

...written by a angry woman or a #Soyboy? So hard to tell sometimes.:

Investigating the Reinforcement of Social Inequality Through the Soyboy Discourse

Anne McNutt Patrick

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David L. Brunsma

Shannon E. Bell

Ashley V. Reichelmann

Letisha A. Engracia Cardoso Brown

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ABSTRACT

The soyboy is a label given to men who do not fall into culturally idealized versions of masculinity, specifically men who are politically left leaning and embrace alternative masculinities. This discourse surrounding the soyboy participates in the larger symbolic boundary that upholds and reifies traditional masculinity. The soyboy discourse engages with cultural knowledge that reinforces the gendered and political hierarchies that are upheld through traditional masculinity. This project outlines the soyboy discourse through two analytic components: Component I analyzes digital spaces, defining the soyboy and how the discourse is used and Component II explores how that discourse influences face-to-face interactions, reinforcing inequalities. Through a content analysis of Twitter.com, Component I answers the question of how the soyboy discourse is used and which structures of power it is reproducing. Through interview analysis with eighteen (18) young adults, Component II answers the question of how the discourse is seen in face-to-face interactions and what that means compared to online interactions. Component I details how social inequalities are a part of the soyboy discourse and Component II identifies how that discourse shapes and influences human interactions. The final section of this project outlines how the soyboy discourse reifies existing inequalities through mundane or "low-stakes" interactions. Through the use of Component I and II's data, the final section examines the process through which inequalities are continued and preserved.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Social media is often perceived as a separate part of life compared to our day-to-day, face-to-face interactions. The mundane or “low-stakes” interactions of social media are not seen as impactful in comparison to how our face-to-face interactions are perceived. This dismissal of online interactions limits our ability to understand the social world. Through an investigation of the phrase “soyboy,” this project outlines how interactions in online spaces move from digital space to face-to-face interactions. The first component of the project analyzed social media posts from a collection of Tweets containing the phrase “soyboy” from 2015 to 2021.

Component I defines what a soyboy is and points out how the use of “soyboy” contributes to certain social inequalities. Component II moved to observe how the discourse can be seen in our daily interactions. Through interviews with eighteen (18) young adults, Component II details the way online discourses influence how people interact with each other. The final section of this project connects the findings from Component I and II to explain a cycle of cultural reproduction, which reifies and preserves social and cultural inequalities.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

The soyboy. The soyboy is a man who does not meet the standards of masculinity prescribed by traditional, conservative, western, heterosexual, cisgendered, white culture. The soyboy is a man who vocalizes thoughts about his politically progressive stances, a man who doesn't eat meat, a man who doesn't drink coffee black, a man who believes in social justice, a man who cries. The soyboy is the bogey man of cultural and social shifts that attempt to highlight social inequalities. The soyboy is not actually an individual, but a reflection of cultural response to shifts in gender performance and alternative masculinities. The context in which the soyboy is being explored is the discourse that surrounds the phrase, i.e. the gathering of knowledge together with social practices. In this project, discourse will be outlined through the construction of social boundaries that influence identity threat, which people use to emboldened controlling images, that then are again used by people to understand/bolster social boundaries. The discourse that outlines this cultural signifier is the meat of this study. By outlining the discourse surrounding the soyboy, this project works to examine how mundane or low-stakes interactions of discourses reinforce larger structural patterns of inequality and how discourse online often shape our individual interactions in day to day life.

Throughout history there are words and phrases that are used with great cultural significance. Words such as tomboy, cuckold, or snowflake are recognizable and have significant cultural value that is shaped through the exchange of cultural knowledge, but are labeled as insignificant in mundane interactions. Even with that label, the use of the words share cultural understanding and knowledge. For example, snowflake is recognized as a term that was popularized by the political right referring to the political left. The trending of these terms reflect cultural fads, but still carry significant meaning and participate in larger discourses. In 2016, a phrase began to make the rounds of alt-right online spaces. This includes right-leaning subreddits and Twitter, as well as 4-chan. Falling in line with the insult snowflake and cuck,

soyboy was created. Cuck, originating from cuckold, refers to a man whose wife is cheating on him. Often partnered with racism, this word is used to refer to the fear of Black men sleeping with white men's wives (Sommer 2017). Cuck offers an example of a discourse that has been shaped by online interactions and has significant cultural meaning in different contexts. A person who regularly uses social media platforms where this discourse is present understands using the word cuck, referring to a person as a cuck means that person is weak, easily fooled, etc. The word not only has specific meaning, but also signals an understanding of the discourse when used. Like snowflake, cuck is used in a way that specifically targets people vocalizing their political ideology, often politically left leaning people. The terms are gendered, because the use associated the person targeted with feminine traits or likening them to women as an insult. Cuck has been a favorite of the alt-right for a while, but soyboy fills the space that specifically insults liberal or left-leaning men.

Varis (2018) explains that "soyboy" began trending online in 2017. An early definition of soyboy could be found on Urban Dictionary in June of 2017, defined as

"Slang used to describe males who completely and utterly lack all necessary masculine qualities. This pathetic state is usually achieved by an over-indulgence of emasculating products and/or ideologies.

The origin of the term derives from the negative effects soy consumption has been proven to have on the male physique and libido.

The average soyboy is a feminist, nonathletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labeling the opposition as "Nazis".

See also: cuck, beta/omega male, orbiter, kissless virgin, male feminist

*Man 1: If **you kill** your **enemies** they win.*

*Man 2: Shut the fuck up, **soyboy**.”*

Varis goes on to name some of the men who were listed as soyboys on online spaces, such as Barack Obama, Justin Trudeau, and John Mayer (2018). Associating cultural understandings of masculinity with political affiliation, the pejorative phrase is primarily used to control or enforce regulations over gender which will be referred to as policing masculinity. In 2017, soyboy could be found on Twitter, used by alt-right talking heads (Sommer 2017). Soyboy was used in /r/The_Donald, which was banned from Reddit.com for hate speech. The use of soyboy is shaped by pseudoscience and promoted by known conspiracy theorists (Sommer 2017), engaging in discourse that perpetuates the belief that consuming soy makes men less masculine or feminizes them because of the presence of estrogen in the products (Varis 2018). A 2006 study explored the phytoestrogens present in soy-based food products (Thompson et al. 2006); this study sparked the alt-right connection to the idea that soy feminizes men. The findings of Thompson’s 2006 study do not support these assumptions. While this myth existed before this study, the idea that soy-based products feminize men is present in many contexts and a claim that it is also based in racist anti-Asian sentiments could also be made because soy consumption is associated with Asian countries. This understanding of gender indicates that gender is shaped by biological features instead of being socially constructed. This means that when bodies change, so would our gender, which disregards ideas such as gender identity. Some of the leading names backing these types of theories are voices highlighted by the conservative site, InfoWars.com (Varis 2018). The decision to target products with soy content moves beyond critiques of nutritional value, into defense of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and conservative ideals of gender roles.

Claims that supported this idea that soy feminizes men cited a veterinarian who believes the Burger King Impossible Whopper caused men to grow breasts (Gaynor 2019). In August of

2019, Burger King released their version of a plant-based burger, the Impossible Whopper. Burger King is among the list of fast-food corporations moving toward more vegetarian or vegan options. These meat alternatives were created to replicate the flavor of animal products and the sensation of eating that product, without actually doing so. Burger King's Impossible Whopper is one example of the rising popularity of meat alternatives in fast-food restaurants (La Monica 2019). Online responses to Burger King's decision to switch up their menu reveals an insightful discourse linked to American norms of consumption and identity. I completed a pilot study (2019) examining Twitter users' responses to the fake meat Whopper found that users associated consumption of fake meat products with femininity and engaged in a discourse that labeled those who consume these products as weak. Populated with the phrase "soyboy" responses about culturally valued expectations of what a real man is, my pilot study highlights the significance of understanding how people bolster certain identities through consumption and act to continue structures of inequality. The soyboy works as a figure that helps understand connections between consumption and identity.

Purpose Statement

By exploring various online discussions about the term or using the term "soyboy", this project seeks to understand how discourses surrounding consumption, political affiliation, and gender are shaped in online spaces and how they move to face-to-face interactions.

Motivating Research Questions

1. Does the discourse about "soyboys" reinforce cultural and political structures of power in the US? If so, how? In what context is this type of discourse often used?
2. Is "soyboy" discourse a controlling image? If so, how?
3. Is "soyboy" discourse used to shape identities through symbolic boundaries? If so, how?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Investigating questions about the contemporary discourse of soyboy is informed by several theoretical and empirical bodies of literature. In this section I will review those literatures and theoretical conversations through three major themes. To understand how the discourse surrounding soyboys engages with cultural consumption, I will be first examining social structures, such as symbolic boundaries grouping people based on similarities such as background and beliefs, that influence individual interactions throughout the world. I will examine the influence of structure and symbolic boundary over individuals, increasing identity threat when intimidated. I will finally explore how discourse engages in the use of controlling images, images that further stigmatize marginalized people, to protect boundaries and oppose others.

Discourse impacts the order of social structures, and thus the presence and ongoing existence of inequalities. Gendered, classed, or racialized social structures (all power orders) are reified through discourse (Bourdieu 1990; Graham 2016; Hochschild 2016; Lisnek 2022; McIntosh 2020; Plant et al. 2000; Reitz 2007; Risman 2018). These discourses are enacted to help people understand/bolster their own identities and create boundaries from those with opposing/differing identities. Distinct boundaries are created when identities are threatened. The boundaries use symbols for groups to help associate themselves with certain ideologies and appearances. Through these boundaries, controlling images are used to reproduce the boundaries, which help establish initial identity. Discourse can be outlined through (1) the construction of social boundaries that (2) influence identity work, which people use to (3) emboldened controlling images, that then are again used by people to understand/bolster social boundaries. This project seeks to examine how soyboy is used to police masculinity and how the discourse is used to reproduce gendered, racialized, and classed structures of inequality. By exploring the soyboy discourse, in a variety of contexts, this project seeks to find how this discourse polices masculine identities.

Recognizing the acknowledgement that discourse and language impacts our social world, I want to note the reason for not capitalizing specific words. Words, such as christian, eurocentric, and white, will not be capitalized because of the existing power that these words hold and the capitalization acknowledges the power as something that should be upheld. A similar decision was made with the use of soyboy as one word and not capitalized. Soyboy should not be held at the same value in text as a person, which is why it is presented as one word in this writing and not capitalized. Similarly, chad will not be capitalized. As the project will examine, the meme upholds social expectations that contribute to social inequalities and this project does not seek to give that messaging personhood.

Structural Influence

Essentialism vs social constructionist theory

Sociologists refute ideas that revolve around essentialist perspectives that social and cultural norms are inherent in nature and exist as fixed phenomena (Sayer 1997). By seeing social phenomena as fixed and without acknowledgment of cultural and historical context, essentialism functions without nuance. This perspective views social phenomena as biological which often leads to biological explanations for difference that further inequalities. Social constructionist theory counters beliefs that rely on essentialism through foundational thought that explains social phenomena can be understood as fluid and the consequence of historical and cultural contexts.

To better understand the social and the cultural, social constructionist theory offers an explanation of social phenomena as being born through human interaction (Gablin 2014). This means that human interactions are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts that should be included in understandings of our social world. Social differences are created, maintained, and changed through human interactions. Through this perspective, social phenomena are a part of a larger structure that influences individual paths throughout the world (Gablin 2014). By

utilizing the social constructionist perspective, this project acknowledges that systems of the social world are influencing individual paths. By rejecting essentialist assumptions, we begin by examining how the social world is led by influence of social structures and social institutions. Bourdieu discusses this process through a theory of habitus.

Symbolic Boundaries

Bourdieu's (1990) defining understanding of the habitus outlines that structural impacts influence how an individual moves throughout the social world. The interactions that individuals have are shaped by individuals' positions within the social world, such as class position, race, gender, ability, age, or other identities people associate with themselves (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015). A person's biography and the societal history of such biographies determines much of how they are able to not only move throughout the world but shapes their perspectives of the world. A person's habitus refers to the individual experiences that are predetermined by the social institutions they live within (Crossley 2001). Family, school, peer group, economy, government, etc. shape individual experiences and form a path for an individual's future experiences. While the path is formed, the habitus does not determine exact experiences. By understanding that individual social worlds shaped through structural forces lead people through their social environments and influence their daily decisions, we can see that distinct cultural boundaries are created. These boundaries are referred to as symbolic boundaries and present categories where, due to structural influences, people feel as though they fit. Backgrounds, beliefs, cultural attitudes, and interests draw the lines that are considered symbolic boundaries. Sociologists have used symbolic boundaries to understand multiple fields within the study, including class and wealth, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and sex. Symbolic boundaries lead to how people shape and bolster their own identities and in turn influence how identities work to maintain social structures. The influence of symbolic boundaries maintains social systems.

Symbolic boundaries are created through societal influence, creating a cycle where an individual upholds their identity which in turn upholds social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries create groups and through this creation, individual feelings of connection with similar people ensures that those boundaries will be upheld. Jarness (2017) highlights the difference between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries detailing that symbolic boundaries are distinctions made by the social actor through interpretation of the structural influence, whereas social boundaries are boundaries that are formed through social differences and access to materials and non-materials. Symbolic boundaries are not simply differences between individuals and their identities. Even though lines can be drawn between group characteristics, symbolic boundaries are reflective of individual interests as well.

Though it feels like an individual decision, how we understand our positions in the world are shaped by symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” acting as a foundational structure through which people gain resources and perceive their position within the structure (Lamont and Molnár 2002:168). Resources can consist of cultural knowledge, which help individuals move throughout social institutions, as well as social capital. The idea of cultural knowledge as a resource can be seen in Bourdieu’s analysis of class (1970) and how the symbolic boundary of class separates lower-income students from academic success because they go into academic institutions with less cultural knowledge about how the institution functions. Dumais and Ward found that students who had parents with college degrees were more likely to have positive initial college applications than students without (2010). The study specifically examined how cultural capital helps students with college educated parents versus first generation students. The knowledge held by parents shaped how success students would be in the college application process (2010).

Another example of a symbolic boundary can be seen in Rosenfeld and Tomiyama’s work on anticipated stigma of vegetarian diets (2020). The authors found that meat-eaters were

more likely to avoid vegetarianism because of anticipated stigmas (2020). Young, white, conservative men were the most likely to anticipate some form of stigma for choosing a limited diet (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama 2020). Symbolic boundaries outline that because of already existing identities, such as man, young, white, and conservative, other identities overlap with the interests and disinterests of the established identities. Avoiding the diet or feeling anxiety because of the stigma associated with vegetarian diets demonstrates that the established identities cannot be interrupted by new identities. The boundaries for those identities are already set. This is an example of how symbolic boundaries are created and influenced by larger social structures, but the pressure of this influence determines how an individual might react. Even before an action of other group members has happened, the person anticipates some sort of reaction that might impact their access to their group. This anticipated stigma may restrict their access to the connections (resources through social capital) that are already available through their participation in established symbolic boundaries.

Symbolic boundaries have norms associated with categories and like breaking other social norms, those within the category will react to a broken norm as though it is deviant. The young, white, conservative man recognizes that the others within their boundary would react negatively if they took on a norm breaking diet (vegetarianism). This anxiety over stigma pushes the individual to remain within the established boundaries. The cultural knowledge and social capital associated with the boundaries influence individual movements as well as individual reactions to other people's movements. The boundaries examined in Rosenfeld and Tomiyama's study revolve around consumption, because consumption acts as a form of communication (Willard 2002). This communication determines how someone fits or does not fit into their social world. Due to symbolic boundaries, including but not limited to, race, gender, age, and political affiliation, people made a decision to not try a different diet.

This may be perceived as an individual decision, but through Bourdieu's structural analysis, there are larger societal influences that shape that decision. Discourses, such as that

surrounding the phrase soyboy, are shaped and molded by socially understood boundaries. While the decision to engage with certain discourses remains to be seen as a “personal choice”, the motivations to engage stem from these societal influences. Bourdieu’s structural analysis of symbolic boundaries points to an understanding that boundaries are set before the opportunity to decide is available. Symbolic boundaries influence how one may bolster their individual identities and which groups they want to associate with.

Hegemonic Masculinity as Societal Influence

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally-exalted understanding of masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and the prescribed norms of masculinity (Connell 1995). Stemming from Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, hegemonic masculinity works to maintain dominance men hold over women and hierarchies of masculinity that contribute to that dominance (Demetriou 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Through valuing certain aspects of masculinity and praising behaviors that fit into that category, people who adhere to hegemonic masculinity benefit from society’s acceptance of them. Even men who do not actively or consciously participate in masculine behaviors benefit from the presence of the hierarchy and power dynamic that hegemonic masculinity reifies. Hegemonic masculinity works to perpetuate patriarchy through subordination. Hegemonic masculinity also works to continue systems of power (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is an example of how the individual is influenced by structures of power, in this case to maintain patriarchy and gender hierarchies. Those who perform or fall in line with idealized understandings of masculinity benefit from the power associated with those understandings. Hegemonic masculinity also encourages the subordinated groups of people to consent to their subordination (King et al. 2021). An example of this may include women upholding culturally valued masculinity even though within this system, they are the oppressed group. By upholding values of hegemonic masculinity, women are consenting to their subordination and benefiting from the oppressive system because they are falling in line with cultural norms.

The basic premise of hegemony is the power of one group over the other. Hegemonic masculinity does not denote specific traits or behaviors that men can take on to ensure they have power over women in their individual lives. Hegemonic masculinity is the systematic way masculinity can be used to produce and reproduce ideologies and actions that continue a structural oppression of the opposing groups (in this case, women, alternative expressions of masculinity, and often non-white individuals). Ideologies and actions that adhere to hegemonic masculinity do not just appear and disappear in everyday life, they are built within the structure of social life. Socialization is an example of how we can see hegemonic masculinity directly present. From birth, baby boys are treated radically differently than their baby girl counterparts. Parents are more likely to be more attentive to a crying baby girl than a crying baby boy (Condry and Condry 1976). The expression of crying by an infant is inherent and a way to communicate to the adults around them. That communication is interpreted differently depending on the sex of the infant because of the structures that parents have lived within. Parents wait several minutes longer to console a baby boy when they are crying compared to baby girls. This demonstrates the beginning of the conversation that is currently happening around boys and men and their ability to express forms of emotion beyond anger.

Condry and Condry found in a study on perceptions of gender and emotional expression that adults determine what emotion a baby is trying to communicate by crying based on the baby's assumed gender (1976). The adults are told the sex of the babies. The participants in the study confidently said the baby boys' cries were out of anger, while the baby girls' cries were out of sadness or fear. However, the sex of the babies told to the participants did not align with the babies' actual sex. These studies indicate that perceptions of sex determine how infants are treated by parents and the adults in their lives. And no matter how caring or attentive parents may actively try to be, this type of structural influence shapes our behaviors and is hidden within our actions. Parents participate in socialization in ways that feel less direct than the obvious "boys will be boys" mentality.

How quickly a parent responds to a child's distress or how they use tone and inflection in their language towards their infants communicates specific messages, which shapes how the child perceives themselves and how they will continue to perceive what is praised or punishable behavior as they age. Interactions such as touch also impact children's perceptions. How babies are carried differs among boys and girls (Condry and Condry 1976). Parents are more likely to bounce and throw around baby boys, being more carefree with their movements. Baby girls are more likely to be cradled and held tightly by their parents. Again, subconscious beliefs that boys are tougher, more durable, and angrier shape how parents and adults interact with infants. This pattern continues as children age. Socialization of toddlers and young children show trends of boys being perceived as tough and more likely to understand less abstract ideas (Ruble et al. 2006). Concrete ideas are shared with boys, while girls are allowed to have more open and creative ideas (Ruble et al. 2006). Parents share more emotive language with girls, contributing to the trend that boys are not encouraged to show emotion beyond anger, or even shamed for sharing emotions (Ruble et al. 2006). Because of rhetoric like "boys will be boys" it is difficult to directly point out the issues surrounding how hegemonic masculinity shapes gender socialization of children.

Gender and behaviors around masculinity and femininity offer excellent examples of how essentialism shapes how gender is understood. Instead of seeing gender as a social construct that is shaped by cultural understandings of gender, gender is perceived as binary and gender roles are seen as inherent to each gender. This leads to myths and stereotypes about gender, such as the belief that men are supposed to behave in specific ways, women are to behave in specific ways, and the two actions cannot overlap. When men and women do not adhere to these gender norms, they are seen as deviant. While these gender norms are less restrictive currently compared to past decades where gender roles restricted access to certain spaces such as work or business, these norms still shape how we are able to move throughout the social world. Hegemonic masculinity is the societal influence that reifies these standards and

acts as an oppressive force that shapes how social pressure restricts a person's ability to live beyond restrictive norms.

Through hegemonic masculinity, it is seen that men are likely to behave in specific ways to be perceived as masculine. This could be acts of aggression, apathy, heterosexuality, athleticism, or physical strength. These are culturally idealized expectations that are associated with masculinity. Not every man fits directly into these descriptions, but by emphasizing these traits in some way, they are more likely to be considered manly (Demetriou 2001; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). An example of how hegemonic masculinity impacts social interactions is through Bell and Braun's (2010) work involving environmental justice work. They found that men in coal mining communities were less likely to join environmental justice organizations because of the consequences of speaking against an industry that shaped community understanding of masculinity (Bell and Braun 2010). Women did not experience the same consequences because their gender was not associated with the work in the same way.

Hegemonic masculinity is an example of how symbolic boundaries are established through structural influence and individuals enact their own interpretations of that boundary to secure their position within a group of society. This can be literally acting a certain way to be associated with a group or being influenced by the habitus that leads them to a group. How individuals navigate their positions within a symbolic boundary leads to understanding of identity bolstering and how one responds if their position and identity is threatened.

How the Individual Navigates Structural Influence

To understand how discourse about soyboys shapes understandings of social structures, exploring the impact of identity threat on social interactions is important. How individuals interact creates the means of identity threat, because the importance of identity helps shape how people engage in social structures and use their identities to place social value, opposing identities may lead to feelings of identity threat. By bolstering those identities that validate and support their

own identity, reinforcement of common values and norms continues. Petriglieri (2011) explains there is not a concrete definition of identity threat, but offers general themes found throughout identity threat work, including appraisal of threat and identity threat coping responses. Within identity threat coping responses, identity-protection responses outline three ways that identity threats are countered - derogation, concealment, and positive-distinctiveness (Petriglieri 2011). Like Petriglieri, Branscombe et al. (1999) clarifies that identity threats can be separated by type of threat and type of response from those who are threatened.

Branscombe et al. (1999) discusses the four types of threat that are distinguishable in identity threat. The first form of identity threat is categorization, where categorizing a person with a group they do not openly associate with creates feelings of threat (Branscombe et al. 1999). Categorization threat derives in many social situations, including categorization with a group that does not fit with one's own understanding of their identity, categorization with a group that is not valued, or categorization with a group that does not benefit the person in certain contexts (Branscombe et al. 1999). The second form of identity threat discussed by the authors is distinctiveness threat (1999). Highlighting Tajfel's social identity theory work, the authors begin by emphasizing that "people use social categories to structure their social environment and to define their own place therein" (1999:41). Distinctiveness threat occurs when distinctions between groups blur and the differences between the groups are not as evident (Branscombe et al. 1999). If social categories, that are used to bolster social structures, are not distinct from other groups, feelings of identity threat are more common. People will work to clarify these distinctions. The third form of identity threat are threats to group values. In understanding group values, Branscombe et al. (1999) explains when other groups threaten the values of the group this can cause identity threat, along with outside pressure beyond the ingroup and sources of threat within the group. Threats to group values create circumstances where members of that group may respond to threats, attempting to bolster their own identity and countering the threats to the group identity. The final form of identity threat outlined by Branscombe et al. (1999)

includes acceptance threat. This type of identity threat occurs when acceptance of a member of a group is not clear and their position within the group is not defined.

This understanding of identity threat helps delve into the idea that certain groups within certain societies, at certain times are more likely to have extreme or outward responses to threat. That is, studying such identity competitiveness, that are fundamentally social, like threat, can inform us about the contemporary social, political, cultural, and economic order. Munsch and Willer (2012) examine how gender identity threat impacts understanding of sexual violence. They found when masculinity is threatened, men are more likely to place blame on victims, instead of the perpetrator (2012). Generally, men's responses to threats were more outwardly present, compared to women's responses (Munsch and Willer 2012). The authors connect this to the cultural devaluation of femininity, citing Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, stating that this perspective is "a tendency for men to dominate other men and subordinate women." (2012:1129). Understanding how identity threat is impacted by gender and gender inequalities helps better understand discourse surrounding gendered topics and language, which reify gender inequalities.

Masculinity Threat

Munsch and Willer (2012) explore how hegemonic masculinity impacts individual identity. The authors explain that threatened gender identity might result in heightened emphasis on hegemonic masculine norms (2012). By emphasizing the norms associated with culturally valued masculinity, their gender identity threat is countered and the resolution leads to identities being bolstered. Munsch and Willer (2012) found that men whose masculinity was threatened were more likely to express favorability toward the perpetrator of date rape or sexual coercion and associated more blame onto the victim. While threatened masculinity evoked a strong response from men, women whose femininity was threatened also demonstrated more support to the group they associate with. The significance of this finding though relates to the type of reaction to threatened group identity. Men were more likely to have an intense and harmful

response, compared to women. Meaning, men were more likely to demonstrate ideology that aligned with gender hierarchies and violent perpetuation of gender norms (Munsch and Willer 2012). Dahl et al. (2016) found that when threatening men's masculinity, men were more likely to promote ideologies that indirectly subordinate women. When men are presented with a situation where a woman outperforms them in a masculine task, they are likely to respond with aggression and anger, and benevolent sexism (Dahl et al. 2016). The authors found that "men's power over women is a key aspect of men's masculinity." (2016:251). Rubin et al. found that men whose masculinity is threatened are more likely to participate or condone online harassment to bolster their masculinity (2020).

Willer et al. (2013) found that when men were described as feminine, they were more likely to overcompensate by demonstrating acts of emphasized masculinity such as supporting war and homophobia. The authors found that women, when described as masculine, were not affected (Willer et al. 2013). Understanding that masculinity threat leads to more violent responses from men and reification of hierarchical gender structures is important moving forward.

While hegemonic masculinity is understood as a culturally idealized masculinity, it does not offer an understanding of multiple masculinities. Hybrid masculinity offers people the ability to negotiate and transition their masculinity to fit a more cohesive portrayal of masculinity. This concept was countering hegemonic masculinity because Demetriou believed the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity did not reflect the reality that hybrid masculinities allow change to reproduce oppressive structures in more ambiguous ways (2001). That being said, hybrid masculinities exist in a context of patriarchy and work to still have dominance over women. The hegemonic bloc is hybridization of masculinities, taking and learning from different groups which can be presented as progressive. Demetriou highlights that transformation into counter-hegemonic is deceptive and leads again to hidden reproductions of misogynistic structures (2001).

An example of hybrid masculinities can be seen in Abelson's work (2019). Through interviews with transmen, Abelson found what she refers to as "goldilocks masculinity" (2019). This understanding stems from the way masculinities are received and perceived by the men who are either working toward a type of masculinity or trying to avoid a specific type of masculinity. While many of the interviews referenced traits that align with hegemonic masculinity, the interviewees recognized the perception of these traits stating that they were "too hard" (Abelson 2019). In response to the perception that masculine traits are "too hard", Abelson found that interviewees described "progressive men" or "regular men." Both of these types of men were described as acting in ways that countered norms surrounding hegemonic masculinity, while still participating in patriarchal structures. Several interviewees were categorized as progressive men or regular men, which alludes to an idea that they had moved beyond hegemonic masculinity avoiding hypermasculinity and aggression. Even so, descriptions of their interactions with women were still based in patriarchal systems that determine norms of how women and men should behave (Abelson 2019).

There are a multitude of cultural markers that are associated with current understandings of masculinity. Cultural markers include the actions, behaviors, values, etc. used by an individual to mark their relationship to masculinity. Cultural consumption can be seen as the consumption of cultural belief, type of media, etc. A type of consumption that shapes understandings of gender is consumption of food. Consumption of food, or specific restricted diets, are an example of how masculinity can be performed as a cultural marker. Meat consumption is associated with masculinity (Ruby and Heine 2011; Calvert 2014; Adams 2015). This association between meat consumption and masculinity helps shape one's perception of themselves and how they want others to perceive them. Food and consumption function as a system of communication (Willard 2002). Adams (2015) explains that meat consumption is linked to forms of power and domination of women. This understanding of meat consumption speaks to the cultural and social significance of meat to men's daily diets. Beyond thinking the nutritional value of daily

meals of meat are important, the symbolism of meat consumption demonstrates control over a once living creature and the monetary freedom to purchase meat for each meal (Adams 2015). Consuming meat offers implicit symbolisms that create and reify specific identities. Sumpter (2015) cites that men are more likely to consume meat, specifically red meat to promote a masculine identity. Chan and Zlatevska (2019) found that meat consumption is also associated with heightened social status, that consumption of meat worked to bolster and define one's understanding of their perceived identity. Perceptions and gendering of foods indicates that what men consume and how they consume helps shape their identity. For instance, Gough (2007) found that men are less likely to engage in dieting because of the feminized assumptions about dieting.

