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

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Abstract:

This study explores gendered dating scripts among university students from Mexico City (CDMX) and Oaxaca, analyzing both idealized and real-life romantic narratives. Eighty participants (40 women and 40 men) narrated their first and ideal romantic dates. Through thematic coding and Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), we examined patterns of gender, region, and the symbolic and emotional components embedded in romantic scripts. The results revealed regional contrasts: in CDMX, especially in men's narratives, spatial and temporal structures were emphasized, such as walking, eating, and transitioning between public and private spaces; in Oaxaca, narratives tended to be more fluid and interactional, highlighting shared decision-making (e.g., meeting halfway), brief encounters, and activities in nearby public places such as parks or plazas. In contrast, women's narratives in both regions focused more on emotional connection, communication, and affective elements such as laughter, physical contact, and mutual conversation. Common rituals included going out for coffee, visiting parks or museums, and sharing food. LDA analysis confirmed these gendered and regional patterns, offering deeper insights into dominant narrative structures and emotional tones. Thematic saturation indicated the persistence of heteronormative expectations, although Oaxacan narratives showed more signs of negotiation and shared agency, and 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, 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

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investigación contribuye a la comprensión de 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.

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 and fostered new dynamics in dating interactions.

In this context, behavioral scripts operate as cognitive frameworks that guide social interaction, particularly within romantic settings. These scripts, shaped by gender norms, carry significant implications for perceptions of agency, responsibility, and power. The present study builds on seminal research on dating scripts, particularly Rose and Frieze's studies of young singles in the United States.[1,2] Their work identified standardized sequences of first-date behaviors—such as who initiates, who pays, and how intimacy progresses—that have been widely used as a reference point in subsequent research. 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, highlighting both continuities with prior findings, culturally specific variations, and entirely different script elements unique to our culture.

TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES IN DATING

Behavioral scripts, following Simon and Gagnon's script theory[3] are cognitive and normative structures that guide social interaction by providing culturally shared expectations about "who does what, when, and how." They operate as social templates that individuals use to determine appropriate behavior and routines across a range of contexts.[4,5] Gender scripts are a particular 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: 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 choosing a location, engaging in conversation, managing costs, or initiating physical contact—that both reflect and reproduce broader gender ideologies.

Masculine scripts typically involve taking initiative: inviting a date, planning the outing, managing public spaces by driving or opening doors, initiating physical contact or sexual behavior, and covering the expenses.[10,11] Men also often assume responsibility for transportation, escorting their partner home, or providing small gifts.[1] These practices remain prevalent even in modern dating contexts.[12-14]

In contrast, feminine scripts emphasize passivity and receptivity. Women are expected to focus on their appearance, accept invitations, and respond rather than initiate. They may wait to be picked up, receive flowers or gifts, and respond to the man's plans and sexual advance.[9,15,16] These scripts reinforce asymmetrical power structures where men are agents and women recipients of action. Moreover, when women deviate from these norms—for example, by initiating a date— they are often perceived as more sexually available or assertive, which may invite misinterpretation or judgment.[17,18]

Gender scripts are socially reinforced through family, peers, and media representations and they are embedded in broader cultural expectations.[19-21] These traditional roles shape sexual perceptions and behaviors, often positioning men as initiators and women as gatekeepers.

CONTEMPORARY SHIFTS AND PERSISTENT NORMS

Despite persistent stereotypes, dating dynamics are evolving. Women increasingly initiate dates, share costs, and assert decision-making power. These shifts 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 to express themselves and to appeal to partners, while also 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 affect how individuals perceive and experience relationships over time, reinforcing inequalities and affecting long-term relational dynamics. Even as discourse around gender equality progresses, implicit biases continue to reinforce 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] Studies on romantic scripts often rely on self-reported perceptions and reconstructions of past experiences to assess common dating behaviors.[33]

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

In Mexico, most studies have focused on gender roles in family life, sexuality, or marital dynamics[34-36], but very few have examined dating scripts specifically. One exception is the study conducted in 2010 with 214 university students[37], which highlighted persistent gendered expectations in courtship. Building on this limited empirical base, the present research explores how romantic scripts are enacted in different regional and cultural settings.

