

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MASCULINITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE:  
COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the internet has become an increasingly pervasive presence in the lives of undergraduates. Consequently, social media has become a way to perform ones' identity in anonymous and polarizing ways because of how certain sites are structured. This study explores the implications of these online identities. The topics investigated include the different ways gender roles are portrayed online versus face-to-face interactions and the extent to which these roles are more visible on some social media sites than others. There has been moderate research done on the performance of hegemonic gender roles online, but little on the internalized emotions students have performing these roles. This project explores perceptions of hegemonic gender roles online through one-time, in depth interviews with students. When using social media sites, students' interactions with peers changes because performance of oneself is more visually prominent in the form of a picture, comment, or post than it is in face-to face interactions. Expression of oneself has become remarkably different on the internet because of the ability to block people and the different reasons students choose to have an online presence in the first place.

*Keywords:* Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity, Performance, Anonymity, Alienation, Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

For most of history, gendered identities have been cultivated through face-to-face interactions and relationships. However, in the last 20 years we have seen the world become more connected through the internet, drastically changing how we form communities and identities. Up until the 1940's women were rarely seen in professional settings outside of the household (Francis, 2010). Culturally, women living in the United States have a history of staying in the domestic sphere, cleaning, cooking, and caring for their husbands and children. However, with World War II in full effect, women started to gain a foothold in the economic realm by working outside of the household. "Whereas from the 1950s to the early 1970s women had tended to marry a little more than a year after graduation, by 1981 the median age of marriage for college-educated women was 25. This delay allowed many women to be more serious students and less concerned about securing a husband while pursuing an undergraduate degree (Francis, p. 1)".

In the 1980's women started becoming more visible in the public sphere while looking for careers instead of just a part-time job, due to the combined effect of the introduction of the birth control pill and delayed age of marriage. Starting in the recent 2000's the number of women who are enrolled in American colleges has surpassed the number of men enrolled (Francis, p. 1). The reversal of the college gender gap is a phrase used to describe the recent switch of more women in college than men. "Another aspect in the reversal of the college gender gap, rather than just its elimination, is the persistence of behavioral and developmental differences between males and females. Boys often mature more slowly than girls. In grades K-12, boys tend to have a higher incidence of behavioral problems (or lower level of non-cognitive skills) than girls. Girls spend more time doing homework than boys (Francis, p. 1)". All these factors have contributed to a

shift in gender role performance and changing perceptions of gender roles in face-to-face and online interactions.

Due to this change in traditional gender roles, there has been a highly publicized “masculinity crisis” that pervades in public discourse and conversation. The “masculinity crisis” refers to the damaging ways in which traditional gender roles have negatively affected young males in the United States. For the writer Thomas Page McBee, “the crisis involves men who are hurting in the face of society’s stereotyped expectations that they should be more inhumane than humane, more violent than empathic (Wong, 2018)”. Additionally, research shows that “when men feel like their masculinity is challenged, they are more likely to advocate for war, discriminate against homosexuals, and believe in the inherent superiority of men (Wong, 2018)”. One of the questions guiding this research is what effect does this have on college students and their performance of traditionally masculine and feminine gender roles.

Following World War II, the traditional narrative of gender-based roles has prevailed: men hunt, and women gather; men go to work, and women stay in the household; men are hyper competitive, strong, stoic, and women are vulnerable, empathetic and sensitive (Morettini, 2016). Further, social theorist Judith Butler also discusses the ways in which our genders are not an innate part of our being, but rather a way for us to perform our identities (Butler, 1988). Children learn at a very young age what it means to be a boy and a girl and then express their knowledge of their identities by conforming to the ways in which they have seen these roles performed (Butler, 1988). As we grow older, we learn to perform our identities based on multiple media platforms that saturate our culture and permeate our senses of being.

Scholars such as Michel Foucault explain that “sexuality becomes an essential



construct in determining not only moral worth, but also health, desire, and identity”.

Foucault also argued that modern sexuality was characterized by the “secularization of religious techniques of confession: one no longer confesses the details of one’s sexual desire to a priest; one goes to a doctor, a therapist, a psychologist, or a psychiatrist (Gutting et al, 2019)”. Foucault’s concept of the ways in which we express sexuality can be applied to the ways in which our communication has changed and consequently who and how we discuss sexual desires. As technology has become faster and more advanced, people are confessing their gender roles and other aspects of their identities to the online world.

