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Platform Aesthetics and Relational-Risk Cues in Short-Form Relationship Advice

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether familiar short-form presentation features distinguish relationship-advice posts that include literature-informed relational-risk cues from posts without them. The analysis addressed the specificity of five presentation categories and the contextual distinction between normalizing problematic behavior and warning against it. A qualitative-dominant secondary analysis used the existing five-pass qualitative multimedia coding of 100 public videos, evenly split between TikTok and Instagram Reels. Posts were classified as cue-positive when at least one of 10 operationally defined relational cues was present and cue-negative when none was present. Within-corpus comparisons used Mann–Whitney and Fisher exact tests, false-discovery-rate correction, and qualitative negative-case analysis. Nineteen posts were cue-positive and 81 were cue-negative. Parasocial Proximity and Platform Normalization appeared in every post. Presentation-feature density and Advice Genre Framing did not differ significantly. Authority Framing was more common in cue-positive posts (84.2% vs. 46.9%; odds ratio = 6.04; adjusted q = .011), whereas Intimate Setting Cues were less common (47.4% vs. 87.7%; odds ratio = 0.13; q = .002). Negative cases showed that similar aesthetics also accompanied protective and boundary-supportive advice. These exploratory findings support examining relational content and the function of authority claims; they do not establish grooming, creator intent, audience effects, or validated risk indicators.

KEYWORDS: qualitative multimedia content analysis, TikTok, Instagram Reels, relationship advice, relational risk

TikTok and Instagram Reels have become prominent platforms for brief, creator-centered explanations of relationships, dating, emotional health, and personal boundaries. Adolescents and young adults use these platforms extensively, but usage is heterogeneous and does not establish that any particular user encountered or was affected by any specific post (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024; van der Wal et al., 2024).

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Within the relationship-advice genre, creators routinely translate complex interpersonal judgments into signs, scripts, warnings, lists, and memorable rules. In interviews with 64 emerging adults, Langlais et al. (2024) examined TikTok use in relationship initiation and maintenance, including viewing, sharing, and posting videos, as well as TikTok-related conflict. These messages merit careful analysis because spoken words alone do not convey their meaning.

Scholarship published between 2017 and 2022 provides a conceptual basis for distinguishing platform features from relational processes. Nesi et al. (2018) theorized that social media can transform adolescent peer relationships by altering the immediacy, intensity, and nature of interactions. Their framework focuses on peer relationships rather than public relationship-advice videos, but it motivates examining how a communication environment relates to the behavior conveyed within it. Valkenburg et al. (2022) reviewed 25 reviews of social media use and adolescent mental health; most characterized the associations as weak or inconsistent. Together, these contributions support a focused analysis of observable messages without assuming that platform use or a presentation style establishes harmful audience effects.

Short-form video is an audiovisual artifact. Camera distance, direct gaze, posture, domestic setting, vocal delivery, music, captions, editing, and on-screen labels can work together to make a message feel intimate, casual, authoritative, humorous, or urgent. Research on video analysis and multimodal framing shows that visual, verbal, sonic, and textual channels should be preserved rather than flattened into transcripts (Fazeli et al., 2023; Geise & Xu, 2025; Grzenkowicz & Wildfeuer, 2025; Mordecai, 2023). Social-media content methods likewise require alignment among the platform, unit of analysis, sampling procedure, and the type of evidence available (Fu et al., 2023). A transcript can show what was said, but not how the post staged a one-to-one relationship with the viewer or gave ordinary advice the appearance of expertise.

The methodological importance of multimodality is especially clear when researchers examine relational behaviors associated with online grooming and exploitation. Existing research has identified recurring strategies, including accelerated trust, intense attention, secrecy management, isolation, boundary testing, sexual escalation, validation, and exclusivity (Arett et al., 2025; Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Reneses et al., 2024; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Schittenhelm et al., 2025). Much of this evidence comes from chat logs, survivor accounts, police records, offender communications, or retrospective interviews. Computational grooming-detection research has also focused heavily on text and private-message exchanges (Rezaee Borj et al., 2023). These sources are essential for understanding grooming pathways, but they do not equate public relationship-advice posts with grooming interactions. A public post, by itself, does not establish a targeted victim, private contact, creator intent, audience interpretation, criminal conduct, or harm.

That distinction creates a specificity problem. Common short-form conventions can resemble the surface characteristics through which relational influence is communicated. A close camera position can create simulated proximity. A bedroom, couch, or car can make the delivery feel private. A confessional tone and direct gaze can create a sense of personal address. Captions and hooks can make advice memorable. An authoritative register can make a relational claim sound diagnostic or professionally grounded. Yet these features also occur in benign, corrective, educational, humorous, and survivor-supportive content. If an aesthetic feature appears equally in posts with and without a narrowly defined relational-risk cue, the feature has little value as a standalone indicator of risk.

This problem has practical consequences. Media-literacy efforts can become alarmist when they teach young people to equate ordinary platform aesthetics with manipulation rather than examining the behavior being promoted. Automated systems can also generate false positives when

they treat generic creator conventions as proxies for harmful intent. Media-literacy theory emphasizes interpretation of message purpose, credibility, context, and consequences rather than reflexive suspicion of a medium's ordinary form (Austin & Domgaard, 2024; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022). Similarly, qualitative analysis should preserve negative cases and boundary decisions instead of forcing all intimate or authoritative content into a risk frame (Braun & Clarke, 2025; Nicmanis, 2024).

