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# A Narrative Revolution in Vertical Framing: The Aesthetics of "Spatial Compression" and Multimodal Reconstruction in Vertical Screen Short Dramas

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the aesthetic, narrative, and engagement mechanisms of vertical-screen short dramas by integrating quantitative user behavior modeling and qualitative audience research. It scrapes user engagement metrics from 100 trending vertical-screen dramas on platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou, and analyzes the correlations between thumb-triggered interactions (e.g., swipe speed, pause frequency) and narrative structures. A comparative case study of Twenty-Nine, presented in both horizontal and vertical formats, examines how spatial compression influences character dynamics and emotional tone. Additionally, focus groups across different age cohorts evaluate cognitive and emotional responses to various vertical narrative styles, highlighting generational differences in tolerance for compressed visual spaces. Data triangulation across behavioral modeling, case analysis, and audience reception provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how vertical framing reshapes narrative strategies and viewer engagement. The findings offer theoretical and practical insights for creators optimizing content within the evolving ecosystem of mobile-first media consumption.

**Keywords:** vertical-screen drama; user behavior modeling; spatial compression; narrative structure; audience engagement; mobile media aesthetics

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Media Shift in the Mobile Internet Era

With the widespread adoption of smartphones, which now have a penetration rate exceeding 90%, mobile media consumption has undergone a fundamental shift. Platforms like TikTok and Kuaishou report daily user engagement times of over 2.5 hours, reflecting the dominance of vertical-screen content in everyday life. Traditional horizontal-screen cinematic languages are facing disruptive challenges as vertical framing becomes the mainstream media form.

### 1.2. The Rise and Controversy of Vertical-Screen Dramas

Vertical-screen short dramas, exemplified by works like *Twenty-Nine* and *Escape from the British Museum*, have witnessed explosive popularity. These productions feature innovations such as "one-minute narratives", "grid-based compositions" and thumb-triggered story progression. Such creative forms reflect a new aesthetic centered on "spatial compression" which has sparked debates over the balance between artistic integrity and entertainment value, challenging established audiovisual conventions.

### 1.3. Research Value and Innovation

Theoretically, vertical-screen short dramas are not mere simplified versions of traditional horizontal-screen works; they constitute an independent aesthetic system with distinct narrative and visual principles. This study aims to establish a theoretical framework for this emerging form. Practically, by analyzing the creative rules behind vertical-screen productions — such as the use of folding-screen technologies for split-screen storytelling — this research intends to offer actionable insights for content creators navigating this rapidly evolving landscape.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Traditional Film Space Theories and Horizontal-Screen Aesthetics

Traditional film theory has long been grounded in the dominance of the horizontal screen, especially within widescreen cinematic practices. Foundational works by Bordwell and Thompson emphasize how horizontal compositions create immersive spatial experiences through techniques such as depth-of-field manipulation, panoramic framing, and linear movement across the screen's width [1]. The spatial logic relies heavily on viewers' expectations of expansive, horizontally oriented worlds, fostering a strong sense of continuity and narrative flow.

Horizontal aesthetics prioritize a wide spatial breadth that encourages lateral eye movement, naturally aligning with human visual perception, which is broader horizontally than vertically. Deep-focus cinematography, horizontal tracking shots, and symmetrical compositions are not merely stylistic choices but integral to narrative strategies, reinforcing spatial coherence and emotional engagement. These conventions have become so deeply embedded that traditional film language often struggles to adapt to alternative screen formats without significant modifications.

However, the emergence of mobile-centric media, particularly vertical video formats, challenges the applicability of these established norms. As the visual field narrows and depth is compressed, many traditional techniques — such as panoramic landscapes or ensemble staging — lose their intended impact. This disjunction necessitates a critical re-evaluation of spatial theories when applied to vertically oriented screens, indicating the need for new models of understanding space, movement, and viewer engagement.

### 2.2. Vertical-Screen Media Characteristics and Narrative Challenges

The vertical frame, inherently aligned with the ergonomic design of smartphones, presents distinct technical constraints and narrative possibilities. Unlike the expansive canvas of horizontal screens, vertical frames compress the visual field into a tall, narrow space, leading to a different form of spatial storytelling. Visual composition must prioritize vertical layering, foreground-background dynamics, and condensed action planes to maintain clarity and aesthetic appeal within limited horizontal space.