As the dominant medium for performing our gendered identities changes from face-to-face to online, some of the consequences are explored in this project. Morettini explains:

“Hegemonic masculinity that dominates social hierarchies has different characteristics depending on the community in which it is embedded. Nevertheless, it displays common features throughout different geographical and historical communities. One of the popular definitions of hegemonic masculinity has been ‘an idealized, dominant, heterosexual masculinity, constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities, and closely connected to the institution of marriage’. Any man that aspires to embody this masculinity must display aggressive and violent behavior whilst restraining the flow of vulnerable emotions. He should also exhibit strength and toughness and be competitive and successful. Finally, and most notably, the dominant man should be heterosexual (Morettini, 2016)”.

This project serves to expand on this idea of hegemonic masculinity by asking Texas State Students’ their perceptions of masculinity on social media sites versus in face-to-face interactions.

As social media has become a new way of interacting in the lives of students, their gender identities have translated to the online realm. In this study I will discuss the ways

in which students perceive gender roles differently online versus face-to-face and specifically hegemonic masculine gender roles. Hegemonic or toxically masculine traits have always been studied by many social theorists. However, there is a gap in the literature when discussing how these roles are performed on social media and what males and females perceive as the impact of these roles being expressed online.

While there has been research done on hegemonic masculinity, there has been little to no research done on how men and women express hegemonic masculinity in online spaces and how this reinforces their perceptions of hegemonic masculine traits. In some cases, the lack of validation for these hegemonic masculine traits in face-to-face interactions leads young men to create spaces for validation of these identities online. Hegemonic or toxic masculinity as described by Soraya Roberts refers to, "...men's engaging in toxic practices — including physical violence — that stabilize gender dominance in a particular setting (Roberts, 2019)".

Furthermore, with the emergence of social media, there is now a space for young men to form communities in which they are unidentifiable. The phrase "online disinhibition" refers to the ways in which people interact online with little to no restraint in comparison to when one is interacting face-to-face (Barak, 2012). To illustrate, a student may feel more inclined to be verbally abusive and violent or overtly vulnerable and sensitive online because there is no bodily restraint. Toxic disinhibition is described as:

"online flaming and acting-out behaviors that often involve damaging the other's or even one's own self-image, without any beneficial personal growth (Barak, 2012)". Flaming behavior is considered a "typical manifestation of toxic online disinhibition and is defined as the use of hostile expressions toward others in online communication. It typically includes the use of a variety of textual elements, such as aggressive and hostile language, swearing, derogatory names, negative comments, threats, and sexually inappropriate comments (Barak, 2012)".

This behavior can typically be seen in sites like 4chan, 8chan and r/redpill where white men will go to bond over their mutual feelings of hate or disgust for women.

The attraction to communities such as 4chan, 8chan, and r/redpill is one of the main questions addressed in the interviews. Many mass shooters and white supremacists profiled in the media have claimed to be “alt-right”, perpetuating the culture of hyper competitive hegemonic masculine roles that leads to anxiety and violence (Patton, 2013). As this need for attention festers, women, men, and children are becoming victims to these violent communities and ideologies.

On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, a 21-year-old self-declared white supremacist committed a mass shooting, killing 23 people, and injuring 25 more. “Just before the attack, a hate-filled racist screed, linked to the suspect, was posted on 8chan, an online forum popular with extremists. The rant decried the “invasion” of Mexican immigrants to the United States and hailed the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shooter, an anti-immigrant white supremacist who left 51 dead in March (Li, 2019)”. 8chan, 4chan, Reddit, and other sites are known for this type of flaming behavior and hate filled discourse that manifests itself into deadly situations like the one in El Paso, Texas. This shooting and many others were inspired by other mass shooters who are highly active on these discourse sites.

Discourse that takes place on social media websites where people can become unidentifiable or disinhibited can give way to unhealthy, destructive attitudes and manifestos to form (Sculos, 2017). While online disinhibition can allow people to feel more comfortable because they are unidentifiable, on other sites they become hateful. The El Paso shooter posted his white supremacy manifesto on 8chan, and shortly after, killed and injured many innocent victims.

