



## TikTok's Influence on Marriage and Relationship Attitudes among Young Adults in Urban Kampala

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**Abstract.** This study examines how TikTok content about marriage and relationships influences the perceptions of young adults in urban Kampala, Uganda. Drawing on Cultivation Theory, the research explores the ways social media narratives shape relational attitudes in a rapidly digitising society. A qualitative case study design was employed with forty purposively selected participants (20 men and 20 women, aged 18–35). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and analysed thematically. The analysis revealed that TikTok communicates recurring messages highlighting open communication, shared responsibility, gender collaboration, and support for single parenthood. At the same time, the platform often presents glamorised and unrealistic portrayals of marriage and intimate life. Participants found these messages both empowering and problematic: they encouraged collaboration and offered practical advice, but also promoted unrealistic expectations, trend-driven pressures, and discouraging images of marital life. The findings suggest that TikTok functions as a dual-edged cultural tool. It provides valuable relational lessons while simultaneously glamorising and normalising idealised or dysfunctional dynamics. The study highlights the need for media literacy initiatives to enable young people in Uganda to critically evaluate digital ideals of relationships within their cultural context.

**Keywords:** TikTok; marriage; relationships; Uganda; cultivation theory; qualitative research

### 1. Introduction

TikTok, a global platform with more than one billion monthly active users (Al Hassan et al., 2024), has rapidly emerged as a powerful arena for cultural expression, identity negotiation, and relational storytelling among young people. In Uganda, as in many parts of the world, young adults are increasingly consuming short-form videos that communicate narratives about love, marriage, and family roles (Pettersen & Karlsen, 2024; Ulusoy et al., 2023). These narratives often challenge established cultural norms in which marriage has traditionally been framed as patriarchal and lifelong. Unlike earlier platforms centred on text or static images, TikTok's participatory design and algorithm-driven amplification give it a distinctive ability to shape relational ideals through emotionally engaging, shareable, and relatable content (Farid, 2025).

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Existing scholarship has documented how digital media influences perceptions of intimacy, marital expectations, and relational practices. Studies in Western contexts show how social media reshapes ideas of love, conflict management, and even toxic relationship dynamics (Ella et al., 2023; Ling et al., 2023). African scholars have also begun to examine these dynamics. For instance, research from Nigeria highlights the destabilisation of marital roles and responsibilities through social media use (Adegboyega, 2022), while Moroccan-Spanish studies illustrate cultural hybridisation through TikTok storytelling (Civila & Jaramillo-Dent, 2023). These findings suggest that social media platforms like TikTok play a role in redefining cultural expectations of marriage. However, they also demonstrate that outcomes vary depending on cultural context, and insights from one region cannot be directly applied to another.

Despite this growing body of work, empirical research on TikTok and relationship perceptions in East Africa particularly Uganda remains limited. Much of the existing literature either focuses on Western societies or treats Africa as a monolithic cultural space, overlooking Uganda's unique context where marriage continues to be regarded as a marker of social stability, adulthood, and personal success (Adebayo et al., 2021; Ella et al., 2023). This lack of Ugandan-focused scholarship creates a gap in understanding how globalised digital narratives interact with deeply rooted local marital values.

Addressing this gap is important because Ugandan youth are increasingly negotiating their identities and relationship choices in an environment where traditional values intersect with global media flows. TikTok, in particular, introduces both empowering content such as narratives of communication, gender collaboration, and inclusivity and problematic portrayals that glamorise wealth, reinforce unrealistic expectations, or depict marriage as inherently unstable (Farid, 2025). Understanding how these messages are received and interpreted is crucial for advancing media literacy and for strengthening cultural resilience among young people.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate TikTok's influence on how young adults in urban Kampala (aged 18–35) perceive marriage and relationships. Guided by Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1970), it explores three core questions: (1) What dominant messages about marriage and relationships are conveyed through TikTok content? (2) How do young Ugandans perceive and interpret these messages? and (3) What are the broader implications for media literacy, cultural identity, and relationship practices in Uganda? By situating Ugandan voices within a global scholarly debate, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital cultures reconfigure relational values in non-Western contexts.

