

# Vertical Screen Documentaries: Creating Masterpieces and Achieving Classics – An Analysis of the Emergence and Development of Vertical Screen Documentaries, Using “Talking to Strangers” as a Case Study

*Qingqing Yang*

Soochow University, 50 Ren'ai Road, Gusu District, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, 215006, China

1355668250@qq.com

---

**Abstract.** As the number of short video users continues to grow, China is embracing the “mobile vertical screen era.” To satisfy users' demands for a quicker immersive experience, major platforms are adopting a vertical screen format for micro-movies and videos, particularly given the maturity of the fragmented online context, initiatives for aging media adaptation, and the trend towards younger internet users. These factors provide a prime opportunity for the development of vertical screen video formats. Many short video platforms have begun experimenting with vertical documentaries. This paper takes the vertical documentary “Talking to Strangers” as a case study to discuss its strengths and weaknesses in conjunction with the future development of vertical screen documentaries. In today's era of fragmentation, where various types of work are emerging, how to make vertical screen documentaries into refined classics is a question worth considering and discussing deeply.

**Keywords:** vertical screen documentary, aging media adaptation, “Talking to Strangers,” populist democratization, achieving classics

---

## 1. "Unexpected yet Inevitable" – The Inevitability of Vertical Screen Documentaries

### 1.1. The Booming Development of Short Videos Ushers in the "Vertical Screen Era"

Nowadays, short videos are ubiquitous on various mobile devices, such as smartphones, computers, and iPads, which have become essential tools in people's daily lives. Data shows that the average adult citizen spends 100.75 minutes per day on their mobile phone, with an average of 38 minutes spent watching short videos. Through apps like Weibo, TikTok, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu, which rapidly update short video content, people can quickly become informed about the latest social trends and information.

Today, short videos are not just a popular form of entertainment; they have become a complete industry chain with comprehensive content, enough confidence, and strength to lay the foundation for the advent of the vertical screen era, enabling the robust development of vertical screen documentaries.

### 1.2. Multiple Factors Contribute to the “Vertical Crossover” of Documentaries

The “vertical screen era” creates limitless possibilities for vertical documentaries. Besides the rapid development of short video platforms and the advent of the vertical screen era, the development and adaptation of aging media also make the emergence of vertical documentaries possible. Currently, adaptations like “TikTok Large Font Version,” “Senior Mode,” and “Care Mode” have involuntarily or voluntarily swept seniors into the internet wave, making them part of the internet masses. How to increase the sense of happiness and belonging for the elderly in the digital world also inspires documentary creators.

Low production costs, the integration of various media in today's era, active dissemination across multiple short video platforms, the empowerment of big data, and the development of generative AI technology are all key factors enabling documentaries to “cross over” into vertical formats.

## **2. “The Trend and the Will” – The Flourishing Development of Vertical Screen Documentaries**

Today, short video platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou have become a new favorite among numerous netizens. According to analysts, the vertical screen presentation of videos is a key factor in the success of these apps. The vertical format aligns more closely with people’s daily viewing habits and makes it easier to hold a smartphone. Despite the popularity of iPads and tablets in the market, their sales and usage rates still fall far short of smartphones. Internet users are accustomed to the vertical viewing mode and one-handed operation, which is convenient for repeatedly watching short videos by simply scrolling up and down, greatly saving time.

As the general educational level of netizens has significantly improved compared to the past, there is a higher demand for the quality of videos and content they watch. Many are no longer satisfied with purely entertainment-based content or lengthy videos and yearn for content that is culturally enriching and profound. Thus, the emergence of vertical micro-documentaries is both a natural trend and a response to public demand.

In today’s world, where life and work pressures are high, there is a greater aesthetic preference for therapeutic content. “Talking to Strangers,” a documentary series featuring character interviews, exemplifies this trend. The series motto, “In a world that slows down, listen quietly and talk to strangers; the calmer, the more tumultuous,” is enough to warm hearts and provoke thought. Although there is a certain homogeneity in the documentaries found on most short video platforms, these are often dialog-based, drawing on the simplest people and stories to provide a healing touch, which has contributed to the rich development of vertical screen documentaries.

