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# Fragile Masculinity: Men, Gender, and Online Harassment

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## ABSTRACT

Harassment is a persistent problem in contemporary online environments, with women disproportionately experiencing its most severe forms. While critical scholars posit that online gender harassment may be linked to men’s anxieties about fulfilling normative masculine gender roles, this relationship has not been examined by empirical research. We survey 264 young men between the ages of 18-24 about their masculinity anxieties and their perceptions of harassment directed at a woman on Twitter. We find that men who perceive themselves as less masculine than average men report higher endorsement of harassment. Further, we find that the relationship between masculinity anxieties and harassment endorsement is fully mediated by men’s adherence to normative masculine norms (e.g., aggression) and toxic disinhibition. We interpret these results through the lens of social media’s specific affordances, and we discuss their implications for technology designers and other practitioners who wish to better detect, prevent, and remediate online harassment by accounting for the role of gender.

## Author Keywords

Online harassment; Gender; Masculinity; Women; Social media; Misogyny

## CSS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing**; *Human computer interaction (HCI)*; Empirical studies in HCI • **Social and professional topics**; *User characteristics*; Gender

## INTRODUCTION

Despite a rich history of research exploring online misbehavior, both in HCI [6,7,9,11,23,51,91] and other disciplines [13,19,61,63,90], harassment and other forms of abuse are a pervasive problem in contemporary online environments, particularly those in which strangers interact. A Pew survey conducted in 2017 [25] revealed that 66% of adult internet users in the US have witnessed online harassment, with 41% of users having personally experienced it. Lenhart et al. [55] found similar results, with 72% of American internet users reporting witnessing

harassment online and nearly half of users (47%) having personally experienced it.

*Online harassment* refers to a broad spectrum of abusive behaviors facilitated by technology [7], including flaming (or the use of inflammatory language or personal insults), doxing (or the adversarial broadcasting of personally identifiable information, such as an address or phone number), and impersonation (or the nonconsensual use of someone’s name or likeness). These tactics are frequently deployed together, particularly when groups of individuals collaborate to intensify the negative impacts of harassment for their target or targets (sometimes referred to as “dogpiling”). Online harassment is disruptive to targets’ offline lives—even simply reporting harassment to moderators or platforms requires not insignificant labor and technological literacy [7]—and can result in emotional and physical distress, changes to technology use, and increased safety concerns [25,40].

Although men and women both experience harassment online, women “experience a wider variety of online abuse” [55] and are disproportionately affected by more serious violations, including being stalked, sexually harassed, or physically threatened [24]. Gendered experiences of online harassment are “both reflective of and inextricable from systems of structural oppression,” such as sexism, racism, and so on [7]. Despite this, platform policies and tools are largely designed for a presumptively homogenous pool of users, without recognition of the differing impacts and experiences of specific individuals or historically marginalized groups. This façade of neutrality has made it especially difficult for major social media platforms to manage surges of harassment fueled misogyny or racism, such as the severe and gendered harassment of women during Gamergate [39], a term which both describes ongoing controversy surrounding a loosely-organized community of gamers protesting journalistic practices and, colloquially, refers to a specific faction of gamers who targeted women game developers and journalists over the course of several years. Men associated with this faction of Gamergate used gender stereotypes and sexism to humiliate women who advocated for gender equality in the gaming industry, using online harassment as a means for discrediting critics [12,63]. The misogynistic undertones of this harassment underscore the importance of gender—and in particular masculinity—in understanding why women are disproportionately targeted by harassment online.

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Escalations in gendered online harassment coincide with the rise of “popular feminism,” which may be understood by some men as a threat to normative masculinity and manhood [3,44,60]. Popular feminism is seen in hashtags like #Mencallmethings and #Yesallwomen; in websites such as *Jezebel* that link pop culture with empowerment; and in Twitter hashtag campaigns that amplify feminist activism [37]. As women’s empowerment becomes increasingly public and connected online [22,46], some men may perceive these highly-visible feminist messages as an attack on their hegemonic authority [3,8]. The proliferation of hostility toward women in online environments may therefore reflect what we refer to as *masculinity anxieties*—that is, men’s anxieties over maintaining normative masculine gender roles.

In this paper, we examine the role of masculinity anxieties in men’s endorsement of online gender harassment. Research and theory in the field of psychology have found that failure to live up to masculinity expectations is linked to psychological distress in some men which, in turn, may increase the risk to engage in sexist behaviors as a means of demonstrating manhood [17,93]. We investigate whether a similar dynamic occurs in social media environments: we consider whether men who perceive themselves as insufficiently masculine, and who experience anxiety about this perception, are more likely to endorse gender harassment aimed at a hypothetical woman who advocates for gender equality online. We also investigate two potential correlates with masculinity anxieties: men’s attitudes about the competence of the woman user and their willingness to engage in toxic online behaviors (e.g., the use of threats and insults). Finally, we explore mechanisms that might explain why some men who experience masculinity anxieties more readily endorse gender harassment on social media.

To explore these questions, we surveyed white, heterosexual men between the ages of 18-25 from the United States ( $n=264$ ). We found that for some young men, masculinity anxieties play an important role in their attitudes. Young men who perceived themselves as less masculine than the average man and who experienced distress about this violation reported lower competence ratings and greater harassment endorsement directed at a woman who advocated for gender equality on social media; additionally, these men also reported greater toxic online disinhibition. When considering mechanisms linking masculinity anxieties to harassment endorsement, results show that young men’s adherence to masculine norms (e.g., aggression, dominance) and toxic online disinhibition fully mediated this relationship. That is, one reason that young men who experience masculinity anxieties more readily endorse gender harassment is that they are more likely to adhere to normative masculine norms and in turn, engage in toxic online disinhibition.

