

The Limits of Small Stories on TikTok

Audiovisual Dissonance in Rescripted Self-Narratives

An analysis of the Top 10 song-centric TikTok trends (2023–2025) shows that users are rescripting audio content from viral small stories with new visuals that can distort the rhetoric of the original message's intended meaning. Drawing upon rhetorical narratology, this paper argues that TikTok videos demonstrate the devaluation of authorial ethos as creators/users privilege pathos via the modality of song, often at the expense of narrative logos. This paper addresses two key questions: what limits and dangers arise when song-focused small stories on TikTok become viral macro-narratives that cross media platforms; and how are rescripted TikTok self-narratives creating audiovisual dissonance? The “Anxiety Dance Trend” serves as a case study to ground this theoretical analysis to demonstrate the limits and potential dangers of viral small stories on TikTok. A wider analysis of viral TikTok song-centric videos shows how audiovisual dissonance occurs within rescripted videos and the increased limited meanings of these small stories once they are reported as viral trends across other media (i.e., macro-narratives). By identifying and analysing this phenomenon, the study reveals the three key communicative limits (i.e., what, how, and where) associated with TikTok's viral song-focused self-narrative trends.

1. Introduction

There has been a proliferation of self-narratives published as videos on various social media platforms, and increased value has been placed in micro-narratives and ‘small stories’ – coined by Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2007) as worthy of analytical studies. “Small stories” typically “perform the minute-by-minute everyday life experience; are transportable and circulatable in different media platforms; are embedded into a variety of online and offline environments; are multi-semiotic and multi-authored; [and] address simultaneously different, potentially big and unforeseeable audiences” (269). Small stories are an important part of sociocultural documentation, preservation, and progress across media. For example, any large-scale positive changes have arisen due to collective actions inspired by many self-narratives shared on social media, such as the #Metoo movement which made an “invisible power structure visible” (Mäkelä 2022, 204). However, despite the many benefits of increased online vernacular storytelling provide, there are limits to fleeting small stories as self-narratives on social media.

TikTok, as a platform, sees constant waves of viral trends that are short-lived but gain widespread reach both within the platform and beyond into other media. TikTok creators often want to ‘jump on the bandwagon’ and join an ongoing conversation, to go viral, and be trendy with their song choices. Unlike other social media platforms used for various modalities of storytelling, TikTok places more emphasis on music as a storytelling modality. Georgakopoulou (2017, 275) identified two main story-sharing practices on social media, namely “narrative stancetaking”, posts with conventional story framing, which can be told, developed and updated later, and “rescripting”, which involves “visually or verbally manipulating previously circulated stories so as to create alternative stories.” This rescripting is often done with humour or satirical versions of the original story

(275). As this paper will demonstrate, TikTok song-centric narratives are being rescripted into viral macro-narratives, and this process limits the rhetorical impact of these multimodal vernacular self-narratives. These current postmodern conditions require new considerations for how the proliferation of self-narratives are making new meanings based on rescripting audio-narratives with textual/visual self-narratives for TikTok platform users and as macro-narratives to nonusers.

This paper applies rhetorical narratology (Phelan 2011) to show that since authorial ethos (i.e., person's good character) is devalued on TikTok, it has been passed down to the masses who remix and share self-narratives that focus more on the pathos (i.e., emotional response of audience) through the modality of song, which can lead to issues or limits with the resulting narrative logos (i.e., reasoning/logic). The limits of self-narratives are examined through a rhetorical narratological analysis on a selected sample of Top 10 audio-focused viral small stories published on TikTok between 2023 and 2025. The selected case study example of the "Anxiety Dance Trend" will be used to contextualise a theoretical discussion on the limits of TikTok viral self-narratives. The research questions addressed in this paper are:

RQ1: What limits and dangers arise when audio-focused small stories on TikTok become viral macro-narratives that cross media platforms?

RQ2: How are rescripted TikTok self-narratives creating audiovisual dissonance?

The proposed phenomena termed 'audiovisual dissonance' has been observed in multiple users' rescripted self-narratives with existing audio tracks and is discussed in the context of this sample of viral song-focused TikTok Top 10 videos.

