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DIGITAL RITUALS AND EVERYDAY NARRATIVES: A VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF SHORT-FORM VIDEO CULTURE

Abstract: *This paper examines how short-form video platforms transform everyday routines into recognizable narrative and visual patterns. Through qualitative content analysis of 21 videos from TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, this pilot study identifies how compressed sequences of action become procedural micro-narratives. These videos rely on minimal cues of setup, shift, and closure, reinforced by visual grammars and culturally coded symbols that ensure legibility at feed speed. The analysis shows how repetition and template use function as digital rituals that both reflect and standardize everyday storytelling. By combining narratology, semiotics, and digital anthropology, the study contributes to understanding how short-form platforms not only distribute content but also actively shape cultural expression and identity. Methodologically, the adoption of the micro-narrative as a unit of analysis enables comparison across languages and platforms, while also highlighting the influence of algorithmic curation on sample formation. The findings open paths for future research using larger datasets*

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and mixed methods, offering insights into how platforms shape the forms and rhythms of everyday narratives over time.

Keywords: *short-form video, digital rituals, visual anthropology, procedural micro-narrative, platform aesthetics, semiotics, TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts.*

1. Introduction

Scrolling through TikTok, Reels, or Shorts doesn't just kill time. It rewires how time itself is perceived. In place of long-form storytelling or reflective posts, short-form video now dominates the way people document, interpret, and aestheticize their daily lives (Social Insider, 2024). From 20-second skincare routines to silent coffee montages, everyday moments are compressed, filtered, and looped until they become instantly recognizable visual patterns. This transformation is not incidental. It reflects a deeper, systemic shift in how self-presentation, communication, and meaning are structured in the digital age.

Short-form content functions within a specific logic: brevity, rhythm, repetition, and modularity. These elements are not just stylistic choices, but requirements imposed by platform infrastructure itself (Chen et al., 2024). The formats are built to promote behaviors that are easily scannable, emotionally immediate, and infinitely repeatable. This accelerates not only content circulation but also the normalization of certain rituals, aesthetics, and moods. The daily scroll becomes a collective choreography of sameness – comforting in its predictability, but also algorithmically governed. These aesthetic forms emerge from the economic and political architecture of platforms. Under platform capitalism, visibility is currency, and attention becomes the raw material extracted from users (Srnicek, 2016:pp.27–32). The value of content is not measured by its depth, but by its ability to capture a viewer within the first two seconds. Within this dynamic, creators are not just individuals expressing themselves, but also unpaid micro-producers feeding a system that rewards speed, volume, and conformity.

What appears spontaneous is, in fact, highly structured. The performance of the self, now packaged in under a minute, is shaped by norms that are infrastructural as much as cultural. Platform design, algorithmic incentives, and interface feedback loops define what gets seen and what disappears (van Dijck, 2013:pp.9–14). The banal becomes spectacular not because it's meaningful, but because it aligns with a platform's logic of engagement, shareability, and affective efficiency. Nevertheless, not all short-form content is interpreted as narrative. For many users, these videos function more like visual mood boards or rhythmic rituals than storytelling de-

vices. They are patterns of affective display, structured enough to be familiar, but open enough to be endlessly adapted. Whether or not they are consciously read as "stories", they still perform narrative functions: they suggest order, intention, and identity through visual repetition (Marwick, 2013:pp.186–195).

The paper explores, trough this pilot study, how everyday rituals, once anchored in personal habit or cultural tradition, are restructured into visual narratives within short-form video platforms. The central research question is: How are daily routines transformed into structured visual narratives through short-form video formats? To answer this, the paper focuses on TikTok, Reels, and Shorts, identifying how ordinary actions are framed, stylized, and ritualized under platform constraints. Beyond mapping narrative patterns and aesthetic codes, the aim is to understand the cultural and systemic forces that render these forms not only viable but dominant.

2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the identity-forming potential of short-form video requires a layered theoretical lens, combining classical narratology, digital storytelling, and contemporary media-specific narrative strategies. These perspectives jointly ground the analysis in questions of how meaning, identity, and ritual are produced within digital environments. The framework therefore integrates narrative theory, semiotics, and digital anthropology to explain how short-form video aesthetics transform everyday actions into recognizable cultural expressions.

2.1 Narrative Structures in Digital Contexts

Narrative, in its most fundamental sense, is not merely a story but a structured act of meaning-making. Traditional narrative theory identifies essential components such as temporal order, causality, and the presence of narrative agents, which help organize events into coherent sequences (Abbott, 2008:pp.13–20). These structures are not neutral as they frame how information is processed, remembered, and interpreted. This shift from heroic arcs to patterned everyday storytelling on TikTok has already been observed (Frenette et al., 2024). In digital media, however, narrative forms have been reshaped by both the medium's constraints and its affordances. Unlike linear storytelling rooted in print or film, digital storytelling emphasizes fragmentation, modularity, and interaction. It operates less as a fully developed arc and more as a mosaic of moments, impressions, and cues (Alexander, 2011). But even though it has been fragmented and modular, the core narrative remains the

same. Even a six-second clip often contains a setup, a shift, and a resolution, only compressed, visual, and indexical rather than explicitly verbal. These compressed forms do more than economize time; they also activate memory and emotional processing differently. When narrative fragments are decontextualized or repackaged for new platforms, users engage them with different cognitive frames, often reconstructing story logic on the fly (Chiossi et al., 2023:pp.4–6). Such shifts are not incidental as they speak to a new semiotic economy in which coherence is expected to emerge not within the video, but across the feed. While TikTok's fragmentary storytelling relies on ultra-short, feed-based coherence, YouTube represents the earlier phase of digital narration, where longer vlog formats allowed for more sustained narrative arcs and self-presentation routines.

