Visual Consciousness System Model in Chinese Drama

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ABSTRACT

Chinese dramas on short-video platforms reorganize narrative logic by introducing a visual system immediately after moments of crisis. This host-exclusive interface assigns missions, rewards, and procedural actions, shifting storytelling from exploratory problem-solving to system-driven intervention that directly bypasses narrative obstacles. This study employs a qualitative approach using document-based structural narrative analysis. Narrative readings are conducted through Chase's narrative model to examine how systems function as meaning-making practices within Chinese digital dramas. Narrative is conceptualized as a cultural mechanism that organizes crisis and problem-solving through visual systems. The data consist of digital narrative documents, including selected episode segments, crisis scenes, and visual system representations from dramas themed around reincarnation and cross-reality transitions. The analysis applies thematic procedures to map system functions in structuring relations between crisis, action, and outcomes. The findings formulate a Visual Consciousness System Model that explains how narrative crises trigger system activation, transforming the protagonist into a host-exclusive subject governed by predefined system parameters. Within this model, crisis functions as an activation threshold, the system operates as a host-only interface, and character consciousness is procedurally oriented toward task execution rather than reflective evaluation. Action unfolds through system-regulated procedures, producing outcomes that resolve crisis without narrative exploration and reproduce new crisis conditions through continued system dependence. This model implies a broader shift in digital storytelling, where problem-solving is no longer framed as cognitive exploration but as procedural compliance with visual systems. Narrative agency is reconfigured as system alignment, and creativity is reduced to optimization within closed parameters rather than the generation of alternative narrative possibilities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on consciousness indicate a fundamental shift from understanding consciousness as an autonomous internal experience toward viewing it as an organized structure that depends on the relationship between cognitive processes, representations,

and action-guiding systems. In contemporary developments in neuroscience and philosophy of mind, consciousness is no longer understood merely as "what is felt," but rather as a mechanism for regulating content, orientation, and readiness to act (Cumming, 2022; Seth & Bayne, 2021). This perspective positions consciousness as the result of a dynamic orchestration between brain structures, contextual conditions, and mediating media that shape attention and decision-making (Luppi et al., 2023; Northoff et al., 2024).

In line with this shift, research on consciousness increasingly emphasizes its distributed and structured nature rather than locating it within a single mental locus. Consciousness emerges from the coordination of multiple subsystems that regulate detection, selection, and transitions between conscious states (Blumenfeld, 2021; Whyte et al., 2024). This perspective opens a conceptual space in which consciousness can be directed, modulated, or even simulated through external systems that provide decision structures and action parameters, as demonstrated in studies of distributed consciousness and system-based simulations of consciousness (Butlin et al., 2023; Sapaty, 2023).

Within digital culture, this evolving understanding of consciousness converges with the development of interface-based visuality. Visual elements no longer function merely as representational media, but have become operational mechanisms that regulate what subjects can see, select, and do. Studies on visual and digital rhetoric demonstrate that interfaces do not simply "display" information; they act by directing behavior through layout design, notifications, and instructional systems (Halstyan & Halstyan, 2024)

The role of interfaces as regulators of action is further reinforced by research on digital platforms and systems of control. Digital systems are not neutral; rather, they shape dynamics of control through programmed rules, incentives, and action pathways (Ens et al., 2023). In the domains of education and digital gamification, system-driven narratives have been shown to enhance engagement and presence by shifting subjects' focus from open-ended reflection toward structured mission completion (Jiménez-Valverde et al., 2025; Khaldi et al., 2023). Together, these findings indicate that visual-narrative systems actively motivate and construct logics of action.

At this point, digital narratives can no longer be understood solely as stories, but rather as system-based mechanisms of meaning. Narratives operate through procedural rules, missions, and visual feedback that organize the relationship between crisis, action, and outcome. This approach aligns with the view that narrative functions as a cultural means of organizing experience and problem-solving (Bruner, 1990), yet it is now mediated by visual systems that actively determine narrative direction. Developments in artificial intelligence and semantic web technologies further reinforce this tendency, as systems no longer merely support storytelling but increasingly become its primary drivers (Roy, 2025).

