



Emotional openness as an affective norm in representations of Gen Z masculinity on TikTok

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation and normalization of *emotional openness* as an affective norm in Gen Z masculinity on TikTok, focusing on the *fineshyt* content trend. Using a qualitative discourse analysis approach, the study analyzes 15 TikTok videos featuring emotional expression by male Gen Z creators and 436 audience comments purposively selected based on affective relevance. Data were collected between August - October 2025 and examined to identify patterns of emotional expression and audience interaction. The findings show that emotional openness is not articulated solely as individual expression but is collectively legitimized through audience responses that function as affective validation. Three dominant patterns of audience response emerge: affirmative appreciation of emotionally open masculinity, resistance grounded in traditional masculine norms, and relational fantasies that frame emotional openness as affective appeal. These interactions indicate a contextual shift in the representation of masculinity within specific TikTok content, where emotional expression is positioned as socially acceptable rather than as a sign of weakness. While previous studies on digital masculinity have primarily focused on male self-representation, this study highlights the central role of audience interaction in shaping and normalizing emotional expression. This study extends existing masculinity and digital communication scholarship by conceptualizing emotional openness not merely as individual expression, but as an affective norm co-produced through audience interaction. By positioning the comment section as a site of affective negotiation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender norms are constructed within participatory digital environments.

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1. Introduction

Masculinity is often associated with norms of emotional control, affective rigidity and emotional distance. The hegemonic construction of masculinity assumes that men are capable of suppressing expressions of feelings such as empathy, vulnerability or emotional sensitivity, because emotions are often perceived as a sign of weakness (Nordin et al., 2024). This understanding aligns with broader sociological perspectives that conceptualism emotional restraint as a socially constructed expectation embedded within hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gados, 2025). Hassan (2025) states that these norms not only shape interpersonal relationships but are also widely reproduced through media representations that portray emotional control as an ideal

characteristic of masculinity. As a result, these norms influence men's interpersonal relationships, causing them to become more withdrawn in social situations.

The transformation of digital media has changed the way people communicate and interpret emotions in the public sphere. Social media is no longer just a tool for distributing messages, but also a space for affective interaction where users can collectively produce, exchange and validate emotions (Ou et al., 2025). Digital platforms increasingly function as affective infrastructures that shape how emotions are performed, circulated, and legitimized through algorithmic visibility (Loupeppis & Intahchomphoo, 2025). According to data from a report of DataReportal, 2025 in (Fuadiy et al., 2025; Maddalena, 2025), TikTok has become one of the social media platforms that is currently gaining a lot of attention from internet users, especially in Indonesia with 108 million active users. TikTok, with its short video format and participatory culture, allows emotions to be expressed openly, performatively, and repeatedly, thus forming a distinctive pattern of affective communication among the younger generation (Zhang, 2025). Fundamental concepts such as gender, particularly masculinity, have undergone significant reinterpretation and shifts in meaning.

This shift has brought emotional openness to the fore as an increasingly visible and accepted component of masculinity. In contrast to the traditional paradigm that dictates men to be tough, stoic, and emotionally restrained, popular content on TikTok shows Gen Z men deliberately discussing their vulnerability, mental anxiety, personal failures, and need for emotional relationships. This is in line with research of Wahyuni & Fajarini (2025) which proves that TikTok is not only a medium for entertainment, but also a space for self-expression, idea sharing, and social interaction that allows users to present their emotional experiences personally and publicly. This practice marks a fundamental transformation: emotional openness is no longer seen as a sign of weakness but is increasingly constructed as an essential element of an authentic and evolving man. Similar trends have been observed in studies of digital masculinity that highlight vulnerability and emotional disclosure as emerging markers of contemporary male identity in online spaces (Anderson, 2010; Rice et al., 2021).