Digital platforms, particularly YouTube, have fostered the rise of vlog-based micro-narratives that balance between authenticity and scripted structure, a format later adopted and compressed by short-form platforms such as TikTok. These narratives typically rely on recurring formats, character tropes, and pacing strategies to simulate spontaneity while retaining narrative cohesion (Vlahović, Ercegovac & Tankosić, 2023:pp.30–33). In these cases, the performance of "everyday life" becomes a narrativized genre that invites audience participation while maintaining creator control. At a deeper level, narrative in the digital age functions not only to entertain or inform, but to construct identity and shape perception. Storytelling is one of the fundamental ways individuals make sense of experience, positioning themselves and others within frameworks of meaning, belonging, and intention (Bruner, 1991:p.5). When creators repeat themes, visual styles, and emotional arcs, they are not just telling stories, they are telling the story of themselves, repeatedly, in slightly modified but highly recognizable forms.

2.2 Semiotics and Visual Coding

In short-form digital video, meaning is shaped not only by language or story structure but also through visual signs and codes that function within broader cultural frameworks. The difference between denotation and connotation helps explain how seemingly simple images carry complex cultural meanings and reinforce ideological positions (Barthes, 1972). A cheerful emoji or a wide-angle drone shot may seem neutral but often signals deeply coded messages about mood, aspiration, or even social status.

Core semiotic categories such as icon, index, and symbol, alongside the concept of interpretive codes, offer tools to decode the underlying logic of visual content

(Chandler, 2022: pp.14–28). For instance, a steaming cup of coffee may function as an index of warmth and comfort, a symbol of routine, and an icon of lifestyle aesthetics simultaneously – depending on how it is framed within the feed. In algorithm-driven feeds, these signs function as fast-loading shortcuts to narrative cues, inviting the viewer to recognize, react, and scroll within milliseconds. Their repetition across formats creates a shared semiotic grammar that reinforces platform-specific aesthetics. Semiotic theory positions meaning as fluid and negotiated, rather than fixed or author-driven. Eco's concept of the "open text" supports the notion that visual materials gain significance through viewers' cultural positioning and interpretive habits (Eco, 1979:pp.8–13, 57–67).

This flexibility makes short-form videos particularly powerful in constructing multiple, sometimes conflicting, layers of meaning – depending on the context in which they are consumed. The structure of visual language in media – gaze, framing, composition, and layout – functions as a communicative grammar, guiding how meaning is constructed and which values are encoded (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). For example, a downward camera angle combined with pastel color grading may produce entirely different affective responses than tight framing in saturated tones. These choices are rarely accidental; they signal genre, mood, and even social hierarchies.

Recent analyses of social media images demonstrate how content creators rely on culturally resonant symbols to shape audience engagement. Visuals are used not only to express identity but also to implicitly communicate norms and aspirations (Nikulina et al., 2024:pp.609–611). A clean, minimalistic interior or a vintage filter does not merely reflect taste – it projects a semiotic package of lifestyle, values, and belonging, pre-coded for recognition. Recent multimodal work shows that such value-laden signals are detectable at scale in TikTok influencer content (Starovolsky-Shitrit et al., 2025).

2.3 Digital Rituals and Platform Aesthetics

Short-form video platforms do not only disseminate content, but they also cultivate habits, impose rhythms, and encourage symbolic behaviors. These patterns, often repeated and collectively recognized, can be understood as digital rituals. They include practices such as mimetic participation in trends, comment-driven interactions, or the use of specific filters and soundbites (Trillò, Hallinan & Shifman, 2022; Schellewald, 2024). Rituals on social media serve dual purposes: they foster a sense of community through shared behaviors, and they increase algorith-

mic visibility. This blend of social cohesion and performative visibility redefines ritual not as tradition-bound, but as algorithm-responsive and context-sensitive. Everyday sharing practices on TikTok function as social scripts that stabilize these routines (Schellewald, 2024).

Alongside these ritualized behaviors, platform aesthetics guide how content should look, feel, and unfold. On TikTok, for example, aesthetic conventions are often marked by informal camera work, direct address, rhythmic editing, and everyday mise-en-scène. These features collectively establish what has been described as a "contemporary ethnographic aesthetic" – a mode of expression that simulates authenticity while conforming to implicit platform norms (Braun & Vollmer Mateus, 2024:pp.197–201). Even when creators present spontaneous or personal moments, the visual and sonic grammar of their videos tends to follow repeatable, learnable patterns optimized for discoverability. On Instagram, visuality itself operates as an affordance that steers production routines, pacing, and what counts as publishable (Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025).

