

TikTok and Gendered Romantic Expectations: a Qualitative Study of College Students

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ABSTRACT

As TikTok continues to gain popularity for its short-form videos, romance-related content has become a prominent genre, often promoting specific ideals and norms in romantic relationships. This study analyzes the influence of TikTok on shaping romantic expectations among male and female users. Using a qualitative approach, this research involved semi-structured interviews with young adults who actively engage with romance-themed TikTok content. The findings reveal that male participants highly maintained traditional views of masculinity and financial responsibility, such as the expectation to be the primary provider, before and after consuming such content. Female participants, meanwhile, experienced more noticeable shifts in expectations, holding flexible and realistic views on romance, but later expressing greater desire for visible emotional and financial investment from partners. Despite these influences, both genders demonstrated critical engagement with the content, often distinguishing between social media ideals and real-life relationship values. This research emphasizes TikTok's dual role as a platform that both strengthens and challenges traditional gender norms in

romantic contexts. While some creators show how men should not share their emotional vulnerability, others challenge these norms by promoting emotional openness between men and their partners. Users, in turn, selectively compare these portrayals in line with their personal experiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, study shows that most social media users in this generation spent most of their time watching a short video model that influenced their daily screen time (Xu, Tedrick, & Gold, 2023). TikTok is one of the social media platforms where users can create, share, and watch short videos, typically between 15 seconds to 10 minutes long. TikTok started gaining major popularity around late 2018 to early 2019, especially after it merged with Musical.ly in August 2018. As in 2025, TikTok is currently one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. While it started as a platform mainly for entertainment, it's now also used for education, news, marketing, and more. With its short-form video style and viral trends as the content highly made, TikTok offers a platform to express creativity and sharing experiences, and even fantasy about romances (Langlais, Boudreau, & Asad, 2024). One of the most popular types of content on TikTok is romance-related. Not just an individual topic shown in the video content, people are also able to show their intimacy of romantic relationships in TikTok as content they upload. Many couples share moments of their relationship, offer relationship tips and tricks in creative ways.

While TikTok's entertainment value is clear, its role in constructing gendered romantic ideals remains underexplored. Over time, this kind of content has contributed to the formation of certain expectations among viewers, often referred to by participants as the "TikTok standard," particularly within the Indonesian TikTok context. These expectations are shaped by culturally situated content and algorithmic curation, influencing how users perceive what constitutes a "good" or ideal romantic relationship. "TikTok standard" that TikTok users are mainly talking about now is talking about a set of a standard that counts as a good relationship based on the trend or dynamics talked about in the content on TikTok itself. For example, when a relationship must follow what people on TikTok usually set like men must pay the bills of a date or when women need to wear less make up so their partner will not feel disappointed when they erase their makeup. This standard is also closely tied with "bare

minimum” trends, it is where users of TikTok explain which one is the bare minimum in a relationship and needs to be done along the relationship and which one is actually the special treatment. TikTok standards often reflect the traditional gender expectations which occur in the financial aspect and its responsibility on men. Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999) also explained these behaviors are not merely all natural but are also constructed over the generations and times, then shaping how a person views and behaves in a relationship. In the TikTok standard, it is reflected in the idea that men should always to pay, lead, and initiate in the relationship, which is aligned with traditional male provider roles based from the Social Role theory.

A romantic relationship is a connection between two people that involves love, affection, emotional closeness, and often physical attraction. However, over time, romantic relationships may not always be rooted in what can be described as sincere emotions. In this study, sincere emotions refer to feelings that are demonstrated through consistent emotional engagement, mutual commitment, open communication, and genuine care for a partner’s well-being, rather than relationships formed primarily due to loneliness, social pressure, convenience, or external validation. They can form for various reasons, for example, a person might enter a relationship simply because they feel lonely and want companionship immediately. In other cases, the motivation might be influenced by social pressure, convenience, or even a desire for validation. Being in a romantic relationship also involves a range of emotional and interpersonal skills, such as effective communication, conflict resolution, setting healthy boundaries, and building trust. According to Davila et al. (2021), these skills are essential for increasing healthier relationships and can be effectively taught from a young age. Introducing these concepts early on helps prevent common relationship problems that often appear when such skills are only learned after problems have already occurred. TikTok not only entertains but also educates its viewers about what love should look like, who should do what in a relationship, and how partners should express their emotions (Siddhartha & Darbari, 2025).

