OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Understanding the Digital Evolution of Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Association with the Male Adolescent Psyche

Gabriel Cadet
gcade003@somerset.colegia.org

ABSTRACT

Hegemonic masculinity (the sociocultural ideal of manhood that legitimizes masculine domination and gender inequalities) has been widely studied in gender studies, but not empirically in its association with adolescent males' mental health in the digital age. This mixed-methods exploratory case study examined the association between hegemonic masculinity expressed on social media on adolescent males' self-reported psychosocial experiences and gender beliefs in South Florida between the ages of 14 to 17. Data was collected using an electronic survey (n = 57) and a focus group (n = 6). Assessed variables included social media use, hegemonic masculinity, self-identity, self-esteem, emotional support, and discomfort with peer vulnerability.

A series of bivariate correlation analyses revealed a strong positive correlation between greater reported exposure to hegemonic masculinity and greater self-reported personal identity changes (r = 0.668) and lower perceived emotional support (r = 0.730). The results suggest that social media may function as a medium for hegemonic masculinity and that social media exposure is associated with self-reported psychosocial experiences during adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

From idolizations of mythological heroes like Hercules to cementations of peak masculinity in celebrities like Christian Bale, the foundations and characteristics of masculinity itself have been contested and redefined across time and space, tackled at length by public forums and academia alike.

In the area of gender studies, notable sociologists such as Raewyn Connell have defined the amorphous cloud of origins, implied effects, and recurring patterns of masculinity into several types of masculinities, used as a mirror from which to reflect on hegemonic masculinity's association with society, media, and individual mental behaviors.[4] These masculinities (hegemonic, toxic, dominant, etc.) have become commonplace in discussing the increasingly identified negative ramifications of so-called ‘harmful masculinities’; hegemonic masculinity being one notable branch, defined by Connell as the culturally

idealized, dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes men's control over women and preserves hierarchical relationships.[4]

Hegemonic masculinity, by nature, assumes cultural dominance in societal conversations, emerging in modernity's newest hotbed for cultural discussion: social media. Championed and touted by male content creators such as Andrew Tate and Braeden Peters (colloquially recognized as Clavicular), the construct has strengthened its online influence on its most susceptible audience: adolescent males, influencing its adherents to excessively exhibit masculine modes of behavior, such as violent and petty crime, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control.[2]

Separate from external demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity, numerous studies in recent decades indicate adolescent males are internalizing negative mental health behaviors shown to them, growing into harmful patterns that are associated with self-reported psychological distress and difficulties in identity development and relationship formation.

This research study will chart a course through hegemonic masculinity's evolution throughout history and into social media, analyzing its association with the self-reported mental health experiences of present adolescent men in a dissertation on its role in self-reported emotional and behavioral patterns in the digital age. By collecting direct attestations and numerically recorded opinions from adolescent males, this research will narrow the academic gap fostered by a lack of focus on the adolescents active on social media faced with hegemonic masculinity, with the aim of creating valid evidence in support of anti-hegemonic masculinity rhetoric, programs, and discourse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before discussing hegemonic masculinity's effect on adolescent males, one must first delve into its origin and the definitions it has acquired throughout its conception– a long history first spurred by Raewyn Connell.

History of Male Gender Studies

Connell, professor emerita at the University of Sydney, revolutionized the study of gender in the 1980s with seminal works like "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept" that pioneered explorations of sub-fields previously left unexplored, opening a gateway for academic debate and the birth of the the term hegemonic masculinity.[4]

However, the field has not always been so vivid. Gender studies prior to Raewyn Connell's introduction have been described in a 2017 interview with the woman herself and Marcos Nascimento, in which Connell illustrates the field as populated with new texts, but filled with old assertions.[11]

According to Connell, there were books emphasizing the need to recover 'true masculinity' thought to reassure men so they could function as patriarchs once again, adorned with the characteristics that empower men.[11] As societal norms shift and the ways in which we communicate expand, previously set ideas are reeled back into the academic spotlight, set against a modern backdrop.

In a digest of "On Men and Boys" by Connell, Cann *et al.* questions about the lives and experiences of men and boys continue to raise remarkable media interest, public concern and controversy as the modern definition of hegemonic masculinity becomes more active in online discourse.[1] Still, they acknowledge that applications of hegemonic masculinity lack global uniformity, with many like Cann *et al.,*noting a lack of consistent application due to hegemonic masculinity often referring to a fixed type of masculinity and on other occasions referring to whatever type is dominant at a certain time and place.[1]

However, hegemonic masculinity's broad, often interpreted as vague scope, can be attributed to society's ever-changing nature, just as Connell and James Messerschmidt emphasize; ambiguity in gender processes may be important to recognize as a simple mechanism of hegemony.[4]

Defining Hegemonic Masculinity

The origin of hegemonic masculinity and the subsequent birth of modern gender studies began in a study on a collection of Australian high schools. These beginnings soon grew into a series of systemic sociological theories of sex and gender codified in the article "Towards a New Sociology for Masculinity", ultimately landing on the previously mentioned definition, that being: the culturally idealized, dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes men's control over women and preserves hierarchical relationships between men.[4]

Although often conflated with other forms of dominant masculinities or misunderstood as a term simply meant to refer to boys or men acting badly as mentioned by Peter Kareithi PhD.[9] Messerschmidt claims hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally separate from these masculinities as hegemonic masculinity acquires its legitimacy by embodying 'superior' gender qualities in relation to 'inferior' gender qualities distinguished by its natural pressure to set all men in relation to it.[10] Most worrisome, it can build ideas of false superiority in men, leading to adoption of other forms of masculinity, such as complicit and toxic, risk-taking behaviors, and– focused on throughout this study –self-reported negative emotional and behavioral patterns.[4]

Dangers of Hegemonic Masculinity

Unique to hegemonic masculinity and similar masculine constructs, the tenets of dominance, strength, and emotional isolation often persist longer due to the intrinsic link to identity formation, solidified by centuries of cemented gender norms. In turn, adolescent males are forced to grapple with their own identity and the persona they are encouraged to adopt by hegemonic masculinity, most evidently showcased in Messerschmidt's 2020 article *"Becoming a Super-Masculine 'Cool Guy': Reflexivity, Dominant and Hegemonic Masculinities, and Sexual Violence"*

Centering his argument in opposition to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, around a young boy named Sam, Messerschmidt chronicles the boy's experiences following an interview in which Sam attests that from elementary to high school, he was subjected to consistent verbal bullying from the dominant boys.[10] He was bullied because of his physical size, his inability to respond, and his inability to physically fight back, as masculine culture dictated. The consistent and agonizing bullying led Sam to have frequent internal conversations about inadequacy, as well as a sense of masculine powerlessness. To avoid further assessment of his body and conduct, Sam eventually reflexively decided to isolate himself at school and do all he could to elude any interaction with the bullies.[10]

Although simply a single instance, Sam represents an entire population of boys that relate to Sam's situation, painting a severe image of the repercussions of hegemonic masculinity that may have been previously perceived, as young males retreat inward and create cycles of negativity that may burst into violent actions, associated with real-world consequences.[10] In an article focusing on hegemonic masculinity's interaction with crime in populations of impoverished adolescents, Clare Choak– head researcher at the University of London –posits that these masculinities use violence, confrontation and domination to create and sustain reputations of masculine modes of behavior, incorporating violent and petty crime, fraud/personal identity theft and low-level drug dealing.[3]

To reiterate, although these consequences are identified in extreme, specific cases of internalizing hegemonic masculinity, it must be recognized that hegemonic masculinity no longer exists in small, interconnected communities. Rather, it has ballooned into a nebulous idol to which all adolescent males with access to social media are able to compare themselves and embody, raising concern for this social phenomenon that entails not only self-reported psychological experiences, but also societal repercussions.