From a policy perspective, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024) identified platform design, transparency and accountability, digital media literacy, and research access as priorities. These priorities make it useful to distinguish what a public artifact can show from claims that require evidence about targeting, exposure, or effects. For practice, the social-media-literacy review by Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido (2022) supports attention to critical interpretation and users' competencies. The present study contributes a bounded comparison relevant to these concerns: whether common presentation categories discriminate between posts with and without explicitly coded relational cues. It does not evaluate a policy intervention or the effectiveness of a literacy program.

The original qualitative multimedia content analysis that produced the present dataset identified 10 recurring categories from 289 operationally defined codes. Five high-frequency categories described how advice was presented: Parasocial Proximity, Platform Normalization, Intimate Setting Cues, Advice Genre Framing, and Authority Framing. Five lower-frequency categories described relational content or functions: Power Imbalance Normalization, Rapport and Trust Exploitation, Coercive Reframing, Boundary Erosion, and Isolation and Secrecy. The first analysis showed that presentation-layer categories were far more common than the 10 literature-informed relational cues. However, it did not directly test whether those presentation categories distinguished posts that contained a formal cue from those that did not.

The present study addresses that missing comparison. It treats cue status as a post-coding analytic distinction rather than a claim about creators or viewers. The term relational-risk cue refers only to manifest content that meets one of the 10 written definitions derived from the grooming literature. Cue-positive indicates that at least one such code was applied. Cue-negative indicates that none was applied. Neither label classifies a creator, establishes grooming, or measures harm.

These scholarship, policy, and practice concerns informed three research questions. RQ1 establishes the cue distribution, RQ2 examines the specificity of presentation features, and RQ3 explains the contextual boundaries through qualitative contrasts:

RQ1. What was the distribution of the 10 literature-informed relational and boundary cues across the corpus?

RQ2. Did cue-positive and cue-negative posts differ in overall presentation-feature density or in the presence of five previously developed presentation categories?

RQ3. How did qualitative negative cases clarify which short-form presentation features were nonspecific and which contextual distinctions mattered?

Researcher Context and Reflexivity

I was the primary analyst for the original QMCA and conducted this secondary analysis of the coding record I had developed. My relationship to the inquiry includes selecting, coding, and interpreting the public media artifacts. My analytic interest is in how relationship advice presents trust, autonomy, control, and boundaries, and whether familiar presentation conventions can be distinguished from the relational conduct being promoted. My investment in this project is to

inform prevention-oriented interpretation while avoiding unsupported judgments about creators or viewers.

This protection-oriented focus could sensitize me to coercive meanings and encourage overinterpretation of ordinary intimacy or expertise. To make that influence visible, I used explicit inclusion and exclusion rules, distinguished endorsement from warning, documented coding decisions, and retained cue-negative cases. The secondary comparison also tested the limits of categories I had developed rather than treating their recurrence as evidence of risk. This account of my analytic role supports evaluation of the findings alongside the procedures and limitations reported below (Alderaan, 2026; Levitt et al., 2018).

Method

Design

I conducted a qualitative-dominant secondary analysis of a completed qualitative multimedia content analysis (QMCA). The design was a content analysis of a bounded artifact corpus, not a case study of an individual, organization, or event. Content analysis supports systematic, transparent interpretation of communicative artifacts when the unit, coding frame, and inference boundaries are explicitly defined (Krippendorff, 2019). Video-centered qualitative methods also require analysts to preserve the interaction among visual, verbal, sonic, and textual channels (Fazeli et al., 2023). The present analysis used the existing post-level coding matrix, codebook, category mapping, audit trail, and de-identified document memos. No new social-media posts were collected, no original coding decisions were changed, and no categories were reconstructed to produce group differences.

The comparison was developed after completion of the original coding and taxonomy. It is therefore exploratory rather than preregistered or confirmatory. The purpose was to assess the specificity of the existing presentation categories by using the formal relational-cue codes as an internal contrast. Exact probabilities and effect estimates are reported to calibrate the magnitude of within-corpus differences. They are not used to estimate platform prevalence or causal relationships.

Corpus and Artifact Selection

The corpus contained 100 public, English-language, platform-native short-form video posts: 50 TikTok posts and 50 Instagram Reels. The main posts were collected from June 21 through June 25, 2026, following an eight-post pilot that was excluded from all reported analyses. A dedicated research browser profile and rotating hashtag and search pathways were used to locate public posts framed as dating, relationship, lifestyle, or closely related advice. Comparable hashtag-based content analyses have used bounded search procedures to construct transparent social-media corpora (Basch et al., 2022). The archived Post Log recorded 96 distinct discovery pathways.

