CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SHORT VIDEOS AS THE DOMINANT FORMAT FOR AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT ON TIKTOK, IG REELS, AND YOUTUBE SHORTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract
This study examines short video content as the dominant format driving audience engagement on three major social media platforms: TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Using a literature review method, this study analyses the technical characteristics and content formats of each platform, as well as the factors influencing user engagement levels. The findings reveal that while all three platforms share the core concept of vertical short videos, they each possess unique characteristics in terms of duration, editing features, distribution algorithms, and audience profiles that influence interaction patterns. TikTok is known for its high virality and strong content personalisation, Instagram Reels relies on visual aesthetics and social interaction, while YouTube Shorts combines short and long-form content to reach a broader audience. Factors such as visual quality, content relevance, popular music, and interactivity have proven significant in increasing audience engagement. This study provides a comprehensive understanding that is beneficial for content creators, digital marketers, and social media researchers in optimising digital communication strategies based on short videos.
Keywords: Short videos, TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, audience engagement, literature review, social media, digital content.

Introduction

The development of digital technology in the last decade has fundamentally changed the way people interact and consume content. Social media has now become one of the main spaces that influence communication patterns, entertainment, and information dissemination. In particular, short video formats now dominate almost all major social media platforms, from TikTok and Instagram Reels to YouTube Shorts (Nguyen, 2024) . This phenomenon is not merely a fleeting trend but reflects a fundamental shift in audience preferences toward quick, easily accessible, and entertaining content consumption. Short videos with extremely limited durations have emerged as an effective new language for capturing mass attention amid the overwhelming flow of information (Fatimah & Nasir, 2025) .

TikTok, as a pioneer of the short-form video format, has successfully popularised a multimedia consumption style that combines entertainment with intense interactivity. TikTok's sophisticated algorithm personalises content so that users can enjoy videos that are highly relevant to their interests and behaviour, significantly increasing engagement levels (Cao, 2023) . TikTok's success was followed by two other social media giants, Instagram and YouTube, which launched similar features called Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. These three platforms are now fiercely competing for user attention and engagement with similar content approaches while maintaining the uniqueness of their respective features (Kang, 2022) .

Audience engagement is a key indicator of the success of short-form video content. This engagement encompasses various forms of user interaction, ranging from watching the entire video, liking, commenting, sharing, to remaking or reusing content. In the context of social media, engagement is not just about the volume of interactions but also the quality and intensity of the relationship between content creators and viewers. Short videos have great potential to build quick and strong emotional connections, as their concise and entertaining format can effectively convey messages in just a few seconds (SocialInsider, 2025) .

Scientific studies on short videos in the context of social media are still developing, but some research shows a positive correlation between the use of short videos and increased engagement. Factors such as creativity, uniqueness, appealing music, speed of message delivery, and current trends greatly influence the appeal of content (Mehmeti & Bajrami, 2025) . However, despite all three platforms using short-form video content, differences in distribution algorithms, community culture, and interactive features give each platform a unique character in terms of how users interact with and engage in content (Abidin, 2020) .

TikTok, for example, uses a highly aggressive algorithmic approach to present content through its "For You" page, allowing users to watch hundreds of videos in a short period of time without having to follow specific accounts. In contrast, Instagram Reels, which is integrated with the broader Instagram ecosystem, tends to highlight content from friends' networks and well-known influencers. YouTube Shorts, although offering a similar format, relies more on integration with existing YouTube channels, enabling more segmented and consistent audience engagement over the long term. .

The shift from long-form to short-form content is a response to the declining attention span of users in the digital age. This condition requires content creators to adapt to strategies that can maximise messages in a very short time, while maintaining the audience's interest so they do not switch to (Du, 2022) . These short, concise, and easy-to-digest videos provide a practical solution to this challenge. Additionally, this format enables users to actively participate, such as by creating their own versions or using the same sound, thereby fostering a collaborative ecosystem that strengthens community engagement (Roberts, 2025) .

