

October 2023

“We Need to Figure Out Who We Are”: Reframing Manhood in an Online Discussion Forum

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“We Need to Figure Out Who We Are”:
Reframing Manhood in an Online Discussion Forum

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
October 6, 2023

Keywords: gender, masculinity, trans men, authenticity, Reddit

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my amazing committee members, Dr. Crawley and Dr. Sloan for helping shape this thesis project's direction. A shoutout to all the amazing graduate students and faculty members in the Sociology Department that I got to know during my time at USF.

Furthermore, I would like to extend my gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Graham, who has mentored me since I was an undergraduate. I remember taking your Identity & Community course in the Fall of 2019, right before the pandemic. Coming into college, I had no idea what I was passionate about or what I wanted to do. You helped me realize my potential as a scholar early on, leading me to where I am today. Being a first-generation college student, there were times when I felt like I could never truly belong in academia. There were rough patches and bumps along the way, but you were always there to help. Your many insights, wisdom, encouragement, and support have not only helped me grow as a scholar but as a person as well. I'm incredibly grateful for your mentorship and I will always cherish my experience being your student.

To my family—this degree is yours as it is mine. I would like to give a special thanks to my mom, Noelia, and dad, Tomas Sr., for raising me to be the person I am today, fostering my intellectual curiosity from an early age, and always supporting my goals and ambitions. I would like to thank my sister Kayla whose humor never fails to lift my spirits. Also, a shoutout to my brother, Giovanni, and my kid sister, Clarisse.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the potential of online communities in negotiating alternative forms of “doing” masculinity. I focus on the /r/bropill which is hosted on Reddit – home to thousands of active discussion forums called subreddits. I argue that the members of /r/bropill subreddit are attempting to redefine what it means to live your life not only as a man but as a “good man.” Using a purposive sample, I analyzed 24 discussions which totaled 1325 posts (n = 1325). I conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the original posts and comments inspired by grounded theory. My findings reveal the struggles that many of the posters—a large proportion of them identifying as trans men—feel that they are failing at signifying masculine selves. Many of the commenters reject gender conformity and an essentialized notion of masculinity and manhood, utilizing the “logics of neoliberalism” (Rose 1996) such as freedom and autonomy to encourage other men to negotiate their individualized hybrid masculinities that are based on a ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ self. Additionally, my project reveals how men signify masculine selves through being principled, and practicing good and moral conduct to live as “good men.” I end this thesis by discussing this subreddit's positive implications in helping expand gender categories. Despite being well-intentioned in their goals, members of the /r/bropill subreddit seem to inadvertently perpetuate forms of cis privilege that overlook differences and the experiences of trans men.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a man? Asking such a question would probably elicit various responses as it depends on who you ask. Most commonly, people's understandings of manhood are based on hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Connell 2005), the gendered practices and ideals often ascribed and associated with men. Right-wing social actors make claims that 'traditional' American masculinity is being threatened and 'under attack' by feminists and left-wing political actors (Cassino and Besen-Cassino 2021; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Kimmel 2013). Others make claims that frame masculinity as a social problem in which certain aspects of 'traditional' masculinity are deemed 'toxic' and 'harmful' to men's health and well-being; hence, with concepts such as "toxic masculinity" becoming widely used in large part of the #MeToo movement (Harrington 2021). This framing of "toxic masculinity" seems to mirror historical frames adopted by the men's liberation movements of the 1970s (Messner 1998).

Another problem that is being widely discussed is how masculinity is implicated in many high-profile mass shootings, particularly in cases where the motivations of the killer result from their feelings of 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kalish and Kimmel 2010; Kimmel 2013; Pfaffendorf, Davis and Kinney 2021; Vito, Admire and Hughes 2018). The sociologist Michael Kimmel (2013) uses the term 'aggrieved entitlement' in his book *Angry White Men* to refer to how many white men feel entitled to certain rights and privileges because of their status; a birthright. As Kimmel (2013:63) states: "[Angry White Men] tend to feel their sense of aggrieved entitlement because of the past; they want to restore what they *once had*. Their entitlement is not aspiration; it's nostalgic." This sense of an unfulfilled promise that never came to fruition; a historical past

that they long for where men knew their rightful place. However, they claim that left-wing political actors, women, queer folks, and people of color have ‘robbed’ them of these promises; they see themselves as victims who have been left behind in a changing world.

Feelings of aggrieved entitlement are embodied within many online men’s spaces. The manosphere refers to the group of online men’s communities whose collective identities are based on the logics of male supremacist ideas (Ging 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018). Some of the communities represented by the manosphere include the alt-right, pick-up artists (PUAs), involuntary celibates (incels), men’s rights activists (MRAs), and ‘men going their own way’ (MGTOW). While the collective identities and communities that are represented under the manosphere often appear to be fragmented because of their contradictory ideas on how they should present and perform gender as men, they are united in their shared misogynistic rhetoric as well as the ideology which they refer to as the “Red Pill.”

The “red pill” metaphor originates from the 1999 film *The Matrix*. The protagonist of the film Neo (played by Keanu Reeves) must decide whether to take the ‘red pill,’ which would expose him to an enlightened, but uncomfortable truth about his existence and reality, while the ‘blue pill’ would lead him to live in a state of ignorant bliss, continuing to exist in his simulated reality. Red pill adherents claim that feminism is the root of men’s problems today; that feminism has gone ‘too far’ to the point where now women are empowered to hate men (misandry), making men the ‘victims’ (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Ging 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018). They claim that feminists are attempting to feminize and emasculate men, disempowering them of their ability to assert their ‘rightful’ position within the gender order.

After ‘taking’ the redpill, how they go about asserting their status is what differentiates these communities. For example, MGTOW communities encourage men to separate themselves

from women (Jones, Trott and Wright 2020); incel communities, on the other hand, take a fatalistic approach adopting what is referred to as taking the ‘blackpill’ which is the logic that because their genetic ‘inferiority’ has affected their physical appearance, they will forever remain a virgin and alone (Ging 2019; Halpin 2022). Pick-up artists and some Red Pill communities encourage men to develop and improve their sexual strategies to manipulate women into having sex with them, using biological essentialist logic presuming that women are attracted to physical attractiveness, wealth, sexual virility, and other signifiers of power and status (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Ging 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2021).

In my unpublished undergraduate honors thesis that I began in 2020, I studied a community on Reddit called /r/exredpill, a subreddit dedicated to helping de-radicalize individuals from the Red Pill and male supremacist ideologies. I wanted to understand what drew men into these manosphere communities in the first place and what moments or events led them to reject these ideologies eventually. Like Thorburn (2023), who recently published their findings on /r/exredpill, I found that many users described feeling unnoticed or rejected by women. I kept encountering a common narrative among these men in that they felt “weak,” “emasculated,” and “unmanly.” They described turning to these manosphere and Red Pill communities which ‘sold them’ this idea of male success should look like: physical attractiveness, muscularity, wealth, sexual prowess, and power. These ideals may be alluring to many straight, cis men as they embody many aspects of hegemonic masculine ideals that our culture glorifies. However, these ideals often reinforce a gender order that perpetuates the subordination of women, queer folks, and men whose embodiment of masculinity does not align with the hegemonic ideal.

As a self-identified feminist and queer person, I began to wonder what alternative forms of masculinity are available for men? I want to understand what men are “doing” to change the

ideals of being a man. In her book, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, the late bell hooks (2004) states:

Many men in our society have no status, no privilege; they receive no freely given compensation, no perks with capitalist patriarchy. For these men domination of women and children may be the only opportunity to assert a patriarchal presence. These men suffer. Their anguish and despair has no limits or boundaries. They suffer in a society that does not want men to change, that does not want men to reconstruct masculinity so that the basis for the social formation of male identity is not rooted in an ethic of domination. Rather than acknowledge the intensity of their suffering, they dissimulate. They pretend. They act as though they have power and privilege when they feel powerless. Inability to acknowledge the depths of male pain makes it difficult for males to challenge and change patriarchal masculinity (2004: 138-9).

hooks (2004) seems to imply that for change to occur, men who receive little to no benefit from a patriarchal order must realize that the current gender system is hurting them too. As they try to signify a masculine self, their enactments of power are a front that conceals a much deeper problem that men need to confront. But how can they rethink what it means to be a “man?” Online spaces provide one answer to this question.

In this study, I focus on an online space called /r/bropill subreddit. In my initial reading of the discussions that are taking place on the /r/bropill subreddit, I read the space as a masculine one. While it is difficult to determine the percentage of men on the /r/bropill, I encountered many discussion threads about manhood, masculinity, and what it means to be a man. There are also a few guidelines present on the subreddit that hint that this is a men’s space. One of the rules of the space states: “Men have problems too. Don't dismiss them with other groups' issues.” Another rule states: “Do not promote Red Pill, MRA, MGTOW, or male supremacist talking points and content creators,” stating that “There are enough spaces for that kind of hatred, and we're not going to be another one.” This seems to suggest they are trying to be a space that avoids reproducing the toxic features within groups associated with the manosphere. Based on these clues, I read /r/bropill as a gendered space that is at least predominantly composed of men.

What is an interesting thing to point out is that the name “bropill” utilizes the pill metaphor that is adopted by the manosphere. If we remove the symbolic meanings of the pill metaphor, a pill with its literal interpretation is understood to be something you take to alleviate a condition such as illness. Thorburn (2023:20) mentions the need to study these communities geared towards providing “support for men and boys who are struggling with loneliness and self-esteem.” In this research, I am focused on how alternative forms of “doing” masculinity are negotiated that not only stray away from the masculinities found in manosphere and Red Pill communities but also challenge hegemonic ideals on what it means to be a man.

Drawing from Foucault, Rose (1996) argues that neoliberalism has shifted how we view ourselves. Whereas before, individuals relied on social institutions such as religion to govern the self; now, we live in an age where we have become individually responsible for governing and choosing how to live our lives (Rose 1996). In cases where we cannot reach the state of selfhood that we desire, we are responsible for seeking the help of others to provide us with the knowledge to enact change to achieve the meaning, happiness, and fulfillment we seek (Rose 1996). In the case of /r/bropill, people come to /r/bropill seeking advice on how to live life as a man, and members impart knowledge on how to live one’s life as a man through the advice that they give.

