

Conceptual Paper

Interactive Narrative and Aesthetic Education in Children's Short Dramas on Short-Video Platforms: A Study of Implementation Pathways

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Abstract

Children's short dramas on short-video platforms have emerged as a content format with notable potential for aesthetic education. This conceptual study examines the interactive narrative mechanisms of such dramas and considers how these mechanisms may contribute to aesthetic education. Drawing on interactive digital narrative theory and Dewey's account of aesthetic experience, the study constructs a three-layer analytical framework that links interactive narrative, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic education. The analysis conducted at the levels of narrative structure, audio-visual semiotics, and interactive design suggests that branching narratives, multimodal signal intensification, and bullet-comment interaction may foster aesthetic experience. The aesthetic education dimensions of perception and judgement cultivation, creativity stimulation, and cultural identity construction are identified and matched to the three mechanism families. The proposed implementation pathway includes content production, age-tiered narrative design based on the stages of cognitive development, and platform-level algorithmic optimisation involving multiple stakeholders. The analysis suggests that interactive affordances may be preconditions rather than guarantees of aesthetic development, and the structural tension between the traffic logic of the platform and the reflective temporality of aesthetic education may be the principal obstacle to realising this potential at scale.

Keywords

Children's short drama, Interactive narrative, Aesthetic education, Short-video platform, Narrative immersion

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and problem statement

Short-video media have revolutionized how children consume media content. A survey of pre-adolescent and adolescent TikTok users from 60 schools in Denmark revealed that the main motivations for media consumption are entertainment and emotion, with younger children showing higher engagement rates than older children (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). This phenomenon is not unique to Western society. The concurrent platformization of Douyin and TikTok, facilitated by ByteDance's two-market strategy, has created two different yet interconnected environments in which children's content is becoming increasingly prominent (Kaye et al., 2021). Within these media ecosystems, children's short dramas—a serialized narrative form that runs for one to three minutes per episode—have emerged as a distinctive format that combines narrative with the interactive possibilities of the comment section, bullet comments, and recommendation algorithms. Although the popularity of such content is increasing at an unprecedented rate, the previous studies mainly focused on the use and psychosocial effects of the consumption of short videos among youth (Chao et al., 2023). The narrative and educational attributes of children's short dramas, however, have yet to receive sufficient attention. A significant gap in current understanding concerns the intersection between the interactive features inherent in short-video media and the potential for aesthetic education that children's narrative media could provide. The relationship between a production logic that prioritizes entertainment and a logic of aesthetic development is an underexplored problem in media and communication studies.

1.2. Research significance, key concepts, and research questions

This research seeks to address the gap identified above by examining interactive narrative mechanisms in children's short dramas on short-video media, as well as the mechanisms through which aesthetic education functions can be realized. From a theoretical perspective, this research extends interactive narrative theory into the context of children's short media, an area that has not been fully addressed by existing studies. From a practical perspective, it offers a framework for individuals seeking to implement aesthetic education functions in children's short dramas.

There are some basic concepts that require further clarification. Interactive narratives refer to narratives in which the audience can contribute to the progression or meaning of the narratives through certain technological affordances available in the medium. *Children's short drama* refers to a serialized form of dramatic content mainly targeting children under the age of 14, distributed in short-video formats, with each video lasting no more than three minutes. While this study uses fourteen years as a broad upper boundary, it treats the audience as developmentally heterogeneous and distinguishes, where relevant, between early childhood (3–6 years), middle childhood (6–10 years), and pre-adolescence (10–14 years). The aesthetic education function refers to the capacity of media content for fostering aesthetic awareness, judgment, creativity, and cultural identity. Short-video

platforms are mobile-oriented content distribution tools featuring algorithmic recommendations, vertical screen display, and interaction capabilities. The main short-video platforms in China include Douyin, Kuaishou, and Bilibili. This study is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) What interactive narrative mechanisms characterize children's short dramas on short-video platforms? (RQ2) In what ways may these mechanisms contribute to aesthetic education? (RQ3) What implementation pathways can be identified for realizing the aesthetic education potential of such content?