Eligibility was assessed at the artifact level. A post needed to be publicly accessible at the time of capture, be a native short-form video, serve as relational or lifestyle guidance or commentary, and contain enough visual, audio, or on-screen text to enable multimodal coding. Duplicates, private or restricted-access content, static images-only, and comment threads as primary units were excluded. The analysis record, Post Log, documented a decision on advice

framing and an inclusion decision for each post. All 100 main-study posts fulfilled these criteria. Cue status was determined only after formal coding and was not used to define the main dataset.

The sample was purposive and bounded. It was designed to support qualitative comparison and category development, not to estimate the prevalence of any feature across TikTok, Instagram, adolescent feeds, or relationship-advice content. Hashtag-based discovery also differs from a personalized recommendation feed. The findings therefore describe recurrence and contrast within the archived corpus.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection (IRB approval number 06-17-26-1170208; approval date June 17, 2026). The analysis drew on publicly available media artifacts and involved no direct interaction with creators, viewers, or other participants. Public accessibility did not relieve the obligation to minimize traceability. Social-media ethics scholarship cautions that searchable quotations, usernames, direct links, screenshots, and combinations of descriptive details can enable re-identification even when the original source is public (Harrington, 2025; Lathan et al., 2023; Tanner et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Each post was assigned a study identifier, either TK-01 through TK-50 or IG-01 through IG-50. Handles, URLs, and the confidential linkage log were kept separate from de-identified analytic files. The manuscript uses paraphrased case descriptions rather than verbatim captions or quotations. Original videos and identifying linkage information are not publicly redistributed due to copyright, privacy, and re-identification risks.

Original QMCA Coding Procedure

The original analysis treated each post as the unit of analysis and any directly observable, audible, or readable characteristic as a potential unit of observation. The final codebook contained 289 codes: 40 visual, 150 audio, 89 on-screen text, and 10 relational-cue codes. Visual, audio, and text codes were developed inductively through the pilot and main coding. The 10 relational cues began as literature-informed sensitizing concepts and were operationalized during the pilot with explicit definitions, inclusion rules, and exclusion rules (Arett et al., 2025; Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Reneses et al., 2024; Ringenberg et al., 2022). The hybrid strategy allowed the platform's observable presentation features to emerge while keeping the relational-cue set fixed (Kaur et al., 2025).

Every main-study post underwent five passes. The first pass was an uninterrupted, normal-speed viewing for orientation. The second pass focused on visual features, including setting, framing, gaze, gesture, lighting, editing, props, and composition. The third pass focused on spoken framing, tone, pacing, music, and sound. The fourth pass focused on captions, hooks, overlays, labels, scripts, and calls to action. The fifth pass applied the relational-cue codes only after the visual, audio, and textual context had been documented.

Relational-cue decisions followed a three-question manifest test: Was the behavior shown, stated, or normalized as advice or desirable conduct? Did it meet the written definition and inclusion rule? Could it be identified without inferring creator intent or off-platform conduct? A cue was not applied if any answer was no. The codebook also distinguished normalization from warning. A post discussing jealousy, control, boundary violation, or sexual pressure did not receive

the corresponding cue if it criticized the behavior, identified it as a red flag, or supported autonomy and consent.

The 10 cues were: accelerated trust building, excessive or strategic flattery, secrecy normalization, isolation from support networks, boundary testing, desensitization through incremental escalation, pressure or control reframed as care, validation-based manipulation, age-gap or power-asymmetry normalization, and exclusivity or obsessive attention framed as desirable. These codes were deliberately narrow. I excluded ordinary commitment, healthy trust, mutual compliments, privacy, consent-based communication, and protective guidance.

Category Development Before the Secondary Comparison

The original category structure was established before the cue-positive versus cue-negative comparison. Categories were developed from a code-by-post matrix and a same-document co-occurrence matrix, followed by a memo-based review of shared communicative function and category boundaries (Bingham, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). Each active code was assigned to one primary category. A category had to be explainable in one sentence, predictable from its name, supported by the matrices, and distinct from adjacent categories.

The present comparison focused on five categories describing audiovisual packaging rather than the relational content of the advice. Parasocial Proximity captured features that simulated personal address or one-to-one closeness, including face-centered framing, direct gaze, confessional delivery, and gesture emphasis. Platform Normalization captured familiar short-form conventions such as static or handheld single takes, speech captions, platform-native hooks, casual creator style, and common editing patterns. Intimate Setting Cues captured bedrooms, beds, cars, couches, home interiors, natural window light, dim settings, reclined posture, and other cues that made the setting feel private or physically relaxed. Advice Genre Framing captured the conversion of relational claims into tips, signs, warnings, scripts, tutorials, or lessons. Authority Framing captured diagnostic, expert, spiritual, moral, coach-like, or otherwise authoritative presentation.

Cue-Positive and Cue-Negative Classification

A post was classified as cue-positive if at least one of the 10 relational-cue codes appeared anywhere in the post. Each post was counted only once, regardless of how many cues or coded segments it contained. Posts with no relational-cue code were classified as cue-negative. The classification was based on the locked code definitions and the existing code-by-post matrix. It was not based on category membership, presentation style, severity judgment, or the researcher's later interpretation.

The primary presentation-density variable was the number of distinct non-relational codes in each post. Multiple coded segments for the same code did not increase this value. Category presence was also binary at the post level: a category was present if at least one of its constituent presentation codes occurred. This approach preserved the distinction between spread across posts and the number of coded segments within a post.

