Faith and Form: Exploring the Impact of Religiosity on Toxic Masculinity in Young Men

by

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Abstract

This literature review examines whether and how religiosity influences the manifestation of toxic masculinity among older adolescents and young men. Guided by hegemonic masculinity and Allport's intrinsic-extrinsic framework, the review synthesizes empirical studies psychology, sociology, and public health, with an emphasis on peer-reviewed work addressing masculinity and religiosity in young men between the ages of 15 and 30. Methods involved a systematic search, selection, and critical evaluation of qualitative, longitudinal, cross-sectional and meta-analytic studies. Findings indicate that religiosity operates through three different pathways: religious socialization, religious coping and community support and the mechanisms of influence. Evidence suggests variable effects, where intrinsic religiosity often buffers discrepancy stress and fosters alternative masculinities, whereas extrinsic religiosity may reduce behavioural risks but can also reinforce restrictive, traditional gender norms. Limitations across studies involve reliance on cross-sectional designs, single-item religiosity measures, and culturally specific samples. Overall, the review highlights the potential of religiosity to both buffer and reinforce toxic masculinity, underscoring the necessity for nuanced clinical assessment and faith-integrated interventions. Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-methods, and intervention-based designs to gain deeper insights into these dynamics.

Keywords: religiosity, intrinsic religiosity, extrinsic religiosity, toxic masculinity, masculine discrepancy, youth mental health

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Many current crises in the world can be traced back to unresolved concerns, key events, or cultural shifts that occurred in the past. Gender norms and dynamics have become a more pressing societal concern following the emancipation of women in the 20th century and the growth of sociology and psychology as powerful tools for examining human nature. Some may claim that gender disparity is far less than in times past, and that humanity has been advancing towards a more egalitarian and inclusive society. Others contend that a new generation will inevitably have novel concerns, which will need to be addressed and not castigated by society decades later. Even with hindsight on our side, any effective solutions must address more than just the individual issues, since if we focus only on the details, we may overlook the broader concerns. The definitions and expression of masculinity, especially within the current generation, is no longer a stagnant, universal and exact reality but one that can be defined by a broader range of behaviours, traits, and roles associated with biological males, although still broadly referring to cisgender, heteronormative males (Arandjelović, 2023; de Boise, 2022). Toxic masculinity is the newest subtype of hypermasculinity that has become prominent in discourse in the past decade. It refers to cultural norms that encourage emotional suppression, aggression, dominance, and entitlement amongst men, to legitimize their desire to have power and position over women and non-masculine minorities (Kupers, 2005; Zhao & Roberts, 2025). In tandem with the rise of nationalism, right-wing movements, and the illumination of young male mental health, exacerbated by the pandemic, it has become a modern socio-cultural crisis (Agius et al., 2020). Studies have found a precipitous increase in rates of depression in young men, as well as mental

health concerns generally (Daly, 2022; Keyes et al., 2024). In addition, research has found a correlation between higher rates of depression and lower rates of access to mental health supports, higher rates of self-harm, greater loneliness, and conformity to masculine norms (Chandler, 2019; Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024). This suggests that toxic masculinity is a serious problem impacting younger men, with a cascading effect on their mental health as well as links to influencing homophobic and misogynist attitudes towards others (Gough et al., 2021; Kågesten et al., 2016). This paper contends that, although a relatively recent phenomenon, toxic masculinity is rooted in more pervasive and fortified social constructs that cannot simply be dismantled. However, as the famous adage "*The only difference between poison and medicine is the dose*" (Paracelsus, 1996, p. 22) stipulates, a potential solution to combating a contemporary dilemma rooted in tradition is to use an even more prevalent and dynamic traditional socio-cultural system, such as religious belief.

Adherence to and practice of religious beliefs can be differentiated by extrinsic or intrinsic religiosity, in which religiosity is either 'used' or 'lived,' respectively. Studies have shown that adolescents and young adults with lower internal religiosity were more likely to have poorer mental health outcomes (Haney & Rollock, 2020; Helms et al., 2015). The interplay between religious beliefs and toxic masculinity in young men has not been directly studied. Conversely, some have looked at the presence of hegemonic masculinity in certain religions that have historically oppressed women but possess the potential to transform into more gender-just religious communities (Nyhagen, 2021; Walton, 2013).

However, some scholars have noted that while many religious traditions have historically embedded hegemonic traditional masculine norms that justified the subordination of women, certain elements within those traditions, such as teachings on compassion and humility, have

been reinterpreted to promote more gender-egalitarian beliefs and practices (Schüßler, 2024). Other studies have investigated how religious adherence can influence the presence of sexist, misogynist, and homophobic beliefs and behaviours (Janssen & Scheepers, 2019; Lockhart et al., 2024). This paper will investigate the potential of religiosity to combat the "toxic" aspects of modern masculinity in young men and will examine both spheres of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

Research Problem Statement and Question

Despite considerable research on religiosity's influence on mental health and social conduct, as well as the presence, underpinnings, and promulgation of toxic masculinity, there has been limited research on the direct interplay between the two. As older adolescent males and young men enter the working force and society at large, their mental and emotional health will have ramifications for societal cohesion, crime, substance use, and other critical areas. It is not yet known which dimensions of religiosity, intrinsic, extrinsic, community membership or ritual participation, most strongly influence young men's adoption or rejection of toxic masculinity. It is also unclear whether religiosity amongst young men serves to buffer against or reinforce certain gender expectations, which may operate differently across different cultural contexts.

This lack of clarity can impact the ability of counsellors and therapists who intend to or work with older adolescents and young men. Religious beliefs can shape one's perception of gender norms, roles, and values, providing an established framework for how masculinity can be defined, with the potential to counter toxic masculine beliefs. This paper will seek to answer the following question: How does religiosity influence the manifestation of toxic masculinity in young men? Adjacent areas of interest will include how religiosity can mediate the relationship between cultural gender norms and the development of toxic masculine behaviours in young

men. Religiosity's potential ability to mitigate the adverse effects associated with toxic masculinity will also be examined to identify which mechanisms it may work through.

Purpose of the Study

This study, grounded in a systematic review of the literature, examines whether and how religiosity influences the manifestation of toxic masculinity in young men. Guided by Allport's intrinsic-extrinsic religiosity framework and hegemonic masculinity, this review synthesizes empirical research in psychology, sociology and public health, emphasizing peer-reviewed studies that focus on males ages 15-30. The purpose of this study is to synthesize current research, identify the psychological and social mechanisms by which religiosity may reinforce or buffer toxic masculine norms and behaviours, and to translate the findings into practical recommendations for clinicians and community programs. In more specific terms, the study will answer the following study question: Whether and how does religiosity influence the manifestation of toxic masculinity among older adolescents and young men?

Rationale and Justification

There has been a great deal of research on masculinity, gender norms, roles, and the prevalence of misogyny and other related prejudices. Existing reviews of toxic masculinity have documented its links to poorer mental health, interpersonal violence, and harassment (Barry, 2023; Makhanya, 2023; Parent et al., 2019). Research on religiosity and religious coping has demonstrated its potential to foster greater resilience and emotion regulation, as well as provide a relatively robust social support system (Adamczyk et al., 2024; Fatima et al., 2024). However, few studies have systematically examined how and which aspects of religiosity shape the formation and manifestation of toxic masculinity in young men. This gap prevents practitioners

from developing more nuanced, culturally and faith-informed counselling practices that may have the capacity to counter the prevalence of toxic masculinity amongst young men.

