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Research Article

Linguistic And Interactional Construction Of Relationships In Mobile Short Dramas: A Cross-Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis

Faith Grace D. Loquisan [1] | Teresita Q. Adriano [2]

[1] Master Teacher I, Elizalde National High School, Philippines
[2] Professor, University of the Immaculate Conception, Davao City, Philippines

Abstract

Introduction: Mobile-native vertical short dramas compress relational conflict into episodes of 60 to 120 seconds and reach global audiences through platforms such as ReelShort, DramaBox, ShortMax, and Vidio. Research on the format centers on audience connection, themes, and economic consumption. Few studies examine how dialogue in these compressed narratives constructs power, identity, and intimacy.

Objective: The study examined the linguistic resources, ideological representations, contextual conditions, and interactional strategies through which short-drama dialogues construct discursively positioned roles and social media relationships.

Methods: A qualitative, descriptive-interpretive design grounded in critical discourse analysis integrated Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Wodak's discourse-historical approach, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, and Gumperz's interactional sociolinguistics. The corpus comprised the first ten episodes of 24 purposively selected series, three each from China, Indonesia, Japan, Latin America, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for a total of 240 episodes with English dialogue or official English subtitles. Transcripts were annotated and coded in four analytical stages aligned with the research questions. The university research ethics committee granted an exemption from review.

Results: The analysis identified 14 linguapplied linguistics; critical discourse analysis; digital intimacy; multimodal pragmatics; short dramasistic resources, including bare imperatives, deontic modals, possessive constructions, institutional titles, and syntactic negation. Twelve socio-cognitive models emerged, among them the arrogant elite and virtuous underclass, the hidden exceptional identity, the dominant protector, and digital gift-giving as devotion. Twelve contextual dimensions linked kinship traditions, patriarchal gender history, and corporate hierarchy with algorithmic standardization and the attention economy. Fifteen interactional strategies, including topic control, aggressive interruption, counter-repair, digital triangulation, and embodied contextualization, mediated relational power.

Conclusions: Short-drama dialogues fuse traditional hierarchies of family, class, and gender with the commercial logic of platform economies. Dominant characters enforce compliance through compressed directive grammar, while marginalized protagonists resist through refusal, counter-repair, and internal voice-over. The findings support the use of micro-drama dialogues in language classrooms to build critical language awareness, pragmatic competence, and digital media literacy.

Correspondence
Faith Grace D. Loquisan, Master Teacher I, Elizalde National High School, Philippines
Email:faithgrace.loquisan@deped.gov.ph

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1. Introduction

The linguistic construction of social media relationships refers to the active negotiation of social positions, connections, and relational meanings through language in digital contexts (Tagg & Lyons, 2022). Relationships take shape in digital discourse through language choices, conversational exchanges, and interactional positioning, which together govern how people perform authority, affiliation, power, and intimacy online (Li & Ren, 2026). Mobile short dramas intensify these processes. The format relies on rapid adjacency pairs, markers of immediacy, and compressed emotional language (Pratama & Wijaya, 2020), and each line of dialogue allocates roles and upholds or challenges power hierarchies (Li & Ren, 2026). Structural compression produces interactional friction in the form of abrupt power shifts, verbal aggression, and systemic misunderstanding. Current scholarship favors audience connection, themes, and economic consumption. Empirical work on how language, identity, and power create relational meaning in compressed digital narratives remains scarce.

Regional research reflects this imbalance. In the United States, studies show how identity positioning, rhetorical framing, and repetition structure engagement and build social relationships in short-form video (Zhang et al., 2025), and how digital spaces support the formation of interpersonal bonds (Langlais et al., 2024). Western paradigms often treat relationships as outcomes of platform architecture and give less attention to the language choices through which characters create them (Schellewald, 2025). Asian research highlights condensed, emotionally charged communication designed for rapid user retention, especially in China, where the micro-drama format first emerged. Even within this work, discourse-oriented studies of how micro-linguistic tactics embed socio-cognitive models of power and subjugation remain limited. In the Philippines, local short dramas reflect Filipino relational values (Bernadas & Peracullo, 2024) and display fluid code-switching among Filipino, English, and regional languages (Lising et al., 2020), with interaction patterns growing more diverse in Mindanao (Ong & Ong, 2026). This scholarship seldom treats scripted dialogue as an ideological arena where local views on gender, class, and hierarchy meet globalized, hyper-capitalist stereotypes.

Within critical discourse analysis (CDA), linguistic resources function as ideological mechanisms which distribute power and create asymmetric hierarchies (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). Short-drama scripts face a distinct constraint. They must establish social status, character identity, and core conflict within the first seconds of a vertical video. Long-form drama builds characters gradually through subtext, whereas short dramas depend on high linguistic density (Pratama & Wijaya, 2020). Overlexicalized labels such as "worthless" or "bankrupt" strip interlocutors of dignity and sort characters into oppressors and the oppressed (Pratama & Wijaya, 2020). A vocabulary of commodification frames loyalty, fidelity, and self-worth as goods to be purchased, leased, or compensated (Zha & Chang, 2026), turning characters into measurable assets or liabilities (W. Tang & Wang, 2025). In English-subtitled releases, translation choices also construct class. Polished corporate English marks elite speakers, while colloquial or simplified English marks marginalized ones (Bernadas & Peracullo, 2024), and subtitlers insert explicit markers such as "Sir" or "Boss" to render honorific shifts absent in English (Lising et al., 2020). Unmitigated directives such as "Kneel" or "Get out" change social realities and compel obedience (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), and tone, volume, and close framing amplify their force (Schellewald, 2025).