This research makes two primary contributions: first, while critical scholars have noted that men’s support of online gender harassment may be linked to anxiety about

masculinity and manhood [3,8,12,68,83], research has not empirically tested this relationship. Empirical research testing this relationship not only supports existing theory but has important implications for social media companies, who have traditionally approached harassment policies without taking into account how certain groups are targeted based on their social identities. Second, we discuss the implications of our results for the design of technological systems, policies, and practices, which can more effectively reduce online harassment by better accounting for the role of gender.

## RELATED WORK

### Psychological Approaches to Masculinity

Masculinity describes the behaviors and expectations culturally associated with boys and men [16]. Generally, in the United States where the present work takes place, normative masculinity involves being assertive, demonstrating bravery through risk-taking, upholding heterosexuality and rejecting femininity, and establishing dominance through aggression [59,72]. There are, of course, alternative masculinities in which men are able to express their emotions, reject violence, and champion fighting all forms of oppression of women and other men [72]. However, cultural norms in the United States reinforce the expectation that men who demonstrate normative masculinity are “real men,” whereas men who fail to uphold normative masculinity are “lacking” [89]. We focus on normative masculinity in the current research since it reflects the dominant cultural narrative about certain men’s dominance, power, and privilege over women.

A large body of research in social psychology has examined men’s conformity to gender role norms, or standards that guide and constrain masculine behavior [10,59,70,94]. Survey research examining men’s gender role attitudes indicates that adherence to normative masculinity have been linked to gender inequities, such as positive attitudes towards sexual harassment and negative attitudes towards gender equality [84]. Experimental research using a computer harassment paradigm also suggests that some men strongly identified with normative masculinity may be more likely to harass women [42,58], especially when women express egalitarian or feminist views [18]. Taken together, these findings indicate that conforming to some masculine social norms may be associated with maintaining sexist beliefs and dominance over women.

Yet, despite evidence that adherence to normative masculinity is linked to hostile attitudes towards women, some men on the opposite end of the continuum may behave in similar ways [78,81]. Pleck [74,75] conceptualized a *gender role strain paradigm* in which not living up to masculinity norms has consequences for self-esteem and as a result, some men experience discrepancy stress when they fail to behave in accordance with what it means to be a man [74,75]. Simply put, discrepancy stress arises when a man believes that he is, or believes he is perceived to be insufficiently masculine.

Psychologists have posited that experiences of discrepancy stress are often compounded for men who perceive themselves as not living up to masculinity norms. Survey research indicates, for example, that some men who perceive themselves as insufficiently masculine (i.e., gender role discrepancy) and who experience stress about this violation (i.e., discrepancy stress) are more likely to perpetrate physical assault [78] and intimate partner violence [81]. These findings suggest that men who experience a high degree of discrepancy stress may be more likely to engage in stereotypical masculine behaviors as a means of demonstrating their manhood. In the current study, we apply this framework to understand how perceived failures in masculinity, and the anxiety that arises from these violations, influence men's attitudes towards a woman who advocates for gender equality on Twitter.

### Applying Masculinity Anxieties to Online Gender Harassment

Numerous studies demonstrate that online harassment reinforces normative gender roles by reducing women's visibility, censoring women's voices, and denigrating women's competence [14,30,34,44,45,60,76]. Notably, research examining the frequency of abusive comments makes clear how online harassment is gendered. For example, in a content analysis of chat room interactions, Meyer and Cukier [67] established that women's names received an average of twenty-five times more abusive messages than men's names. These patterns were also seen in blocked comments on news sites. A content analysis of over 70 million comments on the Guardian website found that articles written by women received more blocked comments than articles written by men across all news genres. Women also received a greater rate of attacks that demeaned their competence and appearance [36]. These findings make evident that unlike online attacks on men, women are harassed *because they are women*.

Although scholarship is beginning to delve into the relationship between masculinity anxieties and online harassment, social science research on this topic is scarce. Theory and research from other disciplines, such as feminist media studies, have established that women experience *online gender harassment* that includes the transmission of gender-degrading materials, sexist jokes and slurs, and offensive comments that evoke gender stereotypes [44,45,56]. Importantly, online gender harassment is most likely a byproduct of shifting gender dynamics in the U.S. [45,60,76]. As Banet-Weisner and Miltner [3] argue, contemporary gender politics is one where the rhetoric of "toxic masculinity" are in opposition to feminist empowerment that is increasingly public and connected on social media. These changing social environments, to many men, reflect crises in masculinity and anxiety over the diminishing social status of men [29,50]. Other scholars have noted that online gender harassment reflects these anxieties—some men demean women who challenge the

status quo as a step towards validating their manhood to which they feel entitled [8,12,68,83].

Several recent social media movements, such as #Gamergate and the rise of men's right activism (MRA), demonstrate the role of masculinity anxieties in online gender harassment (see [61] for a review of MRA). Both #Gamergate and MRA share similarities in that men involved in these movements are often self-described "geeks" or "beta males" who feel a sense of subordination to other men and who perceive themselves as the victim in women's calls for gender equality [8,83]. Scholars have noted that online harassment worked to alleviate these anxieties through an aggressive adoption of masculine stereotypes and overt sexism [12]. Some men, for example, responded to feminist critics through sexually explicit comments and insults that demeaned their competence in an attempt to "prove" their manhood publicly online [8,68,83].