2. Literature Review and Narratological Concepts

2.1 Small Stories on TikTok

To identify the limits of small stories on TikTok, it is important to situate the storytelling context of the platform. TikTok, formerly known as Musicly, is "characterized by camera-first communication, music, dance moves, trends, and memes" (Georgakopoulou 2025, 15). TikTok affords the "intermingling of the personal with the collective/generic" where users often share "life-in-the moment" and this emphasises a "shift of authenticity from teller-based truth-telling to a tale-based relatability" (11). TikTok videos sit within an "unspecified temporal frame that stresses ongoingness and habituality" (30), or shareability for the purposes of relatability. Georgakopoulou (32) argues that future studies should move away from text-centered to multi-modal approaches. The concept of "intermodal density" describes the rescripting choices (e.g., derived from memes making) incorporated "into the current story voices, images, and music from popular culture, films and TV shows" (14). The limits of storytelling on TikTok will be examined via the multimodal choices, or intermodal density, present in rescripted videos in terms of the rhetorical meaning making and what impacts small stories can collectively have when they become a decontextualised macro-narrative (e.g., a 'master plot', or global trend). Mäkelä (2025, 35) notes that TikTok videos are "sharable and relatable story templates that have a great potential to develop into culturally dominating masterplots with replicable plots, characters, and moral positioning", rather than focusing on the influencer's story as personable and relatable. While there are social media influencers

on TikTok, the virality of videos has generally been attributed to the number of views and shares, as determined by the algorithm, rather than requiring or primarily deriving from the authenticity and likability of the creator, as seen more commonly in some other social media platforms. TikTok's artificial intelligence-powered filters and user-created Do-It-Yourself filters serve as mimetic templates that enable trend-driven content and virality (Lee / Umbach 2026, 324).

In terms of the limits of small stories, Mäkelä et al. (2021, 139) formulated a theory via the Dangers of Narrative project of “how viral, affective storytelling may distort the intended rhetoric and ethics of narrative.” They note that narratives of personal experience are “the predominant currency in today's story economy” (Mäkelä et al. 2021, 140), which shifts focus onto whether the narratives are relatable and believable rather than informative or representative (Mäkelä et al. 2021, 146). They argue that narratives of personal experience are part of the post-truth mentality where “relatability, experiential position, and graspable moral of the story outweigh referentiality and representativeness” (Mäkelä et al. 2021, 147). For example, Lee and Umbach (2026, 1) summarised how a “single viral TikTok video can spark a global trend within the current digital economy” through the example of the ‘Dubai chocolate bar.’ The Dubai chocolate bar became a global phenomenon after a female content creator posted an ASMR¹ video in December 2024 of a ‘small story’ focusing on the audio sounds of her eating/crunching the chocolate bar without any spoken dialogue. The video received 50 million views within a few months and resulted in many businesses across the world creating their own version of the ‘Dubai chocolate bar’ to capitalise on sales from this online trend (cf. Lee / Umbach 2026, 1). While this small story became a global macro-narrative trend, the original story got lost in the process. Fix Dessert Chocolatier, Sarah Hamouda, developed the *Can't Get Knafeh of It* (i.e., the viral Dubai chocolate bar) in 2021 when she had a pregnancy craving (officialfixdessertchocolatier 2026). Although the viral ASMR eating video resulted in huge growth for the business, the owners noted that copycat bars are “very frustrating because people are trying knockoffs, which damages our brand” (Rackham 2025). Looking at the limits of this small story turned macro-narrative, the even lesser-known story is how the viral ‘Dubai chocolate’ impacted the environment by causing a shortage of pistachios (Thorpe 2025) and placing increasing demands for irrigation since it takes 10.000 litres of water to produce one kilogram of pistachios (Cwienk 2025).

Beyond this viral ASMR example, Lee and Umbach (2026, 2) note that some viral TikTok content remains viral to specific communities or niches. For example, a K-Pop community meme of “cat walks on the frozen Han River” which notably resulted in someone claiming copyright on the remixed sound. TikTok's algorithm develops “clustered publics” through “siloe d virality,” which depends on the “frequency of repetition through engagement (e.g., views) and adaptation (e.g., remix) among the algorithmically identified group of users based on shared and similar behaviour patterns on the platform” (9). Therefore, some viral videos will be unknown to a wider userbase as TikTok relies on “geolocation in shaping content silos” (20). Furthermore, virality is often short-lived as new trends constantly emerge (3). Thus far, existing studies of small stories and TikTok videos have not examined the rhetoric of the multimodal audiovisual techniques employed in video meme making as an origin story compared to its contribution to a wider macro-narrative resulting from the subsequent rescripted videos that create a viral trend.

¹ ASMR videos aim to trigger an Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response to those who are sensitive to it. Social media content creators have created a variety of ASMR video sub-genres, which include sounds such as whispering, eating/crunching, and many other sounds.