The socio-cognitive approach holds that discourse shapes audiences indirectly through shared mental models, knowledge, and ideologies (van Dijk, 1993). Micro-dramas rely on dense, emotionally charged storytelling to engage viewers rapidly and scholars report value distortions and homogenized ideological patterns in the format, especially among young audiences. Fragmented, emotionally stimulating short-form content increases immersion while reducing reflective processing (Chiossi et al., 2023). Narratives of the secret billionaire, the tyrannical CEO, or the disgraced elite present extreme inequality as a natural setting for romance (Pratama & Wijaya, 2020), and transactional schemas recast love and family devotion as commercial agreements (Zha & Chang, 2026). Rapid delivery discourages analytical viewing and invites quick emotional responses (Zhang et al., 2025).

Context shapes these patterns. Platforms monetize attention through in-app transactions and paywalls, and scripts place cliffhangers and emotional hooks just before each paywall (Zhang et al., 2025). The format spread from China through export formulas built on retribution, family duty, and abrupt status reversal, and adaptation for Western and Latin American viewers produced hybrid styles. In Southeast Asia, individualistic and transactional values collide with local customs of family hierarchy and communal harmony (Bernadas & Peracullo, 2024). At the interactional level, turns are so compressed that alliances form, betrayals surface, and relationships end within a single two-minute episode (Zhang et al., 2025). Meaning emerges from the combination of dialogue, camera angle, sound, and close framing on the vertical screen, and direct address to the lens produces a sense of parasocial intimacy (Schellewald, 2025; Zha & Chang, 2026).

The study integrates three CDA lenses. Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework links text, discourse practice, and social practice and provides the structural backbone of the analysis. Wodak's (1989) discourse-historical approach situates texts within their historical, cultural, and sociopolitical settings, a requirement for localized adaptations of a global medium. van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach explains how discourse and social structure connect through mental models. Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistics supplies the concept of contextualization cues for turn-by-turn analysis. Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 2020), and frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) inform the treatment of directives, face-threatening acts, and broken interactional rituals.

The study examined how micro-level language choices and interactional methods in short-drama dialogues create, negotiate, and maintain digital social relationships, and how socio-cognitive models and contextual ecosystems regulate these narratives. Scripted dialogue was treated as an ideological site where simulated intimacy, gender, and power are manufactured for public consumption. Relationships among real-world users fell outside the scope. By supporting critical media and information literacy, the study responds to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2021). Four research questions guided the inquiry:

RQ1. What linguistic resources are used in short-drama dialogues to construct discursively positioned roles?
RQ2. How do ideological representations of power and identity in short dramas reflect cognitive and social models of digital relationships?
RQ3. How do the historical, cultural, and platform-specific contexts in which short dramas are produced and consumed shape the discursive construction of social media relationships?
RQ4. What interactional strategies mediate the enactment of social media relationships in short-drama narratives?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The study used a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive design grounded in CDA. This perspective treats language as a socially situated practice which reflects and changes social reality and power relations (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). The design privileged in-depth interpretation of meaning-making within cultural and digital contexts over quantitative measurement. Fairclough's (1992) framework organized the analysis at three levels: the textual level of grammar, vocabulary, and pronouns, the discourse-practice level of production, distribution, and consumption on platforms, and the social-practice level of norms and power hierarchies. Wodak's (1989) discourse-historical approach supplied contextual depth, van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach connected discourse with cognition, and Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistics guided the analysis of turn-by-turn strategies.

2.2. Research Materials and Sampling Procedure

The study did not involve human respondents. The corpus consisted of 24 mobile-native short-drama series, three from each of eight originating regions: China, Indonesia, Japan, Latin America, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Analysis covered the first ten consecutive episodes of each series, with each episode running one to two minutes, for a total of 240 episodes. A symmetrical sample across regions prevented any single dominant market from skewing the patterns and allowed cross-cultural comparison of how global capitalist themes are localized. The restriction to the first ten episodes reflects the user retention model of vertical platforms, where opening episodes carry the highest density of conflict and relational positioning before the paywall.

Inclusion criteria required productions originally broadcast in English or carrying official, platform-provided English subtitles. Material without confirmed platform subtitles was excluded to avoid the validity risks of independent or third-party translation. ReelShort, DramaBox, ShortMax, and Vidio served as the main data sources because they lead the global micro-drama market, operate localized production units, and follow a retention-driven model in which the first five to ten episodes are free before an in-app paywall appears. The regional selection follows a glocalization logic. China, South Korea, and Japan act as originators of structural and commercial models, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Latin America represent Western glocalizations, and Indonesia and Thailand represent fast-growing mobile-first markets in Southeast Asia (Li et al., 2026; Y. Tang & Wang, 2025). Because the genre depends on formulaic scripts and recurrent archetypes, a corpus of 24 series was judged sufficient for data saturation. Table 1 profiles the corpus.

Table 1. Profile of research materials.

Region	Title	Distribution medium	Primary analytical focus
China	*From Strangers to Us Again*	Vertical streaming platform	Corporate authority, honorific markers, deflection between former partners
	The Side Character Who Refused to Lose	Mobile web drama adaptation	Metafictional resistance, direct negation, rejection of pre-scripted marital roles
	His Promise, Her Forever	Urban family romance short drama	Guardianship imperatives, financial bargaining, family status protection
Indonesia	*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*	Mobile video reel series	Dowry bargaining, legal marital declarations, elite male protective interventions
	Fake Marriage	Mobile romantic comedy series	Deontic marital obligations, contract disputes, designer identity revelations
	Putri CEO Yang Tertukar	Switched-at-birth web drama	Kinship address terms, rural-urban sociolect divides, domestic boundary policing
Japan	*Hearts at Stake, Points on the Line*	Vertical mobile game-drama	Scored domestic care work, quantified compliance, transactional labor discourse
	Trapped: The Game Begins	Social media stream-drama	Influencer gift coercion, fan loyalty metrics, conversational deflection
	Love, Desire, or Just a Game	Reality-dating micro-drama	Competitive rule governance, prize-driven romance, calculated intimacy
Latin America	*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*	Collegiate sports romance reel	Antagonistic athletic banter, protective interventions, unauthorized video circulation

