

A Study on the Causes and Sources of Minors' Exposure to Harmful Information in Short Videos in the Digital Age and Pathways for Legal Regulation

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, due to characteristics such as the personalized nature of algorithmic recommendations, the diverse nature of content disseminated, and the covert and complex nature of harmful content, various forms of harmful information frequently skirt the line and quietly infiltrate the lives of minors, poisoning their minds. Current regulations place heavy emphasis on controlling content at the source, while overlooking the multidimensional, underlying causes of minors' exposure to harmful information. Therefore, by conducting in-depth analyses-through methods such as questionnaire surveys and case studies-of the current state and root causes of harm caused by harmful short-video content to minors, we can establish a source-based governance approach that combines restrictions with guidance. Rather than simply "building high walls," we must foster multi-stakeholder collaboration to safeguard the healthy growth of minors.

KEYWORDS: Digital Age; Short Videos; Minors; Harmful Content; Platform Responsibility; Source-Based Governance.

How to cite this paper: Dingqi Guo | Yixuan Niu | Chaoyue Mo | Chunyu Xiao "A Study on the Causes and Sources of Minors' Exposure to Harmful Information in Short Videos in the Digital Age and Pathways for Legal Regulation" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-4, August 2026, pp.1070-1077, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd142145.pdf



IJTSRD142145

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, the number of minors using the internet in China has reached 196 million, with an internet penetration rate as high as 97.3 percent; short videos have become deeply embedded in minors' online lives. However, the development of this emerging field comes with many hidden dangers. The activation rate of "minor mode" remains low, allowing a large amount of content promoting distorted values to be disseminated to minors through short videos. Harmful information-such as vulgar memes, soft pornography, and "slow-foot" culture-is quietly infiltrating and poisoning adolescents whose value systems have not yet fully formed. Minors have weak abilities to guard against online risks. Coupled with the highly disguised nature of information dissemination on short-video platforms-where harm is often covert and complex-this has led to increasingly rampant industry malpractices that harm minors' physical and mental health. In response, the state has introduced a series

of measures to address these issues. Multiple departments, including the Cyberspace Administration of China, the National Press and Publication Administration, and the Ministry of Education, jointly issued the "Measures for the Classification of Online Information That May Affect the Physical and Mental Health of Minors," effective March 1, 2026. By implementing a detailed classification system for information, these measures provide clear and explicit guidance to website platforms, content creators, and others. On June 1, 2026, the National Radio and Television Administration launched a two-month special campaign to address harmful and vulgar content, as well as copyright infringement and piracy, in micro-short dramas; In July 2026, the Cyberspace Administration of China issued a notice to launch a nationwide, four-month-long "Clear and Bright: Online Protection for Minors" special campaign,

which will be carried out in two phases: "Clear and Bright: 2026 Summer Online Environment Rectification for Minors" and "Clear and Bright: Rectification of Online Information Harmful to the Physical and Mental Health of Minors." These various measures clearly demonstrate that rectifying the chaos in the short video industry is a matter of urgency. However, most existing legal research emphasizes strict control and rigid regulation at the outcome stage. For minors-a special demographic-excessively strict controls may trigger a rebellious mindset and prove counterproductive. This paper will employ a variety of methods-including literature review, case analysis, and questionnaire surveys-to empirically examine the actual patterns of minors' exposure to harmful content in short videos. It will conduct an in-depth analysis of the underlying causes of harm to minors from such content and, building on existing research, further refine source-based governance of this issue. The ultimate goal is to create a clean and healthy short-video environment, protect the physical and mental well-being of minors, and provide comprehensive legal safeguards for their healthy development.

ACTUAL PATTERNS OF MINORS' EXPOSURE TO HARMFUL CONTENT IN SHORT VIDEOS

A. Actual Situation of Minors' Exposure to Harmful Content

1. Research Participants, Sample, and Methodology

To investigate the actual situation of minors' exposure to harmful content online, our research team targeted parents of minors. In 2026, we distributed and collected 346 valid questionnaires via online channels, covering minors in four different age groups: elementary school and below (6.65%), elementary school (11.27%), middle school (20.23%), and high school (61.85%). This comprehensive sample provides a relatively complete picture of how minors in different age groups engage with short videos.