This type of performance or cultural marker that communicates specific identities to others, while bolstering the person's identity, are seen throughout all aspects of life. While consumption offers an important example of how cultural markers demonstrate identity and group association, cultural markers range in a multitude of ways. These markers make up how one communicates with those around them about how they would like to be perceived, how they perceive themselves, and how they perceive others. Cultural markers can include food, entertainment, music, clothing, ideologies, or beliefs. Political ideology acts as a cultural marker, signaling expectations about how one should proceed in interacting with and communicating with another person.

Political Affiliation as Boundaries

People associate with groups, which can be used to help embolden their identities. This includes political affiliation. From a 2014 Vox article, opinions about dating or marrying outside of one's political orientation are significantly more pronounced. The author, Prokop, shared that in 1960 only three percent of people who identify with the republican party would object to their child marrying a democrat. A significant rise in disapproval of mixed political party marriages can

be seen in 2010, with around 49 percent of republicans objecting to their children marrying outside of the party (Prokop 2014). This type of strict identity work continued into Trump's presidency. In 2020, a study by the Pew Research Center found that almost 71 percent of democrats looking for a relationship would "probably not" or "definitely not" consider dating a Trump supporter (Brown 2020). While around seven in ten democrats said no to dating a Trump supporter, 45 percent of those "no's" stated they would definitely not ever date a Trump supporter (Brown 2020).

The perceptions that people associate with political parties or political affiliation help shape one's understanding of their own identity. While political affiliation is not always as significant in terms of identity compared to ascribed characteristics, that does not mean that this type of identity does not help shape important and meaningful understandings of one's being. As can be seen in the studies referenced above, political affiliation can help determine how one moves through the social world. Not only can political affiliation impact social circumstances such as dating or relationships, it also can represent how discourses are shaped. Political polarization is a common theme when considering political affiliation. Political division or political polarization has made up a large portion of the studies surrounding political identity. Hochschild (2016) founded her research on this premise.

Hochschild's *Strangers in their Own Land* offers insight about a group of individuals who identify with the political right. Many of the people interviewed by Hochschild (2016) mentioned how their feelings define their response to the political arena. This is true for people who identify with the political right and the political left. Hochschild (2016) discusses the "empathy wall," the divide that prohibits our ability to understand individuals in different circumstances as the obstacle that deepens any political divide. The empathy wall separates people through how they observe the world (Hochschild 2016). Divisions of culture can be exercised through understanding of cultural objects as well. More tension may be placed on Hochschild's empathy wall when cultural objects take on specific meaning to differing groups. Cultural objects have

different meanings depending on one's positionality and these cultural objects are perceived as more significant because of the divide.

Hochschild offers a theoretical understanding of political identities and how symbolic boundaries outline how identities are formed. An empirical understanding of political identity is demonstrated through Wrenn's (2017) work on political identity and food consumption. Through a survey of people following a vegan diet, Wrenn (2017) found that political orientation of participants was more likely to be left leaning. Political orientation was not decided based on their restricted diet, but how the person engaged with social movements in general and how they perceived vegan diets as aligning with their beliefs on social movements (Wrenn 2017). If people were active in social justice issues, including issues surrounding nonhuman animals, they were likely to identify themselves as politically left.

How political identity interacts with symbolic boundaries and identity is highlighted again through Hodson and Earle's (2018) piece about conservative vegans and vegetarians. The authors found that people following a vegan or vegetarian diet that identified as politically conservative were more likely to experience relapses in their restricted diets (Hodson and Earle 2018). This was because the conservative people were less likely to be around others with similar diets. Relating back to Bourdieu's habitus, Hodson and Earle's work reiterates that identity is shaped by boundaries that are set through social structures. Conservative vegans and vegetarians are less likely to adopt their diet because of social justice issues and more due to health issues (Hodson and Earle 2018). The authors found this again was because there was less support for those motivations among their peers than those with politically liberal views (Hodson and Earle 2018).

When individual identities within symbolic boundaries are threatened, differing forms of responses occur based on the type of threat. Group value threat identifies the significance of a group's value and belief system. These values and beliefs are reinforced through symbolic boundaries that then produce a feeling of commitment by an individual in the group to the group.

If values are threatened by another group or change in cultural trends, the individuals defend the group and its values. What may occur during this process is the use of cultural tools to ensure the group's identity continues. Symbolic boundaries are maintained through controlling images that reify strict expectations about certain identities, which continues to isolate them and reinforce structures of power and hierarchy.

How are Symbolic Boundaries Maintained?

Controlling Images

Referring back to a perspective previously mentioned, essentialism, Patricia Hill Collins' work surrounding controlling images (2000) explores how specific images create narratives, or discourses, that continue to perpetuate structures of power, importantly constituted by racist and gendered hierarchies. Patricia Hill Collins' work is grounded in Black Feminisms and explains that Black Feminist thought is from specifically Black communities, focusing on the intersection of race and gender (1989). Her work on anti-Black racism informs the concept of controlling images. Controlling images create and reify systems of racism and racist beliefs, perpetuating the ideas as natural. The narratives associated with controlling images were/are presented as inherent, meaning the stereotypes used to perpetuate inequalities were believed to be biologically based or an essential social fact. Controlling images acts as a tool used by those in power to oppress those already experiencing marginalization. Collins explains, "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (2000:69). Controlling images work to build onto existing forms of oppression, creating a false reality that validates forms of hate. By using controlling images, power and resources are denied to the person who is seen in the images.

An example of how a controlling image contributed to the denial of resources is how welfare policies were cut in the 1980s by the Reagan administration. This administration used

the controlling image of the welfare mother or welfare queen as an excuse to deny resources to Black communities (Hancock 2003). By claiming, based on the stereotype of the welfare queen, that Black single women were fraudulently collecting government assistance, the administration was able to slash benefits at a structural, national level. The use of this controlling image specifically allowed for anti-Blackness racism and resources to be denied to communities in need, perpetuating further inequality by denying them government assistance. Through this analysis, symbolic boundaries align within a power structure that displays inequality. Symbolic boundaries are maintained through controlling images because these controlling images disadvantage specific groups of people, by dehumanizing them to white populations. These groups of people are unable to exercise power, meaning they are unable to fight against the prejudice that is perpetuated within the controlling image. By creating the images, the control acts as a way to dehumanize and isolate people based on the false understanding of identities.

Creating a narrative that presents discriminatory ideology as natural, controlling images act to justify oppressive structures. As an example, Collins (2000) explains this through the controlling image, the mammy. The mammy sets to reify economic exploitation of Black women as domestic servants (Collins 2000). The mammy is seen as naturally and instinctually mothering and caring. When Black women professionals are in care work roles, Collins explains the “mammification” of these roles leads to the expectation from white employers that their Black employee is subordinate. If Black women do not fall in line with the tropes of the mammy, they are likely to be penalized and their jobs are negatively impacted (Collins 2000). Another example of controlling images that Collins (2000) describes is the welfare mother or welfare queen previously mentioned. The welfare mother offers an example of how controlling images define discourse surrounding issues of political and economic power. The welfare mother created a narrative that shaped how cuts to government aid were presented. By exploiting a racist belief that Black mothers were lazy and inactive, the Reagan administration was seen as appropriately cutting resources (Collins 2000). Collins connects these examples of controlling

images by explaining that the welfare mother is a failed mammy (2000). Systemic uses of controlling images reifies systems of oppression. Controlling images are used to create discourse that presents oppressive structures as natural as well as neutral. Those with power use these images to continue oppressive systems.

Through Collins' concept, controlling images, it can be seen that this tool is used by groups with social, cultural, and economic power. By using images that stereotype and stigmatize already marginalized people, groups in power reify power structures. Collins' concept is used to understand anti-Black racism. Application of traits of the concept to cultural discourses can demonstrate that controlling images are used to reify a number of power structures. Specifically, with the application of the dehumanization and naturalization process that occurs within controlling images, a discourse can be analyzed to be seen as a tool that reinforces narratives that uphold inequalities. Critical whiteness studies explore how white people use white identities to uphold racist social structures. Twine and Gallagher (2008) explain how the third wave of critical whiteness studies engages with similar ideas as Collins' concept of controlling images, "by an interest in the cultural practices and discursive strategies employed by whites as they struggle to recuperate, reconstitute and restore white identities and the supremacy of whiteness" (Twine and Gallagher 2008:13). Controlling images act as a tool to reinforce inequality and can be used by individuals who hold power, whether that is economic, political, or social power. By utilizing traits of the concept, discourses can be seen as a process that dehumanizes the target which then strips them of personhood.

Different stereotypes are used to create and perpetuate levels of inequality, such as the hillbilly. These stereotypes dehumanize the targets, categorizing and labeling white people of a certain class. While communities of poor white people benefit from white privilege, the stereotype of the hillbilly works to categorize and label them as separate from other classes of white people. Power structures, such as patriarchy and class dynamics, are upheld through traits of controlling images. This project seeks to examine soyboy as a controlling image,

specifically the dehumanization process, that is used to legitimize gendered, racialized, and classed structures. Discourses about soyboys may be used to pressure men (possibly mostly white men) to fall in line with expectations of masculinity assigned by the patriarchy, which also emboldens systemic racism. The soyboy may exist within a larger matrix of controlling images within the discourse and these relations, between different cultural images, are used to further reify these structures, keep men and their identities in order. If soyboy acts as a controlling image, it is not to control already marginalized groups, but groups of men that attempt to counter power structures that perpetuate inequality. The soyboy does not function as a controlling image in the same way as Collins' original definition because controlling images are based in understanding racism, but the traits of the dehumanization process can demonstrate how the discourse is used to perpetuate inequalities through interactions. The discourse of the soyboy does not invoke the same response from our culture though as controlling images described by Collins (2000). While the traits described in the concept can help understand the social processes of the soyboy discourse, the controlling images of the soyboy are not consequential in the same way that Collins' controlling images are to Black communities.

My Contributions

By utilizing literature and theoretical frameworks on symbolic boundaries, identity threat, and controlling images, this project outlines how the mundane interactions of a discourse are used as a tool to reinforce social inequalities that exist. Through a process of reproduction of cultural information, a discourse reifies the way social inequalities function. Beginning with symbolic boundaries, the knowledge that is shaped within those boundaries inform and influence how an individual might navigate through the social world. The informing of individual perspectives from the symbolic boundary acts as a way to shape individual interactions and identity threat. When that individual, that is shaped through cultural knowledge of a symbolic

boundary, is threatened, the individual reacts. This process utilizes controlling images to reinforce the boundaries established by the symbolic boundary.

Examining discourses about soyboys may contribute to the understanding that masculinity threat leads to stronger and more damaging reactions from men. This will be examined through mundane interactions in online spaces. Along with contributing to understandings of masculinity threat, this project will outline how low-stakes or mundane interactions have large impacts on our social world, even though they feel insignificant. This project will offer knowledge about how the interactions online that are seen as low-stakes or mundane contribute to reinforcing gender inequalities, as well as other social inequalities.

Research Questions

(1). Does the discourse about “soyboys” reinforce cultural and political structures of power in the US? If so, how? In what context is this type of discourse often used?

A. What is a soyboy?

How is the soyboy discourse used by people online? Does this discourse change in different online contexts? If so, how?

Do the gender practices found throughout the online discourse transfer to face to face interactions? If so, how?

B. Does the soyboy discourse help legitimate values of hegemonic masculinity? If so, how?

Does the soyboy discourse reflect responses to hybrid masculinities?

C. Within the soyboy discourse, what types of gender practices are used to affirm the cultural idealized performance of masculinity?

(2). Is “soyboy” discourse a controlling image? If so, how?

D. Does this discourse act as a controlling image of masculinity?

(3). Is “soyboy” discourse used to shape identities through symbolic boundaries? If so, how?

E. Are people who are politically right leaning policed by the soyboy discourse more so than people who are politically left leaning?

Does this discourse act as a tool of policing political affiliation? If so, how?

The soyboy discourse will be outlined in two chapters: The first in Component I, which examines the messages within the soyboy discourse and what boundaries are being upheld through the continuation of the discourse. By collecting data from Twitter.com, this Component explores what cultural symbolic boundaries are drawn through the use of the discourse and how this discourse functions as a reinforcement of structural inequalities. The second way the soyboy discourse is outlined in Component II is through interviews with college students, discussing how they see the soyboy discourse transitions from online spaces to face-to-face interactions. Component II explores how the boundaries outlined in Component I are reinforced through individual bolstering of identity and if answers the question, does the soyboy act as a controlling image? The final section, and fourth chapter, of this project outlines how the soyboy discourse demonstrates the reproduction and reinforcement of inequalities through “low-stakes” or mundane interactions, specifically in digital spaces. This section utilizes data from Component I and Component II to outline the way reinforcement of inequality can be seen in the soyboy discourse.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPONENT I: Twitter Analysis

What is the Soyboy?

Online spaces now shape and impact how people move throughout their lives. Not only do online spaces influence interests such as clothing, food, entertainment, music, celebrities; online spaces influence how these interests, and disinterests, are formed. Digital communities and spaces influence beliefs, knowledge, norms, values, and ideologies. Online spaces and media have shifted how cultural knowledge is gained and shared. While researchers see the impact of social media and online spaces on the individual (Coyne et al. 2020), the way people interact with others and how they interact within digital communities may also impact cultural knowledge. Knowing that digital space impacts people and individual interactions, this chapter seeks to understand how mundane interactions in online spaces reinforce discourse and how that reinforcement reifies existing inequalities. The soyboy discourse is an online discourse that is shaped by cultural knowledge. By specifically trending in online spaces, the soyboy offers a unique perspective of how digital discourses reinforce norms, values, beliefs, and ideologies. This discourse interacts with cultural expectations of gender as well as political beliefs. The expectations reinforced by the soyboy discourse demonstrate how societal inequalities are reified through individual defenses of discourse. This chapter outlines the soyboy discourse and the boundaries that are reinforced through the discourse. This chapter includes four major findings that shape the soyboy discourse: traditional masculinity, references to political ideology, language that contributes to the discourse, and references to consumption.

Data and Methodology

Twitter.com is a social media website that was established in 2006 and, as of, 2023 has 330 million monthly active users. Twitter offers users an online space to share information,

thoughts, views, and content as well as a space to generally connect over the internet. Twitter is a social media site that allows users to publish short blurbs that consist of 140 characters or below, known as a “tweet.” Users are able to include images, videos, GIFS, or emojis in their tweets. Twitter is a public online space, with the option to change privacy settings to private. Twitter users have accounts that include their profiles where they can share their own content as well as sharing others’ tweets, known as “retweeting.” A retweet is sharing a tweet of a fellow user. As long as a profile is set to public other users are able to see, favorite, and retweet tweets. Tweets and retweets can also include a Twitter thread, a chain of consecutive tweets, connecting posts. Twitter is a unique online space that has been referred to as “microblogging”, which allows for small messages of one’s thoughts to be shared with others in the digital space (Murthy 2012).

Searching Twitter to find users you are interested in following (which means following their profile) is easy with a search engine available to all users. The search engine can also search for words, topics, and hashtags. A hashtag is the use of the symbol “#” connected with a specific word (e.g., #travel) or string of words (e.g., #MeToo) you want others to find. For example, #VirginiaTech would allow other users interested in Virginia Tech to not only find your hashtag, but the tweet that you included the hashtag in. Hashtags are used to consolidate and spread information and allow tweets to gain traction if others are searching the hashtag. Twitter is accessible to anyone who has available internet access. This accessibility also leads to a large number of users, which means the site offers a wide range of social interactions and often direct commentary of cultural, societal, and political events. Moloney and Love (2018) found that approximately 25 percent of men and 21 percent of women who use the internet interact with Twitter in some way.

Due to the popularity of Twitter.com, an analysis of tweets offers unique insight into users’ views and beliefs surrounding specific topics. The search engine and use of hashtags also allows for analysis of specific topics with a simple search and collection of tweets.

Twitter.com is a space that is ripe with cultural commentary that needs to be utilized to understand societal trends. This understanding of social media helps shape the idea that social media interactions, in this case Twitter, serve as a social interaction that reflects and develops social and cultural norms. Sociologists and social scientists have used twitter to investigate a wide range of social interactions or phenomena, such as the #MeToo movement (Pellegrini 2018), expression of distress (Brownlie and Shaw 2019), and white supremacist ideology trending on social media (Graham 2016). The breadth of Twitter data depends on the content produced by public accounts, which means a trending or popular topic usually lends itself to a vast amount of data for researchers.

This project uses a grounded theory approach to find themes within the dataset. By utilizing an inductive content analysis, this project seeks to understand cultural phenomena surrounding the discourse of soyboy. This project seeks to outline the discourse and this begins with the collection of the following search queries: #soyboy, soyboy, and soy boy. These search queries were chosen due to results of prior research finding that consumption acts as an indicator of identity (Patrick 2021). The previous project used a Twitter.com thread to analyze responses to Burger King's vegetarian option. This project revealed the soyboy was used to define and categorize people who were consuming meatless options. This initial project found that consumption was the form of communication used to help shape identities and associations with certain groups of people.

Steps of data collection:

After completing a previous study analyzing discourse surrounding consumption and gender in online spaces (Patrick 2021), identification of the search term was based on results from that study; soyboy. Using a variation of the phrase soyboy allows me to find different uses of the phrase, with similar intention - this search variation included: #soyboy, soyboy, and soy boy. Twitter was scrapped using Python software. By utilizing Python, tweets using a specific

word, hashtag, or phrase during a set timespan could be collected. The month of November was chosen as the collection period because elections often take place during that month. The entire month was included in the collection and the years that were collected from were 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. These years were chosen because Google.com trends show that searches for soyboy did not begin until 2015. A total of 5,757 tweets were included from the collected tweets. A total of 1,918 were collected with from the #soyboy search, which is where most of the tweets referenced in the text will be pulled from. Tweets that were not in the decided years were excluded, as well as tweets that were not in English and repeated tweets. The trends of how many tweets were collected by year can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Once the tweets were collected, they were then uploaded to NVivo where they were further analyzed. Coding occurred through a pilot coding session, which helped establish some of the expected outcomes of the analysis. Coding of the data was separated by year and variation of the phrase, and then thematic coding. The thematic coding including the following themes: other hashtagged words, beta and cuck; comparison to women; mention of COVID-19; shaming restricted diets, vegan and vegetarian; mention of consumption of soy generally; mention of emotions, emotional, crying, crybaby; mention of feminism; mention of hormones; leftism, which included mention of democrats, liberals, leftism; mention of masculinity and manhood; mention of politicians; mention of race; and discussion of what is weakness. These codes shaped the larger themes that were patterns within the themes. These codes can be seen in Table 3 below.

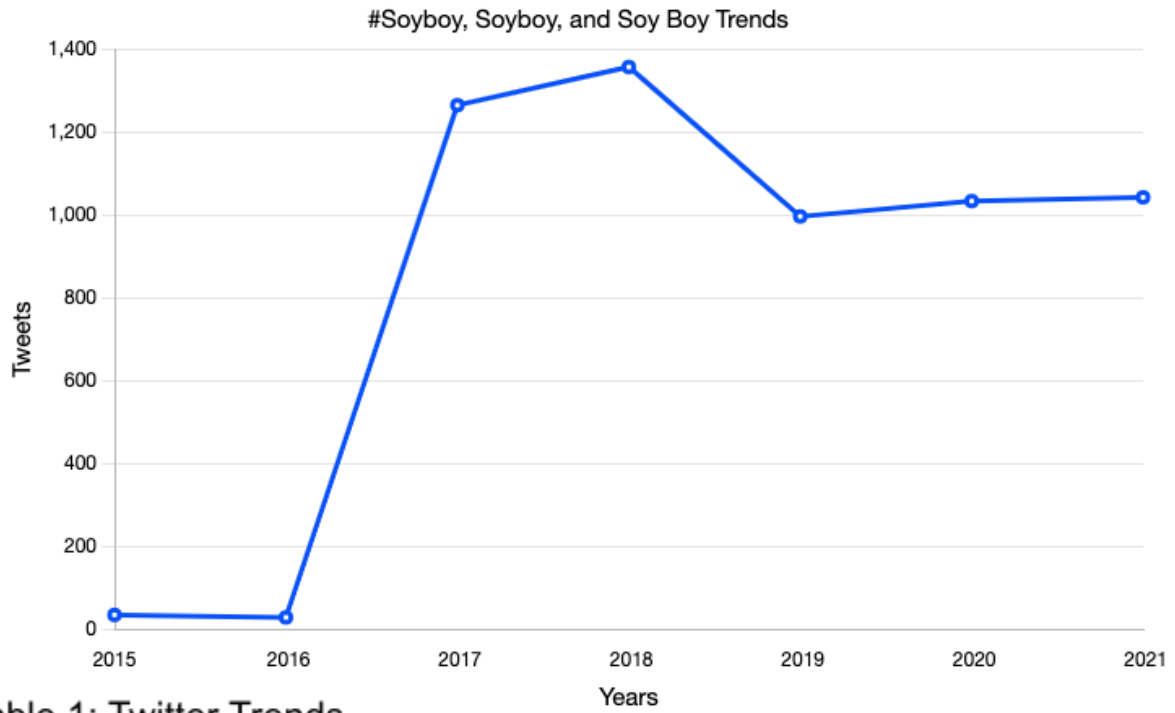


Table 1: Twitter Trends

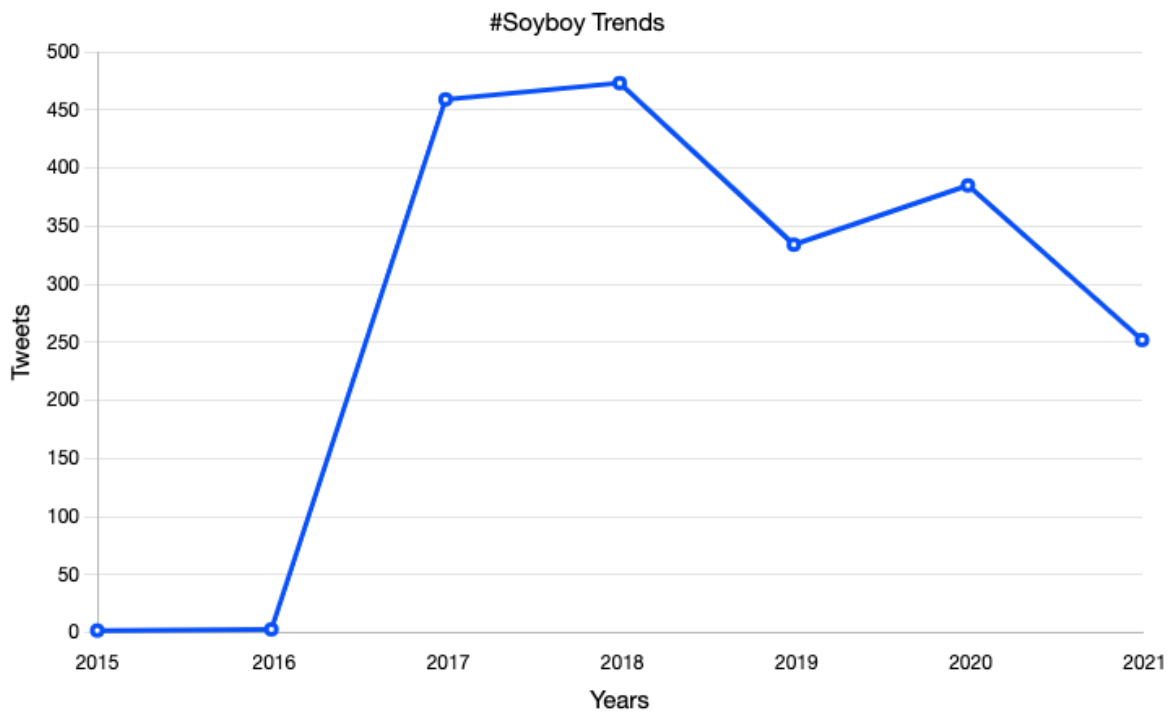


Table 2: Twitter Trends

Table 3: Twitter Codes

Codes	Example Tweets
Hashtags	"Don't you get tired of being less than a man? Also have a serious question, will you wear that mask forever? #SoyBoy #betacuck"
Comparison to women	"The men look like women,, ohhhh that's the plan !!! Generation of #soyboy"
COVID-19	"Pathetic. Put on your mask and go to Costco to buy your tampons in bulk before the shelves are empty.. #SoyBoy"
Shaming of restricted diets	"You are not a man if you do not eat animal flesh. This is in the Bible, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution and written on the back of every #Mancard ever issued. #soyboy #grassguy #leaflover #barkboi #dirtduke #waterweakling"
Consumption of soy	"stop eating soy it is feminizing the world and soon men will lose all their culture and become weak feminine pansies who only care about having gay sex and stopping straight marriage #soy #soyboy #wakeupsheep #men #mgtow #gay #yum #momsagainstsoy"
Emotions	"Maybe – but he's definitely a sobbing little b!tch. #soyboy"
Feminism	"Happy #InternationalMensDay! REMEMBER: - Masculinity is not toxic - Your penis is perfectly fine - Fancying women isn't sexist - Nor is enjoying pornography - Criticising feminism isn't misogyny - Being a #soyboy won't get you laid "
Hormones	"another limp, testosterone deficient cuck straight out of central casting #SoyBoy"
Leftism	"Aww. Libs can't take it when they get called out for their lies and slander. #SoyBoy"
Manhood	"Masculine Men do not wear make-up, high heels, dresses and they do not Veet their balls. It's just that simple, #SoyBoy"
Politicians	"Hey #SoyBoy President Trump was investigated for 2 YEARS by the liberal FBI. Guess what, they found ZERO! I bet your soy ass couldn't do it!! #FJB"
Race	"More like a #soyboy to me!! Extremely sad that the black culture is conditioned to think EVERYONE is racist!!!"
Weakness	"Awww and you fell for it... #Weak #SoyBoy #BetaBoi"

Findings

This chapter addresses several of the research questions pertaining to the soyboy discourse, including outlining the cultural and political structures of power used in the discourse and how that reinforces the inequities within these influences. This chapter's findings answer questions about how the soyboy discourse is used and how the discourse reifies inequalities surrounding gender as well as how the discourse reproduces values and norms of existing symbolic boundaries. This study reveals a variety of themes about what the soyboy discourse is and how the soyboy discourse is engaged with by individuals, including: expectations of traditional masculinity; references to political ideology; soyboy adjacent language; and references to consumption.

Expectations of Traditional Masculinity.

This theme was seen in most, if not all, of the tweets collected and analyzed from this dataset. Whether the tweet used direct pejoratives for women or indirect messages about the "weaknesses" of femininity, these tweets contained a multitude of forms of sexism and misogyny. We can see that with each code explored, the Twitter users were demonstrating their cultural and social understanding of gender norms online. In terms of sub-themes, several were prominent and contributed to this theme: likening to women and hysterical reactions.

Likening to Women

A portion of tweets collected directly compared men to women, likening certain men to women, making sweeping statements about lack of masculinity resulting in weaker, more feminine or womanly men. In turn, these tweets led to those men being called or categorized as a soyboy. This sub-theme includes tweets that directly compare soyboys to women or call them women, tweets about manhood, and tweets about weakness because of femininity. One hundred and forty eight (148) tweets were included in this sub-theme. This is used as an insult

because women = bad. While it's not a very creative insult, it does get to the point, culturally prescribed norms surrounding masculinity, such as physical strength, aggression, and hypersexual behavior, performed by cisgendered (white) men are valued and if you don't fall into that category of person or perform correctly, you are not valued. The value not only determines how some may interact with you but also determines whether your ideological belief will be valued in groups that value the culturally prescribed norms of masculinity. Comparing soyboys to women places them in a category that immediately disregards them. This tweet offers an example of the direct comparison: "*The men look like women,, ohhhh that's the plan !!! Generation of #soyboyz*". As this tweet states, the soyboy looks like a woman which is used to insult the individual. As another example, this tweet compares soyboys to women expressing anger: "*...written by a angry woman or a #SoyBoy? So hard to tell sometimes.*" Another example demonstrates that soyboys are worse than women, displaying the cultural devaluation of femininity as well as men who aren't masculine in culturally idealized ways: "*Probably because most women have more testosterone than he does #SoyBoy*". These tweets offer examples of how the soyboy is used to reiterate the expectations of how men should be categorically different from women and should not have traits that overlap with the cultural definitions of femininity.

