

THE IMPACT OF MASCULINITY IN IDENTITY FORMATION, HEALTH BEHAVIORS AND OUTCOMES IN THE MASCULINE IDENTITY FORMATION – IN RELATION TO ‘BOYS DON’T CRY’ (1999) AND ‘THE MASK YOU LIVE IN’ (2015)

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Abstract

This study critically investigates the impact of masculinity on identity affirmation and the impact of men's health behaviours and outcomes in masculine identity formation concerning the movies, ‘Boys Don't Cry’ (1999) and ‘The Mask You Live In’ (2015). The objective of the study is to examine the dichotomy between stereotypical masculinity and its effect on the physical and psychological disposition of males. It further elaborates on the possibility of constructing an alternative masculinity model that can improve men's health. As a qualitative research paradigm, the study employs Content analysis and Thematic analysis to analyze diversified narrative structures to identify the impact of violence, relationships, vulnerability, and emotional enticements in both films to explore the capability to reconstruct physical and psychological spaces for men. The findings of the study reveal that both films articulate a critical portrayal of traditional masculinity and the negative consequences of the identity formation of males. ‘Boys Don't Cry’ depicts the protagonist's adherence to masculine norms as a significant barrier to seeking help for his physical and mental health issues, ultimately leading to tragic consequences. Simultaneously, ‘The Mask You Live In’ suggests the impact of toxic masculinity on young males and how they are socialized into behaviours and attitudes that can lead to negative health outcomes such as substance abuse and depression that criticize the narrow identification of masculinity. In conclusion, both films highlight the necessity to have more nuanced and intersectional approaches to understand the complex rapport of identity formation, masculinity and the health of males to promote positive models of masculinity.

Keywords: Health, Identity, Masculinity, Psychological, stereotypical

Introduction

‘Masculinity is always local and subject to change. What does not change is the justification and naturalization of male power or masculine ideology.’ (Bhasin, 2004, p. 9).

The desire for boys and girls to get different socialization is an avenue to explain gendered socialization. Girls are expected to adhere to

feminine duties, behaviors, and acts that are appropriate for women, whereas boys are raised to comply to masculine gender roles' expectations.

In addition, an individual's age, sexual orientation, caste, class, race, and ethnicity all influence their masculinity. Patriarchy, which upholds a hierarchical social structure and

promotes inequality, views men as superior to women and men who are lower in status and position than them, placing them in a position of authority and control. In this way, patriarchy also supports the supremacy of masculinity as masculinity determines relationships not just between men and women as well as inside males. Women are also observed to take on masculine leadership and working methods in public settings in an effort to exert control and hostility over their subordinates.

The interplay between masculinity, identity formation, and health consequences generates a complex narrative that influences both individuals and societies within the complex structure of the human experience. According to Cowards (1999) in his list, he mentioned that men are generally far more reluctant than women to face up to and respond to physical and psychological problems. Furthermore, Cowards explained that men face constant job role changes, the threat of unemployment and job related stress daily. The advent of post modernity has resulted in redundancy and downsizing: less than 50 per cent of men aged 55 and over in Britain are in work and many such men die prematurely. Many remain bad at acknowledging and expressing feelings and are trapped between old-style, machismo and nurturing 'new man-ism'. All of these put together are some of the crisis faced by men in the late modern society (Beynon, 2002).

This study undertakes a thorough investigation, analyzing the multifaceted relationships between masculinity, identity, and men's health through the cinematic perspective provided by 'Boys Don't Cry' (1999) and 'The Mask You Live In' (2015). As a social construct, masculinity is essential to the formation of personal identities. Male identity and dignity are evaluated by males utilizing the standards of conventional masculinity as an indicator. Social norms have an

impact on the routes people take on their journey towards self-realization within this framework. The study aims to critically examine how masculinity affects the process of forming an identity and the ensuing effects on the health-related behaviors and outcomes of males. This research explores the conflict between normative masculinity and its effects on men's physical and mental health, concentrating on the films 'The Mask You Live In' (2015) and 'Boys Don't Cry' (1999) to examine the possibility of establishing a different model of masculinity that has a beneficial impact on the health of males.

Literature Review

The complicated and multidimensional concept of masculinity is vital in forming people's identities as well as affecting their health-related behaviors and outcomes. To draw comparisons with the cinematic depictions in 'Boys Don't Cry' (1999) and 'The Mask You Live In' (2015), this literature review examines the effects of masculinity on identity development and considers the implications it has for both mental and physical health.