For this thesis, I am interested in answering the following questions: (1) how do posters frame their posts when seeking advice or input on “doing” masculinity/manhood; and (2) how do members negotiate and frame the meaning of masculinity/manhood through their comments? I argue that through discursive means, the members of the /r/bropill subreddit attempt to negotiate masculinity in a way that allows for greater inclusion of more diverse “doings” of masculinity.

They are embracing forms of self-expression that do not fit hegemonic masculine ideals as well as they fit a moral, ethical, and principled way of how to live their life as men.

My findings suggest that one of the ways in which the members of the /r/bropill subreddit accomplish this is by utilizing the “logics of neoliberalism” (Rose 1996) such as freedom and autonomy as discursive resources for users to attempt to individually craft and negotiate masculine selves that are authentic to them. This individualizing of masculinity allows for a broader range of “doings” of masculinity, expanding gendered boundaries on what practices and embodiments are categorized as masculine. Additionally, some members on /r/bropill attempt to signify masculine selves based on the idea of being a “good” person. Members draw on virtues, moral values, and personal codes of conduct that emphasize reducing harm to others (and to themselves) and leading their lives as “good men.” I argue that these findings help us to understand how people who are in search of meaning and guidance on what it means to live their lives as better men collaborate with others online and draw from culturally available vocabularies and discourses to negotiate and put into practice a version of manhood that they find to be better than the dominant version. They are constructing a logic focused on asserting your right to be yourself.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

I situate my project within multiple literatures anchored within social constructionist approaches to gender. I will first discuss West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of "doing gender," which is rooted within ethnomethodology. I will describe how gender is an interactional accomplishment that includes being made to account for gender presentation and performance. I will then describe the social sanctions that are deployed when people fail to adequately do gender and some of the strategies that men employ to accomplish gender in reaction to being sanctioned. I will then discuss Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity and its connections to the more recent concept of hybrid masculinity. By making these connections between hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, I will highlight how hybrid masculinities expand the possibilities for negotiating masculine selves. Finally, I will discuss how hegemonic and hybrid masculine practices are negotiated and practiced within online spaces.

Doing Gender

West and Zimmerman (1987) conceptualized the notion of "doing gender," based on the premise that gender is routinely accomplished through interaction. Building on the work of Garfinkel and Goffman, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that we are expected to do gender in a way that is appropriate for the sex category ascribed to us. Those who are presumed to have a female body are expected to do gender through feminine practices, and those who are presumed to have a male body are expected to do gender through masculine practices (West and Zimmerman 1987). Similarly, Butler's ([1990]1999:10) notion of "gender performativity"

focuses on the way gender is a performance in which social actors are engaging in gendered acts that are repeated, attempting to imitate gendered norms of femininity or masculinity based on “sexed bodies.”

Adhering to its roots, West and Zimmerman (1987) also take up the notion of accountability, a defining feature of ethnomethodology. In our attempts to make sense of our reality, we attempt to account for actions based on normative assumptions that we have about how the world works that are “taken for granted” and become a form of “commonsense knowledge” (Garfinkel 1984). “Accounts and accounting are active practices used to define reality and produce or repair order, especially when situations are unstable and reality becomes unclear” (Crawley 2022:378). In the case of doing gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) are attempting to argue that our gender presentations and performances (doings) are held accountable through our accounts in interactions based on normative assumptions about the gender paired with the sex category (male/female) that others recognize us to fit.

Thus, people “do” gender with the assumption that their actions and behaviors will be surveilled and assessed by others. Actors who “do” gender inappropriately for their presumed sex category are made to account for their “doings.” Social actors are expected to give accounts for actions that violate social rules, for example, giving a reason and explanation for their transgressions—an “account” (Scott and Lyman 1968; West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender is an accomplishment, and those who do not “do” gender appropriately or cannot account for their gender transgressions face social sanctions of many possible types. This can come in the form of homophobic bullying (Pascoe 2007), slut-shaming (Armstrong et al. 2014), or physical violence, such as in the case of trans people (Abelson 2014), just to name a few examples. Negative social sanctions are meant to reify the binary gender system, a “taken for granted” part of social reality (Garfinkel 1984; West and Zimmerman 1987).

When men are socially sanctioned because their “doings” of gender are transgressive, there are different ways for them to respond. One of the ways in which men may respond is by engaging in “manhood acts” to (re)claim masculine status and “signify a masculine self” (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) refer to “manhood acts” as men’s attempts to claim a *masculine self* for which they are held accountable by others through interaction. Carrying out “manhood acts” requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity ‘man’ is established and upheld in interaction” (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009: 279). Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) discuss how manhood acts are employed in situations such as attempting to claim status and privilege as men, practicing control over women, or resisting control.

Men may also engage in “compensatory manhood acts” to signify a masculine self through hypermasculine doings of gender (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Ezzell 2012). Findings from previous work, such as Ezzell (2012: 197–202), reveal how men try to signify masculine selves by engaging in “violence,” “aggression,” “homophobia,” and “misogyny.” Phillips and Rogers (2021) highlight how trans men engage in manhood acts that reproduce gender inequalities, such as sexism, to signify masculine selves and to gain acceptance and validation from cisgender men as ‘one of the guys.’ Abelson (2014) finds how trans men who feel unsafe and threatened will adapt their “doings” of gender based on their situation. In situations where trans men feel in danger or unsafe, they may engage in “defensive masculinities” to signify a masculine self. This is literally a form of self-defense employed to prevent or survive a conflict or altercation with other men (Abelson 2014:562-4).

However, while some might ‘double-down’ by engaging in manhood acts to compensate for inadequate doings of gender, another practice one might engage in is “doing” gender in a way that does not conform to normative assumptions. Deutsch (2007:122) uses the term “undoing

gender” to describe the “social interactions that reduce gender difference.” Deutsch suggests that engaging in actions that resist the normative assumptions of gender can contribute to “undoing” the gender classifications assigned to different social practices. While Deutsch offers valid points, their argument fails to account for the gendering of bodies and our embodiments of gender through our bodily practices and features, which include the appearance of our bodies and how we move our bodies (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008; Crawley and Green 2021).

Hegemonic and Hybrid Masculinities

Challenging the dominance of the sex roles theory in American sociology that is rooted in the structural-functionalism paradigm (Connell 1987: 30), Connell (1987: 98-99, 120) takes up a structural analysis approach to theorize the social order of gender or *gender order*, examining how gender regimes produce the power relations between men and women. Gender regimes are the gender relations in social institutions such as schools, families, and workplaces that play a pivotal role in constructing masculine and feminine ideals, shaping the social practices of individuals in everyday life—including interactions—leading to the social reproduction of the gender order (Connell 1987).

Gender expectations around masculinity and femininity are social/cultural constructions that have been ever-changing through different historical moments (Connell 1987; Connell 2005). Connell (1987) introduced the concepts of *emphasized femininity* and *hegemonic masculinity*. Emphasized femininity refers to the social practices that women engage in that “institutionalize men’s dominance” (Connell 1987:185). Hegemonic masculinity is “constructed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities” (Connell 1987:186). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the gendered social practices that legitimize the patriarchal order, “which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee to dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005:77). Connell (2005) builds upon her argument on the gender relationality

between masculinity and femininity, discussing how there are *multiple masculinities* that are ordered within a gender hierarchy. Still, they are always constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

While not all men embody hegemonic masculinity completely, Connell makes the argument that men not only benefit from the patriarchal order that subordinates women but are *complicit* in sustaining the patriarchal order through their realization of the benefits of being men (2005:79). While men benefit from patriarchal order due to their gender, some groups of men (gay and queer men) are in a subordinate position within the gender hierarchy due to their presumed social proximity to femininity “from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity” (2005:78), thus leading to stigma in the form of ostracization or even violence. Within the gender order, masculinities within the gender hierarchy are further positioned in relation to class and race. Hegemonic masculinity within a particular culture is often constructed based on the dominant or powerful group, such as wealthy or middle-class white men. As a result, while a man from a particular racial/ethnic background (e.g., Black, Asian, and Latino men) may embody hegemonic masculinity in their “doings” of gender, their race and class positions place them in a marginalized status (Connell 2005:80-1). Hegemonic masculinity is not universal but varies by culture and the dominant form of masculine norms and expectations that exist and are reproduced (Connell 2005). In the United States and most Global North countries, social practices associated with manhood, such as strength, dominance, and stoicism, are valued and expected from men (Connell 2005).

Demetriou (2001) critiques the limitations of Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, arguing that Connell fails to show how hegemonic masculinity has changed historically in relation to non-hegemonic masculinities. Demetriou (2001:347) argues that Connell’s analysis of the historical development of hegemonic masculinity neglects to include how non-hegemonic

masculinities have affected that development, thus creating an ahistorical binary where hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic masculinities seem to have developed separately rather than coinciding and being affected by one another. Demetriou (2001) further develops the concept of hegemonic masculinity by explaining how hegemonic masculinity develops throughout time in relation to non-hegemonic masculinities.

Connell (2005:81-2) refers to gender as both a “product” and “producer” of history, noting the way gender relations are negotiated throughout historical moments as they are “formed and transformed over time.” The structural inequality that is produced through a patriarchal order has led to conflicts throughout different historical moments as gender relations are negotiated and contested. Connell (2005:84) borrows Habermas’ notion of “crisis tendencies” to describe the social processes that occur when the legitimation of gender order is being challenged in a way that “implicates masculinities.” For example, feminist and gay liberation movements challenged and contested men’s power and dominance within the gender order, thus leading to attempts to “restore a dominant masculinity” to maintain order. This can be witnessed in our current historical moment as the rights of women and trans people are being rolled back across the country with moves like bans on abortion and trans healthcare.

However, in moments where the patriarchal power of men is threatened, masculinities can be renegotiated where “the formation of a new masculine hegemonic bloc” incorporates “elements produced by... ‘marginal’ and ‘subordinate’ masculinities” to maintain “the reproduction of patriarchy” (Demetriou 2001:349). In this case, practices from marginalized and subordinate masculinities are being taken up and negotiated to construct a new hegemonic masculinity that is hybridized. As a result, while hybrid masculinities may signify progress and gender equality, they can often mask gender inequalities and the privilege of cisgender, white, heterosexual men (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001).