From a communication studies perspective, emotions are not understood solely as individual psychological experiences, but rather as symbolic practices that are communicated and interpreted through media. Emotions function as messages that build connections, affiliations, and resonance among users (Fadillah et al., 2020). In social media spaces, audience responses such as comments, praise, and expressions of solidarity are an important part of the meaning-making process, as this is where emotional values and norms are collectively negotiated (Chornobylskyi et al., 2025).

This transformation indicates that emotional openness has shifted from being merely an individual behavior to what can be called a new affective norm. Affective norms refer to a set of unwritten rules that govern which emotions may be expressed, how they should be expressed, and by whom such expressions are considered valid (Vishkin & Tamir, 2023). On TikTok, this new norm is constructed through the platform's cultural mechanisms, such as supportive duets, stitches that provide validation, hashtag trends such as #MentalHealthAwareness or #Masculinity, and comments that praise emotional honesty. The algorithm then reinforces this norm by promoting similar content, creating a cycle in which certain expressions are valued and replicated.

However, this normalization of emotional openness does not occur in a vacuum. It is a direct response to a broader socio-cultural context, including increased awareness of mental health, the deconstruction of toxic masculinity in public discourse, and the influence of social movements promoting gender equality (Horton et al., 2026). Gen Z is often credited as the generation most concerned with psychological well-being, making the integration of mental health and gender

identity a necessity. TikTok, with its direct visual and audio language, is an ideal medium for articulating and disseminating these values (Nabila & Ismail, 2025).

Previous studies have examined the transformation of masculinity in digital media, particularly in relation to non-aggressive representations, visual aesthetics, and male body performance. A study Rochman & Noertjahjo (2025) shows that representations of androgynous men on TikTok elicit diverse audience reactions, indicating that digital platforms provide space for negotiating masculine meanings. The study Fauzan et al. (2025) position TikTok as a space for fragile and emotionally expressive masculinity; however, their analysis remains centered on male self-representation rather than on the affective dynamics emerging in the comment section. Similarly Kumalasari et al. (2025) demonstrate that positive masculinity on social media can transcend hegemonic stereotypes through supportive roles and open communication, thereby broadening discussions on contemporary masculinity.

Most existing studies prioritize content production and representation, while audience affective engagement is often positioned as supplementary rather than constitutive. Yet, audience comments and emotional responses function as a crucial arena where affective norms, social expectations regarding which emotions are legitimate and how they should be expressed, are collectively shaped and reinforced. Although emotional vulnerability in men has been increasingly discussed, few studies explicitly conceptualize emotional openness as an affective norm, particularly within the context of TikTok Indonesia and Generation Z (Kholili & Wijiharto Tunggal, 2023). Much masculinity research continues to frame emotions within individual or psychological paradigms, overlooking the role of digital communication infrastructures in normalizing emotional openness as a social practice.

Addressing this limitation, the present study examines how emotional openness is represented and communicated in TikTok content and how audience interactions actively participate in shaping and legitimizing affective norms of masculinity. By foregrounding affective communication practices, this research positions emotions not merely as personal expressions but as socially negotiated elements in the construction of masculine identity in digital space.

In this study, affective norms are understood as patterns of social expectations formed through the repetition of audience emotional responses to certain expressions. Affective norms are identified through several indicators, namely: 1) the dominance of affirmative comments on expressions of emotional openness, 2) the repetition of similar affective patterns in the comments section, and 3) the lack of strong social sanctions against such emotional expressions. With these indicators, emotional openness is not only understood as an individual expression, but as a communication practice that gains social legitimacy.

Therefore, this study aims to critically examine how emotional openness is constructed and normalized as an affective norm in representations of Gen Z masculinity on TikTok. The focus of the analysis is not only on the content itself, but also on how the platform shapes it. The underlying research question is: How are narratives and emotional openness represented in the *Finest* trend on TikTok? How do TikTok's technical features and algorithmic logic facilitate or limit the formation of this affective norm? Also, how does the Gen Z audience respond and participate in affirming or challenging this new norm?

