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THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE-CREATED VIDEOS ON TIKTOK USING THE HASHTAG #AIVIDEO

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the generative AI-produced videos with the highest engagement on TikTok. We collected the 100 most-liked posts using the hashtag #AIvideo (last six months). After applying eligibility criteria, the final sample was n=76. Using a mixed-method approach, we conducted an imaginaries-based analysis (rooted, transformed reality, new fictional worlds) and a thematic category analysis, along with a cross-analysis of both frameworks. The findings indicate that, within TikTok's ecosystem, generative AI does not necessarily displace everyday-based memetic logics; rather, it amplifies them by enabling rapid, visually effective displacements within recognizable settings.

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1. Introduction

The rapid spread of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools is quickly reshaping audiovisual production practices in the social media ecosystem. In this context, the coexistence of mass social media platforms and everyday artificial intelligence (AI) applications is particularly significant: in 2025, Statista (2025) ranked ChatGPT and TikTok among the most globally downloaded mobile applications, an indicator that helps to understand why algorithmic creation has been naturally integrated into the expressive repertoires of younger audiences.

Beyond the enthusiasm for innovation, the expansion of GAI in social media raises relevant questions for digital communication studies: on the one hand, because of its impact on everyday creativity and on the logics of visibility; on the other, because of the proliferation of artificial realities and narratives that are difficult to verify, with implications for trust and the construction of shared imaginaries. TikTok itself has incorporated mechanisms for labelling and sharing AI-generated content, revealing both an institutional response and a cultural dialogue around the authenticity and transparency of content.

The overall aim of the research is to analyse the narrative, thematic and imaginary construction characteristics of GAI-generated videos posted on TikTok that receive greater engagement in the time frame established under the hashtag #AIvideo in order to identify dominant patterns of production and circulation of this type of content. To achieve this, the following two specific objectives were pursued:

1. To classify and describe the sample according to imaginaries (rooted content, transformed reality and new fictional worlds), establishing their distribution and distinctive features.
2. To examine the relationship between the identified imaginaries and the thematic/scenic categories (e.g. animals, professions, leisure, politics, food, etc.) through a cross-analysis that allows recurring associations and high engagement content profiles to be identified.

2. Literature review

In June 2025, ChatGPT and TikTok were the most downloaded mobile applications worldwide, with 50 million and 37 million downloads respectively. These figures highlight the undeniable popularity of both AI applications and the aforementioned social media platform. Such platforms are rapidly gaining ground, especially among younger demographics (Statista, 2025a; Statista, 2025b).

Since the launch of TikTok in 2016, it has continued to gain popularity and attract both fans and capital, becoming one of the highest-valued digital platforms. Among the reasons for its success are its variety of effective marketing strategies, precise algorithm technology and the satisfying of user needs according to the theory of uses and gratification (Wang, 2022).

With advances in GAI, new opportunities to accelerate content creation emerge, expanding the volume of user-generated videos on social media (Hua et al., 2024). As Forbes magazine (2025) notes, TikTok has been inundated with AI-generated content, with over a billion videos uploaded and the ability to upload increasingly coherent, complex images.

Within academia, research on TikTok tends to use content analysis as its primary method, focusing mainly on user behaviour and the platform's usage culture (Kanthawala et al., 2022). However, this method lacks the depth to analyse the underlying meanings in the content of the videos itself. In the present study we approach this through a thematic analysis, allowing us to explore an area in which the literature is very limited.

A number of studies analyse AI-generated content posted by users on social media. Lacasa et al. (2025) analyse how AI filters on TikTok transform creative practices related to narrative and identity construction in the context of its participatory culture. Their results reveal that TikTok facilitates creativity by allowing users to reimagine their identities and experiment with aesthetic norms.

Meanwhile, following the same trend, Lara et al. (2025) thematically analyse videos with the tag #AI and conclude that their findings reveal three emerging categories of AI-driven storytelling: rooted content, transformed reality and new fictional worlds, thus categorizing the analysed videos according to the degree of similarity to reality. This is yet another indicator of the possibilities that this technology offers to create new universes in cyberspace and, similarly, in the minds of viewers.

3. Theoretical approach

3.1. Social media and GAI content creation

Artificial intelligence has revolutionized the production of audiovisual content for social media, resulting in an increase in the amount of shared content (Wei & Tyson, 2024), as well as optimizing communication processes and strategies (Ibarra et al., 2025). So much so that the 2025 Annual Social Media Study carried out by IAB Spain (2025) points to images and videos created or edited by AI as the most viewed content on social networks, especially for users under 45 years of age, and ranks TikTok as one of the platforms where this type of content has been most viewed.

One reason for this accelerated trend may be the availability of versatile, accessible tools for content generation and personalization (Midoglu et al., 2024; Jadhav et al., 2024). Examples of this are SoraTurbo (OpenAI) and Veo 2 (Google), both launched in December 2024, which offer the ability to generate high-fidelity video content (Temsah et al., 2025). Unlike their predecessors, these applications allow users to generate videos using keywords alone, and the results include a range of vibrant colours and complex camera manoeuvres, symbolizing a paradigm shift in GAI (O'Callaghan, 2024).

These tools are rapidly transforming the landscape not only for marketing professionals (Mogavi et al., 2024) but also for users who create content on social media. The capabilities of GAI could provide new opportunities to facilitate and accelerate content creation for independent creators, helping them to generate ideas, develop scripts and optimize their creative workflows (Hua et al., 2024).

