



Algorithmic Intimacy and Toxic Relationship Narratives: How TikTok Shapes Youth Perceptions of Men and Romantic Roles

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become an influential space shaping young people's ideas about romantic relationships, gender roles, and partner expectations. In Indonesia, toxic relationship narratives using terms such as "cowo mokondo" (men perceived as economically dependent) and "cowo bingung" (men perceived as emotionally uncertain) have circulated through TikTok's recommendation system. This study explores how algorithmically circulated toxic relationship narratives shape youth perceptions of men and romantic roles. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 TikTok users aged 18-25 and observation of 50 TikTok videos on toxic relationship content, analyzed thematically. Findings reveal four themes: repeated exposure to toxic relationship content, perceived algorithmic intimacy, emotional identification with narratives, and reconstructed gendered romantic expectations. Repeated exposure may increase suspicion toward men, reinforce expectations of male financial and emotional responsibility, and simplify relationship problems into viral gender labels, although such content can also help users recognize unhealthy patterns and set boundaries. TikTok thus functions not merely as entertainment but as a psychological and cultural space for constructing meanings about masculinity and romantic commitment. These findings contribute to digital psychology by highlighting algorithmic intimacy's role in shaping gendered youth perceptions in Indonesia, though the small, purposive sample limits statistical generalizability.

Keywords: algorithmic intimacy; tiktok; toxic relationship; gendered stereotyping; masculinity; romantic roles

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of TikTok has transformed how young people encounter, interpret, and discuss romantic relationships. Unlike conventional social media platforms that rely primarily on deliberate friendship networks, TikTok operates through a highly personalized recommendation system that continuously curates short-form videos based on users' viewing behavior, likes, comments, searches, and engagement patterns. As a result, users may repeatedly encounter emotionally charged relationship narratives even when they do not intentionally search for such content. This algorithmic environment has made TikTok not only a source of entertainment but also a digital space where young people learn, negotiate, and reproduce ideas about intimacy, gender roles, partner expectations, and romantic conflict (Boeker et al., 2022; Langlais et al., 2024).

One increasingly visible phenomenon in Indonesian TikTok culture is the circulation of toxic relationship narratives involving gendered labels such as “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung.” In this study, “cowo mokondo” is defined as a regional Indonesian slang term used to describe men who are perceived as economically dependent, unwilling to contribute materially, or lacking responsibility in romantic relationships. Meanwhile, “cowo bingung” refers to men who are portrayed as emotionally uncertain, indecisive, inconsistent, or confused about commitment and romantic responsibility. Although these expressions are informal and culturally specific, they represent broader psychological and social issues: the labeling of men through economic usefulness, emotional reliability, and conformity to expected masculine roles. When repeatedly presented through humorous, dramatic, or judgmental TikTok content, these labels may shape young audiences’ perceptions of men and romantic relationships.

The objective of this study is to investigate how exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives influences youth perceptions of men and romantic roles, with particular attention to the role of algorithmic intimacy. Algorithmic intimacy refers to the perceived sense that a digital platform understands, reflects, and emotionally responds to the user’s personal experiences or identity through personalized content recommendation. In the context of TikTok, this may occur when users feel that the For You Page repeatedly presents relationship videos that seem relevant to their own romantic experiences, fears, or expectations. Prior research on perceived algorithm responsiveness has shown that users may experience algorithms as responsive when recommended content appears aligned with their identity, needs, and goals (Taylor & Choi, 2022). Therefore, this study examines whether algorithmically curated toxic relationship content may intensify users’ emotional identification with negative romantic narratives and influence their gendered perceptions.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, young people increasingly use TikTok as a source of social knowledge, including knowledge about dating, commitment, partner selection, and warning signs in relationships. Langlais et al., (2024) found that TikTok plays a meaningful role in emerging adults’ romantic relationship experiences, including how they communicate, flirt, interpret relationship situations, and share relational content. Similarly, TikTok content has been found to influence young adults’ perceptions of marriage and relationships by shaping attitudes toward romantic expectations and relational decision-making (Cherukut et al., 2025).

These findings suggest that TikTok is not merely a passive platform for entertainment; it can function as a symbolic environment where romantic norms are constructed and circulated. Beyond its theoretical contribution, understanding this process also carries practical relevance for platform designers seeking to moderate harmful gendered content, for mental health practitioners supporting young clients navigating online relationship narratives, and for digital media educators developing critical literacy programs for youth; these practical implications are elaborated further in the Discussion.