To answer these questions, this study will utilize a multimodal discourse analysis approach to a sample of relevant TikTok content. The sample will be selected based on popularity, engagement, and the use of key hashtags related to masculinity and emotional health. The analysis will explore not only the apparent themes and messages, but also performative strategies, the use of music, overlay text, and interaction patterns in the comments section, which together form the ecology of

meaning on the platform. This qualitative approach follows interpretative research traditions that emphasize contextual meaning-making, multimodality, and iterative analysis in digital communication research (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

Thus, this study is expected to contribute to broader academic discussions on digital media, gender studies, and the sociology of emotions, while also providing a critical lens for understanding how young people are actively shaping the future of masculine identity in new public spaces.

2. Theoretical Framework

Affective Publics and Emotional Communication on social media

In the study of digital communication, emotions are increasingly understood as a central element in the process of meaning formation and public engagement. Papacharissi (2014) through the concept of affective publics explains that digital spaces are not only inhabited by rational individuals, but by publics connected through affection, sentiment, and emotion. Emotions function as a communication infrastructure that drives participation, strengthens affiliations, and shapes shared norms on social media. Thus, the expression of emotional openness on social media can be understood as an affective practice that gains legitimacy through audience response (Wetherell, 2012).

Affective publics are not built through cognitive consensus, but through shared emotional intensity that is responded to simultaneously (Rohlinger & Sobieraj, 2022). In the context of platforms such as TikTok, comments, expressions of support, affective humor, and emotional validation become communication practices that reveal how emotions are circulated and normalized. Thus, emotions are not positioned as private experiences, but as symbolic practices that can be observed, analyzed, and interpreted socially.

This framework is used to examine how emotional openness functions as an affective norm in representations of Gen Z masculinity on TikTok. When expressions of empathy, concern, and emotional warmth receive positive responses from audiences, these practices become not only individual expressions, but also shape social expectations about how men should display emotions in digital spaces.

Gender Performativity and the Normalization of Emotional Expression

To understand how masculinity is shaped through affective communication practices, this study also uses the concept of gender performativity from (Butler, 2022). Butler asserts that gender is not an innate identity, but rather the result of actions that are repeatedly performed in specific social contexts. Gender identity is formed through performance, namely actions, gestures, language, and expressions that acquire meaning through repetition and social recognition.

In the context of social media, emotional expression can be understood as part of gender performance. When Gen Z men consistently display empathy, vulnerability, and emotional warmth in TikTok content, and receive validation from their audience, these expressions function as performative acts that reinforce a certain form of masculinity. The repetition of emotionally expressive content that is positively received contributes to a process of normalization, where emotional openness is no longer seen as a deviation from masculinity, but rather as a legitimate and expected practice.

Through this framework, emotional openness is understood not as an individual psychological trait, but as the result of performative practices negotiated through communicative interactions. Emotional masculinity is shaped not only by content creators, but also by audience responses that affirm or negotiate the meaning of such expressions.

Representations of Masculinity and Affective Norms

To complement the analysis, this study also draws on representation theory [Hall et al. \(2024\)](#), which views the media as an arena for the production of social meaning. Representation does not merely reflect reality, but actively shapes the way individuals understand identity, social relations, and cultural values. In this context, representations of masculinity on TikTok play a role in constructing images of how men should behave, feel, and interact emotionally.

Affective norms in masculinity are formed through a process of repeated and socially legitimized representation. When content that displays emotional openness continues to be produced and receives positive affective responses, social media functions as a space for normalizing certain emotional values. Thus, TikTok is not only a medium for individual expression, but also a space for communication that shapes and disseminates affective norms of masculinity among Generation Z.

Based on the three theoretical frameworks of affective publics, gender performativity, and representation, this study positions emotional openness as a collectively negotiated communication practice. This framework allows for an analysis that examines the relationship between content, emotional expression, and audience response in shaping emotional masculinity in the digital space.

