

# ATTITUDE TOWARDS MASCULINITY NORMS BY YOUNG AND MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS

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## Abstract

Since decades there has been gender role expectations and gender role norms imposed on people around the world. Especially in a country like India with rigid social norms, these expectations are elevated. This study aimed to explore the attitude of two groups of people, young and middle-aged adults, on the aspect of masculinity norms, find out the extent to which they accept or deny these strict gender norms and compare both the groups if they had any difference in their attitudes towards the traditional masculinity norms.

Objectives: To identify and compare the attitude towards male role norms in young adults and middle-aged adults.

Methods: Sample size N=80. Sample 1 - young adults aged 18-21; Sample 2 - middle-aged adults aged 45-65. Participants were chosen from Chennai. Both male and female participants were included. Data collected through: Male Role Norms Scale (developed by Thompson and Pleck in 1986). Purposive sampling technique was used.

Results: Independent sample t test results revealed that there is a significant difference in the factors status and toughness ( $p < 0.001$ ) and antifemininity ( $p < 0.05$ )

Conclusion: There is a significant difference in attitudes towards masculinity norms among young and middle-aged adults.

**Keywords:** Attitude, masculinity, masculinity norms.

## INTRODUCTION

Gender role expectations in India

Since decades there has been gender role expectations and gender role norms imposed on people around the world. Especially in a country like India with rigid social norms, these expectations are elevated. Such norms are so overwhelming that people belonging to a particular gender, find it extremely narrow and are unable to perform certain behaviors outside of the social expectations that are ultimately considered as gender-deviant behaviors. This compulsion makes them comply to an old and inflexible socially constructed gender norm. On majority there are two genders, i.e, male and female. People being born in a gender are expected to abide to those gender-specific rules

that are constructed by the society which almost all the cultures similarly categorize as masculinity and femininity norms.

Earlier done researches focused on certain aspects of masculinity and how it has been attributed as the central trait to the male society. A man's self-esteem and his optimism were seen to positively correlate with adherence to masculinity norms by majority of the older population (Barry, 2020). It wouldn't be an exaggeration if we say that such obedience towards traditional masculinity is a shield for men to protect themselves from feeling insecure in their clan. Studies support the above statement, where, Willer et al. did a thesis on how men overdo their gender, as a reaction to threats to their masculinity. When

men felt threatened on this very spectrum that they hold high, they tend to be more dominant, homophobic and disregard effeminate men, supported male superiority, and whole, wanted to feel powerful (Willer et al., 2013).

#### Definitions

Attitude is defined as “a complex of feelings, desires, fears, convictions, prejudices or other tendencies that have given a set or readiness to act to a person because of varied experiences” (Chave, 1928).

Khan defines masculinity as a “complex cognitive, behavioural, emotional, expressive, psychosocial and socio-cultural experience of identifying with being male.” (George & Loosemore, 2019).

Joseph Pleck defined the masculinity ideology as “beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards for male behavior” (Pleck, 1993). Such ideologies give rise to masculinity norms or male role norms.

Masculinity norm is a “societal expectation of how a man should think, feel and behave” (McDermott et al., 2019), we can see that masculinity ideology is a personal expectation, while masculinity role norms are societal expectations.

#### Societal influence on gender expression

Men are expected to be the dominant gender, who are stubborn, strong and powerful. Stigma based on color preferences, even toy preferences in childhood, clothing, accessories, career, sports, etc. are culturally taught to all genders from generation to generation. And when men seem to deviate from the non-written gender rules of society, they are questioned on their manhood/masculinity. It is even worse if those men who are being deviant from their gender roles adopted feminine roles as they all will be the target of discrimination (Alam, 2016). Extreme traditional ideologies of masculinity give rise to superiority complex in the male population and thus, being the dominant group, they feel the need to overpower the female population (Harris, 1977). This, on a longer run paves way to

physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and psychological abuse towards women. Pressure imposed by masculinity norms not just prove negative to the opposite gender but people belonging to the same gender itself as it is highly stereotypical based on all aspects of living. (Vogel et al., 2011).