Second, toxic relationship content may have psychological implications because it often simplifies complex relational experiences into viral labels, moral judgments, and gendered stereotypes. Although such content may help users recognize harmful behaviors, it may also encourage overgeneralization, suspicion, and negative stereotyping. In this context, repeated exposure to videos portraying men as financially exploitative, emotionally immature, or

commitment-avoidant may contribute to biased perceptions of male partners and transactional expectations in romantic relationships. This issue is relevant to digital psychology because TikTok's short-video format may amplify emotionally intense messages and increase the perceived normality of particular relationship problems.

Systematic reviews have shown that problematic TikTok use is associated with mental health concerns and that TikTok exposure can influence psychological well-being, especially among adolescents and young users (Conte et al., 2025; Jain et al., 2025). Broader reviews of youth social media use similarly point to elevated risks of psychological distress, sleep disruption, and mental health difficulties associated with intensive or problematic engagement (Agyapong-Opoku et al., 2025; Rogowska & Lechowicz, 2025; Shannon et al., 2022), while gender-identity-related patterns of social media use have been linked to differences in psychosocial adjustment among young users (Coyne et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2022). These findings reinforce the relevance of examining not only how frequently young people encounter toxic relationship content, but also how such exposure intersects with gender in shaping psychological outcomes.

Previous studies have discussed TikTok's influence on romantic relationships, social connection, mental health, and algorithmic personalization. Boeker et al., (2022) demonstrated that TikTok's recommendation system is affected by user interaction signals such as following, liking, and viewing behavior, which can shape the type of content users repeatedly receive. Taylor & Choi, (2022) introduced the concept of perceived algorithm responsiveness, explaining how users may interpret algorithms as attentive to their identity and personal goals. Langlais et al., (2024) specifically examined how emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships, while Cherukut et al., (2025) explored the role of TikTok in shaping relationship and marriage attitudes among young adults. Together, these studies provide a foundation for understanding TikTok as a psychological and relational environment.

However, there remains a gap in the literature. Existing research has generally examined TikTok use, romantic relationships, mental health, or algorithmic personalization separately. Limited attention has been given to how algorithmically curated toxic relationship narratives shape gendered perceptions of men and romantic roles, especially in culturally specific contexts such as Indonesia. Moreover, slang-based labels such as “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung” have not been sufficiently examined as digital psychological phenomena, even though they are widely used in online relationship discourse. The novelty of this study lies in integrating algorithmic intimacy, toxic relationship narratives, and gendered romantic perception into one explanatory model. More specifically, studies on TikTok and gender have tended to examine gendered patterns of platform use and self-presentation rather than gendered relationship narratives (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024), while research on social media and gender identity has largely focused on psychosocial adjustment outcomes rather than romantic role perception (Bakhyt et al., 2025).

Likewise, although Praptiningsih et al., (2024) examined toxic relationship communication among youth through a self-love intervention lens, that study did not address how algorithmically personalized platforms such as TikTok actively shape exposure to such narratives. Similarly, work on algorithmic personalization on TikTok has clarified how the recommendation system responds to user behavior Boeker et al., (2022) and how users perceive

algorithms as responsive to their identity (Taylor & Choi, 2022), but has not examined whether this perceived responsiveness intensifies emotional identification with gendered, toxic relationship content specifically. This study addresses these combined gaps by situating algorithmic intimacy, toxic relationship discourse, and gendered romantic perception within a single Indonesian youth context.

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives that help explain how repeated, algorithmically curated exposure translates into gendered romantic perception. Cultivation theory proposes that repeated and prolonged exposure to consistent media messages gradually shapes viewers' assumptions about social reality, particularly when messages recur across many pieces of content (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Applied to TikTok, this perspective suggests that the recurrence of “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung” narratives across the For You Page may cultivate a generalized belief that men are typically financially unreliable or emotionally inconsistent, independent of any single video's content.

Social comparison theory further explains why users evaluate their own relationships and partners against the standards depicted online, since individuals have an inherent tendency to assess their opinions, abilities, and circumstances relative to others (Tesser & Campbell, 1981; 1994); this helps account for why participants in the present study measured their own partners, or themselves, against the idealized or vilified figures portrayed in TikTok relationship content. Finally, parasocial and algorithmic-intimacy perspectives suggest that repeated, personalized media exposure can foster a one-sided sense of closeness or understanding between an audience and a media source (Horton et al., 1956), which in the context of an algorithmic platform extends to a felt relationship between the user and the recommendation system itself.

