Reimagining Masculinity: Models of Masculinities in Italian Cisgender and Transgender Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Masculinities are defined as the repository of cultural and personal meanings attributed to men and boys. According to literature, masculinity ideals have an impact on how men behave. The present study aims at investigating how emerging adults interpret the concept of masculinity and embody and enact it. We were interested in understanding whether trans masculine and cisgender emerging adults conceptualized masculinity differently or similarly and whether they adopted different or similar strategies to act it out. To this aim, we conducted 6 focus groups with trans masculine ($N=16$) and cisgender ($N=15$) young adults. During the focus groups, participants discussed their concept of masculinity and how they embody and perform masculinity. Results showed that both groups identified social and bodily aspects in their conceptualization of masculinity. Although to varying extents, emerging adults were able to identify the limits of traditional models of masculinity. In both groups, markers for being recognized and affirming masculinity were found at both the bodily and social levels. Some peculiarities of the trans experience involve recognition of the privilege associated with masculinity, medicalized transition in order to achieve certain masculine markers, and a shift in perspective following social recognition of masculine identity.

Keywords Masculinity · Masculinities · Transgender masculinity · Cisgender masculinity · Emerging adults

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Introduction

Masculinity is a complex construct influenced by cultural norms and practices that define what it means to be a man (Levant, 2008). This suggests that these gender standards change throughout time depending on the culture or historical period (Lisak, 2000). Recently, scholars have proposed a broader understanding of masculinity as encompassing various masculinities (Wong & Wang, 2022). Masculinities are defined as the repository of cultural and personal meanings attributed to men and boys that are (a) ascribed to themselves and (b) to other people, concepts, and objects; (c) embedded in situational cues; (d) practiced as social practices; and (e) diffused through ecological influences. The authors emphasize how crucial it is that masculinities link to but also go beyond male biological sex (Wong & Wang, 2022). Indeed, masculinities are relevant to women (e.g., Halberstam, 1998), but also individuals not assigned male at birth, namely trans masculine individuals (e.g., Anzani et al., 2022; Gottzén & Straube, 2016; Saeidzadeh, 2020).

Within this theoretical framework, the current article investigates a few domains of masculinity adopting Wong and Wang's perspective (2022). We targeted two populations of emerging adults, cisgender men and trans men or trans masculine individuals. In particular, we investigated (1) how masculinity is conceptualized, in terms of the ideologies, norms and stereotypes associated with men and boys; and (2) how the meanings associated with masculinity are performed and enacted.

Why are Masculinities Relevant?

The cultural expectations of how boys and men should think, and act are known as traditional masculine norms. Some masculine standards are reflected in expectations for behavior in the social environment at the individual level, such as the value of winning, emotional stoicism, and the value of work, but also at the interpersonal level, such as domination over others, control over women, heterosexuality, and sexual prowess (Mahalik et al., 2003). According to a substantial amount of literature, following these masculinity ideals has an impact on how men behave (see Addis et al., 2016). There is a wealth of research suggesting that upholding traditional, hegemonic notions of masculinity may be detrimental to the relationships, behaviors, and mental health of boys and men, and that ignoring mental health needs becomes part of the concept of masculinity (Barber et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2017). Research has primarily addressed masculinity in populations of people assigned male at birth, as well as the consequences for this population of adherence to more traditional norms of masculinity on psychological well-being.

Based on these premises, it is crucial to comprehend how masculinity develops within the social context and what effects this evolution has on individual and interpersonal behavior and well-being. Furthermore, considering the need for a comprehensive understanding of how dynamics of masculinity manifest in social groups that include individuals assigned female at birth (for example, trans men), it is crucial to explore and analyze these dynamics within the existing body of literature. Indeed, understanding the role of masculinity in influencing behaviors, gender expressions,

and roles, and ultimately the psychological well-being of cisgender and transgender men and boys has important implications for clinical practice.

What do we know about Masculine Identity in Trans Individuals?

Previous studies on masculinity in trans individuals have primarily focused on trans men, often relying on qualitative methodologies. Two distinct areas of research emerge from these studies. Firstly, examining perceptions of privilege among individuals with a history of female socialization (Dozier, 2005; Schilt, 2006; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Secondly, exploring behaviors adopted to perform masculinity and foster a sense of masculinity (Abelson, 2014; Phillips & Rogers, 2021).

Regarding the first strand of studies, it is not surprising that adopting a masculine identity brings with it the acquisition of privileges in the public arena for trans men. Acquired privilege follows the stereotypes; thus, the more one's appearance is similar to a male, heterosexual, able-bodied, preferably tall and muscular, the more privileges are recognized (Dozier, 2005; Schilt, 2006; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). In terms of behaviors enacted to perform masculinity, trans men tend to engage in more stereotypical gendered behaviors and transformative forms of masculinity. These behaviors can serve as self-protection in perceived violent situations (Abelson, 2014) or compensatory acts (Phillips & Rogers, 2021). A recent qualitative study by Todd et al. (2022) sheds light on the development of masculine identity in transmasculine individuals. Their findings propose a four-step process: envisioning, adoption, questioning, and revisioning. Envisioning involves constructing an idea of the desired masculinity based on available masculine role models. In the adoption phase, individuals modify their gender presentation and interactions to reflect these masculine ideals. Some individuals may progress to questioning and revising their initial construction and expression of masculinity, particularly after accessing gender affirmation experiences. This process of identity development is iterative and may occur multiple times as individuals continue to explore and understand their masculinity.