Anthropological theories help anchor these observations in a broader framework. Turner's notion of liminality, the in-between space where transformation occurs, resonates with the scrolling rhythm of platform navigation, where users move from one transient moment to the next (Turner, 1969:pp. 94–97). Each post offers a fleeting entry into a symbolic world with its own rules, roles, and affects. Similarly, the view of culture as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms finds its equivalent in the digital sphere: here, symbols include emojis, audio snippets, filters, and pacing styles that structure perception and frame social reality (Geertz, 1973).

Empirical studies support the view that adolescents, in particular, navigate these ritualized environments not only for entertainment but to manage visibility, social risk, and identity. On TikTok, young users adapt their privacy strategies, self-presentation, and engagement patterns in line with evolving platform conventions and peer expectations (Ebert et al., 2023:pp.227–230). Their behavior illustrates that digital rituals reflect norms while actively producing and regulating them.

These theoretical foundations function both as a contextual frame and as a practical tool for analyzing visual and narrative patterns in short-form video. In this research, they support the interpretation of digital rituals and aesthetic conventions as signs rooted in platform logic and cultural codes, rather than isolated stylistic choices. This perspective focuses the analysis on how identity is shaped through everyday content, its forms, repetitive structures, and algorithmically optimized expressions.

3. Methodology

This research applies qualitative content analysis to examine narrative and visual patterns in short-form video formats. The focus is on everyday rituals represented in digital media and how these rituals visually and symbolically encode meaning. This method allows for detailed interpretation of recurring narrative and semiotic structures that may not be visible through quantitative techniques. By systematically coding visual and audio elements, qualitative content analysis uncovers how small aesthetic and procedural choices contribute to broader cultural meanings. The dataset, drawn from publicly accessible short-form videos, offers an empirical basis for comparing how different platforms shape routine-based storytelling and the construction of identity.

3.1 Sampling and selection

The sample comprises 21 videos from three platforms, TikTok (9), Instagram Reels (9), and YouTube Shorts (3), assembled in 2025 from openly accessible feeds. Items were drawn from platform discovery surfaces (For You/Explore/Shorts feeds) and targeted queries/hashtags. Only posts published in 2024–2025 were eligible, to reflect current format conventions and platform practices (Social Insider, 2024). To keep the sample culturally varied, the set includes videos from multiple countries (e.g., UAE, Canada, Morocco, USA, Finland, Serbia, India). Inclusion criteria targeted ordinary routines: morning rituals, beverage preparation, walking, cooking, and comparable repetitive actions visually coded in recognizable ways. Exclusions covered brand advertisements, compilation edits, and reposts/duplicates; no more than one video per account was retained, while all videos were between 30 to 90 seconds long. These patterns correspond to a typology of digital rituals that function as cultural markers of identity and belonging (Trillò et al., 2022:pp. 2–5). The platform mix and the 2024–2025 eligibility window were selected to reflect current distribution and format conventions on short-form platforms (Social Insider, 2024). Because the analysis operates at the event and frame level, a focused corpus is appropriate; N = 21 is sufficient for pattern discovery and cross-platform contrast in an exploratory, theory-building design (Zhao, 2024; Trillò et al., 2022; Braun & Vollmer Mateus, 2024).

Shorts is treated as a control reference for speed and template legibility, providing an upper bound against which contrasts on TikTok and Reels are read. Preference was given to creators not yet positioned as influencers. Operationally, inclusion favored accounts without verification badges, recent sponsorship tags or

paid-partnership labels, and without prominent shop/affiliate integrations in recent posts. The intent was to observe everyday routines with minimal confounding from branding incentives and commercial scripting, which can reshape format choices and performance style (Marwick, 2013).

3.2 Analytic approach and codebook

The analysis combines visual analysis and narrative analysis. Comparative statements focus on TikTok and Reels; Shorts serve as a reference baseline for template-forward pacing. Coding categories include: (1) narrative structure (implicit beginning, turning point, closure), (2) visual and semiotic codes (color schemes, camera movement, composition), (3) platform logic and rituals (aesthetic templates associated with algorithmic promotion), (4) affect and cultural codes (calm mood, ideal lifestyle, regional or global markers), and (5) audio–text interaction. Platform engagement and recommendation dynamics are treated as contextual factors for interpreting form (Zannettou et al., 2024).

3.3 Reliability

A pilot pass on a small subset was used to refine operational definitions. A random 20% subset (n = 5) was independently double-coded against the final codebook. There was one coding discrepancy across the grid, yielding an overall percent agreement of 98.8% (79/80 binary decisions; five clips × sixteen codes). Cohen's κ (nominal, binary), averaged across the principal categories, was κ = 0.98. Given the small subset and the presence of several low-prevalence codes, κ should be read as indicative rather than definitive; the single disagreement was resolved by discussion prior to coding the remainder.

