

# Stifled by Masculinity: A Quantitative Look at Why Men Don't Go to Therapy

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the societal expectations surrounding masculinity and analyzed how these expectations affect the likelihood of emotional disclosure in the context of therapy. Previous research reported that men are less likely to disclose internalizing emotions like sadness, shame, and anxiety than women (Brody, 1999). This study explored how hegemonic masculinity intersects with emotional disclosure, and how they work in tandem to determine men's attitudes towards mental health counseling. This study used several revised measures to further investigate four variables: acceptance of hegemonic masculinity, willingness to disclose emotional information, perceived effectiveness of therapy, and likelihood to utilize counseling as a resource. The researcher surveyed 127 participants and found there were negative correlations between hegemonic masculinity with likelihood to utilize counseling, perceived effectiveness, and willingness to disclose. These results indicated that men who accept hegemonic masculinity to a greater extent are less likely to communicate their emotions or believe therapy is a beneficial tool for them. This study also found that there were positive correlations between willingness to disclose with likelihood to utilize counseling and perceived effectiveness. These results indicated that men who are willing to disclose their emotions are more likely to believe therapy is effective and attend sessions themselves.

## INTRODUCTION

As Western society continues to evolve culturally, ideas of sex, gender, race, and sexuality have begun to shift as well. In particular, ideas of masculinity and femininity are being continually revisited and reshaped by contemporary inspirations across every form of media. This cultural shift has brought with it a more open and honest conversation about mental health and the utilization of counseling services. Yet, while modern understandings of gender presentation are inching towards inclusivity, there remains unequal stigmatization between men and women in the mental health field. Predominantly, counseling services are largely underutilized by men. Statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health (2021) show that one in five US adults (20.6% of the population) have a mental illness. Of this demographic, individuals aged 18 to 25 have the highest prevalence of mental illness, yet this remains the group that is least likely to receive mental health services (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). Females with mental illnesses are significantly more likely to receive mental health services (49.7%), which can be either medication or counseling, than males (36.8%) (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). As indicated by these statistics, men aged 18-25 are significantly less likely to receive services for their mental illness, likely because of societal pressure for men to subscribe to hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) define hegemonic masculinity as the societal practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in the social order, while it subordinates women and other less acceptable forms of masculinity.

Western countries are still deeply entrenched in the patriarchy, which is a societal system that is built on the foundations of men holding the social, political, and economic power while women are largely excluded from that power. The patriarchy and role of hegemonic masculinity in society encompasses a host of problematic expectations for men. Men are expected to suppress all forms of vulnerability, appear strong physically and mentally, and constantly strive for individual success without assistance. While the specifics may vary between generations, generally these traditionally masculine standards have persisted across time to create an atmosphere of toxic masculinity that men can find themselves trapped in. With such strict standards stifling men's expression of vulnerability, it can be nearly impossible for men to find an outlet in their personal networks to express their internal struggles. The practice of hegemonic masculinity combined with the continued stigmatization of mental health equates to an entire population of men feeling as if therapy is an inappropriate option for them to even consider.

Communicating about and disclosing private information is inherently an interpersonal communication practice, thus the study of why men do not desire to disclose private information in the context of therapy is worth studying.

The purpose of this study is to explore the societal expectations surrounding masculinity and analyze how these expectations affect the likelihood of male emotional disclosure in the context of therapy. Research has provided significant data about gender differences in emotional disclosure (Antony & Sheldon, 2019; Chaplin, 2015; Panjwani et al., 2016). Numerous studies have examined which emotions are more acceptable for each gender to express, key aspects of each gender's close relationships, and the different ways that each gender provides social support (Antony & Sheldon, 2019; Chaplin, 2015; Panjwani et al., 2016). Lanciano and Curci (2015) have also studied emotional intelligence (EI) and have overwhelmingly found that men score significantly lower on various EI measures when compared to women. Combined with knowledge of hegemonic masculinity and media representations of masculinity, this creates a solid basis for further research into this topic. There is minimal research that explicitly associates men's understanding of their masculinity with their decision to not utilize mental health counseling, to which this study aims to fill that knowledge gap. Examining the specific reasons men do not go to therapy will further the conversation and future research of men's mental health.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The proposed research contains information on the topics of hegemonic masculinity, media representations of masculinity, emotional disclosure, online avenues for disclosure, and communication privacy management theory. Petronio's (1991) communication privacy management theory provides the communication studies foundation to understand when, how, and why people disclose private information. A reluctance on behalf of men to disclose emotional information, combined with a generally lower ability to understand one's emotions (Lanciano & Curci, 2015), can offer insight as to why men do not seek therapy. The discussion of these topics will culminate in the proposed research questions and quantitative method of data collection to provide results that contribute to understanding why men do not utilize mental health counseling.

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Modern society still remains rooted in systems of patriarchy, with hegemonic masculinity reinforcing male-dominant values and norms. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept for analyzing how masculine portrayals of gender work in tandem with the social power to remain superior to expressions of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender and sexuality are both socially constructed, meaning people are not inherently born with them, but they are performed for an audience (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). Masculinity and gender are created by language, making this topic a communication concept that is worthy of study (Pace, 2015). Stereotypically masculine traits include toughness, physical prowess, economic power, heterosexuality, and heteronormativity (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). These are learned behaviors and performances, not innate qualities. The enactment of heterosexuality often becomes central to a man's identity (García-Gómez, 2020). These stereotypical qualities are the polar opposite of what is seen as traditionally feminine qualities, so in essence, all forms of femininity are created in the context of male dominance. An important detail of hegemonic masculinity is that not all masculinities are equal, which subsequently puts gay men in an inferior position, akin to women (Abbott & Geraths, 2021).

