



A PORTRAIT OF FILIPINO LOVERS: AESTHETIC NORMALISATION OF #RELATIONSHIPGOALS ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Filipino lovers (FL) represent and negotiate romantic relationships on Instagram (IG) within an artificial intelligence (AI)-mediated platform environment. It aims to understand how platform affordances and user practices interact in shaping contemporary forms of digital intimacy and the aesthetic normalisation of #relationshipgoals. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study examines forty-seven publicly accessible IG contents. The analysis focuses on patterns of relational representation, affective expression, and platform-driven visibility to identify how romantic relationships are constructed and performed in everyday digital practice. Findings show that IG is not primarily used as a marker of relational authenticity, but as a curated space for managing visibility, emotional expression, and social validation. FL strategically engage the platform to negotiate jealousy and surveillance, establish social proof, construct emergent forms of romantic performance, respond to perceived relational threats, and express romantic excitement. These practices demonstrate how intimacy is continuously negotiated. This study further finds that IG's AI-mediated features, including algorithmic curation, filtering tools, and content circulation systems, significantly shape how relationships are visually and emotionally represented. These platform mechanisms encourage selective disclosure and aesthetic enhancement, reinforcing emerging norms of idealised romantic visibility. This study concludes that romantic relational norms are co-produced through the interaction of algorithmic platform logics and culturally situated practices. This highlights how intimacy, visibility, and relational aesthetics are actively constructed in AI-mediated social media environments.

Keywords: Media representation, aesthetic normalisation, #relationshipgoals, Instagram (IG), artificial intelligence (AI)

INTRODUCTION

Instagram's (IG) role as an aesthetic platform becomes particularly significant in the context of romantic self-presentation. Through filters, algorithmic recommendations, and engagement metrics, the platform shapes how intimacy is visually performed and evaluated online. Scholarship on aesthetics and postcolonial critique points to how beauty standards are shaped by historical and global influences. IG privileges the visual through filters, curated feeds, algorithmic recommendations, and engagement metrics that reward beauty, desirability, and

performative affection (Leaver et al. 2020). As a platform structured around visual appeal and affect, it has become a key site where aesthetic norms are produced and circulated (Duguay et al. 2020). IG functions as both a mirror and a shaper of relationship ideals, where IG-worthy content serves as a vernacular measure of attractiveness and romantic legitimacy. In this way, the platform not only documents relationships but aestheticises them through algorithmic cues that privilege visual styles and narrative forms (Fejes-Vèkássy et al. 2022).

Filipino lovers (FL) are individuals or couples who publicly represent romantic relationships on IG within a Filipino cultural context (i.e., primarily urban and platform-active users in the present dataset). This study examines how FL engage with IG as an artificial intelligence (AI)-mediated platform that shapes how relationships are presented and interpreted. IG's core features, i.e., algorithmic feeds, recommendation systems, and visual enhancement tools, are not neutral but actively structure what becomes visible and desirable. Drawing on the analysis of selected online media contents, it explores how FL navigate these platform dynamics through their visual and textual practices. The discussion first outlines the socio-technical features of IG, then examines how these features are reflected in users' contents and finally situates these practices within broader cultural and postcolonial contexts.

A central issue in digital culture is how AI-enabled social media features shape self-presentation, particularly in representations of romantic relationships. Platforms such as IG enable diverse, media-based practices that engage users globally (de Freitas and Filho 2022). This study examines how FL use IG's AI features, such as filters, effects, and transitions, to curate idealised depictions of intimacy. While these tools offer creative expression, they also contribute to aesthetic normalisation, a process through which users reproduce platform-driven visual norms aligned with dominant ideals of love and partnership. At the centre of this inquiry is how new media mediate and potentially standardise emotional expression in contexts where the visibility of relationships is highly valued.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, limited face-to-face interaction led many couples to rely on platforms such as Meta, IG, and TikTok to maintain their relationships, fostering new social media practices that shape aesthetic normalisation in relationships. Succinctly, social media has transformed how relationships are approached, experienced, and negotiated (Labor and Latosa 2022; Portolan and McAlister 2022; Pascual and Tarrayo 2023). Meta refers to Meta Platforms Inc., the parent company that owns and operates several platforms, including Facebook and IG. Facebook is used to refer specifically to the social media platform. This pattern has continued into the post-pandemic period, shaped by evolving algorithms and AI. Many users rely on multiple platforms to sustain relationships (Lenhart 2015), with Meta remaining widely used for interpersonal communication, followed by IG (Dumrongsiri 2017; Fejes-Vèkássy et al. 2022). Common motivations include monitoring others' activities, maintaining social ties, and engaging in interactions (Utz et al. 2015; Portolan and McAlister 2022), particularly to support romantic relationships (Labor and Latosa 2022; Pascual and Tarrayo 2023). This process is shaped by multiple intersecting forces. These influences operate simultaneously and are often internalised by users. This study hopes to shed light on how media represent modern-day FL dealing with their relationships using IG-AI to reach #relationshipgoals and aesthetic normalisation. This has brought about new experiences and challenges for the FL (Rodriguez 2020; Labor and Latosa 2022; Portolan and McAlister 2022).

Social media connect users with both known and unknown others, facilitating the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships (Abbasi 2019a, 2019b). Among these platforms, IG has become a prominent site for relationship representation, with user activity often shaped by romantic relationship status. IG, with over 1.2 billion users globally, has become a dominant platform for photo and video sharing (de Freitas and Filho 2022). Building on Pertierra et al. (2002), IG shapes romantic practices in ways that carry broader social and

cultural implications. By enabling interactions that are both private and publicly visible, IG reflects what Leaver et al. (2020) describe as a visual social media that mirrors culture, while also contributing to aesthetic normalisation.

