

Masculinity & Femininity: Male Attitudes & Perceptions

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Introduction to Masculinity, Femininity, and Attitudes

The study of attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity represents a critical intersection within social psychology, focusing on how individuals perceive, evaluate, and react to the diverse expressions of gender among men. Traditionally, societal structures have imposed rigid binaries, defining **masculinity** as encompassing traits like dominance, assertiveness, and emotional restriction, while relegating qualities such as nurturing, expressiveness, and sensitivity to the domain of **femininity**. These prescriptive norms establish a narrow band of acceptable behavior for men, creating a complex attitudinal landscape where deviations from the perceived ideal are often met with scrutiny, discomfort, or outright hostility. Understanding these attitudes requires acknowledging that gender expression is not monolithic; rather, it exists on a spectrum, and the societal acceptance or rejection of specific points on that spectrum profoundly impacts male identity formation and social interaction.

Attitudes themselves are complex psychological constructs, typically comprising cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. The cognitive component involves the beliefs and stereotypes held about masculine or feminine traits in men--for instance, the belief that "real men" do not cry or that men who enjoy traditionally female activities are inherently weak. The affective component encompasses the emotional reactions elicited by these expressions, ranging from admiration for hyper-masculine displays to contempt or pity for men perceived as overly feminine. Finally, the behavioral component manifests in discriminatory actions, social exclusion, or, conversely, positive reinforcement aimed at encouraging adherence to traditional roles. These attitudes are deeply ingrained, often learned implicitly through family socialization, media consumption, and peer influence, making them highly resistant to change and powerful drivers of social conformity.

Furthermore, the investigation into these attitudes must account for intersectionality, recognizing that the perception of masculinity and femininity is modulated by race, class, sexual orientation, and cultural context. What is considered normative masculinity in one cultural setting may be deemed nonconformist in another, highlighting the relative nature of these social standards. For example, attitudes toward emotional vulnerability in men may vary drastically between collectivist and individualistic societies. Consequently, the attitudes held by an observer are not solely based on the target's gender expression but are filtered through a matrix of biases and socio-cultural expectations, demanding a nuanced approach to measurement and analysis that moves beyond simple dichotomies and embraces the fluidity of contemporary gender roles.

The Social Construction of Gender Norms

Gender norms are fundamentally social constructions, evolving systems of expectations and rules that dictate appropriate behavior for males and females within a given society. These norms are

crucial in shaping attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity because they establish the baseline against which all male behavior is judged. The concept of **hegemonic masculinity**, which defines the dominant and idealized form of masculinity in a society--typically associated with power, heterosexuality, and economic success--serves as a benchmark. Attitudes are often negative toward men who fail to embody this hegemonic ideal, particularly those who display traits deemed subordinate or feminine, reflecting a societal investment in maintaining the hierarchical separation of gender roles. This pressure to conform is intense, often manifesting as internalized anxiety or externalized aggression against nonconforming peers, thereby reinforcing the very norms that generate the pressure.

The enforcement of these norms is maintained through powerful social mechanisms, including sanctions and rewards. Men who successfully adhere to traditional masculine scripts often receive social capital, professional advancement, and validation, fostering positive attitudes toward their behavior. Conversely, men who express **gender nonconformity**--such as displaying emotional openness, pursuing traditionally feminine occupations, or exhibiting non-aggressive communication styles--frequently face social penalties, including teasing, bullying, and systemic discrimination. These negative societal reactions are direct manifestations of negative underlying attitudes, demonstrating how social structures actively police the boundaries of acceptable male behavior. The severity of these sanctions underscores the high value placed on maintaining a clear demarcation between male and female spheres, even as actual behavioral patterns become increasingly blended in modern life.

