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The Issue of Toxic Masculinity

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« The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations ».

- Adichie, C.N. (2014). *We Should All Be Feminists*.

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Abstract

In the most recent times, as a consequence of a major awareness on social issues, individuals have started to realize that a greater extent of their behaviors and attitudes is daily affected by cultural and gender norms that cause much distress on the experience of their gender identity and sexuality. Moreover, it has been acknowledged that a patriarchal system is at the core of gender norms, by having established, for a long time, a hierarchy of gender.

Hegemonic masculinity, namely men who satisfy societal standards at their fullest, has resulted to be at the top of the hierarchy and, in order to maintain its powerful position, it requires individuals to comply with certain behaviors and practices that, by being constantly reproduced, acquire such a naturalness to legitimize their higher status.

These behaviors have proved to have a negative impact on individuals placed at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, such as women, LGBTQ+ people, as well as on those men who do not conform with masculine norms. Toxic masculinity is the term that has been recently used by the media and scholars to comprehensively define the negative repercussions experienced by the whole society, in relation to the unhealthy, risky and violent behaviors that men are required to perform in order to be socially validated as ‘real’ men.

However, public discourses often overlook that men, by suffering from daily pressures and anxieties to comply with social standards, do not actually perceive the privileges of which they are accused to enjoy through the maintenance of their powerful position in society. The reason behind, indeed, is that the privileges inherent to the male dominance have a cost paid by both men who do not conform to traditional masculinity, either by choice or not, and men who conform to social standards by renouncing to their emotional side and endangering their physical and mental well-being.

It is equally true that women and LGBTQ+ people happen to be the main victims of toxic masculinity, by not being executors of masculine norms and, instead, experiencing degradation, humiliation and discrimination on the grounds of a system based on inequalities and male power.

Above all, the main purpose of this thesis is to highlight that masculinity is not toxic in itself, but it becomes as such when traditional masculine behaviors are harmful to the whole humankind, men included, by constraining individuals’ gender identity and sexuality.

Introduction

In the last decade, the media and academic debate have started to introduce the term of toxic masculinity as a catch-all concept which describes all those cultural and social beliefs, behaviors and practices that create a hierarchy of masculinities and portray men, those who completely comply with societal standards, as socially dominant. In order to daily affirm their masculine identity, it has been found out that men engage in unhealthy behaviors and attitudes that are harmful to the whole society. In order to be socially validated, men are required to daily affirm their masculine identity by fulfilling gender expectations, that have been laid down by traditional norms associated with masculinity. Early as childhood, those masculine norms, which need to be satisfied by men to be regarded as 'real' men, exhort them to take on aggressive and unhealthy attitudes that have resulted to be, mostly in a long-term, dangerous to their physical and mental health and their safety. Moreover, traditional norms linked to masculinity strictly reject femininity in men, since it is seen as a sign of weakness, in opposition to the toughness, strength and emotional control that are fundamental prerogatives for being a 'real' man. It follows that traditional masculinity promotes, on one side, sexual violence and degradation towards women to get respect and affirm the distinction between male superiority and female inferiority and, on the other side, hatred towards individuals who breach gender norms, particularly if biologically males, because of the fear to be emasculated and to happen to be potentially feminized. Besides that, in the most recent times, new types of masculinities that differ from traditional masculinity are seeking to challenge and defy toxic masculinity through the increasing embodiment of elements typically associated with marginalized and subordinate masculinities. Accordingly, business entities seem to be willing to contribute to the fight against toxic masculinity and to the promotion of the breach of gender norms through their ad campaigns, although they might aim at merely increasing their profits by catching the attention of a broader audience. Considering that these phenomena are much recent, it is not possible yet to foresee positive or negative outcomes in view of a future dismantlement of gender hierarchies.

To clarify, the main objective of this thesis is not to argue that masculinity is toxic in itself, but rather to point out that some masculine behaviors negatively affect men in the first place, who, in turn, feel the need to overcompensate their anxieties by repudiating what challenges their power and by proving their superiority through violent behaviors, whose persistent performativity acquires such a naturalness to be legitimized. Indeed, the reason why I have decided to focus on the issue of toxic masculinity is that it is necessary to deeply analyze social issues by also looking at the downside, in order to fully eradicate them from the roots. If individuals are not aware of their social privileges and, because of them, cannot perceive what is wrong with their behaviors or why they happen to engage

in unhealthy attitudes, it might result to be much more difficult to abolish systems of power and inequalities in retrospect.

At the beginning of the first chapter, I will introduce the overall concept of masculinity, by analyzing its construction and commonly social associations from a sociological, psychological and anthropological viewpoint. In this regard, I will report the academic debate that takes place between scholars who believe that the concepts of femininity and masculinity are socially constructed and scholars who relate feminine and masculine behavioral traits to biological aspects. Then, I will outline the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and how it has led to the creation of a hierarchy of masculinities, by which those that do not conform to traditionally masculine norms, by embodying certain feminine qualities opposed to toughness and strength, are placed at the bottom and consequently regarded as unworthy. Finally, I will explain the relation of the rise of toxic masculinity with the degradation of other types of masculinities and the devaluation of femininity that have led men to commit to traditionally masculine standards in order to be socially validated.

In the second chapter, I will specify which are the essential norms that men are requested to follow to prove their masculine identity and that, to a greater extent, exempt them from any expression of vulnerability, by trapping them in a sort of 'Man Box'. With regard to that, I will accurately analyze how unhealthy and risky behaviors that men take on, to affirm their masculinity or to compensate their anxieties related to gender expectations, cause negative repercussions on their physical and mental health. Subsequently, to demonstrate that toxic masculinity is harmful to the whole society, I will claim that the legitimization of male power is intrinsic to society to the point that it leads men to sexually harass a good portion of women worldwide and normalizes the performance of those violent acts, strictly inherent to masculine norms. Similarly, I will argue that the persistent rejection and hatred towards femininity and nonconformities to heteronormativity, because of the fear to be associated with those and the necessity to distance themselves from anything feminine to be recognized as 'real' men, contribute to the perpetration of homophobia and transphobia.

Lastly, the third chapter focuses on the recent development of new types of masculinities that seem to challenge toxic masculinity, by incorporating elements typically associated with marginalized and subordinate masculinities. In this perspective, I will discuss whether marketing strategies that seek to promote inclusivity and diversity exploit social issues with the aim of increasing their income by winning the trust of a specific target or whether they are somehow instrumental in facilitating a future crossing of gender boundaries.

This thesis is mainly based on a systemic literature review of academic books, papers and articles, written by sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists and PhD scholars, aimed at producing a broad overview on the overall background, development and relevance of the issue of

toxic masculinity in society. Both qualitative and quantitative studies have been included with the objective to discuss the impact that toxic masculinity has on society.

1. Chapter one: When does Masculinity become Toxic?

Masculinity is a wide and complex concept to define. Indeed, its definition is determined according to two main sources, namely, the culture and the historical period in which masculinity has been conceptualized. Hence, different debates have occurred in regard to the construction of the concept, meanwhile its determinants have changed from time to time to the extent that different types of masculinity have arisen. The most recent debate on masculinity has argued that some practices inherent to the social construct of masculinity need to be conceived as potentially harmful to society. According to this perspective, some behavioral traits that are commonly associated with being males have proved to be dangerous for women and for men themselves. Some practices and behaviors specifically inherent to masculinity have been, for example, associated with the development of mental problems and physical issues in men. The negative repercussions these traits of masculinity have for society have brought many commentators to elaborate the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’. This chapter’s intention is to clarify that masculinity can become toxic when, indeed, those traditional masculine behaviors that are harmful to the whole society are constantly reproduced to the point that they acquire such a naturalness to be legitimized. It follows that, through the subordination of femininity to masculinity, phenomena towards the LGBTQ+ community, such as homophobia and transphobia, are caused by an extremism of masculinity which results in a devaluation of femininity. In the first paragraph, I will discuss about the construction of the term of masculinity from a psychological, anthropological and sociological perspective, and its traditional associations. In the second paragraph, I will describe the debate between scholars who associate the definition of masculinity and femininity with biological aspects and scholars who focus on the social construction and performativity of those acts and traits that are constantly repeated and become to be traditionally considered as masculine and feminine. In the third paragraph, I will highlight different types of masculinity, by which hegemonic masculinity happens to be the dominant one and produces other masculinities that happen to be regarded as lower or even unworthy, due to the fact that they do not partially or completely comply with the dominant idea of being a man. Finally, in the last paragraph, I will argue about the rise of a ‘toxic’ masculinity, that underlines how the social construction of other masculinities and the devaluation of femininity, by means of the constant repetition of acts attributed to the dominant concept of masculinity, affect society as a whole. However, the intention behind the concept of toxic masculinity is often misunderstood since it may be believed that it blames individuals for being men, but, instead, I will explain that certain behaviors are forwarded as if they were a harmful substance, a toxicant, that individuals often are not aware of. With regard to that, I will

discuss whether it is proper to refer to those behaviors with the name of toxic masculinity and whether, meanwhile, a healthy masculinity does exist.

1.1. Defining Masculinity

The term of masculinity is generally defined as the set of physical, psychological and behavioral characteristics associated with being boys and men. According to the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell¹, Sigmund Freud started building, for the first time, a scientific enquiry of masculinity through a disruption of its supposedly natural image, although he has never debated consistently about masculinity in his writings and, at the same time, his ideas have not been taken into account deeply by later researchers. Freud's preliminary analysis of masculinity can be found in three different parts of his extended psychoanalytic theory. First, on the basis of his clinical observation, Freud deduced that gender and sexuality were formed along a conflicting process and were not fixed by nature. The *Oedipus complex*² was the central clue in which he identified the primary construction of masculinity, that in the adulthood seemed to be more complex and even unstable. Secondly, throughout his case of the *Wolf Man*³, Freud identified a pre-Oedipal narcissistic masculinity, enhancing castration anxiety, from which he uncovered the interaction between his desire for the father, his identification with women and his jealousy for the mother. This case study challenges later researches on masculinity since an approach that fails in separating layers and reconstructing the relationships among them does not result to be as much appropriate as the clinical method introduced by Freud that takes into account the conflicts between the masculine character and the events occurred during the course of life. Finally, Freud returns on the issue of masculinity in his inquiry of the personality structure, from which he developed the idea of the *super-ego*⁴ as an outcome of the relation with the father and consequently assumed it as a personality characteristic more developed in boys. In Freud's perspective, the super-ego develops when culture becomes prevalent on the individual desire, in particular aggression and, according to his analysis, this occurs in a more linear way in men. In this perspective, the super-ego emerged as a gendered character. Simone De

¹ Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* – 2nd ed., 8-12. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

² The complex of emotions aroused in a young child, typically around the age of four, by an unconscious sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and wish to exclude the parent of the same sex.

³ A patient of Sigmund Freud, who gave him the pseudonym of Wolf Man to protect his identity after a dream he had of a tree full of white wolves.

⁴ Third intrapsychic section of the structural pattern of the psychic apparatus which originates from the internalization of behavioral codes, prohibitions, values that the child pursues within the relationship with his parents.

Beauvoir explains how the Freudian super-ego is differently existent in men and women. Whereas in Freud the association between masculine and super-ego, indeed, constructs the man as capable of controlling himself, his instincts and emotivity, the feminine super-ego appears to be weaker. In the Oedipus complex, from the initial love for the mother, the ‘complex of castration’ arises in men from the terror of being mutilated by the father and develops both aggressiveness towards him and an internalized fatherly authority, that at the end creates a ‘censor’ super-ego. For the females, the destiny is different, but subordinated to males’ one. The Electra complex explains that the female child is initially attracted to the mother, but, later, when she finds out the anatomical difference between the sexes and thinks to have been mutilated, she loses any pretense towards the mother and, while attempting to identify with her, seduces her father since she would be similar to him. From her hostility towards the mother, the super-ego is created, but weaker than male’s one. The female child can react to the castration complex, but by denying her femininity. According to Beauvoir, this description is based on a male model because the woman seems to feel like a mutilated man and the desire comes mainly from the valorization of virility. In this case, Freud fails in realizing that the paternal sovereignty is part of the social order and in acknowledging why paternal authority prevailed on the mother.

Although not explicitly analyzing masculinity, Freud hence provided a method of research such as the psychoanalysis that made him seek a first input of masculinity’s development, by which he showed that personality appears to be more complex than an unambiguous unit. Indeed, the transition of the Oedipus complex was by necessity disruptive due to the vulnerability of masculinity in adulthood, based on the contrast between culture and desire.

Detaching from a psychoanalytic perspective, researchers, historians and anthropologists have later shown that the concept of masculinity can be difficult to define in absolute terms. What exactly characterizes masculinity appears to be much more controversial since it should be taken into account the fact that it is the outcome of different cultural, historical, social and geographical dynamics. Starting from a constructivist perspective, John Beynon writes in his book *Masculinities and Culture*⁵ that masculinity is associated with culture and it should be interpreted in its heterogeneity and fragmentation. On the one hand, he argues that masculinity should not be confused with ‘maleness’, which refers to the properties distinctive of the male sex and, consequently, it is biological. On the other hand, he defines masculinity as the ‘*child of culture*’⁶, framed diversely by society in the light of multiple times, places and contexts, which have led to the construction and reproduction of social behavioral norms linked to that term. This means that masculinity can be interpreted differently

⁵ Beynon J. (2002). *Masculinities and Culture*, (p. 2). Philadelphia: Open University Press.

⁶ Ibid.

according to culture, history and structures of power in society, and, as a result, there is no commonly appropriate definition of the term.

In Western countries, until the half of the twentieth century, masculinity consisted of a widely stable set of social behaviors that should be adopted by men in order to be considered as such. Masculinity was focused on the working life and mainly on the economic supply given to the family. This idea was, for example, mirrored in Talcott Parsons's works⁷. As the first sociologist who really addressed masculinity and how it was interpreted at that time, Parsons argued that society, to perform at its best, has at its core the role of the traditional family, which entitled the man with his primary function of the main 'breadwinner' and the woman with her primary function of the housewife by taking care of children. While Parsons considered this sexual division of work as 'normal' inasmuch as functional to society, some years later Erving Goffman discussed how complying with masculine identity meant, for the American man, to own a very strictly defined list of characteristics. According to Goffman, to be a man in America meant mainly being "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports"⁸. His symbolic interactionist approach led him to argue that an individual would have considered himself to be a respectable and worthy adult man in the case that he had adopted the features that the society asked for with the aim of being a member of the socially acceptable group. Otherwise, any man who was not able to comply with those traits was likely to judge himself as inferior and unworthy because he owned 'uncommon' or undesirable social aspects that could have led him to be socially stigmatized.

Other sociological and anthropological analyses have shown how, throughout the last part of the twentieth century and the earliest one of the twenty-first, the most diffused representation of masculinity has been socially constructed as completely distant from any appearance, personal trait or characteristic associated with femininity, including emotions, softness and physical or mental care of oneself. Especially in adolescence, boys have been largely expected and allowed to be aggressive, and behaviors such as teasing each other with homophobic terms, aggressively assault young boys owing features that usually remind of femininity and not caring of their own aesthetic appearance, in order to show masculinity, became commonly accepted and diffused amongst young boys, as the American sociologist C. J. Pascoe writes in her book *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*⁹ by examining masculinity in high schools. With regard to that, professor Gail

⁷ Parsons, T. (1954). *Essays in Sociological Theory*. New York: Free Press.

⁸ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes On The Management Of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 148-152.

⁹ Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bederman¹⁰ has explained that a transition from ‘*manliness*’¹¹ to ‘masculinity’, which occurred by the half of the twentieth century, shifted the essence of manhood to its performance. The shift between the two took place since ‘manliness’, that is distinguished from the concept of ‘maleness’, was linked to Victorian era’s moral and religious ideals of being a man, mainly attributed to braveness and Christianity, while, as she states, masculinity, initially used to distinguish men from women, by the thirties, had started to develop and embody patterns that were more likely to include American ideals, such as the increasing interest in strength, aggression and sexuality. Along the same lines, the historian John Tosh takes a broader view of ‘manliness’, which was largely influenced by the Victorian era¹² and which later became to be also popularly substituted in Britain, during the seventies, by ‘masculinity’. He claims that the concept of ‘manliness’ described by Bederman not only should have included politeness and braveness, but also ‘*bodily associations*’¹³ since the capability of self-defense proved physical strength, readiness for combat and the defense of one’s own honor.

1.2. Nature vs Nurture

Scholars in social sciences, from sociologists to historians, anthropologists and psychologists, have faced difficulties in defining masculinity and a general agreement now exists about the necessity to consider gender as the result of something more than just biology. This has fueled a lively debate on gender identities and the relationships between biology, socialization and culture.

The professor of psychology of the California State University Richard A. Lippa¹⁴ describes the novelist Marcel Proust as the perfect example of what is commonly considered as ‘feminine’ due to his artistic sensibility, his focus on emotions, his caring towards others, his sensitivity and his sexual attraction to men. All those features lead back to the what is commonly considered to be the essence of femininity in spite of changes in history and culture. From a psychological point of view, the concepts of femininity and masculinity refer to the existing variations, in terms of gender-related behaviors, among men and women. Throughout the twenties, after his study on children’s *intellectual giftedness*¹⁵, the American psychologist Lewis Terman became concerned of different patterns of

¹⁰ Bederman, G. (1996). *Manliness and Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

¹¹ The traditional male quality of being brave and strong.

¹² The Victorian era was the period of Queen Victoria’s reign, from 1837 until 1901.

¹³ Tosh, J. (1999). *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England*. London: Yale University Press.

¹⁴ Lippa, R. A. (2005). *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*, (Chap. 2). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Inc.

¹⁵ An intellectual ability significantly higher than average.

interests among gifted girls and gifted boys and, later in 1936, alongside the psychologist Catharine Cox Miles, he introduced in their book *Sex and Personality*¹⁶ the possibility to measure masculinity and femininity, by examining the different answers of groups of men and women on average. Despite the cultural and historical limits, their aim was to precisely analyze the extent of masculinity and femininity within individuals and the degree at which they were linked to physical and psychological traits. On the grounds of their test, they assumed that masculinity and femininity were opposites by applying a bipolar approach that excluded each other. They found out that personal interests and, unexpectedly, age were related with femininity and masculinity, that, for instance, reached its highest extent in the late teens and early twenties. In Terman and Miles' perspective, masculinity and femininity were two independent dimensions whose attribution depends on the ownership of positive instrumental traits, in the case of masculinity, and of positive expressive traits, in the case of femininity. Whoever owns high levels of both masculine and feminine traits should be conceived as 'androgynous'¹⁷. It follows that masculinity and femininity are defined on the basis of individual appearances, habitual gestures, attitudes, biological traits, occupations, interests, personality and social roles. The combination of these factors provides the prototype of masculinity or femininity. Nevertheless, the question whether biological factors are the main source of differences among men and women arises.

Biological theories argue that, obviously other than the physical dissimilarity, there are some innate differences between the sexes to the point that individuals may be born as masculine or feminine¹⁸. Following the Darwin's theory of evolution¹⁹, the principle of natural selection that is at its core is defined by him as the "principle by which each slight variation [of a trait], if useful, is preserved"²⁰. It is stated that natural selection is a procedure without any distinction, occurring under circumstances by which organisms fight over existence and have difficulties in reproduction due to environmental changes. At the same time, surviving traits that are inherited by next generations are told to be adaptive by evolving and helping the organism towards survival and reproduction. It follows that evolutionary theorists claim that, throughout history, different evolutionary pressures have affected women and men. In particular, the American biologist Edward Wilson²¹, who was the father of sociobiology, argued that hominid women had been taught to be caring and to look after their children

¹⁶ Terman, L.M., & Miles, C.C. (1936). *Sex and Personality: studies in masculinity and femininity*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

¹⁷ Having the characteristics or nature of both male and female sexes.

¹⁸ Lippa, R. A. (2005). *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*, (Chap. 3). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Inc.

¹⁹ Described in his book *On The Origin of Species* (1859), it is the process by which organisms change over time as a result of changes in heritable physical or behavioral traits.

²⁰ Darwin, C.R. (1859). *On The Origin of Species* – 1st ed., (Chap. 3, p. 61) London: John Murray.

²¹ Wilson, E.O. (1975). *Sociobiology. The new synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

and their evolution led them to be nurturing, while men had been taught to fight and hunt and over time they evolved as more aggressive and skilled.

Scholars in biology and evolutionary studies, such as Trivers and Buss, mentioned by Lippa in *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*, have also argued that some differences between sexes noticeable in terms of a larger predisposition to care in women would be determined by the restricted production of 'fertilized eggs' from women, who appear to be a limited resource. Hence, women would be more likely to guarantee the survival of their offspring by investing resources and time, while men, who provide an unlimited number of offspring, would be less willing to take care of an individual offspring. As a consequence, women happened to be more committing and sexually selective, in order to be careful of their children, and men happened to be less willing to commit, but, contemporarily, more aggressive and competitive with same-sex members by seeking to attract the opposite-sex members. Throughout evolution, these conditions translate in men displaying their power, economic resources, dominance and aggression with the aim of attracting their mates; inasmuch as those men finding their mates are more likely to pass their genes to next generations.

Conversely, Todd W. Reeser (2010) explains the concept of masculinity as an ideology: "*a series of beliefs that a group of people buy into and that influences how they go about their lives*"²². Although ideology is commonly linked to politics, masculinity can also be understood as an ideology. The reason behind is that a dominant ideology is associated with power, which is quite existent in masculinity. However, the latter, in parallel with ideology, is not constructed by a single source that is accountable for its creation, rather, multiple sources and institutions, for example the military, contribute to its spread and establishment. Reeser states that an ideology may be constructed and spread by means of social forms, images, myths, discourses and practices that are daily repeated to the point that they are assumed to be natural and improbably questioned²³. This happens, for instance, through advertising which, in contemporary society, become a key means in the diffusion of a certain image of masculinity. Images in advertising do not actually represent what masculinity is, but they provide subtle symbols of which individuals may be unaware about what masculinity should be. As images become widespread, they are translated into myths and culturally develop the construction of masculinity. Likewise, the ideology is materially constructed and strengthened by the practices that are inscribed in the everyday life and they translate the abstract ideology into a physical interaction too.

²² Reeser, T.W. (2010). *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Chap. 1, p. 20). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21-24.

In line with this perspective, Reeser identifies language as a key source in the formation of the masculinity and argues that the way people act as men and women cannot be separated from the way people think of femininity and masculinity²⁴. In this regard, language works as a point of connection between the way we think of gender and the way we act gender. The analysis of the use of language helps to define the gender hierarchy; as a result, masculinity is constructed by how it is talked about, perceived and strongly mediated and influenced by language, use of words and articulation behind. Even the etymology of certain words appears fundamental in associating masculinity with specific traits: the word ‘virtue’, for example, derives from latin ‘*vir*’ that stands for male and implies a linear correlation between masculinity and virtue. Although the perception of the word and its etymology may not be strictly related, a cultural correlation between the two can be eventually reflected as unavoidable due to the etymology of the word.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, the philosopher Judith Butler reflects upon at which level an individual determines his acts or at which degree his acts are constructed by language and conventions. She claims that the concept of a ‘natural’ behavior is the outcome of hidden and subtle constraints and explores the manners by which language constructs the social world through daily speech acts. By incorporating social conventions in daily performative and speech acts, the artificial norms are not questioned and are regarded as natural or even necessary.

Analogously, another study²⁵ shows that the sex category given at birth is the one by which people feel to be categorized for their entire life. Besides any social criteria assigned to sex distinctions, it is not possible to classify them on the sole basis of objective traits and, hence, they are social constructions which strongly link sex with gender, that, rather, becomes “*the basis for distinctions based on sex*”²⁶. The process by which individuals acquire gender-related characteristics and perform the gendered behaviors that are expected by society is the gender socialization.

According to Wharton, three are the main theories of socialization: social learning, cognitive development and identification. The social learning involves the learning of gender roles by teaching children the gender appropriate or inappropriate behavior. The cognitive development focuses on the internalization of gender meanings learnt by society and used to construct an individual identity. In particular, the psychologist Sandra Bem, cited by Wharton, underlines the idea that what is acceptable for women may not be such for men and the other way around, otherwise anyone is considered as unnaturally deviated. Therefore, Bem also points out the existence of androcentrism in American society which refers to the idea that masculinity is thought to be superior to femininity and to be also

²⁴ Ibid., 29-30.

