# FMST 001
# Critical Approaches to Media



# Fall 2023 Media Zine
# Issue #2 Social Media

# Contents

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# Introduction:
# Tap, Tap, Scroll: Social Media from the Perspective of Gen Z
## - Reina Jones and Erica Cooper

Social media enables new styles and genres of user-generated content to be produced with a low barrier of entry, creating an online landscape that produces a vast array of micro-genres and unique video styles each day. The authors in this issue examine the placement of social media in contemporary times with both broad examinations of various apps as well as case studies of specific creators. From Lana Del Ray fan edits to environmentalists on Instagram, the blogs in this issue each always return to the viewer, exploring why audiences engage with specific types of content and enable creators' success.

**Yuki's post, "Trash is for Tossers,"** dives into environmentalist Lauren Singer's Instagram, exploring how she constructs an informative and relatable online persona. In 2016, she went viral for carrying all of the trash she produces in a mason jar, becoming known as "the girl with the jar." Seven years later, Singer curates her feed to match the relatability and intimacy that come with the title, even as her following and prestige continue to grow.

**In "Short-Form Cinema on Instagram Reels," Ava explores cinematic short-form content posted on Instagram Reels** through travel influencer Alexander James. James uses specific formal elements, such as image filters and music, to romanticize the natural landmarks he travels to; this creates a sense of longing in the viewer for the landmarks that he depicts. She broadly concludes that Reels are an accessible form of communication that expands upon cinematic elements found in film.

**Lucas's post contextualizes fan edits of Lana Del Rey that draw primarily from content in music videos.** Re-editing existing source footage to emphasize a theme in the singer's lyrics is accomplished by changing the aspect ratio and matching cuts in footage to the beat of the background music. The result of this is an expanded repertoire of content, a method of flaunting their knowledge in the fandom, and a creative outlet for fans.

**Jordana explains the various factors that construct the addictiveness of TikTok**, which include its short-form format that provides concentrated doses of entertainment. There is also a sense of relatability that can be curated by finding video communities and encouraging participation.

**Ahmad tackles a more unique form of social media, podcasts, in his blog "The Podcast Boom".** He identifies the casual and varied ways that podcasts are produced as a particularly standout feature of the medium. Some podcast-specific elements have similarities with other media forms, however, like the consistency of uploads (a similarity to network TV and its weekly airings) as well as a range of size of producers (indie vs large studios/corporations). He aptly draws comparisons in a way that is enlightening to those who are unfamiliar with the novel medium so that it doesn't feel as foreign.

**Erica's blog, "TikTok and the Romcom: How User-Generated Content Allows Audiences to Reclaim Traditional Film Tropes," focuses on one-person skits on TikTok** that deconstruct and rewrite traditional rom-com and coming-of-age film tropes. Using language created by fandom and cliches popularized by Hollywood, these creators reclaim these tropes for themselves and their audiences.

# "Trash is for Tossers" (@trashisfortossers)
## - Yuki Yamada

In this blog, I decided to write about one of the Instagram accounts, "Trash is for Tossers" (@trashisfortossers). This account is run by Lauren Singer, who is a famous American environmental activist, blog writer, and CEO of The Simple Co. and Package Free Shop (Turki). To write about her posts, I raised two questions. First, what do Lauren Singer's posts demand the viewers to see? Second, how is the demand of Lauren Singer's Instagram posts realized by the medium-specific way through which the viewer engagement is managed, manipulated, enhanced, or curtailed?

In November 2023, she is an influencer on environmental activism with 335K followers on her Instagram account (Figure 1) (Instagram). When she started using the service in 2013, she was an unknown university student who majored in Environmental Studies. She became famous when she shared that she was able to fit all the trash produced in two years into a 16 oz mason jar. Known as "the girl with the jar", she gave a TED talk to millions in 2016. In 2017, she launched Package Free Shop and became its CEO (Package Free Shop). Learning about her pathway, I became curious about how she uses Instagram. Her social status has drastically changed from an unknown university student to a famous influencer, but does that have any influence on her posts? What does she want her followers and others to interpret about her through her Instagram posts?



Figure 1: The Instagram profile page of "Trash is for Tossers" (@trashisfortossers) (Instagram).

The conclusion that I reached to answer the first question is that her Instagram posts demand us to see her as "the girl with the jar", rather than just "an environmentalist" or "CEO". One of the key evidence for this is the variety of the themes of her posts. While analyzing her posts, I noticed that they can be classified into three categories: the posts that are created as "an environmentalist", "CEO", and "the girl with the jar". Prompted by her current profession, she regularly posts typical "environmentalist" or "CEO" posts, such as those sounding the alarm over the pollution of oceans caused by the massive use of single-use plastic (Figure 2) or showing off her visit to the EV company (Figure 3). However, there is another type of post that shows her personal life, which is seemingly irrelevant to what the other two types of posts tell us. While considering such posts, I referred to the strategy that Cramer used when she wrote about the Instagram posts of "The Very Black Project" (@theveryblackproject). She raised a research question asking how the "seemingly random projects" demand us to see blackness beyond the "racial frames designed to organize visual information and people into distinct categories" (Cramer 124).



Figure 2: Post from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on July 16, 2020 (Instagram).

Figure 3: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on September 15, 2023 (Instagram).



Figure 4: Post from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on September 4, 2022 (Instagram).

