Navigating Role Models: Shaping Masculine Identity Among Transmasculine and Cisgender Emerging Adults

Annalisa Anzani[1] · **Sofia Pavanello Decaro**[1] · **Giulia Paganin**[2] · **Antonio Prunas**[1]

Abstract

Introduction The present study explores the influence of role models on the development of masculinity among emerging adults, specifically focusing on how Italian transgender and cisgender young men draw inspiration from role models to shape their own identities.

Methods We conducted six focus groups with 16 trans masculine and 15 cisgender emerging adults. We transcribed and analyzed the discussions using a specific qualitative analysis framework for focus groups.

Results Both groups identified family members and individuals from the entertainment industry as sources of inspiration for masculinity. Cisgender participants mentioned more role models from the sport industry, whereas trans participants mentioned more social media influencers. Cisgender participants also identified role models embodying traditional masculinity traits, whereas both groups created "anti-models" representing characteristics they rejected in their ideals of masculinity.

Conclusions The study reveals differences in the sources of inspiration and the construction of masculine identities between the two groups. We suggest integrating Todd et al.'s (2022) model for the evolution of transgender masculine identities, taking into account the subtle distinctions rooted in gender socialization and identity.

Policy Implications This work has relevant implications for policy makers, especially in the field of education and social sciences. Educational training targeted at emerging adults should promote a healthy approach to masculinity and should be built in awareness of what are the current models and anti-models.

Keywords Masculinities · Trans masculinity · Emerging adults · Models of masculinity

Introduction

Constructing Masculinity: A Brief Overview

Over time, there have been various interpretations and definitions of masculinities, highlighting that masculinity can be understood and approached in diverse ways. Masculinities encompass a rich interweaving of cultural and individual significances attributed to men and boys, extending far beyond the confines of their biological attributes. These multifaceted meanings are not just confined to self-perception but also extend outward, shaping how men and boys are perceived by others, as well as how they interact with concepts, objects, and people within their social environment. These meanings are reflected in everyday life, such as situational cues that guide behaviors and decisions. Masculinities manifest as tangible social practices expressed through actions, choices, and interactions that reflect and perpetuate these embedded meanings (Wong & Wang, 2022). No longer limited to individuals assigned male at birth, masculinity now is relevant for a diverse range of individuals, contributing to a richer and more nuanced understanding of gender identity (Anzani et al., 2022; Gottzén & Strube, 2016). The present paper focuses on two distinct dimensions of masculinities: first, it examines how masculinity is represented and disseminated through role models in the cultural and social landscapes; second, it investigates how emerging adults engage in the dual process of mirroring themselves in the models of masculinity they encounter, aspiring to emulate and embody those ideals, while also critically deconstructing

✉ Annalisa Anzani
   annalisa.anzani@unimib.it

1 Department of Psychology, University of Milano – Bicocca, Edificio U6, Piazza Dell'Ateneo Nuovo 1, 20126 Milan, Italy

2 Department of Medical and Surgical Science, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

and reshaping these models to align with their own evolving sense of identity.

Scholarly inquiry into the development of masculine identity has yielded a range of theories that seek to elucidate the processes by which individuals internalize and express their sense of masculinity (Phillips, 2006). The Gender Role Strain Theory (Pleck, 1995) underscores the tensions men face when societal expectations clash with personal experiences, revealing the strain of conforming to traditional masculine roles. Pollack's (1995) theory of masculine identity formation accentuates the impact of early socialization with two distinct processes: the traumatic loss that occurs when boys are forced to undergo a process of disidentification and separation from their mothers and the gendered socialization they are exposed to. These processes define how societal messages can stifle emotional expression and influence the development of boys' masculine identity (Phillips, 2006). In contrast, Bergman's (1995) Self-in-Relation Theory of Masculine Identity explores the notion that masculinity is intricately interwoven with interpersonal relationships, proposing that emotional connections and relational dynamics shape the construction of masculine identity. Boys would learn to be men by being different from mothers/femaleness (Phillips, 2006).

In addition to the psychological theories outlined, it is essential to acknowledge the transformative impact of certain sociological works that have substantially shifted the lens through which masculinity is perceived. One noteworthy contribution is Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which introduced the concept of dominant cultural norms shaping idealized forms of masculinity that perpetuate power dynamics. This framework underlines that "hegemonic masculinity represents "things done," in a way that subordinates the non-material processes of expectation, meaning, and identification, suggesting that these "things done" "allow" for a system of domination by men over women to exist" (Howson & Hearn, 2019). While the concept has significantly influenced research on men and masculinities, it has not been immune to criticism, particularly regarding the perceived static nature of hegemonic masculinity (as indicated by Messerschmidt, 2019). Moreover, contemporary explorations within a queer theoretical framework have further enriched the discourse on masculinity development. These recent perspectives challenge conventional notions by embracing the fluidity and diversity of gender identities, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals navigate and negotiate their masculine expressions (Allan, 2019). While the primary focus of the paper does not lie in accentuating the cultural distinctions between Italian masculinity and other Western models, we believe it is pertinent to briefly underscore certain insights. These may contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of the paper's background and findings. In

the Italian context of our study and relevant to gender studies, the family holds a central position, deeply rooted in the concept of familism sustained and deeply ingrained in the political scenario (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Ruspini, 2009a, b). This societal framework sustains strong, separate gender roles, where traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are distinctly defined (Dalla Zuanna, 2004). However, amidst these entrenched gender norms, a remarkable shift in perceptions of masculinity has been observed, particularly among younger generations. Italian men and boys are challenging traditional stereotypes, embracing greater involvement in family life, and redefining masculinity to encompass a more holistic approach to self-care and emotional expression (Ruspini, 2009a, b).