In terms of quantitative research, Anzani et al. (2022) conducted a study comparing adherence to hegemonic masculinity norms in cisgender men and trans masculine individuals. The findings indicate that while trans men and cis men share a similar understanding of manhood, they may prioritize different facets. Trans masculine individuals place less emphasis on aspects of heterosexual privilege and women's submission, which may contradict fundamental LGBTQIA+ community principles (Anzani et al., 2022). Instead, they exhibit higher scores on dimensions such as emotional control and self-reliance. These results can also be interpreted in the context of the individual's stage of masculinity development, as proposed by Todd et al. (2022).

Statement of Purpose

The present study examines how emerging adults interpret and embody masculinity, specifically investigating potential differences between trans masculine and cisgender individuals. Emerging adulthood, 18 to 25 years old, is a developmental transition period between adolescence and adulthood and is a particularly important window of time for identity development (Arnett, 2000). Even though adolescence is where

identity development starts, emerging adulthood is the time when identity exploration is most prominent (Luyckx et al., 2008). For this reason, we felt it was important to select this specific age group at a time of development when they are called upon to bargain with the social models available to them and to construct their own model of masculinity. The main goal is to have a greater understanding of masculinity in emerging adults in its aspects of similarity and difference from traditional models and how these are then embodied in the two different groups. This goal can give clinical insights with respect to working with (both cis and trans) men and boys who are in the process of shaping their masculine identity.

Methods

Researcher Positionality

All authors identify as White and Italian. The first author is a post-doctoral researcher who identifies as a queer cisgender woman. The second author is a doctoral student of clinical psychology who identifies as a queer cisgender/questioning woman. The third author is a postdoc researcher who identifies as a cisgender heterosexual woman. The fourth author is a M.A. student in clinical psychology who identifies as a bi/pansexual cisgender woman and whose partner is a trans man. The fifth author is a psychotherapist who identifies as a transgender queer male. The last author is a professor of psychology who identifies as a cisgender gay man.

Participants

Participants were recruited at the local University via the distribution of flyers, and online via social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. Profiles of activists and pages of organizations that publish content, information, and services useful to trans people and LGBTQ+communities and associations in general, were used to reach transgender participants. The inclusion criteria for participation were (1) being between 18 and 24 years old and (2) possessing a masculine gender identity. As long as they skewed more toward the masculine end of the gender identification continuum, nonbinary gender identities were also accepted. The people that expressed interest in participating in the focus group on the topic of masculinity filled in an online form, which included a thorough description of the study and a socio-demographic questionnaire that served as a pre-screener survey.

The research sample consisted of 16 transgender and 15 cisgender male participants, for a total of $N=31$ participants. The two groups proved to be homogeneous in age ($M=21.19$, $SD=1.72$ for the transgender group, $M=21.13$, $SD=1.92$ for the cisgender group). Participants filled in a demographic data collection, including items on participants' erotic and sexual attraction, age, education, relationship and marital status, ethnicity, and the Italian region where they live. Trans participants' gender identities were recorded in two steps: first they could choose a category they *most* identify with via closed answer, and then write their identity label, to capture the nuances and multitude of identities within the TGNB communities (Harrison et al.,

2012). The trans sample also included 4 nonbinary persons and one who identified as genderfluid, who reported identifying more on the masculine end of the gender identity spectrum. Most of the study participants were of Caucasian ethnicity ($N=26$) and had a high school diploma ($N=22$). Additional demographics are summarized in Table 1. A 20 € incentive, in the form of a gift card, was offered for participation. The study received approval from the ethics committee of [the University of Milano-Bicocca].

Procedure

The research project emerged from the first author's clinical work with transgender young adults, sparking questions about gender and masculinity in a support group. To explore these topics, the authors designed a semi-structured interview for a focus group, aiming to gather rich data through interactive discussions. For example, participants were prompted with the question, "Do you currently exhibit any markers or characteristics that align with your personal model of masculinity?" This question encouraged participants to reflect on their own behaviors and external perceptions

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the sample

	Transgender, N	Cisgender, N
Pronoun		
Male (*He/Him*)	13	-
Male o neutral (*He/They*)	2	-
Neutral (*They/Them*)	1	-
Sexual orientation		
Bisexual	5	-
Gay	2	-
Straight	5	13
Pansexual	3	-
Queer	1	-
Prefer not to answer	-	2
Relationship status		
In a relationship	5	6
In a polyamorous relationship	1	
Single	8	4
Not interested in dating anyone	1	-
Dating	-	2
Other	1	1
Prefer not to answer	-	-
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	15	11
Other	1	1
East European	-	1
Middle-East	-	1
Latin	-	1
Education		
Middle School	2	-
High School	11	11
University Degree	3	4

related to masculinity, fostering dynamic and insightful discussions within the focus group. Focus groups were employed to capture the nuanced interactions and dynamic exchanges among participants, allowing for a rich exploration of shared experiences, diverse perspectives, and collective understandings of masculinity. Furthermore, we emphasize that focus groups provided a conducive environment for participants to engage in open discussions, share personal narratives, and challenge societal norms and stereotypes surrounding masculinity (Krueger, 2014). The interactive nature of focus groups fostered an atmosphere where participants could build upon each other's thoughts, leading to a deeper exploration of their experiences and enabling the identification of common themes and patterns. All the questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Two-hour virtual group discussions on masculinity were conducted via the Webex platform, with participants' consent for recording. Three focus groups included transgender participants and three included cisgender participants. This is in line with Krueger's argument (2014) to create homogenous groups so that participants feel free to engage fully in the discussion which, in turn, leads to the generation of rich data. The discussions were moderated by two researchers: the main moderator (third author) facilitated the group dynamics, while the assistant moderator (second author) ensured a safe space and had expertise in LGBTQIA+issues (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

