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The Short Video Format: Conceptualizing a Ubiquitous Artifact of Visual Platforms

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Short videos first emerged as a core feature of visual-centric platforms and have rapidly expanded across nearly all online spaces, challenging traditional audiovisual norms and reshaping how content is created, consumed, and engaged with. This paper argues that a cross-platform conceptualization is necessary to define how short videos and their features generate meaning, distinguish them from other audiovisual artifacts, facilitate comparison across studies, and support cumulative research. The infrastructure of short videos will continue evolving, shaped by platform objectives and user demands. The conceptual framework introduced in this study allows for tracking and comparing these changes across diverse environments, highlighting how short videos shape platform aesthetics and user practices through mobile-based technological standards, affordances, and the interplay of multiple communication modes. By doing so, this framework provides a solid theoretical foundation for developing tailored methodologies capable of grasping the complex components of this format.

Keywords: short videos, short video format, visual platforms, visual communication, social media

Short videos significantly shape users' experience in current platform ecosystems. Their design aligns with smartphone interfaces and intended use, offering immersive consumption (Mulier et al., 2021; Napoli, 2016; Ryan, 2018) and facilitating creative production (Bahiyah & Wang, 2020; Schellewald, 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). This configuration is particularly relevant in a context of content abundance (Boczkowski, 2021) and growing content consumption via smartphones (Newman et al., 2024), as it contributes to maximizing instant engagement.

Short videos were initially designed for creating user-generated content in highly visual and mobile-first platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, showcasing self-representation, everyday practices, and entertainment (Bayer et al., 2016; Napoli, 2016; Neal & Ross, 2018; Schellewald, 2021; Vandersmissen et al., 2014). Over time, short videos have shaped the aesthetics and practices of mobile communication, with most platforms adopting this format, which is increasingly used by companies (Ge et al., 2021), news

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providers (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022), educators (Carpenter et al., 2024), politicians (Cervi et al., 2021; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), professional digital creators, and influencers (Abidin, 2020).

Despite growing research on short videos, a comprehensive conceptualization remains lacking, and most studies explore these videos in relation to the design and practices typical of individual platforms like TikTok, missing a cross-platform perspective. However, conceptualization is central to theory building because it links abstract ideas to empirical cases, distinguishes the object of study from others, specifies its meaning and properties, and creates shared knowledge that enables comparison across studies conducted in different settings. In this way, it supports rigorous and cumulative research over time (McLeod & Pan, 2005), which is crucial in the current fragmented state of research on short videos.

This study aims to address this gap by conceptualizing short videos as a distinctive format of visual platforms, resulting from the relation among technical standards, user behavior, and situational context (Jancovic et al., 2019; Sterne, 2012; Volmar, 2017). Building on research grounded in visual communication and multimodality, this article outlines the structural characteristics that define this format, situating them within the growing prominence of visual modalities and mobile video technologies in social media. A conceptual framework that treats short videos as a distinctive format, rather than a platform feature, illustrates how their structure and the interplay of diverse modes of communication shape mobile aesthetics and user practices.

In the concluding section, I reflect on the methodological challenges of analyzing mobile audiovisual products and outline future research directions. In this regard, a format-based conceptualization supports tailored methodologies that are valid across platforms and are needed to examine in depth how the format's elements interact, generating meaning for platforms and users.

Social Media as Visual Media

Social media are largely visual media, in fact becoming "image and video centered social media platforms" or "visual-centric social media platforms" (Muñoz & Towner, 2017, p. 291). As long-standing platforms have integrated more visual elements in their architectures, the visual became the dominant mode in these spaces (Rettberg, 2017) and "a critical concern for social media research" (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 48). In recent years, user attention has shifted toward visual platforms that allow users to create and share primarily or exclusively images and videos, especially Instagram and TikTok (Kemp, 2025). The rapid advancement of digital and mobile technologies has indeed facilitated the production and sharing of a huge amount of visual data (Lobinger, 2017).

While some platforms were designed to be visual-first, including Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok, others like X (formerly Twitter) incorporated visual features later in response to evolving user demands. Indeed, when Twitter was launched in 2006, it was a text-based microblogging platform allowing 140-characters posts. Only starting from June 2011, users could attach images directly to tweets (Rao, 2011). In contrast, Snapchat was introduced in July 2011 as a visual-first platform enabling users to share ephemeral photos and videos that vanished after being viewed (Bayer et al., 2016). This innovation influenced competitors: Instagram introduced video sharing in June 2013 and Stories in August 2016, which

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disappear after 24 hours, mimicking Snapchat; Twitter introduced direct video uploading in June 2015 (Hern, 2015). In 2021, YouTube introduced Shorts to compete in the growing market of short videos (Sherman, 2021). As this brief timeline highlights, visual modalities spread through platform interdependence, driven by data sharing, service integration, and user migration (Dijck, 2013). Indeed, "social media platforms constitute a form of environment" characterized by distinct rules and practices, where "no two platforms are alike, although many tend to use similar features and functionalities" (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 243). In this regard, moving images proliferate online, often spreading beyond their native platform (e.g., clips from films or TV shows may circulate on social media and vice versa), resulting in formats that do not always adapt to the new hosting channel and may carry new meanings. Short videos constitute a distinctive format on visual platforms because of a combination of structural features involved in processes of production, consumption, and interaction that are inherent to the videos themselves rather than tied to the hosting platforms. These features distinguish short videos from similar media artifacts, thus serving as the foundation for conceptualizing this format (McLeod & Pan, 2005).

