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Societal Norms and Risky Sexual Behaviour among Undergraduate Students in Nakuru County, Kenya

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Abstract
This study examined the association between societal norms and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduate students in university town campuses in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive correlational approach and collected quantitative and qualitative data. The target population comprised 1,161 third-year undergraduate students from Egerton University, St. Paul's University and Kabarak University. A planned quantitative sample of 212 students was calculated using Cochran's formula and allocated proportionately across the three institutions. The final quantitative dataset comprised 212 respondents. Data were collected through structured questionnaires, three focus group discussions involving 19 students and three semi-structured interviews with university counsellors. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and bivariate and multiple regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. In bivariate analysis, societal norms were positively associated with risky sexual behaviour, but the association did not reach the conventional .05 significance level ($B = 0.850$, $p = .072$, $R^2 = .015$). In the multiple regression model, the societal-norms coefficient was statistically significant ($B = 1.111$, $SE = 0.522$, $\beta = .162$, $p = .035$), although the overall model was not statistically significant, $F(4, 207) = 1.478$, $p = .210$, $R^2 = .028$. Qualitative accounts identified perceived changes in social boundaries, alcohol-related social settings. The study concludes that societal norms form part of the broader social environment within which undergraduate students make sexual decisions, but their influence on risky sexual behaviour is not conclusively established. The study recommends a modest, measurement-sensitive association rather than evidence of a strong causal effect. The study contributes locally grounded evidence that can inform student-centred sexual-health education and support services, while underscoring the need for a more reliable measure of societal norms.

Key terms: Risky sexual behaviour, sexual permissiveness, sexual socialisation, social boundaries, societal norms.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined the association between societal norms and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduate students in university town campuses in Nakuru County, Kenya. Social behaviour is partly organised through scripts: learned cognitive and social frameworks that help individuals interpret situations and select contextually appropriate actions. In sexual contexts, scripts shape expectations about relationships, gendered roles, consent, intimacy and conduct considered acceptable within a particular social setting. Sexual scripting theory distinguishes cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts. Cultural scenarios convey collective meanings and expectations; interpersonal scripts guide interaction between people; and intrapsychic scripts organise individual desires and interpretations (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Scripts are not fixed: they can be reproduced, negotiated or modified as social environments change. Contemporary accounts similarly recognise scripts as both internal cognitive structures and socially constituted patterns of conduct (Albarracin et al., 2021).

Societal norms are shared expectations about what people commonly do and what relevant groups approve or disapprove. Descriptive norms concern perceptions of what others do, whereas injunctive norms concern perceptions of what others expect or endorse. These forms of normative influence are analytically distinct from personal attitudes and from peer pressure, although peers may constitute an important reference group through which wider expectations are communicated. Cislaghi and Shakya (2018) emphasise that social norms are multidimensional and that analysis should identify relevant reference groups and distinguish social norms from gender norms. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour is also relevant because it identifies subjective norms, alongside attitudes and perceived behavioural control, as determinants of behavioural intentions; however, subjective norms should not be treated as interchangeable with the broader construct of societal norms.

Sexual norms may shape how young adults interpret casual relationships, multiple partnerships, alcohol-related sexual encounters, condom use and the negotiation of consent. Online environments also form part of contemporary sexual socialisation. Maas et al. (2019), for example, examined online sexual experiences among female adolescents and reported that patterns of online sexual engagement were associated with subsequent sexual-health and victimisation outcomes. Their findings do not establish that social media inevitably produces risky behaviour. Still, they demonstrate that digital experiences can form part of the context in which sexual expectations and behaviours develop. Research on university students in Botswana also documents the prevalence of sending and receiving sexual messages and reports associations between sexting, alcohol use, drug use and sexual activity (Makgale & Plattner, 2017).

Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa indicates that risky sexual behaviour among university students includes multiple partnerships, inconsistent condom use, early sexual debut and sexual activity in contexts involving alcohol. A meta-analysis of studies from the region reported substantial pooled prevalence of multiple partnerships and inconsistent condom use, although estimates varied across countries and study populations (Lungu, 2022). In Ethiopia, Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Tesfay Asgedom (2016) documented risky sexual practices among undergraduates at Jigjiga University. In South Africa, Lentoor (2022) identified economic and psychosocial factors associated with transactional-sex relationships among female university students. These studies suggest that sexual behaviour is shaped by interacting normative, interpersonal and material conditions rather than by a single social influence.

Consequently, Kenyan studies provide further evidence of the issue in higher education. Mbuthia et al. (2019) reported early sexual debut, multiple partnerships and inconsistent condom use among undergraduates in the coastal region. Mukonyo et al. (2020) examined sexting and risky sexual behaviour among students at Machakos University, while Mutiso and Mbuya (2022) documented sexual behaviour among female students at the University of Nairobi. Ouyo et al. (2019) examined early sexual initiation and reproductive-health outcomes among undergraduates in universities within Nairobi County. In Nakuru County, Langat et al. (2020) specifically investigated sexual norms and risky sexual behaviours among

undergraduates at selected university main campuses. This local study is particularly relevant, but it differs from the present investigation in population coverage and setting, focusing on third-year students at university town campuses and combining questionnaire evidence with focus-group and counsellor perspectives.

Despite this body of work, three issues remain important. First, studies often examine particular behaviours or reference groups—such as sexting, peer norms, contraceptive use or transactional sex—rather than assessing a broader composite of societal expectations in relation to risky sexual behaviour. Second, findings on norms and behaviour are not necessarily uniform: norms may shape perceptions and intentions without translating directly into subsequent behaviour, as illustrated by experimental work on descriptive and injunctive norms and health-related risk behaviours (Vanderzanden, 2017). Third, evidence from different Kenyan settings cannot automatically be generalised to university town campuses in Nakuru County, where student mobility, access to campus services, social activities and local economic conditions may differ. The present study addresses this contextual and measurement-related gap by examining the association between a societal-norms measure and risky sexual behaviour among third-year undergraduates in three university town campuses, and by using qualitative accounts to contextualise the statistical findings.

The study objective was to examine the association between societal norms and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduate students in university town campuses in Nakuru County, Kenya. The null hypothesis was:

H_{01}: There is no statistically significant association between societal norms and risky sexual behaviour among undergraduate students in university town campuses in Nakuru County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual scripting theory explains how collective expectations become meaningful in everyday sexual interactions. Cultural scenarios provide broad conventions about gender, relationships and acceptable conduct; interpersonal scripts shape the negotiation of particular encounters; and intrapsychic scripts concern individual meanings and desires (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). This framework helps explain why students' sexual decisions may be influenced by family, religious institutions, campus culture, media and wider social expectations. Social-norms scholarship distinguishes between what students believe others commonly do and what they believe others approve. These perceptions may not correspond to actual group behaviour, creating scope for pluralistic misperceptions and norm-focused interventions (Cislaghi & Shakya, 2018).

Empirical studies point to several pathways through which normative environments may relate to sexual risk. Peer-group expectations can influence perceived acceptability, while campus social settings may increase exposure to alcohol, parties and opportunities for sexual encounters. Jahanfar and Pashaei (2022), in a survey of university students, found that attendance at parties, bars and movies was associated with a greater likelihood of risky sexual behaviour, whereas religiosity was associated with lower risk. Makgale and Plattner (2017) found associations between sexting and alcohol or drug use among undergraduate students in Botswana. These findings support examining social settings and perceived expectations together, but they do not establish that social norms alone cause risky sexual behaviour.

Similarly, material circumstances also intersect with norms. Lentoor (2022) found that transactional-sex relationships among female university students were shaped by psychosocial and economic factors and could constrain the negotiation of safer sex. In Kenya, Lahiri et al. (2023) examined social norms and modern contraceptive use among young people in rural Kilifi County rather than risky sexual behaviour among university students. The study is relevant because it demonstrates that descriptive and injunctive norms can be associated with reproductive-health decisions in a Kenyan setting; however, its outcome and population differ from those of the present study. Similarly, studies of risky sexual behaviour in the coastal region and Nairobi document behaviours and associated factors but do not directly test the same composite societal-norms construct (Mbuthia et al., 2019; Mutiso & Mbuya, 2022; Ouyo et al., 2019).

