

# The ecosystem of short-form drama in the age of digital media: a perspective from media convergence

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**Abstract.** Short-form dramas are rapidly occupying the global film and television market. In the current media context driven by algorithms and the deep integration of audiovisual technologies, short-form dramas—with their fast-paced narratives and fragmented dissemination—constitute a new visual paradigm that structurally reshapes the traditional audiovisual ecosystem. Using Netflix’s Korean drama *When the Phone Rings* as a case study, this paper explores how short-form storytelling infiltrates long-form narrative grammar in terms of textual structure, character development, and media logic, forming a multidimensional path of media collage and hybridized narration. In the pleasure-consumption mechanism shared by short dramas and short videos, platform algorithms and viewer psychology constitute a capital network of emotional circulation. Meanwhile, traditional long-form dramas still exhibit irreplaceable cultural depth and reflective space through visual aesthetics and ethical storytelling. This paper advocates for a symbiotic model of audiovisual production based on the mutual embedding of long- and short-form narratives, in order to resist the creative discipline and cultural homogenization induced by platform power. Amid the wave of redefined viewing experiences, it becomes imperative to recalibrate the value coordinates of visual content between media efficiency and humanistic concern.

**Keywords:** digital media convergence, narrative ethics, viewing mechanisms, platform logic

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## 1. Introduction

Amid the rapid evolution of digital media, audiovisual forms are undergoing a profound structural transformation. As a form of visual expression driven by micro-narratives and information flow, the short-form drama has quickly embedded itself into the foundation of contemporary audiovisual culture. Through dense conflicts and layered sensory gratification, micro-dramas skillfully capture the fragmented attention spans of young audiences. The emotional shift they offer—from relaxation to sensory thrill—has reshaped how users perceive time and emotion. This fast-paced, fragmented narrative paradigm not only disrupts traditional film and television ecosystems but also mirrors the existential conditions and emotional anxieties faced by youth in the digital age [1].

Within this context, “short-form” does not merely denote brevity; rather, it signals a systemic reorganization of audiovisual ecology—from production logic to viewer psychology. Its implications extend far beyond the literal meaning of shortened content. In 2023, the scale of China’s short-form drama market surged to 37.39 billion yuan, with a growth rate of 267% [2]. This phenomenon is not a localized trend; the global expansion of short-form dramas underscores their potential as a “new cultural vehicle” [3]. Platforms like South Korea’s Vigloo are rapidly gaining traction. At the same time, the Netflix Korean drama *When the Phone Rings* (hereafter WTPR) integrates short-form strategies—such as dense plot twists, heightened emotional manipulation, and elements drawn from popular online literature—into the traditional grammar of long-form Korean dramas, prompting widespread discussion among critics and viewers. This drama is not just an experimental text; it exemplifies the negotiation and translation between visual industry conventions and cultural production. From the perspective of digital media art, this paper investigates how short-form drama reshapes the ecological structure of audiovisual production by intervening in media logic, viewer behavior, and emotional communication.

## 2. Short dramas and short videos: the main battlefield of fandom economy and sensory consumption

### 2.1. Fast-paced narratives and character tagging: the structural appeal of short dramas

The “short” in short-form drama does not simply refer to a reduction in length. On the contrary, by compressing time and amplifying emotion, it creates a narrative structure filled with dense twists and climaxes. This approach resembles condensing the content of a traditional multi-episode series into just a few episodes, crafting a storyline that is tightly packed and high in intensity. Take *When the Phone Rings* as an example: within just a few dozen minutes, the plot races from a contractual marriage to a staged kidnapping and then to emotional redemption—each dramatic arc unfolds explosively within one or two episodes, completely diverging from the slow build-up typical of traditional long-form dramas.

Characters in short dramas are often dramatically stylized and distinctly labeled. The male lead might be a seemingly aloof “pseudo-domineering CEO”, while the female lead could be a mute woman—characters loaded with dramatic tension. Such vivid, archetypal character designs allow viewers to form emotional connections instantly. The structure of short dramas delivers intense visual and emotional impact, enabling each character to function as an emotional conduit within a limited time span. In this sense, characters are not just plot drivers; they serve as vessels for viewers' emotions, mediating emotional resonance during the viewing experience.

### 2.2. Platform mechanisms and emotional capital: how short videos amplify the effects of short dramas

The rapid popularity of short dramas is inseparable from the powerful dissemination mechanisms of short video platforms. Through precise content recommendation systems and User-Generated Content (UGC) models, these platforms slice and circulate highlight scenes from short dramas, transforming them into emotional flashpoints. Algorithms capitalize on users' viewing habits and preferences, spotlighting emotionally charged and dramatically twisted scenes to grab attention quickly, converting casual viewers into devoted fans in mere seconds.

