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Research on the Characteristics and Dissemination Effects of Short-Form Video Content: A Literature Review Based on Cover Design, Content Style, and Video Duration

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Abstract. As the user base for short videos continues to expand and their commercial value keeps growing, how thumbnail design, content style, and video length influence dissemination effectiveness has become a question that marketing and communication studies need to address systematically. This paper employs a literature review approach to synthesize several representative empirical studies conducted in recent years on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. It examinies the relationship between the visual attributes of thumbnails, content style, video length, and metrics such as view count, engagement, and completion rate. The review reveals that the emotional intensity, color schemes, and character portrayal of thumbnails, as well as trending elements and the emotional tone within the content, all have a significant positive impact on dissemination effectiveness. The role of content style is partially mediated through social media engagement. However, no consistent conclusions have been reached regarding the role of video duration, results vary across different research contexts, suggesting that this relationship may be moderated by factors such as content verticals. Future research could expand to domestic platforms, incorporate experimental designs, and examine the interactive effects of cover visuals and content style. These findings can serve as a reference for content operators, such as MCN agencies, to assist them in making decisions regarding cover design, content selection, and duration control.

Keywords: Short videos, outreach effectiveness, cover design, content style, video length

1. Introduction

According to data from iMedia Research, as of June 2025, the number of short-video users in China had reached 1.068 billion, accounting for 95.1% of the total internet user base—effectively covering nearly all internet users [1]. The user base has gradually expanded from the early days—when it consisted primarily of young urbanites—to include middle-aged and elderly groups as well as users in lower-tier markets. Consequently, the industry's market size has expanded rapidly. According to calculations by the China Internet Audio-Video Program Service Association, the market size of China's short-video industry reached 420 billion yuan in 2024, with advertising revenue accounting for 210 billion yuan—a year-over-year increase of 16.7% [2]. Against the backdrop of widespread

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user coverage and continuously growing commercial value, the question of what kind of short-video content is more likely to achieve high view counts and high engagement has become a practical concern for content creators and requires systematic explanations from marketing and communication studies.

Existing research has examined various short-video content characteristics, including the color, emotional intensity, and character portrayal of thumbnails, the entertainment value, emotional tone, and trending elements of the content, as well as video duration. These studies have separately analyzed the impact of the aforementioned characteristics on metrics such as view counts, likes, shares, and engagement rates. However, research contexts have been relatively fragmented, with samples primarily drawn from specific content types on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, and methodologies predominantly consisting of cross-sectional surveys and content analysis. Thumbnails, style, and duration are typically examined separately, empirical research that incorporates all three into a single framework to test their interactions remains insufficient. Furthermore, existing conclusions have not reached a consensus on the exact nature of the relationship between video duration and communication outcomes.

This paper systematically reviews the mechanisms and empirical evidence regarding how thumbnail design, content style, and video duration influence dissemination metrics such as view counts, shares/reposts, and likes, while discussing the shortcomings of existing research and suggesting directions for future studies. This paper incorporates thumbnail design and content style into a single analytical framework, addressing the long-standing gap in existing research that has historically examined these two factors in isolation. It can serve as a decision-making reference for content operators such as MCN agencies. This approach can enhance organic traffic and lay the foundation for subsequent commercial monetization efforts, such as brand collaborations and live-streamed e-commerce.

2. Definition of key concepts

This paper defines communication effectiveness as the observable reactions users generate in response to short-form video content. Research typically uses view count to measure the breadth of a content's reach, the number of likes and comments to gauge users' willingness to engage superficially, and the number of shares or reposts to reflect the content's ability to spread further. On the other hand, view-through or completion rate focuses on whether users watch the video in its entirety. A high view count does not necessarily mean users watched the video attentively: the former reflects the decision to click, while the latter reflects the viewing experience, therefore, the two are typically measured separately in empirical research.

This paper defines content characteristics based on three operational and measurable dimensions. The cover (thumbnail) is the static visual information users see before clicking on a video, its attributes include color, contrast, emotional expression, and whether it features people. Content style refers to the video's subject matter and emotional tone, such as entertainment-oriented or emotionally charged content, as well as whether it incorporates currently trending elements. Video duration refers to the length of time the video plays from start to finish. The following sections review the relevant empirical research on these three dimensions in turn.