2.2 The Gap: Audiovisual Dissonance in Rescripted TikTok Videos

To date, there have been few studies examining the narrative role of songs in TikTok videos that do not focus on the virality of singers/songwriters or dance trends. For example, Rahardjo et al. (2024, 162) analysed viral melodies of 5,693 TikTok records from Kaggle and found “high tempo videos go viral more often than non-viral videos, with a percentage of 39.45% for viral videos and 23.98% for non-viral videos”. As a quantitatively focused study on music tempo, there were no further reflections on the video content or the narrative paired with the music. In another study on musical narrative functions appearing in film and other multimedia, Wingstedt et al. (2010, 194f.) identified six classes as: (1) emotive (music’s ability to communicate emotive qualities), (2) informative (music expresses or explains phenomena /events through cognitive communication), (3) descriptive (music describing something rather than representing values), (4) guiding (directs the eye, thought and mind through indicative or imperative functions), (5) temporal (time dimension for continuity), and (6) rhetorical (comments on narrative events or situation). The classes relevant to this study of TikTok videos are the “informative function”, and the “rhetorical function”, which also refers to how “the musical expression contrast[s] the visuals or by referring to well-known musical material” (195).

In many examples of TikTok rescripting, the phenomenon termed ‘audiovisual dissonance’ occurs in self-narratives where the audio, whether it be music, song lyrics, or soundbites, contrasts with the visual rhetoric of the video. The concept of audiovisual dissonance is derived from past studies applying terms, such as ‘ludonarrative dissonance’, ‘musical incongruence’, or ‘soundtrack dissonance.’ Hocking (2009) introduced the concept of ‘ludonarrative dissonance’ in the context of video games. He explained that *Bioshock* throws “the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition” where the game’s narrative structure works against its ludic structure and thus “destroys the players ability to feel connected to either, forcing the player to either abandon the game in protest [...] or simply accept that the game cannot be enjoyed as both a game and a story” (256). Ludonarrative dissonance became a useful concept to describe the contrast between a narrative structure (i.e., rhetoric of what was being communicated) and the game play (i.e., mechanics and actions players can or cannot take). Therefore, parallelling the operationalisation of the term ludonarrative dissonance, audiovisual dissonance is being applied in this paper to describe the contrast between the multimodal composition of the textual-visual rhetoric and the audio modality of the narrative.

In terms of previous research on musical incongruence in films, Ireland (2018, 4) notes that “less sustained focus has been placed on the related idea of incongruence of music that does not seem to share properties with filmic images or narrative content”. Examples of incongruence tend to be “extreme examples of apparent audiovisual mismatch or cases where the music provides a source of ironic commentary on the images and narrative content” (6). In other words, it is used purposefully as a rhetorical tool to communicate irony to viewers. Ireland (9) notes that describing music as either congruent or incongruent implies a dichotomy that suggests a film’s visual and narrative content either completely corresponds to or contrasts with the music, and he states that most film-music relationships fall in between the two extremes. Ireland (2018, 9) suggests redefining incongruence, in the context of film music, as “a lack of shared properties in the audiovisual relationship.” Musical incongruence is a fitting term for longer films that have more complex narratives where “the interplay of the music with visuals, dialogue, sound effects etc., provides

conditions for the music to actively and concretely contribute to the narrative” (Wingstedt et al. 2010, 197), rather than acting as the primary driver of the narrative (with the exception of musicals perhaps). Thus, the term audiovisual dissonance is applied because TikTok creators are not only using music, but also remixed soundbites as the primary narrative mode of communication which are accompanied by visuals.

When analysing rescripted self-narratives on TikTok, the leitmotif is another useful concept. A leitmotif – prominently used by Richard Wagner (1813–1883) – is a “recurring musical motif that is associated with a particular character, object, relationship, place or idea” (Wingstedt et al. 2010, 198). To be considered a leitmotif, “one must observe a clear and consistent relationship between a musical idea and its onscreen counterpart” (Hickman 2006, 43), such as the two-note musical motif associated with the shark in the *Jaws* movie (Wingstedt et al. 2010, 198). The *Jaws* leitmotif has been taken out of context and applied in other films, such as to a pool scene where two heterosexual characters are playfully flirting by removing swimwear in *The Secret of My Success* (1987), because the contrast between the playful situation and dramatic music creates a humorous effect if the viewer is familiar with the *Jaws* leitmotif (205). Once established as diegetic (part of the environment), the audience is inclined to take it for granted, but when music is used for non-diegetic purposes, the “authenticity and situational relevance will usually be essential” (207). This is where the limits of rescripted TikTok audio can cause audiovisual dissonance because creators may not be able to identify the authenticity or situational relevance of a leitmotif to achieve purposeful irony or humour in their rescripted video.

