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VIEWER-CENTRED DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR SHORT-FORM VIDEO MARKETING: INSIGHTS FROM A GEN Z AND STUDENT AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

In today's intelligence era, where digital media consumption is shaped by algorithms and rapid viewer interactions, short-form videos on social media platforms have transformed marketing communication strategies. However, content creators often face challenges such as low viewer retention and limited understanding of audience preferences. This study addresses these issues by developing a data-informed, viewer-centred design guideline for creating engaging short-form marketing videos, using a design-and-development research (DDR) approach comprising a needs analysis survey, formative expert evaluation, and summative field evaluation with content creators. A needs analysis survey of 40 Gen Z and student social media users (ages approximately 15 to 30, currently studying) have identified eight candidate design elements through descriptive and thematic analysis of preference data and open-ended responses. The draft guideline was refined through formative evaluation by three multimedia experts and field-tested in a summative evaluation with five content creators, who implemented the guideline in their own videos on TikTok, Instagram, and RedNote. Engagement metrics (views, likes, comments, shares, and engagement rate) were compared between each creator's guideline-based video and a matched baseline video, measured over the same one-week window. All five creators showed an increase in engagement rate after applying the guideline, providing field evidence of the guideline's practicality and perceived usefulness rather than a statistically confirmed causal effect. By integrating viewer insights with structured design strategies, this research contributes to the evolving discourse on media transformation in the intelligence era and offers an evidence-informed framework developed specifically for Gen Z and student content creators and marketers seeking to enhance short-form video engagement.

Keywords: Design Guideline, Engagement Metrics, Gen Z, Short-Form Video, Social Media Marketing

INTRODUCTION

In the fast-evolving digital media landscape, short-form videos have emerged as a defining trend, reshaping how brands and individuals communicate with their audiences. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are at the forefront of this transformation, attracting marketers seeking to connect with viewers in more immediate, visually compelling ways. Nearly seven in ten marketers now consider short-form marketing videos to be among the most engaging content formats (Mosby, 2025). Typically, under 60 seconds in length, these videos align with shifting media consumption patterns and declining attention spans. Research shows that 66% of one-minute videos are watched in full, whereas longer formats rapidly lose audience interest (Edwards, 2025). By delivering fast-paced, visually driven content, short videos not only match contemporary audience preferences but also offer cost-effective marketing opportunities, particularly for small and start-up companies operating on limited budgets (Tran, 2024).

Short-form videos may not always translate into higher subscriber counts, but they play a critical role in generating interactions, fostering engagement, and increasing brand visibility (Stepanova, 2024). Yet, despite their popularity, many content creators struggle to achieve meaningful viewer engagement. The Aesthetic-Usability concept suggests that visually appealing content is perceived as more usable and enjoyable (Moran, 2024), while other studies highlight that personalisation and precise pacing can enhance viewer retention (Bao et al., 2024). However, such insights remain scattered across the literature and are rarely consolidated into a clear, actionable framework for practitioners.

As a first step toward addressing this gap, this study conducted its own needs analysis survey (Stage 1 of the methodology reported below) with 40 social media viewers aged 16 and above. Consistent with prior evidence that heavy or undirected short-form video consumption is linked to reduced attentional control (Xie et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2024), the survey indicated that many content creators experience low viewer retention due to a limited understanding of audience preferences. Without targeted design guidance, creators risk producing videos that fail to capture attention, communicate effectively, or stand out in a highly competitive social media environment. This gap between research and practice limits not only the impact of individual content creators but also the overall potential of short-form video marketing in the intelligence era.

To bridge this gap, the present study develops a research-based short-video design guideline grounded in audience preferences. The guideline identifies eight key elements. Its effectiveness was explored in two further phases: a formative evaluation by three multimedia experts to assess quality, usability, and effectiveness, followed by a summative evaluation in which five content creators applied the guideline to their own videos. The results, based on before-and-after comparisons, offer preliminary, practice-based evidence that a structured, preference-driven approach may help improve engagement metrics, and provide creators with a practical starting point for producing short-form marketing content, while, as discussed in the Limitations section, further controlled research is needed before the approach can be generalised or claimed to be statistically effective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Short-Form Video Consumption and Engagement

Short-form video (SFV) has rapidly consolidated as a dominant content format in contemporary digital marketing, driven by both user behaviour and platform affordances. Empirical analyses of user engagement on short-format platforms reveal that SFVs attract different interaction patterns than longer videos; they tend to elicit rapid, often brief viewing sessions that are strongly shaped by recommendation algorithms and user feed design (Zannettou et al., 2024). At the same time, clinical and behavioural studies indicate that heavy consumption of SFV formats is associated with altered attentional dynamics and faster content-switching behaviour, suggesting that SFV consumption both reflects and contributes to changing attention patterns among frequent users (Yan et al., 2024; Xie et al., 2023).

Platform mechanics and recommender systems play a central role in amplifying SFV reach and shaping content form. Studies of TikTok and other short-video ecosystems show that platform design features (infinite scroll, autoplay, vertical orientation) and algorithmic ranking jointly determine which videos achieve wide exposure, producing engagement dynamics that differ markedly from those on traditional social media timelines (Zannettou et al., 2024). Empirical work also highlights that platform-specific affordances encourage certain stylistic norms, for example, vertical framing and "snackable" pacing, which creators must adapt to if they wish to benefit from organic amplification (Meng, 2024).

