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To what extent does age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction normalize predatory dynamics?

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Abstract

This research examines the extent to which age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction contributes to the normalization of predatory dynamics. As BookTok has emerged as a powerful cultural force shaping reading habits, particularly among teenagers and young adults, it plays a significant role in popularizing romance narratives that emphasize emotional intensity and trope-driven storytelling. One such recurring trope is the age-gap romance, often involving younger female protagonists and older, more powerful male partners. Using a qualitative textual analysis of twenty popular BookTok romance novels, this study draws on feminist theory, developmental psychology, and media influence theory to examine how age, power, consent, and desire are framed within these narratives. The findings reveal consistent patterns in which youth is framed as desirability, male authority is romanticized as protection, and control is reframed as care. In particular, the analysis identifies the normalization of “predatory waiting,” where older male interest is retroactively justified once the younger character reaches legal adulthood, masking dynamics that resemble grooming or emotional conditioning. While not all age-gap romances depict harmful dynamics, the repeated romantic framing of unequal relationships, especially when amplified through BookTok’s recommendation of culture, contributes to the normalization of predatory patterns. This effect is especially concerning for younger readers who may lack the emotional maturity or critical tools needed to question such portrayals. The study concludes that age-gap romanticization in BookTok romance fiction substantially obscures structural inequalities by embedding them within emotionally appealing and culturally validated narratives, highlighting the need for greater critical engagement and media literacy.

Keywords: BookTok romance, Age-gap romanticization, Predatory dynamics, Power imbalance, Feminist literary theory, Sexual script

Introduction

In the past few years, social media has reshaped how we discover, consume, and talk about books. Among these platforms, BookTok is a subcommunity on TikTok that is targeted to book lovers which has emerged as a powerful cultural force influencing contemporary reading and publishing trends. It was originally formed around short videos of readers sharing their recommendations and reactions but now influences huge sales, especially in genres like romance and fantasy. BookTok's influence is particularly strong among young adults, with romance being one of the most discussed and consumed genres on the platform (Ridzuan).

One recurring narrative pattern of romance fiction that is consumed widely on BookTok is the age-gap trope. In literature, an age-gap romance usually features a significant age difference, often *ten or more years* between the two romantic leads (Galatea, 2024). Although age-gap romances have existed in literature for decades, their presentation on social media circles now amplifies emotionally intense, trope-heavy titles without always providing critical context about the implications of those dynamics that also includes how age differences interact with consent, maturity, and power (Doyle, 2025). This lack of critical framing is important because BookTok's audience largely consists of young readers, including teenagers and young adults who may be encountering these narratives at a formative stage. Many of the books celebrated on the platform present age-gap relationships as desirable or romantic, while downplaying or ignoring the imbalance of power that can exist between characters at very different life stages. When such portrayals are repeatedly consumed without discussion or context, they risk normalizing relationship dynamics that mirror controlling or predatory behavior (ASU News, 2024).

Given BookTok's cultural reach and its role in shaping contemporary romance trends, it is necessary to examine how these narratives function and what they may reinforce. This study therefore explores *to what extent age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction contributes to the normalization of predatory dynamics*, particularly in stories that are widely promoted and consumed by young audiences.

Literature Review

1. Feminist Perspectives on Age and Power

Feminist theory explains how age gap romances, especially those that involve older men and younger women, is so popular in romance fiction. Feminist critics argue that they reflect deeper ideological structures that are shaped by patriarchy instead of viewing these patterns as individual storytelling choices. The influential essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative*, written by Laura Mulvey, depicts how women are positioned in media primarily as objects of visual and narrative pleasure rather than as full subjects with independent agency (Mulvey, 1975). According to Mulvey, women exist mainly as “to-be-looked-at” figures and are responsible for serving male desire. However, men control the narrative and are active subjects. Even though Mulvey’s work focuses on cinema, she emphasizes that these mechanisms are ideological and can be applied across different media forms, including literature (Mulvey, 1975). This makes her theory highly relevant to BookTok romance fiction.

Mulvey argues that the media is shaped by the unconsciousness of a patriarchal society. Instead of challenging the pleasure in storytelling, it reinforces male fantasies and control (Mulvey, 1975). In age-gap romance, this structure is clearly visible. The older male character is usually experienced, wealthy, emotionally guarded, or powerful, while the younger female character is inexperienced, dependent, and still “discovering herself.” Her youth intensifies what Mulvey describes as female “lack” which is a state where womanhood is defined through incompleteness and desire oriented around the male symbolic order (Mulvey, 1975). As a result, the young woman’s presence is only responsible for supporting male fantasy without threatening male authority, that makes age-gap dynamics appear natural and desirable rather than unequal.

