

A Review of Research on the Communication Effects and Ethical Controversies of AIGC Online Micro-Short Dramas

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Abstract

With the deepening application of AIGC technology, production logic, communication mechanisms, and ethical boundaries have become highly discussed issues in online micro-short dramas. Taking journal literature published from 2020 to 2026 as the core texts, this paper reviews existing studies from three dimensions: technological production, audience acceptance, and ethical controversies. The study finds that the technological production dimension has revealed the evolutionary path by which AIGC shifts from a tool to a subject; the audience acceptance dimension has formed a progressive understanding from viewing motivations to addiction mechanisms and then to aesthetic transformation; and the ethical controversy dimension focuses on four core issues: alienation of subjectivity, copyright infringement, algorithmic risks, and distortion of the pseudo-environment. However, insufficient dialogue still exists among the three sections. Studies on technological production and ethical risks focus on the production end and the text end, while audience studies concentrate on the consumption end, and systematic attention is still lacking to the possible logical chain through which communication effects lead to ethical controversies. Future research may deepen the study of the uniqueness of addiction mechanisms in AI micro-short dramas under an analytical framework that integrates the three sections, and may further promote empirical investigation of copyright infringement and deep synthesis governance.

Keywords

AI short drama, online micro-short drama, AIGC

1. Introduction

The academic origin of micro-short drama research can be traced back to discussions of fragmented narrative and vertical-screen aesthetics in the early rise of short-video platforms. At first, scholars regarded micro-short dramas as an extension of short videos, and the discussion focused on industrial models and user growth. Gradually, the number of micro-short dramas increased sharply and the user scale expanded. Micro-short dramas have grown from a marginal online cultural phenomenon into a mainstream form of digital consumption.

Since 2022, the rapid iteration of generative artificial intelligence technology has further changed the production mode of micro-short dramas. AIGC tools have greatly lowered the production threshold of short

dramas, and a group of full-process AI micro-short dramas have appeared one after another. In the field of audience research, scholars have already accumulated many results with reference value on the addiction mechanisms and emotional structures of young audiences watching micro-short dramas.

A review of existing literature shows that current research is roughly distributed in three directions. The first direction focuses on technological production and discusses how AI changes the production process and narrative mode of micro-short dramas [1, 2]. The second direction focuses on audience acceptance and analyzes changes in the viewing motivations, addiction process, and aesthetic experience of young groups [7, 8, 9, 10]. The third direction focuses on ethical controversies, and the issues discussed include the weakening of creative subjectivity, blurred copyright ownership, content bias brought by algorithmic recommendation, and the influence of AI-generated content on audience cognition [13, 14, 15, 17].

However, the integration of these three directions has received little attention. For example, literature on addiction mechanisms rarely asks whether AI intervention changes the path of addiction, while literature on ethical risks concentrates on the production end and the institutional end and rarely asks how these risks are perceived and experienced by audiences. An integrated analytical framework is still insufficient. Based on the above judgment, this paper searched the CNKI database using the Boolean logic search expression “keyword/topic = (AIGC micro-short drama OR AI short drama OR AI micro-short drama OR online micro-short drama OR AI comic drama).” Finally, 17 articles were included. This paper reviews the existing literature from the three dimensions of technological production, audience acceptance, and ethical controversies, and, on the basis of presenting the research progress of each section, attempts to discuss the possible relationships among the three, so as to provide a literature reference for subsequent research.

2. Technical Characteristics and Production Changes of AIGC Micro-Short Dramas

2.1 Changes in AI-Driven Production Processes

Regarding the production mode of AIGC micro-short dramas, existing studies generally believe that AI has developed from an auxiliary tool into a role that deeply participates in content production, and that the creation of micro-short dramas is shifting from “human dominance” to “human-machine collaboration.” From the emergence of ChatGPT in 2022 to the release of Sora in 2024, generative AI technology has made a leap from text generation to video generation. AI can automatically generate script outlines, storyboard sketches, and character settings according to text prompts entered by users, turn abstract ideas into visualized content through text-to-image and text-to-video models, and then complete post-production through automatic editing and dubbing tools. A production cycle that used to require several months can now be compressed to several weeks [1, 2].

