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# The Effect of Social Identity Threat on Subjective Ambivalence in a Societal Debate

*Felix Sauer*

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S3141969  
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Department of Psychology  
University of Groningen  
Examiner: Martijn van Zomeren  
Daily supervisor: Gonneke Ton

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### **Abstract**

Dominant groups often show little interest in participating in societal debates, thereby passing on important situations of showing allyship towards marginalized groups and fostering social change. In this study, we argue that such apathy might be explained by subjective ambivalence. It is investigated whether subjective ambivalence can arise as the result of social identity threat, specifically through stereotype and group-image threat which could result in opposing attitudinal consequences. A group of 81 German-speaking men participated in a study about a societal debate on gender-fair language. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the experimental condition, the debate was presented in a way that induced social identity threat, whereas, in the control condition, the debate was described in a more neutral way. Afterwards, subjective ambivalence was measured. The results showed that subjective ambivalence could not be explained by a main effect of social identity threat alone, nor by an interaction between social identity threat and perceived male privilege. However, there was a significant interaction between social identity threat and male identification. This suggests that participants who highly identified as male felt more ambivalent when they experienced social identity threat while for low identified participants the opposite was true. This indicates that subjective ambivalence can be caused by social identity mechanisms. However, this effect depends on the degree to which an individual identifies with the group that is targeted by the threat. Implications of these findings and their potential relevance for future research are discussed.

### **The Effect of Social Identity Threat on Subjective Ambivalence in a Societal Debate**

Societal debates are often considered a key aspect of a strong democratic society (Sunay, 2012) and can be seen as an important aspect of social change. However, it is frequently noted that not all social groups participate in debates equally (e.g., Caínzos & Voces, 2010). When it comes to topics about social inequalities, members of dominant groups often seem uninvolved. For instance, White Americans frequently show apathy towards racial inequalities (Brown et al., 2019), are reluctant to engage in discussion (Apfelbaum et al., 2008), and avoid educational material about racial disparities (Goodman, 1998). A similar pattern of apparent disregard can be found for other advantaged groups, for example, men showing disinterest to learn about feminist teachings (Sang & Glasgow, 2016). Overall, dominant-group members are reluctant to engage in topics that concern their privileged status in society.

Given the importance of societal debates, the uninvolved and avoidance of dominant groups towards topics of social injustices is problematic. Dominant-group members (who are working from a position of power) should use their advantage in a productive way by advocating social justice (DeTurk, 2011) and engaging in allyship towards marginalized groups (Ashburn-Nardo, 2018). However, facilitators, or in this case barriers, to allyship behavior remain relatively understudied in psychological literature (Radke et al., 2020). Understanding the reasons for the lack of involvement dominant groups show when it comes to issues of group inequalities can be useful in facilitating societal debates that further social justice issues.

In the current paper, we argue that dominant-group members might be uninvolved because they experience ambivalence in societal debates. That is, they lack a clear attitude towards the subject of the debate making it difficult for them to take a stance. Attitudinal ambivalence is a conflict in the evaluative structure of an attitude. More specifically, an

ambivalent attitude is characterized by simultaneous positive and negative associations with the object of the attitude. The affective reaction to perceiving such an inconsistency is called subjective ambivalence (Van Harreveld et al., 2015). Holding an ambivalent attitude is usually associated with discomfort (Priester & Perry, 1996) and a general desire to avoid decisions (Van Harreveld et al., 2009). As such, subjective ambivalence frequently results in behavioral apathy (Berndsen & van Pligt, 2004; Costarelli & Colloca, 2004). It is, thus, possible that members of dominant groups do not take part in societal debates because they feel ambivalent towards the topic.

The current study investigates how subjective ambivalence can arise for dominant-group members in a societal debate, specifically as the result of social identity threat. People understand themselves, to a certain degree, in the context of the social groups and categories (e.g., sex, age, ethnicity, profession) they belong to – their social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A person can experience social identity threat when they realize that they might be devalued, marginalized, or discriminated in a particular context based on one of their identities (Steele et al., 2002). This social identity threat can have affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences (see Van Harreveld et al., 2015). Since societal debates naturally involve a range of people with different social identities, we argue that individuals can experience threat in this context. This threat might, in turn, influence their opinion towards the topic of the debate. Specifically, we argue that different kinds of threat can lead to opposite influences on an individual's attitude. Therefore, we investigated whether experiencing social identity threat targeting a privileged social identity has an effect on subjective ambivalence. Furthermore, we explore how social identification and the perception of one's privilege relate to this effect.

### **Social Identity Threat Based on a Privileged Social Identity**

Privilege refers to automatic unearned benefits bestowed upon members of dominant groups based on social identity (Case et al., 2012). Despite the various economic and social advantages that, by definition, come with privilege (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004), membership in a privileged group also comprises a problematic social identity that is associated with certain psychological costs. For one, privilege is unfair. Being a member of a privileged group implies reaping undeserved benefits of the social order. Additionally, ingroup transgressions in the form of historical or ongoing suppression of marginalized groups make privileged groups morally suspect (Knowles et al., 2014). Overall, a social identity that is associated with privilege can be seen as problematic (by the holder) thus opening room for social identity threat. we focus on two specific forms of social identity threat that might be important in their potential to elicit subjective ambivalence: Stereotype threat and group-image threat. Societal debates that revolve around conflicts between groups of different status might elicit these types of threat.

### ***Stereotype Threat***

Stereotype threat occurs when an individual perceives that there is a negative stereotype targeting one of their social identities in a particular situation and they are concerned about being judged or treated negatively on its basis (Spencer et al., 2016). While stereotype threat is typically studied for marginalized groups (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995), it does not require a history of stigmatization and can be elicited for various social identities (Steele et al., 2002). It has been shown that also dominant groups perceive negative stereotypes about their ingroup and are affected by stereotype threat (Vorauer et al., 2000). Stereotype threat has been found to prompt negative thoughts and emotions and induce stress (Adams et al., 2006; Schmader et al., 2008). As a result, afflicted individuals seem to be motivated to avoid the situation or topic in

which they feel threatened (Walton & Cohen, 2007). For example, White participants distanced themselves from Black conversation partners, regardless of their racial prejudice, when threat based on a ‘White racist’ stereotype was present (Goff et al., 2008). Overall, stereotype threat can target privileged social identities and elicit adverse reactions and avoidance tendencies.

