

Who invites, Who Pays? Gendered Dating Scripts and Everyday Intimacy in Mexico City and Oaxaca

¿Quién invita, quién paga? Guiones románticos de género e intimidad cotidiana en Ciudad de México y Oaxaca

Melissa García-Meraz ^a, Rubén García-Cruz ^b, Charlyne Curiel ^c

Abstract:

This study explores gendered dating scripts among university students from Mexico City and Oaxaca, analyzing both idealized and real-life romantic narratives. Eighty participants (40 women and 40 men) narrated their first and ideal romantic dates. Using thematic coding and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), we examined patterns of gender and region, as well as the symbolic and emotional components inherent in romantic scripts. The results revealed regional contrasts: in Mexico City, particularly in men's narratives, spatial and temporal structures were emphasized –such as walking, eating, and transitioning between public and private spaces. In contrast, narratives from Oaxaca tended to be more fluid and interactional, highlighting shared decision-making (e.g., meeting halfway), brief encounters, and activities in nearby public spaces like parks or plazas. In contrast, women's narratives across both regions centered on emotional connection, communication, and affective elements –such as laughter, physical contact, and reciprocal conversation. Common rituals included going out for coffee, visiting parks or museums, and sharing meals. LDA analysis corroborated these gendered and regional patterns, offering deeper insights into dominant narrative structures and emotional tones. Thematic saturation indicated the persistence of heteronormative expectations; however, Oaxacan narratives showed more evidence of negotiation and shared agency, while women overall exhibited greater variability in agency and emotional expression. This research contributes to the understanding of romantic scripts within specific cultural and educational contexts by integrating qualitative and computational methods to reveal the symbolic constructions of intimacy and gender.

Keywords:

Gender scripts, Romantic narratives, University students, Cultural differences, Text analysis

Resumen:

Este estudio explora los guiones de citas con enfoque de género entre estudiantes universitarios de Ciudad de México (CDMX) y Oaxaca, analizando tanto narrativas idealizadas como experiencias reales de citas románticas. Ochenta participantes (40 mujeres y 40 hombres) relataron sus primeras citas románticas y sus citas ideales. A través de codificación temática y del análisis por Asignación Latente de Dirichlet (LDA), se examinaron los patrones de género y región, así como los componentes simbólicos y emocionales presentes en los guiones románticos. Los resultados revelaron contrastes regionales: en la CDMX, especialmente en las narrativas masculinas, se enfatizaron estructuras espaciales y temporales como caminar, comer y transitar entre espacios públicos y privados; en Oaxaca, las narrativas tendieron a ser más fluidas e interactivas, destacando la toma de decisiones compartida (p. ej., encontrarse a mitad de camino), los encuentros breves y las actividades en espacios públicos cercanos como parques o plazas. En contraste, las narrativas femeninas de ambas regiones se centraron más en la conexión emocional, la comunicación y elementos afectivos como la risa, el contacto físico y la conversación mutua. Entre los rituales comunes se incluyeron salir a tomar café, visitar parques o museos y compartir alimentos. El análisis de LDA confirmó estos patrones regionales y de género, ofreciendo una comprensión más profunda de las estructuras narrativas dominantes y sus tonos emocionales. La saturación temática indicó la persistencia de expectativas heteronormativas, aunque en las narrativas oaxaqueñas aparecieron más signos de negociación y agencia compartida, y las mujeres, en general, mostraron una mayor variabilidad en agencia y expresión emocional. Esta investigación contribuye a la comprensión de

^a Corresponding author, National Autonomous University of Mexico | Psychology Faculty | Mexico City | México, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7761-8069>, Email: melissa.meraz@psicologia.unam.mx

^b Autonomous University of Hidalgo State | Psychology Area | Pachuca- Hidalgo | Hidalgo, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7348-8113>, Email: rgarciac@uaeh.edu.mx

^c Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca | Anthropology Department | Oaxaca-Oaxaca | México, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3499-0009>, Email: curiel.iis.uabjo@gmail.com

los guiones románticos dentro de contextos culturales y educativos específicos, integrando métodos cualitativos y computacionales para revelar las construcciones simbólicas de la intimidad y el género.

Palabras Clave:

Guiones de género, Narrativas románticas, Estudiantes universitarios, Diferencias culturales, Análisis de texto

INTRODUCTION

Romantic encounters have long served as a space where gender roles are enacted, reinforced, and, more recently, reconfigured. Traditionally, dating has been structured around heteronormative expectations that assign active roles to men and passive roles to women. However, recent sociocultural changes—including movements toward gender equality and the recognition of sexual diversity—have challenged these norms, fostering new dynamics in dating interactions.

Within this context, behavioral scripts serve as cognitive frameworks that guide social interaction, particularly in romantic settings. These scripts, shaped by prevailing gender norms, carry significant implications for how agency, responsibility, and power are perceived. The present study builds on seminal research regarding dating scripts, particularly the work of Rose and Frieze on young singles in the United States.^{1,2} Their research identified standardized sequences of first-date behaviors—such as who initiates, who pays, and how intimacy progresses—which have since served as a primary reference point for subsequent studies in the field. By adapting and regionalizing this framework to the Mexican context, our study examines how these scripts are enacted and negotiated among university students in Mexico City and Oaxaca. Specifically, we highlight continuities with prior findings, culturally specific variations, and unique script elements distinctive to our culture.

TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN DATING

Behavioral scripts, based on Simon and Gagnon's script theory,³ are cognitive and normative structures that guide social interaction by providing culturally shared expectations regarding "who does what, when, and how." These scripts operate as social templates that individuals employ to determine appropriate behaviors and routines across various contexts.^{4,5} Gender scripts are a specific type of behavioral script that organizes these expectations along gendered lines, prescribing initiative, passivity, and responsibility differently for men and women.⁶⁻⁸ In dating contexts, these frameworks are often referred to as romantic scripts, described as structured sequences of actions and meanings that organize courtship and intimacy.^{1,9} Importantly, romantic scripts do not necessarily imply a long-term relationship as their outcome; rather, they regulate everyday dating practices—such as selecting a location, engaging in conversation, managing costs, or initiating physical contact—that both reflect and reproduce broader gender ideologies.

Masculine scripts typically entail taking initiative: inviting the partner, planning the outing, navigating public spaces (e.g., driving or opening doors), initiating physical contact or sexual behavior, and covering expenses.^{10,11} Men also frequently assume responsibility for transportation—such as escorting their partner home—or providing small gifts.¹ These practices remain prevalent, even within modern dating contexts.¹²⁻¹⁴

In contrast, feminine scripts emphasize passivity and receptivity. Women are expected to prioritize their physical appearance, accept invitations, and respond rather than initiate. These scripts may involve waiting to be transported, receiving flowers or gifts, and reacting to the man's plans or sexual advances.^{9,15,16} Consequently, such scripts reinforce asymmetrical power structures in which men act as agents and women as recipients of action. Moreover, when women deviate from these norms—for instance, by initiating a date—they are often perceived as more sexually available or assertive, which may invite misinterpretation or social judgment.^{17,18}

Gender scripts are reinforced through family, peers, and media representations, becoming deeply embedded with broader cultural expectations.¹⁹⁻²¹ These traditional roles shape sexual perceptions and behaviors, frequently positioning men as initiators and women as gatekeepers of intimacy.