A pattern of assumed gender essentialist perspective that the users of the soyboy phrase participate in continued to mention the level of testosterone. Relating to the conspiracy theory that claims when soy products are consumed, they increase estrogen levels. This belief bled through to seventy-eight (78) of the tweets, mentioning that the soyboy has low levels of testosterone. The discussion of low testosterone and high estrogen levels was common within the dataset. The association between testosterone and hypermasculinity is one that shapes how beliefs in traditional masculinity reinforce the gender binary. This binary includes the differences in who has testosterone and estrogen in their bodies. Referencing these hormones was a signal to show specific values of masculinity as well as a signal that gender essentialism is how the

user views their world. An example of this essentialist perspective can be seen in this tweet that relates hormones to not only gender, but other ideologies: *“Ahh another #SoyBoy with no testosterone left in his body. Leave him alone in his safe, in his comfortable sofa with a soft blanket, with looooots of teddies &; easy listening out of the loud speakers + free tax payer access to Soy products from the AOC green new deal fridge.”* This pattern within the data emphasizes specific values that are shaping the boundary these tweets are referencing. The perspective that gender is binary and cannot be fluid emphasizes the claims that masculinity should be performed in specific ways for individuals to be considered a man. Likening soyboy to women, valuing the gender binary, and devaluing femininity contribute to the value of expectations of traditional masculinity.

Hysterical Reactions

Forty eight (48) tweets directly mentioned crying, sobbing, and reactions of emotions. A pattern within the collected data demonstrates how soyboys have strong reactions to a variety of topics, beliefs, ideologies, etc., projected as an overreaction no matter the subject. The reactions include a range of emotive responses, which are not culturally prescribed to be valued by masculine individuals, save anger. The soyboy reacts with anger, but anger that includes sadness and crying, as well as over the top expressions of disapproval. If it is considered an overreaction, from this perspective it means it is something that can be dismissed. The expression of the emotions beyond anger invalidates the reaction. The tweets that spoke to or are about men having emotional reactions to something online or in face-to-face interactions asked the soyboys to not be crybabies or explained that the soyboy will probably go cry. These tweets are as simple as *“Cry. #SoyBoy”*, *“Dude you are crying and wrote a f’n sob story over a cold that was not in the top 15 of your adult life, in your own words. #soyboy”*, and *“Maybe – but he’s definitely a sobbing little b!tch.”*



Figure 1.1

#soyboy” as well as “27,000 people could have been exposed” *could* have been. Read the article, word for word (while using your brain), and you'll see this is so full of shit it's alarming. The thinking man will see right through it. The emotional, crybaby #soyboy will pull out a hanky. #Hoax.” and “Funny enough even women on the left don't want the men on the left. Who wants a guy who cries when someone hurts his feelings. Sure shop with the guy but you know it's not what you're taking home to mom and dad. #SoyBoy #Realmen”. The expression of emotion through crying was referenced as a negative characteristic trait throughout the dataset. Several of the tweets directly state that the act of crying indicates the crying individual cannot use their brain correctly to understand an issue.

The messages surrounding hysterical reactions also often have a face: the soyjak. When coding, the hashtag “chad” was present, often opposing the soyboy; “This dip will make you either a #soyboy or a #chad. Chose wisely.”



Figure 2.1

Know Your Meme is a website that defines cultural memes and the site outlines the soyjak vs the chad meme as the soyjaks being disappointed or upset about a topic while the chads are accepting of an issue or laughs at the issue, instead of caring. Soyjak is a cartoon of a man with his mouth wide open and tears streaming down his face. Know Your Meme explains that soyjak was created from a Mashable article about people taking pictures with an expression of faux surprise. From there, social media site such as 4chan, used the expression of faux surprise as their meme for the soyboy. Soyjak wears glasses, has short or medium length hair, and dons stubble on his chin and beard area, but not a full beard. The meme is also seen as soyjak vs chad, seen in Figure 2.1. While the origins of these memes are difficult to directly cite, Know Your Meme explains this meme was created by a Redditor in 2020. The chad is seen as the pinnacle of the culturally prescribed norms surrounding masculinity vs the soyjak (a soyboy) who is angry, emotional, and irrational.

This idea of overreaction or hysterical reaction connected to the likening to women sub-theme because these reactions are described as characteristics culturally prescribed to women or femininity (Plant et al. 2006). Plant et al. found that people do believe men and women experience emotions differently, specifically anger and sadness (2006). In a study that examined expectations of who expresses which emotion more, women were expected to express 19 emotions at a significantly higher rate than men, with expression of anger and pride as the exceptions for men (Plant et al. 2006). This study demonstrates how the expectation of certain emotions is associated with women and norms around expression are broken if men express emotions beyond anger or pride. We can see this in the following tweet: *“So this is what it looks like when a man is emasculated by feminists enough to post his vagina feelings on twitter. #soyboy”*. This Twitter user compared expressions of disapproval or emotion as “vagina feelings,” directly linking these reactions to ciswomen’s anatomy and the expression those individuals may have as dictated by traditional gender norms. The reference to emotions often includes the use of words such as “cry,” “crybaby,” “emotional,” “hysterical,” “panic,” “sob,” “triggered,” as well as references to acting like children or babies and references to acting like a woman or in a feminine way. One of the other patterns within these tweets were the references to liberals or soyboys needing coddling or comfort after reacting to something, references to hurt feelings, etc. The pattern of these tweets conclude that emotional expressions or reactions that move away from the expected roles that encourage straight-faced, stoic, or no reaction will be considered and labeled as an overreaction. Emotions beyond anger or stoicism are bad. The idea of coddling is seen as an act that is done to children, and to some people, women. Similar sentiments about these groups relate to the concept of protections and that women and children are two groups of people that are unable to protect themselves, which means they must be coddled so as to not upset or scare them. Though these are assumptions about each group of people, it demonstrates expectations of how one should interact with others.

Through gender norms, there has been a historical expectation that women are able to express emotion openly whereas men are expected to either not openly feel their feelings or don't have a reaction to something that women are expected to have a reaction to (Plant et al. 2000). This unrealistic expectation leads to phrases such as "like a girl" and derogatory language such as "pussy" or "pansy" explaining that men who do have emotional reactions are expressing weakness. This includes reference to crying, sobbing, being triggered, feeling fear, hurting someone's feelings, etc. An example of these include: *"#Soyboy got his/her feelings hurt. Don't have to worry about any toxic masculinity in this one. 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂😂"*, *"Don't be triggered your #soy latte will protect you. #soyboy"*, *"Maybe – but he's definitely a sobbing little b!tch. #soyboy"*, *"Cry. #SoyBoy"*. The emotions referenced are most often related to sadness or expression of frustration. One of the ways gender norms influence masculine performance is the idea that crying is feminine therefore men who see themselves as masculine and value masculine should not cry (Plant et al. 2000).

This idea that any reaction is hysterical relates to the idea of the snowflake. The snowflake is a meme that became popular with Donald Trump supporters during the 2016 election and represents the idea that liberals/left-leaning political individuals are mentally and physically soft. McIntosh cites this hyper-masculine posturing as being exaggerated after Barack Obama's 2008 election (2020). Not only did Obama's political orientation and race become targets of the right's harassment, but his gender and sexuality were targets. McIntosh states that even in 2019 "Obama Gay rumors" had over twenty eight million hits on Google.com. After mass protests and mobilization against Trump during his 2016 election, the commentary surrounding this result labeled liberals as weak, crybabies, who weren't able to handle reality (2020). This label has since been attached to the liberal and political left. The soyboy discourse falls into the category of verbiage that is used to disregard topics because the soyboy is overreacting which warrants dismissal.

The soyboy discourse reiterates a cultural norm that reacting is negative depending upon status and identities of the reactor. Reactions to racism, sexism, bigotry, etc. can then be labeled as an overreaction and irrational so they can be belittled and not a real concern. If soyboys are labeled as emotional or hysterical, the beliefs they may hold are also seen as emotional or hysterical. Emotions are associated with femininity, whereas hegemonic masculinity shapes traditional understandings of masculinity that asks men to perform masculinity through apathetic or stoic responses (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Demetriou 2001). Culturally, men are not given the same space women are given to have emotional reactions, which is a way all experience consequences for a patriarchal society. It is also expected of women, which gives an excuse to not value women's opinions or thoughts. This standard and cultural expectation defines not only how men are able to interact in individual spaces, but also to how societal inequalities can be seen at the individual level. This leads to the second prominent theme, references to political ideology.

References to political ideology

Over the last ten years, political discourse occupies many spaces including digital spaces. The soyboy discourse is one of the many cultural and social phenomena that developed in digital spaces to support general political polarization. One of the major themes that was found within this data was the role that the soyboy discourse contributes to the general polarization of political parties in the US. These discourses may reflect Hochschild's concept of the empathy wall, which she writes polarizes, separating groups of people and restricting the ability to understand differing circumstances (2016). Paralleling the soyboy discourse, McIntosh outlines the snowflake discourse, which was popularized during the 2016 election and by supporters of Donald Trump (2020). The soyboy discourse adds to the existing polarization that utilizes hyper-masculine posturing to claim politically left-leaning beliefs are held by weak, irrationally emotional individuals. These discourses use gender inequalities, as well as relying

on other stereotypes surrounding inequalities in our culture. The soyboy itself doesn't appear in all conversations, but the general themes found related to the soyboy discourse can be seen. The themes present through this data are occurring over the timespan of 2016 to 2021, but within the theme of reference to political ideology, the occurrence of the theme grew significantly during 2018 onward, increasing from two to three tweets to 400 tweets. Within the reference to political ideology, the sub-themes relate to leftism, responses to COVID, and social movements.

Leftism

One of the codes that referenced political ideology was mention of leftism, defined broadly. This sub-theme included one hundred and fifty one (151) tweets that mention of the Democratic political party, leftism, liberalism, liberal individuals, also including socialism, communisms, libs, dems, Marxism, as well as derogatory language about the left such as libtard, #UglyLeftists, and #lowIQlib. Leftism was broadly defined because the wide range of words and concepts related to politically left-leaning beliefs were used so heavily and often interchangeably within the tweets. Some of the tweets that were coded for leftism are simply discussing the Democratic party and include a soyboy hashtag such as *"Aww. Libs can't take it when they get called out for their lies and slander. #SoyBoy"*, *"Lol get the fuck outta here with this shit! This pussy is definitely a #soyboy (not) in disguise trying to stir up shit."* *#DemocratsHateAmerica"*, and *"There was NO insurrection. NOT even one person has been charged with insurrection. BTW, if you're such a big man, I would love to see you say this to President Trump's face. #Soyboy"*. These tweets offer examples of discussion of political alignment in connection with the shaming of emotive expression.

There was a specific hashtag that was used multiple times throughout the entire dataset: #LiberalismIsAMentalDisorder. This hashtag included tweets such as *"He's a brainwashed weak beta #SoyBoy always cherry picking and feeding misinfo. Its really pathetic! Just more proof #LiberalismIsAMentalDisorder"*. This hashtag accompanied the soyboy hashtag and other

hashtags specifically citing the Democratic party as associated with the themes of the soyboy discourse. This can be seen in the following tweet, *“Your theft is only temporary... too bad your stupidity isn’t. #LiberalismIsAMentalDisorder #DesperateDems #DyingDemParty #LibtardLeft #SoyBoy”*. The use of the Liberalism is a Mental Disorder hashtag occurred specifically in 2020. This language is reflective of McIntosh’s analysis of the language used by Donald Trump supporters and followers (2020).

Responses to COVID-19

Many of the tweets from 2020 were comprised of similar discourses as the previous years, but thirty six (36) included the discourse about CoronaVirus as well. The conversations surrounding the outbreak of COVID-19 quickly became a political discourse, as well as a discourse about public health (Daher-Nashif 2022). COVID-19 emphasized existing inequalities and the response to the emphasis was dismissive of the impact of the virus and the virus generally. This can be seen in the following tweets: *“And you’re so brainwashed you think covid is real 🤡 stupid mother fucker. #lowiqlib #scum #SoyBoy #LiberalismIsAMentalDisorder”* and *“Want to meet a real man? #soyboy #LiberalismIsTheRealPandemic”*. Not only do these tweets dismiss the importance of recognizing the virus as a risk to the general public, but associate the concern over COVID-19 to specifically a concern felt by liberals.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on how the soyboy discourse was shaped in online spaces. Beginning in 2020, tweets referenced COVID and concerns about the pandemic as something only soyboys have. This tweet directly appeals to this idea: *“Drink some soy latte; you’ll be OK. And get your #COVID19 booster number 36 for safety. And wrap yourself in bubble wrap. Don’t forget to wear three masks inside your house! #SoyBoy”*. This user addresses the quarantine rules, the mask mandates that were common throughout 2020 into 2021, and mandated vaccines as signs that the soyboy is fearful, commenting that the soyboy who does follow these rules should also wrap themselves in bubble wrap for another layer of

protection. This tweet is an example of the use of COVID-19 and reactions to the pandemic as a way to draw boundaries. These tweets also explained COVID is a made up concern to control people. Again, similar messages were present when discussing vaccinations. *“Ah, another COVIDIOT speaks. Unlike your ilk, we don’t need to wait for our masters to tell us what we need to inject in our bodies. #SoyBoy”*. The belief that the pandemic was real and impacting people’s lives beyond getting cold-like symptoms was a sign of weakness and the belief in a larger conspiracy about control. *“Amen! Most of these spineless #SoyBoy mayors (like @Marty_Walsh) who have bowed to their Satanic-demigod Governors and sought to enforce these anti-constitutional (!!) tyrannical executive orders need to be COVID Vaccine Lab Rats. We see through your “state of emergency” SCAM.”* Anti-authority messages can be seen throughout the tweets about the virus. This part of the discourse outlines that being directed or given guidelines go against the values that shape the boundary of the discourse.

Along with this type of discourse, the vaccines were paralleling some of the discourse about soy consumption. The vaccine was related to imbalance of hormones and would make the person receiving the vaccine more feminine. The jab this tweet is referencing is more than likely the COVID-19 vaccine: *“Men should go have their testosterone levels checked. T-Levels in men are the lowest they’ve ever been. “Healthy” T-Levels are measured on a spectrum that doesn’t account for age. Low T causes anxiety, depression, weight gain and impotence. That’s the jab all men need #soyboy”*. These tweets parallel the comments about low testosterone were also made in reference to soy in food and drink products. For example, the following tweet references the consumption of soy products decreasing testosterone levels: *“Dude, you need to lay off soy latte. Your testosterone level is lower than my grandma #SoyBoy”*. This parallel demonstrates that the value of the discourse isn’t restricted to only consumption as a cultural marker, but can be applied to other cultural markers as well. In this case, vaccination statuses act as a cultural marker.

Social Movements

There are several common messages that are included in the tweets discussing feminism and the soyboy. Feminism is a concept, ideology, belief, etc. associated with the political left because it often addresses social inequalities about gender and sexuality (Kelly and Gauchat 2016). One of the messages seen within the data claims the idea that feminism or feminists emasculate men; men should be wary of associating with women who identify as feminists because they are going to reduce men's ability to be masculine. Feminism was mentioned in sixty eight (68) tweets. This can be seen directly in several tweets: *"So this is what it looks like when a man is emasculated by feminists enough to post his vagina feelings on twitter. #soyboy"*, *"It is insidious how the left got us to reject tradi masculinity (viS #ToxicMasculinity public release) drive while accepting emasculated #soyboy man buns."*, and *"Feminists, listen up: How to Completely Emasculate a Man. Pick your #soyboy and go to town. Guaranteed to make your insecurities and male-hating daddy issues fulfilled by a hapless weakling. #StayAngry"*. Feminism is mentioned throughout the data as a belief that leads to weaker, less traditional social structures, and therefore, fewer traditionally masculine men. The soyboy himself isn't often referred to as a feminist, but tweets claim feminism creates a soyboy or soyboys are the only men left for feminists to have a relationship with because traditionally masculine men would not be interested in women who identify as feminists. This is shown in the following tweets: *"Do you want to be #cucked? Because THAT'S how you get #cucked. #SoyBoy #feminismiscancer #mgtow"*, *"Moral of the story unless you are a soy boy don't marry a radical Feminist."*, and *"Because toxic third wave feminism and men who have lost their manhood, #SoyBoy , don't believe in science"*. When a man does identify as a feminist, the response is to call them a soyboy: *"I would expect a soy boy like this guy who has feminism in his tinder bio to not be a racist punk. lmao"*. Through this message, the ideology or belief system within the discourse is outlined, people with feminist beliefs are seen as someone to avoid. This creates and emphasizes the boundaries between groups.

Along with feminism, thirty two (32) of the tweets coded within this theme mention race, refer to Black individuals, social movements about Black experiences, or racism. In several contexts, Black Lives Matter, BLM, was referenced and included in lists about groups or descriptions that were seen as negative. One tweet read *“NO I don't care about you Karen, stop worrying about my non existent mask. This is Florida, if you're afraid stay YOUR ass home. DON'T WORRY ABOUT MY FAMILY & I. To all the #masknazi #Karen #Kyle #SoyBoy #BLM TRASH I'm pro violence if confronted by any of the above”*. While the core message within this tweet revolves around COVID and mask policies, the inclusion of Black Lives Matter indicates that there is an assumed connection between public safety measures, social movements fighting against racism, and the soyboy (weakness). Adding to this message, reference to individual control is present with the user stating others don't need to dictate their actions. This response relates back to the previous discussion about COVID-19, refuting the idea that someone/something is trying to control. A consistent pattern throughout the Twitter data demonstrates a resistance to certain types of control.

BLM or Black Lives Matter was also commonly associated with Antifa, or Anti-Facist, combining the two. One tweet stated *“My lord what a bunch of fucking #SoyBoy losers these people are. #FuckANTIFA #AntifaBLMDomesticTerrorists”*. Rhetorics surrounding BLM and Antifa have been ripe with propaganda (Stanley 2018). Like many of the tweets, masculinity is an important part of the discourse. A tweet from 2020 states *“#AntifaBLM men use women as front line soldiers. #soyboy troop”*. The use of the thug was prominent in several tweets in 2020 and 2017 as well. Thug has a long history of stereotyping specifically Black men as criminal and violent (Smiley and Fakunle 2016). For example, “is probably a #soyboy. Did you know drinking soy can make you want to become a black bloc Marxist thug?” Thug was not used in other contexts throughout the Twitter data but was used when discussing topics of race or racism.

There are unexpected hashtags and topics that occupy space within the data collected from Twitter.com. Unexpected topics include reference to Black Lives Matter movements

because this movement does not directly deal with issues of gender. The connection seemed to be that the BLM movement intentionally addressed structural inequalities, fighting to make changes to systems that benefit those who promote the soyboy discourse, i.e., police reform. These larger pushes towards eliminating cultural norms of racism and sexism are the pattern, not the content of the movements directly. The inclusion of these topics indicates that these specific groups, ideas, values, beliefs, etc. are equated to the soyboy. If a common theme within this discourse equates these topics with the soyboy, the importance and value of these topics decreases, becomes less significant which means they can be disregarded. As one twitter user states, *"When I sniff a hint of #FemiNazi or #SoyBoy on someone they get disregarded."* The message of this tweet reflects the larger invalidation of social movements by labeling participants as someone to disregard. Belittling movements such as Black Lives Matter - issues surrounding violence against Black communities - helps continue and reify the structures that established the violence to begin with.

Soyboy adjacent language

The discourse surrounding soyboy includes more language than the soyboy and participates in other discourses that happen in similar spaces online. Like soyboy, there are many words/phrases/languages that outline similar beliefs, using the discourse to categorize and label specific groups of people. Whether that be men who do not adhere to traditional masculine traits, people who identify with specific political ideology, or people who consume food that is not valued as masculine or "American" enough, these discourses have been present and shape an online culture.

Language such as "beta", "simp", and "cuck" circle the soyboy discourse. All reflect similar messages, that the person being labeled as one of these words is weak, unintelligent, and often empathetic - too caring, which is a cultural marker of fragility. The trendiness of this language ebbs and flows. One of the words gathered in the data is beta and its opposite, alpha.

These words are used to represent men who adhere to traditional forms of masculinity versus the men who aren't seen as competition to the stronger men. Based on Dr. L. David Mech's study on wolf packs, the use of this concept is outdated, and Mech requests the phrase not be used as it was originally defined (International Wolf Center 2023). The original study outlined a wolf pack hierarchy that shows alpha as the leader of the pack, the dominant animal who is expected to be the strongest and the animal who fights with other members of the pack to access control and dominance over the pack. Betas are considered the submissive and weaker male of the pack. This theory has been taken literally by online users, viewing "alpha males" as the strongest, smartest leaders who are expected to have the most "mates" (Andrew Tate is an advocate for this belief). In reality, Dr. Mech has retracted the theory and found that wolf pack hierarchy is based on family order and which wolves breed the most children. Along with the basic fact that humans are not wolves and so the pseudoscience of pack mentality should not be applied to human interactions, the theory that the phrase is based on is misconceptualized.

These discourses accompanied three hundred and thirty six (336) of the tweets using soyboy. *"The media's programmable image of the modern white man = in reality is a soyboy giga cuck. They fear the white Alphas. #soyboy #BringBackManlyMen #GreatReset #weak #soupgenetics"*, *"@realDonaldTrump @RepSwalwell That's the closest Swalwell will ever look tough and like an alpha male. #soyboy."*, *"Don't you get tired of being less than a man? Also have a serious question, will you wear that mask forever? #SoyBoy #betacuck"*, *"#coronavirus #vaccine #MEMES 😂😂😂😂😂😂😂 #beta #Soyboy"*, *"It's fun reading all these comments from Beta 'men' about @joerogan ... #betamen #soyboy #rogan"*, and *"@ferowine please explain. #cuckboy #soyboy #sheeple"*. The words "beta" and "cuck" parallel the intention of soyboy. This language accompanies the messages that are often used to label and categorize individuals into a group distant and separate from the user. The commonality between these tweets is the use of femininity as a negative. By referring to others as soyboys, betas, and cucks, the expectations of how one should be performing masculinity is noted. Betas are the

weaker, submissive male and cucks are being taken advantage of by their partners and other men. These labels intersect the expectations of physicality, sexuality, pride, intelligence, and individuality.

Words such as “beta”, “cuck”, “simp”, “numale” all relate to cultural idealized versions of what men should not be. Like the concept of alpha male versus beta male, the history of these words vary, but lend to similar discourses. Cuck has a history relating back to the time of the Trojan War (Grover 2020). Cuck, or cuckhold, refers to a man who has been cheated on by his wife. In reference to the cuckoo, a bird that lays its eggs in another nest, forcing others to raise the young (McIlvenna 2017), the cuck has existed throughout our history as a phrase used to belittle men who do not fall in line with culturally defined expectations of masculinity. Some of twitter used the definition of cuck as an insult, *“Omicron Male that allows Alpha's to drill his wife who he can't satisfy #SoyBoy”*. Gilmore explains that the making and mending of masculinity in the medieval ages incorporates several degrees of importance - physical protection, providing for a family, and to procreate (1990). The following tweet shows that these discourses are used to reiterate this understanding of the language: *“is another limp, testosterone deficient cuck straight out of central casting #SoyBoy”*.

The experience of being cucked indicates that a man has failed some part of his masculinity and to many who follow traditional understandings of masculinity, a “failure of evolution”. This phrase has made a resurgence among Men’s Rights Activists (McIntosh 2020), highlighting and emphasizing the understandings of masculinity that date back to the 13th century. It is a phrase that accompanied the popularization of far-right ideology with the 2016 presidential election: *“#GavinNewsom #RecallNewsom #DrainTheSwamp #ConstitutionOverCoronavirus #RulesforTheeButNotforMe #cuck #SoyBoy #MAGA.”* Words such as cuck, and beta outline a cultural backlash to the successes of movements such as feminist’s movements of the 20th and 21st century. Lisnek et al. found that the more focus given to issues surrounding women’s experiences with sexual assault, the more likely the perception

that men are victimized by women calling out abuses experienced at the hands of men (2019). The empowerment that movements such as #metoo gave to women, the more men felt threatened by the empowerment (Lisnek et al. 2019). Whether it is the #metoo movement or general shifts in understanding gender equality, the backlash has been clear and continues to increase, for example, the current bans on abortion that directly counter feminist ideology and harm people in need of reproductive justice.

While individual use of language and verbiage does not indicate direct threat or belief, the commonality of the language observed in this code does indicate a patterned ideology about masculinity and interpersonal interactions. Online spaces are seen to be platforms that offer space for these ideologies to blossom and grow. The anonymity of digital space offers room that can lead to radicalization that then leads to more harmful beliefs and sometimes extremely violent actions (Woods et al. 2021). An example of this type of radicalization from the right happened in May 2022 in Buffalo, NY. A young white man entered a grocery store in a historically Black neighborhood and murdered ten individuals. National Public Radio reported on the murderer's online manifesto outlining his radicalization. The murderer had a 180-page document that included writings about the great replacement theory, a white supremacist conspiracy theory claiming non-white voters are "replacing" white Americans (NPR 2022). While this killing was a hate crime based on race, it offers an example of how online spaces and discourse present in these spaces not only offer a space for already racist/sexist individuals, but a space to become more radicalized by far-right white supremacy (NPR 2022). Bryant (2020) and Ribeiro et al. (2020) found that Youtube.com's algorithm specifically curates recommended videos to push users towards Alt-Right content creators. In two studies of the algorithm, researchers found that content begins with mild conservative ideologies, growing more radical with each recommended video (Bryant 2020; Ribeiro et al. 2020). Not only do online spaces offer space for hate groups to grow, but algorithms encourage consumption of content that works to radicalize users.

References to consumption

Generally, the soyboy is related to consumption. Even when the discourse does not reference eating, consuming, etc. the meaning of the words “soy” and “boy” point toward the type of food that one is consuming. An original use of the discourse was made about food with high soy content, often vegetarian or vegan foods such as tofu or alternative dairy options. Two hundred and forty six (246) tweets included mention of diet. An example of this was found in data: *“And then you had some tofu for breakfast no doubt. #SoyBoy.”* The discourse has taken on different meanings, but this study found that a theme about consumption is still very prevalent. Within this theme, consumption was mentioned in several ways. Directly stating too much soy causes undesirable characteristics: *“This is what happens when men stop eating meat and just eat soy #soyboy”*, *“😡 men ain’t men no more .. too much soy in they diet #soyboy.”*, and *“stop eating soy it is feminizing the world and soon men will lose all their culture and become weak feminine pansies who only care about having gay sex and stopping straight marriage #soy #soyboy #wakeupsheep #men #mgtow #gay #yum #momsagainstsoy”*. These tweets send a direct message to readers: soy consumption should be avoided to ensure one is not breaking norms surrounding masculinity.

The soyboy is a threat to those who haven’t yet engaged in soy consumption and the threat allows others to see what the discourse believes they will become. The use of the soyboy as a label that is directly resulting from consumption of soy products threatens those who take pride in traditional forms of masculinity and want to bolster their masculine perceptions. By utilizing the soyboy as a tool, this labeling acts as a threat to ensure individuals stay within the boundaries they already within that outline how to be masculine versus how to be feminine. This soyboy discourse upholds expectations of masculinity through dictation of what foods are masculine and what foods are not.