A growing literature showcases how hybrid masculinities are being constructed by men that diversify the array of different practices and embodiments put forth as masculine. Bridges (2014) reveals how heterosexual men appropriate “gay aesthetics” to negotiate masculine identity. Their findings highlight ways heterosexual men claim a moral self, thanks to their engagement in practices deemed ‘feminine’ and ‘gay,’ thus symbolically distancing themselves from ‘bad’ men. The men in the study “[framed] being gay...as fun and exciting,” revealing how their heterosexual privilege allows them to play and experiment with their “doings” of masculinity while “[ignoring] the persistence of extreme sexual inequality and the hardships that actual gay men face every day” (Bridges 2014:79).

In their study of vegan men, Greenebaum and Dexter (2018) highlight that while practicing veganism is often categorized as feminine, vegan men negotiate the meanings of veganism to reframe the lifestyle as one that can be masculine. Greenbaum and Dexter (2018) find that the vegan men in their study frame care and compassion for animals as ‘manly’ while emphasizing hegemonic ideals such as “physical strength, power, and athleticism” (Greenbaum and Dexter 2018:345). While “vegan men end up benefiting from masculine privilege and the patriarchal dividend,” they suggest that “this is not done in a manipulative or sinister way,” highlighting how the use of their masculine privilege to recruit men to veganism is motivated by good intentions (2018:345).

Eisen and Yamashita (2019:809) reveal in their findings how men negotiate symbolic boundaries between those who practice “mature masculinity” and “immature masculinity,” viewing those who engage in hegemonic gender practices as “immature.” The participants utilize their autonomy to practice “mature” masculinities, “characterizing themselves as choosing to reject society’s expectations,” which enables the participants “to strengthen their stigmatization of men who embraced the expectations” (2019:809). While the men in the study negotiated

caring and empathetic selves towards their male friends (or “bros”) (which included allowing emotional vulnerability), they attempted to preserve the autonomy of their friends from the control of women that they are intimate with based on a logic of ““ bro before hos”” (2019: 811); this supposed step away from hegemonic masculinity operates by reinforcing negative stereotypes of women as overly controlling.

Scholars such as Anderson (2008: 616) attribute this new embracing of men’s practices that are categorized as feminine to "decreasing levels of cultural homophobia." According to Anderson (2008), this seems to be "influential in creating a new form of masculinity" that is more inclusive, shifting away from a white, heterosexual masculinity. Anderson (2008:617) suggests that social practices that are culturally deemed "effeminate” are no longer as stigmatized as they once were.

However, this notion of *inclusive masculinity* that Anderson (2008) proposes has its critics. While Anderson (2008) claims that hegemonic masculinity cannot account for this shift toward masculinity becoming more inclusive, de Boise (2015:333-4) reveals that Anderson's work seems to misrepresent and "caricatures" hegemonic masculinity, failing to engage with the complex theoretical debates on the concept entirely. de Boise (2015) points out that Anderson seems to conceptualize hegemonic masculinity as a fixed and static archetype. However, hegemonic masculinity is an ever-changing historical process in which cultural ideals of masculinity can change – including being renegotiated and reformulated – to maintain men's social power and dominance (Connell 1987; Connell 2005; de Boise 2015). They also fail to acknowledge that masculinity can be hybridized (de Boise 2015) when social practices associated with subordinated masculinities are adopted and merged into hegemonic masculinity, concealing men's power and dominance under the guise of social progress (de Boise 2015; Demetriou 2001, Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Masculinity in Online Spaces

Kendall (2000) authored one of the early studies focusing on men's virtual communities, exploring how members of an online forum constructed a "white nerd masculine identity." Their findings reveal that men reinforced hegemonic masculine ideals using sexually objectifying and misogynistic discourses despite claiming to renounce hegemonic masculine ideals in their offline lives. Furthermore, findings show how members often engaged in "self-deprecating humor" by mocking their marginalized status, such as their lack of sexual encounters (Kendall 2000: 63–5). Many men had "given up" on pursuing women, and they shared their frustration towards women for dating "jerks." Kendall (2000: 266-67) describes how the community acts as a space where men can vent their sexual frustrations online and relate to and sympathize with other men regarding their shared disdain for women who turn them down.

Research on masculinities and the internet has grown considerably, mainly focusing on online misogyny (Jane 2014; Moloney and Love 2018; Sobieraj 2020) and on how online misogyny manifests and is produced within online communities. The internet has become a breeding ground for online misogyny because users are protected/shielded by its anonymity. As Kimmel (2013:113–4) puts forth:

The internet provides just such a man cave, a politically incorrect locker room, where you can say whatever you feel like saying without having to back it up with something as inconvenient as evidence and still hide behind a screen of anonymity so that no one knows that you're the jerk you secretly think you might just be. That's a recipe for rage.

Some literature has been on male-dominated online communities that breed hate, such as communities associated with *the manosphere*. As mentioned previously, the manosphere refers to the collection of online men's communities whose collective identities are rooted within the logics of male supremacy (Ging 2019; Marwick and Caplan 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2021).

Members of online communities associated with the manosphere often construct themselves as

victims of a society that has been ruined and degraded; they often express “aggrieved entitlement” that blames women, feminism, racial and ethnic minorities, liberals, queer folks, and so on, for what they perceive as a decay of the social order and their status within that order (see Kimmel 2013). What is particularly concerning about male-dominated online communities is that they seem to blur the symbolic boundary between the 'real world' and the 'online world,' influencing real-world events such as the election of former U.S. President Donald Trump (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019), as well as several high-profile mass shootings committed by men who identify as incels and those fueled by racist, far-right ideologies (Halpin 2022; Pfaffendorf et al. 2021; Vito, Admire and Hughes 2018).

Some of the literature suggests how online communities can also act as a safe space and refuge for men with interests that deviate from hegemonic masculine ideals; however, antifeminism and misogynistic ideologies can go unchecked. Bailey and Harvey’s (2019) virtual ethnography of the My Little Pony discussion board called “/mlp/” on the internet forum 4chan explores how male users negotiate a “communal identity” and hybrid masculinity based on their failure to “do” heteronormative practices that are associated with hegemonic masculine ideals. They practice non-hegemonic masculinities through their sexual desires toward the ponies from the animated television series and franchise “My Little Pony,” which many describe feeling shame about. Bailey and Harvey (2019:337) reveal that the members blame feminists for their “masculine double-bind” because they feel punished by feminists for being introverted and for their stigmatized sexual desires; they also think they are penalized for trying to accomplish hegemonic ideals. “Online worlds” allow people to share aspects about themselves, including (shameful) pleasures and desires, without having to account for their practices (Bailey and Harvey 2019:336). Middleweek (2021) also reveals how hybrid masculinities are negotiated online in their study of an online sex doll forum. Middleweek finds that users practice misogyny

and sexual objectification through discourse. Yet, they also engage in non-hegemonic masculine practices such as bonding through emotional vulnerability and the desire for intimacy and companionship (2021:383).

However, some communities attempt to renegotiate masculinity by reframing what it means to be a man. For example, Scheibling (2020) reveals how “dad bloggers” attempt to ‘redefine’ fatherhood through engaging in practices such as being caring, being a stay-at-home parent, and adopting pro-feminist values in their fathering practices. While dad bloggers “can enact and enjoy gender flexibility and hybridity” in their “doings” of gender because of “race, sexuality, and class” (2020:15), Scheibling (2020:16) argues that “[dad bloggers] are putting forth a concerted effort to redefine masculinity by publicly promoting men’s capacity to be caring fathers and feminist allies,” thus they are “redoing gender” by challenging the hegemonic ideals of fatherhood, thus redefining manhood while still maintaining the binary logics of gender such feminine/masculine and woman/man (Scheibling 2020:7-8). While they are not necessarily “undoing gender” (Deutsch 2007), they are redefining the gendered meanings assigned to practices and embodiments, which helps to blur the boundaries of gender categories.

Crawley and Green (2021:17) state that “online spaces can be used as sites of identity negotiation and resistance, or possibly serve to further regulate gendered practices.” We can see the vast array of ways masculinities are negotiated online. While the hybrid masculinities being negotiated both online and offline often end up reproducing or at least masking gender inequalities, I think it is essential to consider the intentions and motivations of these spaces. For example, some spaces are explicit in reproducing misogynistic and bigoted discourses. However, studies such as Scheibling (2020) and Greenbaum and Dexter (2018) highlight that the men they are studying have intentions that align with pro-feminist values, showing their commitment to being allies and redefining what it means to “do” manhood. While it is important to highlight

how their privilege may reinforce inequalities, it is also essential to highlight the meanings that they assign to their intentions and motivations. Crawley (2022) highlights how practical actors are constrained by the knowledges that are available to them. Still, as agents, they can use the knowledges available to them—such as discourses and narratives—in “accomplishing particular situations” (2022:14). If we are to think of these men as practical actors, they are using the discursive resources and knowledges that are available to them to negotiate masculinities that redefine the meaning of what it means to “do” manhood. However, what discursive resources and other forms of knowledge are they drawing from to negotiate and redefine the meanings of manhood? In this project, I capture how members of the /r/bropill subreddit draw from different discursive resources and knowledges to negotiate and redefine the meanings behind what it means to be a man.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Because I am focused on meaning-making and how people understand gendered experiences, identity, and selfhood, I will use a constructionist/interpretive framework to analyze and interpret the data. Using this framework will allow me to reveal how members of the subreddit understand the meanings of gender practices categorized as masculine, how gender identity categories such as “man” are negotiated within the subreddit, and how users understand their experiences with “doing” masculinity.

Data Source and Sample

The data source comes from the /r/bropill subreddit from Reddit, which is home to thousands of active online communities based on shared interests, beliefs, and goals. The /r/bropill is publicly accessible, meaning anyone on the internet can view the subreddit without a login or membership. While the /r/bropill subreddit is primarily male-dominated, discussion threads on the /r/bropill subreddit encompass various topics not limited to masculinity and manhood. I decided that a purposive sample would be the best strategy to address my research questions as it would allow me to focus on only discussion threads whose topics are related to my research questions.

I used inclusion and exclusion criteria to narrow my search and produce a manageable sample. I decided to limit my search to only discussion threads posted within a year of when I began my search between May 2022 and May 2023. I created a list of key terms related to my research question that I expected to find on the subreddit. The key terms that I used initially were

“masculinity,” “masculine,” “manhood,” “manly,” “unmanly,” “emasculate,” “macho,” “guy,” “man,” and “dude.” After each search, I would save the Reddit threads whose opening title or initial discussion post contained any of these keywords. I got to a point where I was no longer producing original search results.