This mode of dissemination is more than just content delivery—it transforms emotion itself into a form of social currency. Viewers engage in the propagation of short dramas by forwarding, commenting, and remixing content (such as mash-up videos). This “meta-viewing” behavior transcends platform boundaries, extending into Bilibili, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and other social media, forming a cross-platform dissemination ecosystem. As a result, short dramas evolve beyond being mere entertainment commodities to become tools for emotional expression and social interaction.

The algorithmic recommendation mechanisms of short video platforms also intensify the “information cocoon” effect of short dramas. As Wang Xianpeng notes, in the context of cross-media convergence, micro-dramas rely on content stream placement and mini-program marketing models, where users receive highly targeted content aligned with their preferences, forming a closed loop of “viewing–payment–immersion” [4]. This aligns with Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of the culture industry—platforms use algorithms to discipline user behavior, reducing viewers to “digital laborers” [5].

Under this mechanism, viewers are no longer passive recipients but active participants. Through actions like “screenshot and repost” or “remix and share”, they engage in secondary creation, generating a new mode of viewership—watching the drama, and watching how the drama is watched.

## 3. The persistence and predicament of long-form dramas: ethical narrative tensions and the structural risks of platform logic

### 3.1. The cultural value and artistic depth of long-form dramas

The atmospheric aesthetics characteristic of Korean dramas are best preserved in long-form formats, where directors often use subtle contrasts in warm and cool tones to express inner emotional conflict and psychological transformation. For instance, the stark contrast between the male protagonist's cold gray office and the warm yellow hues of the female lead's sign language classroom vividly reflects the vast differences in their personalities and emotional worlds. This kind of emotional clash conveyed through visual language powerfully communicates the characters' inner struggles, allowing audiences to intuitively grasp their shifting mental states without the need for dialogue. The use of handheld camera shots further enhances the sense of psychological turbulence, imbuing every frame with delicate emotional flow. This nuanced artistic expression is largely absent in short-form dramas, which tend to favor fixed camera angles and high-saturation filters in pursuit of immediate visual impact.

Unlike the fast-paced emotional gratification provided by short dramas, long-form dramas allow for deeper character development and the exploration of more complex social issues. The extended narrative is not merely a matter of longer runtime;

more importantly, it creates space for nuanced character arcs and rich psychological depth. *When the Phone Rings* exemplifies this trait. Through alternating visual tones—cold grays for the male protagonist’s sterile workspace and warm yellows for the female lead’s emotionally rich environment—the director not only portrays their contrasting inner worlds but also communicates their struggles and emotional redemptions. These kinds of visual metaphors are difficult to replicate in short-form formats, as their emphasis on speed and sensory saturation often comes at the expense of rich cinematic language.

More importantly, long-form dramas are equipped to address complex ethical questions. Their narratives often involve causal progression, value conflicts, and psychological transformations—constituting what can be called responsible storytelling and a commitment to humanistic expression. This dedication to coherent character arcs reflects a respect for the viewer’s imagination and serves as a vessel for representing and processing real-world ethical dilemmas. In contrast, the instant gratification offered by short dramas lacks the capacity to bear such thematic weight. Their tendency toward superficiality risks leaving viewers in a cycle of compulsive watching devoid of deeper meaning or emotional payoff [1].

As cultural theorist Raymond Williams once noted, culture is not merely the aesthetic presentation of texts, but a structure of feeling and a repository of values. What long-form dramas provide is a deeply immersive cultural experience, enabling viewers to reflect on life, society, and individual identity within a rich narrative framework. This cultural function is something short-form dramas, by their very nature, cannot replace. Thus, long-form dramas continue to occupy an irreplaceable position in today’s audiovisual landscape—not only meeting viewers’ need for emotional depth, but also playing a crucial role in conveying social ethics and cultural values.

### 3.2. The institutional dilemma of platform logic: the paradox of homogenized narratives and compressed storytelling

Despite their artistic and ethical advantages, long-form dramas face mounting pressure in platform-dominated content ecosystems. First, many long-form productions are being forced to adapt to short-form trends—compressing content and accelerating plot twists. As a result, what should be carefully developed relationships and emotional trajectories are increasingly simplified, leading to the erosion of narrative depth. Second, platforms have shifted from being mere distributors to becoming invisible directors of content. Through algorithmic recommendation and precise user profiling, platforms transform viewer preferences into data-driven benchmarks that influence creative decisions, thereby undermining the autonomy of creators.

