

Influence of Social Media Viral Short Films on Public Opinion among Nigerians**Seun-Akinola, Abimbola Taiwo**

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Busari, Waheed Bayonle*waheed.busari@lcu.edu.ng***Abstract**

This study examined the influence of viral short films on public opinion in Nigeria, focusing on audience exposure, perceived influence, and persuasive content elements. The study adopted the Social Learning Theory and explored how repeated exposure to short-form video content contributes to attitude formation and perception shaping. A quantitative research design was adopted using an online survey method. Through purposive sampling, 101 valid responses were collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings from the study revealed high exposure to viral short films, with the majority of respondents watching such content daily. TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram emerged as the most frequently used platforms. A significant proportion of respondents perceived viral short films as influential in shaping opinions, particularly in areas of entertainment, education, health, and social issues. Storytelling, humor, and emotional appeal were identified as the most persuasive elements. Although fewer respondents reported directly changing their opinions after viewing viral content, the overall findings suggest that influence operates subtly through reinforcement, modeling, and normalization of perspectives. The study concludes that viral short films function as powerful digital communication tools within Nigeria's media ecosystem, capable of shaping public perceptions through emotionally engaging and relatable narratives. The research recommends the need for responsible content creation, strengthened media literacy, and further longitudinal studies to assess long-term effects on public opinion formation.

Keywords: Viral short films, public opinion, social media, Social Learning Theory, digital communication, Nigeria

Introduction

In Nigeria, the rise in the presence of social media platforms has transformed the way people consume and share information (Agbaka, 2025). There are several of these platforms through which different types of information can be accessed for various purposes. Information dissemination through these platforms is done through different formats, one of which is short films.

Short films have emerged as a popular digital content format and have become a powerful form of visual storytelling, capable of reaching millions of viewers within a very short time. Unlike traditional films, short films are often designed for online platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, where sharing and engagement can quickly make any content go "viral." Short films typically spread rapidly because they are emotionally compelling, socially relevant and are frequently reshared by audiences who identify with the messages contained in the short film.

Short films that go viral have become a pivotal force in how we perceive events, products, and cultures around us. Viral short films on TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts are now major tools for political, social, and cultural communication. (Ling et al., 2021; Pera & Aiello 2023). They have the potential to

influence consumer behaviour and brand perception and create cultural and social movements through viral phenomena.

The rise of short-form platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has led to the growing demand for quick, snackable content that fits into our lives (Sky BlueCreative, 2024). TikTok, known for its short, creative clips, has become a cultural phenomenon. Its algorithm promotes viral trends and challenges, making it easy for users to participate and engage. Instagram Reels, allows users to create and share short videos with their existing followers, blending seamlessly into the photo-sharing app's ecosystem while YouTube introduced Shorts as a way for creators to produce brief, engaging videos that can reach a broad audience (Fatimah & Nasir, 2025).

In Nigeria, viral short films have played a significant role in shaping public discourse and influencing opinions on social and political matters. A notable example is the #EndSARS movement, where short films and video clips depicting police brutality, youth experiences, and protest activities circulated widely across social media (Enyiazu 2023; Ugochukwu & Nwolu 2025). These visual narratives contributed to national and international awareness and discourse by shaping public opinion and fueling collective action during the period of the protest. The rapid spread of several contents relating to the protest on social media platforms were instrumental in disseminating evidence of alleged Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) operatives' brutality to wide audiences, contributing to public pressure for reform. It demonstrated how viral short films can amplify social issues, generate empathy, and mobilize citizens to engage in public conversations (Shokoya, 2025).

Equally, through engaging storytelling and emotional appeal, viral short film contents can shape how audiences interpret social events, political issues, and cultural trends. They also have the potential to influence attitudes and behaviours, as viewers may adopt new perspectives after being exposed to compelling narratives. This is especially significant in Nigeria, where social media has become a key platform for discussing political issues, social injustices, and community concerns. Viral short films addressing topics such as corruption, police brutality, gender-based violence, unemployment, and political accountability have often sparked widespread public reactions and online discussions.

