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Urban workers' experiences in consuming C-Drama: An interpretative phenomenological analysis approach

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Chinese micro-dramas on digital streaming platforms has created a genuinely new mode of urban media consumption. This paper examines how office workers in Greater Jakarta (Jabodetabek) subjectively experience consuming Chinese micro-dramas, with particular attention to how this format functions as a tool for escapism, emotional regulation, and identity negotiation within demanding professional routines. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design, data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews (45–75 minutes each) with two purposively selected participants: an HR Generalist and an Accounting Assistant Manager, both active consumers of micro-drama content across platforms including TikTok, WeTV, and YouTube Shorts. The study adopts an explicitly idiographic, exploratory design consistent with IPA's most intensive tradition, prioritising analytical depth over breadth. Analysis produced four superordinate themes: (1) Motivational Escapism and Emotional Regulation, in which micro-dramas operate as psychological safe spaces through predictable, wish-fulfilling narratives; (2) Interstitial Consumption Patterns, reflecting a multi-platform viewing practice embedded in the fragmented gaps of urban professional schedules; (3) Resonance of Materialism and Career Themes, in which the dominant visual economy of wealth and instant social mobility functions as aspirational compensation for rigid corporate realities; and (4) Identity Tensions and Critical Reflection, revealing productive tensions between entertainment satisfaction, productivity guilt, and gender-based social barriers to disclosure. The findings offer provisional, context-specific contributions to the growing literature on transnational media reception in Southeast Asia and carry practical implications for digital media industry localization strategies.

Keywords: Chinese micro-drama; interpretative phenomenological analysis; escapism; multi-platform viewing; urban workers; media consumption; Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Television entertainment has changed dramatically in recent years. For much of its history, Chinese television drama (C-Drama) meant long-form epics (historical sagas, wuxia adventures) that demanded a serious time commitment from audiences (Nesterova, 2022). What is happening now is different. A new wave of ‘mini web dramas’ and ‘micro-dramas’ has emerged, driven not just by technological possibility and low-cost production but by a deliberate industrial response to audiences whose attention has become increasingly fragmented (Wang & Liang, 2025; Zhai, 2025).

For office workers in Indonesia, time is not just scarce, it is rationed. Professional demands and the realities of urban commuting in a city like Jakarta leave little room for conventional entertainment. Micro-dramas offer something different: short, intense narratives that fit into a lunch break, a commute, or even a few stolen minutes between tasks. Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, has long been recognized as a core overseas market for Chinese content (Lee et al., 2023), yet the existing literature remains dominated by studies of long-form dramas and xianxia (Deng, 2024; Xue, 2022).

Within this literature, a precise and consequential gap exists. Prior studies have examined Chinese drama reception in Southeast Asia at a general level (Lee et al., 2023) and have explored the consumption of long-form and costume dramas (Deng, 2024; Xue, 2022), but none have specifically investigated how urban workers in Indonesia engage with the micro-format. How they navigate it, what meanings they construct from it, and how it functions within the specific rhythms and pressures of professional life. Two dimensions of this gap are particularly underexplored: first, the subjective experience of platform-mediated, fragmented viewing among full-time workers; and second, the intersection of micro-drama consumption with professional identity and emotional regulation. These are the dimensions the present study addresses.

The practice involves what Fu and Wang (2025) call ‘platformized audiencing’—viewers moving actively between TikTok, WeTV, YouTube Shorts, and other platforms to piece together an entertainment experience. Yet how this platform-hopping practice is experienced subjectively by working professionals, and how it intersects with emotional regulation and professional identity, remains unstudied. Furthermore, while themes of materialism and modernity pervade Chinese micro-drama content (He et al., 2024), it is unknown how Indonesian urban workers with concrete professional and financial experiences interpret and respond to these representations.

