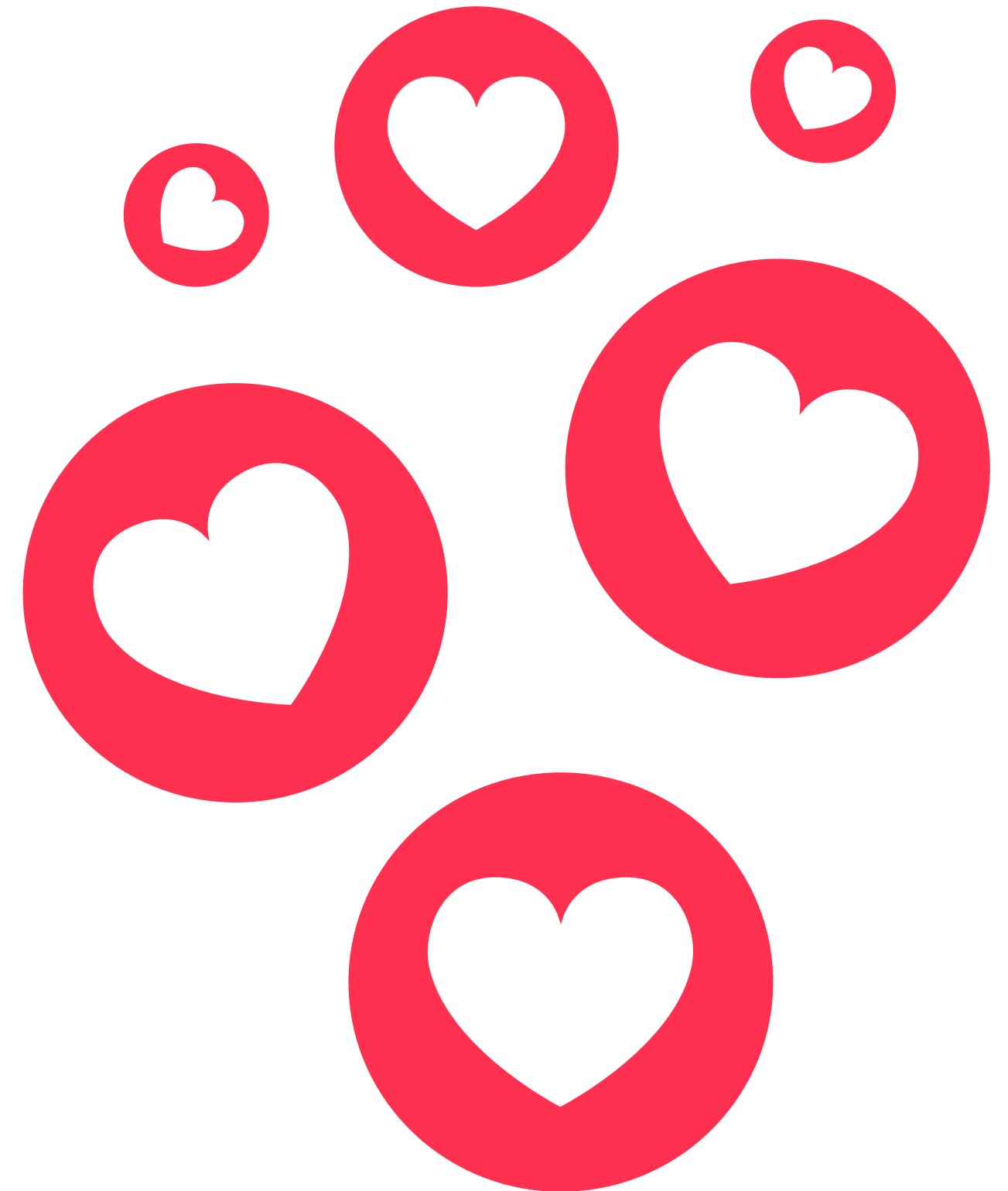


Doing the “bare minimum”:

Therapy-Speak and Relationship Norms on TikTok

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✨ anxious attachment
with texting in dating ✨

if you're spiraling right
now that the person
you're dating isn't texting
you

Sabrina Zohar

Texting in dating with anxious attachment.
#datingadvice #datingtips #anxiou more

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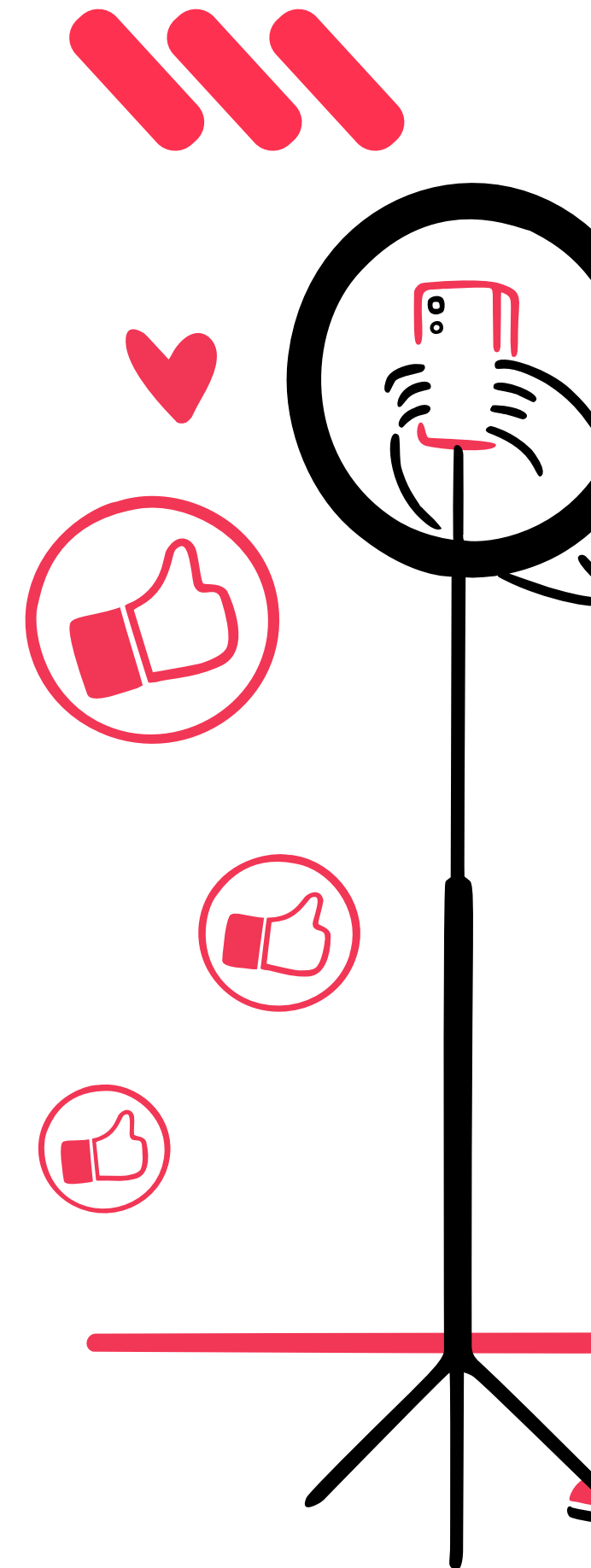
Relationship-related therapy-speak

= the informal use of psychological or therapeutic terminology (for example, avoidant attachment) in digital communication about relationships.



Why this topic?

- **Therapy-speak is now everyday vernacular**
(Ilouz, 2008; Isern-Mas & Almagro 2025; Singkalavanich 2025)
- **TikTok amplifies therapeutic language**
(Avella, 2023; Green, 2024; Stilwell 2024)
- **Dating apps mirror therapy-speak categories** (Hampson, 2023)
- **A gap in research regarding relationship-related therapy-speak specifically** (Dewi et al., 2025; Garofalo, 2024; Green, 2024; Isern-Mas & Almagro 2025)