International research, Rose and Frieze[1,2] and Eaton and Rose[38,39] provided standardized categories of first-date behaviors that have been widely adapted in subsequent instruments. More recently, Timmermans and De Caluwé[40] proposed the Tinder Motives Scale to examine contemporary digital dating practices. They also reflect broader cultural dynamics in which traditional roles—such as male provision and initiative—are still valued, while women's passivity is rewarded. These roles extend beyond dating into workplace expectations and domestic hierarchies.

This study aims to examine the ways in which gendered romantic scripts are expressed, negotiated, and reconfigured in university dating contexts across two Mexican regions. Through a comparative analysis of real and ideal narratives, it explores how masculine and feminine roles are enacted in romantic interactions, and how sociocultural dynamics influence these performances. Guided by this purpose, the study addressed 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 previous literature, we expected that traditional gendered scripts—particularly male initiative and provision—would remain prevalent, yet that women's ideal narratives and regional differences (e.g., 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 City.

In Mexico City, female participants had a mean age of 19.5 years (SD = 1.53), and five reported currently being in a romantic relationship. Male participants reported a mean age of 19.45 years (SD=1.46), with seven indicating that they were in a relationship at the time of data collection. All participants were actively enrolled students at the National Autonomous

University of Mexico (UNAM), from the fields of psychology, law, or medicine.

In Oaxaca City, the 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 Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO), also from psychology, law, or medicine programs.

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

Participant Selection and Regional Comparison

Participants were selected from undergraduate programs in psychology, law, and medicine because these fields provide access to large, diverse student cohorts and are representative of disciplines where gender norms and role expectations are explicitly or implicitly transmitted. The inclusion of both Mexico City (CDMX) and Oaxaca was deliberate: CDMX represents a highly urban, cosmopolitan, and institutionally structured environment, while Oaxaca, as a regional capital with more communal and interactional cultural dynamics, offers a contrasting socio-cultural context. Comparing these two populations allowed us to examine 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 invisible 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 in several Mexican universities, including UNAM. Situating the study in this moment allows us to capture dating narratives at a time when discourses on gender equality and diversity are increasingly present in public debate and, in some cases, institutionalized in undergraduate training. The choice of Mexico City (CDMX) and Oaxaca responds to their contrasting sociocultural and educational environments: CDMX as a large, urban, and highly institutionalized setting, and Oaxaca as a regional capital with 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 about gender and interpersonal roles are especially salient.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via institutional email and invited to participate by responding to an online form. They were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent

was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were asked to narrate two romantic experiences: one describing their first real romantic date, and another imagining their ideal romantic date.

Instrument

The instrument consisted of an open-ended prompt designed to elicit detailed narrative responses. Participants were asked to describe (a) the first romantic date they experienced, including specific actions and details, and (b) their ideal romantic date, specifying at least 7 actions from the proposal to the conclusion of the encounter.

Ethical Considerations

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

Data Analysis

Word Count, Narrative Structure, And Originality Rate

To test for potential differences in linguistic features across region (CDMX vs. Oaxaca), gender (male vs. female), and narrative type (ideal vs. real date), we employed the Aligned Rank Transform (ART) procedure. This method allows for factorial analyses of non-normally distributed data using 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 (unique types/tokens). Post hoc pairwise comparisons were adjusted using Tukey's method. All analyses were conducted in R using the ARTool and emmeans packages.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation was selected because it is particularly well-suited for identifying latent thematic patterns in medium-sized textual corpora such as the dating narratives collected in this study. Unlike purely 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 visible to human coders. At the same time, compared with other topic modeling techniques (e.g., Non-negative Matrix Factorization), LDA has been widely validated in the social sciences and offers 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—makes LDA an appropriate and robust method for analyzing narrative data that combines personal experience with 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 noted the agent performing the action—whether it was the male character, the female character, or both. Following prior 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 whether it was attributed 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 outdated models, we complemented this deductive approach with inductive coding that allowed new scripts to emerge directly from participants' accounts. These included practices specific to the Mexican and contemporary university context, such as going out for coffee, eating ice cream, taking photos with cell phones, window shopping, or sitting together on a bench or on the grass. This combined strategy ensured that the analysis incorporated 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 LDA, a probabilistic topic modeling algorithm commonly used to detect latent themes in textual data.[41] The analysis was conducted using the topicmodels package in R, allowing us to identify the five most salient topics in each corpus grouped by region (CDMX, Oaxaca), gender (masculine, feminine), and date type (real, ideal). These topics were derived based on the frequency and co-occurrence of words within each set of narratives.

