

Perception of Romance Relationship Standards of Generation Z on TikTok

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Abstract

This research investigates how Generation Z perceives romantic relationship standards on TikTok, focusing on how curated content influences their expectations and emotional responses. TikTok introduces idealised romantic representations that shape how young people interpret love and relationships. This study applies Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception to examine how prior experiences, incomplete information, and digital cues influence users' perception of relationship reality. A qualitative phenomenological method was used, involving seven informants aged 18–24 from Jakarta and Bandung. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed using Jhonny Saldaña thematic analysis to identify patterns in how romantic content on TikTok shapes and reinforces romantic ideals. The findings show that informants often internalised unrealistic standards, resulting in insecurity, disappointment, and relational pressure. However, some developed awareness of the curated nature of such portrayals. Further studies may explore emotional well-being impacts, screen time, gender differences, and cultural contexts using quantitative methods to deepen understanding.

Keywords: Generation Z, TikTok, Romantic Relationship, Expectations

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana Generasi Z memandang standar hubungan romantis di TikTok, dengan fokus pada bagaimana konten yang dikurasi memengaruhi ekspektasi dan respons emosional mereka. TikTok memperkenalkan representasi romantis yang ideal yang membentuk cara pemuda memahami cinta dan hubungan. Studi ini menerapkan Teori Konstruktivis Persepsi Richard Gregory untuk menganalisis bagaimana pengalaman sebelumnya, informasi yang tidak lengkap, dan petunjuk digital memengaruhi persepsi pengguna terhadap realitas hubungan. Metode fenomenologis kualitatif digunakan, melibatkan tujuh informan berusia 18–24 tahun dari Jakarta dan Bandung. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik Jhonny Saldaña untuk mengidentifikasi pola bagaimana konten romantis di TikTok membentuk dan memperkuat idealisme romantis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa informan sering kali menginternalisasi standar yang tidak realistis, menyebabkan ketidakamanan, kekecewaan, dan tekanan hubungan. Namun, beberapa di antaranya mengembangkan kesadaran akan sifat terkurasi dari representasi tersebut. Studi lebih lanjut dapat mengeksplorasi dampak kesejahteraan emosional, waktu layar, perbedaan gender, dan konteks budaya menggunakan metode kuantitatif untuk memperdalam pemahaman.

Kata kunci: Generasi Z, TikTok, Hubungan Romantis, Ekspektasi

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital media and advances in communication technology have connected the world like never before. The internet has accelerated cross-country and cross-cultural communication, breaking down geographical barriers and creating a global community (Syahputra et al., 2024). Among these technologies, social media stands out as a major advancement, facilitating rapid sharing and interaction (Kamila, 2024). Tseng & Gonzalez (2023) highlighted the emergence of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, which have transformed how people communicate.

In Indonesia, social media accessibility and internet availability have created new social environments where information flows faster (Ma'ruf et al., 2024). With 139 million active social media users in January 2024, accounting for 49.9% of the population, social media has become integral to daily life in Indonesia (Kemp, 2024). Besides communication, these platforms offer spaces for self-expression, identity formation, and broad social interactions (Rosana & Fauzi, 2024). Social media plays a significant role in romantic relationships, especially among Generation Z, the generation raised in the digital age (de Lenne et al., 2020; Kaur, 2024). J. Zhang et al. (2023) emphasize that social media keeps individuals connected to personal networks and the global community, influencing their thoughts, behaviors, and expectations. This connectivity shapes how Generation Z perceives and manages romantic relationships.

Romantic relationship perception varies widely across cultures and is shaped by norms, media portrayals, and personal experiences (Arikewuyo et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2023). TikTok, as an influential platform, often portrays idealized, harmonious relationships, which impact Generation Z's expectations. This portrayal risks creating conflicts and dissatisfaction by setting unrealistic standards that do not match real-life experiences (G. Zhang, 2023). With its short video format and user-generated content, TikTok facilitates a participatory culture where users publicly share romantic expressions and experiences (O'Grady, 2022). Langlais et al. (2024) note this continuous connectivity enables sharing important life moments, including romantic relationships, shaping public perceptions and expectations.