Content Marketing, Social Media Marketing, and Consumer Engagement

Beyond platform mechanics, the broader content-marketing literature situates short-form video within a wider shift in how brands and creators pursue consumer engagement. Comparative studies of long-form versus short-form video marketing suggest that the two formats serve different roles in the marketing funnel and generate different consumer responses depending on advertising context and viewer age, with short-form content generally favoured for top-of-funnel attention and engagement while long-form content retains an advantage for detailed persuasion (Maenhout, De Kerpel, & Mulier, 2022). Comparative trend analyses similarly note that short-form video's brevity and mobile-first design align it closely with contemporary social media consumption habits, while long-form video continues to serve deeper informational and brand-building goals (Rugrien & Funk, 2022). From a consumer-behaviour perspective, effectiveness research on short- and long-form video marketing suggests that format choice interacts with audience characteristics and platform norms to shape purchase-related outcomes, reinforcing the need for context-specific, audience-informed design guidance rather than one-size-fits-all recommendations (Riaz, 2025).

Within this broader marketing context, user engagement itself is best understood as a multidimensional construct spanning attention (views, watch time), affective response (likes), and active participation (comments, shares) (Whiting & Williams, 2013). This framing motivates the present study's use of views, likes, comments, and shares, rather than a single metric, as the basis for assessing whether the design guideline is associated with improved viewer engagement.

Content Characteristics that Predict Viewer Response

A growing body of empirical research has examined the content characteristics that predict viewer responses to SFVs. Large-sample analyses of short-form video ads demonstrate that content characteristics such as attractiveness, perceived trustworthiness, and emotional appeal correlate positively with consumer behavioural outcomes (Meng, 2024). Experimental and survey work further indicates that structural elements — a prominent immediate hook, concise messaging, and an explicit call to action — as well as audiovisual features (tempo, soundtrack, and clear captions) are associated with improved retention and engagement metrics (Luo, 2025; Meng, 2024). Neurocognitive and psychological investigations complement these findings by showing how rapid visual novelty and emotionally congruent audio can sustain attention in short viewing episodes (Yan et al., 2024).

Research Gap

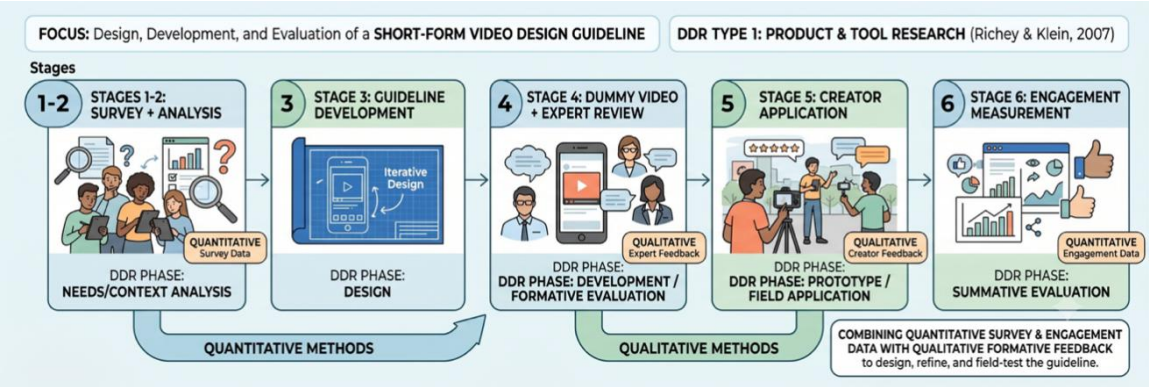
Despite these advances, the literature reveals important gaps that motivate applied, design-oriented research. While several studies isolate individual predictors of engagement (e.g., trust signals, emotional tone, authenticity), fewer empirical works synthesise viewer preference data, expert practice, and creator usability into unified, actionable design guidelines for practitioners. Moreover, much of the publicly cited platform performance data remains proprietary or descriptive (platform white papers or marketing science reports), limiting reproducibility and academic scrutiny. This study therefore addresses a practical research gap by integrating viewer preference data, expert formative feedback, and creator testing into a consolidated short-video design guideline intended for use in real-world social media marketing, while explicitly acknowledging the exploratory, non-statistical nature of its own supporting evidence (see Limitations).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a design-and-development research (DDR) approach (Richey & Klein, 2007), specifically Type 1 product and tool research, which centres on the design, development, and evaluation of the short-form video design guideline through structured needs analysis, iterative design, and formative and summative evaluation. Within this DDR framework, quantitative survey and engagement data were combined with qualitative formative feedback from experts and creators to design, refine, and field-test the guideline. The research process consisted of six sequential stages, mapped onto the DDR phases of needs/context analysis, design, development, and evaluation, as illustrated in Figure 1. This section describes how the study was conducted; the resulting data, statistics, and figures are reported in the Findings section.

Figure 1

Research Methodology Overview: Design and Development of Short-form Video Guideline



Stage 1: Needs Analysis Survey

The first stage of the research involved conducting an online needs analysis survey to gather insights into audience preferences for short-form marketing videos. A total of 40 participants were recruited using criterion-based purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) actively use at least one short-form video platform (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels, or equivalent), (b) view short-form content at least several times per week, so that responses reflected the preferences of an active viewer base rather than the general population, (c) be aged approximately 15 to 30 years, to represent the Gen Z demographic that the guideline is primarily intended for, and (d) be currently enrolled as students in an educational institution, reflecting the study's focus on the student-heavy audience segment most engaged with short-form video platforms. Recruitment was not restricted rigidly to these boundaries: individuals who fell close to the specified age range or study status, but did not strictly meet one of these two criteria, were also considered eligible, provided they clearly met the platform-use and viewing-frequency criteria (a) and (b). This flexible boundary was adopted to avoid excluding otherwise relevant respondents because of minor deviations from the target age or student-status profile, while keeping the overall sample broadly representative of the intended Gen Z, student-heavy population.

The survey was designed to synthesise and validate isolated elements from existing short-form video research into a unified framework for assessing viewer preferences. The questionnaire was divided into four parts, as follows:

- Demographic profiles (age, gender, employment status) to segment responses.
- Social media usage patterns, including platform preference and frequency, to identify behavioural trends observed in algorithmic engagement studies (Dou & Zhang, 2023).
- Video-watching habits and engagement dynamics (Zannettou et al., 2024).

