

DOING THE BARE MINIMUM: THERAPY-SPEAK AND RELATIONSHIP NORMS ON TikTok



An empirical mapping of relationship-related therapy-speak in TikTok relationship advice content.

Author: Christine Redmond, IADT. Co-authors: Auxane Boch, Nicola Fox Hamilton, Liam Challenor, & Caoimhe Dempsey, IADT.

BACKGROUND

Psychological language has travelled a long way from the therapist's chair to TikTok's scroll, becoming a dominant vocabulary for talking about romantic relationships. From "avoidant attachment" to "knowing your worth", the informal use of clinical and therapeutic language (therapy-speak) now structures how users interpret and evaluate relationship dynamics. Yet, how this language is organised, circulated, and made meaningful within platformed environments remains underexplored. This research addressed that gap by offering a systematic, empirical mapping of relationship-related therapy-speak within TikTok relationship advice content.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1** What psychological or therapeutic terms are commonly 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/unspecified content creators?
- RQ3** How does therapy-speak invoke or position autonomy, competence and relatedness needs as described in Self-Determination Theory?

"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."

METHODS

Design

- A preliminary summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) mapped the presence and distribution of therapeutic content across the dataset.
- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) served as the primary analytic framework for examining patterns of meaning and framing.
- Theory-informed interpretation using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The unit of analysis comprised individual videos, including spoken content, on-screen text, captions, and viewer comments.



Search term: "relationship advice"

10 viewer comments per video displayed as "top"

Engagement thresholds: 10,000+ views, 500+ likes, 50+ shares, 150+ bookmarks, 30+ comments

All text of videos content were analysed

FINDINGS

Research Question 1

An original taxonomy of six domains

The most frequently occurring terms were interpreted within broader conceptual clusters developed through iterative coding. This produced an empirically derived taxonomy of relationship-related therapy-speak comprising six domains.

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

"How do I communicate this to potential partners that this is my attachment style without scaring them away?"

"You want to know how you make a man change without begging or nagging? Then listen up."

Definition of relationship-related therapy-speak:
The use of psychological terminology, diagnostic labels or therapy-adjacent conceptual frameworks within discussions of romantic relationships. Both explicit clinical references and vernacular uses are included where they function as interpretive labels.

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

RELATIONAL EVALUATION
Captures the evaluative vocabulary used to assess relationships and partners.
Terms: bare minimum · healthy · red flag · worth · too much · toxic

EXPLICIT CLINICAL TERMINOLOGY
Language borrowed directly from clinical and diagnostic contexts, used outside professional settings.
Terms: gaslighting · trigger · love bombing · wound · narcissist · codependency

LOVE LANGUAGES
Derived from Chapman's (1992) widely circulated framework, now culturally embedded and rarely questioned.
Terms: love languages · words of affirmation · quality time

Research Question 2

Through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three themes were developed:

- 1: Relational authority and the performance of expertise**
Qualified creators cited credentials; non-qualified creators cited experience. Both used direct, informal, "insider" address.
- 2: 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.
- 3: Self-knowledge as a moral imperative in relationships**
Self-improvement was framed as continuous duty ("work," n=28), applied to self and partners alike.

Unexpected finding:
Two accounts in the dataset showed no identifiable human presence and no disclosure of AI use, yet reproduced therapeutic language, diagnoses, and guidance indistinguishably from human creators. One comment read simply, "it's AI," yet engagement with the content continued in the same ways, suggesting engagement did not depend on the speaker's verifiability.

