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Three-dimensional paths for content innovation in micro-short drama: IP linkage, niche cultivation, and interactive narrative

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Abstract

Three-dimensional paths for content innovation in micro-short drama: IP linkage, niche cultivation, and interactive narrative

This article is a conceptual study of content innovation in micro-short drama. As the industry faces pressure to move from quantitative expansion toward higher production quality, homogenization remains its central content problem. Existing research explains parts of that problem — platform-driven production, the formal constraints of the small screen, recurring genre formulas, and audience feedback — but rarely integrates them into a framework for innovation. The article proposes three linked paths. Bidirectional IP linkage treats the short serial as neither a replacement for long-form drama nor merely its promotional residue, but as a format that can test and later extend narrative worlds. Niche cultivation shifts audience address from age and gender toward occupation, cultural interest, and regional identity. Interactive narrative activates user agency through consequential choice and through paratext such as comments and bullet comments, while remaining constrained by platform governance. The framework is an integrative explanation, not an empirically validated model. Some of its principles may travel beyond China; several of its devices depend on Chinese platform, linguistic, and regulatory conditions.

Keywords: micro-short drama, conceptual framework, content innovation, IP linkage, niche cultivation, interactive narrative, user agency

Micro-short drama has expanded rapidly as a serialized short-video form, but expansion has not solved the problem of content quality. Much of the output still relies on immediately legible conflict, flat character types, and repeatable emotional hooks. Studies of the Chinese short-video ecology describe this pattern from different angles. Genre criticism identifies a small set of recurring narrative types and warns that formulaic production produces aesthetic fatigue (Li, 2025). Formal criticism argues that the mobile small screen favors intensified bodies, efficient "database" recombination of familiar situations, and, at the extreme, addictive rather than continuous storytelling (Bian 2024). Production studies show writers compressing character complexity in order to remain visible within short production cycles and algorithmic selection (Cao, He, Liu, & LC, 2026). Regulatory and industry calls for a shift from traffic volume to quality make the contradiction explicit,

but they do not by themselves supply a model of content innovation. The practical challenge is to determine how a fast, fragmentary format can acquire narrative distinction and cultural value without being asked to imitate the long-form series in every respect.

Works discussed as reputation-driven successes, including Findra in Midsummer (《盛夏芬德拉》, 2025, Hongguo / iQIYI) and Inside and Outside the House (《家里家外》, 2025; Hongguo / Douyin / iQIYI), are useful only as illustrations of an emerging demand for recognition and empathy rather than mere stimulation. They cannot establish an industry-wide transition from a sensationalist "1.0" to a quality-oriented "2.0." What they do suggest is that content innovation is no longer adequately described as a change of theme. A drama can adopt a respectable subject and remain structurally generic. Innovation has to be located in the relations among storyworld development, audience specification, and authorship.

The relevant literature has not yet made those relations explicit. One strand examines platforms, creative labor, and feedback workflows. Cao et al. (2026), for example, show how micro-drama writers adapt plots and characters to comments, reposts, memes, and other audience traces, while also documenting the limits of those traces. Their contribution is an empirical account of feedback-responsive authorship, not a general model of content innovation. A second strand examines the form itself: vertical framing, windowed attention, genre typology, and the narrative consequences of the small screen (Bian, 2024; Li, 2025). A third strand, older and more theoretical, explains transmedia extension and participatory meaning-making. Jenkins (2006; 2013) treats convergence culture as a movement of narrative and interpretive activity across media, while Murray (1997) defines agency as meaningful action within a narrative environment rather than the mere presence of options. A fourth, more applied strand shows how micro-short drama can reactivate traditional cultural material as serial intellectual property (Xu & Yang, 2024).

These studies identify important mechanisms, but they leave a conceptual gap. Platform studies explain why production is compressed and data-sensitive. Formal studies explain why the small screen encourages intensification and formula. Participatory theory explains how audiences can become interpreters or agents, but not how that capacity should be specified for micro-short drama. None of these approaches integrates intellectual-property strategy, audience segmentation, and interactive authorship as related paths of content innovation. Nor do they distinguish clearly between features

peculiar to the Chinese industry and principles that might apply more broadly. That integration and distinction are the task of this article.