Taken together, the literature suggests that sexual behaviour among university students is associated with a combination of perceived norms, reference-group expectations, social activities, substance use and economic circumstances. However, the evidence is heterogeneous. Some studies examine behavioural prevalence, others focus on specific practices such as sexting or transactional sex, and others investigate contraceptive use or risk perceptions. These differences limit direct comparison and make it inappropriate to infer a single, uniform effect of societal norms. The present study contributes a focused examination of the relationship between a composite societal-norms score and risky sexual behaviour among third-year students on university campuses in Nakuru County, using qualitative evidence to identify contextual issues that may help interpret the quantitative results.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive correlational research design and collected quantitative and qualitative data. These were preferred because the quantitative component examined the statistical association between societal norms and risky sexual behaviour. In contrast, the qualitative component elicited students' and counsellors' accounts of the social settings and circumstances surrounding sexual behaviour. The study was conducted on university campuses in Nakuru County, Kenya, involving Egerton University, St. Paul's University, and Kabarak University. The target population comprised 1,161 third-year undergraduate students.

A planned quantitative sample of 212 students was calculated using Cochran's sampling formula. Proportionate stratified sampling was used to allocate the planned sample across the three institutions, followed by simple random sampling to select individual students within each institutional stratum. The final quantitative dataset comprised 212 respondents. Legally married students were excluded. The qualitative component comprised three focus group discussions involving 19 students and three semi-structured key-informant interviews with university counsellors. Focus-group participants were purposively selected from the sampled undergraduate students to ensure representation of diverse experiences and perspectives on societal norms and risky sexual behaviours. In contrast, the university counsellors were purposively selected based on their professional roles and direct experience in providing guidance and counselling services to undergraduate students.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions with students and semi-structured interviews with university counsellors. A pilot study involving 20 third-year students at Egerton University's main campus was conducted to assess the research instruments. The societal-norms scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .486. This value indicates weak internal consistency and limits confidence in treating the items as a coherent single scale. The coefficient is therefore reported transparently, and findings based on the composite are interpreted cautiously.

Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS Version 27 using descriptive statistics, bivariate regression and multiple regression. Qualitative data were analysed thematically. The source describes a six-phase process based on Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with transcripts, initial coding, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytic account. Coding was conducted manually. The manuscript reports member checking with three participants, peer debriefing and maintenance of an audit trail.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the Kabarak University Ethics Committee, and a research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Permission was also sought from relevant government agencies and participating institutions. The study reports that informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and participants' right to withdraw were observed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Societal-Norms Item Responses

The self-perceptions of societal norms were measured using eleven items (items 1-10 in Section B of the questionnaire) on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

Societal norms represent the broadest level of what Sexual Script Theory calls cultural scenarios: the collective expectations that prescribe acceptable sexual behaviour (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Social Norms Theory further posits that behaviour is heavily influenced by perceived group norms rather than individual attitudes (Ajzen, 1991). The empirical literature consistently supports this: Hartman (2019) found that perceived peer norms predicted sexual risk behaviour among college students; Lahiri et al. (2023) found that pro-modern contraception norms predicted contraceptive use in rural Kilifi County, Kenya; and Cislaghi and Shakya (2018) argued that social norms theory has potential to enhance adolescents' sexual health outcomes in Africa. The present study examined whether societal norms, as measured, would predict risky sexual behaviour.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution for Societal Norms