Integrative Framework: Conceptualizing Affective Norms in Digital Masculinity

Although affective publics, gender performativity, and representation theory originate from different intellectual traditions, this study integrates them to analyse how emotional openness becomes normalized within digital masculinity. Rather than operating in parallel, these frameworks are positioned as analytically interconnected.

Affective publics [Papacharissi \(2014\)](#) explain how emotions circulate and bind audiences through digital participation. This perspective highlights the role of platform affordances and audience interaction in producing shared affective orientations. Gender performativity [Butler \(2022\)](#) provides a lens to understand how repeated emotional expressions when socially recognized become stabilized as legitimate forms of masculinity. Representation theory [Clarke \(2018\)](#) situates these performances within broader systems of meaning production, emphasizing how media do not merely reflect masculinity but actively construct its symbolic boundaries.

By integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualizes emotional openness as an affective norm: a socially negotiated expectation formed through repeated emotional performances (performativity), circulated and validated through participatory digital interaction (affective publics), and stabilized through representational practices within media discourse (representation theory). This integrative approach allows for an analysis that moves beyond individual expression toward the collective production of gender norms in digital environments.

3. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with [Kress & Leeuwen \(2010\)](#) multimodal affective discourse analysis method. This approach was chosen to understand how emotional expressions and audience responses are communicated and normalized in representations of Generation Z masculinity on TikTok social media. The analysis focused on affective communication practices that emerged through a combination of visuals, text, audio, and audience interaction. The analysis of audience comments in this study referred to a digital qualitative approach that views online interaction as meaningful social text ([Hine, 2020](#)).

The qualitative approach allows researchers to examine the social meaning behind emotional expressions and communication practices that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables. Thus,

this study does not aim to measure the intensity of emotions, but rather to examine how emotions are represented and interpreted in the context of digital communication.

The subjects in this study are TikTok content that displays representations of masculinity among Generation Z males, particularly content that shows expressions of emotional openness such as empathy, concern, and affective warmth. The objects of the study include two main elements, namely the finest trend on TikTok and audience responses in the comments section.

The units of analysis in this study include: 1) visual and audio elements in videos, such as body gestures, facial expressions, POV narration, and tone of voice; and 2) audience comments containing affective expressions, whether in the form of praise, emotional affiliation, empathetic humor, or reflective responses to the representations of masculinity displayed.

Research data was collected from 15 TikTok videos that were part of the finest trend and featured representations of Generation Z masculinity. The videos were selected purposively based on the following criteria: 1) featuring Gen Z male figures, 2) explicitly containing expressions of emotional openness, and 3) obtaining a high level of engagement, namely a minimum of 50,000 views and 1,000 comments. Data collection was carried out from August to October 2025 to capture the dynamics of relatively stable representations.

In addition to video content, this study also analyzed 436 audience comments selected based on affective relevance, such as expressions of empathy, appreciation, resistance, and relational fantasy. Comments were collected manually and documented in the form of screenshots to preserve the context of the interaction.

The analytical process was conducted in four systematic stages. First, data familiarization, in which all selected videos and comments were repeatedly observed to identify preliminary affective expressions and recurring interaction patterns. Visual elements (facial expression, gaze, gesture), audio components (tone, music, narration), and textual overlays were documented alongside dominant emotional reactions in the comments.

Second, initial coding was conducted using open coding procedures applied to both video performances and audience comments. Emotional expressions such as empathy, reassurance, discomfort, irony, admiration, and romantic projection were labelled descriptively. Coding was conducted manually to preserve contextual sensitivity.

Third, categorical development involved grouping similar codes through axial coding into broader affective clusters. Through constant comparison across data units, three dominant patterns were established: affective appreciation, normative resistance, and relational fantasy. These categories were refined iteratively by aligning empirical patterns with theoretical constructs from affective publics and gender performativity.