²⁵ Wharton, A.S. (2005). *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research*, (p. 19). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 22.

the standard, by letting children internalize this gender system²⁷. Lastly, the psychoanalytic perspective set out by the identification theory is focused on gender, gender identity and sexuality; theorists believe that unconscious psychological processes can lead to some characteristics of gender. In this instance, gender identity should be understood as the individual sense of being female or male, that might coincide with the biological sex or might differ from it.

Moving from a symbolic interactionist approach which relates to Garfinkel's studies, Butler argues that "*gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being*"²⁸. In this sense, gender is understood as not only unnatural, but also as a construction produced by repeated actions that establish the two massive categories of what is regarded as 'feminine' or 'masculine'. Essentially, gender is not biologically determined, but it is continuously performed and reinforced by societal norms. What establishes the perception of gender itself and the creation of two sexes are the performance of gender, that, basically, is repeatedly performed; in this respect, individuals are not women or men, but they think to be either by acting as such. Whoever fails acting their gender correctly might face negative consequences.

Simone De Beauvoir explains how femininity is socio-culturally constructed as inferior in relation to masculinity. According to her, since femininity is regarded as inferior, a hierarchy between masculinity and femininity has been constructed. In *Second Sex*²⁹, she points out that socially constructed definitions of femininity and masculinity set out a hierarchical order that is not reversible between the sexes. For women, there is no possibility of being considered on a par. Although the two sexes are necessary for each other, this necessity has never been conceptualized in terms of a reciprocal condition between them. What she states is that women are never placed at the same level of men in the social contract between the two sexes. Women happen to be defined and differentiated in relation to men, while the opposite never occurs. Indeed, the relation between the two is not reciprocal since women become to be defined as 'other' in relation to men, but men are not defined as 'other' in relation to women. For this reason, Beauvoir argues that women are 'incidental', namely unessential with respect to the essential. The man is the subject, whereas the woman results to be always and constantly the object. Hence, the definition of the woman as 'other' constructs the woman as 'other', unequal in relation to the man, indeed, inferior. The issue is not that the woman is constructed as 'other', as something different, but it focuses on the fact that the man is never defined

²⁷ Ibid. p. 34.

²⁸ Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

²⁹ Beauvoir, S. de. (1989). *The Second Sex* – 6th ed. New York: Vintage Books.

on the basis of the woman. This results in defining the woman as the object, while the man as the subject and, consequently, a hierarchy is created between the two sexes.

Lastly, the idea that gender is a social construction was already developed by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel, who is regarded as the father of the ethnomethodology, that is a sociological discipline which analyses the daily practices, through which human beings produce and reproduce their own world. Hence, the fundamental principle is that the social order is not external to the individual, but that any order, included gender order, is created by means of the reproduction of practices. This principle is evident in Butler, but it was already elaborated by Garfinkel and the symbolic interactionism³⁰. Practices are believed to be able not only to reproduce, but also to subvert and change the social order. In Garfinkel's perspective, the gender is created by the practices through which people try to show their womanhood or manhood. In 1967, Garfinkel published *Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an intersexed person*³¹, where he explains a study that he conducted on Agnes Torres, who introduces herself to him as an intersex person, but who, in reality, later, was found out to be a transgender woman. His study is focused on the observation of practices through which she constructs or introduces herself as a woman. He discovers that gender is not internal to the individual, but neither completely external. It arises by learning and executing behaviors that are deemed as appropriate for their own 'public'. This concept is inspired by Goffman's dramaturgical theory, whose fundamental requirement for a good performance is naturalness. The naturalness of gender does not come from the fact that individuals are born with a certain gender, but it arises only because behaviors deemed as appropriate for female or male children are constantly reproduced since early childhood. Even though gender appears as natural, it is not since, as shown by Agnes Torres' case study, it can be learnt also in advanced age. The reason why gender appears as natural is that individuals constantly repeat a set of behaviors until they become to be ordinary and, thus, natural.

1.3. Hierarchies of Masculinities

At this point, from the seventies, the majority of scholars believe that masculinity is not biologically, but socially and historically constructed; by the way, men's studies had not been developed until the nineties. Writers such as David Morgan identify masculinity as a '*cultural*

³⁰ Sociological theory that explains social behavior by observing how people interact with each other through symbols.

³¹ Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*, (Chap. 5). Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.

*space*³², by claiming that masculine and feminine traits can be associated with both men and women since they are only socially and culturally constructed assumptions on people. In line with that, Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett define, firstly, masculinity as a set of culturally accepted attitudes and practices usually linked to men and, secondly, as an unfixed concept that is continuously constructed and reinterpreted through interaction³³; hence, multiple kinds of masculinities should be taken into account.

In line with this perspective, Connell states that gender acts as a structure of social practice by means of the “*reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction*”³⁴. As gender is a social practice, it does not involve biological determinants and it addresses a bodily reproduction of daily practices within historical circumstances. Accordingly, masculinity is defined by Connell as “*the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture*”³⁵. Hence, gender, particularly masculinity, should be understood as a structure of social practice, daily reproduced at different historical paths.

Connell distinguishes three kinds of relations that structure gender: power, production and cathexis relations. Power relations have at their core the gender order established by the persistent male dominance over women and draw up the issue of its legitimacy. Production relations are based on the gender divisions of labor, next to which the capitalist economy works not accidentally, but by letting men take control of leading companies and associating them with wealth, while reinforcing the social relations of gender. Finally, cathexis focuses on the idea that sexual desire commonly seems to be natural, while it is shaped by practices that are part of the gender order, since relationships involve questions of consensus or coerciveness related to the dominant position of men³⁶. At the same time, masculinity also interacts with race, class and nationality, since men are placed at different social positions and create their masculine identity on the grounds of different cultures and available resources that can lead to its successful construction.

This shows that masculinity cannot be uniformly defined through time, culture, class and race and it places itself within a system of gender relations to the point that this interplay creates a multiplicity of masculinities. Elaborating the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell analyzes

³² Morgan, D.H.J. (1992). *Discovering Men: Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities*. London: Routledge.

³³ Whitehead, S.M., & Barrett, F.J. (2001). *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press.

³⁴ Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities* – 2nd ed., (p. 71). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73-75.

the cultural belief on the basis of which certain masculinities are defined as worthy and others not and argues that a hierarchy of masculinities can be noticed in every society. Hegemonic masculinity is thus both an ideology (which defines what is worth and what is not) and a list of traits which every man should work to acquire in order to be recognized as a 'real' man.

The concept of hegemony comes from the analysis of Antonio Gramsci on the establishment and maintenance of control by the bourgeoisie. He defined hegemony as a cultural dynamic by which the dominance of a group over another is legitimized by norms that become to be commonsensical and intuitive, through the inhibition of alternative ideas. In relation to masculinity, hegemony is produced through the legitimization of the male dominance over women worldwide by maintaining authority over women and 'unworthy' men. Indeed, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "*the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*"³⁷. Hegemonic masculinity does not only concern the relation of men with women, but also the relation of men with other men, because at its core it has the control over others that is legitimized in society through the promotion of the dominance of masculinity over femininity and the idea that only men, those that are deserving, can have access to certain roles or positions. As a result, a hierarchy of masculinities is created by marginalizing those individuals that do not satisfy the requirements of the most popular ideology of manliness in society.

The dominant form of masculinity in Western culture, as mentioned above, is hegemonic masculinity that relates the 'right' way of being a man to heterosexuality, white, middle class, physical strength, success, violence and lack of emotions. It follows that, on one side, a complicit masculinity develops by not satisfying all the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and not challenging it either, on the other side, the construction of hegemonic masculinity is always related to women and non-hegemonic masculinities which are all at the center of the functioning of the patriarchal social order. Clearly, the main form of subordinate masculinity resulted from the dominance of heterosexuality is homosexuality that leads homosexual men to the bottom of the hierarchy of masculinities. Connell claims that the reason behind is connected to the patriarchal ideology, that associates femininity with gayness and exempts it from hegemonic masculinity, due to a significant lack of required qualities. Likewise, individuals such as non-white or disabled men, who lack the possibility to conform and benefit from hegemonic masculinity, belong to a form of marginalized masculinity³⁸.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 77.

³⁸ Ibid., 77-81.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has been criticized³⁹ by Demetriou who argued that it was too simplified. He acknowledges the existence of two kinds of hegemony, that are internal and external. The external hegemony stands for the dominance of men over women, whereas the internal hegemony is seen as elitist since one male group is dominant over other men, but, even though subordinate and marginalized masculinities exist in relation to it, they do not affect its construction. Demetriou reckons that the best strategy that external hegemony may adopt in order to continue its domination is a process of hybridity. This means that hegemonic masculinity might take over some characteristics of internal hegemony, belonging to other masculinities, so as to adapt easily to historical changes in masculinities and to reproduce its domination.

It is also important to consider that hegemonic masculinity is constructed along femininity since women are fundamental for its maintenance as mothers, wives or partners. Their submissive roles to men are conceptualized under 'emphasized femininity'⁴⁰, named as such to underline the asymmetry among masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal and gendered system. Emphasized femininity concerns the compliance with patriarchy by fulfilling needs and desires of men and, at the same time, by being unaware of the existing inequality that is such culturally internalized in their everyday life. Indeed, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu asserts to be impressed by the paradox "[...] *that the established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges, and injustices, ultimately perpetuates itself so easily [...] and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural*"⁴¹. Bourdieu relates this issue to masculine domination as one of the main examples of paradoxical submission, as a consequence of symbolic violence, whose victims are often unaware and use ways of thought originated themselves from that domination, in particular through communicative symbols. As an instrument of socio-analysis of androcentric unconsciousness able to objectify the unconscious categories, Bourdieu analyzes objective structures and cognitive forms of the Kabyle society, representative of the 'phallonnarcissistic' view of all Mediterranean societies. In the Kabyle society, the sexual order involves a social meaning as sexual differences belong to a series of homologous oppositions organizing all the cosmos. These schemes result to be perceived as natural differences and distinctive traits are seen as objectively part of the nature and, consequently, legitimized to the extent that this division falls within a natural and habitual order. In this manner, the strength of masculine domination does not need to be justified since the androcentric vision is already legitimized by itself in terms of

³⁹ Connell, R.W., & Messerschmidt, J.W. (2005, December). Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 844-845. Published by Sage Publications, Inc.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 848.

⁴¹ Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine Domination*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1998)

neutrality. This social perception also applies on the body as a biological reality, whose anatomic, sexual differences serve as a natural justification of socially contrasted differences among genders. Hence, a circular casualty occurs since the social vision determines subjective cognitive schemes that, in turn, determine the objective social division; the outcome is the reciprocal influence between subjectivity and objectivity. Given that the schemes of thought and perception of ruled individuals are produced by the domination and comply with its structures, those are not acts of consciousness, but of recognition, as an endorsement of the submission. The difference between men and women is socially constructed by an emphasis of their dissimilarities and an annulment of their similarities and generates the vision of women and men as two variants of the same physiology, respectively inferior and superior.

Bourdieu states that ‘internal-external’ sexual difference has also been instrumental in justifying the status of inferiority of femininity, as sensitivity-reason or passivity-activity. The body is constituted by a frontal and a back part, among which the latter is commonly associated with women because of passivity and submission. Therefore, there is a distinction between public parts, relative to ‘*noble organs of self-presentation*’⁴², and private parts, that should be hidden as shameful. In Kabyle society, this distinction between public and private is linked to the social exposition since men are active participants of the public sphere, while women are distant from it. Sexual relationship and social relationship assimilate each other by reproducing the division between masculine, as active, and feminine, as passive; through this connection among sexuality and power, it is explained why for a man to be associated with femininity is humiliating. The strength of masculine domination is acquired by the combination of two operations: “*it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction*”⁴³. This transformation instills a distinctive definition of legitimate uses of body and sexuality and causes a ‘*somatization of the social relations of domination*’⁴⁴, by fostering the distinctive practices of the genders.

The same symbolic policies acted by women, as the dominated side, against men, as the dominant side, come from the same androcentric vision that is continuously legitimized by its determinant practices; for instance, men are taught to neglect their feminine side, whereas women to show their purity and be submissive. Thereby, as the masculine domination finds all the conditions enabling its full exercise, it can be regarded as a symbolic violence due to its invisible and subtle nature. The measures of domination are, indeed, constructed by a long process of socialization. Men

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

are ruled by honor without any external constriction, in the sense that it conducts its thoughts and actions as a logical necessity, not as an imposed rule. However, nobility and honor are worldwide measures that society has inculcated to be naturally biological and that have become a part of social law. While masculine domination privileges the dominant side, it also forces it to affirm its manliness in any circumstance. Manliness is described by Bourdieu as both a reproductive, sexual and social capability and an inclination in combat and violence. This emphasis of masculine values implies, on one side, a liability for men, on the other side, a certain fear and distress towards femininity since the possibility of weakness is not granted for a ‘real’ man to be considered as such, who needs to prove and affirm his manliness before others, that, in turn, need to validate it. According to Bourdieu, these are the reasons why manliness is clearly a relational concept, created in opposition to femininity, throughout a development of fear towards it, above all in one’s own individuality.

Both Connell’s and Bourdieu’s analysis underline the idea that the restriction of masculinity to a very narrow set of characteristics opposed to femininity is harmful not just for women, but also for men. To obtain full recognition in our society, men are required to comply with a given set of characteristics which cannot be met by most men or which require the performance of risky behaviors to be proven. In the next paragraph, I will discuss how those toxic practices engaged by men have become to be conceptualized under the term of ‘toxic masculinity’, which underlines the emotional stress provoked in men by the requirements they should fulfill to be validated as masculine. Furthermore, I will explain why the meaning of the term of toxic masculinity is often misunderstood and whether a healthy masculinity does exist.

1.4. Toxic Masculinity

A series of cultural and social norms, behaviors and practices associated with masculinity have become to be understood by media and the academic debate as ‘toxic masculinity’. This concept aims at stressing how a certain socially constructed definition of masculinity can be harmful to society, women and men themselves. Concerns about the toxicity of masculinity have been expressed by several voices in recent years.

Alongside the realization of guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men in 2018, for example, the American Psychological Association (APA) has argued that traditional masculinity “*marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression – is, on the whole, harmful*”⁴⁵. The scholar Pappas claims that men prone to this attitude are more likely to undertake unhealthy behaviors

⁴⁵ Pappas, S. (2019). APA issues first-ever guidelines for practice with men and boys. *Monitor on Psychology*, 50(1). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/01/ce-corner>

and, pursuant to other studies, are less likely to prevent their health care, while considering risky health behaviors as normal and avoiding psychological help. According to the psychologist Frank, as early as 1987, Eisler and Skidmore came up with the idea of a ‘*masculine gender-role stress*’⁴⁶ (MGRS), in the sense that individuals highly committed to traditional masculine norms may happen to suffer from daily psychological distress. Specifically, they have pointed out five different elements characterizing MGRS, to which individuals excessively prone to unhealthy, violent and abusive behavior react: feeling of physical inadequacy provoking low self-esteem, expression of emotions, subordination to women leading to a loss of male identity, revealing intellectual inferiority and performing unsuccessfully. This means that the emotional stress associated with the male role in society comes from a cultural requirement of showing a certain body image and physical strength, from an avoidance of being perceived as emotional in order not to be related to feminine characteristics and, hence, not to be regarded as weaker, from a need of falling within social standards, in terms of economic status and interpersonal matters. Men who do not fall within social norms are pressured to adapt their self-identity to them, by recovering those shortcomings that result from not complying with traditional masculine standards. For this reason, the self-esteem might be quite lowered and feelings of guilt and also of loss in terms of control and identity might frequently occur. Similarly, in her book *We Should All Be Feminists* that has become popular in recent debate on feminism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes: “*We do a great a disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage*”⁴⁷. Indeed, toxic masculinity is properly defined as such, it is named as toxic because it stifles and prevents a man from being human, from feeling and expressing emotions common to all human beings, and it forces to be constantly strong, even if he eventually needs to be supported or comforted. Although not all men are affected by toxic masculinity, there is always the chance that whoever has not been taught to follow strictly or occasionally those principles is still somehow affected and socially pressured, by being marginalized and regarded as unusual. It is important to remark that one of the worst, unfortunately most spread, belief is that feminism only favors women, as an attempt to overturn society and to place them in a position of power above men. Naturally, this idea is far away from the real understanding of feminism, that, as a matter of fact, believes in the gender equality and in the abatement of both female and male stereotypes.

⁴⁶ Frank, E. (Ed.). (2000). *American Psychopathological Association series. Gender and its effects on psychopathology*. American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.

⁴⁷ Adichie, C.N. (2015). *We Should All Be Feminists*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

According to Australian feminist studies⁴⁸, the term ‘toxic’ has, indeed, a negative connotation since it describes a state of owning or being poisonous and harmful due to impacts that toxicants have on living beings’ health. Culturally, the term is used to define those social relationships, interactions or environments that affect negatively individuals. Hence, toxic masculinity comprises those toxic behaviors arising from masculinity that have caused much distress on men, women and LGBTQ+ community. It is reported that toxic masculinity is the main source for men to be pushed to control, seek power and be guilty of sexual and domestic violence, ending up avoiding emotions, worsening mental health, disregarding physical health and engaging in toxic, violent and often homophobic actions. Often, early as childhood, the socialization of boys following patriarchal norms happens to normalize actions of bullying and violence through the idea of ‘boys will be boys’. The latter justifies and legitimizes aggressive behaviors of male children and teenagers as biological instincts that should not (and cannot) be limited; hence, it produces unconscious biases and constructs gender stereotypes. Originally the term toxic masculinity was coined during the eighties by Shepherd Bliss under the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement, whose aim, described under the *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*⁴⁹, was to encourage men to explore their emotions, through the telling of myths and fairy tales, and to overcome those barriers that inhibit their emotional expression. Mythopoeists tended to associate the Jungian archetypes⁵⁰ with masculine psychic energies in their myths in order to bring out theirs and to engage in a developmental course. Even though, at the end, the movement failed at challenging the patriarchal system and only practiced a sort of masculinity therapy, mythopoeists’ practices actively challenged the diffused ideas about masculinity.

Unfortunately, ‘*the problem with a fight against toxic masculinity*’⁵¹, exactly how the article of Michael Salter is entitled, is linked to the misunderstanding of the term, whose use is seen as controversial by both conservative and liberal positions that misinterpret the meaning behind the concept of toxic masculinity. They believe that the use of the term refers to the issue of masculine aggression as a ‘*cultural or spiritual illness*’⁵², strongly existent in men for being men, as if they have been infected by it and then led to abusiveness and violence. This assumed conception drives antifeminist critics to understand the term as an existential threat towards manhood and a backlash

⁴⁸ Waling, A. (2019, October). Problematizing ‘Toxic’ and ‘Healthy’ Masculinity for Addressing Gender Inequalities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 34(101), 362-375. Melbourne: Routledge. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021>

⁴⁹ Flood, M., Gardiner, J.K., Pease, B., & Pringle, K. (eds.) (2007). *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, 1 vol. London & New York: Routledge.

⁵⁰ Defined by the psychiatrist Carl Jung as universal and archaic images that originate from the collective unconscious and that inborn inclinations that construct models of people and behaviors.

⁵¹ Salter, M. (2019, February 27). The Problem with a Fight against Toxic Masculinity. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/02/toxic-masculinity-history/583411/>

⁵² Ibid.

from feminism since they feel that it categorizes all men in the same manner. Moreover, many men, even not antifeminist, argue that the term describes masculinity itself as toxic, pushes men to be less masculine and to be ‘feminized’, neglects the issue of ‘toxic femininity’ and aims at weakening men and eliminating them. Eventually, the dismissal of the idea of toxic masculinity is due to the fact that it seems to indicate manhood as a sort of ‘*congenital defect*’⁵³.

In *Ask a Feminist*⁵⁴, the sociologist Michael Kimmel claims that the dichotomy between toxic masculine practices, that are discouraged, and healthy masculine practices, that are encouraged, does not resonate for a significant number of men. Men react to that by feeling as being told to be wrong for being men and to adopt new behaviors, by giving up on old ones. The outcome is that many men might not let go of toxic behaviors because they are considered as unhealthy for being masculine. “*We’re asking them to renounce Vin Diesel and embrace Ryan Gosling*”⁵⁵ is what Kimmel states. Then, he tells about an annual sexual assault awareness lecture, addressed to cadets, where he asked them what meant for them to be a ‘real’ man. He deduces that they told him about the performative part of being a ‘real’ man, that appears to be homosocial, by associating it to strength, competitiveness and richness which are performed for others and are used as means for being validated by other men. Contrarily, the good man, typically associated with a relative or a friend, appears to be abstract. Therefore, he explained them that, at some point in life, it will may occur that they will be asked to betray their own values and beliefs in order to prove to be ‘real’ men. His purpose was not to tell them that their attitudes were toxic, but to clarify them that “*they are already experiencing a conflict, inside them, between their own values and this homosocial performance*”⁵⁶.

Besides that, Andrea Waling discusses some issues behind the term of toxic masculinity in terms of reproducing some gender and sexual inequalities. She claims that the term entails a reliance on the conception of ‘a *‘diseased’ and ‘well’ body*’⁵⁷, that assumes the existence of a toxicant affecting both men and surroundings. Subsequently, masculinity becomes to be seen as a pre-existing, instead of relational, disease contaminating worldwide all the male individuals, who seem to be unavoidable victims, in the case that no cautionary measure has occurred, and exempted from an active engagement. Similarly, she argues that toxic masculinity, due to its assumed ahistorical character,

⁵³ Vinopal, L. (2020, February). Toxic Masculinity Is a Myth, but Insecure Men Lash Out at Women. *Fatherly*. Last Updated: April 23, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherly.com/health-science/toxic-masculinity-fake-male-insecurity/>

⁵⁴ Conversation that is part of the Feminist Public Intellectual Project, presented by *Signs*.

⁵⁵ Kimmel, M., & Wade, L. (2018). Ask a Feminist: Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade Discuss Toxic Masculinity. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(1), 233-254.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷ Waling, A. (2019, October). Problematizing ‘Toxic’ and ‘Healthy’ Masculinity for Addressing Gender Inequalities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 34(101), 362-375. Melbourne: Routledge. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1679021>

might use masculinity as a catchall variable that drives all men's issues, by exempting the responsibility of men from violent acts while blaming an indefinite agent. At the same time, it runs the risk of undermining the value of traditional traits of masculinity that appear to be appropriate and positive under certain circumstances, specifically in the event that they are queered and eroticized.

Nonetheless, toxic masculinity is a term that finally addresses in an explicit manner a set of subtle men's issues that have been constructed long time ago by patriarchal systems, but that still feature society and provide negative repercussions on male individuals themselves and, at the same time, on the whole humankind. Indeed, the concept's intention is not to argue that masculinity is toxic in itself, but rather that some masculine behaviors appear to be associated with hurtful actions. Toxic masculinity implies fundamentally gendered constructs producing toxic behaviors related to masculinity, from which men are conceptually separated and do not embody an issue by nature, with the aim to anticipate critics by men's right and antifeminist movements that reclaim the devaluation of men and masculinity as an outcome of feminism. Yet, an overlooked point is that men, especially from antifeminist and right-wing movements and who often feel themselves as victims, easily neglect the fact that "*men are often the ones who send other men to war, kill and imprison other men*"⁵⁸ and how some groups of men reinforce the structural violence and benefit from other groups of men who are physically and economical exploited and more affected by that violence, in particular in the military context. In this respect, it is reported that psychologists perceive the refusal of toxic masculinity as a fear for men that their status and position of power might be lost or taken away together with their masculine status.

At last, one question arises: might 'healthy masculinity' be a response to toxic masculinity? First of all, Waling confers to 'healthy masculinity' some feminist roots, in the sense that the idea behind is to teach men to be aware of the responsibilities they have by being men, to fight against the conception of masculinity ascribed by the oppressive and patriarchal system and, consequently, to carry on the breaking of power relations producing gender inequality on both male and female behalf. If men use their privileged position for preventing themselves and others from engaging in toxic masculinity, the latter will be more likely to be eliminated and men will be more likely to be willing to show their emotional vulnerability. In this case, 'healthy masculinity' refers to the promotion to engage in one's own emotions and to undertake sexual and, as well, emotional relationships, regardless of gender, in order to improve themselves. Therefore, the distinction between the terms 'healthy' and 'toxic' is a relevant point that underlines not only the encouragement towards boys and men to explore and express their emotions, but also to raise awareness of men's issues related to

⁵⁸ De Boise, S. (2019, August). Editorial: is masculinity toxic? *NORMA, International Journal For Masculinity Studies*, 14(3), 147-151. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2019.1654742>

mental and physical health and to *create safe spaces*⁵⁹ to make them feel comfortable and open in respect to their vulnerability.