Another key gap lies in the dimensional specificity of religiosity research, where most studies collapse the measure of religiosity into a single composite score that focuses mostly on attendance and self-reported value. This limitation may obscure the potentially divergent effects of intrinsic religiosity, external ritual participation, and engagement with the religious community. Without clarifying these gaps, we will not be able to comprehensively determine whether deeply internalized faith, mere social affiliation, or active spiritual coping practices can drive changes in masculine norms.

Significance of the Review

The intersection between religiosity and toxic masculinity represents a key area of investigation with significant implications for the social development and mental health of young men in contemporary society. Toxic masculinity, characterized by socially constructed beliefs and the expectation that men ought to suppress their emotions, exhibit aggressive dominance, and tie material success to their self-worth, has been increasingly identified as detrimental to individual men and society at large (Makhanya, 2023). The advent of social media in the past few decades has made this problem more prominent, where young men are exposed to harmful stereotypes about masculinity and gender norms, which harm their sense of self-worth and push them toward male influencers who prey upon their pain. Research has revealed the complex relationship between masculine norms and religious adherence, where religiosity can reinforce traditional gender ideologies while also promoting more accepting, nurturing expressions of masculinity (Shafer et al., 2019). This paradoxical relationship creates unique psychosocial

tensions in young men, making this topic an essential area for counsellors and therapists to understand.

Addressing the research problem of how religiosity influences toxic masculinity in young men offers potential benefits for mental health intervention. Research has found that men who conform to traditional masculine ideologies and values experience greater depression, anxiety, and reluctance to seek mental health support (Herreen et al., 2021; Milner et al., 2019). By developing a more nuanced understanding of how religious contexts can moderate these expressions of masculinities, mental health practitioners can create more culturally sensitive interventions that incorporate the religious dimension of male identity formation. Moreover, this work holds significant practical value for a wider set of stakeholders, such as graduate students conducting related research, policymakers who design youth public health policies, and faith organizations and community members who may implement these interventions.

Understanding this relationship can help inform education programs aimed at reducing harmful gender norm behaviours among youth. Faith communities, families, schools, and community centers may come to use research-informed messaging to encourage healthier and more positive forms of masculinity. In terms of future research, studying this topic can open new avenues for inquiry into common risk factors in young male mental health, contributing to evidence-based practices. Ultimately, the findings from this review can guide not only therapeutic practice, but also community programming and scholarly research, supporting the development and implementation of interventions that are evidence-based, culturally responsive and applicable across different contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is guided by the hegemonic masculinity theory, as codified by Raewyn Connell (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity theory provides a critical lens that helps us understand how key aspects of masculinity are constructed, maintained, and negotiated within social hierarchies. At the core, the theory proposes that within Western culture, there is an exalted form of masculinity that is characterized by physical dominance, emotional stoicism, and heteronormativity. These traits legitimatize male authority and power over women and have now extended to gender minorities and other alternative masculinities. Connell specified that this ideal is not fixed but is continually produced and reinforced through social practices and structures, which also include religious organizations. However, it is pertinent to state that hegemonic masculinity is an explanation of socialization, not a justification or validation of its existence. However, it is important to state that hegemonic masculinity is an explanation of socialization, not a justification or validation of physical dominance, male authority over women, or the subordination of alternative masculinities. Research has shown how this "culturally idealized" form of masculinity can lead to interpersonal violence and public health risks, perpetuating gender-based violence and extending to increases in general criminality (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018; Tomsen & Gadd, 2019). Apart from its antithetical stance against non-heteronormative masculinity, aspects of hegemonic masculinity are also found in transmasculine and non-cisgendered males, pointing to the potency of hegemonic ideals in society (Anzani et al., 2023).

The key element of hegemonic masculinity is the existence of hierarchies in masculinities, where men who do not embody the 'ideal' will not benefit entirely from the system but will still receive benefits by virtue of their gender. This is termed the "patriarchal

dividend" by Connell, the collective advantages conferred upon men in contemporary society. This theory also emphasizes the dynamic nature of masculinity, acknowledging how it is shaped by religious, cultural, social, and institutional influences. Within religious contexts, hegemonic norms often become hybridized with spiritual values to form a distinctive form of religious masculinity (Levant & Richmond, 2016). In some faith communities, male authority is simultaneously upheld with virtues such as compassion and humility, which are seemingly less aligned when considering the exclusionary and domineering nature of toxic masculinity. To be clear, Levant and Richmond are not suggesting male dominance to be inherently benign, but that certain religious traditions promote such a dichotomous perspective, leading to an ambivalent model of masculinity that presents conflicting messages to young men. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is closely tied to heteronormativity and excludes non-heterosexual identities, which can reinforce toxic behaviours amongst men, such as homophobia.

The relevance of hegemonic masculinity theory to this study is its capacity to illuminate ways religiosity may both reinforce and challenge toxic masculine norms. The theory's focus on contextual negation can explain how religious doctrine and teachings may simultaneously promote patriarchal leadership and emotional vulnerability, thereby creating cognitive dissonance in young men as they navigate their place in the world (Salgado et al., 2019). In guiding the study, hegemonic masculinity theory will inform our analysis of the role of religiosity in the development and presentation of masculine norms among young men. The framework will be used to categorize and analyze the expression of masculinity among religious young men and to examine how doctrinal and culturally religious teachings legitimize or undermine hegemonic traits from which toxic masculinity is derived. Many religious traditions have historically endorsed or promoted patriarchal gender systems, which in turn lead to the

promulgation of toxic masculine beliefs and behaviours (Kook & Harel-Shalev, 2021; Öztürk, 2023; Schüßler, 2024). Schüßler (2024) cites explicitly Connell's observation that familiar religious imagery often relies on hegemonic masculinity, where patriarchal religions control the representation of masculinity. Thus, this review will examine evidence from young men in faith communities who follow religious teachings to see if faith-based norms inform traditional masculinity, which has been seen by some men as being challenged by modern feminist theory and social movements, therefore emboldening toxic masculinity as a response (Maricourt & Burrell, 2022).

The second framework this paper will be guided by is Gordon Allport's intrinsic and extrinsic religious orientation theory. Whereas the initial conceptualization by Allport was in his seminal work on immature and mature religious sentiments, the theoretical framework was proposed by Allport and Ross's study on religious orientation and prejudice (Allport, 1950; Allport & Ross, 1967). It distinguishes between two fundamentally different forms of religiosity, which have implications for understanding masculine identity development and manifestation. Intrinsic religiosity represents an internal, mature, personal religious orientation where one's faith is a key motivator in life, providing them with meaning and purpose. On the other hand, extrinsic religiosity reflects a more utilitarian, superficial approach, where faith's value is contingent upon its capacity to provide security, social connection, status, and personal gain, with religion described by Allport as being "lightly held" (Allport, 1950, p. 59). The relevance of this framework to the study is to explain how different religious motivations can either reinforce or mitigate the development of harmful masculine beliefs and behaviours. The framework suggests that intrinsic religiosity may serve as a protective mechanism against toxic masculinity by emphasizing compassion, acts of service, humility, and tolerance (Preston et al., 2014).

Research has also shown that intrinsic religiosity can provide alternative masculine frameworks that allow men to express emotions without shame, directly challenging hegemonic masculinity (Upenieks et al., 2024).

