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Miscellaneous

Usage of short video applications (SVAs): Exploring Italian users' social representations of short video creators and trust in informational and educational SVA content providers

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Abstract

Adults increasingly spend time on Short Video Applications (SVAs) like TikTok, Reels, and YouTube Shorts, with content expanding beyond entertainment to include a significant amount of informational and educational videos. This study explored the social representations of SVA content creators and examined the age-related differences in the trust that Italian users place in SVA creators who provide informational and educational content. The study used an ad hoc online survey among 767 Italian users aged 18 to 88, recruited through non-probability snowball sampling between 19 and 25 October 2022. Results indicate that Italian SVA users perceive short video content creators as creative individuals skilled in short-form video production and knowledgeable in specific subjects. Informational and sports & entertainment are the primary types of content viewed across all age groups. While younger users place greater emphasis on professional skills and authoritative content, older users tend to prioritize engagement and presentation skills. Quantitative analysis also indicates that trust in SVA creators is moderate overall but higher among students and users who engage more frequently and for extended periods. Trust is further shaped by communication skills, responsiveness, and the creator's willingness to create and share content. Lastly, algorithmic recommendations, user-friendly interfaces, and the accessibility of content are key factors that drive SVA usage.

Keywords
SVA, short videos, information, education, trust, social representations, age differences.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the number of users of Short Video Applications (SVAs, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts) has surged. TikTok is characterized by its trend-driven, creative videos, often featuring viral challenges. At the same time, Instagram Reels focuses on more lifestyle-oriented content, with users typically interacting with Reels in shorter sessions. YouTube Shorts primarily supports educational or tutorial-like content and is often used alongside YouTube's long-form videos. Each of these platforms encourages distinct consumption behaviors: TikTok promotes prolonged engagement, Reels supports brief interaction, and Shorts provides a mix of both short and long-form viewing (Varga, 2024).

Most TikTok users in Italy are aged 16 to 24, but there has been significant growth in the number of users over 25 (Santoro, 2022). A shift in the variety of content has accompanied the change in the user age range. Entertainment, Dance, and Pranks still account for most videos, but the number of knowledge-share content, like tutorials and educational videos, has expanded on SVAs. The most popular knowledge areas are Medicine & Healthcare and Food & Drink (Fiallos et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the 2022 Digital News Report by Reuters (Cornia, 2022) confirms that approximately 5% of Europeans use TikTok as a news source. According to Reuters' 2023 Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2023), younger users prefer social media for news rather than traditional news sites. Research shows that 39% of adults under 30 in the US receive news from TikTok (Leppert & Matsa, 2024). One reason for preferring video news over reading is its convenient appearance in social media feeds. This aligns with the latest report by Censis (2022), where 38.1% of Italians declare they follow influencers discussing the Russian-Ukraine war.

As SVAs are increasingly used for education, information, and news, the risk of online misinformation and fake news rises (Heuer & Bereiter, 2018). Therefore, analyzing SVAs as informational sources is essential since most studies focus on established social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter (renamed to X). In particular, how users socially represent short video creators may influence the use of SVAs, an aspect that has yet to be explored in the literature. Similarly, the use of SVAs may be influenced by trust. While trust in social media has been studied, as reviewed below, research is scarce on users' trust in the short video creators themselves. This study aimed to address these gaps by examining how this novel short video creator figure has taken shape in the collective consciousness and what role trust plays for SVA users, paying particular attention to the influence of age and motivations for consuming informational and educational content on these platforms.

1.1. The SVA Content Creator in the Collective Consciousness

Social representations (Moscovici, 1988) spontaneously emerge when society encounters a new phenomenon that structures itself in the collective consciousness, offering a way to organize this new reality (Colì et al., 2024). Since SVAs are relatively new phenomena undergoing continuous rapid and dynamic developments, to obtain a comprehensive overview of the perception of short video content creators, this research used the structural approach proposed by Abric (2001) to study social representations.

This method helps explore individuals' collective beliefs and perceptions (Colì et al., 2024) regarding these relatively new digital figures. This approach is based on the central core theory, which ascertains that social representations are organized in a dual system with central and peripheral elements.

The central core, which is relatively stable and not subject to much change, consists of a restricted set of elements strongly shared by the group and defines and organizes the social representation. This core structure gives meaning to the whole representation, which includes the peripheral elements. Identifying these central elements helps us understand the

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fundamental perceptions that users commonly hold about these creators, regardless of personal or subgroup differences.

The peripheral system comprises near peripheries (structured in a first and second zone) and a distant periphery. According to Flament (1994), the first zone contains elements involved in transforming a social representation and can reveal how perceptions of content creators might evolve. These components are more likely to shift as the landscape of short video applications develops. In contrast, the second zone can testify to the existence of sub-groups (Abric, 2003), providing insights into how specific groups may view short video creators differently based on their unique experiences. The distant periphery contains more distinctive elements related to individual differences (Castillo-Villar & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2020; Melendrez-Ruiz et al., 2020) and, in this case, users' distinct experiences with these creators.

Understanding these representations is essential because they influence users' behavior towards these creators and how they engage with their content, possibly in terms of trust. Given the absence of existing studies, investigating these representations can address a gap in the existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of how emerging media influences social perceptions. Investigating the research question (RQ1), "How are social representations of SVA content creators structured?" also provides a benchmark for future research, enabling comparisons over time as the role of short video creators further matures and solidifies.

