"Last year, I had an absolute mental breakdown […] and I only got better due to my family and friends": A qualitative study on the role of masculine norms and social relationships for young men's mental health

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Past research shows that men experience difficulties seeking help for their mental health, and further research is needed to understand how masculine norms can be a barrier. The aim of the current study was to explore young men's perspectives on social relationships, masculine norms, and help-seeking. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted on interviews with four men aged 19–24 years. The young men specified how masculine norms are all encompassing and act as a barrier to help-seeking that can prolong the pain. Social networks composed of receptive people were perceived to be beneficial but require the 'right' people to be helpful for men experiencing mental health difficulties. The young men also posed ways of breaking free from 'stereotypical' masculinity. Overall, the findings inform how education about men's mental health could encourage the formation of social networks and ways of redefining masculinity that promote help-seeking.

Key words: *Masculinity, Men, Mental Health, Relationships, Help-Seeking*

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that men struggle more to ask for help when experiencing mental health difficulties. For example, a systematic review by Seidler et al. (2016) revealed that rather than seeking help for their mental health, men tend to fall into social withdrawal as a way of coping. The difficulties that men have in expressing feelings such as depression are linked to the prevalence of male suicide (Clare, 2001). In 2019, global suicide rates were twice as high in men compared to women (World Health Organization, 2022). Men's difficulties in opening-up to others about their mental health contributes to the high rates of suicide (Bilsker & White, 2011). It is particularly important to consider the mental wellbeing of young men as half of all mental health diagnoses appear during the teenage years, and by the mid-twenties this increases to three-quarters (Kessler et al., 2007).

Help-seeking in relation to mental health issues can be done formally via health services or informally through talking to people such as family, friends, teachers, chaplains, or coaches (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). Regardless of who is sought out, seeking help involves the interconnectedness between people – a social relationship. Based on the understanding that men are generally hesitant to communicate their feelings to others (Bilsker & White, 2011; Clare, 2001; Seidler et al., 2016), it is necessary to explore communication, connection, and social relationships. The simplest form of social connection is a social dyad – a group of two people (Smith & Christakis, 2008). Examples of relationships that can impact people's health include friendships, familial relations, marriages, and membership of religious groups (Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Research also suggests that adverse social relationships can have a negative impact on long-term mental health (Angelakis & Gooding, 2021). There are also other negative aspects of social relationships including being pressured by others to drink alcohol and unsupportive peers thwarting healthy routines (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Notwithstanding the complexities of social relationships and health, there is still a large body of evidence that points towards the benefits of social relationships. Specifically, the psychosocial explanation as to how social relationships benefit health argues that support benefits mental health via lessening stress and developing a sense of purpose and meaning (Umberson & Montez, 2010).

The past research reviewed above demonstrates how social relationships are important for mental health. In addition, the dynamic between social relationships and mental health is influenced by gender, and the role of masculine norms is particularly relevant. Gender norms are based on societal expectations of women and men (Courtenay, 2000). Men are expected to conform to masculine norms, which commonly include being stoic, refraining from emotional expression, and showing independence (Mansfield et al., 2003). Such societal beliefs about how men should behave has been coined 'The Man Box' (The Men's Project & Flood, 2020). This metaphorical box contains several key pressures that men face, including but not limited to: being physically and mentally tough; refraining from help-seeking; and conforming to strict masculine gender roles. The influence of masculinity is relevant to young men, where masculine norms are widely subscribed to in adolescence (Kågesten et al., 2016). Furthermore, these norms are promoted mainly by those in an individual's interpersonal sphere, such as family and friends (Kågesten et al., 2016). The dysfunction strain paradigm proposes that men can experience strain due to masculine norms being

unrealistic (Pleck, 1995). Such expectations can ultimately be dysfunctional as they can lead to negative consequences (e.g., exacerbated depression due to feeling the need to be entirely self-reliant). Further, the theory of gender norm conformity (Mahalik et al., 2003) ties masculine norms specifically to mental health, arguing that these norms can lead men to think, feel, and act in a way that can worsen mental health outcomes (such as the hiding of one's emotions exacerbating depression). It is important to consider how masculine norms such as independence, being emotionless, and stoicism relate to the forming of social relationships.