As flaming behavior and discourse grow, the traditional hegemonic masculine traits become more and more deadly. There have been 283 mass shootings this year, yet only 244 days in the year as of September 1st (Silverstein, 2019). Further, sites like Reddit.com, 4chan and 8chan create fertile ground for people to be outwardly misogynistic (Massarini, 2017). It is important to understand why these communities have become so attractive to young adults in the first place and how various discourse sites relate to the depiction of toxic masculinity online. Not all sites are for hateful flaming behavior and discourse, however those in which participants can choose to be unidentifiable are often where hateful, sexist discourse is found.

Due to the novelty of these communities, there has been little research to show why they are appealing to young men. Most violent discourse online is discussed amongst young men in high school or college. This research investigates male and female college students' perceptions of terms like masculinity, toxic-masculinity, and toxic techno culture in order to understand how young people interpret and experience different forms of masculinity.

Massanari explains toxic techno cultures as, “the toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks such as Reddit, 4chan, Twitter, and online gaming (Massanari, 2017)”. There has been a moderate amount of research and policy discussion on ways to deal with the repercussions of these mass shootings, such as gun control or arming school officials. While discussion on gun legislature is important, so is understanding the ways young men and women perceive masculinity and toxic masculinity. For this project, I aim to understand how male and female college students understand and experience masculinity, toxic-masculinity, and toxic online disinhibition. Further, using these interviews I am looking for ways in which performance of masculine

and feminine identities differs online.

### **Methods**

Using an ethnographic approach, I interviewed nine 18-23-year-old college students. Receiving IRB approval on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019 was one of first steps in starting this research project. Next, I recruited participants through asking professors if I could make an announcement during class about my project. Five men and four women were interviewed for approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. The sample includes five men and four women, all coming to Texas State from Texas. Out of the four women interviewed, two self-identified as white, and the other two as African American. All five men interviewed self-identified as white. All participants claimed to receive financial aid and all, but two students lived off campus.

Each student was asked to fill out a demographic survey and then interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for common themes. For the confidentiality of participants, all names were replaced with pseudonyms. Interviews were analyzed with questions such as: what do college students perceive as the definition of masculinity, what does toxic masculinity mean, and what are the different ways they feel hegemonic gender roles are portrayed online and in person?

I chose a qualitative approach in order to gather complete and thorough narratives from students who have multiple identities and exist in diverse spaces across campus and in their personal lives. Foucault claims that “One has to analyze power relations from the bottom up and not from the top down, and to study the myriad ways in which the subjects themselves are constituted in these diverse but intersecting networks (Gutting et al, 2019)”. Gathering narratives from populations who have the most experience in these techno cultures, such as college students, is a bottom-up approach in identifying how

gender is performed online versus in face-to-face interactions. The interviews were guided with the questionnaire labeled Appendix A and include questions as well as visual representations students were asked to comment on. The main objective was to gauge how students have experienced these roles in face-to-face and online interactions and questions were posed to gain narratives and stories in students' personal lives.

## **Chapter I: What Is Masculinity?**

One of the first questions explored was how students define masculinity. Many self-identified male and female students chose to answer this question by drawing on personal experiences with family and friends that reinforced their masculine identities. My first interview was conducted with a 23-year-old male undergraduate student majoring in Environmental Studies. He explained that, for him, masculinity meant acting in a stoic manner and being protective. He claimed that masculinity was being “resilient, stoic, protective, and strong.” Similarly, another 19-year-old male undergraduate claimed that masculinity “is a coping mechanism for the male in society so they can be healthy.” When I asked what he meant by this, he explained that “It is coping [mechanism for me] because it is a way to not be judged. [You want] to present yourself in a way to where you will not be hurt by people's ways of judging you.” By performing himself in a masculine way, Stryker was able to avoid peers judging him for possibly being non-masculine. Stryker also explained that if “guys aren’t getting girls or acting gay” then people will judge them.

Many other students responded in similar manners when asked how they define masculinity. Stryker also discussed how, for him, masculinity is having a high degree of entitlement. He responded to a question regarding what he means by entitlement with:

“I can’t question myself because if I question myself then my entitlement could be lost. Because deep down people don't question their entitlement. An example that comes to mind is frats[fraternities]. It's your social privilege your race, wealth, [they are] conservative usually. You can see it in their walk, in their demeanor, if they look you in your eye or not. Knowing guys in frats, they aren't even capable of thinking about other people or their interpretations.”

