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## GENDERED NARRATIVES IN WOMEN-ORIENTED MICRO-SHORT PLAYS: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY

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### Abstract:

Women-oriented micro-short plays have emerged as a distinctive audiovisual form within contemporary digital media networks, particularly in relation to women's experiences, emotional negotiation, and identity formation. This paper examines gendered narratives in women-oriented micro-short plays from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on how such narratives shape female audience identification and reflect broader socio-cultural conditions. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, the study draws on questionnaire responses, textual and narrative analysis of selected micro-short plays, and an illustrative case study of a representative women-oriented micro-short series distributed on a major short-video platform. The findings indicate that narratives centred on women's self-development, emotional negotiation, workplace experience, and social identity are central to audience engagement. The compressed narrative structure and heightened emotional pacing of micro-short plays strengthen affective resonance and facilitate audience identification. The cross-cultural comparison reveals both shared and culturally specific patterns of gender representation. Domestic productions tend to emphasise family values and relational negotiation, while international examples more frequently foreground personal autonomy, self-realisation, and boundary-setting. This paper contributes to media and communication studies by positioning women-oriented micro-short plays as a gendered media form and by highlighting their cultural significance within contemporary short-form digital storytelling.

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## Introduction

Women-oriented micro-short plays, a type of short audiovisual media, are an emerging genre in the digital media landscape that has become popular among women viewers. With short episode lengths (usually 30 seconds to 15 minutes), these dramas are well adapted to the fragmented viewing experience of mobile media (Zhao & Fu, 2024). Distinguished from conventional television dramas, women-oriented micro-short plays primarily focus on narrative themes relevant to women's experiences, such as emotional negotiation, daily life, work, and self-development. These plays often adopt narrative and character-building strategies aligned with women's aesthetic and emotional expectations, enabling emotional engagement and identification.

From a media studies perspective, women-oriented micro-short plays function not merely as entertainment products, but as gendered cultural forms shaped by platform logics, narrative conventions, and audience reception within social media entertainment ecosystems (Cheng & Shao, 2024; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Popular genres such as romance, melodrama, revenge narratives, and time-travel rebirth employ compressed storytelling strategies through which women's desires, frustrations, and agency are articulated. Through concise pacing, heightened emotional intensity, and recurring gendered tropes, these micro-short plays operate as narrative spaces in which contemporary constructions of femininity are negotiated and circulated.

Although this media form has expanded rapidly in recent years, industry reports indicate a significant increase in production volume, audience reach, and commercial investment in micro-short plays (iiMedia Entertainment Industry Research Institute, 2023). Studies that examine narrative strategies, gender representation, and audience reception—particularly from a cross-cultural perspective—remain limited. This lack of focused analysis is especially evident in research addressing women-oriented micro-short plays as a distinct gendered media form within digital audiovisual storytelling. Market reports also indicate rapid sectoral expansion in recent years, providing a material platform ecology for the proliferation of micro-dramas, including women-oriented subgenres (iiMedia Entertainment Industry Research Institute, 2023).

The development of women-oriented micro-short plays is closely linked to broader transformations in short-form audiovisual media. Early women-oriented narrative traditions emerged across television and online literature platforms, where gender-targeted storytelling

emphasised emotional relationships and personal growth. As short-video platforms evolved, these narrative logics gradually migrated into audiovisual formats, giving rise to micro-short plays characterised by condensed narration, intensified emotional appeal, and platform-oriented circulation. This institutional transformation is further evidenced by a series of regulatory and policy initiatives that formally recognised and stabilised micro-short plays as an audiovisual format in China, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Policy Milestones Shaping the Institutionalisation of Micro-Short Plays in China**