Online Implications

Hegemonic masculinity has effectively been digitized; a particularly concerning development given the magnitude at which adolescents consume social media. According to a 2025 Pew Research Center study, over half of all adolescents surveyed reported using platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube 'almost constantly' or 'several times a day', implying teens are exposed to hegemonic masculinity more than ever before.[13]

Now, social media offers digital technologies to facilitate the sharing of text, images, and multimedia through virtually networked communities, working to connect boys and men from across the globe, creating shared spaces that often perpetuate narrow images of 'manhood', reproducing en masse societal expectations of the time.[14]

Masculine norms on social media, however, can be narrow and perpetuate hegemonic expressions of masculinity that can inhibit healthy identity formation. In this way, we are witnessing social media reflecting a specific set of hegemonic masculine characteristics where the body represents symbolic capital based on how it looks as claimed by Laura Scholes and her team. Low self-esteem for boys and young men is exacerbated through unhealthy comparison to others or by receiving negative or no social

feedback, either through social media or physical interaction. Self-esteem often takes a hit when boys and young men start comparing themselves to others.[14]

Corroborated by Parent *et al*., adherence to this constellation of masculine norms may increase the frequency or intensity of maladaptive or hostile behaviors, and ultimately men's experiences of depression.[12]

The arguments made by the research mentioned delineate a clear gap and issue that must be acted upon. From the internal unrest fostered in the minds of adolescent males to the lack of empirical gender research, especially in studies that examine face-to-face interaction at the micro-level.[2] This absence is worsened when little to no studies take a focus on adolescence– a period of dynamic identity formation –or social media, which now dominates many of the cultural spaces in which society is developed. Thus leading to this research study's guiding question: *how does hegemonic masculinity, perpetrated by social media, associate with the mental health behaviors and gender perceptions of adolescent males aged 14-17 in South Florida?*

METHODOLOGY

This study deconstructs the associations between hegemonic masculinity on the self-reported psychosocial experiences of adolescent males aged 14-17 in South Florida in an empirical mixed-methods case study. This study aims to raise awareness of the harmful effects of perpetuating traditional masculine ideologies in modern conversations, all while analyzing the social nuances of hegemonic masculinity's effect on adolescent males in an age marked by increased periods of time spent on social media and evolving popular sentiments on masculinity and adolescence.

Although this study has situated itself in the southern United States, a culturally diverse and distinct geographical region, similar studies aiming to gather popular perspectives on harmful masculinity have been conducted across the world. For instance, *YouGov* conducted a survey questioning the extent to which perspectives have shifted across age cohorts in the United Kingdom. By inquiring individuals on various questions such as "Do you feel like you have or have not ever been personally impacted by misandry?" and *"Do you personally consider masculinity to be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither?"* the study found that traits often associated with toxic masculinity are seen more favorably by young men; however, it is worth noting that, in all cases, potentially misogynistic views among young men are in the minority.[15] Additionally, a study conducted by Sarah DeGue, Robyn Singleton, and Megan Kearns utilized 13 focus groups to create more nuanced messages about how contemporary parents conceptualize masculinity norms and their relationship to health and well-being.[5] Ultimately, through guided discussions, they highlight the need for more complex and nuanced messages about masculinity norms amongst their chosen demographics of Black, Latino, and White parents, making their work particularly beneficial to this inquiry, given the public ethnic composition of the study's primary student population.[5]

Male adolescents today have a complex comprehension of hegemonic masculinity, inadvertently made difficult to observe by the very effects of hegemonic masculinity; therefore, a data collection method that

allowed them to anonymously provide their perceptions, yet also provide public opinions, was necessary. The study integrated two primary data collection instruments: an electronically administered survey, bivariate correlation analyses, and focus group discussions (FGDs). This design was optimal for capturing the rich, contextual data required to address the identified gap in the literature concerning the modern adolescent male perspective. Examples of questions to be used on the survey are included in Table 1, whereas examples of guided discussion prompts are included in Table 2.

This study employed a convenience, self-selected sampling approach. Survey participants were recruited through physical flyers displaying a QR code, which were posted in locations with high male adolescent traffic (including male restrooms, gymnasiums, lunchrooms, and water fountains), as well as through links distributed to group chats consisting of teenage organizations and sports teams. Focus group participants were recruited through a separate physical flyer and QR code. Because participation was voluntary and recruitment relied on self-selection, the sample represents adolescents who chose to participate and may not be representative of the broader population of adolescent males in South Florida.

Ethical Considerations

Given all participants were minors, this study followed distinct participant-protection procedures for each data collection instrument, as approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). For the anonymous online survey, parental permission was waived by the IRB under the study's approved review procedure, given that the survey was anonymous, minimal risk, and did not collect any identifiable information; student assent was obtained digitally at the start of the survey, where participants reviewed the nature of the study and affirmatively consented to participate before proceeding. For the focus group discussion, written parental consent and student assent were both required and obtained prior to participation. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, risks, and safeguards, and were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were stored securely, and no identifiable information was linked to survey responses to protect participant confidentiality.

Aspects of Methodology

1) Online Survey: The survey was created using Google Forms and accessible via a shared link and QR code (See Appendix A to view flyer design). It was designed to be completed in under 10 minutes to maximize participation and minimize student burden, a consideration supported by Michelle Faverio and Olivia Sidoti.[6] Additionally, their research found teen participants stating extreme online activity, making online surveying a viable, if not beneficial method to collect data.[6] The survey was pilot-tested with three adolescents not in the sample to check for clarity and appropriate reading level; minor wording adjustments were made before full distribution. Ultimately, the final iteration consisted of 20 questions divided into three sections to best keep data organized and explorative (See all questions and sections headers in Appendix J):

- *Informed Consent and Key Terms*: This section informed the survey participant of the nature of the study and what it hoped to accomplish with the data that it gathered. It provided a method for

the participant to digitally provide consent, then informed the participant of common terms that will be used on the survey that they may be unfamiliar with, such as 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'help-seeking behaviors'.

- *Demographics and Social Media Use*: This section gathered data on participant age and frequency of use for platforms including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube, mirroring the demographic and behavioral categories found in national health surveys (CDC, 2024).
- *Perceptions of Masculinity and Basis for Bivariate Correlation Analyses*: This section analyzed the survey participants' prior opinions on masculinity in the United States currently, the role of men and women, and their ideas on which source they receive the most influence on their idea of masculinity. Several questions were derived from Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Kim Parke's 2024 survey, 'How Americans See Men and Masculinity,' for the Pew Research Center, which determined thoughts on manhood and masculinity following concern about how men are doing socially and economically.[8]

2) Bivariate Correlation Analyses: To draw a direct correlation between hegemonic masculinity, perpetrated by social media, and mental health behaviors the survey included a bivariate correlation analyses utilizing questions 13, 14, 15, 17, and 18, respectively from the third section of the online survey collecting attestations on perceptions of masculinity:

13. How often do you witness males displaying or partaking in acts of hegemonic masculinity on social media
14. To what extent do you feel your personal identity is altered by social media?
15. To what extent do you feel comfortable approaching peers on sensitive mental topics such as anxiety, depression, and insecurity,
17. To what extent do you feel confident in yourself and your abilities?
18. To what extent do you feel emotionally and/or mentally supported by your male peers?

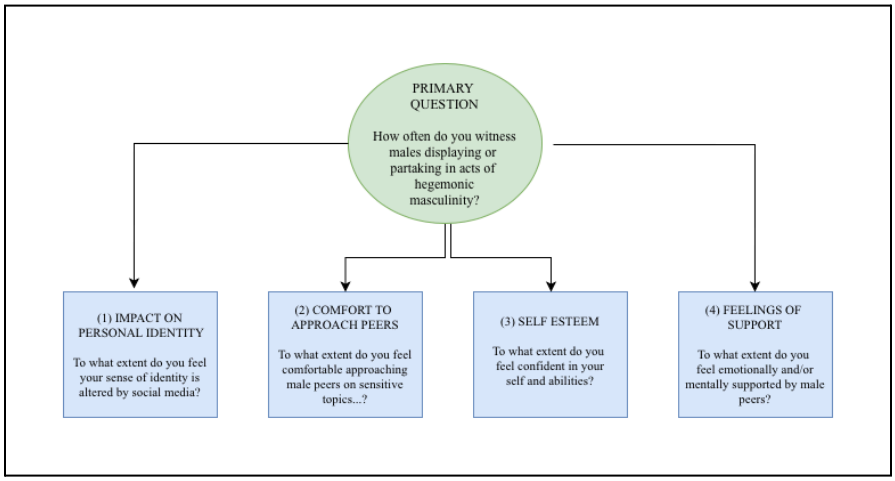


Figure 1. Organization of a correlative study

With question 13 acting as the primary anchor question from which the four other questions will be tested, four r -values will be produced, generating a larger pool of data well-suited for the social sciences, as proven by a similar study conducted by Horowitz and Parker with the Pew Research Center that included a correlational study as well as a broader digital survey.[8]

DATA CODING

Survey responses were coded on 5-point Likert scales. For Questions 13, 14, 15, and 17, higher scores indicated greater frequency or extent of the construct (e.g., 1 = Never to 5 = Almost constantly for Q13; 1 = Not at all to 5 = A great deal for Q14). Question 18 ("To what extent do you feel emotionally and/or mentally supported by your male peers?") was reverse-coded such that higher scores indicated less perceived emotional support (1 = Extremely supported to 5 = Not at all supported). This reverse-coding was applied so that a positive correlation between Q13 and Q18 would indicate that greater exposure to hegemonic masculinity is associated with lower perceived emotional support, consistent with the study's hypothesis. All correlation analyses were conducted using these coded values.