Some studies have already shown that language models are capable of producing content comparable to that created by humans and that the models even adapt to the demands and trends of different platforms (Aldous et al., 2024). The innovative use of these technologies to produce highly realistic videos represents a significant step forward in bridging the gap between real-world dynamics and digital creation (Zhou et al., 2024).

Despite the technical advances, some concerns include the potential misuse of content on social media, as well as the profound implications for public opinion, such as the spread of disinformation and the manipulation of narratives (Sun et al., 2025; Mogavi et al., 2024). On the other hand, the most outstanding applications and benefits of GAI for content creation include increased efficiency and productivity in workflows, the ability to generate novel and engaging content, and the potential for large-scale content personalization (Gayam, 2022).

However, as Cuásquer and Carmona (2024) note, the growing presence of AI-generated content in digital spaces is significantly transforming the formation of social imaginaries and the creation of artificial realities (Wang, 2023) and alternative versions of reality (Dunnell et al., 2024) that alter the very structure of digital interaction. AI-generated content can influence how people perceive and make sense of their environment, shaping shared meanings and collective perceptions.

3.2. TikTok as a catalyst for GAI-generated content

In the digital age, technology, especially AI, has significantly transformed the creative industry, particularly in content creation (Anandaputra et al., 2024). TikTok (2025) categorizes as AI-generated content images, videos or audios that have been created or modified by deep learning or automatic processes.

This content can include depictions of real people that may appear very realistic or have been created in a particular artistic style. To ensure this type of content reaches the largest possible audience, AI-powered algorithms select highly personalized content, reinforcing behavioural patterns and optimizing engagement (Fadillah, 2025).

As AI becomes more relevant in shaping media experiences, short-form video platforms like TikTok and others have emerged as dynamic environments for complex human-AI interaction. Research has shown how users prefer AI-generated content used in entertainment or creative contexts but are sceptical about its role in serious genres such as news or education (Duong & Vo, 2025).

In terms of creative use, AI tools give rise to new realities and fictions, facilitate the creation of imaginary worlds effectively and provide advanced tools for designing complex scenarios with realistic elements. As noted in the study by Lara et al. (2025), all these factors contribute to creating a strong impact on followers' interest.

Concepts that manage to capture the fleeting attention of social media users are repeated and amplified, however strange they may be. The speed and ease of video creation, combined with the race

for attention, gives rise to peculiarly specific trends. One example of this is what is known in the media as AI slop (Fobes, 2025; The New York Times, 2025; Los Angeles Times, 2025), effortlessly generated AI content, often defined by strange, attention-grabbing images in which each scene takes an unexpected turn, resulting in overwhelmingly incoherent narratives that demonstrate that in our AI-infested internet, video recordings can no longer be fully trusted.

3.3. TikTok trends: hashtags and labelling

Since their initial use on Twitter, hashtags have been used to collect, share and create virtual communities to exchange information on the same topic (Xiao et al., 2014). With the new social media, their use remains one of the easiest and most direct methods to increase audience numbers for content on TikTok.

While it is possible for users to generate interest in their videos without using TikTok hashtags, they do promote growth. This is because the best hashtags for TikTok tend to boost the algorithm, helping to categorize content and making it easier to find. Leveraging viral TikTok hashtags means joining the trend, attracting more followers and increasing engagement and views (Forbes, 2025).

In addition to hashtags as a categorization tool, and as GAI becomes an increasingly common tool for content creation, many platforms have introduced disclosure requirements in the form of labels to inform consumers when AI has created or significantly edited the content (Carney et al., 2025).

In the case of TikTok, creators can label AI-generated content as such directly in the video by adding text, a hashtag or context to the video description (TikTok, 2025), although TikTok itself has incorporated the label “AI-generated”, which is automatically applied when it detects that the content has been created or edited using AI.

At a time when generative AI systems are increasingly capable of producing high-quality content, visible, transparent labelling of AI-generated content provides potential protection against deception and confusion (Wittenberg et al., 2024), with this content labelling system demonstrating a clear commitment to both creators and users (de la Torre, 2024).

4. Methodology

The study adopts an exploratory-descriptive methodological design with a mixed approach aimed at identifying thematic regularities and narrative-formal features in videos generated using GAI tools and posted on TikTok under the hashtag #AIVIDEO. The methodological strategy combines, on the one hand, a thematic analysis of the imaginaries deployed in the videos following the typology applied by Lara et al. (2025), which is based on the proposal of Braun and Clarke (2012), and, on the other hand, a complementary category analysis based on the classification system developed by Goor (2012) and used in the coding matrix with the aim of describing the type of predominant scenes or situations and their distribution by categories. Finally, a cross-analysis between both frameworks is included to broaden the interpretation of patterns.

The sample was collected on 5 December 2025 (from 10:00 to 11:30) using an account created specifically for the research in order to reduce biases arising from consumption history and algorithmic personalization. The sample was collected from a neutral account created for the study and within a limited time interval in order to improve the traceability of the extraction process.