As visual platforms continue to rise in popularity, competitors are likely to adapt, reinforcing the shift toward more visually oriented forms of content production and consumption. Consequently, renewed theoretical frameworks and methodologies are essential to examine how visual modalities shape platforms' architecture and user behavior.

Visual and Multimodal Interaction in Short Videos

Videos are sequences of moving images and can be understood as hybrid media objects (Carroll, 1996) that combine the power of visual with other modes. Movement is thus central and is recognized as a new marker of visual modality (Ravelli & Van Leeuwen, 2018). In multimodal media environments, the visual mode interacts with others, such as sound and language, shaping meaning making, structuring narrative processes, directing viewers' attention, and influencing the perception of actions, subjects, and spatial relations (Bateman et al., 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2005; Wildfeuer, 2014).

With respect to the short video format, the visual mode is central in consumption and production, and it contributes to shaping platform aesthetics and associated practices. A combination of animations and design optimized for mobile viewing captures users' attention, creates an immersive experience (Mulier et al., 2021), and shapes the aesthetic of mobile video making (Ryan, 2018). Visual resources help creators establish identity and structure content through recognizable aesthetic choices, such as color schemes and fonts, as demonstrated by Matwick and Matwick (2025) in their studies on food-related Instagram Reels. Similarly, filters assume different roles across platforms; on Instagram, they mediate identity, enable playful or artistic expression, help create social connections, and reproduce cultural norms (Miller, 2024). Instagram filters often encourage the production of content aligned with the polished aesthetics of the platform, while filters on Snapchat encourage rather spontaneous and playful content that people share with their close friends (Schreiber, 2017).

The short video format primarily relies on the visual mode, as it is the precondition for its production and consumption. Other modes, such as sound or text, may be optional, as videos can be created and viewed without audio, captions, or subtitles. Moreover, the interfaces of major short video

apps (see Figure 1) present a range of information (e.g., creator, caption, soundtrack, geotags) and the actions users can take (e.g., interacting with the video or recreating it with the same music template or filter), making the experience intuitive and immediate. The visual is indeed a mode of communication based on association, producing sensory immediacy because visuals are perceived holistically and quickly, and their meaning is strongly dependent on context and prior visual experiences (Müller, 2007). For this reason, showing icons and graphics that present the main format-specific affordances, including affordances of customization and interaction, can further encourage users to engage, turning visual perception into participation.