The success of hegemonic masculinity lies in the fact that it is essentially invisible, so people accept it as an unchangeable facet of life (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). Since it is often unconsciously accepted, unequal gender relations are supported and upheld by the status quo. When men fail to live up to the unrealistic and rigid standards of hegemonic masculinity, they face extreme ridicule from society and experience profound disappointment in themselves as a man (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). When men are in positions of power and ask for help, lead in a communal manner, or display sadness at work, they are viewed as less respectable, less competent, and less deserving of those emotions (Radzi et al., 2021). Kaufman (1994, as cited in Radzi et al., 2021) stated that the consequences of failing to subscribe to strict practices of hegemonic masculinity include further isolation and alienation of men since they must battle with a denial of self and the full range of human emotions. The rising levels of anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues in men can be attributed to contemporary expectations of an unattainable form of masculinity. Traditionally, there is only one culturally acceptable version of masculinity. In practice, hegemonic masculinity is both mostly unachievable and extremely detrimental to men's psyche.

**Military Influence.** Hegemonic masculinity is largely reinforced through one of America's most well-known institutions: the military. In the United States, the armed forces have long been plagued by rigid expectations of conservatism, heterosexuality, and ultra-masculine performances (Van Gilder, 2019). The exclusion of women,

homosexual, and transgender people throughout history have served to maintain hegemonic masculinity and male superiority (Privedera & Howard, 2006).

Upon joining the military, men are socialized to believe that men are protectors and women need to be protected, which comes with a host of expectations about how to appropriately perform masculinity (McSally, 2011). Van Gilder (2019) asserts that masculinity and femininity are presented as two separate constructs that are incapable of overlapping. Femininity is taught as a weakness that will hinder military effectiveness, thereby shutting down the possibility of emotion or vulnerability in men. Gay men are believed to be inherently feminine, and thus not capable of meeting the appropriate version of masculinity that is expected of men in the military. Men learn that in order to be effective soldiers they must embody toughness, aggression, and emotional detachment. Hopton (2003, as cited in Van Gilder, 2019) asserted that this idealized version of masculinity is widely respected and revered among the American public, which further endorses hegemonic masculinity in American culture.

It has been noted that military understandings of masculinity can be related to veterans' processing of trauma and increased suicide rates among service members (Van Gilder, 2019). If veterans refuse to utilize mental health counseling to work through the extreme trauma acquired during deployment, this sets the precedent that men who have not served in the military should not need to attend therapy for their problems either. The military's dangerous construction of what it means to "be a man" contributes to upholding hegemonic standards and makes it incredibly difficult for men to express their masculinity in alternative ways.

### *Media Representations of Masculinity*

Across all forms of media throughout history - books, television, radio, the internet - men have been portrayed with uniformly masculine identities. Media portrayals of men in stereotypically masculine role types included the adventurer, soldier, family provider, hero, warrior, and others of that variety (Radzi et al., 2021). Men were traditionally placed in roles that required an authoritative figure who could take control, did not have the time for domestic work, and objectified women sexually (Radzi et al., 2021). Likewise, the media portrayal of a "bad boy" is successful across a wide range of platforms ranging from advertising to fashion to television (Gopaldas & Molander, 2020). This type of masculinity is both juvenile in nature and yet sexually promiscuous, which creates an enticing appeal for media consumers (Gopaldas & Molander, 2020). Under layers of aggression, rebelliousness, and combativeness lies the potential of a passionate and sensitive man that has been wounded by life's hardships. According to Gopaldas and Molander (2020), creating the image of a misunderstood outsider who can be reformed by just the right person is what continues to reinforce toxic masculinity. Men are conditioned to believe that one day a woman will be able to fix them, which in turn discourages men from taking the steps to fix themselves through options like therapy. Women are intrigued by the possibility of being the hero and making a once-in-a-lifetime emotional connection, yet the reality of this archetype is not so optimistic. This bad boy prototype gives men the leeway to behave just along the edges of appropriate behavior, without ever needing to face any real consequences for their actions (Gopaldas & Molander, 2020). Bad boy branding appeals to men of all sorts so that they can ideally become him, and appeals to women so that they can ideally change him. Adhering to this toxic performance of masculinity contributes to destructive crises in male identities (Radzi et al., 2021). With such negative portrayals of masculinity being the predominant media archetype that men are exposed to, they have little choice but to emulate harmful examples of masculinity.

**Televised Talk Therapy.** One predominant media example of hegemonic masculinity combined with talk therapy is Dr. Phil, a talk show hosted by Phil McGraw. This show reinforces standard expressions of masculinity through McGraw's style of providing "therapy," a term that is used loosely in this case (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). Henson and Parameswaran (2008) concluded that Dr. Phil has created the persona of a wholesome, athletic, family man who has reached professional success through authoritative, no-nonsense therapy sessions. His large physical stature and corporately masculine way of presenting himself create the image of competence in the stereotypically feminine realm of emotional talk therapy (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). The frequent admittance of his ignorance about facets of domestic life reinforces his heterosexual manliness and dismisses those areas as the sole responsibility of women (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). The guests he speaks with are almost exclusively in the form of heterosexual couples that are having interpersonal issues within their nuclear family. He portrays himself as the ideal family man that couples should seek to emulate through his professional advice. His blunt, almost patronizing counseling style blends hegemonic masculinity with therapy in a way that dangerously performs masculinity for the average male (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008). McGraw has been criticized extensively for his lack of personalized and long-term care that most patients seeking talk therapy need. Privacy is signed away on waivers, and previous guests admit that his therapy was of no actual help to them (Henson & Parameswaran, 2008).

This televised talk show sets a dangerous and inaccurate precedent for men about what therapy is like, and what type of man seeks therapy in the first place.

