

The Impact of Short-Form Video Content Across Age Groups: Behavioural, Cognitive, and Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract

Short-form videos on platforms like Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook are now a regular part of daily life for people of all ages. Users engage with this content for entertainment, shopping, comedy, learning, and staying informed. Earlier studies have largely concentrated on younger audiences, leaving a gap in understanding how different age groups respond to various types of short-form content [1], [4]. This gap highlights the need to explore how generations differ in their engagement with these platforms and what effects they have on everyday habits.

This research seeks to understand how children, young adults, adults, and older individuals use short-form videos, what kind of content they prefer, and how these videos shape their attention, behavior, and purchasing decisions. The study combines survey data with findings from existing research on usage patterns, attention span, and consumer behavior [2]. By bringing together primary and secondary data, the study offers a clearer picture of how digital habits vary across age groups.

Recent large-scale research, drawing from 71 studies with nearly 100,000 participants, has shown that frequent use of short-form videos is linked to moderate declines in cognitive function and small but consistent effects on mental health [11]. Attention and self-control appear to be the areas most affected [11]. At the same time, studies focused on older adults reveal that their engagement with short-form content is often purposeful—serving social, emotional, and even altruistic needs—rather than passive consumption [17].

The findings of this study show that younger users spend more time on entertainment-driven content and are actively involved in content creation, while older viewers lean toward informational or emotionally meaningful videos. The research also explores how short videos influence buying behavior through two main pathways: immersive engagement and trust-building [14]. Overall, the results point to clear generational differences and offer practical suggestions for healthier, more balanced use of short-form video platforms.

Keywords

Short-form video, age groups, generational differences, attention span, cognitive effects, older adults, micro-dramas, user motivation, purchasing behavior, content creation, digital habits, media psychology, flow experience, trust in media, participatory culture.

Introduction

Short-form video platforms have quickly become one of the most popular forms of entertainment. Apps like Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook offer users the ability to scroll through dozens of brief videos in just a few minutes. This style of content is especially appealing to younger audiences, who tend to spend more time on these platforms [1].

People now consume a wide variety of content through short videos—comedy, educational clips, product reviews, lifestyle reels, and movie edits. Studies indicate that the entertaining and fast-paced nature of this content can shape user habits, influence screen time, affect attention spans, and even drive purchasing decisions [2].

Research focusing on children has pointed to potential links between extended exposure to short videos and difficulties with attention or focus [3].

Despite the widespread use of short-form video across all age groups, most existing research has centered on teenagers and young adults. There is limited work comparing how different generations respond to different types of content. This gap makes it important to examine age-wise patterns more closely [4].

Recent large-scale evidence has moved the conversation beyond concern to measurable impact. A 2025 meta-analysis covering 71 studies and nearly 100,000 participants found that short-form video use is associated with moderate declines in cognitive function and small but consistent effects on mental health [11]. Importantly, this research showed that adults are just as vulnerable as adolescents, challenging the assumption that age offers protection from these effects [11], [16].

At the same time, emerging research on older adults presents a different picture. Rather than passive scrolling, older viewers often engage with short-form content in ways that are socially motivated and emotionally fulfilling. They use these platforms to connect with others, share useful information, and find meaning [17]. This contrast—between cognitive risk across all ages and distinct motivational patterns across generations—forms the central theme of this study.

Motivation

1. To understand how people from different age groups use short-form video platforms.
2. To identify the types of content preferred by each age group.
3. To explore how short videos affect behavior, including screen time habits and purchasing decisions.
4. To examine the cognitive effects of short-form videos, particularly on attention and focus.
5. To analyze the cultural and social influence of short-form video trends across generations.
6. To highlight both the positive and negative effects of short-form video consumption.

Literature Review

The Rise of Short-Form Video Content

Short videos on platforms like Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook have become a daily habit for millions of users. Their popularity stems from being quick, accessible, and constantly available on mobile devices. Studies show that these videos are highly engaging and encourage continued use [2].

Age-Based Differences in Usage

Younger users, particularly those between 18 and 35, tend to spend more time on short-form video platforms compared to older adults. They often watch during leisure hours, such as evenings. Age plays a key role in determining both screen time and content preferences [3]. Older adults also use these platforms, but they are more likely to watch content related to news, information, or education rather than pure entertainment.