- Duration preferences, evaluating optimal length as debated in platform-specific literature (Zannettou et al., 2024).

Responses, collected via a Google form, were analysed descriptively (frequencies and percentages) and thematically (for open-ended comments) to bridge gaps between fragmented academic findings and real-world creator practices. The demographic profile of respondents is reported in the Findings section (Table 2).

Stage 2: Data Analysis — Defining Engagement Elements

The survey data (n = 40) were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) to identify dominant audience preferences and patterns in short-form video consumption, covering video duration, reasons for skipping videos, audio preferences, and preferences regarding video introductions. From this analysis, a list of candidate engagement elements was generated and evaluated in terms of frequency, importance, and alignment with existing literature on video engagement and marketing effectiveness. The resulting statistics and figures are reported in the Findings section (Figures 2 to 5).

Stage 3: Guideline Development

Using the findings from Stage 2, a structured, viewer-centred draft guideline was developed, integrating two sources of evidence: the descriptive statistics from the closed-ended survey items (video duration, reasons for skipping videos, audio preferences, and attitudes toward introductions), and a thematic analysis of the open-ended survey responses. Open-ended responses were read individually, assigned a short descriptive code capturing the underlying viewer need or preference expressed, and grouped into categories based on recurring codes. Each category was then ranked as high, medium, or low priority according to how frequently it was raised and how directly it related to viewer engagement outcomes. Categories rated high or medium priority were mapped onto corresponding design elements; the lowest-priority category was noted for possible later inclusion pending further evidence, which subsequently occurred following expert review (Stage 4). This combined quantitative–qualitative process resulted in seven draft elements, presented alongside the full survey and thematic evidence behind them in the Findings section (Table 2 and Table 6).

Stage 4: Dummy Video Creation and Formative Evaluation

A short marketing video was produced as a dummy to demonstrate the practical application of each element in the draft guideline and to test its usability. This video served both as a test case for formative evaluation and as a reference example for content creators during subsequent field testing. Consistent with DDR practice, formative evaluation at this stage was conducted with a small expert panel to identify and correct design flaws before the guideline was field-tested with real users. Small, purposively selected expert panels (typically three to five evaluators) are considered methodologically adequate for formative usability evaluation, since a small panel can surface a substantial share of usability and clarity issues, with diminishing returns beyond five evaluators (Nielsen & Molich, 1990; Nielsen & Landauer, 1993).

The draft guideline then underwent a formative evaluation by three multimedia and digital marketing experts. Experts were purposively selected based on (a) professional or academic experience in multimedia content design or digital marketing, and (b) direct familiarity with short-form video platforms. The formative evaluation panel comprised three multimedia and digital marketing experts with a combined 45 years of relevant experience. Two experts were drawn from academia, one with 20 years and one with 15 years of experience in creative multimedia and user experience (UX) education and research, while the third was an industry practitioner with 10 years of professional experience in the field. This composition provided a mix of theoretical/pedagogical and applied/practitioner perspectives. Panel details are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Formative Evaluation Expert Panel

Expert	Years of Experience	Affiliation	Gender
Expert 1	20 years	Academia	Female
Expert 2	15 years	Academia	Male
Expert 3	10 years	Industry / Practitioner	Female

Each expert was provided with the guideline document, the dummy video, and a structured evaluation form assessing clarity, usability, relevance, and completeness across three dimensions: design, content, and functionality. Feedback was collected through both verbal and written responses and was thematically summarised to refine the guideline; the resulting themes and the specific changes they produced are reported in the Findings section (Table 4).

Stage 5: Applying the Guideline in Practice

To operationalise the refined guideline, five volunteer content creators were recruited to produce prototype short-form marketing videos based on its recommendations. Each creator applied the eight design elements to develop a new video related to their own marketing context, on their platform of choice (TikTok, Instagram, or RedNote). This step served both as a real-world application test and as preparation for the summative evaluation described in Stage 6.

Stage 6: Summative Evaluation – Field Testing and Engagement Outcomes

The final phase constituted the summative evaluation stage of the DDR process: a field trial in which the guideline was applied by real content creators in authentic marketing contexts, and its practicality and perceived effectiveness were assessed using engagement metrics as supporting field evidence. This differs from a controlled experimental effectiveness study; consistent with DDR summative evaluation, the aim was to gather real-world evidence of whether the guideline performs acceptably and is perceived as useful and effective by its intended users (content creators), not to establish a statistically generalizable causal effect on engagement. The same five content creators each produced one short marketing video based on the guideline. To provide a point of comparison, a baseline video from each creator, matched by content type and theme, was selected from their previously posted content that had not been developed using the guideline. Engagement performance for both the baseline and guideline-based videos was measured over the same one-week window post-publication, using standard social media metrics: views, likes, comments, and shares. The engagement rate for each video was calculated as:

$$Engagement\ Rate = [(Likes + Comments + Shares) \div Views] \times 100$$

This comparison enabled an exploratory, descriptive assessment of audience interaction before and after guideline implementation. It is important to note that this before/after design does not control for a number of variables that can independently influence engagement, including posting time and day, platform algorithm changes between the two posting dates, ongoing follower growth, differences in topic attractiveness between the baseline and guideline-based videos, the use of trending audio or hashtags, paid or unpaid promotion, prior audience familiarity with the creator, and differences between platforms (TikTok, Instagram, RedNote). Because these factors were not controlled or measured, the engagement changes reported in the Findings section should be interpreted as associated with, rather than proven to be caused by, guideline implementation; no inferential statistical test was applied given the small number of creators (n = 5). This limitation, and recommendations for a more controlled future design, are discussed further in the Limitations and Future Research section.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the survey, the formative expert evaluation, the final validated guideline, and the summative creator evaluation.