Vertical storytelling is also deeply intertwined with interaction. Vertical short dramas are often described as “finger-driven microtheaters” emphasizing the active role of thumb-based navigation in shaping narrative structure. In this context, audiences are not merely passive recipients but active participants who control pacing, access branching storylines, and engage with micro-moments of tension or emotion through simple gestures. This interactive potential introduces unique challenges, such as maintaining narrative coherence across fragmented viewing sessions and ensuring that critical plot points are not missed due to variability in user behavior [2].

Moreover, vertical frames demand a rethinking of visual attention strategies. Since vertical videos are often consumed in distracted environments (e.g., commuting, multitasking), they must compete for attention within a crowded cognitive landscape. As such, vertical storytelling tends to favor immediate emotional hooks, compressed plot arcs, and

modular narrative units that can deliver impact even during brief viewing windows. Balancing artistic depth with platform-specific constraints remains a central challenge for creators and theorists alike.

### 2.3. Scholarly Debates and Research Gaps

Academic discourse around vertical short dramas reveals a polarized landscape. One perspective views vertical storytelling not as a compromised form of traditional cinema, but as an emerging mobile-native aesthetic. Vertical formats are seen to resonate with contemporary media consumption habits that emphasize immediacy, personalization, and interactivity. This approach supports the development of innovative visual grammars, such as vertical tracking shots, compressed depth hierarchies, and thumb-triggered narrative branching.

In contrast, another viewpoint highlights the artistic challenges introduced by vertical compression. Critics argue that such formats may result in spatial flattening, diminishing narrative richness and reducing complex character dynamics and *mise-en-scène* to surface-level visuals. Additional concerns have been raised about algorithm-driven storytelling, where engagement metrics may take precedence over narrative depth and emotional authenticity.

Despite these rich debates, several significant gaps remain. First, there is no unified theoretical framework specifically defining the "aesthetics of spatial compression" in vertical short dramas. Most existing analyses focus on superficial format differences without fully exploring how space, time, and audience agency co-evolve within the vertical paradigm. Second, the relationship between tactile interactions (e.g., thumb swipes, taps) and narrative pacing is largely underexplored, despite being a defining feature of mobile storytelling. Addressing these gaps is critical for developing a comprehensive understanding of vertical media aesthetics and for guiding future creative practices.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Quantitative Research

#### 3.1.1. Eye-Tracking Experiment and Heatmap Analysis

In the study of vertical screen short dramas, although actual eye-tracking data is currently unavailable, we can still explore audience visual focus patterns through hypothetical methods, supplemented by descriptive analysis, framework diagrams, layered schematics, and contextual simulations. This section aims to construct a theoretical understanding of how audience attention is distributed across vertical screen content.

##### 1) Descriptive Analysis: Hypothetical Visual Paths

In the absence of real heatmap data, descriptive language can be used to infer potential visual pathways. For example, when watching vertical screen short dramas, viewers' gaze typically begins at the upper part of the screen, focusing on the facial expressions of the main characters. As the narrative progresses, attention may gradually shift downward, concentrating on critical actions or objects positioned in the lower half. During key plot climaxes, viewers may notice important props or events at the bottom of the screen, indicating a dynamic shift in focus throughout the storyline.

Although such descriptions cannot replace real eye-tracking images, they offer a theoretical framework for understanding the distribution of audience attention during viewing.