Table 1 summarizes the main empirical literature covered in this paper and its core findings, allowing readers to quickly grasp the relationships among the various studies.

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Table 1. Summary of major empirical literature

Key Findings	Literature
Thumbnail contrast is one of the key sensitive features that influence view counts, optimizing thumbnails after publication can boost a video's popularity	Hoiles et al. [3]
The emotional intensity of the cover, the number of design elements, and color schemes influence users' completion rates	Koh & Cui [4]
The Emotional Intensity of Covers and Titles Increases View Counts, but Excessive Sensationalism Risks Eroding User Trust	Cui et al. [5]
The use of trending elements in advertisements significantly boosts user engagement, though the effect varies depending on the type of product or service	Dang et al. [6]
Entertainment-oriented and emotional content indirectly increase users' willingness to rewatch through social media interactions	Manic [7]
Video length and interaction volume exhibit an inverted U-shaped relationship, the optimal length is approximately 34.69 seconds	Reichstein & Dost [8]
The correlation between video length and engagement rate is negligible, the actual explanatory power is close to zero	Ghadafi & Andriotis [9]

3. The impact of cover images (thumbnails) on outreach effectiveness

When users browse a list page, the thumbnail is the only visual cue they see and the primary factor in deciding whether to click. Hoiles et al. used a YouTube dataset containing 6 million videos and 25,000 channels to conduct a sensitivity analysis of 54 "meta-level features" using various machine learning methods [3]. The results showed that thumbnail contrast ranked third in sensitivity—behind only first-day views and subscriber count—and had a significant impact on view counts 14 days after a video's release. The study also found that adjusting the thumbnail after publication boosted a video's popularity in more than half of the cases. This increase primarily stemmed from higher traffic from the Related Recommendations channel.

Subsequent research further distinguished between different visual attributes of thumbnails. A study analyzed the thumbnails of 16,215 YouTube videos and found that strong emotional expressions, whether positive or negative, led to more views, however, strong emotions in text descriptions had the opposite effect [4]. Increasing the variety of design elements in a thumbnail helps convey information, but too many elements may also increase cognitive load. Portraits of celebrities, appropriate combinations of color lightness and saturation, and moderate image quality are more effective at attracting users to click and watch the video through peripheral processing. Clicks for Money points out that while increasing the emotional intensity of titles and thumbnails can drive view count growth, overly sensationalizing emotions and creating "clickbait" titles or thumbnails may also undermine user trust and reduce content credibility [5]. There is currently a lack of sufficient empirical evidence to determine how to balance the benefits of content dissemination against these potential costs.

Existing research provides relatively consistent evidence that cover images can promote views, clicks, and completion rates. In contrast, the potential negative effects of over-optimizing cover

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images have not yet received sufficient attention.

4. The impact of content style on communication effectiveness

Content style research primarily examines how a video's subject matter and emotional tone influence user interaction and sharing behavior. Dang et al. analyzed 750 TikTok commercial ads and found that ads incorporating trending elements, including popular music, special effects, and imitative filming techniques, received significantly more likes, comments, and shares [6]. This effect was more pronounced in product advertisements than in service advertisements. The researchers attributed this result to the "halo effect" in psychology: consumers' positive feelings toward trending content may transfer to advertisements that incorporate these elements, thereby increasing their willingness to engage.

Manic, based on 114 questionnaires and using structural equation modeling, found that both entertainment-oriented and emotional content significantly increased users' willingness to rewatch videos, with social media interaction playing a partial mediating role [7]. Specifically, content style drives interactions such as likes and comments, and these interactions, in turn, further increase the willingness to rewatch. This result provides clues for understanding the pathway through which content style exerts its influence. Future research could not only examine the direct effects of content characteristics on communication outcomes but also test mediating variables to explain how this influence occurs.