In the Philippines, IG is the third most widely used platform, following Meta and YouTube (StatCounter 2024), with over 21 million users as of early 2024 (Kemp 2024). Globally, it reaches around 2 billion monthly active users (Zote 2024). Its continued growth is linked to shifting user preferences and AI-driven features, with Filipino users favouring photos and short videos to express everyday experiences (Medina 2017). Among FL, IG's filters and AI tools enable the creation of visually appealing content that enhances engagement. These affordances support a form of mythmaking, where relationships are presented as curated and idealised (Chua 2019). Through visual storytelling and shared aesthetic preferences, IG fosters connections while shaping how relationships are performed, represented, and, at times, habitually maintained. Based on the dataset analysed, these representations are primarily produced by urban-based, platform-active users and predominantly reflect heteronormative and middle-class-oriented relationship practices, with limited but present representation of LGBTQIA+ couples.

This study examines how FL represent and negotiate romantic relationships in IG content within an AI-mediated environment, focusing on how IG-AI shapes the portrayal of couple relationships. This study addresses the following questions:

1. Why do FL engage in IG-AI aesthetic normalisation as represented by selected online media?
2. What are the dynamics of IG-AI aesthetic normalisation of #relationshipgoals?

Rather than positioning this study as filling an absolute gap, it is motivated by the need to better understand how digital intimacy is articulated within specific cultural contexts. In the Philippines, where social media is deeply embedded in everyday life and interpersonal communication, IG serves as a key site for expressing and negotiating romantic relationships. Examining these practices offers insight into how culturally situated affective norms are shaped and reconfigured within platform environments.

PAST STUDIES

The following section reviews literature on intimacy and relational visibility in algorithmically mediated environments. Studies have shown that IG functions not only as a communication platform but also as an aesthetic environment where intimacy is performed through algorithmically rewarded visual practices. IG has evolved into a platform for expressing aesthetic representations of idealised relationships, commonly framed as #relationshipgoals. Previous studies suggest that users are more inclined to engage with content from romantic interests, making commenting and messaging on posts a potential pathway to private communication, relationship development, and the construction of multiple self-narratives by FL. Hence, IG functions as a space where FL's relationships are made visible through relationship reveals (#softlaunch) to IG official (#hardlaunch).

Research on couples' visual representation highlights photographs as markers of relational milestones. The concept of firsties refers to images capturing the beginning of a relationship, documenting commitment and often being revisited to relive early emotions, making photography a tool for validation and emotional reinforcement (Tarnutzer and Lobinger 2024). To further situate this analysis, Gershon's (2010) concept of media ideology is particularly relevant. At the level of user practice, media ideology refers to people's beliefs about how different forms of media shape communication and meaning making.

IG is also approached as an AI-mediated platform. Its features such as algorithmic content ranking, automated recommendations, and image-enhancing filters, are powered by algorithm that continuously shape what users see and produce. These systems influence not only content visibility but also the aesthetic standards that users adopt. Understanding IG in this way allows for a clearer analysis of how FL's practices are shaped by both technological affordances and platform governance. Contemporary concerns about algorithmic governance and platform manipulation are reflected in the work of Ressa (2021), who has critically examined how social media infrastructures, driven by AI, amplify emotionally charged content and shape user behaviour. She argues that these systems can reinforce engagement through the circulation of affect, i.e., often privileging divisive or sensational material, thereby influencing how individuals interpret and respond to mediated interactions.

IG-AI refers to the interaction between IG's algorithmic systems and AI-assisted affordances that shape how content is produced, circulated, and made visible. It encompasses algorithmic curation, AI-enhanced editing features, and AI-generated visual content, which collectively influence FLs' aesthetic practices and representations of love.

Studies have shown that digital platforms reshape romantic relationships through evolving norms of intimacy, ethical negotiation, and affective engagement (Cabañes and Collantes 2020; Atienza 2018; Labor and Latosa 2022; Albury et al. 2021; Portolan and McAlister 2022). Collectively, these discussions explore that digital intimacy is shaped by technological affordances, moral considerations, and changing relational norms.

Studies on algorithmic governance emphasise how IG structures visibility and engagement through highly visual forms of self-presentation that shape both identity and romantic relationships (Leaver et al. 2020). Curated and AI-enhanced content, including filters and deepfakes, further complicates the representation of intimacy by reinforcing aesthetic norms that define desirable relationship practices (Fejes-Vékassy et al. 2022). These norms emerge through repeated exposure to platform-favoured visual styles and narrative, encouraging users to perform intimacy through curated content while reproducing dominant beauty ideas rooted in colonial legacies (Duguay et al. 2020; Byron 2021; Estares 2019).

Social media function as sites for the commodification of self-presentation, where FL curate idealised versions of themselves and their relationships, reinforcing aesthetic convergence through the replication of popular visual practices (Ali 2023; de Freitas and Filho 2022). Within the Philippine context, this process is intensified by a collective visual culture that value close interpersonal relationships and is shaped by broader socio-economic conditions, making aesthetic presentation a significant aspect of digital intimacy (Estarés 2019; Shtern et al. 2019).

The Philippine digital environment amplifies the social value of aesthetic presentation, as visual storytelling aligns with the country's collectivist and relational culture (Cabañes and Collantes 2020). Filipino IG users interpret these affordances through culturally resonant values such as *hiya* (shame) and *pakikisama* (social harmony), making aesthetic conformity both a moral and visual practice. Consequently, IG-AI shapes not only representations of love but also negotiations of identity, aspiration, and belonging. Integrating Gershon's (2010) notion of media ideology with aesthetic normalisation provides the theoretical scaffolding for examining how users' beliefs about media interact with algorithmic aesthetics to shape the visual and narrative construction of romantic relationships.

Building on this, IG-AI aesthetic normalisation is operationalised as the process through which recurring visual styles, narrative patterns, and affective expressions, enabled and reinforced by these IG-AI affordances, become standardised representations of ideal romantic relationships (e.g., through filtered imagery, curated captions, and algorithmically amplified trends such as

#relationshipgoals). This concept is examined through observable indicators in IG-related media contents, including: (1) use of filters and visual enhancement tools; (2) patterned captions and hashtag practices; (3) recurring visual compositions (e.g., poses, lighting, and transitions); and (4) alignment with widely circulated aesthetic tropes associated with romantic idealisation. Within this context, aesthetic normalisation may be understood as both a cultural and algorithmic process through which users learn to reproduce platform-favoured representations of intimacy and desirability.