		Missing	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
There is no much difference between the women and men dress codes among undergraduate students.	Count	3	44	56	72	37
	Row N %	1.4%	20.8%	26.4%	34.0%	17.5%
Social boundaries seem to be fading with time.	Count	3	16	19	103	71
	Row N %	1.4%	7.5%	9.0%	48.6%	33.5%
Whatever I do, whether right or wrong is all my responsibility.	Count	5	15	17	72	103
	Row N %	2.4%	7.1%	8.0%	34.0%	48.6%
Engaging into sexual activities among people of the same sex is slowly being accepted in the society.	Count	3	29	28	100	52
	Row N %	1.4%	13.7%	13.2%	47.2%	24.5%
Masturbation provides harmless and sure relief from sexual tension.	Count	3	79	49	53	28
	Row N %	1.4%	37.3%	23.1%	25.0%	13.2%
Alcohol consumption is acceptable for both men and women in the society.	Count	6	41	24	100	41
	Row N %	2.8%	19.3%	11.3%	47.2%	19.3%
Expressing sexual feelings can be to same or opposite gender.	Count	13	86	36	58	19
	Row N %	6.1%	40.6%	17.0%	27.4%	9.0%

The frequency distribution of responses to the 7-item societal norms of sexuality scale is presented in the table above, with a total of 212 respondents answering each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Missing responses ranged from 1.4 per cent to 6.1 per cent across items, with item 7, 'Expressing sexual feelings can be to same or opposite gender,' recording the highest proportion of missing data (6.1%), suggesting possible discomfort among respondents in engaging with this topic.

From the findings, the following items received a majority of agreement from respondents, with item 3, 'Whatever I do, whether right or wrong, is all my responsibility,' where the majority (n=175, 82.6%) agreed that their actions are their responsibility. Item 2: 'Social boundaries seem to be fading with time': (n=174, 82.1%) respondents agreed that social boundaries have been fading. Item 4, 'Engaging in sexual activities among people of the same sex is slowly being accepted in society': (n=152, 71.7%) respondents agreed that same-sex activity is slowly being accepted. Item 6, 'Alcohol consumption is acceptable for both men and women in society' (n=141, 66.5%) respondents agreed that both men and women consume alcohol. Item 1, 'There is not much difference between the women's and men's dress code among undergraduate students' (n=109, 51.5%) agreed that there is not much difference in dress code.

The following items received the majority of disagreement from respondents, with item 5, 'Masturbation provides harmless and sure relief from sexual tension,' where the majority (n=128, 60.4%) disagreed that masturbation provides harmless and sure relief from sexual tension. Item 7, 'Expressing sexual feelings can be to same or opposite gender' (n=122, 57.6%), respondents disagreed that they express sexual feelings to either the same or opposite gender. From the findings, it can be noted. At the same time, the majority of the respondents agreed that their actions are their responsibility; there was huge disagreement regarding masturbation providing harmlessness and relief from sexual tension.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on Social Norms

Societal norms statements	Valid N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
There is no much difference between the women and men dress codes among undergraduate students.	209	1	4	2.49	1.015
Social boundaries seem to be fading with time.	209	1	4	3.1	0.855
Whatever I do, whether right or wrong is all my responsibility.	207	1	4	3.27	0.895
Engaging into sexual activities among people of the same sex is slowly being accepted in the society.	209	1	4	2.84	0.957
Masturbation provides harmless and sure relief from sexual tension.	209	1	4	2.14	1.073
Alcohol consumption is acceptable for both men and women in the society.	206	1	4	2.68	1.008
Expressing sexual feelings can be to same or opposite gender.	199	1	4	2.05	1.053

Note: Valid N varies across items because missing responses have been excluded. Standard deviations are sample standard deviations.

As presented in Table 2, the mean scores for the seven societal-norms items ranged from 2.05 (SD = 1.053) to 3.27 (SD = 0.895) on a four-point Likert scale. The statement that whatever individuals do, whether right or wrong, is their responsibility recorded the highest mean (M = 3.27, SD = 0.895), indicating relatively strong agreement with personal responsibility. This was followed by the perception that social boundaries are fading with time (M = 3.10, SD = 0.855), suggesting that respondents generally acknowledged changes in prevailing social boundaries. Similarly, the acceptance of sexual activities among people of the same sex recorded a mean of 2.84 (SD = 0.957). In contrast, the acceptability of alcohol consumption among both men and women recorded a mean of 2.68 (SD = 1.008). The statement concerning similarities in men's and women's dress codes recorded a mean of 2.49 (SD = 1.015), reflecting responses around the scale midpoint.

