

SOCIAL MEDIA USE, TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY NORMS AND AGGRESSION AMONG MEN: AGE AS A MODERATOR

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how social media use, traditional masculinity beliefs, and aggressive behaviour are related among adult men while age is a moderating variable. A cross-sectional correlational design was used, involving 258 men between the ages of 18 and 50 who were selected through purposive sampling. Participants filled the survey form which consist of the Social Media Use Scale, the Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form, and the Brief Aggression Questionnaire. The data was analysed using Pearson correlation, simple linear regression, and moderation analysis. The results showed that social media use significantly predicted traditional masculinity norms, although the effect was small. Among the different types of social media engagement, belief-based and consumption-based use were significant predictors. Traditional masculinity norms significantly predicted aggression. In addition, higher social media use was related to greater aggression. Although the interaction between age and masculinity norms was positive, but it was not statistically significant. Therefore, age did not significantly moderate the relationship between masculinity norms and aggression.

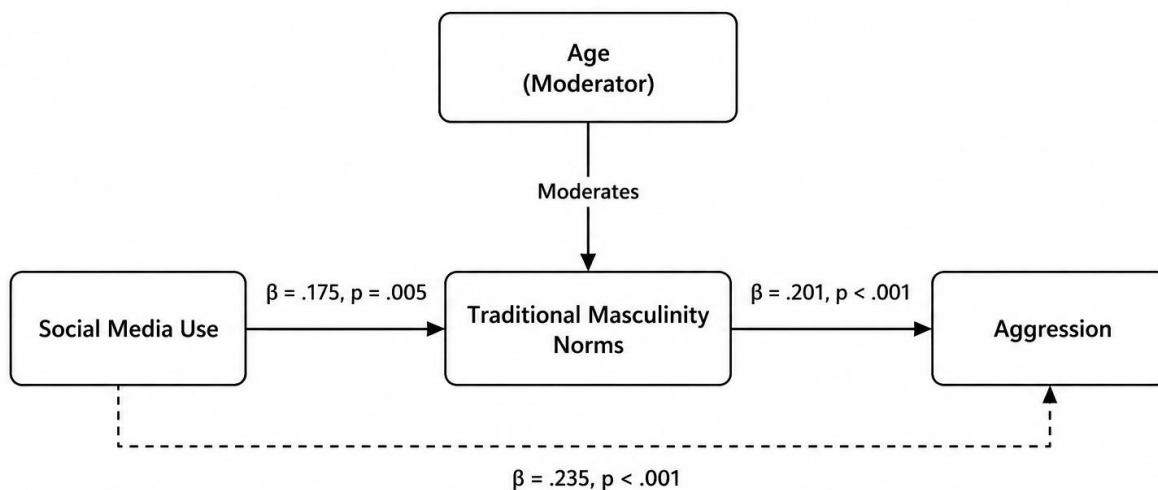
I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become influential environments for social interaction, identity performance, and exposure to cultural expectations. Unlike traditional media, social media combines repeated exposure with personalized feeds, peer feedback, and visible social rewards. These features strengthen the perceived normality of frequently encountered attitudes and behaviors. Cultivation theory proposes that sustained media exposure can gradually shape beliefs about social reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). While social learning theory emphasizes that people acquire behavior by observing models whose actions appear rewarded (Bandura, 1977; Bandura et al., 1963). these findings show that repeated exposure to dominant, emotionally distant, or aggressive role models shaped individuals' ideas about acceptable masculine behavior. Traditional masculinity refers to the social and cultural expectations about how men should think and behave. These expectations often encourage men to appear strong, dominant, independent, confident, controlled and different from women (Levant et al., 2013). These traits do not define what it means to be a man, and not all men follow them in a same way. It is evident that following restrictive masculine norms can negatively affect men's relationship and mental health (Gerdes & Levant, 2018; Wong et al., 2017). Men also respond aggressively when they feel their masculinity is being challenged or questioned (Bosson et al., 2009; Cohn & Zeichner, 2006).

Media is one of the main ways through which people learn about gender roles and expectations. Studies show that media often presents stereotypical and limiting image of men and women (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Research on men has found that frequent media use increase acceptance of traditional gender beliefs and, through masculine norms they also linked with risky behavior (Giaccardi et al., 2017). Media exposure also shapes the adolescents' idea about how men are expected to behave (Scharrer & Warren, 2022). These evidences showed that social media use related to traditional masculinity beliefs. The way people use social media is also important. The Social Media Use Scale identifies four types of engagement: image based, comparison based, belief based, and consumption-based use, instead of simply dividing social media use into active and passive use (Tuck & Thompson, 2024). Aggression appears in different forms, such as physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility. Researchers have studied that repeated exposure to aggressive media content and aggressive role models influence aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Bandura et al., 1963). Problematic internet use has been linked with aggression, because it reduces self-controlled and affect emotional responses (Agbaria, 2021). The present study not only focus on addictive social media use but, it examines different types of everyday social media engagement. This makes it possible to understand whether some forms of social media use are strongly connected with aggression.