2. Overview of Minors' Short Video Usage Behavior

Watching short videos has become a part of minors' daily lives. Among the 346 parents surveyed, 282 indicated that their children watch short videos, accounting for 81.5%. Regarding viewing frequency, 30.92% "watch every day," and 40.17% "watch on weekends and holidays"; these two viewing frequencies are the most common. In terms of daily usage duration, "one to three hours" had the highest proportion (40.17%), "less than one hour" accounted for 32.08%, "three to four hours" for 18.79%, and

"more than four hours" for 8.96%. The survey report reveals that minors' short video viewing is characterized by a large number of users, high viewing frequency, and long viewing duration. Short videos have become an important part of minors' daily lives.

3. Statistics on Minors' Exposure to Harmful Content

The research report also points out that there are significant risks associated with minors' exposure to harmful content through short videos. 64.74% of parents reported that their children had been exposed to harmful content via short videos; 20.23% said their children had not been exposed, and 15.03% were unsure. Only 20.23% of parents could definitively state that their minor children had not been exposed to harmful content through short videos. In terms of specific types, the content primarily consisted of "graphic violence," "promotion of harmful values," and "threats to personal safety," accounting for 54.05%, 53.76%, and 43.35%, respectively. However, "vulgar content" also accounted for 36.13%. Overall, the types of harmful content encountered through short videos are quite diverse, and the impact is widespread.

4. Practical Challenges in Parental Supervision

As the primary guardians of their minor children, parents should assume their supervisory responsibilities; however, in practice, they face significant challenges. In terms of time management, 55.2% of parents "set limits but with little effect," only 30.92% "set limits with good results," and 13.87% set no limits at all. The situation regarding content management is even more severe: 99.71% of parents do not use any methods to manage the short video content recommended to their children, while only 0.29% take management measures. Most parental supervision is limited to simple time restrictions, failing to address the key source-the content recommendations themselves-and resulting in less-than-ideal supervision outcomes. There are practical difficulties in supervising the short video content viewed by minors.

B. The Spread of Harmful Information via Short Videos and Real-World Deficiencies in Platform Protection

In the "Case of Defendants Li Moumou and Mu Moumou et al. on Extortion" issued by the Supreme People's Court in 2025, the two defendants lured others into logging into their accounts through online game power-leveling services, then remotely locked their phones to extort over 75,000 yuan. Upon investigation, it was found that the two had learned their criminal methods from harmful information

posted on short video platforms. This is a typical case of exposure to harmful information through short videos. In this case, the "minor mode" provided by the short-video platform failed to serve its intended purpose. Omissions in the platform's content moderation created an opportunity for minors to access harmful content; the platform failed to fulfill its duty to warn users about potentially risky content, and its minor protection mechanisms were ineffective. These omissions across multiple areas ultimately led to the commission of a crime by a minor.

1. Major Types of Harmful Information Accessed by Minors

Based on the survey responses, harmful information can be broadly categorized into four types: graphic violence (referring to content filled with scenes of dismemberment, abuse, kidnapping, torture, etc.). The popularity of graphic violence content stems from its highly stimulating and interactive nature. Content Promoting Harmful Values (referring to content that promotes distorted views on marriage and romance, gender conflict, and other harmful value orientations). Works in this category are characterized by their ability to provide instant emotional gratification, posing a significant threat to the formation of minors' values. Vulgar Content (referring to soft pornography, depictions of inappropriate behavior such as domestic violence or alcohol abuse, and insulting language). Technical loopholes in short-video platforms' recommendation algorithms, combined with the platforms' own lax oversight and users' attempts to evade regulation, have collectively fueled the proliferation of vulgar content. Content endangering personal safety (referring to content that glorifies self-harm, suicide, or other harmful behaviors, or promotes "dangerous or threatening pranks" against others, such as driving with one hand) often goes viral due to its intense visual impact, thereby falling into a vicious cycle where the more dangerous the content, the more attention it attracts. The questionnaire results collected by our research team show that the types of harmful information minors are exposed to include: gory and violent content (54.05%), content promoting unhealthy values (53.76%), vulgar content (36.13%), and content endangering personal safety (43.35%). "Other" (including additional categories) accounted for 0.58%. The classification of harmful information types is relatively comprehensive.