TikTok's unique short, engaging videos have made it especially influential among Generation Z, which accounts for over 60% of its users worldwide (Scott, 2020; Espinoza & Weekes, 2024). In Indonesia alone, TikTok reached 113 million monthly active users in July 2024, ranking first globally in TikTok usage (Ceci, 2024). The platform's tailored content algorithms attract and sustain young audiences rapidly (Zhou, 2024). Content on TikTok widely covers lifestyle, beauty, and romantic relationships, promoting idealized romance through viral trends (Brian, 2023). Yu (2023) and Choudhary & Louis (2024) argue that TikTok normalizes standardized, ideal romantic relationships that influence users' interpersonal dynamics. Moss (2019) recognizes TikTok as a powerful influencer of romance ideals.

TikTok often showcases love stories without conflict, hiding the complexities of daily relationships (Aryani, 2024). Such portrayals encourage young users to develop unrealistic standards that can cause dissatisfaction and emotional distress when their real experiences fall short (Ahmed, 2023). Delle et al. (2022) link the gap between online representations and reality to negative effects on relationship quality. Social media offers Generation Z couples new means to emotionally connect and share their relationship journeys, as explained by Langlais et al. (2024). According to Abbasi (2019), social media also supports youths in identity development and self-reflection, while O'Grady (2022) highlights its changing role in how couples communicate successes and challenges publicly.

Perfectly framed, conflict-free relationships portrayed on social media can foster unrealistic expectations among young users (Coundouris et al., 2021). These portrayals contribute to a growing disconnect between idealized images of romance and the realities many couples face (Espinoza & Weekes, 2024). TikTok trends like "Princess Treatment" and "Not Lowering Your Standards" illustrate these idealized narratives, emphasizing pampering and high standards in relationships (Meilivia, 2024; Putri, 2024). Such trends encourage individuals to expect special treatment and to avoid settling for less, which many TikTok users reinforce by sharing personal tips and experiences (Putri, 2024). These portrayals shape a distorted perception of relationship norms, particularly impacting Generation Z couples who consume this content heavily (Aryani, 2024). Hertlein & Van Dyck (2020) warn this can lead to discord between social media images and real-life interpersonal relationships.

Generation Z, in their emerging adulthood (ages 18–24), actively explore their identities and relationship expectations (Arnett, 2023). Content depicting harmonious, conflict-free love creates expectations that are difficult to fulfill, causing tension when real relationships differ (Kaur, 2024; O'Reilly, 2020). Coundouris et al. (2021) stress that socially formed relationship expectations often do not match reality, affecting relationship quality. While studies have

explored online interviews about these dynamics, gaps remain in capturing spontaneous reactions and non-verbal cues in Generation Z's relationship experiences on TikTok (Langlais et al., 2024). This highlights the need to understand deeply how TikTok content influences romantic relationship standards amidst young adults still shaping their values and identities.

This study, titled "Perception of Romantic Relationship Standards of Generation Z on TikTok," aims to fill these gaps by conducting in-depth interviews. It seeks to reveal how TikTok content shapes Generation Z's romantic expectations and the conflicts this creates, enriching communication science research on social media's role in young people's interpersonal relationships in the digital era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception

Perception is the process through which individuals engage their senses to make sense of their surroundings and develop meaningful understandings. Unlike the passive reception model of learning, where information is simply absorbed, perception involves an active organization of sensory information, aided by prior knowledge and context. Démuth (2013) emphasizes that perception is not merely about receiving impulses but also about organizing them. According to Richard Gregory's constructivist theory, perception is an inferential process where the mind forms hypotheses about reality based on partial information and experiences. This perspective highlights the roles of expectations, context, and inferences in shaping perception, suggesting that it is a creative process influenced by an individual's cognitive tools and life history.