Fourth, interpretative integration was undertaken to examine the relationship between emotional performance, audience validation, and representational meaning. The focus was not merely on frequency but on how repeated affective responses contributed to the stabilisation of emotional openness as an emergent norm.

To enhance interpretative rigor, the study employed constant comparison techniques, whereby newly identified patterns were continuously tested against previously coded data. Analytical memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document interpretative decisions and theoretical reflections. Disconfirming evidence was actively sought to prevent overgeneralization, and contradictory comments were analyzed to refine category boundaries. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing multimodal expressions in video content with audience responses in comment sections, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

This research utilized publicly accessible TikTok videos and comments. Although the data were publicly available, ethical standards for internet research were observed. Usernames, profile identifiers, and any potentially identifiable information were anonymized. The analysis focused on communicative patterns rather than individual identities, and no attempt was made to contact or trace users. The study recognizes that public visibility does not negate ethical responsibility and therefore prioritizes responsible data handling and contextual sensitivity.

4. Result and Discussion

Analysis of audience comments shows that the process of normalizing emotional openness does not occur in isolation, but rather through diverse affective dynamics. Audience response patterns reveal how male emotional expression is collectively negotiated through appreciation, resistance, and relational fantasy, which together form the framework of affective masculinity norms in digital spaces, as summarized in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Patterns of Audience Responses to Emotional Openness in Gen Z Masculinity

Audience Response Pattern	Key Characteristics	Meaning within the Affective Norm Framework
Affective appreciation	Expressions of empathy, emotional support, and validation of vulnerability	Indicates collective acceptance of emotional openness as a legitimate masculine practice
Normative resistance	Rejection of emotional expression and references to traditional masculine ideals	Reflects tension between hegemonic masculinity norms and emotionally expressive representations
Relational fantasy	Affective attraction and idealization of emotionally open male figures	Positions emotional openness as an affective and relational value within digital interactions

Appreciation Soft Masculinity

The Soft Masculinity category shows the dominance of audience reactions expressing a sense of security, admiration, and emotional attraction to male characters who display calmness, emotional presence, and empathy in TikTok content. Comments such as “cowok begini bikin aman”, “keren banget kakk”, “muka datar tapi hati bergetar”, and “to much ga ya kalo tiba-tiba meluk” show the audience's acceptance of a form of masculinity that is not based on aggression or physical dominance, but on the ability to provide emotional reassurance. Rather than merely indicating positive reception, these responses signal a broader affective reorientation in which emotional reassurance becomes central to masculine desirability. Empathy is not positioned as a deviation from masculinity, but as its emerging normative core within digital interaction.

From a digital communication perspective, this reaction can be understood through the concept of affective public, where emotions serve as the primary mechanism for shaping collective engagement and meaning on social media (Papacharissi, 2014). Audience comments function not only as individual reactions but as affective alignments that publicly validate certain performances. In this sense, admiration and expressions of safety operate as mechanisms of affective endorsement that stabilise emotional openness as a legitimate masculine script. Through repetition, these validations acquire performative force, transforming what was once considered vulnerability into normative masculinity.

These appreciative comments therefore contribute to the social legitimisation of empathetic masculinity. As Ahmed (2013) suggests, emotions circulate and accumulate value through repeated articulation. Here, repetition does not simply reflect preference; it produces normativity. The

comment section becomes a site where emotional openness is collectively rehearsed and affirmed, enabling the gradual institutionalisation of affective masculinity norms (Ahmed, 2025).

The findings of this study indicate a shift in the representation of masculinity among Generation Z, particularly in the context of certain TikTok content that normalises emotional openness as an acceptable affective practice. Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) explain that historically, hegemonic masculinity has been characterised by dominance, control and emotional distance. However, in the fineshyt trend, these traits no longer function as primary markers of desirability. Instead of dominance, affective competence becomes the central axis of masculine value. This suggests that in digital environments, hegemonic masculinity may be recalibrated through emotional credibility rather than emotional distance. This recalibration indicates that emotional credibility operates as a new form of symbolic capital within platform-mediated masculinity.