Beyond Western and North African contexts, research has highlighted how TikTok and other short-form video platforms function as spaces where relational ideals are reframed through humour, parody, and performativity. For example, studies from Southeast Asia demonstrate that young users employ TikTok skits to challenge generational norms about dating, independence, and family expectations (Thi Nguyet Trang et al., 2025). These findings suggest that TikTok is not only a site of consumption but also of active cultural production, where young adults reinterpret relational scripts in ways that reflect their own realities.

In addition, comparative analyses have shown that TikTok fosters transnational flows of relational discourses. Research in Latin America, for instance, illustrates how users adopt and adapt global trends such as the “relationship goals” trope or the “day in the life of a couple” format while embedding them in local cultural idioms (Fonseca et al., 2020; Kornblum et al., 2021). This blending of global aesthetics with local values highlights



TikTok's role as a hybrid cultural space, simultaneously reinforcing and disrupting traditional narratives of love and marriage.

Scholars have also cautioned against the platform's tendency to amplify idealised or toxic relational portrayals through its algorithmic logics. A growing body of work argues that TikTok's recommendation system often privileges highly emotional, visually appealing, and trend-driven content, which may exaggerate unrealistic standards of intimacy, beauty, and marital success (Syifa Martiaz Arifin & Dedeh Fardiah, 2023; Wagimin & Mustika, 2023). Such amplification risks normalising problematic patterns, including jealousy, control, or the trivialisation of long-term commitment, thereby shaping young users' perceptions in ways that may clash with or undermine cultural norms.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how TikTok content influences young adults' perceptions of marriage and relationships in Kampala, Uganda. A qualitative approach was chosen because it foregrounds the lived experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to them, thereby providing a nuanced and contextualised understanding of how global digital culture intersects with local relational norms (Aspers & Corte, 2019, 2021; Braun et al., 2021).

The study focused on young adults aged 18–35 living in urban Kampala, identified as the most active demographic of TikTok users. Using purposive sampling, forty participants were selected to ensure diversity in gender, relationship status, and TikTok usage. The final sample comprised 20 men and 20 women, including single individuals, married participants, divorced individuals, and single parents. While purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of varied perspectives, it also limited representativeness, particularly of rural populations. The sample size, though modest, was adequate for achieving qualitative depth.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Individual interviews, lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, captured personal reflections on how TikTok shaped perceptions of marriage. Focus group discussions, each lasting 1.5 to 2 hours, facilitated interactive exchanges that generated collective insights and revealed group dynamics. Both methods were guided by open-ended questions addressing the types of relationship content participants consumed, their interpretations of messages, and the influence of these narratives on marital attitudes. To enhance authenticity, participants were free to respond in English or Luganda. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent.

The data were transcribed, translated where necessary, and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework (2006). This process involved familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, and synthesis into a coherent narrative. NVivo software was used to assist in coding, and participant quotations were incorporated to illustrate lived experiences and strengthen analytical credibility. Ethical approval was secured from Victoria University's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with pseudonyms used in all reporting.

As with many qualitative studies, this research faced several limitations. Its focus on urban Kampala restricts the generalisability of findings to rural populations, and the purposive sample of forty participants, while methodologically appropriate, cannot claim statistical representativeness. Additionally, TikTok's algorithm exposes users to different streams of content, meaning participants' experiences were not uniform. These



limitations, however, do not diminish the study's contribution; instead, they highlight the need for future research, particularly longitudinal and comparative studies, to examine TikTok's influence on relational norms across diverse Ugandan and broader Global South contexts.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. TikTok as a Source of Relational Learning

The study found that TikTok functions as an informal site of relational education, providing young adults with alternative perspectives on healthy relationship practices. Participants highlighted how creators frequently stress themes such as open communication, mutual trust, and compromise. One male respondent explained, *"Content creators often emphasise themes like communication, trust, compromise, and the importance of maintaining individuality within a relationship."* These narratives resonate with Candelo et al. (2022) findings that digital platforms support relationship maintenance, and they align with Cultivation Theory (Duan et al., 2022; Potter, 2014; Saefudin & Venus, 2007), which suggests that consistent media exposure shapes social attitudes and behaviours.