By the way, some controversies can be arisen also in regard to the term ‘healthy masculinity’. It should be taken into account that, at the moment, there is no worldwide approved definition on what is considered to be ‘healthy masculinity’ and which its nuances are, for instance how marginalization is experienced on the grounds of factors such as class, gender identity, culture, sexuality and race. Last but not least, ‘healthy masculinity’ might still engage in the reproduction of a hierarchy that empowers masculinity over femininity, since the term does not involve a fair feminine shade and seems to repack femininity in a new shape of masculinity that adopts traditional traits attributed to women. Indeed, ‘healthy masculinity’ proves to be much problematic because it reproduces a process by which men are still meant to express only one form of gender identity and femininity is still devalued. As a result, no deconstruction of gender binaries takes place and the same applies to a combination of masculine and feminine traits, aside from biological sex and gender identity.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

2. Chapter two: The Social Impact of Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity reproduces and reinforces existing gender hierarchies and, in so doing, strongly affects men, women, and the LGBTQ+ community. It promotes traditional and rigid gender roles, gender norms and gender binarism by reproducing structural inequalities between genders and forcing men to abide to a certain way of being men in order to be recognized in society. It follows that toxic masculinity is strictly related to the promotion of violence and aggression because it leads men to picture themselves as aggressive and powerful. In a patriarchal society, each man is taught to be the strongest, to provide on his own all the financial resources for his family and to measure up to any issue or situation in which he finds himself. The key element that any 'real' man has to own is virility, which excludes feminine traits, seen as weak, and encourages to suppress the emotional side, to pursue success and to reach the highest social status, self-sufficiency, physical strength, sexual prowess and aggressiveness. Moreover, it is essential that all these masculine characteristics intrinsic to toxic masculinity are validated from other men in order to demonstrate at the fullest one's own masculine identity. Thereby, the power that features the constant affirmation of masculinity has a universal cost, which is paid with struggles concerning physical health, often caused by unhealthy and risk-taking behaviors, aimed at proving strength and resistance (i.e. alcohol consumption, tobacco, drug use), and with mental issues, due to the pressure and anxiety for complying with the societal standards attributed to the dominant masculine identity. As the latter leads men to picture themselves as aggressive, powerful and always on the sexual hunt, they consequently feel the power and allowance to sexually harass and assault women, who are perceived as sexual objects aimed at men's pleasure. The persistent sexual objectification of women's bodies seems to normalize the expansion of a rape culture, whose founding myths promptly do not blame violent actions on the perpetrators, but on the victims who are believed to incite them to act in this way. The affirmation of the masculine identity also results to highly affect the LGBTQ+ community, whose members do not conform with the heteronormative society's norms, both in terms of sexual desires and gender identity. LGBTQ+ identities represent a breach of hegemonic masculine norms and, for this reason, generate fears in heterosexual men that what they have rejected for a lifetime might be uncontrollably incorporated by them. This fear is reflected in the perpetration of homophobia and transphobia, which involves discrimination and violence against individuals who are not in conformity with societal standards, especially masculine ones.

Hence, the aim of the chapter is to show how toxic masculinity negatively impacts men in the first place, who, in turn, overcompensate their anxieties by repudiating what challenges their power and proving their superiority through violent behaviors toward others. In the first paragraph, I will

illustrate which are the fundamental traits at the core of the masculine identity, that traps men in the so-called ‘Man Box’. In the second paragraph, I will discuss the negative repercussions on the men’s physical and mental health that arise from the unhealthy and risky behaviors that men take on in order to compensate or strongly affirm their masculinity. In the third paragraph, I will argue that society is characterized by a rape culture that normalizes violence, inherent to masculine norms, from which the great sense of power and dominance derives and that leads men to commit sexual harassments and assaults on women, who happen to be blamed for the harm that befalls them. Finally, in the last paragraph, I will claim that the repudiation of femininity and of nonconformities to a heteronormative society, that strictly relates to hegemonic masculinity, cause the diffusion of homophobia and transphobia.

2.1. The ‘Man Box’ and its Social Impact

As mentioned in the first chapter, toxic masculinity has revisited the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. It was for the first time defined by the sociologist Connell as the cultural legitimization of the masculine domination over society that has caused the subordination or marginalization of those who are excluded from the powerful position, because they do not comply with the dominant ideology. The concept of toxic masculinity has emerged in the last decade through a deeper analysis of those traditional practices that portray men as socially dominant and that, over time, have resulted to be toxic and harmful to all society, due to their implicit promotion of violence, sexual assault, misogyny and homotransphobia. Nonetheless, paradoxically, in the interview with Lisa Wade, the sociologist Michael Kimmel states that “*all of the power in the world has not trickled down to individual men feeling powerful*”⁶⁰, meaning that a widespread sense of powerlessness emerges amongst men despite the existence of a social order which largely benefits them. Undeniably, men inhabit a stronger societal position than women, due to a series of advantages, that are not personally gained, but that are inherent to their belonging to a social group associated with their biological sex. Yet, the exercise of privileges does not exclude a component of oppression, rather, they influence each other. Indeed, it must be taken into account that patriarchy consists of a duality of power, which means that men’s power is not only existent over women, but also over other men who feel as ‘losers’ because they do not comply with the requirements that society asks to be fulfilled in order to be a man. Naturally, being in a privileged social position has a cost, which is paid with living in a state of conflict and competition with one’s self that might not be even acknowledged. Moreover, while

⁶⁰ Kimmel, M., & Wade, L. (2018). Ask a Feminist: Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade Discuss Toxic Masculinity. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(1), 233-254.

women have realized, thanks to the feminist movement, that they can both embody typical ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits, many men still do not feel enough confident to embody traits that are wrongly associated with femininity, and, rather, should be degendered and regarded only as human traits. For example, in *Guyland*⁶¹, Kimmel shows how differently adolescent girls and boys relate to what is considered to be typically feminine or masculine. While girls are taught to suppress their ambition and often underestimate their abilities, particularly in relation to educational areas traditionally associated with masculinity, boys tend to follow the Boy Code that teaches them to overestimate their abilities, especially in subjects associated with male gender, because of the power they are told to have by the code. The difference lies in the fact that girls, although they tend to undervalue their skills, often attempt to follow a different path from what they have been told and they have in mind from the beginning that they may not be necessarily wrong in what they do, at the end they attempt at least to question themselves. Contrarily, boys, by overestimating their abilities, do not accept the possibility of failure, hence, if they know that they are choosing a path they are told not to follow and they have in mind from the beginning that it is definitely right or wrong, they prefer following the path they are supposed to succeed in rather than eventually failing. Furtherly, an academic career that is believed to be mainly feminine also results to be degrading for boys because they are promptly associated with femininity, which denies their masculine identity. In order to avoid a presumed failure, an association with femininity and a consequent dissent by other men, boys are less likely to embark in a path that is not inherent to their gender role, even in regard to their overall lifestyle. Unlike boys, it is more socially acceptable that girls incorporate masculine attitudes or ambitions since association with masculinity is not degrading as much as it is association with femininity for boys’ identity. Subsequent to social norms learnt from a young age, men are less prone to follow a path attributed to the female gender role and, thus, to take on feminine attitudes or traits. On this perspective, the TED Talk presented at the TEDWomen 2017 by the actor and filmmaker Justin Baldoni is a good example of a dialogue with men in regard to the redefinition of masculinity, in order not only to be good men, but also good humans. Through a personal and emotional speech, Justin Baldoni shares his effort in the attempt of reconciling his identity with what the world believes a man should be. He explains that, as an actor, he has been given scripts of many male characters embodying machismo, charisma and power, that do not reflect himself, rather, he claims that “*it was how Hollywood saw me [...] I’ve been pretending to be a man that I’m not my entire life. I’ve been pretending to be strong when I felt weak, confident when I felt insecure and tough when really I was hurting. I think for the most part I’ve just been kind of putting on a show, but I’m tired of performing. And I can tell you right now that is exhausting trying to be a ‘man enough’ for everyone all the*

⁶¹ Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: Harper.

time”⁶². Having that said, he reports that how he has been told to grow up as a certain kind of man from his childhood made him reject feminine qualities, included the vulnerability of his father, and prevented him from sharing his insecurities or fear of failure.

Similarly, in the event of TEDWomen 2010, the educator and activist Tony Porter reports how he had been taught to be tough and strong at any time and to reject emotions, especially vulnerability, with the exception of anger. Specifically, he describes some occurred situations in his life that made him realize to be locked in a cage. For instance, he tells about the relationship he had with his father who, at the death of Tony Porter’s brother in adolescence, in order to avoid crying in front of the women of his family, happened to burst out crying only in front of his son, to whom he apologized for his reaction and gave cues not to act in the same way. Moreover, he speaks of his relationship with his son whom, contrary to his daughter, at the early age of twelve years old, encouraged to ‘get himself together’, when he was crying and asking him for help, and to talk to him only by behaving ‘like a man’⁶³. Tony Porter encloses all these features, reactions and behaviors, that have been taught to men and that are regarded as essential in order to satisfy the definition of what socially means to be a man, under the name of ‘Man Box’.

Accordingly, in 2017, a research led by Promundo and Axe on the state of manhood in the US, UK and Mexico, defines the *Man Box*⁶⁴ as the set of beliefs and patterns that men are told and pressured to adopt by their own family, their friends, the media, the educational institutions and the workplace. Conventionally, those patterns that men are asked to acquire mainly refer to self-sufficiency, toughness, physical strength, heterosexuality, frequent propensity to sex and aggression. Indeed, the aim of Promundo and Axe’s study is to show the existence of the Man Box, its impact and influence on young men’s lives and to encourage men to ‘break out of the box’ for their own sake. The research, inspired by the Oakland Men’s Project⁶⁵ of Paul Kivel, seeks to measure the extent to which traditional beliefs are interiorized in men’s lives and to which those conventional patterns affect them and their relationships, by means of focus group discussions and the use of email and telephone surveys addressed to a random sample of approximately one thousand young men, within the age of 18 and 30 years old and representative of the different ethnical and social contexts of all the three countries. From the Man Box’s study, it turns out that all those traditional norms,

⁶² Baldoni, J. (2017, December). *Why I’m done trying to be “man enough”* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/justin_baldoni_why_i_m_done_trying_to_be_man_enough/transcript

⁶³ Porter, T. (2010, December). *A call to men* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/tony_porter_a_call_to_men/up-next

⁶⁴ Heilman, B., Barker, G., & Harrison, A. (2017). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico*. Washington, DC and London: Promundo-US and Unilever.

⁶⁵ Innovative and educational organization co-founded by the American writer and educator Paul Kivel in 1979 and focused on preventing male violence on women.

attitudes and practices that men are told to comply with, in order to be masculine, are still existent and are more likely to be harmful and to cause unhealthy behaviors on men that are more prone to embody traits associated with mainstream masculinity. In line with Kivel's project, it follows that many men are trapped by the Man Box which imposes on them social norms about manhood and does not enable them to express wholly their personality, without worrying about others' judgement and validation. Therefore, the research illustrates that more than a half of male population in each of the three countries reveals to have been told to behave as a 'real' man and, consequently, this makes it more difficult for young men to break out of the box and reject traditional norms about being a 'real' man.

Likewise, in 2018, The Men's Project and Dr. Michael Flood led together a research study⁶⁶ on practices and behaviors of young Australian men in regard to manhood, by modelling it on the grounds of the study released by Promundo and Axe in the US, UK and Mexico. Therefore, the study in Australia uses the same research methodology of the precedent study and, analogously, aims at measuring the level at which young men's lives are affected by external pressures concerning the dominant ideology of masculinity, the extent of internalization and manifestation of those pressures in daily behaviors and attitudes and their impact on the beliefs of masculinity in young men's lives. The study's results suggest that more than a half of Australian young men have experienced external pressures by their own family, friends and partners and, as well, those who highly endorse the Man Box rules are more likely to perpetrate violent actions and sexual harassment, to take on unhealthy behaviors, to fall into risky situations and to avoid seeking help for mental and physical health from professionals.

In order to investigate and measure at the fullest the level at which men endorse or reject traditional norms and attitudes concerning manhood, both the research studies have applied the Gender Equitable Men Scale, created by Promundo, that includes seven thematic pillars, each accompanied with seventeen messages reflecting the beliefs of respondents on what means to be a 'real' man and which behaviors the latter should take on. The seven pillars – which include self-sufficiency, acting tough, physical attractiveness, rigid masculine gender roles, heterosexuality and homophobia, hypersexuality, aggression and control - represent social pressures, from which men daily might suffer, and are significant in measuring the extent to which social messages are actually embodied by men. For each country, it has been found out that more than a half of respondents agreed on the fact that society as a whole tells them to incorporate those pillars attributed to the definition of being a 'real' man.

⁶⁶ The Men's Project & Flood, M. (2018). *The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services: Melbourne.

Self-sufficiency refers to the idea that men should not talk about their worries and personal issues, rather, they should solve their problems on their own and should not seek help from others. Similarly, acting tough is associated with fighting back and being strong under any kind of circumstances. These two first pillars, together with hypersexuality and aggressiveness, can be deemed as the main attitudes emphasized by the concept of machismo, that endorses an excessive exhibition of virility, due to the conviction of the superiority of men over women and the need to show off an extreme sense of masculine pride and self-reliance. The development of machismo is harmful on society since it promotes violent responses, for instance physical and verbal abuse, to injustice, an excessive suppression of fear and defense of one's self pride. At the same time, the idea of male superiority also leads women to believe that they should be accompanied by strong men in order to be protected and, thus, it leads men to be unhealthily jealous and possessive towards their partners. According to professor Bron Ingoldsby, the most common theory of the development of machismo and, thus, traits such as the excessive rejection of fear and abuse of violence, believes that machismo is the expression of an inferiority which is hidden through acting superior and undefeatable and by suppressing feminine qualities, while stressing masculine ones. In *A Theory for the Development of Machismo*, Ingoldsby mentions the anthropologist Oscar Lewis to explain how the idea of self-sufficiency exercised since childhood affects male children who end up being raised to be tough and self-sufficient. Basically, the father expects the son to be as he was, namely, to be the main economic source of the family, without expressing his will, neither asking for advices or receiving any affection. As a result, machismo seems to be “*a cultural trait to satisfy the psychological need resulting from the inferiority complex in men*”⁶⁷, which originates from the father-son relation and is transmitted across generations.

The third pillar, physical attractiveness, is related to the aesthetic appearance of the male body that should comply with the dominant ideology of masculinity and, thus, embody masculine traits, in order to be considered as a successful man and not to be associated with feminine traits, in regard to both physical aspect and clothes. The professor Chris Wienke argues that the prevalent cultural idea of the male body consists of the exhibition of muscularity that can be visually seen as a symbol of the predominant stereotypical beliefs on masculinity. Indeed, Wienke states that “*the muscular body serves as a privileged body*”⁶⁸, which means that, generally, individuals who strongly satisfy cultural standards of beauty are more likely to obtain advantages and opportunities. Accordingly, a research

⁶⁷ Ingoldsby, B. (1985). A Theory for the Development of Machismo. *The Annual Meeting of the National Council of Family Relation*, 1-13. Dallas, TX.

⁶⁸ Wienke, C. (1998). Negotiating the Male Body: Men, Masculinity and Cultural Ideals. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 6(2), 255-282.

study⁶⁹ on cultural ideals related to male bodies has asked people to evaluate the physical beauty of different male body types. It was found out that respondents deemed that a mesomorphic body, essentially characterized by muscles, appeared to be more attractive and gratifying for one's self than a nonmesomorphic body because mesomorphic male physiques are usually linked to positive stereotypes, such as healthiness, self-reliance and strength, while endomorphic (fat) or ectomorphic (skinny) male bodies are associated with laziness, fear, weakness and unaccountability. These stereotypical traits attributed to male bodies are existing and culturally preferred in all social classes, races and ages. Consequently, it turns out that there is a direct correlation between men who have a high self-esteem and a muscular body and men who suffer from a higher life dissatisfaction because of the lack of a muscular physique. In view of the muscular ideal, Wienke describes three kind of coping strategies developed by men in order to make sense of their different body types. Unsurprisingly, the first strategy, called as the reliance strategy, relates to the reliance of some men on the bodily standards that meet the cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity, hence, by fulfilling those masculine standards, they better their self-perception and believe to be more likely to be positively judged by others. The reliance strategy runs on two sides: on one side, bodily standards of hegemonic masculinity are preserved and reproduced since men who fit them can profit from them, on the other side, men who do not fit in the hegemonic standards have doubly incentive to fulfil them in such a manner that they try to compensate their feelings of unfit. The second strategy, namely the reformulation strategy, is applied by men who realize their inability of meeting the bodily standards and, thus, rather than compensating their physical shortcomings, they still attain masculine standards, for instance strength and self-sufficiency, and benefit from them, but on their own terms, by acquiring culturally valued attitudes associated with hegemonic masculinity. In relation to that, men who suffer from a certain health issue, as a response to the inability of meeting the body ideal, tend to accept physical inadequacies, by embracing practices, physical and emotional needs that usually are not attributed to masculinity. By the time that they start to take better care of their body's health, they try to redefine themselves, their body and their relation to the bodily standards. The rejection strategy is the last strategy of coping by which some men distance themselves from the cultural conception of the male body ideal. Indeed, they tend to reject the societal bodily standards and try to establish a new model or dismiss the importance of the body image. Often, due to the distance between their physical aspect and the bodily standards, they claim not to care of their physical appearance and consider themselves as anti-conformist and self-reliant, while they

⁶⁹ Mishkind, M. E., Rodin, J., Silberstein, L. R., & Striegel-Moore, R. H. (1986). The embodiment of masculinity: Cultural, psychological and behavioral dimensions. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 29(5), 545-562.

negatively judge those individuals who adhere to the societal body ideal. Thereby, physical attractiveness in relation to the external pressures of societal standards produces feelings of inadequacies in young men who seek to overcompensate them, mainly by adhering to them and reinforcing masculine qualities, or to appear anti-conformist and smarter, by denying the importance of the body image.

Moving forward, the fourth pillar of the Man Box's study, rigid gender roles, focuses on the traditional roles to which men and women are believed to commit in family and fatherhood, on the grounds of their gender. Since men are taught to be independent, society requires them to be the ones who successfully provide the financial resources for the family, rather than women. However, some men are seeking to redefine fatherhood with the aim of moving closer new masculine identities to the family life. According to Catherine Solomon's study⁷⁰, men who are willing to be stay-at-home fathers believe that the labor force prevents them from emotionally connecting with their children and taking responsibility for childcare, hence, they aim at redefining the nature of parenthood and housework in gender-neutral terms. Nevertheless, stay-at-home fathers tell that, through the interaction with other people, they are still stigmatized and treated as outsiders, due to their family status that distances them from the idea of hegemonic masculinity and embraces feminine qualities, to the point that some need to hide their new model of fatherhood. In 2016, the APA's newsletter discussed toxic fatherhood by claiming that it is an issue for individuals and families, mainly caused by toxic masculinity, that cannot be even exempted from the boundaries of the private sphere⁷¹. In the newsletter, the scholar Minahan describes his experience as a stay-at-home father, at a time of his life, who helped his daughter and wife with the housework and observed that his domestic responsibility was seen as amusing and disturbing by other people. He gives the example of a TV commercial that, probably unintentionally, reproduces the stereotypical model of masculinity that promotes violence, especially in defense of one's self. In the commercial, a man is asked what he would do with a pick-up truck and, in the subsequent scene, it is shown that, as soon as he starts the car and accelerates, a chain attached to the back of the truck rip the garage door and, right after, he stops and gets out exclaiming that he was going to get his tools back from the neighbor. The fact that he was driving a pick-up truck and felt the need to retrieve his toolbox, that implicitly represents his maleness being under attack, reflects the belief that men should deal with 'heavy stuff', which

⁷⁰ Solomon, C. (2017). *The Lives of Stay-At-Home Fathers: Masculinity, Carework and Fatherhood in the United States*. 99-107. Emerald Publishing Limited.

⁷¹ Minahan, J.A. (2016, April). Toxic Fatherhood: Hypothesis and hope. *The General Psychologist Newsletter*, 54(1).

Retrieved from <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-1/publications/newsletters/general/2016/04/toxic-fatherhood>

excludes housework and children. Indeed, APA's newsletter argues that the garage door being dragged down the street by the truck, which does not seem to head home, shows that "*to preserve his manhood, a man must either be violent within the domestic sphere or absent from it*"⁷². It results that men might engage in unhealthy relationships not only with their partners, but also with their children, especially males, from whom they emotionally distance themselves. In compliance with that, the PhD Evans claims that the detachment or absence of a father, namely fatherlessness, negatively affects male children and produces an imbalance in the family that is harmful for the development of the self-identity of young boys and causes in them, during their growth, a feeling of anger⁷³. The latter leads, on the one hand, to criminal behavior, delinquency or juvenile crime, on the other hand, to anti-social behavior, low school performance and suicide. Actually, young boys who are more likely to respond to stress with violence, to act aggressively towards their mother and to be willing to take on the role of the householder, suffer, consciously or unconsciously, from fatherlessness at home that results to be a deprivation of a male model whose contact is missing.

The fifth pillar, heterosexuality and homophobia, is mostly concerned with the social messages that pressure men to be heterosexual, in order to be regarded as 'real' men, and that, as a consequence, produce homophobia, particularly among young teenage boys. The sociologist C.J. Pascoe analyzes the development of the adolescent male homophobia, that is characterized by homophobic teasing addressed to gay boys, with the aim of stressing their lack of a masculine identity in the case that they mainly do present feminine qualities. However, Pascoe argues that the homophobic teasing through the use of the word 'fag' does not only consist of a harassment over gay boys by other boys, but it also consists of a sort of disciplinary mechanism, by which any boy can be temporarily called as a 'fag' if he fails at owning masculine qualities, such as heterosexual prowess or physical strength, and, instead, he owns feminine ones. Thus, homophobia is claimed to be gendered in regard to boys, either heterosexual or gay, who are harassed for exhibiting any kind of behavior out of traditional masculinity, whereas lesbian girls are not teased as much as boys since they are still seen as a heterosexual male fantasy. Since male homosexuality seems not to be as much stigmatized as gay male effeminacy, the core issue seems to concern more the lack of masculinity rather than the sexual orientation. Pascoe states that boys try to label other boys as 'fag' because they want to be moved out of that position as much as possible and turn others into that, as if "*the fag became a hot potato that no boy wanted to be left holding*"⁷⁴. From the analysis of talks and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Evans, C. (2003). *Anger in the Bosom of Our Children: The Effects of Fatherlessness on Anger in Middle School Children*. IUUniverse, Inc.

⁷⁴ Pascoe, C.J. (2007). *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

interactions between teenage boys, it results that masculinity “*is assumed to be synonymous with heterosexuality*”⁷⁵, as a sort of quality that boys should show off in order to be protected from the label of ‘fag’. Therefore, those sexualized talks and interactions appear to be less focused on sexual orientation. Rather, they seem to concern the capability to exercise power and dominance over femininity, as a way of affirming their masculinity and individuality. Pascoe calls these sexualized practices and discourses under the name of ‘compulsive heterosexuality’, that is built on the concept of the ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ of Adrienne Rich, who describes heterosexuality as a political institution, that can be differently internalized and oppressive on both women and men. The concept of compulsive heterosexuality refers to the cultural eroticization of the male dominance over the female submission, that reinforces more and more gender inequality through daily interactions, by which teenage boys attempt to figuratively or physically affirm sexual mastery, that is strictly related to the exercise of their masculinity, over girls’ bodies.