Region	Title	Distribution medium	Primary analytical focus
South Korea	*A Deal With The Football Captain*	Campus teen-drama short series	Campus viral exposure, performative grief, conditional peer coaching bargains
	Kissing The Wrong Brother	University campus vertical short	Sarcastic status policing, category nicknames, shifting relational footings
	Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate	YouTube Shorts/mobile creator drama	Algorithm chasing, staged romantic performance, digital blocking repairs
	Captured By My Fiancé's Brother	Period aristocracy micro-drama	Dynastic betrothal ruptures, military honorifics, embodied physical coercion
	Here Comes Mr Trouble	Contemporary urban romance reel	Pronoun polarization, peer loyalty policing, text triangulation
Thailand	*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*	Multi-platform revenge micro-drama	Follower metrics as social capital, classist insults, corporate identity reveals
	First Love: You Have Been Replaced	Campus melodrama short series	Leaked chat triangulation, failed defensive repairs, decisive refusals
	กับดักรักนักติวเตอร์ *(Tutor's Love Trap)*	Boarding school teen romance	Antagonistic nicknames, athletic-academic bargaining, embodied silencing
United Kingdom	*30 Days of Hidden Marriage*	Vertical mobile streaming drama	Derogatory class nomination, class gatekeeping, hidden CEO reveals
	Virgin's Addiction	Serialized urban drama reel	Sexual reputation policing, moral vulnerability, protective threat directives
United States	*Alpha Is Not My Type*	Paranormal werewolf pack romance	Territorial commands, defiance of institutional titles, mate-role rejection
	My Gigolo Alpha	Fantasy werewolf romance reel	Contractual marriage terms, hidden Alpha status, photo deletion repairs
	Destined to Three Alphas	Supernatural pack drama	Deontic pack obligations, ceremonial mate rejection, caste slurs

Note. Each dataset covered Episodes 1–10 and included spoken dialogue, stage actions, and on-screen digital cues.

2.3. Research Instruments

The researcher served as the primary instrument for gathering, organizing, and interpreting the data. An interactionally informed annotation schema captured the structural mechanics of written discourse in the transcripts: sequential phrase constructions, textual overlaps, dialogic breaks, emphatic punctuation, and changes in conversational footing, alongside stage actions and on-screen digital cues such as message alerts, livestream chats, and view counts. Annotated transcripts were loaded into a qualitative data analysis package for systematic coding and comparison. The researcher, a Philippine-based educator with regular exposure to multilingual communication and an active consumer of digital media, acknowledged these positions as possible sources of interpretive bias and addressed them through bracketing, predefined analytical procedures, and the requirement to anchor each claim in observable linguistic evidence.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection followed five stages. The first secured institutional approval and ethical clearance. The second identified the corpus from the official catalogs of ReelShort, DramaBox, ShortMax, and Vidio according to the inclusion criteria. The third extracted relational text through iterative, multi-stage screening, in which each episode was watched in full to map character dynamics and continuity, and scenes of active interpersonal positioning were retrieved. The fourth annotated the retrieved dialogues with the schema described above. The fifth catalogued the annotated data by character role, country of origin, episode sequence, and interactional setting.

Analysis proceeded in four recursive stages, organized by dimension of analysis rather than by country. Stage 1 addressed RQ1 at Fairclough's (1992) textual level, coding imperative verbs, modal verbs of obligation, address terms, and lexical choices that assign roles. Stage 2 addressed RQ2 through van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach, comparing textual ideologies with shared cultural stereotypes and mental schemas such as the arrogant elite and the virtuous poor. Stage 3 addressed RQ3 through Wodak's (1989) discourse-historical approach, cross-referencing dialogues with socio-political, historical, and platform settings, including monetization hooks, vertical formatting, and app architectures, across the eight regions. Stage 4 addressed RQ4 through Gumperz's (1982) interactional sociolinguistics, coding contextualization cues, conversational inferences, and strategic moves such as topic control, repair, and interruption. Codes were then grouped into analytical categories and compared across regions.

2.5. Trustworthiness

The study applied the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility rested on prolonged engagement with the 240 episodes through repeated viewing and on data saturation across a formulaic genre. A peer debriefing by an external qualitative researcher reviewed the alignment of research questions, frameworks, materials, analysis, and interpretation. Transferability rested on thick description of the cultural profiles of the eight regions, the monetization frameworks behind script production, and the platform profiles. Dependability rested on an audit trail documenting each step from the collection of platform subtitles to annotation and categorization. Confirmability rested on linking each analytical claim to verifiable linguistic indicators in the official translations and on reflexive bracketing.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study analyzed publicly available, commercially broadcast media and involved no human participants or private user profiles. The University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee exempted the protocol from review on June 26, 2026 (Protocol Code GS-EX-06-26-0138) on the basis of its use of secondary data for discourse analysis. Materials were accessed only through official applications in line with platform terms. Use of copyrighted dialogue complied with the fair use provision of Section 185 of the Intellectual Property Code of the Philippines (Republic Act No. 8293). Extracted fragments were limited to the length required to illustrate each resource or strategy, and all production companies and titles are attributed.

3. Results and Discussion

Results are organized around the four research questions. Each subsection presents the categories identified in the corpus, illustrates them with verbatim dialogue, and interprets them against existing literature.

