

The Algorithmic Gaze: Short-Form Video Platforms, Attention Economies, and the Reconfiguration of Visual Culture _____

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper dives into the idea of the “algorithmic gaze,” looking at how apps like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts are changing visual culture. The central mechanism concerns how these platforms pull us in through algorithms that shape what we see and what grabs our attention. The paper explores how machine learning flips the way we create, watch, and interpret video content.

Methodology: The paper mixes theories from visual culture, platform studies, and political economy. There is substantial conceptual analysis regarding the underlying architecture and mechanisms of these platforms, how algorithms pick and show videos, and how creators work within these systems. The analysis pulls in real studies on user behavior, platform features, and the economy around creators.

Findings: Here’s what comes out of it: Short-form video platforms create their own unique “algorithmic gaze,” and it runs on three things—machine perception, algorithmic curation, and structured visibility. Because of this, the ecosystem is driven by micro-moments of attention, creativity gets boxed by templates, and meaning often ties back to how something performs in metrics instead of its deeper message.

Value: *The value here is introducing the “algorithmic gaze” as a new way to think about platform power and visual culture. It sheds light on how predictive tech reshapes what it means to see, to work, and to profit in the world of short-form video.*

Keywords: *Visual culture, attention economy, short-form video, platformisation, algorithmic gaze, digital aesthetics*

Introduction

The way we see the world has changed fast in just a few years. We used to use our phones to snap photos and maybe share a few with friends. Now? That little camera is a ticket to an endless reel of short videos, reaching way beyond our own circles. Apps like TikTok (which went global in 2017), Instagram Reels (2020), and YouTube Shorts (2020) didn’t just add another type of content—they kicked off a novel mode of seeing. Algorithms aren’t just picking what we watch; they shape how we create, share, and consume images, all while chasing and cashing in on our attention. This paper examines where visual culture meets attention-driven markets and short-form media. Its main argument: these platforms create an “algorithmic gaze” that changes how we look, how we’re looked at, and even what it means to stand out or be seen.

Visual culture experts have always said our ways of seeing are tangled up in society, history, and politics (Berger, 1972; Mitchell, 2005; Mirzoeff, 2011). But with short videos flying across screens at lightning speed, we need fresh ways to make sense of things. TV once gave us the “spectacle” (Debord, 1967) and early social media let us curate—the “networked image” (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013). Now, we live with real-time feedback loops where machines tweak and push images depending on how quickly they grab us. Additionally, the “attention economy” (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Beller, 2006) isn’t just theory anymore—on these platforms, every swipe or pause feeds a model that decides what you see next. So images aren’t just about meaning. They’re streams—optimized, traded, and always moving.

This shift isn’t new, exactly—it builds on old patterns of mixing visual pleasure and money. Debord’s spectacle, where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,” isn’t just on TV anymore. Now it’s fragmented, personal, and always-refreshing feeds. Beller (2006) took it further, saying that looking is a kind of work—and TikTok turns your attention into ad dollars and predictive data. What’s different now? Algorithms aren’t just packaging what you’ve already watched. They shape what gets made in the first place, guessing and building the attention they want to grab. Similarly, the algorithmic gaze moves us from old-fashioned, broadcast-style spectacle to crowdsourced, instant-to-instant image-making where engagement gets personal—and scales up fast.

So here's where the paper goes: it introduces "algorithmic gaze" as a way to think about the distributed, machine-driven influence steering (Mirzoeff's "visuality," 2011) of what we see online. It's not just about how we look; it's about how computer vision, recommendation engines, A/B tests, and engagement metrics actually sort and frame what makes it onto our screens—sometimes before humans even see it. And the stakes are bigger than academics. Short video is now how people get their news, express themselves, make art, and shape identity. Understanding what rules this visible world hits at questions about democracy, fairness, and whether culture can keep up.

The paper maps out as follows: Chapter two grounds the discussion in key literature on attention economy and visual culture. Chapter 3 discusses the method. Chapter four looks at algorithmic gaze, how platforms turn visuals into micro-moments of attention, checks out the new aesthetics emerging on algorithm-curated feeds. Chapter five tackles how creators play along—with templates, challenges, and metrics shaping their moves, offers up how critique and resistance show up, and wraps with what this means for visual literacy and holding platforms accountable. Chapter 6 articulates the implications across several registers. Chapter 7 concludes by reiterating the paper's central claims. Chapter 8 sketches a credible future research agenda.