In the current research, we test whether masculinity anxieties play a role not only in men's endorsement of online gender harassment but also in the perceived competence ratings of a hypothetical woman who advocates for gender equality online. When women engage in gender-valuing behavior, they are often perceived as threatening the existing status and power structure of men [17]. As a result, those that perceive this to be the case take actions that preserve the established status and power hierarchy by negatively stereotyping women as being incompetent [18]. We expect to see a similar trend in our data.

**H1 & H2:** Men who consider themselves to be less masculine than the "average" man and who experience stress about their masculinity would report higher scores on harassment endorsement and lower scores on perceptions of competence.

### Affordances and Online Harassment

Several affordances make online harassment tangibly different than offline harassment in regard to its breadth and impact. For example, social media platforms amplify the visibility of content, meaning that it is accessible and searchable long after the initial post [91]. Likewise, targets of online harassment typically cannot control the spread of such content, making it more difficult to mitigate negative psychological and professional effects of abuse (e.g., anxiety, humiliation, reputational harms [85]). When considering the experiences of perpetrators, they may receive positive social feedback from others via comments and sharing, which may encourage future incidences of harassment [6,62,73]. Anonymity can further exacerbate harassing behaviors by reducing users' inhibitions and increasing the likelihood to perpetrate online abuse [48,54,57].

Research indicates that the inability to observe nonverbal indicators of disapproval online can embolden some users to engage in negative behaviors (e.g., discrimination) and show bias (e.g., prejudice and stereotyping) that they are unlikely

to exhibit offline due to the online disinhibition effect [87]. While the online disinhibition effect is not necessarily negative, it can manifest as toxic online disinhibition, which includes harassment and cyberbullying [21,87]. For example, due to the absence of an authority figure to monitor prejudicial actions, some men share sexist comments via Twitter because there is no meaningful reprisal [32]. The relationship between gender-related attitudes and computer-mediated communication are an important part of this picture—men’s hostile attitudes toward women impacted the use of derogatory language in tweets, yet the affordances of Twitter (e.g., the ability to be anonymous) amplified the rate of sharing this type of content. Likewise, we expect that men’s masculinity will shape their attitudes towards online communication.

**H3:** Men who perceive themselves as less masculine than the average man and who experience stress about this violation will report greater toxic online disinhibition (H3).

### Understanding Men’s Motivation to Endorse Harassment

A final aim of this research was to examine two indirect pathways via mediation that may underlie the relationship between masculinity anxieties and harassment endorsement. One mechanism that may account for this association is men’s conformity to masculine norms (e.g., aggression, dominance) [81]. Survey and experimental research examining men’s masculinity failures shows that some men who experience anxiety about their masculinity may be more likely to adhere to masculine norms in order to prove their masculinity [88]. Thus, we expect a similar dynamic to occur online:

**H4:** Anxiety about being perceived as insufficiently masculine is positively related to masculine norm conformity.

Evidence also suggests that men who strongly adhere to masculine norms can be more aggressive than their less adherent counterparts [71,80]. When considering online environments, one way that aggression can manifest is through the use of harassment, rude language, hatred, and threats [92]. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H5 & H6:** Conformity to masculine norms will be positively associated with toxic online disinhibition, and in turn, toxic online disinhibition will be positively associated with harassment endorsement.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The online sample included 305 white, heterosexual male participants between the ages of 18-25 who identified as active Twitter users (data collected from September-October 2017). Although harassment occurs in a variety of venues on social media, we limited our investigation to Twitter. Research indicates that women are disproportionately

targeted for gender harassment on Twitter [4,64]. Twitter is therefore an optimal context to examine men’s attitudes regarding online gender harassment.

Participants were recruited through a paneling service by Qualtrics LCC. Qualtrics’ staff removed 37 participants who yielded low quality data: those who completed the survey in one-third or less of the median time (4.5 minutes), those who failed attention checkers (i.e., when participants are asked to indicate a certain response option as a test of their careful reading of each question), and those who provided the same numeric response for all close-ended questions. The final sample size was 268 white, heterosexual males. Participants received \$5 compensation for their participation, and the survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Given the importance of situational characteristics in men’s gender attitudes [15], we specifically recruited white, heterosexual men because critical scholars have argued that whiteness and heterosexual masculinity signify the prototypic man in the U.S. [16,38,50,72]. This is not to say that marginalized groups do not conform to normative masculinity to gain privileges. Rather, the definition of manhood—that men should behave in ways that demonstrate power and dominance—largely reflects the privileges available to white, heterosexual men [17].

The average age of participants was 21.93 years old ( $SD=2.29$ ). Participants rated Twitter as an important part of their daily routine,  $M=4.64$ ,  $SD=.96$ ; 1(strongly disagree) to 6(strongly agree). They also reported that they feel part of the Twitter community,  $M=4.26$ ,  $SD=1.28$ ; 1(strongly disagree) to 6(strongly agree).

### Materials and Procedures

All study methods were approved by a university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were instructed to reflect on the appeal of news media on Twitter. Given that women journalists are often frequent targets of online harassment [36], participants evaluated the Twitter profiles of three journalists to mirror real-world conditions and increase ecological validity. We kept profession and social media venue constant across all three profiles. Participants read the following cover story:

We are interested in your attitudes about news media on Twitter. You will be shown Twitter profiles of three journalists. Demographic information about the journalists have been anonymized. Please take a few minutes to evaluate the Twitter profile of each journalist by reading the content. After reviewing each profile, you will be asked a series of questions about your perceptions of the journalist. You will be randomly assigned to provide in-depth feedback about one of the three Twitter profiles.