Applying Cramer's strategy to Singer's case, I recognized that her "seemingly random posts" demand us to interpret that her life cannot be separated from her "zero-waste" and "well-being" credo. The posts that show her personal life look random, but by closely examining them, we notice that they show her life infused with and adhering to the belief that reducing waste is possible and crucial for personal health. For example, posts show her combining walking her dog with taking her compost to the city's composting system (Figure 4). The photo of her dinner preparation focuses on local, organic, and fresh vegetables (Figure 5), or how to cook zero-waste peanut chocolate by herself (Figure 6).
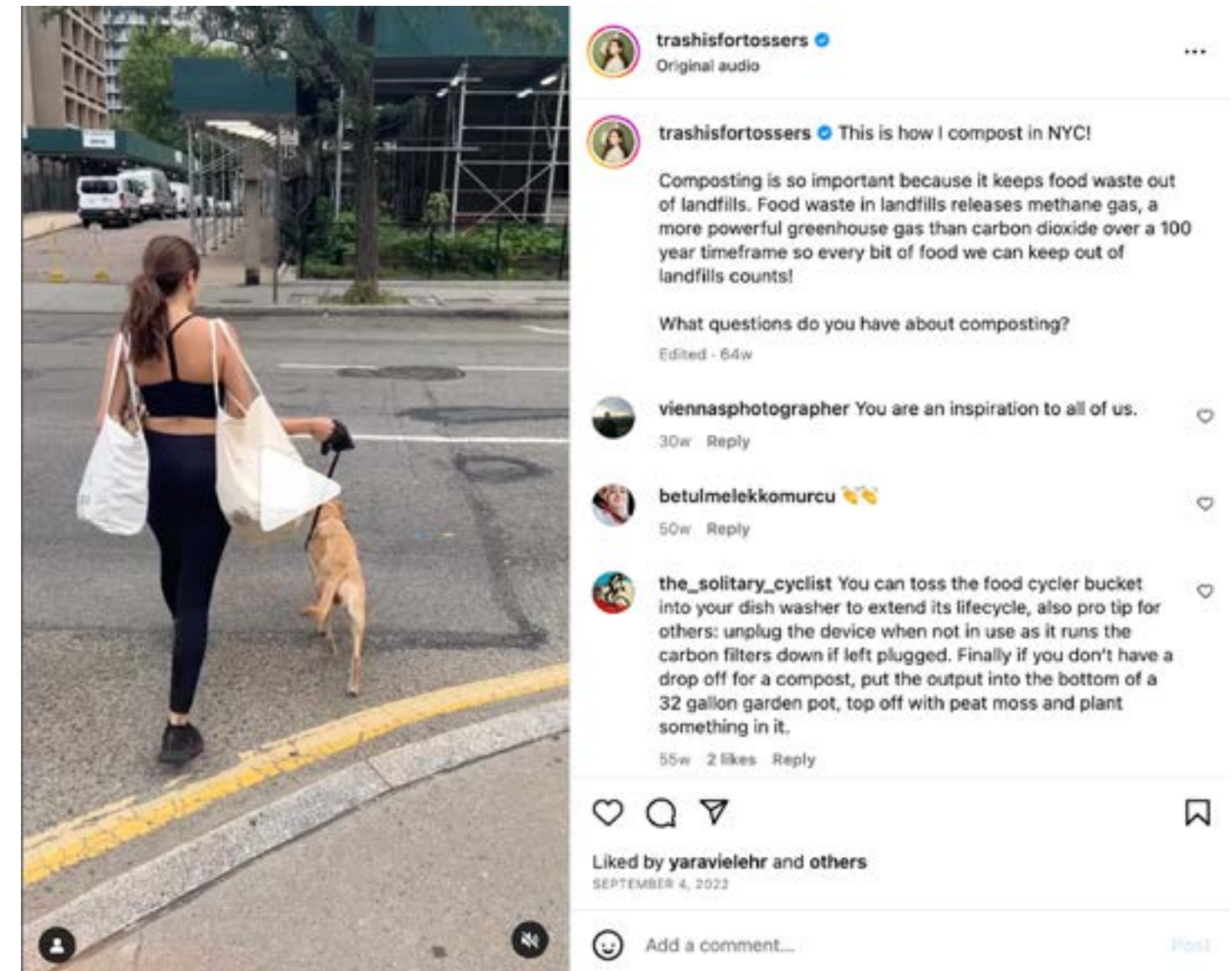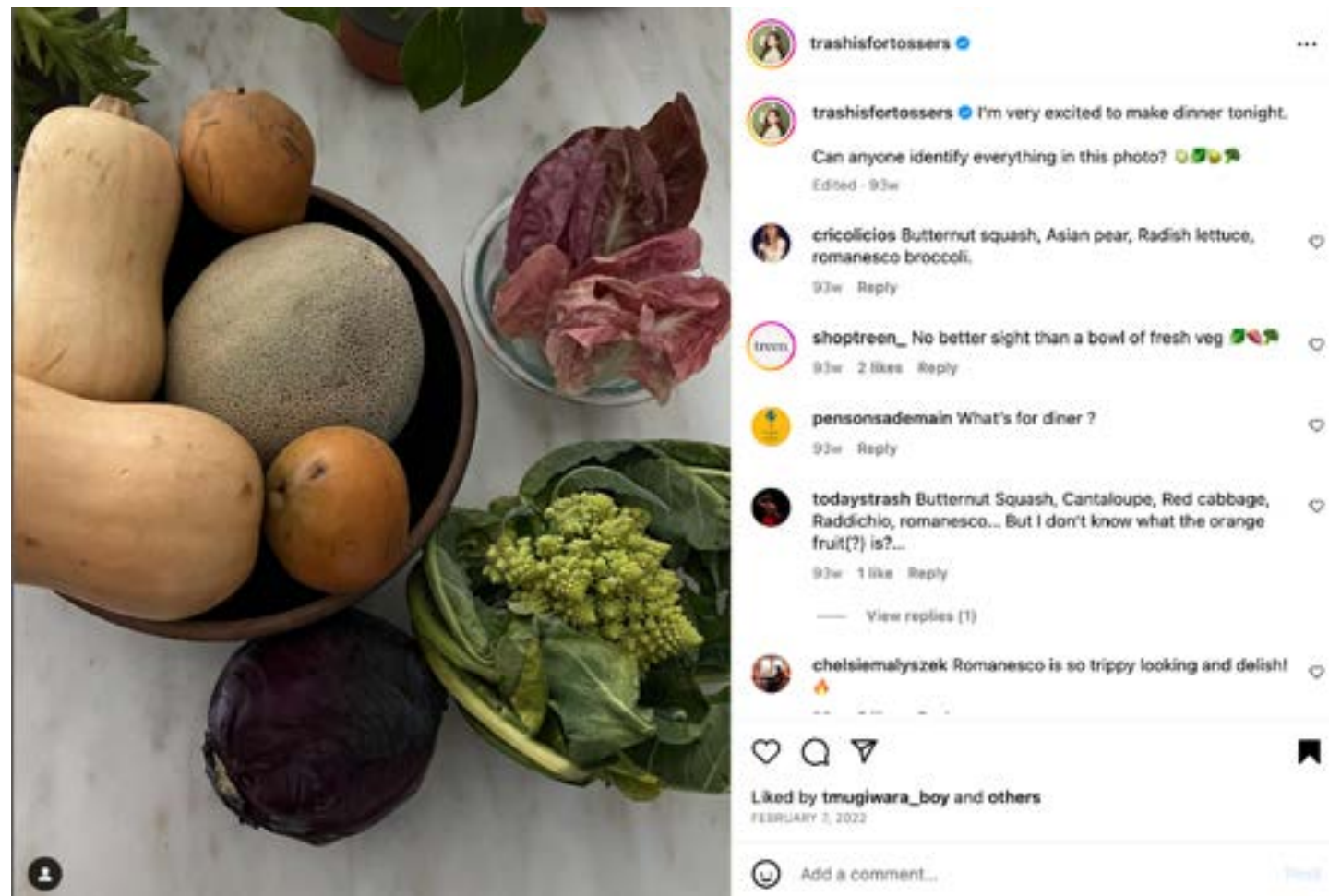
Figure 5: Post from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on February 7, 2022 (Instagram).



Figure 6: Post from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on February 11, 2022 (Instagram).

The purpose of her posts is a "branding" of her self-image. In other words, her posts create a desired impression of her company by conveying positive images of herself and emphasizing that her profession is the self-realization of her credo. This is tangible when her everyday private shots are compared with her "environmentalist" and "CEO" posts. As seen in the post about the plastic pollution in the ocean (Figure 2), "environmentalist" posts are informative and educational, with long captions that explain the details of the problem. The "CEO" posts look professional and sophisticated, like the one showing her visit to the EV company with a pretty black dress. On the other hand, the posts that show her personal life give the impression of being unpretentious, playful, fresh, and youthful. For example, Figure 4 shows that she is on a normal (and not particularly attractive) road in casual wear. Figure 7 is a photo of her biting a bamboo toothbrush, and Figure 8 is a photo of her holding a white reusable pot above her head, closing her eyes and smiling. Figure 9 shows her sitting outside under the blue sky on a weekend. The unpretentious, playful, fresh, and youthful impressions gained from these posts are far from the typical image of an "environmentalist" or "CEO", but rather, they seek to show her unchanged personality as "the girl with the jar" from the time when she was an unknown university student by emphasizing the combination of a playful innocence with dedication to the environmental cause. This could be an advantage to her business considering that these

impressions of her directly relate to the interpretation of her company, too. It is noteworthy that many comments to her posts are positive and show regard and admiration for her. Such comments are seen by other viewers, too, promoting her empowerment and her business. The fluid connection between personal, activist, and professional posts empowers her business by conveying positive impressions of herself and emphasizing the connection between her credo and profession.



Figure 7: Post from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on January 11, 2022 (Instagram).



Figure 8: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on February 9, 2022 (Instagram).

Figure 9: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on May 8, 2023 (Instagram).

Even so, how specifically is this interconnection between her posts realized? And especially, how is Instagram's medium-specificity managing, manipulating, enhancing, or curtailing viewer engagement? As a result of examining her posts, I concluded that Instagram's interactive, instant, unlimited, and limited features influence viewer engagement to realize her posts' potential to increase her economic success through the depiction of personal authenticity.

The first feature is interactivity. This has two possible influences on viewer engagement, one of which is propagating a similar impression of the posts among viewers. Instagram has comment sections and the creator and the viewer can easily communicate. As mentioned before, Singer's posts are often perceived positively and one of the examples of such comments is "Lauren Singer, this is your real year! Successes!!" to her post about bamboo toothbrushes (Figure 7). By seeing such comments, other viewers' impressions of her posts are influenced and one person's thought causes resonance and the idea is propagated. The other possible influence of interactivity is navigating the viewer to the creator's desired source sites. One of the key features of Instagram is the use of hashtags, @ signs, and hyperlinks. In Singer's post about the visit to the EV company (Figure 3), she adds the @ sign to the company's Instagram page. By doing so, the viewer can easily learn more about the company, which leads to enhancing viewer engagement and increases the potential of purchases.

Secondly, Instagram is instant and timely. Compared to other media, such as film and television, the production and consumption of Instagram posts are faster due to the difference in representation format. Instagram posts tend to be a collection of photos or short videos, which enable the creator

to distribute their artwork timely. In one of Singer's posts, she shared the idea of sustainable gifts that could be given on Father's Day (Figure 10). In another post, she shares how to make sustainable chocolate (Figure 6). These posts are posted a few days before the actual special occasion. Although television has seasonal programs, too, this feature of Instagram seeks to establish a shared intimacy between creator and viewers. In Figure 6, for example, she shares how to make homemade chocolate by herself in her kitchen. Such a scene is a familiar sight for many people, compared to, let's say, the scene of a TV program where a celebrity explores and introduces expensive chocolate. As a result, the post underscores her desire to be seen as an unpretentious young woman.



Figure 10: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers on June 18, 2020 (Instagram)

Thirdly, Instagram allows users to share their ideas relatively unlimitedly. As Hudson and Zimmermann state, "[Digital and interactive media] allowed nonprofessionals to produce and distribute media without film's high costs or coding's expertise" (Hudson and Zimmermann 131). Due to the DIY creation and information sharing, the fact that a famous person is using Instagram makes viewers feel intimately connected. Moreover, it allows creators to share any content, even if it is unsophisticated. Compared to the latest posts (Figure 11), older posts look unsophisticated (Figure 12) especially based on today's trend that prefers fewer filters to show realistic photos. By accessing these older posts and seeing the changes in the representation, the viewers' impressions of her as a youthful and developing girl are reinforced.