1.2. Motivations and Motives for SVA Use

SVAs aim to create highly immersive experiences to capture users' attention and keep them connected for as long as possible (Montag et al., 2019). In recent years, several studies have explored these platforms from the perspective of passing time and entertainment. A study by Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz (2020) revealed that the gratification of entertainment or affect was the primary driver behind all behaviors on TikTok, while research by Scherr and Wang (2021) and Fransico and Ruhela (2021) identified escapism as a primary motivator. Omar and Dequan (2020) found that users watch and participate in TikTok to relax and entertain.

Research on the educational aspects of SVAs is also increasing, particularly concerning creative skill sharing (Zhou, 2019). Linke (2022) shows how TikTok is suitable for short learning videos (learning nuggets) that can be employed for informal learning. The convenience of using TikTok anytime and anywhere is also becoming an essential motivation for educational content, as confirmed by a study on students learning English Vocabulary (Hastomo et al., 2022).

However, the information-seeking perspective as a motivation for using SVAs, comprising content such as news sources, tutorials, educational videos, and creative skills, remains understudied, likely because the share of this type of content has increased only recently. Some insight can be found in numerous studies on information-seeking behavior with other social media, particularly regarding health (Wijayanti et al., 2022). Generally, it appears that a large number of people rely on social media to some degree as an information source (Neely & Eldredge, 2021), and according to Panahi *et al*. (2012), social media have abilities to comply with some of the main requirements of tacit knowledge sharing. Along those lines, Pierattini (2022) reports that recent internal research conducted by Google found that among users aged 18 to 24, almost one out of two first go to TikTok or Instagram to obtain information rather than Google Search.

Nevertheless, beyond the cited research, few information-seeking studies specifically include SVAs as a distinct social media platform. Moreover, though more research is available today on how different age groups use social media (Target Internet, 2024), there is little or no literature on differences by age for the motivations, content and different platforms used regarding SVAs. This insight is crucial as the number of SVA users of all ages, not just Gen Z, has increased over the last few years. Accordingly, this study sought to bridge this gap by exploring the motivations and motives for watching informational and educational content shared on SVAs to answer the following research question (RQ2): "What differences exist in the platforms

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used, frequency, and motivations for using SVAs to access various types of content, particularly across different age groups?"

1.3. Trust in SVA Content Creators

Because watching short videos to seek information can pose risks, primarily misinformation, understanding people's perceptions and trust in content creators can shed light on why individuals select certain content. A recent study, particularly regarding healthcare informational videos, found that TikTok users place greater trust in content creators who are actual healthcare providers (Sampige et al., 2024). However, to our knowledge, studies that examine different types of content across multiple SVAs—not just TikTok—and explore age-related correlations are limited in the literature.

Regarding social media in general, Håkansson and Witmer (2015) found through a structured literature review that most articles emphasized a positive relationship between social media and trust, both when used for information and social connections. A recent study found a strong correlation between the trust users put in Facebook and the intensity of their use of Facebook (Cheng & Chen, 2021). However, this finding contrasts with a recent survey by The Changing Childhood Project (2021), a collaboration of UNICEF and Gallup. They found that despite today's 15-to-24-year-olds turning to online sources, primarily social media, to stay informed about current events, they do not trust social media as an information source. Recent research by Galarza Molina (2023) partially confirms this and found that college students are prone to question disinformation and believe older people are more prone to trusting information on social media - yet the research showed that TikTok videos were more likely to be trusted than static Facebook images. Interestingly, a study among university students conducted by Lan and Tung (2024) highlights that students primarily view TikTok as a platform for entertainment rather than a primary source of news, potentially affecting their behavior regarding verifying news sources. These studies further confirm the importance of understanding trust in SVA content creators.

For the concept of trust, this study followed the socio-cognitive model proposed by Castelfranchi and Falcone (2010; see also Falcone & Castelfranchi, 2001). This model suggests that trust is a mental state based on two fundamental ingredients: Goals and Beliefs. In this model's most elementary case of trust, a person has a goal he or she tries to achieve by delegating a particular task to an agent (someone or something). The rational decision to delegate this task is based on the person's beliefs. Among these beliefs, the main ones are "competence" and "willingness", while other beliefs that can come into play are the belief of "unharmfulness", "dependence", and the "context". The belief of competence refers to having the skills, abilities, and support tools needed to accomplish a goal. The belief of willingness relates to possessing the activation attitudes towards the task, like intentionality, readiness, and motivation. The belief of unharmfulness refers to the possibility that, intentionally or unintentionally, the subject may hinder achieving the goal. The belief of dependence refers to the possibility of achieving the goal with varying degrees of autonomy. Belief in trust in the context relates to how much the context can positively or negatively interfere with achieving the goal.

By exploring trust in SVA content creators through the socio-cognitive model, this study aimed to provide insights into how beliefs can influence the use of SVAs where content quality and accuracy can vary widely. In addition, it is fundamental to understand whether trust levels remain consistent across age groups or, as seen in general social media research, vary by age - particularly with older individuals showing lower levels of trust (Kumbhar, 2022). Identifying these differences is central to understanding the effectiveness of SVAs as platforms for informational and educational content. Moreover, recognizing variations in trust levels across age groups can support targeted media literacy strategies, helping users critically assess and navigate content based on their trust dynamics. Answering the research question (RQ3), "How

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does trust in SVA content creators providing informational and educational content play a role, with a particular focus on age differences?" these insights expand the existing literature by furnishing a deeper understanding of trust dynamics in SVA creators of informational and educational content.