**Popular Television & Film.** In recent years, the media has become more representative of numerous types of identities, including age, race, sexuality, disability, gender, and many more. With more representative characters in mainstream movies and TV shows, societal perceptions of these identities become more understanding and accepting. In successful sitcom shows like *Modern Family*, having a diverse cast plays an important role in challenging the way masculinity is traditionally portrayed on television. The five male protagonists - Phil, Manny, Cameron, Mitchell, and Jay - were unique and complex characters in regard to their race, sexuality, and family upbringing. *Modern Family* was an extremely successful sitcom that aired for 11 seasons and was unique in its approach to confronting hegemonic masculinity. The show directly scrutinized the way hegemonic masculinity is socially constructed and confines men (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). During the show, the cast regularly criticized traditional performances of masculinity that are often expected of men in America. Abbott and Geraths (2021) assert that by exaggerating the male characters' attempts to be stereotypically manly, viewers are not only amused but inclined to question their own understandings of masculinity. The show also frequently rewards male characters' behaviors that directly contradict hegemonic masculinity, such as being emotionally vulnerable, flamboyant, and outwardly affectionate (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). This teaches viewers that men can actively choose to perform behaviors that counter hegemonic masculinity since all performances of gender are socially constructed. If men learn that they can choose how to design their own brand of masculinity, they may have more freedom to be emotionally expressive and more comfortable with seeking therapy. *Modern Family's* underlying message is that there is no correct way to be masculine, as all men are complex and unique individuals who do not deserve to be limited by constraining ideas of what masculinity should be. As media like *Modern Family* becomes more prevalent, societal understandings of masculinity can be expected to shift towards inclusivity and the acceptance of alternative forms of masculinity.

A new genre of film has risen to popularity in the last decade, creatively termed "bromance," by combining the words brother and romance. The success of these films can be attributed to the novelty of seeing an intimate, platonic relationship between heterosexual men (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). The male characters tend to be between 20 and 40 years of age and display an emotionally intense bond that can be homoerotic in nature without any actual homosexual action (Pace, 2015). This genre represents a new dynamic of masculinity that focuses on male connection and emotional vulnerability. These films are strongly entangled with the comedy genre, and as a result often make self-aware jokes about underlying homosexual tensions between heterosexual male protagonists (Pace, 2015). Ciasullo and Magill (2015), specifically analyzed the *21 Jump Street* (2012) and *22 Jump Street* (2014) films. Ciasullo and Magill (2015) pointed out that a unique detail of the *Jump Street* films is that they completely remove women as essential figures to the plot, which had been the primary characteristic of former bromance films like *Knocked Up* (2007), *Superbad* (2007), and *I Love You, Man* (2009). With a lack of female characters to drive the plot, the two male protagonists are left to more fully develop their relationship as it is tested by other men. There are ample moments of unembarrassed intimacy, both verbal and physical, between the characters of Jenko and Schmidt, which ensnare the audience in their deep bond and unwavering commitment to each other (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). Traditional gender norms and hegemonic masculinity are challenged by the film's primary focus being their relationship, with all plot-based goals as a secondary focus (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). Through these two films, viewers are left with the impression that the bromance between Jenko and Schmidt is entirely genuine and sweet. Masculinity is shown to encompass vulnerability and emotional support within male friendships (Ciasullo & Magill, 2015). With the rise of bromance film popularity, the expression of platonic male intimacy is beginning to become more socially acceptable. As bromance films remain a common movie trope, they allow male viewers to consider having similar relationships in their personal lives. More vulnerable male friendships could also help dismantle the negative stigma that surrounds men when they disclose emotional information. If men become more comfortable disclosing their emotions to others, this would then likely lead to an increase in men seeking mental health counseling.

**Male Magazines.** Magazines aimed at a male audience can be a particularly influential form of media in challenging traditional forms of masculinity and normalizing alternative identities. Traditionally, male magazines operated as a tool to reinforce male identity through the nurturing of classically masculine cultural ideals (Benwell, 2003). Historically celebrated hallmarks of masculinity included portrayals of violence, fierce autonomy, stony silence, and an undeniable physical prowess (Benwell, 2003). Radzi et al. (2021), identified four primary alternative identities that are trending in contemporary male magazines: fatherhood and family, grooming and aesthetics, emotional expressiveness, and homonormativity. Magazines have the liberty to run counterculture stories, therefore

reflecting practices that counter traditional hegemonic masculinity. Stories of men showcasing emotional vulnerability, being knowledgeable and competent in domestic affairs, anti-homophobic, and conscious of their aesthetic appeal have become increasingly more mainstream. This newer representation of a softer form of masculinity is generating public discourse about the difficulties men are facing in regard to vulnerability, emotional disclosure, and mental health (Radzi et al., 2021). Magazines are running more stories that feature men who proudly claim their role as a nurturing father, a helpful spouse, and an empathetic friend. Intentional use of language is crucial to reframing cultural expectations of masculinity, by associating men with positive adjectives such as emotional, vulnerable, and caring (Radzi et al., 2021). No longer do magazines only represent the image of a man that excels at intense physical labor, organized sports, or heroic survival in the outdoors (Benwell, 2003). As magazines and popular news sources continue to advertise stories of men that are breaking traditional gender norms, the possibility for men to embody alternative masculine identities becomes more likely. As more alternative masculinities are embraced, men may be more likely to recognize the value of therapy and utilize it as a tool. In this study, acceptance of traditional masculinity will be measured to assess if modern examples of media have changed perceptions of appropriate types of masculinity.

