

**Public Intimacy on TikTok: Exploring the Cognitive and Emotional Mechanisms behind
Relationship Satisfaction**

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the impact of romantic relationship content (RRTK) on individual relationship satisfaction on TikTok, through the mediating effects of expectation violation, social comparison, and jealousy. Based on social comparison theory and expectation violation theory, we propose five hypotheses to test how RRTK influences users' satisfaction and emotional evaluations of their own romantic relationships. This study conducted a questionnaire-based survey ($N = 108$). The results indicate that the use of RRTK significantly predicts greater expectation violation and social comparison, which in turn are positively correlated with jealousy. However, it is worth noting that both expectation violation and social comparison are negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, confirming the proposed mediating pathways. Nevertheless, the direct effect of RRTK on satisfaction is not significant, highlighting the importance of indirect mechanisms. Through these findings, we provide theoretical insights into how intimate content on social media alters relationship expectations and highlight the necessity of enhancing media literacy around digital dating narratives.

Introduction

TikTok has become one of the most widely used short-form video-sharing platforms, with over 1 billion active users worldwide in 2023 (TikTok Statistics, 2023). Among the typical uses of TikTok, a popular genre is the sharing of intimate moments from close relationships (Shutsko, 2020). This genre constitutes a novel form of *public intimacy*, which refers to the public sharing of private emotions and romantic moments to achieve social validation and recognition (Dobson et al., 2018). It is a form of the broader concept of intimacy, something that occurs in close interpersonal relationships when they are characterized by trust, vulnerability, and emotional sharing (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

These public intimacy videos on TikTok create sense-making opportunities (Weick et al., 2005) for viewers regarding their own relationships by observing and reflecting on the intimate accounts of others. An example of this could include a TikTok video where couples share their relationship milestones, prompting viewers to compare their own experiences or reassess their understanding of romantic dynamics. This sense-making process shapes users' understanding of intimacy and can affect their relationship satisfaction, a key determinant of well-being that impacts both mental health and overall quality of life (Bradbury et al., 2000). As such, public intimacy on TikTok has the potential to influence relationship satisfaction and individual well-being.

Like other social networking services (SNS), TikTok enables users to share carefully curated content that often highlights idealized aspects of life. Existing research on social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook shows that these platforms can influence users' emotional well-being and interpersonal perceptions (Meier, Gilbert, Börner, & Possler, 2020). Such content may contribute to the formation of unrealistic expectations about relationships,

which can lead to dissatisfaction when real-life relationships fail to align with these idealized portrayals (Toma, 2017; Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). TikTok's unique format—short-form videos amplified by algorithm-driven recommendations—has the potential to intensify viewers' exposure to public intimacy videos (Shutsko, 2020) and magnify its results. This distinctive format requires a deeper investigation into whether TikTok's algorithm promotes specific types of public intimacy videos that may amplify both positive and negative emotional responses that may be uplifting (e.g., feeling inspired or more connected to one's partner) or distressing (e.g., feeling inadequate or envious). Specifically, it remains unclear whether engaging with TikTok videos improves or reduces relationship satisfaction, although the mechanisms revealed by SNS research provide insights into potential pathways, such as upward social comparison, which can evoke envy and dissatisfaction (Appel et al., 2016), or unrealistic expectation formation due to exposure to idealized portrayals of relationships (Toma et al., 2018).

The current project addresses these potentially contradictory effects of TikTok public intimacy in relationship satisfaction. To untangle the differential possibilities, it is useful to understand potential mechanisms that connect exposure to TikTok public intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Two mechanisms may explain this connection, representing distinct pathways: one cognitive and one emotional. Existing research on social networking sites suggests that relationship satisfaction is shaped by both cognitive and emotional mechanisms (Appel et al., 2016). Two key pathways are particularly relevant in the context of TikTok. First, exposure to idealized portrayals of relationships can lead to inflated expectations, which, when unmet, result in feelings of violation and dissatisfaction (Toma, 2017; Chou & Edge, 2012). Second, public intimacy content may trigger upward social comparisons and envy, reducing

users' self-worth and satisfaction with their own relationships (Appel et al., 2016; de Vries et al., 2018; Meier et al., 2020).