2. Method

The research presented in this article was preceded by a qualitative study conducted through focus groups. The discussions aimed to achieve two objectives: first, to collect data regarding trust placed in SVA content creators, explicitly addressing the beliefs that form the basis of trust, as theorized by the socio-cognitive model (Falcone & Castelfranchi, 2001; Castelfranchi & Falcone, 2010); and second, to gather information on the types of SVA content viewed and the motivations for viewing to confirm the U&G classification of motives proposed by Papacharissi & Rubin (2000).

In particular, two separate groups participated in the focus group discussions. These sessions, lasting approximately one hour each, were held online and were recorded. The participants were all students enrolled in an Italian Psychology Graduate program and recruited during online classes. The groups comprised 23 women and six men, aged 23 to 61 (average age of 38, SD = 10,76). A single interview guide was used for both discussions, which addressed the subject of motivations for viewing short videos, the type of videos viewed, and the trust placed in the short video creators who provide informational and educational content. Particular focus was given to elements of the five beliefs part of the cognitive model (Castelfranchi & Falcone, 2010) that contribute to the overall trust. The analysis of the focus group sessions was done based on the transcripts of the recordings and notes taken during the sessions. The sentences were grouped and labeled according to the meaning and content for each topic addressed (motivations, content type, and trust). Based on this analysis, five high-level types of video content were classified, each belonging to either the information-seeking or entertainment motivation. Nine main motives for watching short videos were identified, which confirmed the U&G classification motives suggested by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000). For the part regarding trust, we performed a deductive content analysis using the NVivo10 software (QSR International, 2012), allocating each labeled grouping to one of the socio-cognitive model's five beliefs: Competence, Willingness, Unharmfulness, Dependence, and Context. The results of this analysis guided the development of an ad hoc survey used for this research. Therefore, all data reported in this article will refer to the information collected through the questionnaire.

The survey involved 767 Italian participants who watch short-form videos on any SVA, recruited through non-probability snowball sampling. The invitation to participate in the survey with the link to the Google Form was shared through public posts on social media platforms within the researchers' network, like LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook, including private WhatsApp and Telegram groups. Contacted people were also asked to share the survey within their network. The survey was open for participation for seven days, from 19 to 25 October 2022, and completing the survey took an average of eight to 15 minutes. All participants were invited to read the privacy statement in advance, which contained the study's objectives and information regarding the data processing under current legislation. Only those who provided freely given consent to participate in the study proceeded with participating in the survey.

2.1. Participants

The sample of participants (N = 767) consists of slightly more men (52.4%) than women (45,1%), with ages ranging from 18 to 88 (M=46, SD = 10.92), where most belong to the age groups 40-49 (30.6%) and 50-59 (33.8%). In addition, the predominant level of education is a high school diploma (52.4%), nearly all are (self) employed (85.8%), and the majority live with a partner and children or other relatives (51%).

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2.2. Data Collection

The data was collected through an ad hoc questionnaire based on literature analysis and data obtained from the qualitative study. The survey contained 56 items and was divided into four sections.

The first section comprised four open-ended questions dedicated to social representations. These questions were attuned to a structural approach (Abric, 2001) and a free word association method (Vergès, 1992). In this first part, each participant was asked to write the first three words that came to mind when thinking of short video content creators with the Italian stimulus word *creator di video brevi* [short-form video creator], with the subsequent request to explain the choice for each of the three words.

The second part concentrated on the usage of SVAs in terms of platforms used, content viewed, motivations, time spent, and frequency. The type of video content viewed was measured with a 5 Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always (every day)". Two single-option items measured the frequency of viewing short videos. While motivations were measured with two different 5-point Likert scales: a frequency scale with five items ranging from "never" to "always (every day)", and four items for motivation were measured with a Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "completely agree".

The third part of the survey explored the trust in short video creators who provide informational and educational content through a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = completely agree) created ad hoc based on the focus group results and the socio-cognitive model. Participants were asked to think specifically of content creators who share informational or educational videos when answering questions regarding trust. The scales consisted of 30 items and six dimensions, presented in Table 2.

Finally, the last section was directed at collecting sociodemographic data.

Table 1. Description of 5-point Likert Scale of Trust

Dimension	Description	Examples of items
Competence	8 items aimed at investigating the competence of short video creators	• A short video creator has specific skills regarding the content provided. • A short video creator knows how to handle verbal and non-verbal communication
Willingness	8 items aimed at investigating the willingness of short video creators to provide content	• A short video creator provides additional information and/or more in-depth material. • A short video creator posts content with a certain frequency
Unharmfulness	7 items aimed at investigating the perception of unharmfulness and the absence of conflict	• A short video creator does not have ulterior commercial motives. • A short video creator does not post misleading content
Dependence	1 item aimed at investigating the dependency on the video creator	• Overall, how much do I feel dependent on a short video creator to provide informational or educational content on specific topics

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Dimension	Description	Examples of items
Context	5 items aimed at investigating the influence of external factors	• Short video platforms represent an obstacle to inform or educate myself because the content that is presented is unreliable. • Short video platforms do NOT represent an obstacle to inform or educate myself because the interface is easy to use and well-organized
Decision to trust	1 item aimed at investigating the overall level of trust in the short video creators	• Overall, how much do I trust a short video creator to provide informational or educational content on specific topics