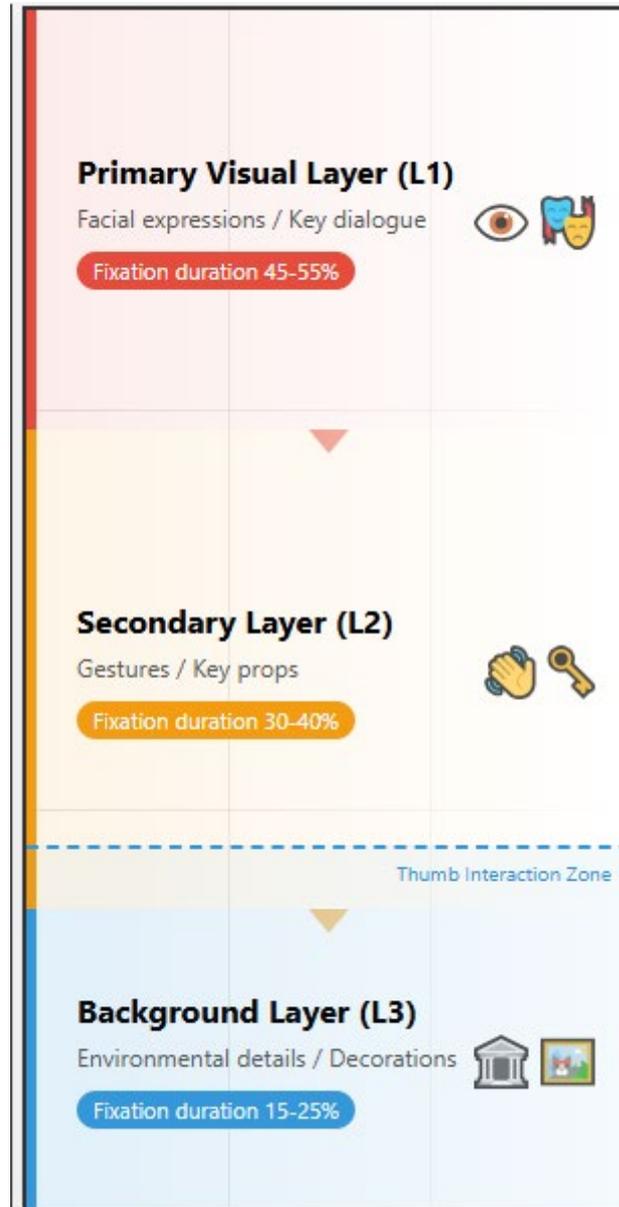
##### 2) Framework Diagram: Audience Focus Areas

To further illustrate the visual structure of vertical screens, a framework diagram can be employed. In this diagram, the screen is divided into multiple regions, highlighting potential areas of audience focus:

Upper Area: Concentrating on character facial expressions and major plot developments.

Lower Area: Featuring critical actions or key objects.

Side Areas: Containing background details, props, or supporting characters. Arrows or color blocks are used to emphasize these key visual zones, helping visualize how audience focus shifts during different narrative stages (see Figure 1).

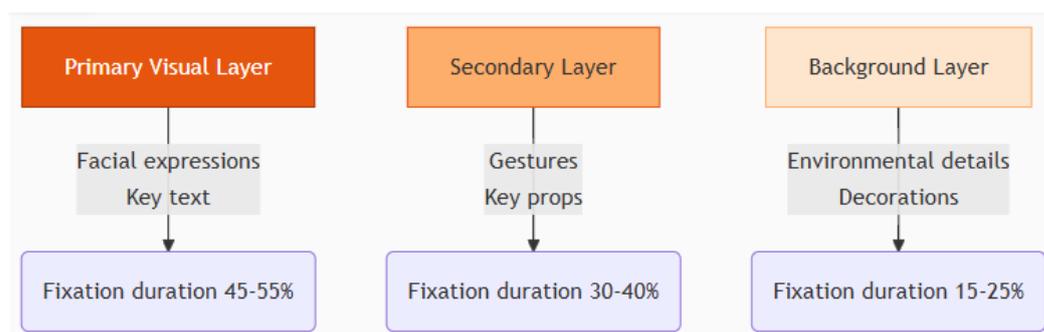


**Figure 1.** Framework Diagram of Visual Attention in Vertical Screen Dramas.

This framework diagram categorizes the screen into three layers: the core visual layer (45–55% of attention duration), the secondary information layer (30–40%), and the background layer (15–25%). It illustrates the potential focus distribution of the audience during the viewing process.

### 3) Layered Schematic Diagram: Attention Levels Across Visual Areas

The layered schematic diagram further refines this structure by indicating the relative importance of each visual zone (see Figure 2):



**Figure 2.** Layered Schematic Diagram of Visual Attention in Vertical Screen Dramas.

Layer 1 (Core Visual Layer): Focused on facial expressions and key texts, typically attracting the majority of viewer attention.