#### Masculinity ideologies affecting men and women

Men having self-stigma towards masculinity ideologies tend to be victims themselves for many unfortunate situations. They tend to seek help in a considerably lower amount because they might fear being the weaker sex. They have always been asked to “Man Up” no matter how hard their situation is. And even if they do seek help, they’re almost always ignored. Yousaf, Popat and Hunter did a study on men’s help seeking behavior and found out that the more men were inclined towards the support of traditional masculinity norms, the more it proved to be a barrier for their psychological help seeking (Yousaf et al., 2015). The society has pushed them so far so that they look down at themselves when they choose certain jobs like nursing, teaching at a school, etc. As much as they aren’t jobs to look down at, they certainly hold a stigma around them considering them to be feminine.

#### Role of education

We certainly cannot negate education’s role in gender-based ideologies. Education has been constantly evolving. It is more inclusive, practical and knowledgeable in today’s generation. Critical thinking has been given primary importance. Also, the once held traditional/stigmatic topics are put forth to make an appropriate decision and a lot of myths have been broken down with facts and evidences. This is the reason why one generation of people might not have the same clarity on a certain topic like the other generation. Thus, there may be a noticeable amount of difference in the most recent generation and the older ones in topic of masculinity attitudes too. This study aims to identify the attitude towards traditional masculinity norms among young and middle-

aged adults and see whether the two groups are differing or are they all similar with their attitudes towards masculinity norms due to greater awareness through other external sources.

#### Need for study

Having understood about the variables of this study, it is highly required to examine the extent to which people accept or deny certain rigid gender norms. Previous studies on the similar topic have been established but there was no comparison drawn between two age groups and many were not based on Indian context. The difference in shared experiences among the two age cohorts may influence their attitudes, and thus, they are taken as the target group. Also, after decriminalization of homosexuality in India on 6th September 2018, there has been a wide range of acceptance of various gender roles in general among the citizens. The current study aims to understand about the difference in attitude towards masculinity norms among young and middle-aged adults and see which group has had changed perceptions towards the once created traditional gender norm for men.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies on masculinity ideologies/attitudes:

Barry (2020) conducted a cross-sectional online pilot study to assess impact of 'toxic' masculinity among men themselves. Sample - 203 men and 52 women (Mean age=46; SD=13). The sample were asked about their views on traditional masculinity, and about their feelings towards job and relationship problems related to their gender. More tolerance was seen towards toxic masculinity when there were views of feminism and anti-patriarchy. Through multiple linear regression, older age, greater education and a greater acceptance of traditional masculinity predicted men's self-esteem and mental positivity.

Obierufu & Ojedokun (2019) did a study that explored the role of masculinity and its subcomponents (i.e., dominance and aggression, conservative masculinity,

hypermasculinity, devaluation of emotion and sexual identity) in rape-supportive attitude. Sample were men (N=107). The results of linear regression analysis revealed that there was a significant contribution of masculinity and its subcomponents towards rape-supportive attitude.

King et al. (2018) as a part of a bigger study, developed "Man Up", a three-part documentary which observed variables like masculinity, mental health, and suicide and also established a relationship between them. The participants (N=169; male), 4 weeks after viewing "Man Up", provided qualitative feedback. The majority of participants were positive about the show and reported having more openness towards expressing their emotions/problems and more willingness towards helping others (behavioral changes in helping) and also being aware of others. Throughout "Man Up", emotion expression and help-seeking attitudes/behaviors were completely normalized, which in turn, questioned the dominant, traditional masculinity norms of being self-reliant.

Alam (2016) did a study among students to examine gender stereotype and behavior towards masculinity and femininity. Purposive sampling method used; 300 participants (77 males; 223 females). The results showed traditional masculine attitudes were high in terms of "Dominating family" (92.02%), low in terms of "Not sharing problem with others" (26%) among males. On investigating regarding attitudes towards masculinity and femininity by both male and female students, it could be concluded that male students seemed to be more traditional than female students.

Zheng & Zheng (2016) made a study on 462 homosexual and bisexual men in China on attitude towards masculinity. From a list of 32 traits for gender roles, participants selected the seven most desirable personality traits for a romantic partner. Results revealed more masculine faces, bodies, and personality traits were preferred by participants. A significant correlation with attitude toward male masculinity and facial, body, and trait preferences showed that participants who

preferred more masculine characters were having more rigid attitudes toward male masculinity (i.e., low acceptance of femininity in males).