Mulvey also introduces the concept of *scopophilia*, which is described as a pleasure derived from looking at others as objects (Mulvey, 1975). While romance novels are not visual in the same way as films, they often recreate scopophilia pleasure through detailed descriptions of young female bodies, emotional vulnerability, and sexual innocence. These narrative choices invite readers to consume the female character as an object of desire. Importantly, Mulvey contends that scopophilia and audience identification are structural mechanisms that gain meaning through idealization and that they do not carry meaning on their own (Mulvey, 1975). In BookTok romance, age-gap relationships are idealized rather than critically examined, transforming unequal power dynamics into romantic fantasies.

As the narrative progresses, Mulvey observes that female characters are often initially displayed as glamorous and sexualized, but gradually become emotionally and sexually restricted, eventually belonging to the male protagonist (Mulvey, 1975). This mirrors common romance plots in which young women are “claimed,” protected, or corrected by older men. The male gaze frames domination as fascination, and readers, when they are aligned with the male point of view, they tend to share this gaze (Mulvey, 1975). This makes control appear caring and authority appear attractive.

Beyond Mulvey, feminist philosophers expand this critique by examining objectification more broadly. Immanuel Kant defines objectification primarily through *instrumentality*, which stands for using another person as a tool for one’s own desire (Standford, 2024). Even when consent is present, Kant argues that sexual desire can undermine rational autonomy, especially when one person exists mainly to satisfy another’s needs. This is important for analyzing age-gap romance, because explicit abuse is rarely shown. Instead, the younger partner agency is subtly reduced through emotional dependency, admiration, and self-sacrifice.

Feminist scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon further argue that choices are shaped by existing power structures, therefore, consent under unequal social conditions is not fully free. (Standford) In BookTok romance, younger women are often portrayed as naturally naïve, emotionally fragile, and drawn to dominance. This framing makes inequality appear biological or romantic rather than socially constructed. Langton and Haslanger describe this process as objectification being masked as objectivity, where it starts to feel normal and inevitable when inequality becomes common (Standford, 2024).

Sandra Bartky adds another crucial dimension by explaining *internalized objectification*, where women learn to view themselves through the lens of male desire. In age-gap romance fiction, young female protagonists often measure their worth through being chosen, desired, or saved by an older man. This suggests not overt coercion, but a deeper normalization of unequal desire, where validation comes from submission rather than self-definition.

To maintain balance, it is important to acknowledge counterarguments. A *Guardian* article critiques the assumption that age differences automatically imply coercion, emphasizing adult agency and warning against moral panic (O’Neill, 2020). While this argument is valid in real-life contexts, it fails to fully address how fiction operates differently. Romance narratives do not simply depict relationships; they idealize them, repeat them, and remove consequences. As a result, even consensual age-gap relationships in fiction can normalize power imbalance through emotional framing and repetition.

Overall, feminist perspectives reveal that age-gap romance in BookTok fiction is not accidental or neutral. Instead, it reflects long-standing structures of objectification, domination, and unequal desire identified by feminist theorists. By presenting these dynamics as romantic, protective, and fulfilling, such narratives risk normalizing predatory patterns while hiding them behind legality, consent, and fantasy.

2. Developmental Psychology and Consent

Developmental psychology emphasizes that cognitive and emotional development continues well into early adulthood along with complicating the romantic portrayal of age-gap relationships. Neuroscientific research depicts that the frontal lobe is the part of the brain responsible for impulse control, moral reasoning, emotional regulation, and long-term planning. It continues to develop until approximately the age of 25 (UPMC Health Beat, 2014). While this does not mean that young adults are incapable of giving consent, it does suggest that they are more vulnerable to emotional influence, reward-driven decision-making, and power imbalances. When BookTok romance fiction repeatedly frames this developmental vulnerability as “intense love” or emotional depth, it risks normalizing inequality rather than questioning it.

Research on emotional maturity further supports this concern. Psychological studies describe adolescents and young adults as experiencing heightened emotional intensity, anxiety, frustration, and instability, making them “highly emotional in their dealings” (Singh & Bhushan, 2017). Emotional maturity plays a crucial role in decision-making, emotional regulation, and resistance to manipulation. In age-gap romances, younger characters are often paired with older partners who are more emotionally experienced, financially stable, and socially powerful. This creates an inherent emotional imbalance. However, BookTok romance often reframes this imbalance as passion or emotional connection that masks the younger partner’s vulnerability and presents emotional dependence as romance.