The construction of personal identities is greatly influenced by masculinity, which is frequently determined by culture. According to Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, men's perceptions of themselves and other men are shaped by the dominant set of masculine standards that societies establish. According to Connell (1995) and Wong (2022), socialization is a significant factor in the formation of male identities, since it impacts behaviors, attitudes, and self-perception. 'The Mask You Live In' and 'Boys Don't Cry' both explore the difficulties of creating a male identity, illuminating cultural norms and the way they affect personal experiences.

Researchers have examined the complex relationship between masculine identity and

health-related behaviors. The conventional understanding of masculinity frequently equates resilience and strength with avoiding vulnerability, which results in the suppression of feelings and the disregard for mental health (Mahalik & Addis, 2023). Repression of this kind could turn up as aggressive behavior, substance misuse, and a refusal to seek medical attention, among other harmful health behaviors (Mahalik & Addis, 2023). The implications of these actions are emphasized in ‘The Mask You Live In’, which also demonstrates the way adhering to conventional masculine norms can obstruct the development of constructive methods for coping. As per Kara (2014) the cinematographer employs powerful cinematic effects to generate the skillful portrayal of themes and concerns in ‘Boys Don’t Cry’. The movie has a lot of dark, grim scenes. The absence of color gives the city a dead, gloomy appearance. The terrible realities of the Midwest, America's heartland, are symbolized by Pierce's use of strong artificial light. The protagonists in this movie seem alone in the broad, dark spaces. The modest interior spaces of the homes combined with the time-lapse transition views of the broad landscape confused the spectator. This is the context in which two people's intense acts of violence and hatred towards Brandon Teena are sustained.

Moreover, Cooper (2010) manifested Boys Don’t Cry in the spectrum of a female masculinity in conflict with dismantling Normative heterosexuality. In this essay, the researcher argues that Boys Don't Cry's narratives challenge heteronormativity and heterosexual narratives in four established ways:

- 1) by challenging the idea of the "American the center";
- 2) by problematizing hypermasculinity;
- 3) by emphasizing female masculinity; and
- 4) by concealing the definition of what is considered to be a woman (Cooper, 2010).

The researcher's identification that the movie impacted on liberating effect by deconstructing the privileged subjectivities of heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity and elevating and normalizing female masculinity and gender fluidity instead is supported by my articulation of these subversive strategies within the film's narratives. ‘Boys Don't Cry’, which celebrates gender flexibility and tolerance, possibly reduces the kind of prejudice and intolerance in society that leads to violent crimes like the murder of Brandon Teena. The film's closing soundtrack emphasizes the severe consequences of such intolerance by reminding us that Brandon's desire of manly self-actualization ended soon. A crucial component of the battle is critical analysis of media performance and content.

Methodology

To investigate the complex aspects of masculinity, identity formation, and health outcomes that appear in the film narratives of ‘Boys Don't Cry’ and ‘The Mask You Live In’, this study employs a qualitative research methodology. A deeper knowledge of the complex relationships between masculinity and its effects on people's physical and psychological well-being can be gained by doing qualitative research to examine the subjective experiences displayed in the films. As a fundamental methodological tool, content analysis makes it possible to systematically analyze the narrative structures of the films. With this method, the movie is thoroughly investigated with an emphasis on significant concepts like relationships, violence, vulnerability, and emotional appeals. The study aims to find recurrent themes, motifs, and patterns that highlight how masculinity is portrayed and how it affects identity and health behaviors using textual analysis. Moreover, to provide insight into the way conventional masculinity affects the dynamics inside interpersonal connections, content analysis closely investigates how these

interactions are portrayed. To understand how masculinity affects the emergence and maintenance of relationships and how these dynamics affect identity construction and health effects, the study examines the interactions between the characters. Thematic analysis offers a more comprehensive classification and interpretation of the themes identified, which is an invaluable complement to content analysis. The study's goal is to determine whether the films offer an opportunity to rethink and question conventional ideas of masculinity, which would then have an impact on the mental and physical spaces that men occupy, by looking closely at the themes identified.