Due to the belief that soy will impact how one behaves and the make-up of our bodies, there were many tweets specifically citing the dangers of soy to our hormones. This belief surrounding hormone levels and causes of hormone imbalances relate to the conspiracy theories that claim soy increases phytoestrogens that derive from plants. While phytoestrogen is present in soy products, many of these theories stem from a conspiracy that claimed consumption of soy will cause men to grow breasts because of the increased intake of estrogen (Hamblin 2020). This became a popular talking point to many mainstream conservative YouTube channels and podcasts, such as Joe Rogan and Jordan Peterson (Hamblin 2020). The influence of this ideology is apparent in the tweets collected: *“FYI, soy has a huge detrimental effect on hormones. Hence, #SoyBoy”*, *“Dude, you need to lay of soy latte. Your testosterone level is lower than my grandma 🙋 #SoyBoy”*, *“Ahh another #SoyBoy with no testosterone left in his body. Leave him alone in his safe, in his comfortable sofa with a soft blanket, with looooots of teddies & easy listening out of the loud speakers + free tax payer access to Soy products from the AOC green new deal fridge.”*, and *“On an epigenetic level yes, but thoroughly enough to gender swap. Notsomuch 😊 A lot of new chemicals our bodies process estrogenically are in our hygiene products, foods, and workspaces coupled w/ a cultural trend damning masculinity. It only takes a generation. #soyboy.”* The last tweet mentioned states “It only takes a generation” referring to the believed hormonal change that soy consumption is causing for younger generations and the linked feminization of men. This rhetoric reflects the language of the conspiracy of the “great replacement” which leads believers to think that nonwhite individuals are being moved into the United States to replace the white population (NPR 2022). This is the theory that was written about by the man who committed the mass shooting in Buffalo, New York previously mentioned. This rhetoric is not only dangerous because of the implication of the conspiracy theory, but the growth at which the rhetoric is being applied to a variety of topics including race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

One of the codes that contributed to this theme was the mention of soy lattes. The cultural recognition of coffee drinks has a narrative that certain coffee related drinks are assumed to be more feminine, whereas coffee drinks such as an espresso are masculine (Reitz 2007). We can see this in the discourse surrounding pumpkin spice lattes. In the collected tweets, many reference soy lattes as a signal that demonstrates someone's femininity or their nonmasculine characteristics. For example, a tweet that was referenced in the conversation about COVID-19 also references soy lattes as a sign of weakness: *"Drink some soy latte; you'll be OK. And get your #COVID19 booster number 36 for safety. And wrap yourself in bubble wrap. Don't forget to wear three masks inside your house! #SoyBoy"*. This offers an example of the boundaries that are drawn through consumption, a simple drink outlines masculinity. *"#SOYBOY probably has moobs from all the estrogen-containing soy lattes."*, *"William needs to lay off the soy lattes #SoyBoy #BetaMaleReference"*, *"Stop. Drinking. Soy. Lattes. #SoyBoy #BetaMale #MAGAReference"*, *"@realDonaldTrump Have you enrolled yet #SoyBoy Stop. Drinking. Soy. Lattes. #BetaMale"*, and *"You should lay off the #SoyLattes... not good for the male member... #SoyBoy"*. The latte represents the feminization of a drink that is considered to be masculine. If the espresso shot is seen as a masculine drink (Reitz 2007), the users are referencing lattes as an opposite, reflecting their understanding of the gender binary: viewing man and woman as opposites.

The data for Component I show a hold of strict essentialist perspectives of sex and gender, men opposite to women. These tweets directly relate to consumption and the idea that products containing soy are more likely to change one's hormonal make-up. This is unfounded, but the impact of a conspiracy theory laced article from the early 2000s is clear. Similar things were said about soymilk. The tweets specifying worries about hormone imbalance are directly talking about soy lattes or soy alone. The themes that are present in these tweets connect to the themes of consumption - physical consumption of food. These tweets exist throughout the data but are more directly present in the earlier days of the soyboy discourse. This discusses the

physical differences between non-soyboys and soyboys. Soyboys are weaker than non-soyboys because of the consumption of soy. The word “limp” is used regularly, which is culturally associated with descriptions of erectile dysfunction, a topic that deals directly with values of masculinity. Along with that message, limp-wristed is often used in the tweets, which is also a homophobic reference. There are specific mentions of phytoestrogens which are plant-based compounds that mimic estrogen.

The themes explored in these findings include expectations of traditional masculinity; references to political ideology; soyboy adjacent language; & references to consumption. Each of the themes are intertwined and can be seen within each other. These themes outline the broader values, beliefs, and norms that shape the cultural markers used within the soyboy discourse. These themes reflect how boundaries are drawn between groups and how one group establishes standards and expectations of how their group should behave, believe, and interact. To understand how these themes shape the behaviors, values, and interactions of those within the established boundaries, the discussion delves into the cultural and social patterns of the findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

“Sorry, had to look it up SOY BOY: The average soy boy is a feminist, non-athletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labelling the opposition as "Nazis ".”

Based on the findings of Component I, the soyboy is a man who is weak because he does not align with culturally valued masculinity and claims to value issues surrounding social justice over individual interests. The soyboy discourse outlined in the findings of this study

reflect larger trends within our culture. This discourse offers a look at how boundaries are drawn among differing groups and how those boundaries reflect existing inequalities - reinforcing them through strict behavior policing. The analysis of this collection of data addresses the expectations of masculinity and the restrictiveness of modern understandings of traditional masculinity: emotional affect is negative and should be punished if felt or shown. The main responses to emotional expression are shame and dismissal, which reinforces expectations of stoicism or apathy. Shame and dismissiveness act as punishment to reinforce traditional understandings of masculinity. This expectation of masculinity is restrictive in how individuals are able to express, not only their emotions, but their gender expressions as well.

The pushback against traditional masculinity is present in our current social world, but beyond individual pushback the structural understanding of masculinity still adheres to patriarchal standards. The idea of hegemonic masculinity as a concept parallels the values of gender essentialism which forms the beliefs that gender differences or gender roles are naturally occurring. To have an analysis of hegemonic masculinity in our social world - which can offer a critique of essentialist thought - illustrates that gender norms are social constructions. Masculinity does not have one core performance, but there are expected ways to perform masculinity to continue to have power. This is a focal concept throughout this discussion; there are expectations with gender exhibited in online spaces and those expectations contribute to larger structural inequalities. Gender norms continue and reify gender inequalities that impact people at an individual and societal level.

The soyboy is a response to changes and shifts in the performance of masculinity. Hybrid masculinities allow for movement in societal expectation, taking on alternative masculinities outside of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Hybrid masculinity does not inherently counter gender inequities but does move away from traditional understandings of masculinity which do align directly with gender inequality. Differing from traditional understandings of masculinity, we can see these shifts in open conversations about

boys' ability to express emotion, the conversation about "boys will be boys" beliefs, #metoo, movements away from strict capitalism and movements away from white supremacy. These movements shift power dynamics which take away power from traditionally masculine, white, wealthy, cisgender men. There are layers to how the soyboy functions and what it means to a variety of people. This section engages with how the soyboy is a response to men stepping away from culturally expected masculine performance. Soyboy is rooted in misogyny, so seeing that shift away from culturally expected masculine performances means leaning towards more feminine masculinity or alternative masculinity - that is what threatens traditional masculine norms.

The largest and most prevalent take away from this dataset is the belief that expression of emotions is a negative characteristic and shame and dismissiveness of messages that are presented with emotions beyond anger. This can be seen as the main finding of this dataset and study. Each of the themes (expectations of traditional masculinity; references to political ideology; soyboy adjacent language; and references to consumption) are rooted in and connected to the idea that expression of emotion is a characteristic that is inherently not masculine, which makes it inherently not for the purposes of traditional masculinity and sociability that aligns with traditional masculinity. To further examine this thesis, we will connect each of the larger themes.

We begin with understanding the theme: expectations of traditional gender norms, specifically related to performances of masculinity.

Expectations of Traditional Masculinity

From the data collected from Twitter.com between 2015 to 2021, there are several definitions and uses of the soyboy discourse. The most basic definition of a soyboy is a man who lacks masculine traits that are prioritized in societal expectations of manliness. The soyboy phrase engages with the belief that masculinity is more valuable than femininity (men are more

valuable than women). Throughout this dataset, there were tweets that directly stated that when men behave in culturally identified feminine ways, they are “less than” men who adhere to masculine behaviors. There were several ways in which a man could be “less than” through action or ideology.

Many of the tweets referred to men as weaker because they expressed some level of emotion, whether that be happiness, sadness, anger, or excitement. This sentiment was expressed in several ways. Some of the tweets directly stated that men who cry are weaker, while others would pair words together that demonstrated a connection between a soyboy and emotions. The use of hashtags showed a connection between a variety of words. Within the critique of men displaying emotions, a common hashtag was #crybaby. The act alone of crying was not the only issue, but what people were expressing sadness, fear, frustration about was another point emphasized within the data.

The theme of weakness associated with emotional expression was one of the more prominent findings. To understand this theme further, we will examine how tweets were coded for shame for emotional expression, the connection between the phrase “triggered” to emotions. Whether a reaction is to either news, hate, or general online interactions many of the tweets collected responded to the reaction more so than the content. For example, if a tweet was responding to a claim about masks, instead of acknowledging the content of the response, the user would claim the reaction is hysterical, overly emotional, dramatic, etc.

The word “triggered” originated from clinical psychology’s warning to patients who experienced severe trauma - a warning that something might trigger their PTSD, causing stress or severe reaction (McLean 2018). The medical definition of triggered varies significantly from the cultural definition. This word popped up regularly in women’s online forums in the 1990s/early 2000s as a content warning, relaying to the reader that the content of the message might cause some psychological or emotional distress. In response to women and feminist spaces using the word, it has taken on new symbolism. The definition hasn’t necessarily

changed but how it is valued has. The cultural definition explains saying that someone is “triggered” now means that they are reacting to something in a way deemed dramatic, cringe, or reacting irrationally (McLean 2018). The word “triggered” is present consistently throughout the data, including all search terms. This indicates that one of the messages that being called a soyboy demonstrates is a reaction or overreaction. This is a word that is used in most events, determining that something is cringe is a way to try to make people stop doing certain things. Cringe, another form of internet slang, expresses that something is embarrassing or awkward. The soyboy is associated with cringe because many people view soyboys’ content online as cringe. This can be anything that people don’t like or anything that the user wants to poke fun at. Being cringe is more than just uncool but a way to determine the cringe person/post lacks common sense and is then devalued.

The co-opting of language such as triggered takes a concept that is used to diagnose psychological ailments and applies it to general publics, which acts as a form of stigma. “Triggered”, “snowflake”, “crybaby”, etc. act as a signal that notifies not only the person using the words, but those engaging with the interaction in online spaces that the person is overreacting. The overreaction may simply be any reaction at all. By placing labels on any reaction as an overreaction, it is a disqualification of the reaction while also labeling the person as weak. The findings show that expression of emotions acts as a disqualifier for many. The emotions are labeled as a sign of weakness, which makes the person experiencing emotions disqualified from participating in the discussion. A section of the collected tweets that claim someone is a crybaby were responding to statements about Trump, tweets addressing problems the user had with his politics, actions, etc.

One of the ways emotions are referenced also includes the idea that a soyboy is irrational and/or hysterical in their responses to their beliefs and topics of discussion. Hysteria is seen as a “womanly” problem that is experienced when going outside of the social and cultural norms associated with being a woman (Tasca 2012). The concept of hysteria has been used to

describe mental health issues experienced by women for centuries. This concept attributed mental health disorders to a specifically womanly phenomena that labeled women as dangerous, mad, or even demonic (Tasca 2012). Freud defined hysteria as a disorder occurring because of lack of conception or maternal instincts (Tasca 2012). The claim of hysteria often isolated women or led to violence, such as the Salem Witch Trials (Tasca 2012). Hysteria and claims of hysteria are not simply words being used to describe an overreaction, but have a deep history of sexism that led to violence against women and control over women. The claim that one is reacting in a hysterical way not only means they are overreacting, but the negative connotation is connected with misogynist and dangerous beliefs that women are less stable, as well as less logical and knowledgeable. In the tweets there was a comparison to women when calling another user a crybaby and telling the user to cry about it. This comparison indicates that the expectation of this level of expression of emotion is only comparable to women. Devaluing of traits that are culturally assigned to femininity means that those who present as more feminine are also devalued.

Culturally idealized versions of masculinity call for specific behaviors to be seen and valued. These culturalized idealized versions of masculinity have been actively produced and policed, by men that benefit from this expectation, to maintain the status quo. This includes stereotypical ideas of traditional masculinity such as physical strength, independence, stoicism, wealth, athleticism - these are the basic descriptions, but this also includes an idea of performance of masculinity that could be associated with Bourdieu's analysis of cultural consumption. There are forms of cultural consumption that help men understand their masculinity as well as perform a specific identity of masculinity. This can be seen through consumption of foods, consumption of entertainment, consumption of products, etc. In Figure 3.1, Tony Soprano, from *The Sopranos*, describes who he views as a valued, masculine character, i.e. the cultural expectations of masculinity. Mitchell (2008) outlines how Tony's character in the Sopranos is written to represent masculinity that is opposite to women's

femininity. The Sopranos was wildly successful, bringing in 10 million viewers per week, which was unprecedented at the time of its debut (Banks 2017). This representation of masculinity demonstrates the trends of how traditional masculinity that is seen in popular culture is a form of cultural consumption for many people. The way masculinity is performed through consumption can be seen in the trends of what is popular. Tony Soprano may not use the language of the soyboy discourse directly, but he uses ideas surrounding traditional masculinity to shame and dismiss others in the show. Mitchell offers an example of language with a line of dialogue used by Tony to scare and punish another character, “Shut up! What are you crying about?” (2008:186). Cultural consumption acts as a way to learn about expectations of traditional masculinity. The soyboy represents the person who Tony is yelling at and shaming, aka the person men should not want to be. Messages to avoid becoming the soyboy can be gained

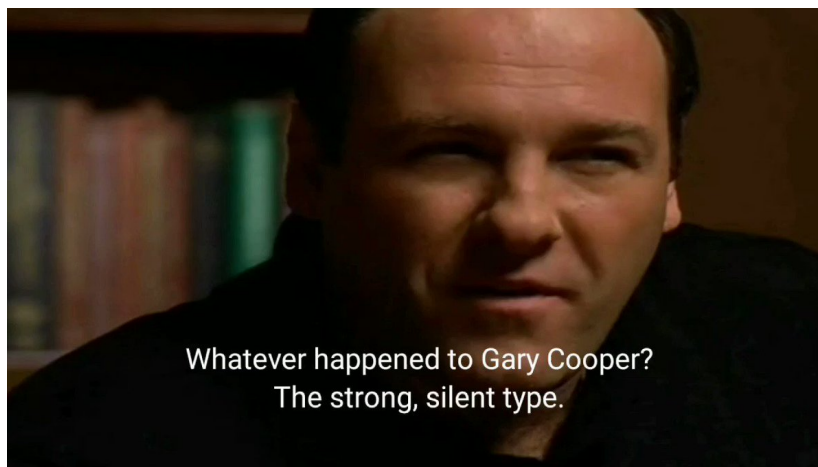


Figure 3.1

through cultural consumption. The soyboy also directly relates to consumption because the history of the phrase begins with the idea that certain foods are chemically changing one's masculine features. This not

only changes someone physically, but also illustrates to others around them that they do not concern themselves with being or seeming masculine in certain ways. The soyboy discourse acts as a form of restrictiveness of cultural consumption, as in media, ideology, behaviors, as well as a form of restrictiveness of food consumption, as in diets of meat and avoidance of soy products.

Political Ideology

One of the ways men perform cultural consumption is restricting belief systems - this study found that belief systems were ways that twitter users drew symbolic boundaries separating themselves from others. The ideological polarization of politics within the US is used to indicate who is in the group and who is not. This means that with discourses online, it is easy to assume if someone is like you or not like you (someone to engage in a positive way with or negative way with) by seeing how they participate in certain discourses. The soyboy discourse offers indication to others based on how the words are used. Many of the tweets used soyboy as a signal that outlines not only masculinity (not emotional, not weak, not overreacting, not caring), but also relates to the political beliefs of individuals. Specifically used in a discussion of political beliefs, the soyboy is a weak man whose ideological position is politically left. The soyboy acts like they are interested in social causes, but only actually uses this to seem “woke” and politically correct. The soyboy is easily controlled and influenced by authority. The soyboy is a feminist.

Feminism is believed to be the opposite of what it means to be masculine because it directly addresses the issues of gender inequality that highlights that traditional masculinity is limiting to women and noncisgender, nonheteronormative people, and people with alternative masculinities. The historical arguments surrounding feminist activism support women’s bodily autonomy in terms of health, sex, and work. These are spaces that have been used (and are being used) to limit women’s ability to exist freely. Feminism at its core counters traditional masculinity that is enacted to uphold the patriarchal social order. Within hegemonic masculinity feminism is a threat to the power dynamics that are in place to uphold non-soyboy’s positions of power. This is present in many tweets that belittle feminisms of all types and men who take on hybrid masculinities that might embrace feminist thought, again threatening the positions of power non-soyboys hold. Soyboys are perceived as feminists which signals to others that the soyboys are interested in and actively believe in gender equity and often other forms of equity.

Along with feminism, other social justice movements were targeted within the soyboy discourse, specifically the Anti-Fascist movement and Black Lives Matter movement. Popular movements that directly counter cultural norms and inequalities were labeled as overreactions. The need for these movements wasn't seen because to address an inequality generally was a sign of weakness or overreacting that could be solved with an increased level of toughness by the individual experiencing marginalization.

The political left or democratic party within the US is labeled as the "party for the people", higher numbers of minority support the democratic party and that is because historically the democratic party is more likely to promote legislation that acknowledges historical inequalities. The tweets that discuss the political left used soyboy as a signifier for weaker, overreactive, and deceptive. This related to how COVID-19 was referenced in tweets as well. One of the larger findings was the use of soyboy when referencing people who supported public safety during the first two years of COVID-19. COVID-19 is seen as a highly politicized topic, ranging from anti-vaccine movements to denial of mask mandates. Again, the soyboy was used to signal an idea of weakness.

The theories and rhetoric that the soyboy discourse is based within are often inaccurate and convey the idea that socially constructed ideas, which shape behaviors, are fixed and inherent in human nature. The themes found within Chapter 3 data are all seemingly grounded in a belief from online users that humans have inherent, natural behaviors instead of learned, socialized behaviors that are influenced by the larger cultural norms that surround us as we age. If online users participate in these discourses - seeing behavior as natural means, there is no changing - essentialism means the bad behaviors are natural and acceptable. For example, this discourse encourages beliefs that revolve around the emphasis of the traditional perspective of masculinity versus femininity, that lead to restrictive gender roles. It is difficult to move away from these ideologies because they are seen as natural and inherent to human behavior.

Chapter 3 outlines that this idea of traditional masculinity, or as a tweet from the data describes “trad-masculinity”, as inherent is the foundation for the symbolic boundary that the soyboy discourse reinforces. The boundary of trad-masculinity informs an individual's values, beliefs, and norms, which encourages restriction of emotive expression, strict beliefs and ideologies of political alliance and social issues, and gender roles. This chapter includes four major findings that shape the soyboy discourse; traditional masculinity, references to political ideology, language that contributes to the discourse, and references to consumption. Traditional masculinity is the symbolic boundary, and the following findings, political ideology, language, and consumption, act as cultural markers that indicate where someone falls in proximity of the symbolic boundary.

CHAPTER THREE

COMPONENT II: Interview Analysis

How is the Soyboy Used?

With the growth of social media and growth of the population that engages with others in digital spaces, the way in which these interactions are influencing behaviors must be studied and understood. Often offline is referred to as the “real world,” as if the interactions in face-to-face engagement are the only interactions that shape individuals. This belief invalidates the truth and reality of online interactions. While online content has been studied vigorously, this study hopes to fill gaps that show engagement with “low-stakes” or mundane interactions online shape beliefs and ideology.

This project’s larger goals are to understand the soyboy discourse, how that discourse acts as a reinforcement of existing inequalities, and how online discourses are present in and influential in face-to-face interactions. As Chapter 2 highlights, online spaces have in-depth discourses that contribute to the reinforcement of larger cultural norms and often inequalities. Chapter 2 findings outline the themes of the soyboy discourse that perpetuate gender hierarchies and restrictive understandings of masculinity. The soyboy discourse acts as a reaction to shifts away from hegemonic masculinity and is used by individuals to police the behaviors of men, signaling their position within hegemonic masculinity and shaping how they hope to be perceived by others. While Chapter 2 examined the soyboy discourse on Twitter and defined the patterns that are presented in the soyboy discourse, Chapter 3 asks how these messages within the discourse are seen in face-to-face interactions and what impact that influence may have. Chapter 3 investigates how this discourse seeps into face-to-face interactions. With the goal of understanding how daily interactions are impacted by larger trends in online spaces, this chapter examines how the inequalities that make up the soyboy discourse translate to face-to-face interactions.

The following portion of the study includes interview data with eighteen participants. The purpose of these interviews was to find a connection between online interactions and discourses and how those may or may not shift into in-person interactions. Interviewees were asked about their social media use, general perceptions of social media, how they see multiple discourses online, how those discourses may be seen in their face-to-face interactions, and how the influence of online interactions might shape interactions more generally. Four general takeaways were found within this data: the soyboy discourse is a reaction to shifts in norms surrounding gender, there is moral ambiguity in terms of engagement with the soyboy discourse, there is a dismissiveness of certain interactions in online spaces, and boundary setting is a skill that has not yet moved to online interactions.

Data and Methodology

Data Collection Procedures

Through eighteen (18) interviews, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of social media use and how they see social media's impact on face-to-face interactions in daily life. The recruitment process began September 22, 2023 by sending scripted emails, see Appendix A, to instructors of record for large introductory courses at Virginia Tech asking them to share the survey recruitment, see Appendix F, with their students. The choice of introductory courses was to recruit from courses with the highest numbers of enrolled students and courses that include students from a variety of disciplines. This process recruited seven participants (7), but the number only slowly increased from September 22, 2023 to mid October 2023. I then visited several classes, including Introduction to Political Science and Introduction to Women and Gender Studies, in person to discuss the opportunity to participate in the study.

Due to the vastness of the online spaces, the interview process began by surveying potential participants to see how familiar they were with the specific trends and discourse being asked about, Appendix F. This was important in recruitment because someone who spends little

time in online spaces won't have the cultural knowledge that lends to understanding how this discourse is seen in face-to-face interactions. Participants were asked to complete an initial survey to gauge participants' recognition of the soyboy discourse before the interview process. Survey questions included items to gather information about the participant, a request to list the social media platforms they have used and currently use, and how they might interpret a tweet collected during Component I. The tweet included for them to interpret was "Truth is no woman likes a simp. A person who might seem like a misogynist in reality is way more attractive in comparison to a soyboy simp." The intention of the inclusion of this tweet was to ensure the participants were familiar with language seen in online spaces.

This led to participants who self-identified as "online", they used social media and participated in social media throughout their daily life. The interviews were recorded through Zoom and on a recording device. Thirteen (13) interviews were conducted over Zoom and the remaining five (5) were conducted in person, on Virginia Tech's campus. The recordings of the interviews were uploaded onto a transcription software, Otter.AI and checked for accuracy.

Transcripts were coded in NVivo. The questionnaire was developed based on the findings of Component I. The interview protocol can be seen in Appendix G. Along with questions based on findings from Component I, two vignettes were included in the interview



Figure 2.2

protocol. First was an image of a meme, which can be seen in Figure 2.2. According to New York University Libraries and Lexology, a Law Business Research organization, limited use of memes fall within Fair Use for academic research. Instead of using the memes imagery for messaging, the participants were asked about perceptions of the imagery. The participants were asked to describe the image and explain in what contexts they had seen the meme before, as

well as their thoughts on how the meme is often used in online spaces. The second vignettes that shared tweets include: *“Sorry, had to look it up SOY BOY: The average soy boy is a feminist, non-athletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labelling the opposition as “Nazis”, “Dosen’t look like he does much physical work. #soyboy”, and “Snowflake Offended By Own Self Won’t Come Out Of Safe Space #soyboy #socialism.”* The participants were asked to explore their thoughts about the tweets, their interpretation of the tweets, who they think might author tweets like this, and generally react to the tweets.

Coding followed the structure of the interview protocol, coding based on answers to specific questions and then sub-coding of the coded answers shaped the thematic trends of the data. For example, within the code: Gender discussion online, the sub-coding included how the gender binary is upheld online, misogyny online, restrictive masculinity online, and expectations of what to post on social media. This project utilized a thematic analysis, finding themes through the data. The interviews were semi-structured and were between 45 minutes to one hour in length. This qualitative study is not meant to generalize the public, but to contribute to inferences about social media interactions, norms, and cultural shifts translating to face-to-face interactions.

Demographics

The population of participants are all students attending Virginia Tech. From the eighteen (18) participants, ten (10) identified as women and eight (8) identified as men. While one of the goals of recruiting from introductory courses was to recruit from the freshmen/sophomore population, this study had six (6) participants who were freshmen, four (4) participants who were sophomores, five (5) participants who were juniors, and three (3) participants who were seniors. Most participants were 18, 19, or 20 years old, with all of the participants being between 18 to 24 years old. Eight (8) of the participants identified themselves as being LGBTQ+. Nine (9)

participants identified themselves as white, one (1) participant identified as Asian American, three (3) participants identified as white Hispanic, two (2) participants identified as African American, one (1) participant identified as Israeli and Hispanic, and two (2) participants identified as Jewish. Two (2) of the participants identified themselves as leaning to the political

right, two (2) said they identified with the political

Table 4: Interview Demographics

	Gender	Age	Race and Ethnicity	Identifies as LGBTQ+	Year in School	Political Belief on Spectrum
Rachel	Woman	20	White	no	Junior	Right
Ricky	Man	21	Asian American, biracial	no	Senior	Left
Teresa	Woman	20	White	yes	Sophomore	Left
Bonnie	Woman	19	White	yes	Sophomore	Left
Ella	Woman	18	White, Hispanic	no	Freshman	Right
Andy	Man	19	White, Jewish	yes	Sophomore	Left
Byron	Man	24	White	yes	Junior	Left
Zach	Man	20	White, Jewish	yes	Junior	Left
Gabe	Man	19	White	yes	Freshman	Left
Tyler	Man	19	Israeli, Hispanic	no	Junior	Middle
Whitney	Woman	18	African American, biracial	no	Freshman	Left
Katie	Woman	18	White	no	Freshman	Left
Norman	Man	18	White, Hispanic	no	Freshman	Left
Travis	Man	22	White	yes	Senior	Left
Julie	Woman	21	White	no	Senior	Left
Maria	Woman	18	White	yes	Freshman	Left
Chelsea	Woman	20	White, Hispanic	no	Sophomore	Left
Lyla	Woman	20	African American	no	Junior	Middle

middle with one (1) saying just left of middle, two (2) said they are politically far-left, with the remaining specifying a belief system such as a “Bernie Sanders democrat” or general left. These demographics can be seen in Table 4 below.

Findings

Within this study participants were asked about experience with social media, perceptions of social media and interactions on social media, and their expectations while in online spaces. Questions focused on general social media use, experiences surrounding cultural discourses seen in online spaces/social media platforms, perceptions of these discourses and the involved interactions in online spaces, and how these interactions translate or shift from online to face-to-face interactions. The major trends within participant answers include: social media use, 'controversial' topics online, interpretations of the online interactions, what does the soyboy mean, soyboy language broadly, use of language, face-to-face interactions, and the influence of social media. Through conversations with participants about these trends, patterns in their answers occurred. These patterns shaped what will be referred to as the themes of the data. These themes include; the soyboy discourse as a reaction to hybrid masculinities, the engagement with discourse even when it is perceived as negative, dismissiveness of discourses because of outlandishness, and the perceptions of hate online and boundary setting. The themes found within this dataset continue the examination of the soyboy discourse and how this discourse shapes boundaries and individual interactions, as well as continuing the discussion of how online spaces reinforce and police cultural norms.

Social Media Use

What platforms are commonly used and by whom?

On average, participants reported that they were using three (3) social media platforms on a daily basis. The maximum number of social media platforms used on a daily basis was six (6) platforms. The most commonly used social media platforms include Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat. Oberlo reports the average age of those who use social media the most are 20- to 29-year-olds. The same report states that at least 84 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds use at least one social media platform. Oberlo reports that 25- to 34-year-olds make up 48.63

percent of Instagram users. A similar report from Exploding Topics states one of the fastest growing social media platforms, TikTok, is most often used by Generation Z, anyone born mid-to-late 1990s to early 2010s, with 25 percent of users being between the ages ten to 19. Almost half of TikTok users are under the age of 30 at 47.4 percent. All of the participants in the study mentioned using more than the platforms that were options on the survey, but either stopped their use because of personal reasons or larger trends surrounding the platform. Seven (7) of the participants mentioned Facebook as a platform that was once popular, but because of their age and their parents' use of the platform they only engage on Facebook to connect with family.

How is social media used?

Along with the platforms used, and the demographics of platform use, participants were asked how they used these platforms. Each participant had their variety of reasons for exploring a platform more, but the patterns of how social media are used revolved around entertainment (15 out of 18 participants), news (12 out of 18 participants), communication and community (18 participants), mental breaks or “mindless scrolling” (5 out of 18 participants), education (4 out of 18 participants), or they used a platform for a work role (1 participant). Hallikainen found that social media use was motivated by interests in social capital and social reward (2014). This coincides with the participant’s motivations for using social media, stating that they like to engage with their community, finding community, and keeping in touch with friends and family. Hallikainen found that resources on social media also motivated users, explaining that searching for information, maintaining contacts, and looking for job opportunities were important in why social media use continues (2014).

What do participants see as positives in their social media use?

