

# **The TikTok Illusion: A Systematic Review Why Short-Form Video Marketing Overhyped and Unsustainable for Brands**

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## **Abstrak**

Pertumbuhan pesat TikTok dan platform video pendek telah mengubah lanskap pemasaran digital, mendorong merek untuk berinvestasi besar-besaran dalam konten yang dirancang untuk viralitas dan keterlibatan. Namun, ada kekhawatiran yang semakin meningkat bahwa strategi semacam itu, meskipun efektif dalam jangka pendek, mungkin tidak menawarkan nilai berkelanjutan untuk pengembangan merek jangka panjang. Studi ini melakukan tinjauan literatur sistematis (SLR) terhadap 20 artikel yang telah direview oleh rekan sejawat yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2020 dan 2025 untuk mengevaluasi tiga pertanyaan penelitian utama: (RQ1) apakah literatur saat ini membahas dampak algoritma TikTok, (RQ2) sejauh mana pemasaran TikTok diukur atau dianalisis, dan (RQ3) bagaimana video pendek diatasi sebagai media pemasaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun sebagian besar studi mengakui kekuatan algoritma TikTok dalam mempengaruhi visibilitas konten, terdapat kekurangan kedalaman dalam mengukur hasil pemasaran di luar metrik permukaan seperti views dan likes. Selain itu, video pendek sering dianggap sebagai hal yang baru daripada alat branding yang berkelanjutan. Kelelahan konten, retensi pesan yang rendah, dan ketidakpastian algoritma semuanya berkontribusi pada keterbatasan pemasaran video pendek. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa antusiasme saat ini terhadap TikTok mungkin berlebihan dan mendorong merek untuk mengadopsi strategi digital yang lebih beragam dan tangguh untuk memastikan efektivitas jangka panjang.

**Kata kunci:** Pemasaran digital, Pemasaran Video Pendek, Pemasaran Media Sosial, Pengembangan Merek, Algoritma Tiktok

## **Abstract**

*The rapid growth of TikTok and short-form video platforms has transformed the digital marketing landscape, driving brands to invest heavily in content designed for virality and engagement. However, there is growing concern that such strategies, while effective in the short term, may not offer sustainable value for long-term brand development. This study conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) of 20 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025 to evaluate three main research questions: (RQ1) whether the current literature addresses the impact of TikTok's algorithm, (RQ2) to what extent TikTok marketing is measured or analyzed, and (RQ3) how short videos are addressed as a marketing medium. The research findings indicate that while most studies acknowledge the power of TikTok's algorithm in influencing content visibility, there is a lack of depth in measuring marketing outcomes beyond surface metrics such as views and likes. Additionally, short videos are often viewed as a novelty rather than a sustainable branding tool. Content fatigue, low message retention, and algorithm uncertainty all contribute to the limitations of short-form video marketing. This article argues that the current enthusiasm for TikTok may be overblown and encourages brands to adopt more diverse and resilient digital strategies to ensure long-term effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing, Short-form Video Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Brand Development, TikTok Algorithm

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The explosive rise of TikTok has positioned short-form video as the new frontier in digital marketing. Brands worldwide are investing heavily in influencer partnerships, paid promotions, and organic content strategies. This shift reflects a broader move from traditional, long-form campaigns to rapid-consumption content designed for virality and instant engagement. As Huimin Shi, Koh, and Park (2023) explain, TikTok's monetization model and knowledge-sharing environment have redefined user interaction, blending entertainment with economic participation.

Despite these trends, emerging literature and market outcomes suggest a growing disconnect between virality and sustainable brand engagement. For example, Melgarejo-Espinoza et al. (2025) highlight how TikTok's algorithm amplifies content based on user behavior, but this does not always result in meaningful consumer relationships. Similarly, Liu, Chiu, and Ho (2023) found that although short videos perform well in public library marketing campaigns, they often fail to generate sustained attention or repeated engagement.

While TikTok content frequently generates high engagement, it may lack the emotional depth or narrative complexity to foster long-term consumer loyalty. Choi et al. (2021) argue that short-form content often encourages habitual scrolling and immediate gratification rather than reflective or value-based interactions, resulting in limited brand recall.

Moreover, TikTok's fast-paced trend cycles can create inconsistency in messaging. Xie, Lin, and Bai (2025) found that while optimistic bias and health campaigns on short-form platforms improve visibility, their long-term educational value remains questionable. Overreliance on vanity metrics—such as likes and views—can misrepresent actual marketing effectiveness, especially when these metrics fail to translate into purchase intention or loyalty (Clarisse et al., 2022).

This paper explores whether short-form video marketing—particularly on TikTok—is a genuinely transformative strategy or an overhyped phenomenon. By analyzing literature, case studies, and empirical findings, we examine whether TikTok's model supports enduring brand equity or if its marketing influence is ultimately unsustainable.

## **Problem Statement**

This study challenges the prevailing optimism surrounding TikTok marketing and provides a critical review based on current literature. These are the problems we have researched.

RQ1: Does the article discuss the impact of the algorithm?

RQ2: Does the article measure or discuss TikTok marketing?

