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RELATIONSHIP QUOTES AS A SENSE-GIVING MEDIUM: A STUDY OF EMOTIONAL INTERACTION AND PERCEPTION ON TIKTOK

Januar Aditya Putra[1)], Veranus Sidharta[2)]

1) Department of Communication Science, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, E-mail: januar.aditya.putra@gmail.com
2) Department of Communication Science, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, E-mail: veranus.vri@bsi.ac.id

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CORRESPONDENCE

Phone:

E-mail: veranus.vri@bsi.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how relationship quotes on TikTok function as a sense-giving medium in shaping users' emotional meaning-making. In the digital era, social media has become a dynamic space where individuals express, reframe, and validate their relational experiences. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach and NVivo-assisted thematic analysis, data were collected from five active TikTok users who frequently engage with relationship quote content. The findings reveal that such content is not merely consumed passively but serves as a trigger for emotional reflection, self-expression, and collective meaning construction. Digital interactions such as commenting, sharing, and creating duets foster sensemaking processes, allowing users to exchange perspectives and build an interconnected emotional ecosystem. These quotes offer a safe space for emotional expression, particularly for female users, while also raising issues such as narrative bias and unrealistic relational expectations. Thus, relationship quotes on TikTok function as a bridge between individual emotions and collective emotional consciousness in digital communication spaces. This study highlights the importance of emotional literacy in navigating the emotionally charged content landscape of social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, social media no longer functions solely as a means of communication or entertainment, but has evolved into a primary arena for forming social meaning and individual emotional expression (Tang, 2021; Sidharta et al.. In this context, social media becomes a virtual public space where individuals represent their identities, build interpersonal connections, and openly communicate their emotional states. This transformation is characterized by the presence of various digital narratives that reflect everyday life experiences, whether in the form of text, images, or short videos. One form of communication that is growing rapidly and is often found on platforms like TikTok is the spread of relationship quotes, namely quotes with relational and emotional nuances that discuss the dynamics of love, inner wounds, hopes in relationships, and reflections on complex interpersonal relationships. (Nemes, 2022; Langlais et al., 2024).

These quotes are often aesthetically and emotionally packaged in short videos accompanied by melancholic music, minimalist visuals, and relatable narratives, creating a psychological appeal for the audience. The spread of relationship quotes not only reflects digital aesthetic preferences but also serves as a form of emotional articulation that can be widely and quickly disseminated. This phenomenon is not just a passing trend, but rather a reflection of a shift in the way individuals express, understand, and reframe their emotional experiences in virtual public spaces. (Markowitz & Bailenson, 2019; Hariyady et al., 2024). Individuals are now more open in communicating their feelings through social media, especially through short narrative forms such as relationship quotes, which allow for the articulation of complex emotions in a short, aesthetic, and easy-to-consume format.

This aligns with Boyd's (2014) view that social media has blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres, enabling individuals to reframe their personal experiences within a broader social discourse (Boyd, 2014). Openness to relational and mental health issues also contributes to the development of reflective and affective content. Users not only use this content to express themselves, but also to seek emotional affiliation, form a sense of belonging to a virtual community, and gain social validation from other users (Hollenbaugh, 2021). In other words, when someone feels "represented" by a quote, their emotional response is amplified through digital interaction processes such as reading similar comments, liking the content, or re-sharing it on other platforms. In this context, relationship quotes on TikTok can be understood as a form of emotional affordance (Schellewald, 2023), specifically referring to how the platform's design and content facilitate the expression and experience of certain emotions. Content creators do not only convey messages, but also carry out a sense-giving process, namely giving meaning that frames how audiences understand their own relationships (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The digital interactions that are created not only create personal meaning but also form collective emotional awareness in an interconnected social media ecosystem. (Tang, 2021).