While these perspectives provide a framework for understanding platform aesthetics and algorithmic influence, this study examines how these dynamics are enacted in practice. Specifically, it analyses how the online media's representation of the FL's IG contents, i.e., captions, visual composition, and platform features, reflect and negotiate these norms in everyday relationship displays. Beyond studies of digital intimacy and platformed relationships, it is also informed by perspectives from communication and media studies, particularly in relation to platform governance, algorithmic mediation, and the circulation of affect online. These fields offer critical insights into how digital platforms shape visibility, engagement, and meaning-making, which are central to understanding how romantic expressions are produced and interpreted on IG.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that IG functions as an important site for the performance of intimacy, the construction of relational identities, and the reinforcement of platform-driven aesthetic norms. Existing scholarship has also examined algorithmic governance, digital intimacy, and the affective dimensions of online engagement. However, limited attention has been given to how these perspectives crossover in the context of Filipino romantic self-presentation, particularly through IG-AI affordances and the aesthetic normalisation of #relationshipgoals. While previous studies have explored online relationships and platform cultures separately, few have examined how algorithmic curation, AI, and culturally situated ideals of romance collectively shape representations of intimacy. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines how IG-AI influences FL, thereby extending existing scholarship on digital intimacy, platform governance, and mediated romantic representation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study conceptualises aesthetic normalisation as a socio-technical process through which visual styles, affective expressions, and narrative forms become stabilised and reproduced as natural or desirable within a mediated environment. While the term normalisation is often broadly used to describe processes of standardisation, it adopts a more specific understanding grounded in three complementary theoretical traditions.

First, drawing from a Foucauldian perspective, normalisation is understood as a process through which norms are not merely imposed but are internalised and reproduced through everyday practices. In the context of IG, this operates through repeated exposure to idealised representations of romantic relationships that come to define what is perceived as acceptable or aspirational. Rather than treating these theoretical perspectives as discrete lenses, this study approaches them as mutually reinforcing in explaining how aesthetic normalisation operates on IG. A Foucauldian perspective foregrounds how norms are produced through repetition and internalised through self-regulation, while platform studies highlight how algorithmic systems structure visibility and desirability. These dynamics are shaped by culturally specific relational values, such as *pakikipagkapwa* (shared identity) and *hiya*, which influence how users anticipate and respond to the gaze of others. Taken together, these perspectives frame aesthetic normalisation as a process that is simultaneously technological, social, and cultural, operating through the interaction of platform affordances, user practices, and locally grounded norms of

relationality. Second, insights from platform studies and scholarship on algorithmic governance extend this understanding by foregrounding the role of technological systems in structuring visibility. IG's algorithmic curation does not simply reflect user preferences but actively amplifies particular aesthetic forms, thereby contributing to the circulation and reinforcement of normative representations. Third, building on Gershon's (2010) concept of media ideology and related work on algorithmic intimacy and consistent with the three-layer model, this study considers how users interpret, negotiate, and strategically engage with platform affordances. Users do not passively consume norms but participate in their reproduction by adopting platform-favoured styles, filters, and narrative conventions. These perspectives are situated within a postcolonial lens, which highlights how globally circulating aesthetic standards may intersect with localised cultural meanings, potentially privileging certain forms of romantic representation over others.

Synthesising these approaches, IG-AI aesthetic normalisation is defined as the recursive interaction between: (1) platform-driven amplification; (2) AI-enabled content modification; and (3) user participation, through which specific aesthetic and narrative patterns of romantic relationships become standardised. It adopts a three-part analytical distinction that captures how IG-mediated relationship practices operate across different but interrelated dimensions. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate categories, the framework is used heuristically to trace how platform features, user practices, and cultural meanings intersect in the representation of romantic relationships.

The proposed model comprises three interrelated layers: (1) the platform layer, i.e., algorithmic visibility and amplification; (2) the aesthetic layer, i.e., AI-assisted visual and textual construction; and (3) the user-practice layer, i.e., patterned reproduction and adaptation of these forms. This model enables the study to examine normalisation not as a single process but as the interaction between technological systems and user practices. These three layers provide the analytical framework for interpreting the findings and demonstrate how they intersect in shaping IG-based relationship representations of romantic relationships among FL. Building on this theoretical framework, the following section outlines the methodological approach and explains how these concepts are operationalised in the analysis.

METHODS

Research Design

While IG operates under Meta's broader platform ecosystem, this study focuses specifically on IG-related online media contents as the primary unit of analysis. Forty-seven publicly accessible IG media contents were collected from January 2023 to December 2024 using the hashtag #relationshipgoals in combination with geotags and captions indicating Philippine origin. Contents were purposively selected to reflect diverse relationship portrayals, including heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ couples, influencers, and everyday users.

The sampling followed a purposive and criterion-based strategy. Media contents were identified using the hashtag #relationshipgoals in combination with Philippine-related geotags and culturally recognisable Filipino captions (e.g., use of Filipino language, references to local places, or culturally specific expressions such as *kilig*²). The initial pool consisted of a large set of publicly accessible contents retrieved during the data collection period. From this pool, contents were selected based on their relevance to romantic relationships and the presence of both visual and textual elements suitable for analysis.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) publicly accessible contents; (2) explicit representation of romantic relationships; (3) use of IG features associated with AI affordances (e.g., filters, transitions, and enhancements); and (4) identifiable Filipino context through captions, geotags, or user self-description. Exclusion criteria included: (1) commercial or brand-driven content lacking relational focus; (2) reposted or duplicated content; (3) posts with insufficient textual or visual data for analysis; and (4) content not clearly situated within the Philippine context. While some contents included location indicators (e.g., geotags or recognisable urban settings), the dataset does not consistently provide verifiable geographic information for all users. As such, this study does not make definitive claims about specific cities or regions. Instead, it interprets the data as reflecting predominantly urban-oriented digital practices, based on visual cues, language use, and platform conventions.