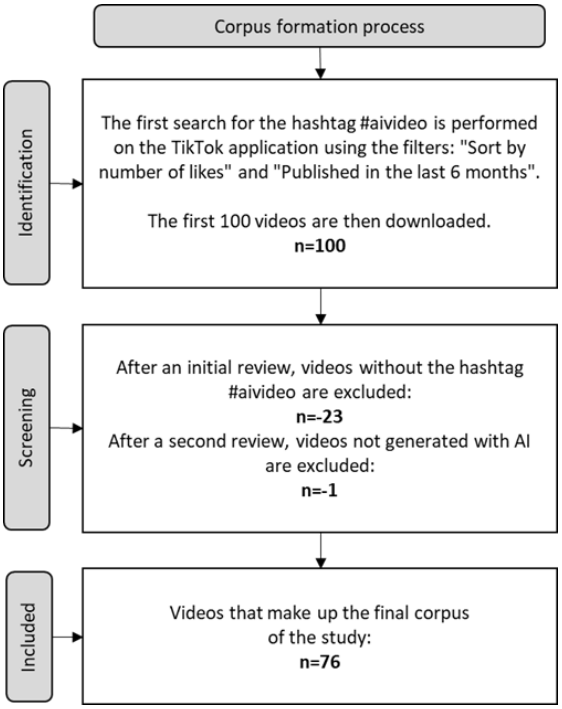
The search was performed on TikTok using the hashtag #AIvideo, applying sorting filters by number of “likes” and by “last 6 months”. From the filtered results, the 100 most-liked videos that included the hashtag in their visible metadata (title or caption, and, if applicable, the list of hashtags) were downloaded. Each video was stored with a sequential identifier (001, 002, 003…) and its link was recorded on the coding sheet. At the time of the sample extraction, a search with the hashtag #AIvideo without any associated filters yielded a total of 986,200 videos.

From that initial filtered set, eligibility criteria were applied in two phases:

1. Hashtag verification: exclusion of items that, after reviewing, did not actually contain #AIvideo.
2. Verification of the GAI nature of the content, which involved the exclusion of videos that, despite using the hashtag, corresponded to material not generated (or not significantly transformed) using GAI tools.

After screening, the final analytical sample consisted of 76 videos. These were included in the analysis by categories and the cross-analysis.

Figure 1. Data collection processes and exclusion criteria



Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

The unit of analysis is the individual video posted on TikTok. For each case, a minimum technical data sheet was recorded (link, description, caption, hashtags, publication date and duration). To reduce the risk of identification, when writing the results, priority was given to references to aggregated patterns and examples, avoiding the reproduction of unnecessary personal data (e.g. usernames) beyond the strictly analytical. The presence or absence of the "AI-generated" label was also recorded when it appeared on screen or as markers from TikTok itself. In addition, a coding system consisting of two blocks was applied:

1. Imaginaries (thematic analysis based on Lara et al. (2025)). Each video was coded into one of the three mutually exclusive categories used in the comparative study:
    a. Rooted content: strange or improbable scenes but possible in physical/social terms.
    b. Transformed reality: combination of real elements with space-time displacements or unreal capabilities (e.g. anthropomorphisms, superpowers, scale inversions), which make it impossible in ordinary reality.
    c. New fictional worlds: openly invented universes with no anchoring in realistic plausibility.
2. Thematic categories of scenes or situations (based on Goor (2012), according to the project's coding matrix). In this complementary way, the presence of the video was recorded in a content typology (not necessarily exclusive in conceptual terms, but operationalized as the main choice in the analysis sheet): domestic animals, wild animals, workplace/professions, everyday activities, food, politics/political figures, sports/extreme sports, leisure activities/holidays, celebrities, imaginary beings/places. This second layer allows what happens in the videos (situations and characters) to be described and facilitates their cross-analysis with the imaginaries.

The coding was performed directly on the registration matrix, integrating the post's descriptive data and the category assignment. To reinforce the consistency of the process, operational rules were established to differentiate especially between rooted content and transformed reality based on a central criterion: the physical possibility of what is represented happening (even if improbable) versus its impossibility (due to explicit alterations in causality, scale, anatomy, severity or temporality). Furthermore, as explained previously, an explicit record was kept of the "AI Generated" label when it appeared, allowing the interpretive coding to be compared with the (automatic or manual) labelling visible on TikTok.

Finally, the subsequent analysis was conducted on three levels, consistent with the sections of the coding book: a univariate distribution by imaginaries, a univariate distribution by thematic categories and, subsequently, a cross-analysis based on the construction of a contingency matrix to observe which

thematic categories are most intensely associated with each imaginary. This cross-analysis is used as a basis for the interpretation of narrative patterns and to guide the interpretation of emerging communicative trends in the sample.

5. Analysis of the results

The three phases of analysis and the results obtained in each are presented below. The third phase builds upon the results obtained in the previous two.