1.3. Methodological approach

This study adopts a conceptual-analytical approach rather than an empirical research design. The analysis synthesizes interactive digital narrative theory and aesthetic experience theory to construct an analytical model, which is then applied to children's short dramas on Chinese short-video platforms. The analysis draws on published literature, platform documentation, and publicly observable content features. The figures and tables presented in this paper function as heuristic frameworks for organizing conceptual relationships rather than as reports of empirically validated findings.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Interactive narrative theory and aesthetic experience theory

Interactive narrative theory is the fundamental lens for understanding the mechanisms of audience engagement in children's short dramas on short-video platforms. A comprehensive system-process-product framework has been proposed for the analysis of interactive digital narrative, in which immersion, agency, and transformation are understood as an integrated whole (Koenitz, 2023). Building on this work, the concept of interactive digital narrative has been further extended as a means of representing complexity, in which the participant is actively involved in co-constructing the meaning of the narrative, as opposed to passively receiving narrative content (Koenitz et al., 2022). Ryan's threefold definition of audience immersion in narratives—spatial, temporal, and emotional—still holds relevance for explaining the process by which audiences become immersed in the story world. Spatial immersion occurs when participants are immersed in the setting of the story world by sensory stimulation; temporal immersion occurs when participants are kept in the story world by suspense; emotional immersion occurs when participants are emotionally invested in the characters. All these modes of immersion apply to the multimodal interactive nature of short-video platforms.

Aesthetic experience theory complements this narrative perspective by articulating how immersion may be transformed into meaningful experience. In John Dewey's conceptualization of artistic experience, emphasis is placed on the continuity between everyday experience and aesthetic experience, with aesthetic education conceived as the development of ways of experiencing the world at large. Barton extended this Deweyan foundation to contemporary educational settings and

demonstrated the potential of aesthetic literacies—perceiving, interpreting, and creating in aesthetic forms—to be developed in various curricular and digital settings (Barton, 2023). Friedrich Schiller’s concept of the “play drive” (*Spieltrieb*) offers another theoretical approach, particularly in the children’s media environment. His notion of aesthetic experience as the product of the combination of sensory and form-related components corresponds closely to the nature of short-video interaction.

