experience, and how to demarcate secondary-creation output from original-film authorial intent, remain enduringly worthy of investigation within digital-era film-consumption studies.

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