TikTok and Romantic Relationships: A Qualitative Descriptive Analysis

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ABSTRACT
Although research has identified how and why individuals use TikTok, it's unclear how these behaviors and motivations impact close relationships. Using tenets from the uses and gratifications theory and media multiplexity theory, the goal of this study is to describe how emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships. This qualitative study employed a descriptive design, where undergraduate college students completed an individual interview via Zoom (N = 64) describing how TikTok was used during relationship development and maintenance. Four research assistants and two principal investigators analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analyses applying Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step approach. The resulting themes regarding how emerging adults used TikTok in relationships were: (1) relationship initiation, (2) viewing relationship content, (3) sharing content in relationship, and (4) posting relationship content. Participants also described their use of TikTok in relationships as a potential source of conflict. Implications for TikTok use in relationships, including comparisons to other social media platforms, are discussed.

KEYWORDS: TikTok, romantic relationships, relationship maintenance, emerging adults, qualitative descriptive

Technology, particularly social media, plays a role in the formation and maintenance of relationships. Individuals can use Instagram to display their relationships to their social network, use Facebook to comment about their relationships with others and use Snapchat to send private messages to current or potential partners. Generally, direct communication on social media with romantic partners and displaying the relationship on social media can be beneficial for relationship quality (Seidman et al., 2019; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). However, excessive monitoring on social media or ignoring a partner on social media hinders the quality of these relationships (Hertlein &

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van Dyck, 2020). The association between social media use and relationship outcome also varies by social media platform (Delle et al., 2023; Dunn & Langlais, 2020). Although studies have examined social media and its effects on relationships (Sbarra et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2017), there is little research on how TikTok contributes to romantic relationship processes, despite this social media platform experiencing significant growth over the past year, with the platform now hosting almost 1.7 billion users worldwide (Ceci, 2023). TikTok has some similarities, but it is also different from other social media platforms, as people primarily use TikTok to view and create content (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). Given its unique affordances, TikTok could influence romantic relationships differently from other social media platforms. The goal of this study is to describe how emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships.

This study advances the literature on social media and relationships in a number of ways. Using a qualitative descriptive design (Siedlecki, 2020) helps to understand emerging adults' experiences with TikTok. Qualitative approaches provide an opportunity to understand different relationship experiences since romantic experiences in the technological context likely vary for individuals. In addition, emerging adulthood refers to individuals between the ages of 18-29 who seek to resolve the psychosocial conflict of intimacy versus isolation (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1963). Emerging adults were selected for this study not only because they are typically romantic relationship-focused but also because they are the primary consumers of TikTok (Eddy, 2024). Additionally, this study focuses exclusively on TikTok, a social media application that can be used differently in romantic relationships compared to other social media platforms due to how emerging adults use TikTok, such as creating or consuming content with others (Ceci, 2022; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). Considering the broader landscape of digital interactions, TikTok-specific behaviors may also contribute to relationship processes. Findings from this study can advance understanding of social media's evolving role in personal relationships, particularly comparing TikTok to other platforms.

Social Media and Romantic Relationships

This study is grounded in two theories that can help explain how emerging adults engage with TikTok within romantic relationships. First, the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973) describes how people are motivated to engage with technology if gratification is received from its use. Individuals may engage in various behaviors on TikTok in their romantic relationships because it leads to gratification in these relationships, such as sending direct messages (colloquially referred to as "sliding into their DMs") or following them on different platforms, both of which lead to increased relationship satisfaction (Valshtein et al., 2022). People can display significant relationship events and milestones on social media (Hetsroni & Guldin, 2017; Steers et al., 2016), communicate with a current romantic partner on social media (Hobbs et al., 2017), and brag about their relationships to their social network (Krueger & Forest, 2020). Each of these studies demonstrates that social media behaviors promote gratification as it often increases interpersonal and relational well-being. It is likely that certain behaviors on TikTok may be reinforced because they also promote gratification.

Second, media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005) provides an additional theoretical lens for how social media contributes to romantic relationship processes. According to this theory, the more multimodal connections someone has with a potential or current romantic partner, such as following them on Instagram and/or being Facebook friends, the stronger the tie strength of that relationship will be, which is a proxy measure of interdependence (Ledbetter &

Mazer, 2014; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). As individuals grow together as a couple, they will connect on multiple media platforms, i.e., increasing their media multiplexity, which then increases their relationship quality and stability. TikTok may serve as an additional multimodal connection that can increase relationship closeness and interdependence. Additionally, how individuals use TikTok may also serve as a means to increase media multiplexity, which could benefit relationships.

