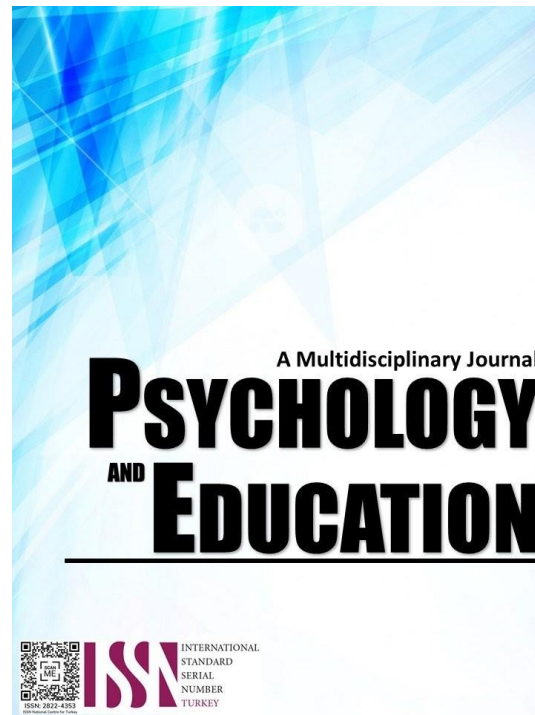


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A Phenomenological Exploration of the Dynamics of Masculinity in Filipino College Students: Redefining Gender Norms in Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

Masculinity has always been a delicate theme. Men frequently believe that they are being tested in this perspective as they feel that the quality shows itself through the conventional convictions to stay away from any type of judgment. The reason for masculinity thinking in Filipino undergraduates within relationships is the mindset that men ought to continuously be extremely forthright and not show any of their weak side; since the public might believe that it is as well “ladylike” or “delicate” for a developed man to show any of these profound ways of behaving. In this study, six (6) college students have been chosen according to their gender, marital status, and location. A semi-structured interview was conducted, and it has revealed that through personal experience and significant time spent communicating with their partners during relationship conflicts, men have realized that they should exert more effort in showing their affections for their partners without restricting them. However, further studies in exploring the shift of the definition of masculinity in relationships on a more comprehensive level is required.

Keywords: *masculinity, relationships, men*

Introduction

Masculinity has always been a sensitive topic. Men often think that they are being challenged in this aspect—as they feel that the trait manifests itself through the traditional beliefs of what “being a man” should look like to avoid any form of judgment. In this regard, they tend to revert to a mindset that allows their insecurities to surface. They become controlling, demanding, and even manipulative just to have more control over their partner (Jeanette, 2017). In doing so, it has put a strain on their romantic relationships.

Since ancient times, there has been an idealized view of gender roles in the Philippines. It is described as (haligi ng tahanan) or the pillar of the home. This means that men must provide the (financial) ability to perform difficult tasks such as minimal carpentry, plumbing, etc. Even in ancient times, when a man was courting, he had to fetch water and chop wood for the girl he was pursuing (Verano Jr. and Gonzaga, 2016). Taking this into consideration, it can be assumed that there are already expectations set for them since birth as it has shaped generations in the past. Evidently, a great deal of men is afraid to be overpowered or emasculated by their partner's success. Especially now, when nearly all privileges are equal across all gender orientations. The notion of (Under the Saya) “Under his wife’s skirt” (Fast, 2022) has also become a part of a culture wherein men are made fun of by other men for being considerate of their partners’ feelings.

The cause of masculinity thinking in Filipino college students that is inside of a relationship, is the mentality that men should always be tough upfront and not show any of their vulnerable side; because the society may think that it is too “feminine” or “soft” for a grown man to show any of these emotional behaviors. The effect has led to a term expressed as “toxic masculinity,” in which men are expected to always “man up,” or other men tend to boast about the fact that they don’t cry over things and do not have the courage to speak their minds honestly about the feelings that were quite hard to express.