Analysis

We analyzed the focus group data at the individual level, focusing on transcribed responses (Cyr, 2019). The coding team consisted of three authors (1st, 4th, and 5th) who were not involved in group facilitation. The analysis results were approved and integrated by the two moderators and the last author. We followed Rabiee's (2004) framework for qualitative analysis, which includes stages of familiarization, thematic framework identification, indexing and charting, and mapping and interpretation.

Data Familiarization

The first and fourth authors independently listened to the audio recording, as well as reading the transcripts in their entirety several times, to get a sense of the interview as a whole and took notes of the emerging themes throughout the process.

Identifying a Thematic Framework

The first and fourth authors wrote down short phrases, descriptive statements, or concepts arising from the texts and began to develop categories. They compared and discussed discrepancies, before meeting with the moderators to integrate their inputs. The following meetings were dedicated to an additional check of the thematic structure, obtained after the revision of the material by the fifth and sixth authors, in order to integrate the perspective of a trans and a cis man respectively.

Indexing and Charting

Once all the authors agreed on the themes, and outlined them graphically, they highlighted and compared participants' quotes that reflected those themes and re-arranged them under the thematic structure.

Mapping and Interpretation

A final group discussion was held to interpret the data in light of the literature on masculinity, and the clinical expertise of the authors.

Results

After analyzing the material, due to the length and complexity of identified themes, we propose as the focus of the present article the answers to two specific questions:

(1) What is masculinity according to you? (Choose three words, and then explain)
(2) Do you currently have markers/characteristics with which you express your model of masculinity? Do you currently have markers that make your masculinity "recognizable" to others?

In this study, core results indicate that both cisgender and transgender emerging adults critically examined traditional models of masculinity, recognizing their inherent constraints, and strive to propose their personal alternative ideas of masculinity. Thus, cis and trans emerging adults engage in an ongoing process of constructing alternative notions of masculinity, reflecting the developmental journey of masculine identity formation.

The relevant themes identified in this study have been summarized in the diagram below (see Fig. 1). Although with different complexities, nuances, and content, both the cisgender and transgender emerging adult groups highlight common macro-themes. When answering the initial question, "What is masculinity according to you?", both groups identify two facets of the masculinity construct. They recognize its physical components (Masculinity: bodily level) as well as its social components (Masculinity: societal level). In addition, both groups appear to identify three degrees of masculinity interpretation: positive, hegemonic, and toxic. Hegemonic masculinity is characterized by a variety of traits that are neither positively nor negatively valenced per se (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), reflecting stereotyped and conventional understandings of what it means to be a man. Toxic masculinity draws attention to an excessively rigid interpretation of masculinity norms that causes one to feel restrained and "caged" (Waling, 2019). Positive masculinity entails eschewing more conventional, stereotyped, and hegemonic models in favor of alternative ones, which cis and trans emerging adults interpret differently. How masculinity was expressed and embodied was discussed in response to the second question posed, which focused on markers and expressions of masculinity. Participants from both cis and trans groups embody, enact, and affirm masculinity through various markers,
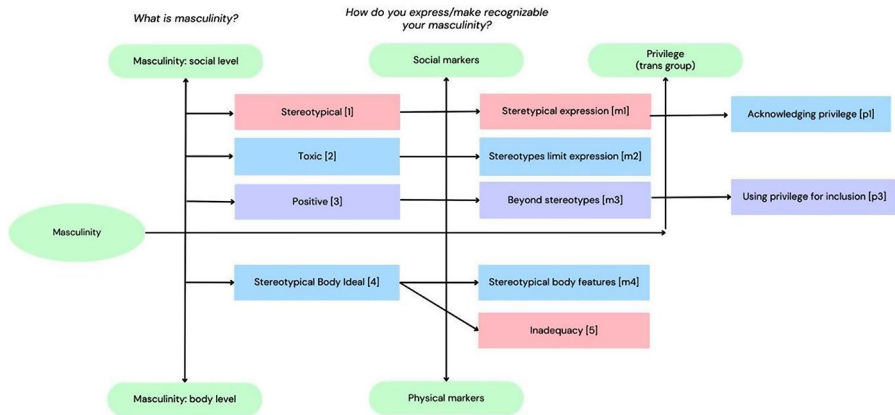
Fig. 1 The diagram summarizes the relevant themes discussed. Below the question "what is masculinity?" we outline the themes relevant to the conceptualization of masculinity, which were discussed on two levels: social (above) and physical (below). Below the question "how do you express masculinity?" we outline the markers of masculinity that were discussed, related to the social sphere (above) and the physical sphere (below). These are directly related to the way masculinity is conceptualized as indicated by the arrows. The left side includes themes that emerged only in the discussion with the trans group the perception of acquired privilege when affirming masculinity

which encompass both corporeal aspects, such as growing a beard, as well as social markers related to gender expression and gender roles.