For many male students, not only did masculinity represent strength and stoicism, but also entitlement. These examples show how male students often

interpret masculinity in their in-person interactions and how a masculine gender role can come with a strong sense of entitlement.

On the other hand, the female students interviewed described masculinity in terms of traits that can exist in both genders as well as institutions. A 19-year-old female undergraduate expressed:

“Masculinity and femininity are social constructs based on culture and I think they have to do with [gender] roles. High heels used to be masculine and now they are feminine. Masculinity is coming from [expressing] a male gender role.”

In comparison to male respondents, females described masculinity as a construct and not in terms of characteristics or behaviors performed by a male. Male respondents discussed masculinity in terms of family, friends and qualities in people. Another female undergraduate, Sarah responded similarly describing masculinity as “important for having structure and agenda [where] feminine is inviting and soft energy.”

Interestingly, women were more likely to describe masculinity in terms of constructs and structures, where male respondents discussed it as a quality such as entitlement in themselves or the people they associate with. While this cannot be generalized to the entire population, this difference in thinking about the concept of masculinity exemplifies how men have come to associate masculinity with certain qualities, while females associated it with more abstract structures and cultural norms.

### **What is toxic masculinity?**

Contrary to masculinity, when students were asked about their first experience with toxic masculinity, every male participant described their first encounter with the term online. This was surprising because when I asked students about their perceptions on masculinity, participants only responded with anecdotes regarding face-to-face



interactions but when I asked about toxic masculinity, all male participants focused on describing online interactions. For example, when asked how he defined toxic masculinity, Stryker responded with:

“The internet is a good place for toxic masculinity to thrive because you could be a super small guy like me and pretend on there that you are this big macho representation but no one really knows what their real life is like.”

Stryker explained how the online platform Tinder allowed him to be extremely selective in the way he chose to present himself online. Due to a degree of disinhibition or lack of restraint from a physical body and environment, students like Stryker manipulate the way their body looks in order to appear more masculine. When another student named Alex replied, he claimed online toxic masculinity is performed by only showing successes and performing oneself as constantly busy. Alex explained that:

“Barriers men put up online is that they are always doing something. It gives a degree of hopelessness because you are so distracted by what others are pursuing you lose your ability to know what you want or what you are doing. Whether it's from your father or friends, you want to be able to show you have money and independence.”

Alex explains that when he interacts with social media sites, he feels he is constantly having to hyper compete with other men. This is like Stryker’s experience on Tinder, a social media dating application. Alex felt that he was being hyper competitive by focusing on what others are doing for money and independence, while Stryker was photoshopping his body to make himself look better than other potential Tinder users. Alex explained that he feels different expressing his masculinity online because it is “often so direct”. The interactions on the internet are guided by paying attention to who is getting the most likes and consequently how others can interact to receive attention as

well.

By having the technology to focus on others constantly, there is little room to pay attention to oneself. Students like Alex feel frustrated because by focusing on what gets the most like or views and trying to match or accelerate those becomes exhausting. This shows how online disinhibition can not only allow obvious forms of violence, such as verbal abuse or bullying, but also can allow students like Alex to feel that they must compete in order to be validated online. The performance of masculinity is facilitated by online disinhibition and becomes toxic because of the ways in which students feel they must compete for attention. Compounded with the disinhibition effect, toxic masculinity is displayed online through the commodification of oneself.

Both male and female students claimed that their performance online is immediately reinforced in the form of a comment, or like. It does not matter who you are necessarily, but rather whether you gain attention from what you post. Online interaction involves immediate feedback and makes students feel as if their interactions become extrinsically valuable instead of intrinsically. Students discussed that they would pick popular representations they know will attract likes, comments, and retweets. We perform ourselves constantly in real life depending on the context of whether we are with family, at work, in school or at a club. However, with online disinhibition this performance becomes toxic in the context of sites where extreme depictions of femininity and masculinity are encouraged. This representation of oneself becomes heavily filtered online and often becomes an unrealistic representation. Through these interviews one can see there is no such thing as an honest presentation of oneself on the internet. It is guided by what gets positively and negatively reinforced. Another student, Tom, a sophomore

claimed that “in real life toxic masculinity is much less prevalent because people care about how they are being perceived by people they know and care for.” This quote demonstrates how for many male participants they felt as though masculinity becomes toxic only in the context of interaction online. Most participants discussed how their performance of masculinity changed when they were online. When there is disinhibition, male respondents claimed that they would use editing apps or post outlandish comments in order to gain attention from strangers and friends online. Barak explains how:

“Cyberspace allows users to control their level of social presence and, thus, their degree of intimacy; that is, to control the amount and duration of visibility or invisibility during social interactions through the use or non-use of pictures, webcam, and videos. Thus, the absence of visibility and the unique form of social presence inherent in online communication accelerate the processes of online disinhibition because of reduced visibility-originated interpersonal communication cues. Selective use of photos and videos/movies significantly contribute to impression management and online relationships (Barak, 2012)”.