Following this computational stage, the identified topics were reorganized and interpreted through qualitative thematic analysis, drawing on narrative segments and theoretical literature on romantic scripts and gender roles. This two-stage approach combined computational modeling with theory-driven interpretation, enhancing the depth and 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 (i.e., total words), complete sentences, and unique word types per narrative. We also calculated an originality rate, defined as the proportion of unique types relative to total tokens, which serves as an index of lexical diversity.

As shown in Table 1, narratives from participants in Mexico City (CDMX) tended to be longer than those from Oaxaca, with CDMX women in the ideal date condition producing the longest narratives on average (M=340.15 tokens). Interestingly, the highest lexical diversity—reflected in the

originality rate—was found among Oaxaca men in the real date condition (M=63.99%), despite their narratives being the shortest in length (M=181.2 tokens). This suggests 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 real condition, demonstrated higher lexical efficiency—conveying diverse vocabulary in 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 (%)
CDMX				
Ideal Female	340.15	6.85	177.4	59.04 %
Real Female	270.75	6.3	150.85	62.61 %
Ideal Male	259.15	7.95	148.7	62.36 %
Real Male	292.1	7.9	164.15	59.72 %
Oaxaca				
Ideal Female	234.25	6.6	137.55	61.69 %
Real Female	209.65	5.85	121.95	62.16 %
Ideal Male	227.2	5	127.65	62.62 %
Real Male	181.2	4.25	108.7	63.99 %

Note. Tokens=total number of words; Sentences=number of complete sentences; Unique Types=non-repeating word forms. Originality rate estimates lexical diversity in the narratives.

Statistical Analysis of Linguistic Features in Romantic Narratives

To examine the influence of Region (CDMX vs. Oaxaca), Gender (Women vs. Men), and Type of Date (Ideal vs. Real) on linguistic features of romantic narratives, we employed the Aligned Rank Transform (ART) procedure, suitable for factorial designs with non-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) indicated no statistically significant differences across any combination of Region, Gender, or Type of Date for the variables analyzed. Estimated marginal means and pairwise contrasts showed p-values above conventional thresholds (all $p > 0.05$), suggesting comparable linguistic complexity and length across groups. These findings indicate 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 as identified in ideal and real-life romantic narratives from university students in Mexico City (CDMX).

Scripts were coded for both men and women, capturing symbolic, spatial, emotional, and logistical elements. The first number indicates the number of files (participants) referencing each script, while parentheses show the total mentions. A script is considered "common" if referenced by 25% or more of participants (≥ 5 files), regardless of attribution to "him", "her", or "both." When only one condition met this criterion (e.g., only in women or only in the ideal narrative), the script was included with a clarifying note in the analysis.

Women's narratives in CDMX 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 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). "Talking about many things" dominated with 80 mentions, followed by "going out to eat or coffee" (42) and "walking" (32), emphasizing activity-based and environment-focused dating experiences. The recurrent mention of picking up a partner and choosing the venue reinforces 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 public space navigation.

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 real and ideal contexts, with 2 mentions of female-led invitations and 1 instance of mutual initiation, indicating variability in agency compared with the increased in CDMX.

Table 2. Dating Script Categories among Women in Mexico City–Real and Ideal Romantic Narratives

Script	Women CDMX	
	Ideal n = 20	Real 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 or 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. Going to a club/ karaoke/movie	8(8)	5(5)
15. Going to a museum / Mall	7(7)	6(8)
16. Going to a 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.

Table 3. Dating Script Categories among Men in Mexico City–Real and Ideal Romantic Narratives and total CDMX sample

Script	Men CDMX		Total
	Ideal n=20	Real n=20	n=80
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 or 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. Going to a club/ karaoke/movie	6(7)	5(6)	24(26)
15. Going to a museum/ Mall	4(5)	7(10)	24(30)
16. Going to a 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 on dating scripts.[1,2,9,16,38,39] Additional categories (e.g., taking photos, window shopping, listening to music, laughing, being

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kind) emerged inductively from participants' narratives in this study.

Table 4. *Dating Script Categories among Women in Oaxaca City – Real and Ideal Romantic Narratives*

Script	Women Oaxaca	
	Ideal n=20	Real 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. Going to a club/ karaoke/movie	5(6)	6(7)
14. Going to a museum / Mall	6(6)	7(7)
15. Going to a 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 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.