The trajectory of Chinese television drama has been one of gradual liberation from state control. Through the 1950s to the 1990s, television dramas served as instruments of cultural governance, tightly monitored for ideological compliance (Cai, 2016; Nesterova, 2022). Digitalization changed the conditions of possibility. New, more fluid sub-genres emerged, and the micro-drama is perhaps the most radical expression of this shift—a move from grand narratives toward what might reasonably be called fast-food content. Wang and Liang (2025) trace this shift to the intersection of capital flows and technological innovations enabling mass low-cost production. Zhai (2025) is more cautious, warning of ‘toxic content’ and problematic values that slip through in the absence of the regulatory scrutiny conventional television dramas receive.

The themes that dominate these dramas are not arbitrary. A longitudinal study of Chinese urban dramas from 1980 to 2019 found a persistent focus on romantic love, wealth, property, and modern family dynamics (He et al., 2024). Definitely, the concerns that occupy office workers navigating their own economic and social pressures. Chen and Chang (2024) found that streaming audiences globally show a marked preference for contemporary modern romance dramas. In the micro-drama context, these themes are pushed to extremes: dominant CEOs, rags-to-riches reversals, public professional vindication. For someone sitting in a corporate office where advancement feels slow and opaque, the cathartic potential of such content is not difficult to understand.

How this content is consumed matters as much as what it contains. Fu and Wang's (2025) concept of platformized audiencing captures a practice in which audiences move strategically between streaming services and fan communities, navigating what they call 'cultural assemblages.' For Indonesian office workers, practical factors (subtitle quality, mobile availability) often determine what gets watched (Chen & Chang, 2024). And because viewing happens in fragments, a single episode consumed at lunch may continue during an evening commute, transforming what was once a ritualistic leisure activity into something interstitial, woven into the gaps of a working day.

Research specifically on Chinese micro-drama reception in Indonesia remains sparse, but the regional literature offers useful context. Southeast Asian audiences exhibit a partial cultural proximity to Chinese content that smooths acceptance even where language barriers create some 'cultural discount' (Lee et al., 2023). Studies of K-Drama reception among Indonesian audiences suggest that foreign dramas can become a discursive space for debating local values around family and national identity (Putri & Purwadi, 2025). Pinardi et al. (2023) found that drama exposure on OTT platforms shapes Indonesian audiences' perceptions of and aspirations toward international destinations. Chinese micro-dramas likely trigger analogous dynamics, where office workers do not merely seek entertainment, but use the depicted modernity of Shanghai or Beijing as an implicit mirror held up to the urban realities of Jakarta.

Against this backdrop, this study poses the following research question: *How do urban office workers in Greater Jakarta subjectively experience and make sense of consuming Chinese micro-dramas within their professional routines, and what meanings do they construct around escapism, emotional regulation, and professional identity through this consumption?* Addressing this question through an IPA lens allows for a fine-grained, idiographic account of a phenomenon that aggregate methods cannot adequately capture.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design. IPA was selected because the research aim is fundamentally about depth, understanding the lived experience and the subjective meanings participants attach to consuming micro-dramas within their professional routines (Haq et al., 2023; Josephine & Jones, 2022). Unlike quantitative approaches oriented toward generalization, IPA treats each case as uniquely significant, understanding it on its own terms before moving to cross-case comparison (Nasir et al., 2022; Pangestu et al., 2024). That orientation is well-suited here, where consumption involves layered personal experiences around emotional management and coping in high-pressure urban environments. IPA's foundational principle of the 'double hermeneutic' is central to this. The researcher attempts to understand how participants themselves make sense of their own experience (Rahiem, 2021; Susilo et al., 2021).

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, consistent with IPA's requirement for sample homogeneity. Inclusion criteria were: (1) full-time office work in the Greater Jakarta area (Jabodetabek); (2) active consumption of Chinese micro-dramas—defined as episodes shorter than ten minutes at a minimum frequency of three times per week over the previous three months; and (3) access to content through digital platforms such as TikTok, WeTV, YouTube Shorts, or dedicated micro-drama applications.