This study followed a two-step qualitative methodological approach which include:

1. Data identification and archiving, which involved systematically searching, screening, and storing relevant contents based on predefined inclusion criteria.
2. Thematic coding and interpretation, which entailed manual coding of visual and textual elements using pre-identified aesthetic indicators, followed by thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

These steps ensured a structured transition from data collection to interpretive analysis. Guided by this definition, the analysis focused specifically on user-facing AI-enhanced features (e.g., filters, transitions, and visual enhancements) and their interaction with platform-level visibility mechanisms (e.g., hashtags and engagement cues), as these are directly observable in contents.

Data Collection

To establish this study's viability, a structured qualitative research process was followed: (1) development of an analysis guide for IG-AI-related media texts; (2) data construction using a discourse-analytic lens; (3) coding of recurring and distinctive themes; and (4) interpretation to contextualise the communication phenomenon and draw theoretical and practical insights.

While no direct interviews were conducted, profile cues and tagged locations in the contents suggest that the couples were predominantly cisgender, heterosexual, and based in urban areas of the Philippines. Age, inferred from captions and visual presentation, generally ranged from 18 years old to 35 years old. The final sample of 47 contents was deemed sufficient for qualitative thematic saturation. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from successive rounds of coding and when patterns across visual and textual elements became recurrent and stable. Given this study's focus on depth rather than breadth, the sample size aligns with qualitative research standards prioritising analytical richness over representativeness.

Data were analysed following a six-step thematic-analysis procedure: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) searching for potential themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the analytical narrative. Inter-coder agreement was conducted between the primary researcher and one independent qualitative researcher trained in thematic analysis. Initial coding discrepancies emerged primarily in the classification of aesthetic categories (e.g., distinguishing between "authenticity display" and "aspirational imagery"). These differences were discussed and reconciled through iterative comparison, resulting in a final agreement rate of 90%. Credibility was strengthened through reflexive memo writing and detailed descriptions of the sample, while transferability was supported by contextualising Filipino IG use.

All materials analysed were publicly available, and no identifying usernames, images, or direct quotations are included. Given the sensitivity of romantic relationships, the analysis prioritises users' privacy and dignity, focusing on broader cultural patterns rather than individual cases. Hence, all IG contents were anonymised. Captions are reproduced in excerpted form, and identifying details (e.g., usernames and exact timestamps) were omitted to preserve user privacy.

The determination of data saturation followed an iterative coding process. Initial open coding was conducted on the first set of contents ($n = 27$), which generated a preliminary set of thematic categories. As analysis progressed, subsequent batches of contents were coded and compared against these initial categories. By approximately the 39th content, no substantially new themes were emerging, and the coding process primarily involved refining and consolidating existing categories rather than identifying novel ones. The remaining contents were analysed to confirm the consistency and recurrence of these themes across the dataset. This process provided empirical grounding for the conclusion that thematic saturation had been achieved within the 47 samples.

This assessment of saturation was supported by coder agreement on the stability of thematic categories during the later stages of analysis. Rather than technically analysing IG's proprietary algorithms or backend AI systems, this study examines how these systems manifest through user-generated content and everyday platform practices. While this study initially adopts a broad conceptualisation of FL's relationships, the dataset reflects a more specific demographic profile shaped by platform visibility and accessibility. The analysed contents are largely drawn from urban, digitally active users, which may privilege middle-class aesthetics and heteronormative relationship representations.

However, it is important to note that LGBTQIA+ contents constitute a relatively small portion of the dataset, and their representation may not fully capture the diversity of queer relationship practices in the Philippines, limiting the extent to which broader claims can be made. The observations presented here are therefore preliminary and suggest the need for more focused research on diverse relationship representations across gender and sexuality. Similarly, regional, class-based, and diasporic variations are not systematically represented. These limitations are not incidental but reflect broader inequalities in digital participation and algorithmic visibility, which shape whose relationships become publicly visible and analysable on platforms like IG. This limitation is significant in the Philippine context, where regional differences (e.g., Metro Manila, Cebu, and Davao) shape cultural references, linguistic practices, and access to digital technologies. Future research may benefit from a more geographically stratified sample to better account for these variations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For FL, IG functions as both a space of expression and a site where aesthetic norms are negotiated. Although the dataset suggests predominantly urban-oriented representations, variations in regional context cannot be fully determined from the available data. To maintain analytical clarity, each finding distinguishes between: (1) patterns observed in the analysed IG contents; (2) insights drawn from media and journalistic sources; and (3) interpretations informed by existing literature. These levels are explicitly signposted throughout the discussion to clarify the evidentiary basis of each claim.

Across the forty-seven online contents analysed, visual filtering and enhancement appeared in twenty-seven contents. Most contents foregrounded couples (34), while a smaller portion (13) highlighted individuals. Hashtag use was pervasive, with #relationshipgoals present in forty-

two contents, alongside recurring tags such as #couplegoals, #sweetescaperelationshipgoals, #relationshipreveal, and #sanaall. Short-form video content was relatively limited (5) and typically relied on simple transitions and synchronised gestures. Overall, the dataset shows a consistent pattern: highly curated visual representations of couples in idealised settings, paired with brief affective captions and dense hashtagging. This recurring structure reflects how aesthetic refinement, textual framing, and platform algorithms collectively construct and circulate mediated expressions of romantic intimacy. Content identifiers (e.g., C1...C47) refer to anonymised entries in the dataset. These are used to indicate recurring patterns across contents rather than to present individual cases in isolation.

A representative post shows a couple framed against a sunset beach, captioned “Forever starts with you #relationshipgoals”, enhanced using IG’s DreamyGlow filter. Another reel uses a reel-to-reel transition that shifts from individual portraits to a kissing scene, timed with a trending romantic audio track. Together, these examples demonstrate how filters, transitions, and hashtags work in concert to produce what this study conceptualises as aesthetic normalisation, where intimacy is rendered visually uniform, curated, and platform-legible (C18, C22, C24, C25, and C40).

