

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Digital media and advancements in communication technology have enabled the world to connect like never before. For instance, the internet has speeded up cross-country and cross-cultural communication, breaking down geographical boundaries remotely and connecting people from different parts of the world into one global community. This technology has drastically changed interacting between human interactions, such as forming relationships (Syahputra et al., 2024). One of the most apparent form of advancement in communication technology is social media (Kamila, 2024). Relating to this, Tseng & Gonzalez (2023) stated that the rapid growth of technology has led to the emergence of various types of social media such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and so on.

As social media has become readily accessible through devices and internet availability, information flows faster, creating a new social environment in many places, such as Indonesia (Ma'ruf et al., 2024). According to Digital 2024: Indonesia, Simon Kemp (2024), reported Indonesia has 139 million active social media users as of January 2024 which equal to 49.9% of the population. This has shown that almost half of Indonesians have joined and used social media as part of their daily routine.

Besides it function as communication media, social media also serves as a place for self-expression, build identity, and broader social interactions (Rosana & Fauzi, 2024). According to (de Lenne et al., 2020; Kaur, 2024), social media has a significant role in romantic relationship, especially among Generation Z. J. Zhang et al. (2023) then emphasized that the pervasive nature of social media ensures that everyone is constantly connected to their personal networks and a larger global community, shaping their thoughts, behaviour, and expectations.

In the context of romantic relationships, perceptions vary widely across societies, shaped by cultural norms, media portrayals, and personal

experiences. Romantic relationship perception refers to how individuals interpret and evaluate the dynamics, expectations, and roles within a relationship (Arikewuyo et al., 2021; Chen & Chen, 2023). This phenomenon is particularly important because it influences how individuals approach and manage their relationships. The ideal type of relationship often superficially portrayed on TikTok social media reinforces perfect and harmonious relationships, and Generation Z, which consists of individuals born in the age of digitalisation, is particularly affected by this. This perception needs to be addressed as there is conflict and dissatisfaction stemming from the lack of alignment between expectations and reality. Building on this, TikTok are beginning to play an essential role in shaping perceptions and expectations about romantic relationships, especially among Generation Z (G. Zhang, 2023). With relationships being more publicly expressed and addressed through TikTok, it aligns with the trend of participatory culture encapsulated in short video formats and user-generated content (O' Grady, 2022). Langlais et al. (2024) further highlights, this continuous connectivity that makes it possible to share current information and important moments in their lives, including romantic relationships.

As one of the fastest growing social media platforms, TikTok has a unique and powerful influence on Generation Z (Espinoza & Weekes, 2024). In line with this, Scott (2020) then emphasize that more than 60% of TikTok users are under 30, which is dominated with Generation Z. In January 2025, users aged 18 to 24, who belong to Generation Z, form the largest group of TikTok users. They are followed by users aged 25 to 34, mostly classified as Millennials, and then by smaller numbers of users aged 35 to 44 from Generation X, as well as those aged 45 and above from older generations. As reported by Ceci (2024) on Statista, TikTok reached approximately 113 million monthly active users in Indonesia in July 2024, further highlighting the platform's significant penetration among young people in the country. It can be seen in the figure below that Indonesia occupies the first position worldwide in the use of TikTok, leaving other countries such as the United States and Brazil behind, which further emphasizes how popular and culturally significant the platform is among Indonesians. The platform offers an engaging short video

format and algorithms designed to tailor content according to users' preferences, which makes it highly appealing and is spreading rapidly to the young audience (Zhou, 2024).

