

A Study to Assess the Influence of Social Media and Peer Influence on Gender Role Beliefs Among Adults

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Abstract—This study examined how social media usage and peer influence bear upon gender role beliefs in young adults. Employing a quantitative correlational design, data were gathered from 33 participants aged 18 to 25 years via online survey forms. Three standardized instruments captured social media engagement, peer pressure susceptibility, and gender role attitudes. The results presented a clear contrast: social media usage showed no significant relationship with gender role beliefs ($r = 0.054$, $p = 0.770$), whereas peer influence emerged as a strong and highly significant predictor ($r = 0.696$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that real-world interpersonal relationships shape gender beliefs far more powerfully than passive digital consumption. The results call into question the assumption that digital platforms are the dominant attitude-shapers among youth, pointing instead toward the enduring primacy of direct peer interaction.

Index Terms—Gender Role Beliefs, Peer Influence, Social Media, Socialization, Young Adults, Emotional Conformity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender roles—the socially constructed expectations governing how men and women are supposed to behave, think, and occupy space—have never been static. Historically, men were cast in roles of authority and economic provision, while women were assigned to the domestic sphere. Over time, cultural, economic, and educational shifts have substantially complicated this picture. Today's young adults, particularly those between 18 and 25, are navigating a genuinely transitional moment.

Two forces are especially visible in this transition. The first is digital media. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and X function as constant socializing agents, feeding users curated streams of lifestyle content and identity cues. The effect is ambiguous: social media has amplified progressive voices, but its algorithms also readily surface hyper-masculine and stereotypically feminine content. The second force is more immediate: the peer group. During young adulthood, belonging matters intensely, and the social weight of close friends cannot be matched by any digital content, because the stakes are real.

This study was designed to bring these two forces into direct comparison—to determine whether young adults form gender beliefs primarily through digital consumption or through the living social world of friendship.

A. Gender Role Beliefs as Cognitive Frameworks

Gender role beliefs are the attitudes and cognitive schemas individuals carry about what men and women should appropriately do, feel, and aspire toward. These are not fixed at birth; they accumulate through socialization beginning in the family and extending through school, media, religion, and peer interaction. For young adults specifically, these beliefs are still being consolidated rather than simply held—making this developmental period a genuine window for attitude change.

B. Social Media as a Socializing Agent

Social media influence refers to the degree to which digital platforms alter or reinforce an individual's attitudes and behaviors. Young adults today spend a

significant portion of waking hours on these platforms, absorbing content that spans the ideological spectrum. The critical question is not whether gendered content exists online—it plainly does—but whether passive exposure actually translates into internalized belief.

C. Peer Influence and Conformity

Peer influence operates through a fundamentally different mechanism than media exposure. Peer groups create social pressure that is immediate and tied to real consequences. During college years, the desire to belong is at a developmental peak. Unlike one-way media transmission, peer interaction is dialogic—it involves response, judgment, and ongoing social negotiation—making it a qualitatively distinct vehicle for belief formation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Theoretical Framework

Research in this domain draws on two established frameworks. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) holds that individuals acquire attitudes through observation and modeling [1]. Bem's Gender Schema Theory (1981) further suggests that gender-related cognitions are organized into mental schemas built from accumulated social experience [2]. Both theories position socialization as central to gender belief development, whether mediated or direct.

B. Social Media and Gender Beliefs

Research on social media and gender attitudes has produced mixed findings. DeMora et al. (2021) found that exposure to feminist content online correlates with more egalitarian gender attitudes [3]. Conversely, Fardouly et al. (2015) demonstrated that idealized images on Instagram reinforce traditional appearance-based standards [4]. More recently, Kim and Yoo (2020) found no significant correlation between general social media time and gender role attitudes, suggesting that undifferentiated scrolling carries little ideological charge in either direction [5].

C. Peer Influence and Gender Socialization

The peer influence literature offers a more consistent picture. Brown et al. (2008) showed that young adults frequently revise gender role beliefs in the direction of their peer group's prevailing norms [6]. Galambos et al. (1990) found that peer groups characterized by educational ambition tend to promote more egalitarian gender attitudes [7]. Across this literature, the common

thread is that peer groups actively shape beliefs through ongoing social negotiation—making them a more tractable target for intervention than broad media environments.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, descriptive correlational design. The rationale was to observe and measure naturally occurring relationships between variables without experimental manipulation. A correlational approach assesses not only whether relationships exist, but also their direction and magnitude—information directly relevant to understanding which influence carries more weight.

B. Operational Definitions

Social Media Influence (IV1): The extent to which digital platform engagement shapes daily cognition and opinions. Measured using the Social Media Use Scale (Lin, Wang, & Chen, 2016), a 22-item 5-point Likert scale [8].

Peer Influence (IV2): The degree to which friends and social groups shape attitudes through conformity pressures. Measured using the Peer Pressure Inventory (Clasen & Bradford, 1985) [9].

