

Micro-drama Preferences of Generation Z Tertiary Students in Hangzhou

Wenyi Fan, Jiping Zhang*

College of Network Communication, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, Zhejiang, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: This report aims to depict the behavioral landscape of online micro-drama consumption among college students in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, and to explore the underlying motivations, preferences, and potential impacts. The study employed a questionnaire survey using snowball sampling, collecting 248 valid responses, and integrated macro-level industry data for analysis. The findings reveal a diversified trend in platform selection, with differentiated competition between TikTok and specialized apps such as Tomato Short Drama; behavioral patterns show low-frequency viewing coexisting with fragmented viewing scenarios; overall consumption willingness is low, with rational consumption dominating; entertainment and leisure serve as the primary motivation, driven by the pursuit of “pleasurable” plotlines; and while most users maintain self-control, nearly 40% of respondents report issues such as time mismanagement and value system influences. In conclusion, micro-drama consumption among college students is characterized by rational dominance, entertainment-driven motives, and varying levels of self-control, necessitating coordinated guidance from both the industry and educational stakeholders to promote healthy media use habits.

Keywords: Micro-Dramas; Tertiary Student Consumption Behavior; Screen Industry Development

1. Introduction

Amidst the wave of media convergence, a new form of artistic expression—the micro-drama—is reshaping the landscape of online audiovisual art with sweeping momentum [1]. Unlike the production and operation models of traditional film and television, micro-dramas leverage the precise big data analysis technologies of short video platforms and [2], through their narrative

style characterized by “fast pacing [3], intense conflict, and vertical screen presentation [4],” have rapidly captured a significant portion of users' fragmented time, giving rise to a substantial market scale. Within this trend, university students, who possess ample leisure time, are highly dependent on social media, and are sensitive to novel things, have naturally become one of the core audiences for micro-drama consumption. As Generation Z—a cohort born into seamless connectivity with the internet age—their upbringing has been, to some extent, influenced by digital media [5]. Compared to ordinary short videos, micro-dramas, with their continuous plots and meticulously designed “thrilling moments” and “plot twists [6],” generate a stronger sense of immersion and user stickiness. Consequently, they may also precipitate a series of new issues, such as excessive consumption, disordered time management, and influences on personal values. Therefore, the author has selected the specific group of “tertiary students in Hangzhou” for this investigation, aiming to precisely analyze this demographic's behavioral patterns and psychological motivations concerning micro-dramas. The goal is to provide region-specific market references for relevant content producers and offer empirical evidence for universities guiding students towards rational consumption and enhancing their digital literacy.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Data Sources

This study employed a snowball sampling method from December 2025 to February 2026 to select tertiary students currently enrolled in Hangzhou as survey respondents. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, and 248 were collected, yielding a response rate of 99.2%. All 248 collected questionnaires were valid, resulting in an effectiveness rate of 99.99%.

2.2 Survey Content

This survey aimed to investigate the channels through which tertiary students in Zhejiang Province access micro-dramas, their average viewing duration per session and frequency, primary consumption scenarios, and willingness to pay. Based on the collected data, the study explored this demographic's core motivations for watching micro-dramas, their genre preferences, and the emotional and cognitive impacts experienced after viewing.

The research was primarily conducted using a questionnaire survey method. A self-designed questionnaire was developed according to the research objectives. The questionnaire comprised four parts: Part One collected basic personal information, including gender, current educational stage, and academic discipline. Part Two investigated consumption patterns, such as viewing platforms, viewing frequency, and viewing scenarios. Part Three examined aesthetic preferences, including favored genres and settings, as well as reasons for not abandoning a series. Part Four utilized a Likert scale to measure the impact of micro-dramas on individuals, where 1 indicated "strongly disagree" and 5 indicated "strongly agree".

3. Research Results

3.1 Overview of Survey Findings

This survey employed a snowball sampling method and collected a total of 248 questionnaires, all of which were valid, resulting in a 100% effectiveness rate. Due to the limited sample size, the statistical results of this study have certain limitations. However, they can still reflect, to some extent, the behavioral patterns, motivations and preferences, consumption willingness and habits of the surveyed tertiary students in this region, outlining the basic profile and potential issues of this demographic within the micro-drama new media market. Based on the 248 valid data points collected, this study will provide a detailed behavioral description and data analysis of the survey results.