### ***Group-Image Threat***

Privilege can be threatening to the dominant group’s image. As indicated before, an individual’s self-concept is tied to a degree to their membership in social groups. To maintain positive self-esteem, the ingroup needs to be perceived in a favorable way (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Ingroup privilege can taint a favorable perception due to its association with unfair advantages or historic and ongoing transgressions. Being confronted with one’s privilege can, thus, result in group-image threat (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). For instance, White Americans that were presented with inequality framed as ingroup advantage (rather than outgroup disadvantage) showed increased feelings of guilt as a sign of group-image threat (Powell et al., 2005). Likewise, inducing thoughts about male privilege reduced the group’s image in men and induced feelings of guilt (Branscombe, 1998). When faced with accusations of unearned group privilege, members of dominant groups frequently show reconciliatory motivations. Framing racial inequalities as ingroup privilege led to increased support among White Americans for affirmative action programs (Lowery et al., 2006) and even increased support for policies that were believed to reduce White advantage (Lowery et al., 2012). In general, dismantling one’s privilege has been argued to be a strategy to dispel group-image threat (Knowles et al. 2014).

### **The Current Study: Social Identity Threat as a Source of Attitudinal Conflict in Societal Debates**

As argued before, being privileged comprises a problematic social identity that can lead to stereotype and group-image threat. A societal debate that makes social identities salient has the potential to elicit these types of social identity threat in members of a privileged group. Given the multitude of factors that influence an individual's attitudes (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), it is likely that experiencing social identity threat can have an impact on one's opinion when participating in a societal debate. The current study investigates whether social identity threat targeting a male identity can lead to subjective ambivalence in men towards a societal debate.

This question is investigated in the context of a societal debate on gender-fair language in Germany. Similar to Spanish and Italian, in the German language, it is common to use the masculine word when referring to mixed-gender groups. This use of a "generic masculine" has been criticized for its lack of inclusivity towards women (Reimann, 2020). As a solution for gender-fair language, it is proposed to implement *gendering* (Diewald & Steinhauer, 2020). That is, using a word or formulation that explicitly refers to both men and women by, for example, using a combined male and female word instead of only the male. In this debate, men represent the dominant group since the traditional use of the language is only inclusive for men. In summary, we investigate how in a societal debate about gender-fair language, men might experience subjective ambivalence as the result of social identity threat.

### ***Hypothesis 1: The Effect of Social Identity Threat on Subjective Ambivalence***

First, we considered how social identity threat, specifically stereotype threat and group-image threat, could elicit attitudinal conflict in a societal debate. We argue that stereotype threat and group-image threat might be contradicting in the influence they exhibit on a person's attitude. On the one hand, stereotype threat leads to negative thoughts and emotions (Adams et al., 2006), which likely relates to negative attitudinal associations. For example, it was shown



that stereotype threat in the workplace is associated with negative job attitudes (von Hippel et al., 2013). This finding indicates that experiencing stereotype threat in a societal debate likely leads to a negative attitude toward the subject of the debate. On the other hand, group-image threat commonly relates to feelings of guilt and reconciliatory motivations (Branscombe, 1998; Lowery et al., 2012), which can have consequences for people's attitudes. For example, group-image threat increased attitudes towards affirmative action in White Americans (Jones et al., 2019). To dispel group-image threat in a societal debate, members of a dominant group likely display positive attitudes towards solutions that can reduce their ingroup's privilege. Taken together, when a debate presents both, group-image threat and stereotype threat, members of dominant groups are likely to experience an attitudinal conflict. While stereotype threat might compel them to hold a negative attitude, group-image threat could motivate them to express a positive attitude. Consequently, perceiving an attitudinal conflict would lead to an ambivalent attitude and, thus, subjective ambivalence. Therefore, we hypothesized that men experiencing social identity threat targeting their male identity increases their subjective ambivalence in a societal debate (Hypothesis 1).

***Hypothesis 2: Moderation of Social Identity Threat Effect on Subjective Ambivalence Through Perceived Privilege***

Furthermore, we investigated perceived male privilege in the context of social identity threat and subjective ambivalence. As argued before, being a member of a privileged social group can be associated with negative implications that can lead to stereotype threat and group-image threat (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Vorauer et al., 2000). This is likely based on the assumption that members of a privileged group, in fact, perceive themselves as privileged. When looking at stereotype threat, a high perception of own privilege might increase the fear of being

judged negatively by others, while not being aware of one's privilege would not bring up such concerns. Similarly, perceived privilege has been found to be associated with guilt, indicating group-image threat (Iyer et al., 2003). For instance, it has been shown that increasing perceived privilege by framing group differences as ingroup advantage (as opposed to outgroup disadvantage) increases ingroup members' attitudes towards reconciliatory actions through collective guilt (Lowery et al., 2012). Overall, this means that an increased perception of own privilege should increase both stereotype threat as well as group-image threat and thus lead to increased attitudinal conflict. We hypothesized that men's perception of male privilege moderates the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, we expect that men who perceive a higher privilege experience more ambivalence because they feel more social identity threat.

***Hypothesis 3: Moderation of Social Identity Threat Effect on Subjective Ambivalence Through Social Identification***

Finally, we investigated whether male identification moderates the relationship between social identity threat and subjective ambivalence. Since social identity threat is based on a particular social identity, the level of identification with that particular group determines how strongly an individual is affected by the threat. It has been demonstrated that the degree of identification with a stigmatized group moderates the effects of stereotype threat (Schmader, 2002). Similarly, the effects of group-image threat increases for individuals that are highly identified with the ingroup (Shuman et al., 2018). This means that men that have a strong male identification are likely to experience social identity threat more strongly in general. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence is moderated by

male identification (Hypothesis 3). Strongly identified men should feel more subjective ambivalence since they are likely more affected by social identity threat.