While IPA studies are often described as involving between six and ten participants (Josephine & Jones, 2022), this range reflects a pragmatic guideline rather than a fixed requirement. Crucially, IPA is an idiographic methodology: its primary commitment is to the depth and richness of individual case analysis rather than to sample size as a marker of validity (Nasir et al., 2022). The present study deliberately adopts a two-case design in keeping with IPA's most intensive idiographic tradition. With only two participants, the analysis is able to sustain a fine-grained, case-by-case engagement with each individual's phenomenological account that would be difficult to maintain across a larger sample. This design is therefore not a limitation imposed by circumstance

but a methodological choice suited to a genuinely exploratory study of a phenomenon, that has not previously been examined qualitatively. The findings are appropriately treated as provisional and context-specific, intended to generate theoretical insights and hypotheses for subsequent, larger-scale investigation rather than to support broad generalization.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Category	SM (Participant 1)	QL (Participant 2)
Name (pseudonym)	SM	QL
Gender	Female	Male
Marital Status	Married	Single
Number of Children	3	—
Commuting Time	30 minutes	20 minutes (private vehicle)
Tenure	2 Years	3 Years
Position	HR Generalist	Accounting Assistant Manager
Viewing Frequency	≥3x/week	≥3x/week
Primary Platform	TikTok, WeTV	TikTok, YouTube Shorts

Source: Primary data (2025)

In [Table 1](#), recruitment was conducted through purposive, network-based sampling within professional circles in Greater Jakarta. Potential participants were approached by the first author and screened against the inclusion criteria before being invited to participate. Both participants provided written informed consent prior to the interview. Each interview was conducted individually, in a semi-structured format, via a combination of in-person and online modalities depending on participant preference. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could express themselves naturally and without language-induced constraint. The interview guide covered four key areas: (1) the circumstances and motivations surrounding micro-drama consumption; (2) emotional and psychological responses to specific content and narratives; (3) navigation across platforms and integration of viewing into daily schedules; and (4) reflections on how viewing relates to professional identity and self-perception. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the first author. Transcription was completed within 48 hours of each interview to maximise accuracy and contextual recall.

Data analysis followed the systematic IPA stages described in current literature ([Lestari & Aunurrahman, 2021](#); [Nasir et al., 2022](#)). These involved: (1) Reading and Re-reading, in which the researcher immersed themselves in each transcript to grasp the overall shape of the participant’s narrative ([Josephine & Jones, 2022](#)); (2) Initial Noting, involving detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual annotations on the transcript margins, attending closely to language use, emotional register, and expressed values ([Haq et al., 2023](#); [Kusumawati et al., 2022](#)); (3) Developing Emergent Themes, condensing initial notes into concise themes while preserving the essence of what the participant communicated ([Ruslaini et al., 2021](#)); (4) Searching for Connections Across Themes, clustering themes into superordinate groupings through an iterative process of abstraction and re-engagement with the data; and (5) Cross-case Analysis, in which the full analytic cycle was completed for the second participant as a self-contained unit before patterns of convergence and divergence across both cases were examined. This sequencing was deliberate: completing each case analysis independently before cross-case comparison was conducted preserved the idiographic integrity of individual accounts and prevented premature thematic closure.

To maintain research credibility, the first author employed bracketing (*epoché*) throughout the analytic process, explicitly reflecting upon and suspending prior assumptions and personal familiarity with C-Drama content in order to approach each participant’s account with openness ([Kusumawati et al., 2022](#); [Nasir et al., 2022](#)). These assumptions were documented in a reflexive research journal maintained throughout the study. While source triangulation was not pursued—

IPA’s focus on singular subjective perspectives makes it less applicable—validity was strengthened through member checking: following analysis, a written summary of the emergent and superordinate themes was shared with each participant via a follow-up meeting (conducted approximately two weeks after the initial interview), who was then invited to confirm, clarify, or contest the researcher’s interpretations. Both participants confirmed that the thematic accounts were a fair representation of their experiences, with minor clarifications incorporated into the final analysis (Ruslaini et al., 2021).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2. Summary of Superordinate and Emergent Themes