Needs Analysis Survey Findings: Sample and Viewer Preferences

The 40 survey respondents were predominantly female (72.5%), with a majority falling within the 18–24 age group (87.5%), and 65% were students (Table 2). This demographic profile reflects the younger, digitally native user base most engaged with platforms like TikTok and Instagram; however, the underrepresentation of older age groups (only 7.5% above 35) and employed professionals (25%) means the resulting guideline is best interpreted as tailored to Gen Z and student-heavy audiences rather than social media users in general.

Table 2

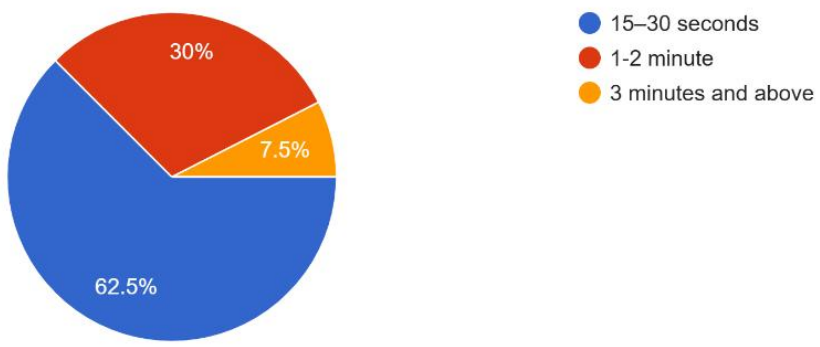
Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Demographic Factor	Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency
Gender	Male	27.5%	11
	Female	72.5%	29
Age	16–18	2.5%	1
	18–24	87.5%	35
	25–34	2.5%	1
	> 35	7.5%	3
Employment Status	Student	65%	26
	Employed	25%	10
	Self-employed	7.5%	3
	Retired	2.5%	1
Device Used	Smartphone	92%	38
	Tablet	8%	2

Regarding video duration, a dominant preference emerged for concise formats: 62.5% of respondents favoured videos of 15–30 seconds, 30% preferred videos of 1–2 minutes, and 7.5% preferred videos of 3 minutes or longer (Figure 2). This finding is broadly consistent with cognitive research on limited attention spans in short-form contexts (Dou & Zhang, 2023), underscoring the value of brevity in content design.

Figure 2

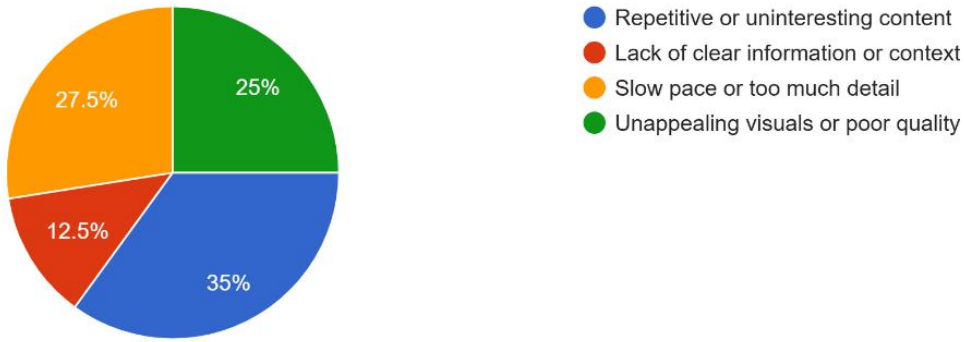
Video Duration Preferences



When examining engagement drop-off factors, 35% of participants attributed video abandonment to repetitive or uninteresting content, 27.5% to slow pace or too much detail, 25% to unappealing visuals or poor quality, and 12.5% to a lack of clear information or context (Figure 3). This is broadly consistent with prior research showing that frequent scene changes prompt attentional re-orientation and can reduce drop-off by maintaining visual novelty (Seywerth, Valuch, & Ansorge, 2017; Valuch et al., 2014).

Figure 3

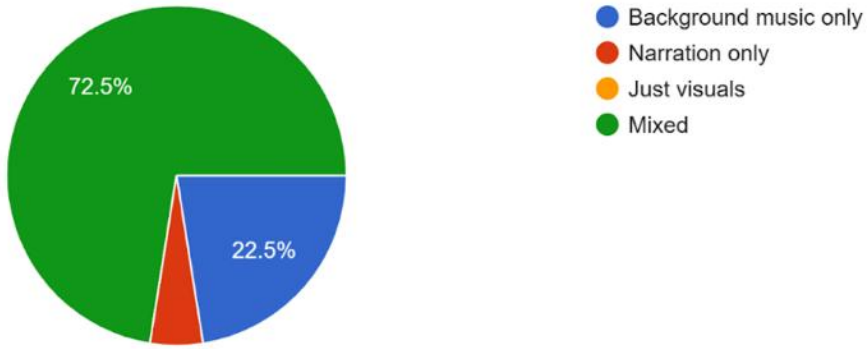
Reasons to Skip Video



Audio preferences showed a clear inclination toward videos combining both music and narration: 72.5% of respondents preferred mixed audio, 22.5% preferred background music only, and the remaining respondents preferred narration only or visuals without audio (Figure 4). This suggests that auditory richness, not simply the presence of music, is associated with viewer preference.