## **3. “Inheriting Development, Integrating Innovation” – The Integrated Development Pathway for Vertical Screen Documentaries**

### **3.1. Integration of Quick, Short Vertical Compositions and Documentary Values**

Vertical screen documentaries have inherited the characteristics of short videos — brief, direct, and vertical composition (9:16) — while also carving out their unique niche. The advent of vertical micro-documentaries, leveraging the vertical screen aspect ratio, retains the advantages of vertical orientation and innovates on traditional documentary formats, achieving an integration of vertical screens and documentary forms. Most vertical screen documentaries are short, fitting within the micro-documentary category and form. This not only represents a continuation of documentary evolution but also an innovative exploration and integration of documentaries and vertical formats. [1]

### **3.2. From Elite to Populist: The Positioning Integration**

The emergence of vertical screen documentaries has also continuously proven that documentaries are not limited to traditional creative models and merely factual functions. Creators are free to choose topics and areas of interest. This diversity not only brings more possibilities to documentary creation but also offers audiences a broader array of choices and experiences. Previously perceived as highly professional, documentaries have now moved towards a more populist and accessible approach.

2017 can be considered the inaugural year for vertical screen documentaries. Tencent Video first introduced a character interview-based documentary, “Talking to Strangers,” in a vertical format. In an era where people are traditionally taught not to speak to strangers, this program invites viewers to meet and engage with various “ordinary strangers.” Each participant shares their vulnerabilities and the courage they muster in the face of adversity with their own voice and personal stories. Not only ordinary people are featured, but also billionaires and those deeply in debt, openly sharing their tales.

These stories transcend age, time, and space, allowing netizens of all ages to realize how vivid documentaries can be, with interviewees appearing without makeup, emphasizing the populist and accessible nature of the content. Behind the popular cultural symbols of the internet lies the reality of individual souls.

This vertical documentary has quietly facilitated change and growth not just in the people featured in the videos but also in every viewer who encounters these “strangers.” This growth is not only a testament to the individuals’ development but also guides the direction towards a more accessible documentary format and marks a step towards a higher level of cultural and spiritual development in the digital age.

### **3.3. Enhancing the Overall Quality and Cultural Spirit of Internet Users**

Compared to traditional documentaries, vertical screen documentaries can convey positive knowledge, values, and healthy lifestyle concepts in a more convenient and accessible manner [2]. The adaptation of media for older adults and the increasing internet coverage among younger children means that many elderly and younger children are also becoming active or passive members of the “internet army.” For the elderly, who are unaccustomed to the fast-paced dissemination methods of platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou and prefer traditional formats like TV shows and series, vertical documentaries blend these two experiences. This format allows older viewers to return to their traditional video-watching habits without feeling left behind by the digital age, enhancing their sense of inclusion and participation.

### 3.4. Innovative Forms Research Content in Unique Ways to “Go Viral”

For younger internet users, using short videos not only has the potential to impede academic progress but also carries the risk of falling victim to scams. However, interesting and unique filming methods and content presentation selectively showcase videos rich in meaningful value and knowledge, allowing them to expand their horizons and gain insights into life in fragmented time. When they browse short video apps, they subtly learn knowledge beyond textbooks. For younger age groups, teachers, and parents, this is a good choice. Looking at society as a whole, it can also help a segment of the population with lower educational levels who are eager for knowledge, enhancing their overall level of knowledge and cultural literacy. This is also a current source of inspiration for vertical screen documentary creation. There are few vertical screen documentaries about knowledge dissemination, and how to innovate in this area and “go viral” is a direction worthy of creators' dedication and effort.

### 3.5. Short-duration and High-efficiency Form Integration

Normally, a single episode of a documentary lasts 60 minutes or more, which for many internet users does not highlight the key points and tends to be predominantly descriptive. In contrast, the duration of vertical screen documentaries on short video platforms is approximately 20 minutes, allowing users to quickly grasp the film's key points and main content in a shorter time frame. Without the opening and closing credits, a story can be well narrated in 15 minutes—short, efficient, and to the point.

For instance, the vertical screen documentary “Talking to Strangers” is broadcast in this vertical format on multiple short video platforms. This documentary, with an average duration of 25 minutes per episode, quickly exceeded one million likes, resonating across the network, and has already released four seasons. Through this documentary, we can experience different lives and worlds. Some netizens have commented, “After watching this documentary, my soul feels cleansed, and I have a deeper understanding of the idea that ‘the sea accepts all rivers, tolerance is greatness.’” Furthermore, the video features vividly personal stories and answers, each “stranger” speaking in their most genuine voice, succinct and compellingly real.