Consistent with this view, perceived algorithmic responsiveness has been shown to shape how users interpret content as personally relevant (Taylor & Chen, 2024; Taylor & Choi, 2022), and identity-related processes on social media, including self-comparison and identity mirroring, have been shown to intensify emotional engagement with personalized content (Nursyahwalny et al., 2025; Pérez, 2024). Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for understanding why algorithmic intimacy may intensify, rather than simply accompany, the influence of toxic relationship narratives on youth perceptions of men and romantic roles.

This study investigates four main variables: exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives, perceived algorithmic intimacy, youth perceptions of men, and romantic role expectations. Exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives refers to the frequency and intensity with which users encounter content discussing toxic partners, male dependency, male confusion, red flags, and gendered relationship complaints. Perceived algorithmic intimacy refers to the extent to which users feel that TikTok's personalized content reflects their own emotional experiences, identity, or relationship concerns. Youth perceptions of men refer to beliefs or judgments about men's reliability, responsibility, emotional maturity, and economic contribution in romantic relationships. Romantic role expectations refer to beliefs about how men and women should behave, contribute, sacrifice, or lead within romantic relationships.

Based on the above framework, this study proposes the following research propositions, framed qualitatively rather than as statistically testable hypotheses. RP1: Exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives is associated with more negative youth perceptions of men. RP2:

Exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives is associated with stronger transactional or traditional romantic role expectations. RP3: Perceived algorithmic intimacy is associated with greater emotional identification with toxic relationship narratives. RP4: Perceived algorithmic intimacy appears to mediate the relationship between exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives and youth perceptions of men. RP5: Perceived algorithmic intimacy appears to mediate the relationship between exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives and romantic role expectations.

Methodologically, this study uses a qualitative descriptive design involving young TikTok users who have encountered toxic relationship content on the platform. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews and digital content observation, allowing the study to capture participants' own interpretations, emotional responses, and meaning-making processes rather than testing statistical relationships among predefined variables. The interview and observational data are analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts and observed TikTok content.

This approach is appropriate because the study aims to understand how young people subjectively experience and make sense of algorithmically curated toxic relationship narratives, which requires depth of interpretation rather than statistical generalization. Through this qualitative approach, the study is expected to contribute to digital psychology, social media studies, and relationship research by explaining how algorithmically personalized toxic relationship content may shape young people's perceptions of men and romantic roles in contemporary digital culture.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore how TikTok toxic relationship narratives shape youth perceptions of men and romantic roles. The study was conducted through online recruitment of Indonesian TikTok users, drawing participants from several urban areas in Indonesia rather than a single institution, so as to capture a range of exposure to Indonesian-language toxic relationship content circulating on the platform.

The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences rather than measure statistical relationships. Data were collected from 25 young TikTok users aged 18–25 years who actively used TikTok and had encountered relationship-related content, particularly videos discussing toxic relationships, “cowo mokondo,” “cowo bingung,” red flags, male responsibility, and romantic expectations.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: being an active TikTok user, having watched relationship-related TikTok content within the last six months, and being willing to share personal interpretations of such content. Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, that is, until additional interviews no longer produced new codes or themes beyond the four major patterns reported below; saturation was judged to have occurred after the 22nd interview, with the remaining interviews confirming rather than expanding the coding structure.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and digital content observation. The interviews focused on participants' experiences of encountering toxic

relationship narratives, their understanding of gendered labels, their emotional responses to TikTok recommendations, and their perceptions of men's roles in romantic relationships. The interview guide covered four main domains: (1) participants' exposure experiences, including how frequently and in what circumstances they encountered toxic relationship content on their For You Page; (2) their emotional reactions to such content; (3) their interpretations of gendered labels such as "cowo mokondo" and "cowo bingung"; and (4) their perceptions of appropriate romantic roles for men and women. Representative guiding questions included: "Can you describe a time when TikTok showed you a video about toxic relationships or 'cowo mokondo'/'cowo bingung'?" "How did that video make you feel about men in relationships?" "Do you feel that TikTok understands your own relationship experiences? Why or why not?" and "What do you think a man should do to be considered a 'serious' or responsible partner?"

In addition, 50 TikTok videos related to toxic relationship discourse were observed to identify recurring themes, language patterns, gender stereotypes, and emotional framing. Videos were located using the TikTok in-app search function with Indonesian-language keywords, including "cowo mokondo," "cowo bingung," "red flag cowok," and "toxic relationship," and were screened for eligibility based on Indonesian-language content, direct relevance to romantic relationship dynamics, and a minimum view count threshold indicating meaningful circulation on the platform; the first 50 eligible videos meeting these criteria were retained for observation. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the stages of data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, and interpretation. To ensure data credibility, the study applied triangulation between interview data and observed TikTok content, while participant statements were compared to recurring digital narratives found on the platform.