One of the main responses from participants (16 out of 18 participants) when asked what they enjoy about using social media was the ease of being able to communicate with friends, family, and others while being physically apart. Hallikainen found similar responses in their study (2014). The other positives listed by participants included social media offering spaces to learn or engage with new ideas, social media is always available as an activity to do when bored, allows for connectedness among communities, they follow accounts about their interests, they appreciate the multitudes of ideas and perspectives floating around online, they appreciate being able to also share their thoughts on subjects they feel passionate about, they are able to express themselves through their profiles, they are able to keep those profiles anonymous if they want, and the convenience of social media. Rachel, a 20-year-old woman, focused on the importance of communication between friends and family on social media, she said “Especially in college when you don’t talk to family regularly. And yeah, it’s nice to see what people are doing every now and then. And just like an informal like, heads up on someone’s life.” By being able to have informal interactions with people in their lives, participants said social media helped them stay in contact and brought them closer with families when they don’t live near each other. Whitney, an 18-year-old woman, mentions this directly, “I’m able to communicate with like my family that lives like overseas. So that’s really nice and like, we don’t have to worry about like paying for phone calls and all that jazz.”

What do participants see as negatives in their social media use?

While each participant of the study was able to think of positives of using social media, each person had significantly more to say about negative aspects of social media. One of the first critiques was the idea of the “highlight reel,” the curated lifestyle images that come from the ability to pick and choose what is shared on one’s social media profiles. Participants acknowledged how important it is to them, for the benefit of their mental health, to keep in mind

profiles are curated and often show only the positives of people's worlds. Nine (9) participants stated the curation of social media profiles leads them to compare their lives and appearances to others, often resulting in negative impacts on their mental health or wellbeing. Rachel stated "I think of Instagram, just because that's definitely a highlight reel of most people's lives. And like, definitely, I believe in the whole, like, sometimes you get caught up in comparing your life to other people's lives."

The people of color interviewed referenced seeing racism online as a big negative. One participant specifically said they are able to avoid hate speech generally, but it is still seen and impacts them. Eschmann argues that online spaces offer white individuals places to exert overt racism in ways that face-to-face interactions do not (2020). Eschmann refers to this as unmasking the racism that white people do not exert in face-to-face interactions (2020).

One issue mentioned was the accessibility of the online spaces; the participant did not like that the accessibility of the online world also allows for constant comments and "takes" on what is shared. Teresa, a 20-year-old woman, stated

"I've noticed, you can post a picture of you or a video or Tik Tok of you, where you think you look pretty and that's all it is. That's all been like, Oh, I'm so happy with myself. Yeah. And somebody will be like, How dare you so egocentric. You can post a video of yourself cooking and be like, I really enjoy this. It's a passion of mine. And somebody has to be like, that's disgusting. Like, yeah, you can't enjoy anything without somebody wanting to just destroy it for you."

Teresa echoed what all participants mentioned throughout their interviews, because of the accessibility of online spaces, they find it is easier for people to be more aggressive with hateful responses. Whereas in face-to-face interactions, this hatefulness may only be thought by a person and not announced or said aloud. Similarly, one participant, Andy, referred to the constant discourse surrounding larger social issues as a negative. Andy, a 19-year-old man, stated "the inability of people to sometimes be able to touch grass" meaning people needed to

spend more time outside instead of online to reconnect with face-to-face interactions. Andy explained that this phrase is often a response to what they described as a “chronically online” take. Chronically online is when people are so within their circles and communities in online spaces, they don’t see how their statements or what they are suggesting is unrealistic for most people. This understanding of social media argues that by communicating with only people with very similar perspectives and beliefs, there is little space for growth beyond those beliefs. The participant continues by explaining the use of neopronouns, a category of English third-person pronouns beyond “she”, “he”, “they”, “one”, and “it”, as being “too online” and not understanding nuance well enough.

While there are issues with the consistent connectedness of social media, problems of bullying also were brought up by seven (7) participants, all of which were women. Bullying on social media is well researched, with a result of 461,000 articles after a search of “social media bullying” on Google Scholar. Ella, an 18-year-old woman, specifically said she wished bullying was censored in online spaces. Byron, a 24-year-old man, shared similar thoughts but mentioned how certain spaces of the internet lead to bolstering ideologies that translate to face-to-face interactions and cause great social problems. Byrons referenced the storming of the US Capitol in 2021 as an event that was promoted in online spaces. While these participants discussed different problems, they highlighted the same broader issue. Online spaces and social media give so much space, that this freedom might lead to behaviors that exaggerate already existing social issues. Censorship was only mentioned by one participant, Travis, directly, but two other participants, Ella and Byron, did say they think it is the responsibility of social media platforms to help control the amount of hate speech seen on their sites. Misinformation spreading in online spaces was another concern that continued in the discussion of censorship and hate speech. The participants related the publishing of misinformation to hate speech. One of the characteristics of the description of this negative aspect that related misinformation and hate speech seemed to be that the misinformation

shared is often about complicated social issues and the misinformation offers no nuance and is presented in a very restrictive way.

“Echo chambers,” “cancel culture,” and “touching grass” were some buzzwords and phrases that were used directly by six (6) participants, but the ideas surrounding the concepts were mentioned in each interview. For example, Teresa, a 20-year-old woman, mentioned how people are shut out or canceled for their perspectives. These words and phrases are attached to social media and gained traction from online interactions. Gabe, an 18-year-old man, stated “I don't like the fact that it allows... that it can very quickly become an echo chamber, if you're not careful.” Julie, a 21-year-old woman, explained a shift she has seen in terms of her interactions online; “And I feel like in the past five years, I feel like that kind of canceled culture has really risen up and yeah, it's not necessarily a lot of cases. And it's not great to look at on social media.” Both of these statements were made when asked about negative aspects of social media when they are engaged online. In both the responses, participants highlight the significance of being aware while using social media. That concept, being aware of what one is engaging in, came up with several participants. Not immediately trusting what they see online or fully engaging with the spaces they are in online seems to still be very present in their minds.

“Controversial” Topics Online

Gender discussion online

One of the trends thirteen (13) participants pointed out was the conversation on gender promoted the idea of the gender binary - the conversations revolved around the binary of man versus woman and did not acknowledge this as restrictive or unrealistic for many people. Teresa explained how she sees the gender binary being upheld on social media:

“Yeah, especially if that person joined social media saying like, ‘Oh, I identify as she, her or she, they’, and then later on, they're like, I decided that that's not me anymore. And now I want to be he/they or just they/them. And suddenly, it's like, a personal attack that

you've decided to leave this gender and like, that must mean that you hate us. And you don't want to be a woman anymore because you don't like women.”

Teresat explained, depending upon the online community, if a person changes their pronouns, the response is often highlighting the gender binary and how they should not move away from the cultural norms of gender.

One way the gender binary is emphasized occurs through expectations of what men and women should be posting, as well as what content they should be consuming. Many of the women in the study discussed the expectations of what they should be sharing or posting on their social media accounts versus men. The women felt there was a large expectation to share about their life in detail on all social media profiles. The ten (10) women participants explained they expect women to share about personal events in their lives, such as travel or attending a party. Rachel explained this pressure by using the concept that women are naturally more likely to talk about themselves:

“I feel like girls just naturally as for... Just taught to compare ourselves more in society, right? ...Yeah. So I think there's more pressure for every female to post a highlight reel of their life. Yeah. Like, who looks better, who has more friends, or who's doing more activities outside of school that are interesting, that are outside of the norm.”

The use of the word naturally is immediately met with the word taught. This idea of naturally comparing one to another person is countered with the idea that women are socially taught to compare themselves with other women. This expectation discussed by the participant focused on sharing events that were considered positive. There was not an expectation to share personal details that may be considered negative. Rachel emphasized the curation that is expected, a curated timeline that shows how exciting their lives are, along with images of themselves.

There was an expectation for women to share pictures of their bodies. Again, this trend participates in the idea of the gender binary and upholds restrictive gender expectations,

emphasizing the importance of physical appearance. One of the types of content the participants expected men to share was about sports, entertainment, or pictures of themselves at the gym. These expectations lend to the idea of how to be a “good man” and a “good woman”. These are of course norms for online spaces, but are shaped and impacted by the norms of face-to-face interactions. Emphasizing the gender expectations, these norms in online spaces act as a way to bolster identities associated with one’s gender.

Ten (10) participants discussed expectations of how to be a “good man” and a “good woman”. Teresa mentioned creators by name whom they believe promote these expectations of femininity and masculinity: Andrew Tate and Addison Rae. This participant stated that there are restrictions on how to be masculine and Tate promotes those by adhering to expectations of physical strength, monetary wealth, intelligence, wit, pride, general stoicism, and apathy with outbursts of anger. Rae promotes expectations that revolve around physical appearance, prioritizing thinness and disordered eating, and consistently using their platform to advertise for their sponsors. There are specific behaviors labeled to be for men versus behaviors labeled to be for women. The same participant goes on to state “It’s such a woman thing or like, you have to make labels for a behavior or a clothing, or even a song to be like, ‘Oh, I love that song.’ Or like, ‘only men will watch that movie’.” Teresa has experiences in online spaces where certain cultural consumption, movies, music, clothing, were specified as consumption for men or consumption for women.

Ten (10) participants spoke about general misogyny, either directed at a woman or gender non-conforming person, or a widespread misogyny in the online discourse. This took on several different forms: misogynistic name calling, gatekeeping of spaces or interests, or threats of violence. The most commonly seen example of general misogyny was the attempt to shut down women’s interactions online by responding to what the women share with trolling. Jane (2014) reiterates that language such as trolling and cyberbullying does not fully depict the specific problem of vulgar hate interactions directed at women in online spaces. Jane defines

these interactions as e-bile, where the “extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse.” (2014: 532). The participants described trolling as actively bullying or making fun of someone with the purpose of upsetting and harassing them. Norman, an 18-year-old man, described trolling as “just kind of a way of poking fun, or I think it's a way of making fun of someone in a way where they think it's an actual argument, but really, it's just kind of in ironic, or just to be ridiculous or absurd.” Chelsea, a 20-year-old woman, describes trolling as

“It's kind of, I feel like it's like when people make jokes about things that are often like, insensitive, and kind of make it an excuse for like, what they're saying or how they're acting, they'll just be like, ‘Oh, well, I'm just trolling. Like, it's just a joke.’ Basically.”

Trolling is not considered a severe form of bullying to participants because it is often excused as a joke. This type of joke is used in harassing people online. Teresa stated that women can share a picture or TikTok video of themselves cooking and the responses will attack the poster by shaming them, making fun of them, or degrading them. Another form of misogyny online was the attack of women who share content about their interests. Bonnie, a 19-year-old woman, shared that their online fandom spaces were specifically filled with misogynistic discourses. “It's a lot of shitting on women for having interests, and then loving men for having interests basically.” Harassment of women in online spaces is well documented (Jane 2014) and acts as a tool to restrict women from entering certain online spaces. This is seen with sexism (Jane 2014) and racism (Eschmann 2020). By labeling trolling as a joke, it is difficult to take the harassment seriously.

Another trend that three (3) of the women discussed was the positive patterns they see online. After a popularization of mainstream feminism, for example Beyonce using a giant “FEMINIST” sign as a prop on her 2014 VMAs set, the trend of the women supporting women became more accepted throughout general society, specifically for the younger generation. This trend was apparent in the way the participants spoke about positives of how gender is

discussed online. Women are supporting other women online. This is a trend that can be seen in comment sections and general themes of posts. Rachel did say because this is a trend, she feels it is also for preservation of self or to be seen as positive and following trends that encourage the “girls supporting girls” interactions. The expectation is to be nice to one another online but it may not transfer in what people are actually thinking. Another positive mentioned was the conversation about awareness of mental health issues for men. Ricky, a 21-year-old man, discussed how their social media profiles are encountering conversations that attempt to spread awareness about issues of suicide among young men. Given the demographics of respondents, majority politically left leaning and eight (8) out of eighteen (18) identifying as LGBTQ+, it seems that the online communities they are engaged with are less gender restrictive and less heteronormative generally. With that being said, these participants were able to identify and outline how they see gender discourses online and how those gender discourses continue to represent restrictive gender roles.

Political discussion online

The first word that ten (10) of the participants said in order to describe political conversations in online spaces was “polarization”. The participants who did not specify that word, used language such as “uncivil,” “hateful,” “aggressive,” “bubbling,” “beefing,” “burnout,” “violent,” “bandwagon,” and “so much noise”. These responses are unsurprising, given that studies such as the Pew Research Center found that 71 percent of democrats looking for a relationship would not consider dating a Trump supporter (Brown 2020). This study emphasizes, not only the opinions of political sides, but the intensity of the differences felt by supporters. Twelve (12) of the participants also said they found news specifically about politics in online spaces as well. A participant, a 20-year-old woman, directly said she is biased when it comes to political discourse in online spaces because she curates her timelines and for you pages to show content that aligns with her political affiliation. Byron, a 24-year-old man, describes online

political discourse as “uncivil? That's the best way to put it. It's, it is more rare to have people have a genuine meaningful conversation than to just turn it into insults, turn it into a disproportionate argument. Or they just say you're wrong.” Byron emphasizes that discussions are seen as arguments.

The hostility of the argument is seen in another response from Zach, a 20-year-old man. He mentions political discussions being violent, aggressive, and often leave little space for compromise. He sees these trends surrounding political discussions leading to a problem where an individual is not able to grow or change. Zach says when a political belief is shared, the responses end up looking like this: “And then people respond with no, you're 100%. Wrong. I'm gonna tell you why I'm 100%. Right? There's sort of no room for growth agreement within differences.” Similarly, Gabe, a 19-year-old man, stated he sees people engaging with this type of thinking in political discussions: “Minimal discourse...I want to stay in my values as much as possible.” The values identified by individuals in online spaces are upheld throughout these political discussions.

Relating to one of the negative aspects of social media, Andy, a 19-year-old man, explained that political discourse is bad because there are too many voices speaking at once and he struggles with burnout in online spaces. As participants mentioned in the negative aspects of social media, the vastness of online space and accessibility to social media does not restrict who speaks or how many people speak. This creates a dynamic that Andy feels is overwhelming and leads to the chaos that may become political discussions online. According to participants, fear of response does not seem to be a problem for those engaged in political discussion online. As Eschmann (2020) relays, online spaces offer a way for overt hate to spread. The anonymity of digital space lends a hand to individuals who want to behave in aggressive and often hateful ways. Katie, an 18-year-old woman, reiterated this by saying “Like, they're not scared to just go under people's accounts and be like, this is completely wrong and here's why.”

While some of the participants stated the trend of bubbling, seeing your own perspective within your feed, as a negative, one participant acknowledged why he views this as a positive in some cases. Rickey stated when asked how he see political discussion online,

“I would say it's very bubbling. Like, it puts people into like your bubbles, but again, I don't necessarily think that's bad all the time...if I'm tweeting about like, racial politics, it's like, sometimes I don't really want to be in a dude who's in like, a space with a dude who's just like yelling, ‘Oh, CRT is bad.’”

This participant specified that he doesn't mind the bubbling effect social media has, because he then does not have to interact with hate. Unless individuals are seeking out posts about topics they disagree with, this participant's feeds don't fit within the bounds that bring hate to their pages.

The participants of color, which included four (4) participants, were more likely to point out that racism was prevalent in both gender and political discourse. The white participants noted that they saw topics and movements such as Black Lives Matter discussed, but did not specifically state racism was observed or did not emphasize it as an issue because it was not directed at them. This does not mean they did not see racist content, but that their position does not lead them to notice as well as the possibility that people of color are more likely to interact with racism online because of their race. White users are able to ignore or not notice racism because they are not the victims of racist behaviors online. Lyla, a 20-year-old woman of color, mentioned Twitter as a social media platform that houses space for racist comments and racism in discourse. Of all the platforms that Lyla uses, she specified Twitter as the one she thinks of when asked about negative discourses and racism. Ricky also cites Twitter as a social media site where he sees racism within discourses.

Interpretations of Online Discourses

When discussing what the participants considered controversial topics they see online, participants mentioned people who spend a long amount of time in online spaces as “chronically online”. This term was mentioned previously as when people are so within their circles and communities in online spaces they don’t see how their statements or what they are suggesting is unrealistic for most people. The participants discussed how the chronically online perspective allows for engagement in discourses that those who are not chronically online would not understand. Through the discussion of chronically online people, the participants outlined some trends around how chronically online people engage with discourses. The vignettes reflect some of the chronically online discourses and imagery. When showing the participants two vignettes, they were asked how they interpreted the content of each. These vignettes include an image, known as a meme, shared online with differing

phrases to convey a message about a variety of topics, and three tweets were collected during Component I. The meme used in the first vignette can be seen in Figure 2.3. This meme features an image of the online persona of the



Figure 2.3

soyboy, known as soyjak, and the chad. Soyjak represents the side of an argument upset, overreacting, to what the chad said. The second vignette that shared tweets include: *“Sorry, had to look it up SOY BOY: The average soy boy is a feminist, non-athletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labelling the opposition as “Nazis”, “Dosen’t look like he does much physical work. #soyboy”, and “Snowflake Offended By Own Self Won’t Come Out Of Safe Space #soyboy #socialism.”*

The Meme: soyjak vs chad

All of the participants had seen this meme, on a variety of occasions, using several different formats, about a range of topics, and on a couple different social media platforms. The

common platform where the chad v soyjak was seen was Twitter, followed by Instagram and Reddit. All eighteen (18) participants had a common interpretation of the meme, explaining the meme was reflective of larger patterns surrounding political commentary, meaning it is argumentative and lacks nuance. Depending on the participant's political ideology, they saw the meme making fun of the opposing side of the political spectrum. For example, Rachel, who identified as conservative, explained "It's more conservative is like stronger, yeah, and then like someone that's liberal is like 'You're a crybaby, You're too sensitive,' yada, yada. Like, these are the messages that I think, this is like, get sent." While political ideology did seem to align the participants' interpretation, the interpretation of the imagery was the same throughout the participants' ideas. Ricky explained the differences between the two cartoons:

"Well, one is probably like, a conventionally attractive dude. He's got like, a nice jawline. It looks like he's got a beard, which can be associated with masculinity. I mean, if you're just gonna like broadly go like, I don't know, they're just like, conventionally attractive. And you have the wojak who's like, got a scraggly beard. Like he's crying. His eyes are bloodshot. Yeah, he just kind of looks like crap. He's also like, way less drawn...the crying makes it better too because they're kinda like, or I shouldn't say better, they may say better. That's more funny. Yeah. Because like, they're like, so upset that they're crying."

Teresa stated

"Well, one of them has almost all the traits of an attractive, man. He's like, he's blond. He's white. He has a full beard. He has like a perfect nose. Like he's considered like, the exact peak of male attractiveness in the face. Yeah. And the other guy looks like a baked potato. So it's basically saying like, if you're going to be upset about all this stuff and call people out for their opinions. Like, you're such like a little bitch boy, like that's what you look like."

The interpretations of the imagery explained the chad, the character on the right, as aligning with cultural expectations of what a man should physically look like. By comparison, the soyjak, the character on the left, was described as being uglier, messier, and generally not who participants would want to be associated with. The imagery of the characters demonstrate how messages are supposed to be perceived from the memes. By placing one message, usually one perspective of an argument, under the chad, the user is then referring to their perspective as rational, stronger, and logical. When placing the message from the other perspective under the soyjak, this refers to the other perspective as irrational and based in overly emotional reasoning.

This meme also represents the binarism mentioned by participants. Participants mentioned the lack of nuance in online discourses and the meme lays out that binary directly. Ella explains “It’s someone defending their partisanship and overreacting about like, the opposite, okay. For example, Karen’s a liberal, the conservative says, Keep America Great or something. And then Karen starts crying.” The meme represents the two sides of the political discourse. Byron also explains how the meme is used as a tool to dismiss or invalidate perspectives,

“Oh my gosh, um, I have seen this so many times on social media. This is anytime that somebody feels they have a more moral superior position than somebody else, they will tweet that out to make themselves look better. So they’re the, they’re the chad with the beard and everything and then the other person is clearly triggered and crying. Yes. They’ll put their position by that guy and look correct, like mature wise, whatever. And then they’ll throw a disproportionate, like, made up reaction and put it on the person crying to like, prove their point.”

The soyjak vs chad meme is reflective of how the discourse surrounding political issues plays out. Byron explains that the meme not only presents one side of the argument as the logical side, but the opposing side is invalidated because they are reacting with outward emotional

expression. The meme not only represents expectations of masculinity but also reflects the devaluation of emotional expression as illogical or hysterical as a way to dismiss that perspective.

Tweets

Three tweets that were collected during Component I of this study were shown to participants to ask them to offer an interpretation of the messages. When discussing the tweets, participants were asked who they believed would author the tweets. All of the participants said they expect men to be the main authors of the tweets and most said specifically young adult men, with a few participants saying older adult men and a few participants saying teens. Generally, the participants showed disinterest in the tweets, meaning they did not take the content of the tweets seriously. Teresa explains,

“I'm conflicted. Because part of me is like, ‘How dare the average man be a feminist who's non athletic, who's never been in a fight, and will probably fall for the first girl who has sex with him.’ That is like, what's wrong with that? I don't understand. Like, there's nothing inherently wrong with caring about the female gender, not wanting to play football, and enjoying and wanting to be in a long term relationship with someone you share intimacy with. I don't think that's an unfair thing. I like to call that White Knight. He's like an internet personality and also like a real world personality. Yeah, he'll go out of his way to be like, ‘Oh, I love women. Women are so great. I'm such a supporter.’ And then he'll like, hold the door open for a woman. And it's like, ‘I held the door open for you. Why aren't you sleeping me?’”

Participants would either laugh or even say they think the tweets are ridiculous, such as Maria. Maria, an 18-year-old woman, said “It kind of made me like, laugh but not in a ‘haha funny’ way. Like, ‘oh my gosh’, kind of way. Yeah. Like, I cannot believe someone probably genuinely said that with their whole chest that sort of thing. Yeah.” Chelsea didn't have a surprised reaction, stating “Um, honestly, I feel like pretty standard for Twitter like I've seen a lot of things like that.

Um, yeah, the deeper you go, misogynistic and like, kind of, like the same thing like a man can't show his emotions or like being a feminist makes him less then which isn't good." Nine (9) of the participants said they assumed the authors of the tweets were conservative and fell into the chronically online category where they don't interact with anyone outside who has differing beliefs. One participant, Andy, did specify frustration with one of the messages in the vignette tweets. After reading the first tweet in the vignette, Andy mentions

"It's just, like, frustrating. Just because like, the internet, for some reason has taken the term Nazis and become obsessed with it, or it's like it, you hear it even in everyday life or like people were like, 'oh, like I'm a grammar Nazi' when it's like, okay, but like Nazis literally killed millions of people, millions of Jewish people. And as we've seen, like Jewish people are still being targeted by hate groups. So like, maybe cool it with that language or just think about how language, because even with like arguments, not necessarily being relevant, like the meat of the argument not being relevant in real life, some of the language that can kind of come out of social media discourse, that is normalized, kind of like the term Nazi, and that kind of adaptation of it of like, just something negative being a Nazi. It's like it, it gives more and less power to the word, depending on what it is, but for Nazi it just kind of gives less power, which is especially horrible."

Andy, a Jewish man, emphasized the importance of thinking about the language that is used. Andy's previous comment mentioned the need for "touching grass", meaning people need to interact with others outside of their internet communities. The connection between this sentiment and the urge to make sure one doesn't adopt language from their online circles just because it is popular is important between the points made by Andy throughout the interview.

Defining the Soyboy

After asking participants to engage with the vignettes, they were asked how they would define the soyboy, based on the content of the tweets as well as previous knowledge about online culture or specifically the use of the soyboy. We then had a discussion about what the soyboy means as well as how it may be used and how that impacts others. When trying to understand what the soyboy means for participants, Ricky mentioned the oil and water approach to understanding differences, meaning oil and water separate. He interpreted the soyboy as the opposite of what is culturally defined as masculine. This approach was reflective of what seventeen (17) of the participants said, the expectations of difference were not seen on a spectrum but a binary that one had to fully commit to to be seen as validated or successful. So for many of the participants, they did see masculinity as a strict way to be and falling outside of that meant you weren't masculine in the culturally expected way. This approach or perspective could be applied to the discourse on gender or the political discourse that are shaping the soyboy discourse at large. How the participants interpreted the soyboy can be categorized by masculinity expectations and political expectations.

Masculinity expectations

The general pattern of understanding the soyboy began with the opposite of what is considered a soyboy: a man who is focused on their own world and benefiting from others around them. Teresa states,

"It's basically like, it's saying, I'm so dominant. I'm so aggressive about what I want and what I have. And I should be in control of these situations. Because I'm so smart. Like, the whole thing is to be confident in yourself. Like treat others as they're like less than you because then they will treat you as you're better.... It's the whole like, Oh, you're not allowed to cry. You're not allowed to genuinely have an open conversation with your friends because that's gay. Yes. Yeah. It's just being like an immobile statue. Having

like, no emotions, except for like, anger. And like, hypersexuality.”

This is how she defined the concept of the high value man, which many referred to as the people who are either participating in the discourse or reinforcing the ideology within the discourse. A high value man is a popular phrase used by online content creators such as Andrew Tate. This concept means that the person is valuable economically, physically, and mentally. A high value man corresponds with traditional values of masculinity and cultural expectations of idealized masculinity. The high value man is another phrase that addresses and incorporates traditional values into expectations of manhood.

The soyboy represents a response to the norms that are culturally shifting away from traditional masculinity to other accepted forms of masculinity. Bonnie mentions how Timothée Chalamet, a 27-year-old actor who starred in movies such as *Call Me By Your Name* and *Dune*, offers a good example of this shift to a masculinity that does not focus on physically large, muscular men who are aggressive and stoic. The popularization of this new masculinity presses against hegemonic masculinity in a way that is critical of traditional masculinity. Soyboy acts as a way to notify others that the person referred to as a soyboy performs a masculinity that does not align with traditional norms, while also notifying others that their own masculinity does align with such hegemonic masculinity norms. The soyboy is a contemporary and online response to cultural shifts in expectations of manliness and manhood.

Political expectations

The soyboy is defined by cultural expectations of masculinity but has a significant connection to cultural understandings of political ideology as well. Through Component I, the soyboy was defined as a politically left-leaning man who is overly concerned with social issues, or some may refer to this as being “woke”. Many of the critiques of the soyboy are that he performs sadness, frustration, or upset over social issues that don’t directly impact a white, cisgender man. The soyboy discourse claims that this concern indicates a form of weakness or

overreaction that demonstrates they are only pretending to be upset to gain social capital with groups who do care about social issues. Ella, an 18-year-old woman, shared similar thoughts stating they would describe the soyboy as “someone who easily like, complies to like something in society and also is seen as weak because they can't form their own opinions.” Part of the problem that the soyboy discourse highlights about political left-leaning ideologies is a claim that there is little to no individual thought and that whatever is seen as popular at the time is the way they should think. Tyler, a 19-year-old man, mentioned an annoyance with political discussions online because of the “bandwagoning” that occurs. He viewed individuals vocalizing beliefs as simply a part of what it is to have a social media profile, even if the individual doesn’t understand or care about the belief they are posting about. A similar sentiment was shared when discussing the girls-supporting-girls trend. Rachel, a 20-year-old woman, said she doesn’t believe that is completely truthful but an expectation because it is the current norm in online spaces.

Language of the Soyboy, Beta, and Cuck

Based on the collection of tweets in Component I, the discourses surrounding soyboy included a variety of words that relate to similar ideas that are established within the discourse. Participants were asked about their experiences with other words that may parallel use and messaging of the soyboy. Ten (10) of the participants mentioned “snowflake” as a word they would associate with soyboy. Each of the participants recognized two words that were found as common hashtags in the Component I dataset, “beta” and “simp”. Ella mentioned how simp had been a word she heard constantly and, for her, it is a word that restricts a person’s ability to connect with someone. She said

“I think it's like, oh, you can like women. Yeah, you can think she's hot, but you do something about it. Like you're trying to get with her. You're giving her attention. You're like, head over heels for yourself. That's too much.”

The simp is seen as a person, often a man, who expresses interests in a woman in a way that focuses too much on that other person and not their own interests. These words were recognized as the words they hear in face-to-face conversation. A few other phrases that participants referenced when asked about similar language to soyboy were “alpha male” or “high value male”. Each of the words or phrases discussed by participants are reactions to expression of emotion. To emote is to show a level of weakness. The words and phrases that describe someone as weak attack action that show expression of emotion, where the words that describe a positive character emphasize the traits that prioritize monetary success or personal successes.