Table 5. *Dating Script Categories among Men in Oaxaca City–Real and Ideal Romantic Narratives and total Oaxaca sample*

Script	Men Oaxaca		Total
	Ideal n=20	Real n=20	n=80
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. Going to a club/ karaoke/movie	2(2)	4(4)	17(19)
14. Going to a museum / Mall	3(3)	6(7)	22(23)
15. Going to a 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 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.

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 real 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 coffee" appeared in 24 ideal and 18 real 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 real), the presence of shared decision-making scripts—particularly in choosing the location (10 ideal, 6 real)—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, which may indicate aspirational shifts in how male participants engage with vulnerability and relational performance. Payment behaviors remained relatively low and diversified, with both real and ideal accounts showing mentions 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 topicmodels package in R. After preprocessing (removing punctuation, stopwords, and common names), we extracted 5 latent topics from the 20 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 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 like food, movement, and emotional connection. This automated analysis supports qualitative coding by revealing frequent lexical and experiential patterns across participants (Table 7).

Table 6. *Translated Topics and Thematic Labels–CDMX Women (Ideal Scenario)*

Topic	Top Words (translated)	Label
1	Place, time, home, do, park, while, together, some	**Shared Public Moments** (places, walking, being together)
2	Girl, boy, says, go out, person, place, well, some	**Interpersonal Framing** (roles, interaction, dating roles)
3	You'll say, I'll say, night, then, see, music, smile, while	**Flirtation and Emotional Tone** (expressivity, anticipation)
4	Place, date, person, home, after, once, there, time	**Structure of the Ideal Date** (sequence, setting, transitions)
5	Things, both, we talked, walked, after, house, path, day	**Connection and Dialogue** (communication, walking, bonding)

Table 7. *Translated Topics and Thematic Labels–CDMX Women (Real Scenario)*

Topic	Top Words (translated)	Label
1	Said, told, then, there, we walked, day, only, metro	**Narration and Movement** (telling, transitions, places visited)
2	Music, people, bachata, then, like this, day, dance	**Atmosphere and Social Setting** (dancing, social interaction)
3	Home, eat, things, then, see, there, plaza, while	**Food and Shared Space** (eating, domesticity, time spent)
4	Home, after, go out, night, day, car, afternoon, while	**Going Out and Routine** (temporal order, transportation, outings)
5	There, we talked, then, house, later, see each other, two, day	**Connection and Intimacy** (talking, 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 analysis supports qualitative interpretations by surfacing recurrent discursive structures and imagined emotional dynamics that frame ideal dating 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 real-life romantic experiences often take place in private or familiar spaces such as restaurants, even the traditional gender role to returns women houses after the date, with casual timing and non-verbal transitions, aligning with cultural dating routines in urban contexts.

Table 8. Translated Topics and Thematic Labels–CDMX Men (Ideal Scenario)

Topic	Top Words (translated)	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–CDMX Men (Real Scenario)

Topic	Top Words (translated)	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). Dates progress from public spaces to private ones such as returning home, reflecting a cultural preference for a rhythm that begins with activity and culminates in intimacy.

Real 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 an emphasis on storytelling and time perception. Topics 3 and 4 show that watching movies and sharing personal stories are key activities that foster connection.

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 (parks, cafes) lead to possible 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)	Label
1	Date, place, like this, day, both, eat, do, pay	**Planning and Reciprocity** (balanced roles, anticipation, mutual engagement)
2	Plaza, like this, let's go, pay, eat, day, home, while	**Flow and Public Outing** (movement, shared meals, dynamic pacing)
3	Date, place, some, person, to be like this, both, could	**Ideal Connection and Possibility** (openness, emotional potential)
4	Date, two, place, time, eat, after, arrive, home	**Sequential Intimacy** (progression from public to private, such as returning home after date)
5	Date, person, eat, day, would like, home, like, together	**Desired Closeness and Enjoyment** (pleasure, compatibility, domestic setting)

Men's real dates in Oaxaca (Table 13) often emphasize the physical and emotional transitions involved: from moving between places to reflecting on what was said or felt. A strong narrative structure is present (Topics 4 and 5), often ending in introspection or decision-making. There's also a practical dimension seen in Topics 2 and 3, where familiar, affordable, or accessible locations shape romantic experiences.