3.4 Reflexivity and ethics

Only publicly accessible videos were observed; there was no interaction with creators, no re-uploads of content, and only minimal verbatim quoting. Researcher account status and browsing routines were documented to acknowledge possible feed shaping; positionality and platform presence were addressed following reflexive guidance for experimental digital ethnography (Zhao, 2024).

4. Analysis

The results back the core hunch: what looks like casual life-logging is patterned work. Everyday actions are cut, timed, and styled until they read as micro procedures the feed can understand. All figures refer to code frequencies within the 21-video sample and are descriptive only.

4.1 Narrative Patterns of Everyday Life

Across the sample, everyday activity is organized as procedural sequence rather than plot, consistent with narratological emphasis on ordered events and agented action. A situational introduction appears in 16/21 clips (76%), most often via explicit captioning ("morning routine," "day in the life," "join me"), first-frame cues (getting out of bed, stretching), or an establishing object (mug, cleanser) that locates the viewer in the first second. Action then proceeds as a chain of steps legible without voiceover. As shown in Figure 1, a typical clip moves from hook to short steps and recognizable cues, with an implied payoff and looped circulation at the feed level.

Figure 1. Micro-narrative unit and feed-level coherence on short-form platforms
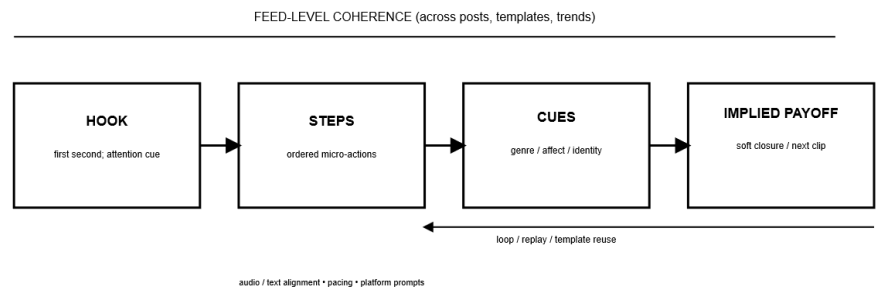
Source: Own research

Turning points are rare (2/21; 9.5%). Where coded, they are marked by an edit or visual shift (e.g., a finger snap that triggers a one-off event, or a move from indoors to outdoors) rather than by complication in the classical sense. Closure is present in 6/21 (28.6%) and typically relies on a small visual gesture (covering the lens with a hand; turning off lights), a text cue ("Ok bye"), or a return to rest (sitting to study). In the remaining clips, sequences end at progression rather than resolution. This distribution aligns with feed-level, modular narration in digital formats, where coherence accrues across posts more than within single clips.

Two supports make these compressed sequences readable at speed. Indexical cues appear in 18/21 clips (85.7%): hands entering frame, zips, pours, footsteps, and other micro-gestures that provide tactile proof the action is happening now. Identity-performance cues also appear in 18/21 (85.7%) and include dress, décor, product choice, and age/gender presentation (e.g., creator on camera; "66-year-old mom" skincare; student desk setting). These cues stabilize persona across posts while keeping single videos minimal in exposition – compatible with accounts of narrative as a mode of making sense (Bruner, 1991) of experience and positioning the self.

The dominant template is setup → ordered action → visible end-state. Within that template, three recurrent configurations are evident in the coding notes:

Step-chain routine. Tightly cut tasks with steady cadence (skincare steps; coffee grind → pour → sip), often concluded by a tactile completion (plated dish; finished cup).

Before/after transition. Minimal setup, a single edit beat (snap/wipe), then a reveal (clean counter, outfit). Here the "turn" is an editing device rather than a narrative event.

Route slice. Door → transit → destination, where movement carries the sequence; arrival may be elided or underplayed.

Platform-conditioned pacing is reinforced by algorithm-oriented structuring in 17/21 clips (81.0%), including salient first frames, hashtags, and follow prompts, trendy music, and links or brand tags ("link in bio," products listed). Captions often double as orientation ("4 a.m. morning routine," "sunny Stockholm"), reducing interpretive load. Taken together, the coding shows that intention, progress, and completion are conveyed through ordered steps, edit-marked shifts, and small closural gestures, while captions and indexical moves carry most of the explanatory burden.

4.2 Visual Codes and Cultural Symbolism

Meaning is borne primarily by visual form. Framing is coded in 18/21 clips (85.7%), keeping objects large and steps legible on a phone screen; indexical cues also appear in 18/21 (85.7%), providing tactile proof that something is happening now (e.g., a hand entering the frame, a zipper, a pour). Together these two elements make short routines readable with minimal text. Editing choices align with platform pacing. Algorithm-oriented structuring, salient opening frames, compact step displays, beat-matched cuts, follow prompts, and links/tags, is marked in 17/21

clips (81.0%). The edit rhythm carries the viewer from cue to cue so that intention and progress are clear without extended narration.