Figure 4

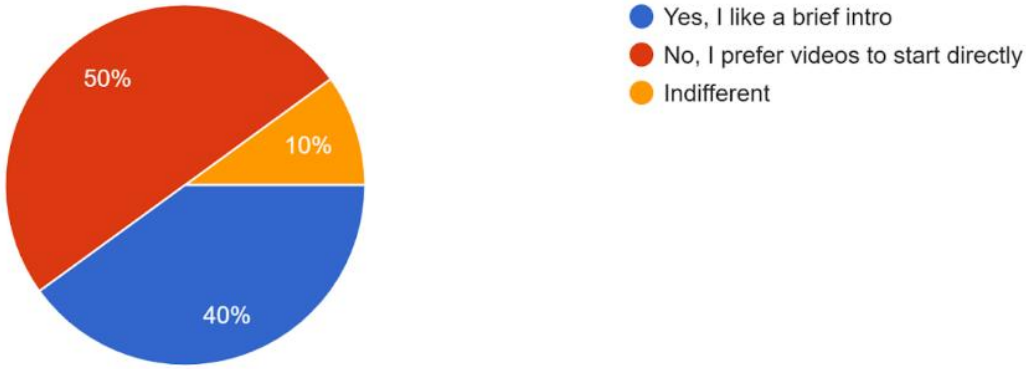
Audio Elements Preferences



Regarding introductions, 50% of respondents preferred videos to start directly without an introduction, 40% liked a brief intro, and 10% were indifferent (Figure 5). While this shows that starting content directly is the single most preferred option, it is a narrower majority than a prior draft of this manuscript reported, and the guideline element on this point should be read as a preference rather than a near-universal expectation. Rapid-hook findings from prior TikTok-ad research (Xiao, Li, & Mou, 2024) provide converging, though platform-specific, support for prioritising an early hook.

Figure 5

Brief Intro Preferences



Collectively, these preferences (i.e., duration, pacing/repetition, audio, and hooks) were operationalised into candidate design elements for the guideline (Table 2), consistent with the mobile-first, snackable content patterns described in prior literature (Mulier, Slabbinck, & Vermeir, 2021).

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Survey Responses

In addition to the descriptive analysis of closed-ended survey items reported above, open-ended responses were thematically coded following the procedure described in the Methodology (Stage 3). This process identified five categories, spanning two high-priority, two medium-priority, and one low-priority need (Table 3).

The two high-priority categories, optimal video duration and visual appeal and design**,** reflected respondents' emphasis on videos between 15–30 seconds for instant engagement, with longer videos (1–2 minutes) considered acceptable only when carrying a clear narrative or message, and a strong preference for eye-catching visuals, legible text, and background music to stand out in a crowded feed. The two medium-priority categories, advanced video editing and tailoring content to audience preferences, reflected a desire for professional editing techniques that maintain quality without appearing overproduced, and for content that reflects current trends and feels relevant to the viewer. The single low-priority category, understanding platform algorithms, reflected awareness among some respondents that hashtags, posting time, and engagement patterns affect how widely a video is seen, though this was raised less frequently and less directly tied to on-screen video design than the other four categories.

These categories directly informed the draft guideline (Table 3): the two high-priority categories map most closely onto the "Keep It Short," "High-Quality Visuals," and "Aesthetic Content" elements, while "Advanced Video Editing" and "Tailoring Content to Audience Preferences" are reflected more generally within "Aesthetic Content" and "Fast Pace," since specific editing techniques were considered too variable across creators' skill levels and software access to standardise into a single element. The low-priority "Understanding Platform Algorithms" category was not incorporated into the initial draft guideline but was revisited following expert review, contributing to the addition of the "Relevant Hashtags" element in the final guideline (Table 3). This partial translation of lower-priority categories into the final guideline is discussed further in the Limitations section.

Table 3

Thematic Coding Categories from Open-Ended Survey Responses

Category	Description	Priority	Participants' Comments	Related Guideline Element
Optimal Video Duration	Preference for short (15–30s) videos for instant engagement; longer videos (1–2 min) acceptable only for story-driven content	High	"I usually skip anything that takes too long to get to the point…15 or 30 seconds is perfect." "If it's a longer video I'll only finish it if there's an actual story, not just talking."	Keep It Short
Visual Appeal and Design	Emphasis on eye-catching visuals, readable text, and background music to stand out in a crowded feed	High	"The videos that stop my scrolling are the ones with really clean visuals and text I can actually read." "Background music makes a huge difference…silent videos feel unfinished to me."	High-Quality Visuals; Aesthetic Content
Advanced Video Editing	Desire for professional editing techniques (transitions, effects) to maintain quality and a distinct style	Medium	"You can tell when a creator knows how to edit…the cuts and transitions keep me watching." "I like when effects are used but not overdone, it should still feel natural."	Aesthetic Content; Fast Pace
Tailoring Content to Audience Preferences	Preference for content that reflects current trends and feels relevant to the viewer's interests	Medium	"I follow creators who post what's actually trending right now, not old formats." "Content feels more worth watching when it's clearly made for people like me."	Aesthetic Content
Understanding Platform Algorithms	Awareness that hashtags, posting time, and engagement patterns affect video reach	Low	"I've noticed videos with good hashtags show up more on my For You page." "Posting time seems to matter…some of my favourite creators post at the same time every day."	Relevant Hashtags

The Draft and Final Guideline

Table 4 presents the first (draft) version of the guideline, derived directly from the survey findings above.

Table 4

Proposed Short-Video Design Guideline for Social Media Marketing (Draft Version)

Element	Description	Rationale
1. Keep It Short	Videos should be between 15–30 seconds.	Aligns with audience attention spans and platform norms, increasing likelihood of full video completion.
2. High-Quality Visuals	Use sharp, clear visuals, 480p–1080p resolution.	Visual appeal enhances perceived professionalism and keeps viewers engaged.
3. Engaging Content	Create aesthetic, attention-grabbing visuals and concise messaging.	Increases retention by delivering value quickly and appealingly.
4. Music or Narration	Add background music, narration, or both, aligned with video tone.	Audio elements enrich immersion and help sustain attention.
5. Start Video Directly	Skip long intros and immediately present key content.	Captures viewer interest early, reducing drop-offs in the first few seconds.
6. Fast Pace	Keep the video fast paced to keep the audience engaged.	Maintains energy and prevents disengagement due to slow pacing.
7. Avoid Repetition	Ensure smooth flow without repeating visuals or dialogue.	Prevents viewer boredom and maintains narrative coherence.