TikTok, with its personalized algorithm and interactive features, allows users not only to consume but also to produce and distribute meaning collectively (Wright, 2021). In this context, relationship quotes not only function as personal expressions, but also as a form of sense-giving, which is the process by which individuals or content creators frame social and emotional realities for others to understand (Giuliani, 2016). This kind of content offers relatable narratives, which are then responded to by the audience through comments, likes, and reposts as a form of participation in the construction of meaning. In this case, the process of sensemaking and sense-giving serves as a bridge between digital messages and individual affective experiences, fostering a shared understanding of love, loss, disappointment, or hope. (Weick, 1995; Luna-Reyes et al., 2021; Robert & Ola, 2021; Sidharta et al, 2025).

TikTok users, especially young people, utilize relationship quotes as a means to respond to personal experiences, foster emotional reflections, and establish implicit social connections. (Nemes, 2022; Wang & Shang, 2024). This interaction shows that social media is not just a space for entertainment, but also a dynamic ecosystem of emotional communication. Users not only see themselves in the quotes, but also feel emotionally validated when they see responses from other users who have experienced similar things. Thus, relationship quotes on TikTok emerge as a symbol of modern emotional expression formed through digital interactions, shared sensemaking, and active participation in the social media ecosystem. Through a qualitative approach, this study aims to understand how relationship quotes on TikTok become a means of providing emotional meaning, as well as how user interactions reflect their active role in creating and negotiating emotional realities in the digital world.

2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative design with a constructivist paradigm and a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen to understand how emotional meaning is formed by individuals in their interactions with relationship quote content on TikTok. The constructivist paradigm enables researchers to investigate the subjective experiences of informants, taking into account their social, psychological, and cultural backgrounds, including digital aspects (Creswell, 2018). The research was conducted online, with TikTok serving as the primary space for observation and data collection. Research informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, comprising five individuals who were all active TikTok users. They were selected based on their direct involvement in relationship quotes content on TikTok. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted online via a video communication application. Interview questions explored users' perceptions, feelings, and responses to relationship quote content.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 Pro software, which enables systematic thematic coding and visualization of relationships between categories. (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). The analysis steps include the data transcription process, open coding to identify meaning units, axial coding to group these units into main categories, and selective coding to organize the findings into key themes. The focus

of the analysis is on the sense-giving process carried out by content creators and the sense-making responses of users in forming emotional meanings towards relational narratives on TikTok. The validity of the data is tested through the strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as stated by Miles (2014).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In today's digitally connected era, social media platforms like TikTok have undergone a significant transformation in their functionality. No longer limited to entertainment or casual communication, TikTok has evolved into a public emotional arena where users openly express their inner feelings. One of the most prominent and relatable forms of expression is the relationship quote, a short, emotionally charged statement about love, heartbreak, longing, betrayal, and relational hope. These quotes are not presented in isolation; they are often accompanied by visually aesthetic short videos featuring melancholic music, slow-motion transitions, and voiceovers that enhance their emotional appeal. This creative packaging enables such content to trigger deep affective responses among viewers.

This phenomenon demonstrates that relationship quotes are not merely artistic expressions but powerful tools of emotional communication. In an anonymous and fluid digital space like TikTok, many users feel more comfortable expressing emotions that may be suppressed in offline settings. Emotional validation becomes a central factor in this interaction, where users feel "seen" and "understood" through empathetic comments, shared experiences, or simple affirmations such as likes and reposts. In this context, relationship quotes serve as a medium of sense-giving, not only delivering emotional messages but also shaping how audiences perceive, reflect on, and make sense of their personal experiences.

Moreover, the emotional resonance created by such content contributes to the formation of a collective affective ecosystem, where personal feelings are mirrored and validated within a broader virtual community. Validation does not solely come from the content itself but also from the audience's engagement and interpretation of it. This process illustrates how individual emotional expression can evolve into shared emotional understanding. Thus, to fully grasp the role of relationship quotes in users' emotional lives, the following section will examine how these quotes operate as both a medium for personal expression and a source of social validation within the evolving digital culture.