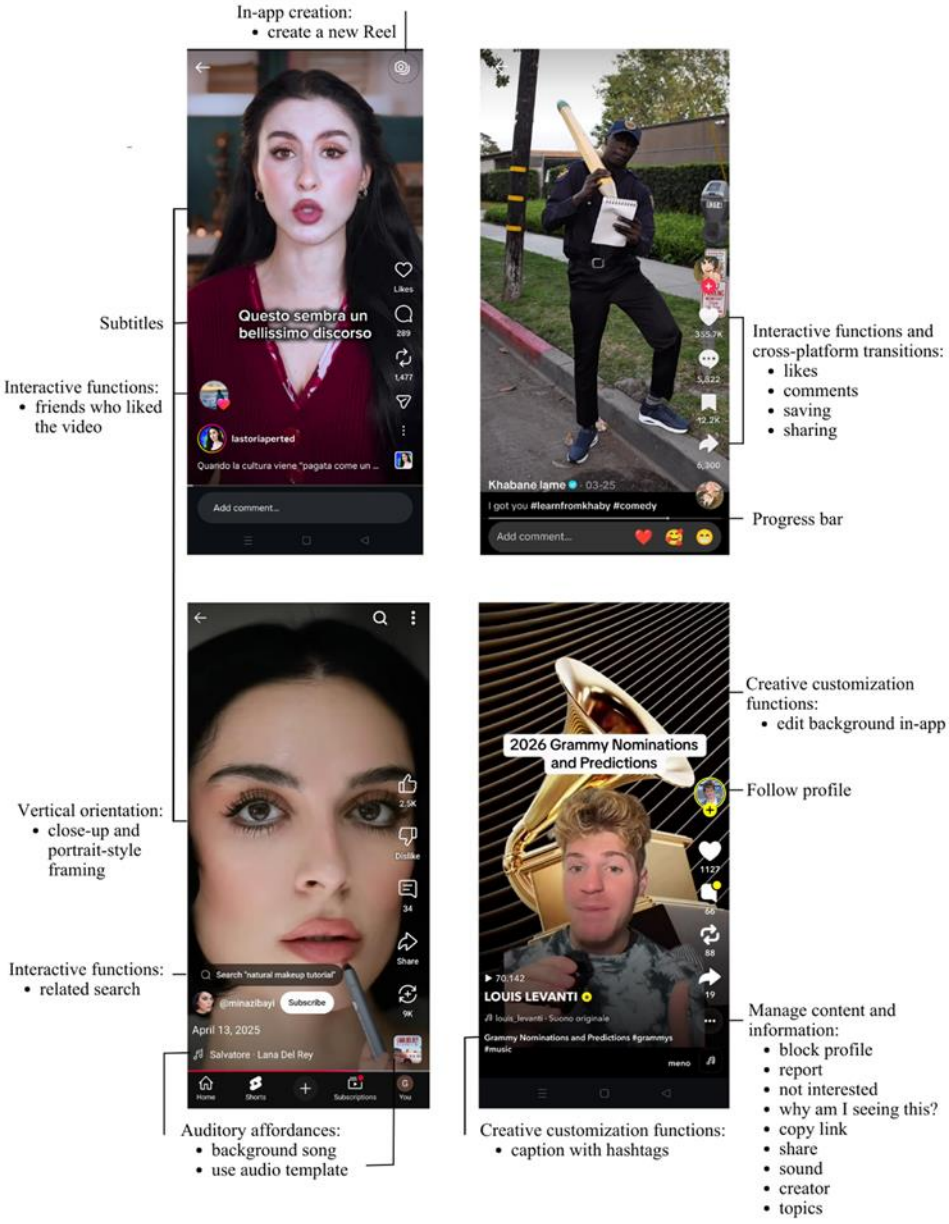

Figure 1. Shared interface affordances of the short video format across four social media platforms (as of December 2025).

Note. Author's own screenshots and illustration; publicly accessible profiles. From left to right: screenshot of Instagram Reels (Tedone, 2025), TikTok (Khabane, 2025), YouTube Shorts (Zibayi, 2025), and Snapchat Spotlight (Levanti, 2025).

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On short videos, the interaction of the visual mode with others such as sound, lyrics, and gesturing supports creative production, imitation, and social practices (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Han & Zappavigna, 2024; Rettberg, 2017; Wang, 2021), enhancing sensorial experience (Matwick & Matwick, 2025). Given the combination of visual and auditory stimuli, which support motivation and perceptual skills, short videos leverage high levels of sensory stimulation (Nicolaou et al., 2019). Thus, meaning making emerges from the multilayered combination of multimodal resources (Grzenkowicz & Wildfeuer, 2025).

Content, Form, and Format: What Is a Short Video?

When opening a social media app on their smartphones, users are highly likely to encounter short videos in their feed. With their growing use (Newman et al., 2024) and adoption by the leading platforms, they have become ubiquitous.

Although several valuable contributions address the topic, a shared conceptualization of short videos is lacking, and terminology varies significantly across studies. Indeed, some studies use the term "video" regardless of platform, whether referring to Vine (Zhang et al., 2014), Snapchat (Schreiber, 2017), Instagram (Muñoz & Towner, 2017), or TikTok (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Rettberg, 2017) or in cross-platform studies (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Others adopt "short-form video" for Vine (Vandersmissen et al., 2014) and "short video" for Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016) and TikTok (Abidin, 2020; Ge et al., 2021; Yaqi et al., 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Varied terminology can also be found within the same study (Anderson, 2020; Lee, 2023). Research on TikTok shows the most diverse terminology, including, for example, "video content" (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022), "short-video content" (Schellewald, 2021; Shutsko, 2020), and "user-generated short-form videos (UGSVs)" (Wang, 2021). Previous research emphasizes the brevity of these videos as the primary feature, but uses the terms "content," "form," and "format" interchangeably, despite relevant conceptual differences. Some studies consider TikTok videos as a format, yet they identify affordances and features based on a single-platform perspective (Cervi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2022), which hinders identifying which elements make these videos a distinctive format.

Given the ubiquity of short videos and the need for dedicated approaches for analyzing them, a cross-platform conceptualization is required. Based on McLeod and Pan's (2005) process of concept explication, which entails (a) analyzing the meaning of a concept, (b) describing its essential qualities, (c) identifying its core dimensions, and (d) prescribing how these dimensions relate to the real world, I first address the definition of short videos as a format and discuss its meaning in social media culture, then identify its structural characteristics and associated user practices, linking them to the platforms in which they operate (p. 25).

Content

In media and communication research, "content" is broadly used as a container term indicating not only the information or meaning of a message but also its form, such as image, text, and sound (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). Within social media scholarship, "content" typically refers to the wide range of materials produced and shared across platforms, including posts, comments, images, videos, and music, along with their associated meanings (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Dijck, 2013; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Papacharissi,

2009). These media artifacts are not confined to a single platform, but are part of a broader media ecosystem where users actively participate in their creation, distribution, reshaping, and consumption (Jenkins, 2006). This active role of users gives rise to what is commonly referred to as user-generated content (UGC), "the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), encompassing various materials like "tweets, status updates, blog posts and comments, photographs and videos and so on" (Lupton, 2015, p. 3). Adopting this perspective, short videos are undoubtedly UGC (Shutsko, 2020), but they are also audiovisual media artifacts (Klug, 2020) that structure complex multimodal messages (Rettberg, 2017). With regard to the nature of visual media artifacts, Lobinger (2016) suggests distinguishing between the symbolic dimension of content, referring to the meanings acquired in practices of production, consumption, and exchange, and the material dimension of visual objects, "situated within particular temporal and spatial contexts" (p. 478). Extending this perspective to the other nonvisual and underlying components of the format, we may argue that its complex multimodal nature is something the term "content" alone fails to fully capture.