5.1. Analysis by imaginaries

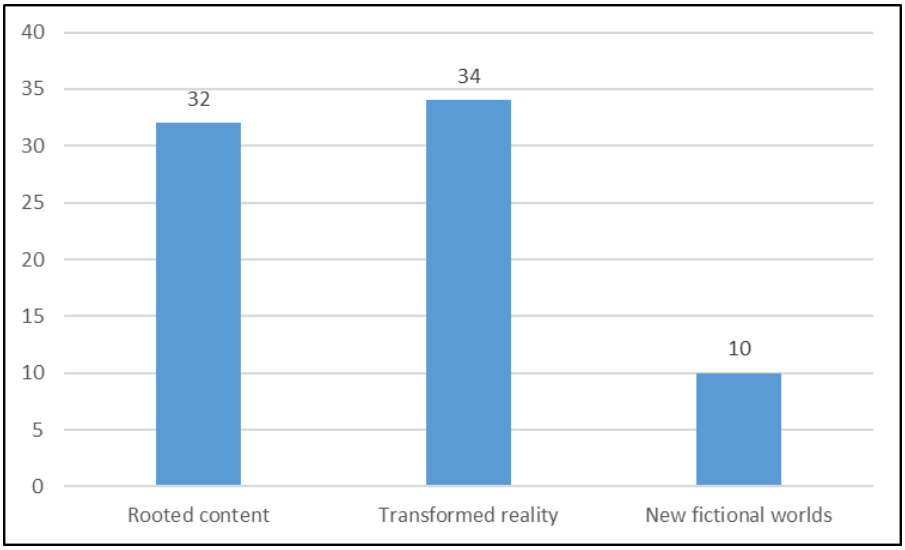
The analysis based on the concept of imaginaries allows us to understand what kind of "reality" is constructed by AI-generated videos that achieve higher levels of engagement in the observed time frame. The applied typology distinguishes between rooted content, transformed reality and new fictional worlds, taking into account the central criterion of possibility/impossibility of what is represented (namely, strange but physically possible scenes versus obviously impossible scenes due to alteration of causality, space-time, anatomy or scale).

5.1.1. General distribution of imaginaries

The results of the general distribution of the imaginaries show a polarization between two dominant narrative strategies:

- Transformed reality: 34 videos (44.7%)
- Rooted content: 32 videos (42.1%)
- New fictional worlds: 10 videos (13.2%)

Figure 2. Category analysis, according to the imaginaries of Lara et al. (2025)



Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

This distribution (reflected in Figure 2) shows that success in engagement is markedly concentrated in content that plays with the recognizability of the everyday world, either by keeping it "almost intact" (rooted) or by destabilizing it through impossible twists (transformed reality), but always maintaining criteria of direct interpellation with the audience's pre-established mental models. In contrast, the new fictional worlds are clearly in the minority: fewer videos venture to create fully autonomous universes without obvious ties to everyday life. At least, videos in this category are in the minority among the list of videos with the highest engagement.

This pattern is relevant because it suggests that, in TikTok's fast-paced consumption environment, immediate intelligibility (recognizing scenarios, bodies, roles or routines) continues to act as an entry requirement for attention, even when the piece is created with AI. The most effective imaginary would therefore not be that of total invention, but rather that of the strategic alteration of familiar elements.

5.1.2. Qualitative features by imaginary: forms of strangeness and displacement

The analysis matrix points to a significant narrative difference between the two main categories. On the one hand, in terms of rooted content, strange or uncomfortable scenes predominate but are sustained by physical plausibility. The key is not fantasy, but the strangeness of the situation: the improbable or disruptive within a recognizable setting. This category is marked notably by spatial displacement (taking public figures, athletes or recognizable characters out of their usual context (see Figure 3)) and a tendency to place people in everyday scenarios where something does not fit but could happen. Also noteworthy are recurring depictions of elderly people in ordinary situations (interviews, driving, wheelchair, etc.), which act as a marker of everyday life and, simultaneously, of strangeness when the scene takes an unexpected turn. A representative example is sports figures turned into delivery drivers or cashiers, producing an effect of displaced normality.

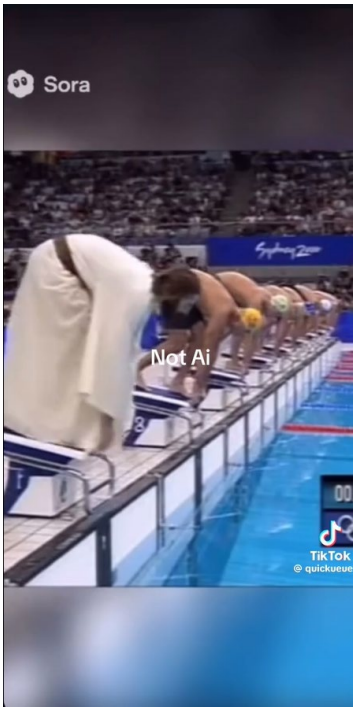
Figure 3. AI-generated video image, created by the account @longliveai



Source: TikTok, 2025.

On the other hand, in the category of transformed reality the displacement is not only spatial/temporal but ontological, i.e. characters are invested with impossible abilities (super strength, babies that walk and talk, bodies that float or fly), anthropomorphism is intensified (animals or objects with human agency) and incongruous elements are mixed with comic intent. Here, humour emerges as a structural resource: it is not only what is represented, but the contrast between registers (the sacred in the banal, the everyday interwoven with the impossible (see Figure 4)). In this case, a representative example is a religious scene of Jesus transferred to a competitive context (running on water in a race), which functions as a synthesis of the imaginary of absolute impossibility with a humorous interpretation.

Figure 4. AI-generated video image, created by the account @quickueue



Source: TikTok, 2025.

What is relevant, in interpretive terms, is that both categories share displacement as a mechanism but differ in its degree and in the way it produces an effect: in rooted content, displacement is based on what could happen, while in transformed reality, it is based on what cannot happen, and precisely for that reason it becomes a visual gag or a surprise.