3.2 Basic Sample Characteristics

A total of 248 tertiary students participated in this survey. Of the 248 participants, 129 were male and 119 were female; 56 were graduate students, 121 were undergraduate students, and 71 were junior tertiary students. Details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Characteristics of Survey

Variable	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Gender	Male	129	52.02%
	Female	119	47.98%
Educational Stage	Graduate Student	56	22.58%
	Undergraduate Student	121	48.79%
	Junior tertiary student	71	28.63%
Academic Discipline	Humanities	54	21.77%
	Social Sciences	82	33.06%
	Natural Sciences	24	9.68%
	Engineering and Technology	64	25.81%
	Agricultural Sciences	13	5.24%
	Medical Sciences	11	4.44%

3.3 Analysis of Platform Selection

In this survey, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.31%) identified TikTok as their primary platform for watching micro-dramas, while over half (52.82%) chose specialized micro-drama apps like Tomato Short Drama. Details are shown in Table 2. Among the 11 respondents who selected "Other," 4 mentioned "Bilibili", and 2 mentioned "Fizzo Novel".

Table 2. Primary Viewing Platforms

Variable	Option	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Viewing Platform	Short video platforms (e.g., TikTok)	157	63.31%
	Image-text communities (e.g., rednote)	105	42.34%
	Social software (e.g., WeChat)	95	38.31%
	Specialized micro-drama apps (e.g., Tomato Short Drama)	131	52.82%
	Other	11	4.44%

3.4 Overview of Viewing Frequency and Scenarios

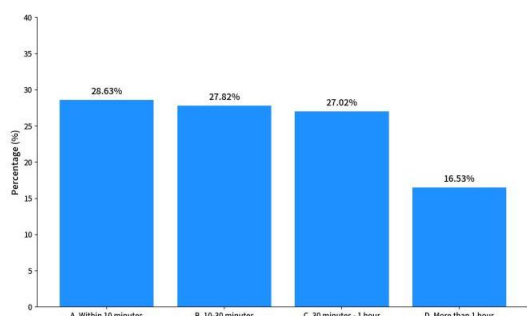


Figure 1. Average Viewing Duration

Low frequency was the main characteristic observed in both the "viewing frequency" and "average viewing duration per session" parts of this survey. Over 28.23% of respondents indicated that they watch micro-dramas less than once a day; approximately 20.97% reported watching only 1-3 times per week. Regarding duration, about 28.63% watched for less than 10 minutes per session; about 27.82% chose the

"10-30 minutes" option; those watching between half an hour and one hour accounted for 27.02%; only 41 individuals (about 16.53%) watched for over an hour per session. This shows a clear decreasing pattern: the longer the single viewing duration, the smaller the corresponding proportion of people. See Figure 1 for details.

This survey further verified the "fragmented" nature of micro-drama viewing. Among the four viewing scenarios provided, up to 61.29% of respondents chose "before sleeping," leading by a significant margin; "queuing/waiting for transportation" and "between classes" accounted for 52.02% and 50.4%, respectively, showing comparable proportions. This indicates that using gaps in daily life to watch micro-dramas is a common behavior among the surveyed tertiary students in Hangzhou. Details are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Primary Viewing Scenarios

Variable	Option	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Primary Viewing Scenarios	During class time	112	45.16%
	Between classes (breaks)	125	50.4%
	Before sleeping	152	61.29%
	Fragmented time (queuing, commuting)	129	52.02%
	Other	94	37.9%

3.5 Overview of Consumption Willingness and Habits

When asked about their willingness to pay, a total of 178 respondents indicated they were "willing to spend money." Considering that this survey targeted the specific group of "tertiary students," the questionnaire design set the consumption amount into four tiers based on their actual financial situations: "10.00 RMB and below," "10.01 to 20.00 RMB," "20.01 to 50.00 RMB," and "50.01 RMB and above."

The largest group, accounting for 38.2%, fell into the "10 RMB and below" acceptable amount range. Approximately 30.34% chose the 10.01-20.00 RMB range. Only 11.8% accepted amounts of 50.01 RMB or more. The overall trend also showed a decrease: the higher the potential consumption amount, the lower the willingness to pay.

