

Exploring the Psychological Mechanisms of Micro-Series Addiction

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Abstract: Based on audience preferences for short videos with rapid pace and plot twists, micro-series characterized by their brief, exhilarating, and refined content have shown explosive growth. At the same time, they have also led to considerable viewer addiction. This paper aims to explore the psychological mechanisms behind this addiction to micro-series. Using case study analysis, it examines three representative works in China's micro-series industry: "Hi, Mom," "Auntie'sWorld," and "Twenty-Nine." It analyzes why these series attract audiences through character settings, plot design, and creative techniques. To foster a healthy and sustainable development of the micro-series field, this paper suggests that future efforts should focus on strengthening industry regulation, implementing anti-addiction measures for youth, and enhancing the overall quality of industry creators.

Keywords: Micro-series, Audience Psychology, Addiction, Pleasure, Empathy.

1. Introduction

Amidst the increasing pace and pressures of modern society, a new form of visual entertainment—micro-series—is rapidly capturing the public's attention. The "2023-2024 China Micro-Series Market Research Report" indicates that in 2023, the market size of China's micro-series industry has soared to 37.39 billion yuan, a growth of 267.65% compared to the previous year. It is projected to exceed 100 billion yuan by 2027[1]. By July of the same year, the number of users on Kuaishou watching more than 10 episodes of short dramas daily reached 146 million; the number of paid users for short dramas on Douyin increased tenfold compared to the previous year[2]. Concurrently, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television initiated a special campaign to regulate online micro-series, leading to the removal of many non-compliant short dramas. In recent years, the administration has continued its efforts, taking over 25,000 micro-series offline in 2022 and removing more than 2,000 "mini-programs" containing illegal content. Starting from June 1, 2024, micro-series will be subject to classified and tiered review; micro-series that have not been reviewed and filed will not be allowed to be disseminated online[3]. Researchers believe that micro-series will face more severe challenges in terms of market models, artistic value, procedural supervision, and development strategies. This paper aims to explore the characteristics and mechanisms of internet short video audience viewing and propose feasible suggestions for the regulation and governance of micro-series platforms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition and Characteristics of Micro-Series

In 2020, the National Radio and Television Administration issued the "Notice on Issues Concerning the Content Review of Micro-Series in Online Film and Television Dramas," officially defining online micro-series as "online audio-visual programs with a single episode duration ranging from tens of seconds to about 15 minutes, having a relatively clear theme and main line, and a relatively continuous and complete storyline." This marks the fourth officially recognized form of online film and television work following online TV series, online movies, and online animations[4].

During the New Year, the short drama "I Was a Stepmother in the 80s" went viral, earning 20 million in single-day revenue and hundreds of millions of views, bringing significant profits to producer Mimi. Shot in just ten days with a post-production budget of only tens of thousands of yuan, it became a successful example of low investment and high returns. What attracted such a large audience?

Researchers believe this is due to the "short, refreshing, refined, and fast" characteristics of micro-series. "Short" refers to the typical duration of a micro-series episode, which is usually between tens of seconds and fifteen minutes, making it suitable for watching during fragmented time. This brief format allows viewers to easily digest the plot and quickly gain a sense of satisfaction, catering to the fast-paced lifestyle demands of modern people; "Refreshing" is the core attribute of online literature. The "refreshing literary view" refers to the literary concept in online literature that takes pleasure as the primary position, with meaning accompanying pleasure. The "refreshing literary view" emphasizes that all readers (including "refined readers") have basic needs, meaning that everyone's vulgar desires need to be respected and satisfied[5]. "Refreshing" in micro-series denotes clear themes, rapid pacing, intense conflicts, and frequent plot twists, capturing attention and enabling narrative leaps. These series focus on immediate emotions, often neglecting logical connections between events, requiring viewers to imagine omitted plot parts. Genres like Rebirth, Comeback, and Boss quickly engage viewers with thrilling developments. "Refined" refers to depth in content creation, detail refinement, quality enhancement, and cultural tourism integration. Many micro-series now incorporate history, culture, and technology to broaden thematic scope and depth, adding layers and meaning.