Comparative Analytic Strategy

I first described the frequency of each relational cue and the distribution of cue-positive posts across platforms. Post duration was examined to assess whether the groups differed in the

amount of material available for coding. The total number of distinct presentation codes per post was compared using a two-sided Mann-Whitney *U* test and Cliff's delta, as the measure was bounded and not assumed to be normally distributed (Cliff, 1993).

The five pre-existing presentation categories were compared using two-sided Fisher exact tests. A Benjamini-Hochberg false-discovery-rate correction was applied across the five category tests (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995). Odds ratios and approximate 95% confidence intervals calculated on the log-odds scale are reported when estimable. These intervals are Wald intervals, distinct from the exact tests used for *p* values. Because Parasocial Proximity and Platform Normalization occurred in every post, their odds ratios were undefined.

A secondary code-level screen examined the 15 most frequent non-relational codes in the full corpus. Codes were selected based on overall document frequency, not on their association with cue status. Fisher exact tests with false-discovery-rate correction were then applied across the 15 comparisons. This screen identified provisional features for future validation, not standalone indicators.

These quantitative summaries served a qualitative purpose: they tested whether the meaning assigned to presentation categories was supported by differential occurrence. Statistical values describe only the archived corpus. They do not turn a purposive sample into a representative sample or authorize population claims.

Negative-Case and Case-Contrast Analysis

After calculating the group contrasts, I returned to de-identified document memos and audit entries. I selected maximum-contrast cases to examine how similar aesthetics supported different relational functions. Cue-positive cases included posts featuring Authority Framing and multiple relational cues. Cue-negative cases included posts displaying intimate, parasocial, captioned, or authoritative presentations while explicitly warning against manipulation or supporting healthy communication. The case analysis used paraphrased descriptions and no searchable source language.

Trustworthiness and Verification

The original analysis used a parallel MAXQDA and Excel workflow. MAXQDA preserved links among posts, coded segments, document memos, and query outputs. Excel preserved code definitions, inclusion and exclusion rules, code status, category assignments, frequency exports, and verification calculations. The study record included 100 main-post memos, a 167-entry audit trail, and 306 substantive codebook change-log entries. Milestone checks occurred after posts 25, 50, 75, and 100. A peer calibration review addressed definition clarity and adherence to the manifest-only boundary; it was not conducted as independent double coding.

The reported procedures address complementary dimensions of trustworthiness (Adler, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). For credibility, repeated multimodal review, explicit warning-versus-normalization rules, and negative-case comparison made competing interpretations visible. For dependability, the codebook, change log, and linked audit records documented how decisions were made. For confirmability, the coding matrix, document memos, and reflexive records permit a reader to trace interpretations to recorded evidence. For transferability, the specified platforms, collection dates, search procedures, eligibility rules, and case descriptions define the context to

which the findings apply. These procedures support evaluation of the analysis; none guarantees that another analyst would make identical judgments.

Final quality control independently recomputed code-level document frequencies, category-level unique-post unions, platform totals, and category classifications from the exported matrices. The present secondary analysis likewise derived all group classifications and counts directly from the de-identified matrix. Transparency, reflexivity, documented boundary decisions, negative-case review, and arithmetic reproducibility supported qualitative trustworthiness (Ahmed, 2024; Levitt et al., 2018). Arithmetic verification checks consistency of the recorded data, not the correctness of the original qualitative judgments. The visual, audio, and textual passes were complementary readings of the same artifacts, not independent investigator triangulation. No participant validation, such as member checking (Lane & Bourdo, 2026), was undertaken because the study involved no interaction with creators or viewers. The limitation of a single primary analyst remains and is addressed below.

Results

Corpus and Analytic Groups

Nineteen posts were cue-positive and 81 were cue-negative. The cue-positive group included 10 TikTok posts and nine Instagram posts; the cue-negative group included 40 TikTok posts and 41 Instagram posts. Within the balanced corpus, cue status did not differ by platform (Fisher exact $p = 1.000$).

No statistically significant difference in post duration was detected. Cue-positive posts had a mean duration of 73.21 seconds ($SD = 38.06$, $Mdn = 69$), and cue-negative posts had a mean duration of 70.89 seconds ($SD = 41.05$, $Mdn = 63$). $U = 830$, $p = .598$. This comparison did not establish equivalence in video length or exclude duration as a potential influence on coding.

Distribution of Relational Cues

Eight of the 10 cues appeared at least once. Trust-building was the most frequent cue, appearing in seven posts, followed by exclusivity (six) and boundary testing (four). Flattery, pressure framed as care, and validation-based manipulation each appeared in three posts. Desensitization appeared in two posts, and age-gap normalization appeared in one. Secrecy normalization and isolation did not appear in any main-study post. Table 1 summarizes the distribution.

