The Adolescent Man Box

Jesuit Social Services
Building a Just Society

Fact Sheet 5
Adolescents online

Young people are spending more time online than ever before, with digital spaces playing an important role in shaping their identities, relationships, and attitudes. This constant connectivity exposes them not only to positive opportunities for learning and connection but also to harmful content, including gender stereotypes and misogynistic attitudes that can normalise inequality and violence.

About the Adolescent Man Box study

The Adolescent Man Box describes a set of beliefs within and across society that place pressure on teenage boys to act in a certain way. The Adolescent Man Box consists of 27 "rules" that represent a rigid and potentially harmful roadmap for how a teenage boy should think, feel, and behave.

We asked Australian adolescents (of all genders) aged 14 to 18 whether they personally agree with the Adolescent Man Box rules. Adolescents were also asked about their perception of the impact of different people, groups and media on their ideas about masculinity. Given the significant and growing role of online spaces in adolescents' lives, the survey also asked about their online social life and the online content creators they follow.

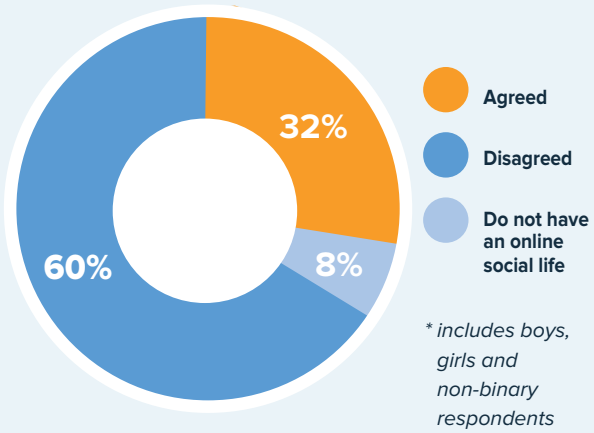
We placed the boys we surveyed into 5 groups (called quintiles) based on how strongly they agreed with the Adolescent Man Box rules. Boys in quintile 1 are those who most strongly reject the Adolescent Man Box. Boys in quintile 5 are those who most strongly agree with Adolescent Man Box rules.

Findings – Influences on adolescents' attitudes

For many adolescents, online social life is not an "add-on" to their lives but central to it

Around one third of all respondents agreed that their online social life is more engaging and rewarding than their offline social life (See Figure 1). This finding is fairly similar across genders (34% of boys agreed and 29% of girls agreed).

Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who agreed that their online social life is more engaging and rewarding than their offline social life*



** includes boys, girls and non-binary respondents*

Boys who most strongly agree with rigid masculine norms were even more likely to find online social life more rewarding than their offline lives

When we divide the responses into five groups according to their level of agreement with restrictive masculine norms, we found that among the boys who most strongly endorse those norms (quintile 5), almost half (47%) agree their online social life is more engaging and rewarding than their offline social life.

For more information about The Adolescent Man Box, and to download the full report, visit **www.adolescentmanbox.org.au**

Jesuit Social Services
Building a Just Society

the men's project
A Jesuit Social Services initiative

The role of media in shaping ideas about masculinity among adolescents

Media is seen by young people as influencing ideas about masculinity – but not as strongly as 'real life' relationships

Respondents were provided with a list of people, groups and media and asked how much impact each item has on their ideas about how teenage boys should act. For each item on the list, they could select whether it had a 'big impact', 'some impact' or 'no impact' on their ideas. There was no limit to how many items respondents could rate as having each level of impact.

Forty five per cent of adolescents rated a form of media as having a big impact on their ideas about how teenage boys should act (as opposed to 'some impact' or 'no impact'). Out of the different forms of media, social media was rated most commonly as having a big impact, and advertising was rated least commonly as having a big impact.

Figure 2: Proportion of adolescents who rated different aspects of media as having a big impact on their own ideas about how teenage boys should act (n=1401)

Media	Boys	Girls	Total*
Social media and online influencers	22%	32%	27%
Video games	15%	18%	17%
Movies and television	14%	26%	20%
Advertising	12%	17%	14%
Pornography	14%	22%	18%
Any of the above	39%	52%	45%

**includes boys, girls and non-binary respondents*

It is important to note that, while adolescents encounter a wide range of influences on their understanding of how teenage boys should behave, their survey responses reveal that they perceive real-life relationships – including family, friends and formal figures – as shaping their views more strongly than online media. Parents were most commonly ranked as having a big impact on ideas about how teenage boys should act: 60% of adolescents ranked their dad or male parental figure as having a big impact, and 47% of adolescents ranked their mum or female parental figure as having a big impact.

Boys who most strongly agree with the Adolescent Man Box were more likely than other boys to report forming their ideas about masculinity online

Boys who most strongly endorse the Adolescent Man Box (quintile 5) were more likely than other boys to be forming their ideas about masculinity in an online media context.

Over half (52%) of those who most strongly endorse the Adolescent Man Box believe that media has a big influence on their ideas about how to be a boy in the world (compared with 34-37% for other quintiles). These boys, who most strongly agree with the Adolescent Man Box, were also significantly less likely than boys in other quintiles to report their mum or female parental figure as having a big impact (34% for quintile 5 compared with 42-66% for other quintiles).

Online life is central but fragmented

When asked to name an online influencer or content creator that they follow, a staggering 438 unique online content creators were named, and the vast majority of these were mentioned by only one respondent (355 content creators were mentioned only once). Only 17 influencers were mentioned by five or more respondents. This is a reminder that the online world is vast, and adolescents are now forming their attitudes and beliefs within a diverse and fragmented media environment.

Implications

These findings highlight the complexity of how adolescent boys develop their ideas of masculinity in an era of both traditional and digital influences. While fathers, mothers, and close friends are perceived to have a big impact on boys' views of masculinity, the online environment adds another powerful but highly fragmented layer. The breadth of online influencers means adolescents are navigating a multitude of micro-influences that vary by individual. The fact that over one third of adolescents find their online social lives more rewarding underscores how central digital spaces have become, suggesting the online world may play an increasing role in shaping adolescents' sense of identity, belonging, and masculinity.