Concretely, interview transcripts and observation notes were coded using a shared coding scheme, after which codes derived from each data source were compared through constant comparison: where interview accounts referenced a pattern also present in the observed videos (for example, the recurring framing of financial readiness as a marker of masculinity), the two sources were treated as mutually corroborating, whereas discrepancies between what participants reported and what was observed on the platform were flagged for closer interpretive attention rather than resolved by simply favoring one data source over the other. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining informed consent from all participants, anonymizing personal identities, and using publicly available TikTok content only for analytical purposes.

Reflexively, the research team approached the data as a mix of active and occasional TikTok users who had themselves encountered "cowo mokondo" and "cowo bingung" content prior to the study; this familiarity assisted in recognizing platform-specific idioms but also required deliberate bracketing of the researchers' own reactions to the content during coding, achieved through peer debriefing among the research team to check individual interpretations against the raw data. Through this method, the study sought to provide an in-depth understanding of how algorithmically circulated toxic relationship narratives influence young people's perceptions of masculinity, male responsibility, and romantic role expectations in contemporary digital culture.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 25 young TikTok users aged 18–25 years and digital observation of 50 TikTok videos related to toxic relationship narratives, “cowo mokondo,” “cowo bingung,” red flags, male responsibility, and romantic role expectations. The findings were analyzed using thematic analysis and resulted in four major themes: repeated exposure to toxic relationship content, algorithmic intimacy and emotional identification, negative perception of men, and the reconstruction of romantic role expectations. These themes address the research propositions stated in the Introduction by showing how TikTok toxic relationship narratives appear to shape youth perceptions of men and romantic roles through personalized algorithmic exposure.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Category	Description	Frequency
Total participants	Young TikTok users	25
Age range	18–25 years	25
Female participants	Women	15
Male participants	Men	10
Active TikTok use	Daily users	22
Moderate TikTok use	3–5 times per week	3
Had seen toxic relationship content	Yes	25
Had seen “cowo mokondo” content	Yes	21
Had seen “cowo bingung” content	Yes	18
Had interacted with relationship content through likes, comments, shares, or saving videos	Yes	19

Source: Data Processed

The participant data show that all informants had encountered toxic relationship content on TikTok, while most of them had specifically encountered the terms “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung.” This indicates that such labels are not isolated expressions but are part of a broader digital relationship discourse among young TikTok users. The findings also show that 19 participants had interacted with such content by liking, commenting, sharing, or saving the videos, suggesting that the algorithm may have received behavioral signals that strengthened the recurrence of similar content on their For You Page.

Table 2. Observed TikTok Content Themes

No.	Content Theme	Number of Videos	Percentage
1	Men as economically dependent or financially irresponsible	16	32%
2	Men as emotionally confused, indecisive, or inconsistent	11	22%
3	Red flags and toxic partner warning signs	10	20%
4	Women’s emotional disappointment in relationships	7	14%
5	Advice on leaving toxic relationships	6	12%
	Total observed videos	50	100%

Source: Data Processed

The digital observation revealed that the most dominant content theme was the portrayal of men as economically dependent or financially irresponsible, which appeared in 16 of the 50 videos observed. This theme was closely associated with the label “cowo mokondo,” which was commonly used to ridicule or criticize men who were perceived as unable or unwilling to provide material support in romantic relationships. The second most frequent theme was the portrayal of men as emotionally confused or inconsistent, appearing in 11 videos. This theme was associated with the label “cowo bingung,” which referred to men who were considered uncertain about commitment, unclear in communication, or unable to make firm relational decisions.

Conceptually, this first theme, repeated exposure to toxic relationship content, refers to the frequency with which participants encountered TikTok videos portraying men through negative gendered labels, and to the cumulative rather than one-off nature of this exposure. These findings are consistent with Proposition 1 (RP1), which suggested that exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives is associated with more negative youth perceptions of men. Although the study used a qualitative design and did not statistically test significance, the interview data strongly indicate that repeated exposure influenced participants’ tendency to generalize negative assumptions about men.

Several participants stated that after repeatedly seeing toxic relationship videos, they became more suspicious of male partners, especially regarding economic responsibility and emotional consistency. One female participant stated, “After seeing many videos about ‘cowo mokondo,’ I became more careful because I started thinking that many men only want benefits without responsibility” (P7). Read through a cultivation lens, P7’s statement illustrates how repeated exposure to a narrow set of framings, rather than any single video, appears to have generalized into a broader assumption about men’s trustworthiness; the shift from describing specific videos to describing “many men” suggests that the label had moved from a content-level observation to a schema participants applied more generally when evaluating partners.