Who is using this language

The expectation of who would be using the language was similar among the participants. Fourteen (14) of the participants mentioned cisgender, white men. Expectations of age included young adults, teens, and one participant, Rachel, said she expected the users of the language to be older. One of the other expectations that the participants shared was the idea of the “chronically online”. Nine (9) participants said they assume the person participating in this discourse is an individual who spends more time interacting with others online, someone who trolls others in online spaces, and someone who does not have a lot of experience with perspectives beyond their own.

Participants mentioned groups of friends or people they were once associated with using the language directly. Three (3) participants brought up men in fraternities using words like “simp” and “beta”. Tyler mentioned his friends in his fraternity, “So I’m in a fraternity, right. So they say a lot of the words, but especially like beta.” Another group that was mentioned by participants when they were asked who would use this language, was the “gym bro” crowd. Men who spend consistent amounts of time in the gym exercising, specifically weight lifting. Zach, a 20-year-old man, mentioned being in the Virginia Tech Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC)

and how this language was very much a part of the socialization process within the Cadets. He described the language as being used in both satirical and unironic ways. Zach explains his experience with this discourse in the Corps as well as working in a kitchen with majority men,

“I was also in the Corps of Cadets my freshman year here. And so a lot of my people I interacted with when I was in the Corps, they were very much deep online on this on the right wing side of things. And they fully believed and supported 90% of what was being said, I think they moderated their views a little bit when they expressed it in person. Yeah. Because again, sort of the lack of distance, there's an actual chance of confrontation. But I think they definitely accepted a lot of that. I think also the discourse has sort of increased since I was in the Corps about a year and a half, two years ago. So I'd be interested to see now because I don't interact with them as much. But I think also, I work in a kitchen where I worked at Virginia Tech. Oh, um, and so a lot of my co-workers these sort of 40, 50-year-old, big, tough masculine men. And I mean, yeah, you'll hear the F-slur thrown out probably once or twice a day. Yeah. And, you know, I hear talking about women sometimes. And it's very much just sort of playing into that hypermasculinity. I know they're active on some of the nicher parts of Tik Tok because occasionally they will try and show me something else, but I don't want to see that. It'll be just like, reactionary, mean video.”

The major pattern of these groups is gender. They are groups made up of often majority men and revolve around systems that are seen as masculine as well, i.e., the military. Women are not often allowed in the groups, either formally or informally. Formally, women are not allowed in social fraternities and have their own space, sororities. Informally, women are allowed to participate in the Corps, but culturally, the expectation continues to revolve around this organization as masculine and for men. Similarly, communities that gym bros are a part of informally exclude women because of the values that the culture emphasizes. When women enter these spaces there are shifts in group dynamics. While the gym bro group is the only

group mentioned that is not an institutionally organized group but is a type of person that celebrates and values physical strengths and a restrictive form of self-discipline that are culturally expected from men and veiled as masculine traits. Gym bro culture is a current trend of the type of man who is weightlifting as a hobby, which is consistently seen in online spaces as well. Rachel explained that her partner and his friends use weightlifting as a hobby and she could imagine hearing soyboy used by that group, "Like for my boyfriend and his guy friends. What I'm imagining is like they're talking about someone the lifter." Four (4) participants, all women, described a gym bro as a person they would expect to use this language to talk about other men. As Rachel mentioned, she imagines the discourse being used against other members of the gym bro culture. The culture surrounding gyms is used to produce content online and creates discourse surrounding what it means to be in the gym and how culturally we value strength. Many of the ways gym bro culture is seen in online spaces could be reflective of face-to-face interactions.

Face-to-Face Interactions

A trend that was quickly demonstrated in participants' responses about how they interpret face-to-face interactions is the ability to set boundaries in person versus in online situations. Participants reference uncivil discourse in online spaces, but if they are addressed in an uncivilized manner in person, they will set a boundary that they will not interact with that behavior. Online spaces seemed to encourage the interaction, whereas social norms of face-to-face interactions or the "social contract" still allows for restriction of behaviors deemed unacceptable. In terms of understanding mental health issues, seven (7) participants cited social media exaggerating mental health problems. Another way boundaries were mentioned is the expectation to avoid conflict. There is a larger boundary that is culturally recognized - avoid conflict - don't talk about things that might have people feeling uncomfortable.

The discussion of gender issues that were mentioned as common in online spaces were not the same gender issues that participants witnessed in face-to-face interactions. There was overlap, but generally the issues were not so readily discussed. While a few participants shared that they have heard people use the language that is seen in Component I, the message or aggressiveness of the message is not nearly as strong in in-person interactions versus how it is discussed online. The political discussion that transitions from online spaces to face-to-face does not reflect the aggressiveness of the interactions online. Ella stated “And like they’re definitely more to themselves because it’s the face to face interaction. You’re not anonymous. But there’s still like the polarization.” Tyler expressed frustration with social media throughout the interview, explaining he doesn’t like what he views as constant bandwagoning about controversial topics and said the following about how that translates face-to-face, “No, that’s the worst part. They won’t even speak about it in person, they just do as I said, they are just followers that repost whatever they see.” Byron believes the aggressiveness is specific to online spaces and explains “Every time I see a conversation in person, both parties are beyond empathetic to each other. It’s like, it’s like they’ve seen what happens on the internet, and they won’t do it. They’re like, I will not stoop to this level.” The idea of “hiding” behind your keyboard was most prominently mentioned when considering why political discussions do not have the same amount of violence in face-to-face conversations.

Teresa explains this with an example of someone she knows personally. Teresa began, “I find people less likely to put forward their beliefs in person.” She continued by explaining the example of individuals she knows posting what she defined as extreme materials on their social media profiles, specifically about political beliefs and politicians they idolized. She went on to say one of the individuals is in a government class with her and this person is silent in the class. She used this example as her understanding of how political ideologies are not discussed in person because of discomfort with confrontation as well as the time and space that people have when figuring out what they want to say online. This was a pattern among many of the

participants, they believed being able to curate a response to something is much easier than addressing it in face-to-face interactions. The participants assumed the anxiety about repercussions and the privilege of time to write a post online combined to influence how political discussions are not nearly as aggressive.

When asked about whether participants had heard the soyboy discourse in face-to-face interactions, all but three (3) participants emphasized that those engaging with the discourse are not their friends. They want to continue a certain perception of themselves and the people surrounding them. Maria, an 18-year-old woman, offered a specific anecdote about hearing the gendered and political discourses in a face-to-face interaction at a football game. Maria explained,

“I was at a football game, and some guy like yelled something behind me that was like, particularly offensive. And I turned around, I was like, ‘Can you not say that?’ Yeah. And then he came up to me, and he was like, ‘Are you a liberal?’ And I was like, ‘Are you a decent human being?’ Yeah. And then he ended like leaving and going to the other side of the stadium. But it wasn't it was just this like, little in passing comment. That kind of like, reminds me that there's people who are just, it just screams kind of insecure to me when you do that out loud.”

Maria was at a Virginia Tech football game and heard the man behind her yelling homophobic slurs toward the opposing team. She asked him to not yell the slurs and he leaned into her closely yelling “Are you a liberal?” to which she said she responded with “Are you a decent human being?” This man’s reaction to Maria asking him not to yell offensive slurs out loud at a game was to assume her political ideology. This interaction offers an example of the ideas surrounding masculinity, left leaning political ideology, and expectations of concern.

The way political and gender discourses transition from online spaces to face-to-face interactions depends on the dynamic of the interaction. When participants noted interactions that reflected online discourses, they were often reflective of the aggressiveness seen online.

The position of the participant, whether they knew the other people directly or not, shaped how the interaction was viewed. Participants have heard and seen discourses such as the soyboy, but have a difficult time connecting the discourses they are seeing online with those that may be happening in face-to-face interactions.

Influence of Social Media

Each participant explained how influential they believe social interactions on social media are, each citing that social media is absolutely influential in their lives and influences those around them. Ella explains,

“Social media has definitely increased its influence on people. It's like one of the main sources that people use to get their political viewpoints, their viewpoints on other genders and the stereotypes like there's the social construct that men and women are separate.”

Each person within the study stated that social media is influencing their lives in ways that go beyond an ideological direction; many state it shapes how they view their bodies, what clothes they decide to wear, and what music they find interesting, as well as gender expectations and political discourses (Eisenchlas 2013; Roth-Cohen et al. 2023). Teresa shared the ways she sees social media influencing her and her friends,

“Oh, I think it's so influential. I think the way that I dress, the way that I talk, who my friends are, has all been affected by social media. Like I will buy a certain pair of shoes. I'll start wearing my shoes a certain way. I think, unfortunately, a lot of my sense of humor now is just repeating Tik Tok audios. And then like, it's so influential because of how often it's ingested, I think, especially during COVID-19. That's all we had to interact with the outside world.”

Some participants mentioned the echo chambers, the ideological bubbles, the one-sided narratives that can be seen on social media and online generally, they mentioned that instead of

changing minds, online spaces usually reaffirm what is already believed. The space that is given of opinions or perspectives is so driven by algorithms based on existing interests, likes, saved videos/pictures, the spaces do not promote listening to others, but validating your already established opinions. The participants fully acknowledged this was a problem, only one participant, Tyler, actively stopped engaging with social media because of this problem. Tyler was adamant about the problems he noticed with social media throughout the interview. When asked about the influence of social media, Tyler was specifying the impact it has on face-to-face interactions because of the attention phones and digital spaces are given, adding

“I don't know, I would just say like just screentime being completely attached to their phone not having real, like, physical communication with others. Okay. Sometimes, like you can be in a group of as many people as you want, nine out of the 10 of them are going to be on their phones, not even talking to each other.”

Tyler mentioned this being a generational difference. This sentiment was shared by Whitney, who stated the influence of social media is apparent, but did not see it as a negative difference. Whitney said,

“I definitely think so. It's like, social media has just become like a really big part of life. I think our generation as a whole, we use it to, like, you know, let's just let people know how we are, how we're feeling, how we're doing. And it's like, being a way to display messages like to just like really large crowds and groups. I feel like as like a generation as a whole, social media has become a huge part of like, getting our message across, and letting people know how we feel and all that jazz, especially in politics. People will repost stories of like a politician that they support and all that jazz and, like messages and platforms that they support. So it's like, I feel like I can't go a day without seeing some sort of, like, politically charged post on any form of social media.”

The influence of social media is prevalent in each participants' life as well as the lives of those around them. The participants mentioned social media impacting the way they behave in the

social world, in terms of dress or music interests, and they noted the influence social media has on their perspectives and views of the social world as well.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this component of the study outline how interactions in digital spaces can be seen in face-to-face interactions. The findings show patterns, including four larger themes: 1) how the soyboy discourse is shaped by reactions to hybrid masculinities; 2) the perceived morality of interacting with the soyboy discourse and adjacent discourses online; 3) the dismissal of discourse because of perceived morality; and, 4) how boundary-setting is not yet an established skill for online interactions versus boundary setting in face-to-face interactions. The soyboy discourse exemplifies how even though daily interactions don't seem to have larger impacts on perceptions, these interactions shape how individuals perceive themselves and how they hope others perceive them.

Soyboy is a reaction to hybrid masculinities

Participants referenced the shift in who is seen as trendy and culturally valued - Timothée Chalamet and Harry Styles. Both men are extremely popular and fall outside of hegemonic masculinity barely but still do not neatly fit within the standards of traditional masculinity. They are both slender versus large muscular men and both are seen in softer roles, ones that do not emphasize anger or aggression. Their hybrid masculinity is still overlapping with hegemonic - white, cisgender men who benefit from structural gender inequities but are applauded because they are seen as "new man" masculine. Bridges and Pascoe explain the hybridization of hegemonic masculinity as "best thought of as contemporary expressions of gender and sexuality inequality" (2014:247).

Messner (1993) discusses this process where the "New Man" is the emotionally sensitive man who puts effort forth in parenting and caring, specifically above career goals. This shift was

referred to as the modern masculinity - there was a general feminist critique of this analysis because the “New Man” does not fill this egalitarian role it claims. The new man must take on new roles, a.k.a. the parental skills, to adapt to the restraints of current societal trends. The idea emphasizes that men were taking on feminist ideas through what they say more so than what they do. By participating in parenting in a modest way, men were taking on a new identity with their masculinity that encouraged them to see themselves as masculine by caring for their family, while women still did the majority of the childcare work and household labor. While this phenomenon was outlined by Messner in the 1990s, this pattern still emerges today (Messner 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). One example of this pattern can be seen in a 2023 SuperBowl commercial.

A 2023 SuperBowl commercial for Kia shows a dad, mother, and baby checking in at a snowy resort. The baby begins to fuss and the mother asks if the father remembers the child’s favorite binky. He realizes he did not pack the binky and the commercial then follows the dad as he drives through ice, roadblocks, and the superbowl field to return home for the item he originally forgot. Throughout these scenes, the dad begins to trend online after someone live streamed him realizing he forgot the binky. The trend is “binky dad” and follows him while he heroically drives through many obstacles. The father finally returns to the resort and offers the baby the binky, only for her to spit it out and the mother states “She only likes the blue one.” This commercial emphasizes the effort the father puts forth to correct the error he originally made. The father is celebrated for his effort throughout the commercial by all of those around him, mostly strangers. What this represents is the effort put forth by the father, but also demonstrates the cognitive labor the mother does to ensure life continues on smoothly. According to Daminger, cognitive labor occurs while coordinating household management, such as what ingredients are needed to make dinner and remembering when the household needs more toilet paper (2019). The mother in the commercial recognizes which binky is the one her child likes and she thought through processes of what was needed for the trip, asking the father

to originally pack the specific binky. The failure on the father's part isn't presented as a failure because he put in the effort during the aftermath. This demonstration of the new man highlights how much he cares and how that is celebrated, while also highlighting the little cognitive labor he participates in to understand the problem before it occurs.

Messner's new man focuses on fatherhood and the shifts in how fathering was presented in the 1990s but is reflective of the larger shifts in masculine norms still present. The celebration of men who exercise a modest amount of labor outside of traditional expectations of men indicates they are taking on a new or modern type of masculinity. The new man's expression of masculinity should be understood as just as devious as the traditional expression of masculinity, because while the mothers/women in their lives are continuing the routine of day-to-day life, the men are celebrated for shifting responsibility slightly. Harry Styles is celebrated as a man who expresses himself openly by dressing in androgynous clothing and painting his nails, represents a new softness of the younger generations, and writes music that connect with issues that girls and women are facing in life. The celebrated shift does not align with hegemonic masculinity, but still those who benefit from taking on alternative masculinities still benefit and thrive in the power that hegemonic masculinity establishes for white, cisgender men. Connell (1995) describes hegemonic masculinity as not an individual man, but the social norms that shape how patriarchy and the dominance of man over women can be reinforced. The hybridization of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the challenging of hegemonic masculinity, but the incorporation of othered masculinities into how often white, cisgender, heterosexual men shape their masculine identity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The shift of incorporating these othered masculinities into traditional masculine expectations blurs the understanding of gender inequality.

The soyboy, and soyboy adjacent phrases, respond to men who are already outside of the hegemonic masculine understanding of gender roles, shaping their identities with hybrid masculinity. It doesn't work to pull the soyboy men in directly but acts as a signal to men who

value traditional masculinity that moving away from the idealized set of prescriptive social norms (Connell 1995) is problematic and leads to less success in individual life - success as in monetarily, sexually, politically (power), and emotionally. Participants consistently noted that the soyboy and soyboy adjacent language is used by men who also include the men who they assumed would be offended by the phrase. They believed the discourse wasn't for the already established soyboys, but for the men who shape their identities around the norms of hegemonic masculinity. This discourse lets users know the soyboy is weak in all realms and continues to demonstrate that the further you move away from traditional masculinity, and more broadly traditional gender roles, the more difficult your life will be. This is seen in the Component I: Twitter Data through the ideas of soyboys being the main men who have mental illnesses, less money, and women who don't respect them/emasculate them and in Component II: Interview Data through the definition that participants offered stating that soyboys don't have individual thought but just move along with what is popular at the moment.

So yes, Soyboy does act as a controlling image but specifically for men who are still adhering to traditional masculinity more so than those who are outside of that. One of the words that was mentioned by the participants was "simp". They mentioned simp as a word that they relate to the soyboy discourse. The participants defined simp as a person who is fully invested in a romantic partner and will go out of their way to do favors for their romantic interest to win them over. Simp is not necessarily gendered but focuses on men who demonstrate this behavior. Simp, like soyboy, outlines for individuals what actions or behaviors are taking a love interest too far. While all of the participants had heard this word used in person, one participant gave a few examples of simp behavior. They explained that a man could be labeled as a simp for holding the door open for a woman or hanging out with a romantic partner instead of with their friends. Another participant explained that they found the simp label frustrating because it made fun of basic decency in a romantic relationship. They felt shame for being interested in romantic relationships because of phrases such as simp. This discourse encourages the

hyperheterosexuality that traditional masculinity presents as important. The idea that having one sexual partner is weak and shows a lack of sexual prowess is emphasized by hegemonic masculinity. Discourses that treat sexual behavior as a marker of masculinity control behaviors. The soyboy has a physical image that is controlling, the soyjak is the imagery used to define the soyboy. The soyboy vs the chad was the meme shown to participants. This specific meme demonstrates the controlling image that soyboy is and how the messages of the soyboy discourse act as a policing of expression of masculinity.

The discussion of generational differences and the understanding of masculinity was apparent in four (4) of the interviews. Participants, specifically women, felt that older generations had harsh responses to younger generations' interpretations of cultural expectations to manliness. Whether this harshness is a reaction to shifts in hegemonic masculinity or to alternative masculinities, this trend was also present in the Twitter Data from Component I. Several of the tweets stated something was wrong with the younger generations because how masculinity is performed does not adhere to hegemonic masculine norms.

The Morality of the Soyboy

The participants had specific labels of who was good and who was not. Many of the individuals referenced how the soyboy is used as negative generally and that they don't agree with it. Even with their staunch beliefs about the good and bad, they engage with and participate in the discourse to a certain degree. The participants acknowledged their engagement with the discourse as ironic or satirical. They were engaging with the discourse by using language or sharing memes but presented this engagement as a way to patronize the people they viewed as

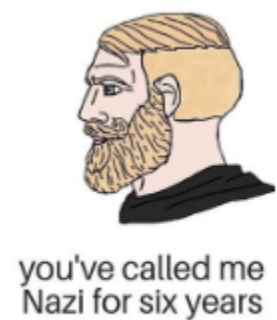


Figure 4.1

real users of the discourse. One of the main examples of this was seen in the meme, the chad vs the soyboy.

The chad vs the soyboy meme is an example of one of the trends that the participants recognized and many applauded. The chad vs the soyboy outlines the cultural expectations of traditional masculinity through not only the appearance of the characters within the meme but

also the message associated with the characters in the meme. The context of these memes changes depending upon what community the meme is shared within and who is sharing the meme. The intention of the meme continues to be the same, one perspective is an overreaction which invalidates it and the other perspective is based in rational thinking. The imagery depicts the “soyboy loser” as emoting and expressing large

emotions about whatever the users make the meme about. In the text there are four examples of the format of the meme and the wide range of use of the meme. This does not fall along political ideological lines, as it is used in spaces that are described as left and right but does however uphold the ideas that the politically left usually dislike. The emotions displayed are meant to invalidate the soyboy’s beliefs and in doing so, it doesn’t present arguments but a simple image of crying vs stoicism. The examples of the soyjak



Figure 5.1



Figure 6.1



Figure 7.1

versus chad memes demonstrate the general messages and intentions the characterizations are associating with each perspective. The soyjak/soyboy is upset, the chad is not; the soyboy is overreacting, the chad is not; the soyboy follows general authority (i.e., the mask and meeting examples), the chad does not. This is seen in Figures 4.1, 5.1, 6.1, and 7.1.

This meme was one that the participants recognized and several discussed how they use this meme regularly. The participants who discussed using the meme were also participants who were adamant about the problem that comes along with online discourses and general the problem of misogyny/hate in online spaces. They however did not see this meme as a problem because the message changes with who makes the meme, meaning the intent changes the value of the messages. Another form of this is seen in how they engage with the people who participate in the discourse they deem bad or negative. Three (3) of the participants mentioned partners or friends engaging in the discourse, using the specific language, and holding an expectation that their friends or partners would be offended or upset if called one of the pejoratives. While the participants had people in their lives that engaged with these discourses, they also were acknowledging that the language used is restrictive and harmful to the larger population. Participants acknowledged the discourse as negative. This offers acknowledgement of the problem, while also engaging with the problem.

Does this offer an example of soyboy creating or reifying symbolic boundaries? The soyboy acts as a signifier of cultural space and place, where someone is within cultural space i.e. their ideological stances and cultural place or where they act on these cultural ideological stances such as online spaces and specific social media platforms. There are several aspects that the soyboy discourse reveals about a person depending upon where they align in the discourse:

- The person signals a specific participation in the discourse if they recognize the soyboy and what it means to understand who or what a soyboy is.

- The person signals how they place themselves within their understanding of the larger social “order” based on their participation in the discourse.
 - If a person uses the language and participates in the discourse as a user, they are signaling not only how they value masculinity and gender roles, but also their understanding of political dynamics. Words like beta, simp, snowflake, triggered, feminazi, etc. fall within the same category.
 - If a person does not use the language but participates in a way that has an understanding of the discourse, they signal their nonparticipation in the group that uses soyboy as a code.

The soyboy outlines a symbolic boundary between those valuing traditional masculinity and those who appreciate or adopt shifts in hegemonic masculinity to hybrid or alternative masculinity. This symbolic boundary is outlined through the values and norms of the soyboy, which emphasizes not only traditional masculinity but other ideological boundaries such as politically conservative beliefs.

Dismissiveness of Discourse because “It’s Not That Deep”

Participants were dismissive of hateful messaging because they believed it to be outlandish or from someone who was “chronically online.” This pattern of dismissal by participants indicated a belief that fringe cultures don’t impact the larger social world. Even though each participant argued that social media is very influential in their lives and the lives of those around them, it is still not valued or validated in being the cause of a larger social problem. This disconnect was emphasized by the dismissiveness they held about the messaging of the soyboy discourse.

The participants, at large, were dismissive of the messages that came along with the discourse surrounding the soyboy. The idea that someone is “chronically online” meant their words and participation in the discourse didn’t matter to the participants. This dismissiveness

occurred through the perception that someone being chronically online meant their actions did not have real world consequences. The response from many participants about who would be using this language or tweeting the Component I tweets focused on how the author probably lived in his mom's basement, never went outside, didn't speak to anyone other than in online spaces, and didn't have real impact on their social world. This dismissiveness did not acknowledge that the language being discussed is already being used by people in face-to-face interactions and did not recognize that they also stated that social media, specifically misogyny online and hate online, are definitely influencing how people interact with each other. This dismissal reflects the dismissal of partners, friends, or community members using the language that is present in the soyboy discourse but differs in ways because this dismissal stems from the belief that online interactions are not generally impactful. This act of dismissiveness did not translate into face-to-face interactions. Most of the participants mentioned they would actively call out someone who said something problematic to them or to a friend.

Participants were able to acknowledge that social media was influencing their behaviors and some said their beliefs, while all participants shared they see social media influencing those around them. These statements were only made about others and when asked at a more narrow level. The responses to broad questions such as "does social media influence you?" varied, but responses to questions such as "does social media influence the people around you?" did not vary. Each participant sees that influence and they were able to outline that influence.

"It's not that deep" was a common sentiment among participants - where they would say others were influenced but they weren't. They saw the tweets shown from Component I as overactions and over the top statements made about something they saw as "not that big of a deal." They, during the same one-hour interview, mentioned it not being a big deal, not that deep, while also talking about the ways they see people treating each other that leads to worse mental health or bad social interactions. "It's not that deep" is about sensitivity in the same way

that snowflake, soyboy, and simp are about sensitivity, being overly emotional - words that are supposed to signal an overreaction. "It's not that deep" demonstrates the same response that the use of the soyboy does, a signal that the person being called a soyboy needs to calm down, get over it, chill out. This phrase offers another way that the invalidating of one's reaction shuts down the possibility of continuing a conversation. If the soyboy discourse is a reaction to hybrid masculinities that often point out and try to reckon with social inequalities, phrases such as "it's not that deep" participate in similar dynamics. The invalidation of a reaction means the conversation will not continue. If those conversations are trying to parse out how one feels or experiences marginalization, the soyboy discourse and the "it's not that deep" response both act as obstacles to continue those conversations.

Setting Boundaries in Online Spaces

While this is not necessarily new information, the combination of influence of social media and the general hatefulness of online spaces seems significant. This is where I think a discussion about Boundaries online vs Boundaries in face-to-face interactions can be placed.

Each person directly stated that discussions of political topics online are hateful, uncivil, and problematic; they are not productive and create more problems than contribute to answers to the problem. This belief is not simply because of what the participants are experiencing, but generally how online interactions are culturally viewed. The word polarization was mentioned by the majority of the participants. While gender discussions were not immediately met with the same descriptors, ten (10) of the participants noted that general misogyny is how they see and experience discussions online. The men in the study noted general misogyny based upon where they were in online spaces, Ricky mentioned misogyny immediately and described his social media platform use focusing on a variety of sports and political discourses. The trend that men and women both saw misogyny online is in no way surprising, but the men that outlined they saw misogyny stated this at the beginning of their response about gender discourses. This

pattern may reveal that spaces that are made up of majority male users are more likely to see more outward misogyny. The spaces with fewer women have less overt sexism, but covert sexism such as expectations of content from users.

Participants mentioned that they don't really see a lot of hatefulness in their face-to-face interactions or conversations because of who they surround themselves with. (Even the ones who said their friends and/or partners use this language said they don't see hatefulness in day-to-day life.) Many of them said they wouldn't put up with anyone who actively participates in these discourses. Ricky explained a situation where his roommate continued to bring an acquaintance to their home who wanted to debate (fight) about social issues. He said the person was aggressive and he set a boundary that the roommate should let him know before this person came over because he did not want to interact with them. That is a direct boundary set by the individual. These boundaries are set with others while online it seems to be much more difficult to set boundaries. Travis, a 22-year-old man, said they stopped using Instagram because of boundary issues. This was not an easy decision to make because of the expectation to use social media and to connect with others using these applications.

The larger takeaway from the Component II Interview Data is that the online soyboy discourse reflects similar discourses that have transitioned from online to face-to-face. The soyboy discourse reinforces boundaries and those boundaries can be seen in daily interactions, for example the established ideology that men who express emotions or interests in a woman or partner are simps. With that conclusion, the assumption is that while the word soyboy may not be a face-to-face popularized term yet, there is space and possibility for it to become a popularized cultural phrase just as snowflake and simp have become. These words overlap in the general discourse online, which defines any reaction to an event, a topic, an interest as an overreaction. This discourse describes someone's most basic indication of care about social inequalities as a sensitivity and a weakness. The categories of social inequalities that fall under

this scrutiny are broad. The boundary that is set by an individual using this language and participating in the discourse gives them permission to call anyone outside of their group sensitive, weak, etc. The major takeaways from this chapter are: the soyboy discourse is a reaction to shifts in norms surrounding gender, there is moral ambiguity in terms of engagement with the soyboy discourse, there is a dismissiveness of certain interactions in online spaces, and boundary setting is a skill that has not yet moved to online interactions.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE CYCLE OF THE SOYBOY

What is discourse?

Discourse can be outlined through a cycle: (1) symbolic boundaries inform cultural knowledge, that shape (2) individual identity, which are then (3) policed by controlling images, that reify boundaries.

Discourse refers to the way of gathering knowledge together with social practices. Discourse includes mundane or low-stakes interactions, which this project uses to outline the soyboy discourse. Discourses surrounding soyboy are present because of existing symbolic boundaries, for example, hegemonic masculinity, which prescribes a set of gender norms that uphold subordination of women and alternative masculinities. These boundaries inform cultural knowledge and structures of inequality that influence how people move throughout their lives - what groups they belong to, groups they want to associate with, and groups they do not want to associate with. For example, white, conservative men are often red meat eaters and more likely adhere to nationalist patriotism than white, liberal men (Chan and Zlatevska 2019; Carian 2022). Symbolic boundaries shape the identities that sharpen and uphold the boundaries people see in their lives such as the action of eating red meat, valuing nationalism - these acts bolster identities that uphold the boundaries. These identities map out how one should behave within specific boundaries and to enact that controlling images are used to police those who may go against the boundaries. For example, calling people who don't eat meat pussies. This controls even those who witness policing happen, acting as a warning to not go against identity boundaries. This control and pressure is strong enough to shape how people behave. For example, white, conservative men worry about the perceptions of restricted diets before even deciding to eat certain ways. Controlling images work to police identities that are crafted within the confines of symbolic boundaries, which create discourse. The soyboy contributes to a

discourse that gives a warning to those who may go against boundaries, but also acts as a warning for those who are already functioning within the boundary that then again reifies the cycle of cultural production. This cycle is the exchange of cultural knowledge that ensures the continuation of social inequities.