### *Emotional Disclosure*

Numerous studies have found extensive differences in the ways that men and women express emotion. Brody (1999) argued that differences in emotional disclosure relate to standards of hegemonic masculinity, with differing socialization of boys and girls as the primary reason why the expression of emotion has become gendered. As early as 4 to 6 years old, boys' expressed emotions start to decrease while girls' do not (Buck, 1977). Internalizing emotions that are considered to be more tender, such as sadness and anxiety, are femininely gendered while externalizing emotions like anger, disgust, and contempt are masculinely gendered (Chaplin, 2015). Brody (1999) asserted that in line with Western gender norms, it is more appropriate for women to express emotions of embarrassment, sadness, shame, and anxiety, whilst more appropriate for men to express anger and contempt. It is seen as more appropriate for women to express emotion in general, and to play a supportive role in friendships (Gilligan, 1994). Women also tend to be more forgiving than men since they are socialized to be driven by a desire to preserve their friendships and be attuned to the needs of others (Antony & Sheldon, 2019). In contrast, men are expected to be ambitious and try to get ahead of others, including close friends. Panjwani et al. (2016) support these findings by claiming that women are geared to be more nurturing in their friendships, while men desire to be assertive and in control. Men tend to minimize conflict instead of addressing it directly, which only encourages the suppression of emotions (Panjwani et al., 2016). As a result of these differences, women tend to have more satisfying friendships because there is more emotional disclosure and positive support (Brendgen et al., 2001).

Hegemonic masculinity has socialized men into believing that maintaining a relatively blunted affect is the best way to appear manly, so as to not seem overcome with emotion. Chaplin (2015) suggested that men may experience the same internal emotional arousal that women do, but are socialized to downplay their emotions so as to appear more collected and in control. This downregulation of emotional expression in men occurs even with happy or positive emotions. There are also gender differences in how men and women provide support, with women using more emotion-focused messages and men using more problem-focused messages (Shebib et al., 2020). In general, women are more likely to provide support, and their support tends to be of higher quality due to focusing on emotion and sensitivity (Shebib et al., 2020). Men are more likely to change the subject, minimize the problem, try to escape the conversation, or divert talk using other tactics (Shebib et al., 2020). Most gender differences found in research reaffirm that men are socialized to suppress their emotions, which in turn follows the norms of hegemonic masculinity. The suppression of emotion in turn minimizes the likelihood that men will have the desire to seek therapy, or even possess the ability to communicate their emotions to others.

**Emotional Intelligence.** In the 1990s, emotional intelligence gained traction in the psychology field as researchers started to surmise that humans were capable of different forms of intelligence. As used by Lanciano and Curci (2015), emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to effectively recognize, process, and communicate emotions. It includes understanding self and others, empathizing and communicating clearly with others, and building strong relationships (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). Emotional intelligence is critical to mental health and positive life outcomes. There are four branches of EI: perceiving, using, understanding, and managing (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). Perceiving refers to accurately identifying emotions, while using refers to using emotion to assist with problem solving and creative thinking. Understanding refers to the use of language to reflect emotions, while managing refers to the ability to keep emotions controlled. Individuals with higher EI are found to be more socially capable, sensitive, and have greater relationships (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). The overwhelming evidence suggests women have greater EI abilities than men (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). Lower levels of EI in men have been linked to

depression, effects on academic performance, and deviant behavior (Brackett et al., 2004). Fivush et al. (2000) contended that men are less skilled at using emotional vocabulary, so their ability to give and receive emotional support is decreased. They are unlikely to be confident in starting or maintaining emotional conversations, expressing emotions clearly, or providing adequate support to others. Men tend to score lower on all four branches than women, indicating that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of emotions and mental health problems (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). Measuring emotional intelligence is a useful way to assess how effective men are at perceiving, using, understanding, and managing their emotions, which they are historically less skilled at than women. In the current study, this literature provides a basis of understanding that men are less adept at emotional intelligence, thus would be less likely to disclose emotional information to others or attend mental health counseling. This study adds to previous research by explicitly examining if there is a connection between men's level of emotional intelligence and their acceptance of hegemonic masculinity.

### *Online Avenues for Disclosure*

With the rise of technology and the shifting norms regarding face-to-face behavior that accompanied a global pandemic, young adults are finding it easier than any generation before them to exist in online spaces. Smartphones have made texting, phone calls, and video calls to peers instantly accessible with a tap on a screen. A supportive social network has an immense impact on mental health and can moderate the effects of stress, depression, self-worthlessness, and even suicidal behavior (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020). As cited in Suwinyattichaiorn and Turner (2020), only 20% of college students who committed suicide had at least one visit to the school's counseling center (Gallagher, 2011). This finding indicates that students tend to rely on their personal social networks in a time of need and may perhaps be unaware of how to initiate in-person therapy. While face-to-face therapy is an important avenue of mental health services, therapy can also be conducted online. The benefits of seeking social support in a computer-mediated context include anonymity, less fear of judgment, social distance, greater options, interaction management, and ease of usage (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020). For current college students, online communication is something they grew up with and feel comfortable using, which makes computer-mediated counseling a more appealing option for them. Online counseling may also decrease the perceived stigma that accompanies attending face-to-face therapy sessions and provide greater anonymity to the client, allowing them to be more vulnerable in their online interactions (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020). Suwinyattichaiorn and Turner (2020) found that individuals in the Millennial and Generation Z cohorts are much more likely to utilize computer-mediated counseling than in-person counseling. These findings indicate that individuals generally may be more likely to consider using online mental health services and that this topic should be researched further. Men, in particular, may be more motivated to utilize counseling services that offer anonymity or the ease of attending from home via virtual options.

**Online Support Forums.** With the rise of the internet, online support forums have grown exponentially, catering to people all around the world who have similar stressors. In terms of mental health, communicating about this stigmatized issue can be easier in an online group since anonymity is a readily available option (Li et al., 2019). However, the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated forums can make it more difficult to accurately emotionally disclose and provide support than in face-to-face interactions (Li et al., 2019). This anonymity leads people to infer gender based on linguistic habits, and perceived gender can impact the type of emotional support provided (Li et al., 2019). Li et al. (2019) established that traditionally, women are more likely to seek social support, explicitly emotionally disclose, and receive social support than men are. Women also tend to use more emotional language, so seeking and providing support is regarded as more socially appropriate for women than it is for men (Li et al., 2019).

