

Article

## Analysis of New Trends in Microdramas: on the Example of Social Media Drama Shorts in China and US

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**Abstract:** The increasing popularity of short videos on social networking sites has given birth to a micro-film model that supports mobile optimization, but the cross-cultural patterns of the latter have received less research attention. Using content analysis as the research technique, the current research comparatively examines 200 dramatic short videos on Chinese (Douyin and Kuaishou) and American (TikTok and Instagram Reels) micro-film platforms on content-related factors, formal structure-related factors, narrative-related factors, and circulation-related factors. The research shows that Chinese micro-film content follows a collective approach that centers around familial morality, linear narratives, moralistic interpretations, and high information density. The findings illustrate that individualistic content with experimental narratives and openness to interpretations prevails on American micro-film platforms. The research provides evidence that value-driven global micro-film platforms create disparate narratives rather than homogenized ones.

**Keywords:** microdramas; social media platforms; cross-cultural comparison; narrative strategies; algorithmic distribution



## **1. Introduction**

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed audiovisual content creation, with short-form video emerging as dominant digital entertainment globally. Chinese short video platforms reached 1.05 billion users by mid-2024, with the market expanding to 420 billion yuan (\$58 billion), reflecting 16.7% annual growth (Shutsko, 2020). In the United States, TikTok has amassed over 170 million monthly active users, with 62% of adults under 30 engaging regularly. This unprecedented growth has catalyzed microfilm evolution as traditional microcinema migrates to algorithm-driven social media ecosystems, where dramatic short videos—characterized by complete narrative structures, emotional intensity, and vertical formats—have emerged as a distinctive subgenre blending cinematic storytelling with platform-specific affordances (Meng et al., 2024).

The dramas showcased on Douyin, Kuaishou, TikTok, and Reels on Instagram offer a new model of microfilm production that may be differentiated by speedy turnaround cycles and algorithmic dissemination. These dramas range from one to five minutes in duration and involve complex narratives such as plot twists and cliffhangers that have led to high levels of engagement based on views from sharing, commentary, and sales of commercial dramas (Luo et al. 2025). The micro-drama industry alone in China has an overall \$7 billion industry that has led to government regulations such as the “review before broadcasting” by the National Radio and Television Administration implemented in June 2024.

Although there have been comprehensive academic discussions and research on the effectiveness of short video marketing and users’ behavior from various perspectives, there has been limited research on artistic and narrative aspects of dramatic shorts on online social media. Although dramatic shorts on Douyin were investigated from the perspective of users’ engagement patterns based on the theory of the cultural dimensions approach by He in 2022 and users’ identity expression on Douyin by Q. Zhang in 2025, comparatively comprehensive research on dramatic shorts’ content characteristics, narratives, and cultural values on Chinese and American online platforms has remained relatively new. The relevant research has found meaningful discrepancies in mechanisms of online platforms. The global content diversification of TikTok via algorithm recommendations as opposed to local



Chinese cultural adaptations on Douyin has been suggested by Wang & Zhang in 2025. The research paper filling this gap examines 200 dramatic shorts from Chinese and American online major platforms.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Research Methods**

This study employs content analysis methodology to systematically examine dramatic short videos, combining quantitative coding of formal characteristics with qualitative interpretation of narrative strategies and cultural meanings. A comparative research approach enables cross-national analysis of similarities and differences between Chinese and American platforms.

### **2.2. Sample selection**

The corpus includes 200 dramatic short videos from Chinese video-sharing platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, as well as American video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reel, sourced from January to February 2024. The dramatic short videos included those which had complete narrative structure, dramatic conflicts, were 1-5 minutes long, and had clear expression of emotions. Based on popularity measures, we picked the top 100 most viewed dramatic short videos from each country to include those that varied in genre such as romance, family dramas, work-related dramas, suspense dramas, and comedy. The analysis of content used quantitative analysis of formal qualities such as shooting types, level of editing, and subtitles.