Many students discussed that social media sites have a hypercompetitive ambience when performing a hegemonically masculine gender role. This is partly due to the degree of disinhibition one feels when using the internet. It also has to do with the lack of visibility of a physical person and environment when seeing posts, images, and comments on social media. Students’ online presence is different than when they are around others because the people they interact with in-person have inhibition due to being in a physical space with a physical body. When students expressed how they interact online they discussed how they were appealing to heteronormative performances and standards of beauty. This type of toxically masculine performance stems from only choosing to portray oneself in a very specific lens because the person posting knows how their audience wants them to appear. Jackson also responded that the objectification of women

is tied in with his definition of toxic masculinity. He claimed that:

“The objectification of woman ties into consumerism and the idea that we are all isolated objects with value. And we isolate ourselves from what made us valuable in the first place and it makes people replace[able] especially how it's so easy to connect and disconnect with people through the phone. People are just something for you, not someone with worth isolated from what they can give you.”

When students discussed toxic masculinity online, they discussed how they appealed to heterosexual norms and ideas. People become interchangeable with objects because they started becoming valuable only if they could positively reinforce what you are posting.

Hegemonic gender roles are performed differently online than in face-to-face interactions because students have an extreme level of control in how others perceive them. Male students also explained how they wanted to be masculine and strong when interacting online because these are characteristics that gain validation and attention online. As Barak explains, visual anonymity induced a sense of freedom from social norms and restrictions, allowing people to manifest their feelings, whether aggressive or affectionate, in more meaningful ways (Barak, 2012).

Further, the female participants discussed toxic masculinity in terms of online interactions and face-to-face interactions. A 23-year-old undergraduate student, Samantha, claimed that:

“For me [when I think toxic masculinity I think] it's the gym bro[ther]s. There's not a lot of difference [between toxic masculinity and masculinity] because for women, [when we perform] gender we apologize for looking bad, [and] men never feel a pressure to look pretty and to put too much energy into that stuff [looking pretty] because putting effort into what you look like is considered the opposite of masculine.

Not only did female participants discuss toxic masculinity in both face-to-face and online interactions, but they also tended to use the term masculinity and toxic masculinity interchangeably. Similarly, another 21-year-old female student, Sarah, discussed how:

“The smallest little thing men will say like “that’s gay” or “no homo” are things a lot of my female friends won’t say and I think that’s masculinity or toxic masculinity.”

Sarah’s interchangeable use of the terms masculinity and toxic masculinity are different than how male respondents discussed these terms. In no way can this be generalized to all females; however, it is interesting to see how females use these terms interchangeably and describe masculinity as toxic online and in face-to-face interactions.

### **Toxic Techno Cultures and Their Relation to Hegemonic Gender Roles**

Toxic techno cultures as defined earlier are places in which flaming behavior runs rampant. Examples of these sites are 4chan, 8chan, and r/redpill/. They are often centered on expressing extreme hegemonic masculinity due to disinhibition. When I asked Stryker what he thought about toxic masculine techno cultures, he replied:

“The idea of masculinity does not stay online. And people start to shape their own personalities off the idea of who they are as a person online. It ends up making people aggressive and pushing good people away. You start to view people more as objects than people. And then you become a bitter, jaded person because you start to look for things that only exist online.”

Stryker explains that images and discourse that are hyper edited online tend to make people think these are the only acceptable ways to gain attention or power. Before social media sites, young men and women who had trouble finding community in face-to-face interactions looked elsewhere. Now, with the extreme accessibility of the online world, it is easy to find community online. However, the community tends to stem from bonding

over one aspect of someone's identity. Communities formed online are greater in breadth but severely lack depth. The relationships cultivated and maintained online can be created through bonding over games, topics, or reaching out to family and friends. However, in the case of toxic techno cultures, relationships are formed based on having commonalities such as in celibacy or the feeling of rejection from family and peers in real life. This manifests itself into an identity focused on hate for the "other", meaning anybody who is not a part of this community.