Yousaf, Popat and Hunter (2015) used Inventory of Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services (IASMHS) and the Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI-R) to study the relationships between traditional masculinity norms, help-seeking attitudes along with gender among 124 participants. Men scored low on IASMHS than women and scored high on MRNI. Through regression analysis, prediction of IASMHS scores were seen from men's MRNI scores. Results shows that a significant barrier to psychological help-seeking is because of men's traditional masculinity ideologies.

Willer et al. (2013) formulated masculine overcompensation thesis which emphasizes that men overly enact their traditional masculinity ideologies as a reaction to masculine insecurity/threats. Study 1 (N=111), revealed that men expressed greater support for war, homophobic attitudes, and interest in purchasing an SUV when they were told they were feminine. Study 2 (N=100) found that men supported dominance more when their gender identity was threatened. Study 3 revealed that men who reported that their status is threatened by social changes also showed more homophobic and dominant attitudes and belief in male superiority. Study 4 (N=54) found that stronger reactions to masculinity threats were shown by men with high testosterone levels.

Vogel et al. (2011) examined relationships between attitudes toward counseling (self-stigma of seeking help) and conformity to dominant U.S. masculine norms (N = 4773 men). Findings showed that some significant differences were present across different racial/ethnic groups and sexual orientations. On the whole, there is evidence that approval of dominant masculine ideals is related to lower help-seeking attitudes and higher levels of self-stigma.

### Limitations of review of literature

With enough evidence from the literature, we can say that there is significant difference in attitudes towards traditional masculinity norms by different groups (based on gender, sexualities, majority/minority groups, etc.). But these literatures do not suffice for the difference in attitude between two age cohorts. Besides, earlier studies were not based on Indian context.

### OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the attitude of masculinity norms in young adults
2. To identify the attitude of masculinity norms in middle-aged adults
3. To compare young and middle-aged adults in terms of their attitude towards masculinity norms

### HYPOTHESIS

H0: There will be no significant difference in the attitude of masculinity norms among young and middle-aged adults.

### METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

#### Statement of Problem

Masculinity role norms have been followed since ages. The aim of this study is to find any difference in attitudes towards masculinity norms between two age cohorts.

#### Research question

Is there a difference in the attitudes of young and middle-aged adults in terms of masculinity norms?

#### Operational definition

#### Masculinity

Khan defines masculinity as a "complex cognitive, behavioural, emotional, expressive, psychosocial and socio-cultural experience of

identifying with being male.” (George & Loosemore, 2019). Masculinity role norms were defined as a “societal expectation of how a man should think, feel and behave” (McDermott et al., 2019).

In this study attitude towards masculinity role norms is operationally defined as the scores obtained by the participants in the Male Role Norms Scale developed by Edward H. Thompson Jr and Joseph H. Pleck (1986).

#### Research design

Ex post facto research design

#### Variables

Independent Variable = Age (young and middle-aged adults).

Dependent Variable = Attitude towards masculinity norms.

Sample (N=80)

Sample size of study was eighty (N=80). Two sample groups were taken; sample 1 consists of young adults aged 18-21 (N=40) and sample 2 consists of middle-aged adults aged 45-65 (N=40). Both male and female participants from Chennai were included in both samples.

#### Sampling technique

Purposive sampling technique was adopted.

#### Inclusion criteria

- Male and female unmarried, undergraduate young adults aged 18 to 21 in Chennai
- Male and female married middle-aged adults aged 45 to 65 in Chennai.

#### Exclusion criteria

- Young and middle-aged adults who were unable to read or access the online questionnaire.

#### Tool used

Male Role Norms Scale by Edward H. Thompson Jr and Joseph H. Pleck (1986).

#### Description of tool

#### Male Role Norms Scale

The Male Role Norms Scale was developed by Edward H. Thompson Jr and Joseph H. Pleck in 1986. This scale consists of 26 questions on whole. It is a self-reported questionnaire with responses in the format of 7-point Likert type starting from, 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree. It has three subsets namely, Status, Toughness, and Antifemininity. Scoring – the higher the score, the more attitude towards male role norms.