Compared to women, men have fewer 'close' social relationships and fewer instances of social support (Fuhrer & Stansfield, 2002; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). Men who have more negative views towards asking for professional help with psychological issues have higher scores with respect to alexithymia (difficulties expressing emotions), masculine ideology, and fear of intimacy (Sullivan et al., 2015). Further, the norm of self-reliance is positively correlated to depressive symptoms in male university students in the US and is explained by lower willingness to open-up to others about negative feelings (Iwamoto et al., 2018). Focus groups with British young men have shown that help-seeking was seen as a last resort by the young men (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Specifically, it was discussed how part of being a man meant help-seeking was not required unless the situation was particularly severe. This desire of men to fulfil the masculine norms of society was again shown by Davies et al. (2000), who found that the greatest barrier for male university students seeking help is the desire to hide vulnerability and appear independent. Participants expressed in focus groups how help-seeking would seem weak and was a last resort. Societal pressures of masculinity were a key barrier to men reaching out for help.

Help-seeking can be hindered because of what men perceive they are supposed to be, and this viewpoint is particularly potent in younger men (O'Brien et al., 2005). Participants in O'Brien et al.'s (2005) study made the point that asking for help for 'minor' problems was unnecessary, and that it was better to cope with such problems alone. Across the findings of Richardson and Rabiee (2001), Davies et al. (2000), and O'Brien et al. (2005), the consistent theme is that men deem help-seeking as a last resort. It seems that societal pressures of having to be independent, self-reliant, and stoic have convinced men that trying to deal with problems on one's own is what a man must do.

Internalisation of masculine norms such as being independent and self-sufficient can be associated with worrying consequences, including suicidal ideation. Cleary (2012) conducted interviews with young men who had attempted suicide. A theme in the interviews was that the strain of dealing with and hiding one's feelings led to a sense of being trapped, where suicide was seen as a way out of this situation. These men attempted suicide rather than disclose their negative emotions to other people, as this was consistent with societal masculine norms. Further interview-based research has indicated the role of masculinity and the related stoic perspectives (e.g., isolation from others when feeling upset) as a risk factor for male suicidality (Player et al., 2015). Interviews with the family and friends of men who have taken their own life showed that one of the key themes was the deceased had hidden their feelings of suicidality and need of mental support (Oliffe et al., 2020). This further emphasises the barrier that men have regarding reaching out for help, even from their friends and family. However, Seidler et al. (2021) found that some men have sudden positive realisations that they cannot solve their problems alone. Initially, men tended to use tactics such as social isolation and distress concealment rather than reaching out for help. However, it was after a long period of exhausting self-sufficiency that men realised the necessity to look past their stoicism and communicate their feelings to others. Because Seidler et al.'s (2021) study considered men of all ages, this raises the question about the perspectives of young men specifically regarding overcoming normative masculine barriers to help-seeking when experiencing mental health difficulties.

The current study aimed to integrate ideas across the literature reviewed above. While much of the existing research focuses on masculine norms and mental health, there is little explicit discussion of the role that social relationships have within this pairing. Indeed, such relationships are likely to encompass the aspects of help-seeking and communication of emotion, yet there is a dearth of research that prioritises the role of social relationships in this equation. The study was undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand – a point of difference to most other research. Based on data from 41 developed countries, Aotearoa New Zealand has the second worst youth suicide rate (UNICEF, 2020). Additionally, as of 2015, the suicide rate for 15-24-year-old men from Aotearoa New Zealand was 20.3 per 100,000, while for women of the same age range this was 13.2 (Phillips, 2019). In tandem, the saliency of masculinity in Aotearoa New Zealand is exemplified through the term 'Kiwi bloke' – a representation of a rugged, hard-working man who keeps to himself (Bannister, 2005; Joseph & Falcous, 2017; Phillips, 1987). While the research on men's mental health, masculinity, and help-seeking is limited in Aotearoa New Zealand, a recent study by Gallagher et al. (2022) considered young men's perspectives towards mental health services such as therapy and social support. Conducted just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the main themes reflected the idea of how men feel the need to try to be independent rather than seek help, as well as have control over their lives. Furthermore, participants identified the importance of social support in coping with and overcoming mental health struggles. Such support was seen as something that was offered through a variety of avenues, such as family or professional services. These findings indicate the relevance of masculinity in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the need for more research to better understand what young men see as the important aspects of social relationships.

The current study aimed to explore how young men in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive masculinity and social relationships with regard to help-seeking for mental health difficulties. The two connected research question being investigated were: 1) How do masculine norms effect help-seeking for mental health difficulties among young men? 2) What connections do young men draw between

mental health help-seeking and the nature of their social relationships?