All correlation analyses were kept organized and conducted through the public software Microsoft Excel.

Table 1. Example survey questions.

How often do you utilize the internet, either on mobile devices or home computers?	1. Almost Constantly 2. Several times a day 3. About once a day 4. Many times a week 5. Less Often 6. No answer
When you think about how things are going for men in the U.S. overall these days, how do you feel?	1. Frustrated 2. Angry 3. Hopeful 4. Proud 5. Other:
To what extent do you feel harmful (including hegemonic, or its consequence, toxic) masculinity alters your personal identity?	1. Greatly alters 2. Somewhat alters 3. Rarely alters 4. Never alters 5. No answer

(3) Focus Group Discussion: Using another physical flyer and associated QR code (See Appendix B) potential participants were offered an opportunity to participate with a minimum of 6 participants and a maximum of 8. The participants, once confirmed for the focus group, were instructed to report to an on-site classroom with ample seating, proper lighting, and a functioning television to present all materials. Participants were guided by visual stimuli, engaging prompts, and verbal encouragement from the researcher, with supervision from a member of the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring all conduct was appropriate given the setting and protected population of adolescents. Prior to the interview, written parental consent and student assent were obtained and participants were digitally emailed the questions guiding the discussion.

- *Procedure:* The discussion began with a preemptive restatement of the research study's objectives, risks, and safeguards along with a required signature from the participants affirming their consent. Participants were then given a guide with blank space (See Appendix G) to record any responses they wished to not share during the discussion and the discussion began following the public example set by Degue *et al.*'s 2024 study separating the focus group into 4 activities spurred by questions guided with a personal edition of the guided discussion with the researcher (See Appendix H) with refreshments and snacks provided following the FGD's conclusion:[5]
    - *Activity 1:* Defining masculinity
    - *Activity 2:* Hegemonic Masculine Social Media Content Reaction (Short Form)
    - *Activity 3:* YouTube Hegemonic Masculinity Advocate Reaction (Long Form)
    - *Activity 4:* Reflection
- *Thematic Coding:* The focus group audio recording was transcribed verbatim into text then reviewed multiple times by the researcher with an inductive thematic analysis approach, leading to four themes emerging from repeated review of participant responses. Responses sharing common content were assigned descriptive theme labels with a minimum of four participant responses required for a theme to be reported.

Table 2. Example Focus Group Discussion Prompts.

Activity 1: What does the media tell us about characteristics that an "ideal man" should not have?	**Activity 2:** What are your initial reactions to this short (short included validated examples of hegemonic masculinity)?
Activity 3: Based on the video, what do you think the point of the video is?	**Activity 4:** What kinds of support do parents need to help protect their sons from potentially harmful messages about what it means to "be a man"?

4) Alignment: Through this digital survey and focus group discussion, a greater sample of the population was possible without trading off discursive responses. In particular, an accessible survey was the best

option for collecting the greatest number of responses. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the survey maintained anonymity and did not ask for any identifiable information, creating a safe and private experience for all participants.

By creating a QR code for the link, it was possible to print out an eye-catching flyer and post in many sites. The wording and stylization of this flyer were tailored to the teenage generation to attract them to scan the QR code and participate in the study. Additionally, the flyer was posted in locations likely to face constant male adolescent traffic such as male restrooms, gymnasiums, lunchrooms, and water fountains. Additionally, the link was sent to several group chats consisting of teenage organizations and sports teams to spread awareness.

The survey was created on the public software Google Forms given its user-friendly interface and recognizability to teenage students, as several schools have opted to use Google programs in coursework. The information collected was then easily translated to a spreadsheet made on Google Sheets, efficiently categorizing and organizing data. Lastly, all methodology strategies were approved prior to the IRB, ensuring all ethical protections, given the source of data: adolescents, a nationally protected population.

RESULTS

Overall, the survey collected 57 ($n = 57$) responses from male adolescents aged 14 to 17 by the end of data collection. The standard age of respondents was 17 (44.6% of respondents) and the region of respondents varied across five cities in two South Florida counties. As described in the Methodology, this sample was a convenience, self-selected sample; therefore, the demographic and geographic distribution of respondents reflects those who chose to participate rather than a random or representative sample of adolescent males in South Florida. The sections below will highlight key findings and describe the complex data collected.

Correlational Statistics

To narrow the sea of diverse information gathered by the survey, bivariate correlation analyses compared the relationship among 4 different themes against the frequency of hegemonic masculinity exposure, as illustrated by Figure 1, resulting in 4 r-values denoting the strength of the correlations.

There was a strong positive correlation between perceived exposure to hegemonic masculinity (Q13) and identity alteration (Q14), $r = 0.668$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants who reported greater exposure also reported greater shifts in their sense of identity. There was also a strong positive correlation between Q13 and perceived emotional support from male peers (Q18, reverse-coded), $r = 0.730$, $p < .001$, indicating that greater exposure was associated with less perceived emotional support. Moderate positive correlations emerged between Q13 and comfort approaching peers on sensitive topics (Q15), $r = 0.493$, $p < .001$, and between Q13 and self-confidence (Q17), $r = 0.492$, $p < .001$, indicating that greater exposure was associated with less comfort and lower self-confidence, respectively. No variables, when correlated

with the primary question, yielded a weak correlation, speaking to the strength of the associations observed.

Table 3: Correlation matrix: Perceived exposure to hegemonic masculinity and psychosocial variables

Variable	Survey Question	Response Scale	Coding Direction	r	p
Perceived exposure to hegemonic masculinity (Anchor)	Q13: How often do you witness males displaying or partaking in acts of hegemonic masculinity on social media?	1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Almost constantly	Higher = more exposure	—-	—-
Identity alteration	Q14: To what extent do you feel your personal identity is altered by social media?	1 = Not at all, 2 = Slightly, 3 = Moderately, 4 = Very, 5 = A great deal	Higher = more alteration	0.668	< .001
Comfort approaching peers on sensitive topics	Q15: To what extent do you feel comfortable approaching peers on sensitive mental topics such as anxiety, depression, and insecurity?	1 = Not at all comfortable, 2 = Slightly comfortable, 3 = Moderately comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable, 5 = Extremely comfortable	Higher = more comfort	0.493	< .001
Self confidence	Q17: To what extent do you feel confident in yourself and your abilities?	1 = Not at all confident, 2 = Slightly confident, 3 = Moderately confident, 4 = Very confident, 5 = Extremely confident	Higher = more confidence	0.492	< .001
Perceived emotional support from male peers	Q18: To what extent do you feel emotionally and/or mentally supported by your male peers?	1 = Extremely supported, 2 = Very supported, 3 = Moderately supported, 4 = Slightly supported, 5 = Not at all supported	Reverse-coded Higher = less support	0.730	< .001

Note. Q18 was reverse-coded such that higher scores indicate lower perceived emotional support. Therefore, the positive correlation between Q13 and Q18 (r = 0.730) indicates that greater exposure to hegemonic masculinity is associated with less perceived emotional support. All other questions were coded such that higher scores indicate more of the construct. p-values are two-tailed.

Because Q18 was reverse-coded, the positive correlation between Q13 and Q18 (r = 0.730) indicates that participants who reported greater exposure to hegemonic masculinity also reported lower perceived emotional support from male peers. Similarly, the positive correlations between Q13 and Q15 (r = 0.493) and between Q13 and Q17 (r = 0.492) indicate that greater exposure to hegemonic masculinity was associated with less comfort approaching peers on sensitive topics and lower self-confidence, respectively. The positive correlation between Q13 and Q14 (r = 0.668) indicates that greater exposure was associated with more self-reported identity alteration.

All four correlations were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Perspectives on Gender Norms and Status

To further picture the surveyed adolescent males' standings on current gender norms, certain questions focused on several aspects of phenomena commonly studied in academic gender studies, such as gender equality and patriarchal ideals. Studies utilized questions 6, 8, and 9, analyzing gender standing, as seen in Figure 2, and misogyny vs. misandry, present in Figure 3.