Table 1
Distribution of Literature-Informed Relational and Boundary Cues

Cue	Operational focus	TK	IG	Total
Trust building	Accelerated trust, bonding, or special emotional safety	5	2	7
Exclusivity	Obsessive, possessive, or all-consuming attention framed as desirable	3	3	6

Table 1
Continued

Cue	Operational focus	TK	IG	Total
Boundary testing	Stretching personal, sexual, privacy, or communication limits	3	1	4
Flattery	Excessive or strategic praise or intense early attention	0	3	3
Pressure as care	Jealousy, monitoring, dominance, or control reframed as care	1	2	3
Validation-based manipulation	Validation used to create dependence or unique-source approval	2	1	3
Desensitization	Incremental movement into sexualized or boundary-eroding content	1	1	2
Age-gap normalization	Age or power asymmetry minimized or romanticized	1	0	1
Secrecy normalization	Concealment from outside support framed as romantic or protective	0	0	0
Isolation	Reduced support-network contact framed as devotion or commitment	0	0	0

Note. TK = TikTok; IG = Instagram Reels. Counts are unique-post document frequencies. Each platform contributed 50 posts. A post could contain more than one cue. Cue-positive is an analytic classification and does not establish grooming, intent, victimization, or harm.

Overall Presentation-Feature Density

Cue-positive posts did not include more distinct presentation features. They contained a mean of 11.84 non-relational codes per post (SD = 2.77, Mdn = 11), compared with 12.09 (SD = 2.75, Mdn = 12) in cue-negative posts. The difference was small and not statistically significant, U = 705, p = .571, Cliff's delta = -0.084. The result concerns the number of distinct coded features; it does not measure audiovisual complexity or establish equivalence between the groups.

Presentation-Category Contrasts

Table 2 presents the five-category comparisons. Parasocial Proximity and Platform Normalization were present in all 100 posts, so they had zero discriminatory value in this corpus. This ceiling applied to binary category presence; it does not establish that every constituent code had identical frequencies in the two groups. Individual-code contrasts are reported separately below.

Intimate Setting Cues were substantially less common in cue-positive posts than in cue-negative posts. Nine of 19 cue-positive posts (47.4%) contained the category, compared with 71 of 81 cue-negative posts (87.7%), a difference of 40.3 percentage points. The odds ratio was 0.13

(95% CI [0.04, 0.39]), Fisher exact $p < .001$ and $q = .002$. Domestic or bodily relaxed staging was therefore not a positive risk marker in this corpus. It was more characteristic of posts without a formal relational cue.

Authority Framing showed the opposite pattern. Sixteen of 19 cue-positive posts (84.2%) contained Authority Framing, compared with 38 of 81 cue-negative posts (46.9%), a difference of 37.3 percentage points. The odds ratio was 6.04 (95% CI [1.63, 22.32]), $p = .004$, $q = .011$. Advice Genre Framing was present in 63.2% of cue-positive posts and 76.5% of cue-negative posts, but the difference was not statistically distinguishable, odds ratio = 0.53 (95% CI [0.18, 1.52]), $p = .253$, $q = .422$.

Table 2

Presentation Categories by Relational-Cue Status

Panel A. Category occurrence

Presentation category	Cue-positive *n* (%)	Cue-negative *n* (%)	Difference (pp)
Parasocial Proximity	19 (100.0)	81 (100.0)	0.0
Platform Normalization	19 (100.0)	81 (100.0)	0.0
Intimate Setting Cues	9 (47.4)	71 (87.7)	−40.3
Advice Genre Framing	12 (63.2)	62 (76.5)	−13.4
Authority Framing	16 (84.2)	38 (46.9)	37.3

Panel B. Within-corpus associations

Presentation category	Odds ratio [95% CI]	Fisher *p*	FDR *q*
Parasocial Proximity	Not estimable	1.000	1.000
Platform Normalization	Not estimable	1.000	1.000
Intimate Setting Cues	0.13 [0.04, 0.39]	< .001	.002
Advice Genre Framing	0.53 [0.18, 1.52]	.253	.422
Authority Framing	6.04 [1.63, 22.32]	.004	.011

Note. $N = 100$. Cue-positive $n = 19$; cue-negative $n = 81$. Panel A reports occurrence; pp = percentage points (cue-positive minus cue-negative). Panel B reports odds ratios with approximate log-Wald 95% confidence intervals, two-sided Fisher exact p values, and false-discovery-rate (FDR) q values. "Not estimable" indicates that the category occurred in every post. Category presence was based on the union of unique posts containing at least one constituent presentation code. FDR q values use Benjamini–Hochberg correction across the five category comparisons. Values describe internal contrasts in a purposive corpus and are not prevalence estimates.

Exploratory Code-Level Screen

The code-level screen did not identify any single presentation code that remained significant after correction across the 15 most frequent codes. The smallest adjusted values were q = .056 for authoritative register shift, action or exposure coaching, and protective-advice text framing. Authoritative register shift occurred in 57.9% of cue-positive posts and 23.5% of cue-negative posts. Action or exposure coaching occurred in 36.8% and 9.9%, respectively. Protective-advice text framing occurred in none of the cue-positive posts and 24.7% of cue-negative posts. Natural window lighting was also less common in cue-positive posts, but its adjusted q value was .134. The complete code-level screen is provided in Supplementary Table S2.