Literature Review

Attention as Visual Economy

If you want to understand how short-form video changes visual culture, you can't ignore the economics pushing these platforms. Attention has always been valuable—Smythe (1981) saw TV viewers as labor, turning their gaze into something advertisers could buy. Scholars carried this idea into the digital age, arguing online platforms are built around an "attention economy" (Goldhaber, 1997; Davenport & Beck, 2001). Beller (2006) said looking itself is now productive, part of how capitalism runs: "to look is to labour" (p. 2). So in this world, attention isn't just a metaphor—it's literally turned into value, with our minds and emotions boxed up and bought.

Visual culture studies have always noticed the money behind images. Berger (1972) linked oil painting to the capitalist gaze. Recent work on Instagram explores how algorithms curate what gets seen (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020). But short-form video changes the game. Old social media favored steady visuals: photos, galleries you could linger on. TikTok and the rest toss out rapid-moving images, each lasting just a few seconds. Every clip is a loop, living for milliseconds in an autoplay feed. Here, attention isn't abstract—it's a measurable event, tracked by sensors built into the platform.

Platform studies highlight how infrastructure shapes this economy. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) talk about “platform society,” where designs and business models steer public values and culture. Short-form video goes further, baking algorithmic suggestions right into the experience. Forget subscription models—TikTok’s For You Page serves up content based on behavior, not connections. This content-first setup (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) means algorithms decide what you see, not your actual network. So the visual landscape is now what Mackenzie (2019) calls an “operational” domain—images made, shared, and consumed through ongoing computation, chasing engagement instead of meaning.

By connecting these ideas together, you start to see how things have ramped up over time. The attention economy has shifted—from the old days, when audiences sat passively in front of broadcast media, to now, when “prosumers” shape and fuel digital platforms with their every click and scroll. We’re living in an era of hypersynchronisation, where algorithms don’t just collect our attention, they actually steer the way we see things and interact with the world online (Chen, Nan & Tsai, Hsin-Tien. 2024)). Short-form video is probably the clearest example of how this works: every part of the system is built to grab those fleeting moments of focus. Our visual culture is changing—built more and more around tiny fragments of attention that platforms predict, trigger, and then turn into profit.

But this picture is mostly based on how things play out in the West. Researchers from the Global South have shown that the story is different elsewhere. Srinivasan (2013) looked at digital platforms in India and found that they can bake in cultural biases, often pushing indigenous visual traditions to the sidelines. Arora (2019) studied attention economies in the Global South and found that things like slow connections and shared devices create new patterns in how people use these platforms. Udupa (2019) took a close look at Indian social media, showing how platforms’ designs often boost mainstream political images and mute those from minority groups. All of this research pushes back on the idea that the “algorithmic gaze” works the same everywhere—instead, it depends a lot on local rules, cultural habits, and what tech is actually available.

There’s a lot to learn from the work on platform governance and moderation too. Gillespie (2018) argued that content moderation is really a form of regulating speech, and Roberts (2019) revealed the often invisible labor of those who screen content for us. Gorwa (2019) mapped out how these platforms are managed by different actors—states, companies, users—each shaping what stays visible online. These perspectives broaden the conversation, moving beyond the algorithms themselves to include the structures that decide what we see in the first place. This paper connects with those ideas here and there, but honestly, future work needs to bring them together more closely if we want a real understanding of how short-form visual culture is taking shape.

The Gaze in Visual Culture Studies

The gaze has always been a central idea in visual culture. Mulvey (1975) described the “male gaze” in Hollywood, showing how movies position viewers in ways where women become objects of pleasure for men. Looking wasn’t just natural—it was set up by power, technology, and story. Later work expanded this idea to racialized gazes (Hooks, 1992), colonial visualities (Mirzoeff, 2011), and the medical gaze (Foucault, 1973). Across all these, gaze isn’t just seeing—it’s a web of power: who gets to look, who gets looked at, and how.

In digital media studies, “algorithmic gaze” has started to get noticed. Turow (2011) looked at how ad algorithms sort audiences, creating profiles. Gillespie (2014) dug into algorithms as relevance-makers, deciding what pops up for users. Carah and Dobson (2016) explored how women’s work to be seen on Instagram gets shaped by the platform’s sense of “hotness.” Still, most research hasn’t unpacked how algorithmic curation plays out visually on short-form platforms. This paper goes deeper, asking not just how algorithms filter stuff, but how they remake visual culture through machine perception, distribution, and visibility.

