Why Portrait Mode for Short Dramas:

A Surefire but Incomplete Choice for Short Video Planforms to Get in The Game

Have you ever paused to consider why, as you scroll through Douyin, the short dramas that capture your attention are framed in portrait mode? This seemingly simple question leads us into the heart of a visual revolution. Within this revolution, the portrait mode is not just a participant but a key architect, redefining the landscape of digital storytelling. This innovation, while appearing straightforward, wields the power to enhance both the efficiency of production and the depth of audience immersion. However, behind the rapid growth of vertical short dramas lies an urgent need for aesthetic improvement.

Portrait mode is believed to be a key factor for the burgeoning popularity of short dramas on short-video platforms. Historically, long video platforms were the pioneers in the layout of the industry, with current research on short dramas often tracing back to the series of comedy shorts “Diaosi Man” on the Sohu platform in 2012 (Yang 74), but they didn’t keep their first mover advantage. Short video platforms then appeared with strong competitive power on both supply and demand sides. Taking Kuaishou as an example, from October 2022 to August 2023, it debuted 214 short drama works and achieved a DAU of 260 million. In contrast, Youku, one of the long video platforms with the highest output, released only a total of 189 micro-short dramas. This comparison is marked by a distinct preference in presentation styles: while traditional long video platforms favor the horizontal screen format, the short video platforms have embraced the vertical screen.

The adoption of portrait mode adeptly improves production efficiency. Portrait mode shooting is notably more accessible, with the average cost ranging from 400,000 to 500,000 per drama, and often less (Zhong 3). It is significantly cheaper than horizontal mode, which requires more elaborate lighting, expansive set designs and a larger cast of extras. Additionally, portrait mode productions offer a more time-efficient process, with shooting schedules typically condensed to about seven days (4). The combination of concise production cycles and lower costs enables the creators to keep pace with current events and make timely adjustments based on the market feedback. Take Jiang Shiqi as an example, a creator with a fan base exceeding 30 million in Douyin, she frequently interacted with her audience in the comments section and even modify the storylines based on the feedback during the production of 'Confessions of a Wicked Girl'. Furthermore, the vertical format can use split screen techniques to convey compelling stories within tight time constraints, which enhances the narrative pace by creating parallel timelines and spaces. Techniques like vertical, diagonal, and multi-panel splits make full use of the vertical space, segmenting the screen to present different pieces of information simultaneously. A case in point is the series “About Love”, where the two protagonists’ internal thoughts are visually integrated through split-screen effects.

Portrait mode also intensifies viewer immersion. First of all, as highlighted by research showing that 53% of mobile users prefer not to rotate their phones for video viewing (Gao et al. 102), portrait mode optimizes user experience by eliminating the inconvenience of screen adjustment. Secondly, vertical short dramas, with their 9:16 aspect ratio, employ a focused framing technique that emphasizes detailed character expression. Compared to landscape mode, this approach can invite the audience into the heart of the story and cultivate a deeper emotional connection with the characters. Thirdly, Portrait mode stimulates interactive behaviors between viewers without compromising the viewing experience. According to Symbolic Interactionism, humans actively and creatively use symbolic communication to achieve mutual understanding (Mead 74). This theory can be reflected in the social functionalities of short dramas, where viewers engage in likes, comments, and shares, turning the content into a symbol of interaction in a direct and easy manner without exiting full-screen mode. And sharing to social platforms like WeChat is streamlined, since it does not require the screen rotation typically needed for landscape mode, ensuring a smooth experience.

Fig 1 The use of split screen in "About Love”

However, portrait mode doesn’t completely unite technology and art. It is acknowledged that the preference for portrait mode in short video platforms aligns with a technical convenience, reflecting the modern mobile viewing standard where brevity and single-handed use are prioritized. But the renowned cinematic norms, set by Hollywood's landscape aspect ratio, have cultivated a deeply ingrained perception of visual storytelling that is hard to surpass. This has led to a prevalent mindset that equates landscape mode with artistry and professionalism, while viewing portrait mode as less professional. The stereotype has, to some extent, influenced certain directors to adopt landscape mode to symbolize their artistic taste. To make things worse, excessive profit pursuit causes some vertical short dramas featuring exaggerated performances and outrageous plots to convey improper values. This cultural expression, characterized by its simplicity and lack of logical consistency and depth, seeks to dissolve subjectivities in a decentralized manner. For example, short dramas with themes like “Cold-blooded Boss Falling for Me”, often prioritize pleasure for sublimity and the gratification of desires for the pursuit of values, providing viewers with an imaginative fulfillment of 'being loved' and 'becoming powerful' through the fake dopamine-fueled experience.