While these concepts were articulated differently by the two groups, both cis and trans emerging adults offered a reimagined notion of masculinity, demonstrating their awareness of the constraints and challenges imposed by the conventional model. Moreover, we identified a further level exclusively brought up by trans emerging adults in the focus groups: privilege. In their understanding of masculinity, trans youths acknowledged male privileges. They were conscious of a shift in their perspective as a result of their early socialization as women, acknowledging their different social power after being recognized as men. In the following paragraphs, the model will be explained in more detail, also with the support of participants' quotes. To highlight aspects of similarity and difference in the two groups, we decided to describe the results for the cis and trans groups of emerging adults separately.

Masculinity Conceptualization and its Markers: Social and body Level

Both trans and cis emerging adults' groups recognize that "masculinity is a social construct". Figure 2 displays the words associated with masculinity reported by both groups. They identify three ways of interpreting it as being (1) stereotypical, (2) "toxic", or (3) "positive". Participants spontaneously employed the terms "toxic" and "positive" to describe certain aspects of masculinity, while stereotypical traits, which were neither inherently negative nor positive, were categorized as "stereotypical." On a body level, both groups recognized biological and physical components associated with masculinity. Each interpretation of masculinity has to do with how it is
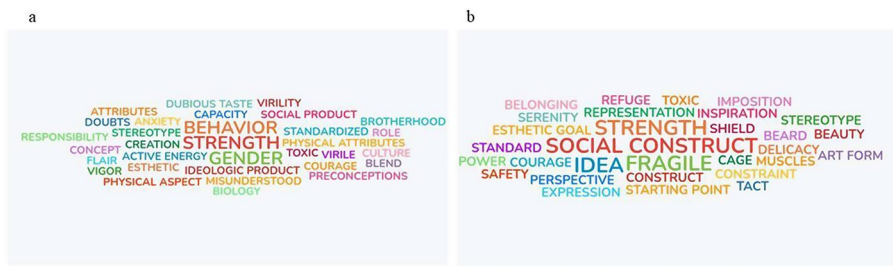
Fig. 2 The words used to describe masculinity by (**a**) cisgender and (**b**) transgender participants. The size of the word increases if the word were used more often

expressed in terms of appearance, mannerisms, and behavior. These elements regard gender expression and gender roles that define the markers of masculinity.

An aspect of particular interest that emerges in both groups is the development of the masculine identity as a discerning exploration of societal norms. Among cisgender emerging adults, a noteworthy pattern is observed. Initially, there is a tendency to conform to the established masculine model prevalent in previous generations, often citing their grandfathers and fathers as examples. However, this initial adherence is followed by a phase of introspection and critique, wherein they perceive the model as overly constrictive and repressive, with evident costs borne by older men. On the other hand, within the context of transgender emerging adults, the journey toward an affirmed masculine identity involves distinct phases. Initially, many conform to gender stereotypes, including assimilation into societal expectations (referred to as "blending" or otherwise "passing"). Subsequently, they embark on a phase of identity integration, where they incorporate aspects of identity and expression traditionally associated with femininity. This integration expands the boundaries of masculinity, challenging conventional notions thereof (Todd et al., 2022). "Passing" typically refers to an individual's ability to be perceived and accepted as a member of a social group that aligns with their gender identity, despite not being assigned to that group at birth. Specifically, for transgender individuals, passing entails successfully embodying and presenting oneself in a way that conforms to societal expectations and standards associated with cisgender individuals (Anderson et al., 2020; Billard, 2019). It implies achieving a level of physical appearance, behavior, and expression that aligns with prevailing cisgender aesthetics, allowing them to navigate social interactions without their transgender status being readily detected or questioned.

The themes that emerged from the discussions among cisgender and transgender emerging adults are described in the first and second paragraphs, respectively. The themes are presented in the same order to facilitate comparison. The first paragraph describes how social masculinity is conceptualized and the associated social markers, while the second paragraph discusses the physical traits associated with masculinity and its markers. Additionally, the trans group discussions highlighted the topic of privilege.

Cis Group

In the cis group, participants describe the characteristics they associate with masculinity either by adhering to the idea shared by men or by acknowledging their stereotypical and sometimes essentialist nature. Thus, a long series of stereotypical characteristics and norms associated with masculinity have fallen within the macro-category of stereotypical masculinity [1]. Cis emerging adults associated masculinity with "strength," "competition", "brotherhood", "prevarication", "virility", "creative energy", "dubious taste", and "[the role of] provider".

> I use the term " dubious taste " to refer to things that are generally very masculine and a little bit thuggish. […] even men's movies, which are considered to be war movies, are all very splatter,[…] even if I think of a sports car, they are aggressive … I mean, they are very beautiful, I like it, and I believe many men like it, but they too are a little bit of dubious taste. Giorgio Armani and other male characters who are well-known for their good taste […] are less stereotypically masculine than we might believe and are more like homosexuals. (A., c3)

In A.'s words, hegemonic masculinity is associated with a variety of stereotypes with more or less negative connotations. When one deviates from the stereotype to embrace different models, one is labeled a "homosexual." In terms of gender expression and gender roles, members of the cisgender group engage in a variety of stereotype-based behaviors that help them identify as men and affirm their masculinity [m1].