3. Methodology

Social media ethnographic observation of TikTok videos published from 2020 to 2026 has revealed a more recent pattern of trending songs being used with a rhetorical function in viral videos. A case study analysis of the song-based viral trend “Anxiety” aims to demonstrate the limits/dangers of self-narratives on TikTok and secondly, a wider analysis of the Top 10 TikTok trends containing viral songs will highlight the emergence of audiovisual dissonance in the rhetoric of rescripted self-narratives and the limits of viral small stories decontextualised from the TikTok platform.

3.1 Social Media Ethnography and Corpus Selection

Social media ethnography aims “to study patterns of activity or behaviours exhibited in the social media world through users’ posts” as their verbal or visual expressions (Delli Paoli / D’Auria 2021, 263). To obtain a systematic sample, a specific search was done using ChatGPT, rather than relying on observed trends on a single TikTok account’s ‘For You’ page,² or a Google search, which produced viral TikTok trends that were not specifically song centric. ChatGPT (19.03.2026) produced a ‘Top 10 list’ (see Fig. 1) that corresponded to the pervasive trends observed through social media

² The “For You” page on TikTok curates videos based on the platform’s algorithm in response to data collected from the user’s profile and activity.

ethnography from 2020 to 2026. The Top 10 videos have been sub-categorised via audio type observed and per Wingstedt et al.'s (2010) classes of musical narrative functions, where the categories of 'informational' and 'rhetorical' are used to classify the audiovisual narrative approach employed within recent Top 10 viral TikTok sounds/soundbites.

Remixed song	Narrative video context	Rescripted narrative classification (Wingstedt et al. 2010)
"Anxiety"	The song <i>Anxiety</i> by DoeChii was used as a backtrack for a clip from the TV show <i>Fresh Prince of Bel-Air</i> and subsequently resulted in a 'Dance Trend' on TikTok.	Rhetorical
"Nothing Beats a Jet2 Holiday"	The audio comes from a Jet2 advertisement featuring music by Jess Glynne. It was reused ironically over chaotic or disappointing clips that contrast with the ad's upbeat message.	Rhetorical
"Love you So"	The sound comes from the song "Love You So" by The King Khan & BBQ Show. It was reused for nostalgic, romantic, or slightly melancholic montage-style edits.	Informational
"She knows"	The sound originates from the song "She Knows" by J. Cole. It was reused for reveal or realisation edits involving secrets, cheating, or plot twists [the variant: was reused in quieter, intimate, or humorous pet POV memes implying secret awareness].	Informational
Original song lyrics	Narrative video context	Rescripted musical narrative classification
"Do you have any kids? Yes, I have one daughter. How about you?"	The audio originated from Luke Holloway, who turns ridiculous dating app conversations into catchy songs. "It was reused in awkward-dialogue memes."	Rhetorical
"I'm looking for a man in finance"	A TikTok creator recorded a clip of her singing this line and she asked viewers whether she had created the 'song of the summer.' The sentence she sung in her original video was clipped and rescripted by many TikTok creators and eventually released as a published song on other music streaming platforms like Spotify.	Informational
Sound bite	Narrative video context	Rescripted musical narrative classification
"Very demure, very mindful"	The phrase was popularised by Jools Lebron on TikTok in a satirical etiquette video. The sound was widely reused for ironic self-presentation and parody "soft-spoken" behaviour.	Rhetorical
"Ice cream so good"	The phrase was popularised by PinkyDoll through NPC-style livestreams on TikTok. It was reused in parody NPC videos and exaggerated, repetitive-response memes.	Rhetorical
"Girl dinner!"	The phrase was popularised by Olivia Maher on TikTok. It evolved into a humorous low-effort meal aesthetic and inspired parody songs and remixes.	Informational
"Girl math"	The concept was popularised by multiple TikTok creators, particularly women making finance and comedy content. It was reused to humorously justify spending through intentionally illogical budgeting logic.	Informational

Fig. 1: Top 10 viral TikTok videos due to rescripted songs/sound bites (~2023–2025)

3.2 Theoretical Framework for Analysis

Phelan (2011, 68)	Implied author	Resources	Actual audiences
Georgakopoulou (2007)	Tellers	Ways of Telling “intermodal density”	Sites
TikTok videos	TikTok content creator/publisher	Multimodal narration as text, moving images, and/or mu- sic/audio; leitmotif	TikTok platform users and wider public