Publicly expressing emotions, especially negative emotions, is traditionally discouraged for men. When an individual explicitly discloses more emotional content in their online support-seeking message, they are more likely to receive support (Li et al., 2019). This is likely because their needs are perceived to be more legitimate and deserving of support when their stress level appears to be high, which tends to happen through more emotional disclosure. However, when a gender-ambiguous account posts an emotionally-rich message, the individual is more likely to be perceived as a woman than a man (Li et al., 2019). Li et al. (2019) found that perceived gender did not affect how legitimate the support-seeking message appeared, or the likelihood they would receive social support. This finding suggests that an online platform creates a more egalitarian space to seek and provide emotional support, especially for men who may feel stigmatized for being vulnerable or emotional in face-to-face situations. This study will assess if online or anonymous counseling services would be more likely to be utilized by men than traditional face-to-face sessions.

### *Communication Privacy Management*

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory was developed by Sandra Petronio in 1991 in an attempt to understand the ways people make decisions about disclosing their private information (Petronio, 1991). As explained by Baxter and Braithwaite (2008), there are five core principles to Petronio's theory. Petronio's first principle is that individuals believe themselves to be the owner of their own private information and that they have the right to control it. Individuals create privacy boundaries between their private information and public information, which determines what they are comfortable disclosing. The second principle is that individuals control their private information through carefully crafted privacy rules. Petronio's third principle is that when other people are granted access to an individual's private information they become co-owners of that information. When an individual decides to disclose private information, they create privacy rules for managing this information with the co-owner. The fourth principle is that co-owners must create privacy rules together through boundary coordination. Privacy rules are in place to protect the individual's information and create new boundaries that include the co-owner. These privacy boundaries can vary greatly in terms of permeability, ranging from very flexible to very rigid. The fifth principle is that when privacy rules are violated by a co-owner, this often leads to boundary turbulence. Boundary turbulence is what happens when there is either unintentional or intentional disclosure on behalf of a co-owner, leading to conflict between co-owners. This turbulence occurs because when the control over one's own private information is taken away, individuals often feel negatively exposed. The individual believes they own their private information and are the decider of who should be disclosed to in order to protect their sense of privacy.

There are very few previous studies that correlate CPM theory with mental health disclosures, and even fewer about men's mental health in particular. Meluch and Starcher (2020) used CPM theory to analyze why college students disclose mental health-related information to their professors. They indicated that students generally did not perceive professors to be appropriate confidants for mental health disclosures if they were seeking assistance or understanding, but students made the disclosure if they believed that there would be a favorable response in terms of academic outcomes (Meluch & Starcher, 2020). Meluch and Starcher (2020) found that risk-benefit assessments were made by students in line with Petronio's original principles, which can be applied to the current study about why men choose not to disclose to a therapist. If men do not perceive the benefit of disclosure high enough to match the perceived risk of being seen as vulnerable, they will not seek the assistance of a therapist. Hall (2020) used communication privacy management theory to explore why individuals disclose mental health-related information in friendships. Individuals often had such strict criteria for selecting a co-owner that they did not have explicit boundary coordination rules after the disclosure took place (Hall, 2020). Individuals usually selected a friend who was very similar to them, as this increased the likelihood of the co-owner being trustworthy. Concerns about boundary turbulence regarding mental health information were usually outweighed by the perceived benefits of disclosure to a friend. Hall (2020) found that disclosure of mental health-related information does follow many principles of CPM theory, but varies in a few important ways which necessitate more research. Most of the participants in Hall's (2020) study were female, so understanding how men, in particular, choose to disclose mental health-related information to their friends must be explored further. The current study will use CPM theory in conjunction with the acceptance of hegemonic masculinity to understand how it influences men's likelihood to disclose emotional information in the context of therapy. As men are constantly bombarded with media messages pertaining to masculinity and the upholding of hegemonic standards, communication privacy management theory can be used to understand why men are unwilling to disclose emotionally sensitive information.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Traditionally, masculine traits include toughness, aggressiveness, heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and dominance (Abbott & Geraths, 2021). Radzi et al. (2021) found that the more a man identifies with societal standards of hegemonic masculinity, the more likely they are to believe that men should keep their emotions to themselves to avoid showing weakness. The enactment of hegemonic masculinity often becomes central to a man's identity, and this indicates men would be less in touch with their emotions due to the way emotional disclosure has often been femininely gendered (Chaplin, 2015). Thus, men are less likely to desire to work with a therapist on managing emotional turmoil. Their acceptance of hegemonic masculinity indicates there may be an inability to relax their rigid privacy boundaries in order to disclose to a co-owner (Petronio, 1991). Therefore, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: What is the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the likelihood to utilize counseling services?

RQ2: What is the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource?

RQ3: What is the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and willingness to disclose emotional information?

Research has found that men typically score significantly lower than women on measures of emotional intelligence, which includes the ability to recognize, communicate about, and manage emotions (Lanciano & Curci, 2015). Men are less skilled at using emotional vocabulary, which decreases their ability to both give and receive emotional support (Fivush et al., 2000). The likelihood of men comfortably starting or participating in emotional disclosure is much lower than for women (Fivush et al., 2000). Not only are women more comfortable using emotional language, but it is seen as more socially appropriate for women to seek support than men (Li et al., 2019). A lack of emotional intelligence implies an inability to negotiate privacy boundaries with co-owners. Assuming that a lack of emotional intelligence exists in men, they are likely unwilling to disclose emotional messages. Therefore, the following research questions are posited:

RQ4: What is the relationship between willingness to disclose emotional information and the likelihood to utilize counseling services?