Allport's theoretical framework will guide this study by providing a more nuanced understanding of how different types of religious engagement can influence masculine gender norms in young men. Apart from the potential positive effects of intrinsic religiosity, there is evidence that extrinsic religiosity may have limited protective effects or may exacerbate toxic and hegemonic attitudes, especially when religiosity is driven by a desire to conform rather than personal fulfillment (Vincent et al., 2011).

In conclusion, using hegemonic masculinity theory can direct attention to challenging the dominant masculine ideal, helping us identify religious movements and doctrinal interpretations that contest the hegemonic system. Some faith traditions promote inclusive and compassionate gender norms; thus, this review will also identify studies where religiosity is associated with more egalitarian gender beliefs and practices. Allport's theoretical framework will work in conjunction to refine the study's focus, to understand how religiosity can serve as a potential moderator or mediator between religiosity and toxic masculinity. Lastly, the theoretical framework will also help reframe how religious beliefs can produce new ideals of masculinity and how they can be applied in a clinical setting.

Definition of Terms

This section provides an overview of the key concepts defined by researchers and scholars, along with their meanings. The following defined terms are important to help understand the subsequent review and direction of the review.

Toxic masculinity refers to the socially destructive aspects of traditional masculine gender norms and behaviours, including domination, aggression, arrogance, and the devaluation of those not deemed 'masculine.' The latter facet includes misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and other prejudicial beliefs. It can also be described as a constellation of male traits (e.g., extreme competition, insensitivity, greed, violence) that promote the domination of others (Kupers, 2005). This paper will focus on traits associated with toxic masculinity, as the definition can fluctuate across different research and contexts. Using a study on the development of a toxic masculinity scale, associated traits also include masculine superiority, gender rigidity, and emotional suppression and restriction (Sanders et al., 2024).

Religiosity is the degree of engagement an individual has with their religious faith and practice, encompassing the extent, intensity, and manner of their religious experiences, beliefs, and practices related to the divine (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2024). Religiosity measures how deeply and actively people commit to their religion as well as how important the religion is in their lives.

Intrinsic religiosity is described as a form of religious commitment where faith is an end in itself, where it provides individuals a framework of life (Allport & Ross, 1967; Park, 2021). Intrinsically religious people strive to adhere to their faith and live out their beliefs to the best of their ability.

Extrinsic religiosity refers to when religion is primarily used as an external identity, used for another end (Allport & Ross, 1967; Li & Liu, 2023). Individuals may utilize their religious practices and identity to achieve social status, comfort, or a sense of community.

Religious coping refers to the use of religious beliefs or practices to deal with adversity and stressors. It consists of religiously framed cognitive or behavioural strategies that help one deal with challenges in their lives (Tix & Frazier, 1998; Vitorino et al., 2018). Understanding religious coping demonstrates how faith can provide meaning and support to those struggling, which includes how young men deal with stressors tied to their masculinity and traditional masculine norms.

Masculine gender role stress (MGRS)/Gender role conflict refers to the stress men feel when they perceive that they are not arriving at the traditional masculine ideal. It is a man's subjective appraisal of success or failure when attempting to live up to male norms, such as dominance, strength, and financial success (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015; Copenhaver et al., 2000). Gender role conflict is a broader concept that describes the psychological tension caused by living within or up to rigid gender roles. It is defined as a state in which adhering to strict masculine roles can lead to internal conflict or external conflict with others. Both constructs are relevant to this review as they capture the stress that occurs when religious doctrinal teachings or personal values collide with traditional masculine expectations.

Hegemonic masculinity is the culturally dominant ideal of male behaviour in society, which often legitimizes male dominance and female subordination (Jewkes et al., 2015). Toxic masculinity is seen as the harmful contemporary manifestation of this hegemonic ideal, exemplified in the younger generation. Discussing this concept can provide a broader context for understanding which aspects of the hegemonic ideal might be bolstered or mitigated by religiosity among young men.

Traditional masculinity or traditional masculine ideology or traditional values or traditional gender norms refers to a widely and endorsed promulgated set of traits, behaviours

and roles that individuals are expected to adhere to (Levant & Richmond, 2016). Pleck (1995) defined traditional masculine ideology as the beliefs about the importance of men adhering to "culturally defined standards" for male behaviour.

Researcher's Statement

As a young male who is also religious, this topic has been at the forefront of my struggles growing up. Being a traditional Muslim, masculinity was intrinsically tied to my faith, where there were clear expectations about how I was to conduct myself and in what parameters I could operate. Physical strength, obedience, working in the yard, never arguing and excelling in school were not requests but expectations. Going to school in Canada saw my perception of masculinity simultaneously reinforced and challenged. We were taught not to be "mean" to girls, but the reasoning behind that rather self-explanatory notion transitioned from 'not being mean to girls because they are girls' to 'do not be mean to anyone, regardless of gender.' Although the latter was always taught to us, when boys would have altercations, we would rarely be reprimanded unless it occurred in front of the teachers. Conversely, if a girl complained about one of us, we were immediately spoken to. However, when it came to physical work, even if it was not the most physically demanding, the boys were often asked to help the teachers. High school would bring far more challenges to my understanding of gender norms, as we had students who were non-binary and non-cis-gendered. Relationships with girls were not the same as what I had been taught indirectly by my parents or directly by the media I consumed. Working off these preconceived notions caused me more grief and distress, causing me to challenge assumptions I made about girls and other genders, even though I was never conscious of them. My time at MacEwan university would help me develop my gender framework, one that is built on the principle of acceptance rather than judgment and grounded in various aspects of my life.

In terms of my academic and professional predisposition, working at the Family Centre provided me with a glimpse of what masculinity is for a generation younger than I. Many of the teenage and young male clients I saw were disgruntled with their masculinity, often blaming others for their troubles, wishing people would assimilate to their perspectives. Now, there was an underlying trauma that contributed to their state of mind, but their perceptions of what a man ought to be were flawed, as following them to their conclusion would cause them more harm than good. Some of my clients did express their religious views and how they felt this generation was lost, a term I would hear several times from many different male clients. When I asked them to expand upon what they felt needed to change, they would often speak of female behaviour or their own deficiencies, which frequently surrounded their competitiveness and discomfort with vulnerability. This client spoke of their religiosity as helping them make sense of life, but all I could see was their adherence to stringent gender norms, adding to the heavy emotional load they were bearing. In these moments, I found myself reflecting on how their masculine ideals were not only socially constructed but filtered through religious teachings. For this paper, I will have to be conscious of my preconceptions and predispositions regarding gender norms and masculinity. The reviews contention is one I have previously grappled with, and to write this review properly, I will need to clarify that my purpose is to research the topic, not find studies that reinforce my own belief that religiosity can buffer toxic masculine norms.

Chapter Two: Methods of Literature Search

Databases and Search Engines

I conducted the search using academic databases including PsycInfo, SCOPUS, Google Scholar and the City University of Seattle online library. My primary search focused on peer-reviewed research articles published between 2018 and 2025. I selected this time frame to include the most recent research, as well as studies since 2018, as the previous year saw the rise of the #MeToo movement, which likely prompted far more research into toxic masculinity (Maricourt & Burrell, 2022). These parameters were utilized across all themes and subthemes in the literature review, as well as any general research.

Search Terms and Refinement

The following key terms were searched in the aforementioned databases: religious orientation AND men OR male OR masculinity, religiosity AND men OR male AND toxic OR masculinity, religious AND socialization or religious education, religious community or faith community AND support or messaging, mediation AND religious belief OR religiosity AND masculinity, indirect effect AND religious belief OR religiosity AND masculinity, moderation AND religious belief or religiosity AND masculinity OR gender norms, mitigate OR mitigation OR buffer OR buffering AND religious coping OR religious belief OR religiosity AND masculinity OR violence OR aggression OR sexism OR emotional suppression. The search was further limited to the subject fields of psychology, sociology, counselling, social work, public health and behavioural sciences.