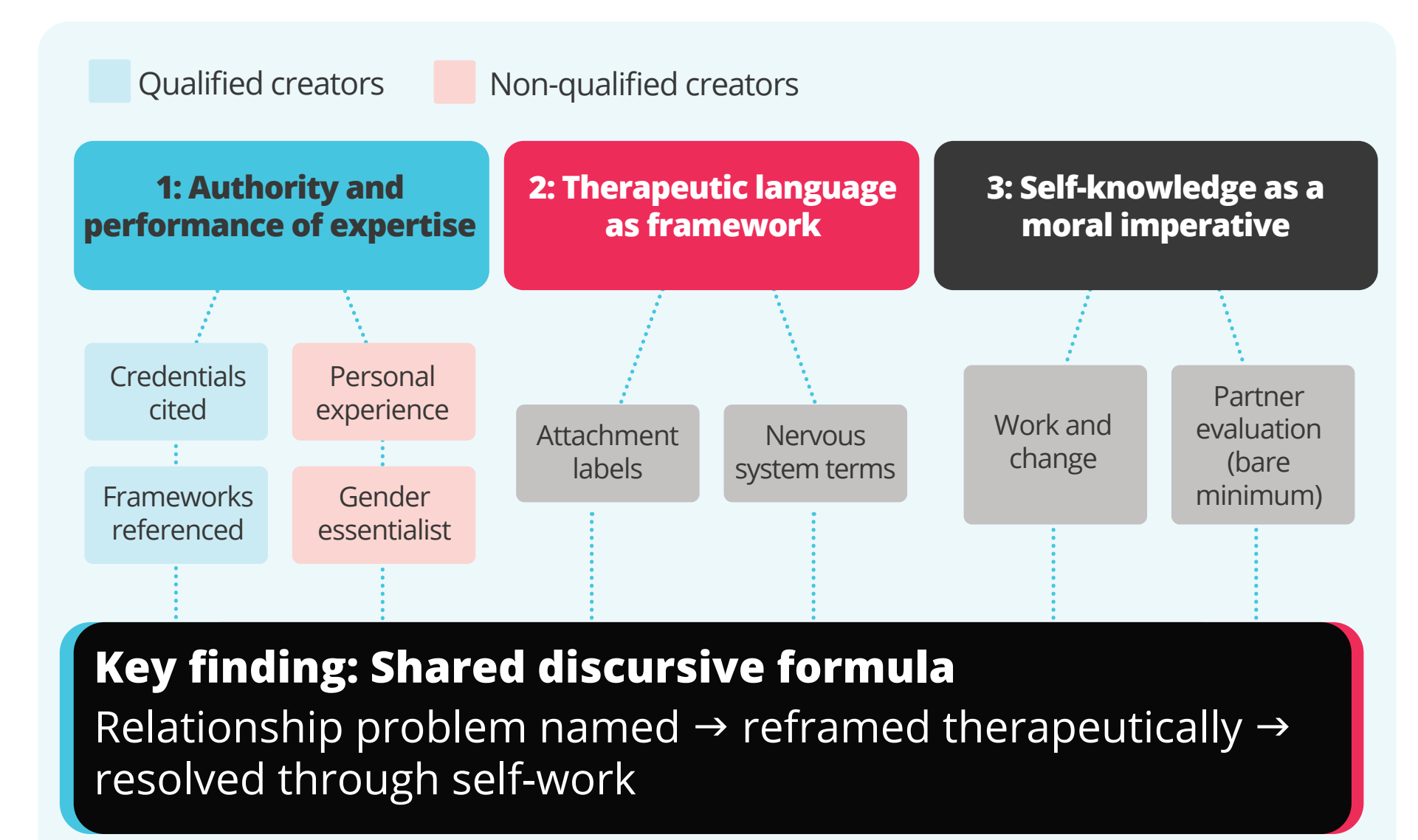
Research Question 3

"Need" was the most frequent term (n=115). Through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the discourse invoked autonomy, competence, and relatedness but leaned toward introjection rather than intrinsic motivation, evaluating relationships against external standards rather than experiencing them as inherently satisfying.

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.

"If your anxious waiting for texts, you need to work on yourself and not worry about a relationship until you heal that."



CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

- This study provides an empirical taxonomy of relationship-related therapy-speak on TikTok, revealing the near-universal presence of psychological framing across high-engagement relationship advice content.
- Digital platforms play an increasingly important role in shaping relationship norms.
- 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.
- Future research could examine how therapy-speak influences relationship expectations, partner evaluation, self-concept, and relationship satisfaction.

REFERENCES

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
Chapman, G. (1992). *The five love languages: How to express heartfelt commitment to your mate*. Northfield.
Deci, E. L. & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Journal of Research in Personality*, 19, 109-134.
Hsieh, H-F. & Shannon, S. E. (2005). *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.

LET'S CONNECT
Connect with Christine on LinkedIn →