To strengthen analytical clarity, this section distinguishes three levels of evidence: (1) findings derived from the textual and visual analysis of the forty-seven contents in the dataset; (2) insights drawn from media discourse, including journalistic and blog sources discussing IG and romantic relationships; and (3) interpretations grounded in existing scholarly literature. Unless otherwise indicated, claims presented as findings are based on the analysis of IG contents. Media and scholarly sources are used to contextualise and interpret these patterns rather than to substitute for empirical evidence.

A small subset of contents in the dataset featured LGBTQIA+ couples. While the sample units do not allow for a systematic comparative analysis, these contents generally adhered to similar aesthetic conventions (e.g., filtered visuals and hashtag practices), suggesting the influence of shared platform norms. However, subtle differences in captioning and presentation indicate possible negotiations of visibility and identity, pointing to an important area for further research. Succinctly, while LGBTQIA+ contents in the dataset generally adhered to similar aesthetic conventions such as curated visuals, affectionate poses, and the use of platform filters, there were subtle differences in how relationships were articulated in captions. In some instances, captions emphasised affirmation, visibility, or resilience (e.g., references to support, validation, or overcoming challenges), suggesting a more reflexive engagement with audience perception. This pattern can be understood in relation to discussions of queer visibility and platform governance, where users navigate both opportunities for expression and constraints imposed by algorithmic systems and audience norms (Duguay et al. 2020). In this context, the subtle differences observed in LGBTQIA+ contents may reflect an awareness of how visibility is negotiated within platform environments that simultaneously enable and regulate representation.

Why FL Engage in IG-AI Aesthetic Normalisation

The analysis of the contents shows five specific perspectives of online media on why FL engaged in IG-AI aesthetic normalisation within the aforesaid framework: (1) to overcome jealousy and do surveillance; (2) to show social proof; (3) to construct a new love language; (4) to confront with flirtatious interactions; and (5) to share *kilig* moments.

This theme can be understood across the three analytical dimensions: as a platform-mediated feature (i.e., through IG’s affordances), a user-driven practice (i.e., through how FL curate and present their relationships), and a cultural process (i.e., through the normalisation of

romantic aesthetics). Whereas, this process can be understood through a Foucauldian lens of disciplinary normalisation, in which repeated exposure to similar aesthetic forms encourages users to internalise and reproduce these standards. For instance, many contents in the dataset reflect highly curated images of couples, i.e., featuring coordinated outfits, filtered visuals, and carefully composed gestures of intimacy, that align with widely circulated ideals of romantic presentation on IG. Over time, such repetition establishes a sense of what is appropriate or desirable, prompting users to regulate their own self-presentation. In the Filipino context, this process is shaped by *hiya*, which encourages sensitivity to how one is perceived by others, and *pakikipagkapwa*, which emphasises relational attunement and social harmony. Together, these cultural values reinforce the tendency to conform to platform-driven aesthetic norms, as users seek to present relationships that are not only visually appealing but also socially acceptable.

To overcome jealousy and do surveillance

Analysis of the IG contents reveals recurring patterns of monitoring and visibility management. Several contents include captions referencing constant communication or location-sharing practices (e.g., “update me”, and “send pics”), suggesting an expectation of ongoing visibility between partners. Visually, these contents often depict couples in shared spaces with geotags or time-stamped stories, reinforcing a sense of co-presence and traceability. These observations are drawn directly from the dataset (i.e., C5, C10, C17, and C29), where such elements appear as recurring features rather than isolated instances. While journalistic accounts have highlighted similar dynamics of surveillance in digital relationships, the present analysis shows that such patterns are also observable in the IG contents. This pattern of monitoring and relational visibility was observed in approximately 18/47 contents, suggesting that it constitutes a recurring feature of how relationships are negotiated on IG.

Analysis of the dataset revealed recurring indicators of surveillance-oriented relationship practices. Several contents included captions referencing constant communication or monitoring as reflected in captions such as “update me every hour” (C10), which accompanies a time-stamped story sequence, and “no secrets, passwords shared” (C17), paired with a couple selfie emphasising trust and transparency, often framed humorously but signalling normalised expectations of visibility within relationships. Visually, some contents depicted couples engaging in coordinated activities framed as transparency (e.g., shared access and synchronised routines).

Contents show that these patterns align with broader media discussions that describe the rise of digitally mediated jealousy and surveillance in relationships (Emond et al. 2023).

Photos and posts can be used by teens to incite jealousy...and lead to jealous feelings for some teens. Teens...described peering at photos on their partner’s profile to look for suspicious images. (Lenhart, Anderson and Smith 2015: 12; C5, C10, C17, and C29)

[S]urveillance on social media can lead to jealousy in various ways...a delayed reply...can make the romantic partner feel unimportant, especially when he or she can see on other social media platforms that their partner is online. (Fox 2023: 13; C11, C20, C22, and C44)

Media discourse similarly frames these practices as emerging norms, while studies on social media surveillance suggest notable implications for romantic relationships. Research indicates that continuous monitoring of a partner’s IG activity can intensify jealousy, partly explained by the availability heuristic, where highly visible online cues are overvalued relative to broader relational context. Likewise, perceived relational ambiguities (e.g., flirtatious) may be experienced more acutely, heightening susceptibility to jealousy in digitally mediated relationships.

Prior research similarly suggests that romantic jealousy is shaped by the visibility and accessibility of partner interactions in online environments, where relational cues are publicly observable (Utz et al. 2015). In the Philippines, where interpersonal connectedness is highly valued and social media use is pervasive, such visibility can amplify relational insecurity. Succinctly, surveillance is not uniformly driven by hostility or insecurity; in some cases, it functions as a form of relational maintenance, particularly in long-distance romantic arrangements (Ali 2023).