To get a more inclusive and exhaustive sample that included “doings” of masculinity and manhood that are marginalized, I decided also to search key terms such as “feminine,” “femininity,” “girly,” “womanly,” “sissy,” “healthy,” “positive,” “toxic,” and “queer.” I discovered a few more discussion threads by searching these key terms. While there are more additional keywords that could have been included in this search, each additional search produced less and less original search results, meaning that I felt confident that my sample was exhaustive given the parameters that I set in place.

In total, my sampling strategy produced a total of 24 discussion threads. Two of the discussion threads' original posts were deleted: Thread 4 and Thread 19. While the original posts were deleted, users within the thread were discussing themes related to masculinity and manhood, so they were included in the sample. Comments for each of the discussion threads ranged from 8 to 158 comments. The total number of posts (original posts plus comments) represented in the sample was 1325 posts ($n = 1325$). In the Appendix, I included the discussion threads that were a part of the sample. I numbered each discussion thread and included the thread's title and the number of comments (Appendix A).

Rather than copying and pasting the text onto a Word document, I saved the entire webpage of each discussion thread as a PDF file. This allowed me to preserve the discussion threads as someone who can view them online. I sought IRB approval in July 2023 with the IRB

ruling that my research does not meet the “human subjects research” criteria, thus not requiring any further review (Appendix B).

Data Analysis and Organization

I conducted a textual analysis, analyzing the data using an inductive qualitative approach that was inspired by grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). I used the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2022, which allows researchers to manage data and tools that aid in analyzing the data. I uploaded each of the discussion thread's PDF files onto MAXQDA. Since I used a purposive sampling strategy, I already had some initial thoughts about the data after reading each of the original posts.

I began analyzing the data with a round of open coding using an *in vivo* approach, which includes labeling a coded segment based on the language used within the text. For example, if a post mentioned the phrase “not manly enough” or “be yourself,” I coded the post as such. I also began writing memos for the codes to begin conceptualizing and defining the meanings of each coded segment. During the coding process, I also began writing analytical memos highlighting core ideas emerging from data and coded excerpts that were exemplary of these concepts.

Before organizing the codes into larger categories, I separated the codes for the original posts into one group and the codes related to the comments/responses into another group to separate the analyses. This was done to understand what users seek when creating a discussion thread and what responses members of the subreddit provide. I organized the codes into larger categories, merging codes based on their connection and similarities to one another. I separated the codes related to initial posts and comments.

During this process, I noticed the broader narratives that were beginning to take shape on masculinity and manhood. When categorizing codes for the original post for each discussion

thread, I began to think about the accounts that users gave to begin a discussion thread. What kind of gendered experiences are they sharing when beginning their initial posts? What kinds of advice or input are they seeking from the members of the subreddit? When coding and categorizing the codes for the responses in the discussion thread, I categorized the data based on the forms of advice that are being given including how masculinity or manhood is defined, what practices are considered masculine, how they encourage others to do gender as a “man”? Thinking about these questions, I was able to start bridging the categories into much larger themes that encompass different frames of how users understand and present their accounts with masculinity and manhood, and what suggestions, advice, or practices are being offered by members of the subreddit on how men should go about “doing” gender.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Gender Troubles

Of the twenty-two discussion threads that had an original post (two of the thread's initial posts were deleted), the overwhelming majority (21 of 22) detailed their struggles and challenges with gender; specifically, trying to accomplish what it means to “be” a man. Findings reveal that many of the original posts (13 of 22) were initiated by members who claimed to be trans and non-binary folks with the posters’ self-identifying as “trans man,” “transgender man,” “trans guy,” and “non-binary trans man.” A common experience that the posters share, especially among trans posters, is that while they “feel” and identify as men, many of them are “confused,” “unsure,” and “lost” on how to “be” a man. Many posters mention that their upbringings and experiences of being brought up as “girls” and “women” do not align with their gender. As a result of their lack of interactions with other men or male “role models,” they describe their struggles of trying to be seen as “one of the guys.” One poster who describes themselves as a “trans guy” and “autistic” writes:

Ok this probably sounds stupid, but I'm a trans guy so grew up mostly around girls/being treated as a girl. I don't understand how to talk to guys, like what topics it would be ok to talk about and what would make me be made fun of. I'm very bad socially as it is and have a hard enough time talking to people generally, but I feel like such a fake guy for not being able to properly know how to talk to guys. I'm completely pre-transition too and I'm worried I'll just be seen as a weird little girl. ^[P]_[SEP]What topics are discussable? What music is generally popular with guys? What tv shows? Is there parts of body language I should be aware of? I've never really spent time around cis guys so I don't know anything. I'm worried my interests will have me made fun of. With girls I know certain topics that are socially acceptable for girls to discuss but I don't know how to do the same for guys. Being possibly autistic doesn't help me socially either (Thread 23)

We can see how the poster talks about his upbringing of "being treated" and growing up as a girl. Growing up and being treated as a girl, he claims he did not "understand how to talk to guys" and did not learn the kinds of topics and interests that "guys" discuss because he has "never really spent time around cis guys." As a result, he describes feeling like a "fake guy" and worries that his interests will be "made fun of." Many of these posts, such as the one above, reflect the binary gender system in that there are assumed differences between the kinds of topics and interests that "guys" and "girls" have.

Many users become aware of these gendered differences based on how they are treated and how others hold them accountable to gender expectations (West and Zimmerman 1987). A few users describe their experiences of being misgendered by others, leading them to believe that they cannot "pass" as a "man." One poster who describes himself as a "dude" who "wasn't born a man" writes in his post:

Im actually trying to come out right now, but in the town I live in people are mostly pretty closed minded and people misgender me all the time, and I know some of these people are just being unsupportive and mean, but I know it may be just cause I don't pass very well (Thread 14)

The poster seems to be questioning his "doings" of gender and whether he is accomplishing gender in a way where he is recognized as his gender by others. shuster (2017: 486) introduces the notion of "discursive aggression" to describe how trans people are held accountable to gender expectations through language and discourse used in interactions. Trans people may excuse "discursive aggression" such as being misgendered by "placing the responsibility" on themselves for failing to adequately present their gender that is based on normative assumptions of gender (shuster 2017:493-4). Another user who describes himself as a "teenage transgender man" also experiences being misgendered, writing, "My family doesn't refer to me as a man at all." They continue writing: "I want to come out publicly, but I think I'm too feminine to not be made fun

of, and no matter how much I try, passing is really hard” (Thread 9). From these two examples (Thread 9, Thread 14), we can see how “passing” becomes a form of self-policing where individuals hold themselves responsible for how they are treated by others based on their gender presentation and are aware of the punishment for not doing gender appropriately whether that is being “misgendered” or “made fun of” by others (shuster 2017; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Some of the users describe feeling “unmanly,” “emasculated,” and are “struggling,” “worried,” and “afraid” of not being recognized by others as a “real man.” Many of the posters want to be recognized as men or masculine and use the subreddit to seek advice. While posters want to be recognized as more “masculine,” some of the posters mention that they want to do so without emulating gender practices that are deemed “toxic.” One poster writes:

I just found this sub, and I’m really glad I did! I’ve been struggling with wanting to be masculine, while also not internalizing toxic masculinity. I don’t have a solid father figure in my life so it’s hard to know where to begin. Thank all you guys (mods, members) for making this sub such a beacon of positivity. If anyone has any words about what masculinity means to you, I’d love to hear it! (Thread 17)

In the post above, we can see that this poster describes that he is “struggling with wanting to be masculine while also not internalizing toxic masculinity.” Here, we can see how some posters desire to be “masculine” and socially recognized as ‘real men’ but do it in a way that does not reproduce certain practices deemed “toxic.” Men who fail to accomplish gender expectations based on cultural assumptions of masculinity can face punishment and be held accountable for their doings of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Kimmel (1991) describes how “fear” of being revealed as “unmanly” or “emasculated” shapes cultural notions of masculinity and the way men shape their gender performances to avoid being perceived by other men as such. As a result, one of how men signify a masculine self is by engaging in manhood acts to compensate for the perceived lack of masculinity; often, these acts are “self-destructive” and “toxic” (Schrock

and Schwalbe 2009: 289). Many of these posters seem to be aware of the conundrum of claiming a "masculine self" and being seen as "real men," suggesting that there is a normative way of "doing" masculinity and how that way is "toxic." However, they want to do masculinity in a way that does not reproduce these ideals. For example, a few posters, most of whom were trans, cited how, now that they identify and are presenting as men, they have become aware of their social power and how this shapes their interactions with other women. One user writes in their post:

I really want to exude healthy masculinity and help women feel safe, especially with my experience of living as a woman in the past, but I cannot bring myself to present femininely in any way. I'm scared I'll start HRT but remain insecure and turn into one of the men that would make me cross the street if I saw them at night. Or that I'll keep being this hard on myself for not living up to my masculine ideal and start pushing it onto others. I really don't want to be toxic, but I don't know how to mark myself as someone safe without making myself uncomfortable. (Thread 5)

Here, we can see that this poster wants to "exude healthy masculinity." His "experience of living as a woman" seems to shape his assumptions about masculinity and wanting to "do" masculinity differently. However, he does not want to "present femininely in any way." This comment also exemplifies how some posters negotiate a dichotomy that categorizes ways of doing masculinity as either good or bad, right or wrong, healthy or toxic. However, how does one go about doing masculinity in a way without engaging in practices that are deemed "toxic"?

Self-Determined Masculinity

Nikolas Rose (1996) argues that neoliberal ideologies emphasizing freedom and autonomy have transformed how we understand ourselves. We now must see ourselves as agents who have control over our choices to seek "happiness" and "fulfillment" in our lives, which can be achieved individually or with the help of others (1996:158-9). As traditionally understood, social control is less needed in a society of people who voluntarily seek to align themselves with

societal expectations of self-fulfillment and happiness. Under this transformed understanding of selfhood in a neoliberal era, according to Rose (1996):

The self is to be a subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice (1996:151).

