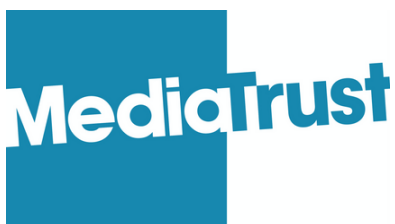


Reframing Relationships

How the media can support young people to form and sustain healthy and dependable relationships



Relationships matter.

We know that the relationships we experience or are exposed to during childhood and adolescence are foundational not just to our mental and physical health, but also to our life outcomes. So much so that more than three quarters of young people say being in a lasting and fulfilling relationship is just as important to their future as their working life.

We all have a responsibility as a society to support young people in understanding what makes a healthy and dependable relationship, to ensure they avoid harm and what they can do to secure and sustain one.

The media and creative industry are instrumental in achieving this and supporting young people to build healthy and dependable relationships that are transformative to their futures.

Almost two thirds of young people say that the media influences their peers' expectations of relationships, and we know that we learn both consciously and unconsciously from interactions we experience or witness. This means there's a real opportunity for the media not just to improve the representation of relationships on screen, but to help shape the way young people secure and experience healthy and dependable relationships throughout their lives.

Fastn and Media Trust have spoken to young people* about what action the media can take to better support their relationship ambitions, building upon a solid foundation of ensuring the safety of children and young people with their content.

Young people challenge the media to:

Show both the ups and downs

One of the top three things young people want to see more of in the media is realistic examples of what it takes to make a relationship work long-term.

“It's so rare we see the real-life pressures involved in relationships, and what's needed to support one another through that.”
- Che, (Birmingham)

Almost half of young people said the portrayal of ‘perfect’ and unrealistic relationships in the media posed a significant challenge to them forming and sustaining their own healthy and dependable relationships. It’s therefore vital that the media seeks to portray the everyday challenges relationships face and how to successfully navigate these.

Platform platonic relationships

While more than three quarters of young people felt romantic relationships were visible in the media, it’s much rarer to see single people thriving in dependable and healthy relationships that aren’t with romantic partners.

“ We need to see different kinds of relationships portrayed on screen, like happy and reliable friendships. I’d love to see the media break away from traditional narratives around what constitutes a relationship or that you even need to be in a relationship with someone else to be happy. You can have a happy and dependable relationship with yourself! ”
- Emily, (London)

Amplify positive and relatable role models

Almost half of young people listed ‘more positive relationship role models’ as one of the top three areas of relationship portrayal in the media that they’d like to see change.

“ You never see positive portrayals of single mums in the media, who are thriving and enjoying life without needing to have a relationship with their child or children’s other parent. ”
- Che, (Birmingham)

Relationship role models don’t need to be high-flying celebrities, or individuals who have overcome immense odds, but more importantly should be relatable and positive people who have sustained healthy and dependable relationships.

Celebrate differences and combat stereotypes

Better diversity of relationships was also among the top three areas of relationship portrayal in the media that young people would like to see change.

At the same time, while improving diversity is vital, the media also needs to work to combat stereotypes around different demographics and their relationships. For example, portraying LGBTQ+ relationships in storylines that aren't centred around struggling to 'come out' or Black characters in relationships that don't have to 'overcome all odds' in order to thrive.

You cannot be what you cannot see, and so by working to include diverse and fully formed characters who are thriving in healthy and dependable relationships, the media has a real opportunity to shape positive futures for young people.

“As part of the LGBTQ+ community, progressively seeing more and more characters and situations on screen that I could directly relate to, had a huge, positive impact on my own life and relationships.”
- Felix, (East Midlands)

Let young people tell their own stories

Content is at its most authentic and effective when created or co-produced by people with lived experience. When the media seeks to portray young people's healthy and dependable relationships, it should look to young people to steer this narrative.

“Seeing other young people talk about what makes a healthy relationship would help us connect, relate and understand better how we can develop one for ourselves.”
- Dan, (East Yorkshire)

Show how relationships take time to build and matter at different life stages

While the media should portray realistic examples of relationships that help young people recognise, seek support and call out abusive behaviours, we must work together to take this further. Young people told us that one of the biggest challenges they face in forming and sustaining relationships is the fact that people want happy relationships immediately, and don't understand that fulfilling relationships take time and effort. Also, that relationships matter for people at all stages of life.

It's vital that media representation demonstrates the fact that securing and maintaining any healthy and dependable relationship can happen at any and all stages of your life, and doesn't happen overnight.

“Getting to a healthy and dependable place in any relationship takes a lot of hard work, and you often don't see that in how relationships are represented in the media.”
- Huma, (Bradford)

What this could look like in practice:

Talk to more young people

“Our pieces are guided by people's lived experience and how this has shaped their worldview. We aim to give a platform to unheard and underrepresented voices. Young people are the experts on what it is to be them today; for the media to be able to authentically tell their stories, young people should be able to share their insights.”
- Jess Austin, First-Person and Opinion Editor, Metro

Coordinating a panel or focus group of young people of all experiences and identities can ensure they steer the narrative of their own stories. This can be done remotely, or at in-person sessions throughout the year, and provides young people with the exciting opportunity to talk to and work with creative industry professionals.

“We engage with groups that keep us up to date with their interests. This helps us tell a story from the inside out, rather than 'peering in' or 'punching down', it's about enabling the people the stories are about to speak for themselves.”
- Yasemin Rashit, Channel Executive, BBC Three

Consult specialists

“With trust in the media at what feels like an all-time low, it's vital that we give audiences confidence and certainty. As journalists, it's not our job to know everything – it's our job to ask the right questions to the right people in order to get the full story. This means consulting experts and other appropriate sources to verify facts and to place a story in its correct context.”

- Reiss Smith, Deputy Head of News, Pink News

Get expert input on what your content is modelling and how it might be experienced from adolescent psychologists and relationship specialists.

Prioritise social listening

Monitor social media to see what conversations young people and relationship service providers and researchers are having about relationships, the issues they're pin-pointing, the questions they're asking and what they aspire to. This kind of attention to detail can help you in the process of developing scripts and storylines.

Individuals are increasingly coming together on platforms like Twitter to challenge issues on representation and stereotyping in the media and are demanding more positive and empowering portrayals of different people.

- Jasmine Dotiwala, DEI Talent Specialist, Broadcaster and TV Executive

Facilitate peer-to-peer discussions

Support relationship-focused discussions among peers. For example, with moderated forums, online panels and debates. A great example of this was 'Tofu', an online documentary series created by Russell T. Davies discussing sex and relationships, to complement his shows 'Cucumber' and 'Tofu' that were broadcast simultaneously on Channel 4 and E4 respectively.

“Creators on YouTube have been cultivating communities around the things they love for nearly two decades. Whether it's comics, gaming, or fashion, people have been carving out those spaces to be themselves, and to find others they share interest with. Live streaming is the new town hall, where users can share expertise and insights, even going live together to set the sparks of debate flying.”

- Jazza John, Senior Strategic Partnership Manager, YouTube

“One of our latest features, Twitter Spaces, has brought conversations on Twitter to a new level through the depth and power only the human voice can bring. These live, audio only conversations allow for authentic, human, and two-way discussion to take place on some of the most important issues we are faced with today.”

- Niamh McDade, Deputy Head of UK Public Policy, Twitter

Supporting young people to thrive in healthy and dependable relationships will take more than a quick fix. We know it involves work, a lot of learning and unlearning and patience. But we hope you'll consider your role, both personally and collectively within the industry, to help achieve this and enable all young people to build happier and better futures!

*Polling conducted by Fastn and Survation in September 2019 and September 2021.