Objectives

- **Map** the psychological and therapeutic terms used on TikTok in romantic-relationship content
- **Compare** how qualified vs non-qualified creators use and frame therapy-speak
- **Interpret** how therapy-speak expresses autonomy, competence and relatedness (SDT theory, Deci & Ryan, 1985)
- **Analyse** how TikTok's platform dynamics shape the meaning of therapy-speak





Research questions

- **RQ1.** What psychological or therapeutic terms are most frequently used on TikTok in discussions of romantic relationships that constitute relationship-related therapy-speak?
- **RQ2.** How does the use and framing of relationship-related therapy-speak differ between self-identified qualified therapists and non-qualified or unspecified content creators?
- **RQ3.** How does therapy-speak invoke or position autonomy, competence and relatedness needs as described in Self-Determination Theory?

(Deci & Ryan, 1985)

LITERATURE REVIEW

ROOTS OF THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

Explores where did the rise of therapy-speak comes from.

- The emergence of the **therapeutic self** (Rieff, 1966; Rose, 1999; Illouz, 2008).
- **Client-centred therapy** (Rogers, 1951, 1961)
- **Neoliberal authenticity**, self-improvement, "emotional capitalism" (Illouz, 2012) and the "sexual contract" (McRobbie 2009)
- Therapy-speak emerges as **moral vocabulary** signalling insight, competence, and virtue (Foster, 2016).

PLATFORMED THERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE

Situates TikTok as an environment that amplifies and reshapes therapeutic discourse.

- **TikTok's algorithmic personalisation** (Avella 2023 & 2024)
- **Therapeutic labour & influencer economies** (Garofalo 2024)
- **Templatability & memetic repetition** (Kaye et al., 2022)
- **Parasocial & relational intimacy** with creators (Dewi et al., 2025)

RELATIONSHIP PSYCHOLOGY IN DIGITAL CONTEXTS

Why does therapy-speak thrive in romantic contexts?

- **Relationships are already psychologically framed** through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Shulman, 2019)
- Love languages as a **diagnostic tool** (Hazlewood & Bunt, 2016; Hughes & Camden, 2020; Piazzesi et al., 2025)
- **Therapy-speak functions as a shorthand** for compatibility, risk assessment, and competence.

IDENTITY & PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

What psychological needs does therapy-speak meet?

- **Meaning-making on TikTok** (Green 2024; Stilwell 2024; Basch et al, 2022)
- **Performed expertise vs. credentialed expertise** (Garofalo, 2024; Avella 2023).
- **Identity construction** in digital spaces (Goffman 1959; McConnell 2010; Kalinoski & Matei 2011).
- **SDT**: autonomy competence, relatedness and therapy-speak as identity-protective, coherence-restoring language (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2020; Knee et al, 2013).



Key research

- **Eva Illouz**'s books *Saving The Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* (2008) and *Why Love Hurts* (2012)
- **Holly Avella**'s papers "*TikTok ≠ therapy*": *Mediating mental health and algorithmic mood disorders* (2023) and *Influencer economies, 'Uber therapies,' and platformed pathologies: Mental health diagnosis and sponsored TikTok content* (2024)
- **James Green**'s paper *TikTok and the changing landscape of therapeutic digital spaces of care* (2024)
- **Deci & Ryan**'s concept of Self-Determination Theory in *The General Causality Orientations Scale: Self-Determination in Personality* (1998)
- **Knee et al**'s paper *Self-Determination Theory and Romantic Relationship Processes* (2013)
- **Kellie Ford Stilwell**'s doctorate thesis titled *The Formation of TikTok's Influencer-Led Mental Health Community: A Content Analysis of Social Penetration Theory* (2004)
- **Braun & Clarke**'s paper *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2006) and much more of their subsequent work on this (2011; 2015; 2018; 2019)
- **Ann Gray**'s book *Research Practice for Cultural Studies* (2003)



Search term:

- Relationship advice

Process:

- Personalised search settings were disabled
- Search dates and screening decisions were documented
- Purposive sampling for creator types

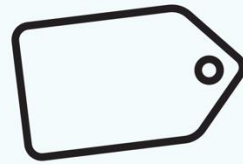
Findings & interpretation RQ1



NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION

Locates relational experience in the body and positions physiological safety as the foundation of healthy intimacy.