In sum, this study addresses the possible positive and negative effects of public intimacy on TikTok on relationship satisfaction, by unpacking two possible mediation mechanisms (expectation and social comparison), along with the potential moderation by the extent to which a public intimacy video involves advice versus personal stories. It involves a quantitative survey to assess TikTok users' exposure to public intimacy content, relationship satisfaction, and experiences related to social comparison, expectation violations, and inspiration. Before discussing the details of the study, including methodology, sample characteristics, and key findings, this paper reviews the relevant literature on two key mechanisms: social comparison theory and expectancy violation theory. It then examines prior research on public intimacy and its implications for mental health and relationship satisfaction. Finally, it discusses the implications of the findings for theory and practice, highlighting potential intervention recommendations and future research directions for understanding the impact of TikTok on romantic relationships.

Relationship Satisfaction, Social Media and Public Intimacy

Relationship satisfaction is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive that their relationship is satisfactory and meets their expectations (Bradbury et al., 2000). It covers multiple dimensions such as emotional, psychological, and behavioral, and plays a critical role in determining relationship quality. In general, high levels of satisfaction are associated with emotional security, reduced stress, and increased interpersonal conflict. Beyond this, relationship satisfaction also shapes broader social interactions by providing emotional support and a sense of stability (Bradbury et al., 2000). Conversely, dissatisfaction can exacerbate mental health

problems, leading to relationship conflict and further psychological distress. Overall, satisfying relationships play a protective role in relieving stress and fostering emotional resilience.

As digital technology becomes increasingly present in everyday life, understanding the role of social media in shaping relationship satisfaction also becomes critical. Research has shown that social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram and Facebook can impact user's perceptions of their relationship in both positive and negative ways (Meier, Gilbert, Börner, & Possler, 2020). Toma (2017) found that users of SNSs often encountered idealized depictions of relationships from the viewer's point of view, which may cause them to raise their expectations of their relationships, and, when their real-life experiences do not align with the online images, can lead to dissatisfaction with their own relationships. In contrast, Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius (2016) showed that upward social comparisons (which are common on SNS) often trigger feelings of inferiority and jealousy, which can negatively impact relationship satisfaction. Unlike traditional SNSs, TikTok's format (short videos and algorithmic content recommendations), enhances users' exposure to public intimacy and intimate relationship descriptions (Shutsko, 2020). This algorithmic drive creates a more immersive environment for viewers, potentially amplifying the benefits and harms associated with digital media on relationship satisfaction. As such, the platform's unique style of interaction warrants a closer examination of its specific impact on relationship dynamics.

TikTok has introduced a unique social media environment that reinforces these dynamics. Its algorithm-driven short videos typically feature emotionally rich portrayals of intimate relationships, a type of content referred to as "public intimacy" (Shutsko, 2020). Public intimacy builds on the concept of intimacy with the act of sharing private emotions and romantic moments in public, often through digital platforms (Dobson et. al, 2018).

This phenomenon transforms “traditional” relational interactions with an intimate nature into public-facing displays that merge personal authenticity with social recognition. Unlike traditional intimacy, public intimacy is mediated by technology, enabling individuals to curate and share aspects of their private lives with others. TikTok, with its algorithm-driven content recommendations and short-form video format, provides a unique environment for expanding public intimacy. By displaying emotionally compelling content, the platform increases the visibility of intimacy, creating a novel form of relationship voyeurism (Shutsko, 2020). This greater exposure to intimate depictions can affect how viewers evaluate their own relationships.