Symbolic Boundaries informing cultural knowledge

To understand how the soyboy discourse reinforces inequalities, symbolic boundaries must be outlined and analyzed to see how the boundaries are informing cultural knowledge. “‘Symbolic Boundaries’ are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others.” (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015: 850). These lines are presented and seen through cultural attitudes, beliefs, practices, and through the favor or disfavor of others, ideologies, behaviors, etc. The lines that are drawn by symbolic boundaries highlight the cultural differences between groups of people. An example of a symbolic boundary that has been thoroughly studied is the boundary between classes. Bourdieu and Passeron explained the differences in academic achievement among social class as the social and cultural knowledge that lower income individuals are not able to engage with to have academic success (1970). The lack of knowledge isn’t the fault of the individual and does not occur naturally, but is a sign that the boundaries restrict knowledge from those outside of the boundary. There are boundaries that exist because of social orders such as class, physically and socially separating people from differing classes. Symbolic boundaries are the boundaries that exist within the social boundary context, but offer internal distinction that bolsters the categorization for individuals. This internal distinction is the recognition of differences between ideology such as political beliefs.

Cultural boundaries are not as simple to observe, but nonetheless offer an opportunity to understand social orders. For example, in terms of political ideology, the line of boundaries may

seem obvious; the line for the boundary is drawn between democrat and republican, the political left belief and the political right belief, or liberal and conservative. While, yes, there are symbolic boundaries within these categories, symbolic boundaries are shaped through and by larger social structures - such as capitalism, values surrounding culturally favored religion, government structure, patriarchy, white supremacy. The boundaries that are being drawn because of these larger social patterns are not as simple as democrat versus republican, but how the dominant ideology influences how the groups of people view themselves and how the groups are able to hoard power.

When utilizing the concept of symbolic boundaries to analyze the soyboy discourse, the discourse contributes to the shaping and reinforcing of boundaries. The soyboy discourse is a tool that upholds the existing boundaries, specifically trad-masculinity. Taken from Component I data, trad-masculinity, meaning traditional masculinity, will be defined as the symbolic boundary that strictly upholds prescriptive norms of masculinity, including how to consume cultural information and what is included within the valued cultural information. This boundary is defined by expectations of expression of emotions, specific political alliances, expectations of how one does work, expectations of use of language, and restriction of diets. The definition of trad-masculinity will be thoroughly outlined below.

The soyboy discourse engages with the boundary that shapes cultural expectations of masculinity within a society that adheres to hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity outlines prescribed norms that shape how masculinity should be performed at an individual level and ensures the continuation of social, cultural, economic dominance over marginalized genders. Contributing to Marx and Engels, as well as Gramsci, Bourdieu and Passeron explore the perspective that symbolic boundaries reify systems of domination (1970). They discuss symbolic boundaries as boundaries that are naturalized in day-to-day life, meaning the understandings of the social boundaries are seen as inherent in nature. If these boundaries are

understood as common sense, or what Gramsci referred to as consent, the boundaries are more difficult to see and analyze as social constructions. The soyboy discourse participates in this boundary-setting through the understanding of masculinity, whiteness, eurocentric beauty standards, stoicism, etc. These traits and beliefs are valued within the symbolic boundary but are valued in way that can be explained through Bourdieu and Passeron's perspective that boundaries are naturalized. The values of the symbolic boundary are seen as inherent to the individuals who are in the boundaries, which they see placing them at the top of the social order. The boundaries exist with the belief that they are natural or fixed. If symbolic boundaries are present in existing unequal social systems, i.e., patriarchy, the boundaries are promoting and reinforcing the norms of those social systems.

This reification of unequal social order can be seen in the data collected for Component I of the study, i.e., the Twitter data. The social order that was most prevalent in the data was reinforcing gendered hierarchies. Through the Twitter data there were several themes found: expectations of traditional masculinity; references to political ideology; soyboy adjacent language; & references to consumption. These themes reflect the larger aspects of the boundary that are reinforced through the discourse. The main lines drawn to build the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity include lack of empathy, conservative political alliance, expectations of physical labor, use of specific language, and expectations of consumption. Within each of these aspects of the boundary, other traits, beliefs, values, and norms are present to contribute to the larger continuation of trad-masculinity. This includes whiteness, eurocentric beauty standards, expression of anger or stoicism, christianity, and nationalist patriotism. These are some of the beliefs, values, and norms that shape the understanding of how to be a part of the symbolic boundary or to fall out of the bounds of the boundary.

Lack of Emotions and Empathy

One of the common trends within the theme of expectations of trad-masculinity was stating that acts of emotive expression demonstrated the emotional person was not adhering to cultural expectations of masculinity accurately or enough. To apply this expectation to understanding the boundary of manhood, those within the symbolic boundary are restricted in their ability to express emotions beyond anger. This expectation is not simply the expected behavior of someone adhering to trad-masculinity, but acts as a cultural signifier that indicates if someone falls within the symbolic boundary of manliness or not. If open emotional responses are common for an individual, that individual is demonstrating a lack of masculinity to those who do fall within the symbolic boundary. Expression of emotion, beyond anger, is one of the lines that is drawn to indicate the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity.

Within the Component I data, discussion of emotions as a tool to identify someone who is not within the boundary was common. Tweets mentioned crying (*"Cry. #SoyBoy"*), crybaby (*"27,000 people could have been exposed" *could* have been. Read the article, word for word (while using your brain), and you'll see this is so full of shit it's alarming. The thinking man will see right through it. The emotional, crybaby #soyboy will pull out a hanky. #Hoax"*), irrational emotions (*"A militant armed group like ANTIFA? Have you ever handled a weapon in your leftarded lifeever? That tirade of false equivalency coupled with selective outrage and virtue signaling says it all. Another ill informed person lashing out with irrational emotion. #soyboy"*), and fear (*"Always a #femtard or a #soyboy. Masculinity is what these #snowflakes fear and hate."*) Expression of emotion is used as a way to separate groups of people. Those who express, or feel, emotions versus those who do not. The way this line is demonstrated is through the direct use of language shaming emotional responses, as well as the claim that feelings are in contrast to facts, *"Clearly this #soyboy isn't up to speed on studies done concerning female contentment. Woman are less satisfied in today's society than previous*

generations. Facts over feelings, research over bs.” and “Oh now Josh, settle down, I’m sorry if my reference to facts made you melt on the inside. #SoyBoy.” By drawing a line that separates those who express emotion and those who do not, this characteristic of the symbolic boundary creates categories of people.

Conservative Political Alliance

Similarly, the expectations of traditional masculinity included different beliefs that demonstrate if a person falls within the cultural symbolic boundary of masculinity. Many of the tweets within the data discuss political ideology as a boundary between masculinity and femininity. One of the traits of the symbolic boundary being drawn is how one shares their beliefs and how they fall within the political spectrum. Brazenly, the data shows that any association with the democratic party excludes someone from the boundary. For example, *“Lol get the fuck outta here with this shit! This pussy is definitely a #soyboy (not) in disguise trying to stir up shit. #DemocratsHateAmerica”*, and *“No, because he has balls unlike you #soyboy and since you’re here, why don’t you prove that he is lying. Pictures don’t lie, unlike you #demoKKKrats”*. Not only is the association with the party an ideological stance that excludes someone, but association with the belief system excludes individuals. This aspect of the boundary connects with the aspect of emotional responses as well, which can be seen in the following tweet, *“This #soyboy is a liar not a conservative Conservatives put facts over feelings. Nathaniel would have you believe EMPATHY is what is missing from today’s Republicans. Translation: Trump used words that made him cry so despite our country doing better he must go #Liberals #MAGA.”* These characteristics of the symbolic boundary work together to draw lines which exclude people from the boundary of trad-masculinity.

The connection between empathy and the negative perspective of emotional responses was used to outline beliefs about social movements as well. Popular social movements were

mentioned within the data that demonstrates where someone falls in the symbolic boundary. As mentioned in the findings of Chapter 2, the Black Lives Matter movement was referenced as a movement that held beliefs that do not fit with the boundary beliefs. Movements, such as BLM, are asking for empathy and for perspectives beyond one's own to be considered to understand the inequalities being faced by marginalized groups. The boundary of trad-masculinity values the existing structure of culture that was built by white supremacy. The symbolic boundary includes a majority white population and to show concern about racism or inequities is perceived as an anti-white perspective; *"You look exactly like someone who would tweet some anti- white-male garbage. Exactly. #soyboy"* and *"The problem is soy boy, they're all a bunch of neo Marxist, anti white traitors."* The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity values whiteness and white supremacy.

Expectations of Physical Labor

While gender inequalities and political power are the main aspects reinforced by the discourse, another belief that supports the boundary includes expectations of labor and work. These beliefs and norms that were present in the data collected in Component I were demonstrated through individual statements. The soyboy discourse was used to shame individuals who do not do physical labor or aren't able to do physical labor. Specifically when referencing men, the value of physical labor is present within the discourse. The ways this boundary is present in this discourse can be seen in comments such as *"Dosen't look like he does much physical work. #soyboy"* and *"More condescending comments about the south from a DC area media #Hack I'll take an honest hardworking Alabama man over a #SoyBoy any day."* While each of these statements draws from the different beliefs commonly seen in the data, the overarching themes of each of the statements relates back to how masculinity should be performed through physical labor.



Use of Specific Language

How language is used is another way that the symbolic boundary is established. Participating in a discourse and having understanding of a discourse is another way we see the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity being perpetuated. Engagement in a discourse, or even having an understanding of the discourse, indicates a system of beliefs within a boundary. The words that are used within the soyboy discourse parallel each other directly. The use of words such as soyboy, cuck, beta, simp, snowflake, etc. indicate an ideology about weakness and how weakness is present in the communities outside of the symbolic boundary. By using language that communicates specific knowledge, knowledge that indicates one is aware of the cultural knowledge gained from a symbolic boundary, that language acts as a tool to signal one's placement in or out of a group. This can be seen in the following tweet, "*Thank God! Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out Dorsey. Dorsey is a Soy Beta Boy who cries a lot.* 🤪". This type of communication and understanding of the words soyboy and beta demonstrate the knowledge that is gained through the symbolic boundary. These are words that can be defined separately from the discourse, but when used in certain ways and about certain topics it indicates a cultural knowledge of the symbolic boundary.

Expectations of Consumption

Engagement in discourses and use of language that collectively represents a belief system shapes a symbolic boundary and demonstrates when someone is not in the boundary. This is similar to the trend that was present in the data about consumption. The discourse surrounding the phrase soyboy referenced consumption regularly. Consumption of any food product with soy, or without meat, was pointed out as a bad form of consumption. The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity excludes those who do not consume meat, specifically red meat.

Restrictive diets such as vegetarianism were directly referenced as a negative, weak, or stupid. *“bruh u think you're some sort of philosophical genius when you're actually a soy boy retard vegan who thinks eating any sort of meat means you love torturing animal's. they are bred to be eaten retard.”* and *“Haha why tf would you go vegan, you turning into a soy boy?”* Vegetarianism and veganism could also be related to social movements, which connects this characteristic of the symbolic boundary with the characteristic about political alliance.

Along with comments about consumption of meat, the other consumption that was referenced consistently was soy lattes. Since the popularization of Starbucks, the type of caffeinated drink that one consumes acts as a cultural marker of class, gender, and individual traits such as weakness and ideology (Reitz 2007). The soy latte is referenced as a signal for weakness. This can be seen in the following tweets *“My trainer looks like a white straight boy douche bag who drinks soy lattes & posts about it on instagram.”* and *“ Army up in here. You soy Latte drinking testosterone blocker boy.  #SaltyMexicanForTrump #BlackAndBrownForTrump.”* These tweets demonstrate that consumption acts as a cultural marker that draws a line for the boundary. The consumption of soy, as a form of communication, interrupts the values and norms of the trad-masculinity symbolic boundary.

Trad-Masculinity as the Symbolic Boundary

This cultural understanding of masculinity isn't separated by gender. This means men are not the only people who can demonstrate traditional understandings and values of masculinity. The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity is based on who has the knowledge to benefit from the privileges of being “in” with trad-masculinity. Though if a person fits within the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity, instead of seeing that as a culturally dictated boundary, it is seen as a difference between people because of biological differences. Masculinity is viewed as an inherent aspect of men, but the knowledge gained within the symbolic boundary is

actually learned which means those who aren't men can gain this knowledge and fall within the symbolic boundary. Women who have this cultural knowledge within the symbolic boundary adhere to these expectations listed within the themes as well. They are not seen as traditionally masculine but place heightened value on traditional masculinity and emphasized femininity, as well as traditional relationships that bolster trad-masculinity. One participant in Component II, a 20-year-old man, mentioned the phrase “tradwife” that he has seen in online spaces, meaning traditional wife. This concept is a woman who sees themselves as a traditional wife. This identity reflects and emphasizes the values, norms, and beliefs of trad-masculinity as a boundary. This can be seen in the following tweet, “Praise God! Manly men are hot....glad I married one! No #soyboy for this woman!” Women who have this cultural knowledge adhere to the expectations of consumption of certain foods, adhere to the expectations of specific political beliefs, expectations of specific religious beliefs, adhere to the expectations of using certain language such as soyboy, woke, snowflake, etc. The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity isn't dictated by who has more testosterone but who adheres to hegemonic masculinity most. The exchange of knowledge that establishes this boundary sets a standard for how to perform gender in a way that benefits the individual.

Trad-masculinity is the symbolic boundary that is upheld consistently throughout the data. Gender inequalities are reinforced by this symbolic boundary. The use of the discourse directly uses femininity or alternative masculinities as a pejorative. With the application of Bourdieu and Passeron's examination of symbolic boundaries as a way to reinforce power dynamics, the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity works to uphold the existing structural gender inequalities. This boundary has values that create a hierarchy where people who do not fit are the most marginalized. The values of this symbolic boundary are whiteness, stoicism, expression of anger, christianity, nationalism, valuing only physical labor for men, specific physical appearance that emphasizes muscular strength. This symbolic boundary marginalizes

anyone who is not white, who expresses emotion or empathy, who is not christian, who does not adhere to blind nationalism, and works outside of manual labor, or who is disabled or who does not fit within the bounds of eurocentric beauty standards. This symbolic boundary works to give access to those within the boundary and works to isolate those who are outside of the boundary.

The symbolic boundary that is reinforced through the soyboy discourse is one that reinforces gendered hierarchies. The general message stems from and reifies beliefs that understand masculinity as a specific way to be and when one's masculinity falls outside of these socially constructed rules, the individual is shamed. The expectation from the discourse upholds a very strict standard of masculinity, but within that expected standard the discourse upholds the inequalities that are the hidden consequence of trad-masculinity. When this expectation is the most prominent, performing alternative masculinity or femininity is then not valued. This devaluing of alternative masculinities and femininity not only means that traditionally masculine men are shamed but that those falling in line with these other traits are harmed. The soyboy discourse participates in the idea that empathy, which is a characteristic associated with femininity, is negative.

The space within the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity that the soyboy discourse reinforces is often taken up by cisgender, white, traditionally masculine men or those who adhere to traditional understandings of gender. The data collected within this project demonstrate how this boundary is reinforced at an individual level, but the analysis of the data also outlines the structural ways this boundary can be seen. The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity shapes the soyboy discourse and how the soyboy discourse is engaged with. The data collected for Component I outlines how symbolic boundaries shape the soyboy discourse and how the discourse exemplifies the values, norms, and beliefs upheld by the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity. The main lines drawn to build the symbolic boundary of

trad-masculinity include lack of empathy, conservative political alliance, expectations of physical labor, use of specific language, and expectations of consumption. Within each other these aspects of the boundary, other traits, beliefs, values, and norms are present to contribute to the larger continuation of trad-masculinity. This includes whiteness, eurocentric beauty standards, expression of anger or stoicism, christianity, and nationalist patriotism. Through understanding the influence of the symbolic boundary, the next approach within this study will be an analysis of the way the discourse offers a space for individuals to establish their identity and bolster their position within a symbolic boundary.

Individual Threat

The symbolic boundary that enforces masculinity curates the cultural knowledge that shapes how a discourse is engaged with by individuals. If a discourse is the gathering of knowledge through social practices, the soyboy discourse is shaped by cultural knowledge that outlines and reifies beliefs and values perpetuating gender inequalities. A discourse does not exist only because it is the gathering of knowledge, but to ensure a consistent set of knowledge continues to be a belief within a symbolic boundary. Cultural knowledge is both informed by the symbolic boundary and reinforces the boundary. Individuals shape the soyboy discourse by using their cultural knowledge informed through symbolic boundaries and engaging with others who share that same or similar knowledge of the discourse. A discourse is stronger if the users engage with beliefs that through symbolic boundaries are seen as inherent in human nature. For example, there is a perception that masculine people are better leaders (Porter and Geis 1983; Prime et al. 2009; Kiser 2015). The soyboy discourse utilizes gendered hierarchies as socially constructed norms that are upheld and believed to be natural. Individuals use the discourse to reaffirm their existing identities, and as a form of communication to those within a group and outside of a group.

By utilizing Branscombe's concept of identity threatened by group values, the soyboy discourse acts as a response to the shifts in cultural values surrounding gender inequalities as well as shifts toward more progressive policies and social movements that place pressure on lawmakers to address structural inequities. In understanding threat to group values and how that impacts the individual identity, Branscombe et al. (1999) explains when other groups threaten the values of the group this can cause identity threat, from outside pressure beyond the ingroup and sources of threat within the group. Threats to group values create circumstances where members of that group may respond to threats, attempting to bolster their own identity and countering the threats to the group identity. The soyboy, personified, is the threat against existing gender hierarchies that benefit those within trad-masculinity. The soyboy discourse outlines how the threat is being perceived, by creating a discourse that shames the values of the outgroup, those within the group bolster their identities while punishing those against their identities.

Reinforcing Threat in Tweets

The tweets collected for Component I demonstrate that individuals protect the identities that are informed through symbolic boundaries by using discourses, such as the soyboy discourse, as a tool to signal to others what masculinity means in terms of behavior, belief, ideology, value, etc. The symbolic boundary draws a line that indicates certain beliefs do not fit within the boundary and the individual tweeting about that specific belief reinforces that line. The soyboy discourse engages with several topics to indicate that an individual identifies with the boundary of trad-masculinity. The markers used act as the signal to ensure the individual self identifies as well as identifies to others their identity. The markers that were examined in Component I of the study include likening someone to a woman, claiming any expression of emotion is hysterical, claiming people who are on the left side of the political spectrum are

weak, emotional, and unintelligent, claiming that responses of concern to COVID-19 are outlandish and overreactions, claims that progressive social movements are innately negative, the use of language adjacent to soyboy, and references to specific types of consumption as negative. Each of these markers demonstrate one's placement within the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity. By using the cultural knowledge from the symbolic boundary, individuals reinforce that cultural knowledge as well as signal to others that they have the cultural knowledge.

One of the markers that was most common within the data from Component I was likening someone to a woman. This can be seen in direct types of messaging, such as *"The men look like women,, ohhhh that's the plan !!! Generation of #soyboy"* and *"my guy I thought you was a girl you have the body of girl. Soyboy Stop counting that fake money if was real you'll be wearing better clothes instead looking like a homeless person #funny #simp #cuck #soyboy #betamale"* as well as indirect messaging such as *"Probably because most women have more testosterone than he does #SoyBoy."* When authoring a tweet, individuals used their cultural knowledge and their proximity to the boundary of trad-masculinity to shape what they say. If they are within the boundary, specific language and messaging is used to signal to others that they are participating in the boundary's values and beliefs. By responding with a marker that compares a man to a woman, the individual is bolstering their idea of what trad-masculinity should avoid and what it is not. In doing so, use of these markers and participation in the discourse reinforces the beliefs and values that the boundary originally set. This following tweet emphasizes the boundary by using several of the markers described previously: *"Right! Another #SoyBoy ! As a grown woman I find the #Leftist #Liberal "men" repulsive. They're just so weak & pathetic it's so unattractive."* This person, who identifies themselves as a woman, uses the marker of the trait of weakness and the belief of political leftism as a way to bolster her own position within the boundary of trad-masculinity. By tweeting publicly, there can be assumed

intent that others will see the message. The use of the soyboy discourse acts as a tool that reaffirms the boundary as well as offers a tool to bolster identities of those within the boundary.

Understanding Threat in Face-to-Face Interactions

The twitter data shows specific patterns about how boundaries are upheld through individual interactions and how these interactions shape and bolster the identities of the individuals. There is a claim that tweets tweeted out into the void that is the internet may not have influence over people and that tweets don't matter in the larger scheme of life. This perspective ignores the possible impact that tweets or mundane interactions have on how inequalities are viewed and reified. This possibility is addressed in Component II of this study. Through data collected during Component II of the study, interviews with college students were analyzed to understand the impact of online discourses on face-to-face interactions. Often online spaces are not revered as an actualized reality. Throughout the interviews, interviewees referred to online spaces and social media as the opposite of real life, meaning our face-to-face interactions. This understanding of the digital world minimizes the way social media and online communities and interactions shape our perceptions of our social world and those around us. Through this data, it is apparent that our digital world is informed by human interactions, as well as informs our human interactions. Participants were asked about the face-to-face interactions that they either witnessed or experienced that reflected the interactions they witnessed or experienced in online spaces. The themes that appeared in their responses outline not only the influence that social media has on our daily lives and interactions, but also how social media and discourses in online spaces are used to shape and navigate individual identities. Four themes emerged in these findings; soyboy is a reaction to hybrid masculinities, the morality of the soyboy, dismissiveness, and boundary setting online.

If the symbolic boundary that informs the cultural knowledge of the soyboy discourse is trad-masculinity, the individuals who are within the symbolic boundary act to ensure the consistency of the boundary. They benefit from the power that is hoarded in this boundary, whether that be cultural capital or access to resources. To ensure the symbolic boundary is consistent, individuals used their cultural knowledge to restrict others from the boundary and bolster their own identities that are included in the symbolic boundary. The first theme found within the findings of Component II, soyboy is a reaction to hybrid masculinities, emphasizes how this practice of boundary protecting can be seen.

Hybrid masculinities take on the traits of alternative masculinities by those who benefit from hegemonic masculinity. Hybrid masculinity does not indicate a complete diversion from hegemonic masculinity, but a shift away from trad-masculinity and how masculinity is presented. The example of this used in Chapter 3 is the trend of men, who benefit from hegemonic masculinity, embracing feminine activities or styles. This act of hybridization contrasts the idea within trad-masculinity that men are not fluid in their gender. This perspective and belief sees gender as fixed, which means shifts toward alternative masculinities or femininity are unnatural. The soyboy discourse does not exist without the threat that traditional masculinities are not the only masculinities.

The soyboy discourse and the soyboy adjacent language acts as a response to the shifting of masculinity. Interview participants offered examples of the shifts in masculinity they see as threatening the individual, i.e., threatening the symbolic boundary which threatens the individual identity. Celebrities, such as Timothée Chalamet, who does not fit directly into the stereotypical traditional man, appear to threaten the established structures that continue the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity. Chalamet is slender, while still muscular, and portrays characters who are sensitive and meek in some ways. This example was specified as threatening to trad-masculinity because Chalamet is popular, specifically with young women.

Trad-masculinity invokes the idea that men who are hyper-masculine will be successful in having sex with numerous women and men who are not masculine will be unsuccessful. This idea is countered by people such as Chalamet. Chalamet's hybridization of masculinity still overlaps with the norms or traits that are valued within trad-masculinity, which means he is applauded by those who don't value trad-masculinity when he hybridizes his masculinity. Chalamet, a white, cisgender, wealthy man is praised for shifting slightly away from trad-masculinity, but this is not true for others with existing marginalized identities. Race shapes how hybrid masculinities are perceived and when a man of color takes on hybridization, it is not celebrated in the same way it is when a white man takes on hybridization. Timothée Chalamet and Harry Styles were the celebrities named by participants as men who are praised for their shift away from gender norms, but celebrities of color, such as Lil Nas X, a 24-year-old singer, have received backlash for their countering of expectations of gender performance.

Many participants noted that these shifts were present and highlighted to them that the generational differences in how masculinity is understood shapes some of the response. Participants believed that Millennials, anyone born between 1981 to 1996, and Generation Z, anyone born mid-to-late 1990s to early 2010s, have a less restrictive understanding of masculinity than generations that came before. When shown tweets collected in Component I, the participants noted that these beliefs were angry responses to the cultural shifts. While they mentioned the cultural shifts away from trad-masculinity, they also discussed how gender discourses online reflect misogynistic beliefs and continue the ideas that are upheld through trad-masculinity. So, while they see shifts occurring, they still experience and witness severe forms of misogyny in online spaces. The tweets collected from Component I may offer an example of what was possibly being seen by participants in Component II. Many of the participants referenced the gender discussions online as violent and uncivil.

The soyboy discourse participates in the pushing against hybrid masculinities that is done at an individual level. As Willer et al. found, when men's masculinity is threatened, they tend to then overcompensate by acting out in hyper-masculine ways to counter the threat (2013). When interview participants were asked who would use language that is seen in the soyboy discourse, they described people who are insecure in their masculinity and want to participate in the discourse to prove how tough and manly they are. This reflects Willer et al.'s findings (2013). This response was common throughout the interviews. The assumed people participating in the discourse were men, who felt the need to prove that they fell into the trad-masculinity. The participants who were able to think of examples of hearing this discourse in face-to-face interactions shared that the individuals speaking that way were often men. Tyler, a 19-year-old man, cited his fraternity brothers as people who he knew used the soyboy and soyboy adjacent language and Zach, a 20-year-old man, cited members of Virginia Tech Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) as people he knew used the language. Both of these groups are predominantly male and spend a significant portion of their time with men similar to themselves. Both of these groups also have a history of violent acts, specifically against women or people with alternative masculinities, such as gay men. Dahl et al. found that when masculinity is threatened, men are more likely to promote ideas and norms that subordinate women (2016), which is present within the soyboy discourse directly. Rubin et al. found that men whose masculinity is threatened are more likely to participate or condone online harassment to bolster their masculinity (2020). Masculinity threat leads to more violent responses from men and reification of hierarchical gender structures. While the soyboy is a discourse that participates in reinforcing these structures, the consequences of reinforcement and reproduction continue violence as well.

The soyboy discourse acts as a guide for men who fall within a culturally valued trad-masculinity. The guide is not concrete and does not mean that all men fall within these

parameters, but the guide that the discourse demonstrates is one that does influence how masculinity is valued and even performed. This guide shapes individual perception of self-identity as well as signals to others how one would like to be perceived. The data collected through Component I and Component II of the project offer examples of how this identity reinforcement and identity building can be seen.

Policed by Controlling Images

Controlling images are perceptions of specific identities that make the socially constructed myth surrounding that image seem as though it naturally occurs with that identity. Controlling images act as a tool for those in power. A tool that enables them to further subordinate those experiencing marginalization (Collins 2000). By creating a narrative or discourse surrounding the identities targeted by a controlling image, the people with those identities are controlled by the myths and stereotypes applied to them, dehumanizing them which restricts understanding of their personhood. Controlling images are used by others to reinforce existing inequalities. Controlling images assist in upholding inequalities and symbolic boundaries (Collins 2000; Hancock 2003). Through the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity, there are markers that individuals use to self-identity within the boundary and the use of these markers signals to others that they are in the boundary. Identity is built through the symbolic boundary, reinforcing the boundary through markers that promote the values, beliefs, and norms of the boundary. When those boundaries are being threatened, individuals will use discourses to not only reinforce their boundary, but also target those outside of the boundary. A controlling image not only targets individuals because of existing identities, but also acts as a tool to reinforce existing structures. The symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity utilizes discourses like the soyboy to attack those outside of the boundary. This practice may not bring those closer to the boundary line if their proximity is distant, but it does bring those in the boundary closer to

each other because they do not want to be labeled the pejoratives and be seen as those outside of the boundary are seen.

The markers discussed in the previous section outline how words and participation in certain discourse indicate messages about the identity of the person using the markers. Not only do the markers act as a way to identify individuals, they also are used to police individuals. To apply this understanding of identity to the soyboy discourse, the discourse can be analyzed as a tool that contributes to a controlling image. The dehumanization process is the discourse surrounding the soyboy. The soyboy has general definitions, but when used in the discourse online signals specific meaning to the user and those engaging with the user's message. The soyboy is an image that acts to control those stepping outside of trad-masculinity. Not only does the soyboy have connotations, there is the meme of the soyboy that is used with as well. The soyjak meme, seen in Figure 1.2, is a figurative image that represents all of the negative traits that one has if they are a soyboy. In my interviews, each participant said they do not want to be seen as the soyjak image depicts a person. They recognize the meme as something they do not want to be associated with. The soyboy as a controlling image polices not only gender expression beyond trad-masculinity and emphasized femininity, but also polices norms, values, and beliefs.