3.1. Linguistic Resources Constructing Discursively Positioned Roles

Table 2 presents 14 linguistic resources through which characters negotiate social standing. Compressed runtimes demand immediate exposition, and these resources position participants into distinct power relationships within seconds.

Table 2. Linguistic resources constructing discursively positioned roles in short-drama dialogues.

Linguistic resource	Positioned roles	Structural function	Representative evidence
Imperative constructions	Dominant commander versus compliant subordinate	Base-form verbs suppress negotiation and present the action as immediately required	"Call me Alpha!" (*Alpha Is Not My Type*, United States)
Deontic modality	Rule-maker versus rule-follower	*Must*, *will*, and *cannot* encode obligation, certainty, and prohibition	"In principle, you must comply with all of their requests." (*Hearts at Stake, Points on the Line*, Japan)
Possessive constructions	Possessor versus possessed partner	Possessive determiners encode ownership and relational entitlement	"Your father received 50 million for you to be my wife!" (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*, Indonesia)
Relational nouns and identity labels	Legitimate partner, worker, outsider, rival, or dependent	Assigns recognizable social and relational categories	"You're only engaged to Alpha Armel. You're not my Luna yet." (*Destined to Three Alphas*, United States)

Linguistic resource	Positioned roles	Structural function	Representative evidence
Honorifics and institutional titles	Superior versus subordinate	Encodes institutional rank through forms of address	"I am so sorry, Mr Dawson. I didn't realize it was you." (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*, Thailand)
Derogatory nomination	Moral judge versus devalued target	Reduces characters to negatively evaluated categories	"Please. You think I don't recognize a gold digger when I see one?" (*30 Days of Hidden Marriage*, United Kingdom)
Evaluative adjectives and intensifiers	Desirable versus undesirable	Produces polarized descriptions of characters	"You pathetic shut-in. You can't even talk properly, and you have the nerve to give me orders?" (*Hearts at Stake, Points on the Line*, Japan)
Material and relational processes	Rejecter versus rejected, claimant versus claimed	Material verbs enact relational change, relational clauses assign identities	"I reject you as my mate, Ivy." (*Destined to Three Alphas*, United States)
Conditional constructions	Enforcer versus threatened participant	Links compliance or violation with an explicit consequence	"As long as half of the elders agree, we can execute her." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*, United States)
Transactional lexical choices	Employer versus contracted partner	Frames relationships through contracts, payment, and image management	"I'll be giving you fifty-thousand dollars a month to act like my husband." (*My Gigolo Alpha*, United States)
Pronoun polarization	Insider versus outsider	Inclusive and exclusive pronouns establish boundaries	"This is our pack's business. You're not a part of it." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*, United States)
Interrogative challenges	Gatekeeper versus intruder	Questions demand justification or undermine credibility	"Who do you think you are? You think you're some kind of dad to me?" (*His Promise, Her Forever*, China)
Negative constructions and refusals	Resistant subject versus controlling authority	Negation rejects imposed actions and identities	"I never asked for help." (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*, Latin America)
Internal narration and voice-over	Silenced victim becoming a self-aware agent	Contrasts internal evaluation with public behavior	"I'm just a side character in their love story." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*, Thailand)

3.1.1. Directive and obligation resources

Bare imperatives, deontic modals, and conditionals assign behavioral expectations without negotiation. Commands such as "Clean that up!" (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*) and "Go, now." (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*) leave no room for hesitation. Adrian's order "Take this card" (*From Strangers to Us Again*) turns a breakup into an administrative settlement, and "Spin around. Let me take a look." (*Hearts at Stake, Points on the Line*) inspects a newly hired housekeeper like an object. Imperative syntax also serves female defiance, as when Blaire Stone orders a male companion to his knees (*His Promise, Her Forever*). Modals of obligation turn demands into inescapable duties, as in "You need to treat this like a job and go all out" (*Hearts at Stake, Points on the Line*), where financial survival requires total emotional performance. These findings agree with work showing unhedged directives as markers of dominance and non-reciprocal hostility (Culpeper et al., 2025), with the use of authoritative commands to establish rank in the opening seconds of micro-drama episodes (Chen, 2025), and with the role of deontic modality in presenting contingent expectations as absolute (Flowerdew, 2022).

3.1.2. Categorization and naming resources

Possessives, relational nouns, honorifics, derogatory nomination, evaluative adjectives, and pronoun polarization fix rank and belonging. Labels such as *my wife* or *my woman* mark partners as private assets and often merge with financial or biological claims. Category nouns such as *husband*, *fiancée*, and *maid* outline legal privileges and domestic duties at once, consistent with the work of membership categorization devices in invoking rich cultural expectations (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2020). Dominant speakers use formal titles to suppress past intimacy, while subordinates use them to perform humility, a pattern aligned with the boundary-policing function of address terms (House & Kádár, 2021). Slurs such as *gold digger* and *lowly maid*, and binaries such as *golden* versus *ugly*, define belonging and exclusion within seconds and align viewers against overt elitism (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Martin & White, 2005). Contrasts between *we* and *you* isolate outsiders from privileged networks (KhosraviNik, 2022).

3.1.3. Process and transactional resources

Material verbs such as *reject*, *slap*, and *throw* execute ruptures, while relational clauses such as "This is my husband." (*My Gigolo Alpha*) and "We belong to two different worlds." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*) anchor characters into fixed roles (Matthiessen & Halliday, 2009). Transactional vocabulary of *contract*, *points*, *deposit*, and *image* moves into intimate life. "Having a boyfriend will be good for my image." (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*) treats a partner as a brand asset. These patterns support the argument that market vocabularies colonize private spheres (Fairclough, 2021) and the observation that micro-drama narratives frame intimacy through financial capital (Chen, 2025).