2. The Algorithm-Driven Mechanism for the Continuous Delivery of Harmful Content

The root cause of minors' exposure to harmful content through short-video platforms lies in the platforms' content recommendation mechanisms. The content

recommendations on short-video platforms are driven by an algorithm that prioritizes traffic. This algorithm constructs a virtual user profile based on user behavior such as clicks, dwell time, and interactions. By pushing different short videos based on the characteristics of this virtual user profile, the algorithm ensures that once a minor user clicks on or spends time viewing a short video containing harmful content, the algorithm promptly and accurately identifies them, turning them into a targeted victim of such content.

3. Shortcomings in Minors' Protection Features on Mainstream Short-Video Platforms

At the same time, current short-video platforms also have certain deficiencies in their protection of minors. The current "minor mode" on mainstream platforms is not enabled by default; instead, users must actively choose whether to activate the system. Furthermore, there is no way to determine whether a viewer is a minor based on user characteristics, which renders "minor mode" ineffective in protecting minors. Another challenge is content moderation. Some short videos do not explicitly contain prohibited content but instead create a subtle atmosphere containing harmful information through combinations of elements or veiled hints. The 2026 "Clear and Bright" Special Campaign and the "Measures for the Classification of Online Information That May Affect the Physical and Mental Health of Minors" have established institutional requirements; however, based on current research, there remains a significant gap between the introduction of these regulations and their implementation by platforms and adoption by parents.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL UNDERLYING CAUSES OF HARMFUL INFORMATION IN SHORT VIDEOS AFFECTING MINORS

A. Adolescent Psychology and Resistance to Regulation

1. The Emotional Compensation Function of Subcultural Short Videos

Short videos are popular among minors due to their rich expressiveness, timeliness, participatory nature, and interactivity. Compared to adults, minors tend to use short videos for entertainment purposes to a much greater extent. With the advent of the new media era, the entertainment function of short videos has been amplified to the extreme, and novel, entertaining subcultural content-such as hedonism, materialism, and the worship of physical appearance-has also attracted the attention and enthusiasm of minors. Especially given the widespread academic pressure minors face today, this subculture-which serves as a form of emotional release-taps directly into real-life

pain points, allowing harmful information to spread more rapidly and deeply.

2. Rigid Controls Give Rise to a Logic of Rebellious Behavior Aimed at Circumventing Regulation

Currently, short-video platforms generally employ a simplistic "minor anti-addiction mode," which regulates minors' access to short-video content through basic prohibitions and blocking measures. Parents, too, often resort to harsh measures to prevent their children from accessing short videos in their offline supervision. For adolescents, such rigid controls are more likely to trigger rebellious behavior aimed at circumventing supervision-such as renting or borrowing accounts.

B. Erosion and Absence of Guardianship Responsibilities

1. Real-World Manifestations of Guardians' Failure to Fulfil Their Duties

China's Civil Code stipulates that minors are classified as persons without or with limited capacity for civil conduct. Guardians who fail to fulfill their guardianship duties or infringe upon the lawful rights and interests of the ward shall bear liability. However, in reality, a significant number of parents-whether because they are unwilling, afraid, or unable to intervene-allow their children to freely browse large amounts of short videos containing harmful content, resulting in a lack of oversight due to the failure of guardians to fulfill their duties. For example, in some rural areas, a large number of "left-behind children" are cared for by their grandparents, who know very little about the children's online activities, making it extremely difficult for them to effectively fulfill their guardianship responsibilities. Once these minors are exposed to large amounts of content such as live streams and short videos without proper parental guidance, they are highly likely to be "swallowed up" by harmful information-or even make large in-game purchases or send generous tips during live streams. Often, the elderly guardians only become aware of the situation after receiving text messages notifying them of bank deductions, rendering guardianship responsibilities virtually meaningless in the face of the digital divide.

