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THE SUBTERFUGE METHODS OF SHORT-FORM VERTICAL DRAMA APPS:ALGORITHMIC LOOPHOLES, ROMANTIC PROBLEMATIC IN NATURE, EXISTING FRAMEWORK AND REGULATORY FORESIGHT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid explosion of digital entertainment has introduced a silent yet highly predatory phenomenon: short-form vertical drama applications (Duanju). Characterized by a 9:16 portrait layout, high-intensity cliffhangers, and ultra-short episodes, these platforms successfully bypass traditional regulatory guardrails. This paper exposes the dual-layered subterfuge engineered by these applications to exploit structural blind spots in automated content moderation and individual consumer psychology within the Indian digital ecosystem.

*First, this study dissects the mechanism of **algorithmic evasion and contextual obfuscation**. It demonstrates how these platforms deliberately replace explicit imagery and banned keywords with melodramatic euphemisms. By doing so, they smoothly slip past the automated AI screening filters of major intermediaries like YouTube Shorts and Meta. This allows deeply toxic, problematic romantic tropes—such as non-consensual captivity, psychological coercion, and extreme hyper-power dynamics—to feed directly into the screens of minor audiences without any age-gating restrictions. Second, it uncovers the **deceptive bait-and-switch micro-transaction models**, which weaponize narrative cliffhangers to trap users inside compounding virtual paywalls, preying heavily on modern, infobesity-driven digital impatience.*

Finally, evaluating this crisis through the lens of Indian jurisprudence, the article identifies a critical legal vacuum. It highlights how these apps successfully slip through the [Information](#)

Technology Rules, 2021, by fragmenting their content to escape upfront age-verification, while shielding themselves behind complex cross-border corporate holding networks.

INTRODUCTION

At least we all have seen one reel or shorts or ad where a billionaire/trillionaire man with infinite supplies of money becomes infatuated with a stranger on the street and believes that his wealth makes him entitled to be able to enslave her against her will for life. Those absurdly hyper-dramatic storylines have become an unavoidable part of every day for anyone stuck in the endless scrolling loops of YouTube Shorts. Unlike regular horizontal micro-drama (Duanju) ads, these vertical TV clips are immediately laughable, sensationalized, low-budget digital content that exploits regulatory blind spots on first glance. But it points out a legal vacuum. As we all know the internet is a freely roaming highway where lots of people across every age are trying out a lot of things and when they see such content they get inspired by it and start normalising actions and thinking. These platforms weaponize, as an algorithmic bait, the themes of extreme psychological violence, non-consensual captivity and hyper power inequalities. In this way, they are able to circumvent ad-filtering programs to directly deliver unregulated, adult-oriented ads into the feeds of minors who are unaware of the true nature of what they purchase — and ensnare prey with predatory micro-transaction models. This seems like a mind-less and innocent digital joke but is actually a case study in the art of regulatory artifice. In this article, we shall delve deeper into the anatomy of the subterfuge i.e., what actually it is, how many irresistible methods they want to prevent legal liability and finally under the laws of India.

UNDERSTANDING VERTICAL DRAMA APPS

So before we get into the topic we have to know what Vertical drama apps & micro drama apps mean, Vertical or micro drama apps are mobile streaming platforms that serve 9:16 portrait-oriented and 1-to-2-minute long shows with cliffhanger-driven episodes. Short-form vertical drama applications (Duanju) operate using a system of dual-layered deception, both against automated content filters and individual consumer psychology. To explore the lack of

Zico Ghosh, *Microdramas in India Run on Fantasy, Humiliation and Retention*, The Established (Apr. 29, 1 2026), <https://www.theestablished.com/culture/entertainment/microdramas-in-india-11775974> [perma.cc].

Why Micro-Dramas Capture Our Brains: Exploring the Neuroscience Behind Short-Form Engagement **Film Shortage**, (July 26, 2024), <https://filmshortage.com/why-micro-dramas-capture-our-brains-exploring-the-neuroscience-behind-short-form-engagement/>

regulation on these platforms, we must delineate their mechanisms by distinguishing between algorithmic evasion via contextual obfuscation and bait-and-switch strategies with consumer-targeted advertising models. The flow chart below clarifies the steps and tools that these portals adopt,

[Programmatic Ad Ingestion]



[AI screening (automated)] —► (pass: NOT FULL NUDITY/banned keywords)



[Open Feed Distribution] —► (Displays minor abduction/coercion theme Emma to the feed)



[Narrative cliffhanger] —► (Forced the app to be downloaded)



[The Money Spending Trap] —► (Resolution blocked by predatory micro-transaction paywall)

A. ALGORITHM EVASION AND CONTEXTUAL OBFUSCATION

Intermediary hosting platforms, including YouTube Shorts and Meta, handle billions of programmatic video ads every few hours. In order to cope with this number, they use

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automated AI screening models rather than human Review for nearly all their inbound. They are set to identify clear violations, such as —

Graphic sexual nudity or graphic sexual activity.

