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## You Might Be Causing Harm If ... : A Poster Campaign from the McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education

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## Journal for Women & Gender Centers in Higher Education

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### **You Might Be Causing Harm If ... : A Poster Campaign from the McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education**

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#### **Abstract**

Rates of sexual violence on college campuses have not changed in six decades—clear evidence that it is time for new approaches to this pervasive problem. The McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education is using a power-conscious framework to shape innovative research and educational efforts aimed at understanding, intervening in, and preventing sexual violence before it happens. The center’s work focuses on those who cause harm or have the potential to cause harm, an intentional effort to shift the narrative around sexual violence on college campuses. This approach informed the “You Might Be Causing Harm If . . .” poster campaign launched by the center in January 2023. The campaign presented eight behaviors identified by student staff as potentially harmful and common among their peers. Posters were linked to blog posts that explained in more detail why the behavior might be harmful and how to avoid it. Among the campaign’s goals: raising awareness and prompting conversations about harmful behavior. The campaign is simple by design and one that could be easily replicated on other college campuses.

*Keywords:* Sexual violence prevention, Sexual assault on college campuses, Prevention programming, Power-conscious Framework, People who cause harm

## **You Might Be Causing Harm If...: A Poster Campaign from the McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education**

Rates of sexual violence on college campuses haven't changed since the 1950s (Cantor et al., 2020; Kilpatrick & Kanin, 1957). Given that rates of sexual violence have not changed in over 60 years, it is clear that our collective strategies for prevention have not been successful (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). The belief that what we are doing at present to address sexual violence is not working serves as a guidepost for the McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention Research and Education (MCVP) at the University of Utah. A hyper-focus on policy and one-size fits all responses has led to stagnant practices and ineffective approaches to sexual violence in higher education (Linder, 2018).

Since its inception in September 2020, the MCVP has worked to close the gap between research and education around sexual violence among college students. We are trying to shift the narrative about this pervasive problem by bringing researchers, prevention educators, and students together to focus on scholarship and best practices for understanding, intervening in, and preventing sexual violence before it happens.

### **A Power-Conscious Framework**

The center's approach to research and education is shaped by a power-conscious framework, which is built on three assumptions: power is omnipresent; power and identity are inextricably linked; and identity is socially constructed and its meaning changes over time. The framework requires a recognition of how power works and a focus on addressing causes as well as symptoms of oppression (Linder, 2018). The power-conscious framework includes six action-oriented tenets. They are:

1. Engage in critical consciousness and self awareness;
2. Consider history and context;
3. Change behaviors based on reflection and awareness;
4. Name and call attention to dominate group members' investment in and benefit from systems of domination;



5. Interrogate the role of power in individual interactions, policy development and practice; and
6. Work in solidarity to eradicate oppression.

The center has differentiated its work by seeking to center people who cause harm — a group that potentially includes everyone — and behaviors that are normalized but, at a minimum, are hurtful and, too often, result in violence. The center’s staff are raising awareness about how not to cause harm rather than how to avoid it. This orientation was at the heart of the “You Might Be Causing Harm If ...” (YMBCHI) poster campaign center staff launched in January 2023. The campaign represented a narrative shift in that it led viewers to consider how a particular behavior could cause harm to someone else. The center’s student staff, who conceived the campaign, designed it to speak directly to their peers.

### **The MCVP Structure**

The MCVP staff is primarily made up of undergraduate students from the University of Utah who represent a variety of majors and identities. The center intentionally chooses to hire a staff largely comprised of students. Mentoring students within a power-conscious framework allows them to develop collaborative, transparent, and socially just leadership skills that they will take with them into their future professions. In the meantime, the students are positioned to share the philosophy of the center with peers, recognizing that peers can be influential in driving change (Pharr, Coughenour, Bungum & Lough, 2018).