Conversely, the statements concerning masturbation as a harmless means of relieving sexual tension (M = 2.14, SD = 1.073) and the expression of sexual feelings towards the same or opposite gender (M = 2.05, SD = 1.053) recorded comparatively lower mean scores. These results suggest relatively lower agreement with these two statements among the respondents. Regarding response variability, the statement on social boundaries fading with time recorded the lowest standard deviation (SD = 0.855), indicating comparatively greater consistency in respondents' views.

In contrast, the statement on masturbation recorded the highest standard deviation (SD = 1.073), suggesting greater variation in respondents' opinions. Overall, the findings demonstrate that respondents held varying perceptions of the societal-norms issues examined, with stronger agreement on personal responsibility and changing social boundaries than on the acceptability of masturbation and the expression of sexual feelings.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics on Societal Norms Score

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
SocietalScore	212	.00	3.71	2.5916	.56648
Valid N (listwise)	212				

The composite score ranged from 0.00 to 3.71 (M = 2.59, SD = 0.566, N = 212), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of progressive or liberal social attitudes. The mean of 2.59 was above the scale midpoint of 2.0, suggesting that participants, on average, held progressive views across the combined items. The standard deviation of 0.566 indicated moderate consistency in overall attitudes among respondents.

Bivariate and Multivariate Results for Societal Norms

In the bivariate regression analysis, societal norms had a positive coefficient (B = 0.850, t(210) = 1.805, p = .072), accounting for 1.5 per cent of the variance in risky sexual behaviour (R^2 = .015). This result did not meet the conventional .05 significance threshold. In the multiple regression model, societal norms had a positive coefficient and was statistically significant as an individual predictor (B = 1.111, SE = 0.522, β = .162, t(207) = 2.128, p = .035, 95% CI [0.082, 2.140]). The coefficient indicates that a one-unit increase in the societal-norms score was associated with a 1.111-unit increase in the risky-sexual-behaviour outcome, holding the other model predictors constant, assuming the outcome and predictor were coded in the stated direction.

The overall multiple regression model was not statistically significant, F(4, 207) = 1.478, p = .210, R^2 = .028. The model therefore explained a small proportion of the observed variance and did not provide statistically significant evidence that the predictor set, considered jointly, explained risky sexual behaviour. Although the societal-norms coefficient reached p < .05 within the model, this isolated coefficient should be interpreted cautiously in light of

the non-significant overall test, low explained variance and weak internal consistency of the societal-norms scale. The change from a non-significant bivariate association (p = .072) to a nominally significant adjusted coefficient (p = .035) also warrants explanation through the full model specification and diagnostic output.

Accordingly, the null hypothesis is not rejected based on the bivariate analysis. The multiple-regression coefficient for societal norms is statistically significant at the .05 level, but the non-significant overall model and measurement limitations prevent a strong general conclusion. The evidence is best described as a modest adjusted association that requires replication with a more reliable measure. Because the design is correlational and cross-sectional, the results do not establish that societal norms cause risky sexual behaviour.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): Familiarisation: transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data; initial: salient features were coded inductively using open coding, searching for themes: codes were grouped into candidate themes based on patterns of meaning, reviewing themes: themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the full dataset, defining and naming themes: each theme was refined and given a clear definition and producing the report: themes were written up with supporting quotes and linked to research objectives.

Coding was conducted manually, and trustworthiness was established through member checking (preliminary findings shared with three participants), peer debriefing (with a fellow researcher), and maintenance of an audit trail. Disconfirming evidence was actively sought and is reported where relevant.

Societal Permissiveness and Risk

Fading boundaries

Participants described a societal environment in which traditional sexual boundaries are eroding.