Results and Discussion

As per results of the study phenomena, it upsizes a critical and comprehensive underplay of stereotypical masculinity that directly affects the psychological health of men. The findings of this research provide insight into the way conventional masculinity that is portrayed in both ‘Boys Don't Cry’ and ‘The Mask You Live In’, exposing the adverse impacts of identity development on men.

Adherence to Masculine Norms

‘He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it’ (Orwell,1936).

‘Mask You Live In’ by Jennifer Siebel Newsom manifests the intense impact to the masculinity and psychological health of males in addressing dogmatic considerations of forming male identity. The documentary rationalizes the masculine identity formation in different arenas like the academic background, sexuality and power hierarchy. The onset of the documentary juxtaposes numerous news events in Europe of shootings, suicides, murders reported yet proper justifications and rationalizations behind men committing these treacherous occurrences is not upsized. It is obvious that, through opinions of

medical experts, suggests the impact of wounded childhood of males that resulted in absurd and extremist behavior of men. Dr. Michael Kimmel, an educator and a Sociologist articulated through the reference to a bunch of boys happily playing in a playground where they question the weakest among the group as ‘Look, who is the sissy around here?’ (Newsom,2015). So he refers to the impact of the comparison to a weak male. Different group of males irrespective of caste, class and color many boys comments the way they feel insecure in their boyhood owing to the societal justifications of himself as a weak male determined by the lack of physical strength, skinny body and their representation of different cultures in America.

‘Rejection of everything which is feminine’ (Newsom,2015).

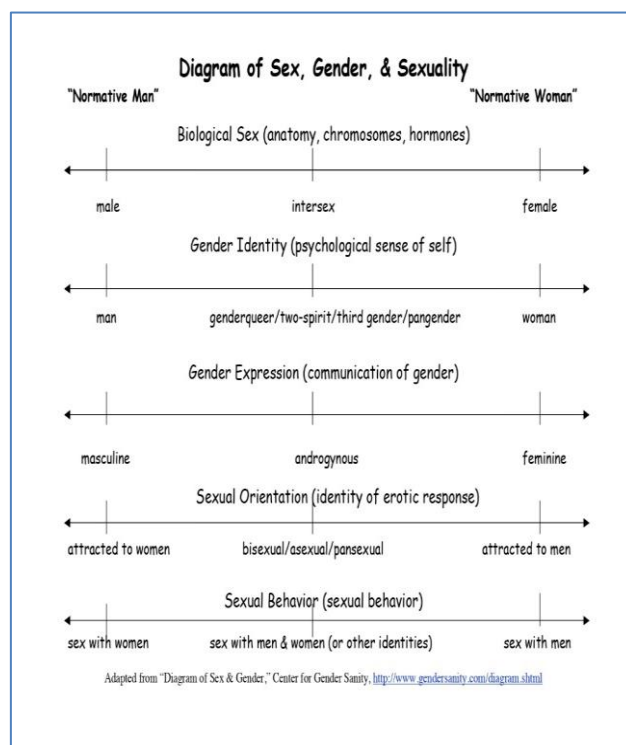


Figure 01: (Grossar,2007)

Several participants in the documentary manifested their psychological torments on the impossibility to voice out their emotions. The society expected to conceal their emotions which

par of building a strong masculine persona. This forceful implications of manhood affected negatively on the psychological health of males. ‘We put them on that trajectory through our education, parenting styles, popular culture and assumptions about natural manhood which are incredible insulting and damaging (Newsom, 2015).

The discussion of males who participated in the San Quentin Juvenile Liters program is reminiscent of adults reflecting their past experiences of adhering to masculine norms. Cleo stated that he was raised in a household that does not fight back to secure identities and individual spaces. As per Cry, the notion of becoming a womanizer was acceptable as the woman is inferior to males since the creation of the world. Furthermore, PJ and KE stated that the manifestation of violent behavior as a man is the part of manhood yet it rejects soft-hearted, calm and quiet males as weak and passive individuals. The concept of man as the breadwinner concept is indicated by Curtes that proving masculinity is assigned with the amount of monetary values exhibited by a man to the society. This sample is significant as all these male figures participated in the program are epitomes of different cultures, ethnicities, social backdrops yet equally marginalized physically and psychologically owing to the dogmatic definition of manhood in America.

The documentary then raises awareness on the impact of sports in the masculine identity formation.