Past studies categorize different social media behaviors in romantic relationships as active and passive. Active behaviors include liking, sharing, creating, and posting content (Chen et al., 2014), and many studies show how active social media behaviors can benefit romantic relationships (Kahlow et al., 2020; Verduyn et al., 2015). Creating and posting content allows for self-expression while receiving likes and positive comments act as a social reward (Scherr & Wang, 2021), which could explain why individuals share their relationships online and why this behavior could help support relationship development. For instance, Seidman et al. (2019) found that commenting on romantic partners' social media content predicted relationship satisfaction. Likewise, posting content about the relationship is generally beneficial for romantic relationships. For instance, posting couple pictures or having a social media profile picture of a couple is beneficial for relationship quality (Krueger & Forest, 2020), except when a romantic partner dislikes the content being shared (Seidman et al., 2019). An active behavior that is also frequently associated with high relationship quality is private messaging (Fox et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Kahlow et al. (2020) found that increased messages sent over Snapchat across six days predicted relationship closeness. Generally, using social media actively in romantic relationships can promote closeness, satisfaction, and interdependence. Active behaviors may also promote gratification for using a specific social media platform, as well as increase media multiplexity.

Passive behaviors, on the other hand, do not involve active posting or communicative behaviors; rather, passive behaviors are best represented by viewing content on social media (Ozimek et al., 2023). A social media user may be motivated to use social media for social surveillance, sometimes referred to as information-seeking behavior, where individuals engage in behavior tracking by paying attention to personal preferences and interactions of others online (Scherr & Wang, 2021). When done in the context of relationships, social surveillance can be used positively to learn new things about a potential partner, or it can have negative effects and lead to unhealthy behaviors, such as stalking (Rozgonjuk & Elhai, 2018; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Passive behaviors, in moderation, could be helpful for relationships, as it allows individuals to keep track of each other (Hetsroni & Guldin, 2017). However, excessive monitoring leads to jealousy and romantic conflict (Langlais et al., 2020; Tokunaga, 2016). Passive behaviors can generally be disruptive to romantic relationships. It is important to note that the majority of studies on romantic relationships and social media have involved emerging adults.

Furthermore, the experience of passive and active behaviors for romantic relationships may vary depending on the social media platform itself. It is common that individuals will often connect with a potential or current romantic partner on multiple platforms (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). However, few studies have compared different behaviors across social media platforms. Utz et al. (2015) found that Snapchat elicited more jealousy compared to Facebook in romantic relationships, given the ephemeral nature of information shared on the platform. Additionally, Delle et al. (2023) found that active Twitter (now X) and Instagram behaviors were associated with relationship stress when examining Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These studies reveal that the type of platform may also contribute to relationship experiences. The experiences that

individuals may have on TikTok in romantic relationships, therefore, may be unique to the platform.

Overview of TikTok

Before describing what TikTok is, it is important to contextualize the history of TikTok and other content-sharing apps. Creating and sharing short videos on social media began in 2012 with the creation of *Vine*, which presented "popular and unique… six-second-long videos," followed by the creation of Musicl.ly in 2014, a similar short video app that allowed users to record themselves lip-syncing to popular music (Anderson, 2020, p. 7). With *Vine*'s discontinuation in 2017, many users transitioned to the Musical.ly platform, indicating they were drawn to short video content. As a result, more popular platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook started offering similar video-sharing capabilities. Chinese company ByteDance followed this trend, creating a lip-syncing platform "Douyin," followed by the global release of TikTok in 2016 (Anderson, 2020). ByteDance later acquired Musical.ly, merging it with their TikTok platform. Since then, engagement in TikTok has increased significantly. When first released, the average user spent about 7 hours per month on TikTok (Kelly, 2022). In 2021, the average time spent on TikTok increased to 25.7 hours a month (Doyle, 2023). About 67% of adolescents are on TikTok, moving away from competing social media platforms to "find the people they want to engage with the most" (Kelly, 2022, p. 1). It is important to note that as of April 2023, various regions and states have started to restrict the use of TikTok, particularly among child and adolescent users.