Relationship Quotes as a Medium of Emotional Expression and Validation

Relationship quotes on TikTok not only function as entertainment content, but have also developed into an important medium for channeling emotional expression and validation for its users. This type of content enables individuals to express feelings that may not always be readily expressed in everyday interactions. In this context, TikTok acts as a digital public space that accommodates users' affective expressions, especially those related to the dynamics of personal relationships. The majority of informants in this study admitted to feeling a connection to the content, especially when they were in a situation similar to the one depicted in the video. As expressed by Informant 2:

> *"I feel sad if the content discusses the problems I am experiencing in my relationship. On the other hand, I will feel proud and happy if the content reflects the positive things that I also feel in my relationship."* (Informant 2)

This quote demonstrates that an emotional connection to content is not just passive but also brings a sense of validation, namely the feeling that one's personal experience is recognized and understood by the broader community. This validation is a form of sense-giving, where content creators indirectly frame relational reality through a narrative style designed to evoke a close connection to their audience's experience. A similar thing was also conveyed by Informant 2, who said that:

> *"I feel that several times the content on TikTok is very relatable to my daily life, and I feel like TikTok can read our minds."* (Informant 2)

Meanwhile, Informant 3 admitted that he had re-shared relationship quotes content because he felt the message *"felt related to the conditions at that time."* These expressions indicate that the relationship between users and content extends beyond the consumption stage, involving a process of deep identification and interpretation of the message content. In other words, the content serves as a means of emotional representation that bridges personal experiences with collective narratives. In this case, TikTok acts as a sense-giving platform, allowing individuals to reframe their personal experiences through the emotional framework provided in the content. When someone likes, comments on, or shares certain content, these actions reflect an attempt to affirm one's own feelings through social validation. This is reflected in the statement of Informant 1, who stated that:

> *"I feel validated and advised when the content addresses the same issues I am experiencing."* (Informant 1)

Through this process, users not only feel heard but also strengthened in their position as part of a wider emotional community. Therefore, relationship quotes can no longer be viewed as merely sad quotes or light content. They play an active role in forming a space of emotional reflection that is socially and psychologically relevant for their users. The validation, connectedness, and affective expression that emerge from interactions with such content reflect the dynamics of modern emotional communication, where social media serves as the primary medium for collectively and individually building relational meaning.

Digital Interaction: Between Passive Consumption and Active Participation

User interaction with relationship quotes content on TikTok reveals a broad spectrum ranging from passive consumption to active participation. This is reflected in the various attitudes and habits of informants when they are exposed to content on their timelines. Informant 4 stated.

> *"I like the content, but I don't comment on the content that is uploaded; I only give a form of appreciation by liking it."* (Informant 4)

Likewise, with Informant 1, who admitted to never commenting or sharing content, but had done so to like. Both informants showed a more passive pattern of involvement, where their interactions stopped at the level of visual and light affective consumption, without engaging in further conversation in the comments space or redistributing content. On the other hand, a more active pattern of interaction can be observed from the statements of Informant 2 and Informant 3, who said that they "have and quite often share content because it represents what they feel in a relationship with someone." This shows that the act of re-sharing is not merely technical, but is based on a strong emotional connection to the content.

Meanwhile, Informant 5 not only saves and reposts videos to his personal account, but also duets or stitches, a form of further interaction that shows that the content is truly considered personally important. Interestingly, both passive consumption and active participation cannot be separated from the user's affective motivation. For those who choose not to interact explicitly, actions such as liking or simply watching are still forms of emotional internalization. In contrast, for those who actively spread or add new narratives through the duet/stitch feature, these actions become a way to project and reframe their personal emotions in the wider digital space.

This process aligns with the concept of sensemaking proposed by Weick (1995), where individuals not only receive messages but also actively shape and formulate an understanding of social reality through their involvement in discursive practices. TikTok, as a social platform, allows personal narratives to become part of the collective discourse. When users like, share, or add comments and personal narratives to relationship quotes, they are participating in a dynamic process of meaning production. In other words, TikTok is not only a distribution medium but also a social interpretation space that brings together individual affective experiences with a wider digital emotional community.