In the production of some AI micro-short dramas, this technological change is especially obvious. This kind of content does not require high narrative logic or visual refinement, and producers tend to adopt a highly templated production method. When keywords such as “overbearing CEO,” “counterattack,” and “rebirth” are entered, AI can automatically generate the plot framework. With automatic dubbing, scene rendering, and post-production editing, the production cost of a single episode can be reduced to less than one tenth of the cost of traditional shooting. This low-cost and batch-replication model enables AI micro-short dramas to flood into platforms in large numbers within a short period of time, forming a supply strategy that wins by quantity [3].

The situation concerning the creative subject is more complicated. AI has not completely replaced human creators. A division of labor has formed between humans and machines: AI is responsible for generation at the technical level, while humans are responsible for controlling the direction. However, in the actual operation of AI micro-short drama production, this division of labor is often simplified into “humans input keywords, and AI completes all content” [4]. The role of the creator has degenerated from an artistic expresser into an instruction inputter. Whether the quality of the generated content is good mainly depends on the algorithm’s training data and how the parameters are set, while the creator’s aesthetic judgment becomes secondary.

2.2 Database-Based Production Mode and Content Aesthetics

In terms of the content generation mechanism of AI micro-short dramas, its core mode is more like a database-based one. After the creator enters prompts, AI retrieves, filters, and recombines narrative units from

an existing data pool to generate plot texts that conform to popular formulas. This production mode does not depend on the causal relationship and linear progression in traditional narrative. Instead, it disassembles narrative elements into calculable and reusable data modules [5].

In visual expression, AI micro-short dramas commonly adopt a method of “cross-code montage” [5]. In essence, this method uses algorithms to integrate visual materials from different sources. It gives priority to sensory stimulation, while story narration retreats to a secondary position. The combination of visual elements serves “how to capture attention more quickly” rather than “how to tell a story well.”

From the perspective of the platform’s distribution logic, the production of AI micro-short dramas is not an isolated technical action; it is also closely bound to the platform’s traffic allocation mechanism. Platform algorithms value completion rate and interaction rate, and this preference in turn affects the direction of AI content generation. Creators and platforms gradually form a tacit understanding. AI produces templated content that fits algorithmic preferences in batches, and platforms reward it with traffic [6]. The convergence of technology and platforms changes AI micro-short drama production from an accidental behavior into an institutionalized process, and this also lays hidden risks for its communication effects and subsequent ethical controversies.

3. Communication Effects and Audience Acceptance of AIGC Micro-Short Dramas

3.1 Viewing Motivations and Addiction Mechanisms of Young Audiences

Regarding the behavior of young audiences watching micro-short dramas, existing studies have roughly formed a progressive understanding from “active choice” to “structural addiction” and then to “spiritual emptiness.” At the level of viewing motivation, young people’s watching of micro-short dramas is not passive addiction. Multiple psychological needs drive it. These needs include emotional compensation under real-life pressure, the filling of fragmented time, and confirmation of belonging to a circle [7]. AI micro-short dramas are especially suitable for such needs. Their content is popular and direct, does not require much thinking, and can be embedded into the gaps of daily life in a low-cost way, so that viewers can watch at any time.

From the perspective of perception, the vertical-screen format and fast-paced narrative of micro-short dramas are changing young people’s perceptual habits. Vertical screens compress spatial perception, while a fast pace causes temporal perception to become disordered [8].

There are two explanatory paths for the addiction mechanism. One explanation starts from the supply side and emphasizes the external influence of platform algorithms, arguing that micro-short dramas form a closed loop of “rapid compensation of needs and continuous escalation of satisfaction” through efficiency maximization, quantifiable production standards, and algorithmic control [9]. The special feature of AI micro-short dramas is that AI’s unlimited generation capacity can continuously supply similar content. Users always have the next episode to watch, which further amplifies the addictive characteristics of short-video products. Therefore, AI micro-short dramas are more difficult to interrupt than traditional micro-short dramas. Another explanation starts from the psychological needs of the audience and focuses on individual psychology. It holds that the sense of “pleasure” brought by micro-short dramas is not simple satisfaction of desire, but a state in which “pleasure” and “displeasure” are intertwined [10]. The endpoint of pleasure consumption is often spiritual emptiness rather than real satisfaction.