> The first thing that comes to mind for me is when there is work to be done being the first one to get down to it concretely. […] This I think is the thing that makes me feel more male, let's say. […] getting to work completely and pulling out a final product. (K., c3)

The concept of stereotypical masculinity and its markers of behavior often reveal benevolent sexism and a rather essentialist view of gender, where women would "naturally" have different proclivities from men and be in a position of subordination [1, m1].

Some cisgender emerging adults describe the stereotypical model without questioning it, while other participants adopt a more critical stance while acknowledging its shortcomings, which can make these standards occasionally "toxic" and anxiety-inducing [2].

> The common expression "man up", which means to "suppress emotions and prove your superiority in the situation," is actually the expression typically directed at men (F., c1).

Cis participants describe how men are less likely to express emotions or struggle more to do so [m2].

I agree with G. when he said that when you are around a group of male friends, you behave differently. However, lately, I've been learning to show even my weaker, more vulnerable sides. […] I don't think it bothers me anymore to say, "it's a difficult phase" instead of always putting up a happy front and saying "it's always okay, always terrific."(L., c1)

Even though L. seems past those difficulties, he talked about how being vulnerable and expressing weaker and more emotional sides was not always easy in his life, but instead, he had to work to be more authentic in a group of male peers. Hence, a prominent aspect that emerges is the developmental nature of constructing one's masculinity over time. As identified by transgender emerging adults, even for cis people, the strictness of the norms imposed on boys and men is what makes masculinity toxic. Cisgender youths also have a positive masculinity alternative, albeit more limited than that of the trans group. The alternative masculinity model incorporates elements that primarily focus on affectivity, relationship dynamics, and family care [3]. In the following example, L. hopes to one day become a different father than his father has been to him. Trying to regain a more emotional and affective sphere that he sees as hard for his father to express.

[referring to his father] He's his own man, who maybe sometimes misses that part that is a little bit more affectionate, or that part of being able to dialogue, because he almost tapers the wings to his emotional part […] and that's something that I certainly hope to be able to change, when it's my time to be in the same position as him. (L., c1)

It is worth noting that the questioning of the masculinity model often involves the observation of the embodied and performed model exhibited by family members. Some cis participants expressed their alternative model of masculinity as having some stereotypically feminine characteristics, particularly characteristics that are caring and empathetic [m3]. However, it is always integrated into a more masculine aspect of the personality.

I genuinely believe I prefer feminine characteristics. Like sensitivity, which is not showing too much of one's virility… I mean, I don't particularly like to express virility at all costs. However […] I prefer to remain logical and restrain my fantasies. For instance, when I encounter a challenge, I make an effort to solve it as quickly and effectively as I can. (R., c2)

On the body level, cisgender youths recognize a biological-evolutionary foundation in masculinity [4].

"[…] masculinity depends on both biological and cultural aspects. Biological in the sense that they are related to evolution. For example, everyone imagines men as physically bigger, stronger, and this has always been there." (E., c3).

The way cis youths talk about body and biology is slightly different from the way trans youths talk about it. In the cis group, they talk about how some physical characteristics associated with masculinity have biological roots, and some were evolutionarily selected because they were attractive to "females". One cis person pushes the biology topic to its logical extreme by claiming that gender identification markers would almost exclusively be tied to physical traits rather than gender expression and role [m4].

> First of all, having a beard and having male genitalia are the ways that I express my masculinity. I believe that I would have been the exact same person if I had been born of the opposite biological sex. So much so that I've had the good fortune to get to know a girl who actually resembles me quite a bit in many aspects. (S., c2)

The body was also discussed by a couple of cis participants in relation to the feelings of inadequacy fostered by the modern concern with muscularity and physical prowess [5].

> …physical appearance is the most overwhelming thing in men's brains, because it's the one we always have to work on to avoid being seen as inadequate, which is then that thing that makes you feel bad. (K., c3)

Trans Group

In the trans group, participants discuss the tension between masculinity as something that is (strongly) desired yet can quickly become a "cage". On the one hand, the idea of masculinity is presented as a starting point, an "inspiration", and a "destination" (stereotypical masculinity) [1]. On the other hand, it is frequently referred to as a cage or an imposition by the same individuals (toxic masculinity) [2] This represents a characteristic aspect of masculinity development among transgender and nonbinary individuals, as previously documented in the literature (Todd et al., 2022). It entails an initial conformity to stereotypical gender norms, followed by an integration of additional facets of identity expression that encompass more feminine or fluid qualities. One participant used the metaphor of the shield to explain this double valence in the most effective manner.

> "I chose the word "shield" because, in my opinion, [masculinity] is and can be a very positive thing because it protects you. Because being masculine in our society allows you to have a lot of advantages […] But at the same time, this shield is heavy to carry. So yes, it can protect you, but it is also a burden". (S., 19, t2)

Participants described behavioral markers that help them feel connected to their masculinity or help others understand them as masculine; this includes both behaviors

stereotypically attributed to men and behaviors that are not necessarily typical are perceived as masculine by participants [m1].