Source: Own elaboration.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis for social representations was done through prototypical analysis using a technique developed by Vergès (1992). The analysis was preceded by a lemmatization procedure of the evocation responses, after which the data were analyzed with the software EVOC 2005 (Vergès et al., 2005). This type of analysis is based on the calculation of two criteria: the frequencies – the number of times the word is mentioned - and the evocation ranks of the words. The rank was established by the order in which the words were provided in the response, where the first word got a rank of 1, the second 2, and the last one 3. The combination of frequency and rank allows allocating the words to one of the four quadrants of the representation. A graph is created where words with higher frequency and lower evocation ranking are located in the first quadrant, the central core. The second quadrant, which coincides with the earlier mentioned first zone, includes words with a higher frequency and ranking. In comparison, the third quadrant corresponds to the second zone with a lower frequency but readily evoked words. Finally, the distant periphery is in the fourth quadrant, indicating elements with a lower frequency and ranking. Content analysis was performed on the text generated by the participants regarding the meaning attributed to each word present in the representation. The most significant phrases will be mentioned in the results section in quotation marks.

The statistical software SPSS version 29 was used for the quantitative data analysis. The reliability coefficient Cronbach's alpha was calculated and used to measure the scale's internal consistency regarding trust. The scale had an excellent overall coefficient, α=0.92, as well as the separate sub-dimensions, namely Competence, Willingness, and Unharmfulness (α 0.86, 0.84, 0.83, respectively).

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was performed to reduce the complexity of the scale of trust. This was done by applying Varimax rotation to each group of items regarding Competence, Willingness, and Unharmfulness. For each of these dimensions, two components emerged; for Competence: Communication Skills (0.77 α) and Professional Skills (0.71 α), which explained 67% of the variance; for Willingness: Content Creation/Sharing (0.83 α) and Responsiveness (0.81 α), with variance explained of 71%, and finally for Unharmfulness: Authoritative content (0.85 α) and Profile/Followers (0.60 α) which also explained 71% of the variance.

Synthetic indices were created from these newly identified dimensions, considering the frequency distribution and the median (e.g., high/low competence). After creating the various indices of trust and recodifying some variables, relationships and covariance between

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categorical (nominal and ordinal) variables were explored through crosstabulation, with the statistical significance based on Pearson chi-square ($\chi 2$), Pearsons R and Spearman calculations.

3. Results

3.1. Social Representations of SVA Content Creators

The 767 participants evoked 2225 words around the inductive term "short-form video creator"; in particular, 668 different words were used to describe the creators. This analysis addresses RQ1, which focuses on social representations of SVA content creators. Among these, 418 words were cited only once, and one was cited 98 times. After the lemmatization procedure and the unification of synonyms, the distinct words were reduced to 187, 76 of which were cited once, and one word was cited 225 times. The words cited at least 43 times were retained for the analysis.

The social representation of short-form video makers consists of 12 terms and includes terms with frequencies above 42 (frequency cutoff point = 43). The four quadrants were delimited by an average frequency of 88 and an average separation rank of 2 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Social Representation of SVA Content Creators

Importance (rank)

Frequency		*High (< 2)*		*Low (>=2)*	
		Frequency	*Rank*	*Frequency*	*Rank*
High (>= 88)		Creativity	255	1.97	Entertainment	162	2.03
		Capability	95	1.72			
		CENTRAL CORE			FIRST ZONE – NEAR PERIPHERY		
		Frequency	*Rank*		*Frequency*	*Rank*
Low (< 88)		Quickness	87	1.89	Conciseness	48	2.02
		Showoff	60	1.98	Money	47	2.27
		TikTok	58	1.79	Novelty	43	2.05
		Young	54	1.54			
		Influencer	51	1.49			
		Interest	47	1.92			
		SECOND ZONE – NEAR PERIPHERY			DISTANT PERIPHERY		

Source: Own elaboration.

The representation of short-form video creators is structured around the terms *creativity* and *capability*. These represent the central core and are frequently cited words with a low rank (high importance); both terms refer to the creator's skills. The word *creativity* has two connotations: one regards creating original content and inventive ideas ("to create content you have to rely on your creativity"), while the other refers to the creator's ability to capture and maintain attention creatively ("creativity is needed for a video to retain attention"). The second word, *capability*, is considered an essential element concerning the subject matter expertise ("one assumes that those who do this have expertise on some topic") but also implies having technical skills required for making short videos ("you have to know how to make them").

Elements in the near peripheries contribute to the representation's organization by identifying other characteristics and skills creators have. In the first zone, the word entertainment surfaces, which, despite not being part of the central core due to higher ranking, has an elevated frequency and identifies the creator's personal trait of being funny and

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the ability to create and share content that, in the strict sense, is humorous ("most of the videos I watch are funny, so I imagine they are, too") and emphasizes the quality of knowing how to "entertain and distract people."

In the second zone of the near periphery, words with a low frequency but considered important appear, such as showoff, young, and influencer, highlighting the creators' personal traits and an association with influencers because "most of them are created by influencers." According to Abric (2003), elements in this zone can complement those in the first zone of the near periphery. In this context, some cite TikTok and associate it with "funny videos", which could be related to the word entertainment in the first zone. Others emphasize the creator's additional skills, like providing content described as "immediate." At the same time, others highlight the skill of providing content that sparks interest.