Gender Role Beliefs (DV): Attitudes regarding appropriate roles for men and women, ranging from traditional to egalitarian. Measured using the Gender Role Beliefs Scale (Kerr & Holden, 1996), a 20-item instrument [10].

C. Hypotheses

H1: There will be a significant relationship between social media influence and gender role beliefs among young adults.

H2: There will be a significant relationship between peer influence and gender role beliefs among young adults.

D. Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 33 young adults (male and female) aged 18–25 years, selected through convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria required current college enrollment and active social media use. Institutional permission was obtained from CSMU College prior to data collection. The three standardized

questionnaires were compiled in Google Forms and distributed digitally. Informed consent was maintained throughout. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients.

IV. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Statistics

Participants reported moderate to high levels of both social media usage and peer influence. Mean scores on the Gender Role Beliefs Scale indicated moderately strong gendered expectations—neither uniformly traditional nor uniformly egalitarian—consistent with the developmental complexity of this age group.

B. Correlation Matrix

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to test both hypotheses. The full correlation matrix is presented in Table I.

TABLE I *Pearson Correlation Matrix — Overall Sample (N = 33)*

Variable	1	2	3
1. Social Media Usage	1.00	-.192	.054
2. Peer Influence	-.192	1.00	.696**
3. Gender Role Beliefs	.054	.696**	1.00

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed)

C. Hypothesis Testing

H1 — Rejected: $r = 0.054$, $p = 0.770$. The p-value far exceeds $\alpha = 0.05$. No significant relationship exists between social media engagement and gender role beliefs.

H2 — Accepted: $r = 0.696$, $p < 0.001$. Strong, positive, and highly significant. As peer influence increases, the strength of gender role convictions rises correspondingly.

D. Gender-Specific Analyses

Separate analyses were conducted for male and female subsamples ($n = 30$ each). Results are presented in Tables II and III.

TABLE II *Peer Influence & Gender Role Beliefs — Males*

Variables	r	p (2-tailed)	N
Peer Influence & Gender Role Beliefs	-.005	.980	30

Not statistically significant among males.

TABLE III
Social Media & Gender Role Beliefs — Females

Variables	r	p (2-tailed)	N
Social Media & Gender Role Beliefs	-.168	.375	30

Not statistically significant among females.

V. DISCUSSION

The pattern that emerges is clear and somewhat counterintuitive: peer relationships, not social media, are the primary correlate of gender role beliefs in this sample.

The null finding for social media warrants reflection. Young adults scrolling through a feed may encounter feminist content, a gendered advertisement, and a satirical meme in rapid succession. This ideological cacophony may prevent coherent belief formation—the contradiction within feeds may paradoxically blunt the impact of any single message. This interpretation aligns with Kim and Yoo (2020), and raises the question of whether type and depth of engagement, rather than quantity, is what matters [5].

There is also a media literacy dimension. Young adults today are digital natives who approach social media with critical distance, insulating their deeper belief systems from casual exposure.

The peer influence finding tells a different story. A correlation of $r = 0.696$ with $p < .001$ is robust for a study of this nature. Peer groups are lived environments rather than broadcast channels. When a close friend expresses a view about gender—with conviction, emotion, and social stakes attached—the impact is categorically different from a post. Peer feedback is immediate, emotionally charged, and consequential. These conditions make peer groups uniquely powerful belief-forming environments.

Notably, the positive direction of the correlation indicates that what peer influence predicts is not the content of gender beliefs but their intensity. Highly influential peer groups foster strong convictions in members—whether traditional or progressive. This is consistent with sociological understandings of group cohesion: tightly bonded groups amplify the salience of shared norms.

These findings suggest that Bandura's Social Learning Theory applies differentially across contexts [1]. Both social media and peers offer observational learning, but only peer interaction provides the direct emotional reinforcement that consolidates observations into deeply held beliefs.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study compared the influence of social media and peer relationships on gender role beliefs among young adults aged 18 to 25. The findings present a clear divergence: social media engagement does not significantly predict gender role beliefs, while peer influence emerges as a strong and statistically robust correlate ($r = 0.696$, $p < .001$). The contrast challenges the prevailing assumption that digital platforms are the defining attitude-shapers of youth, and instead reinforces the enduring primacy of face-to-face social relationships as the primary arena where deeply held beliefs are formed.

Educators and counselors seeking to challenge rigid gender stereotypes should prioritize peer-group dynamics and peer-led dialogue over media literacy programs alone. Peer-led discussion formats and group-based interventions that directly shift peer norms are likely to deliver more durable attitude change.

Limitations

- 1) Sample size ($N = 33$) limits generalizability; replication with larger samples is recommended.
- 2) All participants were drawn from one university, limiting applicability to non-student populations.
- 3) Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias.
- 4) The social media instrument captured usage frequency rather than content type; future research should distinguish between passive scrolling and active engagement with gendered material.

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