3.6 Analysis of Psychological Motivations and Aesthetic Preferences

The survey showed that "entertainment and pastime" was the leading option, indicating it is generally the primary motivation for users. "Relax and vent emotions" ranked highly as the second most chosen option, highlighting its

importance as a secondary purpose. Options like "Attracted by the plot" and "appreciate specific actors" were relatively evenly distributed, mainly concentrated in the 1st, 3rd, and 4th ranks. "Follow the trend" was ranked in the bottom two positions by over 50% of respondents, suggesting this factor is relatively unimportant. See Figure 2 for details.

The author extracted core elements and categorized them into five genres: namely, "Gratification-oriented," "Romance-oriented," "Reality-oriented," "Life-oriented," and "Melodrama-oriented"—corresponding to the five case studies, respectively. Results showed that the preference for "Gratification-oriented" content was highest, with nearly three-quarters (72.98%) of respondents favoring it, leading the other four categories. In contrast, less than 40% of respondents chose "Melodrama-oriented," considerably lower than the other four types. Details are shown in Table 4.

In terms of specific settings, the preference for "Youth Campus" and "Urban & Ethics" both exceeded 60%. "Fantasy Idol" and "Power Struggles" accounted for 55.65% and 55.24%, respectively, showing little difference. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

Regarding reasons for persisting with a series,

"attracted by the plot" had the highest proportion, reaching 66.13%, far surpassing other options. This indicates that plot content remains the core factor in retaining viewers, and the script is still the heart of film and television. Factors like logical coherence and engaging storytelling are far more important to the audience than elements outside the script, such as "actor appearance" or "visual effects." See Figure 4 for details.

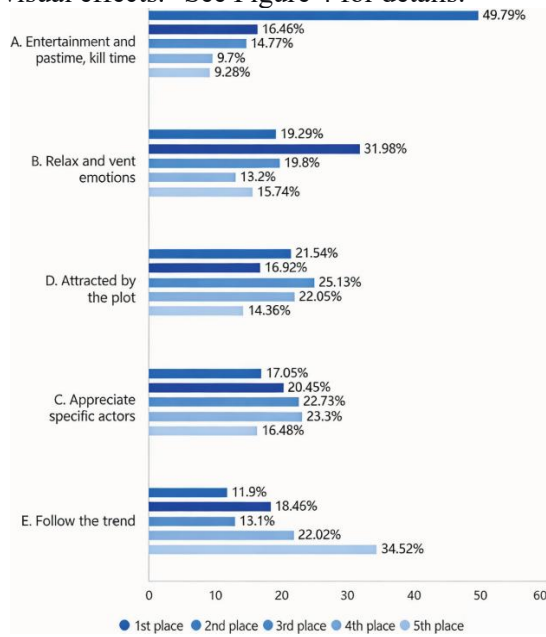


Figure 2. Primary Purposes

Table 4. Preferred Micro-drama Genres

Variable	Option	Frequency(N)	Percentage
Preferred Genre	Gratification-oriented	181	72.98%
	Romance-oriented	149	60.08%
	Serious-oriented	116	46.77%
	Life-oriented	104	41.94%
	Melodrama-oriented	87	35.08%

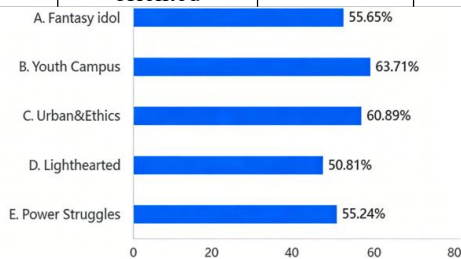


Figure 3. Preferred Settings/Backgrounds

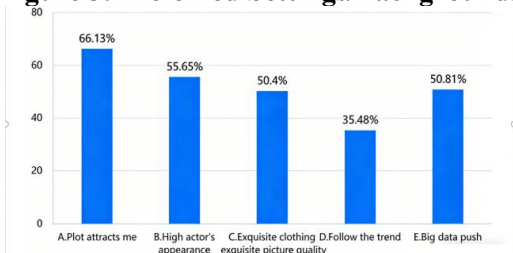


Figure 4. Reasons for Continuing to Watch

3.7 Description of Impact and Perceptions

Table 5. Free Time Taken Up by Micro-Dramas

Variable	Option	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Do micro-dramas take up a lot of your free time?	Strongly Disagree	42	16.94%
	Disagree	46	18.55%
	Neutral	62	25%
	Agree	48	19.35%
	Strongly Agree	50	20.16%

Table 6. Study Delay Due to Watching Micro-Dramas

Variable	Option	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Do you sometimes delay studying because of watching micro-dramas?	Strongly Disagree	63	25.4%
	Disagree	36	14.52%
	Neutral	61	24.6%
	Agree	42	16.94%
	Strongly Agree	46	18.55%

Regarding the statement "Micro-dramas take up a lot of my free time," respondents who chose "Agree" and "Strongly agree" totaled approximately 40%. Similarly, concerning "I have delayed studying or homework because of watching micro-dramas," the total number choosing "Agree" and "Strongly agree" was also close to 40%. Details are shown in Table 5 and Table 6.