In accordance with that, men often feel the pressure to show off their sexual life and sexual prowess, as if a ‘real’ man should have many sexual partners and always be ready for sex; this is what the sixth pillar, hypersexuality, investigates on. Above all, hypersexuality should be understood as the exhibition of an obsessive concern with sexual activity, which traduces in a compulsive sexual behavior that is commonly assumed to be an inborn masculine trait. The writer Lorenzo Gasparrini argues that this sort of compulsive sexual behavior, attributed to men, is strongly internalized in adolescence and apparently, for a long period, replaces the sentimental nature inherent to romantic relationships. For instance, the myth of the first love, in the majority of cases, is differently experienced depending on the gender; while for women it is seen as the embodiment of a passionate and impossible love, for men it is seen as the first sexual experience with another person. This narrative of love reduces emotional connection to the sexual act and nullifies intimacy. This does not mean that the romantic experience will be necessarily replaced by the sole sexual experience for a lifetime, but that the emotional connection that arises from a loving relationship might be left out for as long as a man is willing to reach the maximum achievement of sexual experiences. However, it should be clear that the aim is not the sexual act itself, but mainly the willingness of openly declaring one’s own masculinity. Gasparrini points out that, in contrast to women who show an evident sign of their sexual maturity with the appearance of menstruation, virility is external and can be expressed by young boys, who want to become men, through anything that can extend the male body and mind and that leaves evidences in the external world and in individuals they come across. Thereby, whereas femininity has an unavoidable sign that occurs only once as the entry into sexual maturity, masculinity has not anything definitive, hence, it will be needed to be continuously tested, validated and shown

⁷⁵ Ibid.

both publicly and by one's self⁷⁶. Consequently, this contributes to the need of constantly testing masculinity and might cause a status of continuous and insufferable anxiety. In his TED Talk, Tony Porter tells about the relation that he and his friends had with sex during their early adolescence, by explaining a situation in which he ended up when he was about twelve years old. He says that one of his friends, who was older than him, although he was troubled because of drug and family issues, was said to be alright and was looked up by his company because he was sexually active. One day, Tony Porter is randomly asked by his friend whether he wanted some sex with a girl who was in his friend's room and, probably, just had sex with him without her explicit consent. Tony Porter tells that, under those circumstances, he chose to pretend that he did too once he locked the door because, on the one hand, he felt trapped and could not jeopardize his masculinity, but, on the other hand, he reveals that he did not have sex yet at that age. In relation to that, he explains that boys usually act as they have been having sex since their early childhood. Notwithstanding, the experienced described by Tony Porter also underlines the impact that the issue of male hypersexuality, strictly inherent to the Man Box, has on women who are seen as a means to prove one's masculinity and, consequently, treated as sexual objects.

The last pillar, aggression and control, covers the idea that masculine norms promote the perpetration of male violence, as a way to get respect from others and to maintain the status of masculinity. In 2018, alongside the Man Box's study research, the nonprofit organization Promundo-US published a report in which it explains how masculine norms are connected, to a great extent, to the perpetration of violence by men and reinforce the patriarchal power. First of all, it is argued that "*biology is not the largest driver of men's violence*"⁷⁷ and, consequently, it cannot be regarded as the sole predictive factor that explains violent behaviors or actions committed by men, as it is, instead, inherent to the concept of 'boys will be boys', which wrongly normalizes the perpetration of male violence, especially in adolescence, on the grounds of the biological sex. Contrarily, the connections between masculine norms and violent attitudes consist of a broader intersection of elements, in addition to a biological nature, such as social conditions and gender norms. The 'Seven P's of Men's Violence', elaborated by Michael Kaufman, underlines several elements that link masculine norms to the male violence: patriarchal power, that does not only produce a system of power constituted by a hierarchy of men over women, but also men over other men; the sense of entailment to privilege, that encourages the commitment of violent actions to maintain power; permission, that refers to the explicit social instructions normalizing the use of men's violence; the paradox of men's power, which

⁷⁶ Gasparri, L. (2016). *Diventare Uomini. Relazioni maschili senza oppressioni*. Cagli, PU: Settenove.

⁷⁷ Heilman, B., & Barker, G. (2018). *Masculine Norms and Violence: Making the Connections*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

explains that the construction of a social and individual power produces an outcome of pain and isolation in men; the psychic armor of manhood, that restrains an ability for empathy; masculinity as a psychic pressure cooker, that reduces the range of emotions for men; past experiences, that affect children's growth, especially within family. Accordingly, men often grow up with social instructions related to manhood that encourage violent actions, whose commitment demonstrates power and conformity to the masculine identity. Indeed, men's perpetration of violence leads to a significant perpetration of bullying, that is based on the same belief, that is to exercise power and take control over a victim, in order to maintain a social status of masculinity, particularly within an educational or working institution. With regard to that, Antony Whitehead argues that masculinity works as a dynamic risk factor that produces man to man violence, by excluding other forms of men's identity from the common concept of masculinity. The latter, according to Whitehead, is associated with 'heroism', in the sense that the mythological hero, who demonstrates a transcendental bravery whenever he faces danger, is reproduced by a single and dominant form of men's identity. Hence, the dominant ideology of masculinity is mirrored in the 'hero', whose counterpart is the 'villain' who also reflects the same male identity of the Hero. Instead, the denial of the Hero is the 'Non-Man', who is instrumental in defining "*the Hero and the Villain united, as men, by the key qualifications of masculinity [...], while divided as individuals, by issues beyond masculinity*"⁷⁸. Whitehead encloses violence between men in two categories: inclusive violence and exclusive violence. The intention behind inclusive violence is one's self affirmation of power, through braveness, over a rival man, who is included by the perpetrator in the category of masculinity and, thus, is regarded as a worthy rival. In contrast, within exclusive violence, the perpetrator's victim is the Non-Man, who is excluded from the category of masculinity because he is regarded as an unworthy rival, and the aim is the affirmation of the masculinity of the perpetrator, who is willing to deny the other man's masculinity, through the use of violence and humiliation. Both categories show that the perpetrator's objective is to affirm his masculinity and to demonstrate that he does not belong to the Non-Man's category. On the whole, male violence happens to be a powerful and dangerous dynamic risk factor that results from the internalization of masculine norms, which suggest men maintaining their status of masculinity at any cost.

Finally, the Man Box's pillars significantly constitute the dynamics that is intrinsic to the construction and internalization of toxic masculinity in men. All these elements, explicitly and implicitly promoted by society, affect negatively the mental and physical health of men who, to maintain their status of power and to avoid any potential association with weakness and femininity,

⁷⁸ Whitehead, A. (2005). Man to Man Violence: How Masculinity May Work as a Dynamic Risk Factor. *The Howard Journal*, 44(4), 411-422.

inevitably suppress their emotional side and take on aggressive and unhealthy risky behaviors to compensate their stress and anxiety, in a such a way that they attempt not to seek for the help they secretly need. In the next paragraph, I will accurately illustrate the impact that masculine gender-role stress, that is at the core of toxic masculinity, has on the men's physical and mental health.

2.2. On Men's Health and Safety

At this stage, it is evident that masculine norms have negative repercussions on men themselves. Mainly, those repercussions, consciously or unconsciously, affect the mental and physical health of many men, in particular, men's mental health is usually set aside because society itself does not promote individual mental health as well as it does not help to spread mental health awareness. Indeed, the WHO urges that an increase in investment is needed to promote mental health and support people suffering from mental health disorders. It highlights the severity of increasing suicide rates worldwide, especially by men, and the terrific position reached by depression as the second leading cause of disease and, predictably, as the first one by 2030⁷⁹. Indeed, in 2018, the APA calls on institutions, agencies, departments and individuals to follow a set of guidelines⁸⁰ that it has drafted in order to provide major awareness and knowledge in psychological practice with boys and men. APA claims that boys and men are overrepresented in psychological and social issues, but they do not receive the help that they need. Furthermore, they tend to undermine and manage their issues on their own because they are taught that they should be self-reliant and that internalizing disorders such as depression do not conform to their gender, for these reasons, they are not likely to be diagnosed with internalizing disorders, but with externalizing disorders, such as conduct or substance use related. In addition to mental health issues, both biological and socio-economic factors combined result to have negative consequences on men's physical health and well-being.

From 2018 Eurostat data⁸¹, it is undeniable that a relevant gap between men and women life expectancy does exist. In Europe, women life expectancy (83.6 years) results to be 5 years longer than men life expectancy (78.3 years). Globally, according to 2016 WHO data⁸², average life expectancy is for women about 74.2 years and for men about 69.8 years. Both analyses demonstrate

⁷⁹ World Health Organization (2008). The Global Burden of Disease: 2004 Update.

⁸⁰ American Psychological Association (2018, August). APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men.

⁸¹ Eurostat (2018). Life expectancy by age and sex. [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

⁸² World Health Organization (2016). Life expectancy and Healthy life expectancy Data by WHO region [Data File]. Retrieved from <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/view.main.SDG2016LEXREGv?lang=en>

that women have a longer life expectancy all over the world. With regard to that, some scholars⁸³ suggest that differences between gender and life expectancy rates cannot be reduced to biology, but relative analyses should include an emphasis on the masculine socialization that causes a higher risk for premature mortality. The gap that results between female and male life expectancy is influenced by the gender role stress and the exposure to unhealthy and risky behaviors, caused by a rigid socialization of traditional masculinity, that is associated with risk-taking and avoidance from seeking for help. Even though it is clear that men have greater socioeconomic advantages than women within any ethnic group, they are more likely to take on unhealthy habits, such as smoking, use of drugs and alcohol.

According to James Smith et al.⁸⁴, it is argued that, by examining men's health data, an intersectional approach is needed in order to highlight how masculinity intersects with other different factors and systems of inequality, such as social and economic class, ethnicity, race, disability, sexual orientation. Hence, socio-economic conditions influence health outcomes to a greater extent. For instance, in contrast to men placed at higher socio-economic classes, men from lower positions are more likely to suffer from poorer health outcomes and to experience a higher mortality rate. Additionally, in relation to public health, these scholars claim that men are usually seen under two perspectives. Firstly, "*they are presented as a public health problem*"⁸⁵. Individual masculinity is seen as the key factor that causes a public health problem for men and for other individuals, for example, unhealthy habits and low uptake of health services are deemed as consequences of the traditional masculinity ideology that teaches man to be strong. This idea leads to circumstances under which men are regarded as irresponsible for being late in presenting their health issues and as experiencing them even worse because of the late. Secondly, men are seen as victims who suffer from poor health outcomes due to the pressure that they daily experience in order to fulfil the social standards attributed to masculinity. The stress caused by attempting to achieve a certain social and financial status might lead men who belong to disadvantaged socio-economic classes, to take part of criminal actions, and other men, who belong to higher classes, to work excessively with the aim to reach the common symbols of success. Naturally, feelings of failure or distress, enclosed under the name of 'gender role strain', arise from not being able or working too hard to meet all the socio-economic standards.

⁸³ Gough, B., Robertson, S., & Robinson, M. (2016). Men, 'masculinity' and mental health: critical reflections. In J. Gideon (Ed.), *Handbook on Gender and Health*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited. DOI 10.4337/9781784710866

⁸⁴ Smith, J.A., Richardson, N., & Robertson, S. (2016). Applying a genders lens to public health discourses on men's health. In J. Gideon, *Handbook on Gender and Health*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited. DOI 10.4337/9781784710866

⁸⁵ Ibid.

The Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP), elaborated by Joseph Pleck in 1981, proposes a social constructionist perspective in relation to mental health, on the basis of three theoretical concepts. Essentially, the main notion underlined by Pleck is that “*the individual male’s level of endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology translates into the gender expectations he personally applies to himself*”⁸⁶ and, therefore, affects his self-perception with respect to the male role standards, by eventually producing a discrepancy between the social standards and one’s self. As a matter of fact, “*masculinity ideology directly creates trauma in male socialization*”⁸⁷ and, in accordance with this model, it is probable that men, who formally do not suffer from mental disorders, might be subject to psychological and behavioral dysfunction produced by the gender role strain.

However, before extending the argument to the concrete impact on men’s mental health, it is important to clarify that interpersonal behaviors and attitudes caused by the socialization of traditional masculinity are not regarded as forms of mental illness. Gary Brooks explains that, on one side, it may happen that they are an outcome of mental illness, but, on the other side, it may happen that they are the cause or they contribute to the development of a mental illness⁸⁸. Indeed, Brooks specifies that it should be made a distinction between pathological men and healthy men, but, at the same time, it should not be assumed that anyone who does not fulfill the formal criteria of mental illness does not suffer from any mental issue. Rather, the mental health of many men might even seem to be optimal, but, contemporarily, might be compromised by the stressful demands of the socialization of traditional masculinity. Under the worst circumstances, the demands imposed by masculine norms encourage the development of unhealthy behaviors belonging to the dark side of masculinity.

Effectively, major mental health issues among men are related to risk-taking behaviors and unhealthy habits, such as alcoholism, drug abuse and smoking, that might contribute to the development of mental disorders, especially depression. According to *Our World in Data*’s study⁸⁹, in 2016, it is reported that, contrary to the 6% of women, 35% of men smoke worldwide, thus, men are more likely to smoke in each country of the world. This is reflected in health statistics, as men are more likely to suffer and die from lung cancer, whose primary risk factor is smoking. Likewise, in 2016, another study⁹⁰ reports that, globally, men are likely to end up with alcohol or drug addiction twice than women. Clearly, alcohol and substance abuse is linked to a male problem, which has at its

⁸⁶ Pleck, JH. (1995). *A New Psychology of Men*, 11-32. New York: Basic Books.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Brooks, G.R. (2001). Masculinity and Men’s Mental Health. *Journal of American College Health*, 49(6).

⁸⁹ Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2020). "Smoking". *Published online at OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/smoking>

⁹⁰ Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2020). "Drug Use". *Published online at OurWorldInData.org*. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/drug-use>

core the social construction of masculinity. In *Masculine Norms and Men's Health: Making the Connections*⁹¹, the nonprofit organization Promundo provides an overview on the direct correlation of unhealthy and risky habits with hegemonic masculine norms. In regard to smoking, tobacco use is deemed to be a socially accepted masculine habit, rather than feminine, partially due to marketing strategies used by tobacco companies in order to portray smoking as a socially acceptable attitude. Indeed, it is commonly practiced by young men as a form of socialization and as a way to affirm their masculinity and popularity within male peer groups. In regard to alcohol consumption, men are found to be the majority among alcohol consumers, particularly in young adulthood, because alcohol symbolizes an entrance to manhood and an affirmation of masculinity. Promundo reports that men who adhere more to masculine norms are more likely to suffer from issues related to alcohol consumption and to prefer drinking a large amount of alcohol, mainly liquor that is seen as a symbol of masculinity and resistance. Hence, alcohol consumption is connected to masculine norms because it is an activity that includes aggressiveness, risk-taking, strength, competition and, above all, the willingness to conform to the hegemonic masculine identity. At the same time, alcohol is consumed as a means to handle negative emotions and distress because it enables a decrease in inhibitions and a reduction of anxiety. In regard with drug use, it is reported by the UNODC that illicit drugs are used three times more by men than by women⁹². Drug use appears to be more gendered than alcohol consumption, for instance the majority of drug dealers are men, it follows that masculine norms significantly contribute to the involvement of men in the drug industry. What is more, a sort of hierarchy of masculinity is created on the grounds of the type of drug that is consumed. For instance, harder or doping drugs are associated with a higher level of masculinity rather than soft drugs, such as cannabis. Akin to alcohol, drugs are seen as symbols of conformity to a masculine collectivity that emphasizes risk-taking, emotional control, aggressive behavior, strength and competition. Thus, men who adhere to masculine standards and, particularly, those who are financially unstable or unemployed, are more likely to initiate drug use as a way to affirm their masculine identity and to handle their negative emotions, psychological distress and vulnerability.

Furthermore, the distress caused by the social pressure of masculine norms do not only lead men to engage in unhealthy and risk-taking attitudes, but also to develop mental health issues, such as depressive conditions and suicidal behavior. According to the WHO, across the world, more than

⁹¹ Ragonese, C., Shand, T., & Barker, G. (2019). *Masculine Norms and Men's Health: Making the Connections*. Washington, DC: Promundo-US.

⁹² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017). *World Drug Report 2017: Global overview of drug demand and supply*.

264 million people, from all ages, suffer from depression, which is “a leading cause of a disability”⁹³, “a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease”⁹⁴ and which can lead to suicide. It is acknowledged that women are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, indeed, a study⁹⁵ focused on the Italian population found out that depression seems to affect more less equally both sexes until a certain age, specifically 34 years old, then, the older women are, the more they seem to suffer from depression, often due to social factors or chronic psychopathologies. This, partially, explains the disproportion of number in relation to depressive conditions on behalf of women.

However, paradoxically, the WHO reports that worldwide men are more likely to commit suicide, whose leading cause is, precisely, depression⁹⁶. In accordance with some studies⁹⁷⁹⁸ relative to the relation between traditional masculinity and men’s treatment for depression, the crucial point is that masculine norms have an impact on men’s depressive symptom type and expression, men’s help-seeking behavior and the type of treatments and coping strategies that they are more willing to commit to. Even with depression, men are less likely to seek for help because of the male gender role that imposes a major suppression of emotions, stoicism and fear to lose their masculine identity. Clearly, depression is associated with vulnerability which contradicts the strength and the power that is intrinsic to the masculine standards and, while women are legitimized to ask for help, men feel that seeking professional help does not fulfil masculine norms and that it is equivalent to a feminine action. As a result, they have less possibilities to consult a psychologist and to initiate a therapeutic treatment that is necessary in order to combat depression. Another reason why men who strongly identify with the masculine standards are not likely to consult a psychologist might be that, since the psychological field is ruled to a greater extent by women, they feel more discouraged to ask for help from women rather than from men. Indeed, the same studies focused on male help-seeking behavior claim that men are not completely against asking for help, rather, they prefer a neutral therapeutic approach that gives them the possibility to interact with other men and talk with them about their difficulties. If men affected by depressive conditions realize that other men are facing the same issues, this might lead them not to feel as less masculine or dysfunctional, as, instead, told by masculine norms, and not

⁹³ World Health Organization (2020, January). Depression: Key facts. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Istat (2018, July). Comunicato stampa: La salute mentale nelle varie fasi della vita (2015-2017). Retrieved from <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/219807>

⁹⁶ World Health Organization (2017). Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates.

⁹⁷ Seidler, Z.E., Dawes, A.J., Rice, S.M., Oliffe, J.L., & Dhillon, H.M. (2016, November). The role of masculinity in men’s help-seeking for depression: A systematic review. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 49, 106-118.

⁹⁸ Seidler, Z.E., Rice, S.M., Oliffe, J.L., Fogarty, A.S., & Dhillon, H.M. (2017). Men In and Out of Treatment for Depression: Strategies for Improved Engagement. *Australian Psychologist*, 53.

to be ashamed of their vulnerabilities. Additionally, it is stated that men do not seem to create intimate relationships with other individuals as much as women do and, consequently, when they suffer from loneliness, they have much more difficulties to consult someone close to them because they cannot receive emotional support from strong bonds of friendship. With respect to that, it is argued that social isolation is one of the main reasons why men resort to suicide. Other reasons include chronic illness, imprisonment, schizophrenia, alcoholism and unemployment. The latter results to be quite high among men that suffer from a mentally illness, whose diagnosis can have even a worse impact on their lives, by making them feel almost unemployable. For many men, an inability to be self-sufficient and to provide financial resources for one's own family is considered to be "*their failure as a person*"⁹⁹, since they are far from fitting in masculine societal standards and, thus, a heavy amount of distress and depression can lead them to kill themselves.

Equally important, the exposure to unhealthy behaviors and the reluctance to benefit from health systems turn out to significantly affect men's physical well-being, particularly in situations where their masculine identity may happen to be questioned. Provided that men are taught to be obsessively concerned with sexual activity, Brooks argues that they are also taught "*to approach sexuality from a "nonrelational" perspective in which they are encouraged to experience sex primarily as lust, without any consideration of relational intimacy or emotional attachment*"¹⁰⁰. Consequently, young men are raised with the idea that masculinity needs to be validated by an extreme exhibition of sexual activity, which assumes the form of a 'conquest' and a means to show masculine prowess. Thereby, the greater tendency of young men to frequently have multiple sexual partners might develop sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, due to the propensity to the individual carelessness and unawareness of prevention. Particularly, a study¹⁰¹ shows that black men are more likely to engage in sexual risky activities, since, through explicit masculinity ideologies, they are told to have multiple sexual partners, often simultaneously, and perceive that they cannot refuse sex, even under risky circumstances. While black men perceive that women should be responsible for the use of a contraceptive, they will anyway persist in having sex because they have been raised with the notion that the willingness to use a contraceptive can be overwhelmed by their sexual desire that takes priority and cannot be hindered, even if it might increase the risk of developing sexually transmitted diseases.

⁹⁹ Sayers, P. (2010). Men and suicide. *Promoting Men's Mental Health* – edited by David Conrad and Alan White. Oxford & New York: Radcliffe Publishing.

¹⁰⁰ Brooks, G.R. (2001). Masculinity and Men's Mental Health. *Journal of American College Health*, 49(6).

¹⁰¹ Bowleg, L., Teti, M., Massie, J.S., Patel, A., Malebranche, D.J., & Tschann, J.M. (2011). "What Does it Take to be a Man? What is a Real Man?": Ideologies of masculinity and HIV sexual risk among Black heterosexual men. *Cult Health Sex*, 13(5). doi:10.1080/13691058.2011.556201

Also men's reduced access to HIV services has been interpreted as the outcome of the conflict between ideals of masculinity depicting men as 'naturally' strong, disease free, sexual and economically productive and the ideal characters of the 'good patient' who, instead, should acknowledge the illness, accurately follow instructions from nurses and take on healthy behaviors, that include the regular attendance to hospital visits and the abstention from alcohol consumption and sexual risky behaviors. Not only would men have to follow specific instructions and to accept being ill, but they would also have to enter hospitals that are perceived by them as female spaces, due to the association of health issues with female issues, like pregnancy. This conflict between norms for being a 'real' man and norms for being a 'good patient' might provide an explanation to why many men do not feel encouraged to become aware of or to heal from sexual risky behaviors through the use of HIV services¹⁰².

In the light of these negative repercussions on male physical and mental well-being, it may occur that the interior conflict in men caused by societal standards leads to perceive them mainly as victims of the patriarchal system, by obscuring the relation between men and the perpetration of masculine norms. To put it another way, men do not only happen to be victims of those norms, but, simultaneously, they are also the main executors, even though this often comes back against them. Male violence is a good example of how men's safety is threatened by the execution of masculine norms at the hands of men themselves. After all, male violence is regarded as a quite paradoxical pattern of masculinity because, on one side, it idolatrizes the strength, bravery and heroism, on the other side, it is strongly, and evidently, destructive for the psychological health of both women and men and it is implicitly destructive also for their emotional health and well-being. Although the frequency with which women are assaulted by men is incomparable, men are often assaulted by other men's hands or weapons too. In 2001, Brooks reports that violence among men was the most frequent violent crime in US, where far more than the half of murder victims were men who were killed by male assaulters. Still, the Global Study on Homicide 2019, developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), reports that global male homicide rate is almost five times that of females, while ten times in America, and men commit about 90% of all homicides recorded worldwide¹⁰³.

Moreover, not only women, but also young men tend to be victims of physical abuse. The scholar Lisak, mentioned by Brooks, addresses the significant problem of the underestimation of young men suffering from physical abuse, who underestimate the severity of their abuse because of the shame

¹⁰² Skovdal, M., Campbell, C., Madanhire, C., Mupambireyl, Z., Nyamukapa, C., & Gregson, S. (2011). Masculinity as a barrier to men's use of HIV services in Zimbabwe. *Globalization and Health* 2011, 7(13). doi:10.1186/1744-8603-7-13

¹⁰³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019). Global Study on Homicide 2019. Vienna.

they are afraid to experience and because of masculine norms suppressing emotional weakness. Frequently, men are not believed to have been raped, since they are usually the perpetrators of such violence, they are blamed and accused of not having fought strongly enough, held responsible and not believed to have experienced an actual sexual assault¹⁰⁴. Young men who experience physical abuse are likely to develop long-term mental issues, such as lowered self-esteem, attitude to physical aggression and substance abuse, cognitive delays, neurological dysfunction, emotional detachment and so on. Nevertheless, data related to violence among young men does not reduce the relevance of the male violence against women. In US, domestic violence is reckoned to be the most common health problem for women, who even experience more injuries than the combination of sexual assault, car accidents and robberies. As men's health and safety are compromised because they live in a culture that pressures them to be hypersexualized and violent in order to demonstrate masculinity, women's physical and mental health become to be damaged by the great frequency of experiencing rape and sexual assault, other than domestic violence (see par. 2.3.).