Molly, a cultural hybrid with a Chinese background projects his childhood trauma through the concept of manhood and racial – cultural norms. The adult Molly is revisiting the experience and stating that he was devoid of any support from the family or school and he was unable to defend himself as a child. This

revisiting to the past states the psychological trauma that he bears owing to racial cultural polarizations and the dogmatic concepts of manhood. The documentary stated that only 50% of boys and men with mental health challenges seek help.

‘Hey faggot why isn’t you go back to China’ (Newsom, 2015).

The documentary focuses on the field of education through the perspective of an educator, Ashanti Branch. ‘I became a teacher because I saw my community was hurting’(Newsom,2015). As a teacher in the high school he graduated Ashanthi states that the greatest challenge is to ensure security for young boys through drugs, prostitutions and specially gang violence. He stated his responsibility is to prepare masks for boys to walk and get to school without letting the people to see any vulnerabilities. That should be a very tough mask according to him not to prove masculinity yet to secure themselves from social evils such as drugs, gang violence etc. and safely come to school. At school they can remove the mask and engage in learning which is essential in reconstructing their identity and futures.

In ‘Boys Don't Cry’, Brandon Teena, the main character, struggles to live up to accepted notions regarding what it means to be a man. As Brandon negotiates social expectations and conventions, the film highlights the toxic masculinity that pervades society and has an impact on his identity conflicts. The struggles males have in claiming their identities are poignantly illustrated by scenes showing Brandon's attempts to blend into traditional masculine norms. His confused identity formation is suggested through the masculine identity suggested by Brandon and Teena suggests her feminine identity formation. The onset of the movie depicts the way Brandon ties his chest, trims off his hair, and alters his look

to become more manly emphasizing the pressure from society to conform into traditional gender stereotypes. The difficulties people encounter in balancing their actual selves with society norms are symbolized by these instances, and they provide the groundwork for a critical analysis of the effects on mental health.

‘What’s wrong with you?’

I don’t know!

You’re not a boy. Admit that you are a Dyke!

No, I am not a Dyke’ (Peirce, 1999).

Brandon meets local males who are the epitome of traditional masculinity dictated throughout the film. The conversations and pub scenes amongst these people underline the negative effects of violating accepted norms and portray an impression of a toxic masculine atmosphere. Brandon's quest for acceptance in this excessively macho atmosphere is a reflection of the broader societal difficulties people face while attempting to navigate their identities within such restrictive gender norms.

‘Looser at 24 hrs’ (Peirce,1999).

Social stigmas on the masculine psychological health

The impact of arousal addiction on the psychological health of men is depicted through the addiction of the younger generation to video gaming. 31% of males are addicted annually to video games according to the documentary. This addiction removes men from social interaction that led them to a crappy home life inside their rooms. It is stated that this addiction led to form rigid psychological implications on gender norms and exposure to online porn. This connection raises questions concerning how

people's conceptions of masculinity can shift as a result of extended exposure to particular online environments. Stereotypical gender roles and behaviors are frequently portrayed in video games, which may have an impact on players' views and expectations in real life. In addition to hindering the development of more inclusive and diverse cultural standards, this could help to maintain damaging stereotypes.

These diversified concerns highlighted the impact of the rigid conceptualizations of manhood in the psychological development of male identity formation. The documentary stated that more than 90% of homicide perpetrators are males and almost of 50% of them are under 25 years. Joe Ehrmann, coach and the former NFL player stated his opinions on the identification of power and strength by males through sports such as rugby, football that evaluate the power to the extreme. Power of beating the opponent and securing a goal requires ample amount of power according to his opinion that has the tendency for many males to partake in these two sports. Gaby, mother of a 10 years old boy (Roman) articulated her tangible experiences on this psychological trauma of her son. Her child wanted to practice soccer at school yet as he was the weakest in the team, he was physically and psychologically tormented by the peers. He was even strangled in a hallway. The greatest worry that mother depicts in this revelation is that the child does not take any step to reveal his experiences to his mother owing to the forceful identifications of manhood and his fear that he will be defined by his immediate community as a weaker male. Roman stated that, ‘I felt alone. I was not doing what everyone was doing. I was different’ (Newsom,2015).

According to official reports, 1 in 4 boys in USA reports being bullied at school and only 35% of them notify adults about it. Dr. Terry Kupers depicted the origin of sexism and homophobia

with the Dominance hierarchy. Tough males acquire the top level of dominance while the weaklings resume in the bottom. Accordingly, girls are inferior to males in terms of power and strength. With the concept of homosexuality then again a boy becomes a stigmatized version of weakness and sissyness.