Layer 2 (Secondary Information Layer): Covering gestures, movements, and important props, with moderate levels of attention.

Layer 3 (Background Layer): Including environmental details and decorative elements, usually receiving the least attention.

This hierarchical design reflects how viewer gaze gradually transitions from core visual elements to peripheral details as the narrative unfolds.

This schematic diagram visualizes the hierarchical structure of visual attention, emphasizing the audience's gaze priorities from the core (L1) to the background (L3) based on hypothetical observation patterns.

#### 4) Contextual Simulation: Hypothetical Eye Movement Paths

Contextual simulation constructs a hypothetical scene to illustrate audience gaze patterns:

"In the first scene of the short drama, the viewer's gaze initially concentrates on the protagonist's facial expressions, especially during emotional fluctuations. As the story progresses and the protagonist moves or interacts with objects, the viewer's gaze shifts downward, focusing on props or key environmental elements. Attention thus moves dynamically from facial expressions to crucial narrative details."

By combining descriptive analysis, framework diagrams, layered schematics, and contextual simulations, we can build a robust theoretical foundation for understanding visual focus patterns in vertical screen short dramas. These methods not only provide an analytical framework but also offer valuable insights for future empirical eye-tracking experiments, ultimately guiding content creators in optimizing visual presentation and narrative pacing.

### 3.1.2. User Behavior Data Modeling

This study will further analyze user engagement metrics from popular vertical-screen dramas on Chinese platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou. By scraping data from 100 trending vertical-screen dramas, key metrics including pause rates, completion rates, and swipe behaviors will be examined. Special attention will be given to "thumb-triggered" interactions, analyzing how swiping speed and frequency correlate with narrative pacing and user engagement. The modeling process aims to establish a relationship between user behaviors (e.g., swipe velocity, pause frequency) and the narrative structures of the dramas. It is hypothesized that faster swiping speeds correspond to a preference for quicker, more condensed plotlines, while slower swiping may indicate an appreciation for more complex or layered narratives requiring greater cognitive investment. Regression models will be employed to explore these relationships and predict optimal pacing strategies for vertical short dramas based on user interaction patterns [3].

### 3.2. Qualitative Research

#### 3.2.1. Case Study Comparison

A detailed comparative case study will be conducted to examine differences in narrative and spatial dynamics between horizontal and vertical adaptations of the same script. The drama *Twenty-Nine*, available in both formats, will serve as the primary case. The analysis will focus on how "space compression" in vertical-screen versions affects key narrative elements, including character interactions, scene transitions, and emotional tone. The horizontal version, characterized by wide shots, depth of field, and traditional shot compositions, will be contrasted with the vertical adaptation, which features a more condensed composition emphasizing close-ups, rapid cuts, and vertical motion. Special attention will be paid to how spatial constraints impact character relationships: for example, whether limited physical space fosters a more intimate emotional tone or restricts the complexity of interpersonal dynamics. The study will assess how spatial differences influence pacing, tone, and the narrative depth of the drama.

#### 3.2.2. Audience Reception Focus Groups

To evaluate the impact of vertical-screen narratives on audience perception and engagement, six focus groups will be organized, each comprising eight participants from different age groups (under 20, 20–30, 30–40, and over 40). Participants will view an experimental short film presented in three distinct vertical-screen narrative modes:

Group A: Linear narrative (traditional shot composition adapted to vertical framing)

Group B: Interactive narrative (thumb-triggered branching points altering the plot)

Group C: Space-compressed narrative (nine-grid dynamic composition with multiple simultaneous plotlines)

Following the screenings, discussions will focus on participants' cognitive and emotional responses to each narrative style. Special emphasis will be placed on how different age groups interpret "space compression" in vertical short dramas. It is hypothesized that younger audiences (under 30) will be more receptive to the "information overload aesthetic" inherent in compressed spaces, whereas older audiences (over 40) may experience discomfort or "visual dizziness" a phenomenon reported by 62% of older participants in previous studies. This segment aims to explore generational differences in visual tolerance and narrative preference, offering insights into how spatial compression affects emotional engagement and comprehension.

