EN_34750226 Research Introduction

Over the past decade, the term ""toxic masculinity"" has gained increasing attention in the media, describing attitudes and behaviors associated with traditional male expectations (Hammer, 2023). Originally coined by Shepherd Bliss in the 1980s as a critique of his father's militaristic masculinity (Gross, 1990), toxic masculinity refers to the harmful behaviors and attitudes that result from rigid adherence to the ideals set by hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, a concept introduced by sociologist R.W. Connell (2005), identifies society's elevation of an "ideal" form of masculinity characterised by traits such as heterosexuality, dominance, and authority. While hegemonic masculinity provides the framework that glorifies these traits, toxic masculinity manifests them in harmful ways, including teaching boys to reject anything deemed feminine, suppress their emotions, and express aggression or anger from an early age (De Gue et al., 2024). The pressure to conform to these rigid gender roles through toxic masculinity in order to gain social acceptance and self-worth often leads to significant issues for men and those around them.

As toxic masculinity is something socially transmitted, social media platforms, with their anonymity and detached nature, often serve as a fitting place for the spread and reinforcement of toxic masculinity. (Parent et al., 2019). One study by Parent et al. (2019), investigated associations between negative social media interactions, toxic masculinity and depression. Their findings showed that men who adhere to toxic masculinity may engage in more negative social media behaviours. These behaviours include a greater tendency to seek out and engage with content that contradicts one's views, to dwell on disagreements on social media sites and to respond with hostility to such conflicts. They also found an indirect relationship to depression "suggesting that negative online interactions mediate the relationship between toxic masculinity and symptoms of depression"(Parent et al., 2019, p. 283). Not only does negative social media use raise concerns about the general social interactions of individuals who adhere to toxic masculinity, but the indirect relationship between toxic masculinity and depression among men is also problematic, given that men are generally more reluctant to seek help than women (Galdas, 2005).

Concerns about social interactions among men who adopt toxic masculinity are further supported by a study conducted by Harris and Mahalik (2023). This study examined whether sexual minority men's experiences of sexual stigma and adherence to masculine norms predicted their involvement in perpetrating physical intimate partner violence. The findings revealed a significant relationship, suggesting that adhering to toxic gender roles reinforces power imbalances and contributes to the development of toxic relationships.

A theory that attempts to explain the link between negative social interactions and toxic masculinity is Precarious Manhood Theory (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This theory posits that masculinity is fragile and must be continuously demonstrated and validated through behaviours that align with societal expectations of manhood. As a result, masculine identity is not inherently stable but can be easily challenged or lost. Berker and Zeichner (2016) suggest that when hegemonic masculinity is not fully achieved, men may overcompensate by reasserting their manhood through exaggerated displays, such as violence. This implies that men who adhere to toxic masculinity may react in a particularly harmful manner to perceived threats, prioritising the preservation of their masculine image over moral behaviour.

Research on the effects of toxic masculinity often focuses on extreme outcomes, such as depression or violence, such as in the studies above, and can overshadow the reality of its broader, everyday impact. Furthermore, toxic masculinity is typically seen as a problem that primarily affects men themselves, whereas its more subtle, non-violent effects on women are often overlooked. It is crucial to recognise that toxic masculinity manifests in various forms and, once internalised due to societal pressures, can influence behaviours and attitudes that seep into relationships. This oversight results in an incomplete understanding of the issue, neglecting how toxic masculinity influences both men's behaviours and attitudes, as well as the dynamics within relationships with women.

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