Micro-series possess unique aesthetic traits: immersive experience, keen agility, and emotional resonance. Under network audio-visual media, consumers seek immersive experiences, prompting micro-series to employ close-ups and extreme close-ups, described by viewers as "addictive," "refreshing," and "satisfying." They narrate everyday stories of ordinary people, reflecting joys and sorrows, and addressing social hotspots and emotional shifts, showcasing a strong sense of contemporaneity and realism. Empathetic communication involves forming, transmitting, and spreading shared or similar emotions. Communication scholar Wu Fei divides empathetic communication into three stages: "emotional contagion," "perspective-taking," and "empathic concern"[6]. For example, "Escape from the British Museum" combines the current hot topic initiated by the Global Times, "Please Return Chinese Cultural Relics to China for Free." Through the personification of cultural relics, it arouses audience resonance, giving relics human emotions and voices, and telling the story of cultural relics overseas longing to return home. It has aroused people's attention to cultural relics overseas and the grand vision of eternal peace for the country. Mainstream media such as CCTV and Xinhua Daily also praised it. The creation and dissemination of this drama are a visual practice of the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese culture in the process of Chinese-style modernization[7]. Starting from June 1, 2024, the "Notice of the General Office of the National Radio and Television Administration on Further Coordinating Development and Security to Promote the Healthy and Prosperous Development of the

Online Micro-Series Industry" was officially implemented. A batch of high-quality micro-series emerged, some of which showed the characteristics of refinement during the preparation stage, such as "Dust-Covered Files: Secret Blueprints," which is themed with "anti-espionage + criminal investigation," telling the story of public security organs investigating and solving a case of foreign espionage stealing national secret blueprints in the early days of the founding of New China. The producer, Shaanxi Hehe Film and Television Culture Communication Co., Ltd., employed a senior film photography and art team to bring a movie-quality refined micro-series to the audience. Some have also brought real benefits to the cultural tourism industry of the shooting locations[8]. For example, the micro-series "That Night of Reunion," filmed in Pingtan County, Fuzhou City, Fujian Province, received strong support from the local cultural tourism department during the filming process. Although the duration is limited, in the current micro-series market, micro-series focus on content creation with attention to detail and quality, with every shot, every line, and every sound effect carefully designed to strive for excellence. This pursuit of detail and quality will become increasingly popular in the future micro-series market.

2.2. Research on the Issues of Online Micro-Series

The first issue is the production of substandard works. Numerous scholars have pointed out that micro-series producers often cut corners in pursuit of profit, leading to low-quality, as well as formulaic, homogenized plots and arbitrary charging practices[9]. Huang Chuxin notes that the current market for online micro-series suffers from a severe lack of innovation and uniqueness due to content homogenization. Some micro-series, in their pursuit of click-through rates and attention, may exaggerate plotlines and themes, leading to vulgar, violent, and pornographic content, which not only violates social morals and platform rules but also tarnishes the reputation of online micro-series in the market[10]. Additionally, the intensifying competition in the short video industry, frequent industry chaos, and copyright infringement have become urgent issues to address. Looking ahead, the development of the short video industry is trending towards refinement, mass creation, and social expansion, with short videos gradually becoming an important force in social construction[11]. A significant proportion of micro-series are produced with investments of less than 100,000 yuan, and the highly "accelerated" production and compressed costs have become significant factors affecting the art and aesthetics of micro-series[12].

