

LISTENING TO THE UNHEARD VOICES: PERCEPTIONS, CHALLENGES, AND COPING STRATEGIES OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AMONG MEN IN PAKISTAN

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In Pakistan, the issues of gender have been predominantly focused on the experiences of women while their own experience of men has received scant attention. This qualitative study used Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, and analyzed the construction, challenge and negotiation of masculinity by men in Pakistan. Twenty adolescents and young adults including married and unmarried students and working professionals were purposively selected and interviewed by in-depth and semi-structured interviews in Urdu language in an urban area of Lahore. Thematic analysis was done by using open coding and constant comparison method of analysis. Four themes that were interconnected emerged: normative perception of masculinity, performativity, challenges, coping. The results show that hegemonic masculinity is still the prevailing script for manhood in Pakistan, at a high psychological and social price, and results in men hiding and not showing how hard things are. The main coping mechanisms were silence, self-reliance and spirituality. Finally, the study draws on men's personal stories and builds upon the current gender role strain literature in Pakistan to make recommendations for gender-inclusive education, stigma-free mental health services, and positive media portrayals of masculinity.

Keywords: *masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, adolescents, young adults, perceptions, challenges, coping strategies, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

The enduring concerns and perceptions about gender, and about masculinity in particular, have been challenged by the work of late modernity, and the concept of masculinity has turned out to be a more complex and contested space than previous research indicated. According to gender role strain theory, there is a discomfort and psychological strain related to the rigid, prescriptive expectations that are set for men, and men are often reported to experience distress related to a sense of inadequacy with regard to the inability to openly express emotion (Pleck, 1981). In the search for a single universal definition of masculinity, gender scholars have increasingly suggested that more useful is to explore the different ways in which men and women relate to masculinity and femininity in different contexts (Millington, 2007). Thus, masculinity is not a uniform state of emotions and thoughts, but a dynamic interplay between emotional and intellectual dispositions that are influenced by race, sexuality, nationality and class; it is not a fixed state of being but rather

a historically produced and socially constructed state of being (Kimmel, 1997). As such, masculinity is considered as a space of perpetual negotiation, where institutional and personal power relations are entangled (Berger, Wallis, & Watson, 1996).

This social cost of the enforcement is most apparent in men's health-seeking behaviors. Men often report loneliness, sadness and distress but do not seek professional interventions, and are less likely to be confident or willing to trust others enough to share their experiences in their entirety (Bryant-Bedell & Waite, 2010; Grav, Hellzen, Romild, & Stor, 2012). Men and boys are still one of the least likely groups to access psychological services, often due to the fear of losing control over how they are perceived when experiencing distress (Nam et al., 2010), and are socialized to detach distress and externalize it as anger (Simon, 2014). While the majority of this literature considers stoicism as a personal characteristic, through the lens of Connell, it is much better understood as a socially enforced performance, a strategy the men use to prevent oneself from being called a pansy; this study goes back to this line of thinking directly with the findings on coping.

Male dominance is also created and sustained outside the family. Some jobs in stock trading, engineering, manual construction labor, are still coded as masculine, while cultures in the workplace that value aggression and risk taking may be conducive to harassment and hostility (Doering & Thebaud, 2017; Williams, 1999; Berdahl, 2009; Cooper, 2014). Similarly, physical appearance serves as an indicator of maturity, dominance and attractiveness (Frederick & Haselton, 2009; Dixon et al., 2016), and sport is described broadly as a breeding ground for the conditioning of hegemonic masculine norms (Eitzen, 2012) supported by family, peers and coaches. The pressures of media representations are as well: TV and movies have consistently associated success, wealth, and physical strength with masculinity, which influences how people perform masculinity themselves (Gurkan & Sarttas, 2022). Fathers' roles also differ across countries, with fathers in the United States placing greater importance on achievement with sons, and greater importance on physical play and emotional restraint with daughters, while more fathers in Japan are actively involved in caregiving responsibilities and household work (Mascaro, Rentscher, Hackett, & Mehl, 2017; Nakatani, 2006). It is instructive to consider this cross-cultural contrast, because it makes it clear that hegemonic masculinity is not universal or inevitable, but a configuration of practice that can and does change across social contexts as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Masculinity in the Pakistani Context

Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced in Pakistan by a patriarchal social system, by a documented preference for sons, and by socialization of boys that starts early in life to affect how they eat, dress, work and interact with others. Pakistani men's well-being is further shaped by structural pressures economic uncertainty, unemployment, and the obligation to provide for extended families alongside expectations to complete higher education, secure stable employment, and demonstrate emotional composure throughout. Boys are socialized into a narrow repertoire of

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roles: head of family, guardian, provider, and decision-maker (Kimmel, 1997), a repertoire whose visibility, this study argues, has come at the cost of understanding how men themselves experience the strain of enacting it.

Pakistan-based empirical research substantiates this strain. In one of the more directly comparable studies, Adil, Shahed, and Arshad (2017) surveyed one hundred working men in Lahore and found significant gender role strain linked to the expectations of headship and breadwinning, with strain manifesting in physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms, and varying by age, income, and education. Their findings obtained through standardized scales establish that the burden of masculine role expectations is measurable and widespread among Pakistani men, but stop short of capturing how men themselves narrate, interpret, or cope with that burden; qualitative accounts, including the present study, extend the more prevalent survey-based literature (Levant & Richmond, 2008; Adil, Shahed, & Arshad, 2017) by centering men's own language and meaning-making. In a similarly proximate qualitative study conducted in Lahore, Khan and Malik (2023) documented how Pakistani men construct masculinity through social constructionist processes shaped by family, gender role strain, and shifting cultural expectations, findings that this study's data corroborate and extend through a more explicit focus on coping.

The process of gender socialization in Pakistan is also being actively reinforced by women which makes any simple account of masculinity even more complex. Women may be active stakeholders in the maintenance of patriarchy when they would be protected or empowered by doing so within the existing system as Kandiyoti (1988) states, mothers are often the first to teach sons about masculinities. In line with this, research on the Pashtun families showed that Pashtun women's jobs are coded in the domestic sphere, which is considered feminine, whereas men's jobs are coded as masculine and aggressive jobs and are taught to boys from an early age as a way of their survival (Zainab 2016; Hussain, Naz and Khan 2015). Adolescent years seem to be a heightened time for these norms to be internalized as evidenced by finding that Pakistani boys were pressured during this time to adopt a masculine identity through smoking, drinking alcohol, and other risky behaviors and through changes in facial hair and voice (Shivji et al., 2021).

This study is based on Connell's (1995) theory on the masculinities, which identified its four configurations: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalized, through which gender power is manifested. Hegemony describes the culturally privileged form of masculinity that is used to assert patriarchy over women and over other, subordinate masculinities, and which is linked to a variety of effects including violence and privilege without any request or warrant (Connell, 1995). Importantly, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) subsequently refined the concept to state that hegemonic masculinity is not a universal set of attributes but a variable mode of practice, one which is always being produced and reproduced, never given. It is this distinction that forms the core of the present study how Pakistani men actively create, enact, and at times contest hegemonic masculinity in their everyday lives, rather than it being a list of fixed and unchanging features. It has since been a central concept that links men's studies, critical masculinity studies, and feminist scholarship on patriarchy, and has been relevant to education, violence prevention, workplace policy, health and counselling.