Masculine Identity Development in Trans Individuals

We embrace the queer perspective, which provides a broader outlook on masculinities, as the lens through which we examine masculinity in various identity groups, including cisgender and transgender individuals. Within this perspective, studies on how trans and nonbinary individuals shape their masculine identities have been conducted. In a recent qualitative study by Todd et al. (2022), the authors outline a model of the evolution of masculine identity within a group of transmasculine individuals. Their study delineates a four-stage trajectory that unveils a nuanced developmental process: envisioning, adoption, questioning, and revisioning. The initial phase of envisioning entails the construction of a personalized concept of masculinity, drawing inspiration from available male role models. Subsequently, during the adoption stage, individuals adjust their gender presentation and social interactions to align with these envisioned masculine ideals. Notably, the journey may then transition to the questioning and revisioning phases, wherein individuals critically reevaluate and refine their initial constructs and expressions of masculinity, often prompted by experiences of gender affirmation. This iterative identity development process acknowledges its inherent fluidity, meaning that these stages may recur multiple times as individuals embark on an ongoing journey of self-discovery and enhanced comprehension of their evolving masculinity (Todd et al., 2022). Drawing parallels to Todd's model, our findings from the initial data analysis segment resonate with the developmental stages described in their study (Anzani et al., 2024). Specifically, our results reveal distinct phases in the masculine affirmation and gender expression of transmasculine emerging adults. Prior to embarking on a medical affirmation journey, participants often engage in the acquisition and enactment of masculinity through more conventional and stereotypical means. This strategic approach aims at securing acknowledgment and recognition as men/masculine individuals

while also serving as a shield against microaggressions and misgendering. As a shift occurs and they attain a heightened sense of comfort with their appearance, participants exhibit a growing sense of liberation in their gender expression. This newfound confidence allows them to embrace a broader spectrum of traits, including those traditionally associated with femininity (Anzani et al., 2024).

Current Study

The present study delves into the concept of masculine identity and how cisgender and transgender emerging adults construct a personal ideal model of masculinity. Emerging adulthood, ages 18 to 25, is a developmental transition period between adolescence and adulthood that is highly relevant for identity development (Arnett, 2000). We are building upon our earlier research, which focused on their distinct conceptualizations of masculinity and the markers employed to assert and affirm their masculine identities. Given the rich insights we gathered from the qualitative data, we have divided our findings into two papers. The antecedent work conducted an in-depth analysis of data derived from focus group discussions, underlining the nuanced dynamics through which transgender and cisgender emerging adults perceive and interpret masculinity within the context of their own lived experiences (Anzani et al., 2024). This paper thus emerges as a dedicated exploration of the construction of individualized models of masculinity, with a distinct emphasis on the influential figures who guide this process that cisgender and transgender emerging adults embrace. We were interested in investigating the people they admire and are influenced by — the role models who play a part in shaping their own sense of masculinity. Indeed, identities are driven and shaped by culture along with words, language, clothing, and behaviors. Thus, gender is experienced (individually) but also performed and informed by culture, (collectively) (Butler, 1993). As opposed to framing masculine identity development as monolithic or single process, we take a queer approach by investigating the plurality of masculinities that emerging adults embody, and what are the masculinities that influence them. We do not frame masculinity in opposition to femininity, as this may flatten its complexity (Reeser, 2015). Rather, we aim to explore what masculinity means subjectively and objectively for our target groups.

Therefore, the current study centers on the process of masculine identity development among emerging adult cisgender and transgender emerging adults, specifically on the models of masculinity that shape the ideal of the man they are or want to become. From the corpus of qualitative data that emerged from the focus groups with transmasculine and cisgender emerging adults, the present study centers its focus on the following questions: Who are the models that emerging adults (both cis and trans) turn to as they construct their masculine identities? What are the defining characteristics of these models, and how do individuals reflect themselves in relation to them? Moreover, how do individuals differentiate their own evolving sense of masculinity from these models?