Superordinate Theme	SM (HR Generalist)	QL (Accounting Asst. Manager)
Motivational Escapism & Emotional Regulation	Uses micro-dramas as a ‘safe space’ for mental recovery; consciously selects light, predictable content to decompress after managing complex HR issues.	Frames the viewing experience as ‘hope’ and aspirational projection; derives motivational energy from narratives of characters rising from adversity to success.
Interstitial Consumption Patterns	Demonstrates highly flexible cross-platform viewing, integrating watching between professional and domestic obligations; prefers completed series for continuous binge-watching.	Employs ‘time-stealing’ strategies with supervisory permission; experiences episodes of unintentional all-night watching sessions driven by the minimal episode duration.
Resonance of Materialism & Career Themes	Appreciates luxury visual elements such as branded items and high-end cars as aspirational symbols.	Engages critically with narratives of wealth and investment mastery; recognises the economic implausibility of the plots while deriving aspirational satisfaction from them.
Identity Tensions & Critical Reflection	Occasional guilt about time use is overridden by a self-justificatory framework that positions entertainment as a legitimate micro-recovery tool sustaining professional productivity.	Experiences regret over not redirecting viewing time toward professional development; navigates gender stigma by consuming privately without recommending to male peers.

Source: Primary data (2025)

3.1. Motivational Escapism and Emotional Regulation

In Table 2, across both cases, a strong convergent pattern emerged: both participants actively use C-Dramas as psychological instruments for emotional regulation. Theoretically, this resonates with Uses and Gratifications theory (Nasir et al., 2022), which posits that audiences actively select media to satisfy specific psychological needs. More specifically, both participants enact what Zhai (2025) describes as an escape-from-self function—using narrative immersion to temporarily detach from the cognitive and emotional load of professional life. This aligns with what Lee et al. (2023) describe as cultural proximity, whereby Southeast Asian audiences’ preference for Chinese dramas is partly rooted in the resonance of shared Confucian-inflected values around perseverance, social hierarchy, and aspiration. The convergence between these values and the workplace realities of Jakarta-based office workers amplifies the emotional accessibility of the content.

For SM, whose daily work as an HR Generalist involves constant management of interpersonal conflict and organisational complexity, the predictability and lightness of micro-dramas are not incidental, they are precisely the point. The cognitive accessibility of the format is central to its therapeutic function: “I prefer relaxed shows where I don’t have to think. Chinese dramas are entertainment for when I’m feeling overwhelmed because of their light and relaxing nature (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

This reflects what psychologists' term psychological detachment—the capacity to mentally disconnect from the demands of work during leisure time, which has been identified as a key recovery mechanism for workers in high-demand roles. The micro-drama format, with its self-contained narratives and absence of complex moral ambiguity, structurally facilitates this detachment. For SM, the viewing experience operates specifically as cognitive offloading: after a day of managing interpersonal complexity, the epistemic simplicity of micro-drama narratives provides genuine relief rather than mere distraction. SM articulates this through the metaphor of transportation: “It feels like being in a fantasy world, where simple events can lead someone to meet a rich person who falls in love instantly. In the real world, it's not that easy; so, watching dramas makes me feel like I'm moving to a different world (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

The gap between viewer and screen here is not a source of frustration but of relief. [Nesterova \(2022\)](#) notes that C-Drama's melodramatic genre is structurally designed to combine engaging plots with accessible values, offering a sense of security through predictable story arcs. SM is conscious of this disparity and articulates it directly: “Yes, because in the real world, it is very difficult to get a promotion or a raise, whereas in dramas, everything looks so effortless (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

Crucially, SM's engagement is not merely about switching off. The narratives also generate a motivational charge. What might be understood as narrative self-efficacy, the derivation of a sense of personal possibility from witnessing characters succeed ([Bandura, 1997](#)). This dual function, simultaneously deactivating cognitive load and reactivating motivational reserves, suggests that micro-drama consumption for SM serves as a form of affective regulation that is both restorative and generative: “Watching scenes of people who work hard in Chinese dramas sometimes motivates me and makes me feel there is a possibility that I could succeed too (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