A key aspect of this social construction is the concept of **gender role strain**, which arises when men feel unable or unwilling to meet the stringent requirements of traditional masculinity. Attitudes toward these men are often characterized by sympathy mixed with judgment; while society may acknowledge the difficulty of the role, it simultaneously maintains the expectation that the role must be fulfilled. This strain contributes significantly to negative self-attitudes among men and complex, often contradictory, attitudes among observers. For example, while many individuals may intellectually support gender equality, they may harbor unconscious negative attitudes (implicit biases) when confronted with a male colleague who prioritizes childcare over career advancement, demonstrating the deep-seated nature of culturally transmitted gender expectations and their powerful influence on evaluative judgments.

Historical Shifts in Conceptualizing Male Gender Expression

Attitudes toward male gender expression have undergone significant historical transformations, reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural changes. In the 19th century, particularly within Western industrial societies, masculinity was often linked to self-control, moral rectitude, and the ability to provide, leading to a specific set of acceptable behaviors. However, the 20th century witnessed periods of dramatic renegotiation, especially following major wars and the rise of

second-wave feminism. These shifts challenged the rigid definitions of gender, compelling societies to re-evaluate the utility and appropriateness of traditional male roles. For instance, the rise of the "New Man" archetype in the late 20th century, characterized by increased emotional literacy and involvement in domestic life, signaled a loosening of previously restrictive attitudes, though this acceptance was often tentative and geographically uneven.

The increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ communities and the subsequent push for greater acceptance of diverse sexual and gender identities have fundamentally altered the context in which attitudes toward male femininity are formed. Historically, male femininity was often conflated with homosexuality, leading to severe stigmatization driven by pervasive homophobia. While contemporary society has become increasingly tolerant of diverse sexual orientations, the residual negative attitudes linking non-traditional male behavior to marginalized sexual identities persist, particularly in highly conservative environments. This highlights a persistent cultural anxiety: the fear that blurring gender lines threatens established social order. Therefore, positive shifts in attitudes are often contingent upon the perceived motivation behind the nonconformity--whether it is interpreted as genuine self-expression or a challenge to heterosexual dominance.

Furthermore, globalization and digital media have accelerated the exposure of diverse masculinities, challenging localized, rigid attitudes. Men today are exposed to global models of behavior that may contradict their immediate cultural norms, leading to increased complexity in attitude formation. For example, media depictions of sensitive, artistic, or stylish men in international cinema or fashion can slowly erode traditional, narrow definitions of "manliness." However, this exposure also triggers backlash, resulting in the rise of counter-movements that aggressively reaffirm traditional, often toxic, masculine ideals. This ongoing dialectic between progressive acceptance and reactionary defense underscores the dynamic and unstable nature of attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity in the modern era, suggesting that while the range of acceptable expression is widening, the conflict surrounding these boundaries remains fierce.

Psychological Perspectives on Attitudes and Stereotypes

Psychological research provides valuable frameworks for understanding the formation and maintenance of attitudes toward male gender expression, primarily through the lens of gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are cognitive structures that simplify the social world by attributing specific traits to groups, and **prescriptive stereotypes** dictate how men *should* behave, while **descriptive stereotypes** detail how men *are* believed to behave. Attitudes are strongly influenced by the violation of prescriptive stereotypes. When a man exhibits feminine traits, he violates the prescriptive stereotype, often leading to negative evaluation and social rejection. This phenomenon is rooted in the psychological need for cognitive consistency and the desire to maintain clear, predictable social categories, making deviations cognitively taxing and emotionally unsettling for observers.

The concept of **benevolent sexism** is also relevant, particularly in explaining complex, ambivalent attitudes. Benevolent sexism involves seemingly positive evaluations of women (e.g., viewing them as warm or pure) that simultaneously restrict them to traditional roles. While primarily focused on women, analogous attitudes exist regarding men who fail to live up to the provider/protector role. Attitudes toward these men might include pity or patronizing concern--a belief that they are "nice" but fundamentally ill-equipped for the demands of the world. Such attitudes, while superficially less hostile than outright denigration, are equally damaging as they subtly enforce gender hierarchy by defining non-traditional men as needing protection or incapable of true masculine success, thereby discouraging the adoption of feminine traits.