At the same time, gender has roles in shaping how these expectations are internalized. Gill’s work on media and gender roles guides our examination of TikTok’s “bare minimum” trends. Men and women may interpret the same content differently based on social norms, personal experiences, and gendered stereotypes (Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) argues that media representations often promote the form of “mediated femininity” where women are encouraged to expect a real visible emotional and financial proof of an affection from their partners. On TikTok this could be seen from the trend “if he wanted to, he would,” which is framing effort as the evidence of affection and worth of a relationship. These representations might appear empowering but it still linger on traditional gender expectations where men must do most of the actions and women feel and evaluate it. Moreover, many contents in TikTok regarding romantic relationships have many different outcomes because of the gender roles that TikTok users emphasize in the content. Starting from discussion about bare minimum, gender roles in relationships have become an interesting topic to discuss in TikTok specially when many users share their thoughts on the comment sections. The gender male and female here might be pressured because of some unwritten rules society has set them up and slowly affect the ideas of how one gender must act in a relationship. This study will explore how TikTok contributes to the construction of romantic expectations across genders before and after they are served with three different kinds of related video to express their idea. Male and female audiences may have different results and expectations to contrast between both gender expectations on romance.

Although previous studies have explored the influence of social media on romantic perceptions, the focus on the differences between male and female perceptions remains undiscovered. Platforms like TikTok, which present short-form videos have become influential in forming audiences’ views on relationships. However, there is a lack of research examining how this specific content specifically impacts romantic expectations across genders. Despite evidence that men and women may internalize media messages differently, existing literature rarely addresses the gendered interpretations of such content. Existing studies mention social media’s impact, but not how TikTok’s algorithm-driven visual, short-form content uniquely shapes gendered expectations. This study fills that gap by qualitatively analyzing how TikTok content forms romantic ideals among male and female college students within the Indonesian context. This study examines how TikTok’s romance-related content reinforces gendered expectations, shaping what men and women perceive as “ideal” relationships.

2. METHOD

This research employs qualitative methods, which provides insights into complex phenomena, focusing on human behavior, culture, and social norms. They explore subjective experiences and perceptions, offering a nuanced understanding often unattainable through quantitative methods alone (Creswell, 2014). This research interprets the meanings that TikTok users associate with romantic content, using both interviews to collect data.

This research used interviews as one of techniques to collect data to allow participants to freely express their thoughts while the researcher maintains some guidance through key thematic questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). With using interviews as our way to collect data, we aim to explore more about the reason behind the decisions of the person behind the experiences based on their perspective from each male and female perceptions. The flexibility of this format helps capture both expected and emergent themes (Kvale, 2007). Participants were selected based on purposive sampling, focusing on college students who are TikTok users and

frequently engage with romance-related content. Purposive sampling targeted depth over breadth, focusing on active TikTok users aged 19–23 who regularly engage with romance content. There are 6 University students between 19-23 are chosen because they are ideal for this study because they highly use TikTok daily and understand the algorithm of the trend as well. Some of the participants also have been and currently are in a relationship which makes the interview could help to better understand the decisions they have made as well as those that are still topical to the current one being analyzed.

Participants were presented with three videos relevant to the topic collected by using the keywords #BareMinimum as the highlight point of the video. The hashtag #BareMinimum are chosen because the video contained under the hashtag is more relevant especially in terms of discourse about “Does Split Bill is actually the bare minimum in a relationship?” and other discourse about the right dynamics of a relationship which relate to the topic of this research. The first video is talking about the bare minimum of male to give affirmation and then the following two is male owned videos talking about the terms of “Split bill” occurring in a relationship. The video is then followed by a structured interview to stimulate discussion and gather their responses and perspectives. Especially in terms of romantic expectations. Each interview was conducted individually and recorded with the participant’s consent. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes per participant. All interviews were conducted in person, depending on participant availability and convenience, and were later summarized for analysis. This study was conducted with the informed consent of all participants, who were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of their responses throughout the research process. Researcher reflexivity was maintained by journaling assumptions about gender roles to minimize bias during analysis.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

Before having the exposure with the romantic TikTok content presented, male participants mostly held traditional but personally moderated views regarding romantic relationships especially around financial and emotional roles. As shown in Table 1, most of them believed men should take the role of provider while other one expressed that it should be something discussed together. Participant 1 believes that being able to provide financially is a sign of seriousness in a relationship which could be rooted from past ideas of masculine roles. Similarly, participant 2 accepted and agreed with the expectation but did not seem to be too emotionally invested in the idea, he described himself only as a casual viewer who didn’t take romantic content on TikTok very seriously. These responses align with culturally constructed male roles described in Social Role Theory. However for participant 3, he differed slightly by saying that in a relationship when there is a matter, it needs to be expressed and needs a more communicative and collaborative view specially for financial matters.