TikTok provides many different opportunities to interact with others, which is similar but unique compared to other platforms. TikTok is a platform that provides short video content that is usually 15 to 60 seconds long, allowing users to like, comment, share, create, and go live. Users can share content through direct messaging within the platform, text messages, or other social media platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat. When viewing content, users have the option to view videos posted only by those they follow or scroll through a "For You page" individualized towards each user's preferences based on their past activity. Preferences are determined by a user's interaction with content (liking, commenting, or time spent on video), video information such as hashtags, captions, and sounds, and a user's device settings (TikTok, 2019). To create content, a user clicks on the plus sign at the bottom of their screen, selects their preferred time limit, adds sounds and filters, then presses record. After filming their content, a user can add a comment and share it to their page or save their video as a draft and post later. Like many other social media platforms, TikTok allows users to have a public account, allowing anyone to view their profile, or a private account, limiting the viewing of one's content to only their followers. On a profile, the user can view their drafts, saved videos, and liked videos. Most content on TikTok consists of dance videos, challenges, fitness inspiration, home improvement ideas, beauty and fashion, and life hacks (Ceci, 2022). TikTok is not only a platform for entertainment but can be used to acquire information on select topics, unlike other social media platforms. According to Pew Research Center (Eddy, 2024), 33% of TikTok users claim to regularly get their news from the app. TikTok is a regularly used social media application primarily used to view and share video content.

TikTok has proven to be diverse in its content and its user base. In the U.S., 57% of TikTok users are women, 37% are men, 2% identify as not male or female, and 4% are not accounted for (Pew Research Center, 2022). The majority of TikTok users are between the ages of 18 and 29 years old and 45% of users have a high school education or less, 35% have some college education, and 19% have graduated college (Pew Research Center, 2022). White individuals make up 40%

of TikTok users in the U.S., followed by Hispanic individuals (29%), Black individuals (21%), and Asian English-speaking individuals at 10% (Pew Research Center, 2022). The average TikTok user opens the app eight times per day and spends an average of 95 minutes on TikTok per day (Doyle, 2023). After its founding in 2018, TikTok expanded to 150 countries with over 1 billion users worldwide and is estimated to have 80 million users in the U.S. alone (Doyle, 2023). Generally, TikTok has a diverse user base that is predominantly comprised of emerging adults.

Like many social media platforms, TikTok allows for passive and active behaviors depending on a consumer's motive. Passive behaviors on TikTok include watching videos, reading comments, and scrolling through content. Active behaviors on TikTok include interactions between users and interactions between users and content, such as liking, commenting on, and sending content. With research on TikTok emerging, Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz (2020) identified a new category of online behaviors, referred to as contributing behaviors, which refers to creating content on social media. For TikTok, individuals can engage in contributing behaviors, such as posting content and going live (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found that 74.1% of 11–16-year-old Denmark TikTok users engaged in passive behaviors, 42.2% engaged in active behaviors, and 32.6% participated in contributory behaviors. These behaviors were echoed by Vaterlaus and Winter (2021), who found that young adults were motivated to use TikTok for relational amusement and entertainment and to develop short videos with a purpose. They also mentioned that some qualities of TikTok can be deterring, including cringy material and cyberbullying. Although these studies explain more about how emerging adults use TikTok, there is still a deficit regarding the use and experience of TikTok within romantic relationships.

The Present Study

Social media is regularly incorporated into romantic relationship experiences. Individuals can engage in active and passive behaviors, which usually have consequences for romantic relationships. Recently, the use of TikTok has surged, becoming one of the most popular social media platforms for emerging adults (Eddy, 2024). In addition to active and passive behaviors, individuals may engage in contributory behaviors on TikTok, which could contribute to romantic relationship processes. Per media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005), using TikTok in the context of romantic relationships can serve as a multimodal communication that can increase relationship quality. Additionally, certain behaviors on TikTok may be reinforced due to their gratification for the individual and the relationship, as reflected by the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973). Research is needed to understand how individuals use and incorporate TikTok in their romantic relationships to better understand the contributions of this application for romantic relationship development. Given the empirical and theoretical information reviewed, the goal of this study is to describe how individuals use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships, which is driven by the following research question: How do emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships?