Methods

Participants and Recruitment

We recruited participants through purposive sampling. Flyers describing the study and the inclusion criteria for participation were distributed at the University. These were also posted on online platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook University profiles and trans and LGBTQ + associations, to broaden our reach. Inclusion criteria included age (18–24), fluency in Italian, and having a masculine gender identity. This was obtained by specifying in the call that the focus groups on the topic of masculinity were open to cisgender men, and to people who identified as trans or nonbinary on the masculine spectrum. Those interested in discussing masculinity in focus groups completed an online form that included a detailed study description and a socio-demographic questionnaire acting as a pre-screening survey in which we reiterated the inclusion criteria (age and gender identity).

Our final sample included 31 participants, consisting of 16 transgender and 15 cisgender males. Age homogeneity was observed across groups ($M = 21.19$, median = 21.1 $SD = 1.72$ for transgender; $M = 21.13$, median = 21.2. $SD = 1.92$ for cisgender). Participants shared demographic information including age, education, relationship status, and geographic location within Italy. In the transgender category, participants selected identification categories and provided self-defined labels, capturing the richness of identities within the transgender and nonbinary (TGNB) community. The sample included 4 nonbinary individuals and one genderfluid participant, all of whom identified more towards the masculine end of the gender spectrum. Most participants identified as Caucasian ($N = 26$) and had completed high school ($N = 22$). Further demographic details are summarized in Table 1. Participation was incentivized with a €20 gift card. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Milano-Bicocca ethics committee. All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. All participants in this work provided informed consent.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

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

Procedure

A semi-structured format was developed for the focus group discussions. This approach was designed to elicit insights through interactive conversations. Employing focus groups facilitated the capture of complex dynamics and exchanges among participants, enabling a comprehensive exploration of shared experiences, diverse viewpoints, and collective perceptions of models of masculinity, and enabling participants to build on each other's thoughts and experiences. The format also provided a favorable setting for open dialogue, personal anecdotes, and participants' mirroring of each other's narratives (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The decision to use focus group discussions rather than qualitative methodologies was deemed advantageous for our study, as it allowed for the exploration of shared experiences and the negotiation of meanings surrounding masculinities within a social context, which may not have been as readily accessible through

individual interviews. Indeed, masculinity is shaped within social contexts; thus, group discussions may better capture how individuals interact and embody masculine ideals in a social environment. We created homogeneous groups (Krueger & Casey, 2014) so that, by fostering interactive engagement, participants built on one another's thoughts, leading to deeper insights into their experiences and revealing common threads. Two-hour virtual focus groups on masculinity were conducted via the Webex platform, with participants granting recording consent. The focus groups were thoughtfully segregated, following Krueger and Casey (2014) rationale, creating homogeneous clusters to encourage full participants' engagement in the discussion, uninhibited participation, and yield comprehensive data. Three focus groups included transgender individuals, while three included cisgender individuals. The focus groups were co-moderated by two researchers: the principal moderator (third author) guided group dynamics, while the other moderator (second author) ensured a safe environment and contributed expertise in LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) issues (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). For the facilitation of focus groups, extensive discussion was undertaken regarding the potential influence of facilitators' gender identities on participants' comfort and openness. We recognized the potential for biases and stereotypes associated with cisgender male facilitation (Matsick & Conley, 2016), and the complexities that a trans man facilitator's presence might introduce in the cis groups. While recognizing that facilitators of any gender could introduce biases, it was determined that the potential biases associated with female facilitation seemed comparatively less significant.

Analysis

Data analysis was executed at the individual level, scrutinizing transcribed responses (Cyr, 2019). The first author, independent of the data collection facilitation process, led the coding phase. The analysis was enriched by the inputs of the second and the final author. Rabiee's (2004) qualitative analysis framework guided the study, encompassing phases of familiarization, thematic framework identification, indexing and charting, and mapping and interpretation. Beginning with data familiarization, the authors immersed themselves in the recordings and transcripts, assimilating the participants' expressions and identifying emerging themes. This initial engagement facilitated a holistic grasp of the interviews, setting the stage for subsequent analysis. Then, the first and second authors defined a thematic framework, constructing foundational thematic categories. In examining the characteristics attributed to their masculine role models, the analysis includes a comparison between trans and cisgender individuals. Collaborative input ensured diverse viewpoints

converged in shaping this framework, with the last author adding the perspective of a cisgender man on masculinity. Finally, mapping and interpretation of contextualized findings, reexamining data through masculinity literature and clinical insight, revealing deeper implications and broader significance for transmasculine emerging adults' masculinity development.

Results

Thematic Structure and Overview

In our analysis of the role models and the characteristics articulated by participants during their discussions, we have delineated a set of desired traits that were prominently mentioned. This analysis yielded two overarching themes: "Role Models and Desired Traits" and "Anti-Models of Masculinity."

After presenting an overview of the results, in the following paragraphs, we will elucidate both thematic clusters, looking at responses for the trans groups, followed by the cisgender groups. The subsequent paragraph will delve into anti-models, encompassing the defiance of traditional norms and their impact on participants' conceptions of masculinity.

