

Sexual relationship norms affected by social media

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Men and women often have differing views around the expected norms for romantic relationships, consent and sexual activity, and the messages and images they consume on social media may play a role in shaping those perceptions, according to a new study from the University of Georgia.

Sexual activity and behaviors affect the daily lives of [college students](#), many of whom are living on their own for the first time. This freedom, coupled with the insulated nature of college campuses, potentially could outsize the impact social media has on students' beliefs and perceptions of those behaviors.

To better understand this dynamic, a research team led by Adrienne Baldwin-White from the UGA School of Social Work surveyed college students between the ages of 18 and 25, asking them a series of questions to better understand the relationships between their use of different social media platforms and how that use affected their understanding of healthy relationships.

"The vast majority of my research is about prevention and evaluating those things that lead to the continued prevalence and perpetration of sexual assault on college campuses," Baldwin-White said. "A big part of that is looking at people's attitudes and beliefs, as well as looking at the social and cultural norms that they adhere to. I started to realize that, especially now for this generation, a lot of those norms are influenced by social media, and I also wanted to see if we can use social media to change them."

The research found that, across the board, women had consistently healthier views around what is appropriate in a relationship. They were less likely than men to believe using violence is acceptable and more likely to have a healthy perception of consent. The study also revealed that women were more likely to value or place importance on their partner's desire for sex.

Social media posts, Baldwin-White said, often amplify existing stereotypes and perceptions. It's just one more example of the type of messaging that tells both genders what they should be.

A mix of social media messages

The female students also used social media more than their male counterparts, spending more time across the various platforms, sharing and scrolling through content. Because of this, women are more likely to see a diverse mix of images and messages, which could influence perceptions about relationships. Though even positive images can send mixed messages.

"I think a lot of young people see the word 'relationships' and see all of the happy, pretty pictures, and they think that is what good relationships look like," Baldwin-White said. "But they have no context, and they also have no skills on how to deal with conflict when it does arise in relationships, because all they see is that good relationships are happy all the time. They never see the conflict, they never see couples fight, and they think this is what everything should look like.

"I think the harm in blaming social media is that it dismisses the fact that social media doesn't create these norms, but rather reinforces them," she said. "College students are being inundated with them now. I often think they don't realize how much they're being influenced by the images they see on Instagram or the videos on TikTok. It's almost mindless absorption."

If social media can play a role in exacerbating some negative perceptions, Baldwin-White said it also can promote more positive ones. She noted that social media has helped many people who deal with social anxiety and have a difficult time finding a supportive community. Additionally, parents, mentors and peers can actively engage with college students in promoting positive role models and healthier content to follow on [social media](#).

"We have to be open to how young people are using it, and then teach

them how to use it in a healthy way," Baldwin-White said. "It needs to start in [high school](#), and then that way, you can also implement strategies to help them learn how to combat some of those problematic norms."

More information: Adrienne Baldwin-White et al, Influence of social media on how college students perceive healthy relationships and consent, *Journal of American College Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/07448481.2021.1927049](#)

Provided by University of Georgia

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