In the fall of 2022, student staff members engaged in an eight-week professional development curriculum, where they were able to think deeply and engage with one another on topics related to sexual violence prevention, the history of sexual violence, the power-conscious framework, critiques of campus policies, consent, gender roles and sexual scripts, impacts of sexual violence, and perpetration. Upon completion of the professional development curriculum, student staff were asked to apply the knowledge they learned to develop action projects for educational programming around campus. It was within these weekly educational staff meetings that the students dreamed the YMBCHI campaign into existence.

## Developing the Campaign

Discussion among student staff often was geared toward questioning how, within society broadly and on college campuses specifically, sexual violence prevention efforts are geared towards the people who experience harm rather than the individuals who cause harm. To address violence before it happens, education efforts need to focus on the people who cause harm. Throughout the remainder of the fall semester, meetings included time to brainstorm what different educational materials and topics would look like to address sexual violence at its roots — specifically, those who cause harm. Table 1 lists the topics selected by student staff for the poster campaign. The student staff chose topics they were interested in, that were commonplace among their peers, and that consisted of behaviors easily avoided. Many other topics were considered, however, including use of derogatory language such as “bitch;” pressuring someone into having sex by comparing their behavior to that of a former partner; and assuming silence equals consent.

**Table 1:** *Topics Selected for Campaign*

Poster Topics
1. ...you think it was just a bad hookup and they'll just get over it.
2. ...you aren't getting tested for an STD/STI regularly.
3. ...you talk someone into having sex with you.
4. ...you brag about how much sex you're having to your friends.
5. ...you make fun of someone for being a virgin.
6. ...you ignore signs that your partner isn't enjoying themselves.
7. ...you're sharing nudes that aren't yours.
8. ...you give a person drinks to loosen them up.

## Context

Educational materials for sexual violence typically target people who experience harm rather than the individuals who cause the harm. This means the people who cause harm are not



engaged in the conversation when it comes to the acts of sexual violence that they committed. The MCVP student staff wanted to challenge this approach to sexual violence prevention education by creating educational materials geared toward the root of sexual violence — people who are causing harm. Additional considerations that informed how the team implemented the campaign included the normalization of violence; who is causing harm; minimizing further harm; and facilitating how individuals would receive information by using accessible language.

Figure 1 illustrates common approaches to sexual violence communication used on many college campuses. Educational and policy materials such as this continue to inform not just who experiences sexual violence, since they are often gendered, but shifts the responsibility for safety to individuals who have or who are most likely to experience violence (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015). Another example of how college campuses share safety tips about sexual violence suggests that sexual violence is something that just happens — and generally to women. For example, a common statistic shared in communication messaging is that one in five women experience sexual violence while completing their undergraduate degrees (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Our approach is to share this information by focusing on who is causing harm and the harmful behavior they are engaging in. To restate the information above would be to note that 1 in 7 college men sexually assault their peers (Thompson et al., 2011). Reframing this statistic by including who causes the violence brings attention to the person causing harm as well as seeking accountability for their behavior.

