VISUAL MEDIA IN MOTION: CONCEPTUALIZING THE SHORT VIDEO FORMAT WITHIN VISUAL PLATFORMS

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Abstract

Social media have become increasingly visually focused with the rise of visual-centric platforms like Instagram and TikTok, reshaping aesthetics and user experience. In these mobile-first spaces, vertical short videos redefined digital storytelling, content creation, and engagement. Although their relevance has fostered a rich and expanding body of research, a conceptualization of "short videos" remains elusive, with varying terminology across studies. Moreover, research on visual communication has extensively focused on static images, while missing conceptual work with respect to moving images designed for mobile consumption. Developing a conceptual framework is therefore essential, providing the foundation for systematically analyzing these audiovisual artifacts.

Drawing from format theory, social media studies, multimodality and visual communication, this work introduces a conceptualization of short videos as a distinctive media format, defined by structural characteristics that allow to distinguish and analyze them across platforms. This work outlines the technical infrastructure and audiovisual features of the format, discussing how the interplay of diverse modes of communication fosters both collective and individual experiences, thereby shaping meaning making. This conceptual framework expands research on moving images in mobile environments, offering a comprehensive understanding of the role of short videos within visual and social media culture and supporting methodologies to examine their multimodal components.

Conceptualizing short videos as a distinctive media format

Vertical short videos have become a ubiquitous format of social media platforms. These audiovisual artifacts typically last from a few seconds to a few minutes (Anderson, 2020) and align seamlessly with smartphone interfaces and usage patterns, maximizing the potential of fast mobile consumption (Mulier et al., 2021; Ryan, 2018). Given the increasing content consumption via smartphones (Newman et al., 2024) and content

abundance on platforms (Boczkowski, 2021), short videos are crucial as they capture and maintain users' attention through dynamic storytelling, serendipitous content discovery (H. Yang et al., 2023; Q. Yang & Lee, 2022) and playful affordances (Cervi & Divon, 2023). Previous research has crucially contributed to advancing our understanding of short videos; however, a shared conceptualization is lacking, and terminology varies across studies. For example, some studies use the term "video" regardless of platform, whether referring to Vine (L. Zhang et al., 2014), Snapchat (Schreiber, 2017), Instagram (Muñoz & Towner, 2017), TikTok (Cervi & Divon, 2023), or in cross-platforms studies (Bossetta, 2018). Others adopt "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 also occurs within the same study (Anderson, 2020; Lee, 2023). Research on TikTok show the most diverse terminology, e.g. "video content" (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022), "short-video content" (Schellewald, 2021; Shutsko, 2020), and "user-generated short-form videos (UGSVs)" (Wang, 2021). Some studies explore TikTok videos as a format, considering platform-specific affordances and features (Cervi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Kaye et al., 2022). While these definitions agree on brevity, they interchangeably use the terms "content," "form," and "format." A clear conceptual framework identifies the distinctive characteristics of short videos, distinguishes them from other audiovisuals, enables tracking their evolution cross-platforms and thus allows for systematic comparison across diverse settings, supporting cumulative research (McLeod & Pan, 2005).

The term "content" refers to the information and meanings conveyed by media (McQuail & Deuze, 2020), and to the diverse materials produced and shared across platforms, including posts, images, videos, and music (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Papacharissi, 2009; van Dijck, 2013). In contrast, "form" denotes the visible configuration and structures of media artifacts, distinct from their "content" (Aiello & Parry, 2020). "Format" indicates both technical configuration and socio-cultural meaning, comprehensively encompassing media creation, distribution, and consumption (Sterne, 2012). A format, indeed, specifies formal and aesthetic configurations of media, ensures interoperability across infrastructures, and guides user agency (Jancovic et al., 2019).

The "short video format" emerges as the most suitable conceptualization, as it is grounded on the relation among operational standards, affordances, intended uses and situational context, components that are in dialogue with one another, as proposed by Sterne (2012).

The short video format then is an audiovisual artifact that shapes meaning through diverse modes of communication (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Despite evolving platform infrastructures and affordances (Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Papacharissi, 2009; van Dijck, 2013), this format maintains core structural characteristics over time, which are outlined in the following:

- *infrastructure designed for visual spaces*: short videos originated on visual, mobile-first platforms like Vine (Vandersmissen et al., 2014; L. Zhang et al., 2014) and Snapchat (Bayer et al., 2016). They spread to other platforms under the action of users and competitors (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; van Dijck, 2013), carrying with them aesthetics and associated practices;

- *short length*: "short" refers both to the typical duration of these videos, and the experience of consumption or "short-lived consumption" (Schellewald, 2021, p. 1437), encouraging continuous scrolling (Lupinacci, 2021) and content flow that foster engagement through serendipitous discovery (Q. Yang & Lee, 2022; S. Yang et al., 2019), keeping user attention over time (Zhang et al., 2014).
- *vertical display*: the short video format typically adopts a 9:16 aspect ratio for optimal viewing on smartphone. This challenged traditional compositional norms for horizontal moving images, while creating an aesthetic suited to the intimate, personal experience of mobile use (Napoli, 2016; Ryan, 2018);
- *creative customization functions*: built-in editing tools enable accessible customization (Gerlitz et al., 2019), enhance creativity (Shutsko, 2020), boost engagement by making content creation playful (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Schellewald, 2021;) and foster socio-cultural practices such as imitation and re-interpretation of content (Zeng & Abidin, 2021);
- *auditory affordances*: sound plays a key role in creative production and social engagement, with audio features that drive trends, storytelling, and interactivity (Abidin, 2020, p. 2; Zeng & Abidin, 2021). The possibility to include subtitles improve accessibility, benefiting diverse audiences (Agulló et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021);
- *interactive features and cross-platform transitions*: affordances such as sharing, commenting, and liking, drives engagement, social interaction, and identity expression, fostering individual and collective socio-cultural practices (Schellewald, 2021; Zeng & Abidin, 2021) within and beyond their native platforms (Ge et al., 2021; Schellewald, 2021; Yaqi et al., 2021);
- *versatility of communicative genres*: the short video format offers high personalization and combines different modes of communication, conveying diverse communicative genres and fulfilling varying social function (Van Leeuwen, 2005). This lead to widespread use by stakeholders like companies (Ge et al., 2021), news providers (Klug & Autenrieth, 2022), educators (Carpenter et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2021), and politicians (Cervi et al., 2021; Medina Serrano et al., 2020).

These characteristics form the foundation of a conceptual framework that identifies short videos as a cross-platform format, enables tracking changes, connects studies grounded in diverse settings, and supports cumulative research (McLeod & Pan, 2005).

Conclusions and future directions

Conceptualizing short videos as a format offers a comprehensive understanding of their role within visual and social media culture, exploring how the interplay of diverse mode of communication (Van Leeuwen, 2005), operational standards, affordances, intended uses and situational context (Sterne, 2012) shape meanings. In doing so, this conceptual framework contributes to existing research by providing a theoretical foundation that enhances and encourages dialogue across studies (McLeod & Pan, 2005) and supports tailored methodologies for examining in-depth the multiple components of short videos.

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