Figure 11: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers in August 2023 (Instagram).
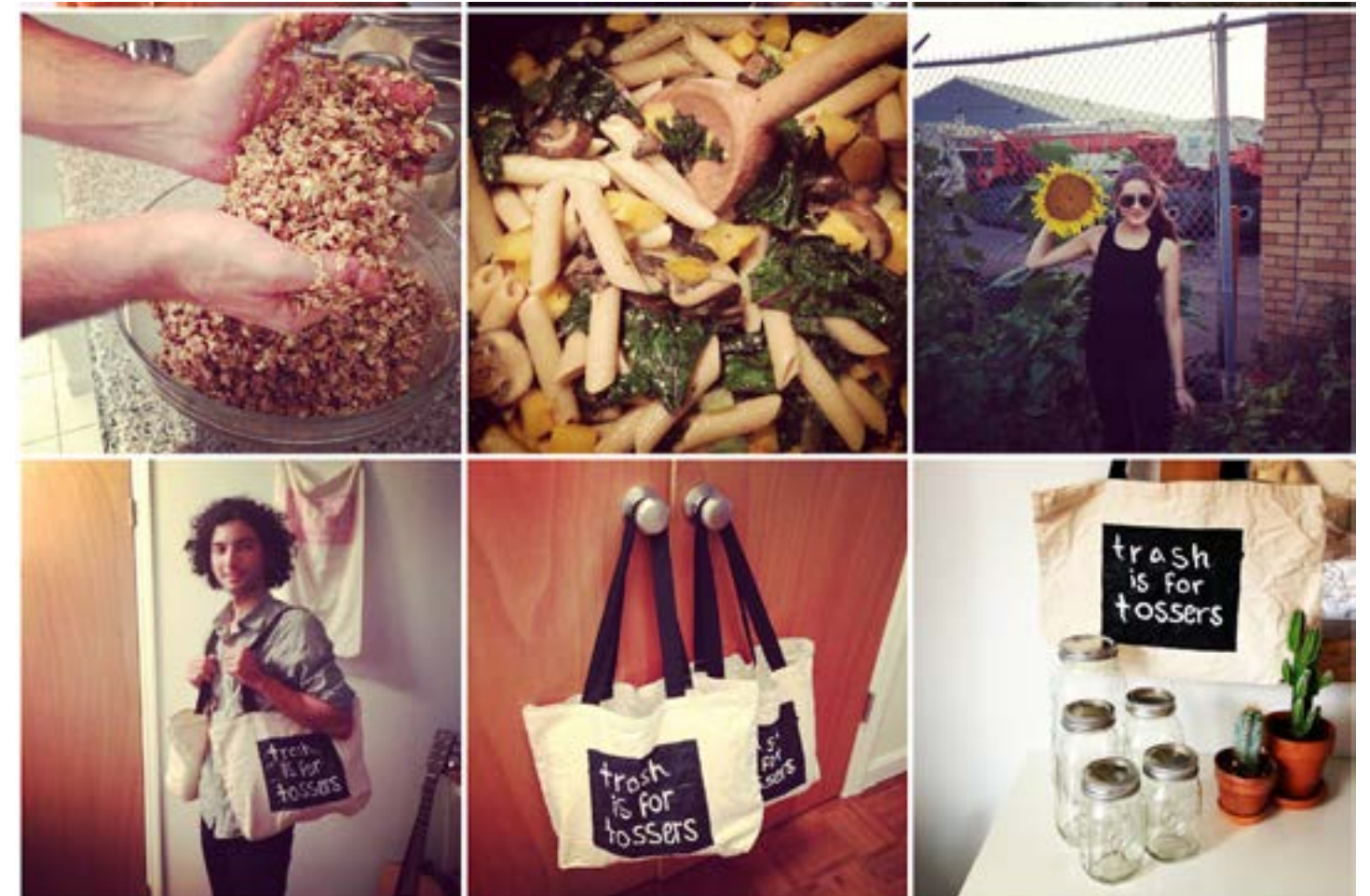


Figure 12: Posts from the Instagram account @trashisfortossers in August 2013 (Instagram).

Last but not least, the fact that access to Instagram is limited by location and socioeconomic status curtails viewer engagement. Although Instagram is free and thus unlimited in terms of production and consumption of content, access is limited by access to the Internet and digital devices. As Rahul Mukherjee pointed out, "In writing about mobile media as part of modern technocultures, one needs to be cognizant of socio-economic contexts and different cultures of modernities" (Mukherjee 138). In Singer's case, however, this may not have a big influence on viewer engagement because her target audience is users and co-creators who are interested in environmental activism, and it can be imagined that mainly middle- to upper class people are privileged enough to enjoy her company's products.

In conclusion, Instagram posts of Lauren Singer demand viewers to see her as "the girl with the jar", rather than "an environmentalist" or "CEO". She does so by posting videos and photos that are seemingly irrelevant to "environmental activist" or "CEO", but in fact, demand us to see that "zero waste" and "well-being" are inseparable parts of her personal life. By emphasizing that her company is her self-realization, Singer's Instagram simultaneously brands her image and conveys positive impressions of her business, too, utilizing and maximizing Instagram's medium-specific way of managing, manipulating, enhancing, and curtailing viewer engagement through frequent, instant, interactive, unlimited, and limited features.

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# Short-Form Cinema on Instagram Reels
## - Ava Gizzie

Instagram Reels is a sub-platform on an already prolific app, Instagram. Found in a tab on the bottom of the home page in the app, users can access a scrolling page called Instagram Reels, which is similar to popular apps like TikTok and Snapchat, which also provide this function. Instagram users have unlimited access to short videos posted by other Instagram users, that can range from 15-90 seconds (compared to TikTok, which allows for up to 3 minutes). Buried in this endless content are pieces of cinematic media, specifically intended to mimic longer-form pieces of media, like feature-length films or videos, but compressed into a much smaller time frame. Users can create these videos in a variety of ways, but there exists a wide range of media on Instagram Reels that are more traditionally cinematic compared to other user-generated videos.

For the purpose of this blog post, I will be focusing on a specific creator, @alexanderjamestravel, who creates travel videos and outdoorsy content. He posts a variety of reels on his page, some vertically oriented, and some horizontally oriented, the latter of which I will be focusing on. His videos have a consistent color palette and tone, and they focus on his travels around the world. Below is the example I will be using:





Social media is a relatively new form of media that communicates complex messages in short periods of time. Many would argue that social media is woven into our lives; it seems inescapable (Patti, 2019). These short-form cinematic videos force the audience to question their intent, and what message they are each communicating. In traditional media, the time to communicate a message is much more forgiving, given a longer running time. Do messages conveyed by Instagram Reels get lost due to their short running time?

Given such a limited running time, it is important for these short-form pieces to evoke emotions

immediately upon starting the video, to draw the viewer into the content (Patti, 2019). The intent of these cinematic Instagram reels by @alexanderjamestravel is to recreate a moment in a specific space experienced by him and his friends and evoke a feeling of longing for what is being shown on screen. You may even know some people who make these kinds of short-form media pieces — the home-made content feels accessible. No longer are we audiences watching fictional scenes of fictional characters experiencing fictional emotions and experiences. Instead we are exposed to a romanticized documentary-like format of media that centers on real people. His content is quick, to the point, and does a spectacular job of drawing the audience in. These videos scream: *This could be you! This could be your life!*

Social media can often become so entangled with our everyday lives that we can no longer differentiate between the one and the other, and it influences our decisions and feelings (Patti, 2019). The music, the color, the mood, and other elements of a short-form cinematic piece can be woven into everyday interaction with social media. Next time you are scrolling on your phone, maybe you will start to think about what kind of messages can make you pause and think, and what kind of messages fail to reach you and why.

When writing about short-form cinematic pieces, we might also examine the way that music influences the emotional undertones of the video (Patti, 2019). These Reels resemble music videos, except that they do not aim to market the selected song. Although you cannot hear the sound in the two example GIFs above, both videos use a calming, alternative style of music, with no lyrics. Instead, the narrator's voice (on- and off-screen diegetic) is overlaying the sound. Other short-form reels utilize music lyrics as a narrative code. The lyrics reinforce or add an additional layer of meaning to the videos (Patti, 2019). This technique is implemented due to the limited time allowed by the Reels format, and it is also used to relate to a certain audience, depending on the music used (Patti, 2019). For example, the use of a more mainstream song in a short-form cinematic Instagram reel will serve to communicate a more "relatable" message to its audience than the use of a more unknown song.

Finally, we can think about the interactive element of a short-form cinematic piece on Instagram Reels. Many, if not all, social media platforms have adopted algorithms to create a personalized page full of media that you might find relevant. For example, a large reason why I have found many of these short-form cinematic media pieces on my Instagram Reels page is because I like that type of content and I interact with it often. Focusing on this example of short-form media from @alexanderjamestravel, it caters to a younger demographic, who enjoy outdoor content and have interacted with it in other places on the app. Once the work finds its intended audience, viewers have the power to pause, like, comment, share the video, and even click on the profile of the person who posted it. This is different from traditional media forms because it opens up a direct avenue to propagate the content through the app and potentially outside of the app as well, whereas a regular film cannot be "shared" or "liked" in a viewable way (Patti, 2019). This interaction also contributes to a growing community around the short-form pieces of media, enabling the creators to continue creating, and spreading their influence (Patti, 2019).

Creators on Instagram Reels can utilize the interactive elements of the app to not only promote their content for free, but can rely on the interaction of users with the content to receive live feedback, suggestions, and potential networking opportunities to create more cinematic pieces in the future.

In all, the medium of Instagram Reels is a powerful communication tool. Although it does not follow the traditional format for displaying cinematic content, it provides a public platform for anybody to create and distribute short-form cinematic pieces. Through the codes of timing, music, and interaction with the medium, it is clear that Instagram Reels can mimic traditional film in various ways, while simultaneously creating different ways in which viewers can engage with short-form cinema.