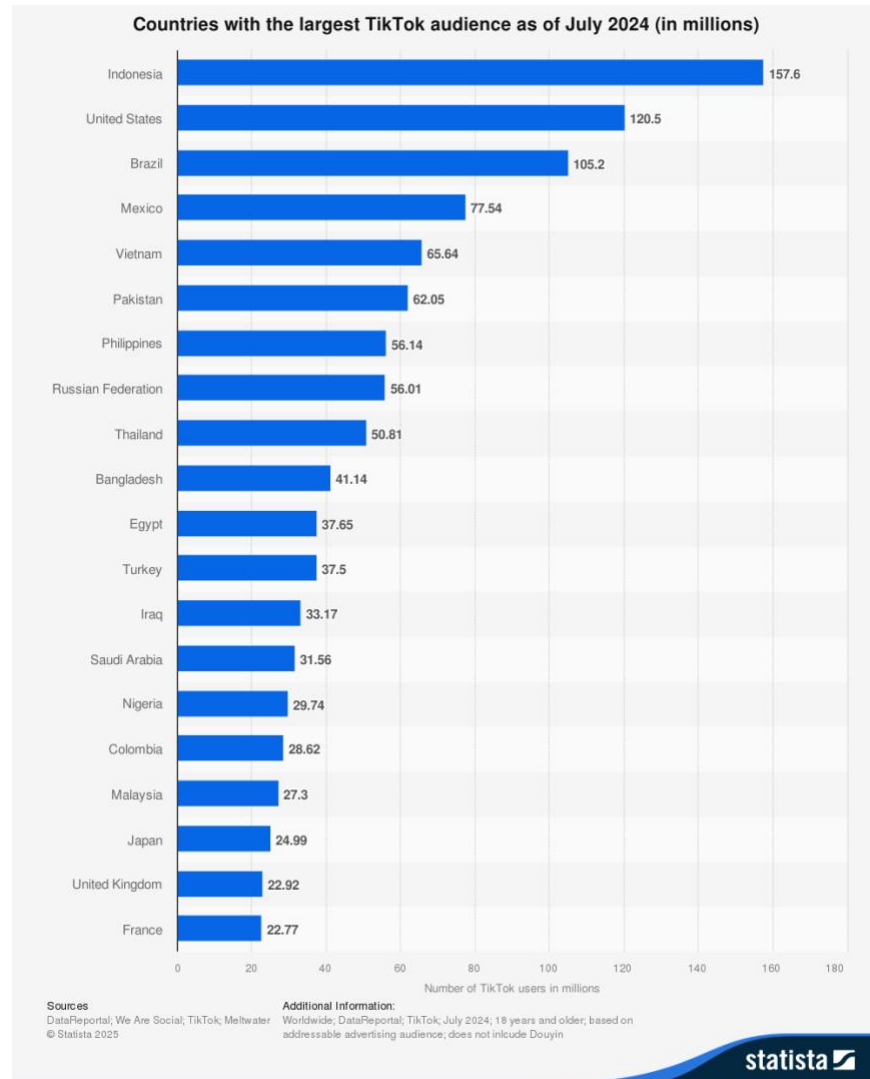


Figure 1.1 Number of TikTok Users in Million
Source: Statista (2024)

Based on data from Ardi Media (2024), Jakarta recorded approximately 20 million active TikTok users, making it the city with the highest number of TikTok users in Indonesia. Surabaya follows with around 10 million users, while Bandung ranks next with approximately 8 million users. These figures highlight how urban centres like Jakarta and Bandung have become major hubs of TikTok engagement, particularly among young people. High user numbers in these cities indicate an environment where Generation Z actively consumes and participates in digital trends, including content that portrays romantic

relationships. The strong presence of TikTok users in Jakarta and Bandung also reflects broader patterns of digital adoption and youth-driven content creation in Indonesia.

TikTok, with its short, impactful videos, has created a unique ecosystem where viral content covers various aspects of life, including lifestyle, beauty trends, and romantic relationships (Brian, 2023). In line with this, Yu (2023) and Choudhary & Louis (2024) added that TikTok has also become a place to create and normalise standardised content of ideal romantic relationships, which has impact on users' interpersonal relationship dynamics. In the context of this study, the perception of romantic relationships on TikTok refers to how Generation Z interprets curated romantic content that frequently highlights idealised, emotionally satisfying, and visually appealing portrayals of love. Such portrayals, often emphasising surprise gestures, verbal affection, and conflict-free communication, contrast with the complexities of real-life relationships, as stated by Wen (2024), which involve emotional negotiation, misunderstandings, and fluctuating dynamics, while TikTok simplifies and aestheticises the romance. Furthermore, Moss (2019) stated that this makes TikTok a powerful tool for influencing users' expectations and shaping the ideal standards of romance.

On TikTok, ideal relationships are often depicted through stories of love without conflict, this can hide the typical relationships of everyday life (Aryani, 2024). This kind of content encourages young users to have unrealistic relationship standards, which can lead to dissatisfaction when their real life experiences do not reflect what they see online. This discrepancy between social media representations and reality can cause conflicts and emotional distress (Ahmed, 2023). Delle et al. (2022) further underlined that the disconnect between expectations established through social media and actual romantic relationship experience can have a drastic effect on relationship quality. The research indicates unrealistic expectations of the fallout from using social media, and puts up a barrier between the picture presented on social media, and the truth behind their interpersonal relationships.

More than simple online engagement, social media is pivotal in determining interpersonal relationships, which has been more pronounced

amongst Generation Z. Langlais et al. (2024) define social media as offering couples verbal and non-verbal opportunities to emotionally connect and foster relationships. Another research by Abbasi (2019) reveals that social media also plays a vital role in how youths develop their identities and reflect on themselves. O' Grady (2022) then emphasizes that the way some younger couples share their successes publicly and discuss their relationship problems has changed with social media and that they now depend on it when it comes to romantic relationships. Furthermore, Coundouris et al. (2021) stated that the tendency of social media to portray relationships as perfect and conflict-free can lead to unrealistic expectations among users.