METHOD

Design

Using a qualitative methodology, the current study employed semi-structured, one-on-one interviews to collect data. The data was coded using an inductive, semantic, and essentialist/realist approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). Inductive analyses are centred on the idea that themes are extracted from the data gathered, rather than attempting to use any particular theory to code the data and identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022). Identifying themes at a semantic level involves carefully considering the surface expressions of participants; the focus is on explicit meanings expressed by participants. Additionally, an essentialist/realist approach looks to conceptualise meaning and experiences from the data at face-value (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).

Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited using a purposive approach seeking young men. Physical posters, digital posts, and word of mouth. The physical posters were displayed around the University of Otago campus. A digital post was made on the Facebook page Otago Flatting Goods, where this page often has a range of advertisements posted beyond topics tied to flatting.

The resulting sample consisted of four participants who were students at the University of Otago. All participants were young men aged 19–24 years old. Their ethnicities were: New Zealand European/Pākehā; Māori/Samoan; South-East Asian; and South Asian.

The project was reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Reference: 22/150). Participants were provided with an information sheet about the study and had the opportunity to ask any questions before providing consent prior to their interview. All interviews took place in a private room on the University of Otago campus. For the sake of consistency, each participant was interviewed by me as the primary researcher. Participants were informed that the interview would last approximately 60 minutes, and interview length ranged from 34 minutes to 56 minutes, with a mean interview time of 44 minutes.

The questions asked in the interviews were primarily open-ended. The use of open-ended questions in interviews allows for a more detailed understanding of personal perspectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These questions looked to uncover the thoughts and/or personal experiences of the participants regarding the role of masculine norms on mental health, specifically in relation to forming social relationships. A consequence of using open-ended questions is that participants are allowed greater freedom to respond in ways which are complex and unique, or they may simply discuss ideas that were not anticipated by the researcher (Albudaiwi, 2017).

Due to the possibility of the discussion being mildly distressing, the contact details of relevant support services were provided at the conclusion of the interview. Each participant was reimbursed for expense with a supermarket voucher.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed using Otter.ai software and checked for accuracy. The general conventions used when going over the transcripts included replacing identifiers with square brackets (e.g., [name of school]), deleting any superfluous transcribed sounds (e.g., ‘um’), and including commas or full stops to signify when the participant was thinking or had finished a thought. The participants’ real names were replaced with pseudonyms, and other names that were mentioned were masked.

The subsequent analysis followed the six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The first author was the primary researcher of this project and was a young male postgraduate student studying psychology with an older male supervisor experienced in supporting qualitative research. Reflective discussions were held between the authors throughout the study. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2022), this subjectivity is a useful component to thematic analysis, where the researchers themselves are tools that contributes to the analysis.

In phase one of the data analysis, the primary researcher familiarised himself with the data by reading over the transcripts. Preliminary notes were taken based on the research aim outlined in the introduction. In phase two, codes were generated based on the commonalties that were identified between interviews. Quotes related to codes were identified throughout each interview by repeatedly re-reading the transcripts.

Phase three of the analysis focused on compiling preliminary themes. The codes were brought together in different groups to form broader themes. During this phase, virtual sticky notes were utilised to organise the codes into different themes. Phase four involved reviewing these themes. This meant that each theme was checked to make sure it reflected one coherent overall idea that was distinct from the other themes, as well as ensuring that the theme related to the overall research questions, as well as the participants’ discussion.

For phase five, themes were labelled with names that reflected the main idea of what was conveyed by the participants. Moreover, a short definition was crafted to accompany each theme. Phase six involved producing the report, where quotations were chosen from the transcript that clearly represented each theme. These quotations are presented in the following results section alongside the related theme and its definition.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

Five themes were identified from the thematic analysis, as outlined in Table 1 along with a key supporting quote for each theme.

Theme 1: Help-Seeking Difficulties Can Prolong the Pain

The first theme encompasses why young men find it difficult to seek help for difficult times in their lives. The young men described wanting to get help but feeling like they could not for the fear of appearing weak. This was tied to how men can struggle to utilise social relationships to overcome their mental health struggles. The consequence of being reluctant to help-seek was the build-

