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I'll Make a Man Out of You: Precarious Manhood Beliefs among Heterosexual-Cisgender Men and Queer Men

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I'll Make a Man Out of You: Precarious Manhood Beliefs among Heterosexual-Cisgender Men

and Queer Men

by

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Abstract

Traditional masculine gender stereotypes often suggest that men should be strong, assertive, and athletic, and these stereotypes promote men's dominance in society and gender inequality. Endorsement of masculine stereotypes may also contribute to heterosexual men being more prejudiced against queer men. Queer men experience unique difficulties in their quest to abide by social norms defining manhood. Research using the precarious manhood theory suggests that manhood is difficult to obtain and even more challenging to maintain. Given the emerging nature of precarious manhood studies, little is known about young men's perceptions of the precarious nature of manhood and how this may differ across sexual orientation and gender identity. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with young men ages 18-24 and analyzed using thematic analysis rooted in descriptive phenomenology. Participants included four heterosexual-cisgender men and six queer (non-heterosexual and/or transgender) men. Three themes emerged from participants' discussions: (a) manhood and masculine traits are non-synonymous, (b) selective endorsement of sociocultural values, and (c) salience of manhood. Within each theme, there are subthemes that demonstrate the similarities and differences between heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men. The findings from this study may demonstrate a generational shift in perceptions of manhood and have implications for clinicians with diverse male patients.

Chapter I:

Introduction

Traditional masculine stereotypes have often been hegemonic in nature, as they promote men's dominance in society and gender inequality (Connell et al., 2005; Iacoviello et al., 2022; Thompson & Bennett, 2015). These gender stereotypes are often implicitly reinforced, as seen by young children who develop distinct cognitive schemas for men and women through learned cultural norms, suggested by gender role socialization theory (Bronstein, 2006).

Further, endorsement of masculine stereotypes may contribute to heterosexual men being more prejudiced against queer men (Davies, 2004; Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2010; Glick, 2007; Whitley, 2001; Valsecchi et al., 2022). The pressure to adhere to masculine norms often infiltrates the queer community and affects their perceptions of masculinity both for themselves and prospective partners (Abelson, 2014; Boffi et al., 2022; Fields et al., 2012; Goodfriend et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2020; Phillips & Rogers, 2021; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Winer, 2022). Subsequently, the endorsement of masculine stereotypes can negatively impact physical health, mental health, and social competency (Booth et al., 2019; Harrington et al., 2021; Iwamoto et al., 2018; Mesler et al., 2022; Pirkis, 2016; Salgado & Johnson, 2019; Stanaland & Gaither, 2021). However, the endorsement of these gender roles and their impact on those with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities remains less understood.

The precarious manhood theory posits that manhood is both elusive and tenuous, meaning that it is difficult to obtain and even harder to maintain (Vandello et al., 2008). Research suggests that those who believe in the precarious nature of manhood are more likely to hold negative beliefs towards homosexual men (Konopka et al., 2021; Kroeper et al., 2014). Less

is known about queer men's perceptions of the precarious nature of manhood and how they

compare to heterosexual-cisgender men.

<center>**Chapter II:**</center>

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

Overview

  This literature review examines the current state of knowledge on the views of masculinity held by heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men and reviews the precarious manhood theory. Common search terms included, but were not limited to: "masculinity," "perceptions of masculinity," "manhood," "masculinity norms," "queer men's perceptions of manhood," "differences in manhood across different sexual orientations/gender identities," and "precarious manhood."

Heterosexual-Cisgender Men and Masculinity

Perceptions of Masculinity

  Beginning in the 1980s, the term "hegemonic masculinity" became popular in masculinity and gender studies and refers to a man's dominant role in society and the importance of adhering to traditional masculine norms (e.g., strength, assertiveness, stoicism) (Connell et al., 2005; Iacoviello et al., 2022; Thompson & Bennett, 2015). Further, American men have identified the "man-of-action hero" as the ideal model of manhood (Holt & Thompson, 2004). The "man-of-action hero" is one who takes direct social action to challenge societal institutions through rebellious acts (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Nevertheless, although men often recognize this gender hierarchy and the establishment of traditional masculinity as the norm, they may not adhere to it themselves (Thompson & Bennett, 2015). In fact, in a survey of 161 American men, average age 40.53 years, and 160 British men, average age 36.85, participants reported that

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traditional masculine norms are important to other men who are not themselves but are not important to society as a whole or important to women (Iacoviello et al., 2022).

More recent scholarship suggests the existence of "hybrid masculinities," which refers to men's performative selection of aspects from marginalized masculinities (i.e., the masculinity of queer men) and femininities (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Hybrid masculinities distance men from hegemonic masculinity and effectively help maintain social inequalities (e.g., across age, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity) (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). In one study using a combination of ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews of 63 men, the majority of which were young, White, and heterosexual, revealed that many heterosexual males described parts of their identity as "gay" to frame themselves as more progressive (Bridges, 2014). For example, one participant described that he is "gay in like how I'm not all into bein' manly," and another described his experience working at Guys for Gender Justice as, "And it's funny, 'cause we're all involved in this totally gay thing, but we're all straight." By doing so, however, they effectively conceal their privilege in benefitting from gender and sexual inequality (Bridges, 2014).

Attitudes Towards Queen Men

Adherence to masculine stereotypes may predict prejudice against queer men. Early research established a link between negative attitudes toward homosexuality and endorsement of masculine norms, negative attitudes toward women, benevolent sexism (i.e., sexist beliefs with positive connotations), and modern sexism (i.e., subtle sexism toward women in which one denies existence of discrimination and condemns complaints while believing women receive "special favors") (Whitley, 2001). Whitley (2001) also established a link between antigay behavior and hyper-gender-role orientation, negative attitudes toward women, and modern sexism.

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In addition, negative attitudes towards homosexual men correlated with negative affective reactions toward homosexual men, hostile sexism (i.e., sexism with negative connotations), and male toughness (i.e., suppressing emotions, being physically aggressive, showing endurance when things get hard) (Davies, 2004). Heterosexual men also reported more negative affect toward effeminate gay men compared to masculine gay men (Glick, 2007). Similarly, Falomir-Pichastor et al. (2010) found that men were more prejudiced towards gay people than women were prejudiced towards gay people, that the more men supported masculine norms the more prejudiced they were, and that, if men perceived gay men as different than them, then they were more likely to be prejudiced towards them. Further, in one study, heterosexual men and women were asked to rate levels of masculinity and femininity in pictures of heterosexual individuals, gay men, and lesbian women (Blashill, 2009). Participants rated gay men and lesbian women as having more characteristics of the opposite gender than heterosexual individuals, suggesting that these men conflated sexual orientation with gender identity (Blashill, 2009).