Method

Research Design

This qualitative study used a descriptive design. The goal of descriptive designs is to describe poorly understood phenomena, focusing more on the what, rather than the how or why (Nassaji, 2015). This design enables researchers to create a comprehensive summary of a phenomenon from participants' straightforward answers to questions using descriptive language, resulting in extensive and thick descriptions that can be used to address the research question (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Other forms of qualitative study, such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative design, were not appropriate for this study. This study did not seek to understand a culture or worldview that is common with ethnographic designs. This study also did not seek to understand the lived experiences or stories of individuals that are characteristic of phenomenological and narrative designs. This study also did not seek to develop or evolve a theory, which is common for grounded theory. The goal of this study was to describe young adults' experiences with TikTok in the context of romantic relationships by gathering rich data that describes these TikTok behaviors. After reviewing the different qualitative designs, a descriptive design was selected as the best approach for this study.

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through posts in volunteering undergraduate courses in Human Development and Family Science courses at a large university in the Southeastern U.S. in the spring and summer of 2022. Using convenience sampling, volunteering instructors shared information about the study in the learning management software (i.e., Canvas) associated with their course. Students who were interested in participating were prompted to email the research team. The research team first verified eligibility (participants needed to be at least 18 years or older and have previously used or currently use TikTok; all participants who emailed the research team were eligible for the study) and then scheduled the participant to complete a one-on-one Zoom interview. Participants were scheduled to meet with an undergraduate research assistant (URA) were sent a Zoom link and a copy of the informed consent ($N = 64$). When participants logged into the Zoom call, the URAs asked the participant if they had any questions about the study and prompted the participant to verbally say, "I agree to participate." Then URAs started the Zoom recording and had participants say that they agreed to participate again, so that it would be documented. The interviews took an average of 25.43 minutes to complete ($SD = 5.99$ minutes). All procedures for this study were approved by the appropriate institutional review board. Participants in this study were undergraduate students recruited from a large university in the Southeastern U.S. and were offered extra credit for their participation in this study. Participants were predominantly female (76.7%), with the remaining participants identifying as male (23.3%). The average age of participants was 20.21 ($SD = 2.32$).

In order to understand how TikTok is used in the context of romantic relationships, the researchers asked semi-structured questions. Questions asked in the interviews included the following: "Describe the typical activities you do on TikTok", "Describe positive experiences you've had with TikTok," "Describe negative experiences you've had with TikTok," "Describe the role TikTok plays in your current and past romantic relationships," and "Describe how TikTok impacted your current and past romantic relationship(s) in any way. If so, how?" After the

interviews were completed, they were transcribed for thematic analyses using *Transcribe*. All transcriptions were checked by two undergraduate research assistants for accuracy.

After data collection, four URAs trained in qualitative analytic procedures conducted inductive thematic analyses using the six steps of Braun & Clarke (2021). These six steps include familiarization with data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the theme, and writing the report. First, all four URAs were given 10 transcripts to review and identify common themes. In order to identify themes, the URAs read and re-read each transcript, marking themes for each of the three research questions for this study. As the rich base of data was analyzed, what emerged was a common set of themes that was surprisingly similar. The research team met to check and reconcile any discrepancies with themes. Although participants' behaviors and motivations were different, their experiences began to naturally fall into statements of relationships and common themes (Creswell, 2007). The URAs were then given 10 more transcripts to read and re-read and identify any new themes. Then the research team met again to reconcile any discrepancies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This process was repeated until all transcriptions were analyzed and saturation was met as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Results

The results of the thematic analysis are presented in Table 1 and are elaborated below.

Table 1
List of Themes from Qualitative Analyses (N = 64).

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
How do emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships?	Relationship initiation	Passive behaviors (e.g., liking content)
		Active behaviors (e.g., sending content)
	Viewing relationship content	Creates insecurity/social comparison
		Increases intimacy
		Increases relationship standards
		Look for relationship advice
	Sharing content in relationships	Hint at something
		Share relatable content
		Sharing content to avoid conflict
	Posting relationship content	Oversharing information
		Publicizing the relationship
		Slandering partner/relationship

How Do Emerging Adults Use TikTok in the Context of Romantic Relationships?
Relationship Initiation

This outcome was subcategorized into *passive behaviors* and *active behaviors*. *Passive behaviors* include initiating contact with someone indirectly or an action that would not lead to direct conversation (e.g., liking content or following their account). A male participant stated:

> There's someone I know that I like, and they actually post TikToks. So, I make sure that I follow them, and I like every single TikTok so maybe, maybe that aspect of TikTok has become like a channel to express different things. Whenever I see the person that I'm interested in I try to engage with them.