RQ3: Does the article include discussion on short-form video?

## **METHOD**

The study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) protocol to analyze academic discourse on TikTok and short-form video content. This methodology was

chosen to systematically examine the existing literature regarding TikTok's algorithmic influence and its role in marketing strategies. The review was designed to answer three key research questions (RQs): (RQ1) whether the literature discusses the impact of TikTok's algorithm, (RQ2) the extent to which TikTok marketing is measured or analyzed, and (RQ3) how short-form video is addressed as a marketing medium.

The researchers utilized several academic databases to gather relevant articles, including Scopus, Emerald, MDPI, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, SAGE, and PLOS One. The search was conducted using a specific set of keywords to ensure the captured literature was highly relevant to the research topic. The keywords used were: "TikTok marketing," "Tik Tok," "short-form video," "attention span," "platform dependency," "viral content," and "Tiktok algorithm".

The search and selection process was guided by strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria specified that articles must be peer-reviewed research or review articles published between 2016 and 2025. Furthermore, the articles had to be open access or open archive and mention keywords such as "TikTok," "short-form video," or "algorithmic marketing".

Conversely, the exclusion criteria filtered out articles not focused on marketing or algorithms, as well as duplicates and non-English papers. This ensured that the final selection of articles was directly relevant to the study's research questions and objectives. The initial search yielded a total of 506 articles.

After an initial screening of the article titles and abstracts, 32 articles met the specified criteria for further evaluation. This step involved a preliminary review to discard papers that were not directly related to the core themes of the research.

The next phase of the process involved a full-text screening and relevance mapping of the 32 articles. This more detailed analysis allowed the researchers to assess the depth and specific focus of each paper. *The goal was to identify articles that provided substantial insights into the research questions.*

Ultimately, a final selection of 20 articles was chosen for an in-depth analysis. These 20 articles formed the core dataset for the systematic review, as they were deemed to be the most relevant and comprehensive for addressing the research questions.

The analysis of the selected articles was structured around the three research questions. For RQ1, the researchers examined how the articles discussed the impact and role of the TikTok algorithm on content distribution and marketing strategies. The findings showed that 85% of the literature recognized the central role of the algorithm in content visibility.

For RQ2, the study evaluated the methods and metrics used to measure the effectiveness of TikTok marketing campaigns. The review found that most studies relied on surface-level metrics like views, likes, and shares, with little discussion of long-term impact, ROI, or real conversions.

In addressing RQ3, the researchers analyzed how the selected literature conceptualized short-form video as a marketing medium. The findings indicated that while short-form video is celebrated for its entertainment and potential for virality, its

limitations in delivering complex messages and fostering lasting brand associations are often overlooked.

*The systematic review concluded that the current literature often reinforces the "illusion of effectiveness" of TikTok marketing by focusing on superficial metrics, without adequately addressing whether high engagement leads to tangible business benefits or sustainable brand value.* This rigorous methodological approach allowed the study to provide a critical review of the current discourse on the topic.

### **Selection Process**

From an initial pool of 506 articles, 32 met the criteria. After full-text screening and relevance mapping (see Appendix A), 20 articles were selected for in-depth analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **RQ1: Algorithmic Impact**

Based on the results of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 20 scientific articles, it was found that the majority of the literature (85%) explicitly recognizes the central role of the TikTok's algorithm in content distribution. This algorithm is the backbone of how content can go viral and reach a wide audience. However, there are some critical points are raised by the literature regarding the impact of this algorithm on marketing strategies and brand sustainability:

TikTok's algorithm is designed to prioritize content that gets a lot of engagement in a short period of time, such as a spike in likes, shares, or comments. This means that viral content is often temporary and doesn't always align with a consistent brand message or identity. As a result, many brands are forced to follow popular trends and formats to reach audiences, even though this may come at the expense of their authenticity and brand consistency.

TikTok's algorithm is opaque (not transparent), making it difficult to predict and strategically utilize for the long term. Small changes in the recommendation system can drastically affect a brand's content performance, creating a high risk of over-reliance on a single platform. This uncertainty makes long-term content planning a huge challenge for marketers.

TikTok's algorithm values spikes in engagement (such as a suddenly viral video) over steady, sustained interactions. As a result, brands often only get a brief and superficial impression of the audience, without building deep relationships or consistent loyalty. The focus on momentary virality can distract from a sustainable, value-based marketing strategy.

### **RQ2: TikTok Marketing Discourse**

Around 90% of the selected articles discuss TikTok as a marketing tool, with varying perspectives. Here are the key points found:

Many studies highlight the role of influencer marketing and consumer perception in TikTok marketing strategies. However, only a few articles actually measure the effectiveness of the campaign empirically (e.g. increased sales or customer loyalty).

Most studies only use surface-level metrics such as the number of views, likes, and shares to assess the success of a campaign. While these metrics are easy to measure, they do not reflect the depth of the relationship with consumers or real conversions (e.g. purchases, loyalty).