Previous sex-role theory models held that psychological health and well-being were linked to adherence to an established set of masculine and feminine behaviors (Pleck, 1984), which was attacked because it appeared to pathologize gender deviance, but not gender norms (Birk and Tannock, 2010). An alternative perspective comes from Connell's relational, power-based conception of masculinity, which is not just an internal orientation, but is produced and maintained by social sanction. Comparative research shows this enforcement. A study that was developing a widely used measure of masculinity ideology among U.S. college students from African, Latino, and European backgrounds revealed that men expressed more traditional masculine ideology beliefs than women, with wide variation among the groups (Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013); a more comprehensive review of cross-national research using this measure demonstrated that men in some countries (including Russia and Pakistan) tended to score higher on the measure than men in the United States (Levant & Richmond, 2008). This endorsement is often justified in the name of religion and culture: in Pakistan, for example, religious discourses are used to legitimate men's dominance over women, while more general cultural discourses about equality for women continue to exist alongside entrenched practices of discrimination (Hopkins, 2010).

METHODS

Research Design

The design of the study was qualitative research design to understand the construction and lived experience of hegemonic masculinity with Pakistani men. The researcher used a qualitative approach because it is more focused on those who are marginalized and under-examined, more person centered and can be used to access the meanings that participants themselves attribute to their experiences (Liamputtong, 2019) which is not easily captured by standardized instruments only.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling, snowball sampling and reaching out through social media were used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling was chosen because it enables the deliberate selection of information-rich cases that meet specific eligibility criteria relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Snowball sampling and social media recruitment (via Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp posts describing the study's purpose and eligibility criteria) were used in combination because adolescent and young adult men were found to be a comparatively hesitant, difficult-to-approach population for a topic of this nature; participants and personal contacts of the researcher were therefore asked to refer eligible acquaintances, with each successive interview expanding the pool of potential participants. Data collection took place between March 15 and March 31, 2023. The majority of participants were based in Lahore, Pakistan, with a small number residing in Dera Ghazi Khan, Rawalpindi, England, and Dubai at the time of interview. Eligibility criteria required participants to be male, aged between 19 and 40 years, and either employed or enrolled as students; men over the age of 40 and retired men were excluded, as the study's focus on active negotiation of career, marriage, and provider roles made this age range most relevant to the research questions.

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Interview invitations were extended to individuals who met the inclusion criteria, and recruitment continued iteratively alongside data analysis: transcripts were reviewed and coded shortly after each interview rather than only at the end of data collection. Data saturation - the point at which continued interviewing ceases to generate new codes, themes, or conceptual insights (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011) was treated as the stopping criterion for recruitment. Saturation was judged to have been reached at the eighteenth interview, once transcript review indicated that no substantively new codes were emerging from the data; two further interviews were conducted to confirm that this pattern held, bringing the final sample to twenty participants. This iterative, concurrent process of collection and analysis is what allowed saturation, rather than a predetermined sample size, to determine when recruitment ended.

The final sample comprised twenty adolescent and young adult men aged 19 to 40 (Table 1). Ten participants were unmarried students, several of whom held part-time or freelance work alongside their studies; one participant was engaged. The remaining participants were married or engaged professionals from various sectors such as medicine, law, engineering, business, teaching, human resources, NGO and development. Reported monthly income was in the range of PKR 27000 to more than PKR 30000, while the general trend was that monthly income of unmarried student-participants was lower or nil with those who are married reporting higher income mostly while engaged in professional activities. This blend of students and working people and of married and unmarried men was deliberate, in order to capture the negotiation of hegemonic masculinity at various stages of life and economic independency.

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Participants

ID	Age	Marital Status	Profession	Monthly Income (PKR)
P1	24	Single	Medium monitoring officer	27,000
P2	35	Married	Senior managerial post	200,000+
P3	28	Engaged	Photocopier operator	80,000
P4	23	Single	Student	—
P5	21	Single	Student / property dealer	45,000
P6	25	Single	Businessman	40,000
P7	28	Married	Industrial businessman	100,000
P8	24	Single	Doctor	80,000
P9	22	Single	Student	—
P10	26	Single	Student	—
P11	29	Single	Freelancer	50,000
P12	30	Married	NGO worker	100,000

