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Review

Attention and Micro-Temporality in Short-form Video Media

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Abstract

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts reorganize audiovisual experience through temporal compression, continuous feeds, and fragmentary sequencing. These formats promote a mode of viewing that relies on rapid cues, affective triggers, and micro-durational segments that sustain attention across short intervals and encourage repeated commitments of viewing time. Rather than operating through narrative development or thematic coherence, short-form video structures engagement through discrete perceptual units, retention strategies, and platform-mediated feedback loops. This study argues that short-form video constitutes a micro-temporal media ecology in which attention functions as both cognitive process and socio-technical resource. Through conceptual analysis, the paper examines how temporal segmentation, content pacing, and platform affordances shape viewing commitment, perceptual involvement, and meaning-making. The study contributes to research on digital media by foregrounding temporality as central to the contemporary attention economy and by situating attention within platform-driven mechanisms of organization and retention. It also suggests that micro-temporal structures play a decisive role in defining how screen-based media reshape spectatorship and communicative practice.

Keywords

Short-form video, Attention, Micro-temporality, Platform media, Perceptual engagement, Attention economy, Media time, Algorithmic curation

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1. Introduction

Short-form video has become a central format of digital media consumption, driven by the rise of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. These platforms reorganize audiovisual content into brief clips designed for rapid perception, seamless scrolling, and iterative viewing decisions [1-3]. Industry and academic reports indicate that short-form video outpaces long-form content in growth across multiple markets, propelled by mobile interfaces, recommendation systems, and shifts in attentional allocation [4-6]. Within this environment, the capacity to attract, retain, and recycle user attention becomes a key operational metric in the contemporary attention economy [7-9].

Short-form video formats introduce distinctive temporal arrangements. Audiovisual experience is segmented into micro-durational units that structure how users commit perceptual resources, evaluate content, and decide whether to continue engagement [10,11]. Rather than relying on extended narrative arcs or thematic coherence, short-form platforms privilege discrete signals, affective triggers, and compressed pacing that support sustained attentional involvement across short intervals. These mechanisms foster a recursive mode of spectatorship in which viewing decisions are distributed across seconds rather than minutes or hours [12,13]. Attention becomes patterned, contingent, and tethered to platform-specific feedback cycles.

The rise of short-form video invites renewed scrutiny of the relationship between attention and media temporality. Traditional models of spectatorship presume longer durations, narrative progression, and stable interpretive frameworks [14,15], while earlier studies of media time emphasized sustained engagement and linear sequencing [16]. Short-form formats challenge these assumptions by foregrounding discontinuity, fragmentation, and continuous feed architectures enabled by algorithmic recommendation [17-19]. Platform affordances such as infinite scroll, automatic playback, and feed-based presentation contribute to these dynamics by lowering the cost of continued engagement and enabling rapid transitions between micro-temporal segments [20,21].

Despite growing interest in short-form platforms, existing research tends to focus on cultural practices, content genres, or recommendation algorithms [22-24], while the temporal organization of perception and engagement remains comparatively under-theorized. Studies of the attention economy illuminate economic and strategic dimensions of attention allocation [7-9], yet seldom examine the micro-temporal mechanisms through which attention is modulated in short-form environments. Similarly, platform studies document governance, datafication, and interface design [25,26], but do not fully integrate questions of time, pacing, and perceptual sequencing. This reveals a gap at the intersection of attention, temporality, and platform logic.

This paper argues that short-form video constitutes a micro-temporal media ecology in which attention functions as both cognitive process and socio-technical resource. Through conceptual analysis, the study examines how temporal segmentation, content pacing, and platform affordances shape viewing commitment, perceptual involvement, and interpretive uptake. By foregrounding temporality as central to the attention economy, the paper contributes to media research on digital spectatorship and offers a framework for understanding how short-form video reorganizes engagement and communicative practice within contemporary platform environments.

2. Attention and Media Temporality in Platform Environments

Research on attention in digital environments has expanded alongside the rise of platform-based media. Classical approaches conceptualized attention as a limited cognitive resource that must be allocated among competing stimuli [8,9]. With the development of networked platforms and mobile media, attention has additionally been reconceptualized as a strategic and economic asset, forming the basis of what scholars describe as the attention economy [10-12]. Within this framework, digital media infrastructures compete for user attention through design, metrics, and feedback mechanisms that modulate how attention is acquired and retained [13].

