

WILL BOYS BE BOYS? ATTITUDES TOWARDS MASCULINITY AND EFFEMINACY IN MEN

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Abstract

The idea that “boys will be boys” has been used as an excuse for many behaviours, both by men and towards them. With the recent burst in attempts to bring back “masculine men” and the rise of the hegemonic norms most may wish were left in the 1920s, this study attempted to explore the attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men held by a sample of Maltese participants. Specifically, any associations between one’s attitudes and their age, gender, and self-perception of their own gender were sought. Since research on hegemonic masculinity is often carried out from a feminist lens, a goal of the study was to take on a neutral approach to determine which stereotypes about men are the most believed. Questions from the BSRI-12, the MRNI-SF, and the AFNS were used to construct an anonymous questionnaire. Hypotheses were tested using data obtained from 410 participants aged 18-78. It was found that older age groups endorse traditional attitudes more strongly than younger ones, and use more dated adjectives to describe masculinity. Additionally, men were found to have more traditional views than women. Participants who perceived themselves as having low levels of femininity were found to endorse traditional attitudes more than those high in femininity. However, masculinity levels had no significant effect on endorsement levels of hegemonic norms. These findings highlight which groups need to be targeted to encourage changes in the way that men are perceived and consequently judged.

Keywords: *Hegemonic masculinity, effeminacy, attitudes, stereotypes.*

1. Introduction

Rigid gender categories can result in harmful behaviours and misperceptions. And they are becoming increasingly problematic in relation to masculinity and the traditional cultural standard of what a man should and shouldn’t be. Moreover, effeminate men tend to be shunned because they do not fit the hegemonic ideal. Though literature on the subject is exceedingly diverse, that pertaining to the Maltese context is somewhat limited.

Both masculinity and femininity can be defined as descriptive gender terms, including characteristic ways of relating, acting, and appearing (Spencer, 2017). These are malleable, depending on the cultural demands of a context or time. Masculinity encompasses commonly socialised behaviours such as limiting emotionality and striving to be powerful. On the other hand, femininity could include being gentle and nurturing. These two constructs are not bound within the limitations of biological sex. They are socially constructed and thus can vary in different societies. Malta has made great strides in civil liberties and laws related to them. However, changing legislation does not always result in changing attitudes.

Sex stereotypes are systemic beliefs about attributes of men and women (Banks, 2012). These are typically applied to a whole group, widely shared, and often support differences between men and women. Moreover, these beliefs are biased and unsubstantiated. Sex stereotypes may be descriptive, pertaining to what men and women *are like* – for example the belief the men are rational rather than emotional. Sex stereotypes may also be prescriptive, delineating how men and women *should behave*. When a behaviour is not in line with the stereotype, it will likely be evaluated negatively (Heilman, 2012).

A prevalent ideology in this area of study is hegemonic masculinity – the notion of what constitutes a ‘real man’ (Connell, 1987). This concept maintains that men who adhere to the masculine stereotype are to dominate over women and other men. It can often be seen as the ideal form of masculinity, and hence it is what men are often socialised to achieve. Men must avoid anything feminine, never show signs of weakness, gain success and status, and take risks (David & Brannon, 1976). These norms might seem outdated or false today, however hegemonic masculinity is still alive and well even in today’s society (Iacoviello et al., 2021).

In addition to this notion there is the anti-femininity mandate, an unwritten rule whereby all feminine tendencies, behaviours, and preferences must be renounced (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013). Research has been consistent on the idea that following the anti-femininity mandate is a way that men affirm their own masculinity (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2019). Hence, it may follow that men who perceive themselves as highly masculine will tend to reject other men who show overt displays of femininity. The precarious manhood hypothesis is a perfect example of the performative nature of gender. Manhood is seen as a precarious state which can easily be lost at the slightest sign of weakness. Bosson & Michniewicz (2013) argue that men affirm their masculinity by eschewing stereotypically feminine behaviours and roles and display it through public action. Effeminacy – often used in a derogatory manner – may be displayed in men who deviate from traditional male norms, take on roles labelled as feminine, or fail in domains labelled as masculine, such as sports. Traditionally masculine behaviour is often rewarded in modern society, whereas effeminate behaviour in men is often stigmatised.