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# @theconeyislandqueen
## - Lucas Liu

Contemporary fandom is inseparable from social media. Modern fan engagements have long included conventions such as concert going, item collection, and fanfiction writing. However, in the past decade, the phenomenon of social media fan accounts has introduced new possibilities. These fan-curated online databases of information are a means for fans to express creativity, track news and activities, or even interact with their fan objects directly. Among social media fan accounts, different platforms lend themselves to different types of engagement. For example, accounts on Twitter primarily share updates regarding celebrities/franchises due to the platform's textual nature, while Instagram or Tiktok accounts mainly feature visual-audio content.

In this blog, I will analyze a specific Instagram account dedicated to the musical artist Lana Del Rey (LDR) from both technical and fandom perspectives. I will discuss the formatting and editing styles exhibited by this account, as well as what motivates fans to create and engage with these materials.

LDR famously builds her career on fantastical, melodramatic storytelling, creating different personas and dropping recurring motifs for her dedicated fans to piece together in a "repertoire treasure hunt". @theconeyislandqueen is what I would refer to as a "recreative" fan account. Except for occasional raw, unedited footage, the curator of this account primarily shares what the fandom calls "edits". "Editing" in this context entails recombining pieces of existing footage of the artist from interviews, performances or music videos with originally unconnected audio clips from her discography, such as other songs that share a similar theme.

Music video for "Ride" re-edited with the song "Kill Kill"

## Technical Feature: Aspect Ratio

Before delving into the deeper content analysis of these edits, several technical features are worth noting.

Music videos, an audiovisual media derived from the pop music industry and popularized by MTV in the 80s, is itself an interesting phenomenon. While they are almost micro versions of film, the visual element is secondary to and serves the sound element, which is the reversal of traditional films.

Music videos largely follow traditional film and TV's horizontal aspect ratios. Originally intended for TV broadcasting, older music videos were most commonly shot in the 4:3 format. Today, to accommodate mainstream video platforms such as YouTube, they are usually made in 16:9. However, "scrolling" social media platforms such as TikTok are intended for mobile phone usage and encourage videos in the 9:16 format. Following TikTok's success, Instagram invented the 9:16 "reels" feature, which receives more exploratory page traffic than the Instagram trademark 1:1 photo posts.

As a result, many creative fan accounts on Instagram noticed the change in algorithm and turned to reels to increase engagement. Instead of letterboxing, which would create unappealing, large empty spaces, editors often crop out vertical strips of music videos, thereby performing a drastic 16:9 to 9:16 conversion. Hudson and Zimmerman invite us to consider how architecture influences user experience in digital media (Hudson & Zimmermann, 132). The 9:16 aspect ratio forces viewers to observe music videos through "tunnel vision", often only perceiving one element of each frame. Therefore, in this complete aspect ratio reversal, fan editors now have the power to decide what is central to each frame and what is to be discarded, For example, which part of the artist's body should be kept? Should we see her, her love interest or an object during this line of lyrics?
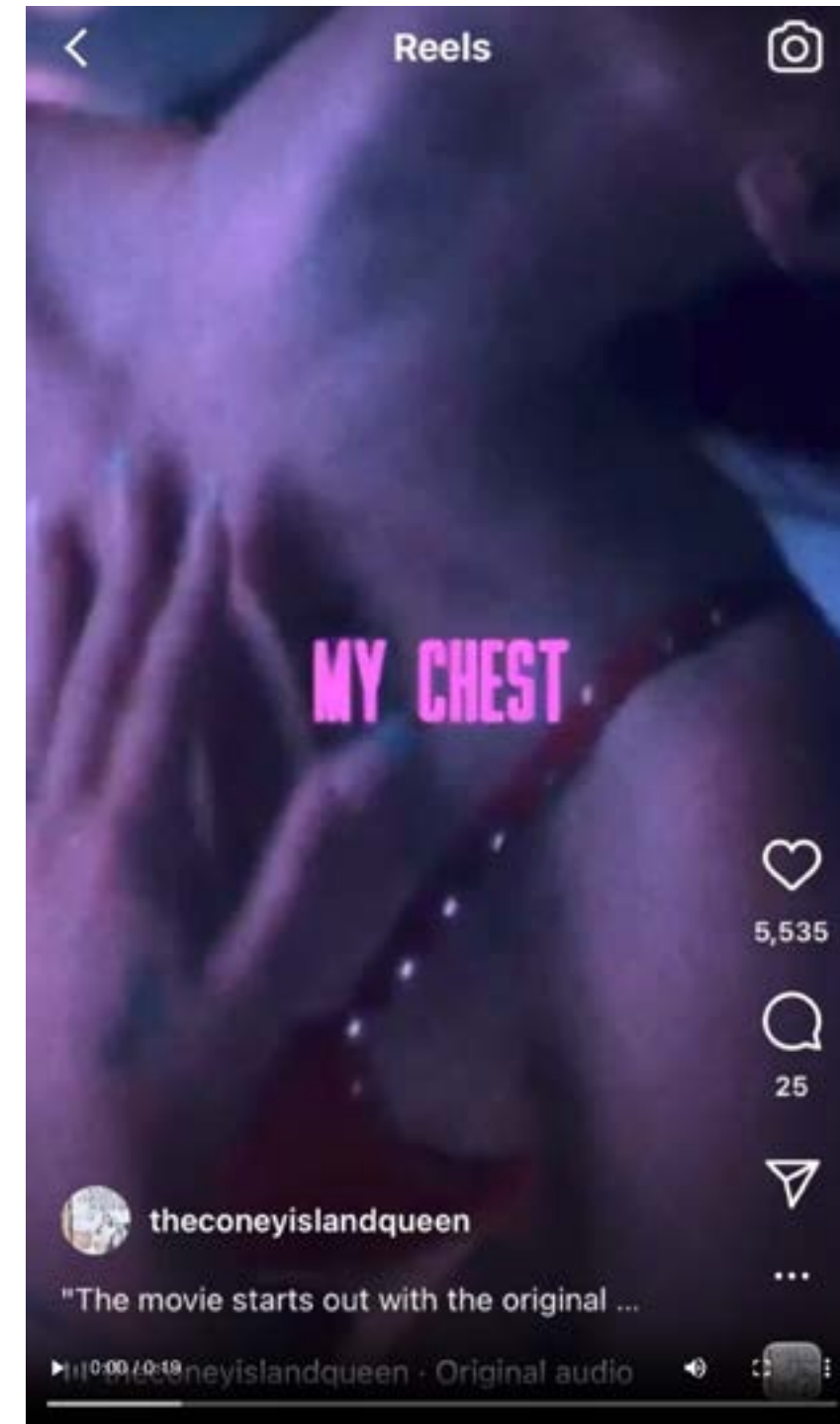


This 9:16 edit features *Tropico*, a LDR short film that is originally aggressively horizontal (3.63:1), and a different LDR song not present in the film. @theconeyislandqueen employed several refitting techniques. For sections of lyrics that refer to the artist's own body parts, those same body parts from the original footage are centered. When the lyrics refer to interaction between her and her lover, such as "run your hands over me", both characters are kept in frame. To achieve this, however, the editor needed to rotate the original video by 90 degrees for shots that portrayed the characters lying horizontally on the ground. Through this process, other motifs in the background of the original music video such as Christian symbols are cropped out, and the footage becomes isolated from its context to refit the new song assigned by the editor.