In the context of digital marketing and branding, short videos have become a powerful tool widely used to attract young audiences who are dominant as active social media users. The ability of short videos to convey messages visually and emotionally in a direct manner has a significant impact on shaping perceptions and influencing consumer decisions. For companies and content creators, understanding how short videos function across different platforms is essential to effectively tailor content strategies to audience characteristics and distribution mechanisms. (Hamilton & Adams, 2022).

The significance of this short video phenomenon has prompted the need for an in-depth study of the characteristics of the content and the factors that influence audience engagement on these three popular platforms. Although some studies have been conducted, systematic comparisons and analyses linking technical features, consumption patterns, and user psychology between TikTok, IG Reels, and YouTube Shorts remain limited (Belanche, 2021). Therefore, this research aims to provide a comprehensive literature review that can serve as a foundation for a better understanding among academics, social media practitioners, and digital policymakers.

Research Method

This research method uses a library research approach by collecting, reviewing, and analysing various relevant and credible secondary sources, such as scientific journals, articles, books, and industry reports that discuss short video content and audience engagement on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). The analysis technique used is thematic analysis to categorise and compare findings from the relevant literature, focusing on two main aspects: the characteristics of short video content on each platform and the factors influencing audience engagement. The criteria for including sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and currency of data, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive and systematic overview of the phenomenon being studied, while identifying research gaps for further study.

Results and Discussion
Characteristics and Format of Short Video Content on Each Platform

Short videos have become a dominant phenomenon in the modern social media landscape, with the three largest platforms leveraging this format being TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. While all three share the core concept of vertical videos with short durations, each platform possesses distinct characteristics and unique features that differentiate user experiences and content dynamics. Understanding these characteristics is crucial because they influence how content creators design their videos and how audiences interact with them (Jamalulel, 2025).

TikTok is a pioneer and market leader in short-form video. TikTok videos are highly flexible in length, ranging from 15 seconds to 10 minutes, giving creators ample space to be creative with a wide variety of content. TikTok stands out with its highly personalised and aggressive "For You Page" recommendation algorithm, which distributes content to relevant users, allowing new videos to quickly go viral. The in-app editing features are comprehensive, including visual effects, filters, music, and audio synchronisation tools, making it easy for even beginners to produce creative content (Klug, 2020).

Instagram Reels is a feature that integrates short videos into the widely known Instagram ecosystem. Videos on Reels range from 15 to 90 seconds in length. Instagram Reels emphasises visual aesthetics and lifestyle, where the content presented is more curated and has a professional or artistic touch. Reels users typically come from a more diverse age demographic but are generally aligned with the millennial and Gen Z generations seeking visual inspiration in the form of fashion trends, beauty, or culinary content (Trivedi & Sama, 2020).

YouTube Shorts, which is relatively newer than TikTok and Instagram Reels, features a short video format with a maximum duration of 60 seconds for uploaded videos and 15 seconds if recorded directly through the app. Shorts leverages the strengths of YouTube's ecosystem, enabling short-form video content to be integrated with existing long-form video content on the platform. While editing features and interactivity in Shorts are still more limited compared to its competitors, the platform offers a unique opportunity for creators looking to reach a broader audience and direct viewers to longer-form videos. (Montag, 2021).

The main differences in the characteristics of the three platforms are also evident in their technological features and interaction capabilities. TikTok offers augmented reality (AR) effects and rich filters, as well as video remixing and duet capabilities that support creative collaboration between users. Instagram Reels also has AR filters and powerful aesthetic adjustments, with the advantage of integrating videos with other Instagram content such as Stories and Feed. YouTube Shorts, on the other hand, remains relatively limited in terms of effects and AR features and lacks direct messaging functionality, thereby restricting the social and interactive aspects of its short-form video ecosystem. (Yang, 2025).