QL's escapism operates differently. Where SM seeks cognitive rest, QL uses micro-dramas as an aspirational space—a proxy arena for desires that remain structurally constrained in his professional reality. Hope, rather than relaxation, is the governing category: “It is like hope. The reality is not that easy, but in the film, our imagination seems to be granted (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

Critically, QL demonstrates a form of lucid consumption: he is fully aware of the implausibility of the narratives yet consciously chooses to derive emotional benefit from them regardless: “It doesn't make sense, but there is a sense of satisfaction. It feels good to see someone who was underestimated prove that they are capable of being successful (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

This ‘wish fulfilment at a distance’, recognising the unreality of a narrative while still allowing oneself to be emotionally moved by it represents a sophisticated form of what media scholars call parasocial engagement. It implies that micro-drama consumers are not passive recipients of fantasy but active, reflective agents who manage the boundary between narrative and reality with precision. Theoretically, this finding challenges the binary framing of escapism as either uncritical immersion or detached resistance. What both participants demonstrate is a third modality: critical-yet-affective engagement, in which cognitive awareness of narrative artifice is held simultaneously with genuine emotional investment. This modality extends [Zhai's \(2025\)](#) escape-from-self model by showing that emotional benefit and critical reflection are not mutually exclusive outcomes of micro-drama consumption but complementary dimensions of the same experience.

3.2. Interstitial Consumption Patterns and Multi-Platform Viewing

The second major finding concerns how both participants actively and creatively negotiate the space between professional obligation and the need for self-recovery. [Fu and Wang \(2025\)](#) theorise this as platformized audiencing—a lived practice in which viewers do not simply consume content but actively assemble entertainment experiences by navigating across platform ecosystems,

each offering different content libraries, subtitle quality, and episode formats. Both participants demonstrate this with notable intentionality and adaptability. What the present data add, however, is an account of how this practice is embedded within and profoundly shaped by the specific temporal structure of professional urban life in Jakarta—a dimension Fu and Wang’s framework, developed from a broader transnational perspective, does not fully address.

SM’s consumption is thoroughly integrated with the rhythms of both professional and domestic life. She does not treat viewing as a discrete leisure activity; instead, she weaves it into the texture of her day, exploiting even the most minimal temporal windows: “I feel neutral [about it], but if the story is very exciting, I often ‘steal’ time to watch. For instance, I’ll turn on a drama while cooking for my children. I will make time to watch even if I only have one or two minutes (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

Her strategic preference for completed series over ongoing ones is directly responsive to this fragmented schedule. By choosing series where all episodes are already available, SM eliminates the anxiety of open narrative loops and ensures the freedom to continue on her own terms: “I don’t like watching dramas that are still ongoing; I prefer ones that are already complete so I can watch them continuously. Even if I have other activities, I will still steal a chance to watch even if only for two minutes, as long as I finish the drama that day. (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

This constitutes what might be termed temporal sovereignty, the active management of one’s own time to carve out spaces of autonomous experience within a schedule largely governed by professional and domestic obligations. The micro-drama format, with its brief episodes, is uniquely suited to enabling this form of temporal self-determination. Theoretically, this extends [Fu and Wang’s \(2025\)](#) notion of platformized audiencing by revealing the motivational architecture that underlies platform-switching: it is not merely a question of content availability but of a viewer’s active project of reclaiming temporal agency within the compressed rhythms of urban professional life.