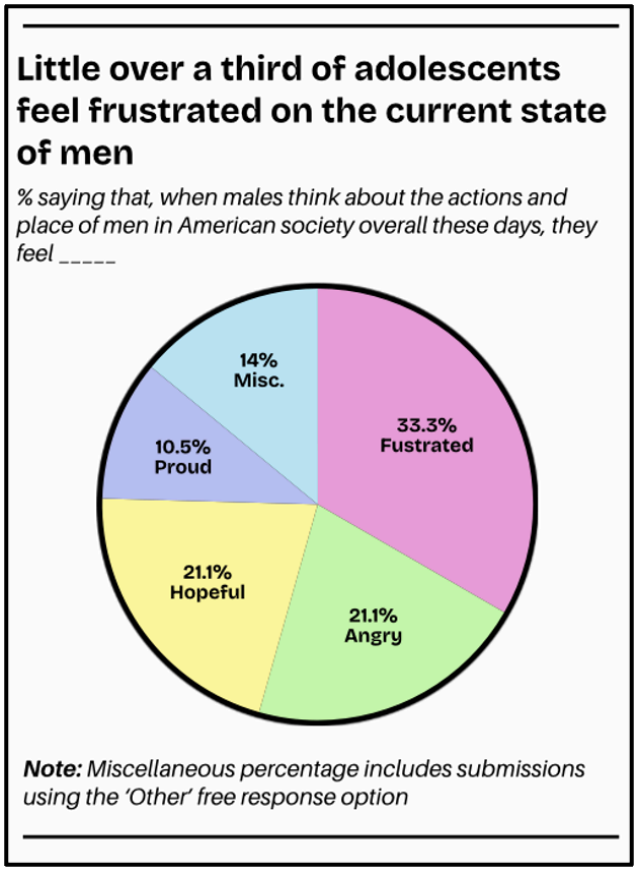


Figure 2. Sentiments on male standing.

33.3% of adolescent males surveyed reported feeling frustrated when prompted on the place, actions, and perceptions of men in America currently, closely followed by 21.1% of respondents reporting angry sentiments, suggesting that more than a majority of the sample population reported negative perceptions of men; however, the question did not prompt the respondent in relation to online hegemonic masculinity, so an attribution to hegemonic masculinity perpetrated by social media is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, when surveyed on their social media usage across four platforms (TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube), *'Almost constantly'* and *'Several times a day'* consistently remained the two most commonly self-reported frequencies, suggesting that despite the weakness in attribution there is still a high rate of social media consumption, and in turn a high exposure of hegemonic masculinity amongst most survey respondents.

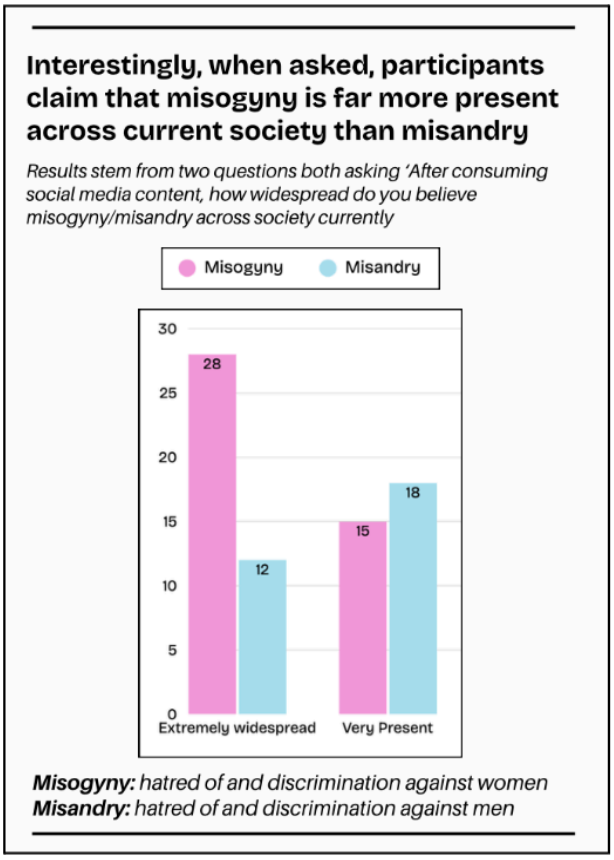


Figure 3. Reports on societal frequency: misogyny vs. misandry.

Misogyny and misandry, defined at the bottom of Figure 3, remain cornerstones of academic gender studies as they embody several concerning notions present across societies. The increased number of respondents stating misogyny is more prevalent and widespread raises a complex discussion, suggesting that a majority of male adolescents believe the scale and institutionalization of misogyny far exceed that of misandry, in spite of the expected notion that the respondents– given their high self-reported amounts of hegemonic masculinity exposure –would believe the opposite, siding with men and compounding the patriarchal tendencies held by hegemonic masculinity, as discussed

earlier in the text.

Focus Group Findings

The focus group included 6 participants and lasted approximately 47 minutes, taking place from 2:22 pm to 3:03 pm, within the classroom and supervised by a certified educator. Upon conclusion, the discussion was transcribed digitally and underwent categorization into the four following themes, illustrated in Table 3, in order to neatly understand the frequency and nature of responses to the prompts, visual stimuli, and other participants' responses (Note that *P* in Table 3 functions as a simplification of *participant)*. Nearly all participants expressed the themes categorized, ranging from 4 to all participants. Although the themes provided maintain overlap with both the correlational analyses and survey questions, each theme integrated anecdotal evidence from participants ranging from interfamilial to parasocial relationships.

1) Pressure to Perform Traditional Masculinity and Conceal Vulnerability *(Explicitly mentioned by ~5-6 participants)* The societal expectation for men to be stoic, brave, first (to act), and to "put up a strong front" or a "mask," especially around family or in public. Excerpts: ● P1: "brave, like always stepping up to the plate... men should open the door first." ● P2: Feels asked if they are "forced to put up a strong performance." ● Multiple participants agree "yes" to being forced/encouraged to be strong.	**2) Social Media as an Amplifier of Hegemonic Masculinity** *(Explicitly mentioned by ~4-5 participants)* Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat spread and glorify toxic masculine stereotypes (i.e. "sigma," "alpha" males, aggression, dominance over women) often without context, influencing young men. Excerpts: ● Participants unanimously agree social media amplifies toxic rhetoric. ● They name platforms: "TikTok, Instagram... Snapchat."

3) Consequence of 'Tough' Rhetoric on Mental Health *(Explicitly mentioned by ~4-5 participants)* The link between phrases like "be a man," "toughen up," or "don't be a snowflake" and negative outcomes like hiding emotions, depression, aggression, and suicidal ideation. Excerpts: ● After the video, participants link "be tough" ideas to teaching boys to "hide their emotions," "act happy," and not talk about sadness or depression. ● P4: Says it's harmful because boys who "can't be tough" will just "go with the flow" for fear of being judged..	**4) The Importance of Trusted Support Systems** *(Explicitly mentioned by 6 participants)* The need for friends, family (like sisters), authority figures, or private outlets (journals, pets) to talk to and be vulnerable with. Excerpts: ● When asked what boys need to be protected, P5 says "have someone you really trust... someone to talk to." ● Participants discuss having friends they can confide in and agree they would suffer mentally more without them. ● The group suggests school programs and open forums as structured versions of this support.

Table 3. Focus group themes, frequencies, and excerpts.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned in the literature review, the amalgamation of dominant gender norms acknowledged as hegemonic masculinity has evolved greatly since its conception by Raewyn Connell in the late 20th century.

However, in a new understanding, the research study has found that instead of merely reflecting the ideals of hegemonic masculinity onto others, adolescent males are internalizing these critically dangerous notions, resulting in a self-destructive mindset that inhibits identity formation and relationship formation, often irreversibly

The prevalence of hegemonic masculinity online would be dismissible in any other previous time; however, this study provides evidence that adolescent males are highly active on social media platforms and self-report high amounts of exposure to displays of hegemonic masculinity. As found, this exposure is associated with lower self-reported foundations of secure mental health in the male subjects tested. For instance, the moderate correlation between exposure to hegemonic masculinity and comfort in approaching male peers on sensitive topics suggests that hegemonic masculinity is associated with males tending to shy away from vulnerability, which may contribute to self-reported feelings of isolation. Interestingly, a similar pattern was expressed during the focus group (summarized as Theme 1 in Table 3), showcasing the ubiquity of hegemonic masculinity's association with adolescent males, despite the separation between the two groups.