Fig. 2: Overview of rhetorical analytical framework applied to TikTok Videos

Phelan’s (2011, 67f.) dynamics of narrative communication chart has been adapted for the following analysis of TikTok videos (see Fig. 2). In Phelan’s (2011, 68) chart, the concepts of the ‘implied author’ (teller) and ‘actual audience’ (listener) are constant, while the changeable components are ‘the resources’ used in the communications (e.g., occasion, paratexts, narrator(s), structure/gaps, etc.). The implied author (i.e., teller) “recognizes that the same actual author can employ different versions of himself in different narrative communications” (68). The implied author aligns with a common argument among many scholars that many users portray ‘social media personas’ or a separate ‘digital identity’ (i.e., implied author). For example, social media researchers have “uncovered authenticity as a major concern surrounding digitally mediated sociality”, and identity theory has been applied to examine different definitions, or versions, of the self (Davis 2019, 95f.). Phelan’s (2011) argument towards the implied author is applicable to TikTok creators who ultimately choose which versions, or small stories, of their self to present online. Phelan (2011, 69) explains that the actual audience “may be radically different from the authorial audience – as becomes obvious anytime we read a text from a different culture.” The ‘actual audience’ on TikTok is a global audience from a myriad of different cultures who bring their own interpretations to the circulated communications. Therefore, the ‘actual audience’ is employed in this analysis to understand the potential meanings (or dissonance) created by TikTok videos published within the platform as small stories, and to compare to stories published outside the platform as a decontextualised, and arguably more limited, macro-narrative.

As Georgakopoulou (2017, 278f.) wrote, small stories place “certain members of the audience in a position to align with the stance in the original posting and to elaborate on, amplify and co-author it, on the basis of (shared) knowledge”. To contextualise the limits of the narrative content in these small stories on TikTok, Georgakopoulou’s (2007, 270) three-layered framework will be applied to examine the: (1) ways of telling, (2) sites (of the stories’ tellings and tales), and (3) tellers (in the broad sense of communicators). In terms of further analysing the ways of telling, rhetorical narratology provides useful concepts for analysing the intermodal density used within TikTok videos. As for resources, the concept of leitmotif will be extended to social media videos to analyse whether subsequent creators have rescripted the multimodal audiovisual narrative that is either congruent with the original rhetoric (or stance) conveyed or whether it causes audiovisual dissonance. Finally, the tellers will be analysed in the context of the presumed original TikTok small story, the subsequent rescripted narrative iterations, and when TikTok small stories are reported as a macro-narrative on other media platforms.

4. The Limits of Small Stories on TikTok: An Analysis

4.1 The Limits of Mental Health/Illness Self-Narratives: Anxiety TikTok Trend

The Anxiety trend on TikTok is based on the song *Anxiety* by Doechii, which was originally released on YouTube on 10 November 2019 and subsequently re-recorded and re-released on 4 March 2025 after it became a trending song on TikTok (cf. Corrine 2025). The lyrics of the chorus are: “Anxiety, keep on trying me / I feel it quietly, tryna silence me (yeah) / My anxiety, can’t shake it off of me / Somebody’s watching me, and my anxiety” (Corrine 2025). Doechii’s *Anxiety* was already a remix of Gotye and Kimbra’s 2011 song *Somebody That I Used to Know* (Wood / Kaplan 2025). The ‘original’ TikTok video that made the song go viral used Doechii’s *Anxiety* as a backtrack to the originally silent clip from the TV show *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, where the character Ashley (played by Tatyana Ali) is dancing in her bedroom with earphones in and her cousin, Will (played by Will Smith), comes in and begins silently dancing behind her until she turns around and is surprised to see him. The “intermodal density” (Georgakopoulou 2025, 14) here rescripts both moving images and music from popular culture on YouTube and a TV show. The rhetoric communicated in the TikTok video that rescripted *Anxiety* over the clip from *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* allows viewers to infer that the lyric “Somebody’s watching me, and my anxiety” refers to the moment when Will was watching Ashley dance (e.g., see @brainrot_stories01). Dance trends on TikTok are common templates used for other creators to rescript, so this video resulted in users re-creating the dance like Ashley and Will in the TV show clip with the *Anxiety* song as the backing track (e.g., see Groovetime 2025). This rescripting made *Anxiety* by Doechii into a leitmotif for this specific dance where multiple creators follow a recurring templated structure: the re-use of Anxiety song, self-narrative performance of the choreographed dance with two participants, and a humorous or upbeat resolution of the creators sharing a celebratory or happy moment together after successfully recreating the dance.