## Technical Feature: Editing Techniques

Second, the editing styles in Instagram short videos are both distinct from traditional narrative film editing and highly internally heterogeneous. @theconeyislandqueen exhibits several popular editing techniques in this specific fandom, which I will use as examples. In line with the videos' short overall lengths, the cuts are also often fast to cater to social media users. Another relatively simple technique that immediately captures attention is editing "on beat", or cutting every time the bass rhythm hits or a new word is sung. This creates a low-effort, easily digestible rhythm for the audience, which draws in potential new followers from the general demographic, even non-fans of the artist.
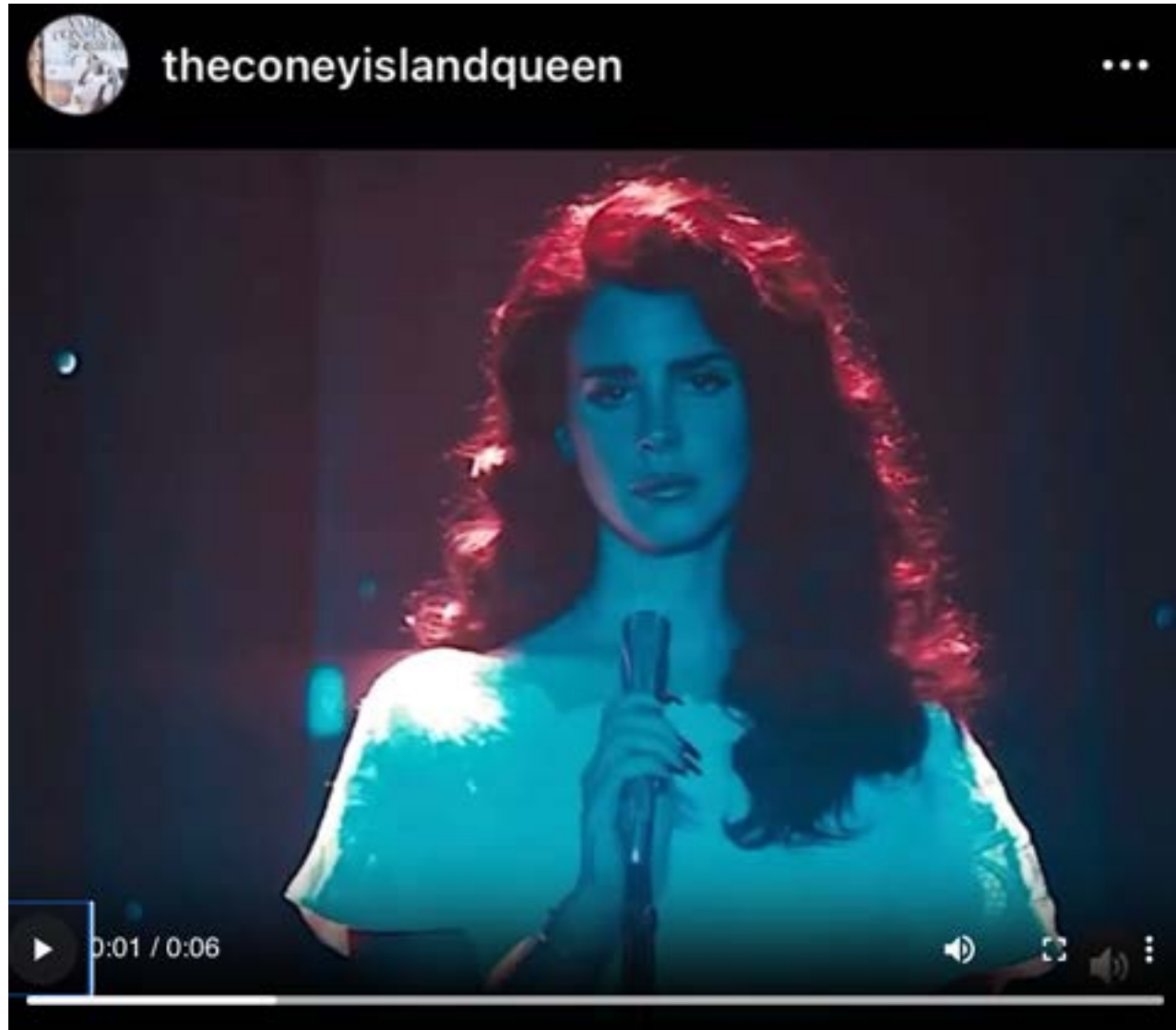


An example of cutting on beat.

This technique is also often accompanied by direct matches between lyrical content and visual elements, which tends to take footage from different music videos, creating a scattered instead of cohesive narrative.



Literal match for lyrics: "strawberries", "angel", "kiss".

## Function in Fandom: Expanding Repertoire

The first function of these edits is to expand an artist's repertoire, creating more content for consumption. For example, pop music fans often feel that certain beloved songs "deserved" a music video but did not canonically receive one. In this case, editors can bring the songs to life by synthesizing convincing pseudo-music videos using the image of the artist herself by sampling existing videos.

Additionally, if the artist's own videography ever fails to satisfy the fans' aesthetic needs, some edits feature other pieces of media that are popular in the fandom either based on the artist's direct references or fan-made associations. For example, *The Great Gatsby* is a popular source text in the LDR fandom due to the artist's direct involvement in the movie's production by writing the theme song *Young and Beautiful* and her frequent allusions to early-to-mid 20th century America. Though not a creation by @theconeyislandqueen, this YouTube fan video pairing *The Great Gatsby* and a different LDR song about the 1920's garnered 39 million views.



## Function in Fandom: Display of Knowledge

Another purpose of these pseudo-music video edits is a display of knowledge. As prior mentioned, LDR profits off narrative-weaving, niche references and recurrent motifs, elevating her discography as a pop singer to a storyworld – the "LDR universe". This is partially achieved by her famously massive body of unreleased and pre-debut songs, including album outtakes, leaked tracks and songs under previous stage names. Fans often take pride in knowing these "deep cuts" and drawing connections to the artist's published work. This knowledge is similar to collecting trivia facts in older sci-fi fandoms such as *Star Trek*, acting as a measure of dedication and seniority that organizes the fandom's internal hierarchy ("Name five unreleased songs!").

Therefore, to establish themselves as more "authoritative" fans, fan accounts sprinkle in these deep cuts in their edits. There are often lyrical and thematic connections between the songs and the music videos selected, showcasing that the editors are aware of the origins of recurrent motifs. Followers of these accounts, on the other hand, accept the intermediate, superior-to-fan but inferior-to-producer authority of these accounts and consume these edits to improve their own knowledge.
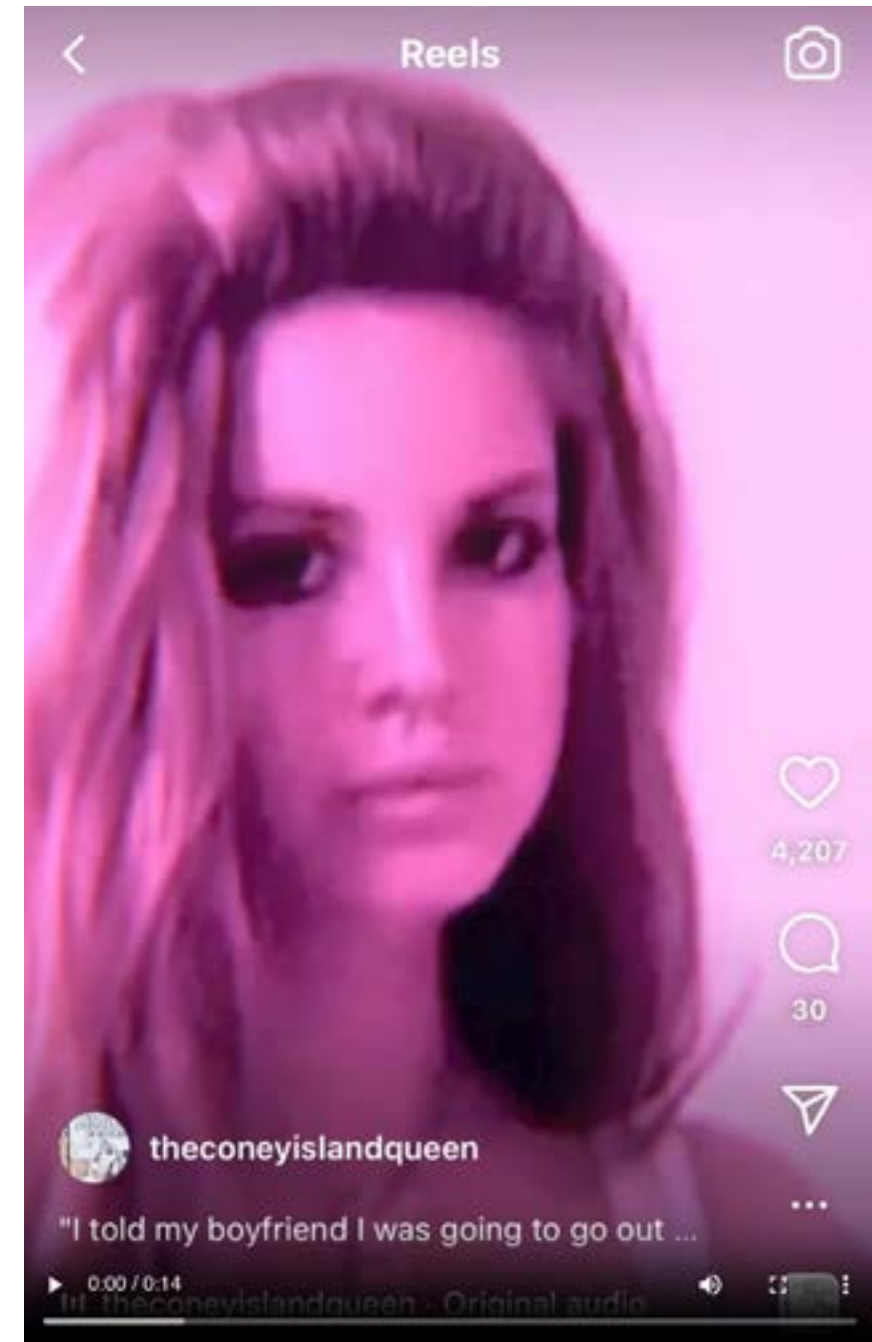


## Function in Fandom: Partaking in Creativity

Finally, making these edits are a means of getting closer to the artist by partaking in the creative process. Fan texts are frequently analyzed in relation to producerly authority: by making secondary content based on canonical source materials, fans "poach" part of the creative power of the artist (Henry Jenkins 1992). For fans, this can facilitate a stronger sense of involvement and maybe proximity to an artist they look up to. For producers, this behavior may be either threatening or profitable to a franchise, depending on the context. For example, according to Carol Vernallis, one primary function of music videos is highlighting the most memorable elements of songs to "sell" them (Vernallis, 102). From this perspective, edits circulating on social media may serve as fan-made music videos that help "sell" the artist's discography.