Pursuant to these several men's health and safety issues, the WHO European Region declares that it strongly commits to address the impact of gender socialization on men's well-being and to include men in the achievement of gender equality in the WHO European Region. An improvement in men's health and well-being is complementary to women's health in order to reach gender equality at its fullest. With the aim of reinforcing and fully achieving the third and the fifth UN Sustainable Development Goals, namely 'Good Health and Well-Being' and 'Gender Equality', in 2018, the 68th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe introduces the Strategy on the Health and Well-being of Men, whose background is provided by the WHO's report *The health and well-being of men in the WHO European Region: better health through a gender approach*¹⁰⁵. The report falls within the scope of recommending Member States committing to a reduction of men's premature mortality from non-communicable diseases, unintentional and intentional injuries, a reduction of inequalities relative to men's physical and mental health and a necessary improvement of gender equality by developing policies that address men's issues in areas such as fatherhood, self-care, unpaid care, sexual and reproductive health, prevention of violence. Overall, male gender intersects with socio-economic, political and cultural factors, which appear to be decisively determinants for men's health and men's approach to health and safety systems that, in such case, leads to a significant exposure to several health and personal integrity risks.

¹⁰⁴ Struckman-Johnson, C., & Struckman-Johnson, D. (1992). Acceptance of male rape myths among college men and women. *Sex Roles*, 27(3), 85-100. doi:10.1007/BF00290011

¹⁰⁵ World Health Organization (2018, September). *The health and well-being of men in the WHO European Region: better health through a gender approach*.

2.3. On Women

Toxic masculinity and relative masculine norms do not only have a negative impact on men, but also on women, who are strongly affected by aggressive behaviors and violent actions, committed by men, that are harmful on both their psychological and physical health. In particular, the promotion of masculine norms such as strength, power, sexual prowess and aggression leads to a subordination of femininity and, consequently, to a male dominance over women. In other words, the legitimization of male dominance and violence affects the gender relation between men and women who, since they are believed to embody femininity that, in the notion of traditional masculinity, is devalued, happen to be submitted by the male gender that enforces its legitimated power through violent actions, especially sexual harassment, in such a way that men successfully strengthen their masculine identity and comply with social standards attributed to their gender. Above all, sexual harassment, committed by intimate partners or non-partners, is regarded as one of the main expressions of male power over women and, at the same time, one of the main affirmations of masculine identity within a male collectivity. However, what it is needed to address is that male sexual violence is an issue that originates from the perpetration of masculine norms that encourage men to resort to the use of violence to get respect, to show off their sexual activity, thus, to look at women as objects for their own pleasure and to feel legitimized not to ask for sexual consent.

Accordingly, the educator Jackson Katz discusses that sexual abuse cannot be called as a women's issue, rather, violent behaviors are strongly connected to the definition of traditional masculinity¹⁰⁶. He firmly asserts that, since the majority of violent crimes are committed by men, violence must be considered principally as a men's issue. Otherwise, it follows that attention is focused on the help to offer to victims only afterwards and not on the educational measures to apply in society, in order to widely teach to reject the belief that men, pushed by biological factors, are supposed to be sexually aggressive with women and to prevent sexual violence as much as possible. Other than the figure of the violent perpetrators, he highlights the bystander approach, that is a behavior characterizing individuals, who are not perpetrators neither victims in a given situation, but who are related to people who might be in that situation and, as bystanders, they do not interrupt or react to it. Male perpetration of aggressive and sexually violent behaviors and indifference to them is harmful to women. By the way, it is not the male gender itself that should be blamed, but masculine norms that have been forwarded to male generations over time and, then, strictly internalized by men. With respect to that,

¹⁰⁶ Katz, J., Earp, J., & Rabinovitz, D. (2013). *Tough guise 2: Violence, manhood & American culture* [Transcript]. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Tough-Guise-2-Transcript.pdf>

in his writings, Katz deepens the reasons why he strongly thinks that sexual violence is a men's issue. First of all, he argues that sexual harassment of women actually reveals more about men than women, indeed, men are the majority of perpetrators of figurative and physical violence. Yet, discussions focused on how culture defines masculinity, how societal standards have negative repercussions on men and what pushes so many men to commit violent actions are quite rare. Paradoxically, it happens that perpetrators are usually portrayed as "*strange aliens who landed here from another planet*"¹⁰⁷, even though mass media regularly broadcast endless stories about rape and domestic violence. Generally, to regard sexual violence as a women's issue is much misleading since this belief completely obscures the social and relational dynamics that cause such a widespread phenomenon and, at the same time, prevents men from realizing their attachment to certain societal norms of which they might be unconsciously unaware. It is crucial to understand that, except for some individuals who suffer from mental disorders, a large proportion of men who act violently, verbally or physically, are ordinary people who have strongly embodied masculine norms and feel legitimized to act as such, due to a normalization of violence conveyed by the traditional ideology of hegemonic masculinity. The set of cultural beliefs and social behaviors that normalizes forms of sexual violence, such as rape, sexual harassment and sexual coercion, is defined under the name of 'rape culture'. In other words, the rape culture consists of a social environment by which acts of sexual violence are normalized, justified and, even, glorified, through the use of a misogynistic language and the objectification of women's bodies. According to studies¹⁰⁸, the rape culture can be viewed as an iceberg, whose tip consists of rape and sexual coercion and whose bottom consists of unwanted sexual comments, sexual insults, nude images posted or sent without consent and sexual offenses. It follows that the rape culture is perpetrated through the smallest actions, that are constantly deprived of their severity and that, eventually, lead to the highest violent actions, such as rape, sexual coercion and, in the worst-case scenario, femicide. Here, sexual harassment should not be understood as a sexual activity driven by uncontrollable sexual desire, but mainly as a gender discrimination that is based on the traditional figure of the woman as a passive, sexual object created for men's pleasure. In this case, gender harassment begins with a range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that express hostility, discrimination, degradation and humiliation towards femininity, and might end up with unwanted sexual advances and offenses and, at worst, with sexual assault.

¹⁰⁷ Katz, J. (2006). *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*, Chap 1. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.

¹⁰⁸ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018). *Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24994>

The recent ‘Telegram scandal’ that has occurred in Italy is the perfect example of the internalization and spread of the rape culture¹⁰⁹. A ‘revenge porn’ chat on the instant messaging platform ‘Telegram’, used to share photos and videos of sexual acts, has been discovered at the beginning of April 2020. The shared images were published without the consent or the awareness of the victims who became objects of a sort of collective virtual rape¹¹⁰. According to existing reconstructions, the majority of the 50.000 members of the chat were young boys who made sexually offensive comments, that mainly recall sexual violence, on random girls’ photos and invited others to figuratively rape them. It is important to notice that the shared photos were often ‘just’ selfies, plain close-ups or pictures taken while wearing a bathing suit, hence, photos that do not recall sexuality at all. Sometimes, these photos and videos were sold in exchange for money, sometimes they were shared freely to take revenge against former partners. Frequent was also the case of men sharing pedopornographic material; which sometimes included secretly taken pictures of the chat member’s own daughters or sisters. Undoubtedly, a number of members might suffer from mental disorders, but the majority is composed of ordinary boys who do not understand the severity of the situation and use the group chat as a means to affirm masculinity. Although this episode does not imply a physical abuse on women, it enhances the internalization and expansion of a hegemonic masculinity ideology, that sexually objectifies women’s bodies, to the point that those imaginary violent actions might turn into real sexual assaults. In fact, they actually do since young boys are pressured to pursue an idealized masculinity characterized by an obsessive heterosexual desire, emotional detachment and incessant competitive spirit, particularly in the case that they do not conform with the cultural ideals of the male body and have to overcompensate those deficiencies to affirm their masculine dominance and vent aggressively their distress and dissatisfaction.

For instance, to observe how the performance of masculinity as a collective activity can turn into reality, the professor David Grazian analyzes how young men employ the power of homosocial collective rituals, such as the girl hunting in the nightlife, in order to reclaim their heterosexuality and to heighten their masculine identity in public¹¹¹. First of all, a girl hunting is defined as a practice employed by young heterosexual men who aggressively look for female sexual partners in typical nightlife’s environments, such as nightclubs or pubs, that are appropriate to actively seek out anonymous, single, female sexual partners. At the root of the girl hunting, it is stressed the weakness

¹⁰⁹ Sexually explicit images or videos or a person posted online, typically by a former sexual partner, without the consent of the subject as a form of revenge, harassment and humiliation.

¹¹⁰ Fontana, S. (2020, 3 April). Dentro il più grande network italiano di revenge porn, su Telegram. *Wired Italia*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.it/internet/web/2020/04/03/revenge-porn-network-telegram/>

¹¹¹ Grazian, D. (2007). The Girl Hunt: Urban Nightlife and the Performance of Masculinity as Collective Activity. *Symbolic Interaction*, 30(2), 221-243. doi:10.1525/si.2007.30.2.221

and subjection of femininity in contrast with masculine stereotypes of dominance and strength. In this respect, the girl-hunting does not serve to construct sexual or loving relationships, but it is defined by Grazian as ritualistic, performative and homosocial, in the sense it consists of a performance of young men's beliefs of manhood, a competition for sexual reputation and peer status and a collective activity by which young men convince themselves of its efficacy. Hence, what they do to collectively legitimize their actions is to exhort each other through fantasies of women's sexual availability in nightlife and competitive sex talks, whose outcome is to build a collective confidence and increase the sense of power. As he argues, they look at the collective activity of girl hunt as a sign of group solidarity and cohesion, but, at the same time, "*it is equally noteworthy that the girl hunt promotes social inequality and subordinate behavior among men*"¹¹² because "*the most dominant men enjoy a disproportionate degree of social prestige relative to their competitors*"¹¹³. As a result, the girl hunt does produce unrealistic sexual expectations, that affect young boys who already suffer from a non-compliance with masculine norms, as well as the repetition of these collective rituals emphasizing masculine identity's affirmation ends up with suppressing empathy for young girls meant for the hunt and seen as prey. Moreover, in many cases, the alcohol consumption, that assumes the form of a prerogative for young men, is instrumental to the performance of sexual offenses, especially rape, since, by drinking, they are more likely to perceive women's behavior as sexually interested and to feel responsible to make first moves as a gender role expectation to the point that the misperception might end up with a sexual coercion. Accordingly, a research¹¹⁴ focused on college students has found out that sexual assault is extremely common among them and at least the half implies alcohol consumption by perpetrators and victims, who are even more perceived as sexually promiscuous and appropriate targets for sexual assault.

However, given that sexual violence on women mainly occurs at the hand of people who are close to them¹¹⁵ (30% of the total 35% of sexually and physically assaulted women worldwide), it is essential to understand what pushes some men to rape women. Above all, Dianne Herman firmly states that "*the rapist is not an exotic freak [...] rape evolves out of a situation in which "normal" males feel a need to prove themselves to be "men" by displaying dominance over females*"¹¹⁶. In other words, the

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Abbey, A. (2002). Alcohol-Related Sexual Assault: A Common Problem among College Students. *J Stud Alcohol Suppl.*, (14), 118-128.

¹¹⁵ WHO, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, & South African Medical Research Council (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence.

¹¹⁶ Herman, D.F. (1989). The Rape Culture. In J. Freeman (Ed.), *Women: A Feminist Perspective* – 4th edition. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

definition of masculinity that requires men to constantly demonstrate their masculine qualities involves an overvaluation of toughness and a repudiation of anything associated with fragility. For this reason, rapist's affirmation of manhood becomes to be automatically bound to a violent disregard towards anything feminine, included females, and, in fact, rapes are often complemented by some form of sexual humiliation. Generally, accused rapists tend to blame the violent action on the victim, by labelling her as a woman of questionable sexual reputation and portraying as sexually provocative. Similarly, date rapes are justified as a sort of sexual payment in exchange for attention or gifts, while marital rapes, that appear to be the most common form of sexual assault, are related to husbands' willingness to dominate, humiliate and take control of their wives. As a consequence of the universal establishment of the rape culture, women's bodies are seen as legitimate objects of sexual violence and, what is more, they are held responsible for the violence they have experienced not only by the perpetrators, but also by a greater extent of society. Therefore, this social phenomenon strictly inherent to the rape culture is defined as victim-blaming, which is frequently followed by authorities' apathy in managing rape cases and a stigmatization of the victim who feels ashamed of the violence suffered and ends up being reluctant to report what happened. Indeed, the rape culture is well consolidated by means of rape myths, namely "*attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women*"¹¹⁷.

Rape myths are fundamentally similar to stereotypes, in the sense that a sexual assault might or might not conform to the rape myths and, in the event that it does, it is broadly publicized, while those rapes that do not comply with the myths are undervalued. One of the most common conviction is that women regularly pretend to have been raped and it is due to rare cases of false accusations of rape that are overly publicized. Rather, many other accusations do not even get to trial because there is a much higher probability that women suffer from rape victimization and choose not to report the crime to the police that might be reluctant to arrest if the facts do not fit with the rape myths. Another most common myth is that only a category of women is raped, that is women who are considered to have 'bad' reputation, meaning that they have loose morals, and who belong to socially marginalized or minority groups. Rape myths serve to prevent individuals from facing the reality and realizing the extent and severity of sexual assault, since it is mentally easier to deny its frequency and believe that "*the world is a just place where good things happen to good people and bad things happen only to those who deserve them*"¹¹⁸. For this reason, individuals attempt to investigate whether there is any

¹¹⁷ Lonsway, K.A. & Fitzgerald, L.F., (1994). Rape Myths: In Review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18 (2), 133-64. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x>

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

factor that might be attributed to the victim's fault, in such a way that they reassure themselves that the victims deserved their fate, while they consider themselves to be immune to rape.

Rape myths are additionally strengthened by rigid expectations of conventional femininity that deny women to take control of their sexuality and, thus, have a disproportionate sense of morality, as opposed to men. In this view, Susan Brownmiller defines the Red Riding Hood as the parable of rape. She attributes the role of the wolves to male figures in the woods and, since females seem to be defenseless before them, women "*better stick close to the path, better not be adventurous*"¹¹⁹. Though, she argues that the passivity of the Red Riding Hood towards the wolf is even more echoed in the Sleeping Beauty, who sleeps immobile for hundred years until the kiss of the prince awakens her. Under those circumstances, female sexuality is described as a beautiful passivity and, provided that the beautiful princess is unconscious and cannot handle this feat on her own, the female role is to be *beautiful and passive*¹²⁰. While the prince is the only one who can manage to awaken her, the 'bad wolf' is still outside and is stronger and more powerful than the female, who better properly behave and not fight back. Beautiful passivity is, indeed, at the core of the so-called 'toxic femininity', that is used as a term to indicate a form of femininity developed as a reaction and adaption to hegemonic masculinity, since hegemonic femininity does not exist and only masculinity is hegemonic. However, toxic femininity refers to the set of behaviors and beliefs that perfectly meet the patriarchal idea of the woman: emotionally unstable, physically weak, helpless, financially dependent and, consequently, waiting for the 'real' man who comes to save and protect her, as it is requested by toxic masculinity. Thus, toxic femininity is complementary to toxic masculinity, whose behaviors contribute to hold women in the same cycle of oppression and objectification, but, at the same time, it cannot be put on a par with toxic masculinity. Whereas the latter aims at taking power, as the only way to prevail in society, toxic femininity has as an objective the survival and works at the benefit of others, while it is detrimental for who adheres to it. If women are taught that they are nothing more than their body and their sexual function, it is not unexpected that they start to use both as an instrument to survive in a patriarchal society that sees femininity as a matter of discrimination. Women who express stereotypically feminine traits, such as passivity, sensuality, empathy and excessive selflessness, might make use of them in order to survive an oppressive misogyny or, probably, to compensate an internalized misogyny¹²¹. In addition, toxic femininity, whether it exists, promotes the silent acceptance of violence and domination and, by means of the toxic masculinity,

¹¹⁹ Brownmiller, S. (1976). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York: Bantam Books.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Savin-Williams, R.C. (2019, August 28). Toxic Femininity: Is acting as fragile and frivolous internalized misogyny? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/sex-sexuality-and-romance/201908/toxic-femininity>

locks women into a gender performance, that is deprived of universally human instincts, for instance independence, control of their own sexuality and anger, and, contemporarily, it is a source of pressure for women to be always feminine, thus beautiful, enough for men's pleasure. According to the objectification theory developed by Fredrickson and Roberts, heterosexuality in toxic masculinity's view grants all men the right to sexualize all women, irrespective of their age or status, and, within an ever-present sexualized gaze, it gives the power to sexually objectify females. Both scholars describe sexual objectification as "*whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her*"¹²². Essentially, when women happen to be objectified, they are treated as bodies "*that exist for the use and pleasure of others*"¹²³, except for some men who prefer looking for enriching relationships with women as a consequence. Nevertheless, women cannot control the sexually objectifying gaze constantly around them and only some exceptions succeed at completely ignoring it. With regard to the majority, women interiorize the outsider gaze, they start to self-objectify as if they were objects to be looked and validated for their appearance, to the point that they also start to increase their anxiety for their physical aspect, fears concerning potentiality of being raped, women's body-shaming, eating and mental disorders, insecurities and decrease consciousness of internal sensations of the body.

Given these points, it is shown that toxic masculinity also severely affects women, as it reproduces its fundamental beliefs through harmful and violent actions, that are performed by men, adherents to masculine norms, who feel the need to demonstrate their masculine identity by degrading anything feminine, and it creates a complementary phenomenon that deprives female individuals from their natural instincts and lets men and themselves sexually objectify their bodies on the grounds of a male gaze. In the next paragraph, I will explain why toxic masculinity is not only detrimental for men and women as a whole, but also why it is furtherly detrimental for the LGBTQ+ community by explicitly and implicitly supporting homophobia and transphobia, that are outcomes of the traditional ideology of masculinity.

¹²² Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T.A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>

¹²³ Ibid.

2.4. On the LGBTQ+ People

Finally, toxic masculinity has a major impact on the LGBTQ+ people. Since hegemonic masculinity enhances certain masculine norms that can be all performed only by one type of masculinity, it creates a hierarchy of masculinities, by which those that do not conform to the dominant type are marginalized and, often, discriminated through the explicit or implicit promotion of homophobia. As a result, heterosexuality, especially for men, becomes the norm or default sexual orientation on the basis of a rigid gender binary system, that excludes transgender, non-binary and gender fluid individuals.

In the first place, it is noteworthy to clarify that masculinity “*is neither static or timeless; it is historical*”¹²⁴. As it is deemed to be socially constructed, it adjusts to the culture of the time, place and people. Michael Kimmel outlines two masculine models that prevailed between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The first one is the Genteel Patriarch, that corresponds to the figure of a landownership with his elegance and richness, while the second one, the Heroic Artisan, is characterized by physical strength, republican virtue, hard-work and independence. Subsequently, since they are complementary to each other, by the 1830s, a new model of masculinity emerged, the Marketplace Man, who is featured by his wealthy and successful status, achieved in the capitalist marketplace as a businessman. Due to the lack of a feminine working figure, it follows an increase of a homosocial environment which pits men against themselves who, in order to prevail over other men, need to demonstrate their masculinity, by exhibiting all the cultural standards attributed to manhood. Since not all men can embody all masculine standards, other types of masculinity are derived from not meeting them partially or at all and are measured and evaluated on the grounds of the dominant masculine identity.

One of the main prerogatives of traditional masculinity is, indeed, the repudiation of femininity, that is accurately explained by Kimmel with reference to the Oedipus complex of Freud. The boy’s sexual desire for his mother leads him to emotionally detach from her and to identify himself in the father, who obstructs his son’s path. Consequently, as the boy fears castration from his father because of his impure desire, he chooses to identify with the source of his fear and to replace the sexual desire for his mother with the sexual desire for a woman who reminds him of her; thus, “*the boy becomes gendered (masculine) and heterosexual at the same time*”¹²⁵. Although the boy identifies himself with his oppressor, the fear that other men may find out that he is still attached to his mother and, for this

¹²⁴ Kimmel, M.S. (1994). Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity. In H. Brod and M. Kaufman (Eds.), *Theorizing Masculinities*. SAGE Publications.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

reason, may not make him appear as a 'real' man remains. The figure of the mother represents the humiliation of childhood, dependency and powerlessness and, thereby, men seem to be acting as if they were being guided or they were fighting against their mother's rules and bans. Hence, they start to reject femininity because they know that their mother can easily lessen their masculinity and, in order to avoid it and to overcome their insecurities, they have to constantly prove their manhood to others. The strict acquisition of the masculine identity will affect the young boy in three ways: he will push away his mother and all traits associated with her, he will suppress his emotional and feminine side as much as possible, and, as a consequence, he will learn to devalue women because he feels the need to reject femininity, that he associates with his mother.

Additionally, the performance of masculinity needs to be validated by other men, through the evaluation the common masculine markers, such as wealth, power and sexual prowess. In this regard, Kimmel argues that masculinity is a homosocial enactment, whose dominant emotion is fear, that, according to Freud, is associated with the fear of the father caused by the boy's sexual desire for his mother. As he identifies with his father, gender identity becomes to be linked with sexual orientation because the boy's identification with the father, a masculine identity, leads him to have a sexual desire for women, thus he becomes heterosexual. Instead, if the boy identified with his mother, he would take the mother's perspective which does not only lead him to see his father as a figure to emulate, but he would also see his father as his mother sees him and thus he would feel both terror and desire. Since the desire for other men is believed to be feminine, he feels the need to permanently suppress it. Therefore, in Kimmel's view, "*homophobia is the effort to suppress that desire, to purify all relationships with other men, with women, with children of its taint, and to ensure that no one could possibly ever mistake one for a homosexual*"¹²⁶. It results a strong repudiation for the homosexual and much anxiety from feeling always observed by both father's and other men's gaze. The latter is the real fear for men, that is more than a fear of homosexual men, rather, it is the fear that men might be perceived as homosexual by other men. Essentially, they are afraid to be unmasked, emasculated and humiliated and, equally, they feel ashamed to fear it to the point that this shame leads them to keep silence whenever their male peers laugh at sexist or homophobic jokes and harass women on the streets. To compensate the shame, rigid gender boundaries are established and all the traditional norms of masculinity are exaggerated, even though they include sexual assault, health risks and mental issues.

Conversely, the development of homophobia towards lesbian women applies differently. Feminist theorists criticize that the existence of lesbian women is implicitly denied because women are usually thought to be innately sexually oriented towards men. Paradoxically, in regard to hegemonic

¹²⁶ Ibid.

masculinity, lesbian couples actually seem to be more socially accepted than male homosexuality. The reason behind is that female homosexuality is seen more as an “*alternative life-style*”¹²⁷ rather than a real sexual orientation, given that heterosexuality is presumed to be the main sexual preference of women. The term homophobia merely refers to male homosexuality and ignores female homosexuality, by neglecting and erasing female experiences. In this concern, Adrienne Rich claims that lesbian women “*have historically been deprived of a political existence through ‘inclusion’ as female versions of male homosexuality*”¹²⁸ and, accordingly, the lesbian existence cannot be equated with male homosexuality since it would still deny the female reality and the subsequent inequalities. Most compelling evidence is the abuse of lesbian women’s erotization within pornographic contexts, which reinforce the deprivation of an emotionally mutual attachment between homosexual females and represent them as sexual commodities, addressed primarily to a male audience. On the one hand, traditional masculinity teaches men to look at women as sexual objects aimed at their pleasure and themselves as the possessors, on the other hand, it teaches them that the female role is associated with submission to men, thus, passivity and unawareness of their own sexuality. It follows that men’s power denies women’s sexuality or, even, forces male sexuality upon them through harassment and assault, so that the enforcement of female heterosexuality, other than a presumed sexual preference of women’s majority, appears to be instrumental in assuring men the physical, economical and emotional control over women. Research studies¹²⁹ on sex differences in attitudes toward female and male homosexuality demonstrate that heterosexual men are more likely to reject and react negatively toward sexual interactions between homosexual men rather than between homosexual women, due to the fact that they are positively influenced by looking at them in erotic terms. In addition, they may be also influenced by a masculinity threat which makes them more susceptible to gender threat, causing them or others to question the validity of their masculine identity. They are more willing to preserve the homogeneity of their gender group than women because men’s gender-role is more rigid and pressuring in terms of feminine repudiation, indeed, they are prone to deem homosexual males as gender-role deviants if they express feminine traits that do not comply with masculine norms, other than breaching them by not being heterosexual¹³⁰. On the contrary, women are more likely to be allowed not to conform to their gender role, since they do not perceive that much pressure if they choose to express masculine traits.