To avoid familiarity effects, participants were shown fictitious Twitter profiles. Mock-ups of social media profiles have been used in past research assessing attitudes about content on Twitter [32,35]. The images used for the profiles

were either created in Photoshop by a researcher or found on Creative Commons. In each instance, researchers sought to control for extraneous factors (e.g., the number of likes for each Tweet and number of followers) such that the effects on user evaluation would be marginal. Additionally, graphical icons were used for each profile picture to control for the effects of the journalists' appearance on participants' perceptions of news content. The three Twitter profiles included the following: Jonathan Miles, a journalist who writes about travel; Kara Michaels, a journalist who writes about public health; and Erin Griffith, a journalist who writes about creating an equitable environment for women. To corroborate the cover story, participants evaluated the Twitter profiles of all three journalists; however, given the aims of the study, the profile of interest was the woman's equality journalist (i.e., all participants were "randomly assigned" to provide additional information). As common in psychological research, we included the travel and health profiles as filler tasks to obscure hypotheses from participants. We chose travel and health domains because they are common in news media; importantly, our hypotheses did not focus on these profiles.

Participants viewed the same profiles, and the order in which participants viewed the profiles was randomized. Participants rated each Twitter user on several traits (intelligent, trained, expert, informed). These traits were taken from a validated measure that evaluated people's perceptions of a public figure's competence [65]. Response options ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Following guidelines by McCroskey and Teven [65], items were averaged to create a *competence score* ( $\alpha=.92$ ). Participants were informed that they would provide additional feedback about the gender equality journalist and would be asked to evaluate tweets sent to her by other users.

#### Gender harassing tweets



Figure 1. Example of gender harassing tweet.

Participants evaluated five tweets made in response to the content on the women's equality journalists' Twitter profile from Twitter users who were men. One tweet displayed positive feedback, and four tweets displayed inflammatory language that evoked sexist stereotypes. To strengthen ecological validity, research assistants located examples of gender harassing tweets on Twitter and used this content in the current research. The language for the Tweets included the following: (1) "Just ran across your article. I give you props for speaking out in public which is never easy" (positive); (2) "The awkward moment in an all-female board meeting when you realize no one has made you sandwiches" (negative); (3) "Stop about how you get treated. Go find

someone who will listen or go back to the kitchen. It's better than you bitching" (negative); (4) "You complain about damsels in distress in the media, but you do it all the time for attention whore" (negative); and (5) "How can you be against hot female characters. Is it because you are an ugly bitch?" Participants rated each tweet along three dimensions (humorous, agreeable, acceptable), and response options ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). These dimensions were selected based on procedures used in research that assesses men's endorsement of sexist content [31]. Items were averaged to create a composite henceforth termed *harassment endorsement score* ( $\alpha=.82$ ). See supplement for study materials, Twitter profiles, and results from pretesting the profiles and gender harassing tweets.

#### Measures

Participants responded to a series of questions about age, ethnicity, level of education, and social media use. The presentation of measures, as well as the order of items within each measure, was randomized.

*Gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress.* Participants responded to a series of Likert-type questions examining their experience of (1) *perceived gender role discrepancy* (e.g., "Most guys would think that I am not very masculine compared to them," "I am less masculine than the average guy" [79]; and (2) *gender role discrepancy stress* (e.g., "Sometimes I worry about my masculinity," "I worry that women find me less attractive because I'm not as macho as other guys") [79]. Participants rated agreement with each statement using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly). The 5 items for the perceived gender role discrepancy subscale were averaged to create a composite ( $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ;  $\alpha=.94$ ). The 5 items for gender role discrepancy stress subscale were averaged to create a composite ( $M=2.60$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ;  $\alpha=.92$ ).

*Toxic online disinhibition.* Participants responded to a measure of *toxic online disinhibition* (use of rude language and threats in online settings;  $\alpha=.79$ ) [87]. An example item includes: "It is easy to write insulting things online because there are no repercussions," and "I don't mind writing insulting things about others online, because it's anonymous." Participants rated agreement with each statement, ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly). The 4 items were averaged to create a composite score ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ;  $\alpha=.79$ ).

*Twitter intensity scale.* To assess connectedness to the Twitter community, participants responded to an adapted version of the *Facebook Intensity Scale* [27]. We revised the original 6 items to evaluate people's experiences with the Twitter community. For example, "Facebook is part of my everyday activity" (original) was changed to "Twitter is part of my everyday activity" (revised). Participants responded on a 6-point scale 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The 5 items were averaged to create a composite score ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=.86$ ;  $\alpha=.84$ ).

Step	Variable	Harassment Endorsement				Competence Ratings				Toxic Disinhibition			
		B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE B	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>
1	Twitter Connectedness	.266	.068	.233***	.05	-.367	.059	-.354***	.12	.302	.084	.216***	.05
2	Twitter Connectedness	.187	.069	.164**	.11	-.296	.060	-.285***	.18	.110	.075	.079	
	Gender Role Discrepancy Stress	.293	.087	.382***		-.190	.075	-.272**		.534	.094	.569***	.29
	Gender Role Discrepancy	-.122	.082	-.164		.006	.071	.009		-.051	.089	-.057	
3	Twitter Connectedness	.127	.069	.111	.15	-.255	.061	-.246***	.21	.070	.076	.500	.31
	Gender Role Discrepancy Stress	.219	.087	.285**		-.140	.077	-.201†		.485	.096	.516***	
	Gender Role Discrepancy	-.132	.081	-.178		.013	.071	.019		-.058	.089	-.064	
	GRD X GRDS	.114	.033	.239***		-.077	.029	-.176***		.076	.036	.130***	

**Table 1. Results of moderation analyses.** \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$  †  $p < .10$ .

*Conformity to masculine roles inventory (short form)*. Participants responded to an 11-item abbreviated version of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI;  $M=3.43$ ,  $SD=.80$ ;  $\alpha=.79$ ) [70]. The CMNI examines behaviors and attitudes related to 11 masculine norms found in the United States (e.g., emotional control, dominance, power over women, pursuit of status, violence). Sample items include, “In general, I control the women in my life” (power over women) and “It feels good to be important” (Pursuit of Status). Response options ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree).