To show social proof

Implicit in this discussion is the logic of social proof, where couples treat IG-AI content as publicly legible reveal or evidence of relational success and happiness (i.e., #softlaunch). Captions thus function beyond expressions of intimacy; they also project curated ideals to an audience, reinforcing the symbolic appeal of #relationshipgoals. This theme was observed in 15 out of 47 contents, indicating that it is a recurring pattern within the dataset.

[R]elationship posts...have many meanings and motives, including genuine relationship satisfaction or a desire to convey happiness to others. (Barry 2024: 5; C4, C17, C18, and C25)

Instagram caption is...when both partners are confident, driven, and support each other's individual success, creating a formidable team. (Kai 2024: 49; C2, C24, C30, and C44)

This curated portrayal often aligns with the broader social media trend of showcasing idealised relationship standards. These images serve as more than just personal mementos; they are significant visual artifacts that act as indicators and proof of commitment (Tarnutzer and Lobinger 2024).

The tension between authenticity and performance on social media is a critical issue for many users. IG-AI encourages FL to perform and curate their identities, which often leads in a conflict between authentic self-expression and the desire to conform to social norms and expectations. This conflict is particularly evident in romantic relationships, when the pressure to project a perfect image can cause stress and discontent.

To construct a new love language

The dataset suggests the emergence of what may be described as a “platform-mediated love language”, characterised by the use of specific visual and textual conventions. For example, are contents featuring highly stylised couple transitions (i.e., before–after edits and synchronised gestures), captions combining affective expressions with platform-native shorthand (i.e., emojis and hashtags such as #relationshipgoals), and repeated visual tropes (i.e., surprise gifts, travel reels, or coordinated outfits). This theme was observed in 13 out of 47 contents, indicating that it is a recurring pattern within the dataset. These elements function as recognisable signals of romantic affection within the platform's aesthetic economy:

[E]merging as a new “love language”. It is fascinating how a simple “like”, a thoughtful comment, or a shared meme can now speak volumes in the world of romance. (Mangalampalli 2024: 3; C3, C20, C41, and C44)

[R]elationship as something we aspire for in our own relationships and marriages... Every person has their own love language.... (Modern Parenting Team 2023: 25; C9, C10, C11, and C36)

IG-AI and romantic relationships can enhance connections by introducing new ways to express love and support. However, previous studies argue that it also introduces challenges, such as managing public versus private relationship dynamics and navigating the possibility for misunderstandings or misinterpretations of online behaviours, which can lead to alternative relationships' dissolution through "ghosting" and "seen-zoning" (Pascual and Tarrayo 2023: 117). While IG-AI can promote intimacy and connection, it can also create new avenues for conflict and jealousy if not utilised carefully due to the dual nature of social media in relationships.

To confront with flirtatious interactions

This theme addresses the issue of flirtatious interactions on IG and advises against responding to such messages, particularly for influencers. The analysis of the contents emphasises the significance of maintaining boundaries in parasocial relationships to protect the integrity of romantic partnerships. FL are advised to avoid such encounters, especially those with huge followings and face blurred boundaries between professional and personal interactions. Contents showing that maintaining clear boundaries is crucial in safeguarding the integrity of romantic partnerships from any disruptions induced by parasocial relationships. This theme was observed in 14 out of 47 contents, indicating that it is a recurring pattern within the dataset.

A "like" from an old flame or a comment on a friend's post can sometimes trigger a whirlwind of suspicion and insecurity...blurs the line between innocent interaction and potential emotional infidelity. (Mangalampalli 2024: 7; C2, C15, C41, and C44)

Rather than a diminished form of intimate interaction, romantic relationships on social media have become an efficient modality... a public display of love offline is usually frowned upon. (Fox 2023: 9; C7, C16, C20, and C40)

Interestingly, clear communication and mutual understanding among partners regarding acceptable social media behaviour are essential for preventing misunderstandings and sustaining trust. Setting expectations about engagement with followers and handling flirtatious messages can protect the relationship's integrity (Utz et al. 2015).

Essentially, addressing these issues proactively, such as clarifying boundaries and acceptable behaviour, can help mitigate the negative impact of flirtation. Transparency in interactions with followers, as well as setting clear boundaries for online behaviour, are key strategies for maintaining relationship trust.

To share *kilig* moments

The expression of *kilig* is evident in both captions and visual composition. Many contents feature affectionate gestures, such as holding hands, close-up selfies, or coordinated poses, accompanied by captions that emphasise emotional excitement (e.g., "still can't believe this is real", and "my forever person"). These patterns, observed across multiple entries in the dataset (i.e., C4, C5, C14, and C38), demonstrate how romantic affect is publicly performed through recognisable aesthetic conventions.

Expressions of *kilig* were identified in 14/47 contents, making it one of the more prominent affective patterns in the dataset.

[S]weet Instagram photo captions fill us with *kilig*, and their strong support for one another's endeavors proves to us exactly how a healthy marriage should be. (Aseoche 2019: 23; C4, C5, C14, and C38)

If you are eyeing for both good vibes and the ultimate *kilig* (Aseoche 2019: 23) ...get your quick fix at the wonderful world of Insta-G. (Yua 2020: 1; C4, C5, C14, and C38)

The FL's emotional connection with their audience is heightened by the shared content's authenticity and relatability.

Previous studies argue that this sharing serves two purposes: it provides lovers with a platform to celebrate their romance, and it offers followers a glimpse into the dynamics of a loving partnership (Ulanova 2020). These moments can range from everyday acts of affection to grand romantic gestures, all of which influence the public perception of the relationship. Sharing *kilig* moments can be rewarding, but it also necessitates careful management to balance of public engagement and private intimacy. FL should balance the potential pressures of keeping a positive public image with the authenticity of their relationship.

The Filipino expression “*Sana all*” (I wish I had that, too) has become a viral response to idealised romantic contents. It reflects social comparison and affective longing triggered by curated content. This engagement extends beyond admiration, as it also creates pressure to conform to aesthetic norms of couplehood shaped by platform culture, symbolising both aspiration and affective exclusion.