Influence on Perception of Love and Relationships

Emotional responses to relationship quotes on TikTok have a profound impact on how individuals perceive love, relationships, and expectations within them. The majority of informants in this study revealed that although they did not use such content as the main reference in their relationships, a reflective process still emerged after being exposed to such emotional quotes. Informant 1 stated:

> *"Several times, the content I watch feels related to the situation I have experienced, but I don't use it all as a benchmark, just as a reminder or comparison with what we experience."* (Informant 1)

This statement shows that, although it is not used as an absolute guideline, relationship quotes still have the capacity to trigger reflection on the relational situation being faced. A similar sentiment was conveyed by Informant 5, who stated that the emotional content he encountered on TikTok often served as a stimulus for introspection or discussion in his relationships. He even admitted that he had compared his relationship to the one shown in the TikTok video

> *"It is very influential for me because I can often be motivated by the content and apply it to real life to become better.", but "not to demand, but so that together we can become better."* (Informant 5)

This demonstrates that relationship quotes can serve as a productive medium for emotional reflection when used consciously and proportionately. However, not all impacts are constructive. There are also ambivalent dynamics that suggest a negative influence from the content, particularly when consumed without a critical understanding. Informant 3, for example, observed this phenomenon and said:

> *“I often see people who make that content the standard of their relationship, continuing to force their partners to do what is in the TikTok content, even though the reality is not like that.”* (Informant 3)

Meanwhile, Informant 1 added that there are also people who become overly emotional about the content of quotes on TikTok.

> *"There are those who are too absorbed in the contents of the quotes, so they end up overthinking it, even though it may not be in accordance with the reality they experience."* (Informant 1)

These two quotes highlight that expectations formed from TikTok content have the potential to create emotional pressure or unrealistic illusions of romance that do not align with reality. This phenomenon reveals that relationship quotes, although they can serve as a space for validation and reflection, also have a problematic side when not addressed with sufficient emotional literacy. When users over-idealize narratives that are aesthetically and emotionally packaged on TikTok, there is a possibility of misinterpreting the real relationships they are in. Therefore, it is important for users, especially the younger generation, to develop critical awareness in consuming emotion-based content, so that their digital experiences do not blur the boundaries between expectations and reality in interpersonal relationships. TikTok, in this case, is not only a space for expression but also a field for forming perceptions of love that needs to be managed wisely.

Gender and Representation of Emotions

Differences in gender-based interactions with relationship quotes content on TikTok are one of the important findings in this study. The majority of informants observed that women tend to be more expressive and open in responding to content related to relational dynamics and emotions. These

expressions are not only in the form of comments and likes, but also include re-sharing content that they feel aligns with their personal experiences. Informant 4 stated that TikTok is a safe space for women to express emotions that may not be freely expressed in offline spaces.

> *"Women often interpret things using feelings. They are more daring to express their feelings through comments or re-sharing touching content."* (Informant 4)

A similar statement was made by Informant 1, who noted that the majority of those who responded to quotes on TikTok were women, and that men tended to be more passive in their responses to content.

> *"A lot of women respond to quotes on TikTok. Sometimes it's like pouring out my heart in the comments column, and that makes me feel less alone."* (Informant 1)

Informant 5 stated that men typically only glance at the content without responding; instead of replying to quotes, most men share the content, but there are also those who feel a connection.

> *"Men usually only look at the content and don't comment much, let alone share the content. But that doesn't mean they don't feel related, it's just a different way of showing their feelings."* (Informant 5)

This reflects the differences in emotional culture between men and women in their use of social media as a space for affective expression. TikTok has also become a platform for more open emotional expression among female users, while men tend to manage their emotions more privately. However, informants also criticized the bias in the narrative of relationship quotes content circulating on TikTok. Most of the content is considered to only voice one side of the story, often siding with women and placing men as the wrong party or lacking empathy. Informant 5 said,

> *"Sometimes the content is too biased, for example men are always considered to be the wrong party and that can be a problem if it is used as a standard without knowing the context."* (Informant 5)

This critique highlights the tendency for unbalanced framing, where emotional experiences are presented from only one perspective. In the context of sense-giving, this suggests that even though creators try to frame certain meanings to arouse audience sympathy, not all viewers will accept the narrative at face value. Furthermore, Informant 1 added that "If you look at the comments column, sometimes it's really busy because guys and girls blame each other. Whereas every relationship has its own context." This shows that even though the content is presented emotionally and relatably, the audience still brings their own framework of experience and judgment when interpreting it. The tension between the message framed by the creator and the audience's interpretation reveals the dynamic sensemaking process. In this case, social media is not only a place for expression but also an arena for negotiating meaning that is influenced by gender identity, personal experience, and emotional representation in digital culture.