<b>Time and leading authority</b>	<b>Policy and regulatory initiative</b>	<b>Key implications for micro-short plays</b>
December 2020 State Administration of Radio and Television (SARFT)	Notice on matters concerning the content review of micro-plays in online film and television productions	Micro-short plays were formally recognised as online audiovisual works. Regulatory definitions, review standards, and approval procedures were clarified, marking the initial institutional acknowledgement of the format.
November 2022 General Office of SARFT	Notice on further strengthening the management of online micro-short plays and implementing the content creation enhancement programme	Targeted governance measures were introduced to regulate “mini-program” micro-short plays, promote standardised production practices, and encourage higher-quality content creation.
December 2022 SARFT Development Research Centre	Promoting the standardisation and high-quality development of online micro-short plays	Platform responsibilities were consolidated, guidance mechanisms for high-quality content were established, and regulatory supervision was strengthened to stabilise the industry.
December 2022 SARFT	Opinions on promoting the prosperous development of short plays	Policy emphasis shifted towards thematic innovation, creative quality, talent cultivation, and the establishment of a modern dissemination and market framework for short plays.
March 2023 Guided by SARFT; co-hosted by the Online Audiovisual Programme Service Association and Kuaishou	Tenth Online Audiovisual Conference: Micro-short plays industry development forum	Industry-level discussions addressed content innovation, business models, and market sustainability, reinforcing micro-short plays as a recognised sector within the audiovisual industry.
November 2023 Department of Online Audiovisual	Working meeting on the management of online micro-short plays	Special governance measures were implemented to curb disorderly practices, strengthen platform accountability, and support the

Programme  
Management, SARFT  
November 2023  
SARFT Development  
Research Centre

Micro-short plays:  
Balancing development  
and governance with dual  
strengthening

November 2023  
Department of Online  
Audiovisual  
Programme  
Management, SARFT

Multiple measures  
implemented to sustain the  
governance of online  
micro-short plays

production of high-quality micro-  
short play content.  
Micro-short plays were framed as an  
emerging form of contemporary  
audiovisual expression, with  
emphasis on achieving sustainable  
and culturally positive development.  
Governance of micro-short plays  
entered a routine phase, with  
continued emphasis on refining  
content review mechanisms and  
formulating detailed production  
guidelines.

Source: Public Policy Documents Issued by the State Administration of Radio and Television (SARFT) and Affiliated Institutions; Compiled by The Authors.

Together, these policy initiatives demonstrate the gradual institutional consolidation of micro-short plays in China, transforming them from an experimental platform-driven format into a formally recognised audiovisual category. Importantly, this process did not merely regulate production practices, but also delineated narrative boundaries, content responsibility, and thematic orientation within short-form storytelling. Industry reporting likewise frames micro-dramas as entering an upgrading phase, strengthening the conditions for women-oriented micro-short plays to circulate as a stabilised audiovisual form (China Network Audiovisual Programme Service Association, 2024).

These policy measures collectively showcase the institutionalisation of micro-short plays in China, from an experimental and platform-orientated audiovisual format to a legitimated audiovisual genre. Crucially, this was not only a regulation of production but also a regulation of narrative, content and themes in short form. Industry reports similarly register micro-dramas as being in an "upgrading" stage, which reinforces the conditions for women-orientated micro-short plays to circulate as a stabilised audiovisual form (China Network Audiovisual Programme Service Association, 2024).

Within this regulatory framework, women-oriented micro-short plays were able to emerge as a stabilised narrative subcategory. The clarification of content standards and platform responsibilities created conditions under which gender-focused storytelling—particularly narratives centred on emotional negotiation, everyday life, and women’s social experiences—could be systematically produced and circulated. Table 1 therefore provides not only a policy background, but also an institutional context that helps explain the rapid normalisation of women-oriented micro-short plays as a legitimate form of gendered audiovisual expression in contemporary Chinese digital media.

## Literature Review

### *Research on Micro-Short Plays and Platform Development*

Research on micro-short plays has expanded rapidly in recent years, largely driven by the growth of short-form digital media platforms. Existing studies have predominantly focused on industrial development, platform governance, and regulatory frameworks, reflecting the institutional and economic dimensions of micro-short play production (Zhao et al., 2024). This

industrial–governance emphasis is also evident in recent Chinese scholarship that maps the current situation and development trends of micro-plays, reinforcing the field’s prevailing focus on sectoral growth rather than gendered narrative analysis (Zhao et al., 2024). While this body of literature provides important contextual insights, relatively limited attention has been paid to narrative structures, gender representation, and audience reception, particularly in relation to women-oriented micro-short plays.