Heterosexual men's negative attitudes towards gay men increases if gay men express femininity and they know that they are gay. In one study, heterosexual men were asked to read information that (a) gay men's gender expression was either masculine or feminine and (b) whether, overall, men's gender roles were remaining masculine or evolving to be more feminine. Participants were then measured on their attitudes towards gay individuals (Valsecchi et al., 2022). Overall, findings suggested that higher endorsement of the antifemininity norm, being presented with a feminine expression of a gay man, and the perceived feminization of male gender roles were all predictors of negative attitudes towards gay people (Valsecchi et al., 2022).

Queer Men and Masculinity

The umbrella term "queer" refers to all sexual orientations and gender identities other than heterosexual and cisgender (Jourian, 2015). Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish sexual orientation from gender identity. Sexual orientation refers to who one is attracted to emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually (Jourian, 2015). Gender identity, on the other hand, refers to the gender (i.e., male, female, nonbinary) one conceptualizes themselves to be, which may or may not match the sex assigned to at birth (Jourian, 2015). This section reviews literature on queer men's perceptions of masculinity, however it is separated by sexual orientation (non-heterosexual men) and gender identity (transgender men). It is important to note, however, that men can identify as non-heterosexual or heterosexual and transgender, however there is a lack of research regarding the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity in perceptions of masculinity. It is also important to note that this paper uses the term "non-heterosexual" to encompass all sexual orientations men may identify with besides heterosexual, however this term is not intended to center heterosexuality as the norm.

Non-Heterosexual Men

The pressure to adhere to masculinity norms may lead non-heterosexual men to overcompensate for a perceived lack of masculinity in both them and their prospective partners by rejecting femininity and striving for hegemonic masculinity (Eguchi, 2009; Fields et al., 2012; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). In an analysis of *straight-acting.com*, a website for non-effeminate gay men to communicate with one another, Eguci (2009) observed that some gay men may act stereotypically straight to achieve hegemonic masculinity and distance themselves from femininity. Further, more traditionally masculine gay men found effeminate gay men unattractive due to their proximity to traditional femininity (Eguchi, 2009). Additionally, 751 gay men (M_{Age} = 32.64 years, SD = 11.94) were surveyed on their perceived

importance of masculinity within themselves and their prospective partners, and their levels of anti-effeminacy (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). Most of these men perceived masculinity as important for both them and their same-sex partner, and the degree to which they endorsed anti-effeminacy accounted for a significant amount of variance in internalized homophobia (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012). Similarly, in a survey with 489 gay men ages 18-72, the level of adherence to masculine norms and threats to one's masculinity were the strongest predictors of internalized homophobia above other demographic predictors (Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). Furthermore, another study assessed young Black men who have sex with men (YBMSM), their partner preferences, and perceptions of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (Fields et al., 2012) and found YBMSM to prefer masculine partners and reject more feminine men as the insertive partner. Additionally, YBMSM believed the more masculine partner should make the decision on whether to use condoms and they perceived masculine partners as less likely to have HIV (Fields et al., 2012). This adherence to traditional masculine norms and anti-effeminacy that some non-heterosexual men experience may leave them more susceptible to threats of masculinity (Hunt et al., 2016; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020).

Recent scholarship suggests a shift among gay men from striving for a hegemonic ideal of masculinity to striving for a so-called "middle-ground" expression of masculinity (Lewis et al., 2020; Winer, 2022). In one study, 867 gay and heterosexual men were assessed on their endorsement of masculine traits, and results showed that the more gay males identified as masculine, the less they were likely to endorse masculine stereotypes compared to their heterosexual counterparts, which Lewis et al. (2020) described as an adoption of "masculinity lite" among masculine gay males. Similarly, Winer (2022) explained that hegemonic masculinity is evolving into hybrid masculinity, which, as described, incorporates marginalized masculinities (i.e., the masculinity of queer men) into masculine norms, thereby disguising the inherent

inequality associated with hegemonic masculinity while still reproducing it. Based on interviews with 29 non-heterosexual men, Winer (2022) suggested that these men experience pressures to fit into a "goldilocks zone" of masculinity where they present as masculine but not too masculine as to be perceived as heterosexual. These non-heterosexual men identified experiencing pressure to adhere not only to traditional masculine norms, but also masculine norms within the gay community related to ideal body image, being the insertive partner to preserve masculinity, and preferring masculine partners over feminine partners, as well as facing pressures from discrimination based on age, socioeconomic class, and race (Winer, 2022).

Transgender Men

Adherence to masculinity norms can be difficult for transgender men, and the presence of other cisgender men may impact their masculinity practices (Abelson, 2014; Boffi et al., 2022; Goodfriend et al., 2022; Phillips & Rogers, 2021). In an interview with 19 transgender men ages 19-49, participants identified that the fear of violent discrimination from cisgender men changed their masculine practices, such that they felt more pressure to conform to defensive masculinities (i.e., upholding traditional masculine stereotypes and hierarchies over femininity as a form of protection) (Abelson, 2014). However, in situations where these men felt safe, they were more comfortable practicing transformative masculinity (i.e., rejecting gender hierarchies and attempting to dismantle gender inequality) (Abelson, 2014). Furthermore, in another study, Phillips and Rogers (2021) conducted interviews to understand the compensatory manhood acts in transgender men. These men identified the need to prove their masculinity through performative acts. They also identified the importance of a sense of approval from and "brotherhood" with cisgender men, which included participating in more sexism to gain approval (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). Similarly, in another qualitative study, transgender men described their experience of masculinity mainly around their "bodily performance" and "social

performance" of masculinity that eventually results in their ability to "pass" as a male (Boffi et al., 2022). This perceived masculinity has been showed to mediate the positive relationship between a transition experience and identity development and higher self-esteem (Goodfriend et al., 2022).

