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Opportunities for the use of short videos in science communication: the case of social sciences

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Abstract. As an increasing number of scientists utilize alternative communication platforms such as TikTok to disseminate scientific information, there is a pressing need to investigate their potential for scientific communication, particularly with younger audiences. A content analysis of 163 posts under four hashtags (#researchpaper, #scientificarticle, #socialscience, and #pewresearch) revealed that TikTok is indeed being employed as a medium for sharing scientific content, including research results. It is notable that some publications make direct references to scientific articles and monographs, indicating the potential of the platform to bridge the gap between the academic community and a wider audience. However, short videos on TikTok generate more engagement when authors share experiences and tips rather than research results. While TikTok is becoming an important channel for scientific communication, it is mainly used as an additional means and not a replacement for traditional media such as academic journals or new resources like preprint servers. Additionally, no formats or examples of content were identified that could be considered a replacement for traditional methods of communicating scientific information. Further research is necessary to investigate the impact of TikTok on science communication across different disciplines and age groups.

Keywords: scientific communication, TikTok, short videos, social media

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Возможности использования коротких видео в научной коммуникации: пример социальных наук

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Аннотация. Поскольку все больше ученых используют для обмена научной информацией альтернативные коммуникационные платформы, в том числе видеосервисы (например, TikTok), необходимо изучить потенциал подобных ресурсов для научной коммуникации, особенно с молодой аудиторией. Мы провели контент-анализ 163 постов под четырьмя хэштегами: #researchpaper, #scientificarticle, #socialscience, #pewresearch. Выяснилось, что TikTok действительно используется как площадка для обмена научным контентом, в том числе результатами исследований. Некоторые публикации даже содержат прямые ссылки на научные статьи и монографии, что говорит о потенциале платформы для преодоления разрыва между научным сообществом и широкой аудиторией. В то же время, короткие видео в TikTok вызывают больший интерес, когда авторы делятся личным опытом и советами, а не результатами исследований. Форматы и примеры контента, способные претендовать на замену традиционных способов передачи научной информации, в ходе исследования обнаружены не были. Хотя TikTok возможно использовать в качестве средства научной коммуникации, он все же может быть лишь дополнительным каналом, а не заменой традиционных медиа, таких, как академические журналы или новые онлайн-ресурсы (например, серверы препринтов). Необходимы дальнейшие исследования, чтобы изучить влияние TikTok на научную коммуникацию в рамках различных дисциплин и возрастных групп.

Ключевые слова: научная коммуникация, TikTok, короткие видео, социальные медиа

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Introduction

The phenomenon of scientists utilizing alternative communication platforms is becoming increasingly prevalent. Researchers quite willingly and actively use Twitter to share information about the latest research results and for discussions; in some countries and communities, social networks are used for the same purposes (Sugimoto et al., 2017). But now the 'basic unit' of Internet content is video, so even in the scientific sphere there are many attempts to use the video format to disseminate scientific information – in particular, international publishers are increasingly turning to it (Spicer, 2014).

The utilization of video as a format for scientific content becomes particularly pertinent in the context of engaging younger individuals in research activities, given the prominent role that video platforms play in the lives of the younger generation (Cervi, 2021).

Previous research has addressed the presentation of scientific information in video format, with examples including YouTube (Kousha et al., 2012). However, little attention has been paid to TikTok, which is a platform that has emerged in recent years and has a particular focus on short videos. The objective of this study was to gain insight into the suitability of video platforms, which are particularly popular among young people, for disseminating scientific information and for scientific communication within the research community.

Literature review

It was not the intention of this study to conduct a systematic literature review on the topic. Consequently, the focus will be on the main issues and trends that relate to the use of social media and video formats in scientific communication, with particular reference to the dissemination and discussion phases of research.

It is evident that social media have long been an integral part of the system of scientific communication, and this can be said about both specialized services and well-known platforms. By the mid-2000s, a substantial corpus of literature on the use of social media and altmetrics by scholars had already been published (Sugimoto et al., 2017). Rather than undertaking a comprehensive review, we will merely present the key ideas reflected in the existing literature:

1. Social media are predominantly used for information dissemination and consumption rather than for career building, for example (Grande et al., 2014; Van Noorden, 2014).

2. Researchers from many scientific fields take a rather pessimistic view of social media and see it as a source of occupational hazards, stress, inaccurate

information, and blog posting is assessed as a 'waste of time' (Harley et al., 2010).

3. At the same time, academics are increasingly using social media and are increasingly turning to new forms of content (Piwowar, 2013; Viney, 2013; Wilsdon et al., 2015).