Age influences this relationship because people's identities, social media use, and beliefs about gender role can change over time. Younger adults spend more time on social media and still be developing their personal and gender identities. Comparatively, older adults have more established beliefs about gender roles. Research shows that traditional masculinity beliefs do not change in the same way across all age groups or masculine groups (Levant et al., 2022). The present study investigated social media use, traditional masculinity norms, and aggression among men aged 18 to 50 years. Four hypotheses were tested: (H1) social media use would be positively related with traditional masculinity norms; (H2) traditional masculinity norms would be positively related with aggression; (H3) social media use would be positively related with aggression; and (H4) age would moderate the relationship between traditional masculinity norms and aggression.

Figure I: The conceptual Framework of the Study



Age was tested as a moderator of the Traditional Masculinity Norms → Aggression relationship.

II. METHOD

Participants

The sample consist of 258 men between 18 and 50 years of age. Participants were selected through nonprobability purposive sampling from educational institutions, workplaces, and community settings. Eligibility criteria were, male, age from 18 to 50 years, current social media use, ability to read English, and voluntary participation. Incomplete or inconsistent questionnaires were excluded.

Measures

A demographic form screened age, education, occupation, marital status, family structure, and the participant's primary social media platform. **[I]** The Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF; Levant et al., 2013) is a 21-item self-report measure. Items assess seven domains: restrictive emotionality, self-reliance through mechanical skills, negativity toward sexual minorities, avoidance of femininity, importance of sex, dominance, and toughness. Responses are made on a 7-point agreement scale, with higher scores showing stronger endorsement of traditional masculinity norms. Internal consistency was $\alpha = .872$. **[II]** The Social Media Use Scale (SMUS; Tuck & Thompson, 2024) contains 17 items assessing four patterns of engagement: image-based use, comparison-based use, belief-based use, and consumption-based use. Participants rate the frequency of activities during the previous week on a 9-point Likert scale. Internal consistency was $\alpha = .876$ for the total score and ranged from $\alpha = .705$ to $\alpha = .844$ for the four subscales. **[III]** The Brief Aggression Questionnaire (BAQ; Webster et al., 2014) is a 12-item measure of physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. Items are rated on a 5-point agreement scale, with higher scores reflecting greater trait aggression. Internal consistency in the current sample was $\alpha = .766$.

Procedure

Permission from the relevant institution was taken before starting the data collection. Participants were briefed about the study, about their confidentiality and that their participation is completely volunteer and they can leave if they want to without any penalty. Participation consent was also taken from each participant. No personal identifying information was included in the final data and all responses were only used for research purpose. Data were analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlations, simple linear regression, and moderation analysis. Separate regression models examined the total SMUS score and each SMUS subscale as predictors of traditional masculinity norms and aggression. A final model included traditional masculinity norms, age, and their interaction as predictors of aggression. Statistical significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Summary of Primary Hypothesis Tests

Model	β	R^2	t	p
SMUS x MRNI-SF	.175	.031	2.85	.005
MRNI-SF x BAQ	.201	.040	3.28	< .001
SMUS x BAQ	.233	.054	3.83	< .001
Age x MRNI-SF x BAQ	.153	.053a	1.67	.096

Note. SMUS = Social Media Use Scale; MRNI-SF = Male Role Norms Inventory–Short Form; BAQ = Brief Aggression Questionnaire. a R^2 refers to the full moderation model including age, MRNI-SF, and their interaction.