This transformation can also be interpreted through hybrid masculinity Bridges & Pascoe (2014), where men incorporate traits previously coded as feminine without relinquishing masculine status. In the fineshyt trend, protective masculinity is retained, yet protection is articulated through calmness, empathy, and communicative presence rather than physical assertion. Importantly, this does not signify the disappearance of hierarchy, but its reconfiguration. Emotional openness becomes a strategic adaptation that aligns masculinity with platform logics privileging intimacy, relatability, and affective engagement.

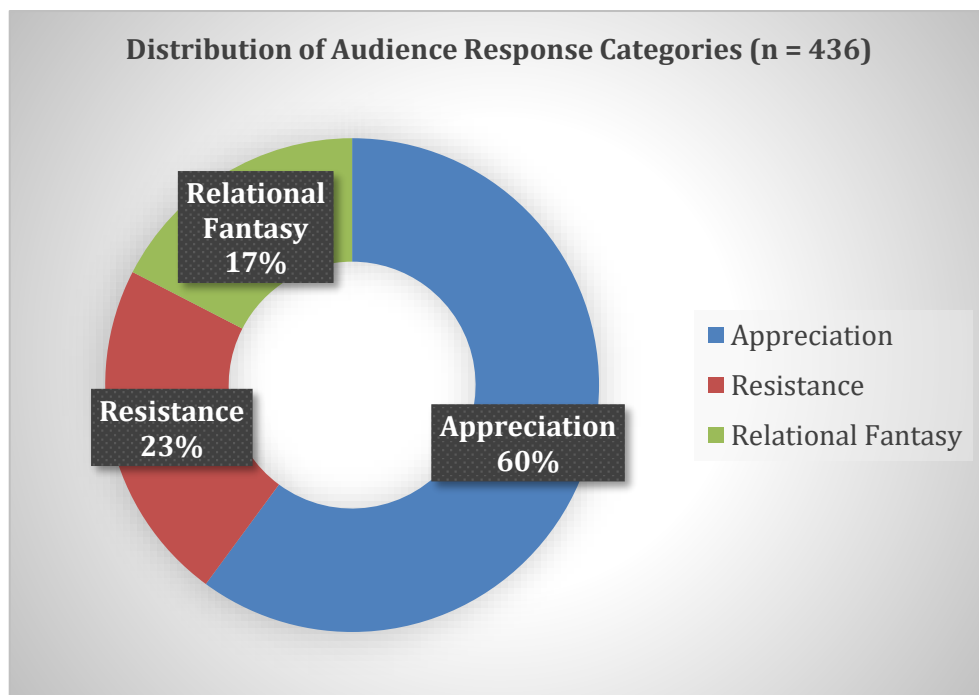


Fig. 1. Distribution of Audience Response Categories (n = 436)

The gender implications of appreciating soft masculinity a more relational and emotionally accountable model of masculinity, a model of masculinity that emphasises emotional responsibility, empathy, and equal relationships. Audience support for this representation indicates a need for affectivity that is openly articulated in the digital space, especially among Generation Z. In the context of communication, empathetic masculinity is not only a personal identity, but also an effective representation strategy in building closeness, trust, and emotional affiliation between creators and audiences (Abidin, 2018). While previous studies have examined affective publics primarily in relation to political mobilisation, this study shows that affective circulation also plays

a crucial role in the rearticulation of gender norms. Emotional openness becomes normalised not through institutional discourse, but through micro-level affective validation in everyday platform interactions.

Thus, the appreciation of soft masculinity does not merely reflect audience taste. It reveals an emergent process of affective norm formation in which masculinity is redefined as communicative competence and emotional reliability. TikTok functions not only as a space of representation, but as an affective infrastructure that enables the performative stabilisation of new masculine scripts.

