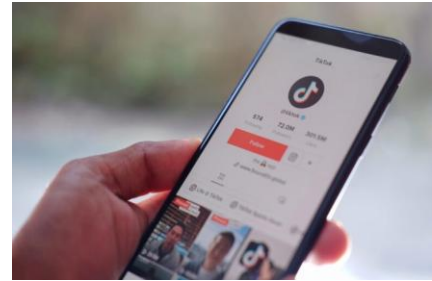


Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

## Social Media as a Digital Genre: Learning to Communicate on Instagram and TikTok



Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become a normal part of everyday communication, especially for younger people. Most people use them without really thinking about how structured they actually are. At first, they just seem like apps where people post pictures or videos for fun, but when you look closer, there are actually a lot of patterns and expectations that shape how people communicate on them. Because of this, Instagram and TikTok can be understood as distinct digital genres, each with its own purpose, audience expectations, and forms of communication that users must learn in order to participate effectively. They are not completely random spaces, even if they sometimes feel that way, and people who use them regularly start to pick up on the “rules” without being directly taught.

The idea of genre helps explain this. In *Genres in the Wild*, Lisa Bickmore explains that genres are “typified responses to recurring situations” (Bickmore 46). What this means in simpler terms is that when people find themselves in similar situations over and over again, they start to communicate in similar ways, and those ways eventually become expected. When I think about Instagram and TikTok, this definition fits really well. On Instagram, posts usually include an

Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

image, a caption, and hashtags, and a lot of users try to make their content look polished or consistent. On TikTok, videos are usually short and often follow trends, using popular sounds or formats that people recognize right away. For example, when I use Instagram, I still regularly post, and I tend to treat it as a more “official” space where I think about how my photos look and how I present myself to others. I usually choose pictures carefully and write captions that match the tone I want to give off. In contrast, I use TikTok in a much more casual way, mostly watching, liking, and sharing videos that are funny or entertaining. TikTok feels less serious and more focused on humor and trends, which makes it a more informal space compared to Instagram. Even though there are millions of users, a lot of content starts to feel similar because people are following these shared patterns. That’s what makes it a genre instead of just random posting.



At the same time, being able to participate in this genre is not something people automatically know how to do. It takes time to figure out what works. Christine M. Tardy et al. explain that genre knowledge can be understood as “a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities” (Tardy et al. 288). This idea is really important for social media because success often depends on how well someone understands the platform. For example, when someone first starts

Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

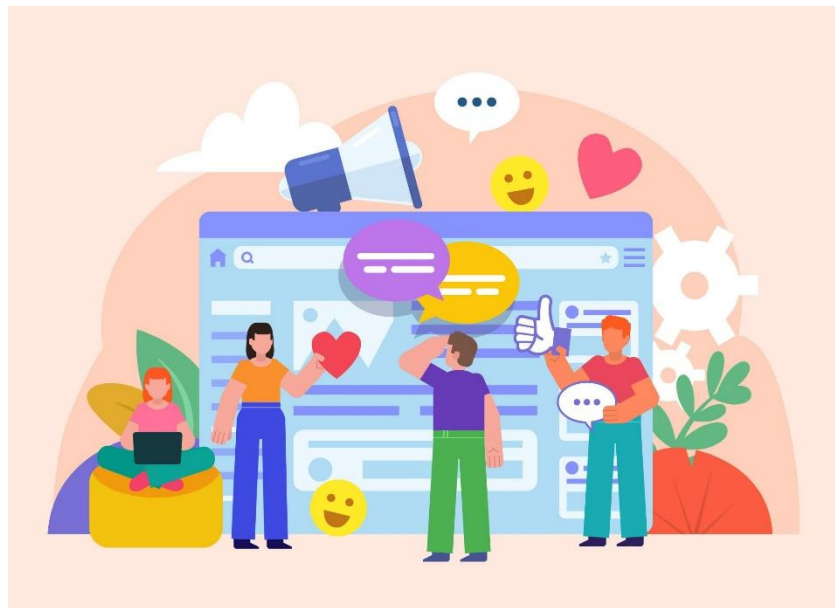
using Instagram, they might post without thinking much about hashtags, captions, or timing, and their post might not get much attention. Over time, though, they start to notice patterns. They might realize that certain hashtags help more people see their content or that certain types of captions get more engagement. On TikTok, users and creators often learn very quickly that videos need to grab attention in the first few seconds or people will scroll past them. This reflects how users themselves have developed expectations for fast, engaging content. As someone who mostly watches TikTok, I've noticed that I tend to scroll past videos that don't immediately catch my attention, which shows how users actively shape what kinds of communication are successful on the platform. These are things people learn through experience rather than being formally taught.