2. Legal Loopholes Arising from Parental Neglect

In practice, some parents, due to a lack of legal awareness, often intentionally or unintentionally infringe upon their children's rights during live streams. For example, the "Loli Shows" and "Cute Kid Shows" that have recently become popular on live-streaming platforms involve parents making fun of their children to elicit laughter and gain attention from netizens, and even encouraging their children to

imitate provocative gestures. Short videos posted via parents' accounts that harm the rights and interests of minors often cannot be regulated in a timely and effective manner. Although these parents may merely be seeking to attract more online attention, such practices actually expose their children to risks and, to a certain extent, infringe upon the minors' right to privacy.

3. Shortcomings in the Disciplinary Mechanisms for Parental Neglect

Currently, there is a lack of effective legal sanctions for neglect of guardianship duties, resulting in guardianship responsibilities becoming a mere formality and failing to effectively prevent the spread of harmful content. For example, Zheng XX followed and liked a large number of videos featuring underage girls on short-video platforms, posted pornographic and non-compliant comments, and even illegally uploaded videos of underage girls-engaging in the excessive exploitation of minors. Subsequently, his account involved in the case was permanently banned, and the mobile phone he used can no longer be used to register, log in, or access the platform. This case not only reflects parental negligence but also highlights the lack of digital literacy among some adults, who may even become consumers or disseminators of harmful content.

C. Traffic Algorithms Eroding Platforms' Management Responsibilities

1. The Inherent Value Bias of Recommendation Algorithms Prioritizing Traffic

Driven by economic interests, short-video platforms prioritize traffic when recommending content to users, neglecting oversight of harmful information and adopting a lenient and permissive approach to content control. This has led to the frequent appearance of content that harms the rights and interests of minors, resulting in adverse social impacts. For example, some short-video creators, in an effort to attract attention, specifically produce vulgar content such as "Social Shake" and "Spiritual Guys," with videos filled with outlandish outfits, exaggerated behavior, and unhealthy values. Due to their sensational and controversial nature, these videos easily garner high view counts and comments, leading algorithms to classify them as "high-quality content" and push them to more users-including a large number of minors-thereby fueling the viral spread of a "culture of the ugly" among minors.

2. Challenges in Fulfilling Platforms' Obligations for Proactive Identification and Preemptive Warnings

Short-video platforms primarily rely on post-publication reports and feedback to filter and screen

video content, while their screening of content involving minors prior to publication remains relatively lax. To attract traffic, many video creators interweave positive content with harmful material to evade regulation, making it extremely difficult for regulators to effectively filter such content.

3. Lack of a Dedicated Review Mechanism for AI-Generated Content and Micro-Short Dramas

As a brand-new form of short-video creation, AI-generated content and micro-short dramas differ from traditional "user-to-user" information dissemination. They incorporate the creation and application of AI big data models into the process. Due to their unique production methods, the new types of harmful information hidden within them are easily overlooked by review systems, making them difficult to detect and regulate in a timely manner. As a result, various borderline content circulates online, and there is a significant lack of specialized review mechanisms on platforms.

D. The Current Governance System Emphasizes Punishment Over Source-Level Guidance

1. Existing Governance Tools Primarily Rely on Rigid Administrative Controls

Current measures to address harmful content in short videos primarily consist of rigid controls such as "fines," "removal," and "rectification." These fail to provide timely and effective oversight for the vast volume of short videos that have permeated daily life. Furthermore, most minors are unable to accurately distinguish harmful content from ordinary entertainment content in short videos. As a result, a large amount of harmful content that harms minors' mental health is widely circulated among this demographic under the guise of entertainment, and traditional rigid governance measures are unable to effectively block its spread.