## Methods

### Participants

Of the overall 103 participants that took part in the study, 22 were excluded. Specifically, participants that did not fit the demographic of native German-speaking men ( $n = 20$ ) or did not complete the questionnaire ( $n = 2$ ) were excluded. This left 81 participants for the analysis. The majority of participants were German ( $n = 76$ ), the other participants indicated to be Austrian or Swiss ( $n = 1$ ), Dutch ( $n = 2$ ), and from non-specified nationalities ( $n = 2$ ). To ensure data anonymity, age was measured in ranges. Most participants were between the age of 21 to 27 ( $n = 48$ ) and 18 to 21 ( $n = 27$ ). Only a minority was above 27 ( $n = 6$ ). The advertisement of the study specifically stated the intended demographic of native German-speaking men and described the study's topic as male attitudes on a societal debate. First-year male Psychology students were recruited online through the SONA participant pool of the University of Groningen ( $n = 53$ ). As indicated before, we selected specifically men for the study since they represent the privileged group in the studied debate and should, thus, be affected by the social identity threat mechanisms that were described before. Furthermore, we restricted the sample to native German speakers since we argued that a native understanding of the German language is required to understand the debate. Finally, we expected students to represent opinions towards gendering relatively balanced. In contrast to the general German population who opposes the use of gender-fair language (Infratest Dimap, 2021), students and young people, in general, tend to show more mixed opinions (Infratest Dimap, 2021; Serafini, 2020). We argued that a well-balanced sample would allow for better generalizability of the findings. Due to the limited number of participants

that fit the desired population in the SONA pool, additional participants were recruited through social media posts, snowball sampling, and flyers ( $n = 50$ ). Only the participants recruited through SONA received compensation in the form of partial course credits.

### **Measures and Materials**

All measures and materials were presented via an online questionnaire constructed with the Qualtrics software (Qualtrics, 2014). Since German speakers were the target group, the questionnaire was presented in German.

#### ***Social Identity Threat Manipulation***

We manipulated social identity threat using an article describing the debate. There were different articles for the two experimental conditions (see Appendix A). In the high-threat condition, the article described the debate in a biased way against men, emphasizing male privilege and criticism directed towards men. For example: “[...] *the generic masculine stands for a "return to power structures long thought to be overcome" [...], as this makes equality more difficult, overrepresents men and reinforces the already existing male privilege.*” In the low-threat condition, the debate was explained in more neutral terms, we avoided mentioning men as a relevant group for the debate in general. For example: “*The use of the generic masculine is criticized primarily for its lack of inclusivity towards females and non-binary people, and is thus considered an outdated aspect of the German language.*”. The articles were accompanied by two tweets that underlined the respective narrative of the articles. Finally, participants answered two questions meant to make possible stereotypes in this debate salient: “*Do you think it is ignorant or sexist not to use gendering correctly?*” and “*Do you think others consider it sexist or ignorant not to use gendering correctly?*”. They were not used in the analysis.

#### ***Independent Measures***

**Male Identification.** We assessed male identification using two items on a seven-point scale. Since the test consisted of only two items, the Spearman-Brown coefficient was calculated as the most accurate reliability coefficient (Eisinga et al., 2013). It showed good a reliability of .87 (Cohen, 1988) for the mean scores of the scale. Participants were asked to indicate how strongly a statement fit for them, ranging from 1 = “*not fitting at all*” to 7 = “*completely fitting*”. The items asked about the importance of being male for their identity: “*Being a man is an important part of my identity*” and “*Being manly is an important part of my self-image*”. The wording was adapted from the male-gender identity scale used by Maass and colleagues (2003).

**Perceived Male Privilege.** Perceived male privilege was assessed using three items on a seven-point scale in which participants stated how strongly a statement fit for them, ranging from 1= “*not fitting at all*” to 7 = “*completely fitting*”. The mean scores of the scale showed an acceptable reliability of  $\alpha = .78$  (Cohen, 1988). The standardized white privilege scale used by Swim and Miller (1999) was adapted to fit for male privilege. The questions were: “*My status as a man grants me unearned privileges in today’s society.*”, “*Men have certain advantages that women do not have.*”, and “*Being a man gives me more opportunities in education and employment*”.

### ***Dependent Measures***

**Manipulation Check.** The effect of the manipulation was assessed using three items on a seven-point scale. Participants were asked to indicate how strongly a statement fit for them, ranging from 1 = “*not fitting at all*” to 7 = “*completely fitting*”. The scale assessed whether they felt their gender was specifically targeted by the debate: “*I think that in this debate others could be prejudiced towards me based on my gender*”, “*I think men are under threat by the gender movement.*”, and “*I think that men are attacked in particular in this debate*”. The mean score of

the scale showed a poor reliability of  $\alpha = .63$  (Cohen, 1988). To compensate for the low reliability of the scale, the items will be addressed in separate analyses.

**Subjective Ambivalence.** Subjective ambivalence was assessed using an eight-item scale as used by Ton and colleagues (in preparation) tailored to fit the specific debate about gender-fair language (see Appendix B). The mean scores of the scale showed a good reliability  $\alpha = .89$  (Cohen, 1988). Items assessed whether participants felt conflicted in their opinion about the debate. For example, “*I feel conflicted about the topic of gendering*” or “*I avoid taking a stand on gendering*” Answer possibilities ranged from 1 = “*not fitting at all*” to 7 = “*completely fitting*”.

**Action Intentions.** We argued before that dominant groups show little behavior in regard to social issues, which might be explained by subjective ambivalence. To test this, we included action intentions as an exploratory variable. It is well established, that subjective ambivalence reduces intentions towards behavior (Brendsen & van Pligt, 2004; Costarelli & Colloca, 2004; Van Harreveld et al., 2009). We expect a negative relation between action intentions and subjective ambivalence. Action intentions were measured with two items, “*Would you take part in a panel discussion on the topic gendering*” and “*Would you discuss this topic with your friends or family?*”. The answer possibilities were “*yes*” and “*no*”. Later analysis of these items showed that the second question: “*Would you discuss this topic with your friends or family?*”, had little variability the majority of participants (68 out of 75) indicated “*yes*” to the question. The question was thus not included in further analyses.

### **Procedure and Design**

The study employed an online experiment in which participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental (high-threat condition) or a control condition (low-threat condition). Of

the 81 total participants, 41 were assigned to the high-threat condition, 40 to the low-threat condition. First, participants were presented with the scales for perceived male identification and perceived male privilege. Afterwards, participants were randomly assigned to the high-threat or low-threat condition. Finally, the manipulation check was administered and subjective ambivalence and action intentions were measured. At the end of the questionnaire, participants received a debriefing, explaining the two conditions of the study and the aim of the research.

### **Power Analysis and Analysis Plan**

Assuming a medium effect size of  $f^2 = .12$  (Cohen, 1988) and a significance level of  $p = .05$  a minimum of 95 participants was calculated using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to achieve a power of 80% in a multiple regression model with three predictor variables. This is larger than the achieved sample size ( $N = 81$ ). Implications will be addressed in the discussion. Due to the smaller sample size, a sensitivity analysis was conducted in G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007) which showed that an effect size of  $f^2 = .14$  would be required to detect significant effects ( $p \leq .05$ ) with a power of .80 given the actual sample size of 81.