Table 1. *The five themes related to the role of masculinity in help-seeking*

Theme	Summary quote
1. Help-Seeking Difficulties Can Prolong the Pain	*Ben: […] you might consider suicide, or you might think of […] driving recklessly, or partaking in dangerous activity, taking drugs, drinking more alcohol, just because you have this overwhelming self-sense of just grief or pain.*
2. Masculine Norms Being All Encompassing	*Jonah: At a young age […] you get told, […] this [acting masculine] is what you should be doing, that people do just decide to go into that box.*
3. Social Networks Can Help All Those Involved	*Jonah: Since my sort of mental breakdown, I have been, like, very open with my parents, […] and this goes both ways.*
4. Helpful Social Relationships Require the 'Right' People	*Marty: I think everybody's needs are different, or everybody wants a friendship is different, you know, any sort of relationship.*
5. Breaking Free from the Constraints of 'Stereotypical' Masculinity	*Ben: I think we're finding out that now, not everyone is just full masculine and, might have more feminine essence […].*

up of pressure and prolonging of pain from mental health difficulties or other challenges in life.

With regards to what being masculine typically entails, participants referred to ideas of confidence and not wanting to appear weak:

> *Marty: I can see how if you would want to like sort of uplift this masculine image, […] the idea of seeking help […] would be seen as sort of weak, you know, and that's not what you want to do. You know you don't want to show that you don't know something or that you're confused about something, or you want to have make it seem like that you are confident and that you are sort of assertive and assured in who you are.*

Evidently, even in the most difficult of times, young men prolong the pain by being reluctant to help-seek. In a pertinent example, Jonah talked about having a mental breakdown following the end of a relationship, and that he tried to deal with the pain himself for as long as he could before he sought help:

> *Jonah: Last year, I had an absolute mental breakdown [laughs]. […] And it was due to holding on to a certain amount of pressure for a certain amount of time and not being able to hold that anymore. And I only got better due to my family and friends.*

Wyatt also talked about how a friend went through an extremely tough time and yet felt he had to uphold masculine norms and hold onto the pain himself:

> *Wyatt: And I know it, just kind of hurtful moment for him. But he don't want to share. [He] said 'I'm fine. I am I'm good'. But I can see in his eyes that how difficult he has to go through.*

Wyatt noted his friend still might seek help from others, however, was not entirely convinced that such help-seeking would occur.

Theme 2: Masculine Norms Being All Encompassing

The second theme considers the way in which masculine norms can become instilled in men. Such norms were discussed as being promoted through societal pressures, friends, and 'influencers' on social media. The young men's discussion of how masculinity is promoted highlights how masculine norms can be pervasive.

It was discussed how societal pressure to be masculine begins early in life and how men just assume that they need to conform to these expectations, with Jonah saying:

> *Jonah: […] because at a young age you get, you're like, you get told, […] this is what you should be doing, that people do just decide to go into that box, and don't actually go, 'oh, I'm allowed outside of this box, I don't actually need to conform to that.' Yeah. 'That I don't need to conform to that societal, you know, standard, that pressure.'*

Friends and peers were seen as a big influence on engaging in masculine norms, making it easier to behave in a masculine way if people around you are doing so:

> *Ben: It very much depends on other friends around you too, because they could obviously be of good or bad influence. If their also, of have like, similar masculine essence, you know, like, it could, well, I guess it's more easier for you to feel that way.*

Technology was identified as another perpetrator of masculine norms, further highlighting how difficult it is to avoid the pressures to be masculine. Jonah said:

> *Jonah: Technology has created that sort of societal pressure via like social media and stuff like that. And I guess the most recent example, […] Andrew Tate [an 'influencer'] has been a massive swing for, for our generation, because we've become so impressionable through technology. […] [Andrew Tate] was talking about that women do not like when men show emotion. That whole cool, calm, collected, but also sort of being an arsehole is better than potentially being your true self.*

Ben also discussed how social media 'influencers' like Andrew Tate who promote a normative or idealised form of masculinity, where they suggest that such behaviour is what women are expecting from, and are attracted to, in men. Can negatively impact young men's mental health, reiterating how such people can have bad advice regarding men's mental health. Ultimately, Ben described being worried about how these negative influences will impact young men in the generations to come, saying: *"It's not good to see where it will take them into the future, it might bring up a whole bad generation of people with bad mentalities."*

Theme 3: Social Networks Can Help All Those Involved

The third theme highlights how social relationships are useful in times of need, where talking to others allows for the release of negative feelings. Participants discussed how having a network of different social relationships was especially important to create a diverse support system, as well as how forming these diverse networks offered benefits to everyone involved, not just the help-seeker.