This borrowed creativity can also be either affirmational or transformational. Affirmational fan

content mainly upholds producerly authority by adhering to the original facts and styles, striving to belong to the canon. For example, the 2013 series *Star Trek Continues* is a fan attempt to completely replicate the original 1960's show's worldbuilding, aesthetics and writing style. In the LDR fandom, this takes form as so-called "Lizzy edits": early, unreleased tracks are paired with home video-style, fragmented and low resolution footage to resemble the low budget music videos LDR recorded under her previous stage name Lizzy Grant. The lip syncing technique is often used to create more verisimilitude, as exemplified by the embedded edit above.

These edits can also be transformational, altering canonical styles and narratives to express novel ideas or even "fix" problems. Fanfictions for unrealized romantic ships often fall under this category. LDR fan edits can transform form by employing editing techniques unseen in original music videos, or transform content by applying lyrics in unintended contexts.



In this edit, LDR's romantic lyrics addressing a male love interest are reapplied in a queer context. While the gender of the addressee remains, the narrator has shifted from a straight woman to a gay man. The obvious mismatch between the gender of the singing voice and the gender of the visual protagonist signals a self-awareness of subversive creativity. Berliner states the significance of considering the context of participatory media, notably "who made it" (Berliner, 115). This edit, for example, showcases a demographic within the LDR fandom: gay men who displace their own voices onto the straight, female singer's voice.

Music videos in pop music expand singer-songwriters' repertoire from audio-only to audiovisual, which creates more opportunities for fan attraction and fan engagement. Instagram fan editors take advantage of this source material and create various new ways of engagement for their fandoms. As one case study, LDR fan edits are inseparable from the characteristics of the artist and the specific social media platform. This prompts further exploration for which of the above phenomena are unique to this niche, and which may be common across different contemporary music fandoms.

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# The Rise and Dangers of TikTok
## - Jordana Sampson

## Birth of TikTok

TikTok has taken the world by storm. TikTok is a relatively new social media platform and is the most popular content-creating app out right now. Before being known as TikTok, the app was formerly known as Musical.ly. Musical.ly got notoriety for being both a music and social network app. The app allowed people to shoot music videos and lip-synch to popular music. In May of 2016, Musical.ly had 70 million users and counting. The app not only offered mainstream music to be used for lip-syncing,

but it also offered live streaming so musicians could host live virtual concerts. While most of the app's content consisted of users lip-synching, aspiring musicians would release their original music on the app, and some users would step away from the music aspect and create comedic content. In 2016, the Chinese internet company Bytedance developed an app that gained popularity internationally. In 2017, the company bought Musical.ly for around a billion dollars and combined its previous app with Musicial.ly in hopes of expanding into the teenage market in America– the merged app was renamed TikTok. While this remodeled version of TikTok contains features from both apps, such as short musical clips, it also allows other types of videos to be posted. Rather than being an app concentrated on music like Musical.ly, TikTok includes diverse video content such as pranks, cooking, dancing, educational videos, comedy skits, book and TV recommendations, and more. TikTok accepts any type of content. However, unlike other social media apps that also allow users to upload video content, TikTok continues to make short videos their focal point. Short-form video has become a big phenomenon, for better or worse.



TikTok Logo

## Upside of TikTok and Short-Form Content

The duration of user-generated content has gone from 10 to 20-minute videos on YouTube to 30-second Instagram reels and TikToks. Why is that? Short-form content is the new social media video art form. There are several reasons why TikTok is rapidly rising in popularity and one of the biggest reasons is its short-form video style. People can obtain quick and entertaining content anytime and anywhere. These types of videos make it easier for users to engage with and access content they like. Before, watching or accessing social media would only be possible during long breaks or after work, but now people can view one video in under 30 seconds, an act of consumption that is easy to integrate into everyday activities.

One of the best decisions TikTok made was diversifying its music-dominated app. On TikTok, people can post anything. From recipes, new dances, breaking news, and educational information to book reviews, act-with me, singing performances and more, TikTok has become all social media apps wrapped into one. On the app, users are encouraged to share whatever they want, and I believe that type of content freedom is what makes the app so desirable.

## Motherhood Case Study

TikTok uses an algorithm that prompts viewers to watch videos that match their viewing history; this is known as the "for you" page. These "for you" pages contain content the app assumes the users want to see, again, making the app easy to engage with. While social media is typically used as an outlet for stressful times and recharging, it can also be used to find a sense of belonging. TikTok encourages viewer and creator participation. As viewers, we want to feel a sense of belonging as we scroll through the internet, and we desire to interact with people who share the same interests as us. The development of these short-form trends, cultural movements, and memes allow us to instantly engage with others and feel connected. Every week it feels like there is a new TikTok trend that engages a sizable section of the world population, giving users and creators a sense of community.

Feeling Out Social Media

In "Feeling Out Social Media" (*Writing About Screen Media* 2019), Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochi contend that social media's impact goes beyond entertainment. We tend to underappreciate the "social" aspect of social media. The authors reference mothers' relationship with social media by collaborating with twenty-nine moms who all had children ten years and younger. The mothers explained the struggles of motherhood to the researchers. From managing their children's busy schedules to various household chores, they admitted motherhood was a struggle: "They cried a lot. They shared feelings of invisibility, deep and abiding fears, a strong desire for more control over their lives amidst job losses and potential health threats, and a staggering need to protect. They loved their kids, but motherhood? It felt impossible, brutal" (120). So, how did these mothers deal with and cope with their struggles? The experimenters discovered that one way was by connecting with mothers who were going through the same experiences online. Many of them logged on to various social media apps to connect with and learn from other mothers.

With these apps, they discovered family dinner recipes, ways to manage family chores, got advice about child development/mothering, and shared heartfelt family photos and memories. Through social media, these mothers not only gained a sense of community and comfort from this community, but they also learned from others and gained knowledge that made their job as mothers a bit easier. While the chapter does not specifically mention TikTok, the content those mothers viewed and shared can be accessed on that app in an even faster and shorter fashion. By using TikTok, these mothers would have instant access to motherhood content through their "for you" page.

Nobody tells you about the loneliness motherhood comes with. Family making plans with each other and leaving you out. People only calling when they need something. Everyone only asking "how's the babies?" It can be so isolating but mamas we can get through it.

This too shall pass

Motherhood TikTok



Last week I went to the playground with my toddler. And I saw 2 moms with their kids, talking and laughing together.

It honestly broke my heart a little bit because we don't have that.

Nobody warned me about the part of motherhood where you hear "find your village" but you haven't found it yet.

And how much I feel like I'm letting my kids down but also how lonely it is to go through the ups and downs without anyone close who really GETS IT.

So mama, if you're still looking for your village too... I get it. You're not alone. ❤️
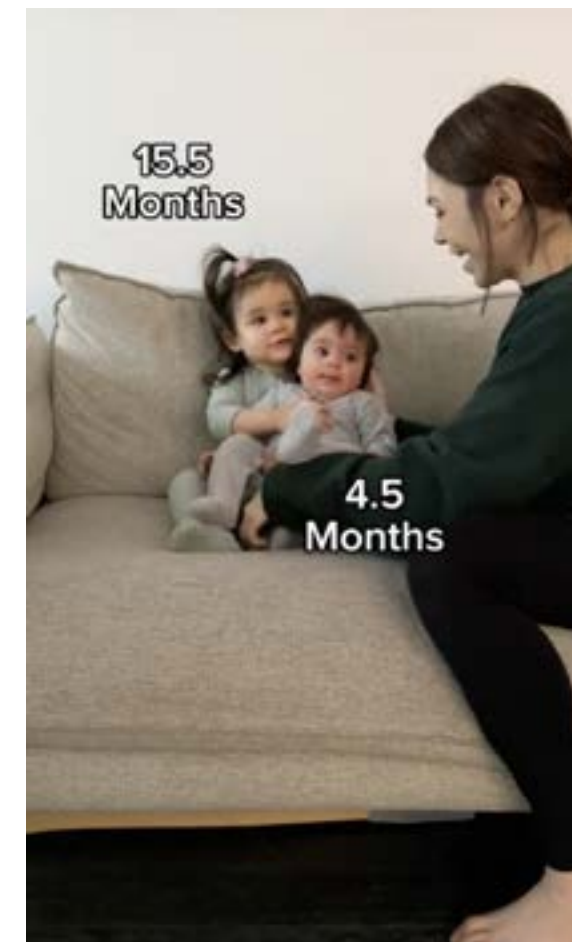
Motherhood TikTok



Bobbie Organic Formula
Yes or no?

Motherhood TikTok



15.5 Months

4.5 Months

Motherhood TikTok

## Downside of TikTok and Under The Dome Case Study

While TikTok has had success over the years due to its unique features, social media can be a dangerous place. If one is not careful, it can become an addiction and a struggle to separate reality from what appears online. While most of what is shown online comes from the real world, these pictures and short videos do not and cannot capture the whole narrative of what is displayed. Social media gives people the ability to form judgments with limited information. Examined by Fan Yang (*Writing on Screen Media* 2019), a viral air pollution video, *Under the Dome*, was released in China in 2015; the video hit 6 million views in 12 hours and eventually accumulated 200 million views. This video became one of the most talked about videos worldwide and brought lots of attention to the air quality in China. *Under the Dome* shed light on the environmental issues China faces and became the face of Chinese pollution. Yang argues: "On the other hand, a lot of attention was paid to its status as a screen artifact that seeks to represent Chinese pollution" (126).