As for the distant periphery, where words have a low frequency and low importance and are, therefore, related to individual experiences and contexts, elements of conciseness, money, and novelty emerge. These refer to additional skills required for creating short videos, such as "the ability to convey an idea with few words or images" and "essence", as well as the job of the creator as a new type of activity that creates a new opportunity in terms of income, as reported by one participant: "I believe this has become a new and modern source of income for those who create videos and the companies that invest in ads that are inserted in the videos."

3.2. General Usage of SVAs

This section addresses RQ2, which explores the platforms used, frequency, and motivations for engaging with SVAs and any variation across age groups. More than half of the sample (63.2%) utilizes Instagram and its feature Reels, followed by YouTube Shorts (40.9%) and TikTok (32.1%). Facebook released its short videos not too long ago (Culliford, 2022), yet 16.2% of the participants have already been viewing them. Other SVAs or platforms, such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, Spotify, and Vine, have small percentages (0.5%, 1%, and a combined 1.6%, respectively). This data directly addresses RQ2, highlighting the platforms most frequently used by participants and laying the foundation for examining variations across age groups. Looking in more detail regarding age, the use of TikTok steadily drops from 46.7% of users aged 18-20 to 28.1% of users aged 40-49, then rises again to 38.4% of users aged over 60, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 9.70$, $p = .05$. The use of Instagram falls from 86.7% of users aged 18-29 to 55.8% of those over 60, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 25.25$, $p < .001$. Facebook use shows an opposite trend, with a steady rise from 3.3% of users aged 18 to 29 up to 23.3% of those over 60, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 10.63$, $p = .03$. Similarly, though less pronounced, YouTube usage increases from 36.7% of those aged 18-29 to 43.8% of those over 60, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 2.46$, $p = .65$. This finding addresses RQ2 by showing age-related variations in platform preferences.

Over half the participants reported using SVAs more than twice a day; 37.9 % said they access them two to five times daily, and 16.3 % access them more than five times daily. In addition, almost 80% of people report watching short videos for less than 30 minutes daily. Of this group, 46.2 % watch less than 15 minutes, and 33.2 % spend between 15 and 30 minutes viewing these videos. Data analysis reveals a statistically significant relationship between age and frequency of SVA use, $\chi2(12, N = 767) = 26.61$, $p = .009$. These results further contribute to answering RQ2, as they indicate that frequency of use significantly decreases with age. Relatedly, as age increases, the amount of time spent on SVAs decreases, $\chi2(12, N = 767) = 66.83$, $p < .001$. Those aged 18-29 typically watch short videos between 30 minutes and an hour (41.7%), whereas only 10% of those over 50 spend that much time viewing short videos. Contrarily, the proportion of people who watch SVAs for less than 15 minutes a day increases from 20% of those aged between 18 and 29 to 53.7% of those aged 50 to 59 and then decreases slightly to 49.3% for those over 60.

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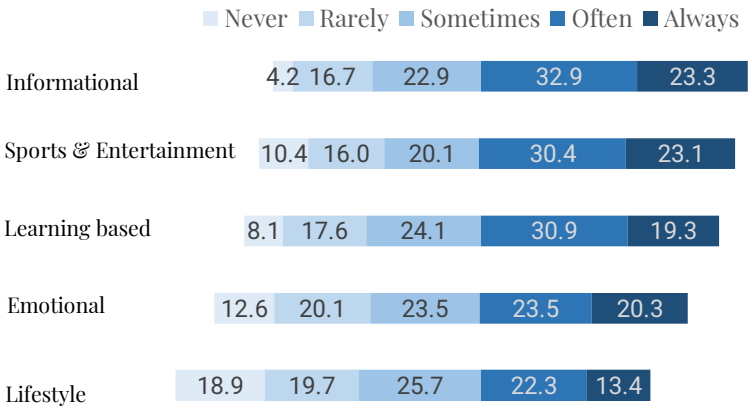
Figure 2 illustrates how informational videos (e.g., experts, specialists, current events, news) are the types of videos most frequently watched, as over half of participants report watching them at least once a week (often) or every day (always). Sports & entertainment content follows closely, and half of the people state they often or always watch learning-based videos (tutorials, life hacks, educational). On the other hand, emotional videos (children, animals, sentimental) and lifestyle videos (travel, fashion & beauty) are watched less frequently, with over half and almost 65% of users, respectively, only watching them once a month (sometimes) or less (rarely), or never. Although over 66% of participants aged 18 to 29 reported watching informational content at least once a week (often) or every day (always), compared to between 54% and 58% in other age groups, the relationship between age and the frequency of viewing informational videos was not statistically significant, $\chi 2(16, N = 767) = 16.83$, $p = .397$. This indicates that while there may be slight variations in viewing habits between age groups, these differences are not substantial enough to suggest a meaningful association between age and the consumption of informational content.

Figure 2. Frequency of Type of Videos Viewed %



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3 addresses RQ2 by identifying motivations that drive people to watch short videos and how these motivations vary across participants. It shows that approximately one-third of participants watch them to pass time when they have nothing else to do or are bored, as well as for entertainment. Nearly a third of survey respondents watch videos at least once a week to find tips or learn something new, and a quarter to improve their skills. The least popular motivation for watching short videos is to follow the latest trends, with a significant share indicating they never do this. Additionally, there is a statistically significant relationship between the purpose of viewing short videos to pass time and age, $\chi 2(16, N = 767) = 37.23$, $p = 0.002$), as well as a negative correlation between the two variables, $r(765) = -0.20$, $p < .001$. Though the correlation is weak, it is statistically significant and indicates that watching videos to pass time decreases as age increases.