To meet the demands of the attention economy, many long-form dramas resort to “dimensional reduction”, quickening the narrative pace, simplifying plots, and borrowing overused tropes from online fiction—such as contract marriages, mistaken identities, and substitute brides—to grab audience attention. While this strategy may boost short-term engagement, it simultaneously dilutes the realism and stylistic diversity that define Korean dramas. Although viewers may still experience emotional stimulation, they are less likely to form deep emotional bonds with the characters as they once did.

More troublingly, platform algorithms not only control distribution but also encroach upon the production process. In pursuit of trending status and algorithmic visibility, creators are increasingly compelled to cater to viewer preferences, losing space for independent artistic exploration. Consequently, long-form dramas trend toward homogenization, formulaic storytelling, and creative conservatism—ultimately forfeiting their uniqueness. As political economy of communication scholars have argued, when media platforms control production, distribution, and commercialization, they become not just intermediaries but dominant forces in cultural production with pervasive influence.

The algorithmic dominance of platforms has triggered a crisis of homogeneity in audiovisual creation. Under the logic of traffic maximization and rapid consumption, many long-form dramas are forced to adopt fast-cut editing and flatten their narratives to meet platform demands. This trend toward “short-form-ification,” though effective in drawing attention in the short term, threatens long-term creative freedom and narrows the spectrum of cultural expression. In the context of digital media, platforms are no longer mere content distributors—they are becoming de facto directors. Preserving the independence and artistic depth of long-form creation amid this environment has become one of the greatest challenges of our time.

## 4. The hybrid practice of short and long-form dramas: the case of *When the Phone Rings*

### 4.1. Structural collage and paradigm hybridization: the embedding of short-form language in long-form frameworks

As a drama with a complete serialized structure, *When the Phone Rings* deeply integrates short-form storytelling techniques such as fast pacing, high-frequency plot twists, and hyper-stylized aesthetics. From contract marriage to staged kidnapping, then to identity reversals and dual-threaded family revenge plots, the show compresses traditional narrative segments with high event density. It replaces progressive narrative development with stacked climactic moments, enabling each episode to independently carry a major narrative “explosion”. As a result, it forms a long-form outer shell with a short-form narrative core.

In terms of visual language, WTPR maintains the high aesthetic standards of Korean dramas. Notably, the initial appearances of its characters are crafted with great audiovisual precision, reflecting the genre's sensitivity to both character psychology and social identity. For instance, the male lead makes his entrance in a lavish social setting, with the camera focusing on his red-soled leather shoes. This visual cue not only creates a color contrast that draws attention but also symbolically reflects his pseudo-executive persona. The red soles—associated with luxury, nobility, and power—stand in ironic contrast to his performative identity, making the shoes a semiotic device of power performance. Through this prop, the director silently embeds a visual metaphor of “power as illusion”, blending fashion with narrative subtext to shape the viewer's first impression.

Yet structurally, the show's frequent reversals and pre-programmed “pleasure points” align seamlessly with the logic of information-flow-driven short-form content. This duality in form and content enables the drama to be classified both as a high-quality Korean series and as raw material optimized for short-form remixing. The “body” of a long-form drama and the “soul” of a short drama come together to exemplify a paradigmatic case of media collage.

#### 4.2. Viewer psychology and dissemination paths: coordinating emotional regulation and social currency

From the audience's perspective, the immersive emotional experiences of long-form dramas and the immediate gratification offered by short-form content are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they can operate in complementary tension. WTPR maintains the narrative cohesion of a long-form series through its central romantic and redemptive arcs—such as “mutual pining” and “identity salvation”. Simultaneously, it plants numerous dramatic reversals and emotionally cathartic moments throughout the plot to satisfy viewers' craving for quick emotional payoffs, mimicking short-form drama tropes.

This dual-track narrative design naturally lends itself to content slicing and second-order creative dissemination on short video platforms. Numerous scenes from the show have been widely re-edited into bite-sized video clips and circulated across Xiaohongshu, Douyin (TikTok China), Bilibili, and other social media platforms, triggering viral dissemination. These user-generated edits not only expand the show's audience base but also serve as tools through which viewers build their own social capital—consuming not just the show itself, but also its derived cultural meanings in social contexts.