Jonah discussed the back and forth sharing of feelings, ideas, and problems with a network of people (whakawhanaungatanga):

> *Jonah: I mean, because there's like the idea of like, whakawhanaungatanga, sort of like coming together, looking after each other. Sort of that, like, which is probably why I am doing as good as I am. Because even though I mentioned in this that my mum helped me, also my aunties and uncles, were there as well. […] I think I wouldn't be as far as I am being happy, if it, if I was just talking to my mum.*

Jonah believed that sharing problems with different people was seen a matter of getting various opinions and advice, which was more helpful than getting only one person's perspective. Wyatt also expressed how having various people to open-up to is important, where different people have different functions:

> *Wyatt: I guess it kind of depends on the people I want to share the information, because different people I will share different piece of information. It's like I have kind of big problem, but I just share that piece of information to them… So different people have different piece of information I'm going to share.*

Going beyond the idea that social relationships just benefit the help-seeker, participants discussed how seeking help can be beneficial to the person who is reached out to. The young men reflected on a variety of people that can reap the rewards of a positive social relationship, and Marty described social relationships as a way to create a sense of fulfilment between an individual and their family and friends:

> *Marty: Friends are going to maybe feel that they have more of a purpose. Like that they mean something to you, if they can feel that they can be of use to you. Same with parents and that sort of thing, who were there to support you and who have supported you.*

Furthermore, Ben explained how social relationships can create environments beneficial to all of those involved:

> *Ben: And that's when it can have a, like, create a positive environment to talk about things that's been on your mind, and, how you've been struggling or how they've been struggling. So it goes like two ways. It's not just you talk to someone, and they listen all the time, but you can also listen to them.*

Theme 4: Helpful Social Relationships Require the 'Right' People

The fourth theme highlights how having social relationships alone is not sufficient to benefit mental health. Overall, participants explained that the quality of relationships are important, but that what is seen as a helpful relationship will differ from person to person.

The young men made it clear that getting help from others was not as easy as making friends with anyone and everyone. It was highlighted that the 'right' people need to be found for beneficial social relationships:

> *Ben: […] it's also about being around the right people to support you during this time, who see that you want to get better. And that can be so helpful, because if you're around people that you can't really talk to about this with, it won't be that supportive for you, and it won't be encouraging for you to get help, seek better, get better, and just feel better, feel more positive about life.*

The young men found that when they shared their problems with the 'wrong' people, this can exacerbate the problems. For example, Wyatt is straight but discussed how a friend of his had opened-up with his sister that he is gay, and how the sister did not respond in a positive way:

> *Wyatt: She was mad at him, she's not happy, because you are gay. […] But I said to him, like you just share the wrong information to wrong people. […] Only the people who was in sort of circumstances can understand what you need to do.*

This idea of forming relationships with people who understand your situation was also emphasised by Marty:

> *Marty: Maybe the fear that they might not understand. Or they might not really empathise with what I'm saying. […] I've had other friends who've had similar issues where they've tried to talk to their male friends about things and it's sort of been unsatisfactory […].*

The participants also emphasised that the type of person that made for a supportive social relationship for one person, would not necessarily be the case for someone else, and that there were individual differences in how relationships could help:

> *Ben: It's just not one person fits all. That's also very, not a very good thing, […] you actually need a whole variety of people, […] because there's no one size fits all, there's a lots of different sizes and they help fill a lot of gaps. And that's a much better way of looking at it.*

Theme 5: Breaking Free from the Constraints of 'Stereotypical' Masculinity

The fifth theme explores the idea of overcoming 'stereotypical' masculine norms. Whilst participants were aware that "*the stereotypes of masculinity*" persist (Marty), they noted that masculine norms are gradually changing making it more acceptable to deviate from norms like stoicism to become more vulnerable and seek help for their problems.

The idea that men are slowly breaking free of "*stereotypes*" associated with masculine norms is exemplified by the experiences of Jonah, who reflected on his road to being more open and vulnerable as "*a learning curve*" and noted this has led him to "*actually asking for help*". Marty also highlighted that while the stigma of men seeking help has not completely disappeared, men are slowly becoming able to talk about their mental health problems more:

> *Marty: Well I think like, in the past sort of maybe 5-10 years, it's sort of been a slightly more of a push for, you know, men to be more vulnerable, and to talk about different issues more.*

Such deviation from the masculine norms may be due to greater awareness about men's mental health:

> *Ben: That's coming from my experience too because there's been more advice offered, more information and, it can help me out and, and also those around me, to see how I can get other people to talk to and, what can I do to make others feel better and help with their mental health.*