The manuscript is intended as a conceptual study. It is not an empirical investigation and does not meet, or claim to meet, the methodological requirements of interview research, content analysis, or platform-data analysis. Its research problem is how content innovation in micro-short drama can be conceptualized so that the format's brevity becomes a condition of innovation rather than only a cause of homogenization. Its objective is to construct a three-dimensional framework—IP linkage, niche cultivation, and interactive narrative—and to show how that framework follows from the different mechanisms of homogenization identified above.

The methodological basis is integrative conceptual analysis. The procedure has four steps. First, the content problem is specified as a series of distinct mechanisms rather than as a general complaint about low quality. Second, concepts already available in transmedia, audience, and participatory theory are revised against documented micro-short-drama practices. Third, publicly discussed cases are used illustratively, to clarify what a mechanism can explain, not as a sample from which general effects can be inferred. Fourth, the resulting framework is bounded by stating which claims are context-specific and which are offered as more general principles. The criterion is conceptual coherence: whether the distinctions clarify the problem and whether the conclusions follow from the analysis. It is not statistical representativeness.

Three terms need definition before they are applied. IP linkage does not mean any adaptation of a known title. It refers to a bi-directional relation between short and long narrative forms, and between an existing cultural text and its short serial development. In one direction, a micro-short drama functions as a limited prototype with which audience response to characters, relations, and story premises can be observed before a larger investment. In the other, a short-form storyworld is expanded into a longer narrative, retaining its concentrated conflict while adding motivations, subplots, and social implication. The concept also includes the reactivation of archival cultural material as a serial storyworld. Linkage is therefore a relation among formats and texts, not a guarantee that traffic will become cultural value.

Niche cultivation translates an industry metaphor of cultivation into an analytical term. "Cultivation" means sustained address to a narrowly specified social world, as distinct from one-off harvesting of broad traffic. The relevant niches are not primarily age and gender cohorts. They are communities

organized by occupation, cultural interest, or regional and linguistic identity. The concept requires knowledge of that community's codes and lived contradictions. It fails when a profession, subculture, or locality is used only as a costume for a generic plot.

Interactive narrative, as used here, is not identical with audience reaction. Following Murray (1997), interaction becomes narrative agency only when audience action has consequences for story or meaning. In micro-short drama that action takes at least two forms: explicit choices among consequential branches, and latent participation through paratext such as bullet comments, comments, reposts, and memes (Jenkins, 2013; Cao et al., 2026). Metrics can inform either form, but optimization for clicks is not itself interactive narrative. The concept also includes a negative condition. Feedback serves innovation only when it is interpreted in relation to narrative coherence. When it replaces judgment, it reproduces the formulas it appears to disrupt.

These definitions indicate why the framework has three dimensions rather than a list of desirable topics. Homogenization, on the analysis above, has three sources: narrative value is truncated by duration; audiences are addressed through overly broad demographic and trope categories; and authorship remains one-directional even when viewers are constantly measured. IP linkage responds to the first, niche cultivation to the second, and interactive narrative to the third. Each section below develops one response and ends by stating what it contributes to the framework and what it cannot solve alone.

Bidirectional IP linkage: Short drama empowering long formats

If the first limit of micro-short drama is duration, innovation cannot consist simply of asking every episode to carry the moral and psychological density of a long series. IP linkage addresses truncation by moving narrative value across formats. The short form and the long form do different work, and the relation between them can be designed rather than left to opportunistic spinoffs.

The first direction runs from short to long. Long-form production typically commits capital before audience response is known, and its stages are difficult to revise once underway. Micro-short drama, by contrast, can be produced and circulated quickly enough to function as a provisional test

of a premise, a relationship, or a character configuration. Cao et al. (2026) describe a related industrial practice in which teams release highlight clips or interpret the performance of an initial batch of episodes before deciding how to continue. This supports the conceptual claim that short serials can generate early audience signals. It does not support the stronger claim that they transform commercial uncertainty into reliable data assets. The same research shows that views and comments may be inflated by promotion, that active commenters do not represent silent viewers, and that some visible interaction is itself manufactured. A short drama can reduce one kind of uncertainty—whether a premise elicits immediate recognition—while leaving intact another: whether the premise can sustain a longer narrative. IP linkage is therefore a strategy of partial and early learning, not a method of risk elimination.