The category-level association did not translate into an individual-code association meeting the adjusted significance threshold. Because the category and code screens used different sets of comparisons, these results do not establish that the category estimate was more stable. Authority Framing combined multiple indicators, including authoritative register, coaching, diagnostic language, expert-like explanation, moral framing, and visible authority props. No single feature should be extracted from that combination and treated as a diagnostic signal.

Qualitative Case Contrasts

The memos clarified why presentation form could not substitute for relational function. TK-15 was cue-positive and contained Authority Framing without Intimate Setting Cues. The post used a medium-close talking-head format, a face-centered text overlay, confessional delivery, and directive method framing. Its substantive advice included selecting a low-confidence partner, directing changes to the partner's body or appearance, and portraying loyalty as the expected outcome of that transformation. The formal coding applied boundary testing, desensitization, validation-based manipulation, and exclusivity. The authority signal mattered because it organized a stepwise relational strategy, not because the creator looked close to the camera.

IG-05 was also cue-positive and contained Authority Framing without Intimate Setting Cues. It used a numbered, coaching-like advice structure, action-oriented delivery, and familiar captioned talking-head conventions. The post promoted techniques intended to produce obsessive attention through rapid rapport, sentimental written attention, and attraction strategies. It used trust-building, flattery, and exclusivity. Again, the relevant distinction was what the authoritative advice instructed viewers to normalize.

Cue-negative cases shared many of the same aesthetics. TK-10 used a sustained close gaze, natural window lighting, a face-centered overlay, speech captions, hand emphasis, and a confessional warning-list structure. However, its content identified disregard for a partner's preferences and poor support-network quality as red flags. The post criticized potentially relevant behaviors rather than promoting them, so no relational cue was applied.

IG-48 illustrates why Authority Framing was insufficient on its own. The post used sustained gaze, a talking-head composition, hook text, dynamic speech captions, emphasis text, and an authoritative corrective tone. Its substantive message challenged simplistic claims about secure relationships and emphasized open communication, mutual understanding, continued connection, and repair. No relational cues were used. The case demonstrates that authority can support protective guidance as well as problematic relational instruction.

Across these cases, direct gaze, captions, close framing, and familiar creator style formed a common delivery grammar. The decisive coding boundary was whether a post normalized a relational behavior that met the written cue definition or instead warned against that behavior, preserved autonomy, or promoted communication and consent.

Discussion

The study tested a basic but consequential question: Do the aesthetics surrounding short-form relationship advice distinguish posts containing formal relational-risk cues from those without them? For the most common platform conventions, the answer was no. Parasocial Proximity and Platform Normalization appeared in every cue-positive and cue-negative post. Overall presentation-feature density was also nearly identical. These findings limit the usefulness of the two ubiquitous categories as discriminators of cue status within this corpus. They do not test whether any post conceals or facilitates grooming.

The findings support a more conservative distinction between form and function. Nesi et al. (2018) conceptualized social media as a context that can alter relational processes; the present artifact analysis adds a narrower observation that similar presentation conventions accompanied different relational messages. Face-centered framing, captions, direct gaze, confessional tone, and static single takes are part of the genre's communicative infrastructure. Their presence alone did not establish a post's cue status, and their effects on viewers were not measured.

Nonspecificity of Parasocial and Platform-Native Features

Parasocial Proximity was initially analytically useful because it documented how creators simulated a one-to-one interaction through camera position, gaze, voice, and gesture. Platform Normalization documented the familiar edits, captions, hooks, and production conventions that made advice appear ordinary. The present comparison shows the limits of interpreting those categories as risk mechanisms. Both categories peaked at the ceiling in both groups. They describe the medium and genre, not a distinguishing characteristic of cue-positive content.

This does not make them irrelevant. Multimodal analysis still needs to preserve how a message is staged, because presentation can affect salience and interpretation (Geise & Xu, 2025; Grzenkowicz & Wildfeuer, 2025). The categories may help researchers describe the delivery environment or analyze viewer reception. However, they should not be labeled as warning indicators without an external criterion demonstrating specificity. Close camera framing and captioned direct address also accompanied boundary-supportive advice; this study did not measure whether either type of message was engaging. This distinction is consistent with the caution warranted by heterogeneous social-media-effects evidence (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Authority as a Contextual Differentiator

After correction, Authority Framing was the only presentation category positively associated with cue-positive status. Within this corpus, the odds of Authority Framing were 6.04 times as high in cue-positive posts as in cue-negative posts (95% CI [1.63, 22.32]); the observed proportions were 84.2% and 46.9%, respectively. Qualitative cases suggest a plausible interpretation. In some cue-positive posts, authoritative delivery transformed a relational preference into a method: identify a vulnerable partner, produce attachment, interpret surveillance as desire, or pursue obsession as a successful outcome. In the analyst's interpretation, these authority claims presented the relational strategy as teachable expertise; the study did not test whether viewers accepted that authority.

The result should not be converted into a diagnostic rule. Nearly half of cue-negative posts also contained Authority Framing, and IG-48 showed that authoritative delivery can support

corrective, communication-centered guidance. Authority is better understood as a contextual amplifier. It may warrant closer examination when it accompanies a clearly defined relational behavior, especially when the advice positions the creator as a diagnostician, coach, or holder of special relational knowledge. The behavior being authorized remains the primary analytic object.