During the focus group discussions, participants were engaged in recognizing and sharing individuals they deemed as notable models of masculinity they aspired to. They were actively encouraged to provide specific names and elucidate the qualities they perceived as positive or exemplary within the context of masculinity represented by these individuals. In essence, the participants were invited to draw on their personal observations and perspectives to construct a nuanced portrayal of their ideals of masculinity. A preliminary observation on the role models cited by both cisgender and trans emerging adults reveals some distinctions in the types of figures embraced as role models for these two distinct groups. The trans groups predominantly draw from a diverse spectrum, including influencers, individuals from the entertainment industry, and family members. Notably, they also mention fictional characters and exhibit a broader range of influences. On the other hand, the cisgender groups lean towards historical figures, sports athletes, and family members. In one cisgender group, participants expressed that their inspiration solely stemmed from family members. These initial observations set the stage for a deeper analysis of the traits of those models.

Moreover, it is interesting to observe how both cisgender and trans emerging adults chose some counter-stereotypical figures as masculine role models. Some of the characters are, in fact, expressing a fluid gender expression (i.e., American artist Prince, American performer Gottmik), a few of them are elderly (i.e., Italian singer Franco Battiato, Japanese

filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki), and others are appreciated for their caring and gentle attitude (i.e., Italian football player Claudio Marchisio, British actor Andrew Garfield). Table 2 presents a summary of all the role models mentioned by participants.

Role Models and Desired Traits

We summarized in Table 3 the characteristics mentioned by participants as valued in the chosen idols of masculinity. It can be appreciated from the table how both cisgender and transgender emerging adults selected counter-stereotypical characteristics compared to the traditional model of masculinity and characteristics more in line with the traditional model, which we called stereotypical.

Trans Groups

For the trans participants, the ideal masculine model is often defined by a distinct set of "counter-stereotypical" traits. Those traits include qualities such as "non-rigid or soft masculinity," which is a masculinity that is not confined to the traditional "tough" and "strong" image of the man but rather embraces more fluid and unconventional expressions:

> The first model I thought of is Andrew Garfield, the actor. What's cool about him is that he's got his own brand of masculinity that isn't all stiff and rigid. Unlike some other actors, especially those in the Marvel universe, who often have to put on this super tough and hyper-masculine vibe, like Thor, for instance.

In certain instances, the role models are admired and respected for their ability to freely express their gender identity and creatively showcase their authentic selves, both on the level of identity and gender expression:

> […] Gottmik, the drag queen, really stood out to me. It was a big deal because he's the first drag queen I saw who's a trans guy. It kind of hit me that I had this silly notion before – that a trans guy couldn't do drag. I mean, I used to think you couldn't just be cool with that and still hold onto your masculinity. But seeing someone like Gotmik changed that for me. He's got his own masculinity going on, but he lives it in this really laid-back, chill way, you know? It was a real eye-opener for me personally.

This quote introduces a discourse about representation and underscores the significance of having individuals with marginalized identities to look up to. For many emerging adults, seeing someone they aspire to be like, who shares a similar marginalized identity, holds immense importance.

Table 2 Role models indicated by the transgender and cisgender groups

	TRANS emerging adults	CIS emerging adults
Entertainment industry	Andrew Garfield×2	Prince
	Conan Grey	Battiato (IT)
	Gottmik	Chris Evans
	Chef Rubio (IT)	Chris Hemsworth
	Viola Davis	Dwayne Johnson
	Sufjan Stevens	Johnny Depp
	Keanu Reeves	Hugh Jackman
	Zac Efron	Fedez (IT)
	Miyazaki	Keanu Reeves×2
Sport	Lewis Hamilton	Cristiano Ronaldo
		Zanetti
		Muhamad Alì
		Mike Tyson
		Claudio Marchisio
Fictional characters	Dorian Gray	Dorian Gray
	Emile Hirsh	
Historical characters	Oscar Wilde	
	Winston Churchill	
Family members	Father	Father×4
	Brother	Friend
	Grandfather	Mother
	Mother's husband	
Influencers	Alyssa	
	Guglielmo Scilla (IT)	
	Francesco Cicconetti (IT)	
	Thomas Rossier	

Table 3 Desired traits

	TRANS emerging adults	CIS emerging adults
Stereotypical traits	Physical and appearance	Physical and appearance
		Success
		Breadwinner
		Protect
		Sacrifice
		Fearless
		Social climb
Counter-stereotypical traits	Soft	Kindness
	Kindness	Affectivity
	Not rigid	Care
	Feminine	Support of women's rights
	Different	Fearless of breaking social norms
	Wise	
	Creative	
	Free gender expression	
	Social justice commitment	

Another person I really look up to is Francesco Cicconetti, or @mehths, who's this pretty well-known activist on Instagram and happens to be a trans guy. I gotta say, he's the reason I started feeling braver about being more myself. He's all about embracing who he is. He's done more than one post where he's rocking

some makeup or talking about femininity, even though he's a trans guy. And you know what? He's totally cool with rocking women's clothes […] Plus, he's not some fictional character from a movie – he's real, and that makes it even more inspiring.