The heightened exposure to ideal relational content on TikTok raises important questions about psychological and relationship satisfaction. Thus, two key mechanisms we want to explore how public intimacy content may shape how viewers perceive their own romantic relationships: expectation violations and upward social comparison,

Public Intimacy and Expectations Violations

Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook contribute significantly to forming relationship expectations by allowing users to share carefully curated, aesthetically appealing content. Such platforms typically amplify viewers' descriptions of idealized relationships, showcasing moments such as romantic gestures, perfect vacations, and seamless communication dynamics (Toma, 2017). Over time, these depictions can further influence viewers' cognitive schema of what a relationship should be like setting unattainably high standards that can lead to real-life expectation violations (Chou & Edge, 2012), for example.

Research suggests that Instagram users often see posts that emphasize the “perfect” relationship, which may include professionally edited photos of a proposal or anniversary (de Vries et.al, 2018). This repeated exposure fosters the notion that successful relationships must

reflect these idealized depictions, leading to a cognitive disconnect between these standards and everyday relationship experiences. While social media platforms broadly contribute to the formation of relationship expectations, TikTok introduces unique dynamics in the expectation formation process due to its content format and algorithmic design.

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) posits that individuals form expectations about the behaviors and characteristics of others in social interactions based on social norms, personal experiences, and contextual factors (Burgoon, 1978). When these expectations are violated, individuals engage in cognitive assessments to determine whether the violation is positive or negative, leading to corresponding emotional and behavioral responses. In relational contexts, unmet expectations are often interpreted negatively, resulting in disappointment or dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the perceived value of the person violating these expectations can influence the emotional impact, with higher perceived value often softening the negative effects of a violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Thus, our study aims to investigate whether increased exposure is associated with increased experience of expectation violation, and whether increased experience of expectation violation may in turn undermine relationship satisfaction. Previous theories suggest that such disconfirmation stems from overly high expectations, but this study specifically focuses on the disconfirmation individuals perceive in their romantic relationships after using TikTok. Therefore, the hypotheses are:

- H1a.** Greater exposure to publicly intimate content on TikTok is positively correlated with increased experiences of expectation disconfirmation
- H1b.) Experiences of expectation disconfirmation are negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Social Comparison Theory in SNS Contexts

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) posits that individuals have an intrinsic drive to assess their own views, abilities, and qualities by comparing themselves to others. This comparison is a means of self-assessment and identity formation. Festinger identifies two types of comparisons: upward comparisons, in which individuals compare themselves to those they perceive to be superior to them, and downward comparisons, in which individuals compare themselves to those they perceive to be inferior to them. Whereas both types of comparisons serve different psychological functions, upward comparisons are more likely to elicit feelings of inferiority or jealousy, especially in the case of aspirational content. This theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how social media platforms, including TikTok, shape emotional experiences and feelings of self-worth by carefully portraying the lives of others.

Social networking sites have become fertile ground for social comparison because they emphasize user-generated content that often highlights carefully curated and idealized representations of life (Toma, 2017). Platforms such as Instagram encourage upward social comparisons by displaying content that emphasizes beauty, wealth, and perfection (Appel et.al, 2016). These comparisons can lead to feelings of inferiority and dissatisfaction when individuals perceive their lives or relationships to be inferior to the carefully curated content they encounter online (de Vries et.al, 2018).

On the one hand, social media have been found to have a negative effect on personal relationships, particularly due to users' exposure to idealized relationship depictions that may lead to upward social comparisons and jealousy (Appel et.al, 2016). These comparisons may hurt mental health and well-being, including relationship satisfaction (Toma, 2017). Although TikTok differs from traditional social media, repeated exposure to idealized public intimacy on TikTok

may also foster unrealistically high expectations, leading viewers to feel dissatisfied with their own relationships. On the other hand, studies have shown that social users can be inspired by visually appealing content that motivates them to improve their relationships (Meier & Schäfer, 2018).