5.1.3. The label "AI-generated" as an indicator of the (in)visibility of the artifice

The distribution of the label (auto-generated or by decision) "AI-generated" is in itself indicative of the partial visibility of the synthetic nature of the content: in the sample with the highest engagement, more than half of the videos do not show this label. Thus, we see in Table 1 that the label is present in 35 videos (46.1%) but absent in 41 (53.9%).

Table 1. Videos labelled "AI-generated"

	Number
With marking label	35
Without marking label	41
Total	76

Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

A significant finding emerges when relating labels and imaginaries. While in new fictional worlds 7 out of 10 bear the label, in transformed reality the ratio is 16 out of 34; and in rooted content, 12 out of 32:

Table 2. Relationship between the category of imaginaries and the label "AI-generated"

Category	Number of posts with the label	Total posts	Percentage
New fictional worlds	7	10	70%
Transformed reality	16	34	47.1%
Rooted content	12	32	37.5%

Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

A clear gradient is observed: the more obviously fictional the represented universe, the greater the probability that the label will be present, while rooted content—precisely because of its proximity to the plausible—most frequently circulates without visible labelling.

This pattern is especially relevant to research for two reasons. Firstly, because of the risk of interpretive ambiguity, since rooted content exploits the boundary between the possible and the improbable. The absence of labelling in a substantial number of them may lead consumers who do not detect indications of artificial creation to interpret them as being authentic or documentary records, reinforcing the video's persuasive effectiveness (even if its purpose is humorous). In other words, the imaginary that best imitates reality is, at the same time, the one that most tends to circulate with the least visible artifice.

Secondly, the hypothesis of friction between plausibility and labelling plays a relevant role: the greater use of the label in new fictional worlds suggests that the labelling (whether through automatic detection or through publishing decisions) is more easily triggered when the scene contains features far removed from ordinary reality. In contrast, when AI creates something that appears to be real, the labelling system appears less consistent (or less present), which opens a line of discussion regarding transparency and detection criteria in highly viral content.

5.1.4. Duration and complexity: a complementary indicator

Although the main objective of this subsection is the analysis of the imaginary, the coding itself allows us to observe an additional clue. New fictional worlds tend to be longer (averaging approximately 25 seconds) than rooted content (averaging around 12 seconds), while transformed reality falls somewhere in between (averaging around 14 seconds, with some cases significantly longer). This suggests that the invention of universes less anchored in the everyday may require more exposure time to stabilize meaning, whereas virality based on "plausible strangeness" works well with shorter, fast-impact narratives.

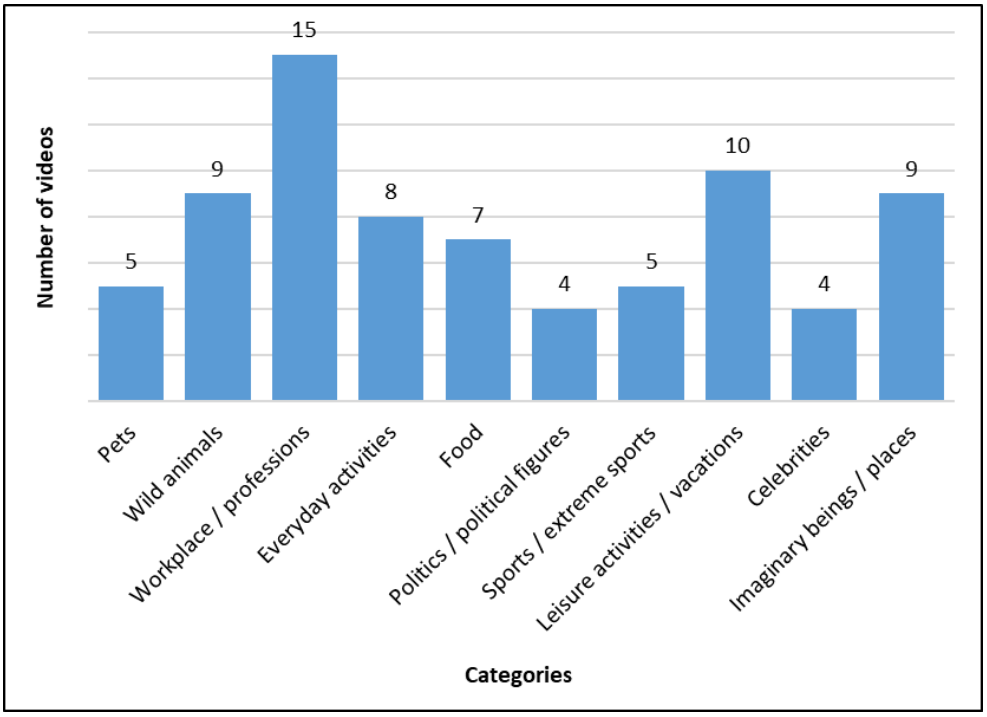
5.2. Analysis by thematic categories

Thematic category analysis allows us to identify which narrative subjects (situations, scenarios and protagonists) are repeated most frequently in AI-generated videos that concentrate the most engagement. Unlike the analysis by imaginaries (which focuses on the degree of plausibility of what is represented), this section focuses on the dominant thematic content of each piece, i.e. on elucidating what the video is about in terms of the main scene.