Precarious Manhood Theory

The main theoretical framework chosen for this study is the precarious manhood theory. This theory, developed by Vandello et al. (2008), posits that manhood, in contrast to womanhood, is elusive and tenuous. The elusive nature of manhood refers to the difficulty of obtaining it. The tenuous nature of manhood emphasizes that even when manhood is achieved, it can be lost. In the formative paper, researchers conducted five sub studies to a) compare manhood to womanhood and demonstrate that manhood is more elusive and tenuous, b) threaten men and women's gender status and show that men will experience more anxiety and threat than women, and c) see if threatening gender status will activate aggression. The first part of the first sub study tested whether manhood was more precarious than womanhood by measuring how much participants agreed with false proverbs of either manhood or womanhood, depending on the group they were assigned to, and it was found that there was a significant preference for the manhood proverbs. The second part of the first sub study had participants rate the truthfulness about the tenuous nature of either manhood or womanhood and the nature of the developmental transition in becoming a woman or a man, depending on the group they were assigned to, and found that participants thought manhood was more precarious than womanhood and that the transition from boy to man was more based on proving themselves socially. In general, this study suggested that manhood is more precarious and elusive than womanhood.

The second sub study aimed to discover whether participants would perceive interpreting a self-description of either losing manhood or womanhood as difficult, hoping to find that it

would be less difficult to interpret losing manhood, suggesting that they believed manhood was more impermanent. This sub study also looked at if manhood was seen as impermanent, then participants should attribute losing manhood to social changes and losing womanhood to physical changes. The results showed that losing manhood was easier to interpret and that losing manhood was more attributed to social changes.

The third sub study recognized the previous studies' flaw in not considering that childbearing may be seen as a necessary condition for womanhood, which would mean womanhood could be precarious too. Participants either read a story about a man or woman being the one responsible for not being able to have kids and related the story to either an attractive woman/man, an unattractive woman/man, a child, or a horse (control). Results suggested that childbearing is not a necessary condition for womanhood, but it is for manhood because participants used the child sketch to represent the man more than the woman.

The fourth sub study gave participants false feedback based on a gender knowledge quiz to threaten their gender status and measure their anxiety levels. Results showed that men were more threatened by negative feedback and more anxious about it than women were. The final sub study determined whether gender threats elicited more aggressive responses in men or women. Results showed that men had more aggressive responses after being threatened than women (Vandello et al., 2008).

In a later literature review on the applications of the precarious manhood theory, Vandello et al. (2013) identified more key factors of manhood. First, when rating the extent to which a perpetrator's (regardless of gender) aggression was situational (i.e., due to the actions of those around them) or dispositional (i.e., due to their temper), men attributed aggression more situationally and women attributed aggression more to disposition, showing that men are keener to public action for maintaining manhood. The research team also summarized evidence

demonstrating that the endorsement of precarious manhood makes men feel more anxious when their gender identity is threatened, that they will take risky or aggressive measures to reestablish their manhood, and they will avoid displaying feminine traits, as it puts their manhood status at risk. Researchers also described studies done in their lab that revealed how men overestimate the amount of masculinity expected of them from their peers (Vandello et al., 2013).

Other researchers have applied the role of precarious manhood to instances of sexual prejudice. In one study, heterosexual young men were either paired with someone with obvious sexual prejudice toward hiring a gay applicant or someone with no obvious sexual prejudice (Kroeper et al., 2014). Results showed that precarious manhood beliefs predicted less negative reaction to the prejudiced partner, whereas in the non-prejudiced partner condition, precarious manhood had no effect on participants' reactions, showing that more precarious manhood beliefs predict more agreeability with someone who is prejudiced. Precarious manhood beliefs also predicted less confrontation in response to sexual prejudice. It was inferred by researchers that not confronting sexual prejudice allowed participants to confirm their own masculinity. It was also suggested that heterosexuality is a key component of manhood, making heterosexual men distance themselves from homosexual men to further prove their masculinity (Kroeper et al., 2014). Similarly, an experiment found that, using a precarious manhood perspective, a threat to masculinity can increase negativity towards gay and transgender individuals (Konopka et al., 2021).

Evidence suggests that while the precarious nature of manhood may be recognized cross-culturally, there may be culture-specific underpinnings. DiMuccio & Helweg-Larsen (2017) interviewed nine Danish men and nine men from the U.S. and found that they agreed upon the man's protective role and the obtainment of manhood as a signal of adulthood. There were, however, key differences between the two groups of men. Danish men tended to describe what

the male body "is," the importance of having a feminine side, and highlighted key features of manhood by contrasting it to boyhood. U.S. men, however, tended to describe what the male body "does," the importance of rejecting femininity, and highlighted key features of manhood by contrasting it to womanhood (DiMuccio & Helweg-Larsen, 2017).

Less is known about the role of precarious manhood in queer men's perceptions of manhood. Although some studies compare heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men on their perceptions of masculinity, none examine this comparison using the precarious manhood theory, and none compare young men in emerging adulthood, a developmental period after adolescence and before young adulthood where individuals focus on themselves and establish their social identities, namely gender (Arnett, 2006; Verschueren et al., 2018). To address this gap, the following study was conducted.

Present Study

For the purposes of this study, the term "heterosexual-cisgender men" refers to those who were assigned male at birth, still identify as male, and are exclusively attracted to the opposite sex. "Queer men" can refer to those who are not exclusively attracted to the opposite sex and/or those who were not assigned male at birth but now identify as male.
Given the emerging area of precarious manhood studies, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: *In which ways do heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men agree on the precarious nature of manhood?*

RQ2: In which ways do heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men agree on the sociocultural values needed to achieve and maintain manhood?

Chapter III:

Method

Design

To capture the lived experiences of a group of diverse young men, this study applied a descriptive phenomenological framework, which is a qualitative methodology that explores the lived human experience related to a phenomenon. The guiding principles of descriptive phenomenology include openness to the phenomenon being studied, an ability to question preconceived notions about a particular phenomenon, and instilling a reflective attitude (Sundler et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to capture the complex lived experiences of a diverse group of men in emerging adulthood and their understanding of manhood using a phenomenological lens.

Individual semi-structured interviews guided by phenomenology were used to illuminate the commonalities and/or differences of masculinity norms and their effects on heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men by applying the precarious manhood theory.