ID	Age	Marital Status	Profession	Monthly Income (PKR)
P13	33	Married	Data analyst	60,000
P14	34	Married	Administrative HR officer	300,000+
P15	40	Married	Senior development manager	300,000+
P16	38	Single	Doctor	200,000+
P17	23	Single	Student / part-timer	30,000
P18	22	Single	Student	—
P19	38	Married	Teacher	200,000
P20	33	Married	Associate lawyer	100,000

Data Collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with in-depth questions in the participants' native language of Urdu. After reviewing related literature, the guide for the interview was prepared in the light of Connell's theory, translated from English to Urdu by the help of a linguist and then pilot tested with the student's participants under the supervision of the researcher in a focus group discussion and later modified. Guide questions focused on four areas: normative meanings of masculinity, performativity, challenges, and coping strategies, with follow-up probes used to deepen participants' responses. Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes, with some extending beyond an hour. Fourteen interviews were conducted in person - at locations including participants' homes, a university department, and a café, chosen for participants' comfort and convenience and six were conducted by telephone with participants who were unavailable in person or based outside Lahore. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Sociodemographic information - including age, education level, marital status, number of siblings, number of children, employment status, and income - was collected before each interview began.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose and possible contributions of the study to the academic and public understanding of participants' situation were clearly communicated to all participants and efforts were made to ensure participants' dignity and not sensationalize sensitive disclosures. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviewing, using consent forms that detailed the study's topic and purpose, the researcher's and supervisor's contact information, and the fact that interviews would be recorded and anonymized. Recordings were accessible only to the researcher and her supervisor, and participants were informed of their right to stop or withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, an approach well suited to organizing large volumes of qualitative data into interpretable patterns of meaning (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). All

interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed line-by-line multiple times to ensure familiarity with the material. Meaning units were identified from the transcripts and labeled through open coding; codes were then grouped into categories based on shared meaning, and main themes and subthemes were developed by iteratively comparing codes and categories against the dataset as a whole using a constant comparison approach (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

Several measures were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, following the widely used credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through in-depth, extended interviews (45-60 minutes) that allowed participants to elaborate and clarify their responses, and through the use of participants' verbatim language in the reporting of findings. Dependability was supported by the concurrent, iterative process of data collection and coding described above, and by supervisory input during pilot testing of the interview guide.

FINDINGS

The sample comprised twenty adults boys and men aged 19 to 40. Ten were unmarried university students, several with part-time or freelance work; one participant was engaged. The remaining participants were married or engaged professionals working in fields including NGO work, data analysis, medicine, law, business, teaching, and management (see Table 1 in the Methods section for full demographic detail). These themes were intertwined across the interviews: normative understanding of hegemonic masculinity, performativity of hegemonic masculinity, challenges of hegemonic masculinity, coping strategies. Codes and subthemes supporting each of these themes are summarized in Table 2 prior to the full narrative of the findings.

Table 2

Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Codes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Subthemes / Categories	Representative Codes (from data)
Normative Understanding of HM	Provider/protector role; family-based masculine socialization; gendered caregiving roles; devaluation of femininity and intersex identities	"Breadwinner"; "decision-maker"; "family values him"; "women as weak/fragile"
Performativity of HM	Freedom of mobility and unaccountability; gendered career/degree socialization; life-stage transition (adolescence to adulthood); emotional suppression and aggression; calculated risk-taking; media-reinforced masculinity	"Gender-specific jobs"; "be a man"; "block of concrete"; "calculated risks"; media/drama references
Challenges of HM	Pressure to demonstrate athletic/physical competence; appearance-related pressure; economic and employment pressure; father-son relational differences;	"Sport week"; physical appearance; job pressure after graduation; "daughters more preferred"; "fix things"

Theme	Subthemes / Categories	Representative Codes (from data)
	technical/household competence expectations	
Coping Strategies	Silence and self-reliance; religious/spiritual coping; selective peer disclosure; minimization or denial of struggle	"Keep my silence"; "leave everything to Allah"; "my companions are my brothers"; "act like a man"