For example, one of the norms policed by the soyboy discourse is how emotions are or are not expressed. The norm associated with the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity sets a standard that emotional expression or displays of empathy are deviant. The symbolic boundary naturalizes the ideas within the boundary, so norms are seen as inherent to individuals. When people break the norm, not only does this mean they are seen as deviant, but the breaking of the norms also indicates a level of unnaturalness. The naturalization of norms and values, the



Figure 1.2

differences between symbolic boundaries, leads to harsher protection of the boundary by those within the group. If they feel they are different from those outside of the group, not because of social construction, but because of a biological/natural difference, they will be more attached to the boundary. Those that deviate from the boundary norms are called a soyboy or any variety of soyboy adjacent words. Another part of the norm policed by the soyboy discourse is consumption of meat. If a person follows a diet outside of the norm of meat consumption, the label of soyboy may be used. The norms, values, and beliefs of the symbolic boundary are being protected by the discourse and by individuals who use the discourse.

While this type of discourse may act as a controlling image that punishes those outside of the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity, this discourse acts as a control that also restricts and ties individuals within the boundary to the boundary further. Almost all of the participants from Component II mentioned not caring if someone called them a soyboy. The majority of them said that type of language does bother them, but when asked who would be worried about being labeled a soyboy, the participants collectively said the people who participate in the discourse are the ones most influenced by the messages of the discourse. The participants believed that people, specifically men who use the word soyboy, would be the people who would feel anxiety about being perceived as a soyboy. The discourse acts as a control because it categorizes alternative masculinities and femininities as the bogeyman that represents going against the norms of the symbolic boundary. The target being those who do not fit within trad-masculinity, but the impact of the controlling image can be seen more within the boundary than outside of it. While people with hybrid masculinity, alternative masculinities, or feminine people are controlled by the soyboy image, that image is more of a threat to those within the boundary to not move away from the norms, values, and beliefs of trad-masculinity.

The Rosenfeld and Tomiyama (2020) study found that young, white, conservative men were likely to avoid vegetarian or vegan diets because of anticipation of stigma from their peers.

With the application of this idea, the soyboy discourse offers an example of how the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity creates identities that share norms, values, and beliefs of the boundary. Many of the people within this boundary have similar identities. If someone within the boundary were to think about deviating from the norms, values, and beliefs of the boundary, they may experience anxiety about anticipated stigma from their peers. This type of anticipation motivates avoiding breaking norms, values, and beliefs. The soyboy discourse is a form of communication to both people outside of the boundary as well as people within the boundary. The controlling images act to stigmatize individuals of alternative masculinities and femininities, which does harm those people but also restricts those within the group.

Conclusion

The soyboy discourse can be conceptualized as a circular process of cultural reproduction. Shown in Figure 8.1, the soyboy discourse is a part of a larger cycle of cultural reproduction. (1) *Symbolic boundaries* inform cultural knowledge, that shape (2) individual *identity*, which are then (3) policed by *controlling images*, that reify *boundaries*. While it can't be answered where this cycle begins, the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity informs cultural knowledge. The boundary has norms, values, and beliefs that are shared by the group of people within the boundary. The trad-masculinity boundary has norms of restricted emotional expression, expectations of restrictive gender roles, expectations of men's roles in work, assumed heterosexuality and sexual behavior from men, ideological political conservatism, and belief in christianity. This symbolic boundary has norms, values, and beliefs that lend to power hoarding among those in the boundary. The individual identity is shaped by the symbolic boundary of trad-masculinity. Using the soyboy discourse, the individual has their cultural knowledge that shapes how they want to be perceived and how they do not want to be perceived. The discourse acts as a form of communication to indicate to others where one falls

in proximity to the boundary. By using the cultural knowledge of trad-masculinity, individuals work to shape their identity around the expectations of that boundary, which responds to cultural shifts as threats which cause an exaggerated reaction from individuals to strengthen their symbolic boundaries. The soyboy discourse functions as a control that defends the norms, values, and beliefs held by the boundary when it is threatened. The shifts in cultural understandings of masculinity push against trad-masculinity, which results in identity threat to the group values leading to the use of the soyboy as a controlling image. The soyboy is a controlling image that polices how masculinity should be performed. The controlling image is used by people who want to bolster their own identity, while also reifying the boundary of trad-masculinity.

The soyboy discourse includes mundane interactions that seem as though they would not impact individuals, but especially seem unimportant to structural forces. One of the tweets collected in Component I highlights how this dismissal of mundane interactions often excuses rhetoric that contributes to social inequalities. Mentioned previously, a tweet included hashtags and rhetoric that contributes to the great replacement theory, which was inspired by white supremacist ideologies about nonwhite people illegally entering the United States to overrun elections (NPR 2022). This tweet demonstrates how the mundane or low-stakes act of tweeting or sharing a hashtag can normalize extreme ideologies that can lead to acts of mass violence, such as the case of the man who killed ten people in a racist attack. The suspect engaged in these rhetorics online and used the same language and messaging in his 180-page manifesto (NPR 2022).

Not every person who uses the language of the trad-masculinity boundary will act violently, but the discourse of the boundary contributes to violent ideologies. While mass shootings are no longer rare in the United States, other acts of violence that are often reflective of larger beliefs are even more common, specifically intimate partner violence. Using the

National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, Miller and McCaw found that 37.3 percent of women in the study experienced some form of intimate partner violence (2019). In a study of 600 men, Reidy et al. found that the stress of masculinity threat functioned as a predictor for men's history of intimate partner violence against their female partners (2014). Since the soyboy discourse participates in protecting threatened identities, there is a possible connection between men who are committed to the norms and values of the discourse and those men who act violently toward their intimate partners. While this project did not take on the goal to find associations between the soyboy discourse and intimate partner violence, the connection can still be shown as a possible consequence of the mundane, everyday statement reinforcing gender restrictiveness and inequalities examined in this study.

The soyboy is one example of a cultural discourse that could be plugged into this cycle. The circle of cultural reproduction offers an analysis of how inequalities that are often referred to as structural inequalities are reinforced at both a macro and micro level. Structural inequality is a broad term that is difficult to define in a tangible manner, which means the inequality might be difficult to define. By using the soyboy cycle to examine reproduction of cultural knowledge, one is able to see the larger picture. By first identifying and defining a symbolic boundary, one can then see how the cultural knowledge from the boundary shapes individual identity. That identity shapes how one will be able to use controlling images. The controlling image is shaped by the symbolic boundary and is used to reward identities within the boundary and punish identities outside of the boundary.

While this study outlines how the soyboy discourse reinforces symbolic boundaries, offers an outlet for threatened identities and identity building, and acts as a controlling image for threatened identities and boundaries, this study is not without limitations. The collection of tweets is limited to a month, which exclude possible discourse in other periods throughout the designated timespan. Along with the limitations of collection of data for Component I, the

participant recruitment for Component II led to a population that is majority politically left leaning. While this allowed for an analysis of how left leaning people perceive the soyboy discourse, it excludes how those who identify as politically right might understand the soyboy discourse. Along with the political spectrum, almost half of the participants identified as LGBTQ+. This number in the participant population might impact the types of online spaces they are engaging with. Their online spaces may possibly be having and participating in a different discourse surrounding gender compared to the general public. For these reasons, further research is needed to include how the findings from Component I might be interpreted by a politically right leaning community and a population more representative of the United States population. Along with including politically right individuals, future research should include other social media platforms to see if the discourse is reflective in other digital spaces.

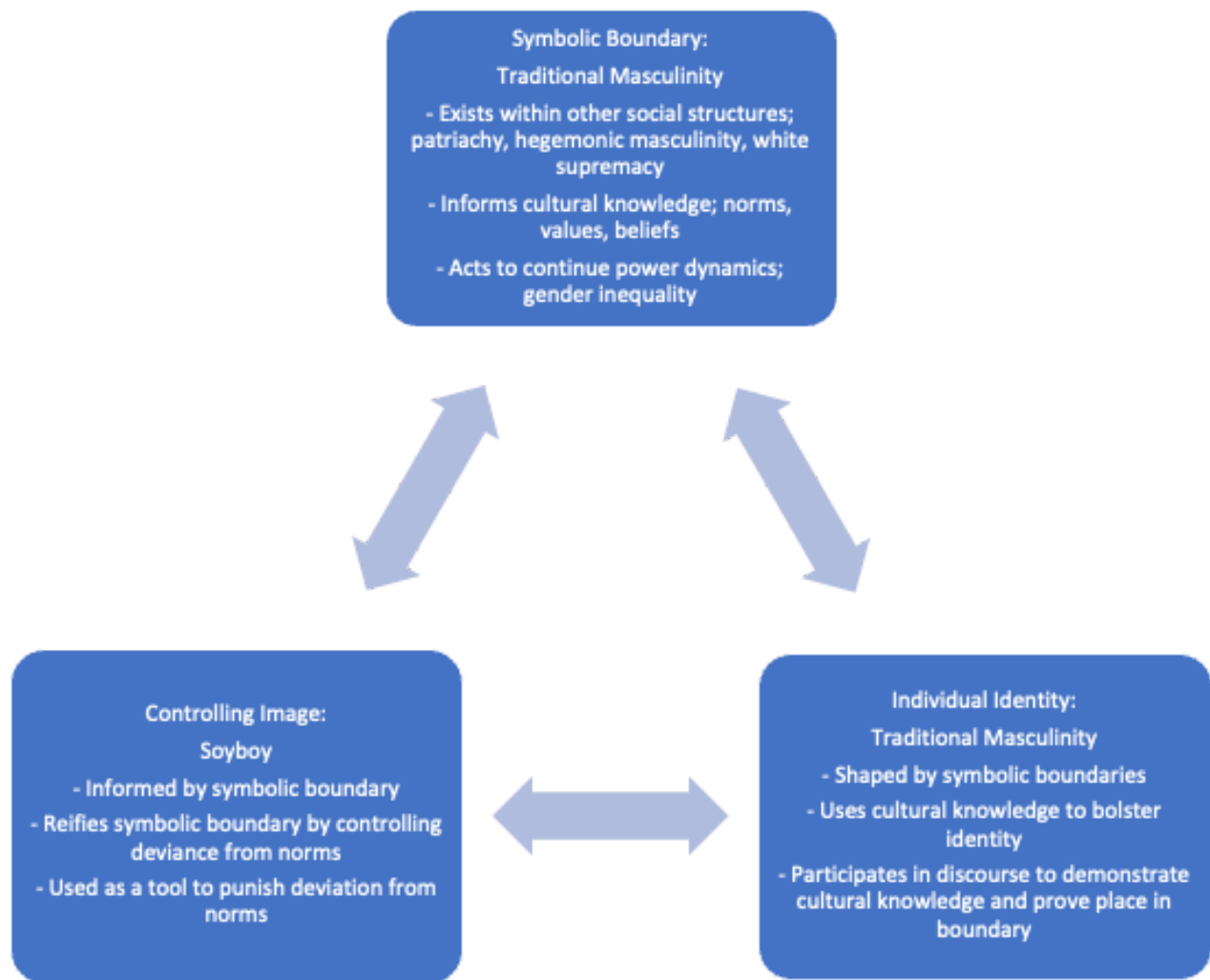


Figure 8.1

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email Sent to Professors

Dear Dr. _____:

My name is Anne Patrick, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Sociology.

Recently, I started my dissertation project that focuses on online interactions and gender.

I am actively collecting data and was wondering if you could share this request for participants with your students in _____.

If you would be willing, here is the recruitment script:

"Hey students! Are you active on social media? Do you enjoy using social media? Do you use social media as a way to communicate with friends and other people? If so, you might be interested in taking part in our research study about online interactions. Questions will be asked surrounding topics of use of social media, how you use social media, and your ideas on social media. There is a QR code available on the poster attached to this email. Through that email you will find a survey. Please complete the survey if you are interested in participating in this project."

I am also attaching a recruitment flyer to share as well.

I hope you will consider sharing the information with your students, and would appreciate a confirmation if you do so. I would also be happy to answer any questions that you might have concerning the study. This project has been reviewed by the Virginia Tech HRPP (#21-589).

Thank you,

Anne Patrick

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster



Department Of Sociology
560 McBryde Hall (0137)
225 Stanger Street
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540-231-8971 Fax: 540-231-3860
www.sociology.vt.edu

Hey Hokies!

Are you active on social media? Do you enjoy using social media? Do you enjoy memes? Do you use social media as a way to communicate with friends and other people?



If you answered yes to any of these questions, you might be interested in being a part of our study. We seek to understand how individuals interact with others and think about others on social media. The survey will take less than five minutes and, if eligible, based on survey responses, interviews will last between 30-45 minutes. Simply follow the QR code (or <https://forms.gle/87Y9zcXEd9YzH3nW6>) linked to the short survey!



If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Anne Patrick at annemp@vt.edu

This is a Virginia Tech research study that was reviewed by Virginia Tech HRPP (#21-589).

Invent the Future

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

Appendix C: Recruitment Email Sent to Students After Initial Survey

Dear _____,

My name is Anne Patrick, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Sociology.

Recently, I started my dissertation project that focuses on online interactions and gender.

You answered a series of questions on (date their survey was submitted) and based on your responses to the survey collected, you are eligible to participate in the interview process of this study. Attached to this email is the consent form which you can review. The consent form also includes further information.

Once you have reviewed the consent form and are interested in participating, please respond with an email notifying me. We will then schedule an interview date and time. The consent form will be signed at that time before the interview begins.

I will send a reminder email if I have not heard back in one week. If you do not reply to that email, we assume you are uninterested. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Anne Patrick

Appendix D: Interview Participant Consent Form

Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Title of research study: “Am I A Soy Boy?” Examining the Gendered and Political Meaning of the Soy Boy Discourse.

Principal Investigator: David Brunsmad, Email: brunsmad@vt.edu, Phone number: 573-355-0599

Other study contact: Anne Patrick, Email: annemp@vt.edu, Phone number: (606)356-4399

You are invited to participate in this research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

My name is Anne Patrick, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. I am conducting this research as part of my dissertation study, in which I study the online discourses and online interactions.

What Should I Know?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in an interview that is scheduled to last between 30 to 45 minutes. During this interview, you will be asked about your social media use and perspectives on online discourses. This study examines how discourses are used online and how that might be used offline, during face-to-face interactions. This document is a consent form. If you choose to participate in this study, your name and other identifying information will remain confidential. You will be given a pseudonym in any writings or presentations related to this project.

If you at any point feel uncomfortable, you may deny response to any question that might make you feel discomfort, and/or withdraw at any point throughout the study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The coinvestigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

Confidentiality

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

All data that is collected for this research will be password protected, stored securely and separately from each other. In addition, your data will not be accessible by anyone except for

Consent to Take Part in a Research Study

Anne Patrick as well as Dr. David Brunnsma. All data for this research will be deleted within two years of September 2021.

Who Can I Talk To?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Anne Patrick at annemp@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Signature Block for Consent

Please complete the following section to document consent:

Do you wish to participate?

Record Subject's Response: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you agree to be audio-taped?

Record Subject's Response: ☐ Yes ☐ No

Printed Name of Person Consenting

Signature of Person Consenting

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent.

Date

Appendix E: Reminder Recruitment Email Sent to Students

Dear _____,

Hope you are well. This is a reminder email about participating in the interview process of the study on online interactions and gender. If you are interested in participating in the study, please send a quick response to schedule an interview time and date.

I appreciate your survey response and hope to hear from you soon. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you,

Anne Patrick

Appendix F: Initial Recruitment Survey

- What is your full name?
- What is your email address?
- What social media platforms do you regularly use?
- Have you ever heard or seen the phrase “cuck”?
- Have you ever heard or seen the phrase “soyboy”?
- What do you think this tweet means?
 - *“Truth is no woman likes a simp.*
 - *A person who might seem like a misogynist in reality is way more attractive in comparison to a soyboy simp.”*

Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about online interactions and conversations - particularly as they take place on social media platforms. Before we begin, I want to ask if you have any questions about the consent form. Do you have any questions about the consent form or the study?

Social Media Use

I'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about your social media use.

- For starters, what social media apps do you use?
- What does it look like when you use these apps? How do you use them?
 - Prompt for each platform. How do you use Twitter? What is a Twitter session like for you?
- What do you like about them?
 - Prompt for each?
- What do you not like about them?
 - Prompt for each?

- Do you engage with people and/or other accounts online, through social media?
 - Who?
 - How?
- Do you use anonymous social media profiles?
 - If so, why?
 - If not, why not? And, What do you think of anonymous social media profiles?
 - How do you feel about anonymous social media profiles?
- What, if anything, would you change about (insert social media platform here) if you had a say in the matter? Why?

Online Discourse

I'd like to now shift to online interactions and conversations and how these are experienced.

- What do you enjoy about threaded discussions on social media platforms?
- If I were to ask you about how gender is talked about on social media, what comes to mind?
 - What are some of the conversations? Examples?
 - Where do you see the conversations?
 - Are these conversations you see in day to day life offline?
 - Examples? Do they look different than on social media?
- If I were to ask you about how politics is discussed on social media, what comes to mind?
 - What are some of the conversations? Examples?
 - Where do you see them?
 - Are these conversations you see in day to day life offline?
 - Examples? Do these conversations look different than on social media?
- How influential do you think social media is to your friends?
 - To people in general?
 - Other influences?

- Have you ever heard of trolling online?
- How would you describe trolling online?
 - What are some examples that come to mind?
- How important or impactful do you believe online name calling or trolling is?
- Have you ever seen this meme? What do you think of when you see these?
- How do you think people on social media relate this to manliness?



(Depending on how they answer the previous question:)

- How do you think people on social media relate this to politics?

Soyboy discourse

There are some specific topics I would like to ask you about. You answered you have (or have not) heard of the soyboy. I am going to show you some tweets that use the word and we can chat about that.

"Sorry, had to look it up SOY BOY: The average soy boy is a feminist, non-athletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labelling the opposition as "Nazis". (<https://t.co/xhodRcz5m5>)"

"@Rothmus Dosen't look like he does much physical work. #soyboy"

"Snowflake Offended By Own Self Won't Come Out Of Safe Space <https://t.co/XRLWK1FL8f> #soyboy #socialism <https://t.co/9SCH4BD9Nv>"

- What do you think these tweets mean?
 - Go through each one? Probe. Follow-up.
- Do any other words, concepts, or phrases that you see online come to mind after looking at these tweets? Other types of conversations?
- If you imagine the person who tweets out these statements, what would they be like? Could I have a description of that person from your perspective?
- After looking at these tweets, what do you think makes someone a soyboy?
- Are there any other concepts or ideas about manliness that comes to mind after thinking about the soyboy?
- How would you feel if someone referred to you or a friend as a soyboy?
 - If they say "I wouldn't care": Interesting,
 - Do you think there are people who would care? What might they be like?
 - What if this term was used within all-female group? All-male group? Female-to-male? Etc.

In Real Life

So social media and online interactions are important for us in our current lives - I would like to move onto some questions about that impact.

- Do you and friends use jokes or words from social media while talking to each other in person?
 - If so, what?
 - If no, why not?
- Do you see other people using jokes, words, concepts from social media while talking to each other in person?
 - If so, what?
 - If no, why not?
- If soyboy is used in in person conversation, what type of conversations do you imagine it being used in?
- Do you see the soyboy and similar conversations happening online impacting how people may interact with each other?
- There was a recent trend on tiktok involving a creator named Andrew Tate, do you know anything about him? If so, what?
 - How might the type of content he creates impact face-to-face interactions?

Demographic Questions

What is your academic standing?

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Graduate Student

What category/ies best describe your race/ethnicity? Check all that apply.

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ American Indian/Native American
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Latino/a or Hispanic
- ☐ Other: _____

What option(s) best describe(s) your gender identity?

Check all that apply.

- ☒ Woman
- ☐ Man

☐ Non-binary

☐ Prefer not

☐ Self define: _____

Do you identify as LGBTQ+?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What is your political affiliation?

☐ I do not have a political affiliation.

☐ I do not know.

☐ Left

☐ Moderate

☐ Right

☐ Other: _____

What is your age?: _____

Table 1.

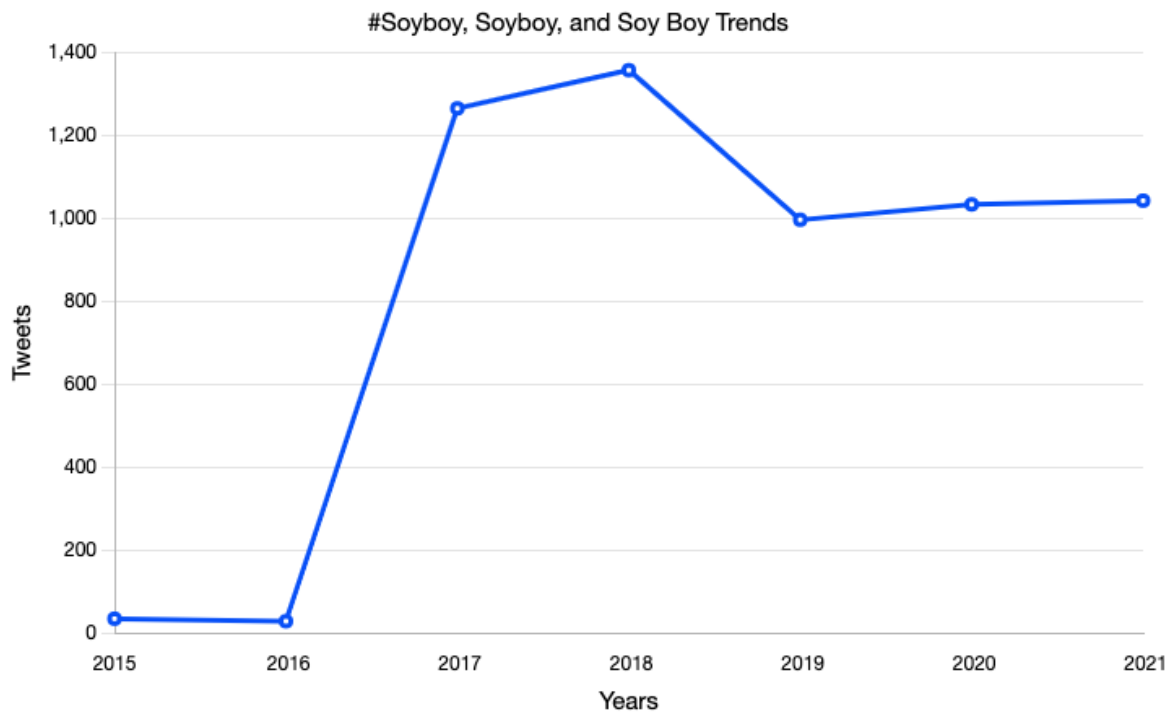


Table 2.

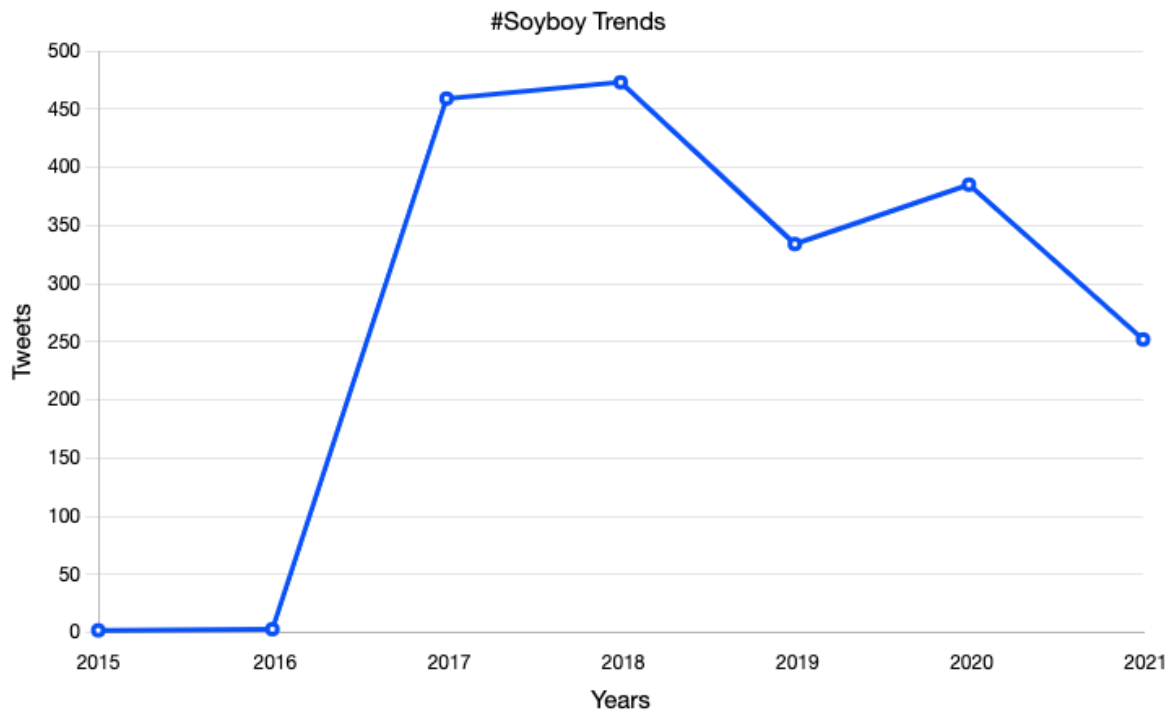


Table 3.

Codes	Example Tweets
Hashtags	"Don't you get tired of being less than a man? Also have a serious question, will you wear that mask forever? #SoyBoy #betacuck"
Comparison to women	"The men look like women,, ohhhh that's the plan !!! Generation of #soyboy"
COVID-19	"Pathetic. Put on your mask and go to Costco to buy your tampons in bulk before the shelves are empty.. #SoyBoy"
Shaming of restricted diets	"You are not a man if you do not eat animal flesh. This is in the Bible, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution and written on the back of every #Mancard ever issued. #soyboy #grassguy #leaflover #barkboi #dirt dude #waterweaking"
Consumption of soy	"stop eating soy it is feminizing the world and soon men will lose all their culture and become weak feminine pansies who only care about having gay sex and stopping straight marriage #soy #soyboy #wakeupsheeple #men #mgtow #gay #yum #momsagainstsoy"
Emotions	"Maybe – but he's definitely a sobbing little bltch. #soyboy"
Feminism	"Happy #InternationalMensDay! REMEMBER: - Masculinity is not toxic - Your penis is perfectly fine - Fancying women isn't sexist - Nor is enjoying pornography - Criticising feminism isn't misogyny - Being a #soyboy won't get you laid "
Hormones	"another limp, testosterone deficient cuck straight out of central casting #SoyBoy"
Leftism	"Aww. Libs can't take it when they get called out for their lies and slander. #SoyBoy"
Manhood	"Masculine Men do not wear make-up, high heels, dresses and they do not Veet their balls. It's just that simple, #SoyBoy"
Politicians	"Hey #SoyBoy President Trump was investigated for 2 YEARS by the liberal FBI. Guess what, they found ZERO! I bet your soy ass couldn't do it!! #FJB"
Race	"More like a #soyboy to me!! Extremely sad that the black culture is conditioned to think EVERYONE is racist!!!"
Weakness	"Awww and you fell for it... #Weak #SoyBoy #BetaBoi"

Table 4.

	Gender	Age	Race and Ethnicity	Identifies as LGBTQ+	Year in School	Political Belief on Spectrum
Rachel	Woman	20	White	no	Junior	Right
Ricky	Man	21	Asian American, biracial	no	Senior	Left
Teresa	Woman	20	White	yes	Sophomore	Left
Bonnie	Woman	19	White	yes	Sophomore	Left
Ella	Woman	18	White, Hispanic	no	Freshman	Right
Andy	Man	19	White, Jewish	yes	Sophomore	Left
Byron	Man	24	White	yes	Junior	Left
Zach	Man	20	White, Jewish	yes	Junior	Left
Gabe	Man	19	White	yes	Freshman	Left
Tyler	Man	19	Israeli, Hispanic	no	Junior	Middle
Whitney	Woman	18	African American, biracial	no	Freshman	Left
Katie	Woman	18	White	no	Freshman	Left
Norman	Man	18	White, Hispanic	no	Freshman	Left
Travis	Man	22	White	yes	Senior	Left
Julie	Woman	21	White	no	Senior	Left
Maria	Woman	18	White	yes	Freshman	Left
Chelsea	Woman	20	White, Hispanic	no	Sophomore	Left
Lyla	Woman	20	African American	no	Junior	Middle