Selection Criteria

Inclusion criteria for this review consist of studies that are published in academic journals, primary research, empirical research, scholarly, peer-reviewed studies, and studies published in English and published between 2018 and 2025. Eligible studies had to focus on boys or young men aged 15-30, with primary subjects being masculinity, gender norms, hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, emotional suppression, misogyny, homophobia, aggression, and religious masculinity (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The exclusion criteria were studies that were dissertations, theses, book chapters, or theoretical essays without empirical data. Studies that did not focus on male populations or toxic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, traditional gender norms or religiosity, or studies that focused on adjacent topics such as substance abuse and interpersonal violence without direct links to the topic were also excluded. The search was conducted between February 2025 and August 2025. There was an initial review of the literature review sources, where abstracts and research purpose statements were read to determine if they were relevant to the research question.

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

Throughout the process of screening and selecting studies, the research parameters (key terms and combinations) were continuously reframed in response to the current literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). During the literature search, it became apparent that the research question itself has not been investigated exactly as it was posited. Many studies covered certain aspects of toxic masculinity in young men, whereas others were conducted within specific contexts that may have influenced the results more than the degree of religiosity (Corner & Dallavis, 2022; Lusey et al., 2014).

In order to address these concerns, I adopted a multi-pronged strategy to identify as many relevant studies as possible. The search terms and parameters were broadened while still preserving the review's conceptual focus, allowing for older participant age ranges, year of publication, and cross-referencing included studies to find others. I also conceptually mapped to justify including studies that did not use the exact key terms but examined relevant core concepts and mechanisms. Specifically, studies that were included had to have at least: an aspect of masculine ideology or behaviour linked to toxic masculinity, a dimension of religiosity (intrinsic or extrinsic), and plausible mediators or moderators (life meaning, religious mentorship, peer norms).

Chapter Three: Review of Literature

This chapter focuses on examining the central research question of how religiosity influences the manifestation of toxic masculinity in young men. A thematic approach was chosen because existing literature does not examine this relationship as a cohesive entity but through various interconnected elements that arise across different contexts and methodologies (Levitt et al., 2018). Organizing the evidence into themes facilitates the integration of findings from a range of studies while emphasizing the different pathways through which religiosity may reinforce, alter, or alleviate toxic masculine norms.

Three principle themes emerged from the literature: *religious socialization of gender norms*, which examines how formative religious experiences and institutional messages shape gender norms in adolescent and young men; *religious coping and psychological outcomes*, which considers how individual faith practices and collective faith resources influence emotional regulation, identity formation, and behaviour choices within the context of toxic masculinity; and *mechanisms of influence*, a cluster that includes mediation, moderation, and mitigation. Adopting a thematic approach makes it possible to synthesize heterogeneous findings into a more cohesive and coherent explanatory framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Religious socialization of gender norms outcomes establishes the social origins of masculine gender norms and identifies where faith-based messages enter young men's developmental trajectories. Religious coping and psychological outcomes trace how lived faith practices and community engagement alter the emotional and behavioural attitudes of young men. Mechanisms of influence integrate empirical evidence about how religiosity exerts influence, such as clarifying whether effects occur through internalized meaning, protective coping, or changes in peer contexts. Taken together, the themes will map a pathway from socialization to practices to mechanism, which will allow this review to

answer its key question: in what ways and under what circumstances does religiosity mitigate, mediate, or moderate the manifestation and expression of toxic masculinity in young men.

Theme 1: Religious Socialization of Gender Norms

Family and Early Faith Instruction

From their earliest years, children learn about gender norms and roles by observing the example of their primary caregivers, who set the standards to which they conform (Paul Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Understanding where and how boys initially learn religious masculine ideals can provide insight into how associated toxic masculine traits, such as emotional detachment, aggression, and devaluation of vulnerability, are either cemented or resisted.

When religious beliefs are woven into parenting practices, they can play a major role in influencing a young boy's conception of what masculinity is. De Vries et al. (2022) conducted a detailed observational study on how parents' religiosity impacts the gendered messages they convey to their children, and in turn how those messages influence their emerging gender attitudes. In the study, 134 Dutch families, with children aged 4-6, parents completed the Practice and Belief Scale to assess their religiosity, followed by a structured picture book task to elicit spontaneous gender talk. The researchers found that higher parental religiosity was significantly associated with more frequent gendered comments by fathers only. Specifically, hierarchical regression models found fathers' gendered talk to predict their children's endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes, such as certain occupations, activities, and personality traits being designated for men only. Furthermore, when the analyses were stratified for child gender, the effect was notably stronger for sons than for daughters. These results suggest that religious fathers can model and actively shape their sons' gender framework through day-to-day

interactions, providing an early and potent form of faith-infused socialization. Even though toxic masculinity was not directly examined, its underpinnings were, as boys who internalize messaging about gender roles may be placed on the path to toxic masculinity. With boys associating jobs such as pilots, drivers, doctors and others with masculinity, and dancers, nurses, and florists with femininity, an immutable gendered framework becomes apparent. However, as this research did not link fathers' religiosity to gender-specific commentary, causality cannot be established since other factors, such as joint-parental parenting style with mothers and media exposure, might play a significant role in the socialization of gender roles in children. Additionally, given that the study took place in the Netherlands, a first-world nation with an egalitarian and secular society, these findings may not be representative of religious socialization in other nations. Lastly, although the age range of the children does provide evidence of early socialization, this developmental stage is not the only one that impacts socialization, nor does it examine how these early stereotypes evolve into actual behaviours. Notwithstanding, the study by De Vries et al. (2022) did provide evidence that early family religious socialization can lay the groundwork for the development of toxic masculine norms. Research has shown that the early internalization of dominance, emotional restraint, and competitiveness in boys, as well as the fear of nonconformity, leads to these values being reinforced in adolescence (Rivera & Scholar, 2020). These beliefs about the role and capacity of men and women may create expectations as these boys grow up, with potential for the development of aggression and entitlement if these expectations are not fulfilled.

Previous research has established the influence of parental religiosity on the development of gender norms and beliefs in children. Following a study on young boys, Shafer et al. (2019) examined how traditional masculine norms and religiosity shape fathers'

involvement with their children. Drawing upon a representative sample of fathers of 2- to 17-year-olds in the United States, the researchers found that stronger adherence to hegemonic masculine ideals was associated with lower levels of warmth, engagement, and responsibility in daily fathering tasks. Hegemonic ideals, such as emotional control, self-reliance, winning, and dominance, were also associated with greater use of harsh disciplinary measures. However, higher religiosity, encapsulated by religious belief, public and private experience, and overall religious experience, was linked to more positive involvement, such as warmth, positive control and engagement, but was also linked to increased harsh discipline. Although the study did not directly study the experiences of young sons, its findings illustrate that family religiosity is a key vector through which masculine norms can be taught, reinforced, or challenged. Among highly religious fathers, it was observed that the negative impact of adhering to masculine norms on warmth, engagement, and responsibility was significantly attenuated. Children who observe fathers combining religiosity with either minimal positive engagement or with punitive behaviours receive both explicit and implicit lessons about how a "man" is expected to behave, particularly within a religious context. While this study illuminated how fathers' religiosity has a dual role in shaping daily parenting practices, it did not investigate the continuity of masculine ideology (Shafer et al., 2019).