> "Many people still view my walk—that is, the way I move—as being overly masculine. For instance, I purposefully adopted the somewhat swinging leg as a pattern to pass and not have issues with strangers… even on the street." (M., t2).

The adoption of stereotypical behaviors, movements, and mannerisms facilitates blending for emerging trans adults. Participants describe how their behaviors and/or appearance are specifically adjusted in order to "pass". In some cases, they may do this at the expense of their authentic gender expression. In some cases, this may also represent something that is experienced as a limitation to one's individuality [m2].

> Personally, I feel somewhat castrated and, in a position, where I wish I could continue to wear certain items of clothing, such as long dresses, which are the kind of summer dresses I really enjoy wearing. But I'm unable to do that at the moment because if I wore them, people would mistake me for a cis female and continue to refer to me in the feminine, which is something I detest. (I., t3)

Some trans participants expressed toxic masculinity through markers that do not represent their authentic gender identity and expression. Rather, there are rules of behavior and appearance to which they feel compelled to correspond in order not to be misgendered or not recognized. Trans participants describe alternative models of masculinity as opposed to stereotypical ones [3]. Trans participants associated the word masculinity with some rather non-stereotypical words such as "delicacy" and "fragility". Their proposed alternative model of masculinity embraces not only the component of expressing emotions (also recognized in the cis group) but going for a much more open expression of masculinity.

> "My words are courage and gentleness. Courage because, in general, I imagine there's a bit in the whole transmasc experience, finding the courage to be able to express one's masculinity. And then there is also the discourse of wanting to break the stereotypes associated with masculinity, and the courage that can serve maybe just to express one's delicacy, or to express one's feelings, or things like that, within what are the criteria of masculinity anyway." (I., t1).

Fragility has to deal with emotion yet manages to get past it, a crucial component of a new model of masculinity. In the example that follows, E. discusses fragility and vulnerability as qualities that are connected to the concept of masculinity. Acknowledging and expressing one's emotions is a prerequisite for expressing one's flaws and showing one's vulnerability, but using these terms also suggests going further. It suggests accepting one's limitations as something that cannot be hidden [3, m3].

> Masculinity is, in a sense, fragile, but it is a positive thing in my opinion because… for me, fragility is a positive thing. It is also something to aspire to

because… maybe vulnerability would be a better word… I don't know, I found myself there, here in my idea of masculinity, of positive masculinity. (E., t3)

For trans participants, a new model of positive masculinity consists of writing new and totally different rules from stereotypical ones. Participants described the way they express their masculinity is completely different from the model of typical cis-het masculinity; their masculinity is queer and expressed as such [m3].

> I don't aspire to be or appear like a straight, cis guy, nor am I interested in doing so. I feel very at ease being both queer and trans. And this also means to have a certain kind of masculinity, one that has a myriad of variations […]. Even while I tend to be pretty feminine, that doesn't necessarily make me a woman; it's more complicated than that, that's all (Emanuele t3).

Relative to body level, trans participants describe masculinity as an ideal model, mainly related to physical and aesthetic standards, even if they are sometimes unattainable [4].

> "I wrote down aesthetic goal [as a word I associate with masculinity]. As far as I'm concerned, the first things you look forward to when transitioning are a beard, mustaches, getting bigger, hairs… and you live this with a lot of anxiety because they present the male model to you as a tall, muscular man with a beard, hard features… and maybe you're a loser because you were born short or you'll never get a beard, and you live it a little bit as a failure (A., t2).

Trans emerging adults link the discourse on their physique and aesthetics to individuals recognizing them as men. In this perspective, a beard, height, and a muscular body become indicators of masculinity. However, the line between biological and social factors becomes hazy. The pursuit of a certain set of physical traits is always related to the masculine body model that society has set forth, as seen in A's response. Naturally, this idea of masculinity is intimately associated with having specific physical traits, which in the case of emerging adults who identify as transgender can also signify the start of a medicalized journey of gender affirmation [m4].

> The physical transition [which allowed to express masculinity], as well as the hormones' contribution to my appearance—I underwent top surgery and everything—made me feel more at ease in my body. (N., t3)

Feelings of inadequacy can often develop when the social model of physical masculinity becomes something wanted but not attained [5].

> "Let's say that I'm still torn between wanting to meet a certain [body] standard and rejecting it, that is, I don't agree with "having" to meet that standard. However […] I don't have the courage to do it in a relaxed manner because then that could result in me misgendering or otherwise being taken for something I'm not…" (G., t1).

A unique theme, not only in content but in its very presence, that emerged in all three focus groups of trans emerging adults is privilege. Not only did the youth recognize it in their experience [p1], but they also adopted behaviors to overcome it [p3].

> […] for our society and our history, masculinity has always been somewhat associated with power, […]. So, it's quite inevitable to see masculinity as a form of power, even oppressive in some ways. (E., t3)

Some individuals' perceptions of acquired power change noticeably due to their early experiences with feminine socialization (e.g., of authority when expressing oneself). However, trans emerging adults also notice elements of difference that are unfavorable, for instance how frightening they are perceived as [p1].