Gregory likens the perception process to scientific hypothesis testing, where the brain not only receives sensory data but also organizes and interprets it by comparing it to existing knowledge. This involves searching for meaning through conjectures that are tested against available information. When a hypothesis aligns with previous experiences and does not conflict with incoming stimuli, individuals perceive it as reality. Conversely, if there is a mismatch, the brain revises the hypothesis to achieve a more accurate understanding. This mechanism explains how humans can quickly recognize patterns and fill in gaps in incomplete information, such as reading words with missing letters or identifying vague shapes associated with familiar objects.

Three fundamental principles underpin Gregory's constructivist perception process: expectations, contextual adjustment, and conclusion inference. Expectations are shaped by past experiences, forming an initial framework for interpreting new sensory information. For instance, individuals may see faces in random patterns due to their familiarity with human features, a phenomenon known as pareidolia. Contextual adjustment refers to how the surrounding environment influences perception, providing additional clues that aid understanding. For example, hearing footsteps in an empty hallway at night may evoke fear, demonstrating how context alters perception. Lastly, conclusion inference involves making judgments about the identity or meaning of observed objects or events, often filling in information gaps based on prior knowledge.

These principles illustrate that perception is more than just receiving sensory information; it is a complex mental activity influenced by past experiences, context, and individual expectations. Gregory's constructivist theory contrasts with James Gibson's direct perception theory, which posits that all necessary information is available in the stimulus itself. Gregory argues that perception is an active construction process, where the brain functions like a scientist testing hypotheses about the world (Démuth, 2013, p. 34-35). This view emphasizes that perception is a subjective construction shaped by an individual's mental schema and experiences, as further elaborated by Cooper (2023), who notes that our understanding of the world is a result of mental constructions influenced by unique internal factors.

b. TikTok

TikTok is a social media platform launched by ByteDance in 2016, focused on creating and sharing short videos lasting between 15 and 60 seconds. It has gained immense popularity, particularly among younger users, with over 60% of its audience aged 16 to 24 (Adweek, 2020). The platform features a diverse range of content, including challenges, trends, and tutorials, and utilizes an algorithmic recommendation system that personalizes user experiences.

based on their interests and past behavior (Cheng & Li, 2024). This personalization allows users to discover various cultural practices, norms, and ideologies, including those related to romantic relationships (Brooke Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Firdausiah et al., 2023).

Generation Z, the primary audience on TikTok, uses the platform to express themselves and engage with the world through easily produced content. Features such as commenting, duets, and reactions facilitate public conversations about love, relationships, and lifestyle (Simpson et al., 2022). However, TikTok can also present exaggerated depictions of romantic relationships, showcasing idealized narratives where everything appears perfect. These portrayals contribute to the formation of social norms that shape how Generation Z perceives love and romance, emphasizing the importance of such relationships in their lives (Barry et al., 2024).

The platform's algorithm customizes user experiences, exposing them to specific themes, such as relationship idealization, based on their interests (Simpson et al., 2022). This creates a context where Generation Z can relate to perceived social standards and explore various models of identity and relationships. TikTok's community-driven nature allows users to create and share stories around their interpretations of love and romance, fostering a collective understanding of these concepts (Ionescu & Licu, 2023).

c. Romantic Relationships Standards on Social Media

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have significantly influenced romantic relationship standards by shaping public perceptions of love. Users often share curated posts showcasing idealized moments, such as gifts and affectionate gestures, which can lead to comparisons between personal relationships and the seemingly perfect portrayals online (Lestari & Kusuma, 2019). This frequent exposure can alter individual expectations about how partners should treat each other, creating a skewed understanding of romance that overlooks the everyday challenges couples face.