Participants referred to the idea of redefining masculinity as well as escaping from the confines that are created by "*stereotypical*" norms. This discussion aligned with the idea that society creates a metaphorical 'box' that men should fit in to, but that men can exist outside of these masculine confines:

> *Wyatt: Being masculine is not just showing the public that you are man. It's that, the feel like from inner yourself, so the masculine come from inner self. Don't be ashamed who you are. Just embrace any moment in the life, because you only live once. So, masculinity, just the word. Masculinity, just the word. The masculine come from you. So you define own oneself.*

DISCUSSION

In this study, the aim was to explore how young men in Aotearoa New Zealand perceive masculinity and social relationships with regard to help-seeking for mental health difficulties. The findings of this thematic analysis contribute a specific focus on the role of social relationships within the field of masculinity and men's mental health. Past research has lacked detailed consideration of social relationships in the context of masculinity as a barrier to men's help-seeking. In addressing this gap, the findings reflect some nuanced ideas about social relationships in the context of help-seeking. The young men emphasised the importance of having a social network of people to reach out to, where such networks could benefit both the help-seeker *and* the people reached out to. Moreover, the participants discussed how merely the existence of a social relationship was inadequate – the 'right' person was required. The findings suggest masculine norms may still be a barrier for help-seeking in young men in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, there seems to be a gradual shift in the expectations of men away from 'stereotypical' masculine norms.

The present findings are largely consistent with past research, albeit there are differences to note. As highlighted in the theme *Help-Seeking Difficulties Can Prolong the Pain*, the young men reflected on the difficulties in seeking help for their problems, where wanting to avoid seeming weak meant their mental struggles were unresolved. This idea coincides with masculine norms such as stoicism and refraining from emotional expression (Kågesten et al., 2016; Mansfield et al., 2003). Relatedly, the influence and pervasiveness of masculine norms were evident in the theme *Masculine Norms Being All Encompassing*. Together, these themes highlight both the centrality of masculine norms in the lives of young men, as well as the problematic outcomes of conforming to such norms. Interestingly, the idea of independence was not as commonly discussed by the young men in this study, which differs from findings across men of all ages summarised by Mansfield et al. (2003). It may be that being stoic and emotionless was more relevant to the young men in the current study due to their age, their role as students, or aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic such as reduced social interaction with peers due to online learning.

The findings here indicated the saliency of masculinity in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the young men appear to fit the description of a Kiwi bloke in terms of wanting to keep to oneself, at least initially (Bannister 2005; Joseph & Falcous, 2017; Phillips, 1987). Moreover, the wide-reaching nature of these norms were evident. Similar to the findings of Kågesten et al. (2016), masculine norms were discussed by participants as being promoted by those in a young man's interpersonal sphere – namely family members and peers. A point of difference was that whilst Kågesten et al. (2016) found a lack of evidence on the influence of broader factors such as media, the current study identified technology and social media 'influencers' (e.g., Andrew Tate) as a central proponent of unhealthy masculine norms. As pointed out by Gavey et al. (2021), there are varying articulations of masculinity. Specifically, in the current study such 'influencers' seemed to promote a normative or idealistic form of masculinity, referring to what women find attractive as an incentive to following masculine norms. The current study provides evidence supporting the idea that masculine norms could be promoted by *both* interpersonal influences and broader societal influences.

In line with the dysfunction strain paradigm (Pleck, 1995), the young men who participated in our study felt the need to fulfil societal expectations of masculinity. The conformity to masculine norms described by young men in our study puts a strain on the mental health on young men, where the sense of feeling unable to reach out for help was dysfunctional as it prolonged the pain that was being experienced. This finding also aligns with findings of research by The Men's Project and Flood (2020) who

posed the concept of 'The Man Box' as the repository of masculine norms. The way young men in our study described societal pressures to uphold masculine ideals provides further support for calls to 'unpack' the Man Box (The Men's Project & Flood, 2020). Moreover, consistent with the theory of gender norm conformity (Mahalik et al., 2003), young men in the present study reflected on how conforming to these masculine norms, discussing was seen as a weakness to seek help, leaving unresolved negative feelings, ultimately leading to the reluctance to utilise social relationships. Help-seeking was seen as a last resort in the current study, which is consistent with previous research (Davies et al., 2000; O'Brien et al., 2005; Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). Young men want to appear confident, assured, and stoic, which is consistent with the limited research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand (Gallagher et al., 2022).