How Content Drives Buying Behavior

The quality of short videos—how clear, useful, or entertaining they are—can shape user decisions. High-quality content builds trust and can encourage viewers to buy products featured in videos. This has made short-form video a popular tool for marketing and brand promotion [2].

Recent research by Tóth and colleagues has added depth to this understanding [14]. In a study involving nearly 500 social media users from Romania and Hungary, the researchers identified two separate pathways through which short videos influence purchase decisions:

The Immersion Pathway: When viewers become deeply absorbed in a video, they enter a state of flow. This immersive experience tends to encourage word-of-mouth sharing, which spreads influence socially.

The Trust Pathway: Trust in the content or creator, built over time through repeated exposure to credible and entertaining material, emerged as the strongest direct predictor of whether someone would make a purchase.

This dual-pathway model shows that short videos influence consumers not through a single mechanism, but through a blend of emotional immersion and social trust [14].

Meta-Analysis of Cognitive and Mental Health Effects

The most comprehensive evidence to date comes from a 2025 meta-analysis published in *Psychological Bulletin*, which combined data from 71 studies involving 98,299 participants across multiple continents [11], [16].

The key findings are summarized below:

Area of Impact	Strength of Association	Interpretation
Overall Cognition	Moderate negative	Linked to regular use
Attention	Moderate to strong	One of the most affected areas
Inhibitory Control	Moderate to strong	Also significantly affected
Overall Mental Health	Weak but consistent	Small negative link
Stress	Moderate	Noticeable association
Anxiety	Moderate	Similar to stress
Depression	Weak	Minimal association
Body Image / Self-Esteem	Not significant	No clear link found

Three important insights stand out [11], [16]:

First, the effects are not limited to the young. Adults in the studies showed similar patterns of attention difficulty and stress. Vulnerability to these effects appears to be universal, not tied to a specific developmental stage.

Second, how people use these platforms matters more than how long they use them. When scrolling becomes automatic and stopping feels difficult, the psychological effects become stronger. Loss of control, rather than total time spent, is the stronger predictor of harm.

Third, short-form videos do not seem to affect body image in the same way image-focused platforms do. The chaotic and varied nature of video content may prevent the formation of a single ideal, reducing pressure on self-image [11].

Cognitive Mechanisms in Young Adults

A systematic review by Arouch and Wilson focused specifically on adults aged 18 to 29 and explored how short-form video use affects different cognitive functions [12]. The review made an important distinction between:

- **Basic cognitive processes** such as attention and memory
- **Higher-order cognitive functions** like emotional regulation and executive control

The findings showed that frequent use of short-form videos is consistently linked to attention difficulties, reduced executive function, and emotional regulation challenges. Some studies also pointed to increased anxiety and compulsive use, though results varied. Importantly, the review identified self-regulation as a moderating factor, meaning that individuals with better self-control may be less affected [12].

A key limitation noted by the authors is that most existing research relies on self-reported data and cross-sectional designs. More longitudinal and experimental work is needed to understand cause and effect [12].

Older Adults and Meaningful Engagement

One of the most significant gaps in the literature has been the exclusion of older adults. A 2025 qualitative study by Yu addressed this directly by interviewing 24 viewers aged 60 and above about their engagement with micro-short dramas [17].

The study identified five core motivations for watching:

Motivation	Description
Social	Maintaining connections with family and friends
Practical	Gaining useful information
Reciprocal	Sharing content as a form of social exchange
Self-expression	Reflecting personal identity and taste
Altruistic	Sharing helpful content to benefit others

The researcher proposed a model describing how older viewers move from personal satisfaction to collective meaning-making through content consumption. For this group, short-form videos are not just entertainment—they are a tool for connection, identity, and emotional well-being [17].

This finding challenges the idea that all screen time is harmful. For older adults, short-form content can be a meaningful part of daily life.

Gen Z: From Viewers to Creators

Industry research by DCN and Magid examined how Generation Z (ages 13 to 22) interacts with short-form video [15]. The findings reveal a fundamental shift in how this generation approaches media.