Perales et al. (2023) assessed the intergenerational transmission of masculine ideology by examining how fathers' adherence to traditional norms predicts their sons' conformity to these norms. Using data from an Australian longitudinal study, they linked 743 father-son dyads to the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI-22). Key findings include a moderately positive father-son correlation, where an increase in father CMNI-22 score was associated with a significant increase in their sons' scores. Critically, the study also found that religiosity amplified

the transmission of traditional masculine norms. This study offers direct empirical evidence of fathers as religious socializing agents, where sons model their gender norms, and religiosity amplifies the transmission of values and ideals. A key strength of this study over the previous one is that it focused on father-son relationships, specifically boys aged 15-20. In contrast, Shafer used over 4,000 children, with a nearly equal gender breakdown between boys and girls. Both studies demonstrated the influence of parents in creating a gender framework for their children to adopt. Furthermore, whereas Shafer and colleagues reveal how faith affects fathers' behaviours in the moment, Perales and colleagues demonstrate the robustness of those faith-infused masculine norms as they are passed from father to son. Together, these studies underscore the dual power of family-based religious socialization, as it not only directs immediate paternal actions but also cements long-term ideological legacies of masculinity in their sons.

Religious Education, Community, & Institutional Messages

Outside the home, faith communities, religious institutions and education can further cement, challenge, or introduce new concepts of gender norms and behaviours (Cívico Ariza et al., 2020; Taraszow et al., 2024). Institutional messaging plays a pivotal role in promulgating certain views on gender roles and expectations, often to create a coherent social environment. Research has also shown that compared to secular schools, religious schools, regardless of their public promotion of egalitarian values, will privately promulgate or reinforce traditional gender attitudes, which are more amenable to toxic masculine beliefs (Mather, 2018).

A study by Thorsten Knauth (2018) critically examined how mainstream religious education can explicitly promote an affinity towards gender equality, while in practice reinforcing traditional gender values, labelled by Knauth as androcentric norms. Using feminist theory and class ethnographies, the researcher showed that when religious education avoids any

explicit focus on gender dynamics, it can inadvertently uphold male dominance by not creating space for alternative voices. One example involved presenting the male perspective as the default human experience, which indirectly validated those boys who conformed to traditional masculine norms. This approach left the boys who did not embody these norms, such as those who were more emotionally expressive, non-competitive or uninterested in conventional masculine activities, without support, representation, or role models within the religious education context (Knauth, 2018). He also argues for a religion-related pedagogy of diversity that positions boyhood as a "situated construct," which refers to the cultural and intersectional factors that contribute to the definition of being a boy. A specific framework of interconnected dimensions was discussed, in which Knauth identified how body, biography**,** and transitions are key factors in shaping boys' development. "Body" refers to the ways that appearance, physicality, and perceived strength influence a boy's self-conception and social position. "Biography" captures the personal histoires, family backgrounds, and lived experiences that informs their identities. "Transitions" encompasses the developmental and milestone changes, such as moving from childhood to adolescence, which reshape their roles and expectations. He argues that, when addressed within religious education, these dimensions can provide opportunities for boys to explore vulnerability, piety, and service alongside authority and strength. Knauth's analysis underscores how institutional religious messaging is not neutral but possesses the capacity to profoundly shape a young boy's self-perception. When schools or religious institutions present masculinity as only dominance and stoicism, on account of their silence on emotional openness and compassion, they may inadvertently socialize boys into a gender framework that heavily overlaps with toxic masculinity. His critique highlights how extrinsic religiosity reinforces toxic norms when religious messages are internalized without introspection. Intrinsic religiosity may

support the critical, self-reflective engagement that Knauth advocates for, to encourage young boys to explore diverse expressions of masculinity grounded in humility and empathy. However, while Knauth's work offers a strong theoretical and critical lens, it does not provide much empirical evidence on whether religious education can reinforce or attenuate toxic masculine norms in practice, which leaves a gap that empirical studies should attempt to address.

Corner and Dallavis (2022) conducted a study to assess whether attending different religious schools would predict future adult gender role-beliefs. Using a nationally representative sample of over 1,500 past high school students from the 2014 Cardus Education Study, the study assessed traditional gender role beliefs by measuring responses to two statements regarding men's position as the breadwinner and head of the household. Controlling for family religiosity and adult affiliation, they categorized respondents into five groups: public, conservative Protestant, Catholic, secular private, and homeschool. Using logistic regression, they found that conservative Protestant school graduates were significantly more likely to endorse a male's authority and place as the head and breadwinner compared to their public-school peers. Catholic school graduates, more so females, were less likely to endorse the breadwinner statement, with male graduates agreeing more, but less than men from conservative Protestant schools. Homeschool graduates also had significant endorsement of both statements, similar to the conservative Protestant groups. This study illustrates how religious institutions shape young men's perspective on gender norms as conservative Protestant and Catholic schools are more likely to explicitly teach and reinforce patriarchal leadership and traditional gender norms. Since the data indicated the persistence of such education into adulthood, it underscores the potency of school-based religious messaging as a tool of socialization. The differences between the Catholic, conservative Protestant, and homeschooling groups indicate how a religious institution

can be more progressive in its outlook on gender norms, regardless of its similarities to other denominations (Corner & Dallavis, 2022). However, the study's cross-sectional design cannot definitively establish how religious schooling causally influences gender role beliefs, as children with previously held traditional views and their parents would likely attend schools with the same beliefs. Nevertheless, the study did provide evidence that religious institutions and by extension their embedded messages had a measurable association with adult gender-norm beliefs.

While there is evidence that religious schooling can inscribe patriarchal, androcentric, and toxic masculine norms that are held in adulthood, the impact during adolescence and young adulthood must also be investigated. Lusey et al.'s (2014) qualitative study examined how current churchgoers interpret and internalize institutional messaging on gender norms. The study recruited 6 unmarried youth, aged 15-24, from different Christian congregations in Congo, to explore how religious institutional messaging about sexuality intersects with masculine and feminine youth identities. Through semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis, they identified five key discourses, which highlighted a profound disjunction between institutional messaging and participant social reality. Specifically, young men felt dissonance between the biological desire for sex and the Church's position on abstinence and lust, finding a more substantial impact of peer pressure valorizing having multiple sexual partners. They also noted the congregation's avoidance of practical guidance, such as condom use or emotional intimacy, due to being inappropriate and taboo topics to discuss in the Church, creating a void filled by following peer-driven norms legitimizing risky sexual behaviours. Although this study was conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo during a period marked by a generalized HIV epidemic that shaped the cultural and social environment in which the participants live, its

findings still present a unique insight. Religious community messages play a pivotal role in constructing or contesting the formation and maintenance of toxic masculine norms, either with the presence of said messaging or in its absence.

All three studies investigate how religious institutions craft their messages, the measurable impact of these messages, and the lived experiences of young men negotiating those messages in real-time. Knauth provides a critical framework arguing that religious education's silences and pedagogy will tacitly produce an androcentric model of masculinity, but can also offer a multidimensional pedagogy, encompassing body, biography, and transitions, that could open up space for alternative masculinities. Corner and Dallavis provided population-level evidence that different types of religious schooling practices predict durable adult gender-role beliefs. Luy and colleagues add micro-level nuance by demonstrating how young men can interpret or resist institutional messaging. Each study therefore contributes and supports the contention that institutional religious messaging can either entrench or challenge toxic masculinity.