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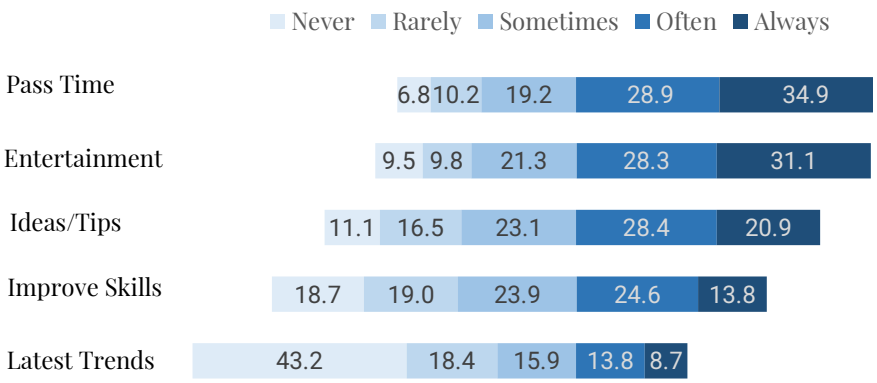
Figure 3. Frequency of Viewing by Motivation %



Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. Trust in SVA Creators Providing Informational and Educational Content

The results in this section explore trust in short video creators, addressing RQ3, which focuses on how trust in SVA creators providing informational and educational content varies, particularly across different age groups. Overall, 45.4% of people interviewed have little trust in short video creators of informational and educational content, 47.5% have a moderate level of trust, and only 7.2% report they fully trust these content creators. Although there are no statistically significant differences between age groups, students tend to be more trusting. 20.7% of students fully trust short video creators, and more than half (51.7%) have a moderate level of trust. It is also worth noting that 89.7% of the students fall into the younger age group of 18 to 29. As part of the findings addressing RQ3, positive correlations are also observed between trust and both the frequency of watching short videos $r(765) = 0.20$, $p < .001$, and the time spent on SVAs, $r(765) = 0.16$, $p < .001$. Even though these correlations are weak, they are statistically significant. Furthermore, those who watch short videos for extended periods and those who watch more frequently tend to trust informational and educational content providers more. Specifically, viewers with daily viewing times of over an hour and those who access SVAs more than five times a day express a high level of trust, 19.6% and 14.4%, respectively. Additionally, most who view informational and educational content place moderate and high trust in the short video creators of that type of content, and show a positive correlation $\rho(765) = 0.20$, $p < .001$.

From an overall perspective of the components underlying trust, as suggested by the socio-cognitive model, Figure 4 illustrates that trust in creators providing informational/educational content is primarily based on the creator's communication skills, such as the ability to capture the attention of the audience they are targeting, or the capability to adjust their language to their audience. Other skills like presenting content creatively and having video production and publishing skills are also essential. Another critical component on which trust is based is the creator's responsiveness in interacting with users, like replying to questions and comments, and the willingness to create and share content conveyed by publishing videos with a specific frequency. This is supported by a positive correlation between overall trust and responsiveness, $\rho(765) = 0.39$, $p < .001$. As for the belief of unharmfulness, creating and sharing authoritative content from a professional profile coherent with the content published and with verifiable sources increases trust. To a lesser extent, the same is true for creators with many followers who interact with their posts (likes, comments, shares). The least influential factor on trust is if

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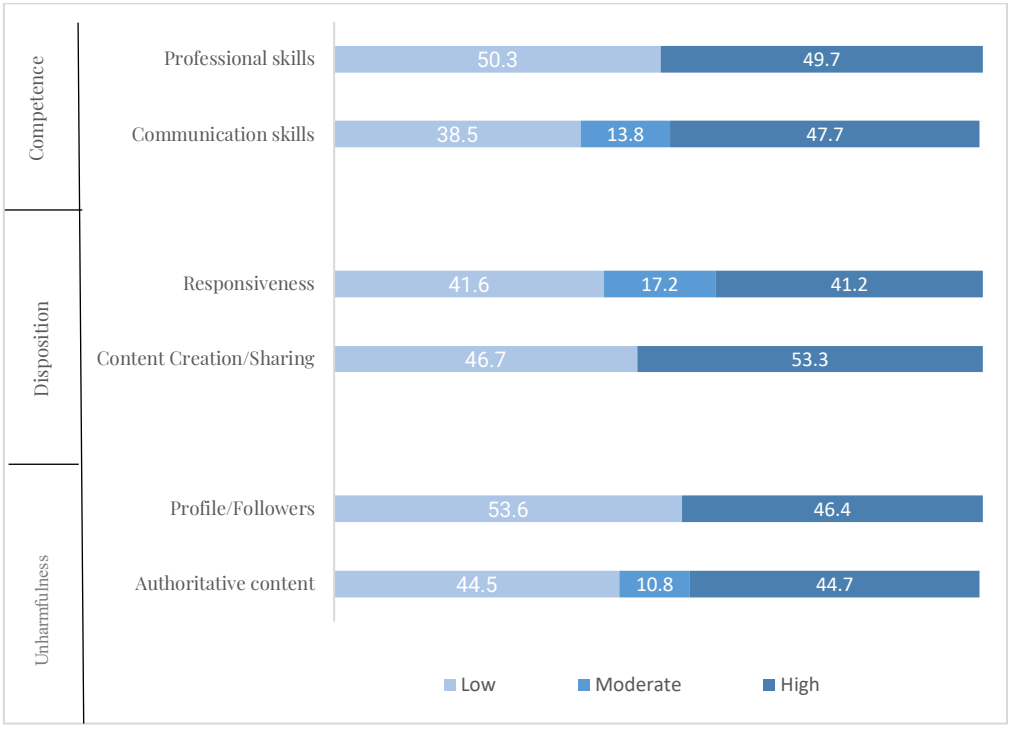
the creator is perceived to have commercial purposes. The analysis of these beliefs and components across different age groups shows notable differences in the perceived importance. Younger users highly value content creators who consistently publish videos created with care, show passion and interest in their work, and maintain their profiles regularly, with 78.3% of those aged 18–29 considering these factors important, compared to 34.2% of those over 60, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 30.91$, $p < .001$. There is a weak but statistically significant negative correlation between age and the importance of this content creation/sharing component $r(765) = 0.20$, $p < .001$. Another noteworthy difference is trust based on authoritative content deemed important by 55.0% of the 18–29 age group, compared to 39.7% for users 60 and over, $\chi2(8, N = 767) = 16.09$, $p = .041$. Regarding Competence, a weak but statistically significant positive correlation is found between overall trust and the importance attributed to communication skills $\rho(765) = 0.30$, $p < .001$, as well as professional skills $\rho(765) = 0.35$, $p < .001$. These results further contribute to answering RQ3, as they highlight how trust is influenced by communication and professional skills. Even if there is no statistically significant difference in the importance of these skills attributed by different age groups, a considerable gap exists for professional skills rated as important by 63.3% of users aged 18–29, compared to 35.6% for the 60 and over group, $\chi2(4, N = 767) = 12.80$, $p = .012$.