On Instagram, romantic content typically highlights joyful and beautiful scenes, while neglecting to depict daily issues or emotional distance. This selective sharing contributes to the perception that romance is effortless and perfect, influenced by cultural and religious values, particularly in places like Indonesia, where public displays of affection may be limited (Lestari & Kusuma, 2019). TikTok further amplifies these ideals through short, engaging videos that present fun and emotional couple content, particularly affecting Generation Z, who may question their own relationships in light of these portrayals.

The feedback mechanisms on social media, such as likes and comments, encourage users to maintain attractive romantic images, often leading couples to alter their communication to appear more appealing publicly (Langlais et al., 2024). This focus on online validation can detract from genuine emotional connections, resulting in misunderstandings and pressure within relationships. As these digital standards become more pervasive, individuals must learn to distinguish between idealized images and reality, recognizing that these norms are socially constructed and subject to change over time (Langlais et al., 2024; Lestari & Kusuma, 2019).

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The research paradigm serves as the philosophical framework guiding the entire research process, encompassing beliefs about understanding the world, acquiring knowledge, and employing appropriate research methods (Creswell, 2022). This study adopts a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meanings through social interactions. This approach is particularly relevant for exploring how Generation Z perceives romantic relationships through TikTok, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the dynamic processes involved in meaning formation (Turin et al., 2024). Additionally, the interpretive paradigm is integrated to analyze communication strategies couples use when their relationship expectations, shaped by TikTok, do not align with reality.

The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, specifically phenomenology, to explore Generation Z's interpretations of romantic relationships based on TikTok content (McLeod, 2024). This method focuses on non-

numerical data, such as personal experiences and narratives, to provide a rich understanding of how participants form their views of ideal relationships in a digital context (Sugiyono, 2013). The subjects of the study are active TikTok users aged 18-24, who are influenced by romantic narratives on the platform, while the object of research is the romantic relationship standards perceived through TikTok content.

Data collection methods include in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation. In-depth interviews allow for a deeper exploration of participants' subjective experiences, while non-participant observations enable the researcher to analyze TikTok content without direct interaction (Creswell, 2013). Documentation, such as screenshots of relevant TikTok content, supports the findings from interviews and observations. Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns and themes from the data, providing insights into the perceptions of romantic relationship standards among Generation Z shaped by TikTok (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure data validity, the study utilizes techniques such as triangulation, which involves comparing data from different informants to identify similarities and discrepancies (Miles et al., 2014). This approach enhances the credibility of the findings by cross-checking information gathered from various sources. By integrating constructivist and interpretive paradigms, the research aims to provide comprehensive insights into TikTok's influence on Generation Z's perceptions and dynamics of romantic relationships.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

a. Research Informant

This study involved seven key informants aged 18 to 24, all active TikTok users frequently exposed to relationship-themed content, residing in Jakarta and Bandung. The interviews aimed to explore how TikTok shapes their expectations of romantic relationships and the realities they experience. Informants were selected based on their intensity of romantic content consumption and emotional involvement with the platform, providing a primary basis for answering the research questions.

Additionally, the study included one supporting informant from Generation Z who uses TikTok but does not actively consume romantic content, allowing for a comparison of perceptions between users with varying exposure levels. To enhance data triangulation, an expert informant, a psychologist specializing in interpersonal relationship dynamics, was also included to provide an academic perspective on how TikTok influences romantic relationship standards among Generation Z. This expert insight helps connect individual experiences with broader concepts like expectation formation and idealization, enriching the analysis and interpretation of the research findings.

Table 4.1 Key Research Informant Data

No.	Name	Age	Domicile
1.	A.B.R	23	Jakarta
2.	D.J.P	21	Bandung
3.	D.N.A	20	Jakarta
4.	E.M.O	19	Bandung
5.	F.B.S	24	Bandung
6.	N.H.P	18	Jakarta
7.	R.B.A	22	Bandung

Table 4.2 Expert Research Informant Data

No.	Name	Description
1.	Mutia Qona'a, S.Psi., M.Psi	Psychological assessment, psychological counselling practice, also active as a lecturer at Telkom University.

b. Result

The study identifies three main themes from the thematic analysis of interview transcripts: Expectations, Contextual Adjustment, and Conclusion Inference. These themes illustrate how Generation Z formulates and navigates romantic relationship standards influenced by TikTok content. The analysis organizes participant experiences into broader categories, each containing sub-themes that provide a detailed understanding of how online content shapes romantic ideals. Informants' narratives consistently reflect the interplay between digital representation and personal interpretation, highlighting the complexity of their perceptions regarding love and relationships.