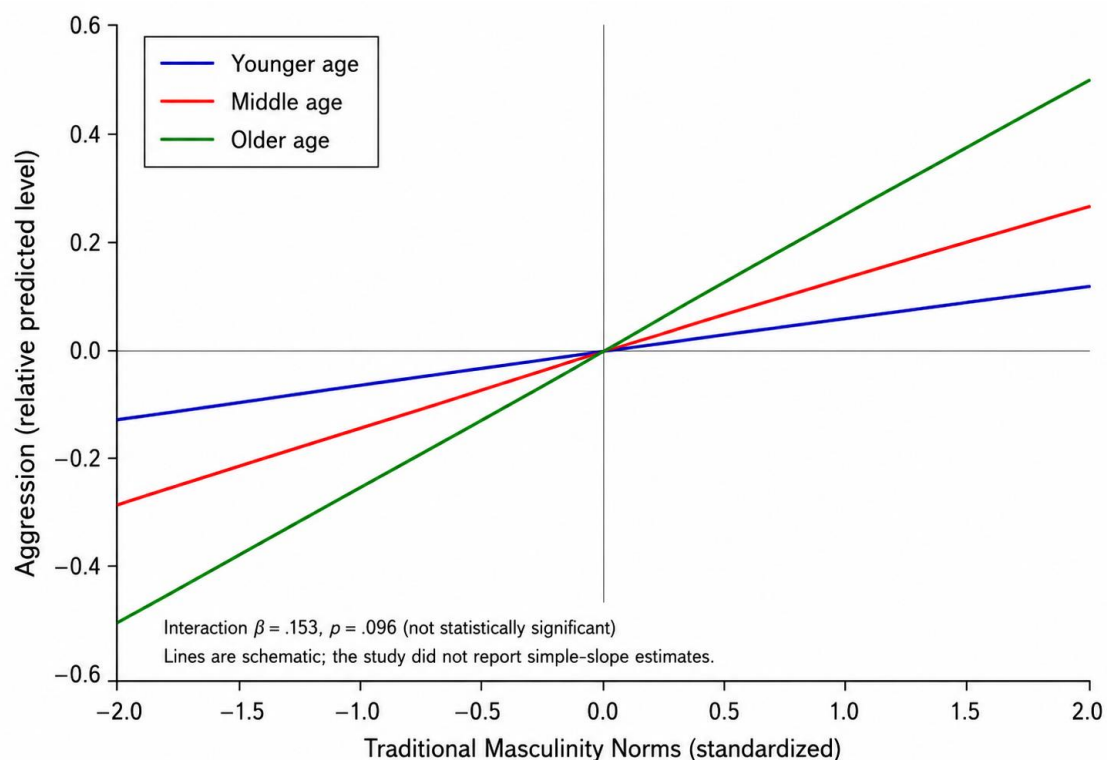
Supporting H1, total social media use significantly predicted traditional masculinity norms, $p = .005$, and accounted for 3.1% of the variance. Belief-based use, $p = .002$, and consumption-based use, $p = .024$, were significant subscale predictors. Image-based and comparison-based use were not statistically significant predictors of traditional masculinity norms. Supporting H2, traditional masculinity norms were positively associated with aggression, $r = .201$, and significantly predicted aggression, $\beta = .20$, $t = 3.28$, $p < .001$. The model accounted for 4.0% of the variance in aggression.

Table II: Social Media Use Subscales as Predictors of Study Outcomes

Predictor	Outcome	β	R^2	t	p
Image-based use	MRNI-SF	.103	.011	1.66	.098
Comparison-based use	MRNI-SF	.116	.013	1.86	.064
Belief-based use	MRNI-SF	.191	.036	3.11	.002
Consumption-based use	MRNI-SF	.140	.020	2.27	.024
Image-based use	BAQ	.150	.022	2.42	.016
Comparison-based use	BAQ	.144	.021	2.32	.021
Belief-based use	BAQ	.134	.018	2.17	.031
Consumption-based use	BAQ	.265	.070	4.40	< .001

Note. MRNI-SF = Male Role Norms Inventory–Short Form; BAQ = Brief Aggression Questionnaire. Each row represents a separate simple regression model.

Supporting H3, total social media use significantly predicted aggression, $\beta = .23$, $t = 3.83$, $p < .001$, accounting for 5.4% of the variance. All four SMUS subscales were significant positive predictors of aggression. Consumption-based use produced the largest relationship, $\beta = .27$, $t = 4.40$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .070$; the effects for image-based, comparison-based, and belief-based use were smaller. H4 was not supported. The full moderation model accounted for 5.3% of the variance in aggression, but the interaction between age and traditional masculinity norms did not reach the conventional level of statistical significance, $p = .096$. Although the positive coefficient suggested a possible tendency for the masculinity–aggression association to become stronger with age, this pattern cannot be treated as a confirmed moderation effect.

Figure II: Moderation of Masculinity-Aggression Relationship by Age

IV. DISCUSSION

The study explored that whether the social media use related to traditional masculinity beliefs and aggression while considering age as a moderating factor. The results supported three main hypotheses. Higher social media use related to stronger traditional masculinity beliefs, stronger masculinity beliefs related with higher aggression, and higher social media use also related with higher aggression. These relationships are significant statistically, while age did not significantly change the relationship between masculinity beliefs and aggression. The relationship between social media use and traditional masculinity beliefs supports the idea that media can shape the people's view about gender roles. On social media, users regularly see how friends, influencers and public figures behave. They also observe which type of posts receive more likes and shares. Social learning and cultivation theories suggest that repeated exposure to such content influence the people's belief about acceptable masculine behavior (Bandura 1977; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). The findings do not prove that social media caused these beliefs. It is also possible that men who already hold traditional masculinity beliefs prefer to follow and engage with content that supports their existing views.