Participants

The sample size for this study was $N = 10$. The sample included four heterosexual-cisgender men and six queer men (all queer participants were non-heterosexual, and three participants were transgender) ages 18-24 living in the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater Metropolitan Area. This age range was chosen because it has been identified as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2006; Verschueren et al., 2018). Most participants ($N = 5$) identified as Asian. See Table 1 below for a detailed breakdown of participants' demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age (Years)	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity
Charlie	24	Gay	Cisgender	Hispanic/Mexican American
James	20	Gay	Cisgender	Asian
Chris	18	Bisexual	Cisgender	Indian American
Spencer	19	Bisexual	Transgender	Korean
Oliver	20	Bisexual	Transgender	Indian American
Forest	20	Bisexual	Transgender	Chilean
Xavier	24	Heterosexual	Cisgender	Bengali American
Peter	22	Heterosexual	Cisgender	Pacific Islander/Hispanic
Justin	23	Heterosexual	Cisgender	Black/Non-Hispanic
Kit	23	Heterosexual	Cisgender	Italian/White

Note: Rather than placing labels on participants' social identities, they were asked to describe their identities in their own words. This led to a lack of uniformity in the way participants described their race and ethnicity.

Interview Guide

An interview guide was used to collect data from participants. The guide included open-ended questions about defining what manhood, how manhood is achieved and maintained, how participants' definition of manhood fits with society's definition, how a man's sexual orientation and/or gender identity impacts their idea of manhood, and how others' perception of their manhood impacts their self-identification as a man. See Appendix A.

The interview team included three cisgender males, including both gay and heterosexual sexual orientations. Participants were matched with interviewers based on their male gender identity in the hopes of eliciting the most genuine responses, however an attempt to match participants with interviewers on sexual orientation was not feasible, as participants' sexual orientation was not learned until after the commencement of the interview. Further, no interviewers identified as transgender.
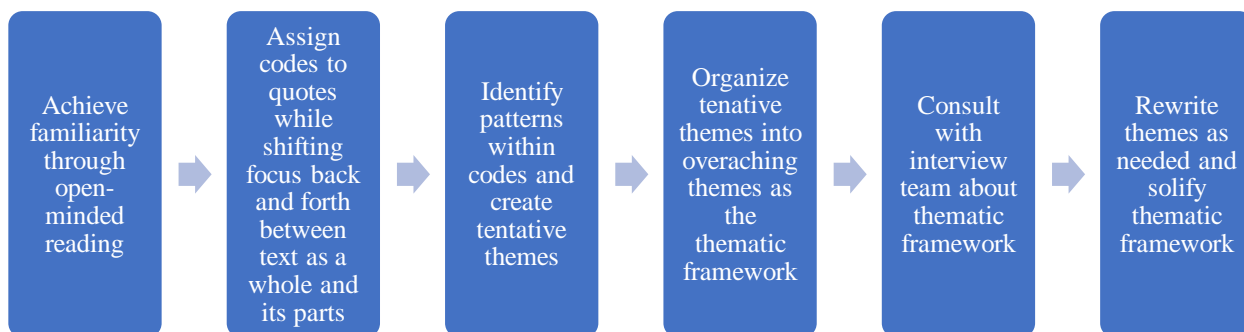
Procedure

This study was approved by the University of South Florida (USF) Institutional Review Board (IRB). See Appendix B. A petition for verbal consent in lieu of written consent was requested since the study was conducted entirely virtually and to ensure participants' confidentiality. Participants were recruited with a flyer distributed through social media and college campuses (USF-Tampa campus and USF-St. Petersburg campus), word-of-mouth, and snowball sampling. After obtaining verbal consent, participants were assigned a pseudonym and engaged in an individual 45–60-minute semi-structured interview with a single member of the research team via Microsoft Teams. Participants were compensated with $25 sent to a mobile banking application of their choice (e.g., CashApp, Zelle, Venmo, etc.). Interviews were recorded and stored in a secure USF Box account. Afterwards, interviews were transcribed, and video recordings were deleted. Transcripts will reside in the Box account until the final report is submitted to the IRB and the IRB's minimum timeframe for retaining data passes (5 years).

Data Analysis

Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis rooted in descriptive phenomenology as described by Sundler et al. (2019). First, the investigator familiarized herself with the data through open-minded reading. The goal of this stage is to thoroughly explore experiences and search for novel ideas rather than what is already known about the phenomenon. Next, the investigator flexibly assigned meanings, or codes, to quotes within the text by shifting focus back and forth between the text in its entirety and its parts. As codes were assigned, the investigator identified similarities and differences between these codes to identify patterns, while also developing tentative themes to organize these patterns. Next, all tentative themes were organized into the thematic framework that encompassed all interviews into a meaningful whole. The investigator compared codes and themes to the original text to ensure that they

aligned with the original data. The investigator then consulted with the interview team to ensure all participants' interviews were interpreted correctly and to ensure that the thematic framework aligned with their perceptions of participants' responses overall. Further, it was crucial to gather feedback from the all-male interview team given their proximity to the topic. Afterwards, the investigator refined themes as needed and solidified the thematic framework. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Data Analysis Procedures

Researcher Positionality

The investigator is aware of the effect her own gender identity may have on the interpretation of the findings. The investigator is a cisgender female; therefore, she does not have personal experience with having a sense of manhood. To combat this disconnect, the investigator conducted a thorough review of the literature, comprised the interview team solely of men, and consulted with the interview team regarding the thematic framework and revised themes as needed

Chapter IV:

Results

Three themes emerged from participants' discussions on manhood, its precarious nature, and the sociocultural values necessary to obtain and maintain it: (a) manhood and masculine traits are non-synonymous, (b) selective endorsement of sociocultural values, and (c) salience of manhood. Within each theme, there are subthemes that demonstrate the similarities and differences between heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men.

Theme 1: Manhood and Masculine Traits are non-Synonymous

A common theme across all men was that manhood was not solely defined by traditional masculine traits. This theme is captured in four subthemes (a) manhood is self-determined, (b) manhood requires emotional intelligence, (c) "Manhood and womanhood are different sides of the same coin", and (d) uniqueness in queerness.