Terms: nervous system · regulate · safe · safe harbour · feels like home · stability



ATTACHMENT-BASED LABELS

Appropriates attachment theory as a self-identification framework for categorising the self and partners.

Terms: attachment · anxious · avoidant · abandonment · chasing



SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Creates the therapeutic subject: self-work is the precondition for relational success.

Terms: heal · doing the work · self-worth · self-love · boundaries · growth



LOVE LANGUAGES

Derived from Chapman's (1992) widely circulated framework, now culturally embedded and rarely questioned.

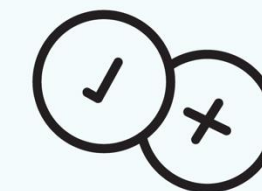
Terms: love languages · words of affirmation · quality time



EXPLICIT CLINICAL TERMINOLOGY

Language borrowed directly from clinical and diagnostic contexts, used outside professional settings.

Terms: gaslighting · trigger · love bombing · wound · narcissist · codependency



RELATIONAL EVALUATION

Captures the evaluative vocabulary used to assess relationships and partners.

Terms: bare minimum · healthy · red flag · worth · too much · toxic

“If they make you feel like you're too much, if they make the bare minimum things feel like pulling teeth. Instead of getting hurt and getting offended when somebody doesn't treat you right, you need to start getting disgusted.”

“So stop apologizing for your standards. You aren't asking for too much. You are asking for the bare minimum required to feel safe. It's biology. When a woman feels safe, she naturally becomes soft. ”



Findings & interpretation RQ2



- **Relational authority and the performance of expertise**

Qualified creators cited credentials; non-qualified creators cited experience.

Both used direct, informal, "insider" address.

- **Therapeutic language as a framework for interpreting relationships**

Both diagnosed self and partners via attachment and nervous-system language: problem named, reframed therapeutically, resolved through self-work.

- **Self-knowledge as a moral imperative in relationships**

Self-improvement was framed as continuous duty ("work," n=28), applied to self and partners alike.

Qualified creators Non-qualified creators

1: Authority and performance of expertise

Credentials cited

Personal experience

Frameworks referenced

Gender essentialist

2: Therapeutic language as framework

Attachment labels

Nervous system terms

3: Self-knowledge as a moral imperative

Work and change

Partner evaluation (bare minimum)

Key finding: Shared discursive formula

Relationship problem named → reframed therapeutically → resolved through self-work



Findings & interpretation RQ3



“the timing is so crazy because i needed this so bad”

Relatedness

“I took my wedding ring off in Feb, he didn’t notice until September. I formally asked for a divorce in May.....”

Autonomy

“Discover 5 key strategies to strengthen your relationship, including communication and quality time. Enhance your bond today! #advice #relationships”

Competence



🔍 Limitations

- Small exploratory sample (n=31).
- Findings are interpretive, not generalisable.
- Single-researcher coding, no second coder.
- SDT applied as an interpretive lens, not tested empirically.
- Comments reflect TikTok's curated "top" responses only.





Implications

- **Theoretical**: Presents therapy-speak as psychological need regulation (SDT), not only cultural discourse.
- **Methodological**: Shows that therapeutic authority is performed through language, platform practices and audience engagement, not credentials alone.
- **Applied (platforms)**: Shows how design choices in apps shape relational sense-making.



Future research

- **Media literacy**: Therapeutic authority is performed through platform practices rather than credentials alone, highlighting the importance of digital media literacy in evaluating relationship advice and raising new questions about AI-generated content.
- **Psychological outcomes**: Relationships between exposure to relationship-related therapy-speak and relationship satisfaction, partner evaluation, self-concept clarity and identity foreclosure.
- **Recommender systems**: How algorithmic curation shapes feelings of emotional insight, self-understanding or being understood.

If TikTok increasingly provides the language through which people understand themselves, their partners and their relationships, then understanding how that language is produced, circulated and trusted becomes increasingly important.





Thank you



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Technology
Dún Laoghaire**

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