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ROMANTIC CONTENT EXPOSURE ON TIKTOK AND ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT
TikTok is widely used by adolescents and provides frequent exposure to romantic content that may be associated with their attitudes and behaviours in relationships. This study examined the association between exposure to romantic content on TikTok and adolescent sexual behaviour at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto. A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 72 students in grades X and XI using total sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires on exposure to romantic content and sexual behaviour. The reliability of the instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.721 and 0.716, respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Data were analysed using Spearman's rank correlation. Most respondents were aged 15–17 years (84.7%) and female (59.7%). A total of 62 respondents (86.1%) were classified as frequently exposed to romantic content, while 55 (76.4%) were classified in the study's risk-behaviour category. Spearman's rank correlation indicated a statistically significant positive association between exposure and sexual behaviour ($r = 0.333$; $p = 0.004$; $n = 72$). Greater exposure to romantic content on TikTok was associated with higher sexual-behaviour scores in this sample. Because the study used a cross-sectional design in one school, the findings do not establish causation and should be generalised to other populations with caution.

Keywords: adolescent; romantic content; sexual behaviour; social media; tiktok

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. During this stage, young people increasingly explore relationships and obtain information from peers and digital media. Social media platforms provide opportunities for communication and self-expression, but they also expose users to content that may influence perceptions of romantic relationships and acceptable behaviour (Astrella & Kholifah, 2023; Ihza dkk., 2024; Keles dkk., 2020; Sala dkk., 2024; World Health Organization, 2024). TikTok uses short-form videos and personalised content recommendations, making a wide range of material readily accessible. Romantic content may portray affection, dating, and relationship expectations in ways that adolescents interpret through their developmental stage and social environment. The possible relationship between media exposure and behaviour should nevertheless be understood alongside other influences, including peer relationships, family monitoring, knowledge of reproductive health, and individual differences.

Previous studies have reported associations between social-media use and adolescent sexual behaviour. (Yusuf & Hamdi, 2021) examined the interaction between social-media use, reproductive-health knowledge, and risky sexual behaviour, while (Nuraeni dkk., 2021) reported a relationship between social-network use and adolescent sexual behaviour. However, findings from

other populations do not automatically describe students in every school setting. Local data are therefore useful for informing health education and digital literacy initiatives (BMJ, 2023; Gyane dkk., 2025; Ningrum dkk., 2025; Santi dkk., 2024; Waliyanti & Aristawidya, 2025). A preliminary assessment among ten students at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto found that all used TikTok and some reported experiences of physical affection in dating relationships. In response to this context, this study aimed to (1) describe students' exposure to romantic content on TikTok, (2) describe sexual behaviour among students at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto, and (3) analyse the association between exposure to romantic content on TikTok and sexual behaviour among these students. The findings are expected to provide evidence to support the development of adolescent reproductive health education and digital literacy initiatives in school settings.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative observational approach with a cross-sectional design. It was conducted at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto, Banyumas, Central Java, on 12 May 2025. The study population comprised students in grades X and XI. Total sampling was used, resulting in 72 respondents. Primary data were collected using questionnaires on exposure to romantic content on TikTok and adolescent sexual behaviour. The exposure questionnaire assessed attention, interpretation, duration, and frequency, while the sexual-behaviour questionnaire recorded responses to behaviour-related items.

Instrument validity and reliability were assessed before the questionnaires were used in the study. The thesis reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.721 for the romantic-content exposure instrument and 0.716 for the sexual-behaviour instrument. Both coefficients exceeded the commonly used threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. However, the specific validity-testing procedure, including the validity test used, the number of items tested, and the validity coefficients obtained, should be reported based on the original instrument-testing results. These details are necessary to establish the validity of the instruments and should not be inferred from the reliability coefficients alone. Responses were coded and analysed descriptively using frequency and percentage distributions. The association between the ordinal variables was tested using Spearman's rank correlation. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. The research documentation describes informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation as ethical safeguards. The ethics approval number should be provided if applicable and required by the journal.

RESULT

The respondents' characteristics, exposure to romantic content, and sexual-behaviour categories are summarised below.