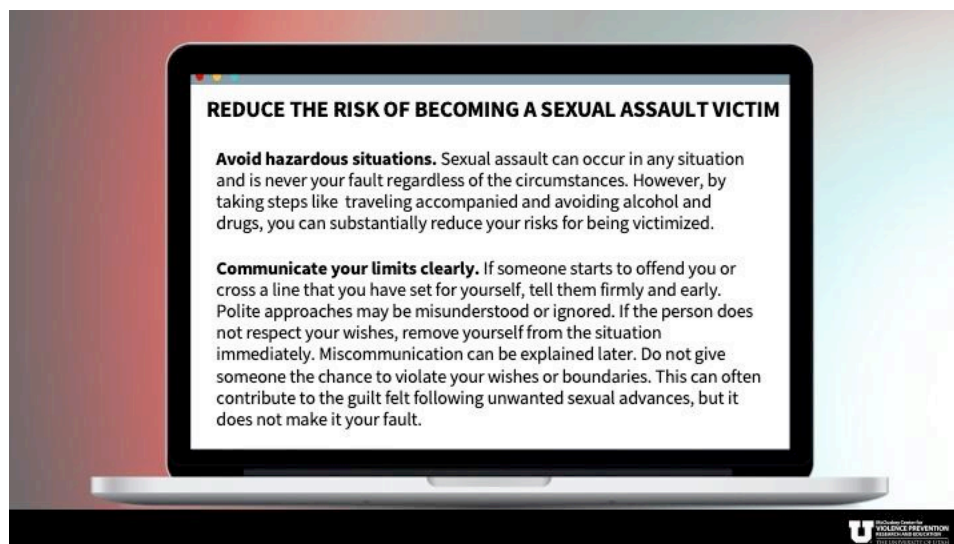


Figure 1: Typical Campus Educational Materials

The absence of people who cause harm from violence prevention work (McMillan and White, 2023) is also a gap within sexual violence research. A content analysis by Linder et al. in 2020 found only 10% of research publications are focused on perpetrators. There is still a lot to understand about the risk and protective factors of people who cause harm. What we do know about people who are at risk of causing harm is they likely experienced violence growing up, ignore boundaries to get what they want, and are socialized to not have complex feelings (Abbey, Wegner, Pierce, & Jacques-Tiura, 2012; Hudson-Fledge, Grover, Mece, Ramos, & Thompson, 2018; Voller & Long, 2010). This means that people who are causing harm may have also experienced harm themselves, blurring victim/survivor identities, and some may not even recognize that they are causing harm. Some people who cause harm may ignore or respond defensively to educational programming and also react aggressively, known as the boomerang effect (Malamuth, Huppín, & Linz, 2018). With these factors in mind, the center's hope was that viewers of the YMBCHI campaign would include people who do not know that they are causing harm as well as those intentionally causing harm.

The decision to use the construction “you might” be causing harm could be puzzling to viewers considering some of these behaviors are widely understood by most people engaged in violence prevention work to be harmful. In addition to recognizing the potential for a boomerang effect, the group aimed to be very intentional about the messages used in both the posters and blogs. We used language that the general reader could understand and avoided gender language and wording that might be off-putting. If individuals are told directly they are causing harm without any context or established relationships, they could become defensive and not be open to learning and adopting the behavior changes promoted by the posters and blogs (Malamuth, Huppín, & Linz, 2018).

This approach also recognized that everyone has different boundaries and experiences of what is or is not harmful. Some people reading the posters and blog posts may have experienced the identified acts but never considered them harmful; in some cases, the individual reading the poster may be engaging in the identified behaviors, and we hoped to prompt their recognition and curiosity about why the behavior could be harmful. As with diversity training, individuals who are part of a dominant group are less likely to engage in a workshop with the aim of social change if they feel defensive (Sidanius, 1993).



## Campaign Implementation

Once the students identified topics, they wrote short blog posts expanding on why the behavior might cause harm. The blog posts then were reviewed and edited by the center's associate director for communication, who worked collaboratively with the eight student authors to make revisions as needed. The poster design was intentionally stark and simple, using a black background with a bold statement in oversized red and white font that filled nearly the entire upper portion of the 11 x 17-inch space. That statement read: "You Might Be Causing Harm If..." It was followed by a statement about one of the eight behaviors identified by the student team as potentially problematic. Each poster also included a unique QR code that was linked to the corresponding blog post about the behavior on the center's website. The center used the QR.io program to generate QR codes included on posters and linked to the corresponding blog post. Figure 2 shows images of the posters.



Figure 2: Campaign Posters



The center had 345 posters — 43 of each statement — printed, which student staff placed in public spaces or delivered to offices throughout the University of Utah campus during the third week of January 2023 (see Figure 3). In addition, digital versions of the posters were displayed on electronic boards in two locations with high pedestrian traffic, including the campus’s main library, for a one-month period. It took several weeks to get the posters in place and displayed on electronic boards. Blog posts were publicly rolled out one day at a time via the center’s website and social media.