Herreen et al. (2021) found that as one ages, conformity to masculine norms decreases and gender roles become less rigid. Anti-effeminacy bias could be stronger in men than women due to the tendency for men to adhere to traditional norms more rigidly. Gul & Uskul (2021) attempted to test the expression of this bias in men by focusing on the reluctance of men to be friends with effeminate men. Effeminate men were seen as less valued in the group, and men were concerned that their reputation would be damaged by association. Ulrich & Tissier-Desbordes (2018) found this attitude encompasses the avoidance of using feminine brands as they are perceived as threats to their manhood. Vandello et al. (2008) found that men feel more anxiety about their gender status than women, and may explain their reasons for endorsing masculine traits and rejecting feminine ones to preserve their manhood. It has also been found that men find it more important to differentiate masculine and feminine characteristics, and that men are more likely to sanction non-traditional men (Iacoviello et al., 2021).

Based on this literature search, the below hypotheses are being proposed:

H₁: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary with age.

H₂: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary with gender.

H₃: Attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men vary between people who identify as having high or low femininity/masculinity.

2. Design and methods

A quantitative approach was used, with data being collected through anonymous online questionnaires made up of four sections: (1) demographic data – age and gender; (2) Bem Sex Role Inventory-Short Form (BSRI-12) (Mateo & Fernandez, 1991); (3) Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF) (Levant et al., 2013); (4) the Anti-Femininity Norm Subscale (AFNS) (Brannon & Juni, 1984), as well as some questions related to stereotypes towards women. These additional items about women served as distractor items, so that the intent of the test would be more difficult to infer. These items were not scored, as they were not related to the objectives of the study. Finally, an open-ended question asked participants for words and phrases which they associate with the word ‘masculine’.

BSRI-12. This scale was used to assess whether respondents viewed themselves as more masculine or feminine. In turn, the aim was to determine whether viewing oneself as more masculine or feminine affects the way they judge others. Reliability for the BSRI-12 is good, with Cronbach’s alpha being .77 for the feminine subscale and .73 for the masculine subscale (Fernández & Coelleo, 2010).

MRNI-SF. This scale was used to assess attitudes towards masculinity. It has high reliability, as Cronbach’s alpha was found to be .92 for men and .94 for women (Levant et al., 2013). All items except one were kept the same. One of the items was changed from ‘*the President of the United States should always be a man*’ to ‘*the Prime Minister of Malta should always be a man*’, to be more applicable to the Maltese context.

AFNS. This subscale was used to assess attitudes towards effeminacy. It is a 7-item subscale taken from a 110-item measure developed by Brannon & Juni (1984), called the Brannon Masculinity Scale (BMS). Although the scale is quite old, it was still determined to be a good fit for this study as the scenarios presented are still relevant today. A seven-point Likert scale was used for all items of all three scales.

The questionnaire was piloted and feedback addressed. The volunteers had two criteria for participation – being Maltese and above 18 years of age. The reason for such unspecific criteria was to be more inclusive. Previous studies similar to this one were often carried out with students or samples having a good level of education. The research study was approved the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the University of Malta.

3. Results

Table 1 describes the sample of participants and gives their age and gender. There is an overrepresentation of participants between the ages of 18-24 years of age. The sample is also overrepresented in females. Because it is not a representative sample, the findings cannot be generalised to the population.

Table 1. Demographic and descriptive data.

Gender	n	%	Age	n	%
Male	107	(26.3)	18-24	155	(37.8)
Female	303	(73.7)	25-29	29	(7.1)
			30-39	53	(12.9)
			40-49	76	(18.5)
			50-59	66	(16.1)
			60+	31	(7.6)

Independent samples t-tests were carried out to compare the scores on the MRNI-SF and AFNS between genders. T-tests were also carried out to compare groups scoring high and low in masculinity/femininity. Comparisons were made based on scores of the MRNI-SF and BMS.