CONTEMPORARY SHIFTS AND PERSISTENT NORMS

Despite persistent stereotypes, dating dynamics are evolving. Women increasingly initiate dates, share costs, and assert decision-making power—shifts that reflect a move toward relational equity and mutual negotiation. Likewise, men are rethinking traditional masculinity, rejecting behaviors rooted in control or emotional suppression.⁸ Collaborative practices, such as shared expenses and joint planning, signal broader cultural transformations.^{6,7}

Nonetheless, symbolic expectations continue to shape dating. Romantic fashion, for instance, is a key element of self-presentation and impression management.²²⁻²⁴ Clothing communicates identity, attraction, and social cues aligned with gendered scripts.²⁵ These expectations operate bidirectionally: individuals dress both to express themselves and to appeal to partners, while simultaneously projecting preferences for how others should appear.^{26,27}

Romantic scripts remain culturally embedded, particularly in heterosexual interactions where male dominance and female submission persist.²⁸ These roles influence how individuals perceive and experience relationships over time, thereby reinforcing inequalities and shaping long-term relational

dynamics. Even as discourse around gender equality progresses, implicit biases continue to sustain these traditional dynamics in subtle yet powerful ways.²⁹

Feminist cultural critiques have highlighted the emotional labor women perform in romantic interactions and the limitations imposed by normative heterosexuality, which often restricts female agency and emotional expression.³⁰⁻³² Research on romantic scripts frequently relies on self-reported perceptions and the reconstructions of past experiences to assess common dating behaviors.³³

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

In Mexico, most research has focused on gender roles within family life, sexuality, or marital dynamics.³⁴⁻³⁶ However, very few studies have specifically examined dating scripts. A notable exception is a 2010 study involving 214 university students³⁷, which highlighted the persistence of gendered expectations in courtship. Building on this limited empirical base, the present research explores how romantic scripts are enacted across distinct regional and cultural settings.

In the field of international research, Rose and Frieze^{1,2} and Eaton and Rose^{38,39} established standardized categories of first-date behaviors that have been widely adapted in subsequent instruments. More recently, Timmermans and De Caluwé⁴⁰ developed the Tinder Motives Scale to examine contemporary digital dating practices. These studies reflect broader cultural dynamics in which traditional roles—such as male provision and initiative—remain valued, while female passivity is reinforced. Such roles extend beyond dating, permeating workplace expectations and domestic hierarchies.

This study aims to examine the ways in which gendered romantic scripts are expressed, negotiated, and reconfigured within university dating contexts across two distinct Mexican regions. Through a comparative analysis of real and ideal narratives, the research explores how masculine and feminine roles are enacted in romantic interactions and the extent to which sociocultural dynamics influence these performances. Guided by this objective, the study addresses the following research question: How are masculine and feminine roles enacted, negotiated, and reconfigured in romantic dating interactions among university students in Mexico City and Oaxaca? Based on existing literature, we hypothesized that traditional gendered scripts—particularly male initiative and provision—would remain prevalent; however, we also anticipated that women's ideal narratives and regional variations (specifically in Oaxaca) would reveal emerging forms of shared agency and negotiation.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 80 undergraduate students participated in this study (40 women and 40 men), equally divided between Mexico City and Oaxaca.

In Mexico City, female participants had a mean age of 19.5 years (SD = 1.53), and five reported being in a romantic

relationship at the time of the study. Male participants had a mean age of 19.45 years (SD=1.46), with seven indicating that they were currently in a relationship. All participants were actively enrolled students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM), pursuing degrees in psychology, law, or medicine.

In Oaxaca, female participants had a mean age of 19.25 years (SD=1.48), with nine reporting being in a romantic relationship. Male participants had a mean age of 19.7 years (SD=1.92), with six indicating they were currently in a relationship. These participants were students at the Universidad Autónoma Benito Juárez de Oaxaca (Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, UABJO), also enrolled in psychology, law, or medicine programs.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory, cross-sectional design. Data collection and analysis were conducted over a period from March 2023 to December 2024, during the first author's sabbatical.

Participant Selection and Regional Comparison

Participants were recruited from undergraduate programs in psychology, law, and medicine, as these fields provide access to large, diverse student cohorts. Furthermore, these disciplines are representative of professional paths where gender norms and role expectations are either explicitly or implicitly transmitted. The inclusion of both Mexico City and Oaxaca was deliberate: Mexico City represents a highly urbanized, cosmopolitan, and institutionally structured environment, whereas Oaxaca, as a regional capital with more communal and interactional cultural dynamics, offers a contrasting socio-cultural context. Comparing these two populations allowed for an examination of how gendered romantic scripts are enacted within distinct urban and cultural settings, highlighting not only generalizable patterns but also region-specific nuances that would remain obscured in a single-site study.

Contextualization in Time and Space

This research was conducted during 2024, coinciding with an expansion of gender-focused curricular initiatives across several Mexican universities, including UNAM. Situating the study within this timeframe captures dating narratives at a moment when discourses on gender equality and diversity are increasingly prominent in public debate and, in some cases, institutionalized within undergraduate training. The selection of Mexico City and Oaxaca reflects their contrasting sociocultural and educational environments: Mexico City as a vast, urban, and highly institutionalized setting, and Oaxaca as a regional capital characterized by more communal and interactional cultural dynamics. Focusing on university students in psychology, law, and medicine further grounds the study in professional fields where normative discourses regarding gender and interpersonal roles are especially salient.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via institutional email and invited to complete an online form. They were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were then prompted to narrate two distinct romantic experiences: a description of their first actual romantic date and a narrative of their ideal romantic date.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of an open-ended survey designed to elicit detailed narrative responses. Participants were instructed to describe (a) the first actual romantic date they experienced, including specific actions and events, and (b) their ideal romantic date, specifying at least seven discrete actions from the initial proposal to the conclusion of the encounter.

Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional ethics committee and was supported by funding from the Dirección General de Asuntos del Personal Académico (DGAPA-UNAM). All data were collected in strict accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

Data Analysis

Word Count, Narrative Structure, And Originality Rate

To test for potential differences in linguistic features across region (Mexico City vs. Oaxaca), gender (men vs. women), and narrative type (ideal vs. actual date), we employed the Aligned Rank Transform (ART) procedure. This method allows for factorial analyses of non-normally distributed data within standard ANOVA frameworks. Separate ART models were conducted for each linguistic outcome variable: total word count (tokens), number of sentences, number of unique word types, and originality rate (type-token ratio). Post hoc pairwise comparisons were adjusted using Tukey's HSD method. All analyses were conducted in R using the ARTool and emmeans packages.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was selected for thematic analysis as it is particularly well-suited for identifying latent patterns in medium-sized textual corpora, such as the dating narratives collected in this study. Unlike manual coding, LDA allows for the systematic detection of co-occurring terms across narratives, providing a probabilistic model of thematic clusters that may not be immediately apparent to human coders. Furthermore, compared with alternative topic modeling techniques (e.g., Non-negative Matrix Factorization), LDA has been widely validated in the social sciences, offering interpretable topics that can be meaningfully aligned with qualitative thematic analysis.⁴¹ This dual capacity—capturing emergent lexical structures while remaining compatible with

theory-driven interpretation—renders LDA a robust and appropriate method for analyzing narrative data that bridge personal experience and culturally shared scripts.