Today, toxic behavior due to masculine norms is less common among Filipino college students as they are increasingly aware of these traits. With the help of their partner, they create a safe environment for them to open and better understand their emotions, and they can freely embrace their emotions, and they can freely embrace their emotions and share them when necessary. Drinking with friends, including female friends, provides them with a place to express these emotions. Through these support systems, they can transform these toxic traits into positive qualities.

Society has set a gender standard on how men should act—using dominance as a tool to make decisions in life while remaining indifferent toward their own vulnerability. Unfortunately, this is considered a weakness, as most men are now vulnerable to criticism about their masculine characteristics - and even cooperate with each other to make themselves feel better. In this generation, people have become more open to understanding their own emotions, especially their partners. A sense of validity and acceptance provides emotional support and prevents gender dysfunction in relationships where gender stereotypes are less common. This promotes a healthier self-image and relationships with others. These influences affect their sensitivity and the way they face reality. Continued research will improve individuals' awareness of gender stereotypes and maintain a broader perspective on masculinity empowerment.

Perception plays a huge role when it comes to how people want to present themselves. Opinions provide powerful consequences for the public's ideas about what should and should not be. Considering this, society came up with what it called the “social image.” This results in a huge impact not only towards men’s physical attributes, but also, what they should attain in life and how they handle their

mental and emotional state (Pearson, 2019). If people remain indifferent about their perception towards men's roles in society, it can pass to the future generations. Society will remain uneducated, and men will still face pressure to conform to traditional social standards regarding gender roles, which will ultimately make it more difficult to have and maintain healthy relationships.

It has been suggested that several studies relating to the masculinity of Filipino college students who are in relationships, concentrated on the levels of maturity, emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, and the ability to exercise empathy. The studies were based on the degree of each factors' effectiveness.

A claim has been shown that men should have open thoughts or opinions with regards to masculinity. Men don't need to always act tough and have empathy or be wary of their partner's feelings. It is because the fear of intimacy that can be associated with what men have grown into has negatively impacted their perception of how to treat others, themselves included (Smith, 2020).

However, recent work in the field suggested that being masculine "robust" (male-breadwinner) is still widely accepted. The term used can be identified as a salient norm that is strongest among couples for whom the male-breadwinner identity is most dominant in terms of preserving relationships between married couples. This study has been conducted as a cross-country variation in gender norms to test the hypothesis among heterosexual romantic relationships (Gangl & Gonalons-Pons, 2021).

Despite extensive research on masculinity and gender norms, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Filipino college students navigate and redefine traditional masculinity within the context of interpersonal relationships. While previous studies have primarily focused on Western perspectives or generalized male experiences, the unique socio-cultural factors influencing Filipino youth have not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, the application of a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of these students in challenging or conforming to established gender norms is notably lacking. This research aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the nuanced ways Filipino college students interpret and negotiate masculinity in their relationships, offering fresh insights into the evolving landscape of gender identity in the Philippines.

Research Questions

This study's primary purpose is to explore and understand how Filipino college students perceive, experience, and redefine traditional concepts of masculinity within the context of their interpersonal relationships. Specifically, this study sought to answer the question: How do Filipino college students navigate and negotiate traditional gender norms of masculinity in their relationships, and what factors influence their acceptance or rejection of these norms?

Literature Review

A considerable amount of research has been made about how men are struggling in college compared to women; it has something to do with the stereotyping of men always needing to be the "alpha type". According to studies (Bowman & Filar, 2018), men in higher education identified as having complex issues associated with masculinity, tend to live up to those expectations and which makes them less likely to seek professional assistance that is inclined to reveal their psychological struggles to other people, but little research has been extensively studied. However, less attention has been paid to how toxic masculinity is affecting Filipino college men's ideologies as a romantic partner, and that was the researchers' goal. To determine the underlying effects of conforming to an ongoing societal standard on gender identity involving interpersonal relationships.

Despite the importance of awareness to the proper practice of masculinity, few researchers have studied the significance of balancing the masculine and feminine side of men. People are used to the thinking that men must not expose their feminine side. In fact, according to Cabral (2020), humans consist of both feminine and masculine energies. It is not necessarily the basis of gender representation. Moreover, Sheppard (2023) argues that people tend to focus on how masculinity affects people negatively rather than thinking about the struggles of the responsibility behind the word "masculine", as far as intimate relationships are concerned.