Table 2. T-tests for gender and MRNI-SF/BMS.

Scale	Subscale	Mean and SD		Sig.	C. <i>a.</i>
		Males	Females		
MRNI-SF	Dominance (D)	6.04 (3.51)	4.02 (1.62)	<.001	.79
	Negativity Towards Sexual Minorities (NM)	6.34 (4.03)	5.24 (3.51)	.014	.83
	Self-Reliance Through Mechanical Skills (SR)	14.89 (3.99)	14.66 (4.08)	.615	.72
	Avoidance of Femininity (AF)	7.95 (4.34)	5.69 (3.02)	<.001	.81
	Importance of Sex (IS)	7.14 (4.78)	5.17 (3.02)	<.001	.89
	Restrictive Emotionality (RE)	8.06 (3.46)	5.47 (2.51)	<.001	.68
	Toughness (T)	11.36 (4.40)	7.75 (3.87)	<.001	.71
	Whole scale	61 (20.69)	48.01 (15.08)	<.001	.91
BMS	Anti-Femininity Norms Subscale	18.79 (7.98)	15.53 (6.76)	<.001	.81

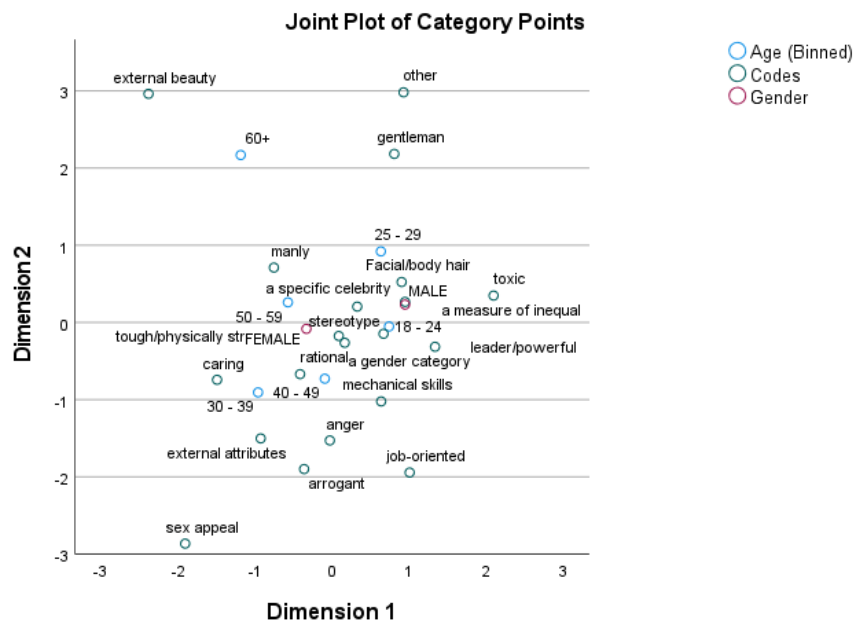
Tables 2 and 3 give the means, standard deviations, and significance of t-tests carried out. Table 2 also provides reliability measures for each subscale.

Table 3. T-tests for BEM-12 subscales and MRNI-SF/BMS.

Scale	BEM-12 Subscale	Mean and SD		Sig.
		Low	High	
MRNI-SF	Masculine	50.76 (15.29)	52.29 (19.53)	.375
	Feminine	54.04 (18.23)	49.04 (16.15)	.004
BMS	Masculine	16.42 (6.48)	16.35 (7.55)	.910
	Feminine	17.41 (7.00)	15.54 (7.32)	.009

Participants were asked to give adjectives that they associate with the word ‘masculine’. Responses were coded according to commonly occurring traits in the literature. A multiple correspondence analysis was carried out to investigate the categorical variables age, gender, and adjectives produced. Two dimensions were extracted. The first dimension explained 47.19% of the variance and second explained 43.63%. Points closer together on the plot indicate a relationship.

Figure 1. Joint category plots for variables of age, gender, and adjectives (codes).