The "Baby Shark Dance" also exemplifies viral digital content that is capable of achieving extensive global visibility and influencing collective audience response. Produced by Pinkfong, a South Korean educational media company, the song and its accompanying dance routine attracted widespread engagement across diverse demographic groups. The video accumulated billions of views on YouTube, placing it among the most-viewed digital videos on the platform and illustrating how viral media content can shape public attention, shared cultural experiences, and patterns of public opinion in the digital age (Pinkfong, 2016).

Viral short films have a unique ability to tap into our emotions, they can make us laugh, cry, or even feel inspired. This emotional impact is a powerful tool for shaping public perception. It can also evoke empathy by showcasing real-life stories or relatable scenarios and trigger strong emotions. (Sky Blue Creative, 2024). One of the key mechanisms through which viral short films influence public opinion is emotional engagement. Research in media psychology indicates that emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared and remembered, and it exerts a stronger influence on attitudes and behavioral intentions than neutral content.

Short films that evoke strong emotions such as empathy, anger, hope, or outrage can elicit affective responses that shape audience beliefs and motivate social action. This aligns with findings in persuasion research showing that emotional arousal enhances message processing and increases the likelihood of attitude change.

Viral short videos can also shape public awareness and political participation among youth (Nadeem, et al 2024). Viral short films have significant implications for public discourse and civic engagement. They have the capacity to raise awareness about critical social issues and mobilize collective action. For example, short films highlighting environmental degradation or social injustice have catalyzed online movements and offline activism, demonstrating the capacity of viral content to bridge digital and real-world spheres.

The socio influence of viral short films extends beyond online platforms. These films can stimulate public conversations, encourage civic participation, and mobilize collective action. For instance, short films that highlight social injustice or environmental concerns can trigger public advocacy and inspire community

responses. Therefore, understanding how viral short film contents affect public opinion is essential in an era where digital media increasingly shapes public perception and societal behaviour. Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes and beliefs of the general population on social and political issues. It encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and preferences of the general population on various issues, thus playing a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of political decision-making within a democratic society. This study therefore examined the social influence of viral short film contents on public opinion in Nigeria, focusing on how these films shape attitudes, beliefs, and social actions among audiences.

Statement of the Problem

The growth of social media has created a new environment for information sharing, where short films can rapidly spread and influence public perception. In Nigeria, viral short film content has increasingly become a major source of social commentary, political awareness, and cultural expression. For example, during the #EndSARS protests, short films and videos depicting police brutality and youth experiences spread rapidly on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X, shaping public discourse and mobilizing citizens. Despite this influence, there is limited research on how viral short films shape public opinion and contribute to societal change. While some short films highlight issues such as corruption, police brutality, gender-based violence, and youth unemployment, it is not clear how these films influence viewers' attitudes, beliefs, and actions. This study, therefore, explored the extent to which viral short film content influence public opinion in Nigeria.

Objective of the Study

The study examined the social influence of viral short film contents on public opinion in Nigeria, focusing on how these films shape attitudes, beliefs, and social actions among audiences.

Research Questions

To what extent do viral short films influence public opinion in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Concept of Social Media and Digital Content

Social media refers to internet-based platforms and applications that allow users to create, share, and interact with content and communicate with others in real time. These platforms enable individuals, organizations, and communities to exchange information, ideas, opinions, and media content across different locations. Sujon et al. (2025) define social media as digital platforms that facilitate user interaction, content creation, and engagement within networked environments. Social media functions as a sense-making tool, as users interpret, construct, and assign meaning to information through sharing, interaction, and collaboration with others. The widespread sharing of information enhances its social relevance and collective understanding (Nyambandi, 2022; Perez et al., 2023). Thus, social media is more than a new way to communicate. It is a new way of thinking and interacting with the world. Social media websites and platforms that emerged with Web 2.0, the second generation of online content creation (Cohen, 2013) has transformed audiences into active participants who both generate and share content between themselves.

Common examples of social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X, and WhatsApp, where users can post messages, images, videos, and live streams. Unlike traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers, social media allows users to be both content creators and content consumers, making communication more interactive and participatory. Digital content, on the other hand, refers to any form of media or information created and shared in digital format through electronic devices and the internet. Digital content includes text, images, videos, audio recordings, animations, podcasts, and short films shared online.

In recent years, digital content consumption has increased significantly due to widespread internet access and smartphone usage. Social media platforms have become major channels for distributing digital

content because they allow content to spread quickly among users. Content that attracts attention often becomes viral, reaching large audiences within a short period.