This has led to a new phenomenon of how social media, influences users perceptions and expectations about various aspects of life, specifically romantic relationship standards on TikTok (Espinoza & Weekes, 2024). Content featuring 'idealised' relationships on TikTok is often presented in a romantic, harmonious, and conflict-free narrative (Delle et al., 2022). Representations of relationships on this platform generally highlight relationships that pamper couples, such as giving shallots as gifts and displaying idealized expressions of love without showing the realities or challenges that couples experience in everyday life (Aryani, 2024). This engenders a distorted perception of the ideal relationship, particularly among young Generation Z couples who frequently consume such content. Confirming to Hertlein & Van Dyck (2020), it not only fosters unrealistic expectations but also gives rise to discord between the images portrayed on social media and the actuality of their own interpersonal relationships.

One of TikTok's examples of content that promotes the perfect standards of romantic relationships is trends like Princess Treatment and Not Lowering Your Standard. Princess Treatment is a situation where someone receives special treatment and is treated like a princess in a relationship. This includes acts such as surprise gifts, consistent verbal affection, being prioritised in daily routines, and being emotionally pampered (Meilivia, 2024). On the other hand, Not Lowering Your Standard is the idea that one should never settle for less in a relationship and always strive for the best. This trend is increasing because there are many people out there who are willing to have

better relationships and do not want to be taken for granted in relationships, according to Putri (2024). The rise of individuals in setting relationship expectations is also backed up by the many TikTok users who post their own experiences, tips, and advice concerning this concept. In order to better illustrate these trends, the following images provide visual representations of how Princess Treatment and Not Lowering Your Standard are portrayed on TikTok. These images show how TikTok is greatly involved in creating perceptions and standards of romantic relationships in the digital world.

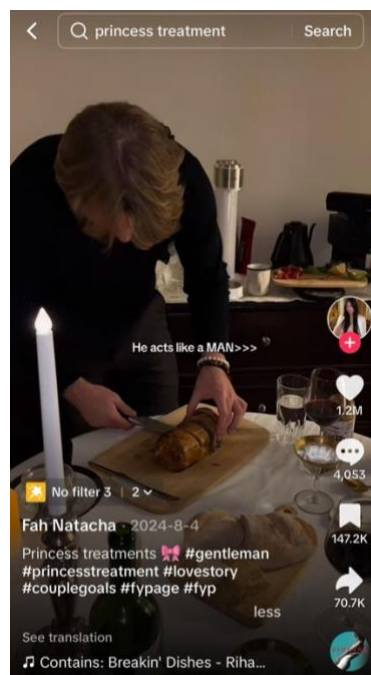


Figure 1.2 'Example of Princess Treatment' Trend
Source: Processed by Author (2024)

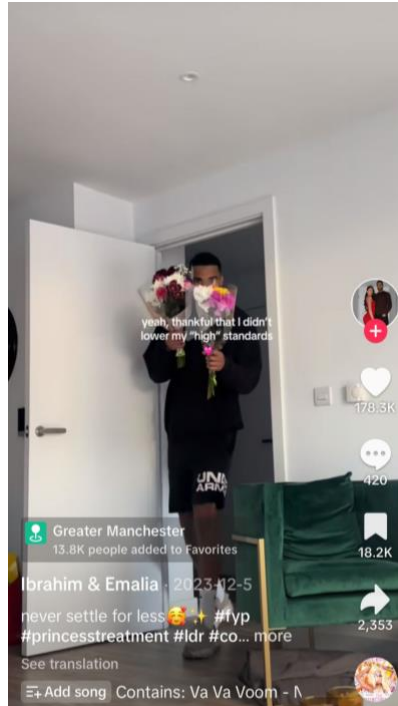


Figure 1.3 Example of ‘Not Lowering Your Standards’ Trends
Source: Processed by Author (2024)

Generation Z is actively engaged in the search for identity as they transition into adulthood, including interrelationship. Emerging adulthood, which runs from age 18-24, is about exploring all aspects of life, including careers, relationships, and outlook on life (Arnett, 2023, p.22-23). In the context of romantic relationships, Generation Z go through a period of exploration to find their ideal form of relationship, so the expectations expressed through content on TikTok have the potential to shape their perceptions of relationship standards (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). Notably, Scott (2024) reports that Generation Z dominates TikTok’s user base. This makes Generation Z a relevant group for exploring how TikTok content shapes perceptions of romantic relationships. Their active engagement on TikTok allows them to interact with and contribute to evolving ideas about love and partnership in the digital era. As digital natives, Generation Z experiences social development alongside rapid media evolution, relying on social media, not only for entertainment but also as a guide to relational norms. Being in the identity exploration stage, they are particularly vulnerable to internalising online relationship standards compared to previous generations (Espinoza & Weekes, 2024; Axford, 2020). These ideals often stem from romantic content portraying relationships as harmonious and conflict-free, which may create

unrealistic expectations and tension when real relationships do not match these portrayals (Kaur, 2024; O'Reilly, 2020). Supporting this, Coundouris et al. (2021) found that social media-shaped relationship expectations frequently differ from reality, ultimately impacting relationship quality.