Traditionally, hegemonic gender roles have been able to reproduce the system and structures seen today. However, there has been a rise in online communities like r/redpill, a group founded on the belief that men are oppressed by women. This is in response to women expanding their social roles in the United States beyond the home. Donna Zuckerberg explains that:

“While trolls have been part of the internet landscape for decades, the Red Pill community as it exists today seems to have coalesced around 2012. It began as a group of websites with a self-conscious focus on men's issues, including the subreddit founded in 2012 by Robert Fisher-later a Republican politician-called r /theredpill. Internet sexism predates that period, but the Red Pill represents a new phase in online misogyny. Its members not only mock and belittle women; they also believe that in our society, men are oppressed by women (Zuckerberg, 2019).

Students are taught all their life, consciously and unconsciously, that being in certain positions, like a male social role, will grant certain power and privilege. Consequently, when the privilege is not granted in the form of attention or power, those who were taught this look for people to validate that social role and form prejudices against people they feel could potentially jeopardize their privilege. Jackson claimed that he was once following a Reddit forum where an anonymous person posted his rejection from a female and one user posted “keep your head up king, she is probably with a Chad”. A “Chad” is a man who

represents the identity of a hegemonically masculine gender role, and can be seen in the visual image in Appendix A. Instead of this anonymous person accepting rejection and moving on, he was validated as a “king” and told she meant nothing. Furthermore, the peers that do validate them are the ones they choose to pay attention to and conform their identity too. Those who do not support this view become potential people to form a prejudice against. Additionally, in another student interview Kellen, a male undergraduate, explained that part of the appeal of toxic techno-cultures comes from community:

“People who would never consider [participating in] a school shooting [can] find inspiration [to do so] and [online forums] give [potential mass shooters] a place to thrive. I personally am 100% for free speech but I feel like private companies should take them down. If we didn't have the internet this wouldn't have happened. The consequences can be severe and the degradation of humans and separate people from being humans and seen as objects.”

Participants interpret their online experience in the context of rejection from being able to express this internalized mentality in person. Students who would normally never imagine shooting another person, let alone multiple people, can find inspiration to do so in these online spaces. Kellen elaborates how masculinity becomes toxic online because men will “dedicate themselves to the point where it is toxic, and they feel they are the most dominant, funny and attractive person in the room”. This type of validation may not occur in rface-to-face interactions, but students can find validation in any identity on the internet, including deadly ones.

## **V. Polarity’s connection to Toxic Masculinity**

Many students also claim there is a feeling of polarity when it comes to expressing oneself online. This comes from performing one’s self always in an extreme manner. Students can be selective about which parts of themselves they choose to display whether

it is a certain picture, comment, or post. This is a direct effect of having editing tools, disinhibition, and control over the degree of visibility one has. The ways in which they perform themselves is also largely affected by positive reinforcement from peers, coming in the form of “likes”, comments or going “twitter viral”. Many students explained that two of the most toxic masculine platforms they interact with are Reddit and Twitter. These are two of the social sites that require no personal data in the case of Reddit, and little personal data to register for Twitter. After asking Kellen a question about which platforms he found more depictions of toxic masculinity, he responded by describing Twitter:

“All you have is a little profile picture and people can be and post whatever they want. Twitter is also a very opinionated platform. I think twitter is all about going viral. It is built to make certain things go viral if you have a quick take on a joke or dissing somebody it will go viral. I think it is one of the most active places for conv[ersation] and you must get likes to get validation and with toxic masculinity [men on] twitter [are] kind of hateful and a lot of women will gas people up. And men [who are toxic] toxic men will try to put people down in shitty ways”.

The internet allows students like Kellen to perform masculinity in extreme ways. Another part of the attraction to the online community is that you can be anyone due to disinhibition and still find a community to connect with. This can have serious consequences if the community that is attractive is based on the hate of someone else or a group of people. A female student aged 23, named Sarah, explained how the internet and in person interactions differ because relationships are easy to gain and lose. She explained that “Reddit personifies these roles, people are acting, it’s cool to be outlandish and racially problematic especially when no one knows you”.

