



Masculinity Contest Culture in German Startups: A Quantitative Study on Prevalence

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Abstract

It is frequently reported that the environments within tech startups are characterized by the celebration of masculine norms and competitive behaviors, which ultimately affect an inclusive work environment and employee well-being. However, there is a lack of sound empirical evidence, including startups in other industries, to substantiate these claims. This study investigates the prevalence of masculinity contest culture (MCC) within German startups through a quantitative analysis involving 101 participants. The Masculinity Contest Culture scale was employed to assess the manifestations of traditional masculine norms related to emotional resilience, physical superiority, workaholism, and aggressive competitiveness. Results show an overall low prevalence of MCC, with no significant differences based on gender perceptions, contradicting previous studies suggesting entrenched masculinity in startups. “Put Work First” emerged as the most prominent dimension, reflecting a persistent culture of work prioritization. This study challenges the stereotype of startup environments as bastions of toxic masculinity. The findings underscore the need for further research to understand cultural factors influencing startup ecosystems and to foster healthier work environments. Future studies should expand sample sizes to validate these findings and enhance generalizability.

Keywords: gender dynamics, organizational behavior, toxic masculinity, work environment, workplace culture

1. Introduction

Startups are regarded as significant contributors to technological advancement and are lauded for their capacity to disrupt established industries through innovative, rapidly scalable business models. Their status as nascent, small- to mid-sized enterprises contributes to their reputation as agile disruptors (MacVicar & Throne, 1992; Ries, 2011; Cockayne, 2019; Jansen et al., 2023). Startups are associated with innovation, technocentrism, and rapid growth. On the one hand, they are linked with an informal organizational culture marked by youth, flexibility, and dynamism. On the other hand, they are associated with an extreme dedication to work and stressful working environments (Cockayne, 2019; Koskinen, 2021).

The startup environment is shaped by cultural norms and practices that prioritize traditional masculine traits and behaviors (Tobiasiewicz, 2021). In the context of technology startups, masculinity has been identified as a geeky “brogrammer” culture (Wynn & Correll, 2018), “dude culture,” “bro culture” (Miller et al., 2021), or “tech bro masculinity” (Crandall et al., 2021). This manifests in ways that perpetuate male dominance and marginalize other genders and identities. Such an environment is typically regarded as toxic, accompanied by an acute disavowal of femininity that compels individuals who do not align with the conventional norms of white, heterosexual, able-bodied masculinity to internalize gender stereotypes and align themselves with the prevailing masculine model (Marlow & McAdam, 2013; Massanari, 2016; Papageorgiou, 2018; Edwards & McGinley, 2019; Miller et al., 2021).

Berdahl and colleagues (2018) proposed that this phenomenon could be conceptualized as a masculinity contest culture (MCC). In workplaces where MCC is the dominant culture, there is a constant competition for dominance, with those who most closely align with the masculine ideal gaining the greatest advantage. MCC manifests in four distinct dimensions. (1) “Show No Weakness” (hiding emotions and vulnerability), (2) “Strength and Stamina” (displaying physical endurance and strength), (3) “Put Work First” (giving absolute priority to work over personal life), and (4) “Dog Eat Dog” (engaging in cutthroat competition) (Glick et al., 2018, p. 451). The ongoing pursuit of status under a “survival of the fittest” mentality has the potential to be detrimental to the well-being of individuals from all gender identities (Berdahl et al., 2018; Regina & Allen, 2023; Xie & Zheng, 2023).

Startups demonstrate several characteristics associated with MCC: survival pressure within the industry, a high proportion of men among founders and staff, hierarchical structures (Berdahl et al., 2018), intense competition for resources (Ely & Meyerson, 2010), and an emphasis on brilliance (Vial et al., 2022). These characteristics suggest the pervasive presence of MCC. However, there is a dearth of quantitative research on startup culture, including MCC, to corroborate this presumption. This study aims to contribute to the existing body of purely qualitative research on startup masculinities (Wynn & Correll, 2018; Pöllänen, 2021; Tobiasiewicz, 2021) by providing quantitative evidence of the prevalence of MCC in startups and by extending the evidence base beyond tech startups.