The second issue is the vulgarization of aesthetics. The vulgarization of aesthetics in online micro-series has been criticized. Scholar point out that in the pursuit of quick returns and market share, micro-series often neglect artistic value and aesthetic standards, leading to inconsistent work quality and even tendencies towards vulgarization[13]. Rustic style culture, a derivative of native internet subculture, is one of the manifestations of the vulgarization of aesthetics in micro-series. It is a new popular culture that emerged with the widespread rise of internet live streaming. In its original sense, Rustic style culture refers to culture that is out of touch with trends and has a rural flavor[14]. Micro-series use rustic style as a content characteristic, showing a solid subcultural gene attribute, that is, by setting fantasy themes and grassroots perspectives, tight plots and fragmented narratives, exaggerated and jesting performances, guiding the audience through multi-level emotional experiences such as bottom-layer consolation, desire stimulation, entertainment carnival, and content consumption[15].

The third issue is the bias in value orientation. Some scholars believe that transitioning from high traffic to high quality and positive value orientation is an inevitable trend for the second half of the micro-series industry[16]. In recent years, micro-series have experienced explosive growth, becoming a popular "digital snack" among young audiences. However, micro-series, with their fast pace, low cost, and low barriers to entry, also face issues such as inconsistent content quality, distortion of personal and social values, damage to the artistic creation ecosystem, and impact on the

national image while being wildly popular[17]. Some scholars point out that mainstream values should be used as a framework to immerse micro-series, starting from the central idea of regulating value deviations and negative value orientations. In the process of producing and making micro-series, focus on constructive value orientations such as upward and virtuous, positive and warm, and thought-provoking, and reduce content creation that enhances "watchability" through "money worship and showing off wealth," "extreme revenge," and "malicious competition" and other negative values[18].

3. Research Methodology

This study employs case study analysis to examine user comments with significant impact on the internet, thereby inferring the psychological motivations behind audience addiction to micro-series. Case study analysis, also known as case analysis or typical analysis, is a scientific method that involves conducting a thorough and meticulous study of representative phenomena to gain an overall understanding[19]. The research began by selecting three representative cases: "I Was a Stepmother in the 80s," "The World of Aunties," and "Twenty-Nine." "I Was a Stepmother in the 80s," a family-themed series about a woman time-traveling to the 1980s, became the top-rated micro-series during winter vacation with over a billion views on Douyin. "The World of Aunties," a comedy with 170 million views, was recognized as an outstanding work by China's National Radio and Television Administration in 2023, humorously addressing social issues through the lives of two retired women. "Twenty-Nine," an urban emotional series, garnered over 800 million views on Douyin, averaging 40 million per episode, and explored the challenges faced by two women. These series, spanning different genres and boasting significant online influence, provide a comprehensive overview of the psychological addiction caused by Chinese micro-series.

The second step is data collection, where the researcher gathers relevant data for the cases through multi-dimensional audience feedback and interaction data.

Table 1: Overview of Case Studies

Title	Release Date	Number of Episodes	Duration per Episode	Views	Comments
《Hi, Mom》	February 12, 2024	82 episodes	2 minutes	Over one billion	21,345
《Auntie's World》	December 30, 2021	30 episodes	5 minutes	170 million	14,477
《Twenty-Nine》	January 26, 2023	20 episodes	3-4 minutes	Over 800 million	Over 10,000

The comments for the three micro-series mentioned were collected from the Douban and Weibo platforms. Douban is a community website that provides user-generated descriptions and reviews for books, movies, music, and other works. Weibo (Micro-blog) is a social networking site with significant influence in China, with a monthly active user base of 583 million and a daily active user base of 256 million as of the second quarter of 2024[20].

4. Research Findings

4.1. The Emotional Catharsis Value of the "Thrilling" Sensation

The "thrilling" sensation is a psychological experience, and the pursuit of such a sensation is a psychological need, resulting from an individual's emotional involvement and experiences, culminating in a release[21]. Scholars believe that the root of the "thrilling" sensation lies in the sense of "identification." Readers immerse themselves in the protagonist's experiences, going through

various adventures, ultimately achieving a "fulfillment of desires" that satisfies the long-suppressed "id"[22].