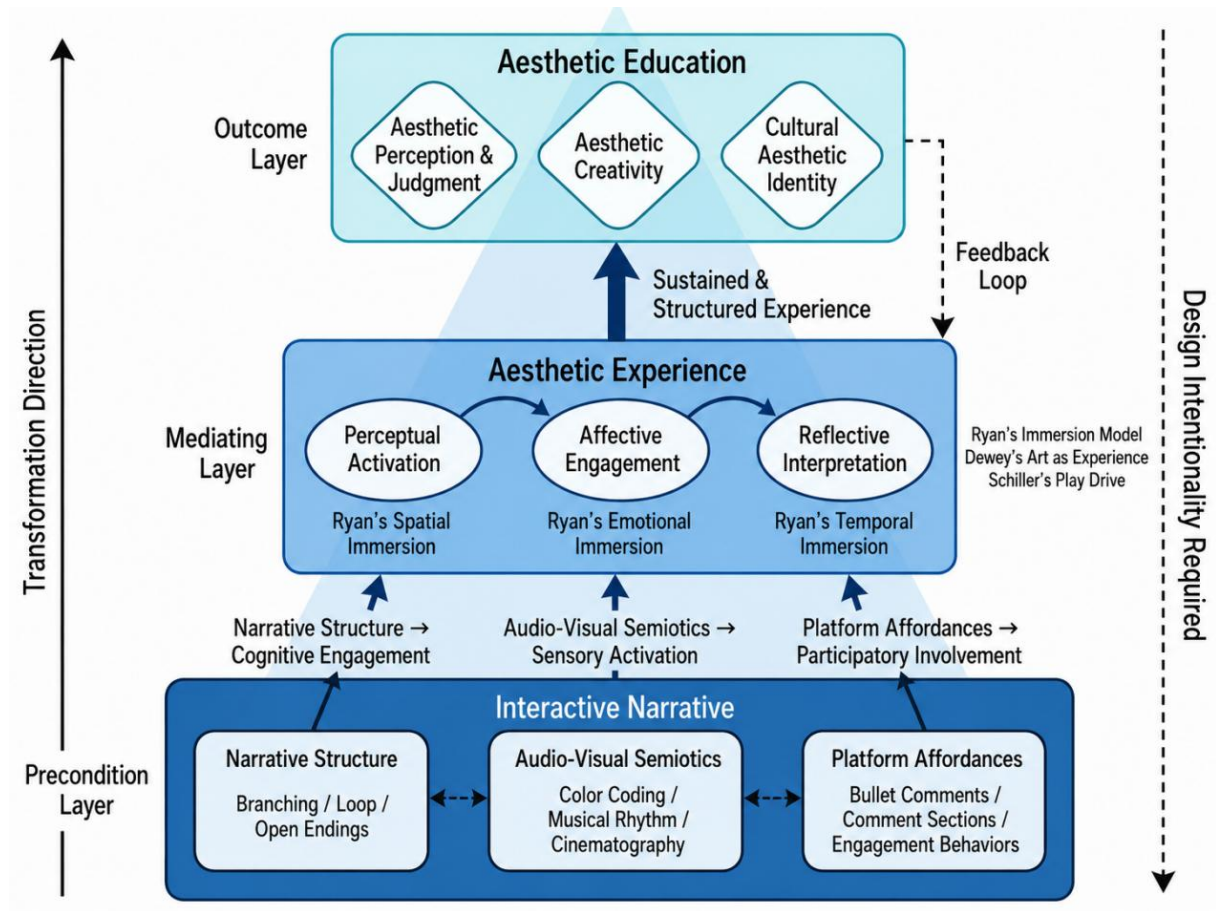
These four theoretical perspectives are introduced not as parallel commentaries but as components of a single argument. Koenitz supplies the systemic vocabulary—immersion, agency, transformation—through which interactive narrative is analysed at the first layer of the model. Ryan refines one of these constructs, immersion, by distinguishing its spatial, temporal, and emotional modalities, allowing immersion to be operationalised across the three families of platform mechanism examined in Section 3. Dewey provides the conceptual bridge from immersion to the second layer of the model, namely aesthetic experience, while Barton translates Dewey’s framework into educationally relevant aesthetic literacies—perceiving, interpreting, and creating—which correspond directly to the three aesthetic-education dimensions developed in Section 4. Schiller, finally, accounts for the play-oriented motivational structure that distinguishes children’s media engagement from adult media reception, thereby providing the rationale for treating children’s interactive aesthetic experience as a distinct theoretical case.

2.2. Construction of the “Interactive Narrative—Aesthetic Experience—Aesthetic Education” three-layer analytical model

Based on the theories discussed above, the present research develops a conceptual model conceptualizing interactive narrative, aesthetic experience, and aesthetic education as sequentially mediated processes at three levels (see Fig. 1). At the first level, the mechanisms of interactive narrative, including narrative, audio-visual semiotics, and platform-based audience participation, serve as the basis for audience immersion. The middle layer translates these immersive experiences into aesthetic experiences through perception, emotion, and reflection, in line with the aesthetic pedagogical approach that focuses on children’s bodily and technology-mediated experiences in their learning environments (Clark-Fookes, 2023). Studies of digital storytelling in early childhood education have shown that interactive digital storytelling has a positive mediating effect on the communicative and imaginative engagement of young learners (Rahiem, 2021). At the top layer, consistent and systematic aesthetic experiences may contribute to the development of aesthetic education, enhancing aesthetic perception, judgment, creativity, and cultural identity. The model suggests that interactive narratives are not inherently educationally effective, but may serve as preconditions whose aesthetic education potential depends on design intentionality, content quality, and structural support.

Figure 1

visualizes the directional relationships and feedback loops among these three layers

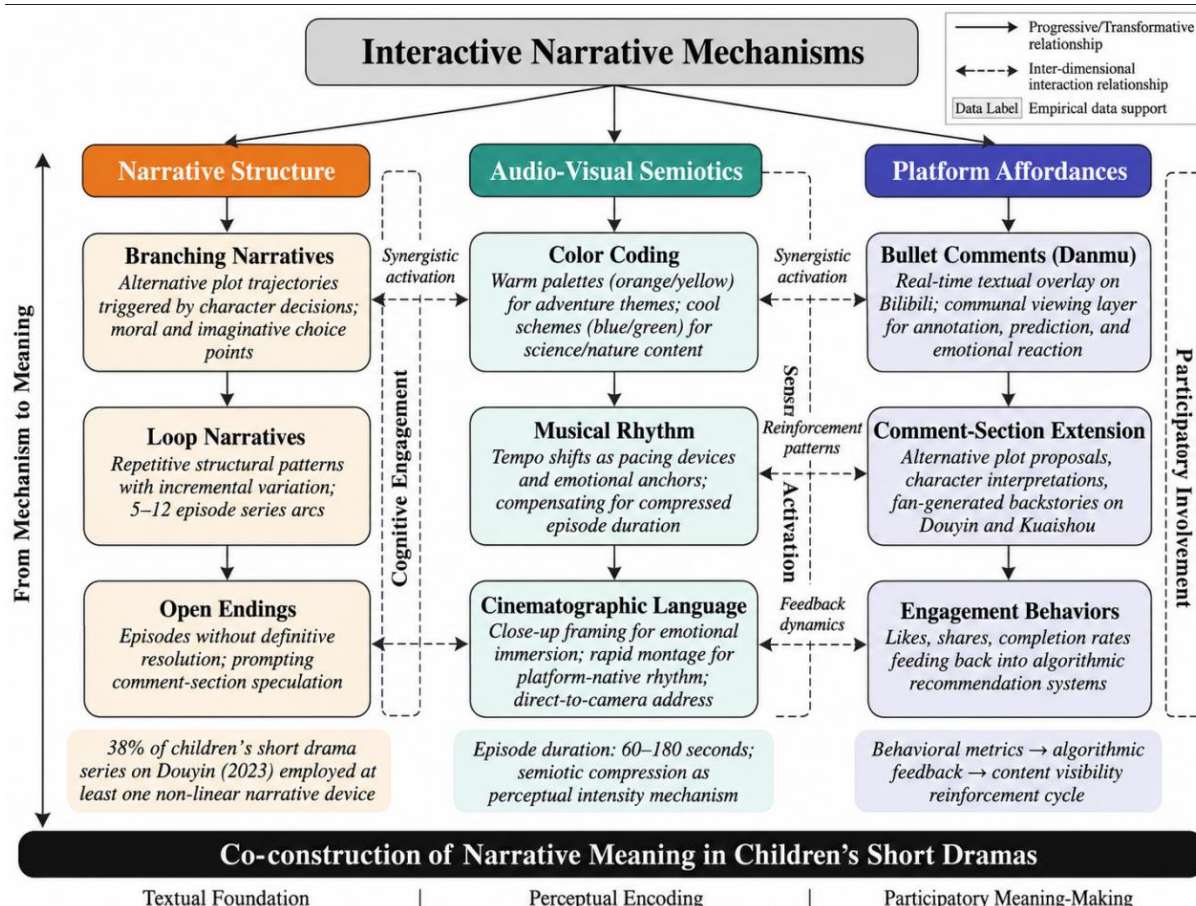


3. Interactive Narrative Mechanisms in Children's Short Dramas on Short-Video Platforms

The interactive narrative mechanisms of children's short dramas on short-video platforms can be examined theoretically from three perspectives: narrative structure, audio-visual semiotics, and platform affordances. Fig. 2 presents the layered architecture of the mechanisms and their functional relationships.

Figure 2

Interactive Narrative Mechanism Structure of Children's Short Dramas on Short-Video Platforms



3.1. Narrative structure: branching narratives, loop narratives, and open endings in children's short drama production

The short dramas produced for children and shown on platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili employ non-linear storytelling, which differs from the linear approach of traditional children's television programs. This is because non-linear storytelling allows episodes to present different plot paths depending on the narrative choices presented to the audience (or, in some cases, choices made by the characters within the story). Loop narratives, commonly used in educational and comedic short dramatic series, involve repetitive structural patterns that vary in increments. This technique maintains thematic content while providing novelty within a series of five to twelve episodes. Open endings are the third structural technique, in which scenes provide an ending but no final resolution, thereby promoting further engagement and discussion in the comments section and expectations about the availability of sequel content. These non-linear techniques may operate differently across age groups: loop narratives may be more suitable for younger children (6–10 years), whereas branching narratives may be more appropriate for pre-adolescent audiences (10–14 years).

3.2. Audio-visual semiotics: color coding, musical rhythm, and cinematographic language as drivers of aesthetic perception

The short duration of short drama programs, ranging from 60 to 180 seconds, demands dense audio-visual signaling for moods, information, and aesthetics. Color coding serves as a primary semiotic resource. Warm tones, such as orange and yellow, are used for adventure and friendship-themed shows, whereas blue-green tones are used for science and nature-themed shows. Music rhythm serves as both a pacing device and an emotional focus, with tempo changes making transitions within individual episodes where conventional scene-setting exposition is impractical. Cinematographic techniques in the vertical screen format include close-ups that focus on facial expressions to create an immersive emotional experience, montage sequences that align with the editing rhythm of the platform, and direct address that bridges the distance between actor and viewer. Collectively, these audio-visual techniques establish brevity as a semiotic device that heightens perceptual intensity.

3.3. Platform affordances: bullet comments, comment-section narrative extension, and co-construction of meaning through user engagement behaviors

Beyond producer-generated content, bullet comments (danmu) enable real-time textual feedback displayed on the video. This creates a social space in which young people can comment on and share their emotional responses to the narrative presented in the video. The comments section under the videos on Douyin and Kuaishou serves as an extension of the narratives. Thus, the audience provides suggestions for alternative plot developments, offers their own analyses of the characters, and even crafts their own narratives. Behavioral engagement metrics include likes, shares, and completion rates. As depicted in Table 1, the three mechanisms of interactive narratives operate at different but related levels: narrative structures, audio-visual semiotics, and platform affordances.

Table 1

Comparative Features of Interactive Narrative Mechanisms in Children's Short Dramas

Dimension	Core Elements	Primary Function	Interaction Mode
Narrative structure	Branching, loop, open endings	Story progression and cognitive engagement	Viewer anticipation and re-viewing
Audio-visual semiotics	Color coding, musical rhythm, cinematography	Perceptual activation and emotional immersion	Sensory reception and aesthetic response
Platform affordances	Bullet comments, comment sections, engagement behaviors	Meaning co-construction and community participation	Real-time annotation, narrative extension, algorithmic feedback

4. Aesthetic Education Dimensions of Interactive Narrative in Children's Short Dramas

The interactive narrative mechanisms discussed in the previous chapter do not directly produce educational outcomes. Rather, the aesthetic education potential lies in certain functional dimensions. Table 2 shows that the three interactive narrative mechanisms correspond to distinct but overlapping aesthetic education functions in a structured manner.

Table 2

Mapping Between Interactive Narrative Mechanisms and Aesthetic Education Dimensions

Interactive Narrative Mechanism	Aesthetic Education Dimension	Mediating Pathway
Audio-visual semiotics (color, rhythm, cinematography)	Aesthetic perception and judgment	Multimodal sensory stimulation → perceptual sensitivity → evaluative discrimination
Narrative structure (branching, loop, open endings)	Aesthetic creativity	Non-linear engagement → imaginative exploration → creative expression
Platform affordances (bullet comments, comment sections, engagement behaviors)	Cultural aesthetic identity	Participatory meaning-making → shared aesthetic repertoire → cultural identification

4.1. Cultivation of aesthetic perception and aesthetic judgment

Aesthetic perception and judgment represent the foundational and evaluative stages of aesthetic education. Through dense audio-visual semiotics, such as color differentiation, tempo variation, and vertical screen cinematography, children's short dramas may activate multimodal perceptual channels within concentrated temporal windows. Such semiotic density may encourage young audiences to become increasingly discerning in distinguishing visual and auditory stimuli. Aesthetic judgment emerges as a secondary capacity in response to the evaluative pressures of narrative conflict. The presence of branching narratives with moral or imaginative dilemmas may foster the ability to distinguish between aesthetic value and sensory appeal.

4.2. Stimulation of aesthetic creativity

Non-linear narrative forms act as catalysts for aesthetic creativity because they depart from conventional linear storytelling, thereby requiring young audiences to actively construct narrative possibilities. The open-endedness of non-linear storytelling, along with loop narratives featuring

incremental variation, allows young audiences to imagine different narrative possibilities. This cognitive activity is further reflected in the creative behavior observable in short-video media. Comment-section contributions on platforms such as Bilibili frequently include narrative suggestions from young users, indicating a mode of reception in which the viewer functions as potential co-creator, thereby engaging the productive dimension of aesthetic education.

4.3. Construction of cultural aesthetic identity

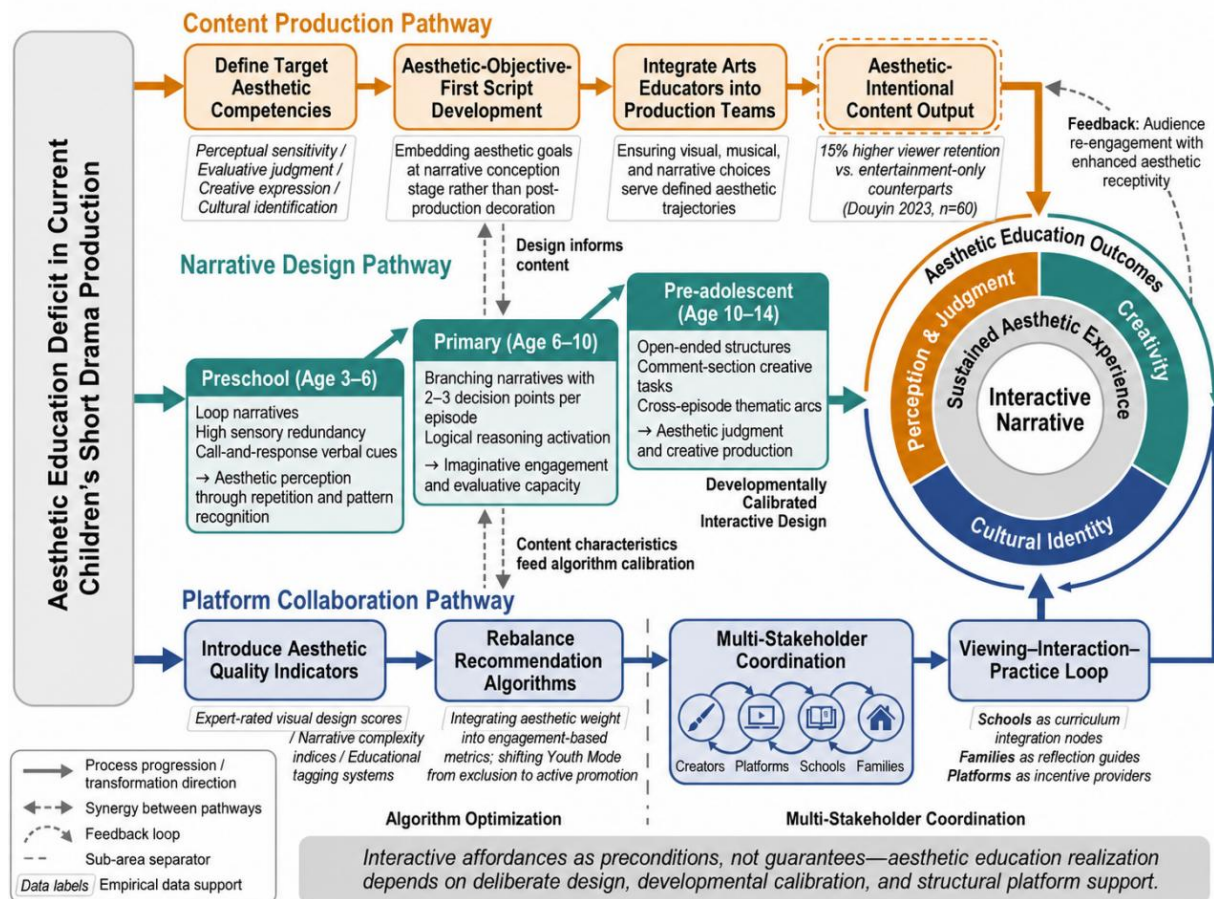
Children's short drama shows are increasingly incorporating culture-specific aesthetic features in their interactive models. On Douyin, children's drama series featuring Chinese ink painting or classical mythology themes have demonstrated notable audience engagement among younger viewers. Platform affordances contribute to this cultural dimension through communal participation, as bullet comments and reactions allow for a collective aesthetic experience in which young people navigate cultural meanings collaboratively. The cyclical process of consuming cultural content, interpreting it through interactive engagement, and validating interpretations through communal participation on platform affordances may, over time, contribute to the formation of cultural aesthetic identity—that is, a sense of self connected to certain cultural aesthetic traditions that extend beyond personal taste.

5. Pathways for Realizing Aesthetic Education Functions

To translate the aesthetic education dimensions identified above into sustainable outcomes, interventions in three interrelated areas are necessary. As depicted in Fig. 3, these pathways integratively involve the content level, the narrative design level, and the platform level.

Figure 3

Integrated Pathway Framework for Aesthetic Education Realization in Children's Short Dramas



5.1. Content production pathway: embedding aesthetic objectives into narrative cores

The dominant logic of children's short drama production on short-video platforms is engagement-driven, focusing on completion rate, sharing, and follower growth, and lacks pedagogical intentionality. Reorienting this logic would involve developing an “aesthetic-objective-first” production paradigm in which aesthetic education objectives are integrated at the script development stage, as opposed to being an afterthought or mere decoration. This means that the intended aesthetic competencies (perceptual sensitivity, judgment, creativeness, or identification) must be established before the narrative genres, visual styles, and interactive modes are determined. Collaboration between production teams and arts educators during the content development process could ensure that visual design, music, and conflict resolution function as components of a coherent aesthetic learning trajectory.

5.2. Narrative design pathway: tiered interactive strategies aligned with children's cognitive developmental stages

Children vary greatly in their cognitive capacity for dealing with narrative complexities, making evaluative judgments, and for thinking creatively. Therefore, different design strategies for integrating aesthetic education into interactive narratives are required. For preschool children aged three to six

years, stories with high sensory redundancy—including simple interaction prompts such as verbal call-and-response—align well with the preoperational stage of development and can effectively foster aesthetic perception. Stories containing two or three decision points per episode facilitate logical reasoning for audience aged six to ten years. In contrast, open-ended narrative structures paired with creative tasks in the comment section cater to the aesthetic judgment and creative abilities of audiences aged ten to fourteen years. These age bands are heuristic rather than rigid, and should be treated as orientations for design rather than as fixed developmental thresholds.

5.3. Platform collaboration pathway: algorithmic recommendation optimization and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms

Platform-level intervention is a structural prerequisite for scaling aesthetic education content to reach wider audiences. The algorithm recommendation systems of Douyin and Kuaishou currently favor engagement velocity and completion rates, which places content requiring deeper cognitive processing at a disadvantage. Incorporating aesthetic quality indicators, such as expert visual design scores, narrative complexity indices, and educational tags, could help balance content promotion with engagement optimization. The “Youth Mode” feature of Douyin provides only limited content for users under age fourteen. This feature is inherently exclusionary. Besides the adjustment of algorithms, a coordination mechanism among multiple parties, including content creators, platform operators, schools, and families, is needed to complete an aesthetic education ecosystem. Schools can integrate short drama series into arts curricula; families can participate in children’s reflective activities after viewing; and platforms can provide incentives—such as traffic subsidies and prominent placement in children’s content sections—to promote aesthetic education content.

6. Discussion

6.1. The tension between entertainment-oriented interactivity and aesthetic depth

The mechanisms of interactive narratives, as described in the present research, exhibit an intrinsic tension: the very features that make them engaging can also undermine the depth of aesthetic experience when not deployed with pedagogical intentionality. This concern is supported by empirical research on children’s digital content more broadly. An investigation of the top 100 ranked “educational” apps for children revealed that the majority failed to effectively apply learning principles, with free apps being particularly problematic due to distracting features such as advertisements, unnecessary animations, and low-level interactivity (Meyer et al., 2021). The same issue applies to children’s short dramas on short-video platforms. Interactive elements such as rapid-fire bullet comments and autoplay sequences may disrupt the focused attention required for

aesthetic contemplation. The proposed design approach within the tiered narrative design pathway may partially mitigate this issue, but the economic incentive structure for creating such content still favors immediate stimulation over sustained engagement.

6.2. The structural contradiction between platform traffic logic and the slow-dissemination nature of aesthetic education content

Beneath the content-level tension discussed above lies a deeper structural contradiction. Algorithmic recommendation systems used by major short-video platforms prioritize attention-grabbing content over content that requires slower, more contemplative processing. An experimental study of algorithmic recommendations on a children's video-sharing platform found that recommended content exhibited a bias toward sensational and attention-grabbing content with each successive interaction, and that problematic content types increased during longer viewing sessions (Radesky et al., 2024). In this temporal context, aesthetic education content, with its elaborate visual design, intricate narratives, and multi-faceted interpretative requirements, demands a slower dissemination mode that is fundamentally at odds with the logic of algorithms. It is this issue that the proposed platform collaboration pathway seeks to address structurally. Otherwise, such content would remain a niche product regardless of its production quality.

6.3. Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations. As a conceptual analysis, it does not provide empirically validated evidence for the proposed relationships. The three-layer model and pathway framework are presented as heuristic tools, not as empirically tested causal models. Future research could employ content analysis, experimental designs, or longitudinal studies to test these propositions. Ethical considerations surrounding research involving minors' media consumption—including informed consent and data privacy—should be carefully addressed in any empirical extension of this work.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the interactive narrative mechanisms of children's short dramas on short-video platforms and identified three pathways through which aesthetic education functions can be realized: content production, narrative design, and platform collaboration. The results of the "Interactive Narrative—Aesthetic Experience—Aesthetic Education" analytical model indicate that the interactive features are premises rather than guarantees of aesthetic development; their effectiveness ultimately depends on intentional design and structural support. The inherent tension between the traffic logic of entertainment platforms and the reflective temporality of aesthetic development remains a central challenge. Further research could examine the longitudinal

development of aesthetic competence in young viewers, as well as extend the scope of this study to other culturally specific platform environments. Given that this is a conceptual study, empirical validation of the proposed model remains an important task for future research. Ethical considerations related to minors' media consumption should also be addressed in subsequent empirical investigations.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

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Consent to participate

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Consent for publication

All authors have given their consent.

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