Upward social comparisons typically elicit a range of emotional responses, many of which are negative. Research has shown that such comparisons can lead to feelings of envy, inadequacy, and dissatisfaction, especially when individuals perceive that their lives do not measure up to the standards portrayed in social media (Meier et.al., 2020). In this case, jealousy is characterized by a desire for the superiority shown by others, which can lead to frustration and decreased self-esteem (Appel et al., 2016). For example, when viewers repeatedly watch videos of romantic relationships marked by exaggerated gestures or seemingly perfect communication, it may make them feel that their own relationship is not good enough in comparison.

This sense of inadequacy often extends beyond relationship satisfaction to broader measures of self-worth, exacerbating emotional distress and dissatisfaction (de Vries et.al, 2018). Furthermore, the emotional reactions triggered by upward comparisons are not fleeting but can have lasting effects on mental health and relationships. Jealousy and feelings of inferiority undermine interpersonal trust and emotional intimacy, leading to decreased relationship satisfaction (Toma, 2017). Whether TikTok's unique content delivery mechanisms exacerbate negative emotional outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction) or whether they provide opportunities for constructive relationship reflection remains an open question. Further research is needed to explore how TikTok's algorithms and content dynamics facilitate these processes and their potential impact on relationship satisfaction.

Thus, this study investigates whether increased exposure to intimate content on TikTok is associated with increased upward social comparison, and whether such comparison predicts stronger feelings of envy, which in turn leads to lower relationship satisfaction. This study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2a. Greater exposure to TikTok public intimacy content is positively correlated with upward social comparison.

H2b. Upward social comparison is positively correlated with feelings of envy.

H2c. Feelings of envy are negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Methods

This study will use an online survey to examine how TikTok's publicly intimate content relates to relationship satisfaction (RS) across different types of long-distance couples.

Participants and Procedure

During May 2025, I recruited participants from prolific.com. The participants were screened by the following criteria: First, they were currently in a romantic relationship that had lasted for at least three months. Second, TikTok was among their top three most frequently used social media platforms. A total of 242 individuals completed the screening survey, and 136 participants met the eligibility requirements and proceeded to the main study. At the end, the effective sample size is $N = 136$. These participants were on average 28.47 year old ($SD = 9.74$), with 50% identifying as female, 48% as male, and 2% as non-binary, genderqueer, or genderfluid. In terms of racial and ethnic identification, 63% identified as White, 15% as Black or African American, 15% as Asian, 7% as Hispanic or Latino, 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and less than 1% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.. See Table 1 for more statistical details of the demographics.

Table1: Demographics

Variable	n	%	M	SD
Age (years)	136		28.47	9.74
Gender				
Female	68	50		
Male	65	48		
Non-binary / Genderqueer / Genderfluid	3	2		
Race/Ethnicity				
White	86	63		
Black or African American	20	15		
Asian	20	15		
Hispanic or Latino	10	7		
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	2		
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	<1		

Measurements

Exposure to TikTok Romantic Relationship Content (RRTK). Participants' exposure to romantic relationship content on TikTok was assessed through a set of items measuring how frequently and attentively they watched such videos. These items were averaged to create a composite score, with higher values indicating greater exposure.

Expectation Violation (EV). Expectation violation was measured using two sets of items. EV1 assessed general unexpectedness in partner behavior over the past three months (e.g., “My partner surprised me a great deal”), while EV2 asked participants to reflect on the most memorable unexpected behaviors (e.g., “The unexpected behavior makes me feel like my partner really cares about me”). Items from both scales were averaged, with higher scores representing greater perceived expectation violation.

Social Comparison. Social comparison was assessed using a nine-item scale capturing relational comparisons triggered by TikTok content (e.g., “Watching TikTok relationship videos makes me feel less desirable as a partner”). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree) and averaged to form a composite score.

Envy

Envy. Two types of envy were measured: benign envy (EVY1) and malicious envy (EVY2). Each subscale included five items (e.g., “I wanted my relationship to be like the one shown in the videos” for benign envy; “I had hostile thoughts about the people in relationship-focused TikTok videos” for malicious envy). Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale and averaged, with higher scores indicating stronger feelings of each envy type.