In addition to individual researchers, academic journals are also developing social media activity: according to 2018 data, their social media presence ranges from 7 to 14 % depending on the discipline and is constantly growing (Zheng et al., 2019). Moreover, the results of statistical analyses indicate that the value of social media metrics correlates with the impact factor of the journal.

The increased use of audiovisual content on social media is not a direct consequence of the format becoming available; scientists have been using video for decades to present research results at conferences, as part of lectures, as accompanying materials to articles, and so on. Moreover, video is an extremely effective medium for communicating information that is difficult to convey through text, and therefore almost essential for describing complex technical protocols (Pasquali, 2007).

Already at the beginning of the century, researchers were actively writing that the use of video content could greatly enrich scholarly communication. As researchers noted earlier, we now live in a world of 'visual cultures', a world of remediation and crossmediation, where content and experiencing it take many forms (Bolter, 2001). One of the main arguments in favour of wider acceptance of video is that this format is much better at conveying information about many practical aspects of scientific research (Löwgren, 2011).

One of the first industrially recognized steps towards audiovisual formats was video annotations, which are now a routine part of the work of major international publishers (Spicer, 2014). In addition, scientific journals are very active in publishing videos as accompanying materials to an article – usually just to convey information that cannot be presented in text format (Pasquali, 2007).

There are now several academic journals that position themselves as video journals (see, for example, *The Video Journal of Education & Pedagogy*). The experience of this type of publication has also been reviewed in academic literature (Canet, 2019).

When it comes to the video format on social media, YouTube is the most popular platform among researchers, not only for dissemination (Thelwall et al., 2012a) and discussion (Thelwall et al., 2012b) of information, but even as a source of citations (Kousha et al., 2012). An analysis of publications indexed in Scopus for the years 2005–2011 within four scientific fields (Sciences, Medicine and Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities) showed that citations of YouTube videos are most often found in Social Sciences and Humanities publications – 0.2 and 0.3 % respectively. At the same time, in the fields of science, medicine and health sciences, the videos cited were directly scientific (e.g. recordings of laboratory experiments) or educational (recordings of lectures), while in the fields of humanities and social sciences they referred to

cultural, historical, or journalistic content. It can therefore be concluded that there are considerable differences in the use of supplementary services by the representatives of the various disciplines.

The survey results are also consistent with the above findings: more than a half of the UK scientists surveyed said they use video for work at least occasionally. Most respondents use one or more social media for work purposes, but researchers rarely act as content creators and are mainly content consumers. There are some differences in social media usage patterns by age and discipline. Interestingly, researchers who use social media more frequently are also more active consumers of scientific information in traditional form (Tenopir et al., 2013).

TikTok has also already been the focus of research (Cervi, 2021), as this platform has had a significant impact on traditional media systems in different countries (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022), and this impact has not passed by the science communication system.

Due to the growing popularity of the social network and its influence on the younger generation, some researchers say that TikTok is the future of scientific communication (Hoić, 2022). Of course, in this case, the video platform cannot be seen as an alternative for scientific journals – TikTok is seen primarily as a replacement for Twitter, which has already become a routine part of the information exchange of many scientists.

There are not many direct studies of the TikTok content of scientific topics, and they focus primarily on popular rather than scientific content (Radin, Light, 2022; Wang et al., 2022). The most comprehensive existing study is dedicated to the analysis of memes in TikTok. The authors examined a total of 1368 videos on scientific topics, which allowed them to identify groups of content creators and the main types of scientific memes in TikTok (Zeng et al., 2020). In addition, a whole body of research focuses on the use of TikTok within specific scientific disciplines – for example, clinical research (Lindsley, 2022) and geosciences (Zawacki et al., 2022). Much of this type of research focuses on questions such as what content might be of most interest to a potential audience of scientists belonging to a particular scientific discipline, what types of content are represented on the platform by a particular discipline, etc.

Research methodology

Within the study we had several questions of interest:

1. Is there content on the TiKTok platform that takes the viewer directly to the scientific literature?

2. Who creates this content?

3. What types of content are most appealing to the audience?

The answers to these questions indicate the extent to which the scientific community is interested in using this social network and the suitability of the short video format for scientific communication.

As we have seen from earlier studies (Kousha et al., 2012), the specifics of using a particular platform depend quite strongly on the discipline, so we decided to focus on the example of social sciences: on the one hand, here we will not find videos from the laboratory, and on the other hand, the results of sociological research may be of interest to a wide audience.