While the young men who participated in this study did express difficulties in help-seeking, they also explained how help was sometimes sought once a breaking point was reached. This is different to previous research indicating that suicide is often seen as the only alternative instead of help-seeking (Cleary, 2012; Oliffe et al., 2020; Player et al., 2015). At the same time, our findings coincide with Seidler et al.'s (2021) findings that men will look past their stoicism and seek help only after exhausting themselves through self-sufficiency. This may reflect how masculine norms are gradually changing, illustrated through the novel theme *Breaking Free from the Constraints of 'Stereotypical' Masculinity.* Young men talked about how greater awareness about men's mental health can help reduce the stigma associated with help-seeking, encouraging men to be vulnerable and redefine masculinity in a healthier way. Gavey et al.'s (2021) gender and masculinity workshops with young men emphasises how awareness of gender stereotypes can be the catalyst for positive change away from harmful norms. The current study's theme of redefining masculinity is consistent with the findings of Gallagher et al. (2022), where the young men recognised how social support was an important factor in overcoming mental health issues, indicating that men may be adhering less rigidly than in the past to masculine norms such as stoicism and avoidance of emotion.

In terms of overcoming the difficulties tied to help-seeking and utilising social relationships, participants in the current study echoed the benefits of relationships in the theme *Social Networks Can Help All Those Involved*. Connecting with a variety of different people as well as getting a diverse range of advice was seen to be an important aspect of the effectiveness of social relationships. Relationships were seen to be mutually beneficial for all parties, not just the help-seeker, where the person providing the support gains a sense of purpose. Furthermore, the nuances tied to these relationships was highlighted in the theme *Helpful Social Relationships Require the 'Right' People*, where the young men recognised individual differences in terms of what is needed from a social relationship. For example, some young men emphasised the preference for reaching out to women for advice because they are seen to be more knowledgeable about mental health. Others talked about seeking help from people who were simply receptive and available to the needs of the help-seeker.

These findings align with the psychosocial explanation of why social relationships are beneficial for mental health (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Participants in the current study described how family and friends were caring, and that this created a positive environment that helped alleviate some of their pain. A possible interpretation of this is that by people taking the time to offer advice, or even simply listen, this helped give the young men more purpose and meaning. Furthermore, the current study adds to the psychosocial explanation by highlighting how experiencing purpose and meaning is not exclusive to the help-seeker, and that these feelings can be experienced by the person who is reached out to as well. The findings also align with the stress-buffering model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Participants' discussion in the current study reflects the idea that in times of stress, supportive, receptive social networks allowed for stress to be shared and alleviated.

It is important to note that not all social relationships buffered the young men's stress levels. In some cases, family and friends were seen to be unhelpful due to not understanding the difficulties that the young men were experiencing. Hence, it is not as straightforward as saying social relationships universally alleviate stress; it appears that people who understand what men are experiencing are better at assisting in men's mental health struggles. The importance of a social *network* rather than just a social dyad ties to the variety of people that can be reached out to (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012). In addition, the concept of needing the 'right' people in relationships as alluded to by the young men in the current study supports how some social relationships can have negative impacts on the individual (Angelakis & Gooding, 2021; Umberson & Montez, 2010). There may be cases where family or peers may promote unhelpful masculine norms or may be unreceptive to help-seeking. These are the nuances to be aware of when considering the benefits of social relationships.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This research has several strengths and limitations. Using a methodology of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews was a strength because it allowed participants the opportunity to engage in thoughtful and reflective discussion with minimised social pressures. Another strength of the current study was that having four participants was within the suggested number of participants when focusing on personal experiences (Smith et al., 2009) and allowed an appropriate depth of analysis of each participant. The sample was diverse in terms of ethnicity but not sexuality. One of the participants identified as Māori and Samoan, meaning that some aspects of Māori and Pasifika worldviews were incorporated but, there was limited discussion specifically referencing Māori cultural views on masculinity. Based on past research, some Māori believed that masculine and feminine norms could both be expressed by men, whilst others believed it was not tika, or correct, to do so (Daniell & McConnell, 2021). King and Robertson's (2017) research on Māori conceptualisations of masculinity found that some Māori men see colonisation as having