Reliability: The Cronbach’s alpha for status, toughness and antifemininity were found to be 0.81, 0.74, 0.76 respectively.

Validity: Confirmatory factor analysis shows that the three distinct factors have good intercorrelations and are highly valid. The questionnaire has good construct validity.

#### Administration

The data was collected through the questionnaire mentioned above – Male Role Norms Scale. The questionnaire was sent online to the participants via google forms to collect individual responses.

#### Ethics

Ethical guidelines were followed. Sample groups were given a choice of voluntary participation. Considering sensitivity of the topic, anonymity was maintained and confidentiality was assured.

#### Statistical technique of data analysis

The statistical technique used for this study was independent sample t-test (using SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 28.0)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Descriptive statistics

##### Mean

##### Standard deviation

## Inferential statistics

## Independent sample t test

TABLE 1 *Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
<b>Young Adults</b>	40				
Status		17	73	43.15	15.23
Toughness		8	50	26.6	9.47
Antifemininity		12	41	23.95	8.26
<b>Middle-aged adults</b>	40				
Status		36	74	56.7	12.10
Toughness		20	51	35.48	8.39
Antifemininity		13	47	27.55	7.68

Table 1 represents the Descriptive Statistics, i.e., the mean and the standard deviation of scores from Male Role Norms Scale among two groups of participants (variables).

TABLE 2 *Independent sample t test for the mean differences in all factors of Male Role Norms Scale between young and middle-aged adults.*

Variables	Young adults		Middle-aged adults		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Status	43.15	15.23	56.70	12.10	-4.404***
Toughness	26.60	9.47	35.47	8.39	-4.434***
Antifemininity	23.95	8.26	27.55	7.68	-2.017*

\*\*\*=  $p < 0.001$ , significant at the 0.001 level, two-tailed

\*= $p < 0.05$ , significant at the 0.05 level, two-tailed

Table 2 represents the independent sample t test results for factors of male role norms (status, toughness and antifemininity) between young and middle-aged adults. From table 2, it can be seen that there were significant mean differences (i.e.,  $p < 0.001$  for factors status and toughness, and  $p < 0.05$  for antifemininity), between the young and middle-aged adults on their male role norms.

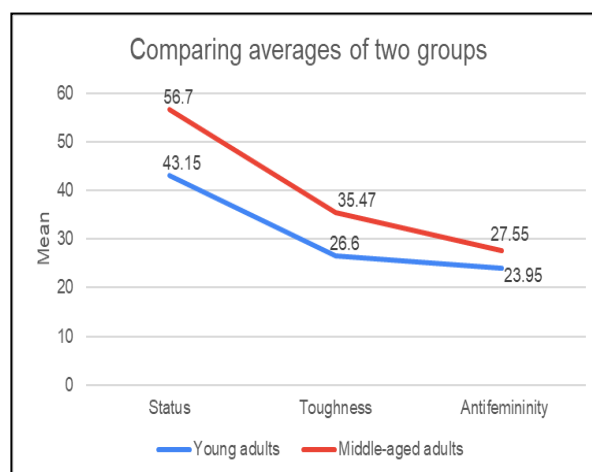


Fig. 1 represents the difference in averages of attitude towards masculinity norms among the two sample groups.

## Discussion of findings

Results of independent sample t test showed that the middle-aged adults were significantly higher in their attitude of confirmation of traditional masculinity norms in all three factors of the scale than young adults. This may be because young adults, especially in this decade, have been highly exposed to various gender fluid behaviors. This might've made them more welcoming and open-minded to fit in their perception a spectrum of behaviors for any gender rather than having particular behaviors constricted to certain genders alone. The society is gradually becoming more inclusive than how it was during the growth period of middle-aged adults and this also might be a factor that would've increased the tolerance of non-masculine behaviors of men among young adults.