3.8 Analysis of Future Industry Development

When asked about the biggest shortcoming of current micro-dramas, about 61.29% of respondents chose "mindless plots," and about 35.48% selected "poorly made/shoddy production." Another 3.23% (8 individuals) provided more diverse critical views, such as "severe homogenization, weak copyright awareness," "inconsistent with the superstructure," and "just clickbait," directly pointing to industry problems. See Figure 5 for details.

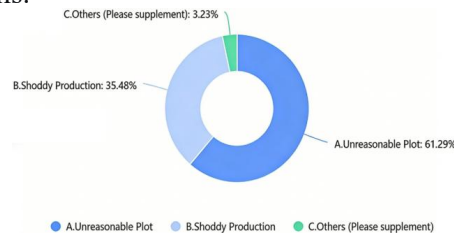


Figure 5. Biggest Shortcoming of Current Micro-Dramas

4. Discussion and Recommendations

4.1 Discussion

The study finds that in the current micro-drama market, the choice of short video platforms is showing a trend of diversification: Specialized micro-drama apps represented by Tomato Short Drama have emerged but have not formed a monopoly; they are currently cultivating highly engaged core users by deepening vertical content and optimizing user experience, pushing the market towards refinement. Meanwhile, traditional short video platforms represented by TikTok, with their massive user base, powerful big data algorithm recommendation capabilities, and complete content ecosystem, continue to attract a large number of micro-drama viewers, serving as the main entry point for the general public and still occupying a dominant position. Non-traditional short video platforms represented by rednote, Bilibili, and Fizzo Novel are also leveraging their own advantages to achieve differentiated competition.

Currently, tertiary students in Hangzhou mostly watch micro-dramas in short, fragmented intervals—such as while commuting or waiting in line. Their average viewing duration per session is relatively short, generally not exceeding 30 minutes. Overall willingness to pay is low, mainly concentrated in the lower price range (10 RMB and below), with extremely low acceptance of consumption amounts above 50 RMB. Overall, rational consumption dominates, forming an attitude of "low frequency, low dependence, low willingness to pay" towards micro-dramas.

In terms of genre and setting preferences, compared to bizarre ancient settings with class conflicts, this group of tertiary students in Hangzhou prefers realistic settings such as urban and campus life. The vast majority watch micro-dramas primarily for psychological "thrills", rejecting "melodramas" during their leisure time. Plotlines such as underdogs triumphing over the powerful, rebirth and revenge, returning to age 18 to get into top universities and becoming all-powerful figures like "Zhen Huan" or "Mei Changsu" remain, to some extent, the "mainstream plots" in the market, further supporting the conclusion that "entertainment is the primary purpose".

When facing the appeal of micro-dramas, tertiary students in Hangzhou overall

demonstrate high self-control, trying not to let them affect their normal lives. However, among the 248 respondents, a small portion still experiences interference with their academic work due to micro-dramas. Meanwhile, over 30% of respondents reported feeling empty after watching micro-dramas, and that the content (such as values) of the dramas had an impact on them. These two data points reflect a deeper issue—micro-dramas may not only occupy time, but the value orientations implied in their plots may also subtly influence the audience's emotional state and cognition.

4.2 Recommendations

Currently, although platforms for viewing micro-dramas are still dominated by TikTok and Tomato Short Drama, non-traditional short video platforms like Bilibili and Fizzo Novel have also entered the fray, vying for market share. Although Bilibili primarily features medium-to-long videos, its user age is mostly under 35, with a strong desire for secondary creation. In the future, it could launch related activities, calling on content creators from various channels to showcase their talents and produce high-quality content through AIGC technology, editing techniques, etc. Fizzo Novel, as a well-known online literature platform in China, possesses a natural IP transformation [7] advantage and can achieve cross-platform [8] linkage through "novels + micro-dramas." Both have the potential to grow into emerging battlegrounds for micro-drama platforms, competing with mainstream ones like TikTok [7] and Tomato Short Drama.