Another participant said, “Sometimes TikTok makes it look like most men are confused and cannot commit, so I become afraid to trust easily” (P12). These statements show that the repeated circulation of gendered labels may shape cognitive and emotional interpretations of romantic partners. P12’s account further suggests that the effect is not purely cognitive: the phrase “afraid to trust easily” points to an emotional, precautionary orientation toward future partners, indicating that cultivated beliefs about men as a category can translate into anticipatory caution in participants’ own relational decision-making, not only into abstract judgments about others.

The findings are consistent with Mutmainna et al., (2025), who explained that social media can become a space where verbal aggression appears in various forms, including attacking character, competence, and self-concept. In the present study, the terms “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung” functioned as forms of symbolic and verbal labeling because they reduced complex male identities into simplified negative categories. This supports the view that digital interaction can intensify judgmental communication, especially when controversial topics such as romantic relationships and gender expectations are discussed

publicly. Mutmainna et al., (2025) also found that individuals with higher argumentativeness tend to show greater verbal aggression on social media, suggesting that online relationship discourse may easily shift from sharing experience to attacking identity.

Conceptually, the theme of reconstructed romantic role expectations refers to the way participants' standards for an acceptable male partner became more transactional and criterion-based, shifting from general qualities such as kindness toward specific, checkable markers such as income or decisiveness. The second finding relates to Proposition 2 (RP2), which suggested that exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives is associated with stronger transactional or traditional romantic role expectations. The results showed that 17 of 25 participants associated ideal male roles with financial readiness, decisiveness, emotional certainty, and leadership in romantic relationships.

Although participants acknowledged that relationships should be based on mutual support, many also stated that TikTok relationship content strengthened the belief that men must prove seriousness through financial and emotional stability. One participant explained, "If a man is not financially ready, TikTok makes it seem like he should not start a relationship" (P3). Another participant said, "The videos make women think that if a man is confused, he is not serious" (P16). These statements suggest that TikTok narratives appear to reinforce traditional and transactional expectations in which men are evaluated through economic contribution and emotional certainty.

Both P3 and P16 frame "seriousness" as something inferred from external, TikTok-legible markers, financial readiness and decisiveness, rather than from qualities observed directly within the relationship; this suggests that toxic relationship discourse may function less as a description of individual partners and more as a public checklist that participants apply when judging whether a relationship, and a man, is worth pursuing.

This finding is supported by Kusmardani, (2024), who reported that economic pressure and marital conflict are among the major factors contributing to relationship breakdown in Indonesian families. Although their study focused on divorce rather than dating relationships, it shows that economic issues are socially recognized as important factors in relationship stability. In the present study, TikTok narratives transformed economic responsibility into a viral standard for evaluating male worth in romantic relationships. Therefore, economic discourse did not appear only as a practical issue but also as a symbolic measure of masculinity and romantic eligibility.

Conceptually, the theme of algorithmic intimacy and emotional identification refers to participants' felt sense that TikTok's recommendation system was personally attuned to their emotional state, rather than presenting content at random. The third finding is consistent with Proposition 3 (RP3), which suggested that perceived algorithmic intimacy is associated with greater emotional identification with toxic relationship narratives. Most participants reported that TikTok's For You Page often presented relationship videos that felt personally relevant to their own experiences, fears, or expectations. A total of 20 participants stated that the content seemed to "understand" their emotional condition, especially after they watched, liked, or saved similar videos. One participant stated, "When I was having problems with my partner, TikTok suddenly showed many videos about toxic relationships. It felt like TikTok knew what I was feeling" (P9).

Another participant said, “The more I watched videos about red flags, the more similar videos appeared. After that, I felt that my own relationship might also be toxic” (P18). Drawing on the parasocial and algorithmic-intimacy perspective outlined earlier, P9’s statement that “it felt like TikTok knew what I was feeling” illustrates how a one-sided, personalized information flow can be experienced as a form of understanding usually reserved for close relationships, even though the recommendation system has no actual awareness of the user’s situation. P18’s account extends this further: the escalation from watching red-flag videos to reappraising their own relationship as potentially toxic suggests that algorithmic intimacy does not merely reflect users’ existing concerns back to them, but can actively prompt reinterpretation of one’s own relationship in light of the labels the platform repeatedly surfaces.