Emotionally, all three male participants described men as expected to remain rational and reserved. Participant 1 highlighted that “men have to be strong” and not show sadness, while Participant 2 showed a detached stance, expressing minimal emotional influence from the media and not really influenced by what is trending currently at the moment. In contrast, Participant 3 held neutral and personal views on love, believing the importance of emotional honesty and connection. These pre-exposure responses show that while participants acknowledged traditional gender roles, some were already beginning to question them especially in areas involving communication and shared responsibility.

Table 3.1. Pre-exposure Perceptions – Male Participants

Male	Pre-exposure		
	Financial Aspects	Emotional Aspects	Ideal Preferences
Participant 1	Man tend to be the provider	Not deeply shaped by media; more logical. Men have to be the one who is strong, not showing their sadness.	Not influenced by trends; focuses on real-life experience.
Participant 2	Men tend to be the provider	Casual viewer, didn't take romantic content seriously.	No clear “ideal” type; values caring personality.
Participant 3	Viewed money matters as something to discuss; believed communication is key in things like split bills.	Neutral; had personal ways of viewing love and relationships.	Values genuine connection and communication

Before being exposed to TikTok's romance-related content, female participants showed a range of perspectives that leaned toward realistic, flexibility, and self-reliance in romantic expectations. As shown in Table 2, Participants 1 and 2 both conveyed comfort with financial independence, expressing no strong expectations that their partners must fulfill a provider role. Participant 1 was open to the idea of splitting bills and believed that actions, rather than words or gifts, were more meaningful in a relationship. Likewise, Participant 2 described herself as someone who could financially support herself and had personal romantic preferences that were not overly demanding.

Participant 3, however, approached romantic ideals from a more fictional or fantasy-based perspective, often shaped by K-pop idols and media representations rather than personal or social experiences. Although her standards were idealistic, she remained highly critical of romantic portrayals on TikTok, noting that many of them promote exaggerated or one-sided love. She expressed awareness of how such content can influence others' expectations while reaffirming that open communication and mutual respect were more realistic goals in a relationship.

Overall, the female participants, whether grounded in personal experience or shaped by fantasy, showed a strong ability to differentiate between idealized romance and practical relationship dynamics, signalling thoughtful and reflective engagement with romantic ideals even before exposure to curated media content.

Table 3.2. Pre-exposure Perceptions – Female Participants

Female	Pre-exposure		
	Financial Aspects	Emotional Aspects	Ideal Preferences
Participant 1	Open to split bills, flexible in money matters.	Valued actions over words, had basic relationship understanding.	Realistic and open-minded about partner traits.
Participant 2	Comfortable financing herself; had no strong expectations.	Had personal romantic standards but wasn't overly demanding.	Did not expect perfection; open-minded about roles in a relationship.
Participant 3	Not strongly affected by TikTok standards; ideal partner comes from fictional standards (e.g., K-pop idols).	Already had advanced or fictional expectations—so not easily influenced.	Feels that romantic TikToks often show one-sided love or unrealistic affection (e.g., gifts, looks). Realizes communication is key to managing emotional expectations and ensuring fairness in a relationship.

After watching TikTok content centered around romance and gender expectations, male participants experienced varying degrees of reflection and resistance. As shown in Table 3, all three participants became more aware of social pressures around financial contributions especially regarding the ongoing debate over split bills. Participant 1 began to associate financial effort with emotional sincerity, stating that men paying for things reflects seriousness in a relationship. He opposed the idea of women paying, except when it comes to giving gifts.

Participant 2 also recognized the rising expectations placed on men and described the pressure as both challenging and motivating. He acknowledged that media content sets high emotional and financial standards but emphasized the need for mutual communication over one-sided effort. Meanwhile, Participant 3 expressed the strongest resistance to TikTok norms, arguing that content often promotes false standards of masculinity. He disagreed with the idea that men should always pay or act first, describing it as an outdated mindset.

Emotionally, all three participants were influenced by the idea that men should be more expressive, although their reactions differed. Participant 1 stated that men can now show their sadness to loved ones, suggesting a loosening of emotional restraints.

Table 3.3. Post-exposure Perceptions – Male Participants

Male	Pre-exposure		
	Financial Aspects	Emotional Aspects	Ideal Preferences
Participant 1	Pressured by split-bill debates, believes men paying = seriousness, disagrees with women paying (except gifts).	Felt some pressure as a man; uses content as a lesson, believes men must “prove” themselves more in modern dating. But also, men still can show their sadness to the women they love.	No major shift, not really a demanding person, especially to his partner.
Participant 2	Recognizes rising expectations from women; sees “provider” role as men’s bare minimum; uses pressure as motivation.	Sees that media sets standards and creates competition; feels emotional expectations but tries to stay neutral.	Learns more about women’s hopes; values mutual communication over unrealistic standards.
Participant 3	Aware that some expect men to always pay; sees this as unrealistic and lacking communication; believes such content promotes false standards of masculinity.	Feels slight pressure; notices expectations placed on men to always provide or act first.	Preferred natural connection, shared hobbies like singing, after consuming similar contents.