5. The impact of video length on viewership

There is still no consensus on the relationship between video length and engagement. In the study How Video Length Shapes Engagement, researchers used OLS regression and nonlinear tests to find that there is a significant inverted U-shaped relationship between short video length and user engagement [8]. Engagement does not continue to increase as video length shortens or lengthens, but rather reaches a maximum within a certain length range, the optimal length estimated by this study is approximately 34.69 seconds. However, a longitudinal study of financial TikTok influencers (finfluencers), "Finfluencers on TikTok", yielded different results [9]. After excluding abnormally long videos, the study used correlation analysis and found that while the correlation between video length and engagement was statistically significant, the effect size was negligible, and the actual explanatory power was close to zero.

These discrepancies suggest that the role of video length may depend on the specific context. For example, since general entertainment content and financial education content belong to different verticals, the relationship between video length and dissemination effectiveness may vary accordingly. Therefore, the impact of video length cannot necessarily be generalized as a universal rule independent of context, its strength may be moderated by variables such as content vertical, which remain insufficiently integrated into existing analytical framework.

6. Research review: limitations of existing studies

Existing research on cover art, content style, and video duration still has six shortcomings.

First, research conclusions are limited by the sample contexts. Relevant studies are scattered across specific platforms or content types, with most using samples from YouTube gaming and entertainment channels or TikTok commercial advertisements. It remains unclear whether these conclusions can be applied to user-generated content on China's domestic short-video platforms.

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Causal validation is also insufficient. Most studies employ content analysis, historical data regression, and cross-sectional surveys, primarily to explore relationships between variables. Sample size and research design—particularly cross-sectional surveys and non-tracking data—limit the ability to determine the direction of causality.

The analytical approach must also take into account the constraints brought about by the "content condensation" feature of short-form video as a medium. While this highly condensed content format aligns with users' consumption habits characterized by short attention spans, it also limits the depth of information. Existing empirical research has rarely discussed how this contradiction affects the sustainability of communication outcomes.

This paper focuses specifically on the relationship between cover design and content style. Existing literature generally examines these two factors separately, few studies have simultaneously incorporated both types of variables and tested for their interaction. The cover is the only visual cue visible before a click, while content style is the core variable that determines the viewing experience after a click, theoretically, the two should exhibit a synergistic effect. This relationship remains an unaddressed research gap.

Research on negative effects is also relatively limited. Most studies focus on the communication benefits derived from cover images and content style, while insufficient attention has been paid to the potential erosion of user trust caused by practices such as the excessive sensationalization of emotions and "clickbait" headlines or cover images. Against the backdrop of increasingly stringent regulation of short-form video content, the trade-off between communication effectiveness and potential costs warrants further study.

Divergent conclusions regarding video length stem from issues of applicability. Some studies have identified an inverted U-shaped relationship, suggesting an optimal length range that maximizes engagement, however, research on certain niche content categories has found an extremely weak correlation between video length and engagement. This suggests that factors such as content niche may moderate the impact of video length and limits the generalizability of a single conclusion to other contexts.

7. Conclusion

This paper reviews recent empirical research on short video thumbnail design, content style, and video length. Existing evidence suggests that the emotional intensity, color schemes, and character portrayal in thumbnails, as well as trending elements, entertainment value, and emotional appeal within the content, along with video length, all influence metrics such as view count, engagement, and completion rate to varying degrees. The role of content style is partly realized through social media engagement, while the impact of video length may vary depending on the content niche. Consequently, communication outcomes cannot be explained solely by the content itself. It is also necessary to examine how content characteristics are transformed into communication outcomes through users' cognitive and interactive responses, as well as how this process differs across various contexts.

This study did not strictly follow systematic review protocols to conduct an exhaustive literature search, the number of included studies is limited, and omissions may exist. Furthermore, the variables examined were limited to cover art, content style, and video duration. Other content attributes that may influence dissemination effectiveness—such as publication time, hashtags and trending topics, and background music—have not yet been included in the analysis.

Future research could further examine the relationships among these variables by expanding the scope of the literature and the range of variables. For example, cover design and content style could

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be placed within the same analytical framework to examine whether dissemination effectiveness is enhanced or diminished when a single content style is paired with different cover strategies. When evaluating dissemination benefits, metrics such as content credibility and user trust should also be incorporated to analyze the potential costs of overly sensationalized emotional content. Regarding video duration, content verticals could be treated as moderator variables to test the boundary conditions and scope of applicability for the concept of "optimal duration."

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