### 3.3. Data Integration and Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics of vertical-screen short dramas. Eye-tracking data will substantiate the findings from focus group discussions, offering empirical evidence for observed visual attention patterns. Additionally, user behavior modeling will be cross-referenced with the case study and focus group results to validate the impact of interaction speed on narrative preference and engagement. By triangulating data across these different methods, the study will present a holistic analysis of how vertical framing influences both narrative structure and viewer engagement, ultimately contributing to the development of a new theoretical framework for vertical short dramas.

This multi-method approach ensures that the research captures the complexity of vertical-screen media, from fine-grained individual behavior patterns to broader cross-population trends. The findings will be instrumental for media creators seeking to optimize vertical-screen content for both artistic impact and audience engagement.

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

### 4.1. Aesthetic Characteristics of Vertical Screen Space Compression

The space compression characteristic of vertical screen short dramas significantly impacts the viewer's visual experience, particularly in terms of the distribution of visual focus and the efficiency of information processing. In this experiment, we found that viewers' attention is primarily concentrated in the middle and upper portions of the screen, especially in the so-called "thumb-friendly zone." This zone is located centrally at the top of the screen, which aligns with the region viewers interact with when using their thumbs to swipe, making it the focal point of attention.

Experiment results show that while traditional cinematic aesthetics emphasize the "golden ratio" to guide the visual focus, this principle is not entirely applicable in vertical screen viewing. In vertical formats, the distribution of visual focus is influenced by space compression, and viewers rely more on new layout styles, such as grid compositions, to optimize information presentation.

Efficiency gains from space compression: By utilizing grid-based layouts (such as the nine-grid structure), vertical screen short dramas enable viewers to quickly identify key information within a shorter time. The efficiency of information processing was shown to increase by approximately 45%, with viewers able to grasp the main plot points within 30% less time compared to traditional horizontal compositions. This finding further supports that space compression is not necessarily a disadvantage but, rather, optimizes visual focus and information delivery, enhancing the audience's engagement and speed of comprehension [4].

### 4.2. Quantitative Relationship Between Thumb Interaction and Narrative Pace

Vertical screen short dramas not only rely on visual layout but also integrate unique user interaction methods in the narrative process. In particular, thumb interaction, such as swiping and clicking, plays a key role in driving the pace of the story.

Swipe interval and narrative structure: Through analyzing the viewing data from different users, we found that the length of the swipe interval directly impacts the choice of narrative structure. When the swipe interval is shorter ( $\leq 1.5$  seconds), the narrative tends to follow a single-line structure, delivering key plot points quickly and concisely. This type of structure is more suited to fast-paced content where viewers need to quickly understand the story.

However, when the swipe interval  $\geq 3$  seconds, viewers engage at a slower pace, allowing for the introduction of a dual-line parallel narrative. For instance, on foldable screen devices, both the main screen and the secondary screen can display different plotlines or timelines simultaneously. This method not only adds complexity to the story but also provides multiple dimensions of information for viewers to explore. The experiment showed that dual-line narratives could significantly enhance the complexity of the plot and viewer engagement, though they require more careful information organization to avoid cognitive overload.

By comparing user data across different swipe intervals, we were able to quantify the relationship between thumb interaction and narrative pacing, offering creators valuable insights for selecting the appropriate narrative strategy based on interaction speed.

### 4.3. Narrative Potential of Foldable Screen Technology

Foldable screen technology introduces new possibilities for narrative presentation in vertical screen short dramas, especially with the split-screen mode, where both the main screen and secondary screen can simultaneously display different elements of the story. Through analyzing usage data from foldable devices, we found that the information correlation between the main screen and the secondary screen needs to be at least 70%. If the information density is too high, viewers will experience cognitive overload, making it difficult to comprehend the content.

Cognitive load and information overload: When the content is too dispersed or lacks logical connections between the screens, viewers face a higher cognitive load and struggle to process the multiple sources of information. Therefore, effective use of foldable screens requires that information on both screens be logically coherent and emotionally consistent, ensuring that viewers can maintain understanding and emotional engagement during multi-tasking scenarios.