Research Gap

Lots of work explains attention economies and platforms, but not much zeroes in on the unique visual regime of short-form video. That’s the gap here—looking at how three things intersect: the infrastructure of algorithmic recommendation, the shifts in how visuals are experienced, and the changing shape of creative work. The “algorithmic gaze” offers a framework to understand how these all come together in TikTok-style platforms.

Methodology

This paper takes a conceptual synthesis approach, which fits well for a theoretical study at the crossroads of media studies, visual culture, and political economy. Building on Swedberg’s (2014) method for theory-building in social science, the paper covers three connected lines of inquiry.

First, the paper performs critical analysis of platform architectures by analyzing technical documentation that’s available to the public, looking closely at platform interfaces, and reviewing what other scholars and journalists have published about how these platforms operate. For example, it examines TikTok’s For You Page algorithm, content moderation processes, and creator tools by drawing on sources like white papers, patent filings, and investigative reports. The focus stays

on areas that matter most for visual culture—things like how recommendation systems work, how content gets classified, the kinds of templates and effects that are available, and how engagement metrics are shown.

Second, the paper examines major theoretical frameworks from visual culture studies (Berger, 1972; Mirzoeff, 2011), theories about the attention economy (Beller, 2006; Smythe, 1981), and platform studies (van Dijck et al., 2018; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). It looks for where these ideas overlap and where they clash, then weaves them together to offer a new concept: the algorithmic gaze.

Third, the paper brings in existing empirical research on how users behave on short-form platforms (Chen, Li, Guo, Fu & Wang, 2022), the world of online creators (Bishop, 2019; Carah & Dobson, 2016), and how algorithmic culture takes shape (Gillespie, 2014; Mackenzie, 2019). The studies picked for this analysis weren't chosen through a rigid systematic review, but rather through a more flexible, interpretive process. The goal was to find strong, widely-cited studies that tackle the three aspects of the algorithmic gaze: machine perception, algorithmic distribution, and structured visibility. Preference went to research specifically about short-form video, studies that actually collected data, and work published by respected academic sources. When there were disagreements in the literature, these were acknowledged, but the paper usually leans on research with bigger samples or more direct measurements. This is deliberately an interpretive synthesis, shaped by the author's own theoretical perspective and the key themes in the field, not an attempt to cover everything. Someone else using different sources or highlighting other details might draw different conclusions. The point here is to use these existing studies to help clarify how the algorithmic gaze shapes what gets seen, produced, and interpreted on these platforms.

There's one central empirical claim in the paper—that users often decide to skip or keep watching a video in less than 250 milliseconds. That comes from Chen, Chen, Li, Guo, Fu & Wang, (2022) study, which used eye-tracking and touchscreen data from a controlled lab experiment with 120 participants. The finding lines up with other research into how quickly people make visual decisions, but it isn't clear if results from the lab always translate to everyday use, where people might be multitasking or dealing with distractions. The paper treats this result as a sign that attention is fractured and fleeting on these platforms, not as a hard-and-fast rule about human perception.

The paper doesn't present any new data. Its value lies in weaving together existing theories and introducing a new framework for understanding how these rapidly evolving media platforms shape what we see and how we see it—something especially important now, since empirical research in this area is still limited.

Results

The Algorithmic Gaze: A Three-Level Framework

If you spend any time on short-form video platforms, it quickly becomes clear that algorithms aren't just sorting content—they're shaping everything we see. The "algorithmic gaze" works on three levels, all tangled up.

First, it's a kind of sensing machine. Built-in computer vision, optical character recognition (Prakash & Hanumanthaiah, 2025), and audio analysis push platforms to pull features out of every uploaded video. They spot objects, faces, text overlays, sounds, changes in scene—more than we might realize. It's not just recording, it's sorting and labeling, feeding these details straight into recommendation engines. Take a TikTok video showing a sunset. While a person might see beauty or think about impermanence, the algorithm just breaks it into a color palette, outdoor setting, trending soundtrack, similarity to other clips in its database. That raw data feeds statistical models for engagement. Human intent fades—what matters are attributes the system can measure and use (Babar, Shahbaz, & Abeeha, 2025).