5.2.1. General distribution: predominance of the recontextualized everyday

The frequency distribution in the sample (n=76) reveals a clear hierarchy, as shown in Figure 2. The percentage order is as follows: workplace/professions: 15 videos (19.7%); leisure activities/vacations: 10 videos (13.2%); wild animals: 9 videos (11.8%); imaginary beings/places: 9 videos (11.8%); everyday activities: 8 videos (10.5%); food: 7 videos (9.2%); pets: 5 videos (6.6%); sports/extreme sports: 5 videos (6.6%); politics/political figures: 4 videos (5.3%); and celebrities: 4 videos (5.3%).

Figure 5. Thematic analysis as per Goor (2012)



Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

Beyond the ranking, what is relevant is the structural weight of socially recognizable scenarios: adding professions, everyday activities and food reaches 39.5% of the samples. This suggests that, even when content is GAI-produced, the videos with the highest engagement tend to rely on ordinary experience settings (work, routine, consumption) that the user decodes in a few seconds. In the context of TikTok, where attention spans are short and the decision to swipe to the next piece of content is immediate, this recognizability functions as a narrative anchor: the video gains traction when it offers an identifiable situation and, from there, introduces surprise, displacement or a humorous twist.

5.2.2. Thematic blocks and virality logics

Next, an analysis of the categories is carried out, circumscribing them to the areas of thematic blocks and logics of virality:

a) Work and professions: the everyday institution as a driver of strangeness (19.7%)

The most frequent category is not fantasy, but the world of work. This suggests a logic of virality based on recontextualization: a highly codified scenario (supermarket, delivery, customer service, recognizable jobs) is taken and a disruptive element is introduced—often through displacement of the character or role—to produce strangeness and humour. In the comments on the qualitative analysis, the prime example is the absurd normalization of extraordinary figures: athletes or public figures inserted into ordinary jobs, as already analysed in the section on imaginaries. In terms of communication, this operation is efficient because it combines two narrative forces: semantic immediacy (everyone recognizes the work setting) and rupture (what happens within the setting does not fit with what is expected).

b) Routines, food and everyday activities: familiarity and micro-anomaly (19.7% when grouped)

The categories everyday activities (10.5%) and food (9.2%) confirm another dominant route: engagement is sustained in daily life as a setting. In this block, AI does not necessarily work to create worlds, but to intensify small anomalies in highly familiar situations (cooking, eating, driving, walking, domestic scenes). The supporting material also highlights the striking presence of older people in ordinary contexts, a feature that reinforces the interpretation of everyday life and, at the same time, amplifies the contrast when the scene becomes strange, unsettling or unexpected. In terms of reception,

this strategy facilitates the "this could happen... but not like this" response, which usually triggers comments, reactions and shares.

c) Animals: more wild than domestic (18.4% overall)

The animal block totals 14 videos (18.4%), with a significant distribution: wild animals (11.8%) outnumber pets (6.6%). This asymmetry suggests that engagement is not so much based on the cuteness or familiarity of the animal, but on the spectacular and extraordinary potential of wildlife (size, strength, danger, rarity), which AI can easily manipulate to produce impossible or comical scenes. Furthermore, in the qualitative comments a recurring resource appears: anthropomorphism (animals with human actions, gestures or capabilities), a formula particularly compatible with TikTok due to its speed and memetic capacity (a single shot is enough to activate the joke).

d) Leisure/holidays: aspirational scenarios as a visual support (13.2%)

The presence of leisure and holidays (13.2%) indicates another key dimension: AI is used to amplify the visually appealing (travel, leisure activities, landscapes) and turn it into an impactful mini-narrative. This block functions as a flexible container: the viewer recognizes the aspirational setting, and the clip can oscillate between the plausible and the transformed without losing comprehensibility. On TikTok, where aesthetic value and the promise of escapism are recurring drivers, this type of content offers fertile ground for virality, especially when combined with surreal or humorous twists.

e) Imaginary beings/places: fantasy as a stable minority (11.8%)

The category of imaginary beings/places (11.8%) is relevant because it shows that pure invention exists but does not dominate. Its frequency (9 videos) is comparable to that of wild animals, which suggests a sustained presence of visual fantasy as a formula for engagement, although subordinated to content more anchored in the recognizable (work and routine). Interpretively, this reinforces an idea that runs through the sample: AI does not triumph only when it creates, but when it rewrites reality with a calibrated degree of strangeness.

f) Public figures: low frequency, high symbolic power (17.1% if politics, celebrities, sports are grouped together)

Although politics/political figures (5.3%) and celebrities (5.3%) appear with modest counts, their role may be disproportionate in terms of circulation: they are categories with high recognition capital and strong potential for commentary (admiration, mockery, controversy, discussion). If we add sports (6.6%), the block of public/competitive figures reaches 17.1%. The analysis comments highlight precisely the displacement of politicians and athletes outside their usual context, a tactic that intensifies the comic effect and facilitates meme-making: the well-known character functions as a semiotic shortcut that accelerates understanding and reaction.

5.2.3. Relationships significant to research

Overall, the thematic analysis reveals three particularly useful relationships for interpreting the engagement of GAI videos on TikTok.