These developments in digital narrative find concrete expression in the expansion of Chinese dramas distributed through global streaming platforms and short-video applications. Studies on the global distribution of C-dramas indicate that their dissemination

differs from conventional television drama, relying instead on digital platforms, algorithmic circulation, and narrative formats adapted to rapid, cross-cultural consumption(Sarkar & Yang, 2024; Zhan, 2023). Chinese dramas are thus positioned both as national entertainment products and as components of digital popular culture operating through platformization and narrative fragmentation.

Transformations in medium have also driven changes in narrative form. Research on digital narratives emphasizes that the shift from long-form text to short audiovisual formats alters audience engagement, moving from reflective involvement toward engagement driven by visual attention and emotional intensity (Hossain, 2025; Zafar et al., 2024). Short videos, vertical screens, and dialogue-free visual designs reinforce the dominance of visual elements as primary drivers of meaning, while narrative structures are simplified to remain effective within limited durations (Çalışkan, 2022; Heorhii, 2025b). In this context, visuality functions as the central structural component of narrative.

Adaptations of cinematography to vertical-screen formats and mobile consumption further underscore this shift. Studies on vertical-screen narratives show that spatial constraints encourage the use of interfaces, textual overlays, and visual markers as primary tools for directing audience attention and emotion (Heorhii, 2025a; Yang, 2024). These practices align with findings on micro-video and minute-long content, where visual design, rhythm, and instructional systems play a critical role in sustaining user engagement (Sallam et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, the distribution of Chinese dramas through digital platforms reveals processes of cross-cultural reception mediated not solely by cultural proximity, but by narrative formats and systems. Research on overseas reception of C-dramas demonstrates that global audiences respond to narratives not only at the thematic level, but also to the ways stories are digitally packaged and presented (Chen & Chang, 2024). This process highlights how narrative transformation is closely linked to digital media consumption dynamics across national contexts, including Indonesia as an active market for short-video content.

A number of previous studies have focused on the relationship between consciousness and creative processes across contexts such as adult writers, children, and digital literacy practices. Research on imaginative consciousness in adult fiction writing and on transforming digital experience into literacy practice suggests that consciousness functions as a guiding structure in meaning production rather than as a purely individual psychological background (Helmanto, Boeriswati, et al., 2025; Helmanto, Efendi, et al., 2025). These studies position consciousness as a site of interaction between experience, popular culture, and narrative processes.

This research trajectory has been extended to visual literacy, children's narratives, and story-based learning practices. Studies on narrative structure, writing creativity, and visual literacy among elementary school students indicate that narrative operates as a cognitive framework shaping how subjects understand events, characters, and resolutions (Alya et al., 2024; Fatma et al., 2025; Idris et al., 2025). However, across these studies, narrative

is still largely understood as a product or representation of experience rather than as an operational system that actively regulates consciousness and action through visual interfaces.

In drama and popular culture studies, research on Chinese and Asian dramas generally foregrounds characters, plot, and cultural values as primary analytical foci. Numerous studies examine cross-cultural adaptation, dramaturgy, characterization, and moral values in drama and film through literary, sociopragmatic, or cultural approaches (Fairuzzahra, 2020; Rahim et al., 2022; Zasna et al., 2021). While these studies contribute significantly to understanding representation, ideology, and moral messaging, they remain grounded in assumptions of narrative as a conventional textual or dramatic structure.

Other research more closely aligned with digital media highlights transformations in narrative form driven by platformization, vertical-screen formats, and transmedia distribution. Studies on short videos, visual storytelling, and digital narratives demonstrate that changes in medium substantially affect how stories are constructed and received (Çalışkan, 2022; Hossain, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Nevertheless, these studies primarily focus on form, visual strategies, or reception patterns rather than on the internal mechanisms of narrative as systems that guide protagonist consciousness.

Taken together, prior research reveals two dominant tendencies. On the one hand, studies of consciousness and literacy conceptualize consciousness as a cognitive and phenomenological structure, yet rarely connect it directly to visual systems within popular digital narratives. On the other hand, studies of drama and digital narrative address transformations in form and meaning, but do not position visual systems as agents that construct protagonist consciousness and problem-solving logic. The intersection of consciousness, systems, and visuality in digital Chinese drama narratives thus remains insufficiently theorized.