On the other hand, a few participants mentioned a lack of models that could represent them, especially if they identify as nonbinary. Similarly to the case of Italian influencer and trans activist Francesco Cicconetti, the attribute of femininity is acknowledged as a noteworthy aspect among individuals appreciated for their embodiment of masculinity. This observation underscores the notion that these role models exemplify a nuanced understanding of gender, highlighting the acceptance of a spectrum of gender expressions within the construct of masculinity. In this sense, it was particularly interesting that one of the participants chose a woman as a masculine role model.

The second character I've chosen to symbolize masculinity is actually a woman – [American actress] Viola Davis. She's just amazing, you know, both as a person and in her acting. But for me, she's a masculinity model because, it's like, I can't really put my finger on what masculinity is exactly. To me, it's more about having this mix of traits in how you carry yourself.[…] She had this incredible blend of qualities that you'd usually associate with both men and women. She was fiercely independent, yet sometimes vulnerable; sometimes reserved, sometimes totally on top of things, and then at other times, she just went with her gut instinct. I mean, she pretty much covered the whole range of emotions and behaviors you can think of. And that's what really gets me – I find inspiration in every aspect of these characters.

The participant articulated the struggle to define masculinity precisely and ultimately, with the example of the fictional character of Annalise Keating, a diverse range of social and emotional attributes exemplifies a dynamic representation that transcends traditional gender dichotomies. Moreover, trans participants described their ideal masculine model as feminine, diverse, wise, and creative.

A few TGNB participants described it as an ideal masculinity trait to be physically in a certain way, for example muscular or tall.

The premise is that I don't have models either, mainly because I tried to stop having them. […] I focused purely on the physical aspect, so masculinity from a physical perspective as it is always an objective to reach. I tried to stop because there is still the awareness that I can't reach these models. So, I realized that this comparison simply made me feel worse rather than better, so I tried to limit comparisons as much as pos-

sible, even with other guys in general, with other trans people, with the journey, in the sense of where one is or what one has achieved. […] However, if I had to indicate a reference model, purely from a physical point of view and as a completely utopian concept, and you can even tease me about this, I would probably say [American actor] Zac Efron.

For some, having a particular body type represents the most stereotypical feature of the masculine model idea they have. It must be noted that this might be related to body dysphoria.

Cisgender Groups

The cisgender participants paint a multifaceted picture of their ideal model of masculinity, encompassing both stereotypical and counter-stereotypical attributes. Stereotypical traits like physical appearance, success, breadwinning, protection, sacrifice, fearlessness, and social ascent find prominence in their ideal masculine model. Simultaneously, counter-stereotypical traits like kindness, emotional affection, childcare, support for women's rights, and fearless defiance of societal norms also form integral components. Cisgender emerging adults often construct a socio-cultural archetype that upholds a quasi-paternalistic role for men within society. They envision a man who fulfills the traditional role of being the primary breadwinner, assuming responsibility for both the well-being of his family and the welfare of his community. In this construct, the male figure is not merely a provider of financial support but also a caretaker who plays a central role in nurturing and safeguarding familial and communal interests.

I have never really had anyone famous or well-known to identify with or aspire to become in the future. I've always had a clear goal in my mind, one that I still hold today. The only person, so to speak, I can look up to, aspire to be like, or even imagine myself becoming similar to is my father. It's about becoming a man who can support his family, find stable employment, and at the same time, make time for his children and enjoy life.

This model encapsulates deeply ingrained societal norms and expectations that cisgender emerging adults inherit and may subsequently internalize as they navigate their own roles and identities within the broader cultural landscape. Another traditional model that emerges from some participants revolves around the notions of success, social ascent, and the construction of one's fame, often starting from humble beginnings. This model can also be linked to the concept of being a hero. This narrative wherein individuals aspire to overcome adversity, attain recognition, and be celebrated

for their accomplishments. Such aspirations reflect a deeply ingrained desire to strive for achievement, mirroring the enduring allure of the hero's journey archetype in cisgender emerging adults.

> The hero figure has always been very relevant ever since I was a child, it has always fascinated me. Perhaps it's because I want to be that hero, to become the best version of myself, to be completely independent, and to do good for others as well. This makes me admire the characters they portray, and also their real-life counterparts, because these are individuals who have achieved incredible success in life, and some of them may have started from nothing…

Another aspect that some participants emphasize in constructing their ideal model of masculinity is the importance of kindness, emotional intelligence, and affection. In the following example, the participant is talking about his grandfather.

> He was sensitive, polite… I like him as a person, although maybe I'm idealizing him […]. [The person I am talking about] is my grandpa. He and my grandma were always arguing, ever since I got to know them better growing up. But they'd make up eventually, and whenever they stopped talking for a while 'cause they'd had a real row, I'd go to my grandpa and ask, 'How're you doing?' and stuff, and he'd tell me, 'Go to grandma, see if she still wants to talk to me, give her a kiss, ask her how she's doing, be nice to her too, ask her if she forgives me.' He was just such a sweetie pie. It really struck me that he had a big heart, even though he was a guy, and that's why I chose him."