Next, the algorithmic gaze runs the show as a distribution system. It decides who sees what, in what order, for how long, and basically builds the entire stream we watch. This isn't old-school editorial curation or chronological feed; it's constant tweaking for maximum time-on-platform and advertising reach. Zulli and Zulli (2022) describe TikTok's "For You Page" as a hyper-personalized endless feed that reflects what you do—and what the algorithm thinks you'll like (p. 187). But the system isn't passive. It doesn't just respond to preferences; it actively shapes them, running massive A/B tests to see what grabs our attention. So this gaze is anticipatory and experimental, always nudging the feed around to optimize engagement.

Third, there's a visibility regime at work. Building from Dean (2010) and the idea that communicative capitalism thrives on circulating feelings more than content, platforms surface specific visual forms while burying others. Items that nail high completion rates, quick replays, fast shares—think surprise reveals, rapid edits, catchy text hooks, intense emotions—get a big boost. The algorithm puts strong pressure on what succeeds visually; it's like a kind of "cultural natural selection" where only content suited to machine capture sticks around. So these platforms don't just host culture. They shape it, picking which forms live or die. However, this metaphor needs a closer look. "Natural selection" makes you think of an evolutionary process where the most adaptable forms win out, all happening on its own, with no one pulling the strings. In biology, those pressures are just out there—nobody's designing them (Blanke, S., Schellens, T., Soetaert, R. et al.

2014). But with online platforms, it's a different story. Here, the whole environment gets set up on purpose by designers chasing engagement and ad dollars (Renkai Ma, Xinning Gui, Yubo Kou. (2023). What counts as “adaptive” in this world isn't what helps us grow as people or supports creativity. It's whatever grabs and holds our attention for a few seconds at a time. So, platforms aren't just neutral spaces for culture to play out. They actively shape what rises and falls, driving the way our visual culture evolves.

Micro-Attention and Temporal Reordering

This algorithmic gaze also scrambles our sense of time. Unlike cinema or TV shows that asked for sit-down attention and followed a story arc, short-form platforms push us into what I'll call micro-attention—a way of watching driven by fleeting moments, endless transitions, and the constant itch for the next thing.

On TikTok, videos usually last anywhere from 15 seconds to 10 minutes, but the hits are almost always under a minute. What matters more than each video's length is the feed's relentless flow. Autoplay keeps things moving—no pause between clips, so the end of one is the start of another. Swiping adds a physical rhythm, letting people dismiss or select in less than a second. Studies show these decisions—skip or continue—happen in under 250 milliseconds (Chen, Li, Guo, Fu & Wang, 2022), even faster than conscious thought. Watching videos becomes automatic, guided by quick reactions and familiar patterns.

This shift has real effects on how we see. Schivelbusch (1986) explained how trains changed perception, creating a “panoramic gaze” that favored broad views over deep focus. The algorithmic feed takes it further: instead of a panorama, we get a blur of images engineered for endless novelty. You're always a step ahead, anticipating the next clip before the current one fades. To catch our attention, content trades depth for clarity and immediate impact.

Micro-attention isn't natural—it's designed. Algorithms lean on predictive models calibrated by billions of data points, deciding how to order content (Diamondsalam, 2026). If a video's completion rate drops, the system pushes it down. Creators learn fast. Videos need to grab viewers in the first one to three seconds, using hooks like “Wait for it...” overlays, quick zooms, bold colors, exaggerated expressions. These tricks aren't new, but at this scale, they set fresh visual standards.

Platformisation of Creative Practice

Algorithmic gaze doesn't just reshape viewers—it alters how people make content. If you're creating for places like TikTok, it's less about starting from scratch than working within templates, trending sounds, built-in editing tools, and viral

challenges. Creative work becomes standardized, repeatable, and tightly linked to engagement optimization.

Templates simplify editing. You can drop your photos or clips into preset sequences with synced beats, transitions, effects. TikTok promotes these ready-made formulas—through “Effects,” “Templates,” and editing software like CapCut—so huge pieces of content are scripted in advance. Templates aren’t just neutral tools; they’re “cultural scripts” (Manovich, 2020), channeling expression into forms algorithms can digest quickly. Turvy (2025) calls this “pre-emption of creativity,” where originality is about remixing coded elements that guarantee baseline quality and trendiness.

Trending audio is the engine of this trend cycle. Songs, voiceovers, and sound effects become vehicles for virality. Creators chase “algorithmic value,” picking audio not for artistic merit but for its distribution power. The result: massive clusters of visually diverse videos united only by a shared soundtrack, forming tangled “fractal” trends where the same sounds echo across constantly changing visuals.