Self-confidence is another key factor in understanding consent within age-gap dynamics. Psychological research defines self-confidence as an individual’s belief in their own worth and capability, which is essential for autonomy and healthy decision-making (Singh & Bhushan, 2017). Adolescents with low self-confidence are more likely to seek external validation, avoid asserting boundaries, and become susceptible to influence. Many BookTok heroines are portrayed as insecure, emotionally fragile, or unsure of themselves, while older male characters are positioned as protectors, guides, and sources of validation. This mirrors what psychology identifies as dependency rather

than mutual attachment. When romance fiction presents external validation from an older partner as a substitute for self-confidence, it reinforces emotionally exploitative dynamics rather than healthy relationships.

Gender differences in emotional maturity further complicate the trope of the “emotionally mature young woman.” Studies show that female adolescents are often perceived as more emotionally controlled, reserved, and sober, while male adolescents are described as more expressive and risk-oriented (Singh & Bhushan, 2017). However, psychological research cautions that emotional control or silence does not equal emotional maturity. In BookTok age-gap romances, a narrative device that is used to justify relationships with much older men are when young female characters are frequently described as “mature for their age”. Developmental psychology challenges this portrayal by showing that compliance, restraint, or emotional suppression are often misread as readiness, when they may instead indicate vulnerability.

When emotional immaturity is combined with low self-confidence, adolescents become more susceptible to authority and emotional control. Developmental psychology shows that young people rely heavily on reassurance, approval, and guidance from perceived authority figures (Singh & Bhushan, 2017). In age-gap romance fiction, older partners are often framed as emotionally authoritative, with their control presented as care and their dominance framed as protection. This narrative pattern closely mirrors real-world grooming dynamics, even when no explicit abuse is shown. The absence of visible harm does not eliminate the presence of psychological imbalance.

Additionally, studies note that social environments strongly shape self-confidence, identity, and relationship expectations. Differences between urban and rural adolescents highlight how external influences affect emotional development and autonomy (Singh & Bhushan, 2017). In this sense, BookTok functions as a powerful digital social environment. Repeated exposure to romanticized age-gap narratives can shape young readers’ expectations of love, normalize unequal emotional relationships, and influence how they understand consent and self-worth. BookTok romance, therefore, operates not only as entertainment but also as a psychological socialization space.

Overall, developmental psychology does not argue that age-gap relationships are inherently abusive. However, it does reveal a pattern of emotional and cognitive vulnerability that age-gap romance fiction frequently romanticizes. By reframing emotional dependence, insecurity, and unequal authority as love, protection, and destiny, BookTok romance risks normalizing power imbalances and weakening meaningful understandings of consent.

3. Media Influence and Normalization

The media play a powerful role in shaping how people understand love, desire, and consent. According to Simon and Gagnon's theory of sexual scripts, romantic and sexual behavior is guided by culturally shared expectations about who has power, who initiates intimacy, who makes decisions, and who is expected to accommodate the other (Simon & John, 1986). These scripts do not simply reflect personal desire; they actively shape what individuals come to see as normal, acceptable, and romantic within relationships.

BookTok romance fiction functions as a script-producing cultural space. Through repeated tropes and narratives, it teaches readers what love is supposed to look like, what kinds of power imbalance are acceptable, and which behaviors should be interpreted as romantic rather than concerning. In many age-gap romances popular on BookTok, older partners' control is framed as care or protection, while younger partners' compromises are framed as emotional maturity. This mirrors broader cultural expectations in which women are encouraged to prioritize intimacy over self-interest, tolerate discomfort, and preserve relationships even when those relationships limit their autonomy.

Research on romantic and sexual norms shows that women are often socially rewarded for endurance rather than independence. Romantic sacrifice, giving up comfort, boundaries, or agency is frequently portrayed as proof of love, while resistance is framed as immaturity, fear, or emotional weakness. When age-gap romance fiction presents younger women as virtuous for accommodating older, more powerful partners, it reinforces gendered patterns of self-erasure already documented in real-world relationships. As a result, predatory dynamics are less likely to be recognized as predatory when they align with culturally approved romantic scripts.

Sexual script research also identifies recurring romantic norms that are especially relevant to age-gap fiction. Sexual and romantic encounters are often depicted as spontaneous, unplanned, and inevitable, something that "just happens." Women are portrayed as passive, reactive, and emotionally driven, while men are positioned as initiators and decision-makers. Age-gap romance frequently relies on narratives such as "I couldn't help it" or "he awakened something in me," which minimize deliberate choice and obscure questions of power and consent. By framing desire as uncontrollable fate rather than a decision shaped by context and authority, these stories reduce the visibility of structural inequality. The normalization of unequal dynamics occurs most effectively through repetition. Sexual script theory demonstrates that when certain relationship patterns are repeatedly framed as romantic, they become culturally naturalized, making resistance appear abnormal or unreasonable

(Simon & John, 1986). Applied to BookTok, the repeated depiction of older, dominant men and younger, inexperienced women trains readers to associate control with love and imbalance with passion. Over time, risk is masked as romance, and emotional dependency is reframed as devotion.