### ***Hypothesis 1: Effect of Social Identity Threat on Subjective Ambivalence***

The effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence will be tested using a one-way ANOVA with subjective ambivalence as the dependent variable and social identity threat as the group variable. We expect subjective ambivalence to be significantly higher ( $p \leq .05$ ) in the high-threat condition than in the low-threat condition.

### ***Hypothesis 2: Moderation of Social Identity Threat Effect on Subjective Ambivalence by Perceived Male Privilege***

Hypothesis 2 will be tested using a multiple linear regression with subjective ambivalence as the dependent variable. The interaction term for condition  $\times$  perceived male

privilege is used to predict subjective ambivalence. The main effects of perceived male privilege and condition (high threat, low threat) will also be included as predictor variables. We expect that the interaction of perceived male privilege and condition significantly predicts subjective ambivalence.

***Hypothesis 3: Moderation of Social Identity Threat Effect on Subjective Ambivalence by Male Identification***

Hypothesis 3 will be tested using a multiple linear regression with subjective ambivalence as the dependent variable. The interaction term for condition  $\times$  male identification, condition (high threat, low threat), and male identification will be used as predictor variables. We expect that the interaction of male identification and condition significantly predicts subjective ambivalence.

***Exploration of Action Intentions***

Exploratory analysis will be conducted in order to test whether subjective ambivalence is associated with action intentions in the current study. Since action intentions have been found to reduce with high ambivalence, we expect participants who experience more subjective ambivalence to be less likely to indicate that they would like to take part in a panel discussion (i.e., show action intentions).

## **Results**

For the analyses, the mean score for subjective ambivalence, perceived male privilege, and male identification were calculated. The analysis of the correlation between the main variables showed one statistically significant correlation between male identification and perceived male privilege (see Table 1). We conducted assumption checks for the individual analysis which did not show violations of the assumptions. We did not detect influential outliers.



**Table 1***Descriptive statistics and correlations coefficients of main study variables*

Variable	<i>m</i>	<i>sd</i>	1	2	3
1. Subjective ambivalence	3.13	1.27	–	–	–
2. Perceived male privilege	4.72	1.61	-.11	–	–
3. Male identification	3.99	1.61	-.06	-.34**	–

*Note.* \*\* Statistically significant correlations at the level of  $p \leq 0.01$ .

### Manipulation Check

To test whether participants in the high-threat condition would, in fact, experience more threat, we tested for group difference for the manipulation check variable. An ANOVA was conducted to test whether there was a significant difference in the manipulation check mean score between the threat and control condition. The ANOVA did not show a significant effect of condition on the manipulation check ( $F(1, 80) = 0.01, p = .918$ ). This means that, against our assumptions, we did not find a difference in threat between the group as measured by the manipulation check variable.

Given the poor reliability of the items as a scale ( $\alpha = .63$ ), the effect was tested for the three individual questions with three separate t-test. Again, results showed no group difference for the individual questions: “*I think that in this debate others could be prejudiced towards me based on my gender*” ( $F(1, 80) = 0.01, p = .940$ ), “*I think men are under threat by the gender movement.*” ( $F(1, 80) = 0.10, p = .758$ ), and “*I think that men are attacked in particular in this debate*” ( $F(1, 80) = 0.24, p = .723$ ). Overall, this measure indicates that the high-threat condition did not

experience more threat than the low-threat condition. Implication of this will be addressed in the discussion.

### **Hypothesis 1: Effect of Social Identity Threat on Subjective Ambivalence**

The ANOVA conducted to test the effect of condition (high-threat condition, low-threat condition) on subjective ambivalence showed no significant differences between the groups ( $F(1, 80) = 0.50, p = .480$ ). This means that there was no significant difference in subjective ambivalence between the high-threat and low-threat condition. Contrary to our hypothesis, participants in the high-threat condition did not display more subjective ambivalence than participants in the low-threat condition. This is in line with the analysis of the manipulation check since it did not indicate a difference in threat between the groups.

### **Hypothesis 2: Increase of Social Identity Threat Effect with Increased Perceived Male Privilege**

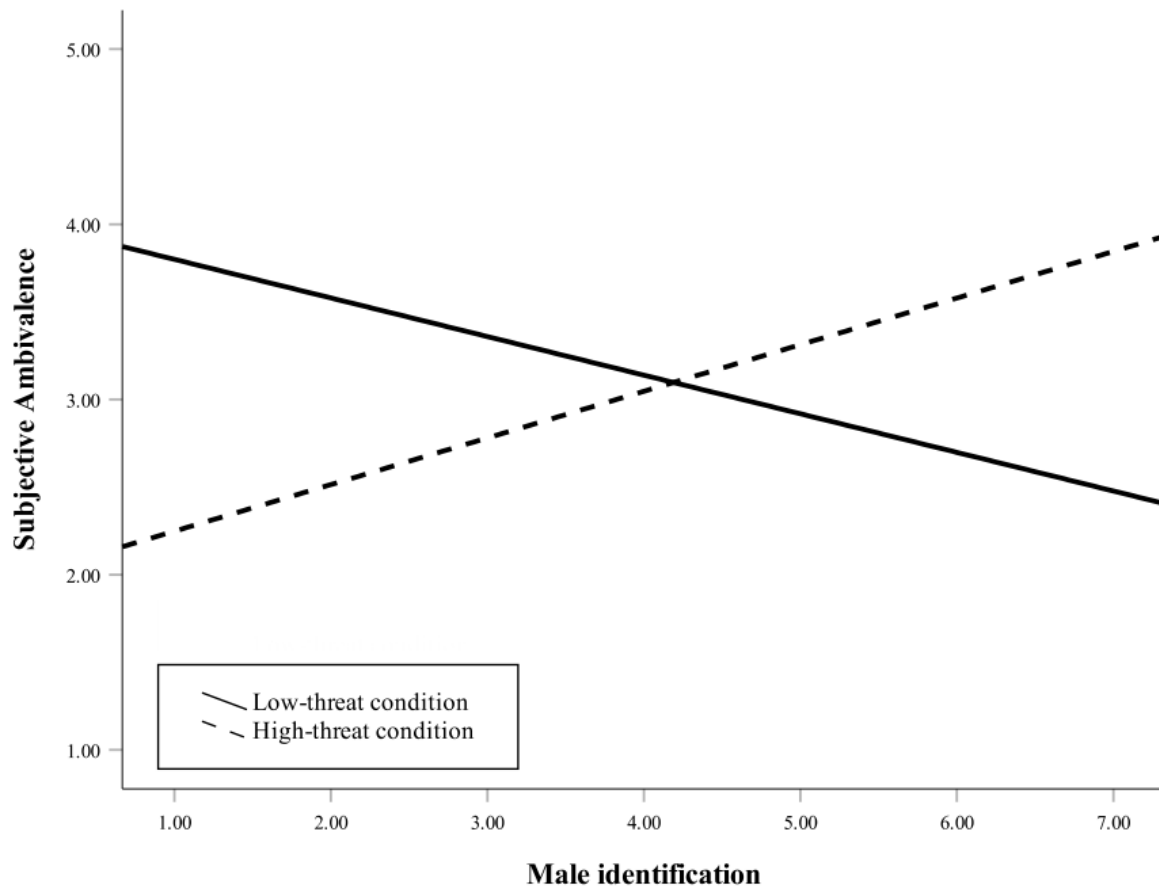
In order to test for an interaction between social identity threat and perceived male privilege, a multiple linear regression was calculated to predict subjective ambivalence based on condition as a factor, male identification as a covariate, and the interaction term of condition  $\times$  male identification. The results showed that neither condition ( $F(1, 80) = 0.41, \beta = -0.68, p = .524$ ), perceived male privilege identification ( $F(1, 80) = 1.09, \beta = -0.21, p = .300$ ), nor the interaction of condition  $\times$  perceived male privilege ( $F(1, 80) = 0.73, \beta = 1.19, p = .395$ ) were significant predictors of subjective ambivalence. This means that contrary to our hypothesis, the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence did not depend on participants level of perceived male privilege.