The code-level findings reinforce caution. Authoritative register shift and action coaching showed the largest positive differences, but neither survived false-discovery-rate correction across the code-level screen. The result is therefore category-level and configurational rather than reducible to a single vocal feature or text hook. Future studies should prospectively test combinations of authority, directive language, and relational normalization in an independent corpus.

Intimacy Was Not a Risk Marker

The inverse association with Intimate Setting Cues was the most unexpected result. Bedrooms, cars, couches, domestic interiors, natural window light, and relaxed posture appeared far more often in cue-negative posts. This finding undermines the intuitive assumption that private-looking settings make relational-risk content more likely. In this corpus, intimate staging was part of ordinary advice production and often accompanied protective, reflective, or boundary-supportive messages.

The result also illustrates the value of negative-case analysis. Without cue-negative comparison, the recurrence of bedrooms, beds, cars, and warm lighting could be interpreted as evidence that creators were constructing private or emotionally close conditions for manipulation. The same data, compared by cue status, show that these settings were more characteristic of posts without a formal cue. Aesthetic intimacy and relational risk are analytically separable.

P*ublic Advice Is Not Private Grooming Communication*

The absence of secrecy normalization and isolation is substantively important. Reviews of grooming strategies and survivor accounts identify secrecy, isolation, and controlled access to support as consequential features of grooming pathways (Chiu & Quayle, 2022; Reneses et al., 2024; Ringenberg et al., 2022). Their absence under the study's coding rules limits what this public advice corpus can reveal about private relational escalation. Public relationship posts may circulate problematic ideas about obsession, pressure, trust, or boundaries, but the absence of these two codes cannot establish that secrecy or isolation is absent from other public posts or related private interactions.

This distinction helps prevent a category error. The study does not show that public advice posts are early grooming events or that they cause later exploitation. It shows that a minority of posts contained observable relational behaviors similar to constructs described in grooming research. Those similarities may be useful for media-literacy discussions or for generating research questions about normalization, but they do not establish a contact pathway, a targeted victim, or creator intent.

Methodological Implications for Qualitative Multimedia Analysis

The analysis shows why qualitative multimedia research needs explicit boundary rules and internal comparison. A codebook can accurately document that an aesthetic feature occurs

frequently yet still overinterpret its function without a negative-case test. Qualitative rigor is not achieved by producing more codes or more detailed descriptions alone. It also requires asking whether a category distinguishes the phenomenon it is said to illuminate.

Three practices were especially important. First, relational cues were coded last, after the post's visual, audio, and text context had been recorded. This sequencing was intended to reduce the risk that an early risk judgment would drive subsequent coding; its effectiveness was not independently tested. Second, warning and normalization were treated as opposites. Posts that discussed manipulation to criticize it were not counted as modeling the behavior. Third, cue-negative posts were retained rather than removed as irrelevant. Those negative cases ultimately provided the strongest evidence that generic aesthetics were nonspecific.

The findings also clarify the appropriate role of frequency in qualitative content analysis. Recurrence can indicate that a pattern is common within a corpus, but commonness does not establish risk relevance. Parasocial Proximity was the most recurrent yet least discriminative. Authority Framing was less frequent but more informative for the internal contrast. Qualitative researchers should therefore distinguish recurrence, specificity, communicative function, and theoretical importance rather than treating them as interchangeable.

Implications for Media Literacy and Prevention

A prevention-oriented interpretation should focus on relational conduct rather than visual suspicion. Media-literacy education can prompt viewers to examine what behavior a post presents as desirable, how evidence is presented, what forms of authority are invoked, whether autonomy and outside support are preserved, and whether pressure or obsession is reframed as care. These questions align with media-literacy approaches that emphasize message interpretation, credibility, purpose, and contextual judgment (Austin & Domgaard, 2024; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

Treating bedrooms, cars, direct gaze, captions, or confessional tones as danger signs would risk classifying ordinary advice as harmful; the present study did not measure false-positive rates against an external harm criterion or test young audiences' responses. The same caution applies to practitioners and caregivers. A useful conversation begins with the relational claim: Does the advice respect consent? Does it encourage dependence or exclusivity? Does it frame monitoring or jealousy as love? Does it discourage outside input? Does it present boundary erosion as a technique? The setting and delivery can then be treated as context rather than as evidence of intent.

Implications for Automated or Computational Detection

The study also has implications for multimodal detection research. Text-centered grooming detection has made important progress in private-message contexts (Rezaee Borj et al., 2023), but public short-form video poses a different classification problem. Generic aesthetic features are abundant and may dominate a model if they are easy to extract. The occurrence of face-centered composition, captions, direct gaze, confessional tone, and domestic settings in cue-negative advice cautions against using them as standalone harm indicators. Their predictive performance against independently established harmful content remains untested.

A responsible detection pipeline would need to distinguish content function from surface form. Relational behavior, whether it is endorsed or warned against, the direction of advice, and the role of authority should be represented explicitly. Automated classifications would also require

an independently labeled corpus, bias evaluation, transparent error analysis, and human review. The present taxonomy can generate candidate feature families, but it is not a validated detection instrument and should not be used to label creators or posts as grooming.