In addition to these qualities, they also express a commitment to supporting women's rights. These individuals prioritize a masculinity that embraces empathy and nurtures emotional connections, challenging the traditional, more rigid model of masculinity.

> Claudio Marchisio, not sure if you know him… he's never changed. He's my perfect ideal of masculinity because, you see, he always finds simplicity and he's comfortable in it. He's chill with his family, his stuff, never causing any trouble, even though he's always in the spotlight. You get me? He's always respectful, never says the wrong thing, and actually uses his influence to do good… he's always supports women's rights, always… It's a big deal 'cause… people in the spotlight should be like that…

Furthermore, a few cisgender participants mention their admiration for individuals who, through their behavior or gender expression, take a stance against societal norms that impose a stricter, traditional model of masculinity. These

admired figures exemplify a form of masculinity that is more fluid and open to a wider range of expressions. Their actions and choices serve as a source of inspiration for participants seeking to redefine masculinity in a more inclusive and progressive light.

> […] I immediately thought of Prince, the singer and musician who passed away a few years ago. Primarily because he was a man who never hesitated to not only break free from conventions but also to create his own… In other words, he was the one who set the rules for his own life […] I believe that someone of his caliber should […] make an effort to show their followers that there are values to pursue… values that may be considered more feminine. Not necessarily values of competitiveness or being the best but of demonstrating inclusivity towards everyone, not only in terms of gender but also ethnicity.
> Oscar Wilde is bisexual and is the example of a man who choses how to live his life and is not afraid to show it, even to others. Also his way of thinking, I believe, is among the things who best represent positive masculinity.

Anti-models of Masculinity

The second theme encompasses the defiance of traditional norms and their impact on participants' conceptions of masculinity. Participants, in their descriptions, often exhibited a proclivity for identifying their ideal models of masculinity not by their similarity to existing models but by the stark differences that set them apart from prevailing or conventional paradigms of masculinity to which they had been exposed. This theme can be best characterized as the concept of "anti-models." In essence, the concept of anti-models predominantly emerges within the context of close family members, individuals who are known intimately for their strengths and weaknesses. Particularly, the limited emotional expression displayed by fathers and grandfathers is emphasized by both cisgender and transgender emerging adults as a shortcoming.

Trans Groups

Trans participants shed light on an undesired traditional trait associated with masculinity that becomes particularly pronounced when something considered feminine is linked to an individual. Furthermore, they hint at the perception that cisgender men who conform to and embody traditional masculine roles may lack awareness regarding the privilege they enjoy and the space they occupy within society.

> I have my older brother close to me. He's straight and cisgender. He says things like 'I accept everyone,' but when it comes to discussions about gender stereotypes,

he doesn't really get it. He embodies what you might call 'fragile masculinity.' Anything even slightly feminine or close to it, he strongly rejects because he sees himself as a man. I've also noticed this in our household dynamics. We were raised differently, and this shows in how he carries himself, taking up more space, whether through talking, physicality, or energy. Even in small things, like watching TV, he keeps it on what he wants to watch for hours. It's an attitude of 'it's all mine,' which I notice in men with this type of masculinity. So, maybe I take him as an example of 'what not to do' to break down some of these behaviors. Unfortunately, I don't have many positive role models close to me. In fact, I deliberately surround myself with queer people to avoid this kind of person.

The participant highlights their brother's embodiment of "fragile masculinity," where even slight hints of femininity are perceived as a threat to his identity. This contrast is evident not only in behavior but also in how space is occupied and shared within their household. The participant consciously aims to resist these behaviors, emphasizing the need to dismantle patterns associated with "fragile masculinity."

Cisgender Groups

Several cisgender participants highlight their father's traditional and emotionally reserved behavior as a defining characteristic of what they do not wish to emulate in their own future role as a father. As exemplified in the following quote by a cis emerging adult.

In my view, one of the aspects I find unfavorable about my father is his tendency to embody a traditional, old-fashioned father figure. He is what I'd describe as a steadfast man, and at times, he falls short in terms of displaying affection or engaging in meaningful conversations. His error lies in not keeping up with the changing times, particularly regarding his emotional side, which he seems to suppress. This is something I actively focus on, and I hope to bring about change when I assume a similar role in the future.

This underlines the desire to break away from conventional, unyielding masculine roles and a commitment to promoting more open, emotionally expressive, and participatory approaches within the family structure. This willingness to embody a different type of masculinity also extends to a reevaluation of traditional gender roles and how they have been historically enacted. As exemplified by one of the cisgender participants.

Regarding the point L. raised earlier about his father's upbringing and the behaviors instilled in him, this reflects a common aspect across our parental and grandparental generations. Many of our role models come from a different era. Consequently, certain behaviors that were once prevalent may now appear somewhat outdated. For instance, I think of my grandfather, a person I have always considered a role model and a genuinely good individual. However, in his case, there was a clear division of family roles along gender lines. My grandfather, for example, hardly ever served his own food; it was consistently brought to him at the dining table.