The first relationship is everyday anchoring combined with disruption, which constitutes the categories with the greatest weight (professions, routines, food), indicating that the most successful content usually stems from ordinary settings and generates engagement through an anomaly or displacement. The second is that of non-humans as a resource for surprise, where the combination of animals (especially wild ones) and imaginary beings or places shows that the non-human operates as a shortcut to the spectacular, humorous and impossible, taking advantage of the visual plasticity of GAI. Finally, the third relationship is that of social recognition as an accelerator: public figures (politicians, celebrities, athletes) appear less frequently, but when they do, they provide an immediate layer of meaning that encourages rapid reactions and circulation.

These trends pave the way for cross-analysis (5.3), which shows more precisely how each thematic category is associated with one imaginary or another (rooted/transformed/fictional worlds) and which combinations seem most efficient for maximizing engagement.

5.3. Cross-analysis: imaginaries and thematic categories

Next, the cross-analysis between imaginaries (Lara et al., 2025) and thematic categories (Goor, 2012) allows us to specify which narrative combinations concentrate engagement in the sample, going beyond isolated interpretations of what is being told (themes) or how reality is constructed (imaginaries). As can be seen in Table 3, the matrix as a whole reveals a strong association between both dimensions: the thematic categories are not randomly distributed, but tend to preferentially fit with a specific type of imaginary.

Table 3. Thematic analysis as per Goor (2012), cross-analysed with the categorization of imaginaries

	Rooted content	Transformed reality	New fictional worlds
Pets	1	4	0
Wild animals	0	8	1
Workplace / professions	9	6	0
Everyday activities	8	0	0
Food	2	5	0
Politics / political figures	2	2	0
Sports / extreme sports	2	3	0
Leisure activities / vacations	6	2	2
Celebrities	2	2	0
Imaginary beings / places	0	2	7

Source: Authors' own creation, 2026.

5.3.1. Three sets of virality: anchoring, displacement and fantasy

The most relevant pattern is that the sample is organized into three relatively consistent profiles, each with its own logic of meaning production and appeal:

a) Intensified everyday life: rooted content (32 videos) is concentrated in categories that operate as settings of immediate experience:

- Workplace/professions: 9/32 (28.1%)
- Everyday activities: 8/32 (25.0%)
- Leisure/vacations: 6/32 (18.8%)

This profile defines a core of virality based on the recontextualization of the ordinary: scenarios that the user easily recognizes (work, routine, leisure) and that allow strangeness to be introduced without breaking plausibility. The interpretation is consistent with what was observed in sections 5.1 and 5.2: TikTok here rewards the combination of anchoring (everyday setting) and micro-disruption (somewhat out of place, but still possible).

A particularly telling finding from the cross-analysis is that "everyday activities" appears exclusively in rooted content (8/8; 100%). In other words, when the video relies on routine as its central theme, it does so by avoiding the construction of impossibilities: its effectiveness seems to reside in plausible strangeness, not in surrealism.

b) Spectacle and visual gag: transformed reality (34 videos) shows the reverse pattern, i.e. it relies heavily on categories that favour ontological alteration, anthropomorphism and visual impact:

- Wild animals: 8/34 (23.5%)
- Workplace/professions: 6/34 (17.6%)
- Food: 5/34 (14.7%)
- Pets: 4/34 (11.8%)

Here, GAI functions as a technology of exaggeration and transgression of limits: through their plasticity and grotesque/comic potential, animals and food are especially compatible with the impossible twist. Furthermore, the fact that the wild animals category belongs almost exclusively in transformed reality (8 out of 9 cases; 88.9%) indicates a clear mechanism: wildlife becomes viral when it is humanized, overwhelms or is placed in incongruous scenarios.

This block outlines a narrative economy typical of TikTok: content that aims to capture maximum attention does not need explanation, but a visual shock that triggers laughter, surprise or disbelief in the first few seconds.

c) Autonomous fantasy: in new fictional worlds (10 videos) the cross-analysis is even clearer, to the point of bordering on thematic specialization:

- Imaginary beings/places: 7/10 (70.0%)
- Leisure/vacations: 2/10 (20.0%)
- Wild animals: 1/10 (10.0%)

The result suggests that when the imaginary is fully fictional, the most congruent thematic category is, almost necessarily, imaginary beings or places. In interpretative terms, this confirms that total invention operates as a niche: it requires its own semantic universe and relies on the aesthetic power of AI (creatures, landscapes, impossible architectures) rather than on the rewriting of everyday settings.

5.3.2. "Shuttle" categories and "marker" categories

The cross-analysis also allows us to distinguish between categories that function as a shuttle (moving between imaginaries) and categories that act as markers (sticking to one imaginary):

a) Shuttle categories

- Workplace/professions appear in rooted (9) and transformed (6) but not in fictional worlds. This suggests that work is a flexible resource: it can sustain both the plausible (situational humour, role displacement) and the impossible (gags and transformations) as long as it retains the recognizable setting.
- Sports/extreme sports are divided between rooted (2) and transformed (3). It operates as a shuttle because it already contains, by definition, a component of bodily exceptionality; GAI can intensify it (transformed) or reframe it in plausible situations (rooted).

b) Marker categories

- Everyday activities related to rooted content (8/8): a marker of plausibility and closeness.
- Wild animals in relation to transformed reality (8/9): a marker of spectacularization and the breaking of physical/social laws.
- Imaginary beings/places in relation to fictional worlds (7/9): a marker of autonomous fantasy (and, by extension, of world-making).