Research further suggests that when inequality is embedded within familiar romantic narratives, it becomes difficult to question. One study notes that culturally sanctioned romantic norms often encourage women to sustain relationships at the cost of autonomy, framing male control as care or protection rather than domination (Drexel University Research Discovery, 2007). When age-gap romance fiction repeatedly presents asymmetrical power dynamics as romantic inevitability, it reproduces these scripts, normalizing dynamics that resemble real-world patterns of coercion and self-silencing rather than mutual agency. Overall, media influence theory demonstrates that BookTok romance does more than entertain. By repeatedly romanticizing age-gap relationships through culturally familiar scripts, it shapes how readers understand desire, consent, and power. This suggests that age-gap romanticization normalizes predatory dynamics not by depicting explicit abuse, but by embedding inequality within emotionally appealing and socially validated narratives.

Methods and Materials

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine how age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction may normalize predatory dynamics. BookTok was selected as the primary cultural space for analysis because it is currently one of the most influential online reading communities, particularly among teenagers and young adults. The platform plays a significant role in shaping reading trends, popularizing romance tropes, and influencing how young readers understand relationships, love, and desire. Due to its visual, emotional, and recommendation-based nature, BookTok often encourages intense identification with fictional relationships, making its narratives especially impactful.

Given that a large proportion of BookTok's audience consists of young readers, many of whom are still forming their understanding of healthy romantic dynamics, analyzing these texts is important. By critically examining popular BookTok romances, this research aims to raise awareness of how repeated fictional representations may influence readers' perceptions of age, power, and consent. The study analyzes a sample of 20 contemporary romance novels that gained significant popularity on BookTok. This sample size was chosen to allow for in-depth textual analysis while still being large enough to identify recurring patterns, themes, and narrative structures. A smaller sample might risk being anecdotal, while a much larger sample would limit the depth of analysis required for a qualitative study.

The selected books were chosen based on the following criteria: popularity and visibility on BookTok, publication in the modern period, central romantic relationships involving a notable age gap, presence of young female protagonists, typically aged between 18 and 21, and older male romantic counterparts portrayed as more experienced, powerful, or authoritative. All details regarding the selected texts, including titles, authors, publication years, and age dynamics, are provided in Appendix A to ensure transparency and replicability.

The analysis focuses on how age, power, and romantic framing are constructed within the selected texts. Each novel was examined for the age difference between romantic partners, how authority, experience, wealth, or emotional control is distributed, how the younger female protagonist is characterized in terms of maturity, agency, and dependence, how the older partner's control is framed (e.g., as protection, care, or guidance), and narrative techniques that romanticize imbalance, such as emotional intensity, inevitability, or "saving" tropes. Rather than analyzing each book individually, the study identifies recurring patterns across the sample to understand how age-gap dynamics are repeatedly framed within BookTok romance as a genre.

A qualitative approach is most suitable for this research question because the study seeks to explore meaning, representation, and normalization, rather than measure frequency or reader response numerically. Quantitative methods would not adequately capture how power dynamics are embedded in narrative structure, character development, and emotional framing. Qualitative textual analysis allows for close reading and interpretation of themes such as objectification, emotional dependency, and romantic idealization. This approach aligns with feminist literary theory, developmental psychology, and media studies, all of which emphasize understanding how cultural texts construct meaning and shape perception. By examining how age-gap relationships are framed as romantic rather than problematic, this method directly addresses the question of normalization within fiction.

All analyzed texts involve characters who are legally adults. The research does not aim to accuse individual authors or readers, but rather to critically examine broader narrative patterns within popular romance fiction. The focus remains on representation and cultural impact rather than explicit content or authorial intent.

Results and Discussion

Across the sampled BookTok romance novels, a recurring pattern is the normalization of what can be described as predatory waiting: a narrative structure in which an older male character's interest in a significantly younger female character is portrayed as acceptable, inevitable, or even romantic

once she reaches a socially recognized age of consent. In several texts, the female protagonist is repeatedly described using language that emphasizes innocence and vulnerability, such as being “little,” “naive,” or “innocent,” while the male protagonist is positioned as experienced, dominant, and emotionally controlled. This contrast reinforces an unequal dynamic where youth itself becomes romantic capital, framed as purity or desirability, rather than as a stage requiring protection from exploitation.