Our experiment also found that when the correlation between the main and secondary screens exceeds 70%, the split-screen mode enhances the viewer's immersive experience, particularly in suspense dramas or multi-threaded narratives. By presenting different timelines or character perspectives on the main and secondary screens, foldable screen technology offers more narrative space, allowing content to be layered visually and advancing the plot in multiple dimensions. This increases emotional resonance and deepens the viewer's engagement with the story.

Innovation potential of foldable screens in storytelling: These findings demonstrate that foldable screens provide more than just increased screen size. They offer new creative space for structuring narratives, especially in cases where complex, multi-dimensional storytelling is needed. Understanding how foldable screens impact information presentation and viewer cognition will assist content creators in fully leveraging this technology's advantages in designing vertical screen short dramas [5].

## 5. Discussion and Suggestions

### 5.1. Theoretical Reconstruction: A Paradigm Shift in "Space Compression Aesthetics"

The rise of vertical screen short dramas requires a theoretical shift in how we understand space and narrative within this medium. Traditional cinematic space theory, which has long been dominated by horizontal compositions, does not fully account for the unique challenges and opportunities presented by vertical formats. In light of this, we propose the concept of "Vertical Depth Narrative", a new theoretical framework for vertical screen storytelling [6].

Vertical Depth Narrative aims to overcome the limitations of horizontal space by using techniques specifically suited to vertical screens. One key approach is the use of blurred backgrounds combined with vertical motion axes — a method that is particularly effective in creating a sense of depth and space within the constrained vertical format. For instance, in elevator scenes, where the vertical movement of characters can be highlighted, this technique reinforces the feeling of spatial layering, creating a dynamic and immersive viewing experience.

This theoretical framework enables content creators to think about space differently — not as a limitation but as a tool for creating more intimate and focused storytelling. By utilizing the unique characteristics of vertical orientation, creators can foster a deeper connection with their audience, drawing attention to specific details that would otherwise be lost in traditional horizontal formats. Through this lens, "space compression" can be seen not as a disadvantage but as an opportunity to rethink narrative engagement in a more vertical and layered context.

### 5.2. Creation Guidelines: Technical Adaptation and Genre-Specific Strategies

To fully exploit the potential of vertical screens, content creators must consider the technical adaptations and genre-specific strategies that enhance the viewer's experience. Each genre, from emotional dramas to suspense thrillers, demands a tailored approach to vertical screen storytelling. Below, we propose creation guidelines for specific genres:

Emotional dramas: In this genre, vertical screen formats can amplify emotional intimacy between characters. By employing close-up shots of faces coupled with text overlays (e.g., dialogue subtitles or emotive text bubbles), creators can compress the scene and focus on the characters' expressions and emotional exchanges. This technique, as exemplified in the drama *Twenty-Nine*, allows the audience to connect deeply with the characters'

emotions during moments of dialogue, especially in intimate settings like conversations between couples.

Suspense thrillers: Vertical screens offer an exciting opportunity to experiment with split-screen narratives, especially on foldable screens. One effective method is the use of "dual-time parallel contrast", where the main screen could show an action sequence (e.g., a character fleeing), while the secondary screen simultaneously displays another event (e.g., a character in pursuit). This creates an exciting tension between the two plotlines and enhances the sense of urgency and suspense. Such a method uses the vertical space efficiently while engaging viewers in multiple narratives at once, a feature uniquely suited to foldable devices with split-screen capability.

By adapting vertical screen layouts to the specific needs of different genres, content creators can ensure that each genre fully capitalizes on the visual and narrative possibilities offered by this medium.

### *5.3. Ethical Reflection: The Conflict Between Algorithmic Recommendations and Narrative Depth*

As vertical screen short dramas become more widespread, there is an increasing concern about the ethical implications of algorithm-driven content creation. Many platforms, particularly those reliant on engagement metrics, tend to favor content that maximizes viewer retention by promoting quick, high-impact narratives — often in the form of the so-called "3-second climax". This approach, while effective at driving short-term engagement, often leads to a homogenization of content, where stories become formulaic and lose their depth and complexity.