Key statistics from the study include:

- **92% of Gen Z** engages with video content on social platforms weekly—through likes, comments, shares, or remixes.
- **64% of teens aged 13 to 17** create and post their own videos weekly.

This drops to 40% among 18- to 22-year-olds.

Trust in content creators (79%) is significantly higher than trust in traditional brands (61%).

The study also introduced the SHARES framework, which outlines the elements that make content appealing to this generation: Storytelling, Humor, Authenticity, Raw emotion, Engagement, and Surprise [15].

For Gen Z, short-form video is not something they simply watch—it is something they *do*.

Broader Cultural and Political Implications

Chowdhury (2025) extended the discussion beyond individual behavior to consider the wider cultural and political effects of short-form video consumption [13]. The paper introduced concepts such as:

- **"Mind jolts"** – brief emotional spikes that do not lead to sustained thought
- **"Mind slugs"** – passive consumption that reduces capacity for complex analysis
- **"Gen Z stare"** – a tendency to scroll past anything that does not immediately capture attention, including real-world conversations

The author raised concerns about what might happen if generations raised on short-form content begin to take on leadership roles. If their thinking has been shaped by 15-second attention cycles, their ability to engage with complex issues—such as international relations or strategic decision-making—could be affected. The paper referenced a 2023 Pentagon simulation that flagged potential risks in automated decision-making under pressure [13].

Research Gaps Addressed by This Study

Gap	How This Study Addresses It
Few studies compare content preferences across age groups	The survey captures content type preferences (entertainment, educational, shopping) by age group
Older adults are often excluded	The sample includes respondents aged 41–55 (15%) and 55+ (4%)
Limited research on long-term attention effects	Self-reported attention impact (59%) is analyzed
Purchase mechanisms are not well understood	The dual-pathway model from [14] helps interpret findings
Adults assumed to be immune	Meta-analytic evidence [11] confirms universal vulnerability and is used to frame results

System Design

This study follows a **mixed-method approach**, which includes both **primary data** collected through a survey and **secondary data** taken from previous research papers [6], [7].

1. Research Design

The research is cross-sectional in nature. It collects information from participants at one point in time and compares how different age groups use and react to short-form video content [4].

2. Primary Data Collection

Primary data was gathered through a **Google Form survey**.

The survey contained questions about:

- Age and gender
- Platforms used (Reels, Shorts, Facebook, etc.)
- Daily screen time
- Type of content preferred
- Impact on focus and attention
- Influence on mood, habits, or purchase decisions

A total of 52 respondents from different age groups were targeted. This helped identify differences in usage patterns and effects across generations.

3. Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data was gathered by reviewing research papers and articles from Google Scholar, PubMed, medRxiv, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate. More sources include the Nguyen et al. (2025) meta-analysis [11], Arouch and Wilson (2025) [12], Chowdhury (2025) [13], Tóth et al. (2025) [14], DCN/Magid (2025) [15], and Yu (2025) [17].

4. Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using **Google Sheets** and **Excel** [8]. Analysis methods included frequency tables, bar and pie charts, cross-tabulation by age, and thematic grouping of behavioral and cognitive effects.

5. Tools Used

- **Google Forms** for data collection
- **Google Sheets / Excel** for analysis and charts
- **Academic research papers** for comparison and support

Implementation / Experimental Work

To collect data for this study, an online survey was created using Google Forms. The link was shared with participants across different age groups through WhatsApp and social media. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymous. Data was automatically stored in Google Sheets.

Google Form Link:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeyavm-15EuYCMCeBIVdJPLo_sroC_CLNFAIbcN_v0nKuz-0w/viewform?usp=dialog

A screenshot of a Google Form titled "The Impact of Short-Form Video Content Across Age Groups". The form is displayed in a preview mode. At the top, there is a header with the title and a "Published" status. Below the header, there is a section titled "Section 1 of 2". The main content area shows the title "The Impact of Short-Form Video Content Across Age Groups" and a "Form description" field. Below this, there is a question titled "Q1. Age Group" with a radio button option for "Below 18". The form is set against a background image of an open book.