Table 1.
Respondent characteristics (n = 72)

Characteristic	f	%
Age 15–17 years	61	84.7
Age 18–20 years	11	15.3
Male	29	40.3
Female	43	59.7

Table 2.
Distribution of exposure and sexual-behaviour categories

Study variable	Category	f	%
Exposure to romantic content on TikTok	Infrequent (<30 minutes per session)	10	13.9
Exposure to romantic content on TikTok	Frequent (≥30 minutes per session)	62	86.1
Sexual behaviour	Risk category (as tabulated in the thesis)	55	76.4
Sexual behaviour	Non-risk category (as tabulated in the thesis)	17	23.6

Most respondents were aged 15–17 years (61; 84.7%), and 43 (59.7%) were female. Frequent exposure to romantic content, operationalised in the thesis as TikTok use of at least 30 minutes in

one session, was reported for 62 respondents (86.1%). Ten respondents (13.9%) were in the infrequent-use category. According to the frequency table, 55 respondents (76.4%) were classified in the risk category and 17 (23.6%) in the non-risk category. The cross-tabulation showed that among respondents in the infrequent-exposure group, 3 (30.0%) were in the risk category and 7 (70.0%) in the non-risk category. In the frequent-exposure group, 52 (83.9%) were in the risk category and 10 (16.1%) in the non-risk category.

Table 3.
Cross-tabulation of exposure to romantic content and sexual behaviour

Exposure category	Risk behaviour f (%)	Non-risk behaviour f (%)	Total
Infrequent (<30 min)	3 (30.0)	7 (70.0)	10
Frequent (≥30 min)	52 (83.9)	10 (16.1)	62

Spearman's rank correlation showed a statistically significant positive association between exposure to romantic content on TikTok and adolescent sexual behaviour ($r = 0.333$; $p = 0.004$; $n = 72$). The correlation coefficient indicates a weak positive relationship.

DISCUSSION

The present study found a statistically significant positive association between exposure to romantic content on TikTok and adolescent sexual behaviour among students at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto (Spearman's $r = 0.333$; $p = 0.004$; $n = 72$). The positive direction indicates that higher exposure scores tended to be associated with higher sexual-behaviour scores in this sample. However, the correlation was weak, suggesting that exposure to romantic content represents only one of several factors potentially associated with adolescent behaviour. This finding is consistent with (Hastutii dkk., 2023), who reported significant associations between social media use, peer influence, and sexual behaviour among 134 high school students in Surabaya. Similarly, (Gyane dkk., 2025) found an association between social media use and sexual behaviours among 401 adolescents in Ghana. Nevertheless, these studies examined broader social media use rather than exposure specifically to romantic content on TikTok. The present study therefore contributes setting-specific evidence concerning the relationship between romantic-content exposure and adolescent sexual behaviour. Because the study employed a cross-sectional design, the findings cannot establish temporal order or causality.

Most respondents (86.1%) were categorised as frequently exposed to romantic content according to the study's operational classification. This finding indicates that frequent exposure was common among the students surveyed. TikTok facilitates access to short-form videos and personalised content recommendations, potentially increasing users' encounters with similar material. However, the exposure classification should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the exact content viewed by each student. Time spent on a platform does not necessarily indicate that all viewing time was devoted to romantic content, nor does it establish whether the content was interpreted positively or negatively. (Suárez-Álvarez dkk., 2023), through a comparative content analysis of 447 TikTok videos produced by adolescents aged 11–17 years in Great Britain and Spain, identified sexualising characteristics in videos shared by young users. Although their study examined the characteristics of uploaded videos rather than the effects of viewing them, it highlights the importance of distinguishing content characteristics from the frequency or duration of exposure. In the present study, the questionnaire assessed reported exposure to romantic content and did not establish whether the material contained sexualised messages or influenced individual respondents' interpretations.

The cross-tabulation provides additional context for the observed association. In the infrequent-exposure group, 3 of 10 respondents (30.0%) were classified in the risk category, compared with 52 of 62 respondents (83.9%) in the frequent-exposure group. Conversely, 7 respondents (70.0%) in the infrequent-exposure group were classified in the non-risk category, compared with 10 respondents (16.1%) in the frequent-exposure group. This distribution is consistent with the positive Spearman correlation. However, the groups were unequal in size, particularly because only ten respondents were classified as infrequently exposed. Consequently, the percentages should be interpreted cautiously.

They describe the distribution of the study's outcome categories and do not demonstrate that frequent exposure directly causes sexual behaviour. Furthermore, the interpretation depends on the operational definitions and scoring direction of the exposure and sexual-behaviour instruments.

The findings are also consistent with evidence indicating that the relationship between digital media and adolescent sexual health is complex. (Banougnin dkk., 2023) investigated associations between mobile phone use, social media engagement, health-content use, and sexual risk behaviours among adolescents and young adults in South Africa. Their longitudinal analysis showed that associations differed according to the type of digital engagement and the sexual-risk outcome examined. Social media use was associated with a higher probability of unprotected sex, whereas using mobile phones to access health content was associated with lower probabilities of certain sexual-risk outcomes. These findings suggest that digital engagement should not be considered uniformly harmful or beneficial; its relationship with sexual health may depend on the content accessed and the outcome assessed. Similarly, (Shukri & Baharom, 2023) examined social media use, pornography exposure, reproductive-health knowledge, and depression in relation to adolescent romantic relationships in Malaysia. Their research illustrates the relevance of considering digital exposure alongside psychosocial and reproductive-health factors. Nevertheless, differences in study populations, research designs, exposure measures, and outcome definitions mean that these findings cannot be interpreted as direct evidence of the effects of romantic content on TikTok.