Script-Based Behavioral Coding

Narratives were analyzed to identify romantic date behaviors based on 47 scripts previously documented in the literature.^{9,34} For each narrative, trained coders annotated the occurrence of these behaviors and identified the agent performing the action, specifying whether it was the male character, the female character, or both. Following established research conventions, a behavior was coded as part of the romantic script only if it was explicitly mentioned in participants' narratives and occurred in at least 25% of the accounts, regardless of its attribution to "him," "her," or "both".

In coding the narratives, we drew on previously documented categories of dating scripts from Rose and Frieze^{1,2} and Eaton and Rose^{38,39} as a comparative framework. However, to avoid imposing potentially outdated models, we complemented this deductive approach with inductive coding, allowing new scripts to emerge directly from the participants' accounts. These included practices specific to the contemporary Mexican university context, such as going out for coffee, eating ice cream, taking photos with mobile phones, window shopping, or sitting together on a bench or on the grass. This dual strategy ensured that the analysis accounted for both the continuity of long-standing dating behaviors and the cultural and temporal specificity of current romantic practices in Mexico City and Oaxaca.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

To explore the underlying structure of dating narratives, we employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a probabilistic topic modeling algorithm widely used to detect latent themes in textual data.⁴¹ The analysis was conducted using the topic models package in R, enabling the identification of the five most salient topics in each corpus, categorized by region (Mexico City, Oaxaca), gender (men vs. women), and date type (actual vs. ideal). These topics were derived based on the frequency and co-occurrence of terms within each set of narratives.

Following this computational stage, the identified topics were reorganized and interpreted through qualitative thematic analysis, drawing on specific narrative segments and theoretical literature regarding romantic scripts and gender roles. This two-stage approach integrated computational modeling with theory-driven interpretation, enhancing both the analytical depth and the cultural specificity of the findings.

RESULTS

Word Count, Narrative Structure, and Originality Rate

To explore potential differences in lexical diversity and narrative construction across regions, genders, and types of romantic experiences, we computed the average number of

tokens (total word count), complete sentences, and unique word types (lemmas) per narrative. Furthermore, we calculated the originality rate—defined as the type-token ratio (TTR)—which serves as a standardized index of lexical diversity.

As shown in Table 1, narratives from participants in Mexico City were generally more extensive than those from Oaxaca; specifically, Mexico City women in the ideal date condition produced the longest narratives on average (M=340.15 tokens). Notably, the highest lexical diversity—reflected in the originality rate—was observed among Oaxaca men in the actual date condition (M=63.99%), despite their narratives being the shortest (M=181.2 tokens). This finding indicates that narrative length does not necessarily correspond to lexical richness.

In both regions, female participants generally produced more tokens and unique word types than male participants. However, male participants—particularly in the Oaxaca actual condition—demonstrated higher lexical efficiency, conveying a diverse vocabulary within fewer words. These patterns highlight subtle regional and gender differences in narrative expression, suggesting that cultural and experiential factors may shape how individuals construct and articulate romantic memories.

Table 1. *Word Count, Narrative Structure, and Originality Rate*

| Group | Tokens | Sentences | Unique Types | Originality Rates (%) |
|---------------|--------|-----------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Mexico City | | | | |
| Ideal Female | 340.15 | 6.85 | 177.4 | 59.04 % |
| Actual Female | 270.75 | 6.3 | 150.85 | 62.61 % |
| Ideal Male | 259.15 | 7.95 | 148.7 | 62.36 % |
| Actual Male | 292.1 | 7.9 | 164.15 | 59.72 % |
| Oaxaca | | | | |
| Ideal Female | 234.25 | 6.6 | 137.55 | 61.69 % |
| Actual Female | 209.65 | 5.85 | 121.95 | 62.16 % |
| Ideal Male | 227.2 | 5 | 127.65 | 62.62 % |
| Actual Male | 181.2 | 4.25 | 108.7 | 63.99 % |

Note. Tokens=total word count; Sentences=number of complete sentences; Unique Types=non-repeating word forms (lemmas). Originality rate represents the Type-Token Ratio (TR) used as an index of lexical diversity within the narratives.

Statistical Analysis of Linguistic Features in Romantic Narratives

To examine the influence of Region (Mexico City vs. Oaxaca), Gender (Women vs. Men), and Type of Date (Ideal vs. Actual) on linguistic features of romantic narratives, we employed the Aligned Rank Transform (ART) procedure, which is suitable for factorial designs that do not meet parametric assumptions. Separate ART models were fitted for each dependent variable: Tokens, Unique Word Types, Sentences, and Originality. Results from the ART ANOVAs and post hoc comparisons (Tukey-adjusted) revealed no statistically significant

differences across any combination of Region, Gender, or Type of Date for the variables analyzed. Estimated marginal means and pairwise contrasts yielded p-values above conventional thresholds (all $p > 0.05$), indicating comparable linguistic complexity and narrative length across all groups. These findings suggest that the quantity and lexical diversity of narratives did not vary meaningfully by gender, region, or narrative type, despite potential expectations based on sociocultural or gendered discourse patterns.

Script-Based Behavioral Coding

Tables 2 and 3 present the frequency and distribution of dating script categories identified in ideal and actual romantic narratives from university students in Mexico City

Scripts were coded for both men and women, capturing symbolic, spatial, emotional, and logistical elements. The first value indicates the number of participants referencing each script, while the parentheses show the total number of mentions. A script was considered “common” if referenced by 25% or more of the participants (≥ 5 files), regardless of its attribution to “him”, “her”, or “both.” In cases where only one condition met this criterion (e.g., exclusively within women’s narratives or only in the ideal date condition), the script was nonetheless included in the analysis with a clarifying note.

Women’s narratives in Mexico City revealed a strong emphasis on emotional and interactional elements (Table 2). Most common scripts included “talking about many things” (65 mentions), “going out for coffee or food” (40), and “walking” (26), pointing to a relational framing of the romantic experience. Frequent mentions of hugging, laughing, sharing food, and kissing suggest that women’s accounts prioritized affective depth, verbal intimacy, and mutual connection. Interestingly, ideal scripts included slightly more references to meeting at a midpoint and being picked up—indicating nuanced shifts in agency within traditional norms. These patterns support the idea that emotional expression and reciprocal communication remain central to feminine romantic scripts.

Men’s narratives, on the other hand, leaned toward structural and spatial organization (Table 3). While “talking about many things” dominated with 80 mentions, it was closely followed by “going out to eat or for coffee” (42) and “walking” (32), emphasizing activity-based and environment-focused dating experiences. Furthermore, the recurrent mention of picking up a partner and choosing the venue reinforces traditional masculine roles of logistical control and initiative. Payment and transportation roles were also more prevalent, indicating adherence to provider-oriented scripts. Although ideal narratives introduced more relational elements—such as listening to music or kissing—the overall structure suggests that men continue to perform traditional masculine roles rooted in planning, movement, and the navigation of public spaces.

Women’s narratives in Oaxaca combined emotional expressiveness with spatial flexibility (Table 4). Common elements included “talking about many things” (59 mentions), “going out for coffee or food” (38), and affectionate behaviours

such as kissing, hugging, and laughter. In idealized narratives, women showed a strong preference for midpoint meetings (17 mentions), museum visits, and park outings—suggesting a desire for egalitarian mobility and shared experiences. Notably, women acknowledged initiating the date in both actual and ideal contexts, with two mentions of female-led invitations and one instance of mutual initiation, indicating a degree of agency that, while present, showed distinct variability compared to the patterns observed in Mexico City.