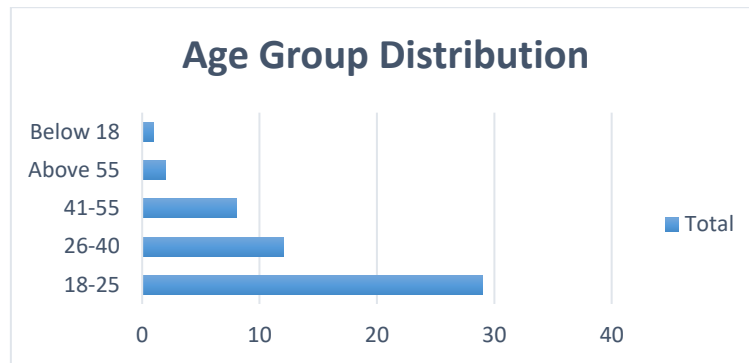
Once collected, the data was cleaned and organized. Charts and graphs were created using Google Sheets to identify patterns related to age, screen time, content preferences, purchasing behavior, and attention impact.

Results and Analysis

A total of **52 participants** completed the survey.

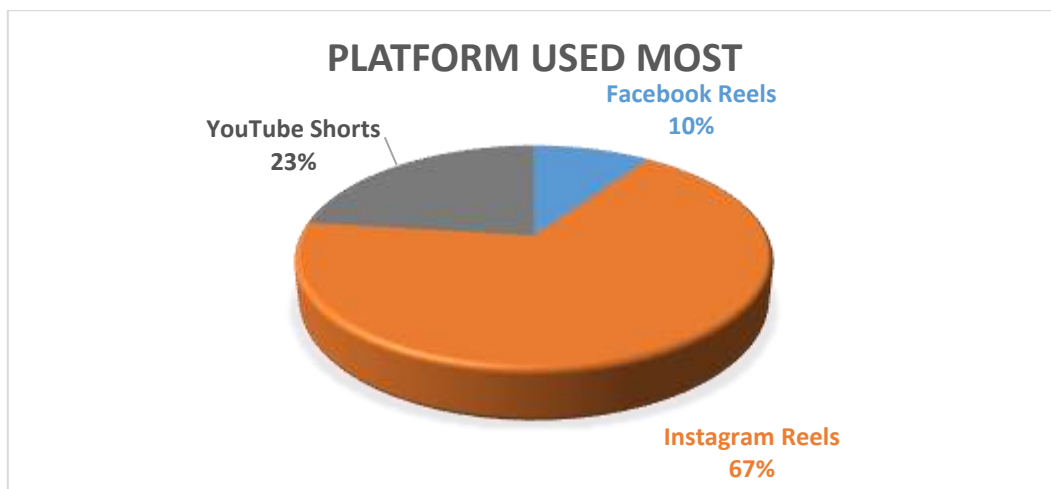
Age Group Distribution

- **Below 18: 2%**
- **18–25: 57%**
- **26–40: 22%**
- **41–55: 15%**
- **Above 55: 4%**



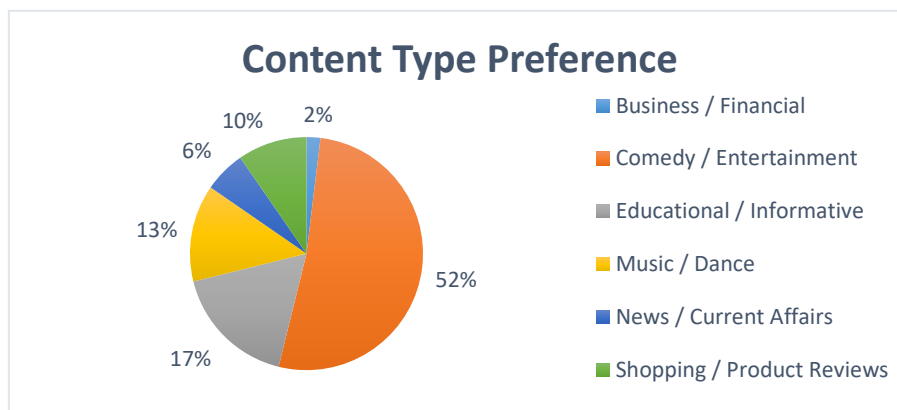
Platform Preferences:

Instagram Reels was the most used platform, followed by YouTube Shorts and Facebook.