The short prototype also has a character-specific function. Compressed storytelling pressures writers to make characters recognizable at once, which often means using flat types (Cao et al., 2026). Used reflexively, however, the same compression can reveal which traits and relationships viewers actually retain. The useful output is not a command to reproduce the most clicked type. It is evidence of where a character has been understood only as a function of the plot and therefore needs motivation before any long-form expansion. In this respect, the short drama is a diagnostic form. It shows the narrative debt that a longer adaptation would have to repay.

The reverse direction runs from a circulated short-form storyworld to a longer drama. Earlier industrial practice often adapted established television or film properties into short supplements. The emerging reverse path is different. A micro-short drama may already have a recognizable premise and an engaged audience, but its duration restricts character change, subordinate plots, and engagement with social experience. Expansion is justified only if it does more than prolong the original stimulus. Jenkins's (2006) account of transmedia storytelling is useful here because it distinguishes extension from repetition: a storyworld grows by distributing narrative information across forms, not by retelling the same event at greater length. Applied to this industry, the common narrative denominator is the concentrated conflict that made the short version legible, while the long version must add the relations that conflict alone cannot supply—a character's capacity to change, a moral problem that cannot be settled by reversal, and a social situation that gives the conflict a world.

This is a normative principle for adaptation, not a description of what all successful adaptations achieve. Cases such as the movement between an established long-form property and a short-form derivative, exemplified in industry discussion by There Is Wind on My Return Way (《我的归途有风》, 2024, Douyin), clarify the older direction. They do not prove that every viral short drama possesses a storyworld deep enough to be lengthened. Some viral works exhaust their premise in the hook. The conceptual test is whether enough narrative information remains undeveloped, not whether the short version has already attracted attention.

A further modality should be included if IP linkage is to be defined by relation rather than by one commercial route. Xu and Yang (2024) discuss AI-produced micro-short dramas that serialize mythic and classical material, such as Chinese Mythology (《中国神话》, 2024, CCTV Video) and AI Reading the Classics (《AI看典籍》, 2024, CCTV Video). Whatever judgment one makes of their aesthetic results, they show that linkage can also run from a cultural archive to a short serial. Here the existing "long form" is not a television series but a body of stories already held in common. The short drama does not validate a market in the ordinary sense; it re-specifies an inherited storyworld for contemporary viewers. This modality matters because it prevents IP linkage from being reduced to traffic conversion. It also shows why the concept can include public-cultural as well as commercial development, without making artificial intelligence a separate dimension of the present framework.

IP linkage thus gives the framework its narrative economy. It explains how micro-short drama can contribute to cultural value without pretending that a one-minute episode is a complete long-form work. It does not decide whose social world the story addresses, and it does not decide whether viewers have any agency in the story's development. A storyworld can be carefully extended and still speak to no one in particular. That is the problem taken up by niche cultivation.

Niche cultivation: From demographic stratification to multi-dimensional segmentation

IP linkage can move a narrative between formats while leaving its imagined audience unchanged. The second source of homogenization lies in that audience construction. Micro-short drama frequently addresses viewers through

broad demographic categories and through a reusable inventory of situations: domination and romance, revenge and rebirth, family conflict, and sudden reversal of status. Bian (2024), drawing on the logic of database narrative, argues that such situations can be connected without strong causal continuity. Li (2025) likewise treats genre repetition as a source of fatigue rather than of distinction. Under these conditions, a new setting does not constitute innovation if the underlying address remains interchangeable.

Niche cultivation names a different principle of address. Demographic variables such as age and gender still describe markets, and the recent visibility of silver-economy drama shows that demographic targeting remains an industry logic. The point is not that such targeting is always invalid. It is that age or gender cannot specify the knowledge, obligations, and contradictions that make a story non-substitutable. A shift toward sociological segmentation asks which social world the drama knows well enough to represent from within.

Occupation is one such world. A profession carries technical knowledge, a hierarchy, a vocabulary, and a set of practical dilemmas. Narratives about clinicians, teachers, or legal workers therefore cannot be credible if the occupation is only a label attached to a generic romance or revenge plot. The conceptual requirement is twofold. The drama must be accurate enough for members of the occupation to recognize the practice, and it must translate a profession-specific dilemma into a human stake that other viewers can understand. Neither condition is sufficient alone. Accuracy without translation becomes insider display; translation without accuracy becomes costume drama in occupational dress.