Following the formative expert evaluation (Table 6), four substantive revisions were made; clarifying the fast-paced element, raising the minimum resolution standard, emphasising flexible application, and adding a hashtag element, producing the final, validated guideline shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Final Validated Short-Video Design Guideline for Social Media Marketing

Element	Description	Rationale
1. Keep It Short	Videos should be between 15–30 seconds.	Aligns with audience attention spans and platform norms, increasing likelihood of full video completion.
2. High-Quality Visuals	Use sharp, clear visuals, 720p–1080p resolution.	Visual appeal enhances perceived professionalism and keeps viewers engaged.
3. Aesthetic Content	Create aesthetic, attention-grabbing visuals and concise messaging.	Increases retention by delivering value quickly and appealingly.
4. Music or Narration	Add background music, narration, or both, aligned with video tone.	Audio elements enrich immersion and help sustain attention.
5. Start Video Directly	Skip long intros and immediately present key content.	Captures viewer interest early, reducing drop-offs in the first few

		seconds.
6. Fast Pace	Keep the video fast-paced (recommended 2–3 seconds per scene) to keep the audience engaged.	Maintains energy and prevents disengagement due to slow pacing.
7. Avoid Repetition	Ensure smooth flow without repeating visuals or dialogue.	Prevents viewer boredom and maintains narrative coherence.
8. Relevant Hashtags	Add specific and trending hashtags to help the video reach a wider audience.	Relevant hashtags help increase visibility on social media platforms.

The guideline was developed to be platform-agnostic, that is, intended as a generic short-form-video design framework rather than a guideline specific to any single platform. This is reflected in Stage 5 and 6, where creators applied it on three different platforms (TikTok, Instagram, and RedNote) rather than one. Readers should note, however, that the underlying survey (Stage 1) asked primarily about TikTok- and Instagram-style content, so the guideline's applicability to other platforms (including RedNote, where one creator tested it) has not yet been independently validated by platform-specific survey data.

Formative Expert Evaluation

The formative evaluation with three multimedia and digital marketing experts focused on three dimensions: design, content, and functionality. Table 6 summarises the main themes raised by the experts and the corresponding changes made to the guideline.

Table 6

Formative Expert Feedback Themes and Resulting Guideline Changes

Theme	Expert Feedback Summary	Resulting Change to the Guideline
Clarity of "fast pace"	Experts felt the term "fast-paced" was too vague to be actionable without a concrete benchmark.	Added a recommendation of 2–3 seconds per scene and an illustrative timeline.
Technical standards	Experts considered the original 480p minimum resolution outdated for current mobile devices and platform standards.	Minimum resolution revised from 480p to 1080p.
Usability / flexibility	Experts noted that not every element would suit every content goal and asked for explicit permission to adapt.	Guideline text revised to clarify that elements should be selectively applied based on content goals.
Completeness / discoverability	Experts noted the draft guideline did not address discoverability, only on-screen content quality.	Added a new eighth element: "Relevant Hashtags," supported by Kumar, Qiu & Kumar (2022) and Alustwani & Shaari (2024).

The experts did not raise concerns requiring changes beyond those summarised in Table 6; the revised guideline (Table 5) was accepted as ready for summative testing with content creators.

Summative Evaluation: Creator Testing and Engagement Outcomes

In the summative evaluation, five active content creators each produced one video using the final guideline and posted it on their own social media platform (TikTok, Instagram, or RedNote). Engagement metrics for each guideline-based video were compared with a matched baseline video that had not used the guideline, measured over the same one-week window. All five creators showed an increase in engagement rate after applying the guideline (Table 7; Figures 6–10).

Table 7

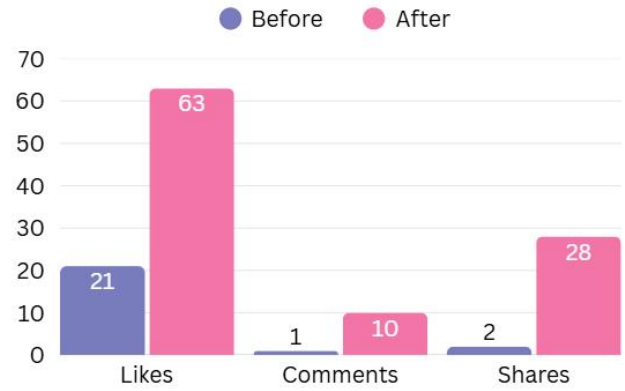
Engagement Metrics Before and After Guideline Implementation

Creator's Account (Platform)	Phase	Views	Likes + Comments + Shares	Engagement Rate	Change
*5.blooms_*	Before	918	24	2.61%	+4.61 pp
(Instagram)	After	1,398	101	7.23%	
hotdoggerino	Before	385	11	2.86%	+5.97 pp
(TikTok)	After	6,842	604	8.83%	
Mmmme7	Before	126	7	5.56%	+8.12 pp
(TikTok)	After	307	42	13.68%	
Serambipelangichanglun	Before	416	4	0.96%	+13.12 pp
(TikTok)	After	412	58	14.08%	
Wenyi	Before	182	10	5.49%	+8.08 pp
(RedNote)	After	516	70	13.57%	

For the *5.blooms* Instagram account, views increased from 918 to 1,398, and the engagement rate rose from 2.61% to 7.23%. Likes rose from 21 to 63, comments from 1 to 10, and shares from 2 to 28 (Figure 6). The pronounced rise in likes and shares relative to the modest rise in views suggests the video may have retained and engaged viewers more effectively, though as noted in the Methodology section, this cannot be attributed to the guideline alone given the uncontrolled comparison design.