QL’s interstitial consumption is similarly intentional, but introduces an additional and theoretically significant dimension: the occasional collapse of temporal control. The ultra-short episode format, which [Zhai \(2025\)](#) identifies as designed to deliver rapid emotional payoffs to time-constrained audiences, creates a low-friction pathway to extended, unintentional viewing: “Sometimes I ‘steal time,’ but I have already obtained permission from my supervisor. As long as the work is completed, it is not an issue. Occasionally, I also continue watching at home from the time I return from work until late at night (QL, personal communication, 2025)”, “I woke up at 2 a.m. because I had fallen asleep early after work. I started watching and it felt like only a short while, but suddenly it was already 6 a.m. and time to take my younger sibling to school. Time seemed to pass very quickly (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

QL’s account reveals a productive tension within platformized audiencing: the same architectural features (short episodes, perpetual availability, algorithmic continuation) that enable micro-recovery can also produce temporal overreach. This suggests that the format’s design logic is not neutral; it does not simply fill gaps in the user’s schedule but actively creates new temporal demands. The theoretical implication extends [Fu and Wang’s \(2025\)](#) model by highlighting the coercive potential within what they describe as an active, agentic practice. Platformized audiencing is active, but it operates within platform architectures specifically designed to minimise resistance to continued engagement, raising questions about the boundary between agentic consumption and platform-induced compulsion.

3.3. Resonance of Materialism and Career Themes

A compensatory orientation toward material achievement and career success emerged as a significant dimension of both participants’ viewing experiences, particularly for QL. This validates [Zhai’s \(2025\)](#) observation that contemporary short web dramas frequently foreground social status and financial prosperity, and is consistent with [He et al.’s \(2024\)](#) longitudinal finding that the pursuit of wealth is a persistent thematic current in Chinese urban television. What the present

data add is an account of how these themes are received and interpreted by professional viewers whose own economic circumstances create a specific interpretive lens.

QL's background in accounting and financial management positions him as an unusually calibrated reader of micro-drama's economic narratives. He simultaneously desires these narratives and sees through them: "Chinese dramas emphasize success and luck (hoki) more. Suddenly having 15 billion [Rupiah] or being an expert in stock investment. That's very much a male imagination about money, different from Korean dramas which focus more on romance (QL, personal communication, 2025)"

This is a theoretically significant posture. QL is not deceived by the financial fantasies on screen; rather, he engages with them as a form of compensatory consumption, using the narrative to inhabit, temporarily and knowingly, a version of economic reality that his professional life does not yet afford him. Lee et al. (2023) associate the visual language of wealth in Chinese drama with heightened audience consumption intentions, but QL's account complicates this: the aspirational stimulus does not necessarily translate into consumption behaviour but into an affective experience of imagined possibility—what might be understood as a form of aspirational imaginative projection that is pleasurable precisely because it is contained, bounded by the viewing experience itself. Both SM and QL respond to the luxury visual economy with a form of aesthetic pleasure inseparable from aspiration: "It's exciting to see fine stones [jewellery], luxury cars, and other high-end items. It's a visual pleasure because there is a hope that someday I could possess similar things (QL, personal communication, 2025)" "I like visual elements such as good-looking cars and branded goods. (SM, personal communication, 2025)"

The career retribution narrative in which a professionally marginalised protagonist achieves spectacular success and publicly vindicates themselves—functions as a particularly potent emotional trigger. QL's account reveals the precise mechanism: the narrative provides vicarious resolution to accumulated professional injustice, offering an imagined enactment of institutional fairness that the real workplace does not deliver: "In the film, someone who works well gets promoted immediately. In reality, the process is long, and sometimes it is the team's work that only the manager gets credited for. In real life, it is far more difficult (QL, personal communication, 2025)"

For SM, the dynamic operates at the level of motivation rather than grievance. Watching industrious characters succeed reinforces her own sense of professional agency—a form of narrative self-efficacy transfer in which observed fictional success generates a felt increase in the viewer's own sense of capability (Bandura, 1977). This has important implications for understanding micro-drama's function in the lives of professional workers: where institutional recognition pathways are opaque or slow, fictional narratives of merit-based success may serve an affective compensatory function, temporarily supplying the sense of justice and possibility that workplace structures withhold. In this sense, micro-drama consumption is not a retreat from professional concerns but an informal affective resource for sustaining professional motivation in environments that do not adequately reward effort.