This quote is a good example of someone using TikTok to initiate a romantic relationship. *Active behaviors* through TikTok are any behaviors that lead to a conversation with someone (e.g., creating content together or sending content). A female participant said, "I communicate sometimes through TikTok 'cause I mean, some people are very shy, and this is a great way to just throw it out there without speaking one-on-one." This participant indicated using TikTok to communicate with someone with less pressure. These behaviors may result in gratification for using TikTok per the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973).

Viewing Relationship Content

One subtheme of viewing relationship content is *social comparison and creating insecurities*. Participants reported viewing TikTok dyadic content and comparing it their current or past relationships. A male participant said:

> I think a lot of relationship problems are relatable. So, some couples will be like, "oh when this happened," and then I'll be sitting next to my girlfriend and be like, "oh we had that happened too." So, it's like sometimes it's funny to be like, we're not alone in the sense that couples have the exact, some of the same experiences. So, it's kind of reassuring and also it's like, oh, how did you fix that? Or how did you do that?

This participant compared the problems of TikTok couples to the problems that they face in their relationship. This participant also illustrates the subtheme of *increasing intimacy*. As the participant watched TikToks with their girlfriend, they came across methods to solve problems. Other participants reported *increasing intimacy* by viewing funny or relatable content with their partner. A female stated, "When I see something that's relatable to my relationship, I share it with my partner, and I'm like, oh, that's so you, and that's me." Another female participant said, "I'm on therapy Tok… it's interesting to see their recommendations to keep my relationship going and strong." TikTok can also create insecurities when individuals compare their relationships to those they see online. A female participant reported, "If I'm scrolling on TikTok a lot and I see a content creator that maybe I look up to, I might feel a little insecure, which can show up in my relationship," while another female stated, "[TikTok] makes people in relationships feel insecure about their own [relationship] if it's not matching the standards of you know someone who has a glamorous lifestyle." These participants shared insecurities that occurred as a result of social comparison on TikTok.

Another theme is *increasing relationship standards*. When participants reported viewing relationship content, their ideas of "perfect relationships" (as one participant stated) changed. For instance, one female said:

> I see a lot of TikToks where it's like, you know, happy couples and they're like, "OMG. I love my boyfriend. Like, blah blah." And I'm like, it's good, but at the same time, I feel like it gives me something to idolize with men

> when I don't find that. I'm like well damn... I guess it's not the guy for me,
> even though it could totally be the guy for me.

After viewing relationship content on TikTok, this participant idolized other users and changed what they were looking for in a partner. Another subtheme is *looking for relationship advice*. Participants looked for advice specific to their relationship and attempted to implicate it. A male said, "I've actually learned about a bunch of…advice for long-distance relationships from TikTok." Another female said:

> I do see some couple therapists on TikTok too where they're like, oh, how
> to better your communication. And I follow those too because a big thing
> in my relationship is communicating, but I always feel like we can grow
> on that. So whenever I find a video that is easy to follow or they like role-
> play it, then I'll share that with him too, but more in person. Like I'll
> actually be next to him when I show him that. And that's typically after
> like if we had a misunderstanding or something, I'm like, Oh, maybe if we
> like, try this next time. But he doesn't take it in a bad way. Like, I think
> it's almost easier for us to hear it from someone else. And then like, try it
> ourselves than for me to say like, well maybe if we did this or that.

This participant found relationship advice from someone they followed on TikTok, viewed this content with their partner, and discussed strategies to improve their relationship from this content. When participants viewed TikToks about relationships, their perspectives on current and future relationships seemed to change. Using TikTok together could be a way to boost multimodal communication per media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Sharing Content in Relationships

Sharing content in a relationship is sending content to someone through TikTok or sending TikTok content through another platform such as Messenger or Snapchat. A subtheme is *hinting at something*. Participants reported sending TikToks to others to hint at something they would like to implement in their relationships or things they would like their partner to start doing. One female stated:

> Every now and then, if I see a video that's like, Oh, girl or boyfriend gave
> his girlfriend a large bouquet of flowers, right? And then I'm like, oh, I
> really want that bouquet of flowers. So then I'll send it to him and be like,
> oh, isn't this like so cute? And then, like, maybe next week, he will give
> me flowers and stuff. So that's probably how I use, is kind of like a sly
> way to say like, Oh, this would be cute if we did that.