Form

The term "form" is typically used to describe the visible configuration of platforms and their artifacts, for example, the structure of early social network sites, such as "the form of profile-centric sites" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 216), or blogs as "the earliest form of Social Media" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63). Wildfeuer (2014) argues that the individual modalities of films should be described "on several levels to reveal their form and meaning" (p. 32), separating the two concepts. Similarly, Aiello and Parry (2019) distinguish between the form and content of images:

> Images are produced via various means (drawing, photography, animation, digital effects) and so their "content" should be considered alongside their form and medium. The choices made regarding representational form and content work together to produce meanings through visual means (in interplay with other modes of communication). (p. 17)

Therefore, defining short videos by their short form highlights their limited duration, yet a comprehensive understanding of their transformative role on visual platforms must also account for underlying elements that are not immediately observable.

Format

While some studies already recognize short videos as a format (Canella, 2018; Cervi et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2022; Mulier et al., 2021; Napoli, 2016), a consistent conceptualization remains elusive. Format theory emphasizes that the creation, distribution, and consumption of media are deeply influenced by formats: "*Format* denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium" and "a set of rules according to which a technology can operate" (Sterne, 2012, p. 7). Formats enable information transmission across infrastructures since they "consist of specific sets of descriptions and requirements of how to arrange and present information" and "ensure interoperability across diverse industries and ecologies of media devices" (Jancovic et al., 2019, p. 7). Formats define not only media file type, for example, MP3 for audio and MP4 for videos, but also their underlying structure, aesthetics, the

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ability to function across different systems, and the intended ways of using them. While platforms provide affordances that enable and constrain user activities (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), formats also embody specific affordances that mediate interactions among users and platforms (Volmar, 2017), shaping communicative and sociocultural practices. For this reason, they are considered "critical nodes of media culture" (Jancovic et al., 2019, p. 10). For example, Dijck (2013) describes the tweet as a textual "global format" whose structural characteristics, particularly the 140-character limit and the use of hashtags, influenced the "online culture" and journalism practices (p. 76). Changes in media formats reshape usage patterns. For instance, the rise of mobile video technology and vertical framing has challenged traditional filmmaking norms, encouraging amateur content creation (Napoli, 2016; Ryan, 2018), while posing challenges to professional video makers who need to integrate this format into conventional media like local television (Canella, 2018). Thus, adopting a format often reflects strategic choices beyond aesthetics, driven by technological, economic, or functional needs (Jancovic et al., 2019).

Given this, "format" comprehensively encompasses the representation and underlying structure of a media artifact, or *form*, its associated information, or *content*, and the cultural practices embodied in its usage. Thus, "short video format" best indicates the complex nature of this media artifact.

Structural Characteristics of the Short Video Format

My conceptualization of short videos as a format is grounded on the relation among operational standards, affordances, intended uses, and situational context, as proposed by Sterne (2012). Indeed, Sterne indicates a comprehensive approach to analyzing formats that considers technical specifications (e.g., infrastructures, codes, and operational standards), political and institutional forces involved in formats' standardization and distribution, user behavior and perception, and the historical legacy of prior technologies and practices that drove formats' development. Similarly, Entrena-Serrano (2025) argues that users' ability to curate the content they consume on social media ("consumptive curation affordances") is co-shaped by three interlinked forces: technological design of platforms, user practices, and broader social arrangements (economic, cultural, and regulatory contexts).

The short video format is thus shaped by the architecture of platforms, that is, their underlying technical structure and design, which evolve constantly (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Dijck, 2013; Papacharissi, 2009), making it challenging to define stable characteristics across time and platforms. Nevertheless, the analysis of existing literature reveals nine structural characteristics that constitute the basis of the conceptual framework for the short video format: the native spaces in which short videos originate and spread, their technical infrastructure, their brief length and vertical display aligned with smartphone interfaces, creative customization functions and auditory affordances, interactive features and cross-platform transitions that enhance user engagement, and versatility in conveying diverse communicative genres. These characteristics are discussed in detail below.

Native Visual Spaces and Infrastructure

The native spaces of short videos are "short video platforms" (Schellewald, 2021; Yang et al., 2019; Yaqi et al., 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021; Zeng & Kaye, 2022) or "video-sharing social networking

service" (Lee, 2023, p. 408), which are designed to facilitate fast mobile consumption of audiovisual content. The architecture of these platforms, primarily conceived for mobile consumption of images and videos, has influenced the technological standards of the short video format, which has integrated new functionalities while migrating across applications. Vine and Snapchat pioneered short videos in 2013. Vine allowed six-second looping clips in a square (1:1) format (Vandersmissen et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014), which did not fully suit smartphones' vertical displays. Vertical videos, in contrast, were introduced by Snapchat in My Story and were designed to disappear after 24 hours, popularizing ephemeral content (Bayer et al., 2016). Instagram followed with 15-second Stories in 2016, while YouTube enabled uploads of vertical videos in 2015 (Neal & Ross, 2018). TikTok, launched in 2017, redefined this format, making vertical short videos permanent and central to the platform. Its popularity, especially among young audiences (Yang et al., 2019), influenced other competitors; therefore, Instagram launched Reels in 2020, and YouTube introduced Shorts in 2021. Google began testing a Short Videos tab in its search menu in April 2024 (Schwartz, 2024), making it permanent in 2025, while Netflix is testing a mobile-only vertical feed for short videos in its iOS and Android apps (Forristal, 2025), highlighting the format's growing relevance.