Results also indicated that there was significantly high difference in the mean scores of the factors, status and toughness among both the groups ( $p < 0.001$ ). The factor 'status' is relative rank of men in a hierarchy of prestige especially and factor 'toughness' is defined as the ability to withstand and deal with hardship or to cope in difficult situations. Middle-aged adults comparatively felt these two components to be highly efficient for a man and thus, they had a mean score which is relatively higher (approximately 10 units higher) than that of young adults. But on the factor antifemininity, the mean differences of two groups were not so drastic, rather they differed only by 4 units. 'Antifemininity', is defined as shunning any kind of feminine trait. Moreover, this factor was describing about deserting a man who does an activity that was/is considered to be feminine. This factor had low scores and it may be because this factor had comparatively less questions than other two (Status – 11; Toughness – 8; Antifemininity – 7); but that still doesn't meaningfully account for such low score from both groups. Therefore, even though number of questions have a role to play in the scores, it doesn't necessarily affect it drastically as all three factors have just one or two questions difference, in comparison. And the statistical significance of the factor antifemininity is at  $p < 0.05$  level, unlike other

two factors which were even more highly significant being at 0.001 level.

The questionnaire had 26 questions on whole and the score range from minimum to maximum is 26 to 182, indicating that the high the score is, the higher is an individual's support/confirmation towards traditional male role norms (Fischer et al., 1998). The mean for status will be 44.0; for toughness it is 32.0; and for antifemininity it will be 28.0.

On average, the young adults group scored 43.15 for status which is quite close to the mean 44.0. This maybe because this group expects a man to hold on to his status and dignity along with his prestige of being a 'man'. Their average score for toughness is 26.6 but this is not too close to the mean 32.0, thus making this factor of 'being tough' not so expected by this group, on men. The factor antifemininity also had a score of 23.95 and this also is not quite close to the mean 28.0. This might be because the younger adults' group may feel that those traits expected to be feminine can be masculine too. Having lower scores in toughness says that they may feel that a man can be vulnerable too. It also might mean that no feminine trait is considered weak. It's evident that they scored less on antifemininity, meaning, they do not disregard any feminine traits on a man, rather they consider it normal and accepting. They also don't seem to discriminate job activities of any kind for any gender, thus, their openness towards the same.

However, on an average, the middle-aged adults scored 56.7 in the factor status which is very high than its mean 44.0. The factor toughness had a score of 35.47 which is quite higher than the mean 32.0. Antifemininity score for them was 27.55 which is very close to the mean 28.0. With all these scores, we can see that middle-aged adults expect a man to hold on to his prestige of being a 'man', not embrace anything considered feminine and be tough in any difficult situations. A study done by Willer and colleagues also support the statement where the sample expressed their masculinity ideologies to overwhelming level that they embraced being masculine as a trait

(Willer et al., 2013). Also, their score on antifemininity says that they disregard any job or activity considered feminine to be performed by a man. All these indicate that middle-aged adults, on a significantly higher level compared to young adults, still hold on to traditional masculinity norms.

The results from the study rejects the null hypothesis which stated that there would be no significant difference among the two groups and thus, proves that there is a significant difference in attitude towards masculinity norms among young and middle-aged adults.

### Conclusions of the study

- Young adults scored high on status but low on toughness and antifemininity.
- Middle-aged adults scored significantly high on all three factors.
- The aim was to find any difference in attitudes and this study found that there is a significant difference in attitude towards masculinity norms among young and middle-aged adults.

### Limitations

- The study is based on self-reports, which has the risk of being biased with social desirability.
- Generalization of results is not possible because the study was limited to sample groups from one city and the sample size is relatively small.

### Suggestion for future study

- The same study can be done between male and female groups to study the influence of gender.
- Addition of new constructs or variables can be done to make it as inter-disciplinary research so that it will have broader implications

- Larger sample and larger target area can be chosen for getting better generalizability.
- More than two age cohorts can also be studied in the future.
- Sampling frame could be drawn from list of potential respondents, and sample can be chosen on random selection basis to avoid any kind of bias in selection of sample.
- Probability sampling techniques can be used to get more accurate and unbiased results for the study.
- Can be administered in field setting by researcher themselves by not involving self-reports of participants to eradicate socially desirable responses
- Different localities, cultures and religions can be studied on their attitude and their influence on gender norms.
- Further analysis like correlation, regression, etc. can be done to see how the variables affect one another
- Extensive research like a pre-post study or a longitudinal study can be done using interventions to find outcomes for different time periods regarding gender role norms.
- Future research can study the factors that influence the attitude changes among the two groups, young and middle-aged adults.

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