From a social identity perspective, attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity are often tied to ingroup-outgroup dynamics. Men who strongly identify with traditional masculinity may express intensely negative attitudes toward men who display feminine traits, viewing them as an outgroup threat that undermines the status and definition of their own ingroup. This defensive mechanism serves to reinforce group cohesion and maintain the perceived superiority of the traditional masculine identity. Research using implicit association tests consistently reveals that even individuals who express egalitarian explicit attitudes may harbor strong **implicit biases** associating masculinity with competence and femininity with incompetence, demonstrating the deep, automatic nature of these gendered evaluations which significantly shape immediate, non-conscious reactions to gender nonconformity.

The Role of Ambivalence and Cognitive Dissonance

Attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity are rarely purely positive or purely negative; they are frequently characterized by **ambivalence**, reflecting conflicting beliefs and emotions. An individual may intellectually appreciate a man's emotional openness (positive cognitive component) but simultaneously feel uncomfortable or awkward interacting with him (negative affective component). This ambivalence arises because modern societies often promote ideals of gender equality while simultaneously maintaining powerful, deeply entrenched traditional norms. The resulting tension leads observers to hold two competing sets of attitudes, making their responses unpredictable and often contradictory, which can be particularly confusing for the target of these attitudes.

Furthermore, cognitive dissonance plays a significant role in attitude maintenance and change. When a man who is admired for traditionally masculine traits (e.g., professional success, physical strength) unexpectedly displays a traditionally feminine trait (e.g., vulnerability, intense passion for fashion), observers experience dissonance--a conflict between their positive global attitude toward the man and the negative stereotypical associations they hold regarding the feminine trait. To reduce this uncomfortable dissonance, observers may employ various strategies. They might rationalize the behavior ("He's just doing it ironically"), minimize its importance ("It's a one-off thing"), or, in some cases, adjust their overall attitude toward the man, either by reducing their

admiration or, more progressively, by integrating the feminine trait into their concept of acceptable masculinity.

The societal push for men to be "well-rounded" often exacerbates this ambivalence. Men are encouraged to be sensitive providers yet also tough competitors; they must be emotionally present fathers but ruthlessly efficient employees. The expectation that men integrate these contradictory demands creates attitudinal complexity in the observer. Observers may hold positive attitudes toward the *idea* of the sensitive man, but negative attitudes toward the *implementation* of that sensitivity if it appears to compromise traditional masculine competence (e.g., if sensitivity is perceived as leading to indecisiveness). This dynamic reveals that the acceptance of femininity in men is often conditional, acceptable only when it does not interfere with the performance of core masculine duties, highlighting the persistent prioritization of traditional gender roles in attitude formation.

Societal Reactions to Gender Nonconformity in Men

Societal reactions to male gender nonconformity are powerful indicators of underlying attitudes and often involve both explicit and implicit forms of social control. Explicit reactions can range from verbal harassment and social exclusion to institutional discrimination in settings like the workplace or military. Men who pursue careers traditionally dominated by women (e.g., nursing, elementary education) frequently encounter negative attitudes regarding their competence and sexual orientation, demonstrating that the violation of occupational gender segregation carries significant social penalties rooted in negative attitudes toward femininity in men. These sanctions serve as a clear warning to others about the potential costs of straying from prescribed norms.

Implicit reactions, while subtle, are equally pervasive and damaging. These include microaggressions, nonverbal cues of discomfort, and subtle undermining of credibility. For example, a man who uses expressive, emotionally laden language might be unconsciously perceived by colleagues as less authoritative or rational than a man who uses restricted, direct language, reflecting an implicit negative attitude toward emotional femininity in professional contexts. Research consistently shows that men who engage in feminine behaviors are evaluated more harshly than women who engage in masculine behaviors, suggesting a strong asymmetry in gender policing driven by the perceived lower status of femininity and the imperative to maintain male dominance.