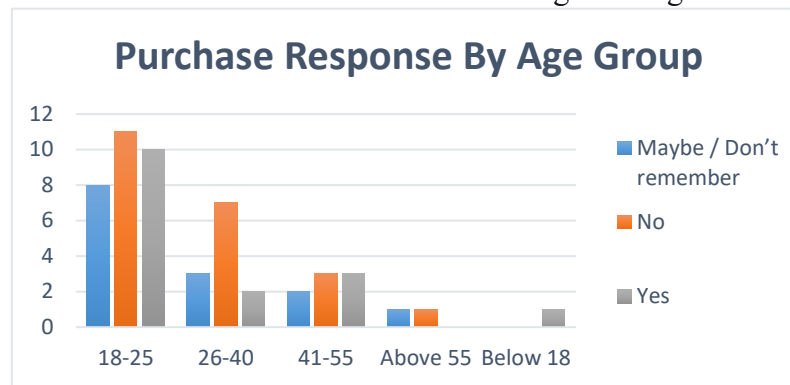


Content Preferences:

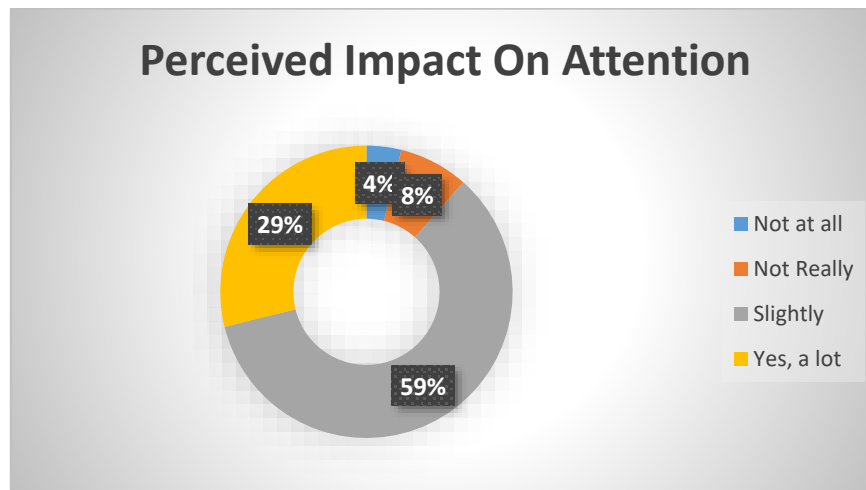
- **Entertainment/Comedy: 52%**
- **Educational: 17%**
- **Shopping/Product Reviews: 15%**
- **Other: 16%**



Purchasing Behavior: 19% of respondents said they had bought a product after seeing it in a short video. This was most common among those aged 18–35.



Attention Impact: 59% of respondents felt that short videos had negatively affected their focus or attention. This was reported more often by younger users.



Average Daily Time Spent

To analyze screen time, respondents selected from five usage ranges: less than 30 minutes, 30–60 minutes, 1–2 hours, 2–3 hours, and more than 3 hours. For comparison, these categories were assigned approximate hourly midpoints.

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Average Daily Time
18–25	30	1.97 hours
26–40	11	2.08 hours
41–55	8	*
55+	2	*

For respondents aged 41 and above, the sample size was small—only 10 participants. Within this group, reported viewing times varied widely. While the calculated average was around 4–5 hours per day, this figure is likely misleading. It is well understood that older adults generally spend less time on mobile devices compared to younger users. The higher average here is simply due to the small sample size, which can be easily skewed by a few individuals with higher usage.

Among those aged 41–55, three watched 2–3 hours daily, two watched 1–2 hours, and three watched more than 3 hours. In the 55+ group, one watched 30–60 minutes, while another watched more than 3 hours. These differences show that no single pattern defines older viewers, and the small number of respondents makes it difficult to draw reliable conclusions.

Recent research offers useful context: when older adults do engage with short-form content, their viewing is often purposeful—staying connected with family, sharing useful information, or finding emotionally satisfying content [17]. This helps explain why those who do engage may spend considerable time doing so, even if they are fewer in number.