¹²⁷ Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Signs*, 5(4), 631-660.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ LaMar, L., & Kite, M. (1998). Sex Differences in Attitudes toward Gay Men and Lesbians: A Multidimensional Perspective. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35(2), 189-196.

¹³⁰ Konopka, K., Rajchert, J., Dominiak-Kochanek, M., & Roszak, J. (2019). The Role of Masculinity Threat in Homonegativity and Transphobia. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1(28). doi:10.1080/00918369.2019.1661728

Another key point that links toxic masculinity to a normalization and expansion of homophobia is that heterosexuality, based on a gender binary system, is believed to be the norm or default sexual orientation. This belief is not only reflected in the development of homophobia, as a non-acceptance of sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, but also in the apparent acceptance of homosexual couples. For instance, a lesbian woman who shows masculine attitudes is likely to be recognized and accepted as a male figure, in such a way that a female homosexual relationship falls within the heterosexuality framework. Similarly, male homosexuality is recognized as a relationship between two men, one of whom is deemed to take on the female gender role, so that the relationship falls once again within the heterosexuality frame.

According to Butler¹³¹, the social construction of gender has produced a normative sexuality that is interiorized as a natural trait. She argues that gender itself can be read as a form of melancholy that emerges in the subject's psyche, not as a response to a loss of a loved and desired object, but as an outcome of a foreclosure, a prohibition on loving. Thus, gender identification is a sort of melancholy, in which the sex of the forbidden object is interiorized as a prohibition that rules the gender identity. If the melancholic response to the loss of the object of the same sex consists of incorporating and becoming that object, the gender identity becomes the internalization of a ban, that turns out to be what shapes the identity. As a result, for all socially constructed subjects, the foreclosure, that is the prevention from the possibility of being homosexual, produces the melancholy of the heteronormative societies. The prohibition from loving anyone that belongs to the same sex gives rise to something that has not been experienced and that cannot be cried about, which is central to the melancholy, to the point that heterosexuality naturalizes itself in opposition to homosexuality and bisexuality. The latter do not appear to be external to the culture, rather, they are placed in a socially invisible 'area', while heterosexuality is progressively constructed through the repeated performativity of practices and behaviors that lead to the suppression of homosexuality and bisexuality, whose course is outlined by the Oedipus complex. In order to dismantle this normative construction, Butler proposes to destabilize the identity's categories naturalized by the binary system of man/woman and introduces the queer theory, which places identity outside social normativity and challenges the conventional practice of constraining the personal identity to separated compartments. The queer theory essentially aims at suppressing the belief that natural and deviant identities do exist and states that anyone has the freedom to assume any identity, each remaining fluid and provisory.

As can be seen, individuals belonging to the LGBTQ+ community are those who transgress gender norms most. While homosexual people reject heteronormative norms in terms of sexual orientation, transgender people cross gender boundaries in relation to heteronormative gender identity and roles.

¹³¹ Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Indeed, transgender individuals are negatively judged as individuals whose gender identities and behaviors do not correspond to those conventionally associated with their biological sex. In this case, men's anxieties about their masculine identity are triggered by unconventional gender identities and, consequently, they contribute to the promulgation of hostility toward individuals who do not conform with norms of gender roles and gender identity. The rejection, degradation and hatred toward individuals who do not meet conventional definitions of gender identity are known under the name of transphobia, which is mainly addressed to issues about challenging gender roles and gender identity. Hence, transphobia can be defined as “*a variant of homophobia understood as hatred of the queer, where “queer” means any formation of sexuality and/or gender that deviates from the norm of reproductive heterosexuality*”¹³². Particularly, scholars¹³³¹³⁴ argue that male-to-female transgender people, who usually undertake a transition from a male to a female body without a genital surgery, incite the promulgation of transphobia from men because they challenge the gender binarism based on the cultural hegemonic masculinity. As homosexual men are traditionally judged and repudiated by many men for their presumed femininity, transgender women, who might be sexually attracted to men, are perceived even more as a threat to masculinity, since they show that they have been able to feminize the male sex. Consequently, on one side, men start to fear a possible feminization of all men, which definitely breaches the distinction between male superiority and female inferiority; on the other side, a transgender woman who is sexually oriented toward the male gender destabilizes both the common definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality and, thus, breaks down the conventional beliefs on sexuality, gender roles and gender relations. Femininity becomes to be even more terrifying for men because, in Freud's view, they feel that they inevitably might get back to identify with their mother and, for this reason, the confrontation with a male-to-female transgender might be the traumatic revival of the boy's deepest repression and overwhelming acknowledgment. Therefore, a fearful sense of loss of control occurs and leads a man to feel “*powerless to prevent his own reversion to a feminine identification [...] reinforced by the very familiarity of that identity*”¹³⁵ and to believe that “*every male, gay or non-gay, is a woman*”¹³⁶. To the emphasize this perpetration

¹³² Norton, J. (1997). “Brain Says You're a Girl, But I Think You're a Sissy Boy”: Cultural Origins of Transphobia. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, 2(2).

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Nagoshi, J.L., Adams, K.A., Terrell, H.K., Hill, E.D., Brzuzy, S., & Nagoshi, C.T. (2008). Gender Differences in Correlates of Homophobia and Transphobia. *Sex Roles*, 59, 521-531. doi: 10.007/s11199-008-9458-7

¹³⁵ Norton, J. (1997). “Brain Says You're a Girl, But I Think You're a Sissy Boy”: Cultural Origins of Transphobia. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, 2(2).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

of transmisogyny, that is the intersection between transphobia and misogyny, in an interview¹³⁷, Judith Butler declares that the majority of the transgender women's murders are committed by men and explains that it may be due to the fact that they repudiate their attraction to them or they are scared to identify with what they reject. Since a murder is the maximum act of power that can be taken by toxic masculinity, under these circumstances, it is incentivized by the transgender women's relinquishment of masculinity that appears to be threatening to a man who is willing to preserve the power that features his identity and, in so doing, he needs to erase any trace reminding them of the threat.

On the whole, the LGBTQ+ community is inevitably affected by the enactment of toxic masculinity whose norms reject nonconformities to a heteronormative and gender binary society. In reaction, repudiation of noncompliance with masculine norms is followed by phenomena such as homophobia and transphobia, that incite to hatred against individuals who violate and cross gender boundaries, respectively in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity.

¹³⁷ Tourjée, D. (2015, December 16). Why Do Men Kill Trans Women? Gender Theorist Judith Butler Explains. *VICE*. Retrieved from https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z4jd7y/why-do-men-kill-trans-women-gender-theorist-judith-butler-explains

3. Challenging and Reproducing Toxic Masculinity: a focus on ad campaigns

Although toxic masculinity is still much present in society and thus individuals are still quite influenced by social norms related to their gender identity, new types of masculinities differing from traditional masculinity are emerging in consequence of an increasing breach of gender norms by individuals. Essentially, men have started to progressively embody behaviors and traits associated with marginalized and subordinate masculinities, whose features, that do not comply with the concepts of toughness, strength and emotional control, have been associated with femininity and consequently rejected and degraded. Non-hegemonic masculinities have also obtained more visibility in media and public sphere. From an optimist perspective, the increasing incorporation of feminine performances might help to recognize masculine identities that differ from hegemonic masculinity and to socially validate femininity. Whereas, from a more pessimist perspective, it may be the case that systems of inequality are reproduced by historically new ways. Since individuals are differently judged because of their socio-economic status, not everybody, especially if belonging to a lower social class, who follows the trend of challenging traditionally masculine norms results to live the same experiences of individuals placed at socially high positions, whose privileges may happen to be obscured. As well, brands seek to contribute to the promotion of the new types masculinities through ad campaigns aimed at raising awareness of gender issues. In this regard, toxic masculinity seems to be highly challenged and nearly on the way to be defied, nevertheless, it may be also true that brands exploit political struggles and profit from social changes in order to increase their income. Given that these phenomena are quite recent, positive or negative outcomes that might result cannot be foreseen. Thus, the aim of this chapter is that, although it is noteworthy to acknowledge new types of masculinities featured by healthier behaviors and increasing inclusivity, it is too soon to claim that systems of power and inequality will be defeated. In the first paragraph, I will speak of the development of new types of masculinities in the most recent times and I will discuss whether, by embodying elements from marginalized and subordinate masculinities according to hegemonic masculinity, they eventually challenge toxic masculinity or whether they reproduce new forms of inequalities. Whereas, in the second and last paragraph, I will focus on the ad campaigns related to the breach of gender norms and argue whether they contribute to the future defeat of toxic masculinity or whether, by means of them, brands exploit social issues in order to financially profit from them, by seeking to win the trust of a specific target to which they can sell their products.

3.1. Problematizing Hybrid Masculinities

As toxic masculinity is culturally intrinsic to society, daily needs, such as daily purchases and goods consumption, are often influenced by one's own gender identification and related social norms. Thereby, gender norms are implicitly reflected by brands' strategies that aim at catching the attention of a specific target, several times on the basis of its gender, in order to increase purchases by riding the wave of contemporary social trends that become to be externally attributed to the brand personality. Since consumers are individuals who, most probably, have internalized gender norms in their lifetime, a greater extent of their consumption choices might be influenced by their gender identity. On one side, what brands seek to do is to reflect consumers' gender roles, by means of the embodiment of a masculine or feminine aesthetics or by publishing advertising spots that convey messages aimed at attracting individuals who are likely to follow gender norms. On the other side, consumers seek to affirm their masculinity or femininity by purchasing from brands whose personality makes it possible for them to symbolically express their own degree of gender identity. In essence, "*marketers support consumers' need for self-expression by creating masculine or feminine brand associations*"¹³⁸, especially through the use of packaging colors, logos or slogans that recall masculinity or femininity according to their social construction. For instance, it is common to find hygiene products, such as shampoos or shower gels, that are differently addressed to females and males, even though the usage is the same for both of them. Such products are usually distinguished by means of colors, which, in the case of men, are prevalently dark, followed by slogans that incite them to use those items in order to strengthen their masculinity. Similarly, men and women tend to have different approaches towards consumption choices related to beauty treatments, among which the haircare sounds to be quite noteworthy. A research study¹³⁹ points out that many men reject the idea to get ordinary haircuts done in a salon, rather than in a barber shop or by professional hairdressers targeted for men, due to the fact that it is commonly seen as a feminine place that could make them run the risk to be feminized. Moreover, it is found out that the share of men who choose to get their haircuts done in a salon, typically characterized by a feminine furniture, usually belongs to a white privileged and upper-middle socio-economic status, that makes them feel entitled enough to disregard the femininity around them. It follows that men in salons take on behaviors such that they attempt to make it clear that they do not belong to those places, in order to distance themselves

¹³⁸ Grohmann, B. (2009). Gender Dimensions of Brand Personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 46(1), 105-119.

¹³⁹ Barber, K. (2016). Styled Masculinity: Men's Consumption of Salon Hair Care and the Construction of Difference. In C.J. Pascoe & T. Bridges, *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change*. Oxford, UK, & New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

from the potentially feminizing character, and to assert themselves in such places by being active and present, in opposition to women who are likely to be passive and relaxed during their beauty treatments.

However, even the mere fact that certain men choose to go to salons and start to take better care of their hairstyle shows that, most recently, new types of masculinities, that do not extremely reject practices or attitudes associated with femininity and, consequently, do not expand and normalize homophobia, are slowly emerging. As new trends related to gender identities become gradually widespread, individuals increasingly start to reproduce them to be socially validated. Basically, these new types of masculinities are defined as ‘hybrid masculinities’, that “refer to the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and [...] femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities”¹⁴⁰. In other words, it is stated that many young, white and heterosexual men are incorporating more and more elements that are typically attributed to masculinities placed below or at the bottom of the gender hierarchy ruled by hegemonic masculinity.

According to Anderson’s inclusive masculinity theory, these changes in masculinity are claimed to be challenging gender hierarchies since a hybrid masculinity seems to increasingly expand acceptable heteromale behaviors, which include those that once were stigmatized as feminine, and to blur the distinction between masculine and feminine attitudes. Thus, Anderson argues that hybrid masculinity appears to be more inclusive rather than exclusive and discriminating, although it does not mean that men are finally free from any masculine norm, and that the reason behind relates to the decrease in ‘homophobia’¹⁴¹. The latter is claimed to be the consequence of an increasing awareness of gay identity and a subsequent diminishment in the cultural disapproval of homosexuality, which has decreased the belief that masculinity necessarily implies heterosexuality.

Nonetheless, other scholars are skeptical that hybrid masculinities actually challenge and suppress systems of inequality. For instance, Messner affirms that the incorporation by men of socially feminine attitudes relates more to a shift in the cultural styles of masculinity rather than a fight against the privileged status that men still own in society. It results that these cultural changes in men’s behaviors “do not necessarily contribute to the undermining of conventional structures of men’s power over women”¹⁴². Rather, Messner argues that the fact that new types of masculinity, involving softer behaviors, are expanding to some privileged men’s categories might lead to a reverse effect. On one side, it may be the case that homosexual men, particularly those who are white and belong to

¹⁴⁰ Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive Masculinity*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁴¹ The fear of being thought homosexual due to a behavior that is believed to be gender atypical.

¹⁴² Messner, M. (1993). “Changing Men” and Feminist Politics in the United States. *Theory and Society*, 22(5), 723-737.

the middle class, are genuinely challenging hegemonic masculinity, but, since they already share some of the traditional masculine power and privilege, they might identify with that power, have the sole purpose of including homosexuality into the definition of conventional masculinity and, then, let a combination of masculinities obscure inequality. Of course, on the other side, it may be the case that some homosexual men do not only fight for incorporating homosexuality into hegemonic masculinity, but they also support feminist political issues and actively participate to fight against gender hierarchies. In line with Messner, Demetriou argues that the increase in the visibility and male appropriation of gay culture produces hybrid forms of masculinity that can pursue gender inequality and patriarchy through historically new ways. Indeed, the hybridization “*might make the hegemonic bloc appear less oppressive and more egalitarian*”¹⁴³ and subtly keeps legitimizing the dominance of the patriarchal system through an unrecognizable manner.

In this view, the sociologist Tristan Bridges discusses whether hybrid masculinities are new existing forms of inequality or are actually politically progressive as they claim to be¹⁴⁴. Since hybrid masculinities often integrate the so-called ‘gay aesthetics’ in heterosexual men, what some heterosexual men do is to define some aspects of themselves as ‘gay’, in such a way that enables them to maintain a sort of ‘masculine’ distance from homosexuality. In so doing, those heterosexual men seem to challenge boundaries between gay and straight culturally-associated traits and to socially integrate marginalized and subordinated masculinities, but, in reality, it seems rather that existing gender boundaries are reproduced by new ways capable to blur systems of power and inequality. Bridges, together with Pascoe, argues that, although men declare to have been distanced from hegemonic masculinity, they subtly align themselves with it by creating a new hierarchy between ‘good’ masculinities, those that include traits associated with marginalized and subordinated ones, and ‘bad’ masculinities, those that are more featured by masculine traits associated with hegemonic masculinity¹⁴⁵. Since some feminine qualities inherent to hybrid masculinity become to be regarded as more meaningful than those inherent to hegemonic masculinity, a new type of masculine dominance is established. This is quite evident by looking at the recent evolution of the most appreciated male role models, particularly among celebrities. As can be seen, the cultural ideal related to men’s physical aspect that consisted of major exhibition of muscularity, pronounced masculine traits and carelessness of aesthetics and clothing, has been gradually substituted by a new male model,

¹⁴³ Demetriou, D. (2001). Connell’s Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique. *Theory and Society*, 30(3), 337-61.

¹⁴⁴ Bridges, T. (2014). A Very “Gay” Straight? Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia. *Gender & Society*, 28(1), 58-82. doi:10.1177/0891243213503901

¹⁴⁵ Bridges, T.S., & Pascoe, C.J. (2014). Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities. *Sociology Compass*, 8(3), 246-258. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

that is featured by a major care of one's own appearance, a softer exhibition of muscularity and softer feminine traits. Movie actors like Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt can be regarded among the first best-known examples of prototypes of the new cultural ideal of being men, since they own delicate facial features, take care of their physical appearance, by usually presenting themselves in classy clothes, with a perfect haircut and a slightly shaved beard, and do not excessively exhibit masculine attitudes or traits. Particularly, the aesthetics¹⁴⁶ that DiCaprio owned in his early adulthood seems to be still much more appreciated than that of recent times, because, due to his youth, he owned more visible feminine traits than masculine ones, appeared less physically robust and had a sophisticated clothing style, characterized by accessories, high-waist trousers and vintage shirts or pullovers, which does not completely recall the cultural ideal of men's physical appearance according to hegemonic masculinity.

Throughout the last years, an aesthetics quite akin to young DiCaprio's one has become widely popular among young men. It has been called under the name of 'soft boy'¹⁴⁷ aesthetics, which consists of a fashion style used by men who are willing to display their sensitivity and creativity (i.e. photography, art, music), usually through the use of vintage clothes and accessories, the lack of facial hair and the owning of a medium-length haircut. One of the most representative examples among male celebrities reproducing the evolution of men's preferences toward fashion styles is the actor Cole Sprouse who, in 2017, did a photoshoot for *L'Uomo Vogue*¹⁴⁸ where he posed while crying. Hence, this sort of new cultural ideal of being men does not stop to a softer aesthetics that reminds of a feminine attitude previously associated only with homosexuality, but it actually goes further than that through the development of a new trend that pushes men to display at least a seeming sensitivity. Even more accurately, it can be observed that, in the last decade, the most loved male artists of the pop music industry (i.e. Justin Bieber, Ed Sheeran, One Direction) are those who base their lyrics' songs on their sensitivity, pain and emotions, often by referring to love problems or family issues. Not only they have been widely appreciated for openly expressing their emotional side as young men, but they have also become mainly popular among young girls who feel respected and flattered by listening to their songs that are, for a large extent, characterized by a sort of idolatry of the female gender. It follows that, other than implicitly creating a new hierarchy between young men who are willing to – and, as I will argue in the next paragraph can – express sensitivity, creativity, care of

¹⁴⁶ CR Fashion Book (2019, November 11). *Young Photos of Leonardo DiCaprio: On the actor's birthday*, CR confirms his enduring heartthrob status. Retrieved from <https://www.crfashionbook.com/celebrity/g29742797/young-photos-leonardo-dicaprio/?slide=22>

¹⁴⁷ On Point Fresh (2020). *The Soft Boy Aesthetic – Guide*. Retrieved from <https://onpointfresh.com/soft-boy-aesthetic/>

¹⁴⁸ Vogue Italia (2017, February 8). *Magazine: Cole Sprouse* [Video File]. Retrieved by <https://www.vogue.it/en/news/daily-news/2017/02/08/cole-sprouse/>

their own aesthetics, and who are not willing to, a new hierarchy between young girls is created since, in the same songs, male artists mainly express their love for girls who prefer looking natural, without make-up, who own a conventionally feminine aesthetics, who are usually shy and do not make the first move, but, at the same time, who show themselves as passionate and sensual in private. Indeed, on the one hand, in relation to the evolution of male physical appearance, it might occur that the embodiment of certain feminine traits and aesthetics in men blurs an establishment of a new hierarchy among masculinities that do not include feminine attitudes that derive from subordinated and marginalized ones and masculinities that do include them. On the other hand, it might occur that the constant expression of the emotional side of men leads to a similar outcome and, further, in the case of the pop music industry, even to a new hierarchy among femininities that reinforces gender inequality. Additionally, with regard to these potential outcomes, it is still too soon to establish whether softer forms of masculinity end in themselves, in the sense that some men may merely borrow femininity, as if it became a trend or as a way to sexually attract women, and fortify gender boundaries by leaving the male privilege unquestioned, or whether they could gradually break down the systems of inequality and power by introducing elements that were extremely rejected and degraded before. Another key point emphasizing the risk of a subtle reproduction of a system of inequality is the fact that the incorporation of femininity by rich or middle-class, white, heterosexual men does not lead to the same consequences that low-class, black, homosexual men could experience by acting in like manner. To clarify, a white man who is already widely recognized as heterosexual or a celebrated, rich male artist, like an actor or a singer, does not run the same risk that a black man or a young, low-class man runs by embodying femininity in his aesthetics or character. For instance, an artist such as Harry Styles, who frequently wears feminine accessories, clothes and nail polish in photoshoots and in noteworthy events like the Met Gala 2019¹⁴⁹, due to his higher position in society, would not probably experience the same issues from which a young boy might suffer by merely wearing a pink nail polish at school in a poor neighborhood. Rather, the belief that Harry Styles is succeeding in defying toxic masculinity by wearing a pink ballet skirt in a photoshoot¹⁵⁰ might obscure the several issues, like verbal and physical violence, homophobic teasing by male peers or rejection from their own family, that other men and young boys, who find themselves in a socially lower position, could possibly experience by wearing a similar outfit. Often compared to the male singer Harry Styles, the young actor Timothée Chalamet, best-known for his protagonist role of an adolescent gay boy in *Call Me By Your Name*, represents the direction in which hybrid masculinity is moving by the last years.

¹⁴⁹ Vogue (2019, May 7). *Met Gala 2019: Harry Styles in Gucci*. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.it/moda/article/met-gala-2019-harry-styles-alessandro-michele-gucci>

¹⁵⁰ NBC (2019). Harry Styles Bumper Photos. Retrieved from <https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/photos/harry-styles-bumper-photos/3386007>

In the most recent times, the male actor, by owning quite feminine traits, is seen by a major audience as the new cultural ideal of masculine aesthetics and, at the same time, is commonly acclaimed to have introduced a new era for masculinity by gender-breaking fashion styles through the choice of wearing feminine clothes at red carpets and photoshoots¹⁵¹. Despite that, it is still too soon to affirm that these male artists, who embody hybrid masculinity at its fullest and attempt to publicly break down gender norms, might really succeed in making significant improvements for the future abolishment of gender hierarchies or might obscure the privilege that they still enjoy by being white high-class men who probably would not experience the same negative repercussions that a young, poor, black boy would probably do by reproducing their actions under different circumstances. For example, in the Netflix TV Series *Sex Education*¹⁵², it can be seen how two young boys, who attend the same school, differently experience homosexuality and appropriation of feminine appearance on the basis of their socio-economic status. Eric, the best-friend of the main protagonist, is a homosexual black boy who lives with a religious and low-middle class family and is often marginalized at school, while Anwar is a homosexual mulatto boy who probably lives with a middle-high class family, since he usually wears fancy clothes, and is always around the most popular people in the school. It is noteworthy to observe that Eric, by appearing as sensitive, owning typically feminine qualities and being placed at a quite low social status, is easily teased and degraded, even by Anwar himself. Furthermore, it seems that it is not possible for him to be both homosexual and masculine, since his homosexuality is solely recognized when his feminine appearance is exaggerated, that is portrayed as exceptional. This emphasized homosexuality results paradoxically as more 'acceptable' inasmuch as it can be easily distinguished from the standard heteromale identity and somewhat reinforces boundaries between 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' identities¹⁵³. Indeed, it seems that even his father finally accepts and fully recognizes his sexuality by the time that he starts to see Eric wearing flamboyant make-up and feminine clothes. Whereas Anwar, other than belonging to a wealthy family, looking physically western and appearing less feminine in comparison to Eric, mostly owns typically masculine qualities, in the sense that he usually behaves rudely, teases offensively others and never shows himself vulnerable towards his peers in order to get respect from them. As a result of his higher social status and aggressive behavior, that subtly relates him to masculinity, he seems to suffer from problems with bullying much less than Eric, rather, he is already validated by a greater extent of peers at school and thus he results to be less judged for his sexuality

¹⁵¹ Greenwood, D. (2019, September 19). How Timothée Chalamet is ushering in a new era for masculinity. *Vogue*. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com.au/culture/features/how-timothe-chalamet-is-usher-ing-in-a-new-era-for-masculinity/image-gallery/279f743b36c62f3203306451458111e8>

¹⁵² Jennings, J. (Producer). (2019, January 11). *Sex Education* [Television broadcast]. UK: Netflix.