After being exposed to curated TikTok videos on romantic expectations, female participants showed increased sensitivity toward emotional and financial standards in relationships. As shown in Table 4, all three participants showed changes even though to varying degrees in how they evaluated potential partners. Participant 1 expressed that men should show financial effort to prove their love, a view that emerged after engaging with viral trends like “need a man that is more than just words” This led her to reflect more on her own expectations, though it also resulted in feelings of insecurity due to the emotional pressure these standards created.

Participant 2 similarly began to re-evaluate her views on split bills, noting that financial contribution from a man could be an indicator of effort and care. She felt validated by seeing others express similar thoughts on TikTok, and began to embrace visible emotional gestures as meaningful, not excessive. Participant 3, however, remained critical. Although aware of the so-called “TikTok standards” like two-digit incomes or lavish gifts, she described these expectations as exaggerated and unrealistic. She emphasized the need for communication and shared responsibility in relationships, maintaining a balanced perspective. Despite their individual differences, all participants showed a strong ability to reflect on TikTok’s influence, selectively integrating certain values while also recognizing media exaggeration.

Table 3.4. Post-exposure Perceptions – Male Participants

Female	Pre-exposure		
	Financial Aspects	Emotional Aspects	Ideal Preferences
Participant 1	Expects men to show financial effort, influenced by "men should pay" norm	Feels emotional pressure, agrees with “actions > words,” notices toxic expectations, sometimes feels insecure.	More ideal standards formed, influenced by trends (e.g., “if he wanted, he would”), self-reflection increases, sometimes overwhelmed by high expectations.
Participant 2	Began questioning things like split bills; now feels that if a guy	Feels more validated in her desires; realizes it's okay to want affection	Influenced by romantic content and standards shown—expects more

	wants to show he cares, effort—including financial—is a part of it. Believes men are often expected to be providers.	and emotional investment since many others feel the same. Believes in mutual love, especially valuing visible care from the male partner.	effort and gestures from a partner, but still filters out what she sees as excessive. Believes the ideal partner is attentive, affectionate, and willing to show effort (not just words).
Participant 3	Aware of the "TikTok standards"—like men needing 2-digit income and always providing—but personally finds them exaggerated and unrealistic. Emphasizes that financial roles should be discussed and negotiated rather than expected one-sidedly.	Influenced more by fiction than reality (e.g., K-pop idol-type standards); acknowledges it's "unrealistic."	Still not swayed by romantic TikTok ideals. Believes ideal partners should think with both brain and heart—not just logic, but empathy too.

3.2. Discussion

Long exposure of watching related romance videos may slowly idealize and internalize some expectations to the others, especially their partners. Referring to Social role theories of sex by Alice H. Eagly in 1987 and soon developed by Wendy Wood in 1999, different behaviors and way of thinking of both male and female is not just primarily biological, but also constructed by their environment and also social and cultural expectations. According to Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999), differences in romantic expectations from both male and female participants are shaped not only by biological factors but also by the socially constructed roles each gender is expected to perform. These roles are transmitted culturally and reinforced through repeated exposure to gendered behavior, something TikTok does especially well through its algorithm-driven content. For example, the recurring image of the “nurturing girlfriend,” affectionate, emotionally available, and invested in her partner’s success reflects what Wood (1999) refers to as the evolution of domestic roles in modern media. In the past, women were confined to household responsibilities and now, the same nurturing role is digitally rebranded as emotional labor in relationships where women are still expected to manage emotional closeness while maintaining their attractiveness, patience, and care.

At the same time, female participants who initially reported being financially independent or neutral about split bills began adopting financial expectations from male partners after viewing TikTok content. This contradiction reflects the influence of Gill’s (2007) concept of mediated femininity, where women are encouraged to see themselves as both empowered and deserving of emotional and material investment from men. On TikTok, this plays out through trends like “if he wanted to, he would”, which present financial gestures not as dependency, but as proof of love and validation. Even women who started with flexible views began to internalize these expectations, showing how contemporary media narratives that frame women as empowered while still emphasizing traditional romantic expectations can reshape self-perception not by rejecting independence, but by redefining it through a romantic lens of being “worth the effort.”