TikTok as a Collective Emotional Ecosystem

TikTok is not only a short video-based social media platform, but it has also developed into a collective emotional ecosystem that allows for active and layered affective interactions between users. Through features such as comments, duets, and shares, this platform facilitates the process of exchanging meaning between users, creating a dialogical space where emotions are not only expressed but also reorganized and mutually agreed upon. In the context of relationship quotes content, users do not simply listen to narratives about love and relationships; they also participate in shaping meaning through their digital involvement. As expressed by Informant 1:

"Other people's comments often make me rethink the content. Sometimes I feel like I'm not the only one who feels this way." (Informant 1)

This indicates that the interaction in the comment column serves as a bridge that strengthens emotional connectedness between users, while also acting as a medium of social validation. Meanwhile, Informant 3 stated that:

"I like to read the comments first before really judging the content. because sometimes there are people who have different views that make me think from another side." (Informant 3)

This statement suggests that comments are not merely spontaneous responses but rather an integral part of the sense-making process, as active users strive to understand the emotional message conveyed in the content. Furthermore, the duet and stitch features provide space for users to reproduce, affirm, or even criticize the meaning in relationship quotes through their own narratives. Informant 3 admitted that he had a duet with video quotes:

"I once did a duet with a video quote that was really relatable, because I also had almost the same experience. So I felt like joining in on the story too." (Informant 3)

In this case, users not only passively receive meaning, but also play a role as actors who give meaning to the community. TikTok offers a flexible structure that allows personal content to be collectively reframed, fostering a shared emotional awareness that stems from individual experiences. This phenomenon reveals that relationship quotes on TikTok are not merely viral products that are consumed instantly, but rather part of the circulation of digital emotions that contribute to shaping social constructions of love, wounds, hopes, and relational identities.

TikTok becomes a virtual public space where users reframe personal experiences through digital narratives, while simultaneously establishing emotional connections that transcend individual boundaries. Within the framework of sense-giving, the content not only conveys messages but also shapes mindsets, provides space for reflection, and channels psychosocial needs for emotional connection and recognition. To strengthen the thematic findings of this study, the following visualization shows the relationship between informants and sub-themes that have been analyzed using NVivo software. This image clarifies the intensity of each informant's involvement in certain aspects of the meaning of relationship quotes on TikTok.

The image below shows that each informant has a diverse thematic involvement in the emotional issues framed in the relationship quotes content on TikTok. Each informant is associated with several sub-themes that describe their experiences, perceptions, and forms of interaction with the content. For example, Informant 2 appears to be the most active informant, with connections to various sub-themes such as Validation From the Community, Like, Share and Comment, Debate and Differences of Opinion, Narrative Bias, and Disturbed, which shows that he not only responds emotionally to the content but is also critical of the narrative conveyed.