These two explanations respectively explain the external structure and internal experience of addiction, and they complement each other. However, these studies all take traditional micro-short dramas as their object. Whether the unlimited generation capacity of AI micro-short dramas makes addiction more hidden and more difficult to escape still needs more empirical research for explanation.

3.2 Viewing Experience and Acceptance Mode of AI Micro-Short Dramas

Regarding the viewing experience of AI micro-short dramas, existing studies have begun to pay attention to the differences between them and traditional film and television in aesthetic mechanisms. AI micro-short dramas are undergoing a change from reliance on narrative to reliance on atmosphere. By algorithmically processing visual and auditory signals, AI transforms color, light and shadow, and sound into calculable emotional parameters, replaces narrative rhythm with rapid scene switching, and directly acts on the audience’s

bodily feelings. Narrative logic is greatly compressed, plot is left with only the function of emotional stimulation, and the only purpose of the work is to produce the strongest emotional response in the shortest possible time.

The audience's mode of acceptance has also changed accordingly. In the past, when watching film and television works, audiences defaulted to accepting an aesthetic contract of "assuming it to be true" and were willing to believe in and enter a fictional world [11]. However, the acceptance of AI micro-short dramas is shifting toward a mode of "assuming it to be false." Audiences clearly know that the content is generated by AI and can also detect its technical defects, but they are still willing to invest emotions in exchange for pleasure, forming an overly tolerant way of viewing.

This acceptance logic of "assuming it to be false" in AI micro-short dramas may itself contain an implicit risk. Under the premise that the audience knows the content is generated by AI, it voluntarily gives up critical thinking in exchange for immediate emotional satisfaction. If this viewing mentality of voluntary intellectual lowering is repeated for a long time, whether it will weaken the audience's basic judgment of information authenticity is a problem that needs to be taken seriously. At present, however, there is still little empirical research to test this possibility.

4. Ethical Controversies of AIGC Micro-Short Dramas

4.1 Weakening of the Creative Subject and Content Convergence

Regarding the creative ethics of AI micro-short dramas, one issue that existing studies commonly focus on is that AI is moving from a creative tool to a creative leader, which may lead to the weakening of creators' subjectivity and the homogenization of content. When AI deeply participates in scripts, algorithm-generated content will squeeze creators' personalized aesthetics. In the production of AI micro-short dramas, this situation is even more obvious. When AI generates templated content in batches, the creative activity of creators is simplified into prompt training.

In terms of content convergence, AI transforms dramatic qualities into symbols that can be produced in batches. It extracts patterns from a large number of existing works and then recombines them, generating a large amount of similar content [12]. The homogenization of AI micro-short dramas is especially prominent. The same formula of pleasure is repeatedly applied to different themes, and audiences often need only watch the first 10 seconds to predict the later plot direction. From the perspective of narrative practice, AI micro-short dramas disassemble narrative elements into data units, causing ruptures in causal relationships and stiff emotional turns. From the industrial perspective, creators' high dependence on AI tools causes their participation in core links such as narrative structure design and value expression to continue to decline [13].

These three aspects respectively explain the multiple causes of homogenization from technical logic, narrative practice, and industrial dynamics. However, whether technology is an inducement or the main cause differs according to the focus of each study, and a unified judgment has not yet been formed. Overall, theoretical analysis of the weakening of subjectivity is already relatively sufficient, but there are still few empirical investigations of the transmission relationship between the alienation of creative subjectivity and audience aesthetic experience.

4.2 Copyright Issues and the Regulatory Dilemma of Deep Synthesis

Regarding the copyright and legal risks of AI micro-short dramas, existing studies generally believe that the current legal system is difficult to adapt to the technical characteristics of AI-generated content, and that copyright dilemmas run through the three links of data training, content generation, and responsibility determination.