Figure 4. Specific Components of Beliefs Underlying Trust %



Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding the dependence belief, most respondents (79.8%) reported having very little or no dependence on the creator of short videos for acquiring information or learning purposes. However, 16% said they felt somewhat dependent, and 4.2% reported feeling very or entirely dependent. When looking at the frequency of viewing and time spent watching, the percentage of those feeling very dependent on content creators more than doubles for those who watch more than five times a day (11.2%) and triples for those spending more than an hour a day (15.2%). Similarly, almost 38.4% of respondents who watch between 30 minutes and an hour a day report feeling moderately dependent.

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Concerning context, only 6.9% of people think that SVAs interfere with the possibility of learning or getting information about specific topics through creators' short videos. The majority (61.3%) believe that SVAs represent no or few obstacles, while the remaining (31.8%) believe that they interfere to a certain extent with the opportunity to learn or acquire information. Among the facilitating and interfering factors, 20.5% believe that the content proposed by SVAs is unreliable and that this constitutes a factor that can interfere negatively. 31.7% agree that algorithms can be an obstacle to the automatically proposed content, yet 39.4% believe that personalized content is relevant and a facilitating factor. The SVAs' easy-to-use UI is considered a facilitating factor, as only 17.7% do not agree with this statement.

4. Discussion

4.1. Collective Image of SVA Content Creators

In response to the first research question (RQ1), which sought to explore how social representations of SVA content creators are structured, the data suggests that the collective image of short video creators among SVA users is distinguished positively based on their skills, specifically their creativity, technical proficiency in short video production, and subject matter expertise. Interestingly, these competencies, especially communication skills and professional expertise, are crucial elements that contribute to the trust placed in creators who offer educational and informative content. Moreover, this is consistent with findings in the literature (Törhönen et al., 2018), which show that social video content creators also attribute their perceived popularity to their technical skills.

The presence of entertainment in the first zone of the near periphery might indicate a potential shift in the representation. Alternatively, it could suggest that entertainment was previously located in the central core but has now moved out of the representation. The latter scenario seems plausible, given the confirmation that adult users' content preferences are more focused on something other than videos aimed at providing entertainment. On the other hand, should the shift lean towards the central core, it could imply that users perceive the creation of entertaining content as requiring a distinct skill set. This implication may align with the findings of Törhönen *et al.* (2018), which indicate that video content creators consider investing in entertainment value essential for the popularity of their videos.

Some negative representations are identified within specific subgroups and individuals' personal experiences. For example, some perceive creators as motivated solely by profit. In contrast, others view the economic factor more positively as an opportunity and a new source of income, which is an aspect that could also be linked to the underlying component of "willingness" that influences trust in creators who provide informational and educational content. These findings align with the literature, which highlights the ongoing dilemma for content creators on social media of balancing authenticity with the pursuit of monetization opportunities (Hofstetter & Gollnhofer, 2024).

4.2. Usage of SVAs

As outlined in the research question RQ2 under 'Motivations and Motives for SVA Use', this study examined any differences in platforms, frequency, and motivations for using SVAs, particularly any differences across ages. During this research conducted in 2022, several SVAs underwent changes that likely impacted user engagement. Notably, Instagram made a significant change by including short videos not only in the dedicated Reels section but also in users' feeds, thereby increasing their visibility. Indeed, Instagram was found to be the most popular platform among adult users. Additionally, Facebook's introduction of short videos at the beginning of 2022 has not gone unnoticed, as many participants mentioned using this social media platform to watch short videos, even though it was not explicitly listed as an option in the survey. As recently as July 2024, even LinkedIn, the well-known professional networking social media platform,

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started including short-form videos in users' feeds with an immersive video experience, which will most likely increase short video content usage among existing SVA users and attract new users to this type of media.