This participant used TikTok content to communicate wants in their relationship. Another subtheme was *sharing content in a relationship that was relatable* to the couple. A female stated, "I share like positive things that relate to my relationship, and I'll send those to my boyfriend." Another said, "I'm in a relationship too so when I see something that's relatable to my relationship, I share it with my partner and I'm like, oh, that's so you and that's me." Participants send TikToks to partners to hint at something or because they find the content relatable to their relationship.

The next subtheme is *sharing content to avoid conflict* within a relationship. Participants indicated sharing TikToks with their significant other to reduce tension and add comedic relief to an argument. A male stated, "I feel like a lot of times it's just like little things that we've already worked out and it's kind of thrown at each other again…like later and all I'd send something to just be funny." This participant reported sending TikToks as a funny way to end a conflict with their partner. Another male participant stated, "So you send it to them and maybe calm the emotions on both sides. Kind of clear the air and add some comedic relief and maybe help the problem go away." Essentially, participants use TikTok to help remediate conflict in their relationships, which represents another gratification that someone may receive by using TikTok per uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973).

Posting Relationship Content

The first subtheme for posting relationship content is *oversharing information*. Participants reported their significant others would sometimes share too much information about their relationship online, causing conflict. For example, one participant said, "people who like to overshare or like put their relationship out there" when referring to influencers. Participants stated that viewing influencer couples that overshare their relationships online could have a negative impact on the relationship. Another subtheme is *publicizing the relationship*. Users post short videos with their partner in order to show their followers they are currently in a relationship. A male participant said, "I have a girlfriend and we are both posted on each other's TikToks… It's just cute videos. It's like an Instagram post for us." A female participant said, "…like to express your relationship or show other people that you know or who follow you that you're in a relationship. And it's a more creative ways to do that. Like not just a picture or like a real-time video." Publicizing a relationship by posting TikTok content was often done in a positive way. The final subtheme for posting relationship content is *slandering a partner or relationship*, which is when participants reported posting content to speak badly about their partner or posting about how a relationship ended. One participant explained that posting a TikTok speaking poorly about their ex after seeing an influencer create the same video about their ex. She stated, "that kind of sounds a little petty. All my friends are like, you know, you're being a little extra about it… you're f-ing them without f-ing them." The participant knew they were slandering their ex-partner yet proceeded to post the content. Another female stated, "when we ended things and I kind of moved on, I did see like this funny TikTok, it was about a breakup. So, I recreated it and it's low-key a little petty... I know he saw it because he viewed it." This participant posted a video about their ex to capture their attention.

Post-hoc Analyses

When participants were describing the use of TikTok in their relationships, many participants discussed how TikTok was a source of conflict. Using inductive thematic analyses as before, we also analyzed the transcripts for themes associated with relationship conflict, which are discussed below.

Source of Conflict

The first subtheme for conflict is that it *takes too much time away from the relationship*. Participants indicated that scrolling through TikTok in the presence of others could detract from that relationship. A female participant stated, "It's just part of my routine", while another participant went further into detail, saying:

> In the morning I would get up, you know, I'd watch my TikToks, you're like, you know, sometimes I'll take breaks in the afternoon and just go in bed and like watch TikToks and stuff like that and he just didn't get it. He was like, he was like, why do you spend so many hours on TikTok?

This participant reported that their partner noticed the amount of time they spent on TikTok and how it was affecting their time together. The second subtheme is *unreciprocated communication*. Participants reported conflict in their relationship when they sent a TikTok to someone, and they did not receive the response they were hoping for, or if they did not respond at all. For example, one male participant stated:

> My girlfriend loves sending me videos of babies. And I used to not watch them and then she'd get mad and…then it would kind of kill our vibe at the moment. So I just I gave in and started watching them and like interacting and like that makes her happy…If she sends me something, I typically like, I don't have to watch it, but I should.

This participant indicated a conflict in his relationship when he did not acknowledge his partner's TikToks. This participant was able to resolve the conflict by becoming more active in content response. The final subtheme is using TikTok to *avoid conflict in a relationship*. A female indicated using content she found on TikTok and applying it to her former relationship:

> I'm not saying I'm looking up to these people. But she took him back and she said, pretty much, you know, their relationship had some issues but, you know they had to work through it. Long story short, I realized, you know, a few weeks later once me and my ex-boyfriend ended the first time… I ended up taking him back because I kind of took that advice that she was saying and how she was saying, "Oh like, you know, you guys got to work through your problems." So, I [took] that advice.