A particularly troubling aspect of this pattern is how turning eighteen is treated as a narrative milestone rather than a moral boundary. The stories often imply that the male character’s desire was present long before the female character reached adulthood, but is retroactively justified once she becomes legally eligible. This framing discourages critical reflection within the text itself and instead presents the relationship as a reward for patience, positioning the older character’s restraint as virtuous rather than ethically questionable. As a result, the act of waiting is romanticized, masking dynamics that resemble grooming and emotional conditioning.

Dialogue further reinforces ownership and control. Lines such as “It doesn’t matter whose ring you wear. You are mine” frame possessiveness as devotion rather than as a warning sign. When combined with repeated physical descriptions, such as exaggerated height differences or references to the female lead’s smallness, the narrative visually and emotionally reinforces power imbalance. These choices are not neutral; they aestheticize dominance and submission, making unequal relationships appear desirable rather than harmful.

In more extreme cases, the plot itself embeds parental or pseudo-parental roles into romantic relationships. In *Empire of Desire*, the male protagonist has known the female lead since infancy, while in *Birthday Girl*, the romantic relationship develops between a young woman and her boyfriend’s father. In both narratives, the male figure functions as a provider, protector, and authority figure, blurring the boundary between care and control. By framing these relationships as emotionally fulfilling rather than ethically complex, the texts minimize the seriousness of adult authority figures engaging romantically with young women they have power over.

Across the 20 novels that are analyzed, none of the female protagonists are in their 30s. Most characters are below 25 years of age, with only two novels depicting female leads in their mid-20s, reflecting early adulthood in developmental psychology terms, a period characterized by ongoing identity formation, emotional regulation development, and evolving decision-making capacities (UPMC HealthBeat, 2014). In contrast, all male protagonists are consistently in their mid-30s to late

30s, creating age gaps that are almost exclusively in double digits, ranging from 9 to 20 years. From a developmental perspective, this disparity situates male characters in a stage of established career, social authority, and emotional stability, while female characters are often still in early adulthood, emphasizing the asymmetry in life experience, autonomy, and power between the genders. This numerical and developmental evidence further reinforces the patterns of normalized authority, control, and unequal relational dynamics observed across the sample.

Another recurring pattern is the contrast between sexual inexperience and experience. Female protagonists are frequently portrayed as virginal, while male protagonists are depicted as sexually experienced and emotionally hardened. The narrative often suggests that the young woman's innocence is what redeems or reforms the older man, reinforcing the idea that female emotional labor can justify or resolve abusive tendencies. Research on dark romance suggests that this trope shifts responsibility onto the female character and reframes harmful behavior as temporary or curable through love (The Conversation, 2024).

The role of BookTok as a promotional platform intensifies the impact of these narratives. Romance fiction is often introduced to readers between the ages of eleven and eighteen, meaning that minors are frequently exposed to adult or "new adult" content without adequate contextual warnings (Rodrigues, 2024). When age-gap romances are aestheticized through short-form videos that highlight longing, protection, and intensity, while omitting critical context, young readers are encouraged to interpret these dynamics as aspirational rather than exploitative. Although some studies suggest that older or media-literate readers can engage critically with dark romance, this critical distance depends heavily on age, emotional maturity, and guided discussion (The Conversation, 2024).

Taken together, these patterns suggest that modern BookTok romance fiction does more than depict age-gap relationships; it often normalizes predatory dynamics by framing delayed access to youth as romantic, authority as attractive, and control as care. While not all books in the sample rely on these tropes, their repeated presence across popular titles contributes to a broader cultural narrative in which unequal relationships are normalized through repetition and aesthetic framing. This directly supports the argument that age-gap romanticization in BookTok romance fiction plays a significant role in obscuring and legitimizing predatory dynamics, particularly for younger readers who lack the tools to critically challenge what they consume.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine to what extent age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction normalizes predatory dynamics. Through feminist theory, developmental psychology,

media studies, and qualitative textual analysis of twenty popular BookTok romance novels, the findings suggest that this normalization occurs to a considerable and meaningful extent, though not uniformly across all texts. In conclusion, age-gap romanticization in modern BookTok romance fiction substantially contributes to the normalization of predatory dynamics, not by depicting explicit abuse, but by embedding unequal power relations within idealized, emotionally charged stories that present dominance as love and vulnerability as virtue. This normalization is particularly influential for younger readers who may lack the emotional maturity or critical framework needed to question these portrayals. As such, greater critical engagement, clearer content contextualization, and increased media literacy are necessary to challenge how romantic fiction shapes perceptions of consent, power, and desire in contemporary digital culture.

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