In the past, society assigned specific roles to both males and females. Males are often expected to work in public roles, which most likely put them in leadership positions or in roles that require them to perform physically demanding work. Females, meanwhile, are assigned to domestic roles such as nurturing, which positions them as submissive. Over time, this traditional norm has passed through many generations and has been internalized and reconstructed in different forms, including within romantic relationships. In the contemporary era, males are often seen as individuals who are expected to lead and provide stability within relationships. Females, on the other hand, are commonly viewed as nurturing partners and are reinterpreted as the “feminine girlfriend,” whose value is frequently associated with beauty.

Based on the tables, among male participants, the perception of being the financial provider was already present prior to engagement with TikTok content. This role was described as a societal expectation rather than a personal preference, with participants associating financial responsibility with seriousness and commitment in relationships. Emotional restraint was also identified with men acknowledging the pressure to appear strong and emotionally self-contained. Following exposure to romantic TikTok content, some male participants reported increased

awareness of social comparisons and pressures, particularly surrounding debates on financial contribution (e.g., the "split bill" discourse) and expectations of emotional availability. While a few participants internalized these norms, others approached the content critically, viewing it as exaggerated or unrealistic, and instead emphasized the importance of mutual understanding and communication within relationships.

In contrast, female participants demonstrated more visible changes in their expectations after engaging with romantic TikTok content. Before exposure, many expressed openness to financial independence and flexibility in relationship dynamics, often prioritizing emotional authenticity over material gestures. However, following exposure to romantic narratives on TikTok, particularly those emphasizing male initiative and visible acts of affection, some participants heightened expectations regarding their partners' emotional and financial efforts. Trends such as "if he wanted to, he would" were perceived as validating the desire for more expressions of care. While these types of videos did shape their romantic ideals to a certain extent, participants showed critical engagement by distinguishing between their ideal standards and realistic relationship standards.

Both males and females take the exposure differently, some of them agree with the concept of "Split bill" in the video while others set the standard differently because of the degree of seriousness in the relationship. On the other hand, females are taking the exposure as new insight and also consideration for further set of expectations to calculate between ideal and realistic romantic relationships. While both are having two different takes on receiving new information, both male and female agree that romantic dynamics in a relationship can be discussed further by the people taking part in the relationship to maintain stability and also expectations of both people throughout the time. This actually shows that male and females have different ways of perception about what an ideal romantic relationship must be and their way of making a relationship keep going.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has examined the influence of TikTok's romance-related content on shaping gendered romantic expectations, with particular attention to how male and female audiences internalize such portrayals differently. Male participants tended to interpret financial responsibility and emotional restraint as socially misuse expectations, whereas female participants are more receptive to romantic gestures and emotional investment after engaging with the content. These results reflect the mechanisms described in Social Role Theory, where culturally embedded norms and repeated exposure to gendered messages inform individuals' perceptions of what is the ideal in a relationship. While some participants accepted these portrayals as reflective of reality, others demonstrated critical awareness, negotiating between romantic idealism and realistic expectations. The results of this study indicate the significance of media, particularly algorithm-driven platforms like TikTok, in shaping interpersonal expectations and relational dynamics among young audiences. Future research may consider adopting a cross-cultural approach to further explore how persistent engagement with romantic content affects belief systems and relationship satisfaction over time. Furthermore, integrating psychological frameworks such as attachment theory or impression formation could deepen how personal experiences interact with media influence in the construction of romantic ideals. Ultimately, this study underlined the evolving role of digital media in not only reflecting but actively informing contemporary understandings of gender and romance.

From a practical perspective, this study suggests the importance of promoting media literacy programs, particularly among youth and emerging adults, to address how TikTok's algorithm raises gendered relationship tropes. Educators and counselors could use these findings to encourage young people to reflect critically on the expectations they internalize from social media and how those expectations align or clash with healthy relationships in reality. This study also has several limitations. The small sample size (six participants) restricts the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the participants lacked diversity in cultural background and sexual identity, focusing only on heterosexual male and female perspectives. Another limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported TikTok usage, participants' screen time or content exposure was not verified, which may affect the accuracy of interpretations. For future research, it is recommended to include non-binary and LGBTQ+ participants to better understand how TikTok shapes expectations in non-heteronormative relationships. A quantitative approach, such as conducting sentiment analysis of viral romantic TikTok videos, could also provide deeper insights into how frequently certain gendered themes appear and how audiences respond. Expanding the participant base across cultures would offer more comparative perspectives on how relationship expectations differ depending on societal context and platform engagement.

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