“Is this what being a man is like?”

Executive summary

This exploratory qualitative study examines the appeal of masculinity- and manosphere content to young men in the Netherlands, its perceived influence on their attitudes towards gender, relationships and sexuality, and potential risk and protective factors. Interviews with seventeen young men aged 16 to 30 were combined with online observations. Masculinity content covers topics such as self-development, fitness, success and making money. Manosphere content is distinguished by prescriptive masculinity norms and messages that often oppose feminism and LGBTQ+ communities.

Participants regularly encountered content without actively seeking it, often through social media recommendations. Not everyone found it appealing: some participants rejected the messages or blocked the content. The findings show that masculinity influencers tap into young men’s insecurities about their bodies, self-development and success. The idealised images presented online could appeal to participants, particularly during adolescence, and motivate them to pursue these ideals. This ideal was particularly appealing because participants had encountered rigid ideas about masculinity in their social environment while growing up. The way the content was presented, including “bro humour” and images of bare, muscular bodies, also contributed to its appeal.

Participants described both positive and negative aspects of viewing the content. Several participants valued the motivation to exercise and adopt healthier habits, but experienced pressure to become muscular and earn substantial amounts of money at a young age as negative. Rigid and sexist attitudes, such as sexual double standards and the objectification of women, were particularly evident among participants who followed or had previously followed manosphere content, during the period in which they viewed it. Most participants reported letting go of such attitudes after they stopped watching this content due to change in life and getting older. The findings therefore suggest an interaction between existing beliefs, the content they viewed and the social environment, rather than a clear causal relationship. Harmful attitudes are relevant to the prevention of sexual and intimate partner violence, including violence by former partners, but actual perpetration was not investigated.

The study also shows that young men do not simply adopt the messages they encounter online but assess them critically and selectively. Egalitarian values acquired during upbringing, media literacy and supportive relationships may offer protection to help young men critically assess and navigate online content. Parents, friends, female friends and role models helped participants question rigid attitudes. New social contacts and life experiences created space for alternative forms of masculinity and could reduce the appeal of manosphere content. Participants considered media literacy education at school important, preferably delivered by well-trained teachers in small groups.