2. Insufficient Policy Support for Positive Content Targeting Minors

Since harmful content related to "crime," "early romantic relationships," and "materialism" is strictly regulated in real life, minors are easily drawn to such content when they encounter it online. Many short-video creators incorporate large amounts of this content into their work to gain traffic. In contrast, positive content beneficial to minors' development struggles to attract public attention, thereby diminishing the motivation to create such content. Short-video platforms should strengthen policies promoting the supply of positive content to prevent harmful information from filling the market void.

PATHWAYS FOR COORDINATED LEGAL GOVERNANCE OF THE SOURCES OF HARMFUL INFORMATION ON SHORT-VIDEO PLATFORMS

A. Abandoning a Single-Pronged Ban Approach; Adhering to a Balanced Approach of Restriction and Guidance

1. Practical Shortcomings of Purely Coercive Control

The biggest problem with a single-pronged coercive control approach is that it ignores the psychological characteristics of minors. Adolescents naturally possess a rebellious mindset; a coercive "one-size-fits-all" approach will only fuel their curiosity, driving them to seek compensation in more hidden and extreme corners of the internet. At the same time, coercive controls struggle to alter the platforms' "traffic-first" algorithmic logic; as long as there is profit to be made, non-compliant accounts can simply change their identities and return online. This results in extremely high administrative oversight costs, yet the effects are prone to backfiring.

2. The Legal Basis for a Governance Approach Combining Restriction and Guidance

The law must not only establish the minimum standards for punishment but also provide avenues for protection. China's "Regulations on the Protection of Minors Online" adhere to the principle of "social co-governance." This means that we cannot rely solely on "restrictions"; we must also find ways to "facilitate." We must not only uphold legal red lines and severely punish violators but also help children develop a correct understanding of the internet through education and guidance. Only by combining strict constraints with gentle guidance can we truly address the root causes at their source.

B. Collaborative Governance Between Home and School

1. Regular Cybersecurity Education to Foster Healthy Online Mindsets

To prevent children from getting lost in the vast sea of information on short-video platforms, parental supervision alone is insufficient; schools must help build their "immunity." Digital media literacy courses should be incorporated into the daily curriculum of primary and secondary schools, teaching children in stages how to recognize deceptive tactics, understand algorithms, and prevent privacy breaches. When children understand how those "borderline" videos lure them into clicking, they will not be so easily led by the nose.

2. Clarifying Parental Supervision Responsibilities and Establishing Mechanisms to Address Parental Neglect

In reality, many parents are too busy with work or lack digital literacy, resulting in parental supervision being virtually non-existent; some even treat cell phones as "electronic babysitters." The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Family Education has clearly established that parents bear primary responsibility. In cases where severe parental negligence or indifference allows minors to access harmful content, resulting in adverse consequences, judicial authorities should issue "family education orders" in accordance with the law, mandating that parents fulfill their guardianship duties and ensuring accountability through judicial measures.

3. Enrich Offline Cultural and Sports Activities to Reduce Adolescents' Overreliance on Short Videos

The reason short videos have come to dominate minors' after-school time is often because real life is too dull. Regulatory efforts cannot focus solely on the online sphere. Communities and schools should organize more offline public welfare activities, such as basketball tournaments and educational field trips. When children can make friends and experience a sense of accomplishment in the real world, they will naturally not become overly reliant on the stimulation provided by screens.

C. Platform-Level Remedial Measures

1. Standardize Risk Warning Guidelines and Upgrade Intelligent Detection and Blocking Technology

Short-video platforms currently apply varying criteria for determining what constitutes "vulgar or borderline inappropriate" content, which can easily lead to regulatory gaps. Regulatory authorities must establish uniform warning standards and use AI technology to identify hidden code words and phrasing, enabling intelligent interception of harmful content before it reaches children-thereby denying platforms any "safe harbor."

2. Improving Pre-Publication Review Processes for AI-Generated Short Videos and Micro-Series

In the past two years, AI face-swap videos and micro-series have surged in popularity. Many creators use technical means to repackage existing harmful content, labeling it as "virtual characters" or "anime-style," making it difficult for traditional manual review to detect. This has created a regulatory blind spot. In response, regulatory authorities should act swiftly to introduce new review regulations

specifically targeting AI videos and micro-series. Such videos must be submitted for content registration prior to upload and must be clearly labeled as "AI-generated"; they must not be allowed to deceive minors under the guise of technology.