This perspective encourages a shift towards greater gender role equality. The emphasis lies in not taking certain behaviors for granted as inherently masculine or feminine but rather in striving for a more equitable distribution of responsibilities within the family unit.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the ideal model of masculinity among cisgender and transgender emerging adults, shedding light on the dynamics of masculinity construction and perception in contemporary society. The discussions in the focus groups served as a crucial entry point into understanding the participants' perspectives. It was initiated by asking participants to identify individuals whose expressions of masculinity they admired and who represented their model of masculinity. The findings revealed disparities in the sources and characteristics of ideal masculinity models between cisgender and transgender groups, pointing to an evolution in emerging adults' perceptions of masculinity.

Cisgender individuals, in general, appeared to draw upon more traditional models of masculinity, with reverence for attributes traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as success, social ascension, and the role of the primary breadwinner. Our cisgender participants often mentioned their fathers as role models, which is in line with literature demonstrating the role of fathers' adherence to masculinity ideology on the development of young men's masculine ideals, and the intergenerational congruence between fathers' and sons' masculinities (Perales et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, a notable distancing from these traditional norms was observed, particularly in the reinterpretation of emotional expression and the endorsement of gender equality causes (Anzani et al., 2022). Cisgender emerging adults demonstrated an openness to a broader spectrum of emotional expression and, in some cases, an active advocacy for issues linked to gender parity, underscoring their willingness to embrace a more diverse and inclusive conception of masculinity when compared to the traditional model. This

transition towards emotional intimacy has been documented in the literature. It starkly opposes traditional masculinity norms, which dictate that men remain stoic and refrain from divulging their feelings and emotions, especially to other men (Connor et al., 2021).

In contrast, while cisgender youths often adhered to traditional stereotypes when conceptualizing ideal masculinity, the transgender emerging adults embarked on a unique journey of finding their way of being masculine within a society that presented fewer readily identifiable models of masculinity. This distinction highlights the complex interplay of societal expectations and personal experiences in shaping their perceptions of masculinity. The data emphasized the importance of alternative spaces, particularly social media platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube, which offered transgender individuals a vital avenue for locating relatable models of masculinity. This quest for more diverse models led to an idealization of masculinity that broke free from traditional hegemonic stereotypes. Indeed, literature has highlighted how social media and online communities are important for young transgender individuals and represent emotional support through peer comparison and role models (Selkie et al., 2020). Transgender participants identified characteristics that redefined masculinity, encompassing a wider range of traits that included emotional expression, empathy, and support for gender equality. A similar result was found in a study investigating trans masculinity in South Africa (monakali & Francis, 2022). The study shows trans masculine individuals embrace caring masculinity, although they face pressure from normative standards that devalue emotional expression, impacting their sense of masculinity (monakali & Francis, 2022). The range of masculinity models chosen by transgender individuals, including feminine and non-traditional gender figures (female actress, drag queen, trans individuals, etc.), suggests a more flexible concept of masculinity. This may indicate a broader vision of masculinity among transgender individuals. In contrast, the mostly cisgender male role models chosen by cisgender emerging adults may reflect a more traditional view of masculinity, potentially indicating a narrower understanding of gender expression. Additionally, it is worth noting that a few cisgender participants referenced unconventional models of masculinity as sources of inspiration. Figures like Irish writer Oscar Wilde and Prince were celebrated for their courage to challenge societal norms and express masculinity in unconventional and non-conforming ways.

These cases serve as a reminder that even within the cisgender group, there is a growing awareness of the limitations of traditional masculinity models and a recognition of the value of embracing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of masculinity.

One limitation of the study is the sample size, which does not allow for generalization. Furthermore, our sample was not diverse in terms of ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. Future research may investigate the subject using quantitative as well as qualitative methodology, and including larger samples of diverse age, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. Another limitation is connected to recruitment, we did not trace whether each participant was recruited through flyers or online. This information may be useful to identify patterns and to ensure an equal recruitment process. Future experimental designs may distinguish participants recruited online and in person. Moreover, limitations of our study include potential biases introduced by the use of focus groups, where individuals may feel pressured to conform to certain masculine norms in group settings (i.e., Nielson et al., 2020). This concern stems from the dynamic nature of group interactions, where individuals may be influenced by the perceived expectations of their peers. While focus groups offer advantages such as rich group interaction and the opportunity to explore diverse perspectives, there is a risk that the depth of individual responses may not be fully captured. This is because discussions within a group setting may prioritize consensus over individual nuances, potentially limiting the depth of insights obtained. As a result, while focus groups provide valuable insights into collective perceptions and experiences, they may not always facilitate the in-depth exploration of individual perspectives as effectively as one-on-one interviews.