This finding demonstrates the role of algorithmic intimacy. Participants did not perceive TikTok content as random; rather, they interpreted repeated recommendations as emotionally meaningful. This supports the concept that personalized algorithms can produce a sense of closeness between users and platforms. In this study, algorithmic intimacy occurred when participants felt that the platform reflected their emotional state and romantic concerns. As a result, participants were more likely to identify with toxic relationship narratives, even when the content did not fully represent their personal experiences. This process may increase emotional resonance and make negative relationship narratives feel more realistic, common, and personally relevant.

Table 3. Interview-Based Thematic Findings

Theme	Number of Participants Mentioning the Theme	Example Interpretation
Repeated exposure to toxic relationship content	25	Participants frequently encountered relationship conflict, red flags, and gendered labels on TikTok.
Emotional identification with TikTok content	20	Participants felt that the For You Page reflected their own relationship concerns.
Negative perception of men	18	Participants became more cautious, suspicious, or critical toward male partners.
Stronger expectation of male financial responsibility	17	Participants associated serious relationships with male economic readiness.
Fear of toxic relationships	16	Participants became more alert to signs of manipulation, dependency, or inconsistency.
Awareness of relationship boundaries	14	Participants used TikTok content to identify unhealthy relationship behaviors.

Source: Data Processed

Conceptually, this mediating pattern indicates that exposure and perception are not directly linked; rather, perceived algorithmic intimacy appears to determine whether exposure translates into internalized belief. The fourth finding relates to Proposition 4 (RP4), which suggested that perceived algorithmic intimacy appears to mediate the relationship between exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives and youth perceptions of men. The results indicate that exposure alone did not automatically shape perceptions. Instead, the effect became stronger when participants felt that the recommended content was personally relevant.

Participants who only watched toxic relationship videos casually tended to interpret them as entertainment. However, participants who felt emotionally connected to the algorithmic recommendations were more likely to internalize the messages and apply them to their own perceptions of men. This suggests that algorithmic intimacy appears to function as a psychological bridge between content exposure and gendered perception.

For example, one male participant admitted that he felt uncomfortable with the repeated appearance of videos mocking “cowo mokondo” because he felt personally judged despite not identifying with the behavior. He stated, “Sometimes I feel attacked, because the videos make it look like men are always the problem if they do not have enough money” (P21). This statement shows that toxic relationship narratives may affect not only women’s perceptions of men but also men’s perceptions of themselves. Male participants expressed feelings of pressure, defensiveness, and confusion regarding what is expected from them in relationships. Therefore, algorithmic intimacy may contribute to both external judgment and internal identity pressure.

The fifth finding is consistent with Proposition 5 (RP5), which suggested that perceived algorithmic intimacy appears to mediate the relationship between exposure to TikTok toxic relationship narratives and romantic role expectations. The data show that participants who felt personally connected to TikTok relationship content were more likely to adopt clearer and sometimes stricter expectations about romantic roles. For example, they expected men to be financially ready, emotionally stable, decisive, and protective. At the same time, some participants also expected women to be more selective and less tolerant of uncertain partners. This indicates that TikTok toxic relationship narratives do not merely describe romantic problems but also appear to prescribe how young people should evaluate partners and define acceptable relationship behavior.