In spite of these early observations, limited studies have been conducted on altering their perspective on what it means to be masculine and the mechanisms of understanding the stereotypical masculine image to college students in a relationship has remained unclear. It is because while there is a general understanding of the concept, only a limited amount of research has expounded on certain aspects that are affected by men's perception of others and themselves. How have men truly changed their ways of exhibiting masculinity towards their romantic partners and have reflected on taking care of their mental well-being?

Furthermore, there is limited focus on the experiences of students with multiple marginalized identities. It is not clear whether the use of semi-structured interviews with gay, bisexual, and queer Filipino undergraduate men can modify this study to examine how students defined, understood, and experienced masculinity. Males are predisposed to adhere to masculinity norms due to culturally grounded concepts such as machismo that involves masculinity under relationships with women (Waters & Valenzuela, 2020). Moreover, being in a romantic relationship with a woman threatens one's masculine beliefs, traits, behaviors, and values that are not explicitly detailed out in sex-discrepancy studies (Gebhard et al., 2019). Due to the current state of comprehension of the influences at play towards males' definition of masculinity, there is a need to fill the void in understanding behaviors and perceptions of the current conceptualization of masculinity and how it could be redefined by males which transpires into the need to explore more in how male conceptualization of masculinity redevelops under a romantic relationship with a female. The question remains on how males exhibit their masculine

behaviors and pursue their masculine conformity to their beliefs and gender norms under specific socio-demographic variables and under the context of having a female romantic partner.

Evidence suggests an interesting correlation, therefore, data obtained from these studies will provide a better insight into the Filipino men's value and understanding of masculinity. Factors such as being in long-term relationships, emotional and physical compatibility, emotional intelligence, moral compass, familial relationships, age, and relationship conflict management of men are some of the areas that are yet to be addressed; as studies correlate social rejection and loneliness that stem from relationship conflict to the areas of the brain that process physical pain (Scott, 2021). Consequently, there seems to be a limited number of observations on the difference between changes in men's way of interacting with their partners during the initial part of the relationship and after being with them for a considerable amount of time (Drake, 2021). It is crucial to examine their standpoint as a romantic partner and understand their struggles with conforming to the gender role.

It is also desirable to carry out surveys of why men adopt the ideals of other men who self-identify as alpha males. These individuals exert a significant influence on the concept of masculinity. Their perspectives, personal narratives, and lived experiences greatly shape the understanding of what it means to be a man (McLoughlin, 2023). Furthermore, additional studies of how masculinity is affected by factors such as lack of behavioral control, norms, culture, and traditions are needed (Vallie, 2022). These studies will help better understand how these factors shape perceptions of gender roles and identities.

Methodology

Research Design

The descriptive phenomenological method was employed in this study. This design was used to understand the essence of social phenomena from the perspective of those who perceived it (Ataro, 2020). This can answer most of the questions that researchers want to determine.

Participants

The group of researchers employed six (6) participants who were studying in educational institutions located in the National Capital Region (NCR). Gee (2000) suggested that upon considering the research design, it is ideal to use the number of participants to gain an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences, as it is the practice used in qualitative studies. Moreover, research conducted by Subedi (2021) used a similar sampling technique with the same number of respondents which provides substantial evidence of its effectiveness.

Instrument

The researchers developed a semi-structured set of questions with the objectives of the study in mind. The nature of the questions developed is qualitative, focusing on exploring male perceptions of their concept of masculinity and the process on how they were able to have a sense of comfort in showing vulnerabilities without the presence of emotional restrictive behavior and feel emotional freedom with the help of their romantic partner. The content of the interview was divided into two main sections. First, the perceptions of males towards their conceptualization of masculinity. This allowed the researchers to understand how males perceive masculinity while influenced by their intimate relationships. Lastly, their perceptions towards achieving comfort in presenting their vulnerabilities that contrasts the notion of traditional masculinity. It enabled the researchers to comprehend the development of their current behavior that is characterized with male vulnerability. Due to the instrument being a semi-structured interview, it permitted the researchers to determine the dynamics between masculinity and intimate relationships to a greater degree, as it contained open-ended questions which provided a substantial amount of data.