As illustrated in [Fig. 1](#), affective appreciation constitutes the majority of responses (60%), followed by normative resistance (23%) and relational fantasy (17%). This distribution indicates that emotional openness is predominantly validated within the observed comment space, while still generating pockets of contestation and affective projection.

Resistant and Toxic Norm

Although appreciation for soft masculinity appears dominant, the findings also reveal resistant responses that signal the persistence of hegemonic masculinity norms in digital space. Comments such as “gak di tonton bikin penasaran, di tonton merinding” illustrate affective discomfort toward representations of men who display emotional calmness, affective closeness, or non-aggressive protection. Rather than simple dislike, this discomfort reflects an affective disturbance triggered by the disruption of familiar masculine scripts. Emotional openness, in this case, unsettles expectations that masculinity should remain emotionally restrained and controlled.

These resistant comments show that not all audiences are ready to accept the transformation of masculinity norms. In the context of gender performativity [Butler \(2022\)](#), this resistance can be understood as a reaction to gender performances that violate long-established normative expectations. Masculinity, in this framework, is not a stable identity, but rather the result of repeating actions that are considered ‘appropriate’. When men display emotional openness in public, especially in intimate visual and narrative formats on TikTok, this performance has the potential to be considered a deviation from the traditional masculinity script that demands emotional distance and control of affect. Thus, resistant comments function as informal mechanisms of gender policing, attempting to reassert the boundaries of what counts as “proper” masculinity within platform-mediated interaction.

Resistance is not always expressed in the form of explicit rejection, but is often present in comments that are sarcastic, ambiguous, or subtly derogatory. Expressions such as goosebumps or unexplained discomfort indicate the presence of affective mechanisms at work behind the audience's assessment. [Ahmed \(2013\)](#) explains that emotions such as discomfort or disgust often function as markers of social boundaries, determining who and what practices are considered ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ within a particular normative order. In this context, “goosebumps” or ambiguous unease are not neutral reactions; they are affective signals that position emotional openness within a zone of deviance or excess. Through these micro-expressions, audiences participate in the affective regulation of masculinity..

From the perspective of masculinity studies, this resistant response indicates the persistence of toxic norms that place emotional control as the main indicator of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, as explained by [Connell & Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#), maintains its dominance not only through structural power, but also through affective regulation, namely by limiting emotional expressions that are considered ‘unmasculine’. Therefore, expressions of empathy, gentleness, or affective calmness that are too prominent still have the potential to be read as a symbolic threat to the established masculine order.

The resistant reactions demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity continues to operate through subtle affective sanctions, where excessive tenderness or overt empathy may be read as a symbolic threat to masculine authority.

Importantly, however, the presence of resistance does not invalidate the broader shift toward affective masculinity. On the contrary, resistance itself signals that transformation is underway. If emotional openness were entirely irrelevant, it would not provoke defensive affective responses. The very intensity of discomfort indicates that established masculine norms are being contested within digital interaction. TikTok, as a participatory platform structured by visibility and affective engagement, becomes a site where these tensions unfold publicly.

This study therefore extends existing scholarship by showing that affective publics do not merely validate new norms; they also expose the friction points where older gender regimes attempt to reassert themselves. Emotional openness becomes a contested affective terrain rather than a uniformly accepted value. The gender implications of this category suggest that the normalisation of empathetic masculinity remains incomplete and uneven. Emotional openness in men is still negotiated through competing affective orientations, validation and policing.

Digital space thus operates simultaneously as a site of norm transformation and norm enforcement, revealing that the emergence of affective masculinity is shaped not only by endorsement but also by resistance. The persistence of toxic masculinity is therefore not a static residue of the past, but an active regulatory force within contemporary digital culture.

Discussion on Relational Fantasy

The relational fantasy category demonstrates how emotional openness is intertwined with romantic imagination and affective affiliation. Comments such as “love this trend hahahaha”, “the only nonchalant has been approved”, and “wahh untung ada si kakang...” frame emotionally expressive male figures as desirable and emotionally appealing. Rather than simply celebrating soft masculinity, these responses transform emotional openness into a site of aspirational intimacy, where masculine performance becomes embedded in imagined relational scenarios.