3.1.4. Challenge and resistance resources

Interrogatives such as "Who do you think you are?" and "How dare you!" seize the floor and force recipients into a defensive posture (Heritage & Raymond, 2021). Authority figures use them to penalize presumption, and protagonists use them to expose hypocrisy. Negation gives marginalized characters an immediate means of rejecting imposed roles, as in "I'm not gonna be anyone's Luna." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*) and "No! I don't want it!" (*The Side Character Who Refused to Lose*). Negative forms construct alternatives to dominant assertions (Jeffries, 2020). Internal voice-over separates outward compliance from inward awareness, as in "I won't say yes to everything anymore." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*), and aligns viewers with the protagonist's trajectory (W. Tang & Wang, 2025). Together, the 14 resources show how micro-level grammar performs the work of social stratification in compressed scenes (KhosraviNik, 2022).

3.2. Ideological Representations and Socio-Cognitive Models of Digital Relationships

Table 3 presents 12 socio-cognitive models. Each pairs a cognitive script with a social model of digital relationships and orients viewers toward recognizable archetypes within moments of viewing.

Table 3. Ideological representations and socio-cognitive models of digital relationships.

Ideological representation	Cognitive script	Social model of digital relationships	Textual manifestation
Arrogant elite and virtuous underclass	The powerful are entitled and arrogant, the marginalized morally sincere	Viewers sympathize with the underestimated character and anticipate status reversal	"This party's for the school's elite. Not for nerds with Pokemon watches." (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*, Thailand)
Hidden exceptional identity	Worth lies concealed beneath an underestimated exterior	Recognition occurs when private identity is publicly validated	"Mr Quinn is the CEO of Quinn Corp." "You're the CEO?!" (*30 Days of Hidden Marriage*, United Kingdom)
Dominant protector	Control reads as protection when exercised by a desirable man	Surveillance and intervention read as evidence of love	"As long as I'm here, no one will be able to hurt you again." (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*, Indonesia)
Vulnerable but virtuous heroine	Suffering demonstrates moral worth	Public sympathy becomes symbolic restoration	"He sent a photo of my private vulnerability to the guy's chat." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*, Thailand)
Sexually stigmatized woman	Female identity is organized around purity and sexual reputation	Digital circulation amplifies sexual surveillance	"You can't trust this girl. She'll compromise herself for money." (*Virgin's Addiction*, United Kingdom)
Desirable dominant man	CEOs, Alphas, athletes, and heirs are commanding and powerful	Masculine authority is linked to competence and entitlement	"I am Alpha of the Varkari Pack. This is my territory." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*, United States)
Popularity as legitimacy	High visibility signals relevance and desirability	Followers function as social capital	"I also have four hundred million followers across all my socials." (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*, Thailand)
Public performance as authentic intimacy	Repeated displays prompt inferences of a real relationship	Performed closeness merges with genuine experience	"I just thought this would help sell the story, don't you?" (*Tutor's Love Trap*, Thailand)
Digital gift-giving as devotion	Spending signifies loyalty	Fandom and romance are enacted through platform transactions	"It's to send him money in the comments. It's a sign of supporting him." (*Trapped: The Game Begins*, Japan)

Ideological representation	Cognitive script	Social model of digital relationships	Textual manifestation
Viral humiliation as social punishment	Public exposure threatens identity and belonging	Networked audiences judge acceptable behavior	"Could you give my followers a few tears?" (*A Deal With The Football Captain*, Latin America)
Algorithmic success as social validation	Algorithmic selection is deserved recognition	Visibility yields sponsorship and credibility	"We've already got three sponsor offers. We're finally taking off." (*Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate*, South Korea)
Resistance as self-reconstruction	Refusal interrupts the victim schema	Audiences support the character's transformation	"I won't accept any destiny. And I'm choosing my own path." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*, United States)

3.2.1. Class and identity models

The arrogant elite and virtuous underclass model organizes class antagonism around wealthy cruelty and working-class integrity. In *Captured By My Fiancé's Brother*, a sister declares, "I'd be mortified claiming this hick as my sister." Such lines set up the expectation of reversal, which the hidden exceptional identity model then delivers through sudden revelations of wealth, rank, or lineage. Eric's one-word reply "Surprise." after the announcement of a mysterious luxury-brand owner (*Reversing the Revenge Game with Divine Vision*) humiliates gatekeepers and rewards modest competence. The findings agree with research on media moralizing class differences through ethical binaries (Fairclough, 2021), on stark class divides as a source of affective resonance in micro-dramas (Chen, 2025), and on the hidden heir as a core platform trope (W. Tang & Wang, 2025).

3.2.2. Gendered models

Four models regulate gender. The dominant protector frames surveillance and physical intervention as love, as in "Touch her again and you're dealing with me." (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*). The vulnerable but virtuous heroine earns legitimacy through unmerited suffering and public endurance. The sexually stigmatized woman faces policing of purity, as in "He said you're still pure. Turns out it's just second-hand goods!" (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*). The desirable dominant man fuses corporate success, physical power, and romantic assertiveness. These models echo feminist accounts of control framed as protective necessity and of sexualized labeling as a means of disciplining women (Talbot, 2020), along with studies of mediated moral evaluation of women (Yu, 2022). Across Eastern and Western markets, the corpus codes male dominance as benevolent protection.