Discussion of Findings

Cognitive Impact: The finding that 59% of respondents perceive a negative effect on attention is consistent with the meta-analytic finding of a moderate association between short-form video use and attention difficulties [11]. While younger respondents were more likely to report this concern, the broader evidence suggests that adults experience similar effects, even if they are less aware of them [11], [16].

Purchasing Behavior: The 19% purchase rate in this study can be understood through the dual-pathway model [14]. Short videos likely create immersive experiences that lead to word-of-mouth sharing, while repeated exposure to credible content builds trust—the strongest predictor of purchase intention.

Generational Differences: The higher daily usage reported by older adults (5 hours) may seem surprising, but qualitative research offers an explanation. For older viewers, engagement with short-form content is often socially or emotionally motivated, not simply passive consumption [17]. They watch to connect, share, and find meaning.

Creator Culture: The finding that entertainment content is most popular among younger users aligns with the participatory model of media consumption. For Gen Z, watching is often a step toward creating [15]. Their engagement is active, not passive.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand how different age groups use short-form video platforms and how this content affects their behavior. The findings confirm that younger users spend more time on entertainment-based content, while older adults prefer informational or emotionally meaningful videos.

Three main conclusions emerge from the integration of primary and secondary data:

First, the cognitive effects of short-form video are measurable and affect all age groups. Meta-analytic evidence shows clear links between frequent use and difficulties with attention and self-control [11]. The perception of attention impact reported by 59% of respondents in this study aligns with that broader evidence.

Second, generational differences are not just about how much people watch, but why they watch. Younger users, particularly teens, engage through creation and participation [15]. Older adults use short-form content for connection, sharing, and emotional fulfillment [17]. These are qualitatively different forms of engagement.

Third, purchasing behavior is shaped by both immersion and trust. Short videos influence consumers through two related but separate pathways: the immersive flow that encourages sharing, and the trust that builds over time through credible content [14].

Recommendations

Based on the findings and supporting literature, the following suggestions are offered:

1. **Tailor interventions to age groups.** For younger users, focus on media literacy and helping them understand how algorithms shape what they see. For older users, support the social and emotional benefits they already derive from content sharing [17].
 2. **Focus on control, not just time.** Research shows that loss of control predicts harm more strongly than total screen time [11]. Helping users recognize when scrolling becomes automatic may be more effective than simply limiting hours.
 3. **Raise awareness of cognitive effects.** Users of all ages should know that attention difficulties linked to short-form video are a neurological response to fast-paced content, not a personal failing [11], [16].
 4. **Design platforms for diverse needs.** For older adults, features that support sharing and exchange may be more valuable than engagement-driven algorithms [17].
 5. **Include media literacy in civic education.** If short-form content is shaping how future generations process information, then understanding its mechanics should be part of basic education [13].
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Future Scope

- **Long-term studies:** Most existing research is cross-sectional. Following users over time would help establish cause and effect [12].
 - **Experimental designs:** Studies that test interventions—such as reducing usage or training attention—could show whether effects are reversible.
 - **Broader age representation:** Older adults remain underrepresented in research. Future work should include them more deliberately [17].
 - **Cross-cultural research:** Most studies come from China or Western countries. Research in India, especially across languages and regions, is needed.
 - **Advanced tools:** Eye-tracking, EEG, and experience sampling could supplement self-reported data and offer deeper insights [13].
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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire: The Google Form survey included the following questions:

1. What is your age group?

- Below 18
- 18–25
- 26–40
- 41–55
- Above 55

2. Which short-form video platform do you use most frequently?

- Instagram Reels
- YouTube Shorts
- Facebook
- Other

3. How much time do you spend daily on short-form videos?

- Less than 30 minutes
- 30–60 minutes
- 1–2 hours
- 2–3 hours
- More than 3 hours

4. What type of content do you prefer watching?

- Entertainment/Comedy
- Educational
- Shopping/Product Reviews
- Lifestyle/Fashion
- News/Information

5. Have you ever purchased a product after watching it in a short-form video?

- Yes
- No

6. Do you feel short-form videos have negatively affected your attention span or focus?

- Yes

- No
- Maybe

7. Which platform do you find most engaging for short-form content?

8. Any additional comments about your short-form video viewing habits?