The technical infrastructure of short videos is similar across visual platforms. To watch short videos, users need a stable Internet connection with at least 1 Mbps of bandwidth, which most mobile networks provide (G. Zhang et al., 2021). Insufficient bandwidth affects seamless video streaming, which may lag or fail to load properly. Content creation relies on mobile software development kits and application programming interfaces, enabling video recording and editing with filters and music. After a video is created, it is compressed on the user's device using standard video formats like H.264 or H.265, uploaded to the platform, and processed. The video is transcoded into various resolutions (e.g., 480p, 720p, and 1080p) using codecs such as H.264. Then a preview image or thumbnail is generated, and metadata such as file type, resolution, and geotags are extracted (Kim et al., 2021). Videos are stored using object storage services and delivered through content delivery networks, which quickly send videos from servers close to the viewer's geographical location. A complex architecture of microservices manages feeds, notifications, analytics, and more (Sinha, 2024). To ensure smooth playback, streaming relies on adaptive bitrate streaming, which modifies video quality depending on the user's Internet connection (Kaplunovich & Kaplunovich, 2023). Finally, security mechanisms moderate content (Zeng & Kaye, 2022), while recommendation systems personalize platforms' feeds using machine learning models that aim to predict what users prefer to see based on their behavior (Zulli & Zulli, 2022).

The infrastructure of short videos is expected to continue evolving, shaped by platform objectives as well as user practices and demands. A clear conceptualization allows for tracking these changes across diverse settings and building cumulative research (McLeod & Pan, 2005).

Length

The short video format originated within platforms like TikTok, designed for "short-lived consumption" (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1437). "Short" refers to both video length and consumption habits: Short videos typically appear in scrollable feeds, such as Instagram Stories and YouTube Shorts, where users watch multiple videos in a short time. Often, these videos automatically play without requiring users to click or scroll, a strategy pioneered by Vine and adopted by competitors (Anderson, 2020). This

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seamless autoplay fosters "batch view" (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 87), allowing users to watch multiple clips effortlessly, making skipping difficult and keeping engagement high. TikTok adopts a similar mechanism: "watch, scroll, repeat" (Entrena-Serrano, 2025, p. 10). Scrolling creates a continuous content flow that can be both engaging and exhausting, as users may scroll compulsively, driven by fear of missing out (Lupinacci, 2021), yet scrolling can reinforce serendipitous discovery (Kiddle et al., 2023), counterbalancing algorithmic recommendations that potentially create filter bubbles and echo chambers. Conversely, serendipitous discovery enables users to find unexpected, meaningful content that may shift perspectives or spark new interests (Reviglio, 2019). In this regard, content flow on Douyin has been found to enhance serendipitous discovery by offering vivid, engaging short videos combined with cognitive lock-in (Yang et al., 2023), while TikTok leverages recommendation algorithms that preclude direct user control over content selection, offering surprising content and keeping users engaged over time (Zhao & Wagner, 2023).

Content flow is embodied in video length since videos under three minutes attract higher engagement (Guo et al., 2014), reflecting users' decreasing attention (Rajendran et al., 2024). Short videos' length varies across platforms and over time; as of 2025, TikTok allows recording clips from 15 seconds to 10 minutes (TikTok Support, 2025); the maximum length of Instagram Reels was extended to three minutes, doubling the previous limit of 90 seconds (Instagram Help Center, 2025); and YouTube Shorts expanded the length from 60 seconds to three minutes (YouTube Help, 2025). Videos up to 60 seconds typically perform better; on YouTube, for instance, Shorts attract more views and likes per view than longer videos (Violot et al., 2024), while on Kuaishou, one of the largest short video platforms in China, short videos get fewer clicks per view than long videos, but they often receive more likes and shares, probably because of algorithmic recommendations (Chen et al., 2024). Despite longer video limits, TikTok for Business (2021) recommends that marketers produce in-feed advertisements of 21–34 seconds. Supporting this, Salminen et al. (2024) found that 82.5% of users stop watching TikTok ads within the first quarter of a video averaging 56.7 seconds. These findings align with TV advertising research. Singh and Cole (1993) demonstrated that 15-second ads are most cost-effective for informational content, whereas 30-second ads better suit emotional messaging to enhance brand recall and attitudes.

Videos lasting several minutes demand greater attention from users, which conflicts with fast-paced scrolling and compulsive consumption. Nevertheless, creators usually adapt video lengths to their needs, with many exceeding one minute for storytelling or in-depth reviews. Hence, length alone does not define the short video format, but it shapes how platforms control information flow, content consumption, and user engagement.

Interactive Features and Cross-Platform Transitions

Short videos are social and cultural products, as their affordances shape interactions and content sharing within and beyond native platforms (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022; Schellewald, 2021; Wang, 2021). These format-specific affordances combined with users' agency and "popularisation of behaviours" (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 51), structure and stabilize cooperative practices between users and platforms. This is

an essential function of media formats, which create shared infrastructures in which platform-specific content, aesthetics, and symbols circulate and become established (Volmar, 2017).