contributed to the narrative that they are aggressive and violent. Yet the men in this study looked to challenge this view and highlight the intimate positive relationships they have as part of their manhood. Moreover, Aspin and Hutchings' (2010) work on Māori queering of masculinity suggests Māori were traditionally supportive of sexual diversity prior to colonisation by the West. Through a takatāpui (a term that centres on the fluidity of one's sexual identity) lens, these authors outline how Māori today are looking for inspiration from the past regarding sexuality, and that the Indigenous view of sexual identity recognises how one's sexuality can evolve and change. Therefore, in terms of transferability of the current findings, a greater consideration of the Māori worldview is necessary in future research to better account for the Indigenous perspectives associated with masculinity. Using a Kaupapa Māori approach (Smith, 2021), future research could explore Māori perspectives on masculinity and how this relates to social relationships to better understand the state of men's mental health in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Although not necessarily a limitation, it is important to note the reflexivity tied to the interviews being conducted by a young, male researcher. As noted by Braun and Clarke (2022), the subjectivity brought to the research by researchers can be used as a tool that contributes to the analysis. Efforts were made to connect with the young men who participated by being empathetic and receptive to the points raised. In addition, the rigour associated with the process of reflexive thematic analysis helped ensure that positionality was a tool in understanding the findings, and this was supported by regular meetings between both authors to ensure reflection during each stage of the process.

A potential limitation is that all participants had engaged in some form of help-seeking. This suggests the likelihood of self-selection bias. It might be that the young men were aware of the issues related to masculine norms and had experienced the benefits of social relationships in dealing with mental health struggles, and so were more willing to participate. Thus, it is possible that the participants reflected on the more negative aspects of masculinity, as well as how helpful social relationships can be. This is not to take away from the authenticity of what the young men said. However, the participants in this study may have been more likely to discuss the issues of masculinity and benefits of social relationships based on their past experiences. Future research could employ stratification to also explore the perspectives of young men who have not engaged in help-seeking before.

Implications and Applications

There are several implications and applications of the current findings. First, if having a social network of supportive and receptive people promotes help-seeking in men and gives purpose to those reached out to, then it is worthwhile to consider how such networks can be created. At the core of this point is mental health literacy. Schools could consider incorporating coverage of men's mental health needs. Being more aware of issues like the barriers that masculinity poses to help-seeking could create a cultural shift where society is more informed as to the help-seeking needs of men (Lynch et al., 2018). Those who are reached out to are in a position to make themselves available to men experiencing mental health difficulties and be receptive to the struggles that men express. By having greater literacy on men's mental health, this may foster more social networks comprised of the 'right' people that men are able to utilise in times of need.

Second, it can be tentatively suggested that the next generation of young men could experience masculine pressures unlike what has been experienced in the past. With the rise of social media video platforms like TikTok, excessive watching of such videos can have a negative impact on individual wellbeing (Wu et al., 2021). 'Influencers' like Andrew Tate provide for highly accessible content promoting the idea that men should be emotionless and that being vulnerable in social relationships is a sign of weakness. Therefore, it is a matter of being wary that going forward, social media may have far-reaching influences on masculine norms for young men, making them more salient than ever before. It is unlikely that social media can be regulated in such a way as to prevent the likes of Andrew Tate from expressing their views. This prospect emphasises the need for more interventions to combat the rise of unhelpful masculine norms.

Third, from the young men's discussion comes speculative ideas for what interventions can do to aid in the redefining of masculine norms, promoting the formation of supportive social networks. Redefining masculine norms in a positive manner is an effective way to promote help-seeking in young men (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). For example, the norm of being strong could be framed in a way which suggests that a strong man is someone who has the courage to seek help for their struggles. This redefining process could take place in a semiformal setting through group discussion support services (Lynch et al., 2018). As already highlighted by the workshops held in the study by Gavey et al. (2021), young men are receptive to being informed about the harms that can come from conforming too rigidly with gender norms. Elements from these workshops that were noted to be effective in promoting change included having a balance between providing knowledge to the young men, as well as allowing constructive debate and discussion. Furthermore, the act of providing food created a more relaxed atmosphere, which in turn facilitated more engagement in the personal discussions. These are ideas that should be considered in future interventions with young men. If there is a gradual change of masculine norms towards men being more vulnerable and utilising social relationships, then such interventions may encourage further societal shifts in a positive direction.

In conclusion, the current study suggests that masculine norms remain a powerful barrier to help-seeking among young men experiencing mental health difficulties in Aotearoa New Zealand. The young men who participated in this study discussed the benefits of having a network of social relationships in dealing with mental health struggles, as well as the importance of such networks being comprised of supportive, receptive relationships. While it was acknowledged that the problematic norms associated with masculinity seem to gradually be changing, this is not to say that the harms associated with

masculinity are resolved. If supportive social networks are central to improving men's mental health, then fostering such relationships should be prioritised to help men in Aotearoa New Zealand and beyond.

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