Normative Understanding of Hegemonic Masculinity

These concepts of masculinity were always characterized by a set of normative traits: protector, breadwinner, decision maker, strong, dominant, independent, responsible leader, physically fit. This building was most notable in middle class families, which would have had men as providers and protectors. Participants reported that learning this behavior first in the family, and then reinforced in other social settings, such as peers and community, are consistent with the family being the first arena in which participants were socialized into their gender role. Females, however, were also prominent in their transmission and reinforcement of patriarchal expectations, as was often the case with mothers who were identified as the instrumentality for their sons to become "strong, rough, and tough" as Kandiyoti (1988) describes the role of women, too, in the transmission and reinforcement of patriarchal expectations within the household. Participants recognized that it was hard to embody these idealized qualities given the fact that they differ across men, but they all affirmed the importance of these attributes to the definition of masculinity.

"Basically, I had witnessed it in my family that men are earners, a boy or a man who is earning something is the breadwinner and then he is the father of the house, decision maker and the family values him too" (NGO worker, aged 30).

The same type of normativity was applied to the position of women and gender diverse people in relation to themselves. Women's weakness, fragility and lack of esteem in comparison to men often coexisted with participants' commendation of women's nurturing, emotional and caring attributes, which was representative of the relational nature of the definition of hegemonic masculinity and a devaluated femininity (Connell, 1995). Intersex people were reported to be particularly marginalized, often excluded from the dominant social and economic system.

Hegemonic Masculinity Performativity

Male privilege was mentioned as being wide-ranging, but contingent on "family duty" obligations. Men were socialized to be able to move around outside the home without explaining where they were; they knew this was a privilege that women were not afforded. This lack of accountability spread to career socialization, when participants thought of some careers as belonging to men and some to women, and several pointed to real-world examples of gender-specific hiring practices.

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"Yes women issues, and I have observed that in bank they did not recruit females as their operational staff due to some reasons and other firms do have gender specific jobs, on some jobs only males are recruited" (data analyst, aged 33).

Participants also identified masculinity as a learned and enacted phenomenon in a series of life stages, from a relatively uninhibited adolescence to a more inhibited adulthood after marriage and the birth of children; in this phase, men spoke about enduring conflicts between themselves and others as they tried to negotiate their sense of identity with external expectations.

"All men heard these things in beginning like we are in tension or we are in any kind of problem then be a man, if heart is heavy then be a man. So, men can be defined as a block of concrete that is flawless in all aspects" (doctor, aged 24).

One of the major characteristics of this performance was emotional suppression. While some exhibited vulnerability, others concealed distress and dealt their own blows to their emotional and physical states dealing with hardship alone, and sometimes at a literal cost, showing that managing the performance of masculine composure can have measurable costs on the individual's wellbeing.

"Our happiness and health must be sacrificed as men. My job resembles the one where I to sit in office until 3-4 am in the morning and due to increased time on the screen my eyes are becoming reddish and my headache problem is acute but all this is because of family and children. Driving home in this scenario appears harder and I wish somebody would drive me home and lay me on bed" (senior managerial post, aged 35).

Risk taking was also presented as a sign of manhood, and was sometimes cited as a behavior that boys look to fathers for. However, participants also made a distinction between reckless risk-taking and more calculated risk-taking, which they linked to adult responsibility.

"Ahh! It is a time of taking chances, now I got a child, so I prevent. I make calculated risks whereby I am aware of the worst-case situations" (lawyer, aged 33).

Lastly, participants recognized that Pakistani media including dramas, films, advertisements, political speeches etc. is also a common source of masculine scripts, though they also mentioned that there are some changes in the recent years in the way men are shown on screen that are becoming more complex.

"The topic of Pakistani media is exhibiting certain kind. And these days I watch parizad (name of the series) which is very different and addresses the struggles of men and I do not believe that someone else did the same" (industrial businessman, aged 28).