> The affirmation of masculinity […] I felt it more when I realized the privilege I had acquired. From a social point of view […] I realized that I could go out at any time without any problems, I could dress how I wanted and no one cared. […] I've begun to learn a few small tricks. For instance, if a girl is in front of me, I might choose to use the opposite sidewalk. Perhaps she doesn't even consider it, but it can have an impact. […] (N., t2).

In the scenario N. just described, he not only knows that he has acquired a privilege but also that this can place the other person in a tight spot. N. claims that he is no longer the person in the social setting who feels unable to dress and act as he pleases, but rather is viewed as a threat and acts accordingly, in order to make the other person more at ease [p3].

Discussion

In the current study, we looked at the mental representations and markers of masculinity in emerging trans and cis adults, which we defined as the embodiment and performance of masculinity. Trans and cis emerging adults recognize masculinity as socially constructed, interpreting it as stereotypical, "toxic," or "positive". Participants spontaneously used the terms "toxic" and "positive" to describe specific aspects of masculinity. Meanwhile, traits considered stereotypical were neither inherently negative nor positive. The term toxic masculinity, recently widespread in common language and culture, has been used in literature not without controversy. The term has drawn criticism for potentially alienating men and reinforcing antifeminist rhetoric, however, it also offers a framework for addressing harmful gender behaviors and promoting deconstruction of gender norms (de Boise, 2019). In our study, participants used "toxic masculinity" as a way to describe overly stringent interpretation of masculine norms, leading individuals to feel constrained and "caged" (Waling, 2019).

Positive masculinity is a term adopted in literature as well. Positive masculinity encompasses the pro-social attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of men that yield beneficial outcomes for both themselves and others. These traits are acquired rather

than inherent, developed through a socialization process where men adopt masculine norms that facilitate healthy growth and instill a sense of responsibility towards others (Kiselica et al., 2016). Findings highlight how both cis and trans emerging adults conceptualize positive masculinity as rejecting traditional, stereotypical, and dominant models in favor of alternative ones, with varying interpretations among cisgender and transgender emerging adults. For participants, this shift was associated with a sense of well-being and contentment with their masculinity.

In addition to this conceptualization of positive, negative and neutral characteristics attributed to masculinity, results suggest how young adults are questioning masculinity; however, cis and trans young adults are challenging traditional ideas of masculinity in different ways. In conclusion, the development of masculine identity among emerging adults encompasses a complex and dynamic process that varies between cisgender and transgender individuals. Cisgender emerging adults often engage in critical reflections on traditional models of masculinity within their family and society, advocating for the integration of emotionality and vulnerability in their self-perceived masculinity. This process highlights their developmental journey towards a more nuanced understanding of masculinity and challenges the rigidity of societal expectations. On the other hand, transgender emerging adults navigate a unique trajectory where the exploration of their masculine identity is intricately linked to their gender affirmation journey. This involves self-discovery, self-acceptance, and the negotiation of societal perceptions and expectations. The former group expresses a critique that is primarily focused on the areas of affectivity, emotionality, and caring. Young cis adults may recognize in older generations—often their dads or grandfathers—models of compelled affectivity when men are forbidden from expressing their feelings and showing care for others. For this reason, the model proposed by cis participants may be defined as "emotional masculinity". Not all cis men are able to effortlessly communicate and express feelings and emotions in all situations or scenarios, despite their desire to do so. Some see this as a skill they have developed over time, while others only allow themselves to be more emotional under particular circumstances (e.g., avoiding all-men contexts). Sociological literature in its analyses of men, masculinities, and emotions recognized this shift towards an increasing emotionality in men (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). *Softening masculinity* perspectives view men's increased emotional expression not as a crisis but rather as a positive shift towards gender equality. Secondly, *hybridization perspectives*, while acknowledging men's growing emotional openness, remain cautious about the persistence of traditional gender inequalities within evolving forms of masculinity. Finally, *constructionist* viewpoints treat emotions as products of power dynamics and cultural differences, rejecting the notion of innate emotions while still recognizing their influence on men's behavior in interpersonal relationships (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Our findings reveal how traditional, stereotypical paradigm is complemented by a set of norms and traits merged with this alternative model of emotional masculinity. In fact, cis participants place a high value on a variety of traditional traits associated with males, some of which may also be a result of benign sexism or essentialist views on gender (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Smiler & Gelman, 2008). In the second group, trans people talk about a different understanding of masculinity that we may refer to as "counter-stereotypical masculinity." Emotional expressiveness is seen as

a restriction in the traditional paradigm of masculinity, as was previously discussed for cisgender men. Trans participants, however, go a step further by attempting to include elements that are stereotypically associated with femininity into their view of masculinity. These qualities include fragility and vulnerability, gentleness and kindness, and last but not least, a gender expression that includes feminine aesthetic qualities (such as long dresses, makeup, or nail polish). Despite the prevailing influence of the antifemininity mandate, there appears to be an increasing diversity in expressions of masculinity. Cultural shifts, exemplified by public figures, challenge traditional stereotypes of masculinity. This trend towards a more diverse masculinity is reflected in societal perceptions and the growing presence of men in traditionally feminine domains (Borinca et al., 2021). However, the presence of alternative models of masculinity even in mainstream culture seems not to be reflected in an adoption or integration of that model into the behavioral markers of cis emerging adults.