### ***Women-Oriented Narrative Traditions in Chinese Media***

Women-oriented narrative traditions in Chinese media can be traced back to the emergence of gender-targeted television channels and online literature platforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Early women-centred media content emphasised emotional relationships, personal growth, and everyday life, establishing narrative conventions that resonated strongly with women audiences. With the rise of online literature platforms, women-oriented sections further institutionalised these narrative patterns, creating a reservoir of gendered storytelling that later informed audiovisual adaptations and short-form digital narratives. For example, major platforms such as Qidian formalised women-oriented sections as an identifiable content category in the late 2000s (Qidian Chinese Network, 2009). Popular media commentary has also noted a gradual shift in women-oriented narratives, from idealised romance and formulaic heroines towards more complex portrayals of female agency and self-definition (Zhang, 2023). However, the closure of China’s first professional television channel explicitly branded for women audiences in 2024 marks a symbolic turning point, highlighting the decline of traditional broadcast-based gender segmentation and the rise of platform-driven, algorithmic content distribution (Shao, 2024).

The transition from long-form television dramas and online literature to short-form audiovisual content marked a significant transformation in women-oriented storytelling. As short-video platforms gained prominence, narrative logics rooted in women-oriented literature and television were adapted into compressed audiovisual formats characterised by concise storytelling, intensified emotional pacing, and rapid circulation (Zhao & Fu, 2024). Within this context, micro-short plays emerged as a new narrative vehicle through which gendered stories could be aligned with fragmented viewing habits and platform-based media consumption.

### ***Institutional and Regulatory Context of Micro-Short Plays***

From a regulatory and institutional perspective, micro-short plays have gradually been formalised as a recognised audiovisual format in China. Policy documents and governance measures introduced since 2020 have clarified production standards, content orientation, and platform responsibilities, contributing to the stabilisation of micro-short plays as a legitimate media form. Although such policy texts do not constitute academic scholarship in a strict sense, they shape the media environment in which women-oriented micro-short plays operate and provide an important contextual backdrop for scholarly analysis.

### ***Gender Representation and Cross-Cultural Perspectives***

Beyond the domestic media landscape, women-oriented micro-short plays have increasingly circulated within international digital environments. Existing studies on overseas short-form drama platforms highlight processes of localisation and cultural adaptation, whereby narrative themes, character construction, and representational strategies are adjusted to suit local

audiences (Liao, 2024). While the specific term “women-oriented micro-short plays” is not widely used in international scholarship, research suggests that narratives centred on emotional experience, self-development, and female agency demonstrate transnational resonance.

Scholarly discussions of gender representation in women-oriented micro-short plays indicate that emotionally charged narrative tropes—such as relational conflict, moral confrontation, and personal transformation—are frequently employed to generate affective engagement (Ni & Wang, 2024). Recent studies further argue that women’s genre micro-dramas increasingly experiment with narrative models that foreground female agency and self-definition, even while relying on highly compressed emotional pacing (Liu, 2025). At the same time, critiques note tensions between emotional fulfilment and simplified value expression in some women’s genre short dramas, indicating ambivalence within the empowerment discourse (Gao, 2025). Such narratives often position women protagonists as active agents who negotiate social constraints and pursue self-definition, aligning with broader cultural discourses surrounding contemporary femininity and women’s empowerment.

Some industry tracking also suggests that women-oriented narratives form a substantial share of overseas short-drama attention, indicating that gendered storytelling travels alongside platform expansion (DataEye, 2023). Commentary on ReelShort further highlights how localisation strategies translate Chinese short-drama formats into international markets (Zhang, C., 2025).

### ***Feminist Theory***

Feminist theory offers a critical approach to analysing the construction and negotiation of gendered meanings within media texts, especially as they relate to women’s identity, agency, emotional labour, and social location. In media and communication studies, feminist theory suggests that media representations of women are not objective but are influenced by social, cultural and power dynamics (van Zoonen, 1994). Thus, media narratives can be ideological sites in which femininity is produced, negotiated and normalised through various symbolic and narrative strategies.

In the context of women-oriented micro-short plays, feminist theory enables this study to examine female protagonists not only as narrative characters but also as representations of culturally situated ideals of femininity, empowerment, and social expectation. Narratives that foreground women’s emotional resilience, self-development, and relational negotiation may suggest progressive shifts toward female agency. At the same time, feminist theory also encourages a critical reading of whether such empowerment genuinely challenges conventional gender expectations or remains framed within socially acceptable feminine roles.