#### Debrief

After participants finished the measures, they were informed of the purpose of the study (i.e., research questions and hypotheses). Participants were told that to test our hypothesis, we could not provide them details prior to their participation; this helps ensure that their reactions in this study were spontaneous and not influenced by prior knowledge about the purpose of the study. Participants were also provided with contact information for the research team and the Institutional Review Board to discuss any concerns.

#### Limitations

Although this research has many strengths, it is not without limitations. First, this research examines the attitudes of white, heterosexual men; therefore, it is not possible to say whether men of color or sexual minority men would respond differently. Second, the design of this study does not allow for causal determinations about the role of masculinity anxieties in online harassment. The current research would be augmented by future studies employing experimental designs that would examine the casual relationships between masculine gender role expectations, masculinity anxieties, and online gender harassment.

An additional limitation is the age of participants, which may affect the generalizability of results. Participants are in the developmental stage of *emerging adulthood*: the period of life in between adolescence and young adulthood in which young people explore their identities and their worldviews [2]. At this stage, young people are still developing their capacity for self-reflection and learning to recognize others’ perspectives that may differ from their own. Thus, young

men’s endorsement and perpetration of online hostility may be markedly different than older men given that they are still developing complex forms of thinking (i.e., empathy; respect for others’ worldviews). Additional research should examine the intersections between age, gender and online harassment for potential generational differences.

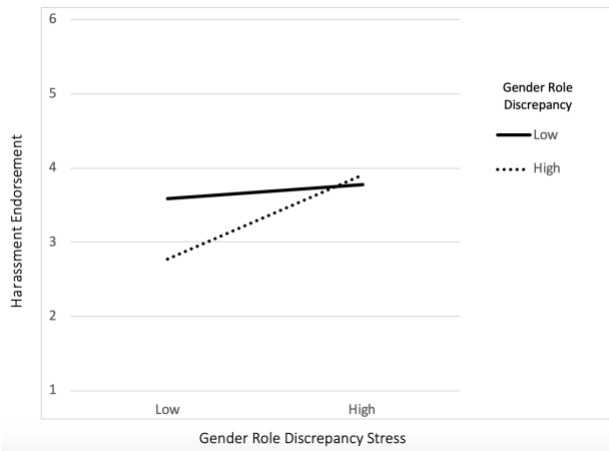
Finally, it’s important to highlight that women who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination offline are likely to experience harassment online that targets their diverse identities [60]. This is because an individual’s race and sexual orientation, for example, can have just as much of an effect as gender on their daily interactions off- and on-line [28]. In the case of online harassment, women of color, LGBTQ women, or non-binary individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles may experience abuse that targets them in compounded ways [1]. Given previous research on stereotypes and attitudes, it is likely that participants were reflecting on their attitudes toward the most dominant or prototypic members of the target group in the current research (i.e., White cisgender women) [26]. Thus, future work should explore the role of masculinity anxieties in the harassment of people with multiple intersecting identities (e.g., women of color, non-binary people).

#### RESULTS

The primary questions for analysis were whether men who endorsed a perceived gender role discrepancy (i.e., less masculine than the “average” man) and experienced distress about this discrepancy would (1) report greater harassment endorsement, (2) report lower competence ratings, and (3) report greater toxic disinhibition. We also investigated if conforming to masculine norms and toxic online disinhibition mediated the relationship between masculinity anxieties and harassment endorsement.

#### Moderation Analyses

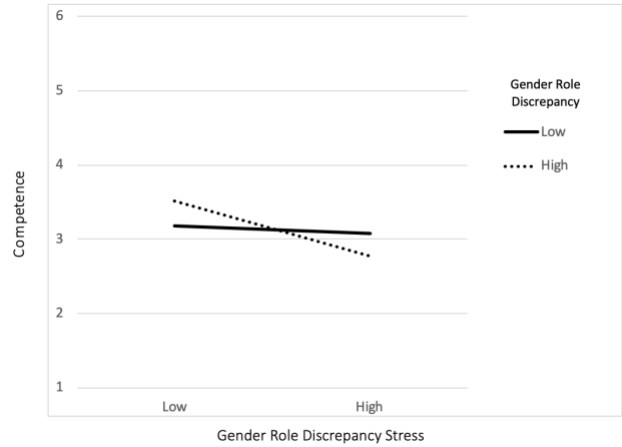
For all tests of moderation, we followed steps outlined in Hayes [41] and used bias-corrected bootstrapping techniques with 5,000 samples in PROCESS software. Listwise deletion was used in all analyses. For regression models, Twitter connectedness was a covariate. Bonferroni adjustments were used to address Type I error rates.