3. Optimizing Algorithm Recommendations and Increasing the Supply of High-Quality Content for Youth

"Blocking" is merely a defensive measure; "guidance" is the key to breaking the deadlock. Currently, the vast majority of short-video platform algorithms are focused solely on maximizing click-through rates. We should mandate that platforms, in "Youth Mode," use algorithms to proactively prioritize high-quality short videos-such as those covering science education, traditional culture, and historical documentaries. When children's phone screens are regularly filled with enriching content that broadens their horizons, that distasteful and vulgar junk content will naturally lose its space to survive.

D. Coordination Between Regulatory and Judicial Authorities

1. Implement Tiered Penalties Based on the Severity of Harm Caused by Harmful Information; Link Serious Cases to Criminal Liability

In law enforcement and judicial proceedings, we must uphold the principle of "proportionality between offense and punishment" and eliminate the inertia of "one-size-fits-all" enforcement. For ordinary accounts that merely post prank videos or seek to ride the wave of traffic, account suspensions, warnings, and fines are sufficient; however, for malicious content involving child pornography, incitement to self-harm, or inducement to commit crimes, administrative penalties alone are ineffective. A mechanism linking administrative and criminal enforcement must be established. As soon as any signs of such activity are detected, administrative regulators must immediately cooperate with public security authorities to initiate criminal investigations, using the threat of imprisonment to deter those online perpetrators who flout the law.

2. Conduct Routine Inspections Across Multiple Departments; Use Uniform Judicial Standards to Compel Platforms to Rectify Issues

The management of harmful content cannot rely on sporadic, one-off special campaigns. Departments such as Cyberspace Administration, Public Security, Culture, and Market Regulation should join forces to form an ad hoc inspection team that directly investigates popular videos and trending live streams. At the same time, the court system should issue guiding precedents for such cases. If a platform loses

a lawsuit due to lax moderation or condoning the spread of harmful content-and is forced to pay substantial damages-other platforms will naturally take this as a cautionary tale and proactively reform their moderation systems.

3. Promoting Industry Self-Regulation to Establish a Long-Term, Multi-Stakeholder Governance Mechanism

The regulatory capacity of public authorities is limited; to achieve long-term effectiveness, the industry must regulate itself. The state should take the lead in encouraging leading platforms to form an "Industry Self-Regulatory Alliance" and establish a shared blacklist of accounts in violation of regulations. Once a platform bans such an account, other platforms must simultaneously block it as well, ensuring that "a violation in one place results in restrictions across the entire network." This will ultimately foster a long-term, collaborative governance framework involving government oversight, industry self-regulation, and public participation.

In summary, addressing the root causes of harmful content in short videos cannot be achieved once and for all through administrative bans alone. Only by grounding our efforts in China's legal framework and deeply integrating the educational influence of family upbringing, the cultivation of character in schools, technological improvements on platforms, and the deterrent effect of judicial sanctions-all working in concert-can we succeed. By upholding the rigid bottom line of the rule of law and making effective use of strict penalties, while supplementing them with flexible, people-centered guidance, we can build a multi-layered and long-lasting barrier to protect minors online and truly create a wholesome digital environment for their growth.

CONCLUSION

In the digital age, it is impractical to completely isolate minors from short-form video platforms. Adolescents are the future of our country and the driving force behind national development. Only when this group embraces the digital wave and stands at the forefront of the times, continuously innovating, will our nation become more prosperous and thriving. Therefore, regarding minors' participation on short-video platforms, the focus must be on enhancing their digital literacy and improving their ability to master digital technologies, so that these technologies become a catalyst rather than an obstacle to their growth. At the same time, we must strengthen protections for minors using short-video platforms. By improving the safeguarding system through collaborative governance between families and

schools, strict government regulation, the enforcement of platform responsibilities, and the enhancement of public awareness, we can build a digitally advanced nation.

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