RQ5: What is the relationship between willingness to disclose emotional information and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource?

## METHODS

In this section, I will discuss the participants, procedure used, measures, and data analysis. This study approached the research questions from a quantitative perspective through the use of existing surveys and scales, with appropriate modifications. I measured participants' attitudes through numerical data in an attempt to predict and explain why men do not utilize counseling services, which meets the conditions for a quantitative study (Keyton, 2011). The goal of this study was to investigate the relationship between males' understanding of masculinity and their desire to seek professional counseling. Thus, the variables present in the study are as follows: hegemonic masculinity, likelihood to utilize counseling services, perceived effectiveness of counseling services, and willingness to disclose emotional messages. To collect data, I created an online Qualtrics survey based on existing scales. By using a quantitative method I was able to analyze correlations between variables via SPSS software, and then interpret those findings in the context of the study.

### *Participants*

Participants had to meet three requirements in order to complete the survey: they had to be 18 years of age or older, assigned the male sex at birth, and still identify as male. Surveys were conducted with 127 participants (100% male) between the ages of 18 and 61 ( $M = 21.51$ ). The majority of participants were White (94.5%), and the rest identified as Black (1.6%), Asian (1.6%), Hispanic (0.8%), Native American (0.8%), or Mixed (0.8%). The majority of participants were Heterosexual (89.8%), and the rest identified as Homosexual (4.7%), Bisexual (4.7%), or Other (0.8%).

### *Procedure*

After gaining IRB approval for the ethical study of human subjects, I created an online survey through Qualtrics that was sent to a random sample of 1,000 University of Wisconsin - La Crosse student emails. In addition, convenience sampling was used when the survey was distributed through private messages on Snapchat, Instagram, and personal email. Snowball sampling was used when people from the previously mentioned methods shared the survey link with others in their social network. The survey was formed and administered digitally using Qualtrics and took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and participants could choose to withdraw at any time. Participant identities remained completely anonymous.

The first page of the survey included information regarding informed consent and eligibility requirements. By clicking, "I consent," the participants gave their consent to use the data from their respective surveys. Participants who selected "I do not consent," were directed to the end of the survey. The first qualifying question asked, "Were you assigned male at birth?" If participants responded "No," they were directed to the end of the survey. If the participants responded "Yes," they were able to continue to the next question. The second qualifying question asked, "Do you still identify as male?" If participants responded "No," they were directed to the end of the survey. If the participants responded "Yes," they were able to continue with the remainder of the survey.

The next section consisted of three demographic questions about participants' age, race, and sexual orientation. Then, the participants worked through four sets of questions, each measuring a different construct, with a total of 59 questions. The first set measured acceptance of hegemonic masculinity (Luyt & Foster, 2001; Luyt, 2005; Padgett, 2017), the second set measured willingness to disclose emotional information (Norton, 1978; Snell,



1986; Padgett, 2017), the third set measured the perceived effectiveness of counseling (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), and the fourth set measured likelihood to utilize counseling services (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020). At the completion of the fourth set of questions, participants were thanked for their participation and their data was stored on Qualtrics until it was transferred to SPSS.

### *Measures*

Participants completed four question sets that were adapted from seven previously created measures. Questions were drawn from the following measures: Male Attitude Norms Inventory (Luyt & Foster, 2001), Male Attitude Norms Inventory-II (Luyt, 2005), Alternative Masculinity Measure (Padgett, 2017), Masculine Role Inventory (Snell, 1986), Communicator Style (Norton, 1978), Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), and Counseling Usage Likelihood (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020).

**Acceptance of Hegemonic Masculinity.** The first question set measured the participants' acceptance of hegemonic masculinity by adapting items from the first and second Male Attitude Norms Inventory (Luyt & Foster, 2001; Luyt, 2005) and the Alternative Masculinity Measure's pro-femininity subscale (Padgett, 2017). Participants used a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate how they felt about each statement. These 20 statements measured the participants' acceptance of traditional male gender roles and social norms of masculinity. The modified question set had an acceptable reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ) after omitting one question from the results.

**Willingness to Disclose Emotional Information.** The second question set measured the participants' willingness to disclose emotional information by adapting items from the Alternative Masculinity Measure's freedom of emotional expression subscale (Padgett, 2017), Masculine Role Inventory (Snell, 1986), and Communicator Style (Norton, 1978). Participants used a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate how they felt about each statement. These 20 statements measured the participants' beliefs regarding the appropriateness of men disclosing their emotions and their own personal ability to disclose. The modified question set had a strong reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

**Perceived Effectiveness of Counseling.** The third question set measured how effective participants perceive counseling sessions to be using a modified version of the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989). Participants used a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) to indicate how they felt about each statement. These 11 statements measured the participants' feelings regarding the perceived competence of a therapist and the efficacy of counseling sessions. The modified question set had a strong reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ).

**Likelihood to Utilize Counseling.** The final question set measured the likelihood that participants' would attend counseling sessions (Suwinyattichaiorn & Turner, 2020). Participants used a Likert scale of 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely) to indicate how they felt about each statement. These 8 statements identified the conditions in which participants would consider using counseling resources. The modified question set had a strong reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### *Data Analysis*

After data collection through Qualtrics, I converted participant responses to SPSS software for data analysis. I answered each of the five research questions by using a Pearson correlation.

## **RESULTS**

SPSS was used to analyze the quantitative data from 127 surveys and test the correlation between each of the four variables. Five research questions were answered with the results from the Pearson correlations.

### *Research Question 1*

Research question one asked about the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the likelihood to utilize counseling services. Research question one was answered through a Pearson correlation. There was a slight negative correlation between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the likelihood to utilize counseling as a resource,  $r(104) = -0.27$ ,  $p = 0.006$ . Participants who accept hegemonic masculinity to a greater extent reported a lesser likelihood of going to counseling.