**Figure 2. Interaction between gender role discrepancy stress and gender role discrepancy on harassment endorsement.**

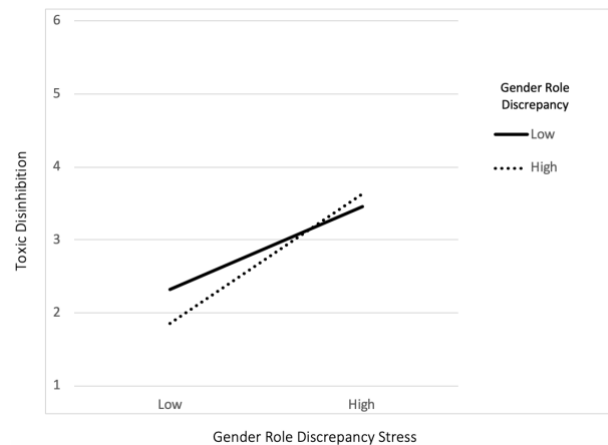
*Harassment endorsement (H1).* The results for the model were significant,  $R^2 = .15$ ,  $F(4, 263) = 12.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . Gender role discrepancy stress was a significant predictor of harassment endorsement ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ); as gender role discrepancy stress increased, men reported greater endorsement. Confirming our hypothesis, this relationship was qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We performed simple slope analyses to estimate the influence of gender role discrepancy stress on harassment endorsement for men above and below the mean for gender role discrepancy. Simple slope analyses indicated that among men high on gender role discrepancy stress, perceived gender role discrepancy was associated with significantly greater harassment endorsement scores ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results suggest that men who experienced masculinity anxieties and who perceived themselves to be insufficiently masculine reported higher scores on harassment endorsement. See Table 1 and Figure 2.

*Perceptions of competence (H2).* Next, we entered perceptions of competence as the outcome in the regression model. The model explained a significant proportion of variance in competence ratings,  $R^2 = .21$ ,  $F(4, 263) = 17.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . Twitter connectedness was a significant predictor of competence ratings, indicating that men who endorsed more Twitter connectedness reported lower competence ratings ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $SE = .60$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, gender role discrepancy stress was a marginally significant predictor of competence ratings ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .07$ ). Confirming our hypothesis, this relationship was qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = -.18$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Men who perceived themselves as less masculine than the “average” man and experienced distress about this discrepancy reported lower competence ratings ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .01$ ). See Table 1 and Figure 2.



**Figure 3. Interaction between gender role discrepancy stress and gender role discrepancy on competence ratings.**

*Toxic online disinhibition (H3).* Finally, we entered toxic online disinhibition as the outcome (H3). Again, the model explained a significant proportion of variance in toxic online disinhibition,  $R^2 = .31$ ,  $F(4, 263) = 29.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Gender role discrepancy stress was a significant predictor of toxic online disinhibition ( $\beta = .57$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that men reported greater toxic disinhibition as gender role discrepancy stress increased. Confirming our hypothesis, this relationship was qualified by a significant interaction ( $\beta = .13$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Simple slope analyses indicated that the influence of gender role discrepancy stress on harassment endorsement was significant for men above and below the mean for gender role discrepancy. Among men high on gender role discrepancy stress, perceived gender role discrepancy was associated with greater toxic disinhibition ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Among men low on gender role discrepancy stress, perceived gender role discrepancy was associated with less toxic online disinhibition ( $\beta = .37$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ). See Table 1 and Figure 4.

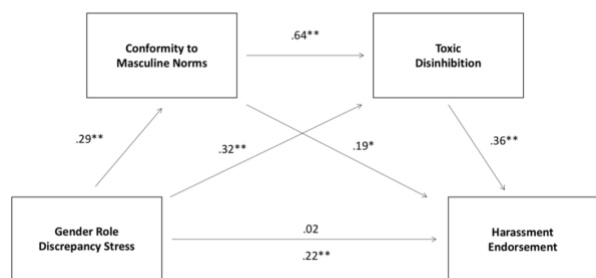


**Figure 4. Interaction between gender role discrepancy stress and gender role discrepancy on competence ratings.**



*Mediation Analyses (H4, H5, H6).* An additional aim of this research was to understand men's motivation to endorse online gender harassment. We used a serial multiple mediation analysis with PROCESS (Model 6) to examine the indirect relationships between gender role discrepancy stress and harassment endorsement via conformity to masculinity norms and toxic online disinhibition. We used the PROCESS macro and resampled 5,000 times for bootstrapping estimates. The distribution of the effects was used to obtain 95% confidence intervals for the size of the indirect effect of conformity to masculine norms and toxic online disinhibition. With the obtained confidence intervals, we interpreted whether the indirect effects were significant if the obtained confidence intervals do not include 0.

Results found a significant serial mediation pathway, as an indirect effect was present between masculinity anxieties and harassment endorsement via both conformity to masculinity norms and the toxic online disinhibition (indirect effect:  $b_{\text{indirect}} = .06$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $CI_{95} = [.04, .10]$ ). Confirming our hypotheses, gender role discrepancy stress was positively associated with conformity to masculine gender role norms (H4), which, in turn, was positively associated with toxic online disinhibition (H5). Finally, this indirect relationship was positively associated with harassment endorsement (H6). These results suggest that men's adherence to masculine norms and toxic online disinhibition mediates the relationships between discrepancy stress and endorsement.