Overall, this contributes to the notion that these platforms feature distinct genres, considering that TikTok users and creators alike tend to agree on what becomes popular. These are things people learn through experience rather than being formally taught.

Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

I think one of the more interesting parts of this is how informal the learning process is. Tardy et al. explain that genre knowledge develops through “participation in social communities and activities” (Tardy et al. 302). That idea really fits social media. Most people don’t sit down and study how to use TikTok or Instagram—they just start using it. They scroll, watch videos, like posts, and eventually start posting themselves. On TikTok especially, people often copy trends or remix videos they’ve seen before. At first, they might not fully understand why something works, but over time they start to figure it out. In my own experience, I have learned what kinds of posts I am more likely to like, comment on, or share, especially when they are funny, relatable, or match current trends. This shows that even interacting with content is part of learning how the platform works. Instagram works in a similar way, where people adjust their posts based on what they see from others, especially influencers or popular accounts.



Another important part of learning this genre is feedback. Tardy et al. explain that genre knowledge includes understanding “how and when a genre can be used to further a community’s

Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

goals” (Tardy et al. 302). Social media makes this really obvious because feedback is immediate.

Likes, comments, shares, and views all show how people are reacting to content. If a post does well, people usually try to repeat whatever they did. If it doesn’t, they change something. From a user perspective, I also respond differently depending on the content. I am more likely to comment on posts that feel personal or relatable, and I tend to share posts that I think my friends will connect with. This kind of interaction still contributes to how the genre works because it shapes what content becomes popular. Over time, this kind of trial and error helps users become more skilled. It also shows that being good at social media isn’t just about creativity—it’s about paying attention to what the audience responds to and adjusting.

At the same time, even though there are patterns, social media can still feel unpredictable. Sometimes people follow trends exactly and still don’t get much engagement, while other times something random becomes popular. This unpredictability is not just because of changing algorithms, but also because user interests and trends shift quickly based on what people find entertaining or relatable in the moment. So even if someone understands the genre pretty well, they still have to keep adapting. That’s part of what makes social media different from more traditional genres. You don’t just learn it once—you keep learning it over time.

Overall, looking at Instagram and TikTok as genres makes it easier to understand why people communicate the way they do on these platforms. It also helps explain why some people are more successful than others. Using Bickmore’s definition of genre along with ideas from Tardy et al., Sommer-Farias, and Gevers, it becomes clear that social media communication is something people learn gradually through observation, practice, and feedback. More importantly, recognizing these platforms as genres shows that effective participation requires awareness of

Sean Folstein  
Dr. Vazquez  
ENC1101  
4/30/2026

each platform's unique conventions and the ability to adapt to constantly changing expectations.

Even though it might seem simple on the surface, it actually requires a lot of awareness and adjustment. Thinking about social media as a genre helps show that it's not just about posting—it's about learning how to communicate effectively within a specific system.

#### Works Cited:

Bickmore, Lisa. "Genres in the Wild." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University Press, 2015,

pp. 45–47

Tardy, Christine M., Bruna Sommer-Farias, and Jeroen Gevers "Teaching and Researching Genre Knowledge: Toward an Enhanced Theoretical Framework." *Written Communication*, vol. 37, no.

3, 22 May 2020, pp. 287–321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088320916554>.