Adolescent Attitudes

When surveyed 54.4% respondents reported feelings of frustration or anger when asked on the current state of men (this "state" referring to the perception of men's general actions and shifting role in relation to women) converse to the expected belief that adolescent males tend to identify with the ideals purported by online role models, as found by digital advocate for Human Rights Watch Edward Herbert in his 2025 article 'Time to Banish Toxic Masculinity.' Herbert's use of 'toxic masculinity' refers to harmful expressions of masculinity; the present study focuses on the broader construct of hegemonic masculinity as defined by Connell.[7]

Moreover, this negative trend is validated by the increased number of respondents who identified misogyny as more prevalent than misandry, suggesting even male adolescents surrounded by inherently patriarchal hegemonic masculinity recognize that men are more likely to perpetrate hateful actions towards women than the inverse. These effects are dangerous and, if left untreated, could lead to serious ramifications.

Moreover, this trend is supported by the increased number of respondents who identified misogyny as more prevalent than misandry, suggesting even male adolescents surrounded by inherently patriarchal hegemonic masculinity recognize that men are more likely to perpetrate hateful actions towards women than the inverse. These associations are concerning and, if unaddressed, could be associated with negative outcomes.

Nevertheless, this study, in conjunction with other recent publications of similar nature, can raise awareness of hegemonic masculinity's presence and effect, thereby increasing its opponents.

Implications

Additionally, Peter Kareithi posits his own set of reparatory actions including but not limited to encouraging media associations to lobby governments and media industries for the formulation of policies to de-emphasize representations of dominant masculinities within their jurisdictions and encouraging media organizations to initiate or support programs to sensitize current media practitioners to recognize and avoid language, symbols, and other representations that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity.[9] Both of which are valid points of action given the results of the research study, with the only suggestion being a greater focus on adolescence.

However, this study is far from perfect; even more, it's restricted by a unique set of methodological limitations.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several methodological limitations that affect the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. These limitations fall into two categories: (1) design and sampling limitations and (2) bias-related limitations.

Design and Sampling Limitations

Concerning sample size, the number of survey and focus group participants fell well below the target population to make results generalizable to adolescent males aged 14-17 in South Florida. Because this study used a cross-sectional correlational design, no causal claims can be made. The associations reported here require longitudinal or experimental validation before any causal conclusions can be drawn.While findings are not statistically generalizable, they may still offer transferable insights for schools with similar socioeconomic and ethnic profiles.

Bias-Related Limitations

- *Researcher Bias*- Researcher bias stems from the assumption that hegemonic masculinity is deeply negative, which may have influenced data interpretation and possibly led to the selection of data that solely supports the hypothesis.
- *Observation Bias*- Observation bias arises during focus groups, where participants may offer socially desirable responses given the apparent critical stance on traditional masculinity.
- *Recall Bias*- Recall bias affects survey data, as adolescents self-report social media exposure and internal states like identity and self-esteem, which are subject to inaccurate memory and emotions.

These methodological limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than confirmatory. Future research with larger, more representative samples is needed to establish whether the associations observed here are causal and generalizable.

CONCLUSION

As this report reaches its conclusion, this study offers direction for any future researchers with a vested interest in the social sciences and who wish to continue further exploration into structural masculinities.

Future research should extend the inquiry beyond South Florida to examine how adolescent males across diverse geographic and cultural contexts experience online hegemonic masculinity. Studies across urban, suburban, and rural communities would reveal whether the patterns documented here reflect universal features of digital masculine ideology or manifest differently depending on local, cultural norms and media environments. To return to a similarity to many early studies on hegemonic masculinity, interested researchers may utilize this methodology but with a focus on hegemonic masculinity in interpersonal relationships, allowing for comparison between prior studies and contemporary studies, contributing to an understanding of hegemonic masculinity's evolution– not only through social media –but rather through

society itself.

AUTHOR NOTE(S)

All scholarly sources were reviewed for author credibility and topic alignment. Sources ranged from scholarly journal entries to public opinion pieces. Online databases LIRN and Google Scholar provided access to many scholarly articles referenced throughout the paper.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely wish to thank my research mentor Ms. Carolina Cucurullo, for her invaluable guidance and support throughout the process of conducting the research from the creation of a literature review to data encoding. Her contribution was invaluable for this paper's completion and my own growth as a researcher.

REFERENCES

1. Cann, Victoria, *et al.* "The Men and the Boys, Twenty Years On." *Boyhood Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, Dec. 2020. *Berghahn Journals*, https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/boyhood-studies/13/2/bhs130201.xml#bib6. Accessed 11 Nov. 2025.

2. Cheng, Cliff. "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction." The Journal of Men's Studies, vol. 7, no. 3, spring 1999, p. 295. Gale Academic OneFile, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A54776375/AONE?u=lirn32500&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c6d92fa9. Accessed 5 Apr. 2026.

3. Choak, Clare. "Hegemonic Masculinity and 'Badness' How Young Women Bargain with Patriarchy 'On Road'." Boyhood Studies, vol. 14, no. 1, summer 2021, pp. 63+. Gale Academic OneFile, dx.doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2020.140105. Accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

4. Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, Dec. 2005, pp. 829–859, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639. Accessed 12 Mar. 2026.

5. DeGue, Sarah *et al.* "A Qualitative Analysis of Beliefs about Masculinity and Gender Socialization among US Mothers and Fathers of School-Age Boys." *Psychology of men & masculinity*vol. 25,2 (2023): 152-164. doi:10.1037/men0000450 Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

6. Faverio, Michelle, and Olivia Sidoti. "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 12 Dec. 2024,

www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/12/12/teens-social-media-and-technology-2024/. Accessed 14 Nov. 2025.

7. Herbert, Edward "Toxic Masculinity in Childhood | the Children's Society." *Www.childrenssociety.org.uk*, 15 Sept. 2020, www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/how-toxic-masculinity-affects-young-people. Accessed 2 Oct. 2025.

8. Horowitz, Juliana, and Kim Parker. "How Americans See Men and Masculinity." *Pew Research Center*, 17 Oct. 2024, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/10/17/how-americans-see-men-and-masculinity/. Accessed 11 Nov. 2025.

9. Kareithi, Peter. *Hegemonic Masculinity in Media Contents*. *Unesco.org*, 2022, unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000368807. Accessed 5 Apr. 2026.

10. Messerschmidt, James W. "Becoming a Super-Masculine 'Cool Guy': Reflexivity, Dominant and Hegemonic Masculinities, and Sexual Violence." Boyhood Studies, vol. 13, no. 2, winter 2020, pp. 20+. Gale Academic OneFile, dx.doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2020.130203. Accessed 5 Apr. 2026.

11. Nascimento, Marcos, and Raewyn Connell. "Reflecting on twenty years of Masculinities: an interview with Raewyn Connell/ Uma reflexao sobre os vinte anos do livro 'Masculinities': entrevista com Raewyn Connell." Ciência & Saúde Coletiva, vol. 22, no. 12, Dec. 2017, pp. 3975+. Gale Academic OneFile, dx.doi.org/10.1590/1413-812320172212.27242016. Accessed 5 Apr. 2026.

12. Parent, Mike C *et al.* "Social Media Behavior, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression." *Psychology of men & masculinity* vol. 20,3 (2019): 277-287. doi:10.1037/men0000156. Accessed 10 Apr. 2026

13. Pew Research Center. "Teens and Social Media Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*, 5 Jan. 2024, www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/teens-and-social-media-fact-sheet/. Accessed 10 Apr. 2026.

14. Scholes, Laura, *et al.* "Social Media and the Medicalization of Boyhood: Critical Literacies to Evaluate Media Messaging." *The Review of Education Pedagogy & Cultural Studies*, 30 Oct. 2025, pp. 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2025.2577579. Accessed 12 Nov. 2025.