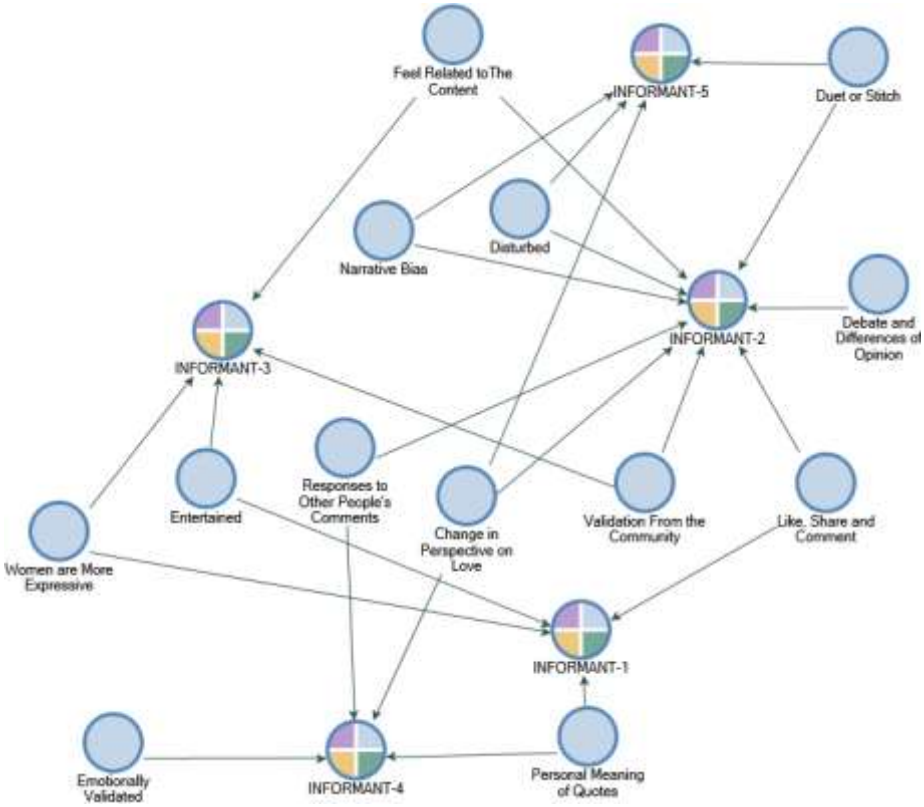


Figure 1. Visualization of Informant Relationships with Sub-Sub Themes of Relationship Quotes on TikTok
Source: Nvivo Thematic Data Processing

Meanwhile, Informant 4 was more connected to reflective and affective themes, such as Emotionally Validated, Responses to Other People's Comments, and Change in Perspective on Love. This suggests that the content of relationship quotes serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as a catalyst for reflection on personal relationships. Informant 1 and Informant 3 stood out in aspects such as Personal Meaning of Quotes, Entertaining, and Women are More Expressive, which highlighted the relationship between gender identity and the digital expression of affection. Informant 5, although having fewer connections, still demonstrated emotional involvement through themes such as "Feel Related to the Content" and "Duet or Stitch." Overall, this image highlights that the experience of relationship quotes is uniquely shaped by the background and interactions of each individual, and demonstrates TikTok's role as a social space for fostering collective emotional awareness.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that relationship quotes on TikTok have evolved into more than just entertainment content, also serving as a sense-giving medium that reframes users' emotional and relational experiences in the digital era. Through a qualitative approach using NVivo, it was found that users not only consume content passively but also actively interpret, disseminate, and affirm their personal experiences through TikTok's interactive features, such as comments, shares, and duets. These contents serve as a bridge between personal experiences and collective emotions, forming a shared awareness of love, pain, and hope that is publicly shared. Various themes, including emotional expression, digital participation, perceptions of love and relationships, and gender dynamics, emerged in the informants' narratives. Users' responses to relationship quotes are greatly influenced by their respective life experiences and interactions in the digital space. TikTok has proven to be a collective emotional ecosystem that supports the process of sensemaking and sense-giving, where users not only understand the world through content but also play a role in shaping the meaning shared within the community. However, these findings also

underscore the importance of emotional literacy and critical awareness, so that content consumers do not become caught up in biased emotional narratives or unrealistic idealizations of relationships.

The suggestions in this study highlight the importance of expanding the scope of research on the dynamics of emotions and digital interactions, particularly on platforms like TikTok. Further researchers are advised to involve more informants with more diverse demographic backgrounds, in order to gain a more representative understanding of the construction of emotional meaning from various perspectives. In addition, the use of a quantitative or mixed-methods approach is also recommended to obtain more measurable data and map the influence of relationship quotes content on user perceptions and behavior more broadly. Cross-platform comparisons, such as Instagram Reels or YouTube Shorts, can also enrich the analysis of how the technological context and media culture shape the way individuals express and interpret emotions digitally.

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