### **2.3. Analytical framework**

The framework for analysis includes four categories. The content category views topics such as subject categories (romantic story, family ethics, working place story, suspense story, comedy), value orientation topics (individualism-collectivism, materialism-spiritualism), and others. The formal category observes the composition of shots, video tempo and audio composition. The narrative category tests structural

elements such as linear and non-linear presentation of narratives. The transmission category records engagement factors such as the use of likes and shares. The framework above helps in performing cross-cultural comparisons.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

All videos were independently coded by two trained coders using an existing framework that enabled an intercoder reliability coefficient of 0.84. The analysis of quantitative data used SPSS 26.0. The analysis of data used descriptive statistics, chi-square tests on categorical variables, and independent t-tests to determine whether there were any important cross-cultural differences. The analysis of data also used theme coding.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Basic characteristics of the sample

The 200 dramatic short videos that were studied have been worked on based on various patterns of duration and themes. As portrayed in **Table 1**, the average duration of Chinese videos stands at 3.2 minutes and 0.8 SD against 2.1 minutes and 0.6 SD in America. The two were significantly higher than the latter based on  $t(198) = 10.47$  and  $p < .001$ . The average total views on Chinese videos were higher at 8.5 million than those in America at 5.2 million. However, the average share-to-view ratio on American videos stands at 1.83%, higher than the 0.49% on Chinese videos. The main theme on Chinese videos includes family ethics that cover 35%, followed by work settings that account for 25%. In contrast, Americans mainly watch love at 30%, followed by comedy at 28%, as well as suspense at 18%.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Thematic Distribution of Dramatic Short Videos by Region*

Variable	China (n = 100)	United States (n = 100)	t / $\chi^2$	p
Duration				
M (SD)	3.2 (0.8)	2.1 (0.6)	10.47	< .001
Range	1.5–5.0	1.0–3.8	—	—
Thematic Distribution (%)			52.34	< .001
Family Ethics	35	12		



Workplace	25	15		
Romance	20	30		
Comedy	12	28		
Suspense	8	15		
Engagement Metrics				
Avg. Views (millions)	8.5 (2.3)	5.2 (1.8)	10.95	< .001
Avg. Likes (thousands)	420 (110)	380 (95)	2.69	.008
Avg. Comments (thousands)	85 (28)	120 (35)	-7.76	< .001
Avg. Shares (thousands)	42 (15)	95 (28)	-16.32	< .001
Share-to-View Ratio (%)	0.49	1.83	-38.42	< .001

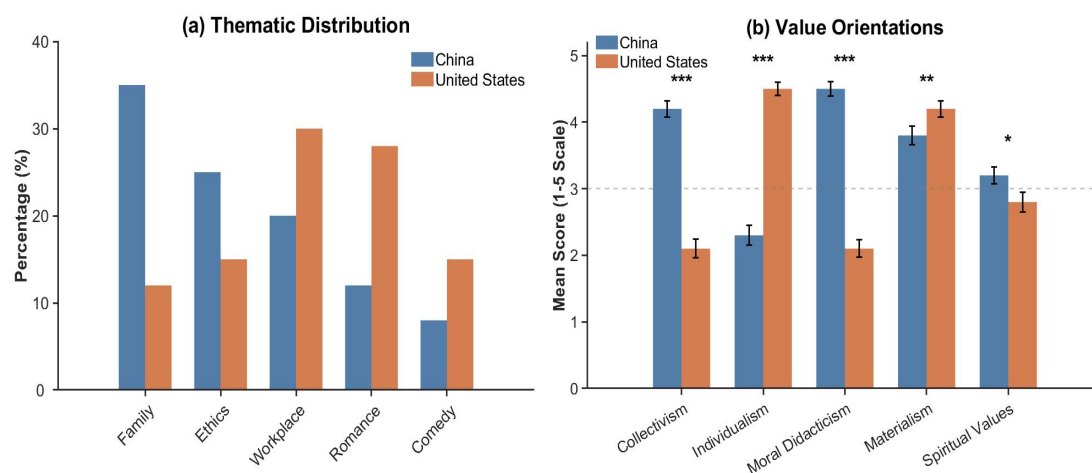
*Note.* Duration measured in minutes. Values in parentheses represent standard deviations. Chi-square test conducted for thematic distribution; independent samples t-tests conducted for continuous variables. All engagement metrics represent mean values with standard deviations in parentheses.

### 3.2. Content feature comparison

Content analysis reveals substantial thematic and value divergences between Chinese and American dramatic short videos. As illustrated in **Figure 1a**, Chinese samples concentrate on family ethics (35%) and workplace narratives (25%), reflecting collectivist values prioritizing kinship obligations and hierarchical achievement. American videos emphasize romance (30%), comedy (28%), and suspense (18%), focusing on individual emotional experiences and entertainment,  $\chi^2(4) = 52.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . **Figure 1b** demonstrates that Chinese videos scored significantly higher on collectivism ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 0.6$  vs.  $M = 2.1$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ),  $t(198) = 22.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , while American content exhibited stronger individualism ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 0.5$  vs.  $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ),  $t(198) = -27.34$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moral didacticism appeared more prominently in Chinese samples (78% vs. 23%), with explicit value judgments in narrative resolutions. American videos demonstrated greater openness addressing identity politics and social justice (42% vs. 15%), reflecting distinct cultural value systems, regulatory frameworks, and audience expectations.