Based on this mapping, the present study positions itself within this underexplored intersection by formulating visual consciousness systems as a theoretical construct for reading digital Chinese drama narratives. Unlike character-centered studies that focus on protagonists as psychological or dramatic entities, this research conceptualizes protagonists as subjects whose consciousness is mediated and directed by visual systems. Accordingly, the focus of the study lies in examining how protagonist consciousness is constructed through system interfaces when confronting crises and determining action.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual–exploratory design to examine system-driven narrative mechanisms in digital Chinese dramas. Using purposive sampling, three titles from the FINDONEL account on the Snack Video platform were selected based on the presence of (1) a crisis as a narrative turning point, (2) a host-exclusive visual system interface, and (3) system-directed actions through missions or rewards. Data consist of episode segments, crisis scenes, and visual system representations, analyzed as visual cultural texts through document-based structural narrative analysis. Key scenes were

systematically identified, transcribed, and thematically analyzed to map system functions as narrative mechanisms. These functions were interpreted through Chase's narrative model to explain how visual systems organize protagonist consciousness and action. Analytical trustworthy-ness was ensured through pattern recurrence across cases and theoretical coherence with the visual consciousness system framework.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Findings

The three narratives demonstrate a consistent pattern in positioning the system as the central mechanism organizing the protagonist's consciousness, despite differences in narrative mechanisms and orientations. In *Supermarket Kiamat*, the system functions as a resource replication engine that fully replaces processes of alternative exploration.

Table 1 Analytical Aspects of System-Driven Narratives in Selected Chinese Dramas

Analytical Aspect	Supermarket Kiamat	Sistem Supermarketku di Akhir Zaman	Supermarket Pemuda Kembali ke Tahun 80-an
Triggering Event (Crisis)	Reincarnation before a frozen apocalypse	Reincarnation in an extreme post-apocalyptic world	Temporal displacement (2020s ↔ 1980s)
System Form	Replication-based virtual supermarket	Exchange-based virtual supermarket	Time-travel system for economic transactions
System Access	Host-exclusive	Host-exclusive	Host-exclusive
System Operating Principle	Replication of goods based on consumption by women in sexual relations with the host	Expansion and continuity of the supermarket through spousal forgiveness	Arbitrage of value exchange across eras
Multiplier Mechanism	Number of women → increased quantity and quality of stock	Number of forgiving wives → supermarket expansion	Economic value differentials between eras
Position of Women within the System	Biological medium for resource replication	High-value exchange objects for survival	Not a system component
System Function in Crisis	Ensuring host survival and power	Ensuring host survival under extreme scarcity	Ensuring financial freedom
Problem-Solving Logic	Bypassing scarcity through sexual relations	Bypassing scarcity through relational legitimation	Bypassing economic constraints through time
Pattern of Protagonist Consciousness	Accumulation-oriented instrumental consciousness	Exchange-based survival consciousness	Calculative, opportunistic consciousness
Form of Visual Consciousness	Supermarket display as decision center	Supermarket as life–death indicator	Temporal interface as rationalization tool

The apocalyptic crisis is not addressed through collective strategies or environmental exploration, but through the optimization of sexual relations, which are directly converted into material abundance. The protagonist's consciousness is shaped by the supermarket interface that visualizes accumulated outcomes, resulting in

actions that are entirely directed by system logic (see Table 1)

In *Sistem Supermarketku di Akhir Zaman*, the system operates in a more extreme mode as a survival mechanism. Total scarcity renders food a symbol of wealth, while the system positions marital relations as the primary medium of exchange. Acceptance or rejection by wives determines the host's survival, indicating that the system regulates not only resources but also defines social relations as technical variables. The protagonist's consciousness in this narrative is reactive and transactional, entirely dependent on system-displayed indicators.

By contrast, *Supermarket Pemuda Kembali ke Tahun 80-an* shifts the system's focus from biological scarcity to economic rationality. The system neither replicates goods nor exchanges relationships; instead, it provides temporal mobility to exploit economic value differentials between eras. The protagonist's consciousness is constructed as calculative, with decisions grounded in comparisons of inter-era values visualized through the system interface.