One possible explanation for the observed association is that repeated exposure to portrayals of dating, affection, and romantic relationships may contribute to adolescents' perceptions of what is common or socially acceptable in relationships. Online videos may present particular behaviours as desirable or socially rewarded, and adolescents may compare these portrayals with their own experiences or discuss them with peers. However, exposure does not necessarily mean that adolescents accept or imitate the messages presented. Their interpretations may vary according to reproductive-health knowledge, personal values, family communication, and peer relationships. The findings of (Hastutii dkk., 2023), which identified associations between peer influence, social media use, and adolescent sexual behaviour, support the importance of considering social context when interpreting these relationships. However, the present study did not directly measure media interpretation, social norms, or the mechanisms through which exposure might be associated with behaviour. These explanations should therefore be regarded as plausible interpretations rather than demonstrated causal pathways.

The findings should also be understood within the broader social environment in which adolescents make decisions. Peer expectations, communication with parents or caregivers, reproductive-health knowledge, access to reliable information, and individual developmental differences may be relevant to sexual behaviour. The findings reported by (Banougnin dkk., 2023) further suggest that access to health-related information may have a different relationship with sexual-risk outcomes from general social media engagement. This distinction is important because digital platforms can provide both potentially misleading portrayals of relationships and opportunities to access reliable reproductive-health information. Since the present study examined the association between two main variables without adjusting for other potential confounders, it cannot establish the independent contribution of these factors. Future research could include relevant psychosocial variables in multivariable analyses and investigate whether they modify or mediate the relationship between exposure to romantic content and adolescent sexual behaviour.

From a health-promotion perspective, the findings suggest that schools and families may benefit from integrating digital literacy with age-appropriate reproductive-health education. Digital literacy can help students critically evaluate online content, recognise that portrayals of relationships may be selective or staged, and distinguish online representations from healthy real-life relationships. Reproductive-health education can provide accurate information about physical and emotional development, consent,

personal boundaries, respectful relationships, and available sources of support. The findings of (Banougnin dkk., 2023) indicate that engagement with health-related digital content may be associated with different outcomes from general social media use, reinforcing the potential importance of making reliable information accessible to young people. However, the present study did not evaluate an educational intervention; therefore, the effectiveness of any proposed educational approach cannot be inferred from the observed association.

Parents and caregivers may also support adolescents by discussing their online experiences openly, establishing mutually understood expectations for media use, and helping young people respond to content that makes them uncomfortable. Rather than assuming that all romantic content is harmful, guidance should focus on the context and messages conveyed, the distinction between online portrayals and real-life relationships, and the importance of respecting personal boundaries. Schools can reinforce these messages through counselling services and health education while protecting students' privacy and dignity. Such recommendations represent potential applications of the findings and should be evaluated through future intervention studies before their effectiveness is established.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample comprised 72 students from a single school, limiting the generalisability of the results to adolescents in other schools or regions. Second, the use of self-reported questionnaires may have introduced recall error or social-desirability bias, particularly because sexual behaviour is a sensitive topic. Third, the cross-sectional design measured exposure and behaviour at one point in time and cannot determine temporal order or causality. Fourth, the operational classification of exposure may not fully capture the frequency, characteristics, or meaning of the romantic content encountered. Finally, the descriptions of sexual-behaviour categories in the source thesis appear inconsistent: some sections refer to mild affectionate behaviour, whereas the results tables use risk and non-risk classifications. The category definitions, scoring direction, and interpretation must be verified against the original questionnaire and dataset before publication. Future studies should use clearly defined and validated measures, recruit participants from multiple schools, and consider longitudinal designs to clarify the temporal relationship between digital-media exposure and adolescent sexual behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Among 72 students at SMK Tamansiswa Purwokerto, 86.1% were classified as frequently exposed to romantic content on TikTok, and 76.4% were placed in the risk category in the results tables. Exposure to romantic content was positively associated with sexual behaviour (Spearman's $r = 0.333$; $p = 0.004$). The association was weak and does not demonstrate causation. Schools and families should strengthen digital literacy and age-appropriate reproductive-health education.

DECLARATIONS

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Author Contributions: Putri Ayu Wulandari: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, and writing original draft preparation. Wulan Margiana: Supervision, research guidance, and critical review of the manuscript. Diah Atmarina Yuliani: Research evaluation, academic assessment, and critical feedback on the research process and manuscript. Khamidah Achyar: Research evaluation, academic assessment, and critical feedback on the research process and manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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