Claims about circulation require similar caution. Professional and interest communities often have dense communication networks, so a drama that touches a recognized pain point may travel first within the group. That is a plausible mechanism of word-of-mouth, not a predictable stage before mainstream crossover. Community approval can also confine a work. Cultivation seeks recognition by a specified audience; it does not promise that every specified audience will become a mass audience.

Interest-based communities make the same requirement more explicitly cultural. Audiences organized around animation and games, historical costume, science fiction, or other shared aesthetic practices are held together by codes: what counts as a competent reference, an authentic object, or an offensive simplification. Jenkins's (2013) account of fan interpretation is relevant

because it treats these codes as participatory knowledge rather than as marketing attributes. A micro-short drama can borrow the visible signs of such a community and still fail the test of cultivation. The key question is whether the narrative can be understood only by using the community's knowledge, or whether that knowledge can be removed without changing the story. If it can be removed, the niche has been decorated rather than cultivated.

Regional culture adds a third mode of specification. Locality is not background color. It is produced through place, shared memory, custom, and language. Dialect, in particular, can organize humor, status, and intimacy in ways that standard speech does not. Inside and Outside the House (《家里家外》, 2025; Hongguo / Douyin / iQIYI) is cited here only as an illustration of how Sichuan-Chongqing speech may be used as a narrative resource rather than as an ornament. The example clarifies the concept; it does not measure the effect of dialect on attention or loyalty. The same caution applies to foodways, garden aesthetics, and ethnic custom. Any of these can anchor a storyworld, but none innovates by its mere appearance.

There is a further boundary. Cao et al. (2026) note that, in cross-cultural circulation, an emphasis on visibly "Eastern" signs can increase discoverability while flattening the culture it claims to mark. Regional cultivation is therefore not the extraction of local symbols for algorithmic legibility. It binds plot decisions to a local social world. A hotpot meal, a dialect joke, or a local landscape innovates only when it changes what the characters can say, risk, or understand. Otherwise it is a transferable sign, and transferable signs are the material of homogenization.

Niche cultivation contributes the framework's principle of specification. It answers why a storyworld made extensible by IP linkage may nevertheless remain generic, and it identifies the kinds of knowledge required to differentiate it. It still treats the audience primarily as the addressee of a producer-made story. It does not explain how viewers participate in narrative development. That requires a separate concept of interactive narrative.

Interactive narrative and audience co-creation: Activating user agency

The third source of homogenization is authorship. Even a precisely addressed and carefully extended drama can treat viewers only as targets of delivery.

Micro-short drama is a weak candidate for that model because its circulation already depends on continuous audience traces. The conceptual task is to distinguish traces that merely rank a work from actions that enter its narrative.

The first mode is explicit choice. Interactive cinema and games have long demonstrated branching structures, but their presence in micro-short drama remains limited and often superficial. A prompt that asks viewers to select an option, while every selection returns them to the same plot, imitates agency without granting it. Murray (1997) provides the relevant criterion: agency is meaningful action, not the display of an interface. A choice becomes narratively interactive when it alters relations, consequences, or the ethical position from which the story can be understood. The strongest form is not a binary contest between two desired outcomes but a dilemma in which each available action carries a loss. Such a design can move the viewer from observer to decision-maker. It does not, however, automatically produce philosophical depth, break the boundary between fiction and audience, or improve aesthetic quality. Those are possible effects of a well-constructed dilemma, not properties of interaction as such. At present, explicit branching is better treated as an emerging possibility of the format than as its dominant practice (Li, 2025).

The second mode is more characteristic of current platforms. Audiences comment, post bullet comments, repeat lines, invent memes, and repost selected scenes. Jenkins (2013) describes this kind of activity as interpretive production rather than as passive reception. In micro-short drama, Cao et al. (2026) give the practice a more specific form. Writers do not usually receive a synchronous instruction from viewers. They infer preferences from dispersed signals—repeated descriptions of a character, attention to a secondary role, meme-like rephrasing, and reposting—and then adjust later episodes. Cao et al. call the audience role "narrative steering": viewers seldom write the text, but their interpretations can influence pacing, emphasis, and plot direction. This distinction should be retained. Calling all audience response "co-creation" collapses a useful difference between making narrative material and supplying traces that others interpret.

Paratext also extend the work after the episode ends. Bullet comments can make a scene's emotional peak visible, while comment sections can prolong argument about a character's choice. They may become part of the viewing experience rather than an external supplement. This is the sense in which micro-short drama can be described as bi-directional. The direction is real,

but it is uneven. Not every comment enters the work. Producers, moderators, and ranking systems select which traces become visible and actionable (Cao et al., 2026). User agency is therefore not the transfer of authorship from writer to audience. It is participation within a procedure whose terms the audience does not control.