**Figure 5. The mediating role of conformity to masculinity norms and toxic disinhibition in the effect of gender role discrepancy stress on harassment endorsement. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$**

### POST HOC ANALYSES

Participants provided competence ratings for each Twitter user to corroborate the cover story of this research. Therefore, we conducted post-hoc analyses to determine if there were differences in competence ratings between the three Twitter profiles. A repeated measure one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction indicated that there was a significant effect of profile on competence ratings,  $F(1.43, 395.89) = 287.61$ ,  $p < .001$ . We followed-up the ANOVA with post-hoc tests to explore differences between multiple group means while controlling the Type I error rate. We found that the women's equality journalist was rated as significantly less competent ( $M = 3.04$ ,

$SE = .05$ ) than the travel journalist ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SE = .05$ ) and health journalist ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SE = .05$ ).

In the above results, we found that men who perceived themselves as less masculine than the average man and who experienced distress about this violation reported lower competence ratings for the women's equality user. Thus, we also tested if our regression model predicted competence ratings for the travel and health journalists. Gender role discrepancy stress was not a significant predictor of competence ratings (travel journalist,  $p = .61$ ; health journalist,  $p = .82$ ). Additionally, gender role discrepancy did not moderate the relationship between gender role discrepancy stress and competence ratings (travel journalist,  $p = .10$ ; health journalist,  $p = .20$ ). These results suggest that the relationship between gender role discrepancy stress and gender role discrepancy were not unique predictors of competence ratings for the other two journalists. Thus, the relationship between these variables may have unique effects for women who advocate for gender equality on Twitter.

### DISCUSSION

Our results demonstrate that, for some men, masculinity anxieties play an important role in the endorsement of gendered harassment online. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that young men who perceived themselves as less masculine than the average man, and who experienced distress about this violation, reported lower competence ratings and greater endorsement of harassment directed at a feminist Twitter user, as well as greater toxic online disinhibition. When considering possible mechanisms linking masculinity anxieties to harassment endorsement, results indicate that young men's adherence to masculine norms and toxic online disinhibition fully mediated this relationship. In other words, in this sample, the reason that young men who experience masculinity anxieties more readily endorse gender harassment is that they are more likely to adhere to masculine norms and in turn, toxic disinhibition.

### Masculine Anxieties and Online Gender Harassment

In recent years, harassment of women on social media and other online public spaces has become increasingly visible and persistent. Much of the public discussion and scholarly debate on this topic have focused on technological explanations for these behaviors, including the anonymity afforded by computer-mediated communication and inadequate content moderation by social media platforms [3,76,86]. These explanations, however, fail to acknowledge that harassment can be an extension of gender power structures which encourage the derogation of women and other non-dominant social groups [14]. While specific technological affordances can enable or even exacerbate online harassment, endorsement and perpetration of online misogyny are nonetheless grounded in traditional dynamics of gendered power.

While the presence of popular feminism on social media in part explains heightened incidences of gendered harassment online, it doesn't entirely explain why some men support harassing behaviors in online environments. Drawing on research and theory in the field of psychology [18, 93], we found that masculinity anxieties play an important role in some men's online attitudes: men who believed they were less masculine than the typical man (i.e., gender role discrepancy) and who experienced distress stemming from this discrepancy (i.e., discrepancy stress) reported more negative attitudes directed at a feminist Twitter user and greater endorsement of toxic online behaviors (e.g., insults, name-calling) more generally. These findings are consistent with research in psychology, which has found that some men who experience masculinity anxieties may be more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors in offline environments (e.g., harassment, denigration of women) to avoid the potential social consequences of being perceived as insufficiently masculine by others [17,18,42,58].

These findings offer insight into recent social media movements that have been associated with online harassment. As more women are encouraged to advocate for equality online, some men perceive this as an attack on their dominance in the prevailing social hierarchy [47,63]. Some men have responded to this "threat" by derogating women, publicly demeaning their competence on social media, and silencing their contributions to online communities [3]. It is important to note that some men who perpetrate online harassment—such as the faction of gamers who engaged in harassment of female game developers and journalists in the wake of Gamergate—are not men who fully embody traditionally masculine qualities, and as such may feel anxiety about fulfilling social expectations around gender [83]. Thus, our results demonstrate that anxieties about being perceived as insufficiently masculine may be an important factor in misogyny that circulates to large audiences online.

#### **Toxic Disinhibition and Online Gender Harassment**

Perceived affordances of online communities, such as anonymity and social distance, can encourage abusive behaviors by reducing users' inhibitions [85,87]. Indeed, considerable research has established that lowering behavioral inhibitions online manifests in aggressive behaviors [32,33,52,82]. What is unique about this research is the relationship between masculinity expectations and toxic online disinhibition. We found support for our predication that when men fail to live up to masculinity expectations and feel distress about this perceived failure, they more readily endorsed toxic online disinhibition. A possible explanation might be that because there are often no "real world" consequences for the offender online, social media can provide opportunities to assert normative masculine expectations through rude language and threats that might otherwise be sanctioned offline. Men who participate in online communities that promote misogyny (e.g., MRA) also receive social validation for each other [62], meaning that these types of masculine appeals may be

exacerbated online because they can earn credibility and status from the group.

We also considered potential mechanisms that might explain why some men who experience masculinity anxieties endorse online gender harassment. We found that men who reported anxieties about their gender more readily adhered to masculine norms, such as aggression and dominance [5]. Adherence to these norms was subsequently associated with toxic online disinhibition and in turn, endorsement of harassing behaviors directed at the feminist Twitter user. One possible explanation is that aggression may occur when a man experiences stress from masculinity failures [75,88]. Ultimately, when normative masculine ideals are upheld, some men may act out in negative ways on social media because consequences appear less apparent online.