The research findings indicate that over half of the participants access SVAs more than twice a day and reveal apparent age-related differences in the use of short video applications, with younger adults spending significantly more time on these platforms than older individuals. Young adults sometimes reach or exceed the average daily usage of all social media platforms in Italy, which is one hour and 47 minutes (Starri, 2022), specifically through their time spent on SVAs alone. This growing popularity and availability of short videos and the frequency and duration of time spent watching these emphasize the importance of studying this form of media.

There were no significant age differences regarding the type of content viewed, confirming that all age groups primarily use SVAs to access informational and sports & entertainment-related content. However, younger adults are likelier to use SVAs for entertainment or passing time, and, interestingly, the study reveals that when people use SVAs for entertainment or passing time, they not only watch content created explicitly for that purpose but also watch informational videos from experts, specialists, and news sources. Another noteworthy observation is that many users watch short videos on SVAs to gain ideas and discover new things, relying on the platforms to deliver relevant and informative content without actively searching for it. This passive information-seeking behavior is further supported by the finding that one of the primary motivations for using SVAs is the algorithm-based personalization of content suggested by these platforms. Particularly among younger adults, the automatic presentation of engaging content is perceived as appealing and has been cited as a reason for watching short videos. Additionally, the convenience of constant access to SVAs is a significant motive for consuming short videos, closely tied to motivations such as entertainment and passing time.

4.3. Trust in SVA Creators Providing Informational and Educational Content

Addressing the third research question (RQ3) on the role of trust, this study reveals moderate trust in short video creators who provide informational/educational content. The findings show that while there are no statistically significant differences in trust between age groups, students tend to exhibit higher levels of trust in content creators, and trust is much higher among those who watch short videos regularly. Given that younger adults use SVAs more frequently and for longer durations, this higher engagement may be associated with greater trust in content creators. However, further research would be needed to confirm this. Trust also depends on the viewer's motivation; those who watch short videos to learn and acquire information, including following the latest trends or finding ideas and new things, have the highest trust in short video creators. In contrast, individuals who watch short videos for entertainment and as a means of passing time have slightly lower levels of trust.

The research question RQ3 explored which beliefs are most significant in shaping trust in informational and educational content creators on SVAs across different age groups. The findings show that younger users place greater importance on professional skills and authoritative content, possibly reflecting awareness of misinformation and a preference for expert-driven content. Considering the concept of skills that emerged in the social representation, this indicates younger users may value the creator's specific expertise in a particular field. In addition to professional skills, younger users also place very high importance on willingness, especially in content creation and sharing, suggesting that consistency and regular engagement with audiences are key factors in building trust among this demographic. While still valuing competence, older users may appreciate the creator's engagement and presentation skills more than the specific expertise.

The follower count and profile coherence have a lower impact on trust. The user interface (UI) of SVAs, which prioritizes infinite content scrolling, may contribute to users not consulting

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a creator's profile. However, the user-friendly UI, one of the context elements, is considered positive. The importance attributed to the accessibility, UI, algorithms, and personalization of SVAs emerge as significant factors influencing how users, particularly younger ones, decide to use these platforms and engage with short video content. The study found that SVA users often rely more on algorithmically suggested content rather than conducting targeted searches, even if concerns remain about the potential for unreliable content. Interestingly, while many users watch short videos to acquire information, only some depend on creators for knowledge. However, those who spend more time watching short videos exhibit a higher sense of dependence on the creators.

4.4. Research Limitations and Future Studies

This study presents a series of limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, the sampling method adopted, which relied on non-probability snowball sampling, may have introduced biases, as the sample is not fully representative of the broader population. The use of a self-report instrument for collecting quantitative data introduces the possibility of response biases, such as social desirability or recall bias, which could affect the accuracy of the reported behaviors and attitudes. Additionally, since the study was conducted exclusively in Italy, the findings may not generalize to other countries or cultural contexts. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights, important practical implications, and questions for further exploration, particularly regarding the evolving role of SVAs and the trust-building mechanisms that vary across age groups.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore how SVA content creators have become integrated into the collective consciousness of its users in a relatively short period of time. The social representations of SVA creators imply a shift in how users associate creators with entertainment. Future analysis could establish any further shifts and the trajectory. Such an analysis would also validate any changes in negative perceptions, such as creators being motivated solely by profit, sensed within specific subgroups and through individuals' personal experiences, potentially related to the findings around trust based on the belief of willingness.

The observation that users still engage with informational short videos even when they are not actively seeking knowledge or information and the passive information-seeking behavior are crucial insights that merit attention. By examining trust in detail, this study provides a valuable understanding of the factors influencing the development of trust in these content creators. Given the growing number of platforms incorporating short videos and users accessing this short-form across a broader range of channels, these insights are critical. Based on these findings, the study holds significant potential for practical application in media literacy interventions to help users critically evaluate the information presented. The age-related differences in factors contributing to trust in SVA creators highlight the need for age-specific strategies to counter misinformation. To further optimize such strategies, future research should focus on how users, particularly younger adults, evaluate the accuracy of short-form video content and how they process and utilize this information. Additionally, studies should explore how dependence on content creators may evolve with increased platform engagement and its potential impact on users' beliefs and behaviors.

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