TikTok studies are associated with certain methodological and methodological difficulties, which are due to the peculiarities of the platform's recommendation algorithms and some legal aspects of data collection (Zeng et al., 2021). The most common methodology used in such studies is content analysis to collect the necessary data, which relies on hashtag or keyword searches, or the study of posts in selected accounts (Kanthawala et al., 2022).

Following the example of our colleagues, we also conducted a content analysis of publications using the four hashtags:

— #researchpaper and #scientificarticle – as general scientific hashtags to assess the availability of this type of content on the platform in general;

— #socialscience – for publications dealing with social science in general;

— #pewresearch – as an example of publications associated with a well-known research organization whose results are of interest both within and beyond the scientific community.

The initial plan was to analyze 50 of the most popular publications under each hashtag, but only 13 entries were found for the query #scientificarticle. In total, 163 publications were analyzed. We focused on foreign content in English, because in Russia representatives of the scientific community hardly use this platform, and we hoped to find relatively established practices of working with content.

Results of the study

We first examined publications under the hashtags #researchpaper and #scientificarticle (63 posts in total) to outline the characteristics of videos directly related to scientific texts, to identify their authors, specific topics and format.

Researchers themselves play an active role in creating content for the platform, even though the number of students as authors is significantly higher (Table 1).

Table 1

Publications under the hashtags #researchpaper and #scientificarticle categorized by types of authors

Type of author	Number of videos
Student	43
Researcher	9
University	2
Media	1
N/a	8
Total	**63**

Source: compiled by the authors.

In addition, university publications were included in our sample, but they were not directly related to scientific information or the presentation of the results of any particular study.

To clarify the specificity of the video, we focused on several parameters: duration (Table 2), type (Table 3), and subject of the video (Table 4).

Table 2

Distribution of likes among publications under the hashtags #researchpaper and #scientificarticle based on the duration of videos

Duration	Number of likes	Number of videos	Average number of likes
15 seconds and less	31	4 407 308	142 171
More than 30 seconds, less than a minute	16	2 380 618	148 789
More than a minute	9	742 935	82 548
16–30 seconds	7	526 761	75 252
Total	63	8 057 622	128 898

Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 3

Distribution of likes among publications under the hashtags #researchpaper and #scientificarticle based on the type of videos

Type	Number of videos	Number of likes	Average number of likes
Meme	31	3 465 117	111 778
Lifehack	25	4 181 940	167 278
Analysis	5	2 465	493
Experience	2	408 100	204 050
Total	**63**	**8 057 622**	**128 898**

Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 4

Distribution of likes and comments among publications under the hashtags #researchpaper and #scientificarticle based on the thematic content of videos

Thematic content	Number of videos	Number of likes	Average number of likes	Number of comments	Average number of comments
Conducting research	31	4 570 200	147 426	27 383	883
Working with sources	2	1 266 600	633 300	1595	798
Writing paper	10	6306	631	103	10
Defence	17	2 212 300	130 135	17 046	1 003
Findings from specific studies	3	2216	739	95	32
Total	63	8 057 622	127 899	46 222	734

Source: compiled by the authors.

The most popular videos, for both authors and viewers, are either the shortest, with a running time of up to 15 seconds, or the more detailed, with a running time of more than 30 seconds, but no longer than one minute: 15 seconds is enough for memes, while the time needed for a quick hack or a description of

one's own experience is a little longer. However, the audience is not willing to watch a video for too long anyway, so going beyond one minute will have a negative impact on the audience.

The topics of popular videos are mainly related to the process of preparing qualification works (including PhD theses), while almost no one is interested in information about already completed research.

We then analyzed a further 50 publications under the hashtag #socialscience. As we can see in Table 5, the ratio of authors was slightly different.

Table 5

Publications under the hashtag #socialscience categorized by types of authors

Type of author	Number of videos
Researcher	17
Student	3
Teacher	3
Media	1
N/a	26
Total	**50**

Source: compiled by the authors.

For some videos, the type of author could not be determined because not all users indicate their place of work, university or degree, and some channels are not personalized. At the same time, even from the data we were able to collect, we can see that researchers are quite active on TikTok.

22 % of the publications reviewed were on topics related to sociology, 15 % were on topics related to psychology, and the remainder were on topics related to other disciplines.

In terms of video duration, the situation is slightly different: short videos are much less popular with both authors and viewers, while videos lasting more than a minute on average gather the most likes (Table 6).