Table 2. Dating Script Categories among Women in Mexico City—Actual and Ideal Romantic Narratives

| Script | Women CDMX | |
|---|-----------------|------------------|
| | Ideal n = 20 | Actual n = 20 |
| 1. Asking someone out | | |
| 1.1 He | 10(10) | 12(12) |
| 1.2 She | 1(1) | 3(3) |
| 1.3 Both | | 3(3) |
| 2. Accepting the invitation | | |
| 2.1 She | 2(2) | 6(6) |
| 3. Talk via social media/ beforehand | 8(8) | 8(10) |
| 4. Choosing where to go | | |
| 4.1 He | 5(5) | 2(2) |
| 4.2 Both | 9(10) | 2(2) |
| 4.3 She | | 3(3) |
| 5. Pick her up at home | 8(8) | 5(5) |
| 6. Meet at a midpoint | 5(6) | 10(10) |
| 7. Talking about many things | 16(29) | 18(36) |
| 8. Walking | 10(12) | 10(14) |
| 9. Eating ice cream | 10(10) | 5(5) |
| 10. Sharing food | 2(2) | 5(5) |
| 11. Physical contact – hugging, touching | 8(9) | 7(7) |
| 12. He brings a gift or detail | 2(2) | 2(2) |
| 13. Going out to eat / coffee | 18(21) | 15(19) |
| 14. Club/ karaoke/movie | 8(8) | 5(5) |
| 15. Museum / Mall | 7(7) | 6(8) |
| 16. Park/picnic | 8(9) | 5(5) |
| 17. Sitting on the grass or a bench | 5(5) | 6(7) |
| 18. Being kind and pleasant | | 5(5) |
| 19. Taking photos | 1(1) | 5(6) |
| 20. Go window shopping | 2(2) | 5(5) |
| 21. Listening to music | 4(4) | 3(4) |
| 22. Laughing | 3(3) | 4(5) |
| 23. Kissing | 5(6) | 6(10) |
| 24. Paying | | |
| 24.1 He | 5(5) | 5(5) |
| 24.2 She | 1(1) | 2(2) |
| 24.3 Both | 1(1) | 2(2) |
| 25. Returning | | |
| 25.1 Accompany her home | 11(11) | 4(4) |
| 25.2 He returns home | 1(1) | 2(2) |
| 25.3 Both go home | 4(4) | 6(6) |
| 25.4 Accompany her to transport | | 6(6) |
| 26. Agreeing to go out again | 8(8) | 5(5) |
| 27. Saying goodbye | 4(4) | 4(4) |

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| 28. Talking on the phone afterwards | 3(3) | 5(5) |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|

Note. Several categories were adapted from previous studies on dating scripts.^{1,2,9,16,38,39} Additional categories (e.g., taking photos, window shopping, listening to music, laughing, being kind) emerged inductively from participants’ narratives in this study. Values represent the number of participants followed by total mentions in parentheses.

Table 3. Dating Script Categories among Men in Mexico City—Actual and Ideal Romantic Narratives and the total Mexico City sample

| Script | Men CDMX | | Total n=80 |
|---|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Ideal n=20 | Actual n=20 | |
| 1. Asking someone out | | | |
| 1.1 He | 14(14) | 9(9) | |
| 1.2 She | 1(1) | 2(2) | |
| 1.3 Both | | 6(6) | 61(61) |
| 2. Accepting the invitation | | | |
| 2.1 She | 4(4) | 7(7) | |
| 2.2 He | | 1(1) | 20(20) |
| 3. Talk via social media/beforehand | 5(5) | 10(10) | 31(33) |
| 4. Choosing where to go | | | |
| 4.1 He | 6(6) | 2(2) | |
| 4.2 Both | 2(2) | 8(9) | |
| 4.3 She | 1(1) | 1(1) | 41(43) |
| 5. Pick her up at home | 7(7) | 7(8) | 27(28) |
| 6. Meet at a midpoint | 8(10) | 6(6) | 29(32) |
| 7. Talking about many things | 19(39) | 18(41) | 71(145) |
| 8. Walking | 9(9) | 12(23) | 41(58) |
| 9. Eating ice cream | 5(5) | 2(3) | 22(23) |
| 10. Sharing food | 5(5) | 3(3) | 15(15) |
| 11. Physical contact (hugging, touching) | 9(12) | 8(12) | 32(40) |
| 12. He brings a gift or detail | 5(5) | 2(2) | 11(11) |
| 13. Going out to eat / coffee | 15(16) | 19(26) | 67(82) |
| 14. Club/ karaoke/movie | 6(7) | 5(6) | 24(26) |
| 15. Museum/ Mall | 4(5) | 7(10) | 24(30) |
| 16. Park/picnic | 9(9) | 5(8) | 27(31) |
| 17. Sitting on the grass or a bench | 3(3) | 9(10) | 23(25) |
| 18. Being kind and pleasant | 1(2) | 1(1) | 7(8) |
| 19. Taking photos | 3(3) | 2(2) | 11(12) |
| 20. Go window shopping | 1(1) | 3(4) | 11(12) |
| 21. Listening to music | 5(6) | 2(2) | 14(16) |
| 22. Laughing | 8(9) | 6(7) | 21(24) |
| 23. Kissing | 5(5) | 5(9) | 21(30) |
| 24. Paying | | | |
| 24.1 He | 3(4) | 3(4) | |
| 24.2 She | 1(2) | 2(2) | |
| 24.3 Both | 2(2) | 1(1) | 28(31) |
| 25. Returning | | | |
| 25.1 Accompany her home | 10(10) | 7(7) | |
| 25.2 He returns home | 1(1) | 5(5) | |
| 25.3 Both go home | 3(3) | 7(7) | |
| 25.4 Accompany her to transport | 3(3) | 3(3) | 73(73) |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------|-------|--------|
| 26. Agreeing to go out again | 4(4) | 3(3) | 20(20) |
| 27. Saying goodbye | 7(7) | 9(10) | 24(25) |
| 28. Talking on the phone afterwards | 3(3) | | 11(11) |

Note. Several categories were adapted from previous studies.^{1,2,9,16,38,39} Additional categories emerged inductively from participants' narratives in this study. Values represent the number of participants followed by total mentions in parentheses.

Table 4. Dating Script Categories among Women in Oaxaca – Actual and Ideal Romantic Narratives