Practical Implications

- For media-literacy education, pair cue-positive and cue-negative examples so that learners examine the relational behavior being endorsed or challenged, together with the authority invoked to support it.
- For practitioners and caregivers, use consent, autonomy, pressure, and access to outside support as prompts for discussion; presentation style alone does not establish harmful intent.
- For platform policy and moderation research, treat these findings as a reason to require contextual review and independent validation before using aesthetic categories as risk indicators.
- For qualitative and computational researchers, preserve negative cases, distinguish endorsement from warning, and prospectively test the locked cue definitions and category contrasts in a new corpus.

Limitations

The findings should be interpreted with several limitations. First, the comparison was post hoc. The five presentation categories existed before the group analysis, but the cue-positive versus cue-negative questions were formulated after the original taxonomy was complete. The adjusted exact tests reduce, but do not eliminate, the risk of chance findings. The Authority Framing and Intimate Setting results require prospective replication.

Second, the sample was purposive, public, in English, and limited to 100 posts collected over five days from TikTok and Instagram. The frequencies are not estimates of platform prevalence, adolescent exposure, or algorithmic recommendation. Search-based discovery does not replicate any person's feed.

Third, one analyst developed and applied the codebook. The audit trail, reflexive journal, operational definitions, peer calibration, and independent arithmetic verification make the analytic pathway inspectable, but they do not establish that independent coders would reach identical interpretive decisions. External validation should have coders apply the locked cue definitions to a new corpus without access to the original classifications.

Fourth, cue status was derived from the same broader coding project that generated the presentation categories. The cue and presentation codes were operationally distinct, and category construction preceded this comparison. Both remain products of a single interpretive system. A future study should classify cue status independently or use blinded coders to reduce shared-method dependence.

Fifth, the study analyzed artifacts rather than creators or audiences. It cannot determine creator intent, target audience, viewer interpretation, learning, behavioral effects, private contact, criminality, or harm. The term risk refers to similarity between manifest relational content and written constructs from the grooming literature, not a determination about any person or post.

Finally, the qualitative case descriptions were selected to explain the group contrasts. They are not statistically representative cases. Their value lies in showing how the same audiovisual form can support different relational functions.

Future Research

The next step should be a prospectively specified replication using a new, independently collected corpus. The five presentation categories and 10 cue definitions can be finalized before data collection. Independent coders can classify cue status, record uncertainty, and report agreement alongside code prevalence. The analysis should test whether Authority Framing remains positively associated and whether Intimate Setting Cues remain negatively associated.

Reception research is also necessary. Adolescents and young adults could evaluate matched posts that vary in authority, intimacy, and relational content. Such work could examine credibility, perceived normality, recall, resistance, and boundary recognition without relying solely on artifact analysis. Interviews or focus groups could identify which distinctions young viewers themselves use when deciding whether relationship advice is protective, manipulative, or simply unhelpful.

Another approach is to compare different communication settings. Public advice posts can be contrasted with ethically sourced private-message datasets or public prevention examples to identify cues unique to targeted relational escalation versus those shared across general relationship discussions. This comparison would clarify the distinctions among genre conventions, problematic advice, and grooming-related communication.

Conclusion

The study addressed the specificity problem introduced at the outset: whether familiar short-form presentation categories distinguished public relationship-advice posts containing operationally defined relational cues. For RQ1, 19 of 100 posts contained at least one cue, and eight of the 10 cues appeared. Secrecy normalization and isolation were absent under the coding rules. These are descriptions of a bounded purposive corpus, not estimates of platform prevalence or findings of grooming.

For RQ2, Parasocial Proximity and Platform Normalization occurred in both groups at the ceiling, and presentation-feature density did not differ significantly. Authority Framing was positively associated with cue status, whereas Intimate Setting Cues were inversely associated. The wide interval around the authority odds ratio, its occurrence in 38 cue-negative posts, and the absence of adjusted significance in the individual-code screen preclude a standalone diagnostic interpretation. For RQ3, TK-15 and IG-05 illustrated advice that normalized coded relational behaviors, while TK-10 and IG-48 showed why similar delivery conventions can accompany warnings or communication-supportive guidance.

The scholarly contribution is a documented distinction between category recurrence and specificity within a multimedia corpus. The practical and policy implication is to examine the behavior a message authorizes, normalizes, or warns against before assigning risk to its presentation. Media-literacy discussions and future moderation research can use that distinction as a question to investigate, not as a validated classification rule. Independent prospective coding and audience research are needed before extending these exploratory findings to detection, prevention effectiveness, or audience harm.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The original study received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board before data collection (IRB approval number 06-17-26-1170208; approval date June 17, 2026).

Informed Consent Form

Not applicable. The study analyzed publicly available media artifacts and involved no direct interaction with creators, viewers, or other participants.

Data Availability Statement

De-identified processed data, the codebook, category mapping, and verification materials are available through the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/jzd8b/) and an archived Zenodo record (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21513869). Original videos, creator handles, URLs, identifiable screenshots, searchable captions, and linkage records are not publicly shared because of copyright and re-identification risk.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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