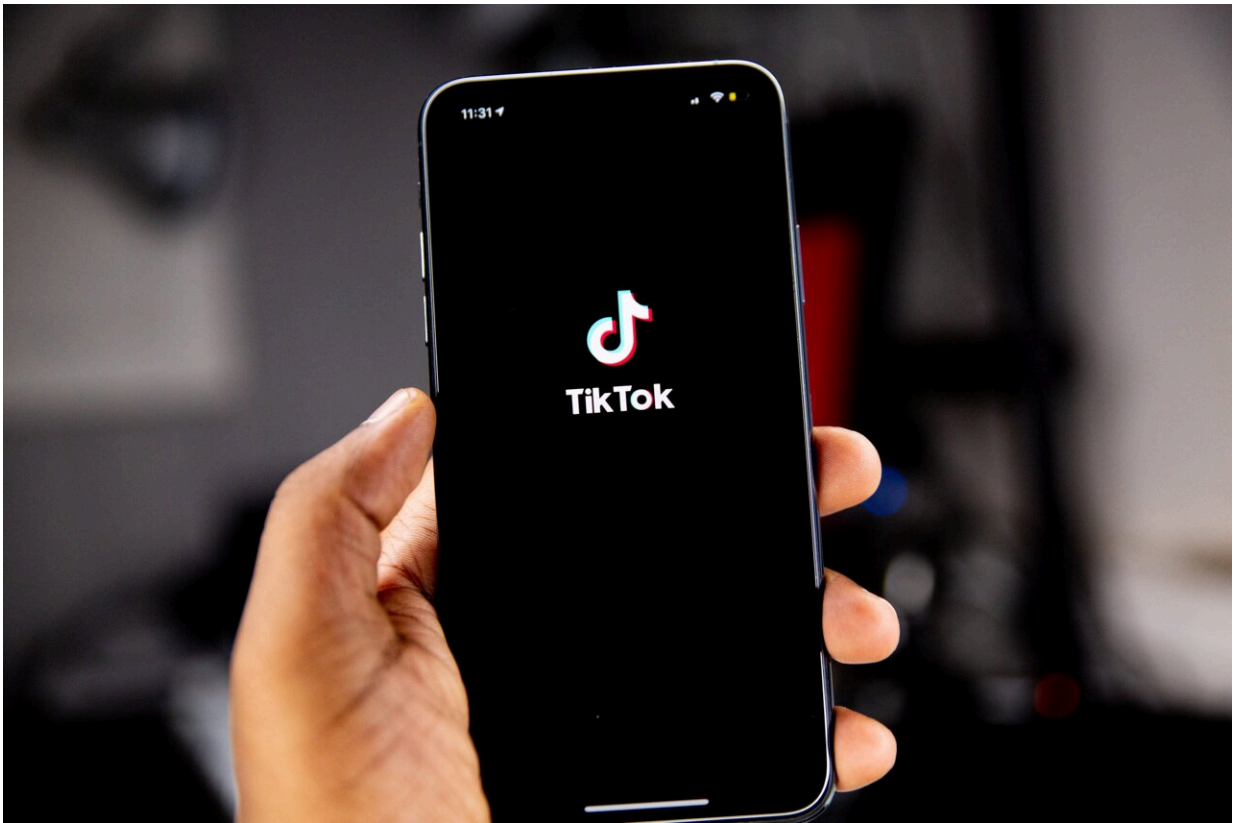


Viral videos about private moments may affect offline relationships

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

When individuals share videos about surprise reunions with their intimate partners on the internet, the reaction from viewers may not be the roses and unicorns the posters expected. Viewers' responses to shared

videos have the potential to shape offline relationships, a case study of one such video found.

In a paper published in the journal *New Media and Society*, Emily A. Mendelson, a graduate student in communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, used the recent "couch guy" [video](#) as a lens for exploring how online audiences form intimate networks of strangers united by shared content, use digital tools to make sense of relationships, and reinforce social scripts and behavioral expectations of romantic partners.

A college student named Robbie achieved instant notoriety as the couch guy when his high-school girlfriend Lauren posted a video to TikTok in September 2021 showing his reaction to her surprise visit to him at college.