### **Hypothesis 3: Increase of Social Identity Threat Effect on Subjective Ambivalence with Increased Male Identification**

To test for an interaction between social identity threat and male identification a multiple linear regression was calculated to predict subjective ambivalence based on condition as a factor, male identification as a covariate, and the interaction term of condition  $\times$  male identification. The results showed that condition ( $F(1, 80) = 8.20, \beta = 2.20, p = .005, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .10$ ) and the interaction of condition  $\times$  male identification ( $F(1, 80) = 7.93, \beta = -0.51, p = .006, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .09$ ) were significant predictors of subjective ambivalence. The main effect of male identification did not significantly predict subjective ambivalence ( $F(1, 80) = 0.35, \beta = 0.20, p = .558$ ). Overall, this suggests that the influence of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence differs depending on participants' level of male identification. In the low-threat condition, participants' subjective ambivalence decreased with their level of male identification while in the high-threat condition high male identification was associated with high subjective ambivalence and vice versa (See Figure 1). The effect size of  $\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .09$  is between small and medium Cohen (1988).

**Figure 1**

Interaction plot of subjective ambivalence between conditions, dependent on male identity.



### Exploratory Analysis of Action Intentions

An explorative analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between subjective ambivalence and action intentions. From the two action intentions questions, one question was excluded from the analysis since a ceiling effect was apparent. For this analysis, the question “*Would you take part in a panel discussion on the topic gendering?*” was analyzed. A binary logistic regression predicting action intentions based on subjective ambivalence did not show significant results ( $\chi^2 = 1.22$ ,  $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $p = .269$ ). This suggest that, against our expectations,

whether participants indicated that they would take part in a panel discussion did not depend on their level of subjective ambivalence.

### **Discussion**

The current study examined how subjective ambivalence can arise for men in a societal debate about gender-fair language. We investigated whether men would feel more ambivalence as the result of social identity threat and whether this effect would be moderated by perceived male privilege and male identification. The results show that social identity threat alone did not increase felt ambivalence towards the societal debate. However, when considering participants' level of male identification an effect was found. Specifically, the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence was dependent on an individual's level of male identification. When strongly identified males were exposed to social identity threat, they felt more ambivalent than low identifiers (i.e., men with low male identification). We did not find a similar relationship for the perception of privilege as there was no effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence regardless of participants' level of perceived male privilege. Finally, we could not find an association between subjective ambivalence and people's intentions to take action in the debate. Overall, these findings suggest that social identity threat does have an effect on subjective ambivalence but only when taking people's level of identification into account.

These results contradict our expectation that subjective ambivalence might be caused by social identity threat. We argued that since stereotype threat would induce negative attitudes towards the debate (von Hippel et al., 2013) while group-image threat would result in positive attitudes (Jones et al., 2019) an attitudinal conflict would likely arise. We thus expected that, by itself, social identity threat could induce subjective ambivalence in the participants. However, this was not confirmed by the results. Overall, participants did not feel more ambivalent when

exposed to social identity threat. A possible explanation is that the manipulation did not have the intended effect of inducing social identity threat. The analysis of the manipulation check variable did not show increased threat for the group that was exposed to the social identity threat manipulation. It is possible that men, representing the privileged group in this debate, do not experience threat based on their social identity. However, previous research has consistently demonstrated that men and privileged groups, in general, are affected by both stereotype threat (Aronson et al., 1999; Hartle & Sutton, 2013; Koenig & Eagly, 2005) and group-image threat (Branscombe, 1998; Lowery, 2012), making this explanation unlikely. Another explanation is that the manipulation failed in inducing social identity threat in general or induced threat in both conditions. While this conclusion can explain why there was no overall effect of social identity threat, it cannot explain the findings regarding male identification.

As indicated by the results, the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence is dependent on an individual's level of male identification. Previous research shows that both stereotype threat, as well as group-image threat, are more impactful for individuals that identify strongly with the targeted social identity (Schmader et al., 2002; Shuman et al., 2018). We thus expected that men who are more strongly identified as males would likely be more affected by social identity threat targeting male identity and would consequently experience more subjective ambivalence (Hypothesis 3). Yet, this is only partly supported by our findings. The results suggest, that a high male identification did not simply increase the effect of social identity threat but rather that there was a different effect depending on whether participants had a high or low male identification. In line with our expectations, men that were highly identified felt more ambivalent when exposed to high threat. However, unexpectedly, men that had a weak identification felt less ambivalent when their male identity was threatened. This could explain

why we did not find an overall effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence. While high identifiers showed a reaction to the threat that was in line with our expectations, low identifiers showed an opposite reaction, which led to no overall effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence. Only considering individuals' level of identification revealed that, in fact, people experienced subjective ambivalence when exposed to social identity threat. In summary, to understand whether men feel ambivalent as the result of threats to their male identity, it is essential to consider how strongly they identify with this particular identity.