Applying feminist theory to women-oriented micro-short plays therefore allows this study to move beyond descriptive narrative analysis and to examine the ideological meanings embedded in female-centred short-form storytelling. It provides an analytical framework for assessing how gendered narratives negotiate female identity, agency, emotional labour, and social expectation within contemporary digital media.

## **Research Gaps**

Despite the growing body of literature on micro-short plays, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies have largely prioritised industrial growth, governance mechanisms, and market dynamics, while narrative analysis and audience reception—particularly from a cross-cultural perspective—remain under-examined. Moreover, few studies have systematically addressed women-oriented micro-short plays as a distinct gendered media form. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a cross-cultural approach to examine gendered narratives and audience engagement in women-oriented micro-short plays, contributing to media and communication scholarship on short-form digital storytelling and contemporary gender representation.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, integrating audience survey data, textual and narrative analysis, and a focused case study. The methodological approach is designed to examine gendered narratives in women-oriented micro-short plays while situating audience reception within broader socio-cultural and cross-cultural contexts.

Data were collected through three complementary sources. First, a questionnaire survey was administered to women viewers to explore viewing habits, narrative preferences, and perceptions of gender representation in women-oriented micro-short plays. A total of 53 valid responses were obtained. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling, since the study required participants who had prior viewing experience of women-oriented micro-short plays. The questionnaire was used to identify audience profiles, viewing habits, narrative preferences, and perceptions of gender representation, rather than to produce statistically generalisable findings.

Second, a small purposive corpus of representative women-oriented micro-short plays distributed on major short-video or micro-drama platforms was selected for textual and narrative analysis. The selection criteria included audience visibility, thematic relevance, and narrative clarity. More specifically, the works were chosen according to their relevance to women-centred narratives and their representation of recurring gendered themes such as emotional negotiation, self-development, workplace conflict, family expectation, and female agency. The study mainly focuses on Chinese-language women-oriented micro-short plays, with selected international examples used for cross-cultural comparison. *During the New Year* was used as the illustrative case study to provide a more focused discussion of narrative construction, emotional framing, and audience identification.

Third, a women-oriented micro-short play series with significant public exposure was chosen as a case study to enable more detailed examination of narrative strategies, emotional framing, and audience engagement within a specific production context.

The data analysis proceeded in three stages. Survey responses were first reviewed descriptively to identify general patterns in audience demographics, viewing habits, and thematic preferences. These patterns informed the interpretation of audience engagement but were not subjected to statistical modelling.

Textual and narrative analysis focused on identifying recurring narrative themes, character configurations, and emotional structures within the selected micro-short plays. Particular attention was paid to representations of female identity, agency, and emotional negotiation.

Finally, the case study was analysed through interpretive comparison, examining how narrative design, platform context, and audience interaction collectively contributed to emotional resonance and social circulation. By triangulating survey insights, narrative analysis, and case-based interpretation, the study identifies cross-cultural similarities and contextual differences in gendered storytelling within women-oriented micro-short plays.

