

What influences adolescents to share marijuana-related content on social media?

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With social media use being as prevalent as ever, a new study from Washington State University's Edward R. Murrow College of Communication shows that adolescents may share marijuana-related content on social media in an effort to fit in with their peers.

Led by Murrow College Associate Professor Jessica Willoughby, this recently published study, "An Exploratory Study of Adolescents' Social Media Sharing of Marijuana-Related Content", examined the types of marijuana-related content that adolescents are posting on [social media](#) and what factors may influence adolescents' decisions to share marijuana-related content on social media.

The team of researchers surveyed 350 participants between the ages of 13-17 living in Washington state, where recreational marijuana use is legal for people 21 and older. The participants answered various questions related to their social media habits and whether they posted content relating to marijuana.

Previous research shows that young people may be exposed to a variety of marijuana-related content on social media, and this exposure may impact marijuana use. Other studies demonstrated youth and [young adults'](#) active engagement in displaying risky behaviors on social media, including marijuana use, which highlights a shared concern with the normalization of risky behaviors among young people.

"Nearly one-third of Washington adolescents we surveyed indicated that they shared marijuana-related content—primarily memes, pictures, and videos—on [social media platforms](#) such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram," Willoughby said. "Even though many marijuana-related web sites require viewers to verify they are old enough to legally use the product, such verification processes are absent from social media."

"The adolescents we surveyed were also more likely to share marijuana-related social media content if they perceived their peers use marijuana and if they believed their parents would approve of them sharing such content," said Murrow College Associate Dean Stacey J.T. Hust, who is second author of the study. "In contrast, if they perceived that their parents were monitoring their behavior, in general, they were less likely to share marijuana-related content on social media."

"Essentially, adolescents who reported their parents were aware of where they were going and who they were spending time with, were less likely to share marijuana-related content," Willoughby said. "But, we didn't find an association between parents checking their adolescents' social media and the sharing of marijuana-related content."

The motives behind sharing marijuana-related content are still unclear, according to this study. As young people use social media for a variety of reasons, including to present themselves to others, it is important to gauge the risk-related messages

youth display on social media and what may be associated with this sharing on social platforms.

"Overall, our findings suggest adolescents may post content that is inconsistent with their personal beliefs in a desire to conform to their peers," Hust said. This is of potential concern because [young people](#) tend to overestimate peer use and acceptance of substance use, and social [media](#) posting related to substance use may imply an intention to use substances or increase perceptions of their use.

More information: Jessica Fitts Willoughby et al, An Exploratory Study of Adolescents' Social Media Sharing of Marijuana-Related Content, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (2020). [DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2019.0721](https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2019.0721)

Provided by Edward R. Murrow College of Communication

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