¹⁵³ Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books.

and appearance. As the TV series attempts to portray reality, it can be observed that the recognition of a masculine identity differing from traditional masculinity is diversely experienced on the basis of the social status, even at the same school. Notwithstanding, it must be said that *Sex Education* is a much progressive TV series that positively contributes to the debate concerning gender and sexuality, since it accurately seeks to raise awareness on social taboos and to improve teenagers' knowledge and attitudes towards sexual behaviors, in opposition to the frequent lack of sexual education at school.

3.2. Brands' Strategies and New Types of Masculinities: Challenge or Reproduction?

In parallel, many brands seek to integrate new types of masculinities close to hybrid masculinity into their brand values, presumably in order to win the trust of more consumers and increase their income by riding the wave of contemporary trends, or, potentially, in order to support gender equality by starting from renewing their values and conveying positive messages through the sales and ad campaigns of their products. In so doing, on one side, several brands have been accused of falling in 'pinkwashing'¹⁵⁴, that can be deemed as 'reversed' with reference to a male target, or a rainbow washing¹⁵⁵, in the sense that they have failed to communicate diversity, because of a lack of connection between the brands themselves and the advertised products in their ad campaigns, or to raise positive attitudes towards their advertisement or products, due to the fact that they are believed to send wrong messages that are opposed to the values that they are attempting to promote. On the other side, other several brands (i.e. Gucci, Gillette, Coca-Cola), that are seeking to publicly show that diversity has become an integral part of their brand values, have been regarded as progressive and widely acclaimed to be actually succeeding in recognizing homosexuality and defying toxic masculinity through their ad campaigns.

To better clarify the phenomenon of pinkwashing, one of the most accused start-ups of using this strategy is Freeda, which is an editorial project theoretically aimed at promoting gender equality, by publishing posts on social media relative to women and men's issues. In reality, the effect they end up producing is seen as opposite to what feminist activism proclaims to fight for. The company barely reports men's issues, rather it often establishes an unfair double standard in regard to certain issues,

¹⁵⁴ Previously used by companies that declared to support the fight against breast cancer with commercial purposes, now it indicates all the marketing strategies aimed at promoting products through an appeal to feminist activism in order to increase sales.

¹⁵⁵ Marketing and political strategies aimed at promoting products, people or entities through an appeal to gay-friendliness, in order to be perceived as progressive, modern and tolerant.

like the *body-shaming*¹⁵⁶, against which it fights on the behalf of women, and usually blames men for being men in regard to social issues. Other than communicating controversial messages with regard to men, it also subtly establishes a hierarchy of femininities by creating disparities between ‘real’ women, who need to completely distance themselves from any typically patriarchal element, and second-class women, who are blamed to be submitted to patriarchy because they dream of their marriage and are self-consciously housewives. What is more, the start-up results to exploit the target of young girls towards whom it is addressed, by benefiting from the political struggles relative to women’s rights, in order to increase its revenue through targeted branded content¹⁵⁷. Rather than breaking down gender boundaries, Freeda reinforces gender differences by referring to the female imagery that has been created on the basis of a female education, aimed at a gender disparity, which establishes women and men’s preferences and interests on the basis of their gender. The start-up over uses specific language, images and colors, like pink, that are instrumental in catching the attention of a socially constructed female audience, in order to strengthen interests that are typically attributed to women and then to sell products that other companies, through online paid partnerships, think to be targeted to that specific audience. Hence, rather than providing proper information and sources, the feminist values claimed by Freeda are exploited in order to create a well-targeted audience based on the gender and to sell it as many products (i.e. make-up, depilatory strips, etc.) as possible through ad campaigns that contribute to the increase in gender disparity and the wrong perception of feminist movements. The start-up seems to be a clear example of a pinkwashing relative to feminist activism and it might not lead to positive outcomes in the future.

Diversely from Freeda, with reference to a prevalently male target, the commercial company Gillette has been highly criticized because of an advertising campaign launched in 2019, whose intent was to explicitly address negative attitudes among men, such as toxic masculinity, bullying, sexism and sexual misconduct, and to exhort men to distance themselves from those behaviors. Indeed, the campaign’s slogan is “*The Best Men Can Be*”¹⁵⁸, which challenges men to show that they can be better than what masculine norms have taught them and to become the best version of themselves. The campaign has not been really accused of a ‘reversed’ pinkwashing of the brand, instead, it has been mostly criticized by a greater extent of the male audience for the delivery of the message that has resulted to be quite ineffective. As can be observed through the dislikes and comments left down below the Gillette spot, on the one hand, some men have seen the behaviors promoted by the

¹⁵⁶ Criticism and teasing of someone based on the shape, size or appearance of their body.

¹⁵⁷ Morning FUTURE (2019, January 11). *Freeda, “pop feminism” has become an editorial success*. Retrieved from <https://www.morningfuture.com/en/article/2019/01/11/freeda-company-feminism/515/>

¹⁵⁸ Gillette (2019, January 13). *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette (Short Film)* [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0&feature=emb_title

campaign as a ‘feminization’ of the masculine identity and an attack to their virility. In this view, even though the spot does not include anything too revolutionary or ever claimed, the fact that many men have accused the brand of attacking their masculinity by attributing to them typically feminine behaviors has shown that the campaign was actually necessary to at least create a discussion concerning the impact of toxic masculinity on society. On the other hand, many men have stated that they have felt upset for having been told how to behave by a profit-motivated company and have complained about an excessive generalization, by claiming that it is unfair to blame all men for sexual abuses, bullying and violence solely on the grounds of their gender. With regard to that, Gillette does not generalize the male gender, rather, it promotes some positive behaviors that certain men already have in order to show that traditional masculinity is no longer at the core of the functioning of society and has been substituted by a masculinity that is no longer afraid to defend women, stand against violence and combat stereotypes. Besides that, objectively, this type of masculinity has not been taken on yet by the majority of the male population, otherwise it would be not necessary to challenge toxic masculinity and tell men that they can do better. It is also true that the campaign can be seen as if Gillette, rather than promoting the values in which it believes in, judges its consumers by asking them to change their social behavior and, whether the message is positive or negative, it is controversial that a brand, whose aim is to increase its profit, allows itself to teach its audience how to behave¹⁵⁹. Overall, it can be said that, although the message behind the campaign is quite positive and necessary, there is an issue concerning the delivery of the message that cannot be ignored if so many men felt attacked by the generalization of their gender and, because of that, did not feel understood and were not convinced by the spot. In the same year, in occasion of the Pride Month¹⁶⁰, Gillette published another campaign¹⁶¹ relative to gender issues by focusing on the importance of the first shave, that is told by a Canadian transgender man who shaves for the first time in front of his father that proudly guides and encourages him. In this case, the advertisement seems to be much more effective because not only it does not fall in clichés, but producers have also chosen to entrust the role of a transgender man to an individual in the process of his transition. Provided that, it cannot be excluded that it may be the case that Gillette exploits gender issues with the aim of increasing its economic profits, nevertheless, it attempts to promote and recognize a new type of masculinity that challenges toxic masculinity by distancing itself from the traditionally masculine identity.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, C. (2019, January 15). Why Gillette’s New Ad Campaign Is Toxic. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/charlesrtaylor/2019/01/15/why-gillettes-new-ad-campaign-is-toxic/#588e9a9a5bc9>

¹⁶⁰ It is celebrated each year in the month of June to pay homage to the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York City.

¹⁶¹ Gillette (2019, May 23). *First Shave, the story of Samson | #MyBestSelf* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/gillette/videos/2353380328320259/>

Accordingly, the fashion company Gucci is seeking to introduce a fight against toxic masculinity by dressing up male artists, like Harry Styles, and the creative director Alessandro Michele with feminine clothes, as it occurred at the Met Gala 2019¹⁶², and by designing some of clothing collections with slogans or genderless aesthetics, both aimed at rejecting toxic masculinity. On Gucci's fall 2020 men's runway in Milan, in occasion of his fifth anniversary in the fashion company, the creative director Michele, who has attempted to blur gender boundaries in fashion from his first collection, presented a simple white tee in front of which it is written "impotent/impatient"¹⁶³. Fundamentally, the slogan aims at challenging toxic masculinity and patriarchy by condemning men themselves to comply with an imposed virility in order to be validated by society. In the same runway, Michele introduced a menswear collection featured by babydoll dresses and schoolboy looks, paired with fluffy blue and pink jumpers, blouses, crop tops and flamboyant suits, with the intention of portraying a kind and caring 'baby-man' in opposition to toxic masculinity¹⁶⁴. By the way, it is still too soon to affirm that Gucci does not involve a sort of 'reversed' pinkwashing, in order to increase its sales and revenue by exploiting a widely debated issue by media, mainly in recent times, such as toxic masculinity, and attracting a well-targeted audience to whom it can address its products or a general audience that has at heart certain political struggles and is more willing to buy from a company that seemingly supports them. At the same time, it is difficult to determine whether Gucci concretely helps to break down gender boundaries since it should be taken into account the fact that there is still a great disparity between the risk run by male models who parade on celebrated fashion runways, while wearing unusual feminine outfits, and young men who might choose to wear similar clothes on the street.

In comparison to the fashion world, several make-up brands attempt to break down gender norms by expanding their audience, prevalently female, to a male audience through ad campaigns showing new types of masculinity that include the use of make-up, which is commonly a beauty activity associated with femininity. However, even in this field, it is not that simple to determine whether certain brands, that claim to be quite inclusive, have ended up doing a 'reversed' pinkwashing or rainbow washing with the aim to attract a wider audience to increase their revenues, by exploiting political struggles

¹⁶² Gucci (2019). MET Gala 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.gucci.com/it/it/st/stories/people-events/article/gucci-met-2019-gallery>

¹⁶³ Yotka, S. (2020, January 14). Gucci's New "Impotent" Tee Is a Challenge to Toxic Masculinity. *Vogue*.

Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com/article/gucci-impotent-tshirt-fall-2020-menswear-toxic-masculinity>

¹⁶⁴ Davidson, E.E., & Heron-Langton, J. (2020, January 14). Gucci rejects toxic masculinity with babydoll dresses and blouses for AW20. *Dazed*.

Retrieved from <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/47463/1/gucci-aw20-milan-fashion-week-alessandro-michele>

relative to the breach of gender roles, rather than actually seeking to implement the idea that make-up has no gender. For instance, in 2018, Chanel has created a make-up line specifically addressed to men, called Boy De Chanel¹⁶⁵, by borrowing elements from femininity for drawing a new masculine aesthetics close to hybrid masculinity. Although Chanel's intent was to apparently promote a masculinity that overcomes the traditional masculine norms by embodying feminine practices, the outcome is contrary since, if make-up has actually no gender, products do not change on the basis of the gender of the individuals using them. To put it in another way, an eyebrow pencil claimed to be for men does not differ from an ordinary eyebrow pencil that may be addressed to women, since the product is the same and differs only from the target to which, theoretically, it is referred. What happens is that Chanel seeks to expand its audience by claiming that it supports the breach of gender norms, but, simultaneously, it ends up making the same mistake already made by many brands that differentiate products, aimed at the same use, on the grounds of gender. It follows that, in reality, what is implicitly supported is a traditional masculinity that, even though it seems to be close to a hybrid masculinity that embodies feminine practices, is still pursued by the fact that men will buy products specifically addressed to them in order to distance from femininity and to affirm their masculinity. Additionally, the launched line for men mainly features make-up products aimed at natural looks and, indeed, it only comprises a colorless lip balm, a foundation and an eyebrow pencil, all paired with a dark and anonymous packaging. Thus, the brand will expand its target to a male audience that does not seem to completely comply with traditional masculinity by taking on typically feminine practices, but that still distances itself from an association with femininity by buying products that are expected to be specific for men, even though each gender equally makes use of them.

In contrast to the attempt of Chanel to appear more inclusive, other make-up brands explicitly declare their fight against gender norms through ad campaigns that are mainly starred by non-binary individuals and men going against traditional masculinity. For instance, a make-up brand such as Milk Makeup proclaims itself to have been an inclusive brand in favor of non-binarism and contrary to gender norms from its first establishment in the beauty market. As early as 2015, the brand published an ad campaign¹⁶⁶, launching its first make-up line, that was not only starred by different types of femininities, but also by a young man wearing a colorful make-up. Similarly, in 2014, the American webstar Jeffree Star, who is best-known as a homosexual man taking on typically feminine attitudes, by usually wearing feminine make-up, wigs and clothes, created his make-up brand that has

¹⁶⁵ Niven-Phillips, L. (2018, August 21). Chanel Launches Men's Make-up. *Vogue*. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/chanel-mens-makeup-boy-de-chanel>

¹⁶⁶ Milk Makeup (2015, December 15). *Introducing Milk Makeup* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmRvYI1K3nI>

at its core the breach of gender roles, visibly promoted by means of ad campaigns¹⁶⁷ posted on social media and featured by himself going against masculine norms. In light of this, throughout the last years, famous brands (i.e. NYX, Morphe), before mostly addressed to a female audience, started to introduce new make-up lines in collaboration¹⁶⁸¹⁶⁹ with young male celebrities, such as Jeffree Star himself and the most popular American beauty webstar James Charles, who are both best-known for embodying femininity and breaking down traditional masculinity. Despite the fact that these brands aim at promoting new types of masculinities far from hegemonic masculinity and at encouraging men to break down from masculine norms, they still partially obscure the privileges that white male celebrities have, contrary to the risks that could be run by young, poor, black boys feeling brave to wear make-up, who are less likely to be socially validated as they do not count millions of followers on their social media as those male stars do. The latter themselves often have revealed to have been strongly bullied and, because of the risks they could have encountered, to have frequently avoided to express themselves at their fullest and, thus, to completely overcome gender boundaries, before having reached such a high social position that has enabled them to be widely validated by society. Thereby, it is not possible yet to determine whether make-up brands, that attempt to promote a genderless world, together with popular white male webstars, who show themselves as brave by engaging in typically feminine practices, will actually lead to achieve gender equality and to defeat toxic masculinity all around the world.

Furthermore, it occurs that many brands' advertisements aimed at positively contributing to diversity are frequently launched in occasion of the Pride Month. Certain brands, mainly those outside the make-up field whose connections with diversity are clearer, run the risk of falling in a rainbow washing, or they at least might seem to get close to it, by failing at properly connecting the brand and its products with the advertisement's message relative to the promotion of diversity. As shown by a research study¹⁷⁰, it is found out that advertisements that include homosexual individuals in ordinary and daily circumstances are perceived as positive messages since they show to the audience that they recognize homosexuality by portraying an inclusive society. For example, in relation to female homosexuality, this is the case of Renault's commercial¹⁷¹ where the car is used as a means that

¹⁶⁷ Jeffree Star Cosmetics [@jeffreestarcosmetics]. (n.d.) Posts [Instagram Profile]. Retrieved May 19, 2020, from <https://www.instagram.com/jeffreestarcosmetics/?hl=it>

¹⁶⁸ Morphe (2019, February 1). *Morphe x Jeffree Star* [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKHUCLNX_Dc

¹⁶⁹ Morphe (2019, October 22). *James Charles w/ Vanessa Davis ft. The Mini Collection* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDWTpFfvRL0>

¹⁷⁰ Berisha, E., Sjögren, M., & Sölve, J. (2015). Pinkwashing or Pro-Diversity? *LBMG Strategic Brand Management – Master Paper Series*.

¹⁷¹ Renault UK (2019, November 7). *30 Years in the making |The All-New Renault CLIO* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrNCVAqbCD0>

enables the two lovers to travel together during their early adulthood and to be reunited at the end. Substantially, the relation between the brand's product and the homosexual-themed advertisement does not appear to be forced because, on one side, the product leads the two girls to share important moments together and, on the other side, the lesbian couple is represented as an ordinary couple whose sexual orientation is not that relevant to be highlighted. Likewise, the Adressändring's commercial¹⁷² about the brand's post-service properly correlates the product to a genuine message towards diversity and does not communicate stereotypes by successfully portraying a verisimilar life issue. In the commercial, a Swedish boy, Kjell, and a French boy fall in love in Paris. Once back in Sweden, the French boy writes to him, but Kjell moves in a new house and, by not changing the address through the post-service offered, never receives his letter asking him to come live with him. Substantially, the commercial properly inserts the service offered as it incites to use the brand's post-service to change the address after moving, in order not to lose anything important in the letterbox, especially if sent by one's own lover, regardless any gender or sexual orientation. Additionally, the ending, that shows him living with a woman, implicitly refers to the reality that many individuals experience by not declaring their sexuality, due to the consequent social stigma and discrimination they could suffer from.

Contrarily to these advertisements containing a logical correlation between the brand's product and an implicit message pro-diversity, many other commercials prefer purely focusing on the audience's emotional impact. If the message is not properly communicated, they often happen to run the risk of being mistrusted and considered users of rainbow washing. The commercial of Björn Borg¹⁷³ in 2008 is a clear example of an inappropriate communication of diversity since it entirely focuses on a gay marriage that has nothing to do with the brand itself. Although the purpose of the brand was to appear much progressive, it has actually produced the opposite effect because of the surprising effect of two men getting married. This kind of approach towards diversity does not seem to recognize new types of masculinities, but rather to emphasize them even more, and, hence, it might not bring positive effects in the long-term. Similarly, but in a less visible manner, Coca-Cola's *Love Unites*¹⁷⁴ advertisement includes diversity by choosing to communicate an emotionally positive message. At first, audience's attitude might result to be positive because of the joy and optimism that are perceived through the ad campaign which is featured by many colors and people having fun. Nonetheless, the

¹⁷² Adressändring (2014, September 15). *Adressändring – Paris (Kort version)* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7e6JqmBG9k>

¹⁷³ Björn Borg (2008, December 3). Björn Borg shows that love is for all in a new campaign video. Retrieved from <https://corporate.bjornborg.com/en/bjrn-borg-shows-that-love-is-for-all-in-a-new-campaign-video/>

¹⁷⁴ Coca-Cola Italia [@cocacolait]. (2019, June 29). *L'amore non conosce limite. Unisce tutto e tutti. #LoveUnites* [Instagram Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BzIEC6QoWzE/>

second impression moves more to a negative attitude towards the advertisement. The latter seems to make use of a rainbow washing strategy since the inclusion of pro-diversity messages does not easily relate to the purchase of a coke. The idea that a coke could save the world, unite lovers and recognize both homosexuality and men embodying femininity is believed to be too simplified and poorly realistic. Moreover, it implicitly reproduces gender stereotypes by combining homosexuality with a feminine and exuberant personality as usual, while the pro-diversity ad campaigns should promote and recognize new types of masculinities that do not necessarily combine homosexuality with femininity and, vice versa, heterosexuality with masculinity.

Above all, the crucial point concerning the mentioned start-ups and brands is that it is unclear what there is actually behind their presumed openness towards inclusive forms of gender identity and sexuality. Whereas some brands visibly promote political struggles to expand their target for commercial purposes, others attempt to raise awareness or recognize diversity. In the second case, brands seek to reproduce an inclusive society that does not reflect the reality yet and, thus, calls upon its audience to make it come true. Following a similar approach, in regard to the new forms of masculinities, femininity seems to have become more fashionable and embodied by men, regardless their sexuality. Even though feminine practices have gradually become to be deemed as fashionable among new types of masculinities, it does not necessarily follow that femininity is no longer degraded and repudiated, particularly in the case of individuals who are already and still socially stigmatized and marginalized for their race, nationality or socio-economic status. However, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the increase in diversity representation on media and the increasing embodiment of femininity by men somehow might help the breach of gender norms and gender stereotypes, at least, initially, on the behalf of individuals who are more likely to be socially validated. Both the expansion of hybrid masculinity and the increase in pro-diversity ad campaigns are quite recent phenomena, as a consequence, positive or negative outcomes, that respectively may challenge or reproduce a gender hierarchy inherent to toxic masculinity, cannot be completely assessed yet.

Conclusion

On the whole, despite recent improvements and attempts to cross gender boundaries, toxic masculinity is shown to be still an integral part of society. The thesis has argued that masculinity is not toxic in itself, but rather that it can actually become as such when inherent behaviors significantly affect men's lives in the first place and, consequently, those of women and LGBTQ+ people. Toxic masculinity reinforces and reproduces preexisting and well-established gender hierarchies, by forcing men to adhere to certain social standards in order to be validated as 'real' men by society. To point out, toxic masculinity is a social issue that does involve anyone's life, through the smallest actions that, by being constantly repeated and normalized, can lead to the commitment of ever more dangerous ones, especially under conditions of unawareness and unconscious biases. The constraints imposed by gender norms are harmful, since they limit anyone's individuality and diversity and cause major anxieties in individuals with regard to expectations related to their gender. On one side, a large portion of people, consciously with the aim to keep their power or unconsciously to feel socially validated, renounces to their unique personality traits by conforming to their socially accepted gender role. Whereas, on the other side, another large portion of people ends up suffering from significant psychological issues, by not complying to socially accepted standards, and from being often forcibly subjected to violence and social injustice. Thereby, the major relevance of the issue of toxic masculinity is that nobody is exempted from negative repercussions, even under privileged circumstances, individuals pay those privileges by setting aside their humanity, singularity and diversity. However, it must be clarified that, even though a greater extent of men who strictly follow masculine norms runs the risk of engaging in attitudes such that they result to be harmful to their physical and mental well-being, as well as their safety, this is incomparable to the countless discriminations, sufferings, abuses, anxieties and injustices that victims of inequalities are daily forced to experience, because of the need, that many men still have, to maintain power and repudiate whatever attempts to challenge it. For this reason, systems of power should be destroyed starting from their roots, thus, from making individuals aware of the social privileges they own and how they and the whole society would feel free and benefit from the suppression of gender norms. It is no longer enough to compensate negative consequences that are subsequent to facts and harmful actions or to distance oneself from them, it is time to widely acknowledge the social and cultural background of gender hierarchies and to face the sources of the issue of toxic masculinity.

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Summary in Italian

Comunemente, per “maschilità” si intende una serie di caratteristiche fisiche, psicologiche e comportamentali che vengono tipicamente rintracciate negli uomini. Tuttavia, il concetto di maschilità è molto più complesso da definire in termini assoluti poiché implica prendere in considerazione il fatto che esso sia il risultato di diverse dinamiche culturali, storiche e geografiche. In conformità, John Beynon sostiene che il concetto di maschilità sia ampiamente influenzato dalla cultura, per questa ragione, dovrebbe essere interpretato nella sua eterogeneità. Egli definisce la maschilità come il frutto della società alla luce di diversi tempi storici, luoghi e contesti che hanno portato alla costruzione e riproduzione di norme sociali legate al comportamento maschile. Pertanto, il concetto di maschilità può essere diversamente interpretato a seconda della cultura, del tempo storico e delle sovrastrutture di potere presenti nella società e, di conseguenza, non può essere definito in termini assoluti. Ciononostante, nel corso degli ultimi due secoli, la definizione socialmente accettata di maschilità solitamente non include alcuna apparenza fisica, caratteristica o attitudine associata alla femminilità, vista come simbolo di debolezza, come ad esempio la sensibilità, la vulnerabilità e la cura della propria salute fisica e mentale. In particolare, nel periodo dell'adolescenza, ci si aspetta, nonché si giustifica ciò sulla base di stereotipi di genere, che gli adolescenti siano più aggressivi e abbiano comportamenti sconsiderati tali da fare battute omofobiche tra loro, trascurare il proprio aspetto fisico e aggredire verbalmente o fisicamente coloro che richiamano caratteristiche tipicamente attribuite alla femminilità, con l'obiettivo di affermare la propria maschilità in un gruppo maschile.

Dunque, in merito a una ricostruzione della definizione comune di maschilità, emerge un dibattito tra studiosi della teoria evoluzionistica, che legano le definizioni di maschilità e femminilità agli aspetti biologici, e studiosi di scienze sociali, che sostengono che i concetti di maschilità e femminilità siano socialmente costruiti sulla base di una costante performatività di azioni e pratiche ripetute nel tempo a tal punto da essere tipicamente associate al genere maschile o femminile.