Challenges of Hegemonic Masculinity

Participants pointed to a number of recurring pressures as an aspect of hegemonic masculinity, though not necessarily at that moment in time identifying the pressure as a "challenge. Participation in sport was extolled as a standard sign of physical maleness, even when one was not interested in

sport, with institutional sports weeks in colleges and workplaces being described as rituals to ensure physical maleness. Clad in the attire they were wearing, physical appearance attractiveness, grooming and clothing also came up as a primary feature of how masculinity is judged by others and was discussed by most participants. Another recurring theme was economic pressure. Participants spoke of pressure from families to get jobs right after graduating and to attend school with the primary aim of finding work, which in some cases led to feelings of depression, and a need to complete their degrees while also holding down part-time work and job searching. Participants who had siblings also talked about the differences between sons and daughters in their families with regard to expectations for marriage and choice of life partner. *"Daughters are more preferred, somehow we are equal but she received more love"* (NGO worker, aged 30). Similarly, another participant highlighted that:

"It is true that if life partner is good then life can be easily spent. My life partner is polite, she understands my decisions, she is a homemaker. Beauty doesn't matter in most of the cases but mine was love marriage so yes, I did fell for her beauty. She is intelligent like she helps kids in their homework's and projects" (senior managerial post, aged 35).

There was also a lesser talked about form of pressure, that of being technically and domestically competent, i.e. knowing how to diagnose and fix technical and household issues, which was often the responsibility of the fathers and passed on to their sons. *"Yes, I try to fix things. First, I try my extremely my best to fix, then baba (father) tries and if both failed then we call someone"* (student, aged 23). *"Yes, I can change bulbs, fan capacitors, wiring issues, my father taught me this. I can check software and hardware issues as well. I have knowledge of cars and technology issues"* (student, aged 22).

Coping Strategies of Hegemonic Masculinity

Participants reported a limited range of coping strategies, mostly internal, to deal with the difficulties of hegemonic masculinity: staying silent, persevering alone and finding spiritual solace. Consistent responses were that silence was the default and the most acceptable response. *"I simply keep my silence, shut myself up in my room and leave everything to ALLAH and the following morning, I simply forget everything"* (doctor, aged 24). Similarly, another participant reported that *"In masculinity challenges I believe in religious factors. I have believe system and this solve so much problems but I have firm believe in Allah in every matter"* (industrial businessman, aged 28).

A smaller number of participants described drawing on close friendships as a limited but meaningful source of support, particularly around practical needs such as financial difficulty. *"My companions and friends are my brothers when any of them requires money then we shall all come to their aid. They are just like my family"* (senior development manager, aged 40).

Notably, several participants denied experiencing identity-related struggles at all, framing masculinity-related distress as something to be dismissed rather than processed a response that itself functions as a coping strategy, reinforcing rather than challenging the norms that produce the

distress in the first place. *"In case any of my friend struggling with masculinity, I would tell him to shut up and act like a man. This does not cause one to be upset"* (student, aged 22).

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study examined the meanings, performances, challenges, and coping strategies associated with hegemonic masculinity among adolescent and young adult men in Pakistan, extending a still-limited body of qualitative work on Pakistani men's own experiences of masculinity. The characteristics and dimensions of hegemonic masculinity found in the data are compiled in Table 3, and form the structure of the discussion which follows.

Table 3

Traits and Dimensions of Hegemonic Masculinity Identified in This Study

Trait / Dimension	Description in This Study	Illustrative Data
Provider / Breadwinner	Financial responsibility for family framed as a defining and non-negotiable male duty	"He is the father of the house, decision maker"
Protector / Decision-maker	Authority over household decisions and responsibility for family safety	Family/household narratives
Strength & Aggression	Physical strength, assertiveness, and emotional restraint valorized; vulnerability concealed	"Block of concrete that is flawless"
Independence & Mobility	Freedom to move, work, and socialize without needing to account to family	Bank hiring account; time-outside norms
Risk-taking	Willingness to take calculated risks associated with adult masculine responsibility	"I make calculated risks"
Physical Appearance	Grooming, beardedness, and attire linked to perceived competence and dominance	Appearance/attractiveness discussion
Technical Competence	Expected ability to independently resolve household/technical problems	"I can change bulbs, fan capacitors"
Emotional Restraint	Suppression of sadness, fear, or vulnerability in favor of composure	Coping-strategy narratives