In the context of this study, social media platforms serve as the primary distribution channels for viral short film content, while digital content represents the media materials that influence audience perception and public opinion. The interactive nature of social media allows users not only to watch content but also to comment, share, and express opinions, which further shapes public discussions and societal views.

Concept of Viral Content

Viral content refers to digital material such as videos, short films, images, or messages that spreads quickly across the internet and social media platforms through repeated sharing by users within a short period. The term “viral” is used because the content spreads in a manner similar to a virus, moving rapidly from one person to many others. Viral content usually attracts attention because it is considered to be entertaining, emotional, informative, controversial, or relatable. People tend to share content that makes them laugh, feel inspired, shocked, or emotionally connected, or content they believe others should see. (Krishnan, 2024).

Concept of Public Opinion

Public opinion refers to the collective views, attitudes, and beliefs held by members of a given society on social, political, cultural, religious, health, and economic issues. Public opinion is shaped by communication processes, media exposure, personal experiences, and social interactions. Media content, including viral short films, contributes to how individuals perceive issues, thereby influencing collective opinions. Scholars argue that media’s role in shaping public opinion and, consequently, political decision-making is evolving in the digital age. The rise of social media platforms has introduced new dynamics to information dissemination and public discourse (Bode, et al., 2018). Public opinion is a dynamic force capable of influencing decision-making processes, particularly in democratic societies where citizens’ views shape policy and governance outcomes (Zaller, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2023).

Social Learning Theory

This study is anchored on Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), which explains how individuals learn behaviours, attitudes, and social norms through observation and imitation of others, especially through media exposure.

Social Learning Theory posits that people do not learn only through direct experience but also by observing models in their environment, including characters seen in films, television, and social media content. When individuals observe behaviours being rewarded or portrayed positively, they are more likely to imitate or adopt similar behaviours and attitudes.

In the context of viral short film content, audiences are frequently exposed to short, engaging narratives that portray social situations, lifestyles, moral lessons, or political and cultural issues. Due to the fact that these films spread rapidly across social media platforms, they reach large audiences and can influence how people think about certain issues. Viewers may internalize attitudes or opinions shown in these films, which can contribute to shaping public opinion. For instance, a viral short film addressing issues such as corruption, domestic violence, or youth unemployment can influence how viewers perceive these issues and may affect public discussions and societal attitudes. When characters in such films are rewarded or sympathized with, audiences may adopt similar viewpoints or behaviors.

Social Learning Theory is therefore considered relevant to this study because it explains how exposure to viral short film content can influence viewers’ beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, ultimately shaping public opinion. This theory therefore provides a suitable foundation for examining the social influence of viral short film content.

Empirical Review

Previous studies have examined the influence of social media content on public opinion. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that emotionally engaging online content is more likely to be shared widely, contributing to rapid information spread. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) explained that digital media spreads through active participation of audiences who share content across networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) observed that social media allows users to influence public discussions by sharing opinions and content.

In a notable study, Sun, Pan, and Shen (2013) explored how media framing affects public opinion during political campaigns. Using content analysis, they examined news articles and social media posts related to election reporting. The results indicated that the way media frames information can strongly shape how the public perceives political candidates, with some frames influencing opinions more positively or negatively than others. Other studies, however, focus generally on social media influence, with limited research specifically examining viral short films and their impact on public opinion, especially within developing countries.

Summary and Knowledge Gap

The literature shows that social media and viral content significantly influence public discussions and opinion formation. There is limited research, however, that focused specifically on how viral short film content shapes public opinion. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the social influence of viral short film content.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate the influence of viral short film content on public opinion. The descriptive survey was considered appropriate for this study as it allows for the systematic collection and analysis of quantitative data to identify patterns and relationships between social media consumption and public perceptions. The population comprised social media users who regularly watch short films on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts.

A total of 219 respondents accessed the online survey link, however, 101 respondents completed the questionnaire adequately and met the inclusion criteria for analysis, representing a 46% completion rate. In online survey research, response rates between 30% and 60% are considered acceptable for behavioural and social science studies (Dillman, et al., 2014). Therefore, the 101 valid responses were deemed sufficient for statistical analysis.