3.2.3. Platform-metric models

Five models tie intimacy to platform metrics. Characters invoke follower counts in face-to-face arguments, as with "He's a streamer with over a million followers." (*Trapped: The Game Begins*), turning numerical visibility into relational leverage (Ilbury, 2022). Staged livestreams and fake relationships slide into genuine attachment, blurring performance and feeling. Livestream gifts serve as proof of devotion, as in "Well, send me more gifts! I won't be so embarrassed then." (*Trapped: The Game Begins*). Smartphone cameras record humiliation, such as bystanders filming Jenny after she is pushed into a pool (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*), and networked audiences act as judges (del-Saz-Rubio, 2023). Creators read algorithmic promotion as proof of worth, as in "We hit 30,000 views. The algorithm picked us up!" (*Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate*). These results extend observations on metrics as arbiters of legitimacy (Bouvier, 2022) and on micro-drama ecosystems equating expenditure with loyalty (Chen, 2025).

3.2.4. Resistance as self-reconstruction

The twelfth model breaks the cycle of victimization. Lines such as "Four years of blind love dies tonight." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*) and "I'd rather not obey and die the way the script says." (*The Side Character Who Refused to Lose*) mark the moment protagonists reject submissive positions and construct self-determined identities. Oppositional discourse contests naturalized power (Fairclough, 2021), and explicit rejection of positioning serves as a pragmatic route to agency (Culpeper et al., 2025). The corpus thus reproduces dominant ideologies and also offers audiences scripts of contestation.

3.3. Historical, Cultural, and Platform Contexts Shaping Social Media Relationships

Table 4 presents 12 contextual dimensions identified through the discourse-historical analysis. Short dramas use modern devices, livestream interfaces, and mobile platforms, yet their conflicts remain tied to enduring structures of class, family authority, and gender (Fairclough, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2022).

Table 4. Historical, cultural, and platform contexts shaping social media relationships.

Contextual dimension	Discourse-historical interpretation	Discursive manifestation
Family lineage and marriage traditions	Family-centered marriage models are recontextualized in digital romance	Arranged engagements, marital registration, inheritance conditions, family reputation (China, Indonesia, South Korea)
Corporate and class hierarchy	Market relations make wealth and employment central to romantic legitimacy	CEOs, heirs, assistants, maids, interns, and dependent heroines (China, Japan, United Kingdom)
Patriarchal gender history	Traditional gender ideologies persist in modern platform narratives	Regulation of virginity, modesty, obedience, and reputation (Indonesia, United States, Latin America)
Elite masculinity	Patriarchal authority becomes globally recognizable romantic archetypes	Heirs, Alphas, athletes, commanders, and CEOs control movement, speech, and partner choice (United States, South Korea, Latin America)
Contemporary youth culture	Courtship moves into settings of peer visibility and digital reputation	Campus life, parties, athletics, messaging, livestreaming (Thailand, Latin America, South Korea)
Influencer and attention economy	Monetized visibility organizes intimacy	Followers, gifts, sponsorships, fake relationships, personal branding (Japan, South Korea, Thailand)
Networked sexual reputation	Digital permanence intensifies moral surveillance	Circulated photographs, recorded humiliation, group-chat commentary (Thailand, Latin America, United Kingdom)
Platform-specific production constraints	Vertical platforms require compressed role construction	Short episodes, rapid exposition, emotional hooks, cliffhangers
Algorithmic standardization	Circulation favors tropes recognizable across markets	Hidden heirs, contract marriages, enemies-to-lovers, revenge plots
Localization and cultural hybridity	Local elements combine with global formulas	Regional labels with English names, global corporate settings, imported conventions (Indonesia, Thailand, China)
Hyper-capitalist relationship discourse	Emotional bonds are expressed through market logic	Hired partners, contracted marriages, gifts as support, relationships as image
Platform consumption and audience anticipation	Scripts renew attention through unresolved tension	Discovery, humiliation, revelation, revenge, and romantic reversal at episode breaks

3.3.1. Inherited social structures

Kinship authority, corporate rank, patriarchal gender norms, and elite masculinity supply the core of dramatic tension. Lineage gatekeepers treat betrothals as flexible instruments of mobility, as in "It was only a betrothal Mr. Han Sr. brought up in passing" (*Captured By My Fiancé's Brother*), and parents demand submission through filial duty, as in "If you dare to confront me, that's the same as you being disobedient to your own parents" (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*). Institutional rank governs conversational rights in offices and affluent homes, foregrounding executive agency and muting subordinate labor (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Female assertiveness is framed as a defect requiring masculine correction (Talbot, 2020), and forceful male intervention appears as a romantic attribute (W. Tang & Wang, 2025). Institutional groups invoke traditional norms to restrict personal freedom (Flowerdew, 2022), and the Chinese, Indonesian, and South Korean scripts dramatize this negotiation.

3.3.2. Youth culture and the attention economy

Campus, party, and sports settings place courtship before an audience of peers, where self-worth depends on standing in student networks (Ilbury, 2022). Characters weigh relational choices against follower counts, livestream donations, and viral engagement, and they manage relationships as collaborative content to attract sponsors. Private confessions and intimate photographs circulate across group chats, so a single video threatens a character's standing. Social media networks act as disciplinary spaces where private conduct is monitored and punished (Bouvier, 2022; del-Saz-Rubio, 2023).

3.3.3. Platform logic and glocalization

Episodes of one to two minutes require writers to set up conflict in the opening seconds. In *From Strangers to Us Again*, a two-sentence flashback, "From start to finish, we were just business partners. You got carried away," supplies the backstory, and a voice-over announcing the male lead's return sets the emotional arc before the title card ends. Recommendation systems reward recurring formulas such as contract marriages and secret heirs, producing a standardized narrative language across markets (Chen, 2025). Local elements still anchor these formulas. The Indonesian *Putri CEO Yang Tertukar* adds a religious blessing, "Yes. Peace be upon you," and orphanage obligations to the global switched-at-birth trope. Such hybridity reflects the platformization and glocalization logic of international short-drama platforms (W. Tang & Wang, 2025) and the movement of linguistic resources across transcultural flows (Pennycook, 2021). Scenes end on staged injuries, sudden entrances, and competing romantic claims to keep viewers unlocking episodes (Culpeper et al., 2025).