Color is used as a fast affective signal. Color palette/filter is explicitly coded in 11/21 clips (52.4%): soft neutrals correlate with calm morning scenes, while higher contrast supports speed and emphasis. Camera motion appears in 6/21 (28.6%), typically as short glides or angle shifts that mark beats rather than plot turns. Where color and motion are combined, they steer attention lightly, highlighting the next step or emphasizing completion, without changing the underlying sequence.

Identity is communicated through style rather than exposition. Identity-performance cues are present in 18/21 clips (85.7%), including dress, décor, product choice, and on-camera presence. These cues stabilize persona across posts so that viewers can recognize the author's "kit" immediately, even when the face is not central to the frame.

Objects do symbolic work in a subset of clips. Culturally coded objects are noted in 5/21 (23.8%); when present, recurring household items or branded packaging act as compact markers of routine, transition, care, mobility, or aspiration. Their function is primarily indexical-symbolic: they both prove the action and label its social meaning. Cultural marking splits into two patterns. Neutralized imagery appears in 14/21 clips (66.7%), with generic interiors, global brands, and broadly legible captions. Local markers appear in 5/21 (23.8%), for example, regional food plating, street signage, or packaging language, adding specificity while retaining the same procedural form. This mix suggests a preference for exportable style with room, in some cases, for regional texture. Sound supports mood and pacing more than semantic anchoring. Music/ambient sound is active in 14/21 clips (66.7%), while strict text–audio syncing is rare (1/21; 4.8%). Audio thus reinforces the step-by-step flow and affective tone rather than carrying narrative information on its own. In combination, these elements form a compact visual system: framing segments the task, indexical gestures certify presence, color sets tone, motion marks beats, identity cues bind clips to a persona, and objects carry social meanings. The result is a quickly readable package through which ordinary activity registers as a small, shareable unit of cultural sense.

4.3 The Aesthetic of Routine and the Ritualization of the Mundane

The dataset shows a stable aesthetics-of-routine: ordinary tasks are presented as legible, repeatable, and finishable units. A routine-type ritual is coded in 16/21 clips (76.2%), while a transition-type ritual, an action that signals a shift, such as

leaving home or changing state, appears in 5/21 (23.8%). Completion is usually tactile rather than dramatic: a surface is wiped, a cup is set down, a face is checked in the mirror.

Styling is consistent. Framing appears in 18/21 clips (85.7%), segmenting action into small steps; indexical micro-gestures, hands entering frame, pours, zips, footsteps, also appear in 18/21 (85.7%), certifying that the action is happening now. Algorithm-oriented structuring is present in 17/21 (81.0%): salient openings, compact step displays, beat-matched edits, follow prompts, and product links/tags. These choices keep the pace quick while preserving step-by-step clarity.

Mood tilts toward quiet satisfaction. Calm affect is coded in 14/21 clips (66.7%), and an aspirational register in 10/21 (47.6%). The combination produces tidy surfaces and soft colors rather than escalation or conflict. Identity-performance cues show up in 18/21 (85.7%), dress, décor, product choice, on-camera presence – binding otherwise short, fragmentary posts to a recognizable persona across uploads.

Cultural coding favors exportability with pockets of specificity. Neutralized imagery, generic interiors, international brands, globally legible captions, appear in 14/21 clips (66.7%), while local markers, regional plating, signage, packaging language, appear in 5/21 (23.8%). Color palettes/filters are marked in 11/21 (52.4%) and camera motion in 6/21 (28.6%); both serve as soft guides for attention rather than drivers of narrative change. Music/ambient sound is active in 14/21 (66.7%), while strict text–audio sync is rare (1/21; 4.8%), indicating that audio mainly carries tone and cadence. Platform distributions reinforce this ritual aesthetic in different ways: Reels concentrates routine-type clips (8/9; 88.9%) with occasional transition marks (2/9; 22.2%) and a high calm rate; Shorts standardizes the format (routine 3/3; 100%; transition 2/3; 66.7%) with full neutralization; TikTok shows the widest tolerance for texture (routine 5/9; 55.6%; transition 1/9; 11.1%) and more local markers. Read together, the elements that ritualize the mundane are straightforward: stable framing, indexical proof, compressed edits, and light identity signals. The result is not drama but a codified presentation, an everyday activity packaged as a small, shareable unit that completes cleanly on screen.

4.4 Variations Across Platforms and Cultural Contexts

Across the dataset, comparable routines take on different shapes on TikTok, Reels, and Shorts, with platform norms and audience expectations guiding how they are staged and edited. Platform contrasts are reported primarily for TikTok

and Reels, while Shorts are treated as a control reference for speed and template legibility rather than a full comparison partner.

4.4.1 Instagram Reels (n = 9)

Reels most often delivers a polished micro-arc: introductions 8/9 (88.9%), closures 4/9 (44.4%), turns 2/9 (22.2%). Framing and indexical cues are universal (9/9 each), while algorithm-oriented structuring is frequent (8/9; 88.9%). Color notes emphasize neutrals ("beige," "off-white," "natural light"), and comments repeatedly flag hashtags, a follow prompt, and trendy music as front-loaded cues. Endings are often small gestures such as "lights off," "hand over lens," or simply sitting down to study, consistent with the higher incidence of closure. Cultural coding skews neutralized (6/9; 66.7%) with occasional local markers (e.g., "Scandinavian interior") in 2/9.