This relationship between male identification and social identity threat is not fully explained by previous research. It has been demonstrated that high identifiers are more strongly affected by stereotype threat and group-image threat, accordingly, low identifiers are less affected (Schmader et al., 2002; Shuman et al., 2018). As a consequence, being exposed to social identity threat should have a smaller effect on low identifiers than on high identifiers. However, our results suggest that, instead of having little to no impact, social identity threat had a *negative* effect on subjective ambivalence for men who had a low male-identification, meaning their subjective ambivalence actually decreased. These findings are not explained by previous research and it is likely that other mechanisms caused a change in the attitudinal structure of the low identifiers. One possible explanation is that participants with a low male identification reacted to the social identity threat by distancing themselves from their identity. It has been suggested before, that distancing from a privileged social identity can dispel threat targeting that particular dominant groups (Branscombe et al., 2007; Knowles et al., 2014). In line with Heider's (1946) balance theory, this would mean that individuals distancing themselves from their ingroup would also distance themselves from attitudes perceived to be held by the ingroup. In the current study, men, as a group, were presented to hold strong, polarized attitudes in the

debate. Weak identifiers who might wish to distance themselves from this group would then take on a strong opposing attitude and would consequently not feel ambivalent (anymore). In fact, we found a significant negative correlation between male identification and perceived male privilege. This could indicate that participants who perceived a high ingroup privilege (likely as negative) were more distanced from their male identity and, as indicated by the results, more certain in their attitude. This could explain why low identified individuals showed decreased subjective ambivalence when exposed to social identity threat.

Furthermore, the role that the perception of male privilege plays needs to be investigated further. We assumed that a higher perception of one's privilege would increase the effectiveness of social identity threat and in turn increase subjective ambivalence (Hypothesis 2). For one, we argued that a higher perception of own privilege would lead to stronger fears of being stigmatized which would, in turn, lead to more stereotype threat. Furthermore, previous research demonstrated that perception of own privilege can induce group-image threat mechanisms (Schmader, 2002). We could not confirm this in our analysis, a stronger perception of male privilege did not seem to lead to a stronger effect of social identity threat.

An explanation could be that we did not implement perception of ingroup privilege correctly. We measured whether participants themselves thought that they were privileged, it might have been more relevant to assess whether they thought that others perceived them as privileged. In other words, it could be irrelevant to what degree an individual perceived themselves to be privileged but more important whether they thought others did. This argumentation is in line with the mechanisms causing stereotype threat. For this threat to occur, an individual needs to perceive that others might hold negative stereotypes about their social identity (Steele et al., 1995). A similar mechanism might occur in relation to group-image threat



in the sense that this threat occurs when an individual thinks their ingroup is perceived as privileged by others. In the questionnaire, we only measured whether people felt privileged themselves not whether they thought others saw them as privileged. Recognizing, at least to some degree, that the ingroup might be privileged is necessary to realize that other could also perceive this privilege. However, the own perception of privilege might only be weakly related to the fear that others see oneself as privileged. In conclusion, perceived privilege might have been the wrong conceptualization of how privilege functions in relation to social identity threat. It might have been more appropriate to consider whether participants perceived that others thought they are privileged.

Lastly, the results of the explorative analysis of action intentions are not in line with previous research. It has been shown that people who feel ambivalent avoid behavior towards and show little intentions that relate to the attitude they feel conflicted about (Berndsen & van Pligt, 2004; Costarelli & Colloca, 2004). Our results do indicate a similar relationship in the present study. However, these findings need to be evaluated with caution, Firstly, we could consider only one question with binary answer possibilities for our analysis. Which makes this not an ideal measurement for action intentions. Secondly, with the power constraints of the present research is difficult to exclude that a small effect might not have been undetected by the analysis. In conclusion, it is possible that our study failed to adequately test for a relationship between subjective ambivalence and action intentions.

### **Limitations**

The current study is underpowered due to the small sample size of 81 participants which is lower than the 95 that were calculated in the a-priori power analysis. This limits the study in two aspects. Firstly, there is a higher probability for falsely assuming insignificant effects (a type

II error). This is, in particular, interesting for the moderation of perceived male privilege for the effect of social identity threat on subjective ambivalence. Despite plausible alternative explanations for a lack of findings, it should not be excluded that a moderation could have been found by a study with a bigger sample. The same is true for the absent relationship between subjective ambivalence and action intentions, given that previous research has consistently found them to be associated (Berndsen & van Pligt, 2004; Costarelli & Colloca, 2004). Secondly, low statistical power can lead to inflated effect sizes (Maxwell, 2004), which means that, in reality, the effect sizes of the statistically significant findings might be smaller than the effects we found (considering also that their effect sizes were below that effect size indicated by the sensitivity analysis). Thus, the effect sizes need to be interpreted with caution. Overall, further research needs to be conducted to exclude the possibility of type II errors and to derive more accurate effect sizes.

Furthermore, the study is limited by the inconclusive findings of the manipulation check. We constructed the manipulation check to measure whether participants actually experienced threat. Even though the manipulation check did not indicate a group difference regarding the threat participants experienced, we found significant differences between the groups regarding their level of subjective ambivalence (dependent on male identification). It is difficult to conclude what caused these findings. Either, the effect that we observed was caused by variables that we did not account for, or the manipulation check failed to measure the variables we expected to cause the effect. From the theoretical reasoning we presented above, both explanations might be true to some degree. The majority of findings could be explained by the study's theoretical background. However, there is reason to believe that to some degree we did not account for all the social identity threat mechanisms that occurred. Future research needs to

address this limitation by employing a manipulation check that does not only measure the theoretical mechanism that we hypothesized more precisely but also addresses additional threat mechanisms that we did not account for.