### *Research Question 2*

Research question two asked about the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource. Research question two was answered through a Pearson correlation. There was a slight negative correlation between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource,  $r(107) = -0.31, p = 0.001$ . Participants who accept hegemonic masculinity to a greater extent tended to perceive counseling as less effective.

### *Research Question 3*

Research question three asked about the relationship between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and willingness to disclose emotional information. Research question three was answered through a Pearson correlation. There was a substantial negative correlation between acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and willingness to disclose emotional information,  $r(116) = -0.60, p < 0.001$ . Participants who accept hegemonic masculinity to a greater extent tended to be less willing to disclose emotional information.

### *Research Question 4*

Research question four asked about the relationship between willingness to disclose emotional information and the likelihood to utilize counseling services. Research question four was answered through a Pearson correlation. There was a slight positive correlation between willingness to disclose emotional information and likelihood to utilize counseling services,  $r(105) = 0.35, p < 0.001$ . Participants who are more willing to disclose emotional information reported a greater likelihood of going to counseling.

### *Research Question 5*

Research question five asked about the relationship between willingness to disclose emotional information and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource. Research question five was answered through a Pearson correlation. There was a moderate positive correlation between willingness to disclose emotional information and perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource,  $r(108) = 0.49, p < 0.001$ . Participants who are more willing to disclose emotional information tended to perceive counseling as more effective.

## **DISCUSSION**

The object of this study was to examine the effects of hegemonic masculinity on men's ability and desire to self-disclose in the context of therapy. This study specifically uses Petronio's (1991) communication privacy management (CPM) theory to frame the interpretations of the results. Communication privacy management theory can be used to analyze the conditions in which individuals choose to disclose their private information (Petronio, 1991). This section will discuss what the results mean, both theoretically and practically.

Research question one examined if there was a relationship between the acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the likelihood to utilize counseling services. The results indicated that there was a slight negative correlation between the two variables. This means that men who have greater acceptance of hegemonic masculinity are less likely to utilize counseling services. This finding is consistent with assertions made by Van Gilder (2019) that femininity is socially conditioned as a weakness, which therefore shuts down the possibility of emotional vulnerability in men. Ultra-masculine portrayals of men in the military produce an archetype of man that must be followed by the general public, characterized by being tough, aggressive, and emotionally detached (Van Gilder, 2019). It also supports statistics from the National Institute of Mental Health (2021) that cite men as being significantly less likely to receive mental health services. However, it adds to previous research by explicitly linking the connection between internalized masculinity with the likelihood of using counseling services. According to the first principle of communication privacy management theory, individuals believe they are the owners of their private information and will create privacy boundaries based on how comfortable they are disclosing that information (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). In line with CPM theory, the findings of this study indicate that the more a man subscribes to hegemonic masculinity, the more intense their privacy boundaries will be. These rigid privacy boundaries prevent men from communicating about their emotions, but it does not stop men from feeling emotions. More masculine men are often out of touch with their emotions and thus unequipped to understand or deal with them. Therapy would be very useful for these men, but their internalized masculinity stops them from even considering the utilization of counseling as an acceptable resource. Practically, this leaves an entire population of men without the ability to fully understand their mental state and no socially acceptable way for them to correct this problem.

Research question two examined if there was a relationship between the acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource. The results indicated that there was a slight negative correlation between the two variables. This means that men who have greater acceptance of hegemonic masculinity are less likely to perceive counseling services as effective. This finding is consistent with research that postulates that men learn the enactment of stereotypically masculine traits like toughness, physical prowess, and heterosexuality must be central to their identity as a man (Abbott & Geraths, 2021; García-Gómez, 2020). Men with greater acceptance of hegemonic masculinity would not want to feel or appear vulnerable, as that would threaten their masculinity. Thus, those men would perceive therapy to be a useless or ineffective tool because it is not something they could partake in without jeopardizing their masculine identity. Since there was not much previous research on how internalized masculinity relates to the perceived effectiveness of therapy, this study adds the knowledge that men who perceive therapy as ineffective usually largely subscribe to hegemonic masculinity. In terms of CPM theory, this would fit with the fifth principle's concept of boundary turbulence. Boundary turbulence is a term for the negative feelings that occur when an individual feels as if their control over their private information is taken away (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). A key aspect of hegemonic masculinity is being logical, rational, and in control. Losing control is antithetical to being a man, thus men would perceive counseling to be an ineffective resource. Practically, this is problematic because people in positions of power, typically men, have the ability to make therapy more affordable to the general public. Yet, this is unlikely to happen because the internalized masculinity in most men makes therapy seem to be a nonessential resource.

Research question three examined if there was a relationship between the acceptance of hegemonic masculinity and willingness to disclose emotional information. The results indicated that there was a substantial negative correlation between the two variables. This means that men who have greater acceptance of hegemonic masculinity are less willing to disclose emotional information. This finding is consistent with research that asserts men are constantly exposed to media that conditions them to embody the traits of stoic warriors, hardy soldiers, and family providers (Radzi et al., 2021). These ultra-masculine media examples teach boys to become aggressive, controlling, and dominant over others (Gopaldas & Molander, 2020). This is also consistent with Buck's (1977) finding that as young as four years old, boys start to downregulate their expressed emotions. With popular media conditioning men to accept hegemonic masculinity and perform it in all facets of life, it denies them the opportunity to learn how to be sensitive and vulnerable with others from a young age. This finding also supports research done by Chaplin (2015), which found that men consider more tender emotions like sadness and anxiety to be femininely gendered, and thus not appropriate for them to disclose. However, it adds to previous research by showing there is a direct correlation between internalized hegemonic masculinity and willingness to disclose emotions. Theoretically, CPM connects to this finding through its third principle, which states that when other individuals are given access to private information they become co-owners of the information (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Hegemonic masculinity is so ingrained in men that they cannot fathom the idea of allowing other people to become co-owners of their private information, which they have been socialized their entire lives by society and the media to hide. Allowing others to become co-owners makes men feel as if they are losing their dominant advantage over that person. Even a therapist, who is legally bound to keep client information private, remains a nonviable option for emotional disclosure.