Analytical Procedures

To test the proposed hypotheses, I conducted a series of multiple linear regression analyses using Excel and SPSS. We examined two parallel models. The first model assessed whether perceived expectation violation mediated the relationship between exposure to publicly intimate content on TikTok and relationship satisfaction. The second model tested a sequential mediation path, where exposure to publicly intimate content on TikTok could predict upward social comparison, which in turn predicted jealousy, and ultimately predicted relationship satisfaction. All predictor variables were mean-centered prior to analysis to reduce multicollinearity. Confidence intervals were set at 95%. The results of these regressions are summarized in Table 2.

The study will analyze quantitative data using regression techniques to discover the relationship between exposure to TikTok’s publicly intimate content and relational satisfaction. Moderation analyses will test whether different types of content (advice-oriented vs. personal experience sharing) affect this relationship.

Results

H1b posits that greater exposure to expectation violation is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. According to the regression (see Table 2 Model 1), expectation

violation is significantly negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ($B = -0.599$, $SE = 0.092$, $p < .001$), supporting H1b. This means that one unit increase in perceived expectation violation can lead to a 0.60 unit decrease in relationship satisfaction.

H2a posits that greater exposure to TikTok public intimacy is positively associated with upward social comparison. According to the regression (see Table 1 Model 5), TikTok use is not a statistically significant predictor of social comparison ($B = -0.217$, $SE = 0.109$, $p = .048$). While the direction was negative rather than positive, the result is marginally significant and does not support H2a.

H2b posits that upward social comparison is positively associated with envy. According to the regression (see Table 1 Model 5), social comparison is significantly positively associated with envy ($B = 0.299$, $SE = 0.083$, $p < .001$), supporting H2b. This means that one unit increase in upward social comparison is associated with a 0.30 unit increase in envy.

H2c posits that greater envy is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. According to the regression (see Table 2 Model 4), social comparison is significantly negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ($B = -0.302$, $SE = 0.059$, $p < .001$), supporting H2c. This suggests that a one unit increase in social comparison is associated with a 0.30 unit decrease in satisfaction. However, envy itself did not reach statistical significance ($B = 0.133$, $SE = 0.079$, $p = .096$), so H2c is only partially supported.

Table2: Regression Analyses

	M1: Expectation Violation	M2: Social Comparison	M3: Envy	M4: Satisfaction(via Envy)	M5: Satisfaction(via SC & Envy)
Intercept	B=4.34 (SE=-0.594)	B=2.766 (SE=-0.95)	B=6.665 (SE=-0.41)	B=3.901 (SE=-0.648)	
TK Overall	B=-0.029 (SE=-0.108)	B=-0.207 (SE=-0.173)		B=0.008 (SE=-0.118)	
RRTK	B=0.143 (SE=-0.154)	B=0.612 (SE=-0.246)		B=0.42 (SE=-0.168)	
Social Comparison			B=-0.422 (SE=-0.092)	B=-0.302 (SE=0.059)	
Expectation Violation			B=-0.354 (SE=-0.097)	B=-0.599 (SE=0.092)	
Envy					B=0.113 (SE=-0.085)
N	108	108	108	108	
R²	0.035	0.068	0.454	0.082	

Discussion

This study aims to explore how public intimacy content on TikTok affects relationship satisfaction, particularly through the dual pathways of expectation violation and social comparison. Therefore, the study draws on the application of these two theories on other social networking platforms to examine whether the use of TikTok leads to increased relationship uncertainty and emotional reactions such as jealousy, thereby reducing relationship satisfaction.

The research findings partially support the proposed hypotheses. First, consistent with Hypothesis 1b and previous research on EVT, expectation violation was significantly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction, indicating that when people perceive their romantic reality as failing to meet overly high expectations shaped by idealized content, they experience dissatisfaction. However, due to measurement limitations, we were unable to test the mediating role of overly high expectations (Hypothesis 1a). Regarding the social comparison pathway, the results strongly supported Hypothesis 2b, indicating that the higher the degree of upward social comparison, the higher the levels of jealousy. However, Hypothesis 2a was not supported,

meaning that exposure to TikTok's public intimacy content was not significantly associated with upward social comparison. Additionally, Hypothesis 2c was not supported, as the results showed that jealousy did not significantly influence individuals' relationship satisfaction.