Theme 1a: Manhood is Self-Determined

All men highlighted that manhood is largely self-determined by how one conceptualizes manhood for themselves, the integrity of their character, and their wealth of experiences. For these men, if one identifies as a man and demonstrates integrity in their character, that is adequate for them to be considered a man:

> A man is man. Like if you wanna be a man, if you are a hardworking man, you are reliable on someone, then you're a man if you want to be a man. *-Justin, heterosexual-cisgender*

Manhood is more, it's not defined really. It's not something that should be defined. It's more of what you want to think it is, because I feel like manhood is different for everyone, so I can only speak on my own experiences. *-Charlie, gay, cisgender*

You can still like identify as a man and not do any of those things...I'm not gonna say you're not a man. Like I feel like it might be like a, you're not a good person or you're not a good friend. *-Oliver, bisexual, transgender*

For these men, manhood was not necessarily something that needed to be defined. They recognized the individualized nature of defining manhood wherein traits they identified in their definition of manhood did not have to resonate with another man's definition.

Theme 1b: Manhood Requires Emotional Intelligence

An integral component of manhood for all men was the importance of healthy emotional regulation including recognizing emotions, fully expressing them, and dealing with them in a healthy way:

I think that what really defines a man is somebody who's strong enough to express and healthily deal with their emotions...but I think more men should be in therapy. I think that's really important. And just like talking and being able to identify your emotions and express them in ways that are, uh, conducive to progress rather than so many traditional men shove down their emotions and they think that's the strongest thing to do, but it really, it just like shoves all their emotions onto the people around them because they become terrible people. *-Kit, heterosexual-cisgender*

Emotional control and situational awareness is a big part of it... If there's someone that makes someone feel a little bit angry or a little bit upset, is to be more rational with your thoughts and to understand, you know, don't take things so personally to where it

overwhelms your feelings and makes you act, uh, uncontrollably. You know, so you don't

want to like lash [out]. *-James, gay, cisgender*

When describing his friend who he models his definition of manhood after, Oliver (bisexual, transgender) stated, "But, he was also like super, like supportive, non-judgmental, um, in touch with his feelings too." In sum, healthy emotional regulation was salient in participants' definitions of manhood.

Theme 1c: "Manhood and Womanhood are Different Sides of the Same Coin"

Many men conceptualized manhood as equivalent to womanhood. For heterosexual-cisgender men, they rationalized that anything a man could do, a woman could also do. Specifically, women can be the head of the household, a role traditionally fulfilled by men:

The single moms ... are like, not obviously men, but they do a man's part too... if she's like, say a single mom, she's taking care of anything. Like she's a hard-working, she's playing the, the husband or the mommy and the dad. Like, I think they should get the props too. You know what I mean? They should be a part of a hardworking man. *-Justin, heterosexual-cisgender*

For queer men, however, traditionally feminine traits (e.g., nurturer role, being a good communicator, and being supportive of others) were key components of their definitions of manhood:

Most of the things that I'm thinking about right off the bat could also be connected with like femininity. So, like, I don't know, but like the first things I would think of was like being there for your friends, but like letting them be there for you too. And overall, just like not being afraid to like love, support and like appreciate those around you. *-Oliver, bisexual, transgender*

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To summarize, many men identified the equivalence between manhood and womanhood. Distinctly, heterosexual-cisgender men explained that women can fulfill a man's traditional role, whereas queer men identified the importance of traditionally feminine traits as part of their definitions of manhood.

Theme 1d: Uniqueness in Queerness

Most men discussed that identifying as queer creates a unique experience of manhood. Heterosexual-cisgender men explained that identifying as queer makes one more of a man:

If a man changes gender from a woman, he's honestly like more of a man cuz he has the, the confidence, like he has enough confidence to be open about it. Some people might have, they, they hide it, you know what I'm saying? Like some people, it takes 'em a long time. They'll hide it and then they'll finally come out. But it's actually more of a man to me. -*Justin, heterosexual-cisgender*

Perhaps women transitioning, maybe already have better ways of dealing with their emotions, identifying their emotions, um, that would make it an easier time being able to control their emotions. -*Kit, heterosexual-cisgender*

Queer men described that their queer identity helped them strengthen their own manhood and what to look for in a male partner:

My orientation plays a part in where since I'm attracted to men, I have to be a little bit more aware of how they behave and what I feel, um, is something I'm looking for you know, and through my experiences, I could, uh, kind of navigate what the boundaries between what I feel a man [is] and a man isn't. -*James, gay, cisgender*

I feel like another good representation of masculinity is like myself, cuz I was raised as a woman. The way I think is very like, women like in terms of like being okay to like show

emotions... a lot of the things that men really struggle to do. *-Oliver, bisexual,*

transgender

All in all, most men recognized identifying as queer as a strength and considered having a queer identity a unique experience within manhood.

Theme 2: Selective Endorsement of Sociocultural Values

Across all men, their definition of how manhood is obtained did not fully mesh with what they perceived as society's definition of manhood. Although many men found certain aspects of society's definition salient for them, they also recognized the differences in their personal conceptualizations of manhood. This is captured in three subthemes (a) splintering from society's definition of manhood, (b) importance of responsibility and utility, and (c) societal and interpersonal validation.

Theme 2a: Splintering from Society's Definition of Manhood

Heterosexual-cisgender men identified aspects of their perception of society's definition of manhood as relevant to their own, however they often adjusted society's definition to match their own narrative and/or identified key differences between society's conceptualization of manhood and their own:

My definition is essentially like just the parts that I like out of society's, cuz society's, it's all about... being able to be independent and being aggressive, but it's also about like, not really showing emotions and about, you know, being able to handle essentially whatever life throws at you. Without relying on others at all. And for me, I sort of reject that in the sense that, yeah, I want some independence, but I'd also like to be able to depend on others if I'm not doing well. *-Xavier, heterosexual-cisgender*

I would say there's an underlying theme of strength, whether it's the traditional view of

like, um, you gotta be strong and not have an emotion or my kind of view of, in order to

be strong, you've gotta have a handle on your emotions. *-Kit, heterosexual-cisgender*

Queer men, on the other hand, more readily rejected their perception of society's definition of

manhood:

I do know society loves to put an emphasis on strength and, you know, or like, I guess

being straight, um, like they like to put emphasis on these very traditional qualities...in

order to determine someone's manhood. But I personally don't see it that way. *-Chris,*

bisexual, cisgender

I would say it doesn't, first of all, I feel like it's completely the opposite. Um, the other

side of masculinity, like the stereotypical one, I see that in like my dad a lot, which is

like, you know, the only ... other male figure I've really interacted with properly. Um, and

like surely he's a man... but his idea of masculinity was more like controlling women, if

that makes sense. So, it's like, obviously that's not my idea of masculinity *-Oliver,*

bisexual, transgender

For most men, their perception of the sociocultural values needed to obtain manhood are

outdated. Heterosexual-cisgender men more readily picked out the parts of society's definition

they found relevant to their own more so than queer men's outright rejection of society's

definition of manhood.