Therefore, it is important to study how TikTok content shapes the romantic relationship standards among Generation Z, especially because this generation is still in a phase of forming their identity and values. Understanding this influence is necessary not only to see how expectations are shaped, but also to help young people manage realistic and healthy relationships in their daily lives. As TikTok keeps growing and being part of young people's routines, the potential impact it brings toward their perception should not be overlooked. This research is important to give insight into how media content can shape personal beliefs and relationships, especially in the digital era where media plays a big role in shaping everyday thinking and interaction.

This study aims to fill in the above gaps by addressing a methodological gap through conducting in-depth interviews to collect rich data using thematic analysis and Constructivist Theory of Perception to promote a deep understanding of how Generation Z perceive romantic relationship created by TikTok content. Thus, this study not only redresses a gap in the existing literature but also sheds light on the functioning of romantic relationships among the younger generation of individuals in the digital context. In addition, this study advanced the broader field of media and communication studies by exploring how TikTok builds audience perception of romantic relationship standards among Generation Z.

This study conducted using a qualitative approach to understand how TikTok shapes romantic relationship perceptions among Generation Z. This study highlights how curated portrayals of ideal relationship standards on TikTok shape Generation Z's expectations as audience. Based on the background, the researcher is planning to study titled "Perception of Romance Relationship Standard of Generation Z on TikTok". This study is expected to contribute to the field of communication science, especially by enriching the research on how social media shapes romantic perceptions.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aimed to explore how Generation Z understands and engages with the standards of romantic relationships portrayed on TikTok. Specifically, it focuses on the perceptions and experiences of Gen Z as audiences, rather than on the content creators themselves. This includes examining the discrepancy between the idealised representations found in TikTok content and the reality of the interpersonal experiences. By analysing these perceptions, the study explains how TikTok shapes their expectations and understanding of romantic relationships. This study will contribute to the field of media and communication studies by providing a clear understanding of how TikTok, shaped standards, expectations, and dynamics in romantic relationships for young adults.

1.3 Research Question

Based on the research objectives that the author has mentioned above, this study aims to answer the following research problems:

1. How do Generation Z perceive the romantic relationship standards presented on TikTok?

1.4 Research Significance

1.4.1 Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding how TikTok shapes the romantic relationship dynamics of Generation Z. By examining how idealised relationship standards on TikTok are interpreted and internalised in shaping relationship expectations and meaning-making, this study adds to existing knowledge on media and communication studies. It bridges the methodological gap in current literature by employing offline in-depth interviews using thematic analysis within the framework of Constructivist Theory of Perception to collect rich insights. Therefore, the study provides a deep understanding of how curated digital content contributes to personal views about romance in the digital era.

1.4.2 Practical Significance

This study will offer practical insights into how TikTok shapes Generation Z's romantic relationship. The findings can help relationship

counsellors, educators, and social media influencers in improving techniques to assist Generation Z in understanding how curated digital content shapes emotional expectations. These insights are relevant in guiding young adults to critically reflect on idealised relationship portrayals. In addition, the results may assist educators and practitioners in designing communication programs that promote more realistic and emotionally balanced interpretations of romantic relationships. Furthermore, social media influencers are also encouraged to create content that represents diverse and contextualised expressions of love, rather than only idealised forms. This study ultimately supports efforts to build healthier digital environments where relationship expectations are formed more consciously.

1.5 Research Time and Site

Table 1.1 Research Time and Site

NO	TYPE OF ACTIVITIES	2024				2025					
		9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Preliminary Research										
2.	Title Seminar										
3.	Proposal Drafting										
4.	Desk Evaluation										
5.	Data Collection										
6.	Data Processing and Data Analysis										
7.	Thesis Defense										

Source: Processed by Author, 2024

As seen in the table above, the researcher started by conducting preliminary research in September 2024 by looking for journals and literature relevant to the concept to be discussed, from the results of the preliminary research, a title was determined in October 2024 with the title “Perception of Generation Z Romantic Relationship Standards on TikTok”, from the title, the researcher continued making chapters I, II and III from September to November, until in December the researcher conducted a desk evaluation to

determine the research that had been carried out. In January 2025 to February 2025, the proposal continued with the search and collection of the required data, followed by processing and analyzing the data that had been obtained in March to May 2025. The results of this research were carried out in the thesis defense in June 2025 to present the results of the research that had been carried out.