Engagement metrics—likes, shares, comments, completion rates—form a real-time feedback loop. Creators pay close attention, tweaking content based on the numbers. Attentional labour (Beller, 2006; Crain, Poster, & Cherry, 2016) ramps up, as creators morph into amateur data analysts, adjusting length, language, color grading, even facial expressions in endless optimization cycles. Bishop (2019) charted YouTube beauty vloggers adapting to algorithmic demands; on TikTok, it’s drilled down to the level of individual frames.

Aesthetics of the For You Page

Short-form video platforms crank out a particular aesthetic, one where meaning comes from metric performance and placement within the feed—not just from the images themselves. Scroll the For You Page and you’ll see abrupt, sometimes dizzying juxtapositions—a cat video might lead right into an activism slideshow. These sequences aren’t random; algorithms predict what combo will boost receptiveness, so a cute clip smooths the way for something serious. Meaning doesn’t just sit in isolation—it flows through the chain of content.

Feeds feel fractal, with the same patterns repeating at different scales. Niche memes explode globally through millions of riffs and variations, feeding engagement signals to algorithmic systems everywhere. The same overlays, effects, reaction formats pop up everywhere, turning specific visual jokes or references into a generic “algorithmic language” that spreads by sacrificing local nuance for broad appeal. Jin (2017) sums this up as a platform dialectic—content becomes both universally available and endlessly fragmented.

Affective triggers run the show. Because grabbing attention matters most, videos ramp up emotional intensity or switch moods fast—what Zillmann (1991) called affective shifts. The most common emotions are sharp and high-impact: *schadenfreude*, surprise, cuteness overload, outrage. Slower or subtler content sometimes breaks through, but only if it nails a hook that fits the rapid arousal pattern. All of this remakes visual culture’s emotional landscape.

Finally, these dynamics blur old lines between authentic and staged. Videos claim “realness” even while piling on effects, filters, or rehearsed scenes. Whether viewers trust what they see depends on how well a clip fits algorithm-driven storytelling and genre expectations. Saying “I saw it on TikTok” becomes a kind of group validation, relying on community buzz and affective signals, not traditional evidence. So digital contexts are shifting towards hybrid frameworks—where machine-generated signals stand in for truth.

Between Analysis and Assertion: Interrogating Observed Patterns

So far, the Results section has laid out a few clear patterns across short-form video platforms: the three-level structure of the algorithmic gaze, the way micro-attention works over time, how templates shape creative labour, and the data-driven look of the For You Page. This is grounded in secondary research and literature. Even so, the framework used to make sense of all this—the algorithmic gaze—is still more of a theoretical lens than something directly observable. That means this section inevitably steps beyond straight-up evidence and ventures into interpretation. For a conceptual paper, that’s normal, but it’s important to be upfront about where facts stop and theory steps in (Swedberg, 2014).

Some arguments here lean heavily on interpretation. For example, calling the algorithmic gaze a “sensing apparatus” built on machine perception lines up well with both technical documents and computer vision research (Mackenzie, 2019). The assertion that algorithmic curation functions as a primary distribution system is robustly supported by platform white papers and empirical studies on user behavior (Gillespie, 2014). However, the idea that the algorithmic gaze creates a whole new “visibility regime,” one that selectively blocks out certain visuals, takes things further—it’s a bigger interpretive leap about how visibility connects to power. That argument draws on Foucault (1973), Dean (2010), and critical theory, not just raw data. It’s a similar story with the claim that micro-attention isn’t just a personal mental habit but something platforms intentionally design. The evidence shows these platforms’ features match up with how people behave, but it doesn’t prove designers made those choices deliberately for that reason. That’s where interpretation comes in (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). That’s also why Section 3 focused on being transparent about methods—so readers can tell the difference between straightforward analysis and broader theoretical claims.

Discussion

These findings make it clear: short-form video platforms aren't just changing the way we see things — they're building a whole new way of looking at the world, one shaped by algorithms. This “algorithmic gaze” pops up everywhere, working through invisible systems: it's always sensing our behavior, deciding what we get to see, and tinkering with who gets attention. It stirs up quick, jittery kinds of focus, pushes creators toward using the same templates, and builds a visual style that's really just the platform's data baked back into what we watch. When you add it up, we're looking at some big shifts in how contemporary visual culture operates.