This process reveals not a one-way flow of content to the audience, but rather a participatory re-encoding of the original narrative by viewers. A new cultural form of viewership is emerging—one that integrates long-form drama, short-form remixing, and social dissemination into a cyclical media ecology.

### 5. Conclusion

#### 5.1. Escaping the illusion of ‘shortness’: the boundary of short drama lies not in duration, but in logic

The “shortness” of short-form dramas is not their essence but rather an outward manifestation. It represents a structural adjustment in response to new viewing mechanisms and media logic. In reality, short-form dramas are not simply compressed versions of long-form content. Instead, they use alternative narrative structures and pacing strategies to transform the viewer's experience. *When the Phone Rings* is a prime example: it combines the intricate character relationships typical of long-form dramas with the rhythmic tempo of short-form narratives to create a dual-structured format. This model retains narrative depth while offering more flexible storytelling—allowing audiences to quickly engage emotionally while still encountering complex plot developments and character evolution within a limited timeframe.

Behind this transformation lies the interplay of platform algorithms, user profiling, and content slicing. Short dramas are finely calibrated to deliver maximum emotional impact and viewing value in the shortest amount of time. Each twist and turn is meticulously placed to stimulate viewer interest and enhance engagement and monetization potential. However, as frequent plot twists and preset narrative beats become standard, short dramas risk sliding into over-templated formats and “database storytelling.” Viewers may grow fatigued, experiencing a flattening of emotional structure and a loss of narrative depth. Therefore, the future of audiovisual storytelling should focus not just on brevity and intensity, but more importantly, on whether the underlying narrative logic can meet emotional needs and deliver meaningful, resonant experiences.

#### 5.2. The logic of long-form survival: not resistance, but reinvention

In today's short-form-dominated audiovisual ecosystem, long-form dramas still occupy a vital space. They are not relics rendered obsolete by shifting trends, but narrative forms that have yet to fully tap into their creative and cultural potential. The cultural richness, ethical depth, and character development offered by long-form formats remain unmatched by short dramas. In *When the Phone Rings*, we see the enduring appeal of long-form storytelling. Although it adopts the brisk tempo demanded by the short-form trend, it retains emotional complexity, psychological depth, and layered plot construction. These qualities equip long-form

dramas to fulfill functions beyond entertainment—serving as platforms for social reflection and ethical contemplation. They meet not only the audience’s desire for storytelling but also their need for thoughtful engagement with human nature and contemporary issues.

The future of audiovisual culture must move beyond the binary of “short equals future” and “long equals outdated”. Instead, we must recognize the complementary relationship between the two formats and build a diversified audiovisual system on that basis. The instant gratification of short dramas and the delayed emotional payoff of long dramas can coexist, catering to diverse viewer needs. In this ecosystem, short dramas can serve as gateways for rapid entertainment engagement through social and platform dissemination, while long dramas bear the weight of cultural accumulation, social critique, and narrative innovation. Their artistic sophistication and ethical inquiries enhance viewer empathy and provide greater creative freedom. A complementary model—where long and short forms work in tandem—can meet commercial imperatives while preserving cultural value and artistic integrity, guiding the audiovisual industry toward healthier, more diverse development.

### 5.3. The double-edged nature of platform mechanisms: algorithms must not replace authors

The growing power of platforms within the short-form drama ecosystem is increasingly apparent. When trending metrics supersede creative intent, and user preferences override narrative ethics, platforms evolve from distributors into dominant arbiters of storytelling logic. This regime of algorithmic control stifles content diversity and gradually undermines the creative agency of cultural production. Algorithms must not replace the role of the creator. In the face of media authoritarianism and the violence of acceleration, it is essential to advocate for digital simplification and promote critical awareness to resist the exploitation of user attention by platform logics [6].

Reaffirming the author’s role and preventing platforms from becoming the sole narrative workshop is central to building a sustainable audiovisual ecosystem. While the trend toward short-form content reflects the inevitable industrialization of film and television production, it must not be seen as the end point. Creative practices must find a balance between commercial viability and artistic integrity. Traditional series should draw on the dissemination logic of short dramas while holding fast to cultural depth.

Under the profound influence of digital media art, the rise of short-form content and the persistence of long-form storytelling are not opposing forces but complementary dimensions [7]. Efficient dissemination and instant gratification empower the platform economy, while long-form narratives—steeped in aesthetic sophistication and social reflection—remain indispensable to the contemporary audiovisual ecosystem. The future should strive to strike a balance between the innovation of short-form content and the depth of long-form storytelling, forging a pluralistic structure in which the two coexist and mutually enhance one another.

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