*Figure 3: Hanging Up the Posters*

## Outcomes

As some posters remain in place, scans continue to be recorded. To date, the codes have been scanned a total of 245 times. Table 2 shows each topic and its total scans as calculated by QR.io.

**Table 2:** *QR Code Scans by Poster Topic*

Poster Title	Number of Scans
...you brag about how much sex you're having to your friends.	50
...you make fun of someone for being a virgin.	37
...you ignore signs that your partner isn't enjoying themselves.	33
...you think it was just a bad hookup and they'll just get over it.	32
...you aren't getting tested for an STD/STI regularly.	31
...you're sharing nudes that aren't yours.	23
...you talk someone into having sex with you.	22
...you give a person drinks to loosen them up.	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>

*Note: Scans from Jan. 17, 2023-May 30, 2023*

According to Google Analytics, the campaign's main landing page on the center's website ([violenceprevention.utah.edu](http://violenceprevention.utah.edu)) has received 1,024 pageviews to date. Table 3 shows pageviews of each blog post on the center's website.

**Table 3:** *Views of Blog Posts on Website*

Post Title	Number of Views
...you brag about how much sex you're having to your friends.	157
...you make fun of someone for being a virgin.	139
...you aren't getting tested for an STD/STI regularly.	97
...you think it was just a bad hookup and they'll just get over it.	75
...you ignore signs that your partner isn't enjoying themselves.	65
...you talk someone into having sex with you.	47
...you're sharing nudes that aren't yours.	45
...you give a person drinks to loosen them up.	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>657</b>

*Note: Views from Jan. 17, 2023-May 30, 2023*

The center reached out to the student newspaper, The Daily Utah Chronicle, for coverage of the campaign. A staff reporter interviewed two student staff members and Whitney Hills, associate director for education, about the campaign. The Chrony, as it is known, published a story about the campaign on January 31, 2023 (The Daily Utah Chronicle, 2023). Student staff member Yulisa Padilla told the Chrony reporter the team hoped those who saw the posters would engage in self-reflection and be curious to know more about why a particular behavior was harmful. “A lot of time people who do cause harm don’t know that they are or they’ve been socialized in ways that can lead to these harmful behaviors,” Padilla told the newspaper.

A story also appeared on the university’s campus news website on January 12, 2023, ahead of the campaign’s launch, that explained how the project came about and its goals. The story received 1,072 views. “Usually when people do awareness education, we focus on teaching people how to avoid experiencing harm,” Center Director Chris Linder said in the story (AttheU, 2023). “We want to turn that on its head and focus instead on teaching people how not to cause harm.” Links to the stories were shared on the center’s website and social media channels.

The campaign overview story and campaign blog posts were also shared on social media (Instagram and Twitter), along with a post about students placing the posters on campus and a student reflection about the campaign. On Instagram, these postings have received a total of 415 “likes,” with a total account reach of 3,193 and 298 total profile visits. There were 545 total impressions of Twitter posts about the campaign.

There was also a notable increase in awareness of the center, its mission, and its educational programming. The MCVP received an increased number of requests for workshop facilitation from offices across campus. During these workshops, participants often shared what they had learned from seeing the posters across campus and drew on that knowledge. On several occasions while traveling around campus, we saw students standing in front of the posters and engaged in conversation. Additionally, advising and student leadership staff as well as Campus Safety requested additional posters to hang in their respective spaces. Some staff even chose specific posters they believed would create an educational opportunity for students that came to their offices. As this article was being written, five months after the campaign was launched, many posters were still in place around campus. This has resulted in an ongoing dialogue regarding the messaging. The YMBCHI campaign also has made its way off the University of



Utah campus, with two different peer institutions adopting the idea and modeling their own campaigns to raise awareness of harmful behaviors specific to their campuses.