The relevance and clarity of the questions in the interview were evaluated through a comprehensive examination. A subset of individuals was given a set of inquiries made by the researchers to provide feedback for potential revisions. The successful assessment indicated that the questions were easily comprehensible.

Procedure

The researchers, along with the participants, were divided into pairs for conducting the interviews for each respondent in their respective universities. This study gathered and instructed male college students that are currently in a relationship to share their lived experiences and perspectives on masculinity in a conducive environment for interviews. Open-ended questions have been provided for the participants to willingly answer and share their thoughts as additional input to the study. Afterwards, the participants were debriefed, which marked the end of the data gathering process.

The data obtained from the interviews were carefully analyzed using a thematic analysis that was assessed by selected experts in the field of study.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the data gathering process, concerns such as consent, confidentiality, data protection, anonymity, right to withdraw or

refuse, voluntary participation, purpose of the study, possible risks and discomforts, publication of results, and type of interventions are considered throughout the research process. The researchers have carefully developed the instrument with an assurance that questions can be catered to a diverse socio-demographic which does not discriminate against any of the participant's responses. A strict implementation of the data collection and its qualitative data analysis allowed the study to eradicate as much as possible any possibilities of biases from participants or the researchers, publicizing false information, and an accurate representation of the data itself. Integrity and transparency are expressed by the researchers to its participants regarding any relevant information included in the research that does not compromise the accurate representation of the results and the ethical standards. The participants gave their full consent, granting the researchers to proceed in the collection of data that are aligned to the purpose of the study.

The study has conformed to the Republic Act 10173 - Data Privacy Act of 2012, which entails that the data collected from the study will be confidential and it will not be used without the participant's knowledge and consent. If the participant wants to have their identity remain unknown, anonymity will be granted. In addition, participants always have the right for withdrawal or discontinuation from the study. Debriefing of the study's purpose was done at the end of their participation to proceed with full termination that guaranteed that the participant concluded their participation in the study and their conditions are similar prior to their participation in the study.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings according to the study's research questions. The following are the emerging themes that have been identified from the thematic analysis that was conducted by the researchers. The superordinate themes with their subordinate themes are as follows: Shifting of perception about masculinity (shift of masculine beliefs, gender role conformity, and lack of awareness and personal experiences on constricting gender norms), degree of societal standards (traditional relationship expectations), beliefs, masculine stereotypes, and gender role conflicts (current beliefs on gender role conformity).

Table 1. *Emerging Themes*

<i>Superordinate Themes</i>	<i>Subordinate Themes</i>
Shifting of perception about masculinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift of masculine beliefs • Gender role conformity • Lack of awareness and personal experiences on constricting gender norms
Degree of societal standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional relationship expectations
Beliefs, masculine stereotypes and gender role conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current beliefs on gender role conformity

The shift of masculine beliefs provided an opportunity for both males and females to express their feelings freely without the judgment of society. One of the respondents conveyed his point of view and his experience of shifting the view of masculinity. "It affects me to the point that my partner helps me out during my journey with her like from during our first day in our relationship until now since she's the more mature one. She also guided me through the relationship, especially motivating me to the journey I've experienced." According to Kortge (2021), men do not need to feel insecure or hesitant about seeking assistance or expressing their emotions. Although changing this perception may take time, efforts are already underway to address it.

