

What Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg's canceled cage match says about masculine anxiety

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While the cage fight between Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Tesla CEO Elon Musk [seems to be on hold](#), if these men do ever end up

sparring, it'll give a whole new meaning to the term "tech bro."

The two billionaires' business interests have butted heads in the past: Musk's 2016 test launch of a [SpaceX rocket destroyed Zuckerberg's US\\$200 million satellite](#).

In 2022, Musk said Zuckerberg [shouldn't dominate social media](#) and encouraged people to abandon Meta-owned Facebook. Meta also recently launched Threads, [which competes directly](#) with Musk's X, formerly known as Twitter.

But threatening to beat the pulp out of each other represents a new—if not bizarre—form of one-upmanship for the two men. At one point, it was rumored that [the livestreamed fight would take place in Rome's Colosseum](#), where gladiators once gruesomely battled to the death.

What in the name of [Maximus](#) is going on?

Though Musk and Zuckerberg have attempted to frame their pugilistic pursuit as a once-in-a-generation event, they are far from alone. They join the ranks of other high-profile men in public and political positions who have shown off their physical strength to burnish their status.

[As a gender scholar](#), I've seen how these fights—let's call them "performances of virility"—tend to coincide with beliefs that masculinity is either in crisis or under attack.

Money can't buy masculinity

You don't usually see two wealthy white billionaires duking it out. So what would Musk and Zuckerberg gain from fighting each other?

As sociologist Scott Melzer writes in his study of fight clubs, "[Manhood](#)

[Impossible](#)," fighting is culturally associated with masculinity, and U.S. culture celebrates men's violence in the right contexts.

For white-collar [white men](#), Melzer explains, fighting can help them to feel they have passed a test of adulthood and fulfilled the cultural requirement of strength. The fighting helps them prove to themselves that they are "real men," despite their soft—probably manicured—hands.

To me, the chest puffing between Musk and Zuckerberg is a desperate display of masculinity for two tech nerds with deep pockets. They say money can't buy happiness. Perhaps money can't buy masculinity, either.

Kris Paap, author of "[Working Construction](#)," explains that men who don't take risks are often seen by their peers as weak and effeminate. Men who risk their health and well-being, on the other hand, prove their bravado for the respect of their peers.

This is particularly the case for working-class men. But politicians have also put on gloves to fight for admiration—and political clout—through displays of physical prowess.

In 2012, Justin Trudeau squared off against Senator Patrick Brazeau [in a boxing match](#). A member of Canada's Parliament who came from money and political royalty, [Trudeau declared before the match](#) that he was "put on this planet to do this ... I fight—and I win."

After emerging from the bout victorious, Trudeau's image as a scrawny [nepo baby](#) all but evaporated. Three years later, he became prime minister [just like his dad](#).

There are countless examples of other powerful men looking to showcase their virility. Russian President Vladimir Putin [infamously](#)

[rode horses shirtless](#), while U.S. President Joe Biden once said that when he was in high school, he [would have taken Donald Trump "behind the gym and beat the hell" out of him](#).

For almost two centuries, performances of masculinity—from William Henry Harrison to Donald Trump—have been a part of successful [U.S. presidential campaigns](#).

The end of men ... again and again

It is no coincidence that Musk vs. Zuckerberg comes at a time when there is popular perception that masculinity is in crisis. Women are [obtaining college degrees at a faster clip than men](#), while income gaps are closing. Suicides and overdoses among men—often termed "[deaths of despair](#)"—are on the rise.

Belief in a "[crisis of masculinity](#)" spikes during times of progressive social change. And proponents of this view tend to blame feminists and other social progressives for critiquing traditionally masculine mores and values, which, they claim, is [causing men to spiral](#).

[Gender scholars](#) point to the turn of the 20th century and the 1990s as other moments of social change that sparked similar anxieties.

In 1890, moves toward coeducation stoked debates around girls and boys being taught the same curriculum. Advocates suggested that sex shouldn't matter in the classroom and that girls' education should prepare them for jobs outside the home.

This didn't go over well with men who benefited from gender segregation. The Boy Scouts of America actually emerged in 1910 so that boys were assured a space where girls and women weren't allowed—and [where boys would be "sufficiently" acquainted with](#)

[masculinity](#).

Similarly, the emergence of identity politics in the 1990s, which highlighted rights-based ideologies, scrutinized, in particular, [the privileges of white men](#).

Today, social progress—whether it's more women in the workplace, more women in political office or girls permitted to join what is now referred to as ["the Scouts"](#)—seems to stoke men's insecurities. You can see it in the popularity of men's rights advocates like Jordan Peterson, who claims men are being asked to [castrate themselves](#) in the name of equality. And you can see it in conservative commentator Ben Shapiro's [scorn toward](#) the "Barbie" movie, which has been lauded for calling out patriarchal values.

In these moments, men have historically taken predictable actions to reclaim the idea that they are inherently different from women—and thus belong in different spaces.

Sociologist [Martha McCaughey](#) has pointed out how evolutionary biology has become the popular way to argue that men just can't help their "innate propensities."

This includes the urge to dominate others, whether that's in business, in bed—or, yes, in the ring.

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