Final Report for the Peer-Tandem Program of the Social Psychology Section of the German Psychological Society

Project: "Masculinity Threat and Men's Rape Myth Acceptance: The Role of Emotions and Threat Type"

Sören Michallek, M.Sc.[1] & Lea Lorenz, M.Sc.[2]

[1] FernUniversität in Hagen, Hagen, Germany, Department of Social Psychology, Faculty of Psychology
[2] RPTU University Kaiserslautern-Landau, Landau, Germany, Department of Social, Environmental, and Economic Psychology

Research on masculinity threat suggests that men may respond defensively when their status as sufficiently masculine is called into question. Building on precarious manhood theory (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), previous research has linked masculinity threats to affective reactions and compensatory responses, although much of this work has been conducted in the United States and findings depend considerably on how masculinity threat is operationalized (Lorenz et al., 2026). Our Peer-Tandem project therefore aimed to examine different forms of masculinity threat in a German sample and to investigate whether such threats affect not only immediate emotional reactions, but also broader gender-related attitudes, particularly rape myth acceptance (RMA).

The project combined our complementary research backgrounds. Lea Lorenz's work focuses on masculinity threat, its prevention, and the comparison of different threat manipulations, whereas Sören Michallek examines masculinity threat in the context of the manosphere, with a focus on misogynistic attitudes and radicalization. The Peer-Tandem funding enabled us to integrate these research lines into a joint experimental study and, importantly, to recruit a non-student sample that would not have been financially feasible otherwise.

In April 2026, we conducted a preregistered online experiment with $N = 262$ men recruited through the professional panel provider Horizoom. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a neutral control condition, a recall-based prototypicality threat in which participants were asked to recall an impossibly large number of instances of stereotypically masculine behavior (Weaver et al., 2013), or a distinctiveness threat targeting the stereotypically masculine provider role (based on the manipulation used in White et al., 2013). After preregistered exclusions, the final sample consisted of $N = 245$ men and was broadly age-representative of the German male population. The study received ethical approval from the local ethics committee of FernUniversität in Hagen. Data, materials, and analysis scripts will be made publicly available upon publication of the manuscript.

A central aim of the study was to test whether masculinity threat directly increases RMA and related gender attitudes. We found no evidence for a direct effect of either threat manipulation on RMA. Thus, neither the recall-based prototypicality threat nor the distinctiveness threat produced an immediate increase in rape-supportive attitudes. At the same time, hostile sexism and gender identification were positively associated with RMA, indicating that broader beliefs about gender and gender relations remain important for understanding RMA.

Importantly, the absence of direct effects did not imply that situational masculinity threat was irrelevant. We found evidence for an indirect association between distinctiveness threat and RMA through public discomfort and anger, consistent with the affective pathway proposed in recent work by Vescio and colleagues (2025). Specifically, distinctiveness threat was associated with increased public discomfort, which in turn was associated with anger, and anger predicted higher RMA. The resulting serial indirect effect was small but significant. This affective pathway appears particularly important because similar processes have emerged across previous studies, suggesting that emotional reactions may constitute a comparatively robust mechanism through which masculinity threat can contribute to problematic downstream responses, such as ideological dominance over women, intentions to sexually harass, and RMA (Dahl et al., 2015; Vescio et al., 2025).

The comparison between threat types also yielded an important methodological insight. Few studies on masculinity threat explicitly compare different threat types (Lorenz et al., 2026). The distinctiveness-threat manipulation was associated more strongly with public discomfort and anger than the recall-based prototypicality manipulation. This is further evidence that masculinity threat manipulations cannot be treated as homogeneous. Rather, effects depend on how precisely manhood is threatened, how personally or publicly consequential the threat is, which reactions are assessed, and how tightly they match the dependent variables. Future work may therefore benefit from refining manipulations further, for example by making the threat more global or more socially visible. The findings also indicate that effects established primarily in U.S. samples may not transfer straightforwardly to the German context. Comparatively low levels of RMA may have additionally constrained the possibility of detecting direct shifts in such attitudes.

Overall, the results suggest that the consequences of masculinity threats are more nuanced than a simple direct shift in gender-related attitudes. We found no evidence that either threat manipulation directly increased RMA. At the same time, the findings indicate that masculinity threat may still be relevant in predicting RMA through the emotional responses it elicits. In particular, the indirect pathway involving public discomfort and anger points to affective reactions as a promising mechanism for future research. More broadly, the study highlights that the effects of masculinity threat depend strongly on how the threat is induced and on which outcomes are examined.

The Peer-Tandem collaboration was particularly valuable for developing this interpretation. Throughout the project, we met regularly, including during several scientific conferences, and jointly developed the study, analyses, and manuscript. Lea Lorenz contributed expertise from her meta-analytic work and her systematic comparison of masculinity-threat manipulations, while Sören Michallek contributed expertise on gender-related dependent variables, RMA, and applied consequences of masculinity threat for gender relations. A particularly valuable opportunity arose when we discussed our findings with Prof. Dr. Jennifer Bosson, one of the scholars who developed the precarious manhood theory, which provided additional theoretical input for interpreting the pattern of results. The collaboration has already developed into a broader shared research agenda: in future studies, we plan to examine the affective pathways of masculinity threat in greater detail, including for whom these processes emerge and which competing pathways may operate.

The study forms Study 2 of a joint two-study manuscript, currently under review. The findings were also presented by Sören Michallek in a symposium at the 2026

General Meeting of the European Association of Social Psychology. We plan to continue the collaboration beyond the funded project and to further develop and use the tested threat paradigms within our respective doctoral research.

We are sincerely grateful to the Social Psychology Section of the German Psychological Society for supporting this project through the Peer-Tandem Program. The grant of 750€ was used to finance recruitment costs and therefore allowed for data collection beyond student samples, which is particularly important for masculinity research. Beyond enabling the empirical study itself, the funding created the basis for a joint publication, strengthened our scientific collaboration, and initiated new shared research questions that we intend to pursue in future projects with international collaborators. We would therefore like to express our sincere thanks for this valuable support.

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