Text-based cursing or blacklisted words in the captions.

Graphic representations of blood and other physical body parts or weapons

Micro-drama theorems also build upon this automation, by a method called contextual obfuscation. These apps submit all the visual assets with dressed actors, and they painstakingly switch explicit words in the dialogue for melodramatic euphemisms (e.g., rather than "kidnapping" or "assault," it says such poetically charged statements like "bringing her home where she belongs," or "exercising marital rights").

Since nothing in the video sounds objectionable from a technical perspective, automated screening algorithms mark the ad as suitable family-friendly general-audience entertainment. As a result, material that portrays horrific warmongering/ asset stripping behaviours—think of a billionaire literally dragging a shrieking woman off the street at night and into the homeless industrial complex from how its horror is now seeping directly into the short-form scrolling feeds of minors without any structural age-gating restrictions.

B. THE DECEPTIVE BAIT AND SWITCH MODEL

The second phase of the loophole involves a bait-and-switch operation, but the switch is pulled on the user. Video ads on the short-form feeds are not neutral trailers of the app. Instead, they are crafted as individual shock-value hooks meant only to elicit a single click that immediately leads to an app download.

In fact, in most of the cases, you can tell that the specific high-stakes sort of kidnapping or public humiliation scene featured on your YouTube Short ad is nowhere to be found within the app story. The advertisement serves as a piece of manufactured narrative leverage. It intentionally juts out at a climactic moment, an emotional high note left unresolved—the cliff-

hanger of the narrative—and plays on a narrow hook to entice the captive user into installing an app to resolve it.

Then, after the user downloads the app, the paradigm shift from algorithmic evasion sublimation to economic entrapment kicks in, as what happens next is instantly split between various narrative fragments all held behind a compounding virtual paywall.

Apps and stories like these, are accustomed to update constantly which has made us way more impatient than we believe. No longer can anyone peacefully watch the T.V. shows anymore. These days people are getting more and more impatient that they want to gather maximum information in a limited period of time instead of spending one hour to get the idea/information (infobesity-driven impatience).

Those who think that it is not something we should be worried about need to take note that this bears testimony to a systemic failure of digital safety and consumer protection in India. This unregulated system is far from an innocent prank, and the level of psychological, financial, and legal threat it poses warrants immediate regulatory attention.

THE LOOPHOLES AND THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

There are a number of laws in India to protect such platforms such as the netizens or consumers watching such content yet the platform keeps on trying on their own sort. Streaming networks fall under "online curated content providers" — streaming platforms authorized to only air age-classified (U, UA, A) content with parental locks as demanded by the framework of the existing IT rules 2021. Because these apps spread content across fragmented 1-minute clips, rather than through neat, formal "episode" or film packages, many avoid upfront age-verification gates altogether. Traditional regulatory structures are set up in a more reactive model which will take longer to raise the legal issues with such content. Film a micro-drama series in less than two weeks, earn revenue from automated adverts, be binge-watched before an official complaint is processed. Cross-border guidelines impose liability on local operations with safe-harbor conditions. Many of the massive micro-drama apps are actually owned indirectly via a labyrinthian set of holding companies based in Singapore or Hong Kong, and therefore not subject to local lawsuits. In the past, Indian cyber law has tended to penalize hosted content as opposed to architecture for delivery on platforms. Because predatory algorithmic design or automated amplification loops are not recognized as separate legal torts (as they should be), apps won't be held liable for promoting screen addiction. India has a constitutional legal

framework which provides powers to regulate as well as the fundamental rights that these apps possibly violate.

India's constitution provides very specific subterfuge guidelines for how short form drama apps will function; this creates a direct clash between state regulatory powers with citizens rights as they are enshrined in fundamental rights. Entry 31 of the Union List (Seventh Schedule) provides Parliament exclusive jurisdiction over digital broadcasting and communication networks, implying its powers under Doctrine of Extra-Territorial Nexus (Article 245) when a wrong is done from outside India and felt within it. Even while these apps try to protect their carefully crafted content under freedom of speech [Article 19(1)(a)], the government used Article 19(2) on "decency, morality and public order" against them in order to block posts. Moreover, the apps' predatory AI-driven algorithmic loops exploiting user psychology match behavioural tracking data and infringe Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty), as clarified by India's Supreme Court of India to include protection against corporate-induced Addictions in violative material and information privacy rights.