Many of the comments in the threads that were analyzed utilized the "logics of neoliberalism" (Rose 1996:150) that place responsibility on individuals for their "doings" of genders.

Approximately fifty-five percent of the coded data addressed the theme "Self-Determined Masculinity." The first subcategory identified, "Inclusive Gender Categories," shows how, rather than gatekeeping who is considered a "man," commenters discursively negotiate manhood in a way that allows for the recognition of any individuals who self-identify as men. The second subcategory, "Authenticity," refers to how commenters utilize the vocabularies of freedom and autonomy to emphasize men's control over their "doings" of gender. Rather than conforming to gender expectations, many commenters encourage others to define and practice what they think being a man means to them. By enacting their "true" masculine selves, they have the means to achieve happiness and personal satisfaction with their lives.

Inclusive Gender Categories

While gender identity categories such as "man" tend to marginalize and exclude social groups whose "doings" of gender do not align with the dominant culture's constructions of masculinity (Connell 2005; Kimmel 1991; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), the findings reveal that members of /r/bropill provide a more inclusive definition governing who can claim to be a man as a gender identity.

Identifying as a male means just that, identifying as a guy (Thread 3)

Identifying as a man, that's what makes it. There are no definite physical nor personal characteristics, so that is the only thing that we have in common. (Thread 4)

You want to be a bro? You are a bro. Simple as that. (Thread 15)

Honestly bro, if you identify as a man, that's enough. (Thread 20)

As illustrated in the examples above, many commenters employ inclusive language when discussing gender identity rather than policing who gets to claim to be a 'real man.' This logic allows for the possibility of expanding gender categories, which contrasts sharply with traditional and hegemonic masculinities (and with dominant discourses in general) where categories such as “woman” and “man” act as symbolic boundaries and bodies and where embodiments are coded as feminine or masculine (Crawley et al. 2008). Outside this subreddit and other liberatory spaces, gender categories are often based on sex category (Crawley et al. 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, the definition of who is considered a man is being negotiated within this subreddit to allow for the inclusion of individuals whose bodies and embodiments are typically not recognized or coded as being “manly.” By recognizing individuals as fitting the gender identity they claim for themselves, regardless of their bodies and practices, users are broadening gender boundaries and chipping away at the idea of gender that is based on sex category. Members put this expansion of gender categories into practice in about half (12 out of 24) of the discussion threads where users identified themselves as trans. Many of the commenters responded to the posts made by trans folks with positive and supportive feedback that validates their claims to manhood.

Welcome to the bro-therhood :) (Thread 2)

Welcome to the fold, fellow man! (Thread 9)

Here are some Broses to welcome you to the Brommunity (Thread 17)

Hey brother, I'm also a trans man and have really enjoyed this subreddit. Welcome!
(Thread 17)

Above are some comments to discussion threads initiated by trans folks welcoming them to the subreddit. The vocabularies utilized by members not only signify the inclusion of trans and non-binary folks in the subreddit but also serve as a form of recognition and validation of their gender identities. This open validation is a practice that is unique to this subreddit when you compare it to most other men's spaces. While many men's spaces practice a "politics of exclusion" idealizing men whose "doings" of gender fit cultural constructions of manhood (Kimmel 1991:138), the /r/bropill subreddit and its members negotiate gender boundaries to include "doings" of masculinity that are on the margins.

Authenticity

A common logic shared by many of the commenters is that—as individuals—they have control over their presentation and performances of gender, circumventing the idea that gender norms control them. One of the core ideas of hegemonic masculinity is the social power that men have as a collective (Connell 2005). However, when thinking about how hegemonic masculinity is embodied in everyday social practices, we can see how ideas such as autonomy and freedom can be manifestations of hegemonic masculinity as they can signify a sense of power and control over your actions and how your life plays out. Many commenters seem to negotiate the practices of autonomy and freedom as part of their negotiations of hybrid masculinity. In a way, this logic acts as an "account" of what it means to be a "real man" as it explains their "doings" of gender (Scott and Lyman 1968; West and Zimmerman 1987). Rather than viewing themselves as powerless over their lives, many commenters utilize vocabularies of autonomy and freedom (Rose 1996) to negotiate 'true' and 'authentic' representations of gender to signify masculine selves (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Below is a common form of advice encountered within the threads, especially to posters seeking advice on what it means to be a man and how one should "do" masculinity.

What is a man? A miserable little pile of secrets!
But seriously... Define your masculinity yourself. Don't let anyone dictate what feels right for you and your body and how you present yourself. Gender expression is a spectrum, just find the place that fits right for you.
There's no right answer to being a man. If you like keeping your chest hairy, and you like your muscles, then do that. If you like shaven legs and a fierce mug of makeup to go with your beard and mustache, do that too.
If you like being feminine with masculine traits go for it, there are plenty of biological women who have very feminine features but rock things like Muscles and body hair. It goes both ways.
You're not alone in how you feel, there's lots of people who feel the same and express themselves in their own way.
I hope you find comfort in your body, and the freedom that comes with it. (Thread 3)

In this example, we can see how commenters utilize the socially inscrutable vocabularies of autonomy and freedom to reframe manhood in a way where individuals are encouraged to define what it means to them and express their individuality through gender. Neoliberal language becomes a resource for commenters, as they know it is beyond reproach in the broader society and that it underlies the whole self-help enterprise. Non-conformity to gender expectations becomes one of the ways individuals on the subreddit exercise their autonomy and freedom, challenging hegemonic masculine ideals. One of the ways in which gender non-conformity is accomplished is through gender presentation. In the comment above, the user states, "If you like keeping your hairy chest, and you like your muscles, then do that," which refers to bodily features coded as being masculine and hegemonic. However, the commenter continues further, stating, "If you like shaven legs and a fierce mug of makeup to go with that your beard and mustache, do that too," which discursively signifies the freedom that men have when expressing their gender, including the practices that they engage in such as wearing makeup and shaving their legs, which are typically categorized as feminine. The commenter contrasts these practices in relation to bodily features categorized as masculine, such as facial hair, signifying the negotiation of a "hybrid masculinity" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014) that incorporates masculine and feminine practices when "doing" gender.

The negotiation of hybrid masculinities is reflected throughout many of the analyzed comments. Many of the commenters shared some of the practices that they engaged in that are culturally categorized as "unmanly," "feminine," and "girly." On one of the more popular discussion threads (Thread 12), users were asked, "What are some things perceived as "girly" that you enjoy doing?" Some of the gendered practices shared include "planting flowers," "sewing," "painting my nails," and listening and singing to pop singers such as "Ariana Grande." What is reflected in many of these comments is that many of the users find pleasure in partaking in these practices and activities.

This pleasure in transgressing traditional gender lines has been discussed by many. Messner (2000) reveals how gender is reinforced among children through toys categorized as "girls" and "boys" toys. While boys may find pleasure in playing with toys that are categorized as being for girls, such as a Barbie doll, other boys may tease and ridicule these boys (Messner 2000:777), thus reinforcing the gender system. Boys and men and their "doings" of gender are policed. They are held to account for gender performances that fail to meet masculinity's normative/cultural assumptions, often by undergoing negative social sanctions such as ridicule, shaming, and so forth (Kimmel 1991; Messner 2000; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, many commenters negotiate a logic that allows them to account for their "doings" of masculinity by reframing conformity to gender as being unmanly. One commenter writing to a "trans guy" says:

Hey bro, First, congrats on coming out!! I know that's a hard thing and we're so proud! But while there are traditionally masculine aspects, being a man is about being yourself and doing the right thing for others. I'm a 6' 300lb cis man of solid muscle. I love steaks and beer, fishing, and combat sports. But I also love art, I can see really well, and one of my favorite things to wear is thigh highs and fishnets. Hell, I can't sleep without a stuffed animal! Do those things make me any less of a man? No! I'd argue if I gave into those pressures and changed I'd be less of a man. Also, being a man, as opposed to just being male, is also about doing what's right, even if it may be difficult. It's okay to look out and stand up for yourself, but it's Important to stand up for those that can't. (Thread 2)

While gender transgressions often bring social punishments, many commenters describe how their (feminine)practices do not make them any less of a man. For example, the commenter's description of his body and the practices that he engages in, such as loving "steaks and beer, fishing, and combat sports," embody hegemonic masculine ideals. Yet, he also engages in practices that are gendered as feminine, such as wearing "thigh highs and fishnets" and sleeping with "stuffed animals." He describes how these practices do not make him "less of a man," but in fact, make him more of a man because he is not caving into "pressures."

This discourse was encountered throughout many of the comments in which enjoying and finding pleasure in practices gendered as feminine signifies your ability to free yourself from gender conformity – freedom that signifies a masculine self. Many of the comments reflected experimenting with their "doings" of masculinity to accomplish and achieve a state of happiness and satisfaction. One commenter who self-identifies as a "trans dude" writing to a "trans guy" says:

hi hello! as other people have said, observing how other dudes behave and speak and whatnot has helped me a lot!! that said, at the end of the day, i've finally gotten to the point of where like... if i'm feeling happy and confident then i'm being masculine bc i'm "brave" enough to just be myself unapologetically. sure, here and there i'll adjust a few minor mannerisms here and there to help me pass (i'm also a trans dude) but for the most part i just... realize that existing is totally metal? idk what i'm talking about okay i just got off work (Thread 2)

In the example above, we can see ideas of authenticity and being your 'true self' reflected by many commenters. However, some of the commenters try to understand the special predicament of transmen who want and need to reproduce particular masculine looks and actions in order to feel authentically men. In this case, another trans commenter who identifies as a "trans dude" gives practical advice on "doing" masculinity for trans men struggling to be recognized as 'real men.' This commenter shares how "observing how other dudes behave and speak" helped them

negotiate masculine selves. Some users gave this advice, but it was not as common of a response compared to responses that encouraged others to be their "true" selves when doing gender.

Within the context of discussion threads, not caring what others think about how they present and "do" gender became a common attitude shared by many commenters. Utilizing the vocabularies associated with hegemonic masculine ideals such as strength and confidence, many commenters seem to retain the ideals but discursively reframe them to accommodate a new kind of masculine self. Many commenters know they will be expected to account for gender performances that transgress masculine ideals. One commenter writes:

Lmao, I'm constantly called a pussy and a bitch because I, as a man, drink cocktails. I cannot understand how a tasty drink that also gets you drunk is considered effeminate (Thread 12).