As for the rhetorical impact, the use of the term ‘anxiety’ is widespread on TikTok in a variety of contexts. When searching #anxiety on the TikTok platform (24 March 2026), it produced a list of over 7.7 million videos. The videos appearing in the search results included the “Anxiety Dance Trend” as well as many self-narratives about users who have anxiety. Anxiety is “a central theme in contemporary popular culture. This phenomenon is especially prominent among Generation Z, a cohort raised in a digital and social media ecosystem where emotional expression and psychological pressure are highly relevant” (Mutqiyyah et al. 2025, 480). A 2024 study showed that “Gen Z reported the poorest mental health of any generation. Particularly, anxiety emerges as the most prevalent mental health condition among Gen Z with over 60% being medically diagnosed” (Luo et al. 2025, 2). This further contextualises the virality of the rescripting of a song about anxiety on TikTok, which has many Gen Z users. As Mäkelä et al. (2021, 147) notes, there has been “a general shift in the affordances of storytelling that turn narratives of personal experience into vessels of a post-truth mentality: relatability, experiential positioning, and a graspable moral of the story outweigh referentiality and representativeness”. Thus, the limits of the self-narratives behind the “Anxiety TikTok Trend” raise the question of whether creators participating in rescripting are contributing to the normalisation or to potential misunderstandings of anxiety as a temporary emotional

experience, a more consistent condition on overall mental health, or as a medically diagnosed disorder.

In the Internet Age, it is not uncommon for users to search online for their symptoms to self-diagnose a variety of ailments and is growing rapidly in the case of psychiatric disorders (Monteith et al. 2024). The limits of self-narratives is the potential for audience misunderstandings in differentiating between medically diagnosed anxiety disorders (e.g., generalised anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic attacks, agoraphobia and other phobias) compared to more generalised statements of physical sensations/feelings by content creators (e.g. “I have anxiety”, “I’m so anxious”, “I’m shaking”, “I can’t sleep”, etc.). Beyond the “Anxiety Dance Trend”, other self-narrative trends related to anxiety include TikTok creators using humour to connect around psychiatric hospitalisation (Schaadhardt et al. 2023), while Mordecai’s (2023) analysis of the top 10 #anxiety videos showed that each video conveyed messages on the themes of personal testimony or the promotion of calming practices. In Gallagher’s (2021) analysis of “AnxietyTok” of 28 mental illness identifying persons’ video content, individuals were seeking peer support online for living with mental illness and they categorised the videos as informational, anecdotal, humorous, and accomplishment sharing. While Doecheii stated she has experienced challenges of anxiety, it is unclear whether she has a diagnosed medical illness, but she used the viral song’s success to create a hub for people struggling with mental health (Irshad 2025). Thus, these self-narrative videos may have positive impacts in normalising or providing possible coping mechanisms for these situations. However, since sharing self-narratives or another person’s experience is beyond factchecking and not susceptible to critique or countering (Mäkelä et al. 2021, 148), they have limits in that they could result in misleading bandwagon behaviours to gain TikTok fame/influencer status if these types of videos are gaining more views/shares/responses.

These limits of self-narratives related to mental illness versus mental health has also been highlighted in other examples on TikTok, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). For example, Fitzpatrick et al. (2025) analysed the top TikTok videos tagged with #OCD and categorised them into two groups: those directly discussing OCD and those portraying stereotypical behaviors associated with OCD without dialogue. Their findings showed that healthcare providers were underrepresented among content creators and most videos come from non-professional sources where 18 % of videos contained accurate information and 29 % that were misleading, which they summarised as a significant lack of reliable material on TikTok (cf. Fitzpatrick et al. 2025). In the context of salutogenetic narratology, “the question of storytelling’s health benefits has neither been properly gauged nor been conceptually explored by narrative theorists, or in interdisciplinary narrative studies at large” (Nünning / Nünning 2018, 157). Therefore, future research on the TikTok platform can further examine where the limits of self-narrative videos are in terms of raising awareness or normalising mental health/illness, such as anxiety, which are beyond factchecking, compared to how they may be posing risks to increased prevalence of self-diagnoses or the possible spread of misinformation.