4.4.2 TikTok (n = 9)

TikTok favors progression without resolution: introductions 6/9 (66.7%), closures 1/9 (11.1%), turns 0/9. Framing and indexical cues are present but less uniform (6/9; 66.7% each). Algorithm-oriented structuring appears in 6/9 (e.g., "hashtags + trendy music" as a standard pairing). Notes point to "pastel/off-white" palettes, wide or mid-shots, and on-camera presence ("young woman," "young couple") with face sometimes out of frame. Affect ranges from slow/ASMR to upbeat jump-cuts. Cultural marking mixes neutralization (5/9; 55.6%) with the sample's highest incidence of local markers (3/9; 33.3%), often small contextual details rather than overt national symbols.

4.4.3 YouTube Shorts (n = 3)

Shorts is the most template-forward in this set: framing 3/3 (100%), indexical cues 3/3 (100%), algorithm-oriented structuring 3/3 (100%), color theme 3/3 (100%), identity performance 3/3 (100%), and full cultural neutralization 3/3 (100%). Introductions 2/3, closures 1/3, turns 0/3. Notes consistently mention caption + trendy music as the opening scaffold and bold, legible palettes ("neon pink," "white/purple," "grey"). The footprint is small (n = 3), but the pattern is clear: rapid legibility, minimal local texture.

4.4.4 Cross-platform comparison

The contrasts cluster into four recurring dimensions, narrative resolution, standardization, affect/aspiration, and cultural coding.

Narrative resolution. Reels shows the highest incidence of closure (44.4%) and the only turns (22.2%); TikTok rarely resolves (11.1% closure); Shorts sits between on closure (33.3%) with no turns. Reels often start with a labeled or visually explicit setup ("morning routine," first-frame bed-making); TikTok frequently opens with a quick collage or caption ("New month reset") before steps; Shorts relies on caption + trendy music for immediate orientation.

Standardization. Shorts maximizes standardization across framing, indexicality, color, and algorithmic scaffolding (100% on each in this sample). Reels is close behind on framing/indexicality (100%) with strong, but not universal, algorithmic cues (88.9%). TikTok is more variable (66.7% for framing/indexicality; 66.7% algorithmic).

Affect and aspiration. Reels leans "calm" (88.9%) with moderate "aspirational" (55.6%); TikTok shows a mixed affect (calm 44.4%, aspirational 33.3%) of both ASMR-style and upbeat edits; Shorts registers calm and aspirational in 66.7% each.

Cultural coding. Neutralization dominates overall, but Shorts is fully neutralized (3/3), Reels is mostly neutralized (6/9), and TikTok carries the most local texture (3/9).

The sample spans 15 countries/regions (Canada, Croatia, Germany, India, Italy, Mongolia, Morocco, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA). Despite this spread, the dominant pattern is exportable styling with pockets of locality: neutralized interiors and global brands are common, while local presence surfaces as plate presentation, signage language, or interior style (e.g., Nordic design cues). Platform norms moderate how much of that specificity remains visible: most on TikTok, least on Shorts, with Reels in between.

5. Discussion

Short-form video in this dataset reads as a feed-native grammar: repetition, compression, and indexical proof stabilize everyday acts into portable forms that travel across audiences. Meaning rides on semiotic kits and platform design, while identity is assembled from serial fragments optimized for quick recognition (Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1979; Marwick, 2013, Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck, 2013).

5.1 Ritual or Representation?

Across the dataset, routine does not unfold as plot so much as format. Actions arrive pre-cut into learnable sequences; orientation is front-loaded; endings are sealed with small gestures. The balance of codes, high introduction (16/21), high indexicality (18/21), high identity performance (18/21), strong algorithm-oriented structuring (17/21), low turns (2/21), and selective closure (6/21), indicates that everyday activity is packaged to be recognized quickly rather than narrated in full (see Table 1).

Table 1. Markers of ritual format in the dataset (N = 21)

Code	Count	Percent	Functional reading
Routine-type ritual	16	76.2%	Everyday habit packaged as a stable sequence
Introduction	16	76.2%	First-second orientation cue (caption/object/scene)
Indexicality (hands/ steps)	18	85.7%	Tactile proof the action is happening now
Identity performance	18	85.7%	Dress/décor/products stabilize persona across posts
Algorithm-oriented structuring	17	81.0%	Salient opening, compressed steps, beat-matched cuts
Closure	6	28.6%	Small end gesture (hand-over-lens, lights off, seated pause)
Transition-type ritual	5	23.8%	Edit/action marks a state change
Narrative 'turn'	2	9.5%	Edit device rather than plot complication

Source: Own research

Read this way, the clips function as digital rituals: repeatable practices that coordinate participation and recognition across the feed (Trillò et al., 2022). The ritual effect comes from stability, step order, familiar props, bounded endings, not ceremony. A "hand-over-lens" or "lights off" acts as a seal, not a climax. Swipe mechanics keep each unit liminal, a brief threshold between one bounded micro-scene and the next, which fits classic accounts of transition and in-between states (Turner, 1969).