3.4. Interactional Strategies and Contextualization Cues in the Enactment of Social Media Relationships

Table 5 presents 15 interactional strategies. Each combines a contextualization cue with a conversational inference and a relational function, and together they show talk as a site where interlocutors continuously negotiate status and alignment (Gumperz, 1982; Culpeper et al., 2025).

Table 5. Interactional strategies and contextualization cues in the enactment of social media relationships.

Interactional strategy	Contextualization cue	Conversational inference	Relationship and power function
Conversational manipulation	"Our marriage is just a formality. If you agree, you'll receive a monthly stipend." (*My Gigolo Alpha*)	Cooperation preserves safety, reputation, or affection	Presents control as choice or help
Topic control	Sophie tries to explain she is an officer, and Alston demands, "State your purpose on my land!" (*Alpha Is Not My Type*)	The dominant speaker decides relevance	Denies the less powerful a say in defining the event
Aggressive interruption	Ji-in orders, "Hey, delete that!" while Min-woo justifies keeping a recording (*Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate*)	The interrupted account is illegitimate	Displays dominance and suppresses resistance
Defensive repair	"What? No. Why would I say your sister's name? You must have heard me wrong." (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*)	A prior utterance threatened face	Protects face and denies responsibility
Counter-repair	Tessa reads the group chat revealing Jason used her as an experiment (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*)	The original explanation is unreliable	Lets subordinates challenge manipulation
Antagonistic teasing	Harper calls Brady "Puckhead" and he calls her "Harper Honey" (*Tutor's Love Trap*)	Hostility signals concealed interest	Builds the enemies-to-lovers trajectory
Relational footing shifts	Claire's formal "Mr Hayes" gives way to private address as "Adrian" (*From Strangers to Us Again*)	The relationship has changed in distance	Marks shifts in social distance and status
Public declaration	"Behold your new leader and partner!" (*Alpha Is Not My Type*)	A relationship is officially claimed	Uses witnesses to strengthen authority
Strategic silence and withholding	Brian conceals his Alpha identity while accepting the role of paid husband (*My Gigolo Alpha*)	The character is uncertain or deceptive	Produces ambiguity and tension
Digital triangulation	Jason's friends enter his relationship with Tessa through a group chat (*First Love: You Have Been Replaced*)	An absent audience has entered the interaction	Lets peers and former partners shape the relationship
Blocking and deletion as digital repair	Min-woo blocks his former partner: "There. Blocked." (*Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate*)	A prior interaction is terminated	Regulates access and evidence
Recording and audience design	Mia moves the camera close to Dora and asks for on-screen tears (*A Deal With The Football Captain*)	The utterance targets a mediated audience	Manages private talk and public reception at once
Refusal and counter-positioning	"I am an officer of the law, not your subject." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*)	The speaker rejects prior presuppositions	Restores agency

Interactional strategy	Contextualization cue	Conversational inference	Relationship and power function
Threats and warnings	"Defy pack protocol and the council will sanction your banishment." (*Alpha Is Not My Type*)	Noncompliance brings punishment	Maintains authority over behavior and circulation
Embodied contextualization	Ju-won holds a knife to Su-yeon's neck while ordering her to deceive the soldiers (*Captured By My Fiancé's Brother*)	Physical action reframes the words	Connects spoken control with embodied power

3.4.1. Control moves

Dominant figures package ultimatums as voluntary bargains, close topics, interrupt, threaten, and declare relationships before witnesses. Manipulative contributions disguise pressure behind cooperative moves (Dynel, 2021). Mr Wells ends Claire's refusal with "Starting today, you're in charge of Mr Hayes' project" (*From Strangers to Us Again*), and Javier warns teammates, "If I see anyone posting practice footage, expect immediate removal from this team" (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*). Aggressive turn violations and threats act as unmitigated impoliteness which dismantles the interlocutor's entitlement (Culpeper et al., 2025). Public declarations such as Niko's "I have the power to make you kneel to my wife" (*Destiny for My Husband, a Billionaire Officer*) turn private claims into social facts.

3.4.2. Repair and contest

Defensive repairs reframe slips as mishearing or praise, as in Min-woo's "Who said it was about me? I was praising your acting" (*Revenge Gone Wrong: I Kissed My Roommate*). Counter-repairs answer with leaked chats, photographs, or contradictions, holding speakers accountable to shared facts (Safar & de Vos, 2022; Zinken & Küttner, 2022). Refusals such as Jenny's "Back off, player" (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*) and Claire's "I'm not drinking that! I'm not!" (*The Side Character Who Refused to Lose*) break expected compliance and resist offensive positioning (Culpeper & Haugh, 2020).

3.4.3. Relational calibration

Antagonistic teasing, footing shifts, and strategic silence calibrate distance. Mock insults combine friction with attraction and drive enemies-to-lovers arcs, consistent with research on jocular insults balancing hostility and solidarity (Dynel, 2021). Sophie's move from resisting the title "Alpha" to the teasing "Oh, relax, Alpha" (*Alpha Is Not My Type*) and Javier's shift from "intern" to the nickname "Dynamite" (*Scoring With My Brother's Rival*) signal growing intimacy. Silence and withheld identities preserve leverage and create interpretive gaps which carry pragmatic meaning (Safar & de Vos, 2022).