4.2 The Limits of Viral TikTok Songs as Storytelling: Audiovisual Dissonance

Of the Top 10 viral TikTok videos in this corpus (see Fig. 1), five were “rhetorical” in terms of how other creators chose to rescript the songs or soundbites where “the musical expression contrast[s] the visuals” (Wingstedt et al. 2010, 194). These Top 10 viral videos often included moving images, subtitled text overlaid onto the video, and the song which represents a trimodal density of communication. The videos classified as “informational” are not further discussed here, because they do not present audiovisual dissonance through rescripted examples. Videos classified as ‘soundbites’ are also excluded from further discussion because they have minimal rhetorical impact as they do not represent ‘song lyrics’ as a small story that contrast the visual content. The sample corpus includes two remixed pre-published songs, namely *Anxiety* (2019) by Doechii, and *Hold My Hand* (2015) by Jess Glynne in the “Jet2Holiday” TikTok video trend. The audiovisual dissonance in the “Anxiety TikTok Dance Trend” appears through the visuals of dancing, people smiling/evidently having fun recreating the TV show’s dance, and the playful high tempo (Rahardjo et al. 2024) of the song contrasts a darker tone that may be associated with a true concern or discomfort of unknowingly being watched by someone (as per the song lyrics) or in contrast to acute manifestations of diagnosed anxiety disorders.

In the rescripting of the TikTok viral song “Do you have any kids? Yes, I have one daughter”, the audiovisual dissonance is more pronounced. The small story can be traced to Luke Holloway (@lewky____) where he appears dressed as two different characters exchanging text messages on a dating platform. The images of the text messages appear on screen for viewers while Holloway creates a song to narrate the exchange. The addition of Holloway’s characterisation via costumes and facial expressions in reaction to the messages as song lyrics adds humour to the rescripted conversation. The underlying humour in this small story lies in the viewer’s comprehension that the (implied) male character does not understand the basics behind sexual reproduction because he asks the (implied) female whether her daughter is “by the same father” indicating that a single child’s DNA could have two different biological fathers. The subsequent rescripting of this song by other creators was applied to a variety of different rhetorical scenarios that imply ignorant disbelief, where a conversation ensues between two people and the person asking the questions does not take the other person’s answers as fact. For example, many creators used the song with overlaid text to describe a variety of awkward question and answer conversations about their own dating stories (@GMA 2025), disbelief due to the person’s race/ethnicity (e.g., @mattia.mas 2025), or assumptions about someone’s career (e.g., @mismoe13). In this case, the leitmotif undergoes rhetorical changes through rescripting that shifts the humour about biology towards shared experiences of not being heard, understood, or believed by a receiving audience. Since the visual media in these rescripted examples uses different moving images and text as subtitles, a dissonance is created between the logos communicated in the visual versus the audio narrative in the song’s lyrics. A sense of ironic humour is similarly carried through the visual rhetoric of rescripted versions of the “Jet2Holiday” TikTok trend where creators show low budget travel items, mishaps, or disappointments in contrast to the original advertisement’s audio script that has a positive sentiment about buyers saving 50 pounds per person on their booking. The “Jet2Holiday” trend also creates audiovisual dissonance with Glynne’s upbeat song because they lyrics are about one romantic partner supporting another (i.e., “oh won’t you hold my hand? / ‘cause I don’t wanna walk on my own anymore?”), which does not cognitively align with the topic of budget travel.

4.3 The Limits of Cross-platform Digital Story Sites: Viral Macro-Narratives

The original small story trend associated with a viral song or soundbite can be difficult to trace on TikTok's algorithm. In a popular culture context, the term 'algorithmic folklore' was used to describe user behaviour on TikTok: "by sharing experiences, asking questions, and crowdsourcing answers, teens are developing an algorithmic folklore while discerning the potential motivations behind TikTok's software engineering" (Akinrinade 2021). Although easier to track compared to oral practices of folklore, digital media makes it possible to "track the sources of algorithmic folklore and reconstruct the trajectory" (De Seta 2024, 249). However, due to the global nature of digital platforms and the process of rescripting and remixing, the 'who was first' arguments often ensue among content creators. Video date stamps can help, but it is also possible that multiple videos were published in proximity with the same song or soundbite which can create a viral tipping point for the algorithm. Regardless of who the attributed content creator is of an original viral TikTok video, the resulting small story using existing music or an original song/soundbite gets carried forward in the pathos of subsequently rescripted videos (as demonstrated in this sample corpus), which can have a range of different logos or intended rhetorical communications. The level of rescripting and meaning retained from the original sentiment of the first, or earlier rescripted posts, is variable based on how the trend (i.e., narrative template) develops.