3.4. Identity Tensions and Critical Reflection

Both participants demonstrate a capacity for critical self-reflection about their micro-drama consumption that complicates any straightforward account of passive escapism. These tensions manifest along two axes: the productivity, entertainment dialectic, and specifically for QL, the navigation of gender-based social norms around drama consumption. Together, they reveal that micro-drama viewing is not experienced as a simple, unambiguous leisure activity but as a practice embedded within a complex field of identity negotiations.

For QL, the awareness that viewing time could be redirected toward professional development generates a persistent, low-level regret, a tension between the present self (seeking immediate affective reward) and the future self (investing in career capital): "There is a small sense

of regret—why I didn’t use that time to join a bootcamp or training to add insights that could be a ‘game changer’ in the future (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

Crucially, this tension does not resolve into a stable position. QL simultaneously justifies, enjoys, and partially regrets his viewing practice, occupying the contested space between entertainment consumer and professional self-developer. He also maintains a firm psychological boundary between narrative satisfaction and behavioural implications: “The satisfaction is only limited to the time of watching; I don’t carry it into personal matters in the real world (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

This boundary work is theoretically significant: it represents an active form of identity management in which QL consciously contains the influence of fantasy content to the viewing moment, preventing it from contaminating his professional self-concept. This cognitive compartmentalisation aligns with what Goffman (1959) terms the maintenance of distinct frames across different social contexts: QL manages the pleasures of micro-drama consumption and the demands of professional self-presentation as rigorously separate social domains. This suggests that micro-drama consumption, for professional male viewers, involves a degree of psychological labour that has not been documented in the existing literature.

For SM, the tension with productivity is less acute. She has developed a self-justificatory framework in which entertainment is repositioned as a necessary input for sustained professional performance: “I don’t feel tired or less productive because watching is my entertainment after an exhausting day of work. I think watching these dramas is very worthwhile because I remain productive the next day (SM, personal communication, 2025)”

SM’s reframing resonates with the emerging literature on micro-recovery: brief, psychologically disengaging activities during or after work hours that restore attentional and emotional resources (Kusumawati et al., 2022). Rather than experiencing guilt, SM has constructed a self-narrative in which entertainment is instrumentalised as a recovery tool—a move that insulates her from social judgment while also legitimising the practice on professional rather than purely personal grounds. This framing positions micro-drama consumption not as a guilty pleasure but as a form of informal occupational self-care, reflecting a broader cultural negotiation between productivity norms and individual wellbeing.

A second and distinct dimension of identity tension emerges from QL’s account. He is acutely aware that drama consumption is socially coded as feminine, and that his engagement as a male professional in a supervisory position is potentially subject to social sanction. His response is not to abandon the practice but to privatise it, restricting disclosure and adjusting his stated justification for engagement to foreground economically rational content (financial and career themes) over romantic content: “As a man, I focus more on the financial and success aspects of these dramas rather than the romance. Maybe people see a man watching dramas as strange, so I just enjoy it by myself without needing to recommend it to others (QL, personal communication, 2025)”

This finding has significant implications for how micro-drama audiences are understood. The privatisation of consumption by male professional viewers suggests that the actual audience may be considerably broader and more demographically varied than consumption disclosure patterns indicate. Male viewers particularly those in positions of authority, appear to systematically underreport their engagement due to gender-based social stigma, performing a form of gender identity negotiation (McIntosh & Butler, 1991) in which the consumption of ‘feminised’ content is reframed or concealed to preserve masculine professional credibility. Future research employing anonymous survey instruments may uncover substantially higher male viewership rates than interview-based studies, where social desirability effects are more pronounced.

What emerges consistently across both cases is that micro-drama consumption is not thoughtless or passive. It is actively managed, reflected upon, and integrated into a coherent self-understanding. The platformized audiencing practice described by Fu and Wang (2025) is not

merely a behavioural pattern, it is embedded within a complex field of identity negotiations specific to the pressures of urban professional life in Jakarta.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how urban office workers in Greater Jakarta subjectively experience and make sense of consuming Chinese micro-dramas within their professional routines. Drawing on an idiographic IPA design, the analysis of two in-depth cases produced four superordinate themes: Motivational Escapism and Emotional Regulation; Interstitial Consumption Patterns and Multi-Platform Viewing; Resonance of Materialism and Career Themes; and Identity Tensions and Critical Reflection. Across all four themes, micro-dramas emerged not as peripheral entertainment but as actively deployed psychological resources—tools for managing urban stress, regulating emotion, and negotiating professional identity.