Based on thematic mapping and structural narrative analysis across the three stories, it becomes evident that the system does not operate as an auxiliary narrative element, but as a core mechanism that regulates how crises are understood and acted upon by the protagonist. The emerging pattern reveals cross-narrative consistency, despite situational variations involving apocalypse, extreme scarcity, and temporal displacement. This consistency lies in the system's role in mediating protagonist consciousness through visual interfaces that provide ready-made action parameters, thereby

displacing reflective processes and alternative exploration as primary drivers of narrative progression. To capture this mechanism conceptually, the findings are synthesized into a model that maps the relationships among narrative crisis, visual system activation, orientation of protagonist consciousness, and obstacle-bypassing mechanisms. This model is presented in the form of a textual diagram in Figure 1 as a synthetic representation of how visual consciousness systems operate within Chinese digital drama narratives.
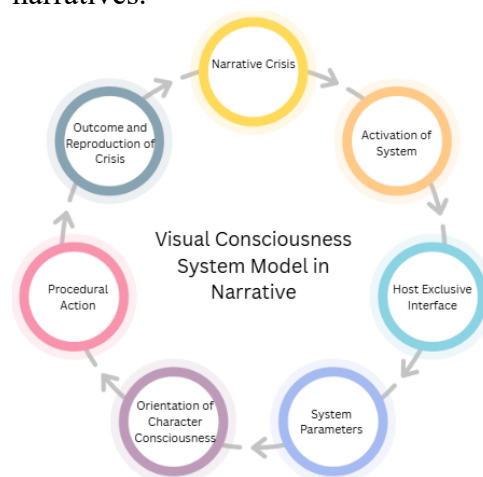

Figure 1 Visual Consciousness System Model in Narrative

3.2. Discussion
3.2.1. Reflective consciousness to system-driven narrative mechanisms

The Visual Consciousness System Model in Narrative (VCSMN) reveals a fundamental transformation in how consciousness and narrative operate within digital Chinese dramas. Consciousness is no longer represented as a reflective internal space in which the protagonist evaluates alternatives, negotiates meaning, or learns through failure. Instead, it is organized as a procedural mode of operation driven by a visual system that provides

predefined rules, missions, and feedback. This configuration resonates with contemporary theories of consciousness that conceptualize it not merely as subjective experience, but as a structured mechanism regulating orientation, readiness to act, and action selection (Cumming, 2022; Seth & Bayne, 2021). Within VCSMN, consciousness functions less as a site of interpretation and more as an interface-compatible system that aligns behavior with externally defined parameters.

This representation is further supported by neuroscientific and philosophical accounts emphasizing the distributed and structured nature of consciousness. Conscious awareness emerges from coordinated subsystems that manage detection, transition, and stabilization across conscious states (Blumenfeld, 2021; Luppi et al., 2023; Whyte et al., 2024). In VCSMN, this coordinative function is partially externalized: the visual system assumes the role of organizing attention, prioritizing actions, and validating outcomes. As a result, the protagonist's consciousness becomes operationally stable not through understanding the narrative situation, but through continuous compliance with system logic. The system does not merely assist decision-making; it actively defines what counts as a problem, which actions are legitimate, and how success is measured. In this sense, consciousness in VCSMN is procedural rather than reflective, enacted through system alignment rather than introspection.

At the narrative level, this procedural configuration marks a departure from conventional story logic. The system does not function as a supplementary narrative device, but as the core mechanism that drives the story forward. Crises do not open spaces for exploration or character development; instead, they trigger the activation of the system, which immediately provides a sanctioned pathway for action. This shift aligns with studies on digital and procedural narratives that highlight the growing dominance of system-driven storytelling, where rules and feedback structures replace psychological depth as the primary engines of narrative progression (Hossain, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Within such narratives, the protagonist operates less as a developing character and more as an executor of system logic.

From the perspective of Chase's narrative model, narratives function as meaning-making practices that organize subject positions, actions, and consequences. VCSMN demonstrates that this meaning-making function is increasingly delegated to visual systems rather than to the experiential development of characters. Meaning is produced procedurally: the system frames the crisis, prescribes the response, and validates the outcome. Consequently, narrative movement follows system logic rather than experiential causality. Stories become circular rather than teleological, oriented toward sustaining system operability instead of achieving narrative closure. Rather than being read solely as fantasy or apocalyptic genres, digital Chinese dramas can be approached as emerging procedural narrative formations, where visual interfaces begin to mediate the relationship between consciousness and storytelling.