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

Topic	Top Words (translated)	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 Local Encounters** (limited time, nearby spaces)
3	Movie, watch, home, plaza, person, always, eat, moment	**Shared Leisure** (cinema, meals, bonding moments)
4	Home, cinema, like this, after, time, I said, movie, said	**Recollections and Narration** (speech acts, past-tense storytelling)
5	Date, while, hour, each, then, time, home, day	**Time and Structure** (duration, scheduling, rhythm of dating)

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

Topic	Top Words (translated)	Label
1	Person, date, place, day, like this, I'd try, then, eat	**Effort and Personal Initiative** (thoughtful planning, mutual discovery)
2	Date, eat, day, we'd go, home, walk, place, drink	**Active Planning and Shared Food** (movement, food, comfort)
3	Person, date, place, to be, interest, some, after, eat	**Mutual Interest and Curiosity** (exploration, compatibility)
4	Each, moment, date, day, partner, time, both, park	**Romantic Symmetry** (togetherness, emotional balance)
5	Date, some, place, topic, good, home, after, case	**Reflexivity and Comfort Seeking** (emotional tone, negotiation of fit)

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

Topic	Top Words (translated)	Label
1	Date, person, same, two, to be, well, previous, matter	**Reflection and Ambiguity** (inner evaluation, expectations vs. outcome)
2	Home, after, date, day, eat, chatting, nearby, park	**Domestic and Familiar Contexts** (casual intimacy, accessible spaces)
3	Home, time, taxi, we spent, restaurant, eat, day, while	**Mobility and Logistics** (effort, coordination, eating out)
4	Date, I was, memory, see, arrived, home, I said, final	**Memories and Closure** (recollection, endings, emotional weight)
5	Date, day, moment, after, place, home, while, we decided	**Progression and Decision-Making** (joint outcomes, 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 real and idealized narratives by gender. The findings reveal both shared cultural patterns and region-specific nuances in gendered expectations, affective practices, and agency across romantic contexts.

These dating scripts reflect not only gendered expectations but also the micro-practices through which everyday intimacy is constructed. Shared rituals such as walking, eating, or accompanying a partner home embed intimacy in ordinary routines, linking private emotion to public gender norms.[23,24,30]

Initiating the date: 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, ideal 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 around gender equity and agency.[25]

Digital preambles and communication

The inclusion of digital interaction prior to the date (script 3) was especially salient among men in idealized narratives, highlighting the role of messaging platforms and social media in shaping romantic initiation. This digital layer not only serves a pragmatic function but also operates as an emotional filter—anticipating mutual interest, managing uncertainty, and offering more control over self-presentation. These mediated exchanges allow individuals to assess compatibility and express interest within the safety of controlled online environments, reflecting broader cultural shifts in romantic scripts toward greater negotiation and personalization.[19,26-27]

Planning and mobility: Navigating urban and cultural geographies

In both regions, men often selected the venue for the date (script 4), echoing traditional norms that associate male initiative with control over public space.[10,11] Yet, the "meeting at a midpoint" option (script 6) was more common in Oaxaca, perhaps reflecting urban infrastructure constraints or cultural norms around female autonomy.[19,20] Picking up the partner at home (script 5) was more common in Mexico City, possibly linked to social expectations of male protectiveness and 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 key bonding element. The high prevalence of this script in both real and ideal narratives highlight its central role in affective connection, suggesting that emotional attunement is a shared value regardless of gender or region. A closer look at the narratives shows that these conversations often included everyday topics such as academic life, future aspirations, family dynamics, and shared tastes (e.g., music, food, movies). In some cases, participants also mentioned more intimate exchanges, such as feelings of attraction or expectations about the relationship. This suggests that conversational intimacy functions as a

bridge between casual socializing and the gradual construction of emotional reciprocity.

Embodied and shared practices: Walking, eating, laughing

Actions such as walking (script 8), eating ice cream (script 9), and laughing (script 17 and 22) were not only prevalent but emotionally coded—symbolizing spontaneity, mutual enjoyment, and physical comfort. These practices reflect a form of embodied relationality, resonant with Goffman's[23] theory of performance and front-stage behavior in social encounters.