In contrast to anecdotal evidence and qualitative findings, the results of this study indicate that MCC is not a significant feature of startup culture. The preliminary findings indicate that the startup work environment, despite its male dominance, does not significantly correlate with MCC. This observation highlights the necessity for further investigation into the underlying factors that drive MCC.

2. Methods

A quantitative study was conducted to examine the prevalence of MCC in German startups. The Masculinity Contest Culture (MCC) scale, comprising 20 items, was employed to assess MCC (Glick et al., 2018). In accordance with the methodology delineated by Matos and colleagues (2018), the participants were requested to indicate on a five-point Likert scale the extent to which each of the statements resonated with them with regard to their own work environments. The response options ranged from 1 (indicating that the statement was not at all applicable to their work environment) to 5 (indicating that the statement was entirely applicable to their work environment). Sample items for the four MCC dimensions following the stem “In my work environment,” are: “Admitting you don’t know the answer looks weak” (Show No Weakness); “It’s important to be in good physical shape to be respected” (Strength and Stamina); “To succeed you can’t let family interfere with work” (Put Work First); “You’re either ‘in’ or you’re ‘out,’ and once you’re out, you’re out” (Dog Eat Dog).

In order to ascertain the degree of internal consistency exhibited by the MCC scale and its constituent subscales, the Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient was calculated as part of a reliability analysis. This yielded an alpha value of .95 for the overall scale, which serves to indicate excellent internal consistency, while the values obtained for the four subscales ranged between .84 and .93. These results demonstrate that the MCC scale maintains a high degree of internal consistency, specifically in the context of startups.

Other variables of interest were self-reported and included the participants' position in the organization, their gender, and the industry in which the startup operated.

A database comprising qualified commercial register data on startups was employed for the purpose of sampling. In total, 3,761 startup organizations were contacted via email, with the message directed to founders, executives, and staff members. To reduce the potential for bias and socially desirable responding, the survey was framed as a study on startup culture. The participants selected themselves through a text link and provided informed consent. The data were collected anonymously through an online survey conducted from February 6 to March 31, 2024. A total of 118 participants responded, resulting in a response rate of 3.1%. The dataset was cleansed by excluding cases that completely lacked responses to the MCC scale. The final dataset included 101 cases.

Of the 101 participants, 71.9% were identified as founders, board members, or managing directors. The participants identified as male at a rate of 54.5%, female at 43.6%, and non-binary at 2%. The majority of startups were in technology and software development (65.4%), followed by health and medicine (13.9%) and clean technology (10.9%), which constituted the largest groups by far.

3. Results

The overall mean score for the MCC scale was 1.80 ($SD = 0.80$). The scale comprises four dimensions. The four dimensions are as follows: Show No Weakness, Strength and Stamina, Put Work First, and Dog Eat Dog. The summary statistics for the MCC scale and its dimensions are presented in Table 1. The Show No Weakness dimension exhibited a mean score of 1.56 ($SD = 0.91$), while the Strength and Stamina dimension demonstrated a mean score of 1.72 ($SD = 0.94$). The mean score for the Put Work First dimension was 2.14 ($SD = 0.93$), while the mean score for the Dog Eat Dog dimension was 1.77 ($SD = 0.91$). These results illustrate the variability across the different aspects of MCC.