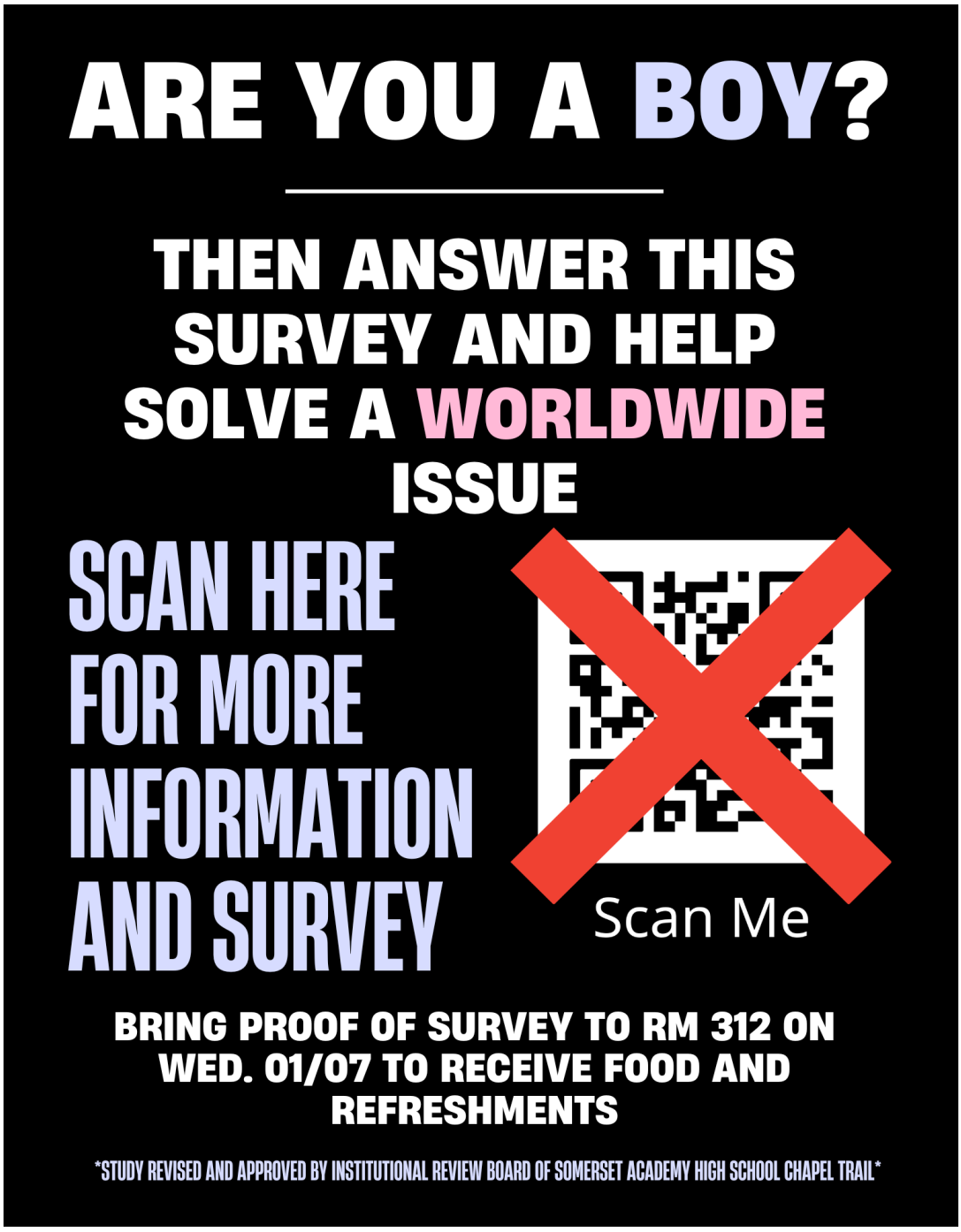
15. Smith, Matthew. "Young Men, Masculinity and Misogyny." *Yougov.co.uk*, YouGov, 14 Oct. 2025, yougov.co.uk/society/articles/52863-young-men-masculinity-and-misogyny. Accessed 12 Nov. 2025.

AUTHOR

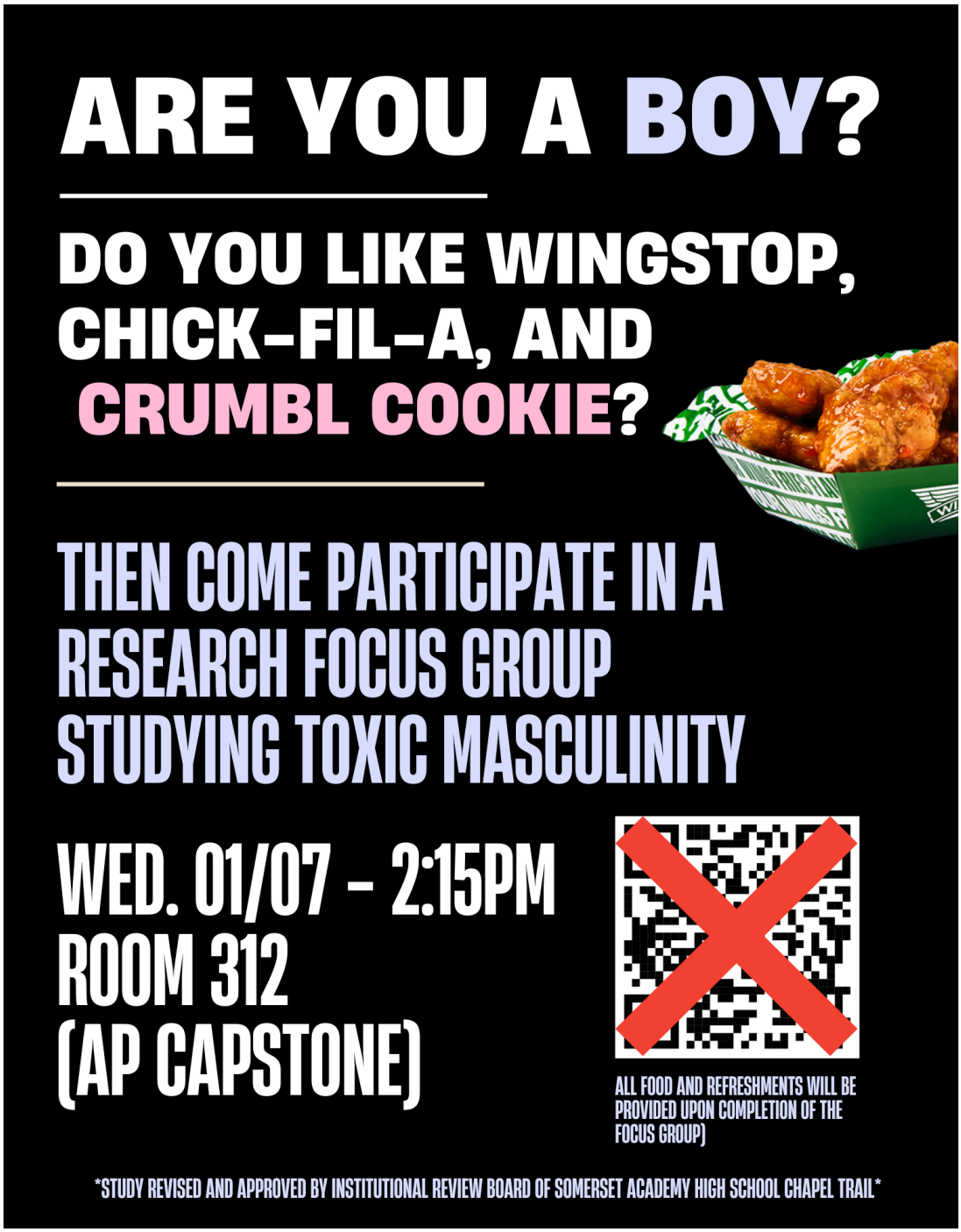
Gabriel E. Cadet is a senior at the Somerset Arts Conservatory in Pembroke Pines, United States of America, with a vested interest in political science, social sciences, and environmental science. He hopes to pursue a double major in geopolitics and environmental engineering to improve infrastructure and add to collective knowledge.