## 4. “Rapid Glances, Simple Understanding” — Challenges in the Development of Vertical Screen Documentaries

It is undeniable that the emergence of vertical screen documentaries has brought more advantages and possibilities. However, some potential issues should not be overlooked. To ensure that the new form of vertical screen documentaries can produce more efficiently, achieving masterpieces and classics, the current development challenges and issues should also be acknowledged.

### 4.1. Skimming Viewing, Lack of Attraction and Memorable Points

Many short video users blindly consume fragmented entertainment information, leaving few deep impressions when watching videos, which is far less impactful than other forms of media like movies or television. Creating premium video series that provide viewers ample reason to pause and watch is a direction creators should strive for. For example, despite “Talking to Strangers” having only six characters and themes per season, viewers often forget the details soon after watching, and recalling main plots and character names is not easy for most viewers. Therefore, how to leave a lasting impression on the audience, not just a fleeting glance, is worth studying.

### 4.2. The Presence of Barrage Comments Can Distract Attention

The unique “barrage culture” of short videos can impact viewer attention. Sociologically, barrage comments exhibit explicit community characteristics. Viewers accustomed to posting and viewing barrage comments engage in continuous interaction, which enhances their attachment to the video content. However, in online viewing behaviors, particularly “emotive” barrage comments can risk shifting the objectivity of documentaries. Barrage comments, scrolling over the video content, can obscure the main subject matter and divert viewers' attention from the documentary [3]. Most netizens post barrage comments simply to “vent,” forgetting their original intent to watch the documentary. As seen in Season 4 Episode 4, “A Miser's Tale,” designed to share young people's views on saving and re-evaluating the value of wealth, many barrage comments critique social conditions and policies, leading to distractions and reducing the viewing experience. Therefore, whether to retain the barrage comment feature in vertical screen documentaries is a topic worth exploring and contemplating.

### 4.3. Low Threshold for Shooting, Difficult to Produce Quality Works

#### 4.3.1. Simple and Quick Production, Inconsistent Quality

As the production threshold for vertical screen documentaries is relatively low, some teams and grassroots creators opt for smartphone filming, lacking professional creative abilities, which results in inconsistent quality and can lead to “creative inertia”.

Despite its innovative content and form, “Talking to Strangers” clearly shows that the production costs are not high and the filming techniques are quite basic, with the quality of each episode varying significantly.

#### 4.3.2. Low-Cost Production, Subpar Technical Standards

As seen in “Letters from Outside the Prison”, Episode 3 of Season 4 of “Talking to Strangers,” the 40-minute video's filter appears “cheap,” and some netizens have commented on the barrage comments about issues like “the host's clothes are faded,” “the filter looks fake,” and “the lighting makes the face look uneven,” which detracts from the high-quality feel expected of documentaries. The equipment used might be just a simple smartphone or camera, with unstandardized composition and extremely low production costs, focusing more on life reflections and world explorations. However, due to minimal investment, becoming a classic work remains a significant challenge.

## 5. Conclusion

As discussed, vertical screen documentaries are a unique product of the modern short video era. They cleverly integrate the features of short videos with documentary filmmaking, playing a significant role in enhancing the cultural and moral quality of netizens. The potential for the development of vertical micro-documentaries is immense. However, how to spread and develop vertical screen documentaries more effectively and efficiently, ensuring the production of high-quality works that can become classics, how to avoid issues of homogeneity, how to make documentaries appealing to older and younger demographics, providing them with a greater sense of achievement and happiness, and how to create vertical screen documentaries that withstand the test of time and scrutiny are challenges we must consider and explore today.

## References

- [1] Penguin Intelligence. (n.d.). *2019-2020 China Internet trends report*. Retrieved from <https://www.useit.com.cn/thread-22195-1-1.html>
- [2] Kang, Z. Z., & Zhang, M. (2020). Production characteristics and value expansion of vertical screen micro-documentaries. *Media Forum*, 3(14), 175.
- [3] Zhong, Y. Q., & Chen, L. B. (2018). Development paradigms and evolution trends of the documentary industry in the context of the internet. *Journal of Hangzhou Normal University*, (1).