Parallel to these developments, research in media studies has begun to interrogate the temporal dimensions of attention. Studies of media temporality examine how platforms segment and reorganize time in ways that reshape perceptual and interpretive processes [14,15]. Contemporary media environments foreground discontinuity, fragmentation, and rapid switching, features that transform how users allocate attention and attach meaning to audiovisual content [16,17]. Recent scholarship emphasizes that attention is not merely cognitive but temporal, structured through the durations within which media consumption unfolds [18,19]. This temporal framing suggests that questions of pacing, segmentation, and sequencing are central to understanding contemporary media engagement.

Short-form video platforms represent a salient context for examining these dynamics. An emerging body of research investigates TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts with attention to platform affordances, recommendation systems, and content production practices [20-23]. These studies highlight the role of continuous feeds, automatic playback, and scroll-based interfaces in enabling uninterrupted transitions between clips and in shaping viewing decisions across short intervals [24,25]. Scholars also note the development of distinctive content styles that rely on rapid cues, compressed pacing, and episodic audiovisual fragments [26-28]. Such work suggests that short-form formats depend on micro-level engagement, wherein attention is sustained across discrete units of viewing time rather than extended narrative arcs.

Platform studies further document how algorithmic recommendations shape visibility and engagement by ranking and sorting content according to behavioral signals, including view duration and interaction patterns [29-31]. These mechanisms establish feedback environments that encourage recurrent viewing and iterative attentional commitments across micro-temporal segments. While this research clarifies how platforms govern engagement, it seldom examines the temporal structures through which attention is modulated in short-form contexts. Existing work on the attention economy foregrounds economic and strategic dimensions [10-12], yet offers limited insight into how attention is allocated at the scale of seconds. Likewise, studies of short-form platforms tend to prioritize cultural practices or influencer dynamics [31-33], leaving the intersection of attention, temporality, and platform logic comparatively under-theorized.

3. Methodology: Conceptual and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach grounded in media theory and platform studies. Rather than relying on empirical measurement or statistical analysis, the research examines how theoretical concepts of attention, media temporality, and platform logic can be integrated to interpret the dynamics of short-form video platforms.

The analysis is based on a structured review of scholarly literature related to digital media, the attention economy, and platform infrastructures. Sources were selected according to three criteria. First, the literature addresses the relationship between media technologies and attention or temporality. Second, the sources engage with platform environments, algorithmic recommendation systems, or digital spectatorship. Third, priority was given to publications produced between approximately 2018 and 2025 in order to capture recent developments in short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts.

Conceptual analysis is used to synthesize these theoretical perspectives and to develop an interpretive framework centered on micro-temporality. This approach allows the study to identify structural relationships between platform affordances, temporal segmentation, and patterns of attention allocation. The objective of the analysis is not to provide empirical measurement of user behavior but to clarify how the temporal organization of short-form media environments shapes contemporary modes of spectatorship and engagement.

4. Micro-Temporality, Attention, and Platform Logic

The analysis of short-form video in this study draws upon three intersecting concepts: micro-temporality, attention, and platform logic. These concepts provide an analytical framework for understanding how short-form formats modulate engagement at the level of perceptual and temporal allocation. Together they specify how time, perception, and infrastructural design converge to shape viewing practices within contemporary platform environments.

4.1 Micro-temporality

Micro-temporality refers to the segmentation of media experience into brief intervals that shape perceptual uptake and decision-making. Scholars note that contemporary digital environments organize time at increasingly smaller scales, producing forms of engagement structured around seconds or even fractions of a second [34,35]. In contrast to long-form media formats, which structure viewing through narrative progression and thematic development, micro-temporal formats operate through discrete perceptual episodes that accumulate across multiple viewing instances. These episodes function as the elementary temporal units through which meaning, relevance, and affective evaluation are processed in short-form contexts.

Temporal segmentation redefines how audiovisual content is processed, evaluated, and continued, establishing micro-durational units as the basis of media consumption [36]. This segmentation reduces the interpretive burden associated with entry into media content and lowers the perceptual cost of continued engagement. Viewers are not required to commit in advance to extended durations or narrative coherence. Instead, they evaluate content through rapid perceptual judgments that inform whether to allocate additional time and attention. Recent research suggests that micro-temporal structures play a role in shaping attention allocation, influencing how users commit perceptual resources across brief and discontinuous segments [37,38]. Micro-temporality thus offers a framework for analyzing how short-form video formats rely on compressed pacing, rapid sequencing, and episodic audiovisual cues to promote sustained engagement without extended narrative progression. Rather than displacing long-form modes of spectatorship, micro-temporality reorganizes engagement from within, distributing attentional commitments across iterative temporal increments.