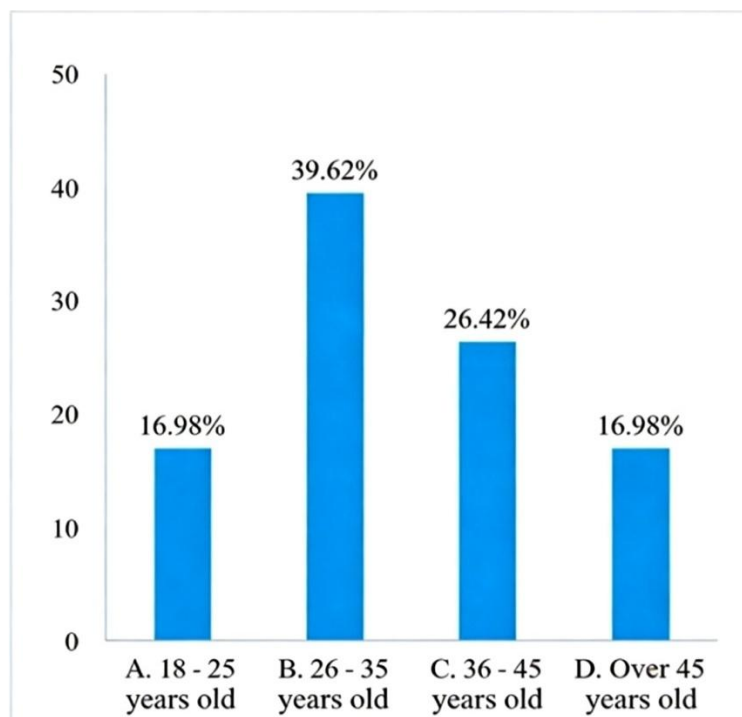
### ***Findings and Discussion***

The findings presented below are derived through the triangulation of three sources: audience survey responses, textual and narrative analysis of selected women-oriented micro-short plays, and an in-depth case study. This integrated approach allows for cross-validation between audience perception, narrative construction, and platform-specific practices.

The findings are organised around four analytical categories: audience identification, emotional labour, female agency, and cross-cultural narrative variation. These categories were derived from the combined interpretation of survey responses, textual and narrative analysis, and the selected case study.

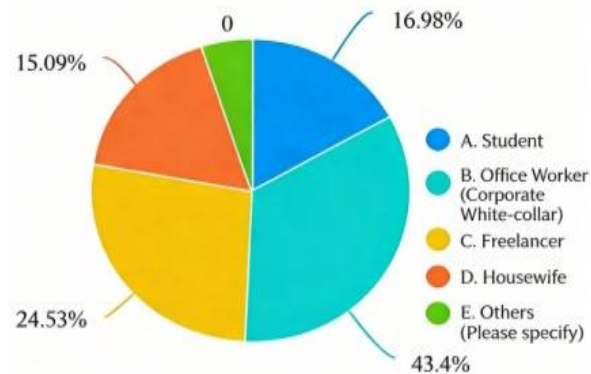
#### ***Audience Profile and Viewing Tendencies***

As illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the audience of women-oriented micro-short plays is predominantly composed of women aged between 26 and 45, many of whom are engaged in full-time employment or freelance work.



**Figure 1: Age Distribution of Respondents Viewing Women-Oriented Micro-Short Plays.**

Source: Questionnaire Survey Conducted by The Authors (N = 53).



**Figure 2. Occupational Background of Respondents Viewing Women-Oriented Micro-Short Plays.**

Source: Questionnaire survey conducted by the authors (N = 53).

This demographic concentration is significant, as it corresponds to a life stage commonly associated with intensified pressures related to career development, intimate relationships, and self-identity negotiation.

Rather than functioning merely as casual entertainment, women-oriented micro-short plays appear to operate as narrative spaces where the lived experiences and emotional tensions of contemporary women are reflected and processed. The frequent viewing patterns reported by respondents indicate that these micro-short plays have been incorporated into everyday media routines, suggesting sustained emotional engagement rather than sporadic consumption. This aligns with broader observations that short-form, platform-native audiovisual content increasingly embeds itself into everyday routines through algorithmic distribution and affective engagement (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

The occupational profile further reinforces this interpretation. Women navigating flexible yet demanding work environments often experience fragmented time structures and heightened emotional labour. The short episodic format and emotionally condensed storytelling of women-oriented micro-short plays align closely with these conditions, enabling meaningful engagement within limited time frames. In this sense, the appeal of women-oriented micro-short plays lies not only in their thematic focus on women's issues, but also in their capacity to accommodate the temporal, emotional, and social realities of contemporary women audiences.

### ***Narrative Appeal and Gendered Identification***

Across survey responses and textual analysis, narrative content centred on women's emotional experiences, self-development, and workplace challenges emerged as a key factor driving audience engagement. Rather than relying solely on visual spectacle or celebrity casting, women-oriented micro-short plays frequently employ compressed, yet emotionally intensified storytelling to foreground moments of personal crisis, moral choice, and emotional negotiation.

Textual analysis reveals that female protagonists are often constructed as active agents who negotiate constraints rather than passively endure them. Common narrative patterns include self-reflection following emotional setbacks, strategic decision-making within intimate

relationships, and redefinition of personal success beyond traditional romantic or familial fulfilment. These patterns align with survey responses indicating strong audience identification with characters who demonstrate emotional resilience and self-awareness.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, the portrayal of female protagonists as emotionally resilient, self-reflective, and capable of decision-making suggests a movement toward more active representations of female agency. These portrayals challenge passive or dependent images of women by presenting female characters as subjects who evaluate relationships, negotiate constraints, and redefine personal success. At the same time, such empowerment should also be read critically. In many cases, female agency is still articulated through socially familiar roles, such as responsible daughters, wives, workers, or emotionally mature partners. This suggests that women-oriented micro-short plays may both challenge and reproduce gender expectations, presenting female agency within narrative frameworks that remain culturally recognisable and socially acceptable.