Beyond communication, TikTok content also reconfigured gender expectations and relational roles. A female participant remarked, *"It has encouraged me to be a hardworking and supportive partner in my family as a woman... With working, I can help my partner in hard times by giving him a hand where necessary."* This reflects broader research in Nigeria and Morocco (Adegboyega, 2022; Civila & Jaramillo-Dent, 2023), which shows that social media disrupts traditional gendered divisions in marriage. Similarly, single parents in Kampala found TikTok to be a practical and emotional resource. One mother stated, *"TikTok content on marriage and relationships reflects on my background of single parenting, so with TikTok, I get ideas on how mothers can take care of their children in the absence of their fathers."* This echoes studies in Indonesia (Frida Kusumastuti & Ningrum, 2022), which show how digital parenting accounts offer solidarity and coping strategies.

The findings indicate that TikTok operates not merely as a source of entertainment but as an informal educational platform where relational practices are communicated and negotiated. Participants consistently pointed out that content creators often frame relationship ideals around respect, compromise, and personal growth. These digital lessons were perceived as accessible, relatable, and relevant to the lived realities of young Ugandans navigating the complexities of modern relationships.

TikTok also provided participants with tools for reflecting on their own relational experiences. By observing how creators discuss challenges such as conflict resolution or emotional vulnerability, many respondents felt encouraged to adopt similar practices in their personal lives. For instance, participants explained that exposure to repeated messages about "listening to your partner" or "avoiding unnecessary drama" encouraged them to rethink how they approached disagreements in their own relationships. Such findings reinforce the argument that social media platforms contribute to cultivating relational literacy among young adults.

Furthermore, the platform appeared to serve as a bridge between globalised relationship discourses and local cultural expectations. While participants acknowledged that Ugandan society traditionally upholds patriarchal models of marriage, TikTok exposed them to alternative narratives of shared responsibility and gender equality. This reorientation was particularly significant for female participants, many of whom



expressed feeling empowered to challenge stereotypical roles by embracing collaboration and independence within their partnerships.

The study revealed that TikTok content contributed to building communities of shared experience, particularly for groups such as single parents. Through relatable storytelling, parenting tips, and motivational accounts, participants found emotional solidarity and practical advice that reduced feelings of isolation. This community-building function reflects the growing role of digital media in supplementing traditional support systems, thereby expanding the cultural resources available to young people as they navigate relational and familial responsibilities.

**Table 1** TikTok as a Source of Relational Learning

Theme	Illustrative Quote from Participants	Interpretation
Communication and Trust	“Content creators often emphasise themes like communication, trust, compromise, and individuality.”	TikTok reinforces the importance of openness, trust, and self-identity in sustaining healthy relationships.
Gender Collaboration	“It has encouraged me to be a hardworking and supportive partner in my family as a woman.”	Exposure to digital narratives reshapes gender expectations, promoting more equitable and collaborative roles.
Support for Single Parenting	“TikTok content on marriage and relationships reflects on my background of single parenting...”	The platform provides practical strategies and emotional solidarity for those raising children alone.
Relational Empowerment	“With working, I can help my partner in hard times by giving him a hand where necessary.”	TikTok motivates participants to adopt proactive, empowering approaches in their relationships.

Table 1 illustrates how TikTok serves as a space for relational learning through four main themes: communication, gender collaboration, support for single parents, and empowerment within relationships. Participant quotes highlight how the content they consume encourages open communication, fosters mutual trust, and emphasizes the importance of maintaining individuality in a partnership. In addition, TikTok’s digital narratives challenge traditional gender roles, enabling women to feel more empowered and engaged as equal contributors within families. For single parents, the platform provides both practical parenting strategies and a sense of solidarity that is often lacking in conventional support systems. Overall, these themes demonstrate that TikTok functions not merely as entertainment but also as a source of inspiration that broadens young adults’ perspectives on values and practices in relationships.

3.2. *TikTok as a Site of Unrealistic Ideals and Pressures*

While TikTok was a source of empowerment, it also projected glamorised and often unattainable ideals of relationships. Many participants noted that videos typically highlight “perfect” moments, omitting the everyday challenges of married life. A female respondent reflected, *“TikTok content typically showcases highlights and idealised moments, often omitting the everyday challenges and complexities of real relationships.”* These concerns mirror Farid’s (2025) critique of TikTok’s aestheticisation of toxic





behaviours and Damayanti *et al.*'s (2021) findings on influencers promoting unattainable lifestyles.