In line with hegemonic masculinity theory, participants identified a privileged form of masculinity that was oriented towards heterosexuality, control, aggression and mental and economic strength, while feminine traits were actively hidden and/or underestimated (Connell, 2005). Professions that have been stereotyped as male (law, medicine, business, and engineering) remained strongly male, reflecting similar results found with Pakistani respondents as well as others in a number of other countries, who tend to endorse conventional masculine attitudes more strongly than respondents in the U.S., at the cost of women's perceived agency (Levant & Richmond, 2008). The near uniformity of the trait's participants provided for provider, protector, decision maker, leader, independent, assertive, fearless traits of manhood, as participants saw them indicate that they are

not simply a matter of personal taste; rather, they are a socially monitored minimum standard for a man that holds true across class, ethnicity, and region, and against the men who don't meet those criteria.

Participants' accounts of socialization via the family followed by peers and schools confirm Kandiyoti's (1988) argument that mothers often teach sons about how to act like men, which renders any discussion of patriarchy as a thing which men impose on women more complex. This pattern aligns with prior Pakistani findings that cultural norms push men toward aggression, risk tolerance, and financial independence from an early age, while domestic competence remains coded as women's responsibility and is rarely taught to boys (Hussain, Naz, & Khan, 2015; Shivji, Lymn, Meade, & Watts, 2021; Zainab, 2016). Similarly, participants' framing of women as vulnerable and nurturing (Zainab, 2016) mirrors the complementary construction of hegemonic masculinity against a devalued femininity that Connell's (1995) theory predicts; the marginalization of intersex individuals described by participants extends this devaluation to anyone positioned outside the male-female binary altogether.

The occupational findings align with international evidence that career pathways remain gender-segregated, with physically demanding or authority-based roles such as banking and law - coded as masculine (Doering & Thebaud, 2017), and with Pakistan-specific findings that fathers exert the strongest influence on Pakistani men's career choices (Sarwar & Azmat, 2013). Health-related findings were similarly consistent with existing literature: participants' reluctance to express sadness or vulnerability, channeling distress instead into overwork or suppressed emotion, mirrors broader findings that Pakistani men's emotional restriction functions to mask vulnerability behind a performance of composure (Connell, 2005; Simon, 2014).

Media emerged as a further reinforcing institution, with participants describing television and political discourse as promoting the breadwinner archetype and emotional restraint, consistent with research on media's role in propagating masculine and patriarchal norms (Thomas & Levant, 2012) and with findings from Turkish television that link masculinity to wealth, romance, and physical attractiveness (Gurkan & Sarttas, 2022) - a striking cross-national parallel suggesting that similar media-driven masculine scripts may operate across patriarchal media markets more broadly, a comparison future research could examine directly.

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding is the disjuncture between participants' acknowledgment of real difficulties economic pressure, appearance-related anxiety, emotional suppression - and their reluctance to label these difficulties as challenges to their masculinity. This pattern complicates Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that hegemonic masculinity is neither natural nor fixed but must be actively, and often precariously, sustained: participants in this study experienced that precariousness directly, yet described it in terms that framed masculinity itself as stable and beyond question. Read together with participants' accounts of pressure to excel in sport (Messner & Sabo, 1999), to maintain a competitive physical appearance (Oh, Shafir, & Todorov, 2020), and to avoid unemployment on pain of a masculinity crisis (Kenneth, Joseph, & Jennifer, 2014), this suggests that Pakistani men may be less likely than the theoretical literature assumes to consciously recognize strain as strain - an important qualification

of Connell's model that the present study's qualitative approach was able to surface in a way that survey-based measures of gender role strain (e.g., Adil, Shahed, & Arshad, 2017) cannot.