Academic discourse rarely discusses Return on Investment (ROI) or the long-term impact of TikTok marketing. Many articles tend to reinforce the “illusion of effectiveness” of TikTok, without addressing whether high engagement truly brings tangible business benefits.

**RQ3: Short-form Video Dynamics**

Short-form video content is widely celebrated for its entertainment appeal, quick consumption, and high potential for virality. However, few academic studies critically explore its inherent temporal limitations or systematically compare its effectiveness with long-form content. The rapid, attention-grabbing nature of short videos often leads to superficial engagement rather than meaningful interaction. Users tend to consume content passively, driven by habitual scrolling behavior, which contributes to content fatigue and significantly reduces information retention.

For example, a 15-second TikTok explaining financial planning may entertain viewers but lacks the depth to build sustained knowledge or behavioral change, compared to a 10-minute YouTube explainer. As a result, the ability of short-form videos to deliver complex messages or foster lasting brand associations is limited, raising questions about their long-term value in strategic communication.

Table 1. research questions and relevances

No	RQ	Relevance
1	RQ1: Algorithmic Impact	85% of the literature acknowledges the TikTok algorithm.
2	RQ2: TikTok Marketing Discourse	90% of articles discuss TikTok as a marketing tool.
3	RQ3: Short-form Video Dynamics	75% of articles mention that short-form videos are effective in reaching audiences and quickly capturing attention.
Total Relevance		Relevant

**Theoretical Implications**

This study contributes significantly to the theoretical development in the fields of digital marketing and social media communication, particularly in the context of platform algorithms and short-form video formats. First, the findings reinforce the perspective of *algorithmic governance*, showing that TikTok's algorithm not only curates content but also actively shapes consumer engagement in a selective and sometimes manipulative manner. This challenges traditional theories of audience behavior such as agenda-setting and selective exposure by introducing non-transparent, automated content delivery systems into the equation.



Second, the concept of short-form video marketing questions the assumptions of classical models such as AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), where content is expected to guide consumers through a linear journey. On TikTok, ultra-short content typically achieves only the “attention” phase, with limited impact on deeper stages like desire or action. This calls for the development of new frameworks that address *transient brand engagement* and attention economy dynamics.

Third, the observed disconnection between virality and long-term brand-consumer relationships raises questions about the validity of existing theories of brand loyalty and trust in high-performance, algorithm-driven platforms. Traditional theories assume that engagement correlates with meaningful connection, but this research reveals that performative engagement — views, likes, shares — can be superficial and fleeting.

Furthermore, the findings prompt reevaluation of *media richness theory* and *dual-processing theory*. Although short videos are multimedia-rich (incorporating visuals, sound, and text), their limited duration constrains complex message delivery and deep persuasion. Emotional, system-1 (intuitive) processing tends to dominate, overshadowing rational, system-2 (analytical) engagement, thus altering the impact pathway of digital content.

Overall, this study advocates for a more multidisciplinary theoretical approach to algorithmic content marketing. Future theoretical development should integrate concepts from *platform capitalism*, *cognitive overload*, and *digital performativity* to better explain how short-form content reshapes consumer behavior, attention spans, and brand communication in the post-viral digital age.

### **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study carry significant practical implications for marketers, brand managers, and decision-makers in the digital communication sector. Over Reliance on platforms like TikTok for long-term brand engagement is shown to be ineffective in many cases. While short-form videos can generate instant attention and viral reach, they do not necessarily translate into sustained consumer loyalty or purchasing behavior. Therefore, brands should adopt a more balanced marketing approach by integrating diverse content formats — including long-form videos, educational articles, podcasts, and email campaigns — that allow for deeper value communication and brand storytelling.

Marketers should also remain cautious about the opaque and constantly evolving nature of TikTok’s algorithm. Sudden changes in content distribution rules can significantly impact the reach and outcome of promotional efforts. It is advisable to avoid putting all marketing investments into a single platform and instead develop a diversified and integrated digital ecosystem. Employing cross-platform storytelling and multi-touchpoint engagement strategies can enhance brand consistency and extend consumer attention cycles. Ultimately, companies should measure campaign success not only through surface-level metrics such as views and likes but also through deeper indicators like retention, conversion, and customer loyalty. This approach enables more resilient marketing strategies amid shifting trends and technological disruptions.

## CONCLUSION

This article highlights that the hype surrounding TikTok and short-form video marketing is not fully supported by academic evidence, as its impact on long-term brand value remains limited; the analysis shows that while effective for rapid visibility, such strategies tend to be shallow, inconsistent, and risk undermining authenticity and customer loyalty, suggesting that brands should view TikTok as a complementary tactic within a broader digital ecosystem rather than a standalone solution. The main limitation of this study lies in the scope of the literature, which remains focused on general marketing perspectives without deeply examining cross-industry variations and long-term consumer behavior. Future research should build on *The TikTok Illusion: A Systematic Review Why Short-Form Video Marketing Overhyped and Unsustainable for Brands* by investigating the longitudinal effects of short-form video campaigns on brand equity dimensions—such as loyalty, perceived quality, and trust—while also exploring industry-specific dynamics and strategies for aligning short-term visibility with sustainable brand growth.

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