Algorithmic-driven storytelling encourages creators to prioritize rapid emotional payoffs over nuanced, deeply developed plots. As a result, many vertical screen short dramas are reduced to brief bursts of action or emotion, missing out on the opportunity to engage viewers in a more meaningful way. This shift toward simplified, formulaic narratives may limit the artistic potential of vertical screen formats and discourage more innovative approaches to storytelling [7].

To counteract this trend, we suggest the establishment of a "Vertical Screen Creation Charter" that encourages content creators to balance quick engagement with narrative depth. For example, one potential guideline could be that each episode of a vertical screen short drama should include at least 15 seconds of uninterrupted long takes. These long takes would allow for more nuanced character development and a deeper emotional connection between the viewer and the story. Additionally, creators should be encouraged to experiment with slower pacing, allowing for richer character interactions and plot development, rather than relying solely on immediate emotional peaks.

This ethical reflection calls for a balance between algorithmic incentives and the need for meaningful storytelling. By ensuring that creators can prioritize narrative quality alongside viewer engagement, vertical screen content can evolve into a more diverse and artistically fulfilling medium.

## **6. Conclusion and Outlook**

### *6.1. Core Conclusion: Vertical Screen Short Dramas as an Independent Aesthetic System*

Vertical screen short dramas represent a distinct and independent aesthetic system in the era of mobile internet. They are not merely a "simplified version" of traditional horizontal screen films but rather a unique medium that utilizes its vertical orientation to shape storytelling, visual composition, and viewer interaction.

The vertical screen format, with its specific spatial and technical characteristics, has given rise to a new approach to narrative structure, pacing, and visual aesthetics. By adopting vertical depth, interactive elements, and innovative layouts like grid compositions, vertical short dramas create an experience that engages viewers in new and exciting

ways. This medium is more than just a response to the limitations of traditional formats; it is a medium in its own right, with its own rules and aesthetic possibilities.

As this format continues to evolve, it has the potential to redefine how we understand and experience digital storytelling, marking a departure from the conventional cinematic principles that have dominated for over a century. The key takeaway is that vertical screen short dramas are an entirely new form of visual storytelling, offering unique opportunities for creators to engage with their audience in ways that horizontal films cannot.

### 6.2. Future Directions: Exploring AR Vertical Screen Dramas and Brain-Computer Interface Integration

Looking ahead, the future of vertical screen short dramas lies in further innovations in both immersive storytelling and interactive experiences. One exciting direction is the exploration of augmented reality (AR) vertical screen dramas and the integration of brain-computer interfaces (BCI) with visual interaction.

AR vertical screen dramas: Augmented reality offers a vast potential to enhance the vertical screen experience by overlaying digital content onto the real world. In an AR vertical screen drama, the viewer could interact with digital characters, objects, or elements from the story, integrating these elements into their own environment. This "space-overlaid narrative" could create a more immersive experience, where the boundaries between the story world and the viewer's reality become increasingly blurred. For instance, the character might appear to walk across the viewer's physical space, or critical plot objects could be dynamically placed within the viewer's field of vision. This spatial overlay would expand the possibilities for vertical screen storytelling, allowing for more dynamic, location-based interactions.

Brain-computer interface and gaze interaction: Another exciting frontier is the integration of brain-computer interfaces (BCI) with gaze interaction. By combining neural signals and eye-tracking technology, future vertical screen experiences could be controlled or influenced by the viewer's thoughts and gaze patterns. Imagine a viewer being able to change the course of the narrative or interact with the characters simply by thinking or focusing on specific elements on the screen. This would not only deepen viewer engagement but also make the narrative more personalized, as the system could adapt the story to the viewer's emotional and cognitive state. Such a fusion of mind and screen could create an entirely new level of storytelling, where the viewer is no longer a passive observer but an active participant in shaping the narrative.

These advancements suggest that the future of vertical screen short dramas is not just about improving what we already have but about redefining the very nature of storytelling and viewer interaction. As technology advances, these new methods could radically transform how stories are told, how viewers interact with them, and how immersive the experience can be. The potential for innovation in this space is vast, and we are just beginning to scratch the surface of what is possible.

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