At the same time, the material is representational. Persona is assembled from reliable visual cues, lighting, palette, décor, dress, product choice, rather than from exposition. Repetition across posts produces a coherent public self that is easy to

recognize at a glance, consistent with studies of networked self-presentation and taste performance (Marwick, 2013). In this register, mugs, mirrors, sneakers, and labeled packaging do double duty: they certify action (indexical proof) and anchor social meaning (symbolic value), a compact version of culture as shared codes expressed in patterned forms (Geertz, 1973; Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1979).

Crucially, these formats are tuned to circulation. Salient first seconds, compressed step displays, beat-matched cuts, and on-screen prompts reduce interpretive load and reward immediate recognition, features that fit recommendation-driven environments where visibility follows attention metrics (Zannettou et al., 2024; Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck, 2013). What looks spontaneous is learned craft: an "ethnographic" surface of everyday life that signals authenticity while staying inside platform habits (Braun & Vollmer Mateus, 2024).

5.2 Identity and Culture

Identity in the dataset is assembled through repeatable visual kits rather than explicit self-description. Identity-performance cues (style, décor, product choice) appear in 18/21 clips, while framing and indexical cues (hands/steps/micro-gestures) also reach 18/21 each, making persona and action legible at speed, consistent with accounts of narrative self-construction and modular, feed-level storytelling (Bruner, 1991; Alexander, 2011).

Symbolic items (mugs, mirrors, branded packaging, plants, sneakers) operate as condensed markers of taste and aspiration, with meanings stabilized through repetition (Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

Cultural coding splits between neutralization and local marking. Cultural neutralization is coded in 14/21 clips (generic interiors, international brands, English text), whereas local markers appear in 5/21 (regional dishes, packaging language, neighborhood signage). Platform profiles diverge: Reels and Shorts lean toward neutralization (Reels 6/9; Shorts 3/3), while TikTok shows more local texture (3/9), though still mixed with neutralization (5/9). As shown in Table 2, the counts and proportions by platform make this split explicit (reported as count/N and proportion).

This pattern aligns with analyses of platform aesthetics and infrastructural logics that nudge expression toward exportable styles (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016; Braun & Vollmer Mateus, 2024).

Table 2. Identity & cultural codes by platform (count / N, proportion)

Code	Instagram Reels	TikTok	YouTube Shorts	Overall
Identity performance	9/9 (1.00)	6/9 (0.67)	3/3 (1.00)	18/21 (0.86)
Visual symbols	2/9 (0.22)	3/9 (0.33)	0/3 (0.00)	5/21 (0.24)
Visual framing	9/9 (1.00)	6/9 (0.67)	3/3 (1.00)	18/21 (0.86)
Indexical cues	9/9 (1.00)	6/9 (0.67)	3/3 (1.00)	18/21 (0.86)
Calm affect	8/9 (0.89)	4/9 (0.44)	2/3 (0.67)	14/21 (0.67)
Aspirational affect	5/9 (0.56)	3/9 (0.33)	2/3 (0.67)	10/21 (0.48)
Culturally neutralized	6/9 (0.67)	5/9 (0.56)	3/3 (1.00)	14/21 (0.67)
Local markers	2/9 (0.22)	3/9 (0.33)	0/3 (0.00)	5/21 (0.24)

Source: Own research

Affective tone supports the packaging of identity and culture. Calm is present in 14/21 clips, aspirational tone in 10/21, reinforcing a model of tidy, ordered everyday life. Visual grammar, gaze, composition, and layout, structure how these meanings are read, while denotation/connotation frames how seemingly simple objects carry cultural values; contemporary work further shows how images transport norms and value-laden cues in fast-scrolling environments (Barthes ,1972; Chandler, 2022; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Nikulina et al., 2024).

Identity and culture appear as immediately readable kits: framing and indexical gestures certify action, affect sets the mood, and recurrent objects carry shared meanings within platform-shaped constraints (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016).

5.3 The Role of Platforms in Structuring Narrative

Short-form storytelling is normalized by platform affordances: duration caps, native editors, caption limits, sound libraries, and templates funnel clips toward front-loaded hooks, segmented action, and brief payoffs that match feed pacing (Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025; Chen et al., 2024). Recommender systems reinforce the same mold by rewarding early engagement and steady retention, which privileges legible openings, compact step-chains, and replayable endings (Zannettou et al., 2024; van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016). Recent findings link short-video format features to shifts in stated evaluations in TikTok and Reels settings (Molem et al., 2024). In practice, the resulting unit is procedural (setup, ordered steps, visible end-state), designed to travel efficiently through the feed.