ANALYSIS

Within this framework, it is underscored that IG-AI aesthetic normalisation involves five specific perspectives that lumps FL's #relationshipgoals. The analysis of online media texts revealed specific aspects as regards the dynamics of IG-AI aesthetic normalisation of #relationshipgoals: (1) reel-to-real transitioning; (2) over-sharing and flooding; and (3) filtering and deepfaking. A key dynamic of IG-AI aesthetic normalisation is the transition from reel representations to real-life relational performances, where mediated visuals on IG increasingly shape how romantic relationships are experienced, validated, and narrated offline.

The analysis of the contents shows that this phenomenon involves the seamless integration of digital personas with physical relationships, resulting in a dynamic in which the boundaries between online and offline worlds blur. The portrayal of relationships in IG has a significant influence on how couples perceive and construct their identities, often aligning with the aesthetic norms of #relationshipgoals as suggested in the following media reports:

[F]rom virtual life to real life (Yua 2020: 1)... It is easy to see why they went viral on their social media pages. It is a peek into cross-cultural relationships. Trinidad 2023: 14; C6, C22, and C42)

These couples write the sweetest captions to and about their loved ones...those same people have never said those words to each other in real life.... (Weatherspoon 2018: 8) ...bridging the gap between what is on social media and what is happening in real life. (Barry 2024: 5; C17, C21, and C34)

These findings suggest that the reel-to-real transition reflects how digital expressions of love, such as curated posts, hashtags, and shared experiences, may improve and even reshape real-life interactions. Many FL use their IG profiles not only as a digital diary, but also to solidify their bond in the physical world. They often use social media to celebrate milestones, share personal moments, and project a shared narrative that reflects societal expectations of a #relationshipgoals.

Another dimension of IG-AI aesthetic normalisation is the tendency towards over-sharing and content flooding, where users continuously circulate relational images and updates, producing intensified visibility of intimacy that becomes habitual and socially reinforced within the platform environment. Over-sharing and flooding on IG are moreover a double-edged sword for FL who want to portray their relationships through #softlaunch or #relationshipgoals. While sharing intimate moments and affectionate gestures can improve FL bonds, excessive sharing might result in oversaturation and audience fatigue (Leaver et al. 2020). The incessant flood of content may dilute the authenticity of the relationship portrayal, causing followers to disengage or perceive the couple as attention-seekers. Thus, moderation and discernment are essential for striking a balance between sharing affection and respecting the privacy of the relationship (Portolan and McAlister 2022; Pascual and Tarrayo 2023). The following extracts suggest these insights:

Sharing too much about your personal life or relationship online can lead to privacy issues. It can also create discomfort or disagreement between partners about what should be private or public. (Mangalampalli 2024: 23; C22, C41, C45, and C47)

Filipinas have found their one true love overseas...through various online dating sites flooding in the internet nowadays (Torres 2019: 17) ...As content created by artificial intelligence continues to flood our social media feeds, it appears one platform is looking for ways to let users know. (Silva 2023: 1; C3, C20, C45, and C46)

Hence, it becomes clear that these practices can significantly enhance the visibility of FL relationships while also posing considerable challenges. The increasing prevalence of AI-generated content complicates the landscape by blurring the lines between real and artificial interactions, diluting the perceived authenticity of personal posts.

A further manifestation of IG-AI aesthetic normalisation is observed in filtering and deepfaking practices, where AI features reshape the visual authenticity of romantic representations, blurring the boundaries between enhanced and synthetic intimacy. While existing literature and media discourse highlight the growing role of deepfake and AI in shaping online representations, such forms were not a dominant feature within the present dataset. Only a limited number of contents exhibited advanced manipulation. As such, this discussion is positioned as a forward-looking implication rather than a central empirical finding.

With the burgeoning of filters and editing tools, users can manipulate their appearance and surroundings to meet cultural standards of beauty and romance. Deepfaking blurs the border between truth and fiction by allowing users to alter facial expressions, body language, and even entire scenes in their uploads. While these technologies provide novel options for aesthetic enhancement, they also pose ethical considerations about authenticity and consent (Fejes-Vékássy et al. 2022). These assumptions can be culled from these texts:

AI filters, personalised recommendations, and AI-generated art. These features continue to make a meaningful impact on our social lives. (Lin 2024: 2; C11, C30, C36, and C40)

AI-powered filters have become part and parcel of the Instagram AI trend...as users can now create customized AI filters...are trained on individual user preferences, style choices, and facial features. (Lin 2024: 11; C11, C30, C36, and C40)

The ubiquitous use of these filters and deepfakes may contribute to a culture that values the idealised, edited version of life above the unvarnished truth. One of the key distinctions between AI deepfakes and traditional photo editing software lies in the level of sophistication and potential for deception. Traditional photo editing tools, such as Photoshop, allow users to manipulate images by adjusting lighting, removing imperfections, or enhancing certain features.

While these edits can alter perceptions of reality, the changes are often superficial and detectable with a keen eye. Deepfakes, however, introduce a much more advanced and potentially harmful layer of manipulation. It can convincingly alter entire facial expressions, body language, or even create entirely fabricated scenarios, making the line between reality and fabrication increasingly blurred. This can have profound implications on how relationships are perceived and valued both online and offline. FL may find themselves struggling to reach these unattainable standards, resulting in dissatisfaction and stress in their real-world interactions. The pervasive nature of these tools can erode trust between FL if one suspects the other is misrepresenting their reality.

In the Filipino setting, where social media plays a central role in communication and maintaining relationships, these changes are particularly pronounced. FL are known to value the platform for its ability to connect them with loved ones and showcase their relationships. However, AI likewise introduces new relational complexities that were not present in earlier forms of media. Within this framework, these include challenges related to maintaining authenticity amidst aesthetic normalisation, managing public vs. private interactions, and navigating the emotional consequences of AI-driven jealousy and surveillance. As a result, IG-AI significantly reshapes the landscape of intimate relationships by altering how love, trust, and connection are experienced in both public and private spheres.