Once it becomes a TikTok trend, a song or soundbite begins to carry rhetorical meaning through its contextualisation within the platform and its users, regardless of whether it was pre-existing in other popular cultural media/contexts and has subsequently been remixed by a TikTok user. When TikTok trends are reported in other platforms, those who are not regular users/viewers of TikTok get a decontextualised version of the narrative. In some cases when a TikTok trend is cross-published it becomes a single modality (e.g., a song on Spotify), and the humour, irony, or rhetoric behind the audiovisual small stories goes beyond non-users understanding because the visual intermodal density may be removed and they miss viewing the multiple iterations of rescripted videos that provide the underlying pathos and logos communicated through the audio as narrator. This is exemplified by "Viral TikTok song" playlists appearing on Spotify, TikTok trend compilations being curated and published on YouTube, and viral trends being reported in e-newspapers or e-magazines/blogs. The rescripting on TikTok leads to many iterations and re-interpretations that may significantly diverge from the original small story. Therefore, small stories on TikTok have platform-specific limitations in terms of their wider rhetorical impacts when republished in other media (i.e., sites).

TikTok trends arguably become part of, an often humorous, "digital mythology" which Rakowski et al. (2025, 679) define as "a contemporary form of collective narratives and symbols arising from the use of digital media technologies in online environments". Digital mythology is "fluid, constantly evolving, crossing regional boundaries, and taking on a global dimension" (679). Digital myths, like traditional myths, "foster social cohesion, strengthen group identity, and present values through intelligible stories that reduce complexity of the world to simple narratives" (679). The small stories on TikTok, particularly those that go viral, usually represent simple and short narratives often accompanied by a viral song or soundbite. The TikTok platform has perpetuated a repetitive, rescripted narrative environment where trends become part of digital myths, which are limited by their fleeting nature, context-specific rescripting, and decontextualised macro-narrative rhetorical impacts.

5. Conclusion and Future Research

This paper examined how viral TikTok songs function as small stories, often becoming sharable templates that are rescripted, and shaped by platform-specific rhetorical developments of the participatory audience. The analysis drew on a corpus of viral Top 10 TikTok videos and examined how intermodal density between the audio (i.e., songs) are rescripted with visual communications and added subtitled text. Commonalities between the viral song-focused Top 10 TikTok list include that they are: “loop-friendly lines under 6 seconds spread fastest”, they offer a clear template for creators to remix, have relatable humour or emotion, strong meme potential across cultures, and often include “remixes of unexpected sources: ads, interviews, and old songs,” or “nostalgia revival: old songs (1960s–2000s)” (ChatGPT 2026). The rhetorical features of TikTok’s viral small story trends invite uptake as experiential authenticity via self-narrative rescripting, which are beyond factchecking and can pose limits or dangers to the audience viewing multiple videos on a topic as demonstrated in the Anxiety TikTok dance trend. The upbeat music and choreographed dance produce an affective frame that recontextualises anxiety as performative, shareable, and in some contexts normalised. Song-focused TikTok trends can create audiovisual dissonance where the tone or song lyrics do not align with the visual communications, whether by intention (e.g., to achieve humour or irony) or unintentionally due to a misunderstanding of the original logos. The storyworld on TikTok is limited when collections of viral/trending videos as self-narratives become a larger macro-narrative decontextualised from the origin story and the rescripted iterations.

Although not included in the aim of this study, it is notable that in this sample, 80 % of the videos likely originated from a female-identifying creator and/or targeted to an assumed (primarily) female audience. The exceptions are “Do you have any kids”, attributed to Luke Holloway, but the text messages were likely from a woman with a daughter’s point of view, and the “She knows” trend, which comes from a male singer and is often rescripted from a male creator’s point of view. Therefore, future research could examine whether female-identifying TikTok creators are creating original songs, music, or soundbites more frequently than other genders. Other future research questions could examine how social media mental health/illness self-narratives are impacting viewers with and without mental health illnesses; whether self-narratives are helping to destigmatise mental illness, or if recirculated misinformation leads to groupthink or self-diagnosis; and how specific hashtags may be used as informal online peer-led group therapy. While social media has democratised storytelling and led to new/viral formats, it is also important to examine the limits of self-narratives in a post-truth digital age.

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How to cite this paper manuscript:

Basaraba, Nicole: “The Limits of Small Stories on TikTok. Audiovisual Dissonance in Rescripted Self-Narratives.” Paper presented at the 8th ENN Conference, September 29–October 1, 2025, University of Wuppertal.