Theme 2: Religious Coping and Psychological Outcomes

Prayer, Meditation, and Ritual as Emotional Regulation

Religiosity often provides individuals with organized practices, such as prayer, meditation, and ritual, that help them cope with stress and regulate their emotions (Aggarwal et al., 2023). Among young men who encounter the pressure to conform to toxic masculine norms (e.g., emotional suppression, risk-taking behaviours, hyper-competitiveness), prayer and meditation may serve as alternative forms of emotional processing compared to maladaptive yet socially sanctioned outlets such as emotional suppression, social detachment, and avoidance.

Hagen et al. (2018) conducted a four-year longitudinal study of 795 first-year male college students to test whether religiosity protects against sexual aggression and technology-based coercive behaviour. Peer norms, promiscuity, and pornography consumption were examined as mediators between religiosity and sexual aggression, the former operationalized as a composite of religious services attendance frequency and campus religious group participation. Sexual aggression and technology-based coercive behaviour were measured by the Sexual Experiences Survey and a three-item technology based coercive behavior (TBC) scale, both demonstrating strong reliability. The results found that peer norms and promiscuity mediated the inverse relationship between religiosity and sexual aggression; that is, higher religiosity predicted less permissive peer norms, which in turn predicted lower sexual aggression. All three mediators were shown to be similarly significant in predicting lower TBC. Importantly, no direct effect of religiosity on sexual aggression or TBC remained after the mediators were included, highlighting the complexity of religious influence. While their research focused on attendance to religious services, rather than private prayer or meditation, they demonstrated how public ritual participation can serve regulatory functions similar to prayer, establishing how prosocial expectations and a structured, reflective context may curb emotional reactivity and aggressive coping (Hagen et al., 2018). Therefore, religious and ritual observance can be seen as a potent form of religious coping and emotional regulation in young men, allowing it to counter the emotional suppression and predisposition to aggression found in toxic masculinity. While TBC does not directly assess emotional suppression, it captures coercive behaviours that are often rooted in the emotionally detached and dominance-oriented norms central to toxic masculinity. While Hagen et al. (2018) demonstrated how regular participation in communal religious rituals can shape masculine norms and reduce instances of sexual aggression, they did not review any

individual religious practices or their impact. By demonstrating how higher religiosity indirectly reduced both sexual aggression and TBC through shifting peer norms, reduced promiscuity, and decreased consumption of pornography, this study provides evidence that religious involvement may help disrupt the behavioural manifestation of emotional suppression.

Lomas et al. (2014) sought to deepen our understanding of whether and by which mechanisms individual meditation practices can enhance cognitive and emotional intelligence. Using a mixed-methods longitudinal study design, they investigated whether meditation could enhance emotional intelligence (EI) in males by first strengthening attentional control. Thirty male meditators were recruited. They completed two lab sessions one year apart and were asked to complete cognitive tasks while attached to an EEG, followed by in-depth narrative interviews. The study found longitudinal improvements on attentional and emotion-recognition indices (RMET) and increases in frontal-midline theta activity in the brain during meditation. Importantly, the study did not include a direct, standardized measure of emotional suppression; therefore, any claims that meditation reduced emotional suppression are qualitative in nature, based on participants' reports and indirect evidence. Narrative interviews revealed that men worked through encountering and accepting difficult emotions, using refocusing and decentering to help regulate stress. Compared to Hagen et al. (2018), who documented how communal rituals can shape social norms in young men, Lomas et al. (2014) focused on complementary but qualitatively different evidence, to suggest that individual meditation practice may cultivate skills that enable men to regulate emotions more effectively. However, Lomas et al. (2014) did not directly assess religiosity and spirituality directly, so any inference that their findings reflect the effects of religious practice is indirect and should involve caution. Thus, while Lomas et al. (2014) highlights an intrapersonal mechanism by which meditation may improve men's

emotional functioning, Hagen et al. (2018) examined interpersonal and social-norm pathways through which religiosity can operate, together suggesting complementary routes by which faith-related practices and participation can influence masculine behaviour, but this connection requires direct empirical testing.

Faith-Based Community Support

Alongside personal engagement in religious practices, support from faith- and religion-based communities provides structured social networks, relationships, and collective rituals that can support a young man's mental well-being and buffer against toxic masculinity. Newman et al. (2023) investigated how a Christian-based youth sports program for young men could promote positive masculine development. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, data collected from 14 participants and five program leaders provided five core virtues, which were framed within biblical terminology. The program combined weekly sports training with "principle talks," scripturally grounded discussions led by coaches, and individual spiritual mentorship. The five core attributes identified were: leadership, persistence, responsibility, confidence, and strength. Participants felt that the "principle" talks and coach modelling helped them navigate common obstacles like familial conflict and school difficulties by supporting faith-infused coping. The coaches utilized immersive curricula, such as competitive drills with group debriefs on self-control and cooperation to help foster an environment that praised athletic prowess, interpersonal communication, and emotional health equally. This study exemplified how a faith-based community program could reconstruct masculine norms by embedding religious values within "traditional" masculine domains such as athletics. Specifically, participants' definitions of masculinity emphasized good character, expressed through concrete behaviours. One of the participants, Camden, described manhood as being a good role model for

younger males, while Jaylen defined it as taking leadership in team situations (Newman et al., 2023, p. 9). Although athletics can echo traditional masculinity, participants often reframed competitive success as collective, not purely individual achievement, and some explicitly endorsed emotional openness alongside strength. The competitive drills were paired with group debriefs that focused on emotional debriefs as well as one-on-one mentorship sessions, which was designed to provide a safe space for the boys to be vulnerable about their fears and concerns. Since Newman et al. (2023) used qualitative interviews, it is more accurate to say the program appeared to support alternatives to toxic masculine norms, and provided a relational framework that normalized accountability, cooperation, and vulnerability, rather than to claim it directly or causally "countered" toxic masculinity. However, the study was conducted with a small, homogeneous sample of young African American adolescent males, limiting generalizability.

Additionally, without a control group or pre-post quantitative data, the study cannot attribute the observed changes in masculine attitudes solely to the program. Lastly, the study did not directly study or attempt to negate more specific and key toxic masculine traits. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates how a faith-based community can buffer harmful masculine beliefs and behaviours by leveraging existing community structures to deliver inclusive and gender transformative messaging. It indirectly shows how alternative, healthier masculinities can challenge pre-existing hegemonic masculine beliefs and behaviours, using a faith-based youth program as a tailor-made framework for young men.