This one online event shows the power of social media. While this video did bring awareness to China's environmental issues, it only addressed a part of them. Because of its global reach, to many, this singular video represented the entirety of China's pollution issues when, in reality, it shows only a fraction of their problems. There are several environmental problems in China, such as its increasing greenhouse gas emissions, illegal wildlife trafficking, and managing plastic waste, just to name a few. However, because of the popularity *Under the Dome* received on social media, air pollution was the only topic on people's minds. This is an example of how social media can reductively manipulate people's engagement; this can be dangerous and lead to ignorance because not everything or every perspective is captured through a video or photo. Instead of people forming their own opinions, social media forms one for them.

For many, TikTok and social media are their only news and information sources. Again, although Yang's chapter does not mention TikTok, it shows that while quick and easy access to content from around the world can instantly help spread awareness on certain topics and causes, it can just as easily and quickly shape people's opinions on them. With TikTok, people can form strong opinions from 30-second clips. Not only do these videos and images show a singular narrative most of the time, but not everything shown on the internet is real or true– a lot of it is fake. Many beliefs users form on the basis of social media feeds alone are either misguided or misinformed because of the unreliability and incredibility of unverified sources. While social media exposes us to information and content we may not usually have access to, users must be critical and careful about the content they view and not believe everything they see, and TikTok's "for you" page algorithm is escalating rather than helping the problem.

Social media creators put a lot of effort and thought into the architecture and navigation of their user-generated apps. According to Dale Hudson and Patricia Zimmermann, "Architecture refers to how projects organize open or closed pathways with user-generated or designed content through their system" (*Writing About Screen Media* 131). TikTok's architecture and navigation is simple. TikTok contains straightforward categories. As referenced in "The Rise of TikTok: How Clever Information Architecture Drove Major Success," "we can attribute much of their [TikTok] success to the way information is organized from the moment a user downloads their app to how they collect ongoing use data." On the homepage, "For you," "Live," "Search," and "Following" are located at the top. This simple organization of TikTok's features allows users to consume content faster and easier than other apps. However, the most impactful navigational decision made by the creators is arranging the "for you" page as the default homepage. So, as soon as users open the app, a page curated with content just for them pops up. This is one of the biggest appeals of TikTok and is what distinguishes this app from others. This navigational decision prevents users from having to search what they want to watch, all

they have to do is open the app and scroll through. However, there are risks to this feature.



"For You" Page

Adding to the previous discussion about the threats of social media being the only source of information for some people, the "for you" page feature only heightens these dangers. Not only can people find any content they want on social media to validate their opinions and thoughts but these content page algorithms give them easy access to that type of information and content. The algorithm of the "for you" page is based on the user's activity on the app, so any type of content the user likes, comments on, or views will be shown on their "for you" page. While this feature is convenient for the most part when it comes to users seeking appropriate content, on the other hand, it does not prohibit inappropriate and explicit content from being featured on the page– as long as the user interacts with the content, it will be featured on their homepage. This characteristic of the "for you" page is an issue, especially if the content a user is viewing is racist, homophobic, offensive, and more. Quick and easy access to content like this is how the formation of problematic social media cults and dangerous conspiracy theories spread and warp the minds of millions of users. While the whole point of social media is to have quick access to information and content, citizens and developers need to engage in conversations around data-gathering and disinformation spread policies of social media apps.

One of the biggest observations when looking at the evolution of social media is video and content duration. We now live in a time when shorter videos and content are more desirable. TikTok has made its mark by being an app that focuses on short video content. But, as mentioned above, while there are

benefits that come with short-form content, there are also many dangers. The real question is do the benefits outweigh the risks?

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# The Podcast Boom
## - Ahmad Fayyaz

In the ever-evolving landscape of media consumption, podcasts have become a cultural phenomenon, experiencing a staggering 29.5% growth in listenership over the past three years (as of 2022). With 120 million avid listeners in the United States and a remarkable 420 million globally (Götting), podcasts have emerged as a transformative force in the way we consume content. This audio-centric revolution is not just a revival of an old concept; it signifies a fresh approach to storytelling and information sharing. Particularly appealing to younger generations, podcasts offer diverse content that seamlessly accompanies individuals throughout their day, marking a significant shift away from traditional media formats.

While the concept of podcasts has been around for a considerable time, its recent surge in popularity can be credited to several factors, one of the biggest being the low barriers to entry for content creators. Unlike other forms of media, setting up a podcast is relatively straightforward. Although planning is essential, the process - from acquiring equipment to publishing on a platform - is a low-effort task. A good microphone and basic technical knowledge, such as operating recording tools like Adobe Audition, are sufficient for establishing a podcast. As highlighted by Jacob Smith of *ESC* "Get a good quality mic and find a quiet place to record your voice - like a closet." (Patti Pg.207) This ease of setup distinguishes podcasts from more resource-intensive forms of media production, such as video recording or music production, making podcasts an accessible and efficient medium for creators.

The widespread popularity of podcasts is further fueled by the assurance of a readily available audience. With a myriad of shows covering everything from motivation and entertainment to politics and sports, the diversity of topics ensures an audience for every niche, encouraging new podcast creators to tailor their content to specific communities. Facilitated by industry giants like Spotify and Apple, sharing a podcast with the world has never been easier. Furthermore, the unique format of podcasts, featuring conversations or a host speaking directly to the audience, contributes to heightened engagement. This dynamic creates a sense of inclusion, as listeners feel like active participants in a lively discussion or recipients of undivided attention. Adding to this, *How Do You Like It So Far*'s Henry Jenkins says it perfectly, "Think of this more as a teaching exercise or better yet, as a conversation with a group of smart friends, not all of whom are academics."(Patti Pg.208). This unfiltered and conversational approach distinguishes podcasts as a medium that offers a more authentic and engaging experience compared to other forms of media.

In the dynamic world of podcasts, where standalone recordings are common, a notable trend has emerged - weekly or even daily uploads dominate the top-rated and viewed charts. Brandon Arroyo, the creator of the Porno Cultures Podcast, aptly captures the essence of this trend by emphasizing the crucial role of consistency in podcasting success, "I think the most important things to remember are that aesthetics and constancy matter. Before I released my first episode I made sure that I had many other episodes recorded so that I would be able to keep up with the demand of a once-a-month schedule." (Patti Pg.207) The frequency of uploads not only keeps audiences engaged but also establishes a reliable presence, fostering a sense of anticipation among listeners. As podcasts become a regular part of people's routines, the commitment to a consistent schedule emerges as a pivotal factor in elevating a podcast's impact and popularity in this rapidly evolving medium. The audience starts to look forward to newer uploads as they become a constant source of balanced entertainment for them.

In contrast to other forms of media entertainment, such as music, films, and TV shows that demand focused attention, podcasts offer a more relaxed and versatile source of engagement. Their extended duration plays a crucial role in this distinction, allowing people to seamlessly integrate podcast listening into various aspects of their daily lives - whether it's while doing household chores, traveling, driving, eating, or engaging in other activities. The appeal of podcasts lies in their less demanding nature; they don't require undivided attention. This characteristic has been instrumental in driving their popularity. As Jennifer Proctor states, podcast hosts are aware that audiences may not hang on to every word (Patti Pg.209), reflecting the understanding that podcasts cater to a multitasking audience. In the current era of social media with a plethora of entertainment options, podcasts stand out as a refreshing alternative. The overwhelming content in other mediums can often exhaust the mind and drain energy. Recognizing this, newer generations prefer the more relaxed and flexible nature of podcasts, making them a better and rejuvenating source of entertainment in today's dynamic media landscape.

As podcasts continue to solidify their place in the media landscape, their growth trajectory looks promising. The factors that have added to their popularity, such as low entry barriers for creators, diverse content catering to niche interests, and an engaging format, are likely to persist. With the ease of accessibility and the consistent demand for varied content, podcasts are expected to attract an even larger audience in the future. As technological advancements and platform innovations continue to support the podcasting ecosystem, the medium is likely to evolve, introducing new possibilities and further contributing to its growth. In conclusion, the journey of podcasts is far from reaching its peak. As a dynamic and influential form of media, the future of podcasts looks promising.