### **Thinking Creatively**

At the MCVP, we subscribe to the idea that we have to do things differently if we want to end sexual violence, and that may mean pushing against the rules and social norms. Within higher education, we are socialized to work in compliance with our institutional policies and procedures and professional organizations, which limits creativity due to fear and perfectionism. Doing things differently is not breaking rules; it is just outside of the norm and often challenges the status quo, which can be uncomfortable.

In the poster campaign, we took a risk in changing the narrative and, subsequently, received institutional support from students, staff, and administrators across campus who saw the campaign and commented on it or asked for posters. An institutional form of power that we have at the MCVP is that our director is also a tenured faculty member. This means that we often utilize this power as a safety net for staff who feel more vulnerable as we work to do things differently. The MCVP's poster campaign did receive criticism -- specifically, the use of the word "might" to qualify harm prompted a reaction from one viewer, as Figure 4 shows. A person used a sticky note to modify the wording to say, "you are causing harm." There also was some critique on a Reddit post about the "might" language (Nachoburn, 2023). In addition, we learned that some viewers were nervous about scanning the QR code because they did not want others to think they engaged in harmful behavior. Overall, the critiques were minimal and generated continued conversation about how these behaviors are harmful and the need for educational materials that address the people who are causing harm.

Our recommendations for how this campaign could have been improved are centered on educational offerings and accessibility issues. The MCVP offers a workshop called, "What is Harm?" with the goal of helping participants change how they talk and think about harm. It could have been helpful to host a dialogue or workshop on that topic during the poster campaign's first weeks to engage in direct conversations with students who had seen the posters

(and those who had not) to foster deeper conversation and answer questions about harmful behaviors and accountability.



Figure 4: Modification to Campaign Poster

## Discussion

The MCVP’s “You Might Be Causing Harm If…” campaign had a simple purpose: raise awareness about common behaviors that have been normalized but that are problematic and may be harmful. The campaign can be easily adapted to feature any behaviors identified as problematic by students within a specific campus community, as demonstrated by the two universities who have already used it as a template for their own campaigns. The format’s simplicity makes it easy to adopt and modify as needed, choosing harmful behaviors to spotlight that are relevant to a particular campus. A few questions to consider in brainstorming content for a similar poster campaign could include: what are some instances of harm that have come up campuswide; what are situations that students have often discussed; and who needs to be reached by this campaign? Creators could also consider if there is a different medium that would speak most broadly to their community.

Data from the MCVP’s campaign showed that some topics received more engagement than others, but we are unable to determine why. Was it the topic itself? The locations of certain

posters? We also received feedback that some students were reluctant to scan the QR codes for fear of being linked to the behavior identified on the poster; together with the low scan rates, this may indicate a QR code is not the most effective way to share additional information on sexual violence-related topics. The data could also indicate areas where we as a campus need to educate our community about the nuances of harmful behavior.

Given our respective roles on a college campus, it is of vital importance that we engage in transformative work that helps students gain the personal and professional skills to move on and be a part of our larger communities. Our student staff were of vital importance in this campaign as they serve as the voice of the campus community; they are the ones experiencing these acts; are able to speak about them using language their peers will understand; and are the future of ending sexual violence. Linder, the center's director, encourages students and staff to try new things, even if there is a risk they might not work. If we keep trying to implement initiatives that have already failed, we will continue to be in the same place. There is not one thing that is going to end sexual violence, but rather it is going to take a million different things (Dame & Kiss, 2021).

## Conclusion

If institutions of higher education continue to post safety tips for sexual violence that are aimed toward those who are likely to experience violence, they will continue to contribute to maintaining rape culture and stagnant rates of sexual violence on college campuses. The "You Might Be Causing Harm If ..." campaign is a model for how to begin changing the narrative regarding sexual violence by addressing the person causing harm, using gender neutral language, and language that is accessible to all. As a field of student affairs educators, if we value student voices, we need to be bold and listen to them and put them at the center of our work.

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