Physical and emotional intimacy

Physical contact (script 11) and kissing (script 18 and 23) were more often mentioned in ideal than real narratives, particularly among women, suggesting that while desired, such expressions may be regulated in real-life contexts by social norms or discomfort. This supports the findings of Simon and Gagnon[3] regarding cultural scripting and the negotiation of desire within public acceptability.

Paying and financial roles

Script 19 and 24 shows that men still predominantly pay, though 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 script 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., both returning together) suggest a slow move toward mutuality.

Getting ready (script 24)

The act of dressing up and preparing oneself for the date was mentioned predominantly by women, especially in ideal narratives, which highlights the internalized gendered labor of self-presentation. The category of "getting ready" emerged predominantly in women's ideal narratives, reflecting the gendered labor of self-presentation in dating contexts. This finding resonates with Goffman's[23] theory of performance and impression management, as well as Belk's[22] notion of the "extended self," where clothing and appearance serve as symbolic resources for identity construction. It also aligns with empirical studies documenting implicit gendered expectations around 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 CDMX and Oaxaca conceptualize real and ideal 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 male real-life accounts—particularly those from CDMX—frequent words such as casa, caminar, comer, lugar, and película 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 real narratives were often characterized by emotionally expressive or relationally focused words such as nos conocimos, me gustó, platicamos, and nos besamos. This pattern reflects feminine scripts that prioritize verbal intimacy, mutual evaluation, and responsiveness.[1,9,16]

The comparison between real and ideal narratives also revealed aspirational shifts. Both men and women in Oaxaca, for example, referenced more aspirational terms like parque, museo, and helado 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 real-life romantic narratives by men and women in CDMX and Oaxaca. This computational technique allowed us to uncover latent structures in discourse, offering insight into the implicit cultural scripts that guide romantic self-presentation.

Shared Themes Across Groups

Across all groups, several themes emerged repeatedly — especially those involving shared food experiences, walking or moving together, and the importance of talking. These results resonate with prior research on relational rituals in romantic scripts, where small, familiar acts such as eating or strolling become key symbolic markers of intimacy.

For example, both men and women in CDMX 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 by gender and region. For example, men in Mexico City frequently used pragmatic and spatial terms such as house, movie, and place, reflecting structured and activity-oriented framings of dates, whereas women in Oaxaca often employed emotionally expressive words like we talked, we laughed, and we kissed, highlighting 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, caminar, comer, and lugar—indicating a 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, nos conocimos, and nos besamos, 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 around gender.

Regional Differences in Topic Structures

Regional variation is also shaped topic distributions. CDMX 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, or ferias, and expressions of sentirse bien (feeling good) and conectarse (connecting). These contrast with CDMX 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 Real vs. Ideal Scripts

A comparison between real and ideal narratives via topic modeling suggests that ideal scripts included more aspirational themes—such as mutual decision-making (elegimos, fuimos los dos), emotionally meaningful activities (momentos bonitos, nos reímos), 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 real-life accounts were more fragmented and action oriented. This supports symbolic interactionist perspectives on romantic behavior, which emphasizes 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

Though both CDMX and Oaxaca participants shared core elements of romantic narratives (e.g., food, shared spaces, mobility), subtle distinctions emerged. Oaxaca participants—especially women—referenced nature-based or culturally meaningful locations (parques, museos, eventos), suggesting the influence of local identity and spatial affordances. Men from CDMX, conversely, presented more pragmatic, linear stories 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 in 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 show how dynamics of domination and submission are perpetuated even within same-sex relationships[42], 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 reproduced but also contested. Recognizing dating scripts as micro-practices of everyday intimacy highlights their potential impact beyond romantic life, influencing expectations around 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 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 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 the 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. For 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 (80 students) is modest and limited to two universities, which restricts generalizability to other contexts. Second, the narratives rely on self-report 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, while powerful for identifying latent themes, is sensitive to corpus size and may overlook subtle but meaningful narrative nuances. These limitations should temper the conclusions, while also pointing to 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 negotiated through socio-cultural, emotional, and digital dimensions. Future research should deepen the analysis through intersectional lenses[43] incorporating class, studies 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 around initiation, planning, and paying—there are signs of transformation, particularly in ideal narratives where women envision more 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 gratitude and 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 (e.g., meeting halfway), while Mexico City narratives reflected heightened concerns around safety, performance, and structured planning.

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