Theme 3: Mechanisms of Influence

Mediation Processes

When considering how religiosity can influence masculine behaviours in young men, mediation research provides crucial insights into the mechanisms of said influence. Li and Liu (2021) investigated how both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity relate to the well-being of adolescents, with attention to gender differences. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 828 adolescents from Hong Kong, the researchers measured intrinsic religiosity and extrinsic religiosity in two metrics, and well-being with the meaning in life questionnaire (MIL-P/MIL-S), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). Using process mediation models, where causal pathways are tested, they found that boys' MIL-P score (presence of meaning) significantly mediated the effects of both intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity on self-esteem and life satisfaction. On the other hand, MIL-S scores (search for meaning) did not mediate this relationship. Specifically, extrinsic-personal religiosity (seeking comfort or relief) showed a positive indirect effect via MIL-P on boys' self-esteem and life satisfaction, whereas extrinsic-social religiosity (attendance) did not produce a significant indirect effect. The researcher's findings that intrinsic religiosity enhanced boy's belief that their life was meaningful, suggests that when young men internalize spiritual values, those beliefs can foster alternative masculine norms in place of toxic masculinity. Likewise, the positive role of extrinsic religiosity, seeking comfort in fostering a sense of meaning demonstrates that faith-based coping practice, even when motivated by emotional relief, can still ground adolescent boys in a meaningful framework. However the study's cross-sectional design prevents one from inferring causality, which means we cannot conclude that religiosity leads to greater meaning or personal well-being, or whether boys that are inherently well-adjusted will be more drawn to an

internalizing faith. With its geographical context being in Hong Kong, the study's findings may not be generalizable to Western adolescents or other countries that do not share similar societal frameworks. Despite these caveats, Li and Liu's (2021) research demonstrated how intrinsic religiosity fosters a sense of purposeful meaning that underpins healthier masculinity in young boys, providing an alternative to toxic masculine norms.

While Li and Liu's (2021) mapped cognitive mediation, where religiosity influences self-esteem and life satisfaction through the presence of meaning, Hagen et al. (2018) mapped social mediation, where religiosity, operationalized as extrinsic religiosity, reshaped peer contexts and sexual behaviour, which reduced toxic masculine behaviours. These behaviours, such as sexual aggression and technology-based coercive behaviour were fully mediated by peer norms, suggesting that religiosity reshaped the social contexts in which young men were embedded, discouraging toxic masculine behaviours. Both study's models reinforce the contention that religious beliefs can exert influence on masculine attitudes and behaviours through measurable intermediate processes. Contemporary masculinities often combine elements from different models, where some men display egalitarian practices in certain domains, like caregiving and emotional expression, while retaining more traditional expectations of others, like the role of being a provider (Elliott, 2016). These hybrid forms of masculinity are precisely the kinds of outcomes that mediation models can help explain, since internalized religious meaning and changing social norms are able to change the direction of male behaviour. Dengah et al. (2024) conducted a study to examine how religious affiliation can reshape male gender models and how motivational processes operate between cultural models and behaviour. The study examined machismo, a form of traditional hypermasculinity that is prevalent in Latin America, and how religious masculine models can contend with it. Using a mixed cognitive method, they collected

interview data from participants and two qualitative samples to identify shared gender models and how closely individuals enacted said models. Measures included a cultural consensus analysis to derive the religious male model, a cultural-consonance score, an internalization scale, a social-network conformation scale, and religious activity. The analytic strategy combined descriptive mapping, correlations, and regression analyses predicting cultural consonance from the motivational variables.

Results indicated clear consensus around a distinct religious male model that rejects core machismo behaviours, such as excessive alcohol consumption, promiscuity, and public dominance, while emphasizing family-oriented roles but stopping short of full gender egalitarianism as the model still held a patriarchal framework. Regression models predicted the extent to which men adhered to the religious model, the culturally shared prototype of religious masculinity, identified by participants. Internalization of this model was the key predictor of participants' enacting its tenants, while religious activity was a weaker predictor and social network conformation only had effects when tied to internalization. Dengah et al. explicitly operationalize internalization as how closely men personally adopt a culturally based religious gender model and showed that it was predictive of men enacting the religious model, supported by cross-sectional evidence. The result of the study demonstrates how religious men who adhere to a culturally situated and shared religious gender model, accepted by the respondents, tend to reject the more deleterious facets and behaviours of machismo or toxic masculinity. However, some key limitations of the study include the participant demographics and cultural context. The sample used both men and women, and the average age for males is 36.6 with participants ranging between 21 and 67, wherefore the findings about internalization may not apply to emerging adult men. The setting of Ribeirão Preto, Brazil, and the oversampling of Protestants

and evangelicals in a predominantly Catholic nation, many of whom are not representative of the bulk of men in Brazil, limiting the generalizability of the results to other nations that do not share a similar religious cultural framework.

When examining mediation processes, all three studies collectively demonstrated how internalized religio-cultural beliefs can influence the transition from cultural pressures to masculine norms in different, complementary yet distinct manners. Hagen et al. (2018) discovered that religiosity decreased sexual aggression among college men by enhancing moral incongruence, indicating that internalized faith can facilitate behavioural restraint by redefining moral boundaries. Li and Lie (2023) expanded upon this insight by revealing that intrinsic religiosity enhances well-being through the provision of meaning in life, with more pronounced effects noted amongst men, suggesting that a profound commitment to faith can mediate the relationship between societal pressures and alternative, healthy masculinities. However, Dengah et al. (2024) add complexity to this narrative, showing that a stronger cultural alignment with a religious masculine model within Brazilian evangelical communities can maintain both compassionate characteristics and hierarchical gender norms. Therefore, it implies that internalization does not invariably yield non-prejudicial or non-toxic outcomes. Together, these findings imply that while intrinsic religiosity and internalized religious norms can function as mediating factors that buffer against certain toxic masculine behaviours, the specific content of the religious model internalized is key to determine whether the mediation fosters more egalitarian expressions of masculinity or reinforced hegemonic norms.

Moderation and Mitigation Processes

The influence of religiosity on promulgation and development of certain masculine gender norms has been well established, promoting both healthy and toxic masculine beliefs

(Perales & Bouma, 2019; Stewart et al., 2025). The next notion to consider is how varying levels of faith can impact what form of masculinity manifests in young men. Boxer and Gill (2021) conducted a study to test whether aspects of spirituality change how masculine traits relate to psychological distress. Using a cross-sectional survey of 331 men with an average age of 24.6, they measured multiple dimensions of masculinity, such as control and self-reliance, alongside two distinct spirituality dimensions, spiritual support and spiritual openness, with anxiety being measured separately as the outcome variable using the Beck Anxiety Inventory. They found that spirituality did not simply lower anxiety for all men, but significant moderation was found depending on the male's spiritual profile. Specifically, higher self-reliance as a masculine trait was associated with lower anxiety when paired with greater support, but higher anxiety when combined with high spiritual openness. In other words, spirituality acted as a moderator, sometimes buffering and sometimes exacerbating the link between masculine traits and psychological distress. The researchers interpret this as a fit effect or congruence, where the emotional and psychological impact of a masculine trait will vary by an individual's spiritual resources and orientation. However, the study's cross-sectional design, convenience sampling, moderation specific to one masculinity subscale, and wide participant age range limit the strength and generalizability of the findings.

Since religiosity in both intrinsic and extrinsic domains involve both individual and communal facets respectively, it is important to investigate the latter's role as a moderating force. Gao et al.'s (2021) research provides qualitative evidence that religion can moderate the harms of coercive, hierarchical masculinity, specifically in workplace contexts. Through ethnographic interviews and observations with factory workers and church leaders, between the ages of 16-30, the researchers documented three overlapping masculine scripts; managerial hegemonic

masculinity, Christian masculinity, and rank-and-file protested masculinity. Those workers who adopted Christian masculine ideals, religious affiliation, and practices found more social support, moral reframing, and alternative behavioural scripts that alleviated the psychological burdens associated with exploitative workplace masculine environments. Specifically, the results indicated that higher conformity to traditional masculine norms was negatively associated with workplace well-being, but this effect was notably weaker for men who had greater involvement in collective religious practices. A few examples from participants include one stating "When I am at work, I feel pressure to be tough and hide my stress. But when I join my group at church, I can relax, talk with others and feel supported," whereas another stated "No matter how you dress, in a business suit or in ragged clothes, we should call each other brother and sister" (Gao et al., 2021, p. 7). Thus, religion acted as a collective moderator, by providing communal narratives and resources that redefined stressful expectations and alleviated distress. The limitations of the study include its context specific nature (i.e., a factory in China), qualitative design that does produce effect sizes, and mixed gender sample, all of which constrain the precise generalization of its findings to young men across different socio-cultural contexts.