4.2 Attention as Cognitive and Socio-technical Process

Attention has traditionally been conceptualized as a cognitive process through which individuals allocate limited resources to competing stimuli [39]. This model emphasizes the perceptual and neurological functions associated with selection, filtering, and prioritization. In digital environments, however, attention also functions as a socio-technical resource shaped by platform infrastructures, design strategies, and engagement metrics [40,41]. The shift from cognitive to socio-technical models does not negate the former but extends attention into the operational domains of digital media

systems.

This dual status highlights the interplay between perceptual processes and material media systems. Platforms not only solicit attention but also measure, quantify, and operationalize it through data-driven feedback loops. Studies of the attention economy demonstrate that platforms compete for attention and that retention is increasingly measured, optimized, and operationalized through data-driven feedback mechanisms [42]. In this context, attention becomes both a perceptual act and a computational signal. Metrics such as view duration, completion rates, and interaction patterns become proxies for attentional states and inform platform-level decisions about visibility and circulation.

Recent work argues that attention unfolds as a temporally distributed process in which users make iterative decisions about whether to continue, switch, or disengage from media content [43]. This perspective aligns with micro-temporality by suggesting that attention allocation occurs at the level of micro-temporal segments rather than extended durations. Attention becomes conditional and cumulative, shaped by moment-to-moment recalibrations rather than predetermined commitments. This conceptualization allows short-form media consumption to be understood not as fragmented attention but as a temporally structured mode of involvement that responds to platform affordances and content pacing.

4.3 Platform Logic and Feedback Mechanisms

Platform logic refers to the ways platforms structure visibility, engagement, and interaction through algorithmic ranking, recommendation, and interface design [44]. Platform infrastructures define the conditions under which content is encountered and processed, establishing viewing pathways that are not neutral but instrumentally organized. Within this logic, engagement signals such as view duration, completion rates, and interaction patterns inform how content is sorted and distributed [45]. These metrics translate perceptual involvement into computational values that align with platform objectives.

Feedback mechanisms generate recurrent cycles of viewing and recommitment, encouraging users to continue engagement across micro-temporal units. Feedback may be immediate, as when continuous feeds provide seamless transitions between clips, or deferred, as when recommendation systems adjust over time to reflect cumulative behavioral patterns. Continuous feeds, automatic playback, and scroll-based navigation reduce friction and lower the perceptual cost of continued viewing [46]. Platform logic therefore shapes how attention circulates within short-form environments, aligning content pacing and temporal segmentation with the operational goals of retention and engagement optimization.

Together, these three concepts establish a framework for analyzing short-form video as a micro-temporal media ecology. Micro-temporality highlights the structuring of media time, attention connects perceptual allocation with iterative decision-making, and platform logic accounts for the socio-technical infrastructures through which engagement is modulated. This framework informs the subsequent analysis of how short-form formats reorganize viewing commitment, perceptual involvement, and communicative practice by distributing attention across sequences of brief temporal intervals.

5. Analytical Findings

Although TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts share the common format of short-form video feeds, their platform infrastructures and recommendation logics differ in important ways. TikTok relies heavily on its “For You” feed, which rapidly adapts to behavioral signals such as viewing duration, swipe behavior, and interaction patterns. YouTube Shorts operates within the broader YouTube recommendation ecosystem, where short-form viewing data interacts with long-form viewing histories and subscription networks. Instagram Reels, in contrast, functions within a hybrid discovery model that combines algorithmic recommendation with existing social-network connections. These differences illustrate that micro-temporal engagement emerges across distinct platform environments even though the underlying logic of rapid sequential viewing remains structurally similar.

5.1 Temporal Segmentation

Short-form video platforms organize media experience through temporal segmentation. Clips are structured into brief intervals that guide how viewers commit perceptual resources, evaluate content, and decide whether to continue engagement. Temporal segmentation operates at the level of seconds, producing a viewing rhythm in which decisions accumulate across micro-temporal units rather than within extended narrative sequences. In this context, attention unfolds as a serial and distributed process shaped by repeated exposure to audiovisual cues and iterative perceptual judgments.