Moreover, it is rather significant to notice that our results perfectly fit Todd and colleagues' model (2022). Trans emerging adults describe many stages of developing the masculinity model they ultimately choose to embrace, embody, and perform. Young individuals frequently feel the need to be recognized and validated as masculine at an early stage of the social and/or medical transition to masculinity. To prevent misgendering and nonrecognition, they adopt gender expression and role models that emphasize masculinity. Later on in their journey, individuals frequently have greater confidence to renegotiate these norms and even incorporate elements that are seen as stereotypically feminine, allowing themselves to revise their model of masculinity (Todd et al., 2022). The extremely binary and gendered language, and thus the Italian context in general, may contribute to the difficulty of recognition for nonbinary and trans people (Anzani et al., 2022).

Results also highlighted biology and body as physical markers of masculinity and as parts of the construct of masculinity. Emerging adults who identify as cis have acknowledged the male body and male assignment at birth as biological indicators of masculinity. Rarely is a masculine physique and muscularity model described as something one aspires to for themselves, which is also accompanied by dissatisfaction and a feeling of inadequacy for not having acquired it. For trans emerging adults, the conversation is different. Trans participants express how the male body and its physical markers, such as beard, height, muscles, hair, and tonnage, are occasionally the source of envy and great desire, partially overlapping with the discussion made above on the adoption of more explicit markers of masculinity at an early stage of asserting their masculinity. The fact that they cannot (in their perception) meet certain standards of physicality is a cause of distress, particularly for young trans men who identify as binary. The research has previously reported that binary trans individuals may have higher levels of body dysphoria than nonbinary people (Jones et al., 2019).

One final observation concerns privilege: while cis participants did not refer to power dynamics between men and women, trans participants discussed acquired privilege and how they used it to be perceived as less threatening in the social environment. Privilege, and the appropriation of privilege following a transition to masculinity, have already been discussed in the literature (Abelson, 2014). In our study, this manifests as a sense of increased voice and power in public settings (Dozier, 2005; Schilt, 2006; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), but it also changes how others per-

ceive one's level of risk. Through interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues in the social environment, trans masculine individuals become aware of how they are now seen as potential aggressors rather than potential victims of aggression.

Clinical Implication

Boys and men are frequently given authority and prestige by gender norms around masculinity, which may help to explain why it is difficult to challenge these standards. These dominating privileges attached to masculinities increase the likelihood of poor psychological well-being (Rice et al., 2018, 2021). Male suicide rates are two to four times higher than females worldwide (Ritchie et al., 2015), and men perform poorly on indicators of substance abuse, risk-taking-related injury, behavior issues, violence, hostility, and, therefore, imprisonment (Rice et al.,2018). Reflecting on the current models of masculinity and how they are being negotiated by new generations of men, boys, and masculine individuals is vital in light of the elevated danger to men's and boys' mental health. In the study presented, we observed how models of masculinity and ways of expressing it are (slowly) being reimagined and restructured in the new generations of emerging adults. This process certainly does not seem to be linear but is characterized by allowing one to imagine that one can express oneself at certain times, stages, or contexts in one's life and not others. A mental health practitioner must consider how the social environment affects (cis and trans) men and boys' health, the strain to express certain aspects of oneself (e.g., emotions and vulnerability), and how privilege makes it more challenging to deviate from conventional notions of masculinity.

First and foremost, it is crucial to avoid feeding damaging stereotypes to our clients in therapy or consultation room. Second, dealing with a client who identifies as masculine may include discussing their notion and expression of masculinity as well as how it affects their well-being as a person seeking psychological help. When working specifically with trans masculine identities, it is important to solicit the development of a critical and personal view of masculinity, one that does not respect unsustainable models. Third, it is crucial to remember that norms are constantly changing. Since they had to deal with various, more or less rigid, and restrictive models of masculinity and standards, it stands to reason that men from different generations will have varied experiences and distinct features of distress.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. It should be kept in mind that the sample size of this project does not allow for generalization. In addition, selection bias may occur in the recruitment of focus group participants. For instance, individuals who are willing to engage in a conversation on the topic of masculinity may have already critically reflected and elaborated on the concept, and thus may not comprehensively represent the plurality of boys' and men's views of masculinity. Given our sample limitation, our findings can be used to inform future qualitative and quantitative studies involving larger and more diverse samples in order to generalize findings. Future studies may use the topics we have identified to explore such aspects of masculinity in larger

samples of diverse age and cultural backgrounds and through quantitative and qualitative analyses. Although conducting online focus groups allows for a greater privacy and the possibility to reach participants in different geographical locations, thus promoting exchange and critical participation, being in a group of people of the same gender may still promote social desirability. In a focus group setting participants may be less willing to share negative or vulnerable aspects, as opposed to individual interviews. Finally, future research may try to focus on intervention strategies that help break down the strict norms that some men adopt and impose on themselves to live more freely and exhibit the masculinity they feel authentic.

Conclusions

Our findings highlight the importance of understanding and recognizing differentiated experiences of masculinity, and underscore the importance of providing support and creating inclusive environments that foster the healthy development of masculine identities in all emerging adults. By embracing the developmental aspect of masculine identity, we can contribute to the growth and well-being of individuals as they navigate their gender identity journeys.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at *University of Milano – Bicocca [protocol number RM-2021-367].*

Informed Consent All participants in this work provided informed consent.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Research Involving Human Participants All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

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