| Script | Women Oaxaca | |
|--|--------------|-------------|
| | Ideal n=20 | Actual n=20 |
| 1. Asking someone out | | |
| 1.1 He | 17(17) | 16(16) |
| 1.2 She | 2(2) | 1(1) |
| 1.3 Both | | 1(1) |
| 2. Accepting the invitation | | |
| 2.1 She | 3(3) | 6(6) |
| 3. Talk via social media or beforehand | 6(7) | 5(5) |
| 4. Choosing where to go | | |
| 4.1 He | 6(7) | 4(4) |
| 4.2 Both | 7(7) | 3(3) |
| 4.3 She | | 2(2) |
| 5. Pick her up at home | 4(5) | 7(7) |
| 6. Meet at a midpoint or at the place | 9(10) | 7(7) |
| 7. Talking about many things | 18(24) | 18(35) |
| 8. Walking | 8(8) | 8(12) |
| 9. Eating ice cream | 2(2) | 7(8) |
| 10. Sharing food | 5(5) | 2(3) |
| 11. Physical contact (hugging, touching) | 7(10) | 8(11) |
| 12. Going out to eat / coffee | 17(21) | 13(17) |
| 13. Club/ karaoke/movie | 5(6) | 6(7) |
| 14. Museum / Mall | 6(6) | 7(7) |
| 15. Park/picnic | 10(10) | 5(5) |
| 16. Sitting on the grass or a bench | 1(2) | 6(6) |
| 17. Laughing | 8(9) | 7(8) |
| 18. Kissing | 7(10) | 7(8) |
| 19. Paying | | |
| 19.1 He | 5(5) | 4(4) |
| 19.2 She | | 1(1) |
| 19.3 Both | 5(5) | 4(4) |
| 20. Returning | | |
| 20.1 Accompany her home | 8(8) | 7(8) |
| 20.2 He returns home | 3(3) | 2(2) |
| 20.3 Both go home | 3(3) | 6(6) |
| 20.4 Accompany her to transport | 1(1) | 2(2) |
| 21. Agreeing to go out again | 4(4) | 4(4) |
| 22. Saying goodbye | 4(4) | 8(8) |
| 23. Talking on the phone afterwards | 2(2) | 1(1) |
| 24. Dress up and get ready for the date | 7(7) | 3(3) |

Note. Several categories were adapted from previous studies.^{1,2,9,16,38,39} Additional categories emerged inductively. Values represent the number of participants followed by total mentions in parentheses.

Table 5. Dating Script Categories among Men in Oaxaca – Actual and Ideal Romantic Narratives and the total Oaxaca sample

| Script | Men Oaxaca | | Total n=80 |
|--|------------|-------------|------------|
| | Ideal n=20 | Actual n=20 | |
| 1. Asking someone out | | | |
| 1.1 He | 16(17) | 13(13) | |
| 1.2 She | 1(1) | 2(2) | |
| 1.3 Both | 1(1) | 1(1) | 71(72) |
| 2. Accepting the invitation | | | |
| 2.1 She | 2(2) | 5(5) | |
| 2.2 He | | 1(1) | 17(17) |
| 3. Talk via social media or beforehand | 9(9) | 10(10) | 30(31) |
| 4. Choosing where to go | | | |
| 4.1 He | 7(7) | 1(1) | |
| 4.2 Both | 10(10) | 6(6) | |
| 4.3 She | 1(1) | | 47(48) |
| 5. Pick her up at home | 6(6) | 4(4) | 21(22) |
| 6. Meet at a midpoint or at the place | 5(5) | 2(2) | 23(24) |
| 7. Talking about many things | 17(28) | 18(28) | 71(115) |
| 8. Walking | 8(13) | 5(5) | 25(38) |
| 9. Eating ice cream | 4(4) | 5(5) | 18(19) |
| 10. Sharing food | 3(3) | 1(1) | 11(12) |
| 11. Physical contact (hugging, touching) | 6(6) | 2(2) | 23(29) |
| 12. Going out to eat / coffee | 16(24) | 14(18) | 60(80) |
| 13. Club/ karaoke/movie | 2(2) | 4(4) | 17(19) |
| 14. Museum / Mall | 3(3) | 6(7) | 22(23) |
| 15. Park/picnic | 6(8) | 6(6) | 27(29) |
| 16. Sitting on the grass or a bench | 1(1) | 3(3) | 11(12) |
| 17. Laughing | 5(5) | 2(2) | 22(24) |
| 18. Kissing | 6(6) | 4(4) | 24(28) |
| 19. Paying | | | |
| 19.1 He | 2(2) | 2(3) | |
| 19.2 She | | | |
| 19.3 Both | 1(1) | 1(1) | 25(26) |
| 20. Returning | | | |
| 20.1 Accompany her home | 12(13) | 8(8) | |
| 20.2 He returns home | 3(3) | 6(6) | |
| 20.3 Both go home | 4(4) | 4(4) | |
| 20.4 Accompany her to transport | 3(3) | 3(3) | 75(77) |
| 21. Agreeing to go out again | 5(5) | | 13(13) |
| 22. Saying goodbye | 3(4) | 6(6) | 21(22) |
| 23. Talking on the phone afterwards | 5(5) | 5(5) | 13(13) |

| | | |
|---|------|--------|
| 24. Dress up and get ready for the date | 4(4) | 14(14) |
|---|------|--------|

Note. Several categories were adapted from previous studies.^{1,2,9,16,38,39} Additional categories emerged inductively. Values represent the number of participants, followed by total mentions in parentheses

Men’s romantic narratives from Oaxaca revealed a blend of traditional masculine behaviors and emergent patterns of collaborative interaction (Table 5). The most frequent scripts included “talking about many things,” which appeared consistently across actual and ideal narratives with 28 mentions in each, reinforcing conversational intimacy as a central element in male dating accounts. Similarly, “going out to eat or for coffee” appeared in 24 ideal and 18 actual mentions, indicating the importance of food-sharing rituals and public social venues.

While initiatory actions were still predominantly attributed to men (17 mentions of “he invites” in ideal narratives, 13 in actual ones), the presence of shared decision-making scripts—particularly regarding the choice of location (10 ideal, 6 actual)—suggests a growing openness to negotiation in early romantic stages. Meeting at a midpoint was referenced in both narrative types, supporting the idea that men in Oaxaca are navigating spatial logistics with increasing flexibility. Emotionally expressive behaviors such as hugging, kissing, laughing, and dressing up also appeared across narratives; these may indicate aspirational shifts in how male participants engage with vulnerability and relational performance. Finally, payment behaviors remained relatively low and diversified, with both actual and ideal accounts showing instances of shared and female contributions alongside male provision.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

To explore thematic patterns in the ideal dating narratives of university women in Mexico City, we applied Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) using the topic models package in R. Following standard preprocessing procedures—including the removal of punctuation, stop words, and common names—we extracted five latent topics from the twenty transcripts of each group (Table 6).

Most narratives clustered around Topics 4 and 5, suggesting a strong emphasis on structured romantic experiences and meaningful emotional connection. This automated analysis complements qualitative behavioral coding by revealing consistent lexical and experiential structures in how participants envision an ideal romantic encounter (Table 6).

Most narratives in this group clustered around Topics 3 and 4, reflecting common themes such as food, movement, and emotional connection. This automated analysis supports the qualitative coding by revealing consistent lexical and experiential patterns across participants (Table 7).

Table 6. Latent Topics and Thematic Labels—Mexico City Women (Ideal Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|---|---|
| 1 | Place, time, home, do, park, while, together, some | Shared Public Moments (spatial presence, walking, being together) |
| 2 | Girl, boy, says, go out, person, place, well, some | Interpersonal Framing (gender roles, interaction, dating dynamics) |
| 3 | You’ll say, I’ll say, night, then, see, music, smile, while | Flirtation and Emotional Tone (expressivity, anticipation, mood) |
| 4 | Place, date, person, home, after, once, there, time | Structure of the Ideal Date (sequentiality, setting, transitions) |
| 5 | Things, both, we talked, walked, after, house, path, day | Connection and Dialogue (verbal intimacy, bonding through walking) |

Table 7. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels—Mexico City Women (Actual Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|--|---|
| 1 | Said, told, then, there, we walked, day, only, metro | Narration, Telling, and Movement (verbal accounts, transitions, urban transit, places visited) |
| 2 | Music, people, bachata, then, like this, day, dance | Atmosphere and Social Setting (shared activities, dancing) |
| 3 | Home, eat, things, then, see, there, plaza, while | Food and Shared Space (eating, commercial spaces, domesticity) |
| 4 | Home, after, go out, night, day, car, afternoon, while | Going Out and Routine (temporal order, transportation, timing) |
| 5 | There, we talked, then, house, later, see each other, two, day | Connection and Intimacy (verbal dialogue, meeting, relational closeness) |

Most narratives clustered around Topics 2 and 3, revealing a strong focus on idealized sequences of interaction, emotional anticipation, and domestic intimacy. This automated analysis supports the qualitative interpretations by surfacing recurrent discursive structures and imagined emotional dynamics that frame the ideal dating experience for male participants (Table 8).