Where some viewers saw a tender moment of speechlessness from Robbie at his girlfriend's unexpected entrance, thousands of skeptics saw a probable cheater who was dumbfounded and slow to react when his girlfriend walked in and caught him sitting on a couch with three women, according to the study.

Attracting over 65 million views online and even the attention of the Today show and a condom manufacturer, the couch guy video chalked up more than 5.3 million likes, 134,000 polarized comments and more than 400,000 shares from sighing romantics and armchair detectives alike at the time of Mendelson's study.

As the video's popularity grew, Mendelson wondered how offline relationships might be affected when videos of private moments go viral. Prior research had found that when individuals posted content about their intimate relationships online, their dyad might become a triad, with the online audience becoming a third member in the relationship.

"I believe one of the main reasons the couch guy video became so popular is people noticed that Robbie's reaction wasn't a typical response—he didn't seem excited to see her at first and was slow to get up and embrace her—and that didn't conform with the social scripts that define the behavioral expectations for romantic partners," Mendelson said.

The ambiguity of Robbie's reaction stirred strong emotions in viewers, spawning a flurry of memes, derivative videos, and duets—viewer-created videos posted side-by-side with the original in which viewers painstakingly analyzed his behavior and body language and that of others shown in the video.

For the study, Mendelson analyzed the top 100 viewer comments and the three most popular derivative videos and duets created and posted by other TikTok users. The original video and the viewer-created derivatives were all set to the same Ellie Goulding love song, "Still Falling for You."

While the original video was earnest and poetic in tone, Mendelson found that the derivative videos were divided into two distinct camps: serious renditions that showed people with "better reactions" such as excitement to surprise reunions that conformed with culturally defined social scripts and behavioral expectations, and parodies that lampooned blatantly unfaithful partners being caught in the act.

"The original video is serious and genuine in its tone and presentation," Mendelson said. "The creator wants everyone to look at this moment and the surprise that she (orchestrated). However, all of the derivatives are exaggerated—they're trying to make fun of the original or show different reactions. And the comments are all alluding to infidelity."

The manufacturer of a popular condom even jumped into the fray by

posting a comment from its verified account facetiously asking, "What are those (colorful) foils on the table?" Mendelson said.

Lauren responded to viewers' comments by saying that she had only wanted to share a touching moment in her relationship by posting the video and was "heartbroken" at viewers' allegations of infidelity and their urging her to acknowledge it and break up with Robbie.

Online audiences may perceive participants in shared videos as actors delivering performances rather than real people, prior research has found. Because the couch guy video raises many questions in viewers' minds, they feel compelled to "know the ending," prompting them to latch onto possible clues such as body language that help them make sense of the relationships and events shown, Mendelson said.

Viewers—both individuals and corporations—may overstep social boundaries "to search for answers, facilitate drama and craft a narrative for entertainment at the expense of those in the [relationship](#)," Mendelson wrote. "The obsession with sleuthing and unearthing the truth has been referred to by a prior researcher as 'mob justice and vigilante detective work typically reserved for, say, unmasking the Zodiac killer, except weaponized against normal people.'"

Accordingly, Robbie lamented the viewer backlash to the video. At the height of its popularity, Robbie said he, Lauren and their friends were inundated with requests for information and unsolicited advice, and viewers seemed to feel as though they had permission to invade the couple's privacy.

The condom company's decision to seize a potential marketing opportunity associated with the video's popularity reflects how corporations and social media platforms can co-opt posted content, transforming people's relationships into property the platform can

present however they choose to further their own interests, Mendelson said.

Despite the unwelcome attention, the lucrative opportunity the video's popularity presented was not lost on Lauren and Robbie either, Mendelson noted. Upon a suggestion from Lauren's father, they designed and began selling Couch Guy T-shirts through a link posted to Lauren's TikTok profile.

Accordingly, Mendelson concluded that "TikTok users who go viral tailor their content to what audiences expect and enjoy, creating an endless loop that feeds into the capitalization of public intimacy."

More information: Emily A Mendelson, Sensemaking and public intimacy on TikTok: How viral videos influence interpersonal relationships offline, *New Media & Society* (2023). DOI: [10.1177/14614448231163231](https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231163231)

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