Temporal segmentation lowers the perceptual cost of entry into media content. Short durations minimize interpretive requirements and reduce the effort associated with initial engagement, enabling rapid uptake and continuous evaluation. Instead of committing attention in advance, viewers make provisional decisions that inform whether to continue or switch. These provisional commitments recalibrate attention at the micro-level and allow engagement to develop cumulatively across successive clips. Viewers can initiate, switch, and discontinue engagement at minimal temporal

expense, creating conditions for recursive participation in platform-based viewing cycles. Scholars note that such fragmentation reorganizes spectatorship, shifting media consumption toward iterative perceptual decisions rather than sustained interpretive commitments [47,48].

Platform affordances support these dynamics by presenting content in feed-based environments. Continuous feeds and automatic playback enable successive clips to follow one another without interruption, reducing transitional friction and facilitating temporal continuity across segmented content [49]. Temporal segmentation interacts with these affordances to normalize ongoing engagement. The default action in feed-based contexts is continuation rather than disengagement, meaning that viewers must actively choose to exit rather than to remain. This asymmetry reshapes the allocation of attention and increases the likelihood that viewing will extend beyond the duration of individual clips. As a result, the temporal units that organize viewing are micro-durational but cumulative, enabling extended engagement through sequential perceptual decisions.

Temporal segmentation contributes to a redefinition of media time. Media engagement is no longer confined to discrete sessions or narrative durations but is instead embedded within everyday temporal practices. Short-form platforms integrate media consumption into micro-breaks, idle moments, and transitional periods, increasing the frequency and variability of viewing opportunities. Temporal segmentation permits media consumption to inhabit temporal margins that long-form formats do not easily occupy. The ubiquity of such viewing intervals expands the contexts in which media consumption becomes viable, including moments previously resistant to audiovisual engagement due to duration constraints.

Through these mechanisms, temporal segmentation conditions how users allocate attention and attach meaning to fragmented audiovisual signals. Meaning does not emerge through narrative accumulation but through pattern recognition, affective modulation, and associative inference distributed across dispersed intervals of engagement. These dynamics prepare the ground for the analysis of viewing commitment and feedback mechanisms that further modulate engagement within short-form media environments. The redistribution of media time and perceptual activity underscores the extent to which short-form formats reorganize spectatorship around micro-temporal structures that synchronize attention with platform-defined rhythms of circulation.

5.2 Viewing Commitment

Temporal segmentation conditions how viewers initiate engagement, yet short-form platforms also depend on mechanisms that promote continued viewing. Viewing commitment refers to the iterative decisions through which users allocate attention across successive micro-temporal units. Unlike long-form media that rely on extended narrative progression, short-form formats encourage viewers to continue engagement through brief perceptual evaluations that accumulate over time. In these environments, commitment emerges incrementally rather than through advance investment, allowing viewers to extend engagement while retaining the capacity to disengage at any moment.

Viewing commitment is sustained through compressed audiovisual cues that encourage perceptual uptake with minimal interpretive burden. Rapid pacing, dense signaling, and episodic structuring enable users to assess content quickly and determine whether to proceed to subsequent clips. Compressed cues minimize ambiguity and reduce the need for contextual reconstruction, allowing users to evaluate content without extensive cognitive load. Recent scholarship suggests that contemporary screen-based engagement is characterized by repeated cycles of perceptual evaluation in which viewers commit attention in short increments rather than through extended durations [50,51]. This iterative structure reconfigures attentional involvement as ongoing and conditional rather than sustained and linear. Commitment becomes contingent upon successive micro-decisions distributed across brief intervals, producing a form of temporally modular engagement.

Platform affordances play a central role in shaping viewing commitment. Continuous feeds, scroll-based navigation, and automatic playback establish environments in which the default action is continuation rather than disengagement. The low perceptual cost associated with continuation encourages viewers to extend engagement across multiple clips, resulting in cumulative viewing intervals that may exceed the duration of individual videos by a significant margin. The asymmetry between continuation and exit is significant: continuation aligns with platform affordances, while discontinuation requires deliberate interruption of viewing flow. Platform studies note that feed architectures operationalize such commitment through design elements that promote sequential decision-making and reduce friction at moments of transition [52]. These affordances condition perceptual involvement while reinforcing the iterative nature of viewing across micro-temporal units.