Table 1: Summary statistics for MCC scale items by dimension

Dimension and Item	M	SD
Show No Weakness	1.56	0.91
1. Admitting you don't know the answer looks weak.	1.66	1.11
2. Expressing any emotion other than anger or pride is seen as weak.	1.53	1.03
3. Seeking other's advice is seen as weak.	1.44	1.01
4. The most respected people don't show emotions.	1.60	1.00
5. People who show doubt lose respect.	1.62	1.03
Strength and Stamina	1.72	0.94
6. It's important to be in good physical shape to be respected.	1.67	1.02
7. People who are physically smaller have to work harder to get respect.	1.32	0.96
8. Physically imposing people have more influence.	1.71	0.92
9. Physical stamina is admired.	1.99	1.25
10. Athletic people are especially admired.	1.86	1.15
Put Work First	2.14	0.93
11. To succeed you can't let family interfere with work.	1.98	1.13
12. Taking days off is frowned upon.	1.65	1.07
13. To get ahead you need to be able to work long hours.	2.45	1.38
14. Leadership expects employees to put work first.	2.43	1.11
15. People with significant demands outside of work don't make it very far.	2.18	1.21
Dog Eat Dog	1.77	0.91
16. You're either "in" or you're "out," and once you're out, you're out.	1.65	1.05
17. If you don't stand up for yourself people will step on you.	1.48	1.05
18. You can't be too trusting.	1.74	1.12
19. You've got to watch your back.	2.36	1.28
20. One person's loss is another person's gain.	1.53	1.16

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation

An independent samples t-test was employed to ascertain any significant differences in MCC scores between male and other genders. No statistically significant difference was observed between the MCC scores of the male and non-male group ($t(99) = 0.82, p = .412$). These results suggest that participants' gender does not have a significant impact on their perception of MCC. Additionally, separate analyses were conducted for the four dimensions of the MCC scale. These analyses also revealed no statistically significant differences between the male group and the non-male group for any of the dimensions. Detailed results for these analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent sample t-test for participants' gender

Dependent Variable	Male M (SD)	Non-male M (SD)	Levene's F	Levene's p	t-value	df	p-value
MCC	1.86 (0.82)	1.72 (0.77)	0.037	.848	0.824	99	.412
Show No Weakness	1.61 (1.02)	1.50 (0.76)	0.892	.347	0.589	99	.557
Strength and Stamina	1.77 (0.98)	1.67 (0.89)	0.007	.931	0.539	99	.591
Put Work First	2.20 (0.90)	2.06 (0.97)	0.654	.421	0.792	99	.430
Dog Eat Dog	1.85 (0.96)	1.67 (0.85)	1.437	.233	0.991	99	.324

Note. *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *df* = degrees of freedom

4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer insights into the prevalence of MCC in German startups. The low mean score of 1.80 ($SD = 0.80$) on the MCC scale indicates that toxic masculinity is not a significant issue in startups. This consistent perception, as indicated by the relatively small standard deviation, demonstrates that the workplace culture is largely devoid of hyper-competitiveness (Dog Eat Dog), toughness (Show No Weakness), and a bias towards physical superiority (Strength and Stamina). The findings indicate that startup culture does not entail

MCC. These results challenge the previously presented images of MCC in tech startups (Wynn & Correll, 2018; Edwards & McGinley, 2019; Pöllänen, 2021).

The portrayal of startup culture, particularly in the context of technology, is often informed by qualitative research and anecdotal evidence. Qualitative studies that are pertinent to the subject matter in question tend to focus on isolated cases (Pöllänen, 2021) or selected situations (Wynn & Correll, 2018), thereby failing to provide a comprehensive account of MCC, while the quantitative data from this study provide a broader picture.

The observational data gathered from recruiting sessions held by US technology companies, including but not limited to startups, point to the potential presence of MCC in the field. However, these observations are limited to instances where company representatives interact with external parties in a setting outside of the company itself (Wynn & Correll, 2018). The application of organizational ethnography in a startup company in Finland reveals the presence of gendered practices within the organization's culture. The study uncovers indications of MCC, including indistinct boundaries between work and personal life, competitive conduct, and marginalization, which manifest to varying degrees across departments (Pöllänen, 2021). Although MCC may not be a dominant factor in German startups, it could still manifest in particular contexts or departments.