Figure 6

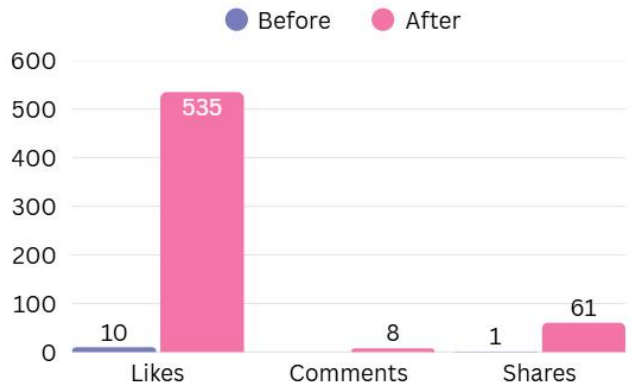
Comparison of Engagement Metrics of 5.blooms (Instagram account)



For the *hotdoggerino* TikTok account, views increased substantially from 385 to 6,842, and the engagement rate rose from 2.86% to 8.83%. Likes rose from 10 to 535, comments from 0 to 8, and shares from 1 to 61 (Figure 7).

Figure 7

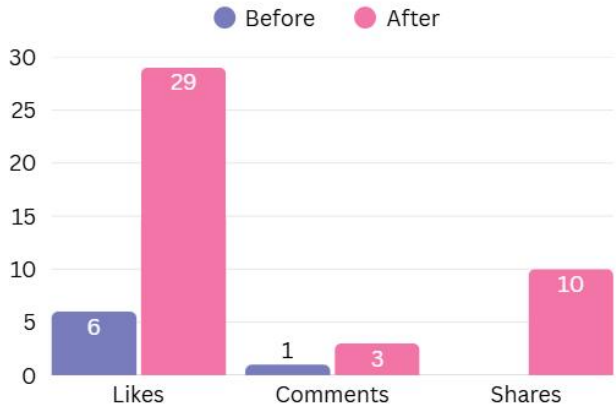
Comparison of Engagement Metrics of hotdoggerino (TikTok account)



For the *Mmmme7* TikTok account, views rose from 126 to 307, and the engagement rate rose from 5.56% to 13.68%. Likes rose from 6 to 29, comments from 1 to 3, and shares from nil to 10 (Figure 8). The creator reported not applying the fast-pace element, because the video needed to include detailed product information; engagement nonetheless rose, suggesting the guideline's other elements may have contributed independently of pacing, though, again, this cannot be confirmed causally from this design.

Figure 8

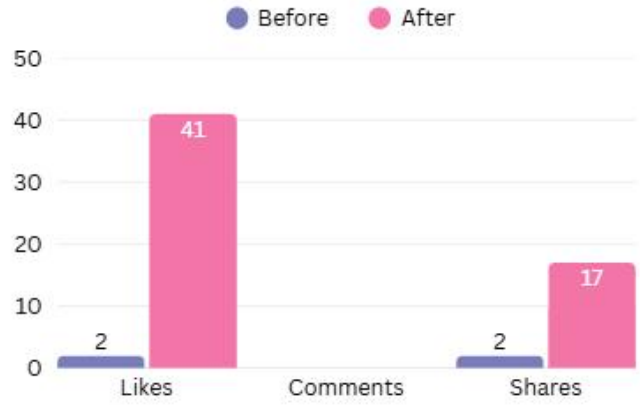
Comparison of Engagement Metrics of Mmmme7 (TikTok account)



For the *Serambipelangichanglun* TikTok account, views remained essentially stable (416 before, 412 after), while the engagement rate rose from 0.96% to 14.08%. Likes rose from 2 to 41, shares from 2 to 17, and comments unchanged at nil. The rise in engagement rate remains the largest observed among the five creators, driven entirely by increased interaction rather than increased reach (Figure 9).

Figure 9

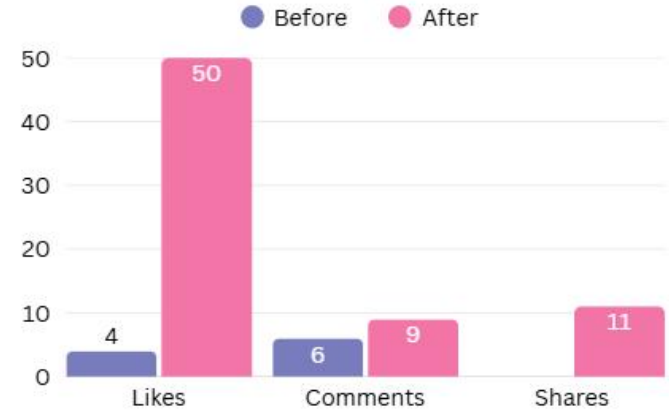
Comparison of Engagement Metrics of Serambipelangichanglun (TikTok account)



For the *Wenyi* RedNote account, views rose from 182 to 516, and the engagement rate rose from 5.49% to 13.57%. Likes rose from 4 to 50, comments from 6 to 9, and shares from nil to 11 (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Comparison of Engagement Metrics of Wenyi (RedNote account)



In addition to the engagement metrics, the content creators provided informal positive feedback, describing the guideline as easy to follow, practical, and helpful in structuring their content. They reported that the step-by-step recommendations were clear and applicable across the different platforms they used. None of the five creators reported significant difficulty applying the guideline or expressed confusion about any of the design elements; this feedback was collected informally (verbal/written comments) rather than through a structured qualitative protocol and should be read as supportive rather than rigorously validated user-experience data.

DISCUSSION

Engagement rate rose for all five content creators after applying the short-video design guideline, suggesting that the guideline is a plausible, practice-relevant translation of theoretical principles into marketing practice. However, as noted above, this exploratory before/after comparison, without statistical testing or control of confounding variables, cannot establish that the guideline caused the observed increases. This finding is broadly consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Whiting & Williams, 2013), which posits that audiences actively select media that fulfil their

personal needs for entertainment, information, and social connection. In this context, the preference for fast-paced, visually dynamic, and emotionally resonant short-form video reflects viewers' apparent motivation for quick, rewarding media experiences that align with limited attention spans and mobile viewing habits.