Viewing commitment also implicates interpretive processes. Short-form platforms emphasize immediate perceptual uptake rather than delayed comprehension or narrative synthesis, allowing meaning to emerge through accumulation across fragmented audiovisual units. Users encounter content as a series of signals that invite pattern recognition, thematic association, and contextual inference. Interpretation unfolds in parallel with perceptual allocation, producing a form of cumulative meaning-making that does not rely on extended narrative coherence. These processes unfold in parallel with attentional allocation, linking perception to iterative temporal decisions. The micro-temporal ecology of short-form video thus configures engagement as a recursive sequence of commitments distributed across short intervals rather than as a singular investment in a discrete media object. Through this recursive model, attention becomes

patterned and distributed, assembled across dispersed temporal increments rather than concentrated within a unified media experience.

5.3 Feedback and Perceptual Involvement

Short-form platforms not only segment time and promote iterative viewing decisions but also incorporate feedback mechanisms that shape perceptual involvement. Feedback mechanisms refer to the algorithmic and interface-driven processes through which engagement signals are captured, evaluated, and recirculated within platform environments. These mechanisms operate continuously and adaptively, recalibrating content delivery in response to behavioral inputs derived from viewing activity. Viewed through this lens, attention operates as both perceptual effort and behavioral signal. Metrics such as view duration, completion rates, and interaction patterns are processed into ranking and recommendation outputs that influence what content is shown and in what order [53,54]. Through this process, platforms convert perceptual allocation into computational values that inform subsequent content distribution.

Feedback mechanisms establish a recursive structure in which engagement informs visibility and visibility informs subsequent engagement. This cycle links perceptual involvement to platform-level operations that govern circulation, sorting, and distribution. Users encounter content within this feedback environment, where viewing decisions are conditioned not only by perceptual and temporal factors but also by algorithmic processes that respond to attention as measurable input [55]. The recursive nature of this cycle enables platforms to adjust content pacing, sequencing, and relevance in ways that reinforce continued engagement. The alignment of perceptual involvement with platform optimization strategies underscores the dual status of attention as cognitive allocation and socio-technical resource. Attention is simultaneously an experiential act undertaken by users and an informational signal operationalized by platform infrastructures.

This recursive structure also contributes to the accumulation of viewing time. While individual clips remain brief, feedback cycles encourage viewers to extend engagement across multiple units, resulting in cumulative intervals that surpass the temporal scope of individual videos. The cumulative nature of engagement demonstrates how micro-temporal structures can generate extended viewing sessions without requiring precommitment or narrative investment. Perceptual involvement becomes distributed across sequences of micro-temporal segments rather than concentrated within a single media object. Platforms leverage this distribution to consolidate engagement through mechanisms that convert episodic viewing into sequences of extended participation.

The interplay between temporal segmentation, viewing commitment, and feedback mechanisms illustrates how short-form platforms reorganize spectatorship through temporally distributed and iteratively reinforced engagement. Engagement is not merely a response to audiovisual stimuli but is situated within socio-technical infrastructures that shape how perception and attention unfold over time. These dynamics demonstrate that attention in short-form environments is not merely captured but structured, patterned, and sustained within platform-specific media ecologies. Such ecologies coordinate perceptual, temporal, and infrastructural processes, redefining spectatorship as a mode of engagement constituted through micro-temporal allocation and recursive decision-making.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how short-form video platforms reorganize media engagement through the interaction of temporal segmentation, viewing commitment, and platform-based feedback mechanisms. The analysis demonstrates that short-form media formats rely on micro-temporal structures that distribute attention across brief intervals rather than sustained narrative durations. Engagement therefore emerges through iterative perceptual decisions that accumulate across successive audiovisual fragments.

By applying the concept of micro-temporality to short-form video environments, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the transformation of digital spectatorship. Attention in contemporary platform environments functions not only as a cognitive process but also as a socio-technical resource that is measured, operationalized, and circulated through algorithmic infrastructures.

Future research may extend this framework through empirical studies of platform interfaces, recommendation systems, or comparative analyses of different short-form video platforms. Such work would further clarify how micro-temporal structures shape contemporary media consumption and how platform infrastructures continue to reorganize the temporal conditions of digital communication.

Author Contributions

The author solely contributed to the conceptualization, analysis, writing, and revision of this manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Generative AI Statement

Generative AI tools were used only for limited language assistance during manuscript preparation, including grammar refinement and stylistic polishing. All conceptual development, theoretical analysis, argumentation, interpretation, and final manuscript revision were conducted and verified solely by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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