Based on this survey, platforms and content producers should improve their mechanisms according to the data collected on "single consumption amount"[9] and "single viewing duration". Platforms should fully consider the current consumption capacity of tertiary students and could introduce corresponding "student discounts,"[10] controlling the discounted monthly consumption amount within 10 RMB to align with the overall entertainment spending level of this group. Content producers should adjust their script frameworks and control the narrative pace based on the inherent "fast-paced" and "short-duration" attributes of micro-dramas, striving to retain viewers from the beginning, with each episode not exceeding 3 minutes to suit the "fragmented" consumption habit [11]. Looking back at the popular micro-dramas of the

past two years, they can be roughly divided into two categories. One category, represented by the Inside and Outside Home series [12], focuses on being "down-to-earth," set in the last century, employing a warm narrative style, and incorporating local characteristics. The other category, represented by Reborn at 18: The Great-Grandma Takes Charge [13], directly targets pain points like "rebirth," "underdog's rise," and "time travel," featuring elite characters such as CEOs, family heads, and professors as protagonists, with "thrills" as the main style [14]. The script is the core and soul of a drama. The success of these two types of genres relies heavily on excellent scripts. This enlightens creators that if they want to produce popular micro-dramas, the script remains the core element for success and the essential way to retain viewers. At the same time, the explosive popularity of these two series also reveals, to some extent, that in the current micro-drama industry, refinement and seeking resonance, as well as industrialization and pursuing thrills, are still trends deeply favored by tertiary students [15]. Subsequent creators can continue to explore further into these areas, combining the spirit of the times, regional characteristics, and mainstream social culture to create higher-quality works [16].

Overall, relying on their high-intensity and high-engagement nature, micro-dramas have formed a situation among tertiary students that is "temporarily controllable overall, but portion worthy of vigilance." In this contest between appeal and self-control, most users can still maintain rational use, but the nearly 40% affected group reflects value confusion and emotional depletion.

For content producers, they should strictly control the value orientation conveyed by the plots, focus on the positive guiding function of content, avoid negative, pessimistic ideas that deviate from mainstream social values influencing the audience, and respond to their deep expectations for "quality content" and "positive values." Platforms need to establish and improve "anti-addiction mechanisms" for all age groups to prevent tertiary students and even various adult groups from falling into time disorder. Facing the wave of micro-dramas, universities and youth researchers should also begin exploring how to guide the establishment of healthy media usage habits while respecting the entertainment needs of different age groups

[17].

Besides improving script quality and production standards, strengthening copyright awareness and reducing homogenization are also major issues facing the future development of the industry [18]. Platforms should increase scrutiny, regulate viewing habits, improve corresponding functions, and vigorously advocate for the prevention of unauthorized content capture, including screenshots and screen recordings. Content producers need to enhance their own artistic literacy [19], fully respect the copyright interests of peers in the industry, refuse plagiarism, reduce the output of homogenized works, foster an atmosphere of healthy and rational competition, listen to audience demands, and promote the optimization and upgrading of micro-dramas towards excellent films and television works that possess both ideological depth and aesthetic value [20].

5. Conclusion

This study, through a snowball sampling surveying 248 tertiary students in Hangzhou, has systematically depicted the behavioral characteristics, aesthetic preferences, real-world impacts, and future expectations of Generation Z regarding micro-drama consumption. Currently, the surveyed tertiary students primarily use two types of short video apps—TikTok and Tomato Short Drama—to watch micro-dramas during fragmented time. Their overall willingness to pay is relatively low, and they prefer enjoying "gratification-oriented" works based on realistic settings for creation. They expect the future micro-drama industry to strengthen copyright awareness and reduce shoddy production. Meanwhile, a small portion of the group has already experienced value confusion and emotional depletion. Based on the above situation, in the future, platforms should leverage their unique characteristics for differentiated development to expand the market and improve pricing and operational mechanisms. Content creators should persist in prioritizing the script, adjusting the pacing, enhancing work quality, and raising copyright awareness. tertiary students and users of all ages should also improve their media literacy to avoid excessive indulgence in micro-dramas that could affect their normal lives.

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