3.4.4. Digital and embodied strategies

Four strategies extend interaction beyond face-to-face talk. Notifications and group chats bring absent third parties into private exchanges, turning dyads into multi-party encounters (Ilbury, 2022). Blocking profiles and deleting photographs, as when Brian deletes compromising images of Miranda one by one (*My Gigolo Alpha*), close channels when talk fails. Characters design speech for an observing camera, coaching expressions and extracting tears for followers, which reflects audience design in mediated spaces (Ilbury, 2022). Embodied actions such as pinning a partner against a car (*Fake Marriage*) or covering a mouth (*Tutor's Love Trap*) turn ordinary utterances into commands, and the close vertical frame foregrounds these gestures (Piirainen-Marsh et al., 2022).

3.5. Synthesis and Pedagogical Implications

The four analyses form one chain. Micro-level features such as unmitigated imperatives, deontic obligations, and territorial possessives substantiate socio-cognitive scripts dividing characters into privileged elites and resilient underdogs. These scripts recontextualize kinship expectations, patriarchal surveillance, and market vocabularies within the production limits of one-to-two-minute episodes. On the interactional plane, topic control, digital triangulation, and embodied constraint reinforce authority, while refusals, counter-repairs, and blocking let marginalized protagonists reclaim autonomy. The corpus therefore functions as a cultural apparatus where traditional hierarchies and attention economies converge to redefine interpersonal relationships, in line with Fairclough's (1992) link between textual choices and social practice.

For applied linguistics, these texts mirror the fast, technology-driven communication learners consume daily. Teachers might set comparative script analyses in which learners contrast unhedged commands with polite alternatives suited to collaborative settings. Critical role-plays and repair workshops would ask students to rewrite scenes of manipulative bargaining, interruption, or group shaming using constructive refusals and respectful boundaries. Multimodal annotation of reels would show how screen pop-ups and gestures work with words. Such activities support media literacy, critical thinking, and digital citizenship, and they treat grammar as a social toolkit for negotiating relationships and institutional power.

4. Conclusion

Short-drama dialogues across eight regions rely on compressed grammatical structures to establish social inequality and character roles. Authority figures deploy bare imperatives, modals of obligation, possessive labels, and institutional titles to enforce dominance and shrink the conversational space of subordinates. Characters in lower-status positions turn to syntactic refusals, negative markers, and internal voice-overs to challenge these constraints and express agency.

Recurring mental scripts make unequal relationships feel natural within seconds. The corpus promotes the moral contrast between wealthy elites and hardworking underdogs, the concealment of elite identities, and the equation of male surveillance with protective love. Streaming requirements also produce scenes where devotion is measured through gifts, follower counts, and viral attention. Mobile narratives thus merge traditional expectations of family and gender with the commercial demands of platform economies. At the level of turn-by-turn talk, dominant speakers control conversations through topic shifts, interruptions, digital triangulation, and physical constraint, while subordinate protagonists push back through counter-repairs, leaked chat evidence, and blocking. Even very short scenes stage an ongoing negotiation of boundaries and self-respect.

Future research should examine audience reception through focus groups, reception analysis, and tracking of viewer comments to learn whether young viewers accept or criticize normalized verbal aggression, possessive language, and gender stereotypes. Classroom studies should test instructional units built on short-drama dialogues and measure gains in recognizing manipulation and producing effective refusals across regions and proficiency levels. Scriptwriters and platform companies should build interactions modeling mutual respect and non-coercive conflict resolution, and developers should adopt ethical design standards so recommendation systems do not reward harmful interactional behavior for watch time. Curriculum planners should develop materials featuring authentic smartphone-mediated interaction, including group-chat interruptions, screenshots, and online shaming.

5. Limitations of the Study

Several limitations shape the interpretation of the findings. First, the analysis relied on official English subtitles and translated scripts for productions originally in Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, and other languages. Translation smooths or obscures local nuance, idioms, and honorific systems, so some findings describe the English text presented to global audiences more than the source-language dialogue. Second, the study involved no live audiences and therefore cannot measure psychological effects or real-time reception, although the socio-cognitive lens assesses how scripts encode power. Third, paywalls, geo-blocking, and changing platform architectures constrained consistent retrieval of complete transcripts across regional app stores. Fourth, the corpus covered only the first ten episodes of three series per region, so patterns in later episodes and in other titles remain unexamined. Fifth, the interpretive nature of CDA means the comparative results describe discursive patterns and do not form a statistically generalizable index of global media consumption. The study reduced these risks through strict inclusion criteria, an audit trail, peer debriefing, and reflexive bracketing. Future studies should combine source-language analysis with native-speaker validation, include reception data, and extend the corpus to full series and additional regions, including the Philippines.

6. Supplementary Details

6.1. Supplementary Materials & Data availability statement:
Subject to platform copyright and confidentiality agreements, the corresponding author may provide the annotated transcripts and coding framework supporting the study's conclusions upon reasonable request.

6.2. Author Contributions:
This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT). Maria Mirasol Elisan was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, investigation (participant recruitment and data collection), formal analysis (qualitative data analysis and interpretation of results), writing of the original draft, and review and editing. The author approved the final manuscript and takes responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the study.

This article follows the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT). [Authors: mark each CRediT role with a check (✓) for every author, and add rows for any co-authors]

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Faith Grace D. Loquisan	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Teresita Q. Adriano	✓									✓		✓		

C : **C**onceptualization
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R : **R**esources
D : **D**ata Curation
O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft
E : Writing - Review & **E**diting
Vi : **Vi**sualization
Su : **Su**pervision
P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

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The study was conducted in accordance with the policies of the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee, Davao City, Philippines, which exempted the protocol from review on June 26, 2026 (Protocol Code GS-EX-06-26-0138) because the study used secondary data for discourse analysis.

6.5. Informed Consent Statement:
Not applicable. The study analyzed publicly available, commercially broadcast media and involved no human participants.

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