The intensity of the reaction is often proportional to the perceived degree of nonconformity and the setting in which it occurs. Attitudes are generally more permissive in artistic or liberal urban environments compared to conservative or rural settings. Furthermore, reactions are often most severe when the nonconformity suggests a potential deviation from **heterosexual norms**, demonstrating the interconnectedness of attitudes toward gender expression and sexual

orientation. The fear of being perceived as gay often acts as a powerful deterrent to adopting feminine traits, illustrating how negative attitudes toward non-heterosexuality are instrumental in enforcing rigid gender roles among heterosexual men, effectively limiting the scope of acceptable masculine expression for all men.

Measurement and Assessment of Attitudes

The measurement of attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity is a critical area of psychological research, employing various methodologies to capture the complexity of these evaluations. Traditional methods rely on **self-report scales**, such as the Gender Role Conflict Scale or specialized instruments designed to assess attitudes toward men's adherence to traditional roles. While these scales provide valuable explicit data, they are susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents adjust their answers to align with socially acceptable egalitarian views, potentially masking underlying negative attitudes.

To mitigate the limitations of self-report, researchers increasingly utilize **implicit measures**, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT measures the strength of automatic associations between concepts (e.g., "male femininity") and evaluations (e.g., "bad" or "weak"). Findings from IAT studies frequently reveal significant implicit negative biases toward male femininity, even among individuals who explicitly report positive, accepting attitudes. This discrepancy highlights the dual nature of attitudes--conscious, controlled beliefs versus automatic, unconscious evaluations--and underscores the pervasive nature of traditional gender stereotypes in shaping immediate reactions.

Furthermore, qualitative methods, including thematic analysis of interviews and observational studies, provide rich contextual data regarding the practical manifestations of these attitudes. Observing actual social interactions--such as how parents react to a son's choice of toys or how employers evaluate a male candidate in a traditionally female field--offers insights into the behavioral component of attitudes that survey data might miss. Comprehensive assessment often requires the triangulation of these methods, combining explicit, implicit, and behavioral data to gain a holistic understanding of the deep-seated cultural forces that shape the reception of diverse male gender expressions.

Implications for Mental Health and Future Directions

The prevailing societal attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity have profound implications for men's mental health and well-being. Negative attitudes toward gender nonconformity contribute directly to **internalized homophobia** and gender role strain, forcing many men to suppress natural emotional expression or behavioral preferences to avoid social sanctions. This suppression is linked to elevated risks for anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, particularly among men who

feel pressured to maintain the restrictive standards of traditional masculinity. Furthermore, men who internalize negative societal attitudes toward femininity may struggle to access emotional support, viewing vulnerability as weakness rather than a normal human state, perpetuating cycles of emotional isolation.

Addressing negative attitudes requires systemic interventions focusing on education, media representation, and early socialization. Educational programs designed to challenge rigid gender stereotypes in schools can foster more flexible and accepting attitudes from a young age. Media creators play a crucial role by portraying a wider, more nuanced spectrum of male characters who embody both masculine and feminine traits without stigma or ridicule. Crucially, interventions must target not only individual attitudes but also the institutional structures that reinforce gender binaries, such as workplace policies and parental leave frameworks that discourage men from adopting caregiving roles.

Future research directions should prioritize longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of attitudes across generations and cultures, paying close attention to the impact of digital communication and globalized identity politics. There is a need for more research examining the specific protective factors that shield nonconforming men from the negative effects of societal rejection. Ultimately, promoting more positive and flexible attitudes toward male masculinity-femininity is essential for fostering a society that allows all men the freedom to pursue authentic self-expression, leading to improved psychological health and more equitable social relationships for everyone. This shift requires a collective commitment to deconstructing the limiting and often harmful historical baggage associated with rigid gender definitions.