Theme 2b: Importance of Responsibility and Utility

Cisgender men, whether they were heterosexual or non-heterosexual, identified the

importance of responsibility and utility in achieving and maintaining manhood, whereas this was

not salient among transgender men. Cisgender men conceptualized manhood based on their

ability to maintain their responsibilities and prove themselves useful to others:

You're the man of the house, then more weight is on your shoulders if you're able to take

care of that weight. Yeah, it's stressful, but you still get it done every day...wake up every

day, go to work, clock in, do what you gotta do and make, make sure you can feed your

family. Make sure they eat stuff like that. Pay the bills, and I consider it a man. *-Justin,*

heterosexual-cisgender

When asked what would happen if he was unable to provide for his fiancé, Xavier (heterosexual-

cisgender) explained:

I honestly, I would feel kind of useless and uh, little pathetic. Um, so if I couldn't really

do anything like say I was like disabled and I couldn't hold a job or like bring any use, I

just honestly feel like a burden.

Charlie (gay, cisgender) described the transition from boyhood to manhood:

I've gone from the transition of boy to man when I was able to basically, in the funniest

sense is I set up my own appointments with a doctor. I pay my own bills. In terms of just,

not necessarily bills, just kind of doing things on your own, having some... initiative in

your life rather than having someone direct it.

For cisgender men, their identity as a man largely rested in their ability to provide and their

achievement as a man came with their independence.

Theme 2c: Societal and Interpersonal Validation

For transgender men, their conceptualizations of manhood were related to their

comparisons to cisgender men and validation from society as "cis-passing":

My definition of manhood is very influenced by what society has told me because as a

trans man, I wanna fit in. I don't want to be the odd man out. I don't want people to look

at me and be like, oh, he's not a real man, he's a trans man. *-Forest, bisexual,*

transgender

I still think like I want to like dress cis-passing because I think like that's what society's

definition is and like, that's what, like, I want to look cis-passing to people. That's the

goal, because I know like, yes, like you can dress a certain way and like that doesn't

define your gender, but, it doesn't by definition, but like, will society see it like that?

Probably like, not like they're still gonna think, oh, you're just a girl. -*Spencer, bisexual,*

transgender

When describing his proudest moment as a man, Forest (bisexual, transgender) identified this

event:

My sister calling me her brother to her friends without a second thought. And then my

brother getting so excited. He goes, 'I'm gonna have a big brother. I have a big brother.

You're kidding me. I always wanted a big brother.' And it's like these, like my family by

accident has reassured me so much without even realizing it.

It is difficult for transgender men to feel accepted in society unless they can pass as cisgender to

others. Also, much of what they define as manhood comes from cisgender male role models.

Lastly, when others recognize them as men, transgender men feel more validated in their gender

identity.

Theme 3: Salience of Manhood

When experiencing threats to their masculinity, men's identification with manhood

remains salient. For cisgender men, childhood was a key time in their life when they experienced

threats to their manhood in relation to their masculine traits, regardless of their sexual

orientation:

Growing up I was always like the slowest kid in all the sports, and so I would always

have like, uh, super cocky, but also super talented kids playing sports with me that would

just like, make fun of me all the time and that, that made me feel like they were

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questioning my manhood... [it made me feel] embarrassed self, self-loathing. Uh, kind of the same idea, just shame. *-Kit, heterosexual-cisgender*

For transgender men, however, their experience of threats to their manhood involved their current physical appearance and behaviors:

I would say my parents, especially like my dad more than anything because... he'll be like, no, but you dress like a certain way. Like I don't wear skirts, but it's like, oh, like the outfits you wear are still like too girly or like everything you do, like your interests are like, are girly or like, um, it's the way you behave, the way you like from like just mannerisms, just stuff like that...it's like brought me down. *-Forest, bisexual, transgender*

Nevertheless, regardless of threats to their manhood, their identity as men endured:

It took like a long time to grow out of that mentality and like eventually in college, I realized that it's essentially whatever the hell I want it to be. *-Xavier, heterosexual-cisgender*

I didn't really feel a certain way about it [threats to my manhood]. It wasn't something that fired me. It wasn't cuz. I don't know. That's, it's never been something that conflicted within me. *-Charlie, gay, cisgender*

Someone said I wasn't a boy 'cause I didn't look like one...then it makes me wonder about masculinity cuz it's like cis men always, I feel like when their masculinity is threatened, that it can be like taken away and stuff. But like personally, I don't feel like it could be taken away from me. Cause it's like I feel like the moment I realized I was a boy, that was that. *-Oliver, bisexual, transgender*