> *In their sexual behavior, there are no clear boundaries. In the past, men were more promiscuous but today both men and ladies are equally engaged in unmanaged sexual behaviors.* (KII-A)

> *Gen zs have no gender roles clearly observed. They are liberated people. No boundaries. 'I am treated like I am a wife'. In rare cases do we see gender roles observed. Majority have no clear boundaries.* (KII-B)

> *No clear boundaries. Different cultural backgrounds, giving in to sex without a question.* (KII-C).

Alcohol and Campus Social Culture

Alcohol was identified as a major facilitator of risky sexual behaviour.

> *They use alcohol and P2.* (KII-A)

> *While in parties, they are drugged and find themselves raped.* (KII-B)

> *Peer pressure, alcohol and drug abuse, prior exposure and freedom.* (FGD 3, REW2)

> *Drugs and substances using drugs as means of healing after break up.* (FGD 3, REM1)

Idle Time and Financial Pressure

Economic hardship and unstructured free time were described as drivers of transactional sex and risky behaviour.

> *They visit clubs and bars off the campus — it is common to find girls and boys in rooms off the campus.*

> *They have a lot of free time from 10 am to 10 pm and are very idle on the campus. Lectures do not occupy them adequately. Strikes have contributed to them being off campus, creating more chances of cohabiting and relationship breakups. During exam time, there are*

fewer cases of sexual interactions. (KII-A)

No specific activities set for them. Idle time is plenty. Most have online-classes therefore a lot of free time for going out, substance use. Have no tangible plans for their lives most of the time, therefore engage in risky sexual behaviors. They lack mentorship in life. (KII-C)

Finances enticed by someone who has more finance stability. (FGD 3, REM3)

Lifestyle: the desire to have money can make one to live a certain way of life. (FGD 1, RW1).

Overall, the qualitative findings add context to the survey results by identifying perceived changes in social expectations, substance-related social settings, unstructured time and financial pressures. They do not resolve the statistical limitations of the quantitative model. In particular, they do not demonstrate that societal norms mediate the relationship between alcohol use, financial pressures and risky sexual behaviour. Such pathways would require direct measurement and an analysis designed to test mediation or other explanatory mechanisms.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that societal norms form part of the broader social environment within which undergraduate students make sexual decisions, but their influence on risky sexual behaviour is not conclusively established. The findings point to the importance of addressing social expectations alongside contextual factors such as peer interactions, alcohol-related settings and financial pressures. Universities should therefore adopt holistic, non-stigmatising approaches that promote responsible sexual decision-making and provide accessible student support. However, the low reliability of the societal-norms scale and the limited explanatory power of the regression model constrain the strength of the conclusions. Further research using validated measures and longitudinal designs is necessary to establish how societal norms interact with individual and contextual factors in shaping risky sexual behaviour.

Recommendations: The study recommends that universities should strengthen comprehensive, non-stigmatising sexual-health education that addresses consent, personal boundaries, communication, contraception, STI prevention and informed decision-making. Given participants' accounts of alcohol-related social settings, institutions should integrate alcohol-harm awareness, consent education and clear pathways for reporting and responding to sexual harassment and assault. Such programmes should avoid implying that intoxication transfers responsibility for sexual violence to the person harmed.

University management and student-welfare units should consider structured extracurricular, mentorship and peer-support activities that provide constructive engagement beyond scheduled lectures. Student-support services should improve access to confidential counselling and information on financial assistance, recognising that participants described financial pressures as relevant to some relationship decisions. Such interventions should be evaluated rather than assumed to reduce risky sexual behaviour.

Ultimately, future research should develop and validate a multidimensional societal-norms instrument, distinguish descriptive from injunctive norms and identify relevant reference groups. Larger studies across multiple university settings should use clearly specified outcome measures, report complete sampling and response-rate information, and account for relevant confounders. Longitudinal research would help establish temporal ordering, while qualitative follow-up could explore how students interpret and negotiate social expectations in different campus environments.

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