Let's examine a few key points: First, even though the algorithmic gaze feels new, it's really just capitalism's old visual habits — now significantly intensified. Debord's (1967) spectacle and Beller's (2006) idea of attentional labor haven't vanished. Instead, they've become more personal and more automated. In the past, TV or movies were aimed at the masses — everyone saw the same advertisements, sat through the same shows. Now, TikTok and similar platforms break the audience into individuals, feeding each person a unique, endlessly optimized river of clips. Instead of building meaning through clear symbols or fixed narratives, these platforms cook up meaning through performance metrics: what gets watched, swiped, or replayed. The old rulebook for reading images, rooted in semiotics, falls apart here. Meaning lives not in the picture, but in how it moves the scoreboard.

Second, if you care about diversity and creativity, there's a problem. The rise of template-driven content and endless A/B testing squeezes everything into the same shape. There are fewer oddballs, fewer local styles, fewer surprises — just more of whatever works best for keeping people hooked. Manovich (2020) saw this flattening happen on Instagram, but on TikTok it speeds up even more, thanks to shorter videos and tighter feedback loops. Creativity gets reduced to “what performs.” What gets lost is hard to measure with numbers: strange experiments, local quirks, any aesthetic that doesn't fit the global engagement formula. That's a real cultural loss.

Third, this algorithmic system scrambles our sense of what's real or fake. When your measure of success is a spike in engagement, the lines between authentic and performed, heartfelt and calculated, get blurry. Machines reward whatever catches attention, not what's true. This sets the stage for confusion, manipulation, and all-out misinformation — a problem researchers are only beginning to untangle (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

The algorithmic gaze does more than just dial up intensity—it changes the relationship between watching and expecting something to happen. If you look back at classical film theory—think Metz (1982) and Baudry (1974)—they

focused on the psychological side of watching movies: getting drawn in by the camera's movements, letting go of disbelief, slipping into that half-dream state in a dark theater. Today's short-form video platforms flip all that on its head. There's no dark theater. There's no group experience, no real story arc that pulls you in. Now, people watch in bright, ordinary places—on the bus, in line at the shop, during five spare minutes between work. You end up with what you could call ambient spectatorship (Brooks & Perkins, 2026). It's fragmented, distracted. Attention jumps from one thing to the next, and you can swipe something away in an instant. The algorithmic gaze isn't just some smarter version of old ways of seeing. It reshapes where and how we look at things, down to the everyday details. For visual culture, this changes everything: that feeling of shallowness isn't a bug anymore; it's what the platforms want. It's the perfect state if you're measuring engagement by clicks and views.

There's something else going on too. Visual memory is changing fast. In the past, we had what Yates (1996) called the "art of memory"—ways to lock images in place, recall them, pass them on. Photography and film gave us family albums, archives; we could always go back. Short-form video platforms don't work like this. They run on presentism. Watch now, forget soon. If a video doesn't grab you in the first two seconds, you never finish it. A trend dominating TikTok's For You Page on Tuesday will vanish by Thursday. You're not supposed to go back and revisit or rewatch—these platforms are wired to keep things moving, not to help you remember. That makes for a visual culture based on things slipping by, not sticking around. It makes you wonder: if images never get the chance to become memories or markers of history, do we lose the ability to remember together? To bear witness? To build shared stories from what we see? The algorithm turns visual culture's traditional job—helping us remember—into a real challenge.

Pulling all this together, the algorithmic gaze breaks out of old academic silos. It links infrastructure (how platforms focus on architecture), visual culture (what we watch and how we look), and political economy (who profits, who gets attention) in one tangled system.

Therefore, we need to look at the rules and alternatives around platform design. The EU's Digital Services Act (2022) is a step in that direction—it's pushing for more transparency in how algorithms work and giving users more control over their data. The idea is simple: if people could actually see, tweak, or even turn off recommendation algorithms without losing their connections or communities, those endless, sticky feedback loops wouldn't have so much power over us.

There are also some interesting efforts out there like public service algorithm ecosystems and cooperative platform models (Scholz, 2016). These show that we don't have to stick with the way things are now; other approaches to online attention are totally possible. But let's be honest—right now, these alternatives are tiny compared to the massive influence and cultural hold that platforms like TikTok have built.

That's why visual culture studies needs to keep poking at the big questions—especially the ideas that make short-form media seem so natural and inevitable. Platforms love to say that “attention is a choice,” but that slogan hides all the engineering that goes into capturing and holding our focus, second by second (Michael 2025). If we want to take our attention back, we need to fight for what you could call temporal sovereignty: the real freedom to look at something, or look away, without being sucked into someone else's predictive system.