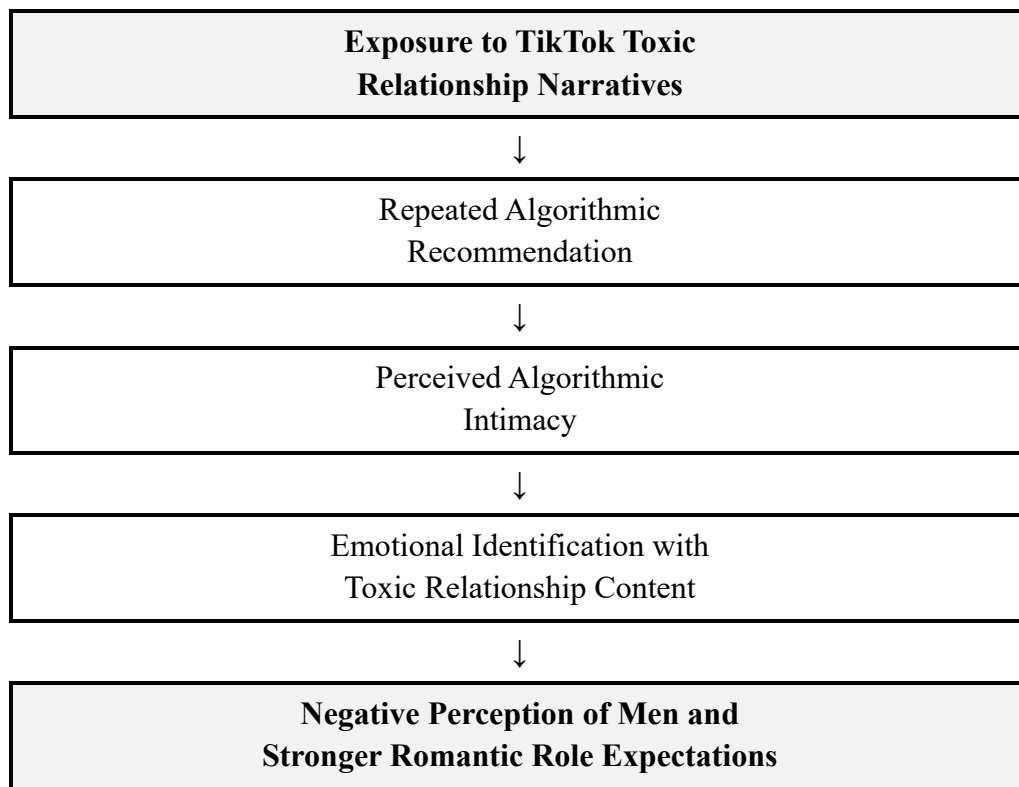


Figure 1. Qualitative Model of Findings

Source: Data analysis from interviews with 25 TikTok users and observation of 50 TikTok videos.

Figure 1 illustrates the qualitative model derived from the findings. TikTok toxic relationship narratives first appear as repeated content exposure. Through user interaction and algorithmic recommendation, similar content continues to appear on the For You Page. When users perceive this repetition as personally meaningful, algorithmic intimacy emerges. This emotional identification then influences how young users interpret men's behavior, masculinity, responsibility, and romantic roles.

The model depicts two analytically distinct pathways rather than a single chain: a direct pathway, in which repeated exposure to toxic relationship narratives is associated with negative perceptions of men and stronger romantic role expectations regardless of how personally relevant users perceive the content to be (as seen among participants who engaged with the content mainly as entertainment); and an indirect, mediated pathway, in which the strength of this association depends on perceived algorithmic intimacy, so that exposure translates into stronger perception change specifically among participants who felt the For You Page “understood” their emotional situation. Because the study is qualitative rather than quantitative, these pathways are presented as analytically distinguished patterns in the data rather than as statistically estimated path coefficients; a quantitative path model with labeled effect sizes would require the kind of survey-based measurement this study's qualitative design was not intended to provide.

The findings also reveal that TikTok toxic relationship narratives have both constructive and problematic consequences. On the constructive side, some participants stated that the content helped them recognize unhealthy relationship behaviors, set boundaries, and avoid emotionally harmful partners. Fourteen participants said that TikTok content made them more aware of red flags, manipulation, and emotional inconsistency. This suggests that digital relationship discourse can function as informal relational education. However, on the problematic side, the same content may also encourage overgeneralization, gender stereotyping, and suspicion. When complex relationship problems are compressed into short videos and viral labels, users may interpret individual experiences as universal truths.

Analytically, this subgroup of fourteen participants functions as a negative or disconfirming case relative to the dominant pattern of suspicion and negative generalization reported elsewhere in the data: rather than becoming more distrustful of men as a category, these participants converted the same exposure into a boundary-setting practice directed at behaviors (manipulation, inconsistency) rather than at men in general. Comparing this subgroup with the more suspicion-oriented participants suggests that the outcome of exposure may depend on whether users interpret toxic relationship content as describing specific, identifiable behaviors to avoid or as evidence about men as an undifferentiated group; this distinction, rather than exposure or algorithmic intimacy alone, may help explain why the same content produced constructive caution in some participants and generalized suspicion in others.

This dual effect is similar to Sani et al., (2024), who found that internet and social media exposure can influence adolescent attitudes, curiosity, and behavior. Although their study examined pornography consumption, the broader implication is relevant: repeated digital exposure can normalize certain perceptions and behavioral orientations among young people. In the present study, repeated exposure to toxic relationship content normalized suspicion, economic evaluation, and emotional caution in romantic relationships. Therefore, TikTok can operate as both an educational and distortive medium depending on how users interpret and internalize the content.

Furthermore, the findings show that “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung” are not merely humorous slang expressions. They function as digital cultural labels that organize how young users discuss masculinity and romantic responsibility. “Cowo mokondo” frames male value through economic contribution, while “cowo bingung” frames male value through decisiveness and emotional clarity. Both labels reflect broader social expectations placed on men in romantic relationships. However, when these labels circulate through viral TikTok videos, they may simplify men’s identities and create pressure for men to perform idealized masculinity. This is important because digital narratives may influence not only how women evaluate men but also how men evaluate themselves.