3.2.2. *Visual interfaces, systemic control, and the*

reconfiguration of problem-solving and creativity

Within VCSMN, visual interfaces emerge not merely as representational surfaces but as active agents that orient consciousness, regulate action, and normalize specific modes of problem-solving. Across the analyzed digital Chinese dramas, systems consistently appear as visual interfaces—textual pop-ups, supermarket dashboards, or transactional panels—that dominate the protagonist's perceptual field. These interfaces do not simply communicate narrative information; they actively structure attention, determine priorities, and delimit the range of possible actions. This observation aligns with scholarship in visual and digital rhetoric, which emphasizes that interfaces function performatively by guiding behavior through prompts, layouts, and procedural cues rather than through symbolic persuasion alone (Halstyan & Halstyan, 2024).

In this configuration, the visual interface operates as an agent of conscious orientation. It defines what the protagonist perceives as urgent, valuable, or solvable, effectively replacing reflective judgment with interface-driven decision-making. Studies on digital platforms similarly demonstrate how control is embedded within system-facing interfaces, where rules and incentives are presented as neutral options while subtly shaping user behavior (Ens et al., 2023). Within VCSMN, agency is not eliminated but reconfigured: the protagonist remains active, yet action is expressed primarily through compliance with system logic. Choices are made, but only within boundaries established by the interface, rendering alternative modes of action invisible or irrelevant.

This interface-driven orientation has direct consequences for how problem-solving is narratively framed. Problems are no longer constructed as open-ended situations inviting exploration, uncertainty, or imaginative risk. Instead, they are translated into system-recognizable conditions that trigger predefined responses. The presence of the system effectively bypasses the exploratory phase of problem-solving, replacing it with procedural execution. This pattern reflects broader tendencies identified in studies of gamification and system-based digital environments, where task completion, optimization, and rule adherence often supersede reflective engagement and creative divergence (Jiménez-Valverde et al., 2025; Khaldi et al., 2023). Within such narratives, success is measured not by reinterpretation of the problem, but by effective alignment with system parameters.

As a result, creativity within VCSMN is redefined. Rather than functioning as a capacity for generating novel perspectives or alternative solutions, creativity is framed as strategic optimization within a closed system. The protagonist's ingenuity lies in maximizing system benefits—multipliers, exchanges, or efficiencies—rather than in transforming the conditions of the problem itself. This configuration produces a homogenization of problem-solving logic, where variation occurs at the level of efficiency rather than invention. Over time, such narrative patterns may contribute to a cultural imagination in which creativity is equated with system mastery rather than with exploratory or transformative thinking.

From a broader conceptual perspective, VCSMN offers a lens for understanding how digital narratives participate in shaping contemporary orientations toward agency, learning, and creativity. By repeatedly modeling system-mediated bypass as the dominant mode of action, these narratives normalize a vision of problem-solving that privileges certainty over ambiguity and shortcuts over exploration. Consequently, creativity is no longer depicted as an open-ended cognitive process, but as a function of access to systems and proficiency in navigating interfaces. This reconfiguration underscores the significance of visual systems in contemporary storytelling, positioning them not only as narrative devices but as formative structures that reshape how consciousness, action, and creativity are imagined within digitally saturated cultures.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital Chinese dramas distributed through short-video platforms consistently construct the system as the central narrative mechanism that organizes crisis, action, and protagonist consciousness. Across different narrative settings—apocalypse, extreme scarcity, and temporal displacement—crisis functions primarily as a trigger for system activation rather than as a space for exploration or narrative negotiation. Once activated, the system operates as a host-exclusive visual interface that provides predefined action parameters, replacing alternative-based problem-solving with procedural execution.

The findings further show that protagonist consciousness is shaped through continuous interaction with visual systems that regulate attention, legitimize action, and validate outcomes. As a result, narrative progression is sustained through obstacle bypassing driven by system logic, producing circular and system-dependent storytelling patterns. These conclusions indicate that, within contemporary digital Chinese dramas, visual systems function not as auxiliary narrative elements but as core structures that reconfigure consciousness, agency, and problem-solving within narrative practice.

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