APPENDIX

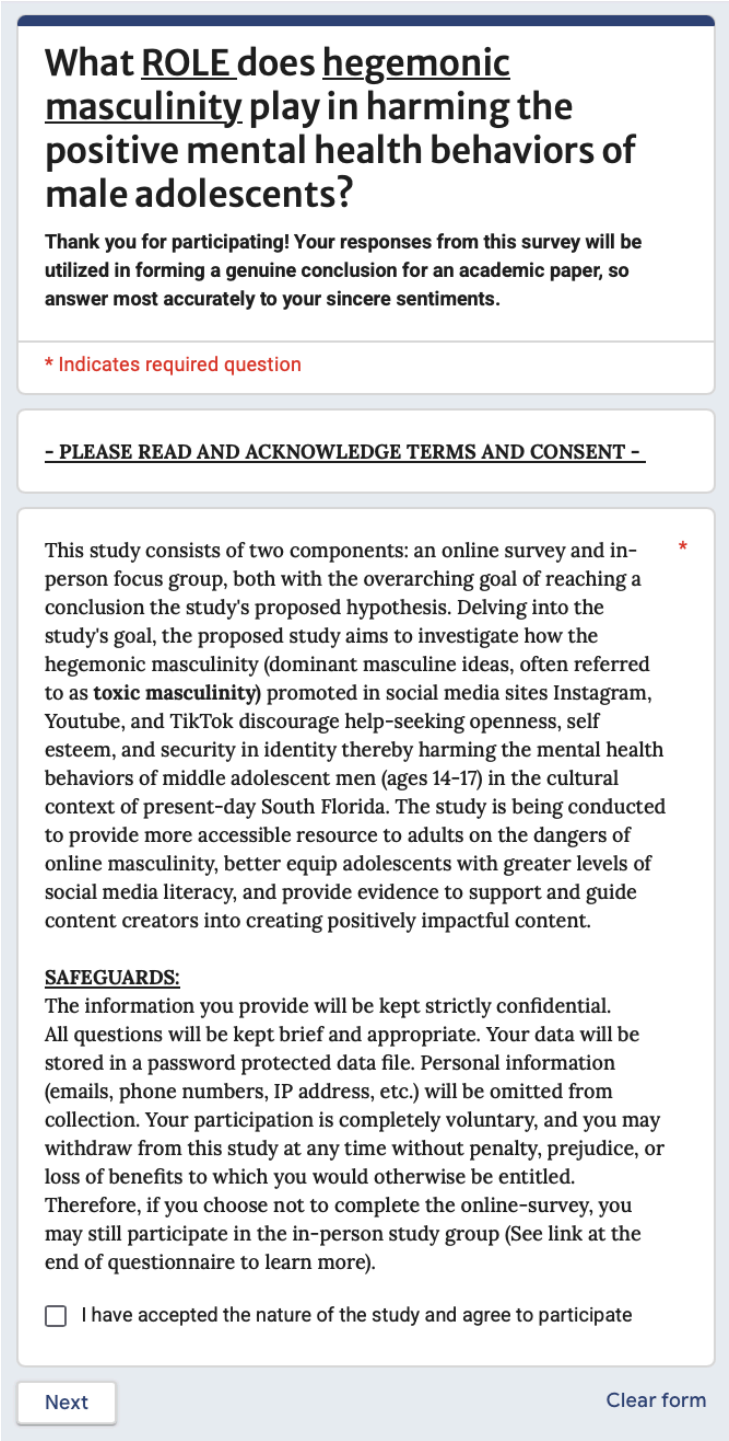
Appendix A. Poster gathering survey responses.



Appendix B. Survey gathering focus group participants.



Appendix C. Top of first section of survey.



What ROLE does hegemonic masculinity play in harming the positive mental health behaviors of male adolescents?

Thank you for participating! Your responses from this survey will be utilized in forming a genuine conclusion for an academic paper, so answer most accurately to your sincere sentiments.

* Indicates required question

- PLEASE READ AND ACKNOWLEDGE TERMS AND CONSENT -

This study consists of two components: an online survey and in-person focus group, both with the overarching goal of reaching a conclusion the study's proposed hypothesis. Delving into the study's goal, the proposed study aims to investigate how the hegemonic masculinity (dominant masculine ideas, often referred to as **toxic masculinity**) promoted in social media sites Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok discourage help-seeking openness, self esteem, and security in identity thereby harming the mental health behaviors of middle adolescent men (ages 14-17) in the cultural context of present-day South Florida. The study is being conducted to provide more accessible resource to adults on the dangers of online masculinity, better equip adolescents with greater levels of social media literacy, and provide evidence to support and guide content creators into creating positively impactful content. *

SAFEGUARDS:
The information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. All questions will be kept brief and appropriate. Your data will be stored in a password protected data file. Personal information (emails, phone numbers, IP address, etc.) will be omitted from collection. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled. Therefore, if you choose not to complete the online-survey, you may still participate in the in-person study group (See link at the end of questionnaire to learn more).

☐ I have accepted the nature of the study and agree to participate

Next Clear form

Appendix D. Top of second section of survey.

What ROLE does hegemonic masculinity play in harming the positive mental health behaviors of male adolescents?

* Indicates required question

- SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND EXPERIENCE -

1) How old are you?

- ○ 14
- ○ 15
- ○ 16
- ○ 17

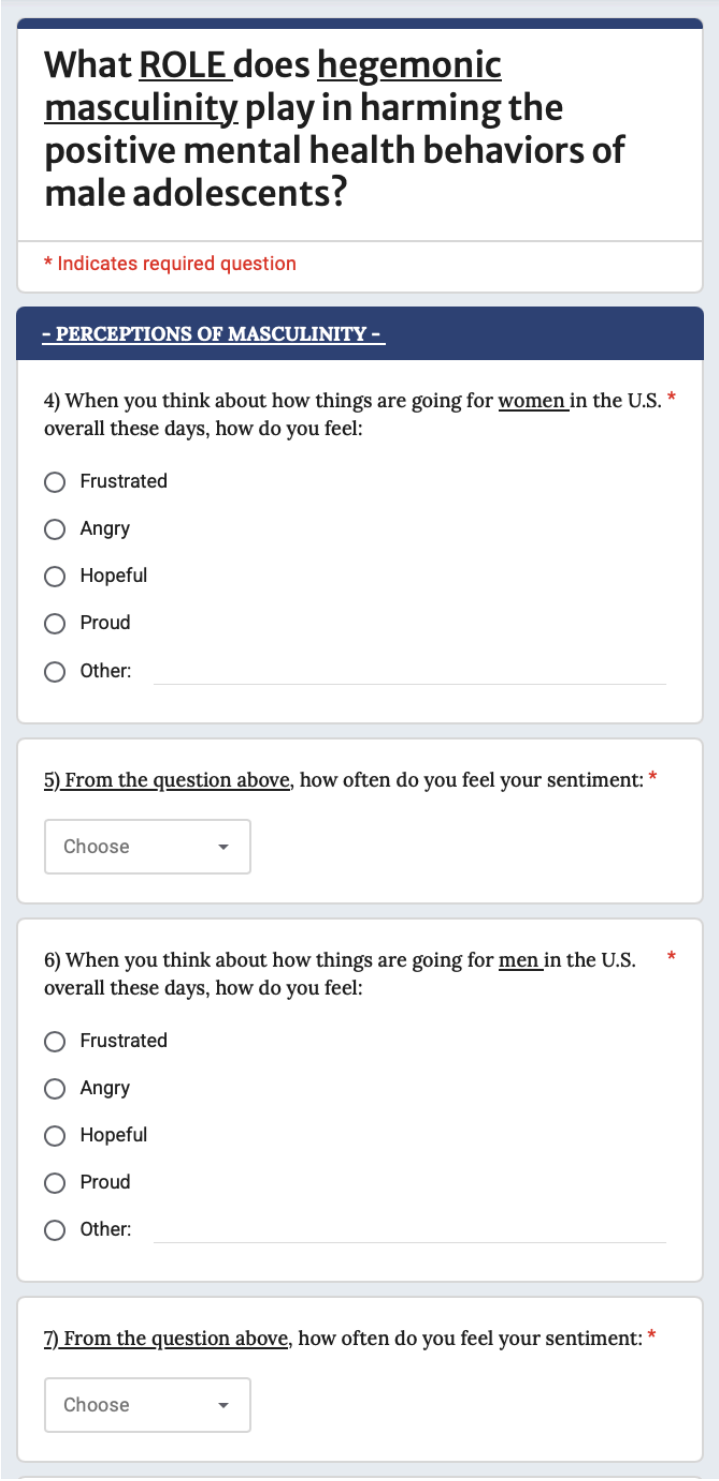
2) Do you ever use any of the following apps or sites? *

	Yes, I use this app or site	No, I do not use this app or site	No answer
Youtube	○	○	○
TikTok	○	○	○
Instagram	○	○	○
Snapchat	○	○	○

3) Thinking about the sites or apps you use, around how often do you visit or use them? *

	Almost constantly	Several times a day	About once a day	Many times a week	Less often	No answer
Youtube	○	○	○	○	○	○
TikTok	○	○	○	○	○	○
Instagram	○	○	○	○	○	○
Snapchat	○	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix E. Top of third section of survey.