From a duration perspective, TikTok is the most flexible with video options of up to 10 minutes, giving content creators the freedom to explore longer formats if needed. Reels limits duration to 90 seconds, which is sufficient for inspirational visual content while still maintaining a fast-paced and easy-to-digest format. Shorts sets a maximum duration of 60 seconds, placing it right between its two competitors in terms of duration flexibility. However, YouTube's approach as a longer-form video platform makes Shorts more of a complement within their content ecosystem. (Moulyagowda & Takalkar, 2025).

The uniqueness of the audience also distinguishes each platform. TikTok is predominantly known for its young users who seek quick entertainment and viral content, often actively adopting trends and challenges. Instagram Reels tends to attract a wider and more diverse audience, with a focus on aesthetic value, lifestyle, and personal and business branding. YouTube Shorts reaches a different spectrum of users, including viewers seeking both entertainment and more in-depth information with the ease of browsing longer content (Stalastiana, 2024) .

The third algorithm of the platform also plays a role in shaping the characteristics and distribution of content. TikTok has a highly responsive and predictive algorithm, maximising engagement by quickly displaying the most interesting content to users. Instagram Reels adopts an approach that prioritises engagement within social circles and existing audiences, resulting in more segmented content distribution to followers and established communities. YouTube Shorts focuses on content discoverability through search and recommendations based on a broader viewing history across the entire YouTube platform. .

In terms of content production, TikTok provides easy-to-access editing tools and a comprehensive library of legal music, allowing creators to freely create with popular soundtracks. Instagram Reels emphasises visual quality and seamless integration with other Instagram features, making it easy to combine visual and commercial content strategies. YouTube Shorts is still catching up in terms of advanced editing features, but it is strong in terms of monetisation potential and linking to longer videos and creator channels (Veirman, 2022) .

Platform limitations also contribute to different content characteristics. TikTok, which is highly focused on short videos, requires content to grab attention quickly in a matter of seconds, making fast-paced editing, humour, and live music its signature style. Instagram Reels sometimes features more artistic content and slightly longer storytelling, but still maintains a concise and visually appealing format. YouTube Shorts, with its limited interactive features and editing capabilities, tends to be technically simpler but remains effective in reaching audiences seeking short-form content (Hussain, 2024) .

Overall, these three platforms offer different opportunities for short-form video creators. TikTok excels in virality and creative freedom, Instagram Reels in visual integration with existing users and segmented marketing, while YouTube Shorts offers the potential to combine long and short content on the same platform. Understanding these characteristics is crucial for content creators and marketers to tailor their strategies to their respective goals and audiences.

Thus, the unique characteristics and formats of TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts make short videos the dominant and effective format for audience engagement today. Each platform has its own strengths and weaknesses that shape content dynamics and how users interact. The intense competition among the three

platforms drives innovation in features and consumption modes, creating exciting opportunities for content creators from diverse backgrounds to effectively reach a global audience. Therefore, a deep understanding of the characteristics of each platform is a crucial foundation for maximising engagement and the success of short-form video content in the digital age.

Audience Engagement Analysis: Factors and Comparisons

Audience engagement has become a key indicator of the success of short-form video content on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. This engagement goes beyond mere views or likes, encompassing deeper interactions such as comments, shares, and audience participation in challenges or remixes of content. Each platform has its own unique engagement dynamics, influenced by technical characteristics, user culture, and the interactive features provided (Belanche, 2021) .

On TikTok, engagement levels are very high, mainly due to the "For You Page" feature, which optimises the personalisation algorithm so that content can quickly reach new users outside the follower network. TikTok also relies on trends, challenges, and popular music to encourage audiences to participate creatively, whether by creating new videos based on trends, imitating specific styles, or collaborating with other content creators through duets and remixes. (Leaver et al., 2020) .