In order to have a prejudice against another person or group of people, you have to have



the privilege to see yourself as different from them. As we know, all racial groups, men and women are equal. Consequently, when people are outwardly racist or prejudice in face-to-face interactions, they are often reprimanded or at the least discouraged from that type of behavior. However, on Twitter and Reddit, there can be entire forums dedicated to discriminating women and people of color, in order to protect the entitlement to power, money, property, and sexual gratification that participants on especially hateful sites feel they deserve. Almost all participants who were asked this question named Reddit or Twitter as one of the most likely spots to find discourse focused on misogyny.

On sites like Reddit and Twitter, Kellen explained that people are encouraged to say problematic comments in order to gain attention. As mentioned earlier, students choose how to perform their masculinity based on what will get the most likes or comments. These participants and others claimed that there is an inextricable connection between anonymity(disinhibition) and the degree to which one performs these roles. Even more, “Reddit’s karma point system, aggregation of material across subreddits, ease of subreddit and user account creation, governance structure, and policies around offensive content serve to provide fertile ground for antifeminist and misogynistic activism (Massanari, 2017)”. Even the site itself is built for these communities to prosper due to the low level of regulation and the extreme degree of disinhibition.

## **VI. Bringing the Conversation to Safe Spaces**

Several of the students interviewed feel they could benefit from a space on campus to learn and discuss hegemonic gender roles where they felt safe and able to express differing opinions.

Kellen voiced that he:

“doesn’t really see these conversations on campus and I think this a time in

people's lives where they should be having these conversations and be present. Society has held on [to] these roles, but it doesn't have to be that way. And I think there have been a lot of people who have had the platform [to speak and voice opinions], but we need to give others this platform and double down on it.

Many students echoed Kellen's sentiments in that they wanted to participate in a space that was safe to discuss gender roles and their impact in students' lives. Another student also explained that by identifying as male he feels he is not allowed or able to outwardly express emotion at times or to be vulnerable with others. He rarely ever has conversations with his friends because they are "bro-y." When I asked him what this means he said he was describing the ways in which men will tell him he is being weak and to just get over it when he voices concerns or is vulnerable with them. Stryker also felt that he would benefit from a space like this because when he does bring these topics up people become very sensitive and automatically think he is attacking them. Stryker also discussed how he believes:

"there should be a class dedicated to teaching about the objectification of women. Kids coming into school at this point are so sensitive that they can't discuss things anymore. The masculinity/objectification thing starts so young and a class should come from discussing these roles from different perspectives. A lot of people don't even think there is a problem with these roles."

Universities like Brown and Duke are implementing masculinity peer education classes that teach about male privilege and examine the cultural lens and way in which we learn gender and its role in society (Campbell, 2017). It appears that Texas State University could benefit from a class like this that examines this cultural lens and its role online as well.

### **Implications**

This study has direct implications for understanding how students at Texas State University engage, interact, and discuss concepts like masculinity and toxic

masculinity in face to face and online interactions.

If this study were to be conducted with a larger sample and with a broader demographic of people, it could have potential implications for sociocultural anthropology, psychology, and gender studies.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited in diversity and scope due to the small sample size of only nine students. While it was relatively equal amount of men and women (five men, four women), a larger sample would produce more generalized data. Nevertheless, due to the qualitative nature of the research data, the narratives captured in these interviews are powerful and contribute greatly to unpacking these concepts.

### **Conclusion**

Using interviews, previous literature, and demographic surveys, I found major themes in how college students perceive masculinity, toxic masculinity, and toxic techno cultures. Every participant described feelings of disinhibition when interacting online. Additionally, women were more likely to use the terms masculinity and toxic masculinity interchangeably. Further, men would only discuss masculinity as toxic when discussing online interactions. A minor theme in the data shows that both women and men feel they could benefit from a space on campus, be it a class or club, to discuss and unpack these ideas about hegemonic roles. The major goals of this project were to gain perspectives

from students on how they understand terms like masculinity, toxic masculinity, and toxic techno culture. Due to the honesty and detailed responses from students, I was able to gain many important, unique narratives from students with diverse histories and demographics.

In the 21st century, the traditional pedagogy and institutions in place have led to little space for voicing opinions, feelings, and experiences regarding our perceptions of these hegemonic gender roles and our intersectional identities in general. Due to the constant portrayal of these traditional roles through social media and other platforms where we consume these messages, they have had a pervasive impact in the everyday lives of students. Open and honest discussion is the only way we can mitigate the negative and alienating consequences of online communication. As we get used to the conveniences of technology, the nature of our relationships differs widely.