What ROLE does hegemonic masculinity play in harming the positive mental health behaviors of male adolescents?

* Indicates required question

- PERCEPTIONS OF MASCULINITY -

4) When you think about how things are going for women in the U.S. * overall these days, how do you feel:

- Frustrated
- Angry
- Hopeful
- Proud
- Other:

5) From the question above, how often do you feel your sentiment: *

Choose

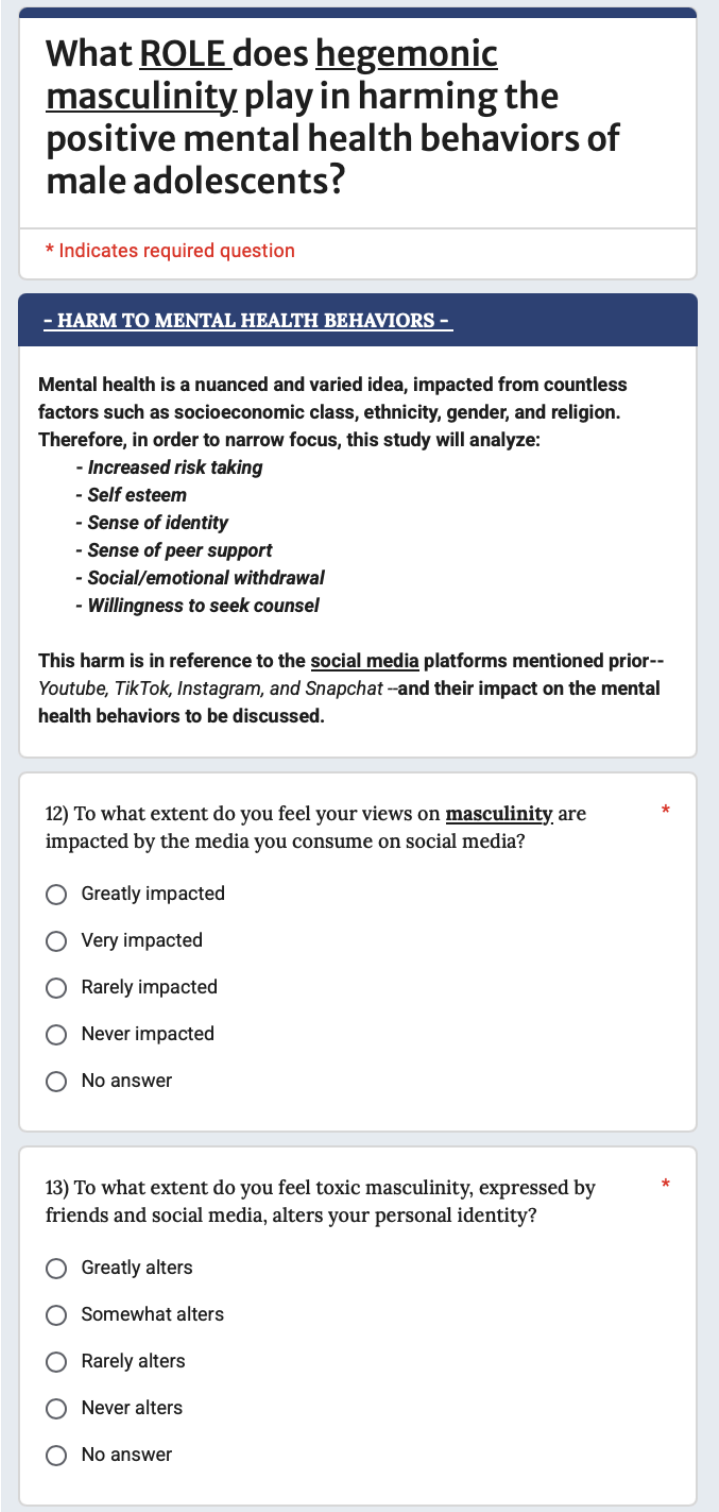
6) When you think about how things are going for men in the U.S. * overall these days, how do you feel:

- Frustrated
- Angry
- Hopeful
- Proud
- Other:

7) From the question above, how often do you feel your sentiment: *

Choose

Appendix F. Top of fourth section of survey.



What ROLE does hegemonic masculinity play in harming the positive mental health behaviors of male adolescents?

* Indicates required question

- HARM TO MENTAL HEALTH BEHAVIORS -

Mental health is a nuanced and varied idea, impacted from countless factors such as socioeconomic class, ethnicity, gender, and religion. Therefore, in order to narrow focus, this study will analyze:

- ***Increased risk taking***
- ***Self esteem***
- ***Sense of identity***
- ***Sense of peer support***
- ***Social/emotional withdrawal***
- ***Willingness to seek counsel***

This harm is in reference to the social media platforms mentioned prior-- *Youtube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat* **--and their impact on the mental health behaviors to be discussed.**

12) To what extent do you feel your views on **masculinity** are impacted by the media you consume on social media? *

- ◯ Greatly impacted
- ◯ Very impacted
- ◯ Rarely impacted
- ◯ Never impacted
- ◯ No answer

13) To what extent do you feel toxic masculinity, expressed by friends and social media, alters your personal identity? *

- ◯ Greatly alters
- ◯ Somewhat alters
- ◯ Rarely alters
- ◯ Never alters
- ◯ No answer

Appendix G. Focus group guided discussion, participant edition.

Online Hegemonic Masculinity Study Guided Discussion

1) **Activity 1: <u>Defining Masculinity</u>**

- *Thinking about what you have seen or heard from the media, which of these words [list of words provided in a handout describe what you think of as an "ideal man" based on what you see in the media?*

2) **Activity 2: <u>Toxic Masculine Social Media Content Reaction (Short Form)</u>**

- *What are your initial reactions to this video?*

3) **Activity 3: <u>*The Mask You Live In* trailer</u> & Short Form Media**

- *What are your reactions to this trailer?*

- *What does the media tell us about characteristics that an "ideal man" should not be?*

Appendix H. Focus group guided discussion, participant edition.

4) **Activity 4: <u>Mental Health Community Bonds</u>**

- *How do you think the rhetoric that we've covered throughout this discussion manifests in your personal relationships, in other words, have you witnessed similar phases or sentiments in your everyday life?*

Appendix I. Focus group guided discussion, researcher edition.

Online Hegemonic Masculinity Study Guided Discussion

1) **Activity 1: <u>Defining Masculinity</u>**

- Thinking about what you have seen or heard from the media, which of these words [list of words provided in a handout describe what you think of as an "ideal man" based on what you see in the media?

  • What does the media tell us about characteristics that an "ideal man" should not be?

  • When we think of an ideal man—as portrayed in the media, what celebrity or famous person comes to mind?

  • If you were to father a son, what would you want for your sons as they grow up to become men. Can you share one or two of the characteristics/words that you would choose?

  • Were there any words that stood out to you as characteristics that would *not* be important to you in what you want for your son? Or that you would *not* want your sons to be like?

2) **Activity 2: <u>Toxic Masculine Social Media Content Reaction (Short Form)</u>**

  - *What are your initial reactions to this video?*

  • What do you think the overall message is?

  • The short ends with the statement "You are a man, and that's all they need to know." Do you agree with the message?

  • The short originally circulated in the fall of 2024. Some majorly approved the video while others criticized it. Do you think this short reflects real issues?

Appendix J. Focus group guided discussion, researcher edition.

• Thinking about what is acceptable for men to do or say, what do you think has changed in recent years?

3) **Activity 3: *The Mask You Live In* trailer**

- *What are your reactions to this trailer?*

• The trailer begins and ends with a list of words and phrases that boys might hear. Which of those words or phrases stood out to you the most?

• Why do you think people communicate these ideas or messages to boys?

• Based on the trailer, what do you think the point of the movie is?

• How do you think these ideas about "being a man" affect boys?

• What do you think young boys need from their parents, families, or communities in order to be resilient, or protected, against messages that might be harmful?

4) **Activity 4: Mental Health Community Bonds**

- *How do you think the rhetoric that we've covered throughout this discussion manifests in your personal relationships, in other words, have you witnessed similar phases or sentiments in your everyday life?*

• How well do you feel your relationships with other males would benefit from an increase in positive masculine habits (e.g. taking responsibility, remaining emotionally vulnerable, checking in on peers)?

• In what ways do you think male social media influencers and adolescent males could reduce hegemonic masculinity across social media platforms and interpersonal groups?