4. Discussion

Males in the sample endorsed traditional masculine norms more than females, and the difference is fairly large ($M_{males} = 61(20.69)$, $M_{females} = 48.01(15.08)$, $p < .001$). Additionally, almost all dimensions of hegemonic masculinity were endorsed by male participants more than females. The dimension showing the largest difference between genders was that of restrictive emotionality ($M_{males} = 8.06(3.46)$, $M_{females} = 5.47(2.51)$, $p < .001$). This may reflect the way society has been constructed. It seems more likely that a man would react negatively to overt displays of emotionality in other men than a woman would, especially since women find it more acceptable to do so. This is corroborated by the literature, as men face the most backlash from other men when they deviate from traditional norms (Iacoviello et al., 2021). Men were also found to endorse anti-effeminacy norms more ($M_{males} = 18.79(7.98)$, $M_{females} = 15.53(6.76)$, $p < .001$) in line with the literature (Gul & Uskul, 2021). This finding makes sense in light of the precarious manhood hypothesis, especially since women do not seem to experience this phenomenon. Hence, while men would feel the need to reject effeminate men because they find their displays threatening to their own manhood, women would have more tolerance for effeminacy in men because they do not feel at risk of losing anything.

According to this study, 18-24-year-olds associated masculinity with toxicity. The 60+ category associated masculinity with external beauty and being a gentleman, echoing the norms often upheld by that generation. Since such attitudes often form early on in life, results may also suggest that people who are older still hold attitudes which were formed decades ago, when gender roles were more stereotypical. Results from the MCA show that the 60+ groups associated being masculine with being a gentleman, whereas the 50-59 group associated it with being tough, manly, and rational.

Testing the hypothesis pertaining to the effect of self-perception of one's own gender yielded some unanticipated results. Participants rated themselves highly in both feminine and masculine domains. This could mean that the tendency to see those adjectives as gendered has decreased with time. It may imply a paradigm shift in the past few years, as it could indicate a movement away from considering adjectives as gendered. This change may have been brought about by recent movements, such as advancements made in the LGBTQ+ community where gender is being seen as more fluid and malleable. Another interesting finding was that there were significant attitudinal differences between participants scoring high and low in femininity (MRNI-SF: $M_{high} = 49.04(19.53)$, $M_{low} = 54.04(15.29)$, $p = .004$; BMS: $M_{high} = 15.54(7.32)$, $M_{low} = 17.41(7.00)$, $p = .009$). This could be explained by the possibility that rejection of femininity in others may also stem from rejection of femininity in oneself. If one rejects and suppresses their own feminine traits to remain in line with the hegemonic ideology, and for the same reason it is likely that these traits will also be rejected in others. Moreover, certain traits which were once thought to be highly masculine may have become more neutral because of more diverse representation. With more Maltese women being represented in political parties and leading business organisations, the common assumption that being a leader equates to masculinity might be given less weight. Another example would be the rise in feminine

Maltese activists, which counteracts the classification of defending one's own beliefs as a masculine trait. Hence, the reason why participants' masculinity levels had no effect might be because the BSRI traits used to classify people as masculine may no longer be presumed to fall into the 'masculine' category. On the other hand, 'feminine' traits may not yet have the same neutrality. Traits such as being sympathetic and gentle have been slower to change, and are exhibited less by prominently masculine people.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to determine the attitudes towards masculine and effeminate men in the Maltese context. The findings obtained had mixed support from the literature presented. Although great care was taken to ensure a valid study, it was not without limitations. The use of a convenience sample decreased generalisability of the results. A non-representative sample could have resulted in skewed results, due to an imbalance in the sample.

Since research in this area in the Maltese context is lacking, this study sheds light on the attitudes held by Maltese participants regarding masculinity and effeminacy in men. This study, in combination with others, may inform policy makers of the target populations (older cohorts and males) for reducing harmful attitudes, such as those pertaining to domestic violence towards men and implementation of paternity leave. If gender categories are socially constructed, then it is possible to re-shape and de-emphasise them through social change.

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