Functions enabling praising, commenting, and sharing increase sociability, the inclination of users to connect with others (Ge et al., 2021). Social interactions are a major factor driving users to engage with apps such as TikTok, alongside activities such as archiving, which involves saving and curating videos; self-expression, which entails sharing personal content; escapism, understood as seeking relaxation or distraction from daily life; and peeking, which refers to observing the lives of others (Bahiyah & Wang, 2020). Apps like TikTok help users connect easily with others, yet technical factors like personalization and entertainment, together with social factors such as interaction anxiety and isolation, can increase app dependence and attachment (Zhang et al., 2019). Users typically share videos by clicking the "share" icon, a right-pointing arrow located in the bottom-right corner of most platforms (see Figure 1). TikTok users, for example, can share a video in app or through external channels, including e-mail or platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). The standardized MP4 video format facilitates content sharing across platforms, enabling compatibility and smooth playback.

Ultimately, interacting features foster a *do ut des* exchange between creators, who produce content to attract audience's attention and maintain visibility, and followers, who spend time consuming this content and interacting through likes, comments, and shares, gaining free access to a large volume of content that can be easily consumed at any time.

Vertical Display

Most apps adopted vertical displays for video content, reflecting how users access social media via mobile devices such as smartphones. This challenged the traditional horizontal norms of film and television, creating a new aesthetic paradigm aligned with users' habits of watching and recording videos on their smartphones (Napoli, 2016; Neal & Ross, 2018; Ryan, 2018). Film and television traditionally employed horizontal formats (4:3 and 16:9, respectively) designed for large screens, such as cinemas and TVs, maximizing peripheral vision and immersive experiences for wide scenes and landscapes. In contrast, vertical video (9:16) was relegated to amateur genres (Mulier et al., 2021; Napoli, 2016), yet it has now become standard for mobile video creation also in professional contexts (Canella, 2018).

The viewing experience in vertical format is perceived as more intimate, immersive, and immediate (Mulier et al., 2021; Ryan, 2018), aligning with the personal nature of smartphones and their usage. It constitutes a form of "small-screen image making, where expansive horizons lose detail and clarity, and the intimate and the personal rule" (Ryan, 2018, p. 257). In terms of shooting, vertical video emphasizes close-up and portrait-style framing rather than wide, expansive shots typical of horizontal orientations. This approach impacts composition, often centering the subject to enhance viewer engagement and highlight individual moments rather than panoramic scenes (Napoli, 2016; Ryan, 2018). While this aesthetic resonates strongly with social media contexts, it draws on a longer history in which the "landscape" and "portrait" formats have always "lived together" (Napoli, 2016, p. 47).

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The short video format adopts a vertical display to align with smartphone-based technologies; indeed, "users make vertical video because it makes sense within the technology" (Ryan, 2018, p. 258). This relates to format theory, which defines a format as "a set of rules according to which a technology operates" (Sterne, 2012, p. 7). Similarly, the aesthetics and practices associated with short videos reflect the ability of formats "to stabilize practices and forge collectives" (Jancovic et al., 2019, p. 11).

The short video format is thus an audiovisual media object composed of a set of moving images, typically adopting a 9:16 aspect ratio, the default vertical display designed for optimal viewing on smartphones. The shift from horizontal to vertical format challenges traditional shooting and compositional norms, introducing a new aesthetic aligned with the intimate, personal experience of consuming mobile media and fostering a distinctive visual language in video production and consumption.

Creative Customization Functions

The short video format features creative customization functions directly provided in app that combine different modes of communication, thereby facilitating content creation, boosting creativity (Shutsko, 2020), and shaping sociocultural practices (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Editing functions, which traditionally existed in separate programs and applications, are now directly integrated in app, offering more accessible customization capabilities (Gerlitz et al., 2019; Wang & Gu, 2022). This allows users to control and modify modalities on their content, an ability formerly reserved for experts (Ravelli & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Editing typically occurs at two stages in most visual platforms: production and postproduction (see Figure 2). During the production stage, users edit their content while recording the video. For instance, they can apply effects to adjust lighting, set a maximum clip duration, control speed, add a green screen or background audio, and more. After generating the clip, users can preview it before sharing. In this preview window, they can make additional changes, such as cutting scenes, adding subtitles or music, and much more. Creators can also customize content during posting by adding textual elements like captions, geotags, and hashtags that are often used to increase visibility through algorithms. Thus, creative customization functions contribute to making platforms like TikTok dynamic spaces, transforming the app's use into a "playful" and "gamified" activity (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1448). However, these editing possibilities are not unlimited, but rather aligned with each platform's aesthetics and objectives, thereby shaping sociocultural practices and associated meanings (Schreiber, 2017). In this regard, since TikTok follows an imitative logic, users can replicate similar videos using standardized and reusable auditory and visual effects, communicating values and expressing identities (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Users are thus encouraged to interact with each other by adopting the same visual languages and styles.