Finally, it's important to highlight that connectedness to Twitter was a significant predictor of competence ratings and marginally significant predictor of harassment endorsement. These results could be interpreted as showing that social norms on Twitter may influence user's perceptions of acceptable conduct online. Slurs and harassment targeted at women have been rampant on Twitter for almost a decade [43]; Twitter's slow response to curbing misogyny may communicate to users that these behaviors are permissible. The lack of consistent harassment moderation polices have consequences to users: bystanders may prefer to offer support privately to targets of gender harassment to avoid becoming targets themselves, and perpetrators of harassment may receive social validation by other Twitter users for online abuse. Alternatively, men who hold misogynistic beliefs may seek out Twitter to identify and support people who share their views. Twitter can therefore provide a platform to communicate misogyny, yet these beliefs are most likely rooted in men's attitudes about gender.

#### **Designing Technologies to Mitigate Gender Harassment**

Although online gender harassment is an extension of existing dynamics of gendered oppression, social media companies do have potential opportunities to more effectively intervene in—or even prevent—harassment on their platforms. Currently, popular social media platforms such as Twitter focus on designing tools that directly support targets, such on easily accessible online forms for reporting harassment; visible links that connect users with content moderation specialists; or community guidelines about available anti-harassment tools. Unfortunately, these approaches place the burden for mitigating harassment on targets, rather than perpetrators, of harassing behaviors. For example, platforms expect targets of harassment to detail their experiences in lengthy forms, requiring significant time and emotional labor from targets but often resulting in unsatisfying responses about the outcome of the complaint with limited opportunity for further review or recourse. Targets of online harassment express frustration with the lack of available support tools [7], often choosing instead to withdraw from online spaces completely by restricting

access to or deleting their social media accounts [91], further isolating themselves from critical social support and illustrating online harassment's chilling effect on speech [7,55,77]. These target-focused approaches suggest that harassment is an individual problem, rather than a systemic issue.

Ultimately, an over-reliance by platforms on reactive mitigation strategies—for example, moderating content in accordance with policy guidelines after it has already been posted to the platform—could exhaust both human and technical resources and prohibit progress on more proactive interventions, which seek to understand, address, and potentially mitigate the root causes of harassing behaviors [6,69,95,96]. Prior research has demonstrated the promise of empathy-based interventions for reforming former perpetrators of online harassment: in a field experiment examining the impact of group identity and normative sanctions on racist online harassment, Munger [69] found that Twitter users who were sanctioned by an account with a high number of followers and a white male avatar significantly reduced their future use of a racist slur. Similar empathy-oriented interventions could be deployed at scale to remind users, particularly young users, that their actions have consequences, lessening the potential for toxic disinhibition.

Social network sites also have the opportunity to better leverage bystanders, or users who are not perpetrating but instead witnessing publicly visible online harassment in their feeds. Indeed, prior research demonstrates that exposure to a bystander intervention decreases the perception that online harassment is deserved or even justified [6], which could potentially disrupt bandwagon effects and the potential for perpetrators to seek group status or social credibility by engaging in harassment. Unfortunately, although bystander intervention can lessen the impacts of online harassment [7,97,98], bystanders rarely intervene, due in part to fears that they may in turn be targeted themselves [7,20]. Promisingly, recent research finds that online bystanders are more likely to intervene in harassment when they feel a sense of accountability and personal responsibility [98], a finding consistent with existing knowledge about mitigating bystander apathy in offline spaces [53]. Bystanders feel more personally responsible—and as such, are more likely to intervene directly—when they are exposed to multiple instances of harassment targeting a single user [49]. Social network sites could consider tools that make harassment more visible to targets' trusted friends, while enabling targets to ask for specific kinds of support from close ties.

Bystanders may also be motivated to intervene when they more fully understand the breadth and impact of harassment, factors which are easily obscured in distributed, cue-sparse environments [7] but which social media platforms can counteract through direct educational messaging and the promotion of pro-social norms. Although many harassment interventions aim to obscure or hide harassment, both from targets and bystanders (e.g., blocklists; Twitter's "Quality

Filter"), reminding users that online abuse is both prevalent and inappropriate could foster a greater sense of personal responsibility while also establishing norms for appropriate online behavior. Normative appeals can be a fruitful avenue to reduce gender harassment online: when community guidelines set expectations about how to behave, users are more likely to conform with the social norms of the group [90]. This is especially important when considering that platforms such as Twitter have a history of permitting gendered slurs and harassment [43], establishing a troubling but powerful descriptive norm. Explicit and visible sanctions of gender harassment by platforms may encourage users to avoid those behaviors themselves.

### Future Directions

Future research should seek to examine both the mechanisms underlying harassment endorsement among diverse groups of men, and the consequences that follow from them. Additionally, it would also be a fruitful future direction to diversify the social identities of harassment targets. Research indicates that online harassment is not only about gender, but are also often racist, with women of color experiencing more extreme forms of abuse [76]. It would be interesting to explore whether women of color are targets of more gender harassment compared to white women who posted the same content on Twitter. A long-term goal of this research would be to evaluate more empirically informed policies and interventions aimed at decreasing racist and sexist harassment on social media—which would offer tangible solutions to preventing online harassment in the future.

### CONCLUSION

As online technologies continue to become integrated in our lives, the question that we must consider is: What motivates gender harassment in a networked era? We present the concept of masculinity anxieties to explain the ways in which gender dynamics shape harassment targeted at women who challenge inequities online. This research suggests that instead of viewing the proliferation of online gender harassment as solely an outcome of technological advancements, there is a "particular political purpose of male [hostile] behavior: the silencing of women who dare to speak in the online public sphere" [66]. We must work to develop more empirically informed policies that consider the intersection between gender dynamics and technology.

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