Li and Li further categorize the manifestations of the "thrilling" sensation into three types: a sense of possession, a sense of exhilaration, and a sense of superiority[23]. The "thrilling" sensation in micro-series is less about the artistic value of the work and more about satisfying the audience's psychological needs, aligning with the "pleasure principle" to fulfill the "id."

From a psychological perspective, thrilling dramas are a psychological product, and their underlying logic is Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Seeking "thrilling" is a symbolic satisfaction of desires that cannot be realized in reality[24], and its sense of satisfaction is related to continuous suppression and lack. The trans-media narrative of "thrilling literature" and "thrilling culture" has allowed the "thrilling literary view" based on web literature to spread rapidly in the field of mass culture. The adaptation of "thrilling literature" in genres such as fantasy, costume, time-travel, and workplace into TV series has given rise to a large number of "thrilling dramas," catering to the audience's "capricious" psychology, and thus forming the "thrilling" culture of social emotional expression[25]. The pleasure derived from "thrilling" micro-short dramas comes from the following forms: First, thrilling short dramas create a new paradigm, with unique narrative stimulation that directly reaches the audience, capturing their attention; Second, users experience a "thrilling" sensation during the viewing process, entering a "flow experience." The audience becomes immersed in the narrative timeline of the plot, and this immersion, which results in a "thrilling" sensation, is confirmed in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Flow theory posits that when the audience fully engages in a task, they filter out irrelevant external information[26], which coincides with the "thrilling" sensation obtained[27] from appreciating film and television art. Third, users save cognitive resources and escape cognitive load during viewing. "Thrilling" short dramas are the audience's choice to avoid cognitive load and use limited cognitive resources to gain great psychological satisfaction and emotional catharsis.

4.2. "Kuleshov Effect"

The "Kuleshov Effect" is a psychological effect discovered by Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov in 1918. Through his experiments, he found that the emotional response in films does not come from the content of a single shot but is produced by the juxtaposition and editing of multiple images[28].

The "Kuleshov Effect" in micro-short dramas enhances emotional engagement through plot design and image composition, elevating the viewing experience. For example, "The World of Aunties" uses counter-routine plots to evoke strong reactions. In the first episode, health product salesman Xiao Li works hard to win over the aunties, only for them to feign ignorance and exploit his labor until he breaks down, creating suspense and unexpected satisfaction. The effect manifests in two ways: rapid plot progression and quick scene transitions evoke intense emotional fluctuations, while frequent twists and suspenseful designs captivate the audience, delivering a thrilling payoff.

Table 2: Overview of Case Studies

Film title	comments
《Hi, Mom》	1. "The casting of the actors and the catchy lines in the script really make it addictive to watch!" 2. "No way, where can you claim a handsome and wealthy husband like the male lead?" 3. "Although the setup is clichéd, the acting skills of the two leads and their chemistry are strong, with plenty of humorous moments, and I really like it!"

Table 2: (continued).

《Auntie'sWorld》	1."Died laughing, the acting of the aunties is really good." 2."It's quite good, very ironic, and has a lot of real-life significance." 3."Still very enjoyable, integrating internet memes and having the elderly perform them is the best!"
《Twenty-Nine》	1. "Just finished watching, it's super good! The female lead is incredibly clear-headed, and the supporting female characters are also well-developed." 2. "Just finished this!! Everyone go watch it!! Superb acting with clear-headedness!!!" 3. "A textbook-style outwitting of a mistress! Constantly delivering golden lines!"

4.3. Emotional Resonance

The term "empathy," originating from psychology, is defined by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers as "the individual's emotional response to the understood emotional state or condition of another, which is congruent with or similar to the feelings or potential feelings of the other person"[29].