At the data training level, AI models are mostly trained on publicly available materials on the Internet, and a considerable part of these materials has not been authorized by the original authors, creating potential infringement risks [14]. Producers of AI micro-short dramas usually have neither the willingness nor the ability to obtain lawful training data, and infringement is especially common in this kind of content. At the content generation level, there are fundamental disagreements over the determination of originality in AI-generated content. Domestic judicial practice tends to recognize users' original contribution through multiple rounds of

modification, while the U.S. Copyright Office has repeatedly refused copyright registration for AI-generated content on the ground that users lack “ultimate creative control.” At the level of responsibility determination, the refined division of labor in the micro-short drama industrial chain, from IP development to platform revenue sharing, forms a “blind zone of responsibility.” In addition, 80% to 90% of production costs are used for traffic purchasing rather than content creation, so right holders face the dilemma that actual infringers have insufficient capacity to pay compensation [15].

These three links respectively correspond to the source of copyright protection, rights confirmation, and accountability. This exposes the incomplete protection of multiple rights and interests, including personality interests, property interests, and data rights, in the current legal system for AI micro-short dramas. Comparison among different jurisdictions also shows that disagreements over originality standards are not only technical issues, but also involve different positions at the level of legal philosophy. Therefore, constructing a governance framework in which technology and law cooperate well has become the core difficulty that copyright governance needs to face.

4.3 Algorithmic Recommendation and Deviation of Value Orientation

Regarding the influence of algorithmic recommendation on the content ecology of micro-short dramas, existing studies mainly focus on how algorithms change creative logic through traffic orientation, and on the aesthetic convergence and value deviation that this change may bring. Data-driven content production changes the creative mode from “experience-driven” to “data-driven.” Platforms predict popularity according to user behavior data and make precise adjustments in topic selection, creation, and distribution. The communication space for works with serious narratives, diverse expression, and concern for reality is further compressed.

In the field of AI micro-short dramas, this effect is more obvious. Creators extensively use narrative strategies featuring novelty-seeking, reversals, and dense pleasure points, and use extreme character settings and stimulating plots to cater to algorithmic preferences. A cycle forms among platforms, creators, and AI. AI tools can produce large quantities of novelty-seeking works that cater to the traffic era, and high-traffic works then receive more platform traffic support. In the long run, opportunities for innovative themes to be displayed will decrease.

At the same time, algorithms construct users’ information cocoons, and the range of content users encounter is continuously narrowed. The feeding of AI micro-short dramas further intensifies this trend. Algorithms not only recommend similar content, but also use AI’s personalized generation capacity to customize plot versions that fit each user’s preferences. The algorithmic recommendation mechanism is therefore no longer only a technical tool for content distribution; it also invisibly guides public attention and emotional focus.

4.4 Distortion of the Pseudo-Environment and Cognitive Risks

Many studies have noticed that the media spaces built by AI short dramas can subtly influence audience cognition. The pseudo-environment constructed by AI micro-short dramas is not a representation of reality, but a visualized presentation that replaces experience with algorithms and observation with data [14]. Creators are less rooted in social reality and lack detailed observation and experience. They mostly use AI tools to reorganize and splice databases, so the deviation from the real world is more obvious.

From the perspective of technical principles, AI often produces details that violate real physical logic during image generation. The repeated appearance of such incongruous details can easily conflict with the cognitive common sense accumulated by audiences [16]. At the level of audience aesthetics, when audiences become accustomed to obtaining satisfaction from image atmosphere and no longer value complete logical narration, their aesthetic judgment may be domesticated by algorithms. Gradually, individuals’ willingness to actively accept different life experiences may decline. From the perspective of value transmission, deep synthesis technology also brings new hidden dangers. With technical means such as face swapping and voice imitation, the images of public figures may be arbitrarily transformed, which may unconsciously carry inherent prejudice and stereotyped cognition [17]. Taking some AI micro-short dramas launched on platforms such as Hongguo as examples, such works revolve entirely around traffic revenue and do not take realism or positive value guidance as creative principles. They can easily amplify social stereotypes and spread prejudice a second time.

The studies above point out the hidden problems in the pseudo-environmental scenes of AI micro-short dramas from the three perspectives of individual cognition, aesthetic feeling, and value output. However, most of the current conclusions come from theoretical reasoning and analysis, and they lack support from first-hand survey data at the audience level. AI micro-short dramas are consumed frequently and have a low threshold. Whether these characteristics intensify their long-term transformation of young people's cognitive modes still needs to be further verified by subsequent empirical research.