Da un lato, le teorie biologiche ed evoluzionistiche sostengono che, oltre alla diversità fisica, vi sono differenze comportamentali innate tra i sessi; in tal modo, alcune abitudini o pratiche vengono rispettivamente attribuite all'identità femminile o maschile. Secondo la teoria dell'evoluzione di Darwin, i tratti che sopravvivono e vengono trasmessi ai discendenti sono quelli che favoriscono la sopravvivenza e la riproduzione dell'organismo. In questa prospettiva, studi biologici ed evoluzionisti, menzionati da Lippa nel libro *Gender, Nature, and Nurture*, affermano che alcune differenze evidenti tra i sessi, ad esempio l'idea che le donne siano più predisposte a prendersi cura di altri individui, sono legate a una produzione ridotta degli ovuli nell'organismo femminile che, in

questo modo, appare una fonte limitata. In tal senso, si pensa che le donne siano più propense ad investire tempo e risorse per garantire efficacemente la sopravvivenza di un'unica prole, mentre gli uomini, poiché hanno la possibilità di riprodursi in una quantità maggiore rispetto alle donne, sono meno propensi a garantire un investimento di tempo e risorse su una singola prole. Quindi, mentre le donne risultano essere più disposte ad investire in una relazione a lungo termine e più selettive nella scelta del proprio partner, cosicché possano garantire le risorse necessarie alla propria famiglia in modo efficace, gli uomini appaiono sia meno disposti ad investire in una relazione a lungo termine, poiché hanno una possibilità maggiore di riprodursi rispetto alle donne, sia più competitivi, poiché entrano spesso in contrasto con i membri dello stesso sesso per attrarre i membri del sesso opposto. Tramite l'evoluzione, queste caratteristiche si traducono nell'uomo con il potere, le risorse economiche, la dominanza e l'aggressività con il fine di conquistare il sesso opposto; difatti, coloro che riescono a riprodursi, essendo riusciti con successo ad attrarre un membro del sesso femminile, hanno più probabilità di trasmettere i propri tratti genetici alle generazioni future.

Dall'altro lato, le teorie sociologiche ritengono che le differenze di genere siano una costruzione sociale che non deriva da una singola fonte che può essere definita responsabile, ma da molteplici fonti, tra cui linguaggio, convenzioni sociali ed istituzioni che hanno contribuito alla diffusione e stabilizzazione di norme di genere. In *Questioni di Genere*, la filosofa Judith Butler sostiene che il genere non solo sia innaturale, ma anche costruito da norme sociali, che stabiliscono in due macro-categorie quali pratiche o attitudini siano tipicamente femminili o maschili. Fondamentalmente, il genere non è condizionato da tratti biologici e innati che distinguono il sesso femminile da quello maschile, ma è socialmente costruito attraverso atti ripetuti costantemente, che riproducono stereotipi di genere, legittimando l'associazione di determinati comportamenti al genere femminile o maschile. Infatti, l'identità di genere socialmente attribuita al sesso biologico diventa quella in cui le persone vengono categorizzate per tutto il corso della vita e di cui acquisiscono le caratteristiche richieste dalla società per essere riconosciuti come donne o uomini. Quest'idea fu originariamente elaborata dal sociologo Garfinkel, il quale, tramite uno studio condotto su una persona intersessuale che poi si rivelò essere una donna transgender, verificò che la ragione per cui il genere appare naturale è che gli individui ripetono costantemente una serie di comportamenti, che sono associati al loro sesso biologico o all'identità di genere che vogliono far trasparire pubblicamente, al punto che assumono una naturalezza tale da non essere messa in discussione.

Dunque, assumendo che il genere sia una costruzione sociale, per maschilità si intende una serie di comportamenti, pratiche e azioni socialmente accettati e attribuiti al sesso maschile. Dal momento che la maschilità non può essere definita in modo univoco, poiché la sua definizione cambia a seconda del contesto culturale, storico e sociale, ne risulta una molteplicità di tipi differenti di

maschilità. Attraverso il concetto di mascolinità egemonica, Connell analizza la credenza culturale sulla base della quale alcune mascolinità vengono definite superiori o inferiori ad altre, secondo una lista di tratti che ogni uomo dovrebbe acquisire per essere considerato un 'vero' uomo. In relazione alla maschilità, l'egemonia è generata tramite la legittimazione universale del dominio maschile sulle donne, mantenendo l'autorità sopra ad esse e sopra a uomini considerati immeritevoli di essere riconosciuti come tali. Emarginando coloro che non soddisfano i requisiti dell'ideologia dominante della maschilità nella società, si viene a creare una gerarchia di maschilità che ha a capo coloro che rispecchiano interamente la forma dominante della maschilità nella cultura occidentale, ovvero gli uomini che possiedono tratti socialmente accettati e attribuiti all'essere un 'vero' uomo quali eterosessualità, pelle bianca, classe sociale medio-alta, forza fisica, successo, violenza e mancanza di emozioni. Ne segue che, da una parte, si sviluppa un tipo di maschilità complice che, pur non soddisfacendo tutti gli standard sociali, non osa sfidarli neanche, dall'altra parte, si sviluppano una mascolinità subordinata, che è caratterizzata principalmente da qualità associate alla femminilità, e la mascolinità marginalizzata, di cui fanno parte uomini che non hanno la possibilità di conformarsi e trarre benefici dai privilegi sociali inerenti alla mascolinità egemonica, a causa di disabilità o di un colore diverso di pelle. Quindi, per essere socialmente convalidati, gli uomini sono tenuti ad adempiere a una serie di caratteristiche, che o non possono essere rispettate da tutti gli uomini, nel caso di tratti fisici o comportamentali permanenti, o richiedono l'adozione di comportamenti rischiosi finalizzati ad affermare la propria identità maschile.

Tutte quelle norme sociali e culturali, quei comportamenti e quelle convenzioni che derivano dalla legittimazione della dominazione maschile e che stabiliscono una gerarchia di maschilità e di genere sono stati complessivamente definiti dai media e dal dibattito accademico con il nome di mascolinità tossica. Il concetto di mascolinità tossica è emerso negli ultimi anni per mezzo di un'analisi più profonda delle pratiche tradizionali che ritraggono gli uomini come socialmente dominanti e che, dopo tempo, sono risultate essere nocive per tutta la società, uomini inclusi, a causa di un'implicita promozione della violenza, dell'abuso sessuale, della misoginia e dell'omotransfobia. Il termine 'mascolinità tossica' comprende i comportamenti nocivi, derivanti dalla maschilità tradizionale, che hanno causato e continuano a causare sofferenza e stress negli uomini, nelle donne e nella comunità LGBTQ+. A tale proposito, la ricercatrice australiana Waling afferma che per gli uomini i principi alla base della mascolinità tossica sono la principale fonte di esercizio del potere, spesso espressa attraverso atti di violenza sessuale e domestica, nonché principale causa di rigetto dell'espressione di emozioni, del deterioramento della salute mentale, della noncuranza della salute fisica e del compimento di azioni dannose, tossiche e spesso omofobiche. Secondo l'APA, gli uomini che interiorizzano fermamente le norme maschili sono più propensi ad adottare comportamenti

malsani, i quali vengono normalizzati in quanto attribuiti alla virilità, e contemporaneamente meno propensi a prevenire problemi di salute e a richiedere un supporto psicologico in un momento di necessità. Ne segue che lo stress emotivo relativo al ruolo di genere maschile deriva dal fatto che a un uomo, per essere culturalmente riconosciuto come tale, viene richiesto di soddisfare determinati standard sociali, in termini economici e interpersonali, di mostrare un'apparenza esteriore fortemente maschile, di possedere una certa forza fisica e di non esprimere vulnerabilità, poiché associata alla femminilità e quindi alla debolezza. Gli uomini che non rientrano nelle norme sociali subiscono pressioni che derivano dalla necessità di adattare la propria identità ad esse, tramite l'acquisizione di mancanze che non permettono la conformità agli standard della maschilità tradizionale.

Nel 2017, una ricerca condotta da Promundo e Axe sulle condizioni della popolazione maschile negli Stati Uniti, nel Regno Unito e in Messico, definisce con il nome di *Man Box* una serie di qualità e comportamenti che gli uomini sono spinti ad adottare dalla loro stessa famiglia, dai loro amici, dai media, dalle istituzioni scolastiche e dal posto di lavoro. Sostanzialmente, i tratti che più sono richiesti agli uomini di avere per essere riconosciuti come tali sono l'autosufficienza, la tenacità, la forza fisica, l'eterosessualità, la prontezza sessuale e l'aggressività. L'obiettivo della ricerca è, infatti, dimostrare l'esistenza del *Man Box*, il suo impatto e la sua influenza nelle vite di uomini giovani, ed incoraggiarli ad uscire da questa sorta di gabbia per il loro bene. Ne risulta che tutte quelle norme e pratiche che gli uomini sono tenuti a soddisfare, per essere maschili allo sguardo altrui, sono ancora esistenti e possono rivelarsi essere ancora più dannose per coloro che sono più propensi ad incorporare i tratti associati alla maschilità tradizionale. Molti uomini si sentono imprigionati dalle norme sociali relative alla maschilità, le quali non gli consentono di esprimersi senza preoccuparsi dei giudizi altrui. L'elemento chiave che ogni 'vero' uomo dovrebbe possedere è la virilità, la quale esclude la possibilità di mostrare tratti femminili, visti come deboli, ed esorta a reprimere la propria emotività, a perseguire il successo e a raggiungere lo stato sociale ed economico più elevato. Per dimostrare la propria identità maschile al massimo livello, è essenziale che tutte le qualità maschili intrinseche alla mascolinità tossica siano convalidate dagli altri uomini. Pertanto, il potere sociale che deriva dalla costante affermazione della propria maschilità ha un costo universale, che viene ripagato attraverso problemi di salute fisica, spesso causati da comportamenti rischiosi e malsani volti a provare forza e resistenza (consumo di alcol, tabacco o droga), e disturbi mentali, dovuti alla pressione e ansia di rispettare gli standard sociali attribuiti all'identità mascolina dominante.

Secondo i dati dell'OMS del 2016, è innegabile che vi sia un divario notevole tra l'aspettativa di vita maschile e quella femminile. Globalmente, la vita media di una donna risulta essere cinque volte più lunga di quella di un uomo, perciò le differenze tra il sesso biologico e l'aspettativa di vita non possono essere ricondotte solo ad aspetti biologici, ma anche ad una socializzazione maschile

che provoca un alto rischio di mortalità prematura. Infatti, il divario è determinato dalle aspettative del ruolo di genere e da una maggiore esposizione all'adozione di comportamenti rischiosi e nocivi per la salute, causati da una rigida socializzazione della maschilità tradizionale, che implica imprudenza e riluttanza a chiedere aiuto.

Difatti, i problemi di salute mentale tra gli uomini sono spesso legati a comportamenti imprudenti ed abitudini malsane, come l'alcolismo, l'abuso di droghe e il fumo, che contribuiscono notevolmente allo sviluppo di disturbi mentali, soprattutto la depressione. Risulta che gli uomini siano più di cinque volte propensi a fumare delle donne in tutto il mondo e ciò si riflette anche nelle statistiche sanitarie, in cui viene riportato che è più probabile che siano gli uomini a soffrire e morire di cancro ai polmoni, il cui rischio primario è il fumo. In modo analogo, complessivamente, risulta anche che essi siano due volte più propensi a soffrire di tossicodipendenza o alcolismo delle donne. Chiaramente, l'abuso di alcol e di sostanze è legato a un problema di genere maschile, che deriva dalla costruzione sociale della definizione di maschilità. Se, da una parte, fumare è un'abitudine comunemente praticata da giovani uomini come una forma di socializzazione e come via per affermare la propria maschilità e riscuotere popolarità all'interno di un gruppo maschile, dall'altra parte, il consumo di alcol e di droghe rappresenta un simbolo di conformità alla collettività maschile che enfatizza l'imprudenza, il controllo emotivo, il comportamento aggressivo, la forza e la competizione. Gli uomini che aderiscono agli standard maschili e, in particolare, coloro che sono economicamente instabili o disoccupati, sono più propensi ad adottare abitudini malsane per affermare la loro identità maschile in un gruppo e per compensare le emozioni negative, lo stress psicologico e la vulnerabilità. Inoltre, lo stress causato dalla pressione sociale delle norme maschili porta gli uomini a sviluppare problemi di salute mentale, come depressione e comportamento suicida. Anche se le donne sono più propense a soffrire di depressione, l'OMS riporta che in tutto il mondo gli uomini sono più propensi a commettere il suicidio, poiché le norme maschili hanno un impatto sul tipo di sintomo depressivo e la sua espressione, sulla modalità di ricerca d'aiuto e sul tipo di cura e terapia che essi sono favorevoli a intraprendere. Essendo la depressione associata ad un carattere vulnerabile, che contraddice la soppressione di emozioni intrinseca agli standard sociali maschili, gli uomini percepiscono la richiesta di un aiuto professionale come un'azione femminile e, perciò, hanno meno possibilità di consultare psicologi e di intraprendere una terapia necessaria a combattere la depressione.

Altrettanto importante, la propensione all'adozione di comportamenti nocivi e alla riluttanza di beneficiare dei servizi sanitari finiscono per colpire gravemente il benessere fisico degli uomini, soprattutto in situazioni in cui l'identità maschile viene messa in discussione. Ad esempio, Brooks sostiene l'idea che la maschilità debba essere convalidata tramite un'estrema esibizione dell'attività sessuale, la quale comporta una maggiore predisposizione nei giovani uomini a frequentare numerosi

partner sessuali. Ciò spesso causa lo sviluppo di malattie sessualmente trasmissibili, quali l'HIV, che non vengono curate o prevenute come dovrebbero, a causa di una mancanza di cura dell'individuo e un disinteresse per la prevenzione. Queste caratteristiche sono dettate implicitamente dalle norme maschili, che portano gli uomini a considerarsi invincibili e ad intraprendere pratiche rischiose per affermare la propria maschilità, soprattutto se messa in discussione da altri uomini.

Alla luce delle ripercussioni negative sul benessere fisico e mentale degli uomini, il conflitto interiore causato dalle norme sociali porta essi a considerarsi principalmente vittime del sistema patriarcale, con il rischio di deresponsabilizzarsi dalla perpetrazione di norme maschili. In altre parole, gli uomini non sono risultano essere vittime di quelle norme, ma anche i principali esecutori, nonostante perseguire gli standard imposti dalla società sia contro la loro stessa individualità. La violenza maschile è l'esempio perfetto di come l'incolumità degli uomini sia minacciata dall'esecuzione delle norme associate alla maschilità da parte degli uomini stessi. Si è constatato che la violenza tra gli uomini è il crimine violento più frequente negli Stati Uniti, in cui più della metà delle vittime di omicidio sono uomini uccisi da altri uomini, e che la tasso di omicidi da parte di uomini è globalmente cinque volte superiore a quella da parte di donne. In più, non solo le donne, ma anche giovani uomini tendono ad essere vittime di abusi fisici e spesso capita che la gravità della violenza subita venga sottovalutata sia dalla società che dagli uomini stessi. Gli atti di violenza subiti dagli uomini molto spesso non vengono denunciati, a causa della paura di essere giudicati per mostrare vulnerabilità, e che non vengono neanche creduti poiché le vittime vengono accusate di non aver combattuto abbastanza o di essere state responsabili della violenza subita.

La mascolinità tossica non ha solo un impatto negativo sugli uomini, ma anche sull'incolumità fisica e mentale delle donne, le quali subiscono molto spesso azioni violente commesse da uomini che esercitano il loro potere legittimato della supremazia maschile. Dal momento che le donne incorporano la femminilità che, secondo la maschilità tradizionale, rappresenta la debolezza, esse vengono viste come inferiori. Occupando il fondo della gerarchia di genere, secondo il sistema patriarcale, le donne vengono sottomesse dal genere maschile che esercita la legittimazione del suo potere attraverso azioni violenti, soprattutto molestie sessuali, con l'obiettivo di consolidare la propria identità maschile e soddisfare le aspettative di genere. Oltretutto, la violenza sessuale, commessa da un partner intimo o non, è riconosciuta come una delle forme principali di esercizio del potere maschile sulle donne e, allo stesso tempo, di affermazione della maschilità all'interno di una collettività maschile. L'insieme di credenze culturali e comportamenti sociali che normalizza le forme di violenza sessuale, come lo stupro o la coercizione sessuale, è definito con il nome di 'cultura dello stupro'. Quest'ultima consiste in un contesto sociale in cui gli atti di violenza sessuale sono normalizzati, giustificati e perfino glorificati, tramite l'uso di un linguaggio misogino e

l'oggettivazione del corpo femminile. La cultura dello stupro può essere vista come se fosse un iceberg, la cui vetta consiste nello stupro e nella coercizione sessuale e il cui fondo consiste in commenti sessuali indesiderati, insulti, offese e immagini di nudi postati o inviati senza consenso. Ne segue che questo tipo di cultura viene perpetrata proprio attraverso le più piccole azioni, che sono costantemente private della loro gravità e che, eventualmente, possono portare a commettere azioni sempre più violente. In più, coloro che vengono ritenuti responsabili di aver commesso l'atto di violenza spesso tendono ad addossare la colpa alla vittima, etichettandola come donna da una reputazione sessuale discutibile e raffigurandola come sessualmente provocante. Allo stesso modo, le violenze sessuali successive a un appuntamento vengono giustificate come una sorta di pagamento sessuale in cambio di attenzione o regali, mentre lo stupro coniugale, che sembra essere la forma di violenza più comune, è legato al desiderio dei mariti di esercitare potere, umiliare e prendere il controllo delle proprie mogli. In conseguenza alla stabilizzazione della cultura dello stupro, i corpi femminili sono visti come oggetti legittimi di violenza sessuale e le donne stesse vengono ritenute responsabili non solo da parte degli aggressori, ma anche da una buona parte della società, delle violenze subite. Questo fenomeno sociale inerente alla cultura dello stupro viene definito *victim-blaming*, ovvero colpevolizzazione della vittima, che è spesso alimentata dall'apatia delle autorità nella gestione dei casi di violenza e dalla stigmatizzazione sociale della vittima che ha vergogna di rendere pubblica la violenza subita e finisce addirittura per non denunciare l'accaduto.

Inoltre, la mascolinità tossica ha anche un notevole impatto sulle persone appartenenti alla comunità LGBTQ+, le quali trasgrediscono maggiormente le norme di genere. Siccome la mascolinità egemonica favorisce degli standard maschili che possono essere soddisfatti solo da un tipo di maschilità, si è venuta a creare una gerarchia di maschilità, in cui coloro che richiamano tratti tipicamente associati alle donne, come l'attrazione verso un uomo o un aspetto fisico più femminile, vengono sia emarginati da altri uomini, sia socialmente discriminati, sia, verbalmente o fisicamente, attaccati. Rigettando qualsiasi aspetto o caratteristica che si lega alla femminilità, le norme di genere promosse dalla maschilità tradizionale alimentano esplicitamente e implicitamente la diffusione e lo sviluppo dell'omofobia. In ragione di ciò, l'eterosessualità, soprattutto per gli uomini, diventa la sessualità predefinita sulla base di un rigido sistema binario di genere, che esclude gli individui transgender, non-binari e gender fluid. Secondo Kimmel, l'omofobia è funzionante a reprimere il desiderio omosessuale. L'ostilità verso un orientamento sessuale differente dall'eterosessualità fa sì che si eviti di non essere in alcun modo percepiti come una persona omosessuale, soprattutto da parte di altri uomini. Infatti, il vero timore per gli uomini è di poter essere scambiati per una persona omosessuale da altri uomini e, dunque, di essere accusati di non essere 'veri' uomini, poiché il desiderio verso il genere maschile è attribuito alle donne e, di conseguenza, ritenuto un aspetto

femminile. D'altra parte, le persone transgender, dal momento che oltrepassano nettamente i confini di genere in relazione a un ideale di identità eteronormativa, vengono giudicate in modo negativo poiché la loro identità di genere e i loro comportamenti non corrispondono a quelli convenzionalmente associati al loro sesso biologico. Il rifiuto, la degradazione e l'ostilità verso coloro che non soddisfano le definizioni tradizionali dell'identità di genere sono inerenti al concetto di transfobia. In particolare, gli individui transgender m-t-f (male to female), ovvero coloro che solitamente decidono di intraprendere una transizione da un corpo maschile ad uno femminile senza sottoporsi ad una chirurgia genitale, risultano essere maggiormente vittime di transfobia da parte di uomini poiché sfidano il binarismo di genere, promosso principalmente dalla mascolinità egemonica. Da una parte, gli uomini temono una potenziale femminilizzazione, che viola l'idea della divisione tra superiorità maschile e inferiorità femminile, dall'altra parte, una donna transgender che è sessualmente attratta da uomini risulta destabilizzante sia in relazione alle convenzionali definizioni di eterosessualità e omosessualità sia in relazione a convenzioni sociali riguardanti la sessualità, i ruoli di genere e le relazioni di genere.

Infine, sebbene la mascolinità tossica sia ancora molto presente nella società a causa di una forte insaturazione di norme sociali relative all'identità di genere, nuovi tipi di mascolinità che differiscono da quella tradizionale sono emersi in seguito ad una crescente violazione delle norme di genere da parte della popolazione. Fondamentalmente, gli uomini hanno iniziato gradualmente ad adottare comportamenti e tratti associati alle maschilità marginalizzate e subordinate, le cui caratteristiche, non corrispondendo ai concetti di forza, durezza e insensibilità, solitamente sono associate alla femminilità e perciò ripudiate e degradate. Nei tempi più recenti, questi nuovi tipi di maschilità distanti dalla mascolinità egemonica hanno sempre più ottenuto visibilità nei media e nei dibattiti pubblici. Da un punto di vista ottimista, la crescente integrazione di pratiche tipicamente femminili potrebbero aiutare a riconoscere identità maschili differenti dalla mascolinità egemonica e a ridurre la degradazione della femminilità. Invece, da un punto di vista più pessimista, potrebbe darsi il caso che sistemi di inuguaglianza e di potere possano essere riprodotti tramite nuove modalità storiche più velate. Dato che gli individui sono diversamente giudicati in base al loro stato socio-economico, non tutti coloro che cercano di sfidare la mascolinità tossica vivono le stesse esperienze di coloro che si trovano ad un'elevata posizione sociale, i cui privilegi potrebbero essere oscurati. Ad esempio, una celebrità maschile o, in generale, un uomo bianco appartenente a una classe sociale medio-alta, che sceglie di vestirsi e truccarsi in modo femminile, difficilmente corre gli stessi rischi di un uomo nero appartenente ad una classe sociale più bassa. In parallelo, molti brand cercano di contribuire alla promozione di nuovi tipi di maschilità, tramite campagne pubblicitarie finalizzate ad incrementare la consapevolezza delle questioni di genere. In questa prospettiva, la mascolinità tossica

sembra essere fortemente sfidata e quasi sulla via di essere sconfitta, tuttavia, potrebbe anche darsi il caso che alcuni brand sfruttino problemi politici e traggano profitto dai cambiamenti sociali, in modo da catturare l'attenzione di un target più ampio, a cui vendere i prodotti in seguito, e accrescere il proprio guadagno. Infatti, spesso molti brand vengono accusati di essere caduti nel *pinkwashing*, nel caso di questioni riguardanti l'attivismo femminista, o *rainbow washing*, nel caso di questioni legate ai diritti LGBTQ+, poiché sembra che abbiano fallito a comunicare e a riconoscere la diversità per una mancanza di connessione tra il brand e il prodotto presentato nelle campagne pubblicitarie o, nonostante le buone intenzioni, per un'inconsapevolezza di aver comunicato dei messaggi opposti ai valori che tentano di promuovere. Contrariamente, altri brand, tra cui Gucci, Gillette e Coca-Cola, tentano di mostrare pubblicamente, attraverso spot pubblicitari o la scelta di artisti fuori dalla norma come ambasciatori del marchio, che la diversità è diventata parte integrante dei loro valori e, dunque, vengono visti come progressivi e ampiamente acclamati per la loro apparente lotta contro la mascolinità tossica. Sebbene ciò, essendo complessivamente un fenomeno piuttosto recente, non è ancora possibile prevedere se questi tentativi di sensibilizzazione alla diversità possano ottenere in futuro esiti prevalentemente positivi o negativi.