

Online 'sexual double standard' disadvantages women

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Young people on social media may be posing for their friends—but potential employers and others who could impact their professional lives are viewing these posts, too.

In a new study by Cornell psychology researchers, female applicants for scholarships or jobs were viewed less favorably than males when study participants, acting as [decision-makers](#), were shown "sexy" social media photos of the applicants.

This points to a "sexual double standard," in keeping with conventional sexual and gender norms that assume men's sexual assertiveness and dominance is a sign of strength, while [women](#) are perceived more negatively when exhibiting the same behavior, the researchers said.

Vivian Zayas '94, professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences, is corresponding author of "Sexy Social Media Photos Disproportionately Penalize Female Candidates' Professional Outcomes: Evidence of a Sexual Double Standard," which is published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Zayas' co-author is Minghui Ni, a doctoral student in social and personal psychology and a member of Zayas' Person and Context Laboratory.

"We noticed that there's a confluence of the social media practices of users—candidates for scholarships or jobs—and of professional decision-makers," Ni said. "And because of this confluence, we feel there may be biases generated in the professional selection process."

Zayas said it puts [young people](#)—perhaps still in college, or just having

entered the job market and looking to advance—in a potential catch-22.

"You're thinking about professional and academic outcomes, but you're also thinking a lot about social outcomes," she said. "And when you're using social media, you're thinking about it in the context of communicating to your friends. And because that's so salient, it's really easy to post photos that you don't realize might have negative effects on other domains."

"Women are more likely to post photos than men," she said. "That is one way women might want to try to get validated, but at the same time, there's a potential penalty."

More than 4 billion people have [social media accounts](#), and increasingly, professional recruiters and hiring managers are researching these sites to glean as much information as possible about prospective hires. According to a 2018 [national survey](#), 70% of recruiters indicated that they'd used social media sites to research job candidates; of those recruiters, more than half said they'd found content that made them decide to not hire someone.

Zayas and Ni developed four separate experiments: two (studies 1a and 1b) using college-age participants as scholarship recipient decision-makers; and two (studies 2 and 3) using older people with actual hiring experience acting as job recruiters.

In the first two experiments (the first in the U.S., the second in China to test the effect in another culture), participants were asked to decide who among two finalists would receive a merit-based scholarship. Both finalists purportedly passed initial assessments and are comparable in terms of qualifications.

Participants in both studies were shown two sets of photos—the first

depicting a man and a woman in semi-professional attire, the second depicting a man and a woman in sexualized attire. In both cases, the woman was deemed preferable in the semi-professional images (in the U.S. trial by a 4-to-1 margin), but far less so in the sexualized images. In the Chinese study, three times as many sexualized men were chosen over women.

For studies 2 and 3, participants were hiring professionals between the ages of 30 and 50, split nearly evenly by gender, and in both studies were asked to evaluate and select candidates for a junior consultant position for their company.

In study 2, participants were shown sexy images and one of three other options: semi-professional; eating; or exercising. Again, participants heavily favored the female candidate when depicted in the semi-professional or other settings (approximately 5 to 1), but not in the self-sexualized setting (nearly 2-to-1 men).

For study 3, study participants were randomly assigned either the semi-professional or self-sexualized image and provided with a job description and CVs of the candidates. Participants favored the female candidate (3-to-1) in the semi-professional setting, but the male (53% to 47%) in the sexualized setting.

Zayas said the preference of women over men in the semi-professional context was not surprising. "That's consistent with past work, and it was interesting to see the robustness of that effect across all the studies," she said. "But then there's a complete reversal when the sexy social [media](#) photos were made available."

Posting provocative images of oneself online could have [negative consequences](#), Zayas said, but women are much more harmed by it.

"Some might argue that posting a provocative photo of oneself on [social media](#) reflects poor judgment," she said. "But our findings suggest that that inference of bad judgment penalizes women much more than men."

More information: Minghui Ni et al, Sexy social media photos disproportionately penalize female candidates' professional outcomes: Evidence of a sexual double standard, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104504](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2023.104504)

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