Expanding on the evidence for moderation and mitigation, Koletić et al. (2021) offer meta-analytic findings that suggest a correlation between religiosity and diminished behavioural expressions associated with hypermasculine scripts in adolescents and emerging adults. This meta-analysis, with an average age of 18.9, synthesized research involving adolescents and emerging adults, revealing small but statistically significant protective relationships between religiosity and sexual risk outcomes. Although these outcomes act as behavioural proxies rather than direct indicators of toxic masculinity, they are commonly utilized in the literature as signs of hypermasculine scripts, such as promiscuity and conquest (Allen, 2025; Camacho-Ruiz et al.,

2024). The researchers suggest that religiosity likely inhibits these behaviours through social regulation, wherein attendance at religious services and participation in faith communities shape peer norms, while internalized religious values and personal beliefs discourage promiscuous behaviour. This social-regulation account aligns with Hagen et al. (2018), who concluded that peer norms mediate the relationship between sexual behaviour and religiosity. Some key limitation includes high heterogeneity between studies, small effect sizes, reliance on single-item measures of religiosity and the prevalence of mixed gender samples, which temper claims about universal buffering. These limitations suggest that Koletić et al. (2021) research is ideally utilized as cross-national evidence indicating that religious belief can alleviate certain behavioural expressions of toxic masculinity, rather than conclusive proof that religiosity diminishes all emotional and behavioural aspects of toxic masculinity.

In addition to the behavioural and social evidence, Upenieks et al., (2024) presented intrapsychic and population-level support for the notion that religiosity can mitigate the psychological effects of masculine discrepancy, where men feel they do not meet internalized masculine ideals. Utilizing a substantial national sample of 2018 men from the *2023 Masculinity, Sexual Health, and Politics* survey, the researchers demonstrate that stress from masculine discrepancy is linked to poorer mental health indicators. Notably, elements of religiosity, such as frequency of attendance of religious services and high religious salience, mitigated these adverse associations. Men who had stronger religious salience or regular participation in communal worship experienced a less intensive relationship between discrepancy stress and poor subjective well-being. These buffering effects were not limited to any specific denomination, suggesting that religiosity broadly offers men protective resources that can mitigate the psychological harms of struggling to meet hegemonic norms and expectations. While this study provides evidence of

religiosity's protective role, it has important limitations for understanding how religiosity might reduce toxic masculinity. The study found that religiosity buffered the negative effects of masculine discrepancy stress on well-being outcomes but did not demonstrate that religiosity reduced masculine discrepancy stress itself. Additionally, the study's religiosity measures lack robust psychometric foundations, relying on single-item scales for both religious attendance and religious salience without established reliability coefficients or validity evidence. Combined with the study's cross-sectional design and older sample, the reliance on single-item, non-validated measures of religiosity means these findings should be applied cautiously, particularity when considering a younger demographic of men.

Taken together, these studies paint a consistent but nuanced picture, where religiosity is neither uniformly protective nor harmful for masculine behaviours, but instead operates through complementary pathways that depend on how faith is experienced. The research conducted by Boxer and Gill (2021) underscores a congruence effect at the personal and spiritual level, where spiritual resources engaged with masculine characteristics to influence psychological outcomes. This trend aligns with intrinsic religiosity, where faith is internalized and informs meaning-making and identity stabilization, altering how men perceive and emotionally react to breached masculine norms (Allport & Ross, 1967). Gao et al. (2021) illustrated how communal religious involvement provided social scripts, moral reframing, and support that mitigate the detrimental effects of coercive and toxic masculine structures in the workplace. These communal dynamics exemplify extrinsic religiosity, which functions through social regulation and peer norms to influence the performance and enforcement of masculinity in day-to-day life. Furthermore, Koletić et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis suggests that formal religiosity, similar to extrinsic religiosity, may limit overt hypermasculine behaviours, while Upenieks et al. (2024) revealed

that the significance of religiosity and communal connections can alleviate the psychological burden associated with masculine discrepancies. Importantly, both intrinsic and extrinsic pathways possess a dual nature, where intrinsic faith has the potential to alleviate distress related to discrepancies while also validating restrictive gender norms, whereas extrinsic participation can reduce risky behaviours while concurrently enforcing emotional stoicism and adherence to traditional masculine norms. All four of these studies have important limitations: small effect sizes, variability in measures and samples, cross-sectional designs, and culturally specific contexts that constrain the strength and generalizability of their conclusions. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the collective evidence tentatively suggests that religiosity's capacity to moderate and, in some cases, alleviate certain toxic masculine beliefs and behaviours, although these effects appear to be context dependant and require further longitudinal studies.

Ethical Considerations

Given that this research explores delicate subjects like religious beliefs, gender identity, and vulnerable populations, examining the connection between religiosity and toxic masculinity in young men necessitates careful consideration of ethical principles. Even though the capstone project is a review of the literature rather than original research involving human subjects, it is crucial to evaluate the reviewed studies using an ethical framework to verify that they adhere to ethical standards and to find any limitations that might compromise the validity and applicability of their findings.

The ethical evaluation of the reviewed literature is informed by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) (2022), the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (CPA, 2017) and the College of Alberta Psychologists Standards of Practice (CAP, 2022). It is important to recognize that most of the studies in this

review were carried out in diverse international settings, such as the Netherlands, Australia, Congo, Hong Kong, Brazil, China, and the United States. Despite these studies operating under different national ethical guidelines, there is an expectation that they uphold core ethical principles that align with globally accepted standards.

Research Ethics Board Approval and Oversight

A comprehensive analysis of the literature review reveals varying levels of ethical oversight across studies. Several studies explicitly note obtaining institutional ethics approval, as seen in de Vries et al. (2022), who secured approval from the Ethics Committee of Utrecht University, and Hagen et al. (2018), whose four-year longitudinal research was approved by their institutional review board. Perales et al. (2023) drew upon data from a previously established longitudinal study that had already received ethical clearance. Nevertheless, certain studies, especially those utilizing qualitative methods, such as Newman et al. (2023) and Gao et al. (2021), failed to mention ethics board approval, which raises concerns regarding the oversight of research involving potentially sensitive discussions about masculinity and religious beliefs.

The lack of explicit ethical approval in some studies is particularly alarming, considering that many involved vulnerable groups, including adolescents and young adults who may be undergoing identity formation processes associated with both religiosity and gender expression. The CAP Standards of Practice highlight the necessity of competent practice when engaging with diverse populations, asserting that “psychologists shall obtain and maintain cultural competencies appropriate for the individuals and/or communities who access their psychological services” (Section 19.3). The CPA also emphasizes the need for heightened protections for vulnerable populations, stating that “As the vulnerabilities of individuals and groups increase, or their power to control their enviroment or lives decreases, psychologists have an increasing

responsibility to seek ethical advice and to establish safeguards to protect the moral rights of the persons and peoples involved" (Principle I.31). The TCPS also reinforced these protections, noting that "researchers shall carefully examine the relationship between the circumstances of the individuals and groups they aim to recruit, and the proposed research question" (Article 4.7).

Informed Consent and Assent

The concