

Miniature Time: A Study on the Narrative and Communication Effects of Online Mini Dramas from the Perspective of Empathy

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Abstract. In the wave of digital media, art forms such as online short dramas have emerged, quickly gaining market demand and audience love. Based on the theory of empathetic communication, this paper conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content narrative, media strategies, audiovisual communication, and communication effects of four representative online mini dramas. It is found that online mini dramas have taken shape in forming deep emotional links with audiences, but there are still many problems. Finally, this paper proposes solutions from multiple aspects such as government departments, creative entities, audiovisual platforms, and industries, to provide useful references for developing online mini dramas to expand artistic boundaries and social influence in empathetic communication.

Keywords: Online Mini Dramas; Empathetic Communication; Content Narrative; Media Strategy; Audiovisual Communication.

1. Introduction

The booming development of digital media has led to the emergence of various online audiovisual programs such as online mini dramas. Their representative characteristics are: in terms of content creation, the main source is adapted from online literature, the main theme of the plot is clear, the plot is compact and complete, and the character setting is distinct; in terms of dissemination form, the duration of a single episode is several tens of seconds to 15 minutes, mostly spread on mobile vertical screen ports such as social media and video platforms; in terms of dissemination effect, viral transmission attracts users to immerse themselves in watching and sharing actively.

Sorting it out, the history of online mini dramas is not long, but has strong vitality. Starting from 2020, China has entered the first year of production and communication of online mini dramas, which brought new research directions to the journalism and communication academia to comprehensively analyze the new formats of radio and television under the Internet. In 2021, China's online mini dramas showed improved quality and diverse changes. In 2022, the rise of online mini dramas has entered a marketing dividend period. Among them, it has become a key topic to explore the practical application of emotional communication, especially empathetic communication, in online mini dramas.

Empathetic communication mainly studies the formation, transmission and diffusion process of common or similar emotions. When forming a deep connection and interaction between online short dramas and audiences, online mini dramas use effective empathetic communication mechanisms. Therefore, guided by the theory of empathetic communication, this paper adopts content analysis and text analysis methods to comprehensively watch and conduct in-depth research on four representative online short dramas that have become popular on various social and video platforms from 2023 to 2024. Then, it constructs categories such as plot development, character image, plot design, and communication effect, and collects data to explore how to fully utilize factors such as content, audiovisual, artistic characteristics and communication effects to achieve empathetic communication strategies and effects, in order to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for improving the artistic quality and social impact of online mini dramas, as well as promoting the innovative and high-quality development of film and television art in the era of intelligent media.

Table 1. Detailed information of four online mini dramas

Title	Creative Subjects	Theme	Content	Time
<i>Escape from the British Museum</i>	Co-produced by vloggers: "Jianbing Guozai" & "Xiatian Meimei".	Patriotic sentiment, Cultural confidence.	A fantastical story of how a Chinese jade teapot, having turned into a woman and escaped from the British Museum, returned to China with the help of a journalist.	August 30, 2023
<i>Hi Mom (Being stepmother in the 1980s)</i>	Tinghua Island Production.	Satisfying, Culture.	Modern female college student travels back to the 1980s and marries a male with two children.	February 13, 2024
<i>Have the New Year</i>	Douyin, Perfect World Film Production.	Marriage concept, Social reality.	A unique emotional story of finding the balance between conflicting topics of "reunion in the Lunar New Year" and "spouse a divorce".	February 14, 2024
<i>The Wind of Journey</i>	Guided by Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film and Television; Co-produced by <i>Douyin</i> , Huace Film and TV.	Slow life, Cultural inheritance.	Young people's choices in life and cultural protection.	February 16, 2024

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Mini Dramas

In November 2022, the State Administration of Radio and Television issued a *notice on further strengthening the creation management and implementation of online mini dramas*, marking the standardization of different expressions, such as "mini dramas" and "short dramas", as "online mini dramas" at the national level, and clarified that the filing time for a single episode is within 20 minutes. In February 2024, the China Advertising Association and the Secondhand System jointly released a research report on the development of the Chinese mini drama market, which pointed out that online mini dramas have four major content attributes and operational model characteristics: short, direct, precise and agile.

According to a search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) using "online mini dramas" as the keyword, there has been a significant increase since the beginning of research in 2021 and in 2022. After sorting, it mainly focuses on three aspects.

First, the social driving force behind the explosion. Huang Zhongjun and Xiao Jiahao (2023) pointed out that it stems from the shift and joint efforts of media, users and capital[1]. Liu Yixin (2024) believed that online mini dramas are a product of accelerating the continuous adjustment of the narrative structure of film and television art in society[2]. Zheng Yapeng (2024) believed that it is a successful conspiracy between consumerism and mass culture in the context of the Internet, which is derived not only from the blessing of narrative form, content and Internet algorithm technology, but also from the accurate grasp of audience psychology[3].

Second, narrative and communication strategies. Shi Hengjing and Peng Yuanyuan (2021) analyzed that the prominent features of the popular vertical screen mini series are the return of professional-generated content (PGC), the continuation of unfashionable content, platform upgrading support, audience aesthetic iteration, etc.[4]. Liu Yixin (2024) summarized that the performance in terms of storytelling is driven by plot, heavy characters, and conceptual backgrounds, while in terms of discourse, it is characterized by level plot, single line structure and biased dissemination[2].

Third, the dilemma and future development. Yang Lin (2023) pointed out that online mini dramas have practical problems such as low quality, imbalanced value, and widespread entertainment[5]. Li

Jiayao and Yu Ouyang (2023) proposed the creative dilemma of excessive fragmentation, emotionalization, and entertainment[6]. Huang Zhongjun and Xiao Jiahao (2023) proposed hidden concerns such as content standards being downgraded, cultural consumption being single, and aesthetic development being limited. They further pointed out the need to respect the form, market and technological operation rules of online mini dramas, while highlighting correct values and aesthetic guidance, improving the "digital menu" in the online era, and cultivating a rich "cultural taste" for the public[1]. Liu Yuhui and Chen Yanyu (2022) provided suggestions for improving content quality, exploring diversified profit models, promoting the industrialization of business models, and improving external institutional supervision[7].

2.2. Empathetic Communication

The concept of "empathy" originated from and is often used in psychological and medical research, referring to the ability of individuals to accurately understand the emotions of others and to make accurate emotional responses in specific situations. Wu Fei (2019) first applied the concept of "empathy" to communication studies in China, which caused a strong response in the academic community[8]. Zhao Jianguo (2021) further defined empathetic communication as the process of forming, transmitting and spreading common or similar emotions[9].

In recent years, research on empathetic communication in China has mainly been divided into three aspects.

First, to explore the theoretical principles and practical models of empathetic communication. Based on the three components or stages of empathy proposed by psychology, namely "emotional infection", "viewpoint selection" and "empathy attention", Wu Fei (2019) proposes how to enhance empathy through communication, laying the foundation for the construction of empathetic communication theory[8].

Second, to examine the effect of empathetic communication in the new media era. Zhang Jie (2020) believed that the term is an innovative concept in typical character reporting, and the tripartite empathy between the media, typical characters and the audience is correlated with promoting the communication effect[10].

Third, to explore the effectiveness of empathetic communication in international communication. Wu Fei (2019) extended the concept to mass communication and international communication[8]. Zhong Xin et al. (2023) pointed out that cross-cultural empathetic communication has great potential in innovating and assisting the international dissemination of Chinese culture[11]. Xu Xiangdong et al. (2023) proposed that based on the basic emotions shared by humans, empathetic communication can help bridge the cultural divide between audiences and become a catalyst for international communication work[12].

2.3. Summary

From existing research, it can be concluded that emotional rendering is an important point for online mini dramas, closely related to empathetic communication. The empathetic communication strategy and application of online mini dramas are still in the exploratory stage. Based on this, this paper integrates the two to introduce new thinking into the theoretical research of online mini dramas, and further enrich the practical application of empathetic communication in the mobile internet era.

3. Study Design

3.1. Research Methods

Content analysis: As shown in Table 2, based on the dissemination characteristics of four online mini dramas, this paper divides them into 16 categories from four macro levels: content narrative, media

strategy, audiovisual communication and communication effects, and conducts information collection and data statistics.

Table 2. Basic information of four online mini dramas on *Douyin* platform

Category		<i>Escape from the British Museum</i>	<i>Hi Mom (Being stepmother in the 1980s)</i>	<i>Have the New Year</i>	<i>The Wind of Journey</i>
Content Narrative	Emotion	Moving, Emotional, Stirring.	Satisfying, Easy.	Light comedy, Slight sadness.	Cure, Warm.
	Type	Fantasy	Comedy Love	Love Family	Love
	Theme	Patriotic sentiment, Cultural Protection, National identity.	Pass through years, Family ethics.	Marriage concept, Social reality.	Slow life, Cultural heritage Inheritance.
Media Strategy	Update	One week for total.	One day for total.	1-2 days/episode.	1-2 days/ episode.
	Episodes	3	82	16	18
	Each Duration (minutes)	2-10	1-1.5	3-5	2-4
	Total Duration (minutes)	16.5	114	64	68
	Play Platforms	<i>Bilibili, Douyin, Little Red Book, Weibo, Kwai, Mango TV</i>	<i>Douyin, WeChat Mini Program</i>	<i>Douyin</i>	<i>Douyin</i>
Audiovisual Communication	Profit Model	Paid viewing	Advertising	None	None
	Format	Landscape screen	Vertical screen	Landscape screen	Vertical screen
	Scenery	Close range, Long shot, Mid to close range.	Close range, Mid to close range, Close ups.	Close range, Mid to close range, Prospect.	Close range, Close ups, Mid to close range.
	Caption	Bottom	Middle & lower.	Bottom	Left Middle
Communication Effect	View (billion)	2.44	1.06	0.88	0.25
	Like (million)	28.39	99.99	11.53	2.34
	Comment (million)	2.26	Not provided	0.33	0.05
	Forward (million)	6.08	Not provided	1.79	0.18

Text analysis: Based on content analysis and statistical results, qualitative interpretation is conducted at the levels of topic setting, content presentation and narrative strategy segmentation to explore the deep intentions and cultural connotations of online mini dramas, and then summarize their communication strategies and problems in the perspective of empathy, and provide suggestions.

3.2. Reliability Analysis

This paper was independently completed by the author. When collecting data, a student majoring in journalism and communication has been invited to conduct a synchronous review, and then complete a reliability test to ensure the stability and consistency of the analysis indicators and collected results.

4. Case Analysis

4.1. Content Narrative

Many online mini dramas are condensed versions of the high gloss content of online novels, and the subdivision of content is constantly expanding and deepening. The four mini dramas studied in this paper represent a common phenomenon in current content creation, and it is found that they attract audience attention and resonance through diverse narrative techniques and emotional expression. The main manifestation is that they are no longer limited to traditional plot frameworks, but integrate various elements such as fantasy, comedy and family ethics, forming a unique narrative style. This innovation not only brings a brand new visual experience to the audience, but also deeply triggers their thoughts on social issues such as patriotism, marriage and intangible cultural heritage inheritance.

According to Raymond Henry Williams, a British Marxist cultural critic, the rise of a cultural trend is essentially a product of a common emotion in society, corresponding to the emotional structure of people in this era. For example, the popular drama *Hi Mom* reflects the emotional needs that people cannot find in real life; The light comedy *Have the New Year* aims to analyze the changes in contemporary marriage concepts, as well as the difficulties and breakthroughs in marital life, to stimulate the audience's thinking and discussion of real-life issues with laughter and tears.

In addition to the shortcomings of family background, deeper national emotions and "poetry and distance" can also meet the deepest emotional needs of the audience. For example, *Escape from the British Museum* depicts the emotional exchange between the protagonist and the cultural relics, presenting a concrete situation of overseas cultural relics through anthropomorphic narration, providing a potential emotional foundation, and condensing deep national and patriotic sentiments. Thus, this kind of universal human emotion is the empathy opportunity for such dramas to go abroad. Meanwhile, *The Wind of Journey* focuses on healing and warm emotions, and through the fusion of slow life atmosphere and intangible cultural heritage cuisine culture, allows the audience to find the power of inner peace and cherish the interaction with family and friends, which fits the current fast-paced modern life.

In summary, online mini dramas have a strong explosive narrative power in their condensed plot duration, manifested in extremely strong emotional tension and profound thematic ideas.

4.2. Media Strategy

In the era of digital media, the four works have both diverse and common media strategies, jointly constructing a vibrant audiovisual world.

In terms of channels, all four works are released on multiple platforms to expand audience coverage and influence. Whether *Escape from the British Museum* is fully launched on the social platforms where young people gather, such as *Bilibili*, *Douyin* and *Little Red Book*, or *Hi Mom* is precisely launched on the ports full of fragmented information, such as *Douyin* and *WeChat Mini Program*, or *Have the New Year* and *The Wind of Journey* are deeply cultivated on *Douyin*, it reflects their efforts to break the copyright monopoly and achieve widespread access to the audience through media channels.

In terms of single episode setting and update frequency, the four works set different modes based on content type, audience preferences and market expectations. First, compared to traditional TV dramas, although the distribution of episodes is diverse, the duration of a single episode is extremely short, and the total duration is correspondingly short. The audience is both immersed in a toxic way like

"brushing short videos", and can also watch and stop at any time, increasing the penetration and convenience of dissemination. Second, updating an episode every 1 to 2 days or completing the entire episode in a week eliminates the traditional urge for updates in TV dramas. This is based on a precise understanding of the audience's viewing habits, reducing the loss and volatility of traffic. Specifically, regular episode-by-episode updates are more suitable for traditional TV dramas to maintain sustained audience attention and extend the impact of the series. *Have the New Year* and *The Wind of Journey* integrate the framework elements of traditional TV dramas and online mini dramas, maintaining an episode updated every 1 to 2 days and completing the update in about 20 days. This is in line with the rich and profound plot content, which can drive the audience and characters to grow together and experience more emotional ups and downs in a slow and steady update. The weekly release of the entire episode is suitable for mini dramas with fewer episodes, longer single-episode duration and a tight rhythm, such as *Escape from the British Museum*, to quickly attract audiences and gather word-of-mouth effects. Moreover, *Hi Mom* releases the entire episode all at once, ensuring a fresh and immersive viewing experience.

4.3. Audiovisual Communication

Online mini dramas have begun to detach from the short video track, gradually forming a unique audiovisual feature: in terms of actor engagement, mini dramas have emerged from the film and television adaptation of online literature, unexpectedly tapping into a huge traffic market. In the main focus on the "sinking market", the grassroots source of the script also maps to the grassroots use of actors. At present, the main actors in mini dramas are mostly short video creators and infamous actors, and they can create stars. Represented by *Hi Mom*, the production team behind it, Tinghua Island, is dedicated to the mini drama market and has gradually cultivated a professional team of mini drama actors. With the explosive power of mini dramas to monetize, many well-known artists have turned from traditional film and television production to online mini dramas. In *Have the New Year*, the lead actors Xu Mengjie and Li Chuan are already well-known artists, and the former is a popular actress from a talent show, which precisely demonstrates the strong grassroots characteristics of mini dramas in terms of actor recruitment, traffic collection, etc.

In terms of audiovisual language, the four works flexibly use landscape and vertical screens to meet the diverse needs of different broadcasting platforms and viewing scenarios. At the same time, the scenery also changes with the horizontal and vertical screens. Close-up and medium views are often used for vertical screens, while distant and panoramic views are flexibly used for horizontal screens. Traditional film and television dramas often have original theme songs, interludes, etc. In comparison, in short dramas, although the music matches the character's mood and environmental atmosphere, the styles are diverse and the originality is limited. A single drama can use excerpts of dozens of music pieces.

In terms of profit models, the four works have different strategies. *Escape from the British Museum* and *The Wind of Journey* do not directly profit from the audience. The former achieves traffic conversion through multi platforms, while the latter achieves exclusive broadcast based on *Douyin*. *Hi Mom* and *Have the New Year* use paid viewing and advertising implantation. The diversified profit models help to bring more revenue, while also meeting the consumption needs of different audience groups.

4.4. Communication Effect

With the technology-enabled, online mini dramas are the product of the combination of small volume content and Internet operations, which is its unique basic attribute and the deep reason for achieving considerable communication effects.

In terms of traffic data, as shown in Table 2, all four online mini dramas have exceeded 100 million views, and *Escape from the British Museum* has reached 2.44 billion views, with a wide audience and a high level of attention and discussion in the market. According to the research report on the market

size of Chinese online mini dramas released by iiMedia Research, the third-party data mining and analysis firm, on November 22, 2023, the market size of online mini dramas has achieved tenfold growth in just two years, with profits breaking through from 3.68 billion in 2021 to 37.39 billion in 2023.

In terms of monetization volume, low cost, high unit price and wide audience make the high gross profit of online mini dramas possible. The most eye-catching one is *Hi Mom*, with a filming period of 10 days and the post production of 80,000 yuan, while the total payment for watching the entire episode is 39.9 yuan, and the daily recharge exceeds 20 million yuan.

In terms of reception interaction, not only do we utilize traditional channels such as the *Weibo* comment section, but we also actively utilize new media channels such as short video platforms to deeply communicate with the audience. Taking *Hi Mom* as an example, the leading actors actively interacted on *Douyin*, and continued to heat up through the "second creation" as a short play. The audience speaks and expresses their opinions freely on these platforms, creating a broad atmosphere of discussion and promoting the widespread dissemination of the series.

On the long tail word-of-mouth, the initial popularity of the creative theme and subject lays a solid audience foundation for subsequent traffic attraction, achieving a long tail effect of traffic continuity. It is worth mentioning that *The Wind of Journey* can be regarded as a sequel to the popular TV series *Meet Yourself*, which has also accumulated word-of-mouth and continued traffic. *Escape from the British Museum* has attracted a large number of fans' attention and love for the team's subsequent work *The Little Beast and the Monster Hunter*. The next step in the continuation of the long-tail effect of traffic is the brand explosion agglomeration effect. Taking *Tinghua Island* as an example, it can always accurately capture the key points, form a phenomenon level trend, and shape the "Mimeng style" plot characterized by soil and coolness.

5. Questions and Suggestions

Although having become popular, online mini dramas have exposed obvious problems in content creation, audiovisual language, media strategies and communication effects. First, the main manifestation is that in terms of content creation, the production is rough and the pursuit of novelty is lacking, with a lack of awareness of high-quality products, resulting in narrow themes, low style and even incorrect value orientation. Second, in terms of audiovisual language, the views are not sophisticated enough, lacking professional design and production standards, seriously affecting the viewing experience and making it difficult to compete with traditional TV dramas. Third, in terms of media strategy, too much reliance on short video platforms such as *Douyin* has resulted in limited communication effects and traffic. Fourth, in terms of communication effect, how to maintain the long-term vitality of mini dramas and avoid fleeting moments is also an urgent problem that needs to be solved. In the long run, problems such as excessive capital intervention and short video infringement have gradually emerged, posing a potential threat to the healthy development of the mini drama industry. The above issues require reflection and improvement from multiple aspects.

5.1. Government Departments: Monitor Industry, and Strengthen Market Heteronomy

In the face of new audiovisual forms, industry regulation of heteronomy cannot be absent. Relevant departments of radio and television, news, cultural tourism and market supervision, as well as professional associations such as the China Mini Drama Industry Association, should establish sound policy standards and regulatory mechanisms, strengthen tracking guidance, and regulate content production and capital operation behaviour. At the same time, we will increase efforts to crack down on infringement, protect the legitimate rights and interests of original works, and provide strong guarantees for the healthy development of the mini drama industry.

5.2. Creative Subjects: Create Content Narrative, and Integrate Cultural Connotations

The directing teams should delve deeper into stories with rich cultural heritage and realistic attention, and create works that are both profound and warm. Producers need to establish correct values and avoid excessive pursuit of commercial interests while neglecting social responsibility. The creative teams should also pay attention to innovative narrative methods, actively explore new narrative strategies such as widening the progress gap, loop layered structure and database narrative, etc., to enhance the attractiveness and infectiousness of the works.

Especially, in terms of content creation, we can continue to strengthen the support of AIGC, IP matrix and traditional culture cultivation: Utilize new productive forces such as artificial intelligence to improve the production level and audiovisual effects of mini dramas; Utilize the influence of popular IP to attract more audience attention; Deeply explore the essence of traditional culture to enhance the cultural connotation and artistic value of works.

5.3. Audiovisual Platforms: Expand Channels, and Deepen Reception Interactions

Actively expanding communication channels of cross-platform cooperation, online and offline linkage, and utilizing marketing interactions such as social media and online live streaming to enhance visibility and influence. The industry can even try to collaborate with local cultural and tourism governments, radio and television stations, and websites to gain official and media support.

Media and platforms, as the main channels for the dissemination of mini dramas, should be strictly reviewed and controlled to eliminate vulgar, violent and other harmful content. Meanwhile, it is necessary to make good use of the interactive mechanism of new media platforms to achieve brand building and word-of-mouth accumulation. The publishers also should pay more attention to responding to feedback, and encourage the audience to join in secondary innovation, which will improve the quality of works and service, and enhance audience satisfaction and loyalty.

5.4. Industry Development: Deeply Integrate, and Build International Communication

The online mini drama industry should keep up with the times, actively explore innovative development models, and strengthen cooperation and linkage with related industries to form a good situation of integration, symbiosis and coordinated development. Taking *The Wind of Journey* as an example, online mini dramas have become the best promotional videos for local cultural and tourism, bringing a win-win situation of soaring traffic and increasing popularity for both parties. From this perspective, with the support of mini dramas, the cultural and tourism industry is about to take shape as a cross industry ecological cooperation model with light volume, low investment and high returns, jointly injecting new vitality into the new quality development of the cultural industry. In addition, the integration of mini dramas with new technologies such as Metaverse and virtual games can integrate the display of third-party content with immersive experiences from the first perspective, making script games a breakthrough in virtual reality and potentially triggering the next audiovisual revolution.

Meanwhile, exporting mini dramas will also become an important trend in the industry's development. By aligning with the international market, Chinese mini dramas will have the opportunity to showcase their unique charm and enhance cultural exchange and understanding between countries. This not only helps to enhance the international influence of Chinese culture, but also lays a solid foundation for the global development of the mini drama industry. Therefore, mini dramas should fully absorb the inspiration and experience of domestic dramas going abroad in the past, and consider cultural differences and multiple market demands in compilation and dissemination, customize strategies to seize opportunities and respond to challenges.

6. Conclusion

This paper conducts an in-depth study of four representative online mini dramas, revealing their strategies and effects in viral communication technology and empathetic communication mechanisms. It is found that online mini dramas establish deep links through short storyline, delicate emotional expressions and vivid audiovisual language, achieving emotional resonance between transmission and reception with audiences. Overall, online mini dramas demonstrate the characteristics of empathetic communication in content narrative, media strategy, audio-visual communication and communication effects. However, they also face limitations and challenges such as insufficient content innovation, weak sustainability of media strategy and insufficient depth of communication effects. In the future, research and practice on empathetic communication of online mini dramas should focus on deepening content creation, optimizing communication strategies and coordinating multiple forces, to demonstrate trends such as industry standardization, content refinement, audiovisual interaction, industry intelligence and international communication, to make greater contributions to the prosperity and development of China's cultural industry.

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