The commenter above describes how they face being ridiculed by being called slurs because they enjoyed drinking cocktails. It is important to point out that the slurs used as social punishment are often the same slurs used to demean women, but they can also be aimed at men who fail to "do" masculinity appropriately.

How do the men in this subreddit respond when they find themselves in situations where they are expected to account for gender transgressions? One practice and a common attitude that was reflected in many of the comments was this: rather than dwelling on what other people think, they should ignore what others think and stop caring. As one commenter writes: "The absolute manliest thing you can ever do is to stop giving a shit about what other people consider manly" (Thread 21). Hegemonic ideals such as strength were used to deflect others challenging their manhood (Scott and Lyman 1968; West and Zimmerman 1987). One commenter writing to a "teenage transgender man" says:

I'm a pretty fem dude. assholes will try to knock my masculinity, the trick to acceptance is it comes from yourself.

when I was younger I'd be easily goated by other teenage boys questioning my masculinity. I still had something to prove to myself. I had my journey through my 20s and now that I'm 30 I couldn't care less what someone says. "gay, femboi, cuck" your emotional reaction to these words says everything about how secure you are in your masculinity.

you know who you are, never let anyone shake that. that's the most masc vibe you can rock. (Thread 9)

Many comments reference being "secure" with your masculinity as a signifier of a masculine self because it shows how you can overcome teasing, ridicule, and harassment from others. In this case, this commenter shares their experience with becoming "secure" with their masculinity after having to undergo other boys, making them account for their masculinity through "questioning." Ignoring what others say is a strategy that many commenters promote because it exemplifies strength in that you do not care what other people say to you because you have accepted yourself by knowing "who you are," thus signifying a masculine self. As we have seen, this insistence on complete gender autonomy also gets discursive support from the widespread logics of neoliberal self-government.

Principled Manhood

The next thematic category, "Principled Manhood," accounted for twenty percent of the coded data. "Principled Manhood" refers to how members negotiate a masculine self based on a moral code of goodness. The theme is organized around the cultural meanings of what is good and moral character, such as showing "care," "kindness," "integrity," and "responsibility." In the first subcategory, "Being a Good Person," I will begin with how commenters negotiate masculinity that shifts away from gender and focuses on "being a good person." The second subcategory, "Care for Others (and Yourself)," focuses on how men negotiate forms of care that include caring for others and self-care as part of the repertoire for being "good men." The third subcategory which I call "Establishing/Maintaining a Personal Code of Conduct" focuses on how

commenters negotiate their personal moral codes of how they and others should conduct themselves. I discuss how commenters hold not only themselves responsible for their personal codes, but also how they maintain their codes by holding others accountable to those that violate their own codes.

Being a Good Man

What does it mean to be “good” and a “good man,” and what does that look like in practice? One of the prevailing vocabularies encountered within the discussion threads was centered on what is considered “good.” Many commenters describe that being a “good man” is also to be a “good person,” as one user puts it: “Being a good man at its core is being a good person” (Thread 2). Some commenters encourage others to redirect their focus away from gender, focusing their efforts on being “good.” For example, one commenter writes:

So how do I cope with "not being manly enough"? I stop focusing on being a man and focus on what I want. Like what I really want. Be a good human being. Treat myself and others with love and respect. Help others when they need it. Reach for my goals and dreams in whatever ways I can while causing the least harm possible. (Thread 7).

These comments seem to assume that there is a shared and normative understanding of how to “do” goodness with very few details on how to be a “good person.” What is deemed “good” is often based on moral codes that categorize actions using binary logics of right/wrong, moral/immoral, and good/bad (Loseke 2007). We can see how, instead of being preoccupied with “doing” masculinity, men should engage in “doing” good, which they presume has no gender attached to it. They decouple morality from gender and reinscribe a gender-neutral morality onto masculinity.

Care for Others (and Yourself)

Many commenters discussed the importance of displaying and practicing care in relation to being a “good man,” which also included different forms of care such as “empathy” and

"compassion." Many of these comments also mentioned other practices in relation to care, such as being "kind," "nice," and "respectful." One user mentions in their comment:

“In my mind, “being a man” isn’t about how you dress or what you like to do, but about your character. A man should be respectful and kind, but will stand up and do the right thing and is willing to protect those he cares about” (Thread 3).

We can see how this commenter negotiates "being a man" away from gender practices, focusing their attention on what is understood to be good character, which includes being "respectful," "kind," and doing "the right thing." Care—along with the different vocabularies used to signify care—tends to be typified as feminine, thus leading it to be a gendered practice (Hochschild 1983). This comment also exemplifies how users masculinize practices such as care by invoking masculine-coded words such as "protect." Like the comment above, many commenters use vocabularies of care in their negotiation of masculine identity and in constructing a masculine self. One commenter writes:

Honestly, masculinity just means to be a good guy, take care of your family and friends and stand up for people that need it. Honestly not much too it. Be confident in showing your feelings and emotions and just look out for one another. That's masculinity for me. (Thread 17)

This comment mentions instances where one can display and practice care, such as taking "care of your family and friends," "stand up for people that need it," and "look out for one another." This reframing of care as being masculine is similar to findings from Scheibling (2020:11-2) who reveals how "dad bloggers" employ "discursive strategies," such as utilizing vocabularies of care, to "redefine" what it means to be a "real man." This is an example of how forms of care are reframed as masculine practices rooted in notions of what is considered good and what it means to be a "good guy." However, what is also interesting about this comment is also the encouragement to practice being "confident in showing your feelings and emotions," which seems to challenge the hegemonic meanings of what is culturally understood as masculine.

I honestly think the best male role model is Superman. He's strong, and uses that strength to protect. He's kind, determined and loves his wife and kids. He always tries to do his best in everything he does. He cried, laughs, loves, encourages and empathises with others. Life is tough, and you can't always be tough with it. All you can do is do your best. (Thread 20)

Several commenters describe the importance of being open to sharing and expressing your emotions and feelings with others. The commenter references the fictional superhero character, Superman, who is understood to be "strong," yet he engages in different forms of care practices such as using his "strength to protect," being loving, and being empathetic. However, he also engages in forms of emotional expression, such as crying. This highlights the complexity of Superman as it shows that he is not only "strong," but he is also "tender" through his displays of care and his ability to show human emotions. In their negotiation of masculinity, the commenter seems to challenge the cultural narrative that men should repress their emotions by suggesting that men "can't always be tough." A few commenters mention the importance of caring for "yourself" and "well-being." One person writes in their comment:

You gotta find the time and methods of taking care of your own well being, and also support and encourage others to do the same. I just started seeing my therapist again after about 9 months of being on my own, and he's a lot of help. I'm taking care of myself, and when I see other people struggling (bros or otherwise) I can support them while setting an example. (Thread 17)

Expressing your emotions and feelings can be interpreted as a form of self-care as men are looking out for their well-being instead of exerting themselves by trying to be "strong" and "tough" all the time. However, it also shows how they care about their mental health and well-being to enact hegemonic masculine ideals. We can see how the commenter above describes seeking therapy for their well-being as a form of self-care. They masculinize care practices as caring for themselves will allow them to care for others. They also construct themselves as

modeling healthy practices, setting an example to their "bros" on caring for themselves and their well-being rather than ignoring it.

Establishing/Maintaining a Personal Code of Conduct

Many commenters describe their own personal code governing how they and others should conduct themselves as a "good man." For example, many of the comments list common virtues such as practicing "care," "kindness," "respect," "responsibility," "honesty" that tend to be associated with what it means not only to be a "good person," but to be a "good man." One frequent theme centered on the value of establishing boundaries that are based on your code of conduct. Some of the comments discuss the importance of identifying and practicing your own personal "values," "beliefs," "ethics," and "morals." One user writes in their comment:

...Practicing healthy masculinity is really no different than simply living a life of virtue and with your own personal moral compass. I think a lot of people complicate it with all of these superficial characteristics like wearing skirts, acting feminine, and dressing a certain way, but the reality is that, if you act like a decent person and engage in encouraging/supporting others, while identifying as a man, you are exhibiting healthy masculinity. (Thread 5)

In this comment, the user seems to conceptualize what "healthy masculinity" is and what it is not. This commenter emphasizes that while some users seem to conflate "healthy masculinity" with gender presentation and performance, these gender practices in themselves are "superficial" without having a "virtue" or following one's "own personal moral compass." Some of the commenters also mention the importance of deciding how you want to present and "do" gender, with the expectation that what you do will not "harm" anyone in the process. One commenter wrote: "There's no right or wrong way to be a man, so long as you're not hurting yourself or others" (Thread 14). This comment seems to counter a component of hegemonic masculinity that condones violence. Previous work by Ezzell (2012: 197–202) reveals the way in which men compensate for perceived lack of masculine status through acts that can be categorized as

"violence," "aggression," "homophobia," and "misogyny." Instead, these commenters suggest that masculine selves are achieved by reducing harm to not only others but to yourself, all while following your personal moral code.

A personal code of conduct can act as a boundary that allows one to determine what is “right” and what practices and actions are “wrong” and problematic. Several commenters mentioned how they hold themselves responsible when they do something wrong, which seems to signify a principled and moral self. For example, one user wrote in their comment: “A real man takes responsibility for his actions and can admit when he's wrong without being angry or taking a hit to his ego.” While everyone is bound to make mistakes and be in the “wrong,” what makes someone a “real man” is the willingness to take responsibility for their actions and not let pride and “ego” get in the way of admitting their wrongdoings.

A few commenters mention the importance of holding others responsible for their wrongdoings, especially for problematic actions that violate the commenter's own codes. For example, one commenter writes:

For me, it means acting with integrity and, importantly, treating both yourself and others with respect. It means keeping your promises, being firm but kind, speaking up when something doesn't sit right with you.

It means not compromising yourself to keep others happy. It means being loyal to your brothers, be there for them in their mental struggles, but don't give them a pass when they act badly.

I think it's an easy trap, when you don't want to join toxic masculinity, to shy away from conflict.

Standing firm in the face of healthy conflict is a good thing for everyone, so you are practiced for the conflicts that actually matter - and inevitably will come.

My best friend really doesn't like to share his snacks with people. Unless they ask. Then he's super cool with it. They just need to ask.

