"WE DON'T WANT TO COMMIT AS MICRO-DRAMA CREATORS": HOW DO THESE PROFESSIONALS NAVIGATE OPPORTUNITIES AND INTERNALISED PREJUDICES IN THE EVOLVING MICRO DRAMA INDUSTRY

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Micro dramas are booming in China's TV sector but remain understudied. They are vertically shot, minute-long episodes featuring frequent plots distributed on audio-visual platforms on smartphones. According to the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), registered micro dramas surged nearly 600%, from 398 in 2021 to 2,775 in 2022, with the industry valued at approximately $54 billion USD by 2023 (NRTA, 2023, 2024). By 2023, the industry was valued at approximately $54 billion USD, with 39.9% of viewers reporting frequent consumption of such content (NRTA, 2024). Despite this remarkable growth, a paradox exists: many professionals from the traditional television industry, particularly those accustomed to producing 40-minute episodes, have transitioned into the micro-drama sector but are reluctant to publicly acknowledge their involvement. As such, it is necessary for this study to examine this phenomenon, addressing why these creators disassociate from their professional identity as micro-drama creators, what the sociocultural implications are of creators' "shame" toward their work for the micro drama and online TV industry, and how these creative professionals navigate opportunities and internalised prejudices in the evolving micro-drama landscape within the platformisation era. Our study contributes to understanding how the micro drama industry, influenced by shifting professional identities and platformisation, has redefined the online television environment.

This study conceptualises micro drama as a specialised subcategory of online television, building on the view that online TV remains rooted in traditional television's core elements—editorially selected content, closed infrastructures, and service-oriented distribution (Johnson, 2019). Like other online TV forms,

micro dramas rely on internet-based platforms and profit-driven services (Strangelove, 2015), while drawing on public service capacities to shape viewing experiences and deliver professional content across multiple screens (Bennett & Strange, 2011; Lotz, 2017, 2018). They also adhere to standardised narrative forms (Lin, 2022) and leverage the infrastructural support of streaming platforms (Keane, 2016). Thus, we situate micro dramas within the online television industry, contributing to debates on the growing specialisation and diversification of China's streaming ecosystems.

As micro dramas are primarily distributed via mobile media platforms, we incorporate theoretical insights from platform and digital labour studies to analyse the online TV industry. Platforms are "reconfiguring the production, distribution, and monetisation of cultural content in staggering and complex ways" (p. 1), and many studies have examined their impact on fields such as journalism (Christin, 2020), music (Baym, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, Jones, & Rauh, 2019), gaming (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019), and publishing (Tomasena, 2019). However, few studies have focused on the impact of platformisation on streaming TV workers. Daphne Idiz and Thomas Poell (2024) examined online TV within the broader screen industry, leaving the emerging micro-drama sector underexplored. By focusing on content creators in China's proliferating micro-drama industry, our research examines how mobile platforms—through datafication and algorithmic curation—reshape everyday cultural production practices and professional roles (cf. Duffy et al., 2019), as creators increasingly depend on the economic models, governance frameworks, and infrastructures of digital platforms (Nieborg et al., 2020; Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

This study employs a multi-method qualitative design that integrates semi-structured interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and secondary data analysis. We interviewed 27 experienced practitioners—each having contributed to at least one micro drama with over 100,000 views—to uncover the factors driving their disassociation from professional identity as micro-drama creators. Additionally, we conducted one month of ethnographic research with a leading production team, observing meetings, filming sessions, and creative discussions throughout the typical one-month micro drama production cycle. We also analysed secondary data (director journals, scripts, and meeting records) alongside our fieldwork to explore the socio-cultural implications of "shamed work" in the industry. This integrated approach provides a comprehensive view of micro-drama production by merging industry perspectives with real-time operational insights.

We argue that a highly commercialised and standardised production model disseminated in mobile media platforms—characterised by efficiency, formulaic storytelling, and platformisation—amplifies a sense of shame among micro drama creators. As the "platformisation" of micro dramas involves algorithmic gatekeeping (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), participants reported that quantifiable metrics—such as pay rates, completion rates, shares, and

subscription conversion rates—have become central indicators of production value. This reliance on data further encourages these creators to formulaic, large-scale production, thereby marginalising creative labour by prioritising data-driven outcomes. Extending the work of Duffy et al. (2019) and Nieborg and Poell (2018), our findings contribute to ongoing debates on digital labour by demonstrating how algorithmic frameworks, data-driven metrics, and platform-influenced funding models reinforce a commercialised and standardised production regime in the micro-drama industry.

Moreover, as micro-dramas need to effectively maximise audience engagement by generating emotions, content creators disclosed that they had to align their production strategies with audience preferences. Media entertainment aims to amplify pleasure or mitigate negative emotions (Zillmann, 2015, p.151), making emotionally engaging narratives effective in sustaining attention, which supports engagement-driven strategies (Papacharissi, 2014, p.23). Our participants, as creators, demonstrated that they must adhere to these production standards to attract viewers and secure paid subscriptions. However, this profit-oriented production model undermines creators' sense of artistic accomplishment (cf. Caves, 2003), fueling a stigma that prompts them to hide or downplay their involvement in the micro drama industry. Micro dramas—reliant on formulaic narratives and lower originality—are deemed less culturally significant and have failed to challenge long-form television's status. Consequently, micro dramas expose the tension between commercial imperatives and creative legitimacy in online TV. As such, our participants negotiated their professional identity within the micro drama industry in the platformisation era: on the one hand, they made use of their extensive experience in long-form online television, positioning themselves as "experts, to gain money-making opportunities in the micro-drama industry; on the other hand, they were reluctant to identify explicitly as micro-drama creators as micro dramas are often perceived as commercially driven and lacking in artistic and cultural depth. Therefore, we argue that content creators' persistent distinction between micro and long-form dramas has hindered the ability of micro dramas to develop and assume the broader sociocultural functions traditionally carried by long-form dramas. Despite the rapid rise of the micro drama, it has ultimately failed to challenge the status and significance of the online television industry.

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