## **Appendix I.**

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide:**

1. What does masculinity mean to you? How would you define it?
2. Where do you think your ideas of masculinity come from?
3. Can you tell me about a time where you first heard of the term “masculinity” or “toxic” masculinity online?
4. How do you think masculinity is portrayed differently in real-life and online?
5. Is this a term that you hear in your age group often?\*
6. Would you say there is a feeling of entitlement that comes with a masculine gender role?
7. Do you ever feel like you perform yourself in more masculine or feminine ways in certain situations? Why or why not?

8. In what contexts do you discuss these terms with peers and what does that conversation look like?
9. Do you feel like you would be comfortable discussing these gender roles with your peers? Why or why not?
10. What do you perceive as the consequences of these toxic masculine techno cultures?
11. Do you feel like there are more depictions of masculinity and toxic masculinity on some sites than others?
12. Can you tell me about some words that come to mind when you hear the term femininity?
  - a. Where did you first encounter correlations with these terms and femininity?
11. How do you perform your gender in certain situations?  
How does this work for you?
12. Do you feel like masculinity and femininity can exist together or are you either masculine or feminine?
  - a. Can you explain a time where you perceived yourself performing one of these roles?
  - b. How would you describe the “Me too” movement? Could it be perceived as a predator-prey relationship?
13. Is the internet community reflective of the hegemonic structures you see today?
14. Why do you think communities like the “Incel” community are attractive or not attractive?
15. Have you ever participated in a gender and sexuality course or received Ally training?  
Would you be interested? Why or why not?
16. Do you feel as though there are safe places on campus to discuss gender roles and hegemonic traits? If so, where and how do you?  
If not, would you participate in a space that allowed and promoted discussion like this?

### **Focus Group Questions**

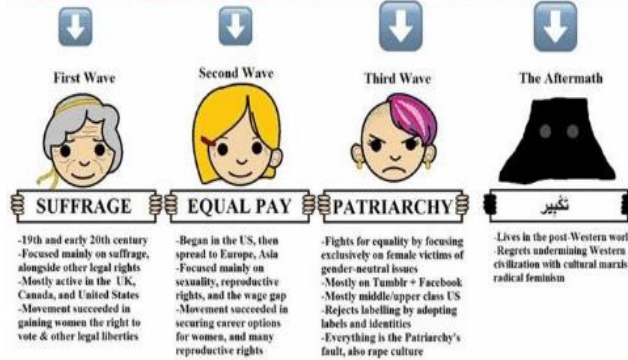
17. As college students, what are some of the first thing that comes to mind when hearing the phrase “toxic masculinity”?
18. When you're with your friends, do you discuss this term? In what context would you discuss it?
19. Are there certain places where you feel more comfortable being vulnerable to discussion about these topics?
20. If Texas State University offered a course that discussed definitions and perceptions of masculine roles and their destructive tendencies, would you participate?  
→ Can you elaborate on why or why not?
21. How do your online communities such as Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and Snapchat influence the ways in which you perform your gender roles?
22. Do you ever feel like being sensitive or vulnerability is a sign of weakness?
23. Looking at the popular depictions of gender roles in media, sometimes referred to as memes, can you take a minute to look at these memes and answer the following questions:

- a. Have you seen these memes before?
- b. Can you identify with them, why or why not?
- c. Can you recall a time where you saw a meme or image like these? And if so where and how did it make you feel?

# Feminism: Know the difference!!!

COMMON SENSE  
DO BELIEVE YOU  
CAN SMOKE IT!  
NO COMMON SENSE  
DO BELIEVE YOU  
CAN SMOKE IT!

## Real Feminism CANCER



(U) They are owed attention from "Beckys."<sup>9</sup>

(U) Most Incels believe only men can be Incels as women could engage in sexual activity if they wanted to.<sup>10</sup>



### (U) EXTREMIST CONNECTIONS AND ATTACKS

(U/FOUO) The majority of Incel online activity falls under First Amendment protected speech. Following the Toronto attack, there was increase in discussion of conducting a variety of attacks.<sup>12</sup> Members primarily use online forums such as 4Chan, 8Chan, incel.me, and Reddit.<sup>13</sup> These are



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