Fortunately, aesthetic exploration that harmonizes technology and art can be achieved by combining theory and technology. From theory side it has its own anesthetic applications. In August 2019, director Zhang Yimou introduced the concept of “portrait mode aesthetics” at the first Douyin Short Video Film Festival, which is reflected in his five-minute vertical short film called “Meet You”. The film suggests the use of vertical spatial settings and the selection of warm topics, using the berths of a train to create a three-dimensional space, with effective lighting to vividly depict the moment when “the boy from the lower berth and the girl from the upper berth lock eyes, and the heart-stirring connection between the two young people begins”. From technology side, advancements in AI contributes to aesthetics exploration in different visual contexts, which provides sophisticated selection techniques in the editing side and content creation skills in the shooting side. For editing, AI can be trained to recognize optimal frame and elements to demonstrate the drama content, which can be proved by “Immersive Channel” in iQIYI app as it employs AI to perform various tasks such as scene segmentation and facial recognition in the cloud to facilitate smooth transitions between horizontal and vertical format (Liu 9). AI can also be a content creator in the production, generating desirable scenes to realize filming while viewing 图片包含 室内, 汽车, 桌子, 窗户

描述已自动生成checking. In the drama "Queen of Tears", the scene where the protagonist chases the antagonist on a rainy night was filmed in a virtual studio, with AI-generated scenes, the pursuing vehicles and the moving backgrounds, displayed on LED screens. Therefore, it is natural to infer that the utilization of AI has enormous potential in uniting technology and art for vertical short dramas.

Fig 2 The AI-generated scenes in “Queens of Tears"

In conclusion, portrait mode is a surefire but incomplete choice for short dramas in short-video platforms, which has transformed the way we create and consume short dramas. Its improvement in production efficiency and its ability to enhance audience engagement have both fostered the growing popularity of vertical short drama. However, the rise of vertical short drama does not signify it is enough for its development, it still has its shortcomings, among which the disharmony between technology and art stands out. As we look to the future, aesthetic exploration integrating theoretical knowledge and technical application offers new possibilities for vertical short drama to thrive.

Work Cited

Gao, Guiwu, and Wu Qi. “Portrait Mode: Creative options for video presentation in moving scenes.” *News and Communication Review* 72.03(2019):98-107. doi:10.14086/j.cnki.xwycbpl.2019.03.009. Accessed 2 Apr. 2024.

Liu, Xiaohui. “AI-enhanced vertical screen immersive playback new experience.” *Tencent Cloud,* 3 Sept. 2020, cloud.tencent.com/developer/article/1691003. Accessed 15 May. 2024.

Mead, George H. *Mind, Self, and Society.* Communication University of China press, Beijing, 2015.

“Queen of Tears CG Effects Compilation Queen of Tears Special 2.” *bilibili,* uploaded by Yuyuan never sane, 5 May 2024, www.bilibili.com/video/BV1f1421z7kV/?spm\_id\_from=333.337.search-card.all.click. Accessed 15 May. 2024.

“The Report of 2023 Micro Short Drama Industry.” *WPS*, 12 Dec. 2023, kdocs.cn/l/ciJU0QHnBETB. Accessed 4 May 2024.

Wang, Xiaoshu. “Interview by Shenxiang.” *36Kr,* 28 Feb. 2024, 36kr.com/p/1470808394295301. Accessed 2 Apr. 2024.

Yang, Sijin. “The Narrative Characteristics of Short Dramas.” *Journalism Communication*.22(2023):21-23.

Zhang, Mingti, et al. "Innovative Research of Vertical Video Creation Under the Background of Mobile Communication." *Applied Mathematics and Nonlinear Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2023, pp. 2503-2514. Accessed 3 Apr. 2024.

Zhong, Qian. “Behind the Market of Nearly 40 billion Yuan, The Business of Micro-short Drama.” *Zongyi Weekly,* 23 Feb. 2024, mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\_\_biz=MjM5NTg1OTYwNA==&mid=2665491957&idx=1&sn=63899f73869d5616dc8aa7663192e87f&chksm=bcf1650ca9df051086a105b2bcf4661f4133eab74f4627bceea8d982ff955216e6f009fc25b4&scene=27. Accessed 4 May 2024.

 “Zhang Yimou Puts Forward the Concept of Vertical Screen Aesthetics in The First Jitterbug Short Video Festival.” *Renming Website*, 25 Aug. 2019, baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1642801003374943971&wfr=spider&for=pc. Accessed 4 May 2024.