A purposive sampling technique of 101 respondents participated in the study. This sampling method enabled the study to select respondents who are active social media users and are exposed to viral short films. This technique was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to deliberately select participants with relevant knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Etikan, et al., 2016). This sampling method enabled the study to focus on individuals most likely to engage with and be influenced by such content. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended items designed to measure respondents' viewing habits, engagement behaviors (such as liking, sharing, or commenting), and perceptions of how viral short films influence their opinions.

The collected data were analyzed using online survey with descriptive statistics, including percentages, frequency distributions, and mean scores, to summarize respondents' engagement patterns and the perceived influence of viral short film content on their attitudes and opinions. This approach provided a clear numerical assessment of the social impact of viral content. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and participation was entirely voluntary. These measures ensured the study adhered to ethical standards while producing reliable and valid findings on the role of viral short films in shaping public opinion.

Summary of Results

This study examined the influence of social media viral short films on public opinion in Nigeria using data from 101 valid respondents.

Demographic Profile

The sample consisted of 57.4% female and 42.6% male respondents, reflecting a relatively balanced gender distribution. The majority of respondents (35.6%) were aged 26–35 years, followed by 25.7% within the 18–25 age bracket, indicating that the study was dominated by young and digitally active adults. Educationally, the respondents were highly literate, with over 88% possessing at least tertiary education. Most respondents (59.4%) were single, consistent with the youthful composition of the sample.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by gender

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Male	45	44.55%
Female	56	55.45%
Other	0	0%
Valid Count Per Participant	101	

Exposure to Viral Short Films

Findings of the result show high exposure levels, with 61.4% of respondents reporting daily consumption of viral short films and 23.8% engaging weekly.

The study further indicate that TikTok emerged as the most commonly used platform, followed by Facebook and Instagram, confirming the dominance of short-form video platforms in content dissemination.

Social Media Platforms Commonly Used by Respondents.

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Facebook	28	28.7%
Instagram	19	18.8%
Twitter	8	7.9%
TikTok	33	32.7%
YouTube	13	12.9%
Valid Count Per Participant	101	

How often do you watch viral short films on social media?

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Daily	62	61.4%

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Weekly	24	23.8%
Rarely	13	12.9%
Monthly	2	2.0%
Never	0	0%
Valid Count Per Participant		101

Influence of Viral Short Films on Public Opinion

The extent to which viral short films influence their opinions across five thematic areas: politics, social issues, health, education, and entertainment.

Politics

Findings indicate that viral short films exert a moderate level of influence on political opinion. While 19 respondents (18.81%) reported “not at all” and 25 (24.75%) indicated “a little,” the largest proportion, 39 respondents (38.61%), selected “moderately.” Only 15 (14.85%) and 3 (2.97%) reported “very much” and “extremely,” respectively. This suggests that although viral short films contribute to political opinion formation, their influence appears more moderate than dominant.

Social Issues

In relation to social issues, the influence appears stronger. A combined 42 respondents (41.58%) indicated “very much” or “extremely,” while 38 (37.62%) reported “moderately.” Only 5 respondents (4.95%) reported no influence. This suggests that viral short films play a significant role in shaping opinions on social matters such as gender issues, social justice, and community concerns.

Health

Health-related content shows a high influence level. A total of 52 respondents (50%) reported “very much” or “extremely,” while 34 (33.66%) selected “moderately.” Only 4 respondents (3.96%) indicated no influence.

This indicates that viral short films are particularly impactful in shaping public opinion on health-related matters, possibly due to the emotional and visual appeal of short-form video content.

Education

Educational topics also show strong influence. A combined 59 respondents (58.41%) selected “very much” or “extremely,” while 31 (30.69%) reported moderate influence. Only 4 respondents (3.96%) indicated no influence.

This suggests that viral short films significantly contribute to shaping perceptions and attitudes toward educational matters.

Entertainment

Entertainment recorded the highest level of influence. A total of 70 respondents (69.3%) selected “very much” or “extremely,” with only 4 respondents (3.96%) indicating no influence.

This demonstrates that viral short films are most influential in the entertainment domain, which aligns with the entertainment-driven nature of short-form video platforms.