#### Figure 1

*Content Characteristics Comparison between Chinese and American Dramatic Short Videos*



### 3.3. Comparison of formal innovation

The Chinese content has a higher incidence of close-ups (68% as opposed to 52%), melodramatic background music (85% for continuous music as opposed to 58% diegetic music), and dramatic subtitling (92% as opposed to 67%). The US content has a higher incidence of special effects (54% as opposed to 38%), especially within the arena of fantasy TV shows. The Chinese content has better video edit depth at 42 cuts per minute as opposed to 31 cuts per minute of US content. The incorporation of artificial intelligence solutions in the post-production process differs as Chinese producers appreciate aesthetic solutions (78%), as opposed to US producers who appreciate narrative solutions. The overall production quality of content has been at a professional level. The content produced by amateurs and experts cannot be distinguished.

### 3.4. Comparison of Narrative Strategies

Narrative strategies display strong structural variation. As seen in **Table 2**, Chinese data prefers linear narrative structures (85%) with closed endings (88%), which define moral statements. In contrast, American video clips leverage structural variation for non-linear storytelling approach exceeding 28%, with 35% of them having open endings that define interpretations. The data on dissection of story series varies immensely. Chinese data bifurcates toward plot multi-episodes by 42%, against 23% data adoption from episodic content. The timing of plot reversals varies by accepted conventions in both video types. Chinese videos tend to unmask dramatic

events within the last 30 seconds of the last sequence by 78%, while Americans space dramatic events throughout by 48%. The data on information density addresses both types of videos having more compressed story events by 8.4 events per minute (SD = 1.2) than American video clips by 6.1 events per minute (SD = 1.5),  $t(198) = 11.23$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**

*Narrative Characteristics and Structural Features by Region*

Narrative Feature	China (n = 100)	United States (n = 100)	$\chi^2 / t$	p
Narrative Structure (%)			48.72	< .001
Linear	85	72		
Non-linear	15	28		
Ending Type (%)			62.15	< .001
Closed/Resolved	88	65		
Open/Ambiguous	12	35		
Serialization (%)			8.53	.003
Multi-episode Series	42	23		
Standalone Episode	58	77		
Plot Reversal Timing (%)			18.94	< .001
Final 30 seconds	78	48		
Distributed throughout	22	52		
Narrative Density				
Story events per minute, M (SD)	8.4 (1.2)	6.1 (1.5)	11.23	< .001
Average cuts per minute, M (SD)	42.3 (6.8)	31.2 (5.4)	12.56	< .001
Emotional Intensity				
Peak emotional moments, M (SD)	3.2 (0.8)	2.4 (0.6)	7.98	< .001
Emotional build-up duration (sec), M (SD)	48.5 (12.3)	32.1 (9.7)	10.45	< .001

*Note.* Chi-square tests conducted for categorical variables; independent samples t-tests conducted for continuous variables. Narrative density measured as discrete story events per minute of video duration. Emotional intensity assessed through coder ratings on validated emotional arc protocols. All percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

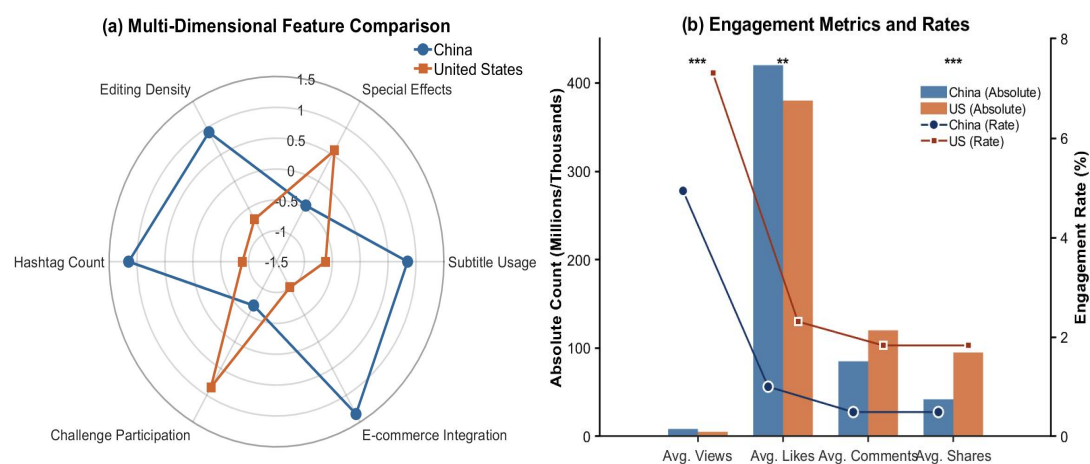
### 3.5. Comparison of propagation characteristics