In online micro-series, the construction of characters often relies on the power of empathic communication, making the characters more vivid and three-dimensional, closer to the audience's lives, and drawing the audience in, thus causing emotional resonance and gaining their affection. The narrative characteristics and emotional tension of online micro-series are one of the key factors in attracting viewers. Unlike traditional TV series, online micro-series bring users into the plot through exaggerated plots, strong emotions, and reversals, establishing a connection with the users and allowing viewers to experience a mental massage and emotional resonance during the viewing process. For example, the micro-series "Twenty-Nine" tells the story of urban women facing and redeeming themselves from the difficulties in life and careers. The female protagonist is a full-time wife who, after discovering her husband's infidelity, chooses to go out to work and plans for a divorce, eventually leaving her husband with nothing. Her strength and self-redemption in the face of difficulties allow viewers to resonate emotionally.

The emotional tension in micro-series stems from empathic elements: 1. **Plot empathy** creates an immersive experience through multi-threaded narratives and fast-paced storytelling, often reflecting social hot topics, fostering strong identification and empathy as viewers relate the plot to their real lives; 2. **Emotional empathy** allows audiences to fulfill dreams by identifying with characters. Micro-series intensify emotional conflicts and create tense atmospheres, often featuring idealized protagonists with perfect traits, satisfying audience fantasies even if the plot lacks logic; 3. **Value transmission** gains audience identification. For example, "Escape from the British Museum" gained popularity by awakening national memory and promoting cultural themes, while "Go Beyond! Ajuan" portrays a young man's perseverance in pursuing his dreams, resonating with contemporary youth facing similar pressures and choices. These elements highlight the connection between micro-series themes and real-life experiences.

4.4. Meeting Aesthetic Needs

Micro-series offer two types of aesthetic experiences: efficient aesthetic experience and immersion. The efficient aesthetic experience is achieved through compact storytelling and fast-paced narratives, delivering core content quickly to meet users' fast-paced entertainment needs. For instance, "Twenty-Nine" enhances its appeal with professional actors, while "The World of Aunties" captivates audiences with dense punchlines and rapid plot reversals. The latter stands out by addressing real-life themes and hot topics like elderly health products, square dancing, and internet celebrities, earning widespread praise. Additionally, micro-series cater to modern fragmented lifestyles, allowing users to watch anytime without long-term commitment.

Immersion and experience: Micro-series bring a stronger sense of experience and immersion to the audience through the flexible use of artistic creation techniques, triggering profound emotional resonance. For example, "Moyu Xuanqi 2" provides a strong sense of experience and immersion to the audience through interactive design and personalized experience. Viewers can make choices for the female protagonist by clicking on the screen, controlling the direction of the plot. This interactive method makes the audience feel as if they are playing a game, with each interaction tache being like a game point, greatly enhancing the audience's sense of participation and immersion. "Debut! Sound Wave Youth" brings a strong sense of experience and immersion to the audience through tight plot rhythm, rich character growth narrative, and suspense subplots. The play adopts a group narrative method, allowing the audience to follow six musicians with different personalities on a journey to pursue their musical dreams. Each protagonist has their growth narrative and dream-chasing story, and each storyline is full of conflicts, making the plot compact and engaging. It also includes suspense subplots such as identity mystery and retirement controversy, adding a mysterious color to the plot. These elements combine popular elements such as youth passion, romantic sweetness, and variety show competition systems, further enhancing the audience's immersion and experience.

5. Conclusion

Through case study analysis, this paper studies the psychological addiction to micro-series and identifies the thrill sensation, counter-routine plots, emotional resonance, and efficient immersive aesthetic experiences as significant factors contributing to addiction to micro-series. The evolution of micro-series from rudimentary to refined is an inevitable trend. To address the issue of addiction to micro-series, the researchers propose the following measures: 1. The state should increase supervision of the micro-series industry, for example, by monitoring undesirable content through visual recognition systems. 2. Strengthen the youth supervision system, with micro-series platforms implementing anti-addiction systems for minors, limiting their viewing time, and enforcing content rating systems. 3. Enhance the artistic standards and comprehensive qualities of industry creators, encouraging micro-series practitioners to continuously improve their legal and quality awareness, focusing not only on traffic data and financial gains but also on the social benefits of their works.

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