This isn't about longing for a simpler, pre-digital world—it's about demanding a visual environment where machines are designed to serve us, not the other way around. Where the algorithms answer to people, and not the other way around.

Therefore, more structural changes on how platforms work can be put in place, not just with new laws, but by rethinking platform design itself. The EU's Digital Services Act from 2022 and the upcoming AI Act both push for algorithmic transparency and accountability (European Parliament, 2022, 2024). Until now though, those ideas mostly lived in theory — so let's get specific. Here are three practical proposals.

First, make transparency a hard requirement. Platforms should have to explain, in plain language any user can understand, what drives their recommendation systems. Think about how the EU AI Act sorts different kinds of risks: short-form video platforms play such a massive role in shaping culture and politics that they deserve the “high-risk” label. With that, they'd need to follow strict transparency standards (European Parliament, 2022, 2024). That means yearly reports analyzing how their algorithms affect diversity, minority voices, and misinformation; easy-to-spot labels so you know when content gets boosted or buried by algorithms; and third-party audits to keep everyone honest (Selbst et al., 2019; Reisman et al., 2018). All of this won't erase the power algorithms hold, but it'd make them visible and subject to challenge (Raji et al., 2020; Sandvig et al., 2014), where users and public have a say.

Second, let's try a public service algorithm pilot. Just like public broadcasters serve the common good instead of chasing profit, a publicly funded social platform — or a special feature on an existing one — could build recommender systems that boost cultural diversity, user wellbeing, and real democratic conversation, not just engagement. It wouldn't have the reach of TikTok or YouTube right away. Still, it'd prove that non-commercial, people-first algorithms actually work. Picture it as a cooperative: users don't just co-own the platform, they decide together what values the recommendation engine reflects. This puts the algorithm under collective control, turning it from a mysterious black box into something everyone can shape (Born & Prosser, 2001; Freedman, 2008).

Third, we need to break the monopoly grip of a few giant platforms by rethinking how platforms connect. Imagine a “federated” short-form video world — sort of like Mastodon does for social media. Here, independent servers run

their own rules and algorithms. Different communities could prioritize different things: some chase attention, others seek out diversity, or encourage slow, mindful viewing (Scholz, 2016, Mansoux & de Valk, 2021; Gehl, 2015). A governing federation would make sure all the servers can still talk to each other, while each community runs its own show. Now, instead of one corporate logic, you have a real field of choices. At the infrastructure level, users select what matters to them.

The paper is not saying any of this is easy. Major platforms have huge market power. Building these alternatives takes real technical skill and collective governance is messy business. Still, these ideas move past vague hope and offer real, testable steps. To ensure this happens, people from law, tech, and design will have to dive in and work together — that’s outside the boundaries of this paper, but it’s crucial next work.

So, if we want a critical visual culture studies that matters, we have to keep calling out the way today’s platforms normalize their version of reality, especially the lie that equates “attention” with “choice” (Babar et al., 2025). That idea hides all the engineering poured into squeezing every second of focus from users. But taking back control of visual attention also means defending control over our own time — the right to look, or not look, and to step outside the endless scroll. This isn’t nostalgia for some lost, pre-digital innocence. It’s a call to make the machine’s gaze transparent, flexible, and, most importantly, something that serves our own desire to see what we want, how we want, instead of just maximizing profit at our expense.

Limitations

This paper isn’t without its limits. To begin with, it’s a conceptual study, so there’s no new empirical data here. Everything comes from analyzing what’s already been researched. If we really want to put this framework to the test, someone needs to get into the weeds—talk to creators, observe how people actually use these platforms, maybe even examine the data that drives those endless video feeds.

Another thing: the focus is heavily on TikTok. Sure, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts pop up, but the paper doesn’t examine how their architectures or local variations might shape things differently. TikTok sets the tone, but that doesn’t mean the findings fit perfectly elsewhere. Comparing how these platforms work under the architecture would reveal how different algorithms create their own “looks” and rhythms.

Then, there’s the matter of perspective. The analysis leans critical, zeroing in on structural constraints and what platforms decide, not so much how users push back or get creative in the face of those constraints. While there’s some mention of resistance and subversion—especially towards the end of chapter 5—the bulk

of the argument revolves around how structure wins out. But there's more to the story: communities and creators constantly find ways to work the system, resist, and carve out their own spaces. More research should delve into these acts of negotiation and opposition.