Finally, this study focused on a specific population in a specific societal debate. As indicated by the unexpectedly influential role that social identification plays in regard to the relationship between subjective ambivalence and social identity threat, the conclusions of this study should not be carelessly generalized to different social groups. Men are a particular social group in that they almost universally boast a privileged position in society. Other privileged groups might react differently to social identity threat and might not experience subjective ambivalence as a result. Further research is needed before these findings can be generalized to different groups.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

The current study represents a first attempt at explaining ambivalence in societal debates as the result of social identity threat. We shed new light on social identity threat processes and their effect on subjective ambivalence. While social identity threat has been associated with attitudes before (e.g., Lowery et al., 2012), the current study indicates that in particular for individuals with a privileged status who strongly identify with their ingroup, social identity threat can produce subjective ambivalence likely as the result of an attitudinal conflict. These findings could explain the apparent apathy and inaction of privileged and dominant groups towards social issues as them experiencing subjective ambivalence due to social identity threat. Overall, our findings could be a starting point for informing strategies that aim to involve dominant groups more in societal debates. Thus, fostering social equality and societal debates as a cornerstone of a democratic society. Nevertheless, further research is needed on this topic.

### **Further Research**

Aside from addressing the limitations of the current findings, this study provides several directions for further research. For one, the findings of this study should be expanded by considering social identification with the targeted group more closely. This could be done by a more exhaustive measurement of group identification (see Ashmore et al., 2004). Similarly, social identity threat needs to be examined more closely. In the current study, we aimed at inducing stereotype threat and group-image threat by making negative stereotypes salient and emphasizing ingroup advantage. However, there is an indication that other social identity threat mechanisms might have affected the participants. Manipulating and measuring different kinds of social identity threat more precisely will help to disentangle their underlining processes. In specific, the possibility that a threat to social identity leads low identifiers to distance themselves from the identity needs to be considered. Overall, this would lead to more precise insights into how different social identity threat processes can influence subjective ambivalence and what individual characteristics play a role.

### **Conclusion**

The present research contributes to the growing literature on subjective ambivalence by conceptualizing an attitudinal conflict as the result of social identity threat processes. Investigating a societal debate on gender-fair language in Germany, we found that, depending on men's level of male identification, social identity threat can influence their subjective ambivalence towards gender-fair language. The current study is the first to explain how privileged groups might feel ambivalent in societal debates when they experience social identity threat. This might be particularly useful in explaining the apathy of dominant groups in a social change context. While the findings are limited by power constraints, they open up interesting

directions for future research that could further disentangle specific mechanisms of social identity threat that could cause subjective ambivalence.

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## Appendix A

### Social Identity Threat Manipulation

#### High Threat Condition

##### *Original German*

Die Verwendung von geschlechtsneutraler Sprache, auch „Gendern“ genannt, ist im Moment ein stark diskutiertes Thema in Deutschland. Im Fokus steht dabei die standardmäßige Nutzung des generischen Maskulinums, die Verwendung der männlichen Wortform für die Bezeichnung von gemischtgeschlechtlichen Gruppen. Anstatt das generische Maskulinum zu verwenden soll nun gendert werden. Dabei geht es darum durch verschiedene sprachliche Mittel die alle angesprochenen Geschlechter zu erwähnen. Oft wird kritisiert, dass Nutzung des generischen Maskulinums für eine „Rückkehr in längst überwunden geglaubten Machtstrukturen“ (Brigitte Foppa, 2021) steht, da hierdurch Gleichberechtigung erschwert wird, Männer überrepräsentiert werden und das ohnehin schon bestehende männliche Privileg noch verstärkt wird. Studien zeigen zum Beispiel eine das eine Nicht-Nutzung von geschlechtsneutraler Sprache mit stärkeren sexistischen Einstellungen korrelieren (Wasserman & Weseley, 2009). Insgesamt ist das Thema jedoch sowohl in der Öffentlichkeit als auch in der Politik stark polarisiert und wird von vielen als eine Frage der Moral gesehen.

Kritik am Gendern wird zum Großteil von Männern geäußert, oft mit nur wenig Verständnis von der Thematik. Dieses Phänomen wurde von der Spiegel-Autorin Margarete Stokowski wie folgt beschrieben: „Stolz auf Inkompetenz bei gleichzeitiger Meinungsstärke: ‚Ich habe keine Ahnung, aber Widerstände in mir, und alle sollen es wissen‘“ (Stokowski, 2017). Tatsächlich zeigen auch Umfragen, dass sich der Großteil aller Männer in Deutschland aktiv gegen die Nutzung von genderneutraler Sprache ausspricht (Infratest Dimapa, 2021).

Ein ähnliches Muster, von männlichen, konservativen Politikern die sich gegen das Gendern stellen, findet sich auch in der Politik. Ein infames Beispiel wäre CDU-Politiker Friedrich März, der mit seinen provokativen tweets für Aufsehen sorgte. Auch CDU-Politiker Ploss äußerte sich zu diesem Thema. Er forderte ein Verbot der geschlechtsneutralen Sprache mit der Begründung, dass Andersdenkende „Angst vor der Sprachpolizei“ hätten. Insgesamt scheinen Männer also mit Unkenntnis und Ignoranz auf das Thema zu reagieren, so zeigen sie Unverständnis gegenüber ihrer eigenen privilegierten Position.

### ***English Translation***

The use of gender-neutral language, also known as "Gendern," is a highly debated topic in Germany at the moment. The focus is mainly on the standard use of the generic masculine, the use of the masculine form of words to refer to mixed-gender groups. The generic masculine is now being replaced by the so-called gendering, which uses different means of the language to mention all addresses genders. It is often criticized that use of the generic masculine stands for a "return to power structures long thought to have been overcome" (Brigitte Foppa, 2021), as this makes equality more difficult, overrepresents men and reinforces the already existing male privilege. (as this leads to an overrepresentation of men and the perpetuation of unjustified male privilege). For example, studies show that non-use of gender-neutral language correlates with stronger sexist attitudes (Wasserman & Weseley, 2009). Overall, however, the issue is highly polarized in both the public and political arenas and is seen by many as a moral issue.

Criticism of gendering is largely voiced by men, often with little understanding of the subject. This phenomenon has been described by Spiegel author Margarete Stokowski as follows: "Pride in incompetence combined with strength of opinion: 'I have no idea, but

resistance in me, and everyone should know". In fact, surveys also show that the majority of all men in Germany actively oppose the use of gender-neutral language (Infratest Dimapa, 2021).

A similar pattern, of male conservative politicians opposing gendering, can also be found in politics. An infamous example would be CDU politician Friedrich März, who caused a stir with his provocative tweets. CDU politician Ploss also expressed his views on this topic. He called for a ban on gender-neutral language on the grounds that dissenters were "afraid of the language police." Overall, then, men seem to react to the issue with ignorance and little knowledge, showing a lack of understanding of their own privileged position.