Influence of Viral Short Films on Public Opinion (Table representation)

Question\Option	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much	Extremely
Politics	19(18.81%)	25(24.7%)	39(38.61%)	15(14.85%)	3(2.97%)
Social Issues	5(4.95%)	16(15.38%)	38(37.62%)	37(35.58%)	5(4.95%)

Question\Option	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Very much	Extremely
Health	4(3.96%)	11(11.54%)	34(33.66%)	42(40.38%)	10(9.62%)
Education	2(2.0%)	7(6.9%)	22(21.78%)	39(38.61%)	31(30.69%)
Entertainment	4(3.96%)	4(3.96%)	24(23.08%)	36(35.6%)	34(33.7%)

Influence on Public Opinion

The results reveal strong perceived influence with more than 61% of respondents indicated that viral short films shape public opinion “very much” or “extremely,” while no respondent selected “not at all.” This demonstrates widespread acknowledgment of their impact in Nigeria’s digital information environment.

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Not at all	1	1.0%
A little	2	2.0%
Moderately	35	34.7%
Very much	33	32.67%
Extremely	30	29.70%
Valid Count Per Participant	101	

Influential Elements

Respondents also identified storytelling, 59 (58.42%) humor, 54 (53.47%) and emotional appeal 47 (46.53%) as the most influential aspects of viral short films as these elements appear to enhance persuasive effectiveness by increasing engagement and relatability.

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Cultural Relevance	26	27.88%
Visual Effects	32	30.77%
Emotional Appeal	47	46.53%
Humor	54	53.47%
Storytelling	59	58.42%
Valid Count Per Participant	101	

Opinion Change

Although a majority (63.46%) reported not personally changing their opinion after exposure while a significant minority (36.54%) acknowledged that viral short films had altered their views on social issues. This indicates that while influence may not always produce immediate opinion change, it contributes to perception shaping and attitudinal reinforcement.

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Yes	35	34.7%
No	66	65.3%

Genre Preference

The study revealed that respondents' preferred genres include, Comedy, 54 (53.5%), Drama: 28 (27.%) and Documentary: 19 (18.8%). The study found out that comedy emerged as the most preferred genre (50.5%), affirming the role of entertainment driven content in audience engagement and potential opinion influence.

Answer Choices	Responses	Responses Percentage
Comedy	54	51.92%
Drama	28	26.92%
Documentary	19	18.27%
Action	0	0
Horror	0	0
Valid Count Per Participant	101	

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study corroborate with Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn attitudes, values, and behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling. According to the theory, audiences do not merely consume media passively; rather, they observe behaviors and internalize meanings presented in mediated content, especially when such content is attractive, relatable, or emotionally engaging. The collective findings from this study revealed that TikTok is the most dominant platform, followed by Facebook used for accessing viral short films. The study further affirms that viral short films play a significant role in shaping opinions on social matters such as gender issues, social justice, and community concerns.

This study further demonstrates that viral short films are most influential in the entertainment domain, which aligns with the entertainment-driven nature of short-form video platforms.

Viral short also play a meaningful and significant role in shaping perceptions and attitudes toward educational matters, education, health communication, and political discourse.

Additionally, the result findings confirm that viral short films have moved beyond mere entertainment and now function as influential tools in shaping public opinion, particularly in non-political domains. Their visual immediacy, brevity, and share ability make them powerful agents of perception formation in contemporary Nigerian digital culture.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of viral short films on public opinion in Nigeria and found that short-form digital content plays a significant role in shaping audience perceptions, particularly in areas such as entertainment, education, health, and social issues. The study indicates that viral short films have become embedded in the media consumption patterns of Nigerian audiences further revealing that storytelling, humor, and emotional appeal are the most influential elements driving engagement and persuasion. The study overall perception revealed that viral short films shape public opinion suggests that their influence operates subtly through repeated exposure, modeling, and normalization of certain viewpoints. Anchored in Social Learning Theory, the study concludes that viral short films serve as important platforms for observational learning and attitude formation within Nigeria's digital public sphere.

Recommendations

1. The study recommends that content creators should recognize the persuasive power of viral short films and ensure that their productions promote responsible and ethical messaging. At the same time, regulatory bodies should establish balanced guidelines that encourage creativity while safeguarding the public from misleading or harmful content.
2. The study further recommends that Government agencies and Non-Governmental organizations can strategically utilize viral short films as effective tools for public education and advocacy particularly in health, civic engagement, and social development.
3. Furthermore, future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand the long-term effects of viral short films on public opinion across different demographic groups.

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