5. Review: Consensus, Disagreements, and Deficiencies

5.1 Research Consensus

Based on the above literature, the academic community has formed a basic consensus. AIGC technology has deeply intervened in all links of micro-short drama production, and human-machine collaboration is becoming a mainstream production mode. There is a close relationship between the highly sticky communication of micro-short dramas and the psychological state of young groups. The ethical risks faced by AI micro-short dramas have already attracted academic attention. However, most studies focus only on one risk dimension, and systematic evaluation is still lacking regarding the possible superposition effects among multiple risks and the corresponding measures.

5.2 Core Disagreements

Beyond this consensus, existing studies still show clear disagreements on some issues. The academic community has not yet reached a unified evaluation of AIGC technology itself. Some results affirm that technology can improve creative efficiency and allow everyone to participate, while many studies focus on the negative effects derived from technology. There are also different judgments on the subjectivity of young audiences. Some studies emphasize the agency of young people's choices, while others pay more attention to structural manipulation. These two perspectives respectively reveal different aspects of the addiction phenomenon. There are also differences in the explanatory paths for addiction mechanisms. Supply-side logic and demand-side psychological experience analysis respectively explain the external structure and internal experience of addiction. The emphases in ethical evaluation of the pseudo-environment are also different. Existing analysis is mainly concentrated at the theoretical level, and there are relatively few empirical studies on cognitive consequences at the audience end.

5.3 Research Deficiencies

Based on the reading of existing literature, current research has three relatively obvious shortcomings. First, there is a lack of an integrated framework among the three sections of technological production, audience acceptance, and ethical controversies. Literature discussing technological empowerment rarely asks whether technology also makes micro-short dramas more addictive. Literature discussing addiction mechanisms rarely asks whether AI intervention changes the path of addiction. Literature discussing ethical risks concentrates on the production end and the institutional end, and rarely asks how the consumption end perceives these risks. Second, the particularity of low-quality AI micro-short dramas has been seriously neglected. Existing studies mostly focus on high-quality AI short dramas produced by China Media Group or leading commercial short dramas, and pay insufficient attention to the large number of low-quality and templated AI micro-short dramas on platforms and their unique communication effects and ethical issues. Third, empirical research on copyright infringement is still relatively weak. Although some studies have begun to systematically sort out judicial cases, more comprehensive solutions and opinions are still lacking concerning the overall scale and industrial influence of copyright infringement in AI micro-short dramas.

6. Conclusion and Prospects

This paper reviews existing research in the field of AIGC online micro-short dramas from the three dimensions of technological production, audience acceptance, and ethical controversies. These three aspects together outline the basic research landscape of this field.

The value of this review lies in placing the three sections of technological production, audience acceptance, and ethical controversies under the same framework for review. It shows the research progress within each section and the possible lines of connection among sections, providing a simple literature reference for subsequent research. In particular, this paper attempts to establish preliminary analytical clues regarding the possible logical chain between communication effects and ethical controversies.

Of course, the analysis in this paper also has some limitations. The literature sources are mainly concentrated in CSSCI and Peking University core journals, and the coverage of English literature is limited, so some interdisciplinary frontier results may be omitted. This paper mainly uses literature of theoretical analysis, and the coverage of empirical studies is insufficient, which to some extent limits the precise evaluation of the audience acceptance effects of AI micro-short dramas. This paper adopts a thematic framework for classification and review. Although this is conducive to presenting the research progress of each section, it may also weaken the detailed presentation of existing fragmentary connections among different sections.

Based on the above analysis, future research can be further advanced in the following directions. First, a cross-sectional research framework integrating technological analysis, audience research, and ethical evaluation can be constructed, and the question of “how AIGC technical characteristics shape communication effects and how communication effects in turn lead to ethical controversies” can be promoted as a clear problem. Next, comparative research can be carried out among low-quality AI micro-short dramas, traditional micro-short dramas, and high-quality AI short dramas to examine what influence differences in content quality may have on communication effects and ethical risks. Furthermore, quantitative and case studies on copyright infringement and deep synthesis governance can also be promoted to provide empirical support for the formulation of industry norms and policies.

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