### *Accompanying Tweets*



●●● **Widder die Wölfe im Schafspelz** 🇩🇪🇪🇺 @AmanoJ... · 2. Juli ...  
 Wie fragil sind bitte männliche Persönlichkeiten, deren Selbstvertrauen vom generischen Maskulinum abhängt?! 🙄  
[#gendern](#)



**Friedrich Merz** ✓ @\_FriedrichMerz · 17. Apr. ...  
 „Grüne und Grüninnen?  
 Frauofrau statt Mannomann?  
 Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit für das deutsche Mutterland?  
 Hähnh\*Innen-Filet?  
 Spielplätze für Kinder und Kinderinnen?  
 Wer gibt diesen [#Gender](#)-Leuten eigentlich das Recht, einseitig unsere Sprache zu verändern?" (tm) [#Merz](#)

### **Low Threat Condition**

#### *Original German*

Die Verwendung von geschlechtsneutraler Sprache, auch „Gendern“ genannt, ist im Moment ein stark diskutiertes Thema in Deutschland. Dabei steht die standardmäßige Nutzung des generischen Maskulinums, die Verwendung der maskulinen Wortform für die Bezeichnung von gemischtgeschlechtlichen Gruppen in der Kritik. Anstatt das generische Maskulinum zu verwenden soll nun gendert werden. Dabei geht es darum durch verschiedene sprachliche



Mittel alle angesprochenen Geschlechter zu erwähnen. Die Nutzung des generischen Maskulinums wird vor allem für die mangelnde Inklusivität gegenüber weiblichen und nicht binären Personen kritisiert und gilt damit als veralteter Aspekt der deutschen Sprache. Studien zeigen zum Beispiel, wenn Berufe mit einer gegenderten Beschreibung präsentiert werden (z.B. Ingenieure und Ingenieurinnen) können sich Mädchen mit ihnen besser identifizieren (Verweken & Hannover, 2015). Das Ziel von genderneutraler Sprache soll also sein, marginalisierte Gruppen mit in den alltäglichen Sprachgebrauch einzubeziehen. Insgesamt ist das Thema jedoch sowohl in der Öffentlichkeit als auch in der Politik stark polarisiert und wird von vielen als eine Frage der Moral gesehen.

Vorschläge zur Umsetzung von Geschlechtsneutraler Sprache werden oft skeptisch empfangen. Laut zeitl. Autorin Marieke Reimann wird Kritik jedoch vor allem von Konservativen und Männern geäußert (Reimann, 2020). Umfragen zeigen das ein Großteil der Bevölkerung geschlechtsneutrale Sprache noch immer ablehnt (Infratest Dimapa, 2021). Während Gegner die Veränderung „ihrer“ Sprache als eine Abwertung und einen Eingriff in ihr Leben verstehen, sehen Befürworter dies als einen notwendigen Schritt um bislang marginalisierte Gruppen sichtbarer zu machen. Auch in der Politik kommt dieses Thema immer wieder zur Sprache. Politiker\*innen der konservativen Parteien gehen oft in den Widerstand. So äußerte sich zum Beispiel CDU-Politiker Ploss zu diesem Thema, indem er ein Verbot der geschlechtsneutralen Sprache forderte, mit der Begründung, dass Andersdenkende „Angst vor der Sprachpolizei“ hätten. Unter den Befürwortern des Genderns herrscht der Konsens, dass niemandem ein spezifischer Sprachgebrauch vorgeschrieben werden kann, dass jedoch die Nutzung gendergerechter Sprache nur Vorteile mit sich bringt

***English Translation***

The use of gender-neutral language, also called "gendering," is a highly debated topic in Germany at the moment. The focus is mainly on the standard use of the generic masculine, the use of the masculine form of words to refer to mixed-gender groups. The generic masculine is now being replaced by the so-called gendering, which uses different means of the language to mention all addresses genders. The use of the generic masculine is criticized primarily for its lack of inclusivity towards females and non-binary people, and is thus considered an outdated aspect of the German language. Studies show, for example, that occupations that are presented with a gendered description (e.g., male and female engineers) make it easier for girls to identify with them (Vervecken & Hannover, 2015). The goal of gender-neutral language should therefore be to include marginalized groups in everyday language use. Overall, however, the issue is highly polarized in both the public and political arenas and is seen by many as a moral issue.

Proposals to implement gender-neutral language are often received skeptically. According to ze.tt author Marieke Reimann, however, criticism is voiced primarily by conservatives and men. Surveys show that a large part of the population still rejects gender-neutral language (Infratest Dimapa, 2021). While opponents see the change in "their" language as a devaluation and interference in their lives, supporters see it as a necessary step to make previously marginalized groups more visible. In politics, too, this topic comes up again and again. Politicians from conservative parties often go into resistance. For example, CDU politician Ploss spoke out on the issue, calling for a ban on gender-neutral language on the grounds that dissenters were "afraid of the language police." There is a consensus among advocates of gendering that no one can be prescribed a specific use of language, but that the use of gender-neutral language has only advantages

### *Accompanying Tweets*



**Raul Krauthausen**  @raulde · 29. Aug. ...

Wir müssen nicht **#gendern**. Niemand verpflichtet(e) politisch je dazu. Bzw. forderte dieses ernsthaft für Privatpersonen.  
Aber wir können gendern. Es bereichert unsere Sprache und unser Denken sensibler zu sein. Das ist eine Einladung. Keine Bürde.  
**#Triell**



**Friedrich Merz**  @\_FriedrichMerz · 17. Apr. ...

„Grüne und Grüninnen?  
Frauofrau statt Mannomann?  
Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit für das deutsche Mutterland?  
Hähnch\*Innen-Filet?  
Spielplätze für Kinder und Kinderinnen?

Wer gibt diesen **#Gender**-Leuten eigentlich das Recht, einseitig unsere Sprache zu verändern?" (tm) **#Merz**

## Appendix B

### Subjective Ambivalence Measure

English translation of the questionnaire used to assess subjective ambivalence. The questions were presented on a seven-point scale with 1 = Not at all fitting and 7 = Completely fitting as anchor points:

Indicate how strongly the following statements fit for you:

I feel conflicted about the topic of gendering

If I really don't have to, I'd rather not take a position on gendering

I am indecisive about gendering

I feel internally torn about gendering

I am sure about gendering (RC)

I have mixed feelings about gendering

I avoid taking a stand on gendering

I have doubts about the topic gendering