The pattern of results is also broadly consistent with Media Richness Theory (Carlson & George, 2004), which holds that media combining multiple cues can be more effective at delivering complex, emotionally engaging messages. The guideline's integration of high-quality visuals, music or narration, and concise structure reflects this kind of richness, and may help content creators communicate brand messages more effectively within a short timeframe.

The design element emphasising music or narration is also broadly consistent with Dual Coding Theory (Mayer & Moreno, 2003), which suggests that information is better retained when presented through both verbal (audio) and non-verbal (visual) channels. The informal positive feedback from creators regarding the emotional appeal and clarity of their revised videos is suggestive of this mechanism, though it was not measured with a validated comprehension or recall instrument.

Similarly, the guideline's emphasis on aesthetic quality and visual appeal is broadly consistent with the Aesthetic–Usability Effect (Kurosu & Kashimura, 1995), which holds that users often perceive aesthetically pleasing content as more usable, trustworthy, and enjoyable. Creators in this study reported that the guideline helped them produce visually consistent, appealing videos, and expressed increased confidence in their content's quality.

Taken together, these theoretical connections suggest a plausible mechanism by which the guideline's individual elements could jointly support engagement. However, because the study used a small, non-random sample of five creators, an uncontrolled before/after comparison, and no inferential statistical testing, these theoretical links should be read as an interpretive framework for the observed pattern rather than as confirmed causal explanations. Future research using a controlled or statistically powered design (see Limitations) would be needed to test these theoretical mechanisms directly, for example, by isolating individual guideline elements (e.g., pacing versus hashtag use) to identify which, if any, drive engagement independently.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge theoretical understanding with practical design strategies. By translating media and cognitive theories into an empirically informed (though not yet statistically validated) guideline, this research offers content creators a structured, evidence-informed starting point for designing short marketing videos aligned with viewers stated preferences. The guideline's flexibility allows creators to selectively apply techniques such as fast pacing, aesthetic visuals, and relevant hashtags, based on their own content goals and target audiences, which may aid its adaptability across marketing contexts, though this too remains to be tested directly.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings and applying the guideline in practice.

- **Sample size and generalisability:** The online needs analysis survey (n = 40) was purposively recruited to represent Gen Z, student-heavy short-form-video viewers (ages approximately 15 to 30, currently studying), consistent with the guideline's intended audience. However, even within this target population, the realised sample was narrower than the recruitment criteria allowed: 87.5% of respondents fell specifically within the 18–24 sub-range, and 72.5% were female, so the guideline reflects the preferences of this narrower slice of Gen Z more strongly than the full 15 to 30, student-and-near-student range originally targeted. The sample was also drawn from a single geographic/institutional context, which was not reported. As a result, the guideline should be read as evidence-informed for Gen Z and student audiences broadly, but not yet validated across the full age range, gender balance, or institutional/geographic diversity within that population. A small expert panel (n = 3) and creator-testing sample (n =

5) further limit how confidently these findings can be extended even within the target demographic.

- **Uncontrolled before/after comparison:** The comparison between each creator's baseline and guideline-based video did not control for posting time and day, platform algorithm changes between the two posting dates, ongoing follower growth, differences in topic attractiveness, the use of trending audio or hashtags, paid or unpaid promotion, prior audience familiarity, or differences between platforms. Any of these factors could independently explain part of the observed engagement change. Future studies should adopt a more controlled design, for example, a counterbalanced or randomised assignment of guideline versus non-guideline conditions across multiple videos per creator, or a matched-pair design with platform and posting-time controls.
- **Engagement metrics only:** This study measured engagement metrics (views, likes, comments, shares, engagement rate) but did not examine conversion metrics, such as click-throughs, website visits, sign-ups, or sales, which are often of greater interest to marketers and small businesses. Future research should extend this work to examine whether guideline-based videos are also associated with improved conversion outcomes.
- **Platform scope:** Although the guideline is intended to be platform-agnostic, the underlying survey focused primarily on TikTok- and Instagram-style content, and only one of the five creators tested the guideline on a third platform (RedNote). Future research should test the guideline across a broader and more balanced set of platforms, including YouTube Shorts, Facebook Reels, and Threads.

Addressing these limitations in future work (i.e., larger and more diverse samples, controlled comparison designs, formal statistical testing, fuller qualitative reporting, and the inclusion of conversion metrics) would strengthen the evidentiary basis for the guideline and support broader claims about its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study responds to the rapid rise of short-form video platforms and the need to understand how audiences engage with fast-paced, visually dynamic content. While traditional storytelling models often prioritise gradual build-up and narrative depth, the findings are consistent with the idea that contemporary audiences, particularly Gen Z and students, value immediacy, concise editing, and direct delivery of core content. By operationalising design elements such as dynamic editing, fast pacing, high-resolution standards, and the strategic use of relevant hashtags, this study offers a preliminary bridge between theoretical frameworks of media engagement and the practical realities of content creation in digital environments.

The contribution of this study is twofold: it adds to academic discourse on media consumption behaviour, and it offers an exploratory, practice-oriented starting point for content creators seeking to improve short-form video engagement. The study's conclusions are necessarily provisional. Reliance on self-reported survey data, a small and demographically narrow sample, an uncontrolled before/after comparison, and the absence of inferential statistical testing all restrict the generalisability of the findings. The study also does not fully account for platform-specific affordances, algorithmic influences, or long-term audience retention patterns, and does not examine conversion-related outcomes.

Future research should extend this work by conducting larger-scale, cross-platform comparative studies with controlled or randomised designs; applying appropriate inferential statistics; reporting qualitative coding procedures in full; examining conversion metrics alongside engagement metrics; and exploring emerging features such as interactive elements and AI-driven personalisation. Such work would help establish whether the associations observed here reflect a genuine causal effect of the guideline and would clarify the guideline's relevance beyond the Gen Z, student-heavy population studied here.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by all authors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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