Within the framework of affective communication, relational fantasy operates as a form of participatory desire. Humour, exaggeration, and collective calls such as “GIRLS KUMPUL SEKARANG JUGA!” indicate that affect circulates not only as validation but as playful projection.

In this process, audiences do not merely consume representations of masculinity; they actively co-construct imagined relational futures around them. Emotional openness becomes narratively extended beyond the video into shared fantasies of protection, compatibility, and romantic safety.

This dynamic reflects the logic of affective publics, where emotional intensities bind individuals into temporary communities of shared feeling. Here, fantasy functions as an affective amplifier, increasing the symbolic desirability of soft masculinity by embedding it within collective romantic imagination.

However, this category also reveals significant ambivalence. While relational fantasies elevate emotional openness as desirable, they simultaneously risk reproducing paternalistic scripts. Men remain positioned as protectors, emotional anchors, or central figures within relational narratives. Thus, emotional openness does not automatically dismantle hierarchical gender structures; instead, it may recalibrate them in softer, more affectively appealing forms.

This ambivalence suggests that affective norm formation is not inherently emancipatory. Emotional expressiveness can coexist with subtle forms of gender asymmetry, particularly when desirability is anchored in protective masculinity. In this sense, relational fantasy demonstrates

that the transformation of masculinity in digital spaces is negotiated within existing relational frameworks rather than entirely outside them.

From a broader theoretical perspective, this finding extends scholarship on digital masculinity by highlighting the role of fantasy and desire in norm consolidation. While previous research has emphasised representation and performance, this study shows that imagined intimacy plays a crucial role in stabilising affective masculinity norms.

Emotional openness gains normative force not only through validation or resistance, but through desirability. It becomes powerful because it is wanted, fantasised, and collectively projected into relational futures.

Overall, the three categories; appreciation, resistance, and relational fantasy, demonstrate that emotional openness has evolved into a negotiated affective norm within Gen Z masculinity on TikTok. This norm emerges not as a linear transformation, but as a dynamic interplay of endorsement, policing, and desire. Social media functions not merely as a mirror of shifting gender values, but as an affective infrastructure where masculine identities are rehearsed, contested, and stabilised in real time. By conceptualising emotional openness as an emergent affective norm shaped through platform interaction, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital communication reshapes gender regimes, not only through representation, but through the circulation of feeling itself.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that emotional openness has emerged as an affective norm in the representation of Generation Z masculinity on TikTok. Through multimodal performances and affective interactions in the comment sections, empathy, emotional warmth, and relational attentiveness are increasingly validated as desirable masculine qualities. Audience engagement plays a central role in this process: appreciation legitimizes soft masculinity, relational fantasy amplifies its desirability, and resistance reveals the continued operation of hegemonic and patriarchal norms. Together, these dynamics show that the transformation of masculinity in digital spaces is negotiated rather than linear. Theoretically, this study contributes to masculinity scholarship by showing that hegemonic masculinity in platform-mediated environments is recalibrated through affective validation, where emotional credibility becomes a new symbolic resource. It also extends the concept of affective publics beyond political mobilization by demonstrating how collective emotional circulation shapes gender norms in everyday digital interaction. Practically, these findings highlight the importance of media literacy efforts that address how digital platforms influence gender expectations through affective engagement, particularly among young users. For digital policymakers and platform designers, recognizing comment sections as sites of both validation and gender policing is essential for fostering more inclusive and emotionally supportive online environments. This study is limited to a specific TikTok trend and publicly visible comments, and it does not account for broader algorithmic influences or cross-platform dynamics. Future research may expand this inquiry through comparative, longitudinal, or algorithm-focused approaches to deepen understanding of how digital infrastructures mediate the ongoing transformation of contemporary masculinity.

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