Table 6

Distribution of likes among publications under the hashtag #socialscience based on the duration of videos

Duration	Number of likes	Number of videos	Average number of likes
More than 30 sec., less than a minute	1 957 455	25	78 298
More than a minute	1 349 739	9	149 971
16 30 sec.	456 700	8	57 088
15 sec. and less	233 787	8	29 223
Total	3 997 681	50	79 954

Source: compiled by the authors.

In terms of video type (Table 7) and topic (Table 8), we can see the predominance of reviews of specific scientific publications, with these videos gaining the highest number of likes on average. The other categories are

represented by an insignificant number of videos; at the same time, users themselves value videos in which the authors share their personal experiences the most.

Table 7

Distribution of likes and comments among publications under the hashtag #socialscience based on the type of videos

Type	Number of likes	Number of videos	Average number of likes	Number of comments	Average number of comments
Analysis	2 268 753	30	75 625	33 192	1 106
Meme	460 601	7	65 800	4 092	585
Experience	1 036 500	3	345 500	7 138	2 379
Fact	101 400	3	33 800	1 139	380
Quiz	78 400	3	26 133	726	242
Lifehack	44 300	2	22 150	234	117
Other	14 956	2	7478	258	129

Source: compiled by the authors.

Table 8

Distribution of likes and comments among publications under the hashtag #socialscience based on the thematic content of videos

Subject matter	Number of likes	Number of videos	Average number of likes	Number of comments	Average number of comments
Findings from specific studies	3 515 094	39	90 131	41 101	1 054
Teaching	223 001	3	74 334	2 292	764
Study	107 186	2	53 593	907	454
Other	65 600	2	32 800	597	299
Writing paper	51 900	2	25 950	1 509	755
Conducting research	18 400	1	18 400	157	157
Looking for job	16 500	1	16 500	216	216

Source: compiled by the authors.

It should also be noted that four of the videos contain direct links to articles (rather than just a screenshot or a mention), one to a book and another to a tweet. The articles are presented in a variety of ways, ranging from short videos of less than 15 seconds to longer videos of up to a minute. They are mostly of the 'parsing' type, but one of the publications is simply a scientific fact with a link to the article.

Finally, we analyzed a group of 50 publications under the hashtag #pewresearch. 46 videos actually refer to publications from the Pew Research Centre. When it comes to the duration of videos, they are much more evenly distributed, with only 15–30 second videos being less common than others. However, the most popular (by an order of magnitude) are videos lasting more than a minute (5.381 likes on average).

Typically, bloggers would display a screenshot of the article in the frame, with the author and title of the publication, as well as specific snippets of material (quotes, infographics). In this way, all the publications reviewed are based on the results of specific studies and belong thematically to this block.

At the same time, not all videos are classified by type (Table 9). In addition, users are more interested in article-based memes than in detailed research narratives.

Table 9

Distribution of likes and comments among publications under the hashtag #pewresearch based on the type of videos

Type	Number of likes	Number of videos	Average number of likes	Number of comments	Average number of comments
Analysis	93 983	40	2 402	6 710	170
Meme	102 543	9	11 394	1 003	111
Fact	125	3	42	7	2
Total	196 651	50	3 849	7 720	154

Source: compiled by the authors.

We see slightly more serious content with longer videos and a strong link to real research published in scientific journals in the case of the latter hashtag.

Conclusion and discussion

TikTok is indeed used to disseminate scientific content, including research results, and such publications sometimes even contain direct links to scientific articles and monographs. It can also be concluded that a variety of actors connected in one way or another with research activities, including universities interested in expanding their audience, are trying to build communication with the audience on the platform. The main creators of scientific content on the platform are students and researchers.

Although scientific content is present on the platform, such videos are quite few and not particularly popular. As we can see from the example of publications under different hashtags, content in which authors share their experiences and various tips and tricks in the field of research generates a much more active response than a story about research results, even if they are relevant and of high quality.

On the one hand, this is because TikTok's audience is mainly young people who really need help and guidance, and for whom such a live exchange of experiences is invaluable. On the other hand, the results of previous research and data show that the video format is most often poorly suited for communicating information directly about the research results – it is more of an auxiliary tool for presenting accompanying data, demonstrating the work process, etc.

We can see that social media and video platforms are becoming increasingly important in the system of scientific communication, but so far they play the role

of additional channels, including sometimes replacing face-to-face communication between researchers. We could not find formats and examples of content that could claim to replace traditional ways of communicating scientific information. At the same time, the scientific content on the platform generates a lot of interest and a very active response from the audience, as shown by the number of likes and comments. Thus, although short video platforms are not an optimal means of communicating with scientists who are already part of the scientific community, they can be an effective tool for engaging young people in science.

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