The findings make several provisional contributions to the literature, appropriately understood as context-specific and exploratory given the two-case design. First, they extend the emerging scholarship on Chinese micro-drama to a Southeast Asian reception context, offering preliminary evidence that the format's appeal among professional demographics in Indonesia is grounded in culturally resonant themes of aspiration, social mobility, and career retribution. Second, they complicate the binary of 'escapism' versus 'critical engagement': both participants demonstrate a form of lucid consumption in which they are fully aware of narrative implausibility yet actively and reflectively derive emotional and motivational value from it. This represents a theoretically distinct mode of engagement and critical-yet-affective that the existing literature has not adequately conceptualised. Third, the identification of gender-based privatisation, where male professional viewers systematically conceal their micro-drama consumption due to social stigma—points to an underdocumented dimension of micro-drama audienceship. Fourth, the data reveal a coercive dimension within platformized audiencing: the format's architectural design, while enabling micro-recovery, also generates temporal overreach, raising questions about the boundary between agentic consumption and platform-induced compulsion.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The two-participant design, while appropriate for an idiographic IPA study, necessarily limits the transferability of the findings. Both participants are drawn from a specific professional and urban context (Greater Jakarta) and their experiences should not be taken as representative of office workers in the city as a whole, much less in other Indonesian cities, professional sectors, or demographic groups. The findings are therefore best understood as hypothesis-generating rather than as broadly representative claims. Additionally, interview-based data are subject to social desirability effects, which may have influenced participant accounts despite the use of pseudonyms and confidentiality assurances—an effect that is particularly relevant given the gender stigma findings. The homogeneity requirement of IPA also means that the experiences of part-time workers, older professionals, or those in non-corporate sectors remain outside the scope of this study.

The practical implications are twofold and are offered provisionally. For the media industry, the findings suggest that accounting for the temporal constraints and psychological needs of urban professionals may offer meaningful guidance for content localization and platform design strategies. For organisational discourse, the data suggest that brief entertainment consumption during or after the workday may function as a legitimate micro-recovery strategy that supports rather than undermines professional performance—a finding with potential relevance for how organisations approach employee wellbeing and informal recovery practices.

Future research should expand the participant sample across a more diverse range of professional sectors, seniority levels, and demographic groups in Indonesia. Quantitative instruments, including anonymous self-report surveys, would be valuable for mitigating social desirability effects and testing whether the gender-based privatisation finding replicates at scale. Longitudinal designs could examine whether and how micro-drama consumption patterns shift

with changes in professional circumstances. Cross-national comparisons with examining how micro-drama consumption functions among urban workers in other Southeast Asian contexts, would further extend the theoretical reach of the present findings.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Given its non-interventional, interview-based nature involving adult participants who provided full informed consent, formal institutional ethical review was conducted in accordance with the standards of the affiliated institution.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. Participant identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms throughout this manuscript.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, MR and EI; methodology, MR and EI; formal analysis, MR and EI; writing – original draft preparation, MR; writing – review and editing, EI.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to the privacy and confidentiality requirements agreed upon with participants.

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Notes on Contributors

Muhammad Rizky

Muhammad Rizky conceived the original research idea focusing on the phenomenon of Chinese micro-drama consumption among office workers in Jakarta and serves as the corresponding author responsible for the project's administration and submission process. MR was solely responsible for the investigation and data curation phases, which involved identifying and recruiting participants, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, and performing verbatim transcription of all primary data. The formal analysis was executed by MR using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, with critical guidance and academic oversight provided by Edoardo Irfan.

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