The subscale findings add specificity. Belief-based use showed the strongest association with traditional masculinity norms, followed by consumption-based use. Belief-based engagement includes sharing, endorsing, or reacting to content that aligns with personal moral or ideological positions. This pattern is compatible with selective exposure and reinforcement processes: users may repeatedly engage with content that confirms existing views, while platform recommendations may supply similar material. Consumption-based use may expose users to repeated portrayals without requiring direct interaction. In contrast, image-based and comparison-based use did not significantly predict traditional masculinity norms in this sample. Thus, the ideological and content-consumption functions of social media appeared more relevant to masculinity beliefs than image management or direct comparison alone. Traditional masculinity beliefs were related to higher aggression. This relationship was not very strong, it supports earlier research showing that pressure to appear masculine, strong, and dominant can increase aggressive reactions (Bosson et al., 2009; Cohn & Zeichner, 2006). Men who believe they always have to be tough, dominant, and emotionally controlled find it difficult to express sadness, fear, and vulnerability. As a result, anger become a more acceptable way of showing emotions. The MRNI-SF measures seven different areas of traditional masculinity, while this study used only the overall score. Therefore, it is not clear which specific masculine beliefs were most strongly linked with aggression.

Social media use directly related to higher aggression, and all four types of social media use showed significant results. Consumption-based use had the strongest effect. This suggest that the content that people repeatedly view is more important than how often they post or interact. Previous studies also relate media exposure and addictive internet use with aggressive thoughts and behavior (Agbaria, 2021; Anderson & Bushman, 2001). A recent study in Pakistan also found a relationship between social media addiction and aggression among young adults (Fareed et al., 2024). The SMUS only measures how people use social media. It does not examine whether they are exposed to violent, hateful, or offensive content. Other factors, such as impulsive behavior, difficulty controlling emotions, relationship conflicts, or existing hostility, also explain this relationship. Age did not significantly change the relationship between traditional masculinity and aggression because the interaction result was above the .05 significance level. Although the positive result suggests a possible pattern, it is not strong enough to prove that age increases this relationship. The age groups were also uneven. Only 15 participants were between 34 and 50 years old, while 243 participants were between 18 and 33 years old. The small number of older participants reduced the strength and reliability of the analysis. Previous research has also shown that masculinity beliefs may differ across age groups, but these differences are not the same for every type of masculine norm (Levant et al., 2022).

Implications

The findings suggest that digital literacy programs should focus not only on how much time people spend online, but also on the type of content they see and how it may influence their beliefs and behavior. These programs can help users understand how social media promotes certain gender roles, repeatedly shows similar content, and rewards dominant or aggressive behavior through likes, shares, and followers. However, masculinity itself should

not be treated as a problem. The main concern is the strict belief in masculine norms that discourage emotional expression or support dominance and aggression. Counsellors and psychologists may also consider discussing clients' social media environments along with stress related to masculinity. They can explore how beliefs about being tough, independent, and emotionally controlled affect anger, conflict, and willingness to seek help. Helpful techniques may include changing unhealthy thoughts, learning to identify and express emotions, improving communication, and developing healthier ideas of strength. However, these suggestions are only possible applications because the study did not test any intervention.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, because the data were collected at only one point in time, the study cannot prove which factor came first or whether one variable caused another. Future studies should use long-term or experimental designs to better understand whether social media influences people's beliefs or whether people choose content that already matches their beliefs. Second, all information was collected through self-report questionnaires. Participants may not have remembered everything correctly or may have given socially acceptable answers. Future research could use actual social media activity records and behavioral measures of aggression to improve accuracy. Third, purposive sampling was used, and most participants belonged to the youngest age group. Therefore, the findings cannot be applied to all men aged 18 to 50, especially older men. Future studies should include enough participants from each age group to examine the role of age more reliably. Finally, the study did not consider other factors such as personality, family environment, exposure to violence, socioeconomic status, mental health, or the type of content viewed on different social media platforms. These factors may also have influenced the results.

V. CONCLUSION

Among 258 adult men, social media use, traditional masculinity norms, and aggression showed small positive associations. Belief-based and consumption-based social media use were the clearest predictors of traditional masculinity norms, while consumption-based use was the strongest social media predictor of aggression. Traditional masculinity norms also predicted aggression. Age did not significantly moderate the masculinity-aggression relationship. These findings support further investigation of how specific online content and gender-role beliefs interact, but they do not establish that social media causes masculinity norms or aggression.

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