Instagram Reels, which is integrated with the entire Instagram ecosystem, offers a slightly different form of engagement. Although the viral effect tends to be more limited to followers and communities, Reels users are more encouraged to show their reactions through stories, comments, and direct messages. , 2019). Engagement is also influenced by the visual quality of the content, personal brand image, and lifestyle themes, so engagement on Reels tends to be more focused on social interaction and self-image.

YouTube Shorts has a different audience base, where engagement is largely influenced by integration with the main YouTube channel. Shorts are often used as teasers for longer content or as a way to expand a channel's subscriber reach. Comment rates on Shorts are relatively high compared to regular YouTube content, but other interactive features are still limited, so engagement patterns are more focused on viewing and subscribing to the channel (Lobato, 2023) .

Factors that drive audience engagement include visual appeal, speed of message delivery, relevance of the theme to the audience's interests, use of popular music, and the use of humour and short storytelling. TikTok really stands out in its ability to combine all these elements in a short duration. Instagram Reels show higher engagement on lifestyle, fashion, and visual beauty content, while YouTube Shorts are effective for educational content, comedy clips, or highlights of viral moments (Lim et al., 2024) .

Differences in engagement levels are often influenced by user demographics. TikTok is dominated by a young audience that tends to be active, explore trends, and

open to new formats. Instagram Reels attracts users of all ages, but engagement is strongest among those who prefer visual imagery and social connections. YouTube Shorts reaches a broader audience, including those already familiar with YouTube as a source of information and entertainment (Omar & Wang, 2020) .

Distribution algorithms are also a key factor in engagement. TikTok gives all users the same opportunity to go viral because the algorithm prioritises content over the number of followers. On Instagram, the chances of going viral are limited without a strong network, but the quality of interactions tends to be deeper. YouTube Shorts, on the other hand, provides opportunities for smaller creators to appear in the feed, but the success of engagement heavily depends on consistency and synergy with longer-form content. .

Engagement in short videos is also greatly influenced by community elements. TikTok encourages a highly active digital community with challenges, hashtag trends, and creators who respond to each other. Reels emphasises interaction within the influencer and follower community with aesthetic visual content. Shorts creates a new community that expands interaction with YouTube channels, providing added value to existing subscribers and attracting new viewers through short videos (Kim, 2022) .

The influence of celebrities, influencers, and micro-influencers also varies across platforms. TikTok has introduced a new trend of "overnight celebrities" who go viral from a single video, while traditional influencers hold more sway on Reels. Shorts are widely used by major YouTubers as a content introduction tool but also open opportunities for creative new faces in a short-form format (Haenlein, 2020) .

Thus, short-form video engagement is greatly influenced by a combination of platform features, algorithms, user demographics, and content creativity. TikTok excels at driving virality and collaborative participation, Instagram Reels excels at creating high-quality social interactions within communities, while YouTube Shorts is effective as a bridge between short and long-form videos. A deep understanding of the factors and comparisons across each platform is crucial for optimising content strategies and maximising audience engagement sustainably in the era of short-form video dominance.

Conclusion

Short-form video content has become the dominant and effective format for driving audience engagement on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Although these three platforms share a similar core concept, each has unique characteristics in terms of duration, editing features, distribution algorithms, and audience profiles that differentiate the user experience and interaction patterns. TikTok excels in virality and content personalisation through its highly responsive "For You Page" algorithm, while Instagram Reels focuses on visual appeal, aesthetics, and social engagement within the Instagram ecosystem. YouTube

Shorts, despite its still-developing interactive features, leverages the combined strength of short and long-form content to reach diverse user segments.

Factors influencing audience engagement on the three platforms include visual quality, content relevance, use of popular music, interactivity, and message delivery speed. Differences in engagement levels are also influenced by user demographics and unique distribution algorithms on each platform. This study shows that short videos are not only a form of entertainment but also a strategic tool for creators and marketers to build emotional connections with their audience through an easily consumable and interactive format. Therefore, a deep understanding of the characteristics and engagement factors on each platform is crucial for optimising the effectiveness of short video content in the increasingly dynamic digital era.

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