Insights from Todd et al.'s Model for Transgender and Cisgender Individuals

Building on the insights from Todd et al. (2022), their proposed model for the evolution of transgender masculine identities offers a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of masculinity development. As outlined in detail in the introduction, the model outlines a phased process, beginning with the envisioning of the desired model of masculinity, followed by the adoption of this model, and culminating in potential revision and adjustment. Notably, the applicability of this model to cisgender males reveals intriguing distinctions. Transgender individuals, having navigated different socialization experiences, often engage in a deliberate process of imagining their masculine identities. In contrast, cisgender males, entrenched in societal norms of masculinity from earlier, may encounter greater difficulty in critically examining or altering these established constructs early on. It is crucial to emphasize that while cisgender men do undergo an envisioning phase, their ability to question or revise those perceptions may be hindered by the socialization they receive during their formative years. They grow up with pre-established gendered expectations, which may, as echoed in the responses of our
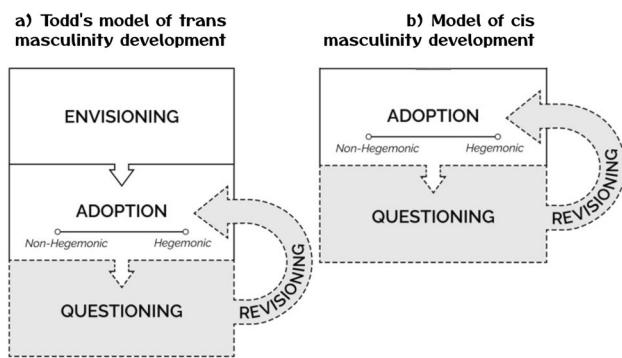
Fig. 1 Evolutionary Model of Masculine Identities: A comparison of the identity construction processes in cisgender and transgender boys and men, highlighting the distinct phases of envisioning, adopting, and revising the concept of masculinity

participants, lead to the assimilation and adoption of certain masculine behaviors without critical examination during their formative years. For individuals assigned female at birth, the process of envisioning a masculine identity often involves starting from a blank slate. Constantly being addressed with female pronouns and expected to conform to feminine norms, they must actively construct an image of themselves as masculine, often in contrast to societal expectations. Conversely, cisgender boys are typically recognized as male from an early age, and their gender identity is affirmed by those around them, and they are indeed exposed to societal norms and expectations. As a result, their process of envisioning may involve refining and aligning their identity with established masculine norms rather than constructing it from scratch. This distinction highlights the qualitative and quantitative differences in the envisioning process based on individuals' assigned gender at birth.

However, as they traverse their journey from adolescence to adulthood, cisgender men may inevitably encounter limitations in these conventional models of masculinity. Such limitations are often manifest in the behaviors and expectations exhibited by their parents and male role models. This realization prompts a phase of questioning, wherein they begin to critically evaluate the alignment of their behaviors with these pre-existing masculine constructs. This process of questioning leads to a subsequent phase of revision and integration, which, while perhaps more challenging due to the ingrained familiarity and reinforcement of certain behaviors, is a pivotal step towards adopting a revised model of masculinity. This revised model often encompasses a more emotionally expressive and caregiving dimension, reflecting the evolving and nuanced nature of contemporary masculinities. Thus, Todd et al.'s (2022) model can be adapted to the development of masculinity in cisgender boys and men, with a notable distinction from the process of their transgender peers:

the elimination of the first step of envisioning (see Fig. 1). This omission highlights a crucial aspect of the social context in which cisgender youth are raised. It seems that society itself plays the role of "envisioning" for cisgender boys, creating and promoting acceptable models of masculinity, and at times, imposing them as normative.

From this perspective, cisgender boys find themselves immersed in an environment that already offers prepackaged models of masculinity, often stemming from gender stereotypes. As a result, some behaviors and attitudes are assimilated and adopted without the need for a conscious process of envisioning. However, over time and with the accumulation of experiences, these young individuals may reach a phase of "questioning," where they begin to critically reflect on the consistency of their behaviors with these models of masculinity.

In this way, Todd et al.'s model takes on new relevance in analyzing the evolution of masculinity among cisgender boys, emphasizing the crucial role of society in defining models of masculinity and the importance of questioning and revision as essential steps towards a more multifaceted and inclusive understanding of masculinity.

Policy Implications

The present work has implications for policy making in the context of sexual education and professional training. We observed who are role models of masculinity and how they are portrayed in the new generations of emerging adults. Policy makers should consider that the social and familiar environment are the main sources of inspiration for emerging adults in the shaping of their masculinity, but that they also turn to the media and the broader entertainment industry for role models. Sexual and affective educational programs that aim at promoting healthy masculinity in emerging adults can stimulate reflections on personal role models, since role models offer new perspectives, also in the expression and embodiment of gender. Educators, clinicians, social workers, and other professionals coming in contact with emerging adults should be aware that hegemonic masculine cultural references are still relevant for this group, especially for emerging adults with a cisgender identity. Understanding and recognizing differentiated experiences of masculinity can pose the basis for policies and intervention strategies that help break down the strict norms that some men adopt. Professionals and policy makers should consider the specificities of transgender emerging adults and should promote practices, social systems, and environments that are also TGNB-affirmative and allow all young men and boys a free expression of masculinities.

Declarations

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