The platform shows differential patterns of hashtag use. As seen in **Figure 2**, Chinese users tend to use hashtags much more than Americans ( $M = 8.3$ ,  $SD = 2.1$  vs.  $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ),  $t(198) = 14.32$ ,  $p < .001$ . The act of participating in challenges shows that virality patterns contrast. About 67% of Americans participated in trending

challenges on videos, as opposed to 38% that focused on algorithmic recommendations on Chinese videos. Engagement patterns show that Chinese platforms led to more overall engagement in that like counts were higher by 63%, yet Americans had better virality factors on share-to-view ratios that were 3.7 times higher than Chinese videos at 1.83% to 0.49%. Monetization patterns showed strong discrepancies as Chinese videos contained direct online shopping components at 72%, as opposed to Americans' reliance on brand collaborations at 58%.

**Figure 2**

*Multi-Dimensional Feature Comparison of Formal and Transmission Characteristic*



## 4. Discussion

The found discrepancies correspond to underlying value-oriented cultures. Up-to-culture content with Chinese characteristics' emphasis on familial ethics and moral teachings and Chinese closure relates to the collective approach based on unity and coherence, as opposed to the individualism of Americans and openness of storylines. This relates to Chinese intensive subtitling design of 92%, based on high-context communication as opposed to American reduced sound design.

The algorithms on these platforms influence optimization techniques. The Chinese artists' heavy use of hashtags and high editing complexity correspond to algorithms that favor keyword searching and retention (Liu et al., 2025). The networking algorithms of the American platforms favor the concept of social validation, as suggested by their high viral ratios. Applications by artificial intelligence solutions (Zhao et al., 2024) ease complex operations. The extensive





adoption of these applications differs culturally—as Chinese artists like aesthetic enhancement (78%), while US producers like storytelling functions.

These transformations necessitate reconceptualizing micro-film definitions beyond temporal constraints toward platform-specific paradigms (Pertiwi & Sanusi, 2023). Traditional duration-based characterizations prove inadequate for videos exhibiting comparable narrative complexity through compressed information density (8.4 vs. 6.1 events/minute). Contemporary micro-films should be understood as mobile-optimized narrative experiences integrating entertainment, social interaction, and commerce.

The flow of contents on cross-platform circulation shows the complicated process of standardization and localization (Wen & Xin, 2025). Although TikTok supports the global transmission of contents, an effective adaptation process involves more than simple translations. The direct online business engagement of Chinese content offerings (72%) as opposed to the indirect business engagement of Americans illustrates two similar settings supporting two totally different ecosystems.

## **5. Conclusion**

The above comparative analysis illustrates that the main patterns of dramatic short videos entail micro-optimized vertical composition design, reduced narrative complexity, prioritized intensity expression, and algorithmic dissemination, thus roughly outlining the emergence of a new micro-film paradigm. However, there still exist culture-related discrepancies since Chinese micro-films primarily focus on familial morality content at 35%, linear narrative structure at 85%, closed ends at 88%, and intensive audiovisual expression with melodramatic music composition at 85% and prominent subtitling at 92%, which incorporate beliefs of collectivist cultures. Americans' micro-films demonstrate higher structural discrepancies such as linear narrative arrangement at 28%, subject disparities within moral considerations, open ends at 35%, and unassuming aesthetic designs indicative of individualism. The above analysis illustrates that micro-film types should discard timing-defined boundaries for new factors suitable for online dissemination and that global technologies increase culturally disparate practices instead of homogenizing globally.

Certain limitations should be kept in mind. The sampling technique may be biased towards high-quality content while ignoring niche content. The cross-sectional



analysis may track specific conditions within a specific timeframe without examining the dynamic growth of content. The content analysis may overlook certain subjective views of audiences. The growth of a platform may perhaps generate certain findings that may be temporally contingent.

Future research could track how these trends evolve over time and extend the comparison to other regions such as Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Combining different research methods—including audience surveys and interviews with content creators—would provide richer insights. Additionally, examining specific genres in more detail would help us better understand the unique characteristics of each type of dramatic short video.

For content creators, the key is finding a balance between optimizing for algorithms and maintaining authentic cultural expression. Platform designers should make it easier for users to discover content from different cultures while respecting cultural differences. Policymakers need to create regulations that encourage creative diversity, ensure content quality, protect cultural values, and improve working conditions for digital content creators.

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