I think that's a tiny, but fantastic example of treating yourself and your boundaries with respect. (Thread 4)

The unwillingness of some men to stick to their principles and be consistent across contexts seems to bother these commenters, and this pattern has also gained some attention in the

literature. Kimmel (1991:131) states, "This might help to explain why women often complain that their male friends or partners are often so understanding when they are alone and yet laugh at sexist jokes or even make those jokes themselves when they are out with a group," highlighting the double-sidedness in how men act with others versus how they act with "the guys." As a result, male homosocial spaces often operate under a culture of silence where misogyny, homophobia, and bigotry go unchecked, and no one is held accountable (Kimmel 1991). However, the commenter above highlights that part of their personal code is ensuring not to give their friends a "pass" when they "act badly." This commenter insists that their friends do not compromise their moral codes when the context changes. This comment also shows how they are ready to stand up for their code by confronting and holding others accountable for their actions, even if it's their friends. Another commenter echoes this sentiment: "Stand up for your feelings and beliefs no matter how against you the odds may seem. All it takes is one "dude, that's fucked up. don't say that." to change the mood" (Thread 20).

A few commenters mentioned the importance of ensuring your friendship circles abide by similar moral codes. For example, one user writes in a comment to a "teenage transgender man": "Firstly, if your friends aren't respecting your [gender]identity then you need new friends" (Thread 9). Boundaries become a way of ensuring respect from others, acting as a litmus test with social consequences if others fail to respect those boundaries. In this example, recognizing your gender identity is a form of validation. Those who refuse to recognize your gender identity are not only being disrespectful, but they are also invalidating your gender identity; thus, you should cut your friendship ties with them. This is a violation of the moral code you should hold in common with your real friends.

Another commenter writing to a "trans guy" states:

Finally, figure out where your personal boundaries are with stuff like jokes and teasing. A lot of guys will joke at each other's expense as part of the conversation. Generally speaking, they do this in a good natured way, aren't trying to hurt your feelings. The expected response would be for you to either laugh or make a similar joke at their expense and you both move on. Having said that, don't tolerate this if it bothers you. Say something like "too far, dude." If they don't respect your boundaries, then don't bother with them. (Thread 23)

Here, this commenter describes how "guys" will joke about each other. While this commenter seems to understand and associate this as a practice that men engage in when being in the company of other men, they describe the importance of knowing your own "personal boundaries." While jokes are a part of the experience of being in the company of other men if a joke violates your "personal boundaries" in a way that "bothers you," you "don't bother with them," suggesting that you should not tolerate actions that cross your boundaries. Teasing and jokes are often seen as aspects of a male homosocial practice, where boys and men exchange jokes and jabs at each other (Pascoe 2007); however, this can blur the boundary dividing acceptable interaction from bullying and harassment. We can see how standing up against problematic actions and holding others accountable not only shows integrity to one's own personal code but can also serve as a way for others to know what practices and actions you find intolerable from others. If they cannot respect you and your code of conduct, you do not need to tolerate these actions and can cut ties.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What Does It Mean to Be a Man?

In this thesis, I argued that the members of the /r/bropill subreddit utilize the discursive resources available to them based on neoliberal logics of ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ to negotiate and reframe what it means to be a man. Members of the subreddit seem to take up ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity such as strength, individualism, and responsibility, and reframe these ideals to negotiate a definition of manhood based on recognizing a diverse array of practices and embodiments as masculine while being a “good person.” This reframing can be seen in how members do not limit practices, bodies, and embodiments to a specific gender category of masculine and feminine. Men can present and perform gender in ways that do not conform to masculine norms, while still being recognized as ‘masculine’ and ‘manly’; men can be kind, caring, and compassionate and express their emotions while still preserving claims to manhood; individuals who identify as a man are in fact ‘real men.’ Interestingly, members are not necessarily “undoing gender” as they still seem to be thinking within the binary logic of gender. They are redefining what it means to be a ‘real man’ in the 21st century, shifting away from so-called “traditional masculinity” to a more open and inclusive form of “doing” gender. Their discursive practices seem to signify how members of the subreddit are instead expanding and broadening the definitions and meanings of masculinity and manhood. Whether or not this will turn out to be a step toward the queering of gender has yet to be seen. That can be determined only from the vantage point of the future, looking back on this particular set of interactions.

Folks seem to enter this subreddit space in search of meaning. They want to learn from others and collectively establish common ideals on how to live life as a “good man.” For people who might be searching for online men’s spaces that are inclusive, welcoming, safe, and free from misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and other forms of bigotry, the options are minimal. Crawley and Green (2021) mention that “future avenues of research should explore the ways in which online spaces can be used as sites of identity negotiation and resistance, or possibly serve to further regulate gendered practices” (2021:17). Unfortunately, many online men’s spaces choose to pursue the latter goal rather than the former: many online men’s spaces reflect or exaggerate the hegemonic masculinity and misogyny typical within the manosphere.

Some similarities exist between groups such as /r/bropill and those associated with the manosphere. Men come to seek help and advice on how to be perceived as more “masculine” and “manly.” In both spaces, users utilize neoliberal logics such as the language of personal autonomy, to negotiate and signify masculine selves. Both spaces also presume the continuation of the gender binary. However, these groups differ sharply in how they negotiate the meanings of masculinity and what it means to be a man. Whereas groups associated with the manosphere encourage men to engage in compensatory manhood acts to improve looks, sex, and status (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Van Valkenburg 2021), members of /r/bropill use existing “logics of neoliberalism” as a way of claiming control over their “doings” of gender to negotiate masculinities that expand the imagined possibilities of a better way to “do” manhood.

It is important to note that while members of this subreddit seem to resist the traditional categorizing of different gender practices and embodiments, they also reinforce the binary gender system. However, here the gender binary acts to make meaning and challenge the social conditions men face, such as a gender system that expects men to conform to hegemonic ideals

or face social sanctions. They seem to be taking binary categories such as “man” and expanding the possibilities of who can claim manhood, and what men can do. The gender system is, for them, what is considered common sense logic and an everyday part of reality. However, by working with the discourses and knowledge that are available to them, they are able to negotiate an understanding where gender categories become extremely inclusive and expansive.

Gender Difference and Cis-Privilege

One may have assumed that there would be open hostility in this online space, especially considering that many online men’s spaces described in previous research allow hateful rhetoric and bigotry to go unchecked. This subreddit, /r/bropill, seems to be a welcoming and inclusive space. This is reflected by the supportive comments that validate transmen and their claims to manhood. Many original posts were created by users who identified as trans, and I encountered a few commenters who also identified themselves as trans. However, it is difficult to know precisely how many cis and trans folks are participating in the discussion threads. However, a discursive practice that I did encounter is that there were a number of commenters who identified themselves as trans before providing advice. Typically, they would say something along the lines of “As a trans guy” when commenting to signify that their personal experiences are based on being trans. While I did see a few comments where users identified themselves as cisgender, this was uncommon to see.

According to Brekhus (1998), “When we linguistically mark something we are essentially qualifying it as a ‘specialized’ form that we must distinguish from its more ‘generic’ form.” Brekhus uses the example of “American” which is seen as the default form of “American” (1998:35). White folks born in the United States typically go under the default of being “American,” whereas racial and ethnic minorities born in the United States have a more

‘specialized’ label attached to them such as ‘African American,’ “Mexican American,” and ‘Asian American’ (Brekhus 1998:35). Identities that are considered ‘deviant’ or do not conform to assumed and normative identity categories are ‘marked.’ For example, being a ‘transman’ is a marked identity because trans identity distinguishes oneself from normative and assumed identity categories such as ‘man.’ While in academic research, we may use “cis men” as a type of male identity category, in everyday interactions and social settings, cis men go ‘unmarked,’ meaning they are seen as the default for “man.” As a result, we can assume that many commenters do not identify themselves because they understand themselves to be within the ‘default’ category.

Additionally, it is important to point out how /r/bropill operates as a space where users can seek advice and learn what it means to be a “real man” based on how they collectively negotiate these meanings. As described before, many of those seeking advice identified as trans. There is almost a form of mentoring that is occurring in this space where trans men are coming here to learn what a “real man” does and what “doings” are appropriate for “men.” However, the well-meaning attempt to be inclusive carries risks; there is the potential for differences between cis and trans folks to be glossed over or minimized. For example, we can see how commenters attempt to impart bits of advice on how to do gender as a man recommending that trans men be their “true” self, “be confident,” “stop caring,” or “ignore” what others think of them.

In an article by Crawley and Broad (2004), they find that LGBT folks are told to ‘be’ themselves when sharing their experiences. Yet, there is the expectation that they will conform to a recognizable and legible story (e.g., coming out narrative) suitable for straight audiences. For the trans men seeking advice on the subreddit, part of their goal is to be recognized as a man, yet they are confronted with advice that tells them to “stop caring” what others think, “do what you

want,” and to just “be yourself.” While these commenters might not be aware of this, there is an underlying form of cis-privilege that exists within what they might believe to be good and helpful advice. In the attempt to provide advice meant to be inclusive and ensconced in the individualism discourse that we encounter daily, this kind of advice fails to recognize and account for differences. This is similar to how post-racial discourses operate in that in our attempts to be racially inclusive; there is a failure to account for how folks of different racial/ethnic backgrounds may experience certain forms of privilege or disadvantage as they attempt to see past differences and practice “color-blindness” (Bonilla–Silva 2015); hence why we see phrases such as “I don’t see race.”

C.J. Pascoe’s (2023:14) new book *Nice is Not Enough* describes their ethnography of a high school where members of the school community practice and “explicitly emphasized kindness, acceptance, and care,” which seems to embody the social progress evident in younger generations. Individual acts of kindness and niceness become utilized to signify acceptance and inclusion. These kind acts become viewed as a sufficient solution to solve systematic inequalities related to race, gender, and sexuality, which Pascoe describes as being a part of a “regime of kindness” (2023:24). Under “regimes of kindness,” differences are celebrated yet talk about the inequalities associated with those differences is avoided (Pascoe 2023:70).