After viewing content, this participant indicated fixing the conflict with their partner. Other participants indicated watching TikToks in the presence of their partner in order to avoid having conversations about a conflict. Participants stated, "I think it's fine. I think everyone needs a break from their partner, and I think the personal time to go on TikTok" and "It depends on the problem itself, but if it's relatable to a video that I can find that could be a way of communicating instead of having that talk." TikTok can act as a source of conflict in relationships when partners use it to avoid working through their problems, when partners feel ignored after sending content, or if the platform is used as a way to slander a person or relationship.

Discussion

Given the popularity of TikTok among emerging adults and the literature on social media and romantic relationships, this study sought to understand how emerging adults use TikTok in the context of romantic relationships. According to uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973), using TikTok in relationships could be a gratifying experience reinforced by its use within relationships; TikTok also likely serves as a form of multimodal communication that supports romantic interdependence based on tenets of media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Participants in this study used TikTok actively and passively, similar to other social media platforms (Kahlow et al., 2020; Ozimek et al., 2023; Verduyn et al., 2015). TikTok was used in unique ways, different from other social media platforms, that appeared to help support relationship growth, whereas some participants mentioned that TikTok could serve as a source of conflict or a strategy to avoid it. Using TikTok appeared to indirectly impact romantic relationships, meaning that in some cases people felt closer when engaging with TikTok with partners and some felt that using TikTok impeded the time between partners.

TikTok was used in direct and indirect ways when forming or maintaining romantic relationships. Emerging adults in this study used TikTok to meet potential romantic partners through mutual interests, followers, and communities, which is consistent with other studies on social media (Utz et al., 2015). Participants reported engaging in passive and active flirting, such as liking a potential partner's content, following their profile, or sending TikTok content to a potential partner. Similar to research on other social media platforms (Langlais et al., 2020; Tienda et al., 2022), TikTok could serve as a multimodal connection that can increase interdependence according to media multiplexity theory (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). According to this theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005), individuals get closer by connecting with others through different media connections. In the current study, participants would share content from TikTok with each other and even consume content together, providing support that TikTok could strengthen relationships by serving as a form of media multiplexity.

Yet, also similar with research on other social media platforms (Meier & Johnson, 2022), using TikTok in relationships may create insecurity, as individuals are exposed to information that could prompt jealousy. Some emerging adults compared their own relationship to what they consumed on TikTok. Sometimes viewing content could be beneficial for relationships, as it could give individuals unique ideas to promote interdependence, such as date ideas or suggestions for conflict resolution. In other instances, TikTok could have hindered relationships by showing them what their relationship could be. This aspect may have led to individuals increasing their relationship standards and possibly reassessing what they were looking for or expecting in their romantic and/or plutonic relationships. These behaviors and outcomes reflect ideas of uses and gratification theory (Katz et al., 1973), where emerging adults may be reinforced (or discouraged) from using TikTok depending on how much gratification they may (or may not) receive from using the application in their relationships.

Sharing content in relationships also appeared to contribute to the relationship processes of emerging adult relationships. For example, emerging adults sent content to others through TikTok's messaging feature or shared TikTok content through other social media platforms, such as videos that dropped hints on what they wanted from their partner. In some instances, emerging adults used videos to mediate conflict within their relationship. Many participants discussed how they would share content with their romantic partner because they thought they would find it entertaining, and a few participants talked about watching TikTok videos with their romantic

partner. These behaviors reflect methods to help promote interdependence in romantic relationships, which are likely gratifying interpersonally and relationally, supporting uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973). Participants would be motivated to use TikTok in their relationships given the gratifications they received from its incorporation in relationship processes.

Emerging adults also reported posting relationship content on TikTok, which contributed to the dynamics of these relationships. Some participants talked about the pride and happiness they had in their relationships when they or their romantic partner posted each other or the relationship on TikTok, which could serve to validate one's relationship (Krueger & Forest, 2020). However, some participants reported that they did not appreciate when content was overshared or when negative relationship experiences were posted, which is also consistent with other studies on social media (Seidman et al., 2019). For instance, participants reported incidents where they uploaded content speaking poorly about their partner or relationship, or how their relationship ended by posting content on TikTok or implying the end through trends on TikTok. Posting content about a relationship on TikTok appeared to support or hinder relationship quality depending on what content was being shared.