Research question four examined if there was a relationship between the willingness to disclose emotional information and the likelihood to utilize counseling services. The results indicated that there was a slight positive correlation between the two variables. This means that men who are willing to disclose emotional information are more likely to utilize counseling services. Likewise, men who are not willing to disclose are less likely to utilize therapy. This finding is consistent with research that claims it is considered more socially appropriate for women to express emotion than it is for men (Brody, 1999; Panjwani et al., 2016). For men who believe it is not socially acceptable to disclose their emotions, they are certainly not going to seek out therapy, of which the entire purpose is to disclose their emotions. The results also support Abbott and Geraths' (2021) assertion that men can choose to exhibit behaviors that directly counter traditional hegemonic masculinity by forming their own personal brand of masculinity that allows for emotional expressivity. Logically, men who are willing to shirk the expectations of hegemonic masculinity and disclose their emotions would feel more comfortable seeking therapy. However, it adds to previous research the knowledge that if men have higher levels of emotional intelligence, as evidenced by their willingness to disclose and communicate about their emotions, they will be more likely to go to therapy. This finding connects to the fourth principle of CPM theory, which asserts that co-owners of private information must work together through boundary coordination to create privacy rules acceptable to both parties (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Men who have lower levels of emotional intelligence are not going to feel comfortable engaging in boundary coordination with a therapist because they do not have the language or skills to successfully have that conversation. Practically, this is troubling because Brackett et al. (2004) have shown that men with lower levels of

emotional intelligence have higher levels of depression, more negative effects on academic performance, and more deviant behaviors. Kaufman (1994, as cited in Radzi et al., 2021) also found that consequences of hegemonic masculinity include isolation and alienation due to the continued denial of self and expression of emotions. If men were more willing to disclose their emotions, these negative effects would likely be mediated by therapy. However, men often remain unwilling to disclose because they have been socialized since childhood to dismiss their emotions in hopes of achieving a realistically unattainable form of masculinity. Practically, this means that men will pointlessly continue to strive for an ideal they will never be able to reach, all while suffering extreme negative consequences in their daily lives.

Research question five examined if there was a relationship between the willingness to disclose emotional information and the perceived effectiveness of counseling as a resource. The results indicated that there was a moderate positive correlation between the two variables. This means that men who are willing to disclose emotional information are more likely to perceive counseling services as effective. This finding is consistent with the research of Fivush et al., (2000), which indicated that men who have higher levels of emotional intelligence are more skilled at starting and maintaining emotional conversations, expressing their emotions with appropriate vocabulary, and both giving and receiving emotional support. Men who are willing to disclose their emotions would find the support of therapy to be more effective than men who are not willing to disclose. Since there was not much previous research on the correlation between willingness to disclose emotions and perceived effectiveness of therapy, this study provides the knowledge that men who perceive therapy as ineffective are likely unwilling to disclose their own emotions. Meluch and Starcher (2020) used CPM theory to explain the risk-benefit analyses made by individuals when deciding to disclose. Theoretically, in this study it holds that men who do not perceive the benefit of disclosure to match the risk of being vulnerable will not find counseling to be an effective resource. Likewise, Hall (2020) used CPM to explain that individuals often choose to disclose to people who they perceive to be similar to them, which would seem to make them a more trustworthy co-owner. This study supports Hall's findings, since men often do not perceive therapists to be similar to them, thus men would not trust a therapist enough to disclose to them. Practically, if men fundamentally do not trust therapists, they will not perceive counseling to be an effective resource. As mentioned previously, men are often the ones in positions of power that could make counseling more accessible, yet this will not happen if they perceive therapy to be an ineffective resource.

## CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this research was to understand the communication phenomenon underlying why men choose to not go to therapy. Through the lens of communication privacy management theory, this study looked at hegemonic masculinity, willingness to disclose emotional information, perceived effectiveness of counseling, and likelihood of going to counseling. Overall, the more a man internalizes hegemonic masculinity, the less likely they will be to communicate about their emotions to others. Likewise, they will be less likely to perceive counseling as effective, and less likely to go to therapy. Furthermore, men who are less willing to disclose their emotions are less likely to go to therapy or perceive it as effective. As men are a unique population due to their gender socialization, this research demonstrated the specific connection between masculinity and the inability or lack of desire to communicate about emotions, especially in the context of therapy. Arguably, the most important aspect of this research is the understanding that acceptance of masculinity is a direct indicator of their emotional disclosure tendencies. More masculine men are less likely to be emotionally competent, which has important repercussions for their ability to be high quality romantic partners, fathers, or friends. It is essential to continue researching how masculinity limits men's emotional abilities and perceptions of their identity. As society continues to inch towards inclusivity, future research has the opportunity to uncover how traditional expectations of masculinity not only hurt marginalized groups, but men themselves.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. First, the demographic data of the participant pool was largely heterosexual and Caucasian. Future studies should sample a more diverse participant population in order to assess the differences in masculinity as it relates to race and sexuality. Likewise, the mean age of participants was 22 years old, which is relatively young, and all the participants were from the Midwest. There are likely generational and geographic understandings of masculinity and opinions on therapy that were not accounted for in this study. The sample included 127 men, which is on the smaller size for quantitative surveys. Future studies should aim to have larger samples sizes for more representative data. Finally, the survey questions were adapted from seven different measures to analyze four different constructs. It would be beneficial for future research to utilize a more cohesive survey measure that perhaps includes a larger question set.

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