Most narratives clustered around Topics 1, 4, and 5, showing a focus on domestic intimacy, movement through space, and food as a relational connector (Table 9). This automated analysis reveals how men’s actual romantic experiences often take place in private or familiar spaces such as restaurants. Furthermore, the narratives highlight the persistence of traditional gender roles, specifically the expectation of returning women to their

homes after the date. These experiences are characterized by casual timing and non-verbal transitions, aligning with cultural dating routines in urban contexts.

Table 8. Latent Topics and Thematic Labels–Mexico City Men (Ideal Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|---|--|
| 1 | Date, moment, time, home, place, while, kiss, speaker | Idealized Date Elements (romantic setting, music, intimacy) |
| 2 | After, person, place, date, day, we would go, time, again | Social Rhythm and Anticipation (sequences, connection) |
| 3 | Date, home, once, moment, ideal, being, after | Structure and Expectation (norms, imagined routines) |
| 4 | Person, date, have, two, place, always, moment, form | Relational Framing (connection with the other, shape of bond) |
| 5 | Place, eat, date, I'd say, go out, do, then | Activities and Initiative (going out, food, action) |

Table 9. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels–Mexico City Men (Actual Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|---|--|
| 1 | Home, date, while, movie, park, time, place, pleasant | Domestic Setting and Comfort (home, movies, routine spaces) |
| 2 | Like this, we continued, day, talking, being, some, home, eat | Flow of Interaction (conversation, time flow, connection) |
| 3 | Home, day, while, museum, moment, I said, path, school | Cultural and Shared Experience (museum, school, walking) |
| 4 | Home, alone, like this, walk, arrive, see each other, girl, place | Encounter and Movement (solitude, transitions, meeting) |
| 5 | Eat, after, some, day, home, place, night, two | Food and Time Together (eating, evening, casual bonding) |

Women’s ideal dates in Oaxaca (Table 10) are imagined as mutual, emotionally balanced experiences, often structured around time flow (Topics 2 and 4), shared meals (Topics 1 and 5), and personal compatibility (Topic 3). These narratives describe dates that progress from public spaces to private ones –culminating in the return home– reflecting a cultural preference for a rhythm that begins with activity and transitions into intimacy.

Actual dating experiences among women in Oaxaca (Table 11) tend to be more contained and temporally brief, often revolving around nearby outings or home visits. The emotional tone fluctuates between hope and reflection, with a clear emphasis on storytelling and time perception. As shown in Topics 3 and

4, watching movies and sharing personal stories are key activities that foster connection within these narratives.

Ideal dates described by men in Oaxaca (Table 12) combine emotional effort and structured planning. Across topics, food, walking, and spending time in public settings –such as parks and cafes– lead to potential private moments. The narratives prioritize showing care (Topic 1), testing compatibility (Topics 3 and 5), and balancing activity with connection.

Table 10. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels – Oaxaca Women (Ideal Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|--|---|
| 1 | Date, place, like this, day, both, eating, doing, paying | Planning and Reciprocity (Balanced roles, anticipation, mutual engagement) |
| 2 | Plaza, like this, let’s go, paying, eating, day, home, while | Flow and Public Outing (Movement, shared meals, dynamic pacing) |
| 3 | Date, place, some, person, being like this, both, could | Ideal Connection and Potentiality (Openness, emotional potential) |
| 4 | Date, two, place, time, eat, after, arrive, home | Sequential Intimacy (Progression from public to private spaces, such as returning home after date) |
| 5 | Date, person, eating, day, would like, home, like, together | Desired Closeness and Enjoyment (Pleasure, compatibility, domestic setting) |

In Oaxaca, men’s actual dating experiences (Table 13) frequently emphasize the physical and emotional transitions involved, ranging from movement between locations to reflections on shared dialogue or feelings. A robust narrative structure is evident (Topics 4 and 5), which often culminates in introspection or decision-making. Furthermore, a pragmatic dimension appears in Topics 2 and 3, where the romantic experience is shaped by familiar, affordable, or easily accessible venues.

Table 11. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels – Oaxaca Women (Actual Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|--|--|
| 1 | Go out, date, day, I think, invite, home, things, cute | Expectations and First Encounters (Uncertainty, emotional tone) |
| 2 | Date, guy, home, things, minutes, park, like this, after | Brief and Localized Encounters (limited time, nearby spaces) |

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|---|--|
| 3 | Movie, watch, home, plaza, person, always, eating, moment | Shared Leisure and Cinema (cinema outings, dining, and moments of connection) |
| 4 | Home, cinema, like this, after, time, I said, movie, said | Narrative Recollection (Speech acts, and retrospective storytelling) |
| 5 | Date, while, hour, each, then, time, home, day | Temporal Structuring (Duration, scheduling, and the rhythm of the date) |

Table 12. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels – Oaxaca Men (Ideal Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|--|--|
| 1 | Person, date, place, day, like this, I'd try, then, eating | Effort and Individual Agency (Intentional planning and mutual discovery) |
| 2 | Date, eating, day, we'd go, home, walking, place, drink | Active Planning and Shared Meals (Movement, dining and spatial comfort) |
| 3 | Person, date, place, to be, interest, some, after, eating | Mutual Interest and Exploration (Compatibility and interpersonal curiosity) |
| 4 | Each, moment, date, day, partner, time, both, park | Romantic Symmetry (Shared presence and emotional reciprocity) |
| 5 | Date, some, place, topic, good, home, after, case | Reflexivity and Comfort (Assessing compatibility and emotional fit) |

Table 13. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels – Oaxaca Men (Actual Scenario)

| Topic | Top Words (Translated) | Thematic Label |
|-------|--|--|
| 1 | Date, person, same, two, to be, well, previous, matter | Reflection and Ambiguity (Internal evaluation and expectations management) |
| 2 | Home, after, date, day, eating, chatting, nearby, park | Domestic and Proximal Contexts (Casual intimacy and accessible spaces) |
| 3 | Home, time, taxi, we spent, restaurant, eating, day, while | Mobility and Logistics (Transportation, coordination, and dining out) |
| 4 | Date, I was, memory, see, arrived, home, I said, final | Retrospective and Closure (Recollection, endings, and emotional weight) |
| 5 | Date, day, moment, after, place, home, while, we decided | Progression and Joint Decision-Making (Relational outcomes and narrative arc) |

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore and compare romantic dating scripts among university students from Mexico City and Oaxaca, focusing on both actual and idealized narratives through a gendered lens. The findings reveal a complex interplay between shared cultural patterns and region-specific nuances regarding gendered expectations, affective practices, and agency across diverse romantic contexts.