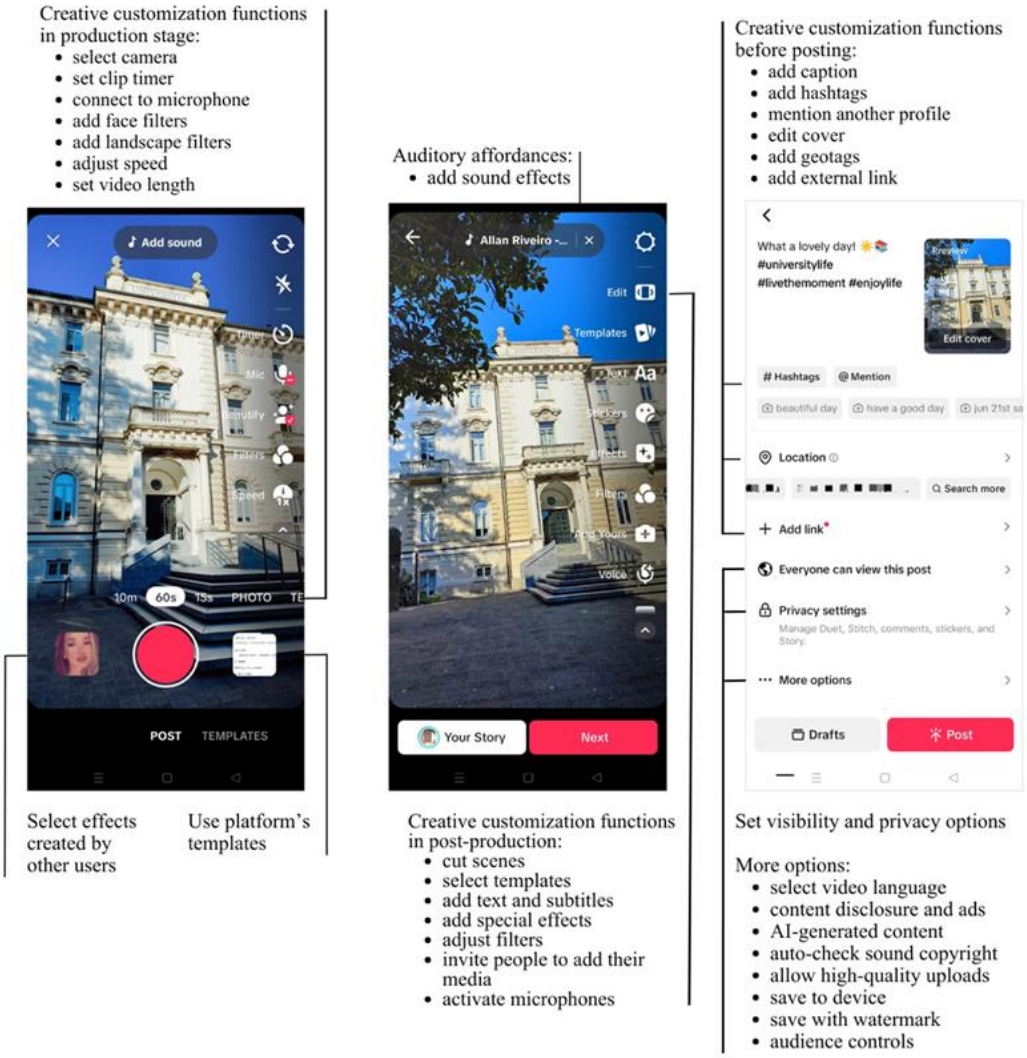

Figure 2. Author's screenshots illustrating the editing functions available in the TikTok mobile application during the production and postproduction stages (as of November 2025).

Note. Screenshots were taken for illustrative purposes only.

Auditory Affordances

Sound is a semiotic mode that contributes to meaning making in multimodal artifacts, using resources such as rhythm, volume, pauses, and timbre to convey emotions, actions, or structure narratives. Sound often interacts with other modes, such as visual and textual, guiding audience attention, emotions, and interpretations (Van Leeuwen, 1999, 2005). In multimodal artifacts, music and visuals have a long history of connections and are increasingly prevalent in contemporary media, such as music videos

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(Bateman et al., 2017). Short videos fit within this context, as they display distinctive audiovisual features that combine synchronized music, gestures, movements, and camera effects into performative expressions (Klug, 2020).

Video-based platforms typically enable users to record or upload clips with original audio, allowing for spoken content with natural background sounds. Alternatively, users can replace the original audio with other sounds available on the app, such as music tracks or popular songs, as illustrated in Figure 2. On Instagram Reels, the interaction of different sound modes such as music, background sounds, and voiceover constructs an immersive and performative narrative, conferring dramatic effects and transforming videos into hyper-sensorial experiences (Matwick & Matwick, 2025). On platforms like TikTok, sound effects support self-presentation and artistic performance, driving popular forms of entertainment such as lip syncing or dancing that often acquire a social meaning for user communities (Klug, 2020; Rettberg, 2017). Reusing and remixing background audio is central to viral trends, functioning as audio memes that enhance imitation and engagement (Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Audio memes enable TikTok creators to shape narratives, convey emotion, time punchlines, and organize trends, often paired with editing techniques to amplify virality. They encompass diverse remix styles and ownership variations, serving as "an organizing principle for how content is catalogued into repositories on TikTok, and how users navigate the platform to seek new trends and contents" (Abidin, 2020, p. 80).