Overall, the results are consistent with the main argument of this study: algorithmically circulated toxic relationship narratives on TikTok appear to shape youth perceptions of men and romantic roles through repeated exposure, emotional identification, and perceived algorithmic intimacy. The findings address the research propositions by showing that toxic relationship content is associated with negative perceptions of men, appears to strengthen transactional and traditional romantic role expectations, and becomes more influential when users feel that the algorithm reflects their personal emotional experiences. Therefore, the study

contributes to digital psychology and social media research by demonstrating that TikTok is not only a platform for entertainment but also a psychological environment where gender meanings, romantic expectations, and relationship anxieties are produced and reinforced.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample of 25 participants, while sufficient to reach thematic saturation for the purposes of this exploratory qualitative study, is small and was recruited through purposive sampling, which limits the statistical generalizability of the findings beyond participants with broadly similar characteristics and TikTok usage patterns. Second, because TikTok's recommendation algorithm is proprietary and not directly observable, the study relies on participants' perceptions of algorithmic behavior rather than on verified access to the platform's actual ranking mechanisms; perceived algorithmic intimacy is therefore treated as a subjective construct rather than a technically verified property of the system.

Third, interview data may be subject to recall bias, as participants were asked to describe past experiences of encountering and reacting to TikTok content, which may be reconstructed or reinterpreted at the time of the interview rather than reported with full accuracy. Fourth, the findings are culturally specific to the Indonesian context in which slang terms such as “cowo mokondo” and “cowo bingung” circulate, and may not directly transfer to other linguistic or cultural settings where comparable but differently labeled discourses exist. These limitations do not undermine the study's exploratory contribution but do define the boundaries within which its conclusions should be read.

Practical Implications

The findings carry practical relevance for several stakeholder groups. For platform designers, the results suggest that recommendation systems which repeatedly amplify narrow, gendered relationship framings may contribute to overgeneralized and potentially harmful beliefs about men, indicating a need for content-diversity safeguards or friction mechanisms when a user's viewing pattern narrows sharply around a single toxic-relationship framing. For mental health practitioners, the finding that algorithmic intimacy can intensify emotional identification with negative relationship narratives suggests that clinicians working with young clients on relationship anxiety or trust issues may benefit from asking about TikTok and similar platforms as part of a broader psychosocial assessment.

For parents, the findings suggest that open conversation about how algorithmic recommendations work, rather than restriction alone, may help young people critically evaluate why certain relationship content keeps appearing on their feeds. For digital media literacy programs and educators, the findings support the development of curricula that explicitly address algorithmic personalization and gendered online discourse, helping young people distinguish between a platform reflecting a genuine pattern in their life and a platform reinforcing a narrow framing through repeated exposure.

Future Research

Building on these exploratory findings, at least three directions for future research are suggested. First, a quantitative follow-up study could operationalize the constructs identified here, exposure to toxic relationship narratives, perceived algorithmic intimacy, perceptions of men, and romantic role expectations, as measurable variables and test the proposed relationships using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the design originally outlined for this study, in order to estimate the strength and significance of the direct and mediated pathways identified qualitatively here. Second, a longitudinal study tracking the same users' perceptions over an extended period could clarify whether the perceptual shifts described by participants in this study are stable, temporary reactions to a period of intense exposure, or accumulate further with continued platform use. Third, future studies could adopt a cross-gender or cross-cultural comparative design, examining whether men and women interpret and respond to toxic relationship narratives differently, and whether similar algorithmic intimacy effects occur in other cultural or linguistic contexts beyond Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that algorithmically circulated toxic relationship narratives on TikTok play an important role in shaping youth perceptions of men and romantic roles in Indonesia. Based on interviews with 25 TikTok users and observation of 50 videos, repeated exposure to "cowo mokondo" and "cowo bingung" narratives appears to shape how young people interpret masculinity, commitment, and partner expectations, framing men through economic contribution, emotional certainty, and decisiveness. This may increase caution toward male partners while also fostering negative generalizations and gender stereotypes. Perceived algorithmic intimacy strengthens this influence, as users identify more strongly when TikTok's For You Page feels emotionally attuned. However, the same narratives can help users recognize unhealthy relationship patterns and set boundaries. By linking algorithmic intimacy, toxic discourse, and gendered perception, TikTok thus functions not merely as entertainment but as a psychological and cultural space where Indonesian youth negotiate meanings of masculinity, responsibility, and romantic commitment.

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