These constraints settle into platform-specific norms (see Figure 1). In this dataset, Reels most often delivers a tidy micro-arc with soft closure, TikTok tends to stop at progression without resolution, and Shorts maximizes template clarity and

speed (Social Insider, 2024; Kozharinova & Manovich, 2024). Within this dataset, Shorts function as a control reference: their template-forward pacing marks the upper bound of speed and legibility. The shift away from grand plotlines toward patterned everyday sequences echoes recent accounts of how everyday stories replace heroic narrative frames on TikTok (Frenette et al., 2024).

From an anthropological angle, the repeated shapes operate as rituals: trends, sounds, filters, caption formulas, and learned "moves" translate private routines into public, copyable procedures (Trillò et al., 2022). Everyday sharing practices themselves function as a social infrastructure that stabilizes these scripts over time (Schellewald, 2024). Meaning rides on familiar symbols and visual grammars (mugs, mirrors, sneakers; gaze, composition, layout) so that the mundane acquires recognizable value in seconds (Geertz, 1973; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). What appears spontaneous is patterned performance aligned with infrastructural incentives (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016).

TikTok, Reels, and Shorts do not merely host stories; they standardize how stories are built, through technical limits, ranking pressures, and aesthetic defaults that make specific micro-narratives easy to produce, recognize, and circulate (Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025; Chen et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2024; Frenette et al., 2024; Schellewald, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This study has shown how short-form platforms transform everyday routines into procedural micro-narratives that circulate smoothly across feeds. Simple acts such as preparing a drink or walking through a city street are organized into compressed sequences that remain legible through familiar cues of setup, shift, and closure. Coherence is achieved less within the single video and more across repeating formats and recognizable trends that allow content to be copied, adapted, and shared within the logic of algorithmic promotion (Chen et al., 2024; van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016).

The findings contribute to narratology by demonstrating how narrative units persist even under extreme temporal compression. Setup, transition, and resolution remain traceable and provide a workable framework for analyzing micro-stories in platform conditions (Abbott, 2008; Bruner, 1991; Alexander, 2011). From a semiotic perspective, meaning is generated through fast-decoding systems of denotation, connotation, and visual grammar, with culturally charged objects anchoring values in recognizable form (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2022; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Nikulina et al., 2024). The anthropological dimension of the study lies in framing

repeated formats as digital rituals that standardize everyday storytelling, connecting personal expression with infrastructural incentives and platform aesthetics (Trillò et al., 2022; Braun & Vollmer Mateus, 2024).

Methodologically, the adoption of the micro-narrative as a unit of analysis proved applicable across languages and platforms. The combined codebook allowed description to remain close to the visible form of videos while still supporting comparison between TikTok, Reels, and Shorts. YouTube Shorts were included primarily as a control reference, which clarified how pace and template use appear when algorithmic conventions differ. One important boundary condition remains: material was selected through discovery feeds and targeted searches, which means that access was shaped by algorithmic curation rather than by a neutral or exhaustive sampling frame (Zannettou et al., 2024).

As this is a pilot study, further research should expand the scale of analysis while maintaining comparability. The same codebook could be extended to larger and multilingual datasets, and supported by computational tools, to track how templates evolve with new editing features and policy shifts. Longitudinal approaches would allow changes in ritualized storytelling to be traced over time, while mixed methods could connect formal video features with shifts in audience perception and evaluation (Molem et al., 2024). Such steps would extend the contribution of this study by building a cumulative understanding of how platforms regulate everyday narrative expression.

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DIGITALNI RITUALI I SVAKODNEVNI NARATIVI: VIZUELNA ANTROPOLOGIJA KULTURE KRATKIH VIDEO-FORMATA

Rezime

Ovaj rad ispituje kako platforme za kratke video-formate transformišu svakodnevne rutine u prepoznatljive narativne i vizuelne obrasce. Kroz kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja 21 video-zapisa sa platformi TikTok, Instagram Reels i YouTube Shorts, ova pilot-studija identifikuje načine na koje skraćene sekvence radnji postaju proceduralni mikronarativi. Ovi video-zapisi oslanjaju se na minimalne narativne signale – uvod, promenu i završetak – koje dodatno pojačavaju vizuelna gramatika i kulturno kodirani simboli,

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obezbeđujući prepoznatljivost u brzom ritmu pregleda sadržaja. Analiza pokazuje da ponavljanje i upotreba šablona funkcionišu kao digitalni rituali koji istovremeno odražavaju i standardizuju svakodnevno pripovedanje. Kombinovanjem naratologije, semiotike i digitalne antropologije, studija doprinosi razumevanju načina na koji platforme kratkog formata ne samo da distribuiraju sadržaj već aktivno oblikuju kulturni izraz i identitet. Metodološki, usvajanje mikronarativa kao jedinice analize omogućava poređenje između jezika i platformi, uz isticanje uticaja algoritamske selekcije na formiranje uzorka. Nalazi otvaraju prostor za buduća istraživanja sa većim skupovima podataka i kombinovanim metodama, nudeći uvid u to kako platforme oblikuju forme i ritmove svakodnevnih narativa kroz vreme.

▸ **Ključne reči:** kratki video-format, digitalni rituali, vizuelna antropologija, proceduralni mikronarativ, estetika platforme, semiotika, TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts.

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