Conforming to the gender roles that have been imposed by society provides a great number of misconceptions and restrictions in relationships. As stated by a participant, "masculinity is parang superiority or superior sya. Parang yung lalake na pag dating sa relationships nakasalalay sa lalaki yung paggawa ng lahat ng bagay, sya yung magdadala ng relasyon tas parang superior sya sya yung nasusunod palagi." which has been proven to be ineffective in managing relationships. According to Williams (2023), while women generally have a higher level of empathy than men, it does not entirely mean that men are incapable of being empathic and resort to taking control of their relationships all the time. Moreover, a significant number of participants have claimed to have no recollection of experiencing restrictions on gender norms. One of the respondents expressed the following: "Not through my knowledge, I have no experience in those kinds of moments so that is it." Contrary to the statement, men have been exposed to constricting gender norms like men being the provider in a family and what consequences will follow if they did not do so. (Wise et al., 2022)

In masculinity, the degree of societal standards became a measurement and a foundation for relationships where men are expected to behave in a certain manner (being dominant in their relationships) regardless of how they perceive themselves. In this generation, it is still visible in most relationships because it has already become a part of the culture of men. One of the participants stated that "Parang 'di ma-i-identify na masculine or feminine parang half half po siya, 'di naman lahat ng lalake masculine yung turing sa partner nila. Parang half pa rin yung soft hearted men and pareho mas nasusunod". In the view of the fact that the societal standard of masculinity affects perceptions of individuality and every relationship.

In the study of Reporter (2023), recent discussions highlight a shift in perception of masculinity and femininity from biological determination to social constructs, allowing men to recognize potential harm from them. Another research from Duffield (2022), explains how being a modern individual entails being at ease with a considerably more expansive concept of masculinity. The notions surrounding what brings about a sense of manhood have become significantly less constricting compared to earlier times. Being

compassionate and defying societal norms of masculinity is crucial.

Approaches on toxic masculinity in the modern generation highlights diverse perspectives, emphasizing the role of social factors, self-rationalization, and dynamics within romantic relationships in recognizing and addressing this issue. Toxic masculinity is traced back to societal expectations, often unspoken and causing silent suffering among men, as noted by Plank (2019). Despite this, respondents noted a sense of gratitude in the current generation, pointing to increased societal acceptance of diverse opinions for both men and women. The ongoing evolution of generations and changing perceptions has fostered open discussions about the impact of gender roles. Interview results indicate a growing awareness and willingness to confront toxic masculinity, underscoring the transformative influence of societal changes on individuals' lives and relationships, as highlighted by Gershberg and Illing (2022).

Findings suggest that relationships in the current generation have improved significantly, with both genders having equal freedom to express themselves, and men being able to show vulnerability. A participant emphasized the importance of respect in relationships, stating, “Uhm, tao din yan, kailangan nating respetuhin sila. Kaya dapat equal lang tayo kase partner natin yan.” As stated by Sheppard (2023), focusing on masculinity alone affects people negatively as far as intimate relationships are concerned. Accepting the notion of increased empathy has led to a reduction in toxic mindsets within relationships. In summary, modern relationships prioritize equality, freedom of expression, and mutual respect, contributing to a healthier dynamic and a diminished presence of toxic behaviors.

Conclusions

The study successfully demonstrated a significant shift in the way Filipino college students perceive and enact masculinity within their romantic relationships. The findings reveal that traditional notions of dominance and control are increasingly viewed as toxic and undesirable, with participants showing a preference for empathy and emotional openness. This shift not only reflects a growing maturity among these young men but also a willingness to challenge and redefine societal expectations of masculinity. The participants' advocacy for emotional acceptance among men further underscores the changing dynamics of gender roles in contemporary Filipino society.

However, the study's reliance on semi-structured interviews conducted within a limited geographic scope presents a notable limitation. The inability to gather data from a more diverse range of locations may have constrained the comprehensiveness of the findings. This geographic limitation highlights the need for broader research that can capture a more varied set of experiences across different regions. Such an expansion would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how masculinity is perceived and performed in different cultural contexts within the Philippines.

Considering these findings, it is recommended that future research should adopt a multi-site approach, incorporating participants from various regions to enhance the generalizability of the results. Additionally, employing mixed methods, such as quantitative surveys alongside qualitative interviews, could provide a more holistic view of the evolving concept of masculinity among Filipino college students. By addressing these limitations, future studies can build on the insights gained from this research, offering more comprehensive strategies to support positive masculinity in diverse relational contexts.

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