The perception of MCC behaviors may vary depending on the degree of cultural sensitivity to gendered practices. The Hofstede model of six dimensions of national cultures identifies societies that are masculine by characteristics such as the primacy of work over family, admiration for the strong, emotional restraint, assertiveness, and ambition. Masculinity is high in German-speaking countries, moderately high in English-speaking Western countries, and low in Scandinavian countries (Hofstede et al., 2010). Although Hofstede's initial findings are outdated and major replications are lacking (Gerlach & Eriksson, 2021), the model may provide an explanation for cross-cultural differences in MCC perception as suggested by empirical evidence. In societies where masculinity is highly valued, such as in Germany, instances of MCC may be less noticeable when they do occur.

Comparative studies of startup ecosystems in the USA and Germany indicate that US ventures are more people-oriented and promote a good work-life balance (Geibel & Manickam, 2016). Given such quantitative data and qualitative evidence of startups' people-orientation as a cultural marker (Egan-Wyer et al., 2018), it is at least questionable if the full range of cultural characteristics of MCC is widespread in startups in general and in tech startups in particular.

The Put Work First dimension exhibited the highest score among the four dimensions of MCC ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.93$), indicating that the prioritization of work over personal life remains a notable expectation within startup environments. This finding aligns with existing literature that describes startup culture as intense and demanding, often glorifying workaholicism (Wynn & Correll, 2018; Papageorgiou, 2018).

The results of this study demonstrate that individuals of different genders do not perceive MCC in their work environment in a significantly different manner. This result is inconsistent with previous research on policing that suggests MCC is perceived more strongly from the perspective of women than from that of men (Workman-Stark, 2021). The disparate findings on gender perceptions may be attributed to context dependency or the relatively low level of MCC scores. The low MCC scores suggest the presence of a floor effect, whereby the clustering of responses at the lower end of the scale may obscure potential differences in gender perceptions (Hessling et al., 2004).

An additional explanation for the relatively low MCC scores may be the overrepresentation of founders and top managers in the sample, which constitutes 71.9% of the total number of

respondents. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals in higher-ranking organizational roles tend to perceive their work environment as less dominated by MCC norms than those in lower hierarchical and occupational positions (Workman-Stark, 2021). In startups, discrepancies also emerge between the perspectives of top managers and employees regarding the nature of the startup culture. Top managers are less aware of a hierarchical corporate culture that can potentially give rise to MCC, in comparison to their employees (Strengers et al., 2022).

The prevalence of technology and software development startups in the sample, which constitute 65.4% of the participants, is consistent with the 67.6% proportion of German startups in these business areas (Startupverband, 2024). While the sample offers a robust counterpoint to earlier reports on MCC in tech startups, this particular characteristic constrains the study's generalizability beyond the tech industry.

In addition to the structural characteristics of the sample, the present study has certain limitations that suggest avenues for future research. While the sample size ($N = 101$) and response rate (3.1%) are adequate, the relatively small sample size and low response rate limit the study's generalizability. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling restricts the ability to make generalizable estimating statements, and self-selection bias may have influenced the results. Therefore, future research should aim to include a larger and more representative sample to validate these findings and enhance their generalizability. With respect to the roles within the company, potential avenues of inquiry include a more targeted approach to managers and employees, as well as quota sampling. In addition, future studies should utilize statistical techniques that can adjust for possible floor effects observed in the MCC scores to better capture potential variations.

In order to facilitate a nuanced comprehension of startup culture, it would be beneficial for policymakers and startup incubators to encourage and financially support further research into the cultural factors inherent in startup ecosystems, particularly those related to work prioritization practices. Policymakers could raise awareness about the dynamics of masculinity in professional settings by integrating this topic into entrepreneurship education, with the objective of fostering inclusive and balanced workplace cultures.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate the prevalence of MCC in German startups. In contrast with prior research focused on tech startups, the findings indicate a low overall prevalence of MCC, suggesting that toxic masculinity is not a significant issue within the startup culture. The study challenges the common perception that startups, particularly in the tech sector, are heavily influenced by masculinity contest norms.

Future research should utilize larger samples to enhance the generalizability of these findings, and to take into account potential floor effects. By contesting the qualitative evidence of toxic masculinity as a pervasive element of startup culture, the study provides a basis for re-evaluating how organizational practices can be adapted to foster healthy work environments.

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