These marker categories are key to the research because they show that engagement does not occur simply by using GAI but by activating stable combinations of topic and mode of reality. In other words, GAI does not homogenize content; on the contrary, it crystallizes formulas.

5.3.3. Implications: why hybrid combinations succeed

The interpretation that emerges from the cross-analysis is that the performance of GAI content is based on a balance between intelligibility and strangeness: everyday anchoring maximizes comprehensibility (work, routine, leisure) and favours rapid consumption; transformation maximizes visual shock (animals, food, anthropomorphisms) and triggers an immediate reaction; and complete fiction behaves as a specialized exception, with high internal coherence but less global presence.

In terms of circulation, this helps to explain why the two primary imaginaries (rooted and transformed) dominate the sample: both allow for rapid decoding but through different mechanisms (plausible micro-disruption as opposed to explicit impossibility). New fictional worlds, although visually powerful, demand greater semantic input and depend on the aesthetic appeal of the proposed universe.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The results suggest that the AI-generated videos that concentrate the most engagement on TikTok are not primarily based on the complete invention of universes, but rather on an economy of recognizability: virality is activated when the content maintains an immediate anchor (everyday situations, roles and spaces) and, from there, introduces a carefully dosed displacement —whether plausible (strangeness within the possible) or openly impossible (ontological transformation and visual gag).

Within the discussion, five interpretive patterns and significant relationships can be identified:

a) The hegemony of the almost real versus absolute fantasy: the distribution by imaginaries shows a clear concentration in transformed reality and rooted content, while new fictional worlds are in the

minority. This pattern should not be read as a creative limitation of GAI but as an adaptation to TikTok's attentional logic: in fast scrolling consumption, the video that requires less initial decoding effort has an advantage. Therefore, the content that works is not that which completely breaks with everyday experience but that which recombines the everyday with a surprising twist.

b) Work and routine as matrices of meaning (and humour): the dominance of workplace/professions and the notable presence of everyday activities and food reinforce the hypothesis that engagement is supported by highly codified social institutions and practices. These are scenarios that the user recognizes in milliseconds and that allow the viral effect to be built through contrast: the extraordinary inserted into the ordinary (displacement of roles, inversion of status, situational mismatch). In this respect, GAI operates less as a factory of worlds and more as a reframing mechanism: displacing bodies, identities or situations to places where they should not be.

c) The non-human as a shortcut to visual impact: the relevance of animals (especially wild ones) and the category of imaginary beings/places points to a second avenue of appeal; GAI facilitates the production of scenes where wonder depends on the change of status (anthropomorphism, hyperbolization, physical alterations), maximizing the visual impact and humour. However, even here a rule can be seen: the non-human tends to perform better when it is inscribed in logics of transformation (the explicitly impossible) than when it is presented as a construction of a fully autonomous universe.

d) The cross-analysis confirms stable virality patterns: the cross-analysis specifies that not all theme-imaginary combinations are equally productive. A structuring into sets is observed:

- Rootedness and everyday life (concentration in routines, work and leisure): strangeness is built without completely breaking plausibility.
- Transformed, animals/food and spectacle: this set is dominated by the visual gag, impossibility and visual shock.
- Fictional worlds and imaginary beings/places: aesthetic coherence but less overall weight.

This finding is relevant because it shifts the explanation from GAI as a novelty to GAI as a technology that crystallizes patterns: engagement is not randomly distributed; it is organized into recurring combinations that act as narrative templates.

e) Transparency and visibility of artifice: a problematic gradation is identified in the labelling data ("AI-generated"), which suggests a key issue: labelling is more frequent when the content is more obviously fictitious and less frequent when the video is more believable (rooted). Interpretively, this generates a tension: the AI that best imitates reality is precisely that which can circulate with the least visible artifice. Although the study does not allow us to infer causal relationships about the labelling system, it does allow us to identify a pattern with communicative implications: plausibility increases perceptual ambiguity and, with it, the need for consistent transparency frameworks.

In conclusion, it can be determined that engagement is associated with the recombination of the everyday, not with the creation of entirely new universes. Within the sample, content that allows for immediate understanding and quick surprise is most successful. On the other hand, work and routine function as privileged narrative devices: they provide comprehensibility, facilitate contrast and support situational humour. Similarly, transformed reality capitalizes on spectacularization (animals, food, anthropomorphisms), confirming that visual impact and the impossible operate as triggers for interaction. Furthermore, it is observed that the theme-imaginary cross-analysis reveals formulas of virality (everyday life–rooted; spectacle–transformed; fantasy–fictional worlds), which suggests that GAI is integrated into relatively stable expressive templates. Finally, the "AI-generated" labelling is not homogeneous: it tends to concentrate where fiction is more evident and be absent where verisimilitude is greater, opening an avenue for discussion regarding transparency and reception.

The study fulfils its main objective by characterizing the narrative and thematic patterns of GAI-generated videos with the greatest engagement on TikTok, identifying an economy of recognizability based on the recombination of the everyday and displacement (plausible or impossible). Similarly, the first specific objective is achieved by classifying the sample according to imaginaries (rooted, transformed reality and new fictional worlds) and describing their distribution and distinguishing features. Finally, the second specific objective is met through the analysis by thematic categories and their cross-analysis with the imaginaries, revealing recurring combinations (everyday life–rooted; animals/food–transformed; imaginary beings/places–fictional worlds) that help to explain the concentration of engagement in certain expressive formulas.

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