The limits are internal to the concept, not objections to it. Comment sections overrepresent active users and can be inflated by paid or automated interaction. Small producers may see only crude keyword summaries. Most importantly, rapid obedience to feedback encourages the stacking of already successful memes and conflicts, which returns production to homogenization (Bian, 2024; Cao et al., 2026). Interactive narrative supports content innovation only under a condition of narrative resistance: audience signals may revise a story, but they cannot be allowed to dissolve its point of view, its internal continuity, or the specificity achieved by niche cultivation. Without that condition, participation is another name for demand optimization.

This dimension completes the framework without absorbing the other two. IP linkage decides how a storyworld can move between short and long forms. Niche cultivation decides which social knowledge makes the storyworld specific. Interactive narrative decides how audience action — explicit or latent, productive or interpretive — can enter the work without becoming the sole author of its value. The three paths are complementary because each failure is different. A participatory drama can be generic; a precisely targeted drama can be closed to its audience; an extensible storyworld can remain socially unspecified.

Conclusions

The three-dimensional framework follows from the separation of mechanisms in the preceding analysis. The argument did not begin with a model and then search for confirming examples. It began with the observation that "homogenization" names more than one problem. Duration truncates narrative development; demographic and database-like address makes different stories interchangeable; one-way authorship wastes the participatory capacity of the platform while uncritical feedback reproduces formulas. No single remedy covers all three. Lengthening a short drama does not specify its audience. Knowing a professional community does not give that community narrative

agency. Opening a plot to comments does not create a storyworld that can sustain extension. The model is the minimum set of concepts needed to keep these responses distinct and related.

Its internal relations can now be stated directly. IP linkage provides the narrative economy, connecting prototype, extension, and cultural reactivation. Niche cultivation provides the principle of specification, replacing interchangeable demographic address with knowledge of a social world. Interactive narrative provides the principle of distributed but constrained authorship, including both consequential choice and second-text steering. Together they describe content innovation as a change in relations—between formats, between text and community, and between producers and audiences—rather than as a change in subject matter alone. The examples used above clarify those relations. They do not verify them. Claims about risk reduction, inevitable community crossover, or the automatic conversion of traffic into cultural value are not entailed by the framework and should not be presented as its findings.

The framework also has operational conditions. IP linkage requires cooperation across production organizations that are used to treating short and long formats as separate markets. Niche cultivation requires domain knowledge and a willingness to accept audiences that may be small before they are broad. Interactive narrative requires systems that can distinguish useful signals from noise, together with editorial authority strong enough to refuse some signals. These conditions limit implementation. They do not weaken the conceptual distinction.

A final boundary concerns transfer beyond China. The Chinese setting shapes several devices discussed here. The close connection between short-video platforms and a developing micro-drama industry gives IP testing its present infrastructure (Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021). Bullet comments are a mature second-text form, and dialect and regional identity are widely available narrative resources. The policy demand for quality also gives the industry an unusually explicit reason to seek an alternative to traffic-led production. These are context-specific conditions, not universal features of short serial narrative.

The underlying principles are more transferable. A short serial can serve as a limited prototype for a longer storyworld wherever production cycles differ in cost and reversibility. Segmentation by lived identity and cultural competence can counter formulaic address in other markets. Audience traces can inform narrative revision wherever platforms make those traces visible.

The devices through which the principles operate should not be copied unchanged. Cao et al. (2026), drawing on interviews with Chinese micro-drama writers, document how audience feedback through comments, bullet comments, reposts, and memes shapes iterative narrative decisions in the Chinese platform context. Such platform-specific practices (particularly danmaku-centered co-creation) may travel less readily than the broader principle of consequential audience action. Transferring the framework therefore means preserving its three relations while re-specifying their local mechanisms.

This article presents the framework as a conceptual clarification. Empirical research can later examine whether particular productions realize one or more of the paths, how producers interpret audience signals, and how audiences understand specificity and agency. Those are different questions. The claim defended here is narrower and, within its scope, prior: content innovation in micro-short drama becomes intelligible when truncation, generic address, and one-way authorship are treated as distinct problems and answered together.

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