Overall, the findings of this study expand upon existing literature, revealing differences between cognitive and emotional mechanisms in understanding the impact of TikTok on intimate relationships. While jealousy is frequently addressed in social media research, this study suggests that relationship dissatisfaction may be driven more by cognitive dissonance (i.e., expectation violation) than by pure emotional jealousy. This nuance offers new insights into the differing performance of EVT and social comparison theory across various SNS platforms.

On the other hand, the findings of this study provide guidance for media literacy and interpersonal relationship education. Users may benefit from a series of interventions to enhance their awareness of how carefully crafted video content shapes unrealistic expectations and relationship dissatisfaction. Additionally, app developers and designers should consider integrating content warnings or prompts to encourage users to engage reflectively with public intimate content. Future platforms may explore features to promote healthier social comparison and emphasize authentic interpersonal relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study still has some notable limitations. First, since the study used a survey as its method, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias due to social expectations or inaccurate recall, especially when participants assess emotionally sensitive experiences such as jealousy or relationship dissatisfaction, or when exposed to TikTok public intimacy content for extended periods. Future research could employ mixed-method or experimental approaches to analyze participants' real-time reactions to TikTok content, thereby addressing this issue. Second,

the sample's cultural diversity is limited due to the language requirements of the survey. All of our participants were recruited from English-speaking countries, which can ensure consistency in comprehension and response accuracy. While our approach supports data clarity, it may also limit the cultural representativeness of the findings. and the focus is solely on TikTok, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. Interpersonal relationship expectations and reactions to public intimacy content may vary across different platforms and cultural contexts. Future research should consider cross-platform comparisons and include more diverse populations to explore how digital intimacy unfolds in different sociocultural environments. Third, the cross-sectional study design limits the ability to draw causal inferences; while an association between exposure to publicly intimate content and relationship outcomes was observed, the directionality of these effects remains uncertain. Future research could establish temporal and causal relationships with greater confidence through additional experimental studies as well as longitudinal research.

Conclusion

This study hopes to comprehensively explore how TikTok's publicly intimate content influences relationship satisfaction through expectation formation, social comparison, and emotional response mechanisms. This study aims to uncover measurable trends and nuanced personal experiences that shape relationship dynamics in the context of TikTok's unique content and algorithmic amplification.

Unraveling the dual impact of TikTok content may have been a key challenge during the research. Whereas certain types of overtly intimate content may inspire inspirational and constructive relationship behaviors, other types of content may elicit negative emotional responses, such as jealousy or inadequacy, which can potentially undermine relationship

satisfaction. The categorization of content types (e.g., advice-oriented vs. personal experience sharing) and their moderating effects on relationship outcomes is another challenge that requires rigorous coding and systematic analysis.

Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed (especially participants' reflections on their intimate relationships and emotional reactions), ensuring anonymity and psychological safety is critical. The informed consent process will clearly outline the purpose of the study, procedures, and confidentiality measures, and adhere to best practices outlined in the research ethics guidelines (Babbie, 2020).

Additionally, this study acknowledges the inherent limitations of self-reported data, such as social desirability bias and inaccuracies in recalling TikTok use or relationship behaviors. Future research may benefit from integrating observational or longitudinal designs to complement the findings and provide a more dynamic understanding of the evolving impact of TikTok content on relationship satisfaction.

Overall, this study has the potential to contribute to the fields of social media, relationship research, and digital literacy. By considering TikTok as a new type of social platform, this study addresses a critical gap in understanding how new media affects relationship perceptions and satisfaction. Findings may provide practical insights for educators, therapists, and policymakers to mitigate the negative effects of upward comparisons while promoting supportive and constructive use of social media.

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