This qualification is also visible in participants reported coping strategies, which converged overwhelmingly on silence, self-reliance, and religious coping rather than active help-seeking. This is consistent with evidence that men's reluctance to disclose is rooted in trust concerns (Grav, Hellzen, Romild, & Stor, 2012) and fear of the stigma attached to appearing vulnerable (Simon, 2014), and with findings that men are among the least likely to seek psychological support due to a fear of losing control over how their emotions are perceived (Nam et al., 2010) and often lack the communicative repertoire to discuss feelings with others at all (Bryant-Bedell & Waite, 2010). What this study adds to that literature is texture: not only does this study confirm that Pakistani men underuse support service but it also reveals how it is handled selectively, and in most cases with same-sex peers, around relatively practical issues, that is, around financial needs; while emotional disclosure is almost entirely absent even from the same-sex ones. This separation of practical and emotional disclosure is more fine-grained than previous Pakistani research on masculinity, and only clearly emerges in a qualitative, subject-specific study.

CONCLUSION

This study builds upon existing literature on hegemonic masculinity and explores participants' own accounts of hegemonic masculinity's meaning, performances, struggles, and coping, as a form of normativity, among adolescent and young adult men in Pakistan. Findings bear out that hegemonic masculine qualities have been internalized and socially endorsed through family, peer groups, and educational establishments. Meanwhile, participants faced real challenges in most aspects of life economic, emotional, relational, physical that they were mostly forced to cover up in order to maintain their masculinity and place in networks of low trust. The hegemonic masculinity in Pakistan thus remains entrenched, with the socialization of men to be masculine remaining strong, even if there are also some glimpses of something new in the media, such as the character of Nawaz Ludhiana, who is not just a straight-A student but also a well-rounded one. But the socialization of men to be masculine is still strong, with the hegemonic masculinity deeply embedded in Pakistan, and even as there are some inklings of change, like Nawaz Ludhiana, not being merely a straight-A student but a rounded one as well. Coping is largely individualized, involves mostly silence, problem solving through self-reliance and spirituality, and some participants do not view masculinity related strain as an issue. The results highlight a significant need for men to be able to express these concerns without facing negative repercussions for their social position, and further research in the structural and relational barriers, that discourage men to seek support. Based on this, the incorporation of discussion of healthy models of male identity in school curricula from a young age can promote a change in socialization over time. Journalists and other media producers also have a part to play in creating male characters who are not limited to stereotypical scripts of their emotions and life options. The present study needs to be replicated in other areas, age groups and occupations across Pakistan to determine the extent to which these trends remain consistent throughout the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In educational institutions, a curriculum that is sensitive to gender should be implemented, as it will help to foster a more flexible and inclusive understanding of masculinity, which will include emotional intelligence and mental health.
- Men's mental health should be destigmatized through public awareness campaigns and culturally acceptable, accessible counseling services.
- Media platforms should actively depict diverse and non-hegemonic representations of men, emphasizing vulnerability, compassion, and shared social roles.
- Workplaces should adopt inclusive policies that promote work-life balance, provide mental health support, and question cultures of overwork and emotional under-expression.
- Government and policymakers should design targeted interventions to address the adverse consequences of rigid masculine norms on men's well-being.
- Community and religious leaders should be engaged to promote fair, humanistic models of masculinity grounded in compassion, responsibility, and mutual respect.
- Civil society organizations should establish community-based programs and support groups where men can safely express difficulties and develop healthier coping mechanisms.
- Families should be encouraged to foster open emotional communication, reducing the intergenerational transmission of restrictive gender norms.
- Future research should examine intersectional dimensions of masculine identity, including class, ethnicity, and rural-urban differences.
- Longitudinal and comparative studies are recommended to track how masculinity and coping strategies evolve across time and cultural contexts.

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