While AI-driven features such as filters and beautification tools offer users aesthetic enhancement, they are not free from racial biases. Scholars have shown that many algorithms used in social media platforms, including IG, have been calibrated on Eurocentric beauty standards, often marginalising users with darker skin tones or non-Western facial features. IG's visual filters and enhancement tools operate through automated adjustments to lighting, contrast, and colour balance, which can produce smoother and more standardised visual outputs. These aesthetic transformations may contribute to the normalisation of appearances, including brighter or more even skin tones, reflecting broader patterns of bias identified in computer vision systems (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018). These dynamics can be linked to broader concerns about bias in visual and algorithmic systems, where technical processes may reproduce dominant aesthetic norms (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018), which intersect with locally embedded histories of colourism and colonial influence.

Across the findings, the three analytical dimensions, i.e., platform features, user practices, and cultural meanings, operate in overlapping ways rather than as discrete layers. The analysis shows that IG's technological affordances shape how relationships are presented, while users actively interpret and reproduce these norms within culturally specific frameworks of intimacy and affect. Beyond individual practices of content creation and relational representation, IG-AI generates broader societal implications by normalising algorithmically mediated visibility and social evaluation, where intimacy and relational legitimacy are increasingly shaped by platform logics and algorithmic circulation.

The findings offer insights for educators, policymakers, and tech developers, emphasising the importance of media and AI literacy programmes to address the ethical and psychological aspects of AI-mediated relationships. Ultimately, it prompts a reconsideration of traditional norms as new dynamics in romance emerge in a virtual reality (VR) and AI world. As algorithmic content curation and AI enhancements become more embedded in everyday media use, it is essential to foster VR, AI, and new media literacy. Filipino users, particularly youth and romantic partners, engage with these technologies without necessarily understanding how platform design, algorithmic visibility, and digital manipulation shape their perceptions of love and self-worth. New media literacy programmes should include critical engagement with platform aesthetics, algorithmic suggestion systems, and the psychological impact of curated affection.

The evolving nature of social media calls not only for literacy but also regulation. Educational institutions and policymakers should work in tandem to ensure that AI deployed on public platforms are transparent, equitable, and culturally sensitive. Beyond corporate responsibility, regulatory frameworks are needed to prevent exploitative algorithmic design that promotes unhealthy beauty ideals, excessive performativity, or data misuse in intimate spaces. Particularly in the Philippines and across the Asia Pacific region, where digital intimacy is deeply intertwined with social identity, ethical oversight is especially important.

From a postcolonial perspective, the findings demonstrate how IG-AI aesthetic normalisation reproduces historically rooted visual hierarchies by privileging Westernised and digitally enhanced representations of intimacy. In the Philippine context, contemporary digital aesthetics cannot be separated from the legacies of Spanish, Japanese, and American colonisation, which institutionalised preferences for lighter skin, Eurocentric facial features, and Westernised lifestyles. Through algorithmic amplification and platform-mediated visibility, these colonial ideals are continually reinforced, shaping dominant standards of beauty, desirability, and relational authenticity in contemporary digital culture. IG-AI operates within this historical continuum. While often framed as neutral or purely aesthetic tools, these features are shaped by training datasets and design logics that tend to privilege globally dominant beauty standards. As a result, they may subtly modify skin tone, smooth facial features, and enhance lighting in ways that align with lighter, more polished appearances. These dynamics are not only theoretical but are also reflected in the dataset. The communication phenomena are observable in the widespread use of filters that enhance brightness, smooth facial features, and standardise visual composition. A significant proportion of contents exhibit these adjustments, often resulting in a more polished and visually uniform aesthetic. While such modifications may be subtle, their recurrence across contents suggests alignment with norms of visual desirability.

Thus, this normalisation operates through three interrelated mechanisms. First, design bias, wherein filters and enhancement tools are calibrated in ways that privilege globally dominant aesthetic standards. Second, algorithmic amplification, where contents that conform to these visual norms are more likely to gain visibility and engagement. Third, user adaptation, as individuals strategically adopt aesthetics to align with perceived platform expectations and maximise social validation.

CONCLUSION

Building on these insights, this study also speaks to ongoing conversations in communication and media studies, particularly regarding how platform infrastructures and algorithmic systems shape mediated forms of expressions. Specifically, it highlights the intersection of IG, AI, and Filipino representations of romantic relationships as both timely and culturally significant, particularly amid the rapid algorithmisation of intimacy in the Global South. This contributes to broader discussions on how platform design and algorithmic curation shape identity construction and the self-presentation of coupledness.

Gershon's (2010) concept of media ideologies is particularly useful here, as it explains how users make sense of communication technologies across contexts. Moreover, this study contributes to theoretical discussions on media ideology by situating it within algorithm-driven social media. It also engages with the mediatisation of intimacy and emotional life, a topic that has remained relatively underexplored in mass communication and critical media studies in Southeast Asia. The findings point to the need for further inquiry into the symbolic and pervasive influence of media and AI in digital storytelling. This, in turn, helps address gaps in understanding how platform neoliberalism, capitalism, and algorithmic governance operate across different cultural contexts.

This study also extends media studies by examining the ethics of visual manipulation, authenticity, and AI representation, issues that are increasingly relevant in newsroom practices, influencer culture, and public trust in media imagery. As communication continues to confront synthetic content and challenges to visual credibility, this study offers a culturally grounded lens on how visual storytelling is consumed, interpreted, and believed in everyday audience life. It therefore contributes to both academic discourse and practical efforts related to digital literacy, platform ethics, and the cultural politics of mediated representation.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of the East Research Ethics Committee on 5 July 2023.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that the study was carried out without any financial or commercial ties that might be interpreted as a potential conflict of interest.

NOTES

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- ¹ *Hiya* refers to a Filipino cultural value associated with self-restraint, propriety, and sensitivity to others' perceptions.
- ² *Kilig* refers to a feeling of romantic excitement or emotional thrill associated with affectionate interactions.

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