The first theme, Formation of Ideal Relationship Expectations, reveals that repeated exposure to curated TikTok videos fosters specific romantic expectations among Generation Z. According to Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception, individuals construct meaning by integrating past experiences with new stimuli, which is evident in how informants describe their shifting perceptions. TikTok's portrayal of affectionate gestures and constant communication sets emotional and behavioral standards that informants adopt as norms, significantly influencing their views on ideal partnerships. These expectations encompass both cognitive recognition and emotional longing, shaping how participants evaluate their relationships.

Within this theme, the sub-theme Influence of TikTok Content on Building Expectations highlights how frequent viewing of romantic content intensifies participants' anticipations of love expression. Informants express concerns about whether their partners can meet these digitally magnified expectations, leading to insecurity and anxiety regarding their relationship adequacy. The allure of idealized romance creates standards that real-life relationships often struggle to match, raising important questions about the impact of digital media on emotional well-being.

The second broad theme, Navigating Romantic Expectations through Social and Digital Validation, examines how participants adapt their relationship ideals within digital culture. Trends like #princess_treatment and #not_lowering_your_standards significantly influence how informants assess their partners' efforts and their self-worth. The heightened expectations created by these viral phenomena provoke anxiety and overthinking about relationship health, compounded by public engagement metrics like likes and comments that validate or challenge perceived norms. This theme reveals the socio-digital mechanisms reinforcing romantic ideals and the pressures they create.

The third major theme, Inferring Romantic Relationships from Curated TikTok Content, investigates how Generation Z assesses their relationships through digitally constructed narratives. Informants often feel their relationships are insufficient when contrasted with TikTok's idealized portrayals, generating doubts and diminished satisfaction. Many

acknowledge that this effect stems from selectively edited content that omits ordinary struggles, highlighting the emotional cost of digital idealization. Additionally, the sub-theme Awareness of Unrealistic Expectations shows that some informants recognize the curated nature of TikTok content, allowing them to temper their expectations and foster a more balanced perspective on relationships.

The Emotional Gap between Expectations and Reality captures the dissatisfaction many experience when their relationships do not meet TikTok-inspired ideals. This gap arises from the dissonance between everyday relational realities and the extraordinary romantic scenarios presented online, leading to feelings of disappointment and insecurity. Furthermore, the Practical Gap in Lifestyle and Resource Limitations addresses the challenges participants face in meeting TikTok's romantic standards due to real-life constraints, such as time and finances, which create a divide between idealized portrayals and lived experiences.

Together, these themes provide a comprehensive picture of how TikTok influences Generation Z's romantic relationship perceptions and experiences. The findings reveal a complex interplay between idealized digital representations and personal realities, mediated by social validation and contextual factors. This nuanced understanding underscores TikTok's dual role as both an inspiration for romantic ideals and a source of anxiety and unrealistic expectations, offering valuable direction for future research, relationship education, and media literacy initiatives.

c. Discussion

This subchapter delves into the thematic maps created for each theme, illustrating the relational patterns among themes and sub-themes identified in the research. These maps serve as visual tools that clarify how Generation Z perceives romantic relationship standards on TikTok, influenced by curated content, social comparison, and internalised expectations. By linking qualitative insights with thematic coding analysis, the maps provide a structured overview that enhances the credibility of the findings. They also help visualize how TikTok content shapes idealised relationship models, emotional responses, and behaviors among young adults, ensuring that interpretations align closely with the data and research questions.