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# TikTok and the Romcom: How User-Generated Content Allows Audiences to Reclaim Traditional Film Tropes
## - Erica Cooper

Since TikTok premiered on the app store in 2016, the app has ushered in a new era of short-form video user-generated content, allowing creators to explore new genres as they navigate this new platform. The iconic feature of the app is its "for you" page, which uses an algorithm that recommends videos to the viewer. All TikTok content is oriented vertically, allowing users to swipe upwards to view a new video and downwards to view a previous video, which is typically no longer than three minutes. Since TikTok took off during the pandemic, the app has fostered the creation of several different types of content that are specific to the platform. One of these is the rise of skits in which one person will play all of the characters, which are typically made by a single creator who writes, directs, edits, and designs the entire micro-production themselves. A popular sub-genre of this type of content is skits which recreate and rewrite classic film tropes from genres such as the romantic comedy and coming of age films. Winter Bassett (@winterbassett1), Caroline Klidonas (@carolineklidonas), and Annabelle (@obsseessed.spam) serve as valuable case studies of creators who have built platforms using this specific sub-genre of content. Below is an example of this type of content from Winter Bassett, whose series "Every 'they're just friends' high school film" has become extremely successful, with the first part of the series garnering over 2.7 million views and 400,000 likes (Bassett). This hyper-specific sub-genre of content exemplifies how TikTok serves as a platform in which creators and viewers can harness and deconstruct the language of tropes created by Hollywood to tell stories that intimately engage audiences and foster digital community.
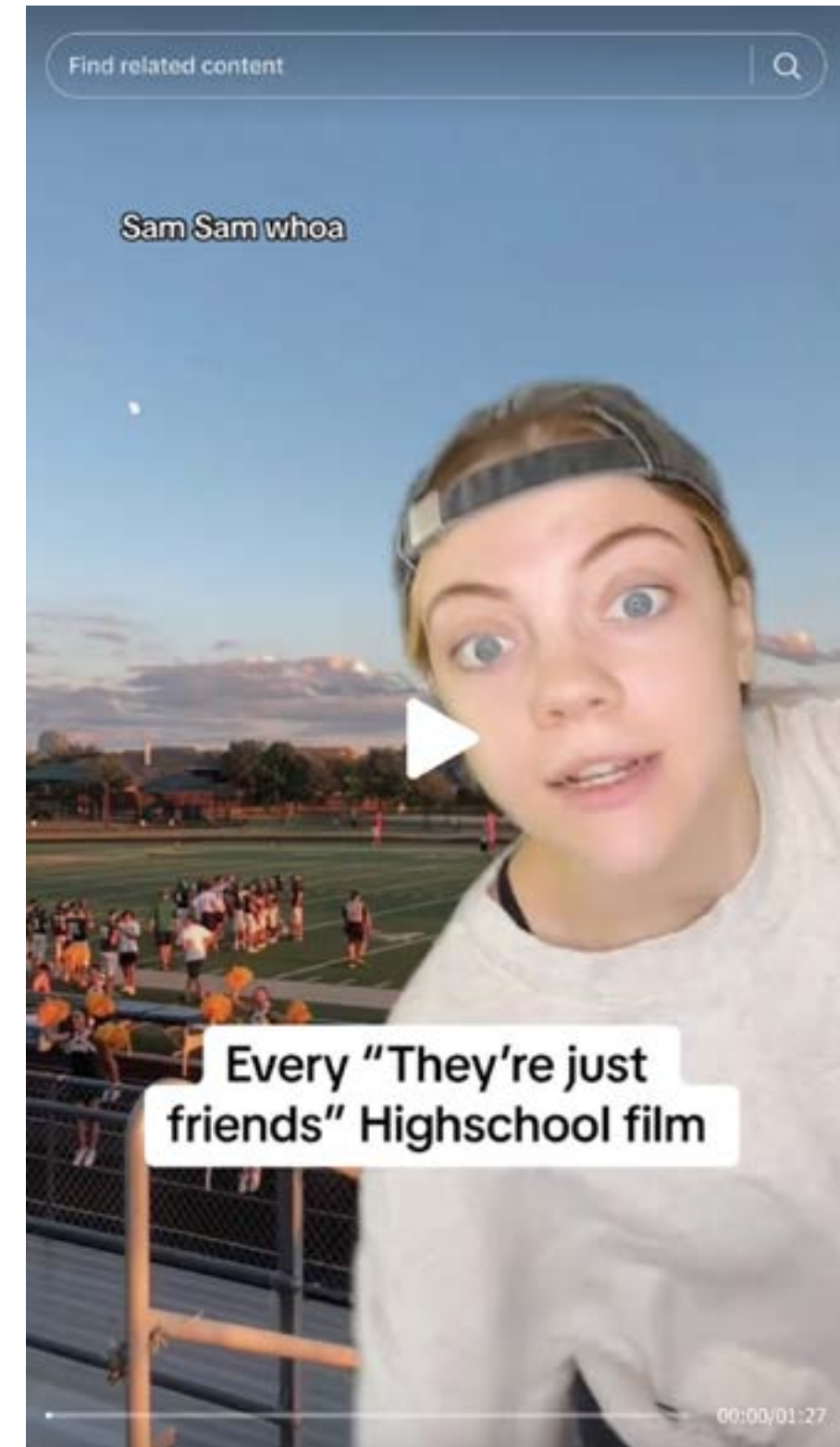


This genre of content relies heavily on established tropes and characters from film and television, both to identify itself to audiences and to tell the story. In her discussion of social media in *Writing About Screen Media*, Lauren McLeod Cramer called Instagram a "highly referential visual economy" (122). Though Cramer was speaking about Instagram, this concept is also applicable to TikTok, as each of these skits references various kinds of external media in order to be understood by audiences. Caroline Klidonas creates and posts skits with titles potentially incomprehensible to audiences who have not consumed specific genres of media, such as "meet-cute in an apocalyptic coming-of-age movie" and "grumpy/sunshine rom-com" (Klidonas). These titles borrow language developed in

fandom spaces, such as Archive of Our Own and Tumblr, to describe general tropes. The use of the phrase "grumpy/sunshine" makes this especially evident, as this uses the "/" to denote a romantic relationship between two characters and the words "grumpy" and "sunshine" to describe the characters' personalities (Archive). Rather than describing specific pieces of media, these tropes are being repurposed to inspire entire characters and plotlines, allowing these skits to be easily broken down and understood by viewers. Thus, these skits cannot exist without the media they reference and draw from, creating a symbiotic relationship in which the content relies on source material from traditional media and in turn popularizes user-generated remediated versions, in many cases drawing attention back to the original professionally produced pieces of media.

This type of content has a distinct homemade quality, driven by the fact that these skits are entirely written, directed, acted, and edited by one person. In this hyper-specific sub-genre, professionalism and prestige are not the goal, setting it apart from similar stories produced by major studios and production companies. The emphasis is not on perfection but instead creativity, and the visible and audible signs of effort contribute to the viewers' sense that the creator has worked hard on what they have posted. This is evident in a recent TikTok posted by Caroline Klidonas which rewrites the traditional romance and fantasy trope known as "Who did this to you?" in which a character finds their romantic interest injured and demands to know who hurt them. Though this is intended to take place in a fantasy setting, Klidonas does not attempt to create a background that matches the genre. Instead, she uses a wooden coat rack to resemble a tree and frames the shot with her living space visible in the background. When she switches characters and angles, she wears a backwards baseball cap to denote that she is now playing a male character, though this would technically imply the existence of a fantasy world that also contains baseball, already completely violating traditional world-building expectations (Klidonas). However, the shots of Klidonas's living space and use of everyday objects to tell these stories may make her more relatable to viewers and her content feel more accessible, like something that any viewer with a phone could create if they chose to. This inherent imperfection provides a contrast to traditional films and series created by major studios, in which the construction of the form is intended to remain invisible. Thus, the homemade nature of this type of content does not dissuade but instead draws in viewers, as they consume content created by their peers rather than perfection produced by distant and inaccessible celebrities.

The appeal of this content comes not only from its visible and audible effort but also from its basis in fan culture. Though these skits are not inspired by any specific pieces of media, they reclaim and rewrite codified traditional storylines in the same manner as fan-created content based on film and television. Although these skits are inspired by distinct tropes, the creators have the freedom to subvert and deconstruct these traditional elements by recasting tropes using characters outside of Hollywood's typical expectations of gender and sexuality. Annabelle provides a valuable example of this in their successful series titled "The pick me girl meets the nonbinary lesbian," which tells the story of a traditional 'pick me girl' unlearning her internalized misogyny by befriending and eventually falling in love with a nonbinary lesbian. This 14-part series takes advantage of romantic comedy and coming-of-age film tropes, such as using a dramatic reveal when one character is dressed up and employing a one-sided rivals-to lovers-trope (Annabelle). However, these tropes are told using queer characters and a plot in which the only male characters are antagonists, elements that are somewhat uncommon in mass media and are unlikely to be greenlit by major studios. On TikTok, Annabelle can bypass the roadblocks built into traditional media structures and reclaim these tropes for themselves and audiences, telling non-traditional stories using traditional tropes. Though this content is only being created by one person, viewers who did not necessarily contribute to the creation process may also feel as if they are reclaiming these tropes by watching; since as Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim explain in *Writing About Screen Media*, social media users consuming the same type of content can be thought of as a community rather than a passive audience (119). Furthermore, as Dale Hudson and Patricia R. Zimmermann discuss in *Writing About Screen Media*, the architecture of the platform is important, as the comment section allows viewers to interact with one another and the creator, actively participating in their community (131). Thus, both the creators and viewers create a digital community through the production and consumption of content that reclaims and deconstructs traditional film and television tropes.

These skits are a combination of the original media containing the tropes they are inspired by, avid fan engagement with the source material, popular culture, recurring tropes, the creator's interpretation of those tropes, and the feedback provided by viewers. Creators thereby interpret, comment on, revise, and adapt the original voice of the content until it becomes something new: a mixture of the traditional, the newly created, and the audience's longterm engagement with it. By borrowing the language of fandom, creators like Winter Bassett, Caroline Klidonas, and Annabelle use old cliches to tell new stories, giving themselves and their audience a voice in the media conversation that has not previously existed.

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