Furthermore, most social media apps enable users to add subtitles to videos in postproduction. This function underscores the role of visuals in enhancing comprehension and conveying meaning in video technologies, allowing people to watch and understand content in contexts where audio is either impractical (e.g., noisy environments) or inappropriate (e.g., medical waiting rooms). Subtitles ensure inclusivity for viewers with hearing impairments and can be customized for users with visual impairments. Additionally, they support non-native speakers, promote social integration, and help increase viewer engagement and the overall experience (Agulló et al., 2019). W. Zhang et al. (2021) found that subtitles in TikTok videos of public hospitals in China enabled viewers to immediately grasp the main ideas and facilitated understanding of the health information provided. The combined use of audio and subtitles makes short videos accessible and comprehensible to a wide audience, two essential requirements for media formats (Jancovic et al., 2019). In the short video format, auditory affordances thus support creative production, user engagement, and content fruition.

Versatility of Communicative Genres

Short videos emerged as a more engaging alternative to traditional video formats, reflecting the tastes of young audiences, fitting fragmented viewing habits, and fostering grassroots creativity (Yang et al., 2019). By integrating multiple modes of communication and enabling editing and personalization, the short video format becomes versatile, conveying diverse communicative genres and fulfilling various social functions (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Entertainment is the most prominent communicative genre, yet its centrality varies across platforms. For instance, entertainment-related categories dominate YouTube Shorts, while educational, political, and artistic content is typical of longer YouTube videos (Violot et al., 2024). Conversely, TikTok

primarily offers entertainment, artistic performances, and self-expression, aligning with its younger audiences (Schellewald, 2021; Shutsko, 2020; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). Shutsko (2020) showed that comedy, musical performances, DIY tutorials, and dance constitute the majority of UGC on TikTok, while Schellewald (2021) identified six overarching communicative forms—comedic, documentary, communal, interactive, explanatory, and meta—emphasizing that typical short video content filters reality through expressive forms of comedic entertainment, addressing topics like religion, politics, global events, and individual life circumstances in a lighter yet no less meaningful way. Moreover, content that shares knowledge, including tutorials and life hacks, enriches the social experience of TikTok, along with popular audio trends and challenges that encourage playful engagement and skills showcasing among users. Entertaining short videos are therefore not merely "silly content"; they give rise to complex forms of communication (Schellewald, 2021), including self-expression, talent showcasing, and user engagement through shared interests, reflecting a performative social media experience (Shutsko, 2020) that is also community-building (Zeng & Abidin, 2021).

Short videos also support professional content. Creators present scientific information (Zeng et al., 2021), journalistic news (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022), and educational material (Carpenter et al., 2024), often using entertaining features like duets or stitches, enhancing engagement. Politicians use short videos to gain visibility among younger audiences (Cervi et al., 2021; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), as do digital activists who exploit playful affordances to promote their causes (Cervi & Divon, 2023). Additionally, short video advertisements offer vivid and low-cost promotion for sellers (Ge et al., 2021).

Short video content must comply with platforms' rules and national regulatory frameworks. Sensitive or disturbing topics are prohibited and banned by moderators, whose work is increasingly important, as "moderating video content is more technologically demanding and time-consuming" (Zeng & Kaye, 2022, p. 80). Platforms typically avoid controversial or inappropriate content, though Shutsko (2020) observed frequent cases of potential violation of copyright and privacy on TikTok in Germany, according to the national law. Despite content moderation challenges, the short video format has become central for conveying diverse communicative genres on visual platforms, especially among younger audiences, sharing knowledge and supporting varied forms of expression.

Conclusions and Reflections for Future Research

This study conceptualizes the short video format and outlines its structural characteristics in a cross-platform perspective, addressing how their technological underpinnings and the interplay of different modes of communication shape meaning for users. I argue that short videos should be understood as a format, not merely as "content," which refers to the information and meanings conveyed, nor solely as a "form" of video, which describes their visible configuration and structure.

The short video format is an audiovisual artifact composed of moving images arranged sequentially, produced and consumed primarily on visual platforms. It adopts a technical infrastructure, operative standards, a full-screen vertical display, and a limited length designed to enhance rapid and immersive consumption via mobile devices. Through creative customization functions and the interplay of visual and auditory affordances, this format shapes platforms' aesthetics and supports varying content

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creation, conveying diverse communicative genres. The interactive features and cross-platform transitions shape user behavior and engagement, enhancing sociability, playful experiences, and collective meaning making, both inside and outside native platforms. The rise of this format challenges traditional audiovisual norms while facilitating new user practices that redefine social media communication.

The growing relevance of short videos has fostered an emerging body of research aimed at developing and readapting methods of analysis (e.g., Cervi & Divon, 2023; Grzenkowicz & Wildfeuer, 2025; Wang, 2021). It must be emphasized that analyzing moving images is challenging, as it requires adapting existing methods to the format's multimodal nature and its mobile-based technologies. Understanding how short videos mediate messages and produce meaning also demands consideration of the sociocultural context and the platform-specific practices through which users engage with them (Kaye et al., 2022). The conceptual framework introduced in this work is situated within this context: By identifying the distinctive characteristics of the format across platforms, it allows studies approaching the concept from different perspectives or research settings to engage in dialogue and be compared, thereby reducing complexity and supporting cumulative, rigorous research (McLeod & Pan, 2005). A format-based conceptualization thus facilitates the development of tailored methodologies that extend beyond individual platforms, allowing a comprehensive analysis of the format's elements (Sterne, 2012). This approach further supports a deeper understanding of how visual culture evolves within social media environments (Reißmann et al., 2023), emphasizing the interplay of technological standards, audiovisual characteristics, and affordances in generating meaning for users.

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