This type of criminal law response to the techniques of deviousness that companies working with short-form drama apps deploy involves a mix of cyber-crime laws tailored to targeting their basic operations and India's amended penal code, which addresses both obscene distribution and predatory monetization. Platforms have criminal liability under Section 67 of the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 with non-bailable imprisonment and/or a fine for publishing or transmitting any material that is sexually explicit or obscene in electronic form which can be aggravated by Sections 67A and 67B where the content arguably enters into 'acts' itself or minor victims are involved. At the same time, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) punishes the commercial framework of such apps by using Section 294 to decriminalize public performance and aggressive advertisement of obscene writings, songs and films; with prescribed punishment prison for up to 3 years — Section 79 gives criminal responsibility of harmful regressive scripts that undermine women against writers' and directors' names. Moreover, the platform is not giving an honest delivery of a story, while also using AI-based algorithms to engage the user — this allows prosecutors to use section 318 in the Banking and Non-Banking Financial Companies (Cheating) Act and charge that it uses a deceitful UI in various apps as fraudulent and devious solicitation with intention of obtaining money through costly digital coin transactions. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986- This is in conjunction with the BNS and this act criminalizes exposing women to be depicted in any manner that degrades or depraves them and most importantly public morals.

India Const. art. 19, cl. 1, subcl. a.

India Const. art. 19, cl. 2.

India Const. art. 21.

You need to pay attention to how these apps are literally tricking youtube shorts and Instagram meta algorithms. Even though none of these highlighted words are present or that the actual footage showcases no physical nudity at all, AI grants it access. The situation — kidnapping, stalking, forced marriage are all dark and for more adult audiences only. The defence made by the host platforms including YouTube and Instagram of the safe harbour rule as provided by section 76 of Information and Technology Act, 2000 is very weak. They are just digital pipes (pipes). Given the sheer number of ads uploaded programmatically every hour, there is no way any human could review each and every single one. You will be told they are secure as long as there is a "Report Ad" button. But the intermediary liability shield is conditional and not absolute. Intermediaries must conduct due diligence under the IT Rules. Sounds worth noting that platforms are still making money from ad-revenue based apps profiting off these predatory applications. A platform whose automated AI systems show a consistent failure to "see" contextual portrayals of abduction is guilty of systemic negligence. They cannot claim automated scale as a reason to evade legal minor-safety requirements. As for the pricey "Coin Economy," the apps also contend that users are under no obligation to purchase virtual coins. Pricing is shown in the app before purchase and ultimately this is a simple consumer transaction — you choose to pay in line with standard terms of service. This completely disregards how Dark Patterns leverage psychology in digital interfaces. The first ad pulls you in with a cliffhanger narrative high (aka, the unfinished story) but hiding the fact that to finish the narrative you're going to need dozens of micro-transactions. This problem is two fold as the consumer arrives at a negotiated price for such product creation upfront, which creates an informational asymmetry in relation to what they can expect to pay, and that therefore constitutes an "Unfair Trade Practice" within the ambit of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.

Rather than merely chasing and banning individual apps or offensive 1-minute video clips after they go viral, India's digital governance framework is modernising to treat predatory user-interface design and automated amplification as systemic policy challenges. The future perspective on regulating short-form drama apps in India shifts toward systemic governance through frameworks like the Digital India Act and IT Rules. Enforcement will target

India Const. art. 245.

India Const. sch. 7, list I, entry 31

The Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, §§ 67, 76, India Code (2000).

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, India Code (2023).

algorithmic accountability, mandate strict takedown windows, remove safe harbor protections for deceptive monetization, and utilize financial chokeholds via MeitY and RBI coordination.

CONCLUSION

The time is now to take every industry for face value—on the originality of it, and treating its content with dignity and respect. A.I. might not impact the user but it will surely change the consumer. Even exposing similar content to a person of every gender and age will have the effect for a lifetime on that person which we cannot imagine. And makes their mind to act in one way. In addition, consciously or unconsciously they change their behaviour as if those are the characters from the drama. The context of these contents can then be used as a passive justification for the violence or non consensual behaviour and even breaking the law. Importantly, society already has innumerable problems and such content when published highly influences the youngsters and it only helps the society to add more issues.

India Const. art. 245.

India Const. sch. 7, list I, entry 31

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