These dating scripts reflect not only gendered expectations but also the micro-practices through which everyday intimacy is negotiated and constructed. Shared rituals—such as walking together, sharing meals, or accompanying a partner home—embed intimacy within ordinary routines, thereby linking private emotionality to broader public gender norms.^{23,24,30}

Date Initiation: Hegemonic and Emergent Masculinities

Across both regions, men predominantly took the initiative to invite their partners out, reaffirming the persistence of traditional gender roles that position male agency as normative in romantic interactions.^{13,14} This pattern reflects longstanding gendered romantic scripts wherein men are expected to act and women to respond.^{9,28} However, idealized scripts among women occasionally included shared or female-led initiation, particularly in Oaxaca, indicating subtle yet meaningful shifts toward more egalitarian dynamics.^{38,39} These instances suggest a reconfiguration of dating norms in response to broader cultural transformations surrounding gender equity and subjective agency.²⁵

Digital Preambles and Communication

The inclusion of digital interaction prior to the date (Script 3) was especially salient in men's idealized narratives, highlighting the critical role of messaging platforms and social media in shaping romantic initiation. This digital layer serves more than a pragmatic function; it operates as an affective filter—anticipating mutual interest, managing uncertainty, and allowing for greater control over self-presentation. These mediated exchanges enable individuals to assess compatibility and express interest within the safety of controlled online environments, reflecting broader cultural shifts in romantic scripts toward increased negotiation and personalization.^{19,26-27}

Planning and Mobility: Navigating Urban and Cultural Geographies

In both regions, men frequently selected the venue for the date (Script 4), echoing traditional norms that associate male initiative with the control of public space.^{10,11} However, the option to “meet at a midpoint” (Script 6) was more prevalent in Oaxaca, potentially reflecting urban infrastructure constraints or cultural norms regarding female autonomy.^{19,20} Conversely, picking up a partner at home (Script 5) was more common in Mexico City, a practice possibly linked to social expectations of male protectiveness and chivalric responsibility.^{9,14}

Conversational Intimacy and Affective Reciprocity

“Talking about many things” (Script 7) emerged as one of the most frequent actions across all groups. This aligns with research on emotional labor and the construction of intimacy, where open conversation functions as a primary bonding element. The high prevalence of this script in both actual and idealized narratives highlights its central role in affective connection, suggesting that emotional attunement is a shared value regardless of gender or region. A closer analysis reveals that these conversations frequently encompassed everyday topics—such as academic life, future aspirations, family dynamics, and shared tastes (e.g., music, food, cinema) – as well as more intimate exchanges regarding mutual attraction or relationship expectations. Consequently, conversational intimacy functions as a bridge between casual socializing and the gradual construction of emotional reciprocity.

Embodied and Shared Practices: Walking, Eating, and Laughing

Actions such as walking (Script 8), eating ice cream (Script 9), and laughing (Scripts 17 and 22) were not only prevalent but effectively coded—symbolizing spontaneity, mutual enjoyment, and physical comfort. These practices reflect a form of embodied relationality, resonant with Goffman's²³ theory of performance and front-stage behavior in social encounters.

Physical and Emotional Intimacy

Physical contact (Script 11) and kissing (Scripts 18 and 23) were more frequently mentioned in idealized than actual narratives, particularly among women. This suggests that while desired, such expressions may be regulated in actual contexts by social norms or perceived discomfort. These findings support the framework of Simon and Gagnon³ regarding cultural scripting and the negotiation of desire within the bounds of public acceptability.

Paying and financial roles

Scripts 19 and 24 show that men still predominantly pay, although mentions of shared or female-led payment appear more frequently in idealized narratives. This reflects evolving yet ambivalent notions of gender equity, where economic independence does not consistently translate into egalitarian dating practices. Traditional expectations persist, positioning men as financial providers and linking payment to masculine initiative. Even among financially autonomous women, the act of paying may be negotiated cautiously, shaped by symbolic norms around romantic agency and perceived availability.^{9,17} These dynamics underscore the tension between shifting ideals and entrenched scripts in heterosexual interactions, where male provision continues to be culturally valorized.^{14,28}

Returning and closure rituals

The detailed mentions in the narratives related to returning home after the date (e.g., accompanying her home, saying

goodbye) indicate a concern for emotional closure and physical care. These actions reinforce gendered expectations—men as protectors, women as recipients—yet the inclusion of shared agency (e.g., returning together) suggests a gradual shift move toward mutuality.

Getting ready (Script 24)

The act of dressing up and preparing for the date emerged predominantly in women's idealized narratives, highlighting the internalized gendered labor of self-presentation. This finding resonates with Goffman's²³ theory of performance and impression management, as well as Belk's²² notion of the “extended self,” where clothing and appearance serve as symbolic resources for identity construction. Furthermore, it aligns with empirical studies documenting implicit gendered expectations surrounding grooming and attire in romantic interactions.²⁶

Word Frequency and Topic Modeling Results

In addition to the thematic coding of dating scripts, this study employed lexical analysis and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to examine underlying linguistic and narrative patterns across participants' accounts. These complementary computational approaches revealed salient experiential and emotional structures, highlighting differences in how men and women from Mexico City and Oaxaca conceptualize actual and idealized romantic encounters.

Word Frequency and Symbolic Cues in Romantic Narratives

Word frequency analysis across narratives underscored the importance of spatial, emotional, and interpersonal cues. In men's actual accounts—particularly those from Mexico City—frequent terms such as *casa* (home), *caminar* (walking), *comer* (eating), *lugar* (place), and *película* (movie) suggest a preference for dates that occur in familiar, domestic or semi-private settings. These findings align with masculine dating scripts that emphasize autonomy, control over public space, and low-risk environments.^{11,40} By contrast, women's actual narratives were often characterized by emotionally expressive or relationally focused words such as *nos conocimos* (we met), *me gustó* (I liked him), *platicamos* (we talked), and *nos besamos* (we kissed). This pattern reflects feminine scripts that prioritize verbal intimacy, mutual evaluation, and responsiveness.^{1,9,16}

The comparison between actual and ideal narratives also revealed aspirational shifts. Both men and women in Oaxaca, for example, referenced more aspirational terms like *parque* (park), *museo* (museum), and *helado* (ice cream) –in their ideal accounts, reflecting a desire for public, meaningful, and pleasurable shared experiences. These patterns resonate with symbolic interactionist perspectives, wherein romantic behavior is shaped not only by gender norms but also by aspirational identity construction and culturally embedded expectations.^{3,19,20}

LDA Topic Modeling and Narrative Structures

To complement thematic coding, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was employed to identify underlying patterns in the language used across the actual romantic narratives of men and women in Mexico City and Oaxaca. This computational technique allowed for the discovery of latent structures in discourse, offering insight into the implicit cultural scripts that guide romantic self-presentation expectations.

Shared Themes Across Groups

Several themes emerged consistently across all study groups, particularly those involving shared dining experiences, walking or moving together, and the centrality of conversation. These results resonate with prior research on relational rituals with romantic scripts, where mundane, familiar acts—such as eating or strolling—function as key symbolic markers of intimacy.

For example, both men and women in Mexico City and Oaxaca exhibited topics related to Domestic or Familiar Settings, Cultural or Public Spaces, and Flow of Conversation. However, the semantic and emotional nuances of these topics varied significantly by gender and region. Men in Mexico City frequently utilized pragmatic and spatial terms—such as *house*, *movie*, and *place*—reflecting structured and activity-oriented framings of dates. In contrast, women in Oaxaca more often employed emotionally expressive words like *we talked*, *we laughed*, and *we kissed*, highlighting a focus on affective connection and mutual enjoyment.