On /r/bropill, members seem to be fostering a culture of kindness that includes and celebrates difference; but underneath this kindness, forms of cis-privilege have the potential to be masked despite good intentions. That is not to say that the advice that they are giving is inherently wrong. This kind of advice may be beneficial for many men to hear, helping to free them from restrictive gender expectations and constant surveillance of policing their “doings” of gender (Crawley et al. 2008). However, this advice of “be yourself” and “ignore what other

people think” can potentially come across as empty statements or platitudes, especially to trans folks as it may fail to account for their experiences with gender. As one commenter writing to a “transgender man” stated: “So I agree with everyone who is saying to be yourself, but I am worried that isn't what you are looking for. I have a feeling you may want more practical advice than that” (Thread 9). While some of the abstract individual autonomy celebrations provided by members of the subreddit may be useful to some users, other users may be seeking more practical advice on how to have their gender recognized as a “man” through ‘passing.’ This may be an instance where cis privilege can impede mutually beneficial interaction.

While for cis-men, gender can act as a site of play and pleasure, many commenters reflect on the playful nature of gender nonconformity when they describe the fun of painting their nails or wearing skirts which seems to echo Bridge’s (2014) finding on how men adopt “gay aesthetics” as a form of play and experimentation with gender. However, trans people may not have the same freedom to “play” with their gender presentation and performance as the cis-men on the subreddit can engage in. In many moments of their lives, their safety and success in interaction depends upon unquestionably “passing” as a cis (Abelson 2014). While strategies to “ignore” or “stop caring what other people think” can be helpful for some users, this advice can end up being less practical for trans men seeking to have their genders socially recognized and validated.

Pfeffer, Rogalin and Gee (2016) discuss the notion of “masculine capital” which refers to how masculinity can act as a “form of symbolic capital” where “[men] accrue but also bank and exchange the masculine capital they accumulate across various fields” (2016:657). One of the ways in which we can think about masculine capital is in the way hybrid masculinities are negotiated. Men who embody many of the hegemonic masculine ideals may have enough

masculine capital to incorporate practices deemed feminine into their “doings” of gender without being made to account for or face negative social sanctions. This can act as a form of “insurance” that can “make up for identities and behaviors” that do align with normative assumptions of masculinity (2016:657).

While Pfeffer et al. (2016) mention some of the limitations of masculine capital and how it plays out in practice, I think it can help us think about some of the experiences of trans men adhering to the gender binary who might seek, at least sometimes, to be viewed as cisgender men. Abelson (2014) reveals in their findings how trans men negotiate their own “doings” of gender based on their sense of safety and security in the space, place, and situations that they are in. Abelson (2014) uses the term transformative masculinities to refer to the ideal practices that many trans men want “do” as it refers to the “gender relations they would like to see” in which trans men want to be socially recognized not only as men but as “good’ men” (2014:566). For example, in my findings, I found that part of having a personal code of conduct would be to hold other men accountable for bad behavior, which can signify that you are principled and strong enough to stand up against bad actors. However, there are situations where trans men may not be able to engage in the practices that they would like to embody because doing so can place them in a dangerous and unsafe situation (Abelson 2014).

Many commenters expressed that men should do what feels comfortable and what feels ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ to them. However, as Abelson (2014) notes, how trans men express and ‘do’ gender in places where they feel free to express their authenticity (such as in queer spaces) may differ from how they do gender in “straight” spaces. In unsafe spaces, they will likely be more self-policing of their “doings” of gender to avoid being seen as transgressive and avoid social sanctions such as ridicule and violence (2014:565-6). Some trans men may engage in

hegemonic masculine practices through manhood acts to claim masculine status (Philips and Rogers 2021; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) and protect themselves in dangerous spaces (Abelson 2014). As a result, practices that were recommended by many of the commenters, such as engaging in non-conformity through experimentation with different gendered practices or holding other men accountable for problematic behavior may carry much more risk for trans men compared to cis-men.

These findings provide a novel way of understanding of online men's spaces by providing an alternative way of looking at spaces that are attempting to negotiate new meanings of masculinity based on existing discourses and knowledges. While I highlight the benefits of a space like /r/bropill for helping us understand how men attempt to negotiate new meanings and understanding of masculinity and manhood based on the cultural and discursive resources available to them, it is essential to note that this subreddit is not entirely free of reproducing certain inequalities. However, the members of /r/bropill seem to actively try to put out more 'good' and 'positive' messages to the internet based on what they know. More research needs to be done to identify these spaces and further understand how men attempt alternative ways of "doing" gender that actively resist hegemonic and normative understandings of gender. While the /r/bropill subreddit is engaging in lots of good things, it is important to mention that this is only a part of the solution to helping men discover a new outlook toward what it means to be a "good man" that strays away from some of the more toxic and problematic practices that are associated with cultural ideas of masculinity. Reflecting back to the metaphor of a pill: they are typically used to alleviate the effects of a medical condition or symptom, and they can be a part of a treatment plan. However, they cannot be the sole solution to the problem as depending on individual actions can only go so far.

Limitations

While this study brought forth some interesting findings, it is also important to note the limitations of this study. One of the limitations is that I decided to focus my analysis on a narrow subset of discussion threads found on the subreddit—particularly threads that discuss the presentation and performance of gender. As a result, the collected data cannot account for other topics found on the subreddit that were out of this project's scope. Additionally, I was primarily concerned with the meanings of gender that were embedded in the posts and comments. Therefore, I did pay close attention to the interactions that were taking place between users and how users interacted with one another in the comments section. I believe that further research should be conducted on the interactions that focus on how commenters talk with one another. In my analysis, I treated all commenters within the discussion threads equally; however, I noticed that some threads tended to garner more comments and have more in-depth, detailed, quality responses from users. I think further research could be conducted to see which threads receive the most engagement and which tend to receive more detailed and quality responses.

Future Directions

In the future, I would like to explore further other aspects of the /r/bropill subreddit including other discussions that are happening within the subreddit. For instance, I encountered particularly cheerful and celebratory threads that seemed geared towards uplifting one another. I would like to continue researching how /r/bropill becomes a space for uplifting and empowering men, and how this form of empowerment differs from spaces that espouse male supremacist logics. Additionally, I would like to explore other subreddits such as /r/MensLib, which shares some similarities with /r/bropill in trying to create a more positive space for men. While /r/bropill contains discussions about living as a man, /r/MensLib seems to be primarily focused on

shedding light on the social, cultural, and political issues related to men and masculinities, engaging in online advocacy that is based upon pro-feminist principles; thus, they seem to stray away from male supremacist logics. In the future, I would like to explore how they frame their intentions, motivations, and goals based on the posts and discussion threads within the subreddit. Additionally, in future research, I would like to utilize other qualitative methods such as interviews, to explore some of the motivations for male users (cis and trans) to seek out subreddits and other online communities such as /r/bropill to learn more about what led them to these communities, do they find these communities helpful, is there something that they feeling is lacking or missing within these communities, how do they “do” gender in their offline worlds?

I also would like to conduct further research on how online communities can foster safe and inclusive spaces, without having their intentions and goals derailed. I assume that part of continuing to keep these online communities a safe space is through ‘moderators’ who are involved in maintaining the boundaries of the community through enforcement, such as banning posts or users who do not align with the rules. Palmer (2023) introduces the notion of “moderating masculinity” to describe the practices that moderators of online communities put in place to regulate discourse to keep women and queer people safe. According to Palmer (2023), “Moderating masculinity is an act of resistance, a way of defending and gatekeeping space to maintain its safety and inclusivity of queer users” (2023:8). If moderated appropriately, online communities can serve and function as safe spaces. While Palmer’s (2023:7) findings are based on a “women-dominated online community,” I wonder how “moderating masculinity” would work in a male-dominated space that is attempting to foster a safe and inclusive online culture. I think this is something that I would like to explore as this needs further inquiry.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLED DISCUSSION THREADS

- Thread 1 – **Why does masculinity mean to you?** (41 comments)
- Thread 2 – **I want to be a bro but I have no idea how!** (21 comments)
- Thread 3 – **What does it mean to be a man?** (88 comments)
- Thread 4 – **What does it mean to be a man?** (56 comments)
- Thread 5 – **How do I practice health masculinity without causing myself dysphoria?** (13 comments)
- Thread 6 – **Who do I feel more comfortable being a guy?** (62 comments)
- Thread 7 – **How do you deal with not being manly enough?** (86 comments)
- Thread 8 – **How to internalise that crying is okay?** (17 comments)
- Thread 9 – **How can I be more of a bro?** (63 comments)
- Thread 10 – **How would I express my feminine side?** (14 comments)
- Thread 11 – **How do you feel about Transmen being “feminine”?** (33 comments)
- Thread 12 – **What are some things perceived as “girly” you enjoy doing?** (158 comments)
- Thread 13 – **How to raise an emotionally healthy bro?** (22 comments)
- Thread 14 – **Looking for tips to pass as a bro from my fellow bros** (24 comments)
- Thread 15 – **hey bros, looking for some validation and maybe advice** (66 comments)
- Thread 16 – **bros, how do barbers work??** (49 comments)
- Thread 17 – **Trans bro here (he/they)** (88 comments)
- Thread 18 – **How to become “one of the guys”** (9 comments)
- Thread 19 – **How do you stop the feeling of having to “prove” that you are a man?** (8 comments)
- Thread 20 – **For lack of a better phrase: how do you actual be a man?** (114 comments)
- Thread 21 – **How Do I Feel Like A Real Man?** (14 comments)
- Thread 22 – **How to act around people now that I’m being read as male?** (90 comments)
- Thread 23 – **I need advice on how to talk to guys in the way that guys would talk to eachother** (109 comments)
- Thread 24 – **Hey gang, I’m having some really deep issues with the intrinsic and unavoidable fact that I’m a man** (58 comments)

APPENDIX B: IRB DETERMINATION LETTER



NOT HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH DETERMINATION

July 31, 2023

Tomas Sanjuan
[REDACTED]

Dear Tomas Sanjuan:

On 7/31/2023, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

IRB ID:	STUDY005906
Title:	Collective Negotiation of Masculinity in an Online Men's Space

The IRB determined that the proposed activity does not constitute research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities constitute human subjects research, please submit a new application to the IRB for a determination.

While not requiring IRB approval and oversight, your project activities should be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the ethical principles of your profession. If this project is program evaluation or quality improvement, do not refer to the project as research and do not include the assigned IRB ID or IRB contact information in the consent document or any resulting publications or presentations.

Sincerely,

Myah Luna
IRB Research Compliance Administrator

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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