Interestingly, many participants brought up how TikTok could be a source of conflict in their romantic relationships. Some participants elaborated on how the use of TikTok interfered with the time that couples spent face-to-face. This research is similar to studies on phubbing (i.e., David & Roberts, 2021), which is when individuals are ignored by someone because they are on their phone. TikTok appears to serve as a source of phubbing in romantic relationships. Other participants discussed frustration when messages sharing TikTok content were unreciprocated. Participants felt ignored or that their partner was not invested in their communication. Individuals also used TikTok to avoid conflict; rather than interact with a partner when tensions were high, participants in this study used TikTok as a distraction from that tension. In some cases, using TikTok to avoid or minimize conflict could be viewed as gratifying as conflict is not often a comfortable or enjoyable experience in romantic relationships.

The unique features of TikTok reveal varied influences that this app can have for relationship development, maintenance, and dissolution, which are similar and different compared to other social media platforms. Consistent with research on active and passive behaviors, TikTok is used both actively, by posting and sharing content, and passively, by scrolling through content, in the context of romantic relationships. The negative consequences of social comparison and oversharing information on TikTok appear similar to other social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram (Seidman et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). However, TikTok appears to be different to other social media platforms as individuals can passively consume content together or create content together, reflecting contributing behaviors as found by Bucknell Bossen and Kottasz (2020). Participants shared content more frequently and discussed watching content together, which has not been consistently found in past studies on other social media platforms. Participants also talked about TikTok as being a primary source of relationship information and advice, which is not commonly found on other social media platforms. Compared to other social media platforms, TikTok is similar in that it appears to be a source of conflict via phubbing, but is also different from other platforms, as individuals use TikTok as a way to avoid or even resolve conflict. Generally, there are some costs and affordances of TikTok that are unique to the platform itself and others that are similar to other social media platforms. Given this information, TikTok can serve as a multimodal connection that can promote relationship closeness considering media multiplexity theory.

It is also important to consider the sociocultural contexts of using TikTok in romantic relationships. This study focused on emerging adults, who are the primary consumers of TikTok (Eddy, 2024). As technology continues to permeate through societies, it starts to contribute to the development and maintenance of relationships. Individuals can use TikTok to flirt and connect with others, which supports research that shows individuals relying on online self-disclosure for relationship processes, rather than in person (Mosby, 2024). The use of TikTok may further shift the landscape of how relationships form. Subsequently, individuals in this study discussed how TikTok was used in relationships in both good and bad ways. Some even mentioned that watching TikTok content together can bring couples closer. Research has shown that individuals prefer short video content compared to long content, and that this preference may have developed as YouTube and TikTok have become more popular. Therefore, the content that couples may share and consume together, may also shift assuming regular TikTok use. Generally, these results provide some ideas about how emerging adults incorporate TikTok in their relationships and how these changes may reflect other sociocultural changes due to increased presence of mobile technology.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although this study advanced knowledge on how and why people use TikTok inside and outside of relationships, it is not without its limitations. First, those who volunteered to be part of the study were predominantly female and all college students, which limits the generalizability of the study results. Because participants were college students, the use of TikTok in relationships may be different given the number of potential partners they are surrounded by on a regular basis. Additionally, having more male participants could have generated other themes. Future studies are encouraged to recruit more diverse samples when trying to understand the affordances of TikTok for individual and relational development. Additionally, this study asked some participants who previously had TikTok to reflect on their experiences with the app retrospectively, making it prone to bias. It would be more valid to conduct a longitudinal study where uses of TikTok in relationships were measured more consistently over time. This approach would help identify how TikTok is used in relationships as they develop, are maintained, and dissolve.

The results of this study show some consistencies regarding the behaviors engaged in on TikTok in romantic relationships compared to other social media platforms, and that TikTok also has affordances and costs for relationships that are different from other social media platforms. TikTok appeared to have direct and indirect effects on relationships, both of which supported media multiplexity theory and uses and gratifications theory. Participants noted that they use TikTok to share their relationship with others, to communicate with others, and even spend time with others (by watching TikTok content simultaneously). They also noted TikTok's role in romantic conflict, both as a source and as a distraction. Although individuals aren't necessarily motivated to use TikTok for their relationship, they still find ways to incorporate the application in their relationships. This study helped elucidate an understudied topic – TikTok and relationships – and helped to lay the groundwork for future studies regarding the behaviors, motivations, and potential implications of using TikTok in the context of romantic relationships.

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Statements and Declarations

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