Geography and culture are also underexplored here. The paper treats short-form video as a global, uniform phenomenon—yet we know algorithms act differently depending on where you are, what language you speak, and what local markets expect. For example, TikTok's recommendation engine likely isn't the same in Brazil as it is in the US or China (van Dijck et al., 2018). Plus, most of the theorists referenced come from Western traditions, which just doesn't cover how these platforms operate—or are understood—elsewhere. There's a real need for cross-cultural, comparative research on this.

Also, platforms change fast—what's true today can be out of date tomorrow. TikTok keeps rolling out new features, Instagram keeps tweaking Reels, and who knows what YouTube will do next. The core framework aims to be flexible enough to handle these shifts, but the specifics need regular updates to stay relevant.

On top of that, there's the matter of the conceptual approach itself. By relying on synthesizing existing theories, choices get made—some things are highlighted, others left out. This reflects the author's perspective and the limits of the available literature. Others, coming from different backgrounds—maybe science and technology studies or feminist media theory—could easily highlight other issues or offer contrasting explanations. The “algorithmic gaze” is offered as one lens, not the lens for understanding these dynamics.

Finally, while the paper calls for alternative visual infrastructures and suggests cooperatives or regulatory reforms, those suggestions remain pretty broad. Concrete policy recommendations or blueprints for new platforms just aren't here yet.

Even with all these caveats, this paper lays out a much-needed framework for thinking about how short-form video is changing what we see and how we see it. The gaps listed here shouldn't be seen as fatal—they're invitations for future researchers to dig deeper.

Conclusions

This paper set out to show how short-form video—think TikTok, Reels, Shorts—is more than just a technical upgrade; it's a major shift in how we look, create, and even understand visual culture. When attention and creativity are reorganized around algorithmic demands, what counts as “seeing” and “creating” start to change in profound ways. The platforms turn fleeting moments into micro-units of engagement, churn out content through rigid templates, and turn the whole visual field into something that's always wired for data, emotion, and market potential.

If anything, that means visual culture studies need to update their toolkit. It's not just about who gets represented or who watches what—who's visible, why, and under what economic and technical conditions has to be front and center. The algorithmic gaze isn't out to erase human choice. It just spreads that choice out across a web of people and machines—so the real power over what's seen (and how) floats further away from individuals, tucked deep in opaque systems that most users won't ever fully decipher.

Naturally, the question for people making stuff on these platforms gets trickier. When what you make is constantly tested by engagement metrics and algorithmic models, creative freedom looks a lot like creative optimization. Is creativity still about pushing boundaries, or just about squeezing innovation from within the lines set by platforms? Right now, the system rewards the latter.

The fragmentation of visual space is another big deal. Instead of public, collective arenas for meaning-making, you get millions of personalized video feeds—each feeding off whatever spikes engagement the most. That's how misinformation, outrage, and emotional extremes get amplified. Being visually literate today isn't just about spotting fakes; it's about knowing why certain images appear at all and what incentives stand behind them.

Even so, this landscape isn't locked down. Users and creators find ways to resist, to poke fun at, or even challenge the conditions—reminding us that the urge to see, and to be seen, can't be boxed in forever. Building a better visual culture means creating legal guardrails for transparency and user control, funding non-profit alternatives, and developing creative practices that keep some things out of the algorithm's grasp.

It's in that messy, unpredictable refusal—in pockets of opacity and surprise—that the richest kinds of seeing and making can thrive again. That's where creative practice might reclaim a bit of freedom from the relentless cycle of attention extraction, making space for discovery, connection, and genuine care.

Future Research Directions

Let's look ahead at where research needs to go. First off, we need real stories from creators — that means deep interviews and ethnographic studies to see how people actually deal with algorithms in their work. Another key area: using data to track how feeds behave on different platforms and in different places, so we can measure things like content sameness and cultural blandness. It'd also help to compare platforms — TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and any new apps popping up — to figure out how their designs shape what people end up seeing.

There's more: intervention studies should examine whether teaching algorithmic literacy or experimenting with hidden creative techniques actually gives creators

more control. And finally, policy research needs to focus on laws like the EU Digital Services Act, and explore new platform models — maybe cooperative, public service, or federated — to see how we can change the bigger system.

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