Gendered Patterns in Topic Modeling

Male narratives in both cities frequently included spatial and logistical references—terms such as *casa* (home), *caminar* (walking), *comer* (eating), and *lugar* (place)—indicating a narrative structure grounded in movement, timing, and activity. These patterns align with traditional masculine dating scripts that emphasize initiation, planning, and control over public space.^{10,11} In contrast, female narratives clustered around emotionally expressive and relationally focused terms such as *me gustó* (I liked him), *nos conocimos* (we met), and *nos besamos* (we kissed), reflecting a framing of romantic experience centered on connection, verbal intimacy, and mutual evaluation.^{1,9,16} These findings highlight how romantic scripts are shaped by socially constructed gender mandates rather than natural differences. Masculine accounts tended to privilege spatial agency and logistical control, while feminine accounts emphasized emotional resonance and relational attunement. Such patterns reflect cultural expectations situated in specific times and contexts, illustrating how dating interactions reproduce broader social norms surrounding gender.

Regional Differences in Topic Structures

Regional variation also shaped topic distributions. Mexico City narratives, particularly from men, included practical and direct language—emphasizing places, sequences of action, and minimal emotional elaboration. Oaxaca narratives, especially

among women, revealed greater use of metaphorical and emotional expressions, as well as references to nature, cultural landmarks, and community events. These differences may reflect the role of place-based identity and localized norms in shaping dating expectations and scripts.

For instance, topics from Oaxacan women's narratives included shared outings to museums, *parques* (parks), or *ferias* (fairs), and expressions of *sentirse bien* (feeling good) and *conectarse* (connecting). These contrast with Mexico City women's topics, which, while also emotionally rich, featured more references to urban entertainment like movies or cafes, suggesting a different socio-cultural context for emotional bonding.

LDA and the Structure of Actual vs. Ideal Scripts

A comparison between actual and idealized narratives via topic modeling suggests that ideal scripts included more aspirational themes—such as mutual decision-making (*elegimos* [we chose], *fuimos los dos* [we both went]), emotionally meaningful activities (*momentos bonitos* [nice moments], *nos reímos* [we laughed]), and shared agency. These contrasts were especially marked among women, reflecting a gendered gap between experience and desire in romantic encounters.

LDA thus revealed that ideal scripts contained more emotionally cohesive and narratively rich themes, while actual accounts were more fragmented and action-oriented. This supports symbolic interactionist perspectives on romantic behavior, which emphasize the role of cultural expectations and identity work in shaping idealized interpersonal performances. The use of LDA not only corroborated manually coded themes but also extended them by revealing patterns not immediately visible—such as implicit regional tones, shifts in affective language, and narrative coherence. As a method, topic modeling proved especially useful for mapping large corpora of qualitative data and triangulating traditional coding strategies, enabling a multilayered understanding of how gender, culture, and geography shape romantic discourse.

Intersection of Region and Gender

Although participants from both Mexico City and Oaxaca shared core elements of romantic narratives (e.g., food, shared spaces, and mobility), subtle distinctions emerged. Oaxaca participants—especially women—referenced nature-based or culturally meaningful locations such as *parques* (parks), *museos* (museums), and *eventos* (events), suggesting the influence of local identity and spatial affordances. In contrast, men from Mexico City presented more pragmatic, linear narratives with less emphasis on mutual reflection.

The combined analysis reveals that romantic self-presentation is deeply embedded in gendered linguistic patterns, regionally shaped ideals, and culturally transmitted scripts. Topic modeling not only supports the qualitative findings but also reflects broader dynamics of emotional expression and gendered socialization within Mexican youth culture.

Romantic scripts remain culturally embedded, particularly in heterosexual interactions where male dominance and female submission persist.²⁸ Our findings support previous studies showing that gendered expectations are reproduced in dating practices, while also highlighting nuanced shifts—especially in Oaxaca—toward shared agency and negotiation. These results resonate with critiques of heteronormativity that demonstrate how dynamics of domination and submission are perpetuated even within same-sex relationships⁴², underscoring the pervasive cultural force of romantic scripts in structuring intimacy.

Social Implications

These findings have broader implications for understanding gender relations in contemporary Mexican society. The persistence of traditional dating scripts—particularly men’s responsibility for initiating, planning, and paying—reflects how everyday romantic practices reproduce wider structures of gender inequality, reinforcing male authority and female dependency. At the same time, emergent elements such as shared decision-making in Oaxaca or women’s expressions of agency in idealized narratives point to ongoing cultural negotiations that challenge these hierarchies. Universities, as spaces of youth socialization, thus become key sites where gender norms are both reproduced and contested. Recognizing dating scripts as micro-practices of everyday intimacy highlights their potential impact beyond romantic life, influencing expectations regarding domestic labor, workplace hierarchies, and broader patterns of gender equity.

Cultural implications follow from these findings. They suggest that everyday dating practices remain a key site where gender norms are both reproduced and negotiated. The persistence of male provision and female receptivity underscores how romantic scripts serve as symbolic enactments of broader gender hierarchies. At the same time, the aspirational elements in women’s narratives and the communal qualities identified in Oaxaca highlight emergent possibilities for greater reciprocity and shared agency.

Practical implications extend to several domains. In higher education, these results can inform affective-sexual education programs that address not only sexual health but also cultural scripts that shape intimacy and gendered expectations. For gender research, the findings underscore the need to integrate computational text analysis with qualitative approaches to capture both structural and affective dimensions of narratives. Regarding equity sensitization strategies, the results point to the importance of challenging the cultural valorization of male provision and fostering more egalitarian relational models. Finally, in university policies, these insights can support initiatives that address everyday practices of dating and gendered interaction as part of broader commitments to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the sample size ($N = 80$) is modest and limited to two

universities, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Second, the narratives rely on self-reports and retrospective accounts, which may be subject to memory bias and impression management. Third, participants were drawn from psychology, law, and medicine programs, and thus reflect a specific subset of university training in Mexico; different patterns might emerge in other disciplinary fields or non-university populations. Finally, the LDA technique is powerful for identifying latent themes, it is sensitive to corpus size and may overlook subtle but meaningful narrative nuances. These limitations should temper the conclusions while also pointing toward directions for future research.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, these findings contribute to the literature on gender and intimacy by illustrating how romantic scripts are not static but are instead negotiated through socio-cultural, emotional, and digital dimensions. Future research should deepen the analysis through intersectional lenses,⁴³ incorporating class, ethnicity, and sexual diversity to capture the full complexity of romantic and affective life in contemporary Mexico.

CONCLUSIONS

The narratives analyzed in this study provide a rich portrait of how young adults in Mexico engage with, resist, and reproduce romantic scripts. While traditional gender roles remain prevalent—especially regarding initiation, planning, and paying—there are signs of transformation, particularly in idealized narratives where women envision greater shared agency and emotional reciprocity.

The reinforcement of traditional masculinity through dating behavior—such as initiating plans and covering expenses—is consistent with broader gender hierarchies in Mexican society. Conversely, women’s expressions of gratitude and their acceptance of male leadership reinforce emotional dependency and unequal power structures.

Differences between Mexico City and Oaxaca point to the importance of contextualizing romantic practices within regional and cultural specificities. Oaxaca narratives tended to emphasize more communal and egalitarian elements—such as meeting halfway—while Mexico City narratives reflected heightened concerns regarding safety, performance, and structured planning.

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