In ‘Boys Don’t Cry’, the scenes depicting Brandon's connection with Lana provide an indirect representation of identity exploration in a personal setting. Traditional ideas of masculinity, which frequently emphasize emotional detachment, are challenged by Brandon's capacity to emotionally connect with Lana. Intimate relationships play a crucial role in helping people navigate their sense of self, and these soft and vulnerable moments highlight how complex developing an identity. The movie centers on Lana's acceptance of Brandon in spite of social expectations and conventions. Moments in which Lana accepts Brandon's identity are a unique and potent example of constant acceptance. On the other hand, responses from others in the story draw attention to how different this acceptance is from Brandon's experience of rejection from society in general. This dichotomy draws attention to external influences that could impact a person's sense of self-worth and aggravate mental health issues. An examination of the interdependence of gender and sexuality can be done through the lens of Brandon and Lana's relationship. The film sheds emphasis on the difficulties encountered by those who cross multiple marginalized identities. Social prejudices against non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities are part of a complex network of issues that have a multifaceted effect on mental health. Through this interaction, the movie offers an insightful examination of the effects of masculinity on individuals' and relationships' well-being, making a strong argument for a more

compassionate and inclusive understanding of gender and mental health.

The movie's depiction of non-conforming masculinity has a strong connection to the brutal assault and death of Brandon. The aggressive response from those who took offense at Brandon's departure from gender norms highlights the toxic nature of cultural regulations. This strong response is a reflection of the potentially deadly effects that could result from those who reject the rigid and constrained standards of masculinity. The consequences of Brandon's assault and demise expose the flaws of the judicial and social systems further. Deeply rooted preconceptions and biases against non-conforming gender identities affect through public discourse, demonstrated by the scenes displaying police enforcement's dismissive attitude and Brandon's lack of protection. The feeling of vulnerability is made worse by this failure, which also contributes to the broader problem of mental health inequalities that people who reject social standards have to cope with. The movie also critiques that Brandon's narrative was sensationalized and the way public perceptions have been influenced by the media. Scenes from the trial and media coverage illustrate that sensationalism can reinforce negative preconceptions and further stigmatize people who identify as non-conforming. People like Brandon struggle with their mental health and are marginalized as a result of this story distortion, which also affects public attitudes. Throughout the interrogation, flashbacks of the rape continue, shifting between shots of him and the sheriff and him being attacked by John and Tom. Brandon had to confess to having a vagina when the sheriff forced him to do so, explaining that this "re-rape" was necessary for him to know everything that was happening. Because the sheriff was seated on a desk higher than Brandon and Brandon was seated on the chair, the cinematography in that scene also communicated

a sense of dominance. As sheriff's massive build and terrifying towering presence over Brandon, the camera angles created the impression that he was a more powerful man.

Conclusion

Deep insights into the complexities of masculine identity formation and its effects on personal well-being can be gained from the critical investigation into the relationship between masculinity and identity affirmation and men's health behaviors, as depicted in 'Boys Don't Cry' and 'The Mask You Live In'. These films are powerful reflections on toxic masculinity, intersectionality of identity, and society expectations. The negative effects of male dominance on mental health are highlighted in both films. Both 'Boys Don't Cry' and 'The Mask You Live In' feature protagonists who struggle with social norms that reinforce negative stereotypes, which can cause loneliness, emotional distress, and, in Brandon Teena's situation, even death. Both films emphasize that race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and gender are all facets of identity that are intersected. While 'The Mask You Live In' highlights the effects of masculinity on a range of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, Brandon Teena's story illustrates that the intersection of gender and sexual identity can result in increased insecurity. To promote a more inclusive perspective of masculinity, it is essential to acknowledge and address these intersections. However, the study identifies some limitations in the films' portrayal of masculinity and health behaviors. 'Boys Don't Cry' is critically acclaimed for the central depiction of a white, cisgender protagonist while 'The Mask You Live In' is criticized for the narrow depiction of middle-class, white boys and for failing to acknowledge the impact of structural inequalities on health outcomes. These observations in a global setting is apparent considering that civilizations all around the world are attempting

to reconcile changing ideas about gender and identity.

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