

2.1 - Toxic masculinity: how social roles are being redefined

Definition

Toxic masculinity is a concept used to describe ideas about how men are supposed to behave, originating from cultural norms and expectations. Men are said to be **pressured into** repressing their emotions, avoiding displays of vulnerability, asserting dominance over others. This most frequently leads to harmful behaviours towards others and towards themselves (physical violence, bullying, sexism, refusal to seek mental health support).

The Internet has produced unregulated spaces where extreme gender norms have developed, before spreading to other spheres, owing to **online anonymity** (lack of accountability → hostile language, harassment, normalisation of misogyny), to **platforms driven by algorithms** (“rage-baiting” = provocative content is promoted to generate engagement), to online communities built around the idea that masculinity is under threat (from third-wave feminism, from the recently increased representation of members of LGBT people in the media), and to influencers glorifying “alpha-male” attitudes (emotional repression, **entitlement**, and toxic masculine norms). → “mansphere” / “incel” (involuntary celibate) forums.

Redefining social norms

Reminder from Year 1: 19th-century first-wave feminism fought for and obtained new rights (voting right, reproductive rights, etc.) ; 1960s second-wave feminism attacked institutions oppressing women like church, family, work (equal pay, abortion, etc.). 1990s third-wave feminism rejected the idea of the end on inequalities, and developed the notion of intersectionality to create solidarity between individuals suffering from structural oppression because of their race, gender, sexuality, social class, ethnicity, and others.

Because third-wave feminism questioned rigid definitions of what a man and a woman should be, and embraced more fluid gender roles, toxic masculinity developed as an attempt to reassert the traditional and historical male dominance, seeing **equality as a threat** (in the USA: 2023 end of affirmative action ; 2025 attacks on DEI initiatives).

Redefining social norms

Toxic masculinity works by pitching the rejection of feminist values as a way for men to “self-improve” and work on their “empowerment”. This explains the role of influencers in the matter: through visibility, engagement, and repetition (echo chambers), they build profitable businesses on social platforms:

- lifestyle influencers, like **Andrew Tate**, portray women as both threats to their dominance and prizes to display men’s social status (toxic masculinity as confidence and success) ;
- dating / “pick-up” influencers, **essentialising** women (=reducing them to a homogeneous group articulated around stereotypes) to manipulate them (masculinity as sexual conquest) ;
- fitness influences, mocking vulnerability and shaming therapy (masculinity as physical strength) ;

Meanwhile, in real life, toxic masculinity participates to domestic violence & feminicides, sexual entitlement & objectification, to unequal relationships, workplace discrimination & silencing, to the policing of women’s behaviours and appearance, to reproductive control by men, online abuse, etc.

For further information, click on the following link: [Money, Muscles, and Anxiety \(The Guardian\)](#)