In sum, cisgender men and transgender men experience different manifestations of threats to their manhood, however they are able to rationalize these threats and maintain their identity as men. See Figure 2 below for a summary of themes.
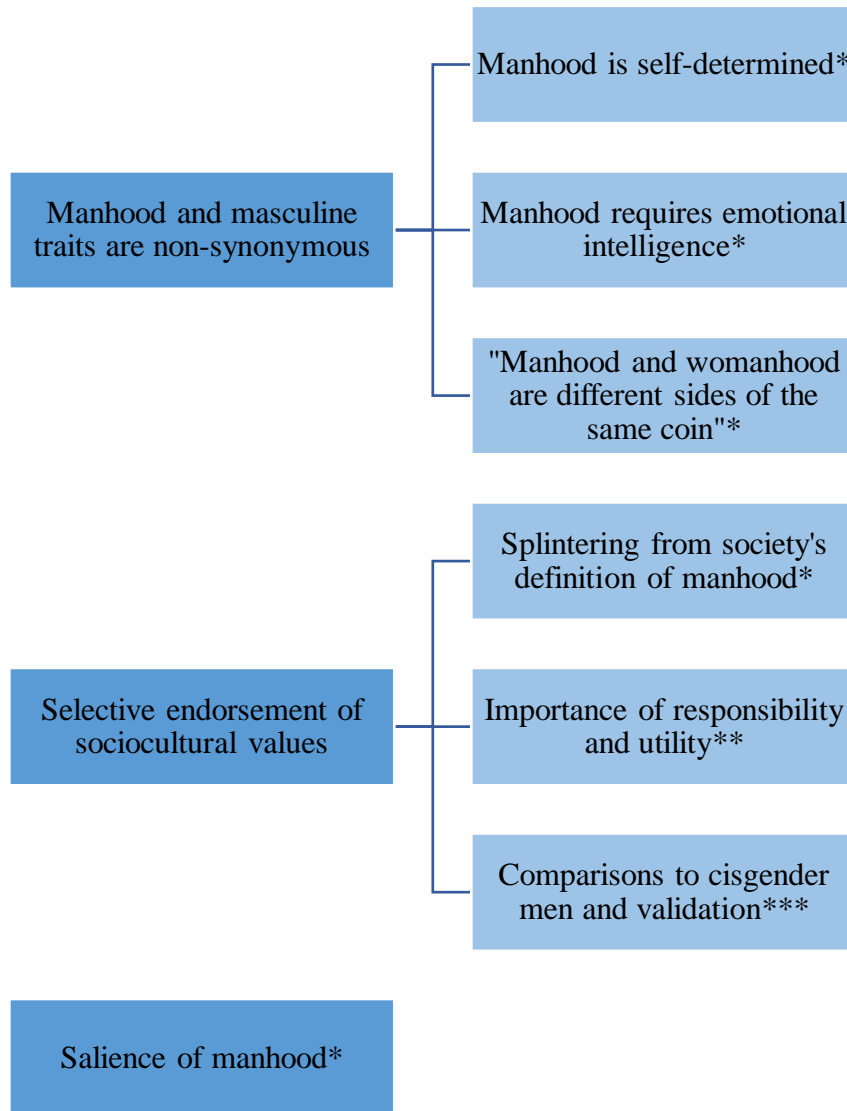
Figure 2. Thematic Map

*Present among all men

**Present among cisgender men (heterosexual and non-heterosexual)

***Present among transgender men

Chapter V:

Discussion

Main Findings

The purpose of this study was to capture the complex lived experiences of a diverse group of men in emerging adulthood and their understanding of the precarious nature of manhood. The findings from this study help to illuminate the nuances between heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men in their conceptualizations of manhood. Three themes emerged from these men's discussions on manhood, its precarious nature, and the sociocultural values necessary to obtain and maintain it: (a) manhood and masculine traits are non-synonymous, (b) selective endorsement of sociocultural values, and (c) salience of manhood.

Overall, participants believed that manhood is not contingent on masculine stereotypes or traditional masculinity, rather it is self-determined, and traits related to men's personal definitions of manhood are more related to personhood rather than unique to manhood. Regarding precarious manhood theory, the findings supported the elusiveness of manhood in a unique way (Vandello et al., 2008). The elusiveness of manhood was related to the difficulty in defining it (i.e., when Charlie stated, "Manhood is more, it's not defined really. It's not something that should be defined. It's more of what you want to think it is") (Vandello et al., 2008). For heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men the tenuous nature of manhood as outlined by the precarious manhood theory (Vandello et al., 2008) was not salient. The inability to obtain and maintain the characteristics they identified in their personal definitions of manhood was more related to their personhood rather than their manhood (i.e., when Oliver stated, "I feel like it might be like a, you're not a good person or you're not a good friend."). Both cisgender and

transgender men experienced different types of threats to their manhood, based on either their masculinity at a young age or their current appearance and behaviors, respectively. These threats to their manhood did not lead to aggression or a perceived loss of manhood. Rather, following threats to their manhood, participants were persistent in their identification as men due to their confidence in their manhood.

Also, in contrast to Vandello et al. (2013), femininity is integral and/or equivalent to manhood, as participants explained the importance of traditionally feminine traits (e.g., emotional expression, communication, role as a nurturer) in obtaining and maintaining manhood. Similarly, a study examining the role of precarious manhood in men from the U.S. and Danish men suggested that men from the U.S. identified the importance of rejecting femininity, whereas these participants identified the importance of embracing femininity and/or recognizing that it is equivalent (DiMuccio & Helweg-Larsen, 2017). However, even though heterosexual-cisgender men are saying women can also be head of the household, they conceptualized this as a "man's part". Therefore, to some degree they are still holding on to the idea that manhood is absent of femininity, although they did identify traditionally feminine traits, such as healthy emotional regulation and communication, as integral to their definition of manhood, and they described that transgender men better know how to achieve this emotional intelligence by growing up assigned female at birth.

One novel finding of this study was the recognition of the unique experience of identifying as a queer man. Both heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men recognized the strength of living as queer, and that this identity was only something to enhance one's identification as a man, rather than detract from it, which may also demonstrate a positive shift in attitudes towards queer men's manhood among this generation of emerging adults.

Consistent with Thompson and Bennett (2015), all men recognized the role of traditional masculinity in society's definition of manhood, yet they did not fully adhere to it. Heterosexual-cisgender men found some traits associated with traditional masculinity relevant to their own personal definitions (e.g., strength and independence), whereas queer men were more outright with their rejection of society's definition of manhood, perhaps since their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is already outside of societal norms. Nevertheless, participants perceived society's definition of manhood as outdated, which further suggests a shift in the conceptualization of manhood among this generation of emerging adults. However, although some research suggests a shift from hegemonic masculinity to hybrid masculinity (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Winer, 2022), there is a lack of research regarding the current generation's perceptions of manhood and gender roles. Cisgender men still, however, recognize the importance of duty and proving their utility, which is consistent with past studies of masculinity (Affleck et al., 2018; Vandello et al., 2013). Further, obtaining manhood is unique for transgender men, as the ability to pass as cisgender is important among them. Consistent with the literature, transgender men aim to receive validation from others, especially from cisgender men (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). In addition, transgender men's achievement of manhood rests heavily on their ability to look and act like cisgender men (Boffi et al., 2022). In sum, while both heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men agree on the dissonance between their personal definition of manhood and society's definition of manhood, cisgender men and transgender men differ in how they prove their manhood and the ways in which they feel validated in their sense of manhood.