The formation of ideal relationship expectations is a key theme, highlighting how Generation Z develops standards through repeated exposure to romantic TikTok content. Informants indicated that their expectations were shaped by emotional displays, influencer portrayals, and material gestures, which were often based on selective digital representations rather than real experiences. This aligns with Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception, where expectations emerge from prior exposure and cognitive interpretation of incomplete visual inputs. The thematic map illustrates four sub-themes: Influence of TikTok Content, Influencers as Models, Idealised Goals, and Internalised Romantic Concepts, demonstrating how participants structured their cognitive expectations based on online consumption.

Navigating romantic expectations through digital surroundings reveals how Generation Z adjusts their standards based on TikTok trends and public responses. Informants reported that viral trends, such as #princess-treatment, influenced their perceptions of what love should look like, leading to emotional responses and self-comparison. The pressure to meet these standards was exacerbated by public validation through likes and comments, which served as social proof of romantic ideals. This aligns with Gregory's theory, which posits that context significantly affects perception formation, as informants interacted with external responses and popular narratives online.

The theme of inferring romantic relationships from curated TikTok content captures how repeated exposure leads to cognitive conclusions about love. Informants often interpreted incomplete digital cues as reality, resulting in emotional reactions and assumptions about their own relationships. Despite recognizing the idealised nature of TikTok

portrayals, many participants felt their relationships were lacking when compared to the curated content. This reflects Gregory's idea that individuals construct meaning from incomplete inputs, leading to emotional dissatisfaction when real-life experiences do not match internalised portrayals.

Ultimately, the perception of romantic standards is actively constructed through repeated digital exposure, as TikTok provides symbolic patterns of romantic gestures and emotional intensity. These digital representations become the filter through which real relationships are interpreted, often resulting in misalignment and pressure. Expert informant Mutia Qona'a emphasized that such exposure alters how love is understood, measured not by context or history but by repetition and visibility. Consequently, the idealised portrayals on TikTok shape Generation Z's expectations, leading to emotional gaps and dissatisfaction in their real-life relationships.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

a. Conclusion

This study investigates how Generation Z perceives and engages with the romantic relationship standards depicted on TikTok, grounded in Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception. The findings reveal that romantic expectations among Generation Z are significantly shaped by repeated exposure to curated TikTok content, where affectionate gestures like surprise gifts and daily affirmations become the norm for expressing love. These expectations are not based on real-life experiences but are cognitively constructed through emotionally charged media portrayals. According to Gregory's theory, individuals form expectations from prior experiences and consistent, incomplete information, leading them to interpret these portrayals as templates for real relationships.

Additionally, Generation Z's understanding of romantic norms is influenced by the context surrounding digital content, including popular TikTok trends and comment sections that provide social validation. Informants reported comparing their relationships to those praised online, which affected their perceptions of effort and emotional success. This adjustment aligns with Gregory's assertion that perception evolves through repeated and emotionally significant cues. Ultimately, the conclusions drawn from digital exposure led participants to feel that their real-life relationships fell short compared to the idealised portrayals on TikTok. Despite acknowledging the curated nature of the content, many internalised these representations as standards for emotional fulfilment, shaping their understanding of love and satisfaction.

b. Suggestions

Based on the research findings regarding Generation Z's perception of romantic relationship standards on TikTok, two key suggestions are proposed: academic and practical. Academically, future studies should explore how internalised digital standards influence emotional well-being and conflict resolution in relationships. Quantitative approaches may be employed to assess correlations with relationship satisfaction, while including variables such as screen time, content type, and gender. Cross-cultural perspectives are also encouraged to evaluate whether similar effects occur in different societal settings. Practically, Generation Z users should critically interpret romantic content rather than adopt it as a standard. Content creators are advised to produce more balanced portrayals of relationships, and educators, counsellors, and parents should promote emotional and digital literacy to foster realistic expectations and healthy relationship understanding.

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