### ***Case Illustration: Narrative Construction and Female Identification***

The women-oriented micro-short play series *During the New Year* is employed in this study as an illustrative case to demonstrate how gendered narratives are articulated within short-form digital storytelling. Rather than serving as a comprehensive industrial or commercial analysis, this case is used to exemplify narrative strategies commonly observed in women-oriented micro-short plays.

Narratively, the series centres on a female protagonist navigating emotional conflict, marital expectations, and questions of self-worth within everyday social contexts. The character is portrayed as an active subject engaged in reflection and decision-making, rather than as a passive figure shaped solely by external circumstances. Through compressed episodic structures, the narrative foregrounds moments of emotional confrontation and moral choice, enabling viewers to recognise familiar social pressures and emotional dilemmas.

The short episodic format intensifies emotional pacing while minimising narrative redundancy. Each episode delivers a concise yet complete emotional arc, allowing cumulative identification to develop across the series. This narrative economy aligns with the fragmented viewing conditions of short-video platforms, while also enhancing emotional resonance and immediacy. Audience responses, as reflected in online commentary and engagement practices, suggest that the series functions as a site of collective emotional recognition rather than mere entertainment consumption. Viewers frequently articulate identification with the protagonist's emotional struggles and expressions of autonomy, reinforcing the role of women-oriented micro-short plays as spaces for negotiating contemporary female identity.

As an illustrative case, *During the New Year* supports the broader findings of this study by demonstrating how narrative compression, emotional framing, and female-centred perspectives converge to produce gendered storytelling within short-form digital media.

### ***Cross-Cultural Patterns and Variations***

The comparison between domestic and international productions should not be understood as a fixed binary opposition. Rather, it is used as an interpretive distinction to examine how similar

gendered themes—such as emotional labour, female agency, autonomy, and relational negotiation—are shaped by different cultural and platform contexts.

Comparative analysis reveals both convergence and divergence in gender representation across domestic and international contexts. In domestic productions, narratives tend to foreground emotional negotiation within family and relational frameworks, reflecting cultural emphases on social harmony and moral responsibility. In contrast, international women-oriented micro-short plays more frequently highlight individual autonomy, self-realisation, and personal boundary-setting.

Despite these differences, both contexts share a common emphasis on female agency and emotional self-determination. This suggests that while gendered narratives are culturally inflected, women-oriented micro-short plays tap into transnational concerns regarding identity, emotional labour, and self-worth. The cross-cultural resonance observed supports the positioning of women-oriented micro-short plays as a gendered media form with broader cultural significance.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined women-oriented micro-short plays as a gendered form of short-form digital media, focusing on narrative construction, audience identification, and cross-cultural variation during the 2023–2024 period. Drawing on audience survey data, textual and narrative analysis, and an illustrative case, the findings demonstrate that these micro-short plays function not merely as entertainment products but as narrative spaces through which contemporary women negotiate emotional experience, self-identity, and social expectations.

The analysis indicates that the appeal of women-oriented micro-short plays lies in the convergence of narrative compression, emotional intensity, and female-centred perspectives. These elements enable short-form narratives to resonate with women audiences navigating fragmented time structures and heightened emotional labour.

By foregrounding women-oriented micro-short plays within media and communication scholarship, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on short-form digital storytelling and contemporary gender representation, highlighting their cultural significance beyond industrial or platform-centred perspectives.

The contribution of this study lies in three aspects. First, it shifts the discussion of micro-short plays from industrial development and platform governance to gendered narrative analysis. Second, it positions women-oriented micro-short plays as a distinct media form through which female identity, emotional labour, and agency are negotiated. Third, by bringing audience reception, textual analysis, and cross-cultural comparison together, the study offers a preliminary analytical framework for understanding women-oriented micro-short plays within contemporary digital media and communication studies.

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