Limitations

Several limitations implicate the interpretation of these findings. One limitation of the study lies in its procedure. During recruitment, participants were made aware of the nature of the

study as investigating how both sexual orientation and gender identity can impact perceptions of manhood. This may have led to a selection bias among those who chose to participate compared to those who did not. Thus, participants in this study may have been less likely to endorse the precarious nature of manhood. Similarly, since participants knew the study was about how sexual orientation and gender identity affects manhood, it could have attracted heterosexual-cisgender men who wished to take the stance that queer men are more so men compared to themselves to frame themselves as more progressive (Bridges, 2014). Further, although the interview team comprised solely of males in hopes of eliciting the most genuine responses, and although unlikely, the opposite effect could have occurred, such that participants may not have wanted to divulge the nuances of their manhood to another man in fear of judgement. Finally, there were no transgender interviewers, which may have limited the transgender participants' level of openness.

Further, although the focus of this study was on differences across sexual orientation and gender identity in conceptualization of manhood, other sociocultural variables can affect one's sense of manhood. The sample was both racially and ethnically diverse, and while some research suggests a universal understanding of gender roles (Doss & Hopkins, 1998; Williams & Best, 1982), others suggest a culture-specific moderation (Cuddy et al., 2015). Therefore, since most participants ($N = 5$) identified as Asian, this could be a potential cultural confounder since perceptions of masculinity can vary across race/ethnicity and align with one's cultural values (Cuddy et al., 2015; Doss & Hopkins, 1998).

Although not a goal of qualitative research, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the population. As mentioned, the recruitment for this study may have introduced a selection bias, and the small number of participants is in no way representative of the diversity between heterosexual-cisgender men and queer men. Queer men are especially diverse, as the

term "queer" is simply an umbrella term to include anyone who is not both heterosexual and cisgender.

Future Directions

Future research should explore the intersection of different sociocultural variables in the conceptualization of manhood. The focus of this study was emerging adults' perceptions of manhood based on their sexual orientation and gender identity; however, other factors may contribute to a more nuanced definition of manhood, such as age, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location.

Given the finding that all participants rejected traditional masculinity, future research should seek to identify whether traditional masculinity is still salient among this generation of young men. Specifically, there is a lack of research regarding this generation of emerging adults' perception of manhood and gender roles, therefore future research should seek to identify how these perceptions may be changing across generations.

The precarious manhood theory is largely supported by experimental evidence (Vandello et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2013), therefore similar experiments should be conducted to compare men across different sexual orientations and gender identities. Even though the precarious nature of manhood was not fully salient among these men in their discussions about their own perceptions, they may behave differently when assessed after experiencing a threat to their masculinity.

Further, past research suggests that the endorsement of masculine stereotypes may negatively impact physical health, mental health, social competency (Booth et al., 2019; Harrington et al., 2021; Iwamoto et al., 2018; Mesler et al., 2022; Pirkis, 2016; Salgado & Johnson, 2019; Stanaland & Gaither, 2021). Since these findings suggest that this generation of emerging adults show a general rejection of society's conceptualization of manhood, future

research should broaden its approach to understanding men's health when considering the influence of masculine stereotypes.

Chapter VI:

Conclusion

To capture the lived experience of a diverse group of young men in emerging adulthood and their understanding of the precarious nature of manhood, 10 young men ages 18-24 participated in a semi-structured interview. Participants included four heterosexual-cisgender men, three non-heterosexual cisgender men, and three bisexual transgender men. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) manhood and masculine traits are non-synonymous, (b) selective endorsement of sociocultural values, and (c) salience of manhood. Subthemes revealed both similarities and differences in the lived experiences of these groups of men. The elusive nature of manhood posited by the precarious manhood theory was salient among men in a unique way, such that manhood was elusive because it was difficult to pinpoint a definition since participants perceived it to be largely self-determined. Manhood was not perceived as tenuous, since the inability to maintain any of the behaviors that were integral to their definitions of manhood were more related to their personhood rather than their manhood and their identity as men was still salient to them after experiencing threats to their manhood. Further, traditionally feminine traits were important to these men's definitions of obtaining and maintaining manhood, and womanhood was seen as equivalent, if not integral in the case of queer men's perceptions, to manhood. Nevertheless, heterosexual-cisgender men still conceptualized women having the ability to be the "man of the house" just as well as men can, suggesting that to some degree, they still perceive manhood as distinct from womanhood. Lastly, these men discussed a general rejection of society's definition of manhood and agreed that these sociocultural values were outdated. More research into this generation of emerging adults' perceptions of gender roles is

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needed and into the empirical relationship between sexual orientation, gender identity, and the

precarious nature of manhood, is needed.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Social identities can help you navigate the world. This can include your sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, among others. Rather than placing labels on you, I would rather you explain which identities represent who you are.

2. How do you define manhood?

3. How do you achieve manhood? How do you know when you are a man?

4. How does your definition fit in with society's definition of manhood?

5. How do you maintain manhood?

    a. What happens when you are not able to maintain those behaviors?

6. What role does sexual orientation play in the definition of manhood?

7. Your gender identity can match your assigned sex, or it may not. Knowing this, what role does gender identity play in the definition of manhood?

8. Describe a time when someone seemed to question your manhood.

    a. How do you feel about that?

    b. How, if at all, did this experience impact your self-esteem?

9. What has been your proudest moment as a man?

Appendix B: IRB Study Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

November 10, 2022

Kemesha Gabbidon

████████████████

Dear Dr. Kemesha Gabbidon:

On 11/9/2022, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY004782
Review Type:	Exempt 2
Title:	I'll Make a Man Out of You: A Comparison of Cisgender, Heterosexual Men and Queer Men
Funding:	University of South Florida
Protocol:	• Precarious Manhood Protocol.11.06.2022

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,

Gabriela Plazarte

Institutional Review Boards / Research Integrity & Compliance
FWA No. 00001669
University of South Florida / 3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165 / Tampa, FL 33612 / 813-974-5638

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