Participants also described pressures to conform to influencer-driven narratives that equate relationship success with material wealth. As one male participant observed, *"TikTok primarily calls upon young gals to get married to rich men, but in real life, no rich man that gets married to a broke woman."* Others warned against becoming "slaves of TikTok," cautioning that the platform can mislead emotionally and culturally. These findings resonate with Hudson *et al.*'s (2016) analysis of social media's consumerist pressures, where material success is linked to relational worth.

TikTok not only provides relational guidance but also amplifies glamorised depictions of love and marriage that are detached from everyday realities. Many participants observed that creators highlight curated and aestheticised "perfect moments," often omitting the hardships, conflicts, and compromises that define long-term relationships. This selective portrayal fosters unrealistic expectations, particularly among young adults still forming their relational identities. These concerns are consistent with Farid's (2025) critique that TikTok aestheticises toxic behaviours under the guise of aspirational content.

The platform also produces significant material pressures, as relationship success is frequently equated with financial stability or luxury consumption. A male respondent remarked that TikTok often implies young women should seek wealthy partners, which can distort the meaning of partnership and reinforce transactional views of marriage. Such narratives echo Hudson *et al.*'s (2016) argument that consumerist ideologies on social media link relational value to material acquisition, shaping desires that may be unachievable in Uganda's socio-economic context.

In addition, participants described how these idealised portrayals contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The pressure to conform to influencer-driven scripts, including how couples should live, dress, or celebrate milestones, often left viewers questioning their own relationships. These comparisons created anxiety about whether their experiences measured up to the digital standards on TikTok. In this sense, the platform cultivates not only aspirations but also insecurities that undermine authentic relational growth.

Some participants reported that constant exposure to discouraging or overly negative narratives about marriage led them to reconsider its value altogether. One participant noted that TikTok content had prompted them to view marriage "not as an achievement," but as a potentially burdensome institution shaped by unrealistic expectations. These responses demonstrate the dual-edge of TikTok, while it informs and inspires, it also glamorises unattainable ideals and fosters disillusionment, creating pressures that may erode rather than strengthen young people's confidence in long-term relationships.

**Table 2** TikTok as a Site of Unrealistic Ideals and Pressures

Theme	Illustrative Quote	Scholarly Link
Glamorisation of relationships	"TikTok content typically showcases highlights and idealised moments, often omitting the everyday challenges and complexities of real relationships."	Farid (2025); Damayanti <i>et al.</i> (2021) on idealisation
Materialistic pressures	"TikTok primarily calls upon young gals to get married to rich men, but in real life, no rich man that gets married to a broke woman."	Hudson <i>et al.</i> (2016) on consumerist pressures
Conformity to	"Some people become slaves of TikTok."	Hudson <i>et al.</i> (2016)



influencer scripts		on	cultural
		conformity	
Discouraging views of marriage	"I am actually rethinking marriage, it's not an achievement."	Razali (2022)	& Yulianti on digital cynicism

Table 2 shows that TikTok promotes glamorised portrayals of relationships, links success to material wealth, pressures users to follow influencer scripts, and sometimes fosters discouraging views of marriage. Together, these patterns suggest that while TikTok entertains and inspires, it also cultivates unrealistic standards that can create insecurity and skepticism among young adults. In some cases, TikTok content fostered disillusionment and even cynicism toward marriage. A participant confessed, *"It is usually eye-opening messages and some are negative depending on people's experiences... I am actually rethinking marriage, it's not an achievement."* Such expressions reflect Razali and Yulianti's (2022) warning that digital narratives can undermine commitment by cultivating scepticism.

The findings further highlight TikTok's polysemic character, as different users interpreted the same content in divergent ways. Some recognised videos as exaggerated performances, while others internalised them deeply, declaring, *"This is exactly us."* This duality reflects Carston's (2021) concept of polysemy, where media messages carry multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings. Taken together with Cultivation Theory, these insights illustrate TikTok's paradoxical influence, it cultivates shared beliefs about relationships while enabling highly personalised interpretations that can empower, mislead, or discourage.

The study revealed that TikTok not only empowers but also discourages young adults in Kampala by amplifying negative narratives about relationships and marriage. Some participants described how repeated exposure to disheartening content diminished their enthusiasm for long-term commitment. For instance, several respondents admitted that constant portrayals of betrayal, toxic dynamics, or failed marriages made them question whether marriage was worth pursuing at all. These reflections resonate with Razali and Yulianti's (2022) observation that digital platforms can cultivate scepticism and reduce confidence in traditional institutions like marriage.

At the same time, participants' responses highlighted TikTok's polysemic nature. While some dismissed the videos as mere entertainment or exaggerated storytelling, others interpreted them as accurate reflections of their own relational struggles. This interpretive flexibility created a space where TikTok could simultaneously provide entertainment, validation, and discouragement depending on the user's perspective. Such findings echo Carston's (2021) notion of polysemy, which suggests that media texts carry multiple meanings that audiences negotiate in personal and context-specific ways.

This duality is particularly significant in Kampala's urban context, where rapid exposure to global digital cultures intersects with local norms. For some participants, TikTok became a mirror of disillusionment, reinforcing doubts about marriage as a valued social milestone. For others, however, the same content served as a coping mechanism, offering relatable experiences that normalised their struggles. The capacity of TikTok to function as both a negative and positive force illustrates how media consumption cannot be reduced to uniform effects, but must instead be seen as a complex process shaped by individual interpretation.



When framed through Cultivation Theory, TikTok's paradox becomes even more striking (Li, 2022). The platform contributes to the cultivation of shared relational discourses both optimistic and pessimistic while simultaneously enabling highly subjective interpretations. This suggests that TikTok is not simply reshaping social attitudes toward marriage in one direction but is instead multiplying the possible meanings that young adults attach to relationships. Its influence lies in this polysemic character namely the ability to empower, mislead, or discourage in ways that are contingent on the user's lived reality.

**Table 3** TikTok as a Discouraging and Polysemic Space

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Disillusionment with Marriage	Exposure to negative narratives fostered scepticism about commitment.	"I am actually rethinking marriage, it's not an achievement."
Polysemic Interpretations	Users interpreted the same content differently: as entertainment or reality.	"This is exactly us."
Emotional Validation	Content sometimes offered comfort by normalising struggles.	"Some stories make me feel I'm not alone in facing challenges."
Contradictory Influence	TikTok cultivated both shared beliefs and divergent meanings.	"Some messages are exaggerated, others feel exactly like my own experience."

Table highlights TikTok's role as both a discouraging and polysemic space. On one hand, repeated exposure to negative relationship content led some participants to feel disillusioned about marriage, questioning its value and relevance. At the same time, the same videos carried multiple meanings: some users treated them as exaggerated entertainment, while others interpreted them as accurate reflections of their own experiences. For a portion of respondents, this content provided emotional validation, offering comfort by showing that others faced similar struggles. Overall, the table demonstrates TikTok's contradictory influence it simultaneously cultivates shared narratives about relationships while producing divergent, even conflicting, interpretations among young adults in Kampala.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how TikTok shapes young adults' perceptions of marriage and relationships in Kampala, Uganda. The findings reveal a dual influence: TikTok functions as a site of relational learning where participants encounter content on communication, trust, gender collaboration, and parenting support, encouraging more inclusive and equitable views of partnership. At the same time, the platform circulates glamorised ideals of romance, consumerist pressures, and discouraging narratives that lead some young adults to doubt or even reject marriage. These contradictory dynamics show that TikTok is both empowering and problematic, offering valuable insights for some while generating unrealistic expectations and anxieties for others.

The discussion, framed through cultivation theory and the concept of polysemy, highlights that participants are active interpreters rather than passive recipients of media content. While some resist idealised portrayals and recognise performative exaggeration,





others internalise the narratives as accurate reflections of their own experiences. This complexity underscores the importance of critical media literacy in enabling young people to distinguish between digital performance and relational reality. The study's limitations its urban-only focus, small purposive sample, and the variability of TikTok's algorithm mean, that the findings cannot be generalised across Uganda, particularly in rural contexts.

Future research should extend these insights through longitudinal and comparative studies across rural and cross-cultural settings to better understand how digital platforms influence intimate life in diverse environments. Meanwhile, media literacy programs, more authentic influencer storytelling, and policy engagement with digital platforms are recommended to mitigate harmful portrayals and support relational well-being. TikTok itself can play a role by amplifying realistic, culturally sensitive content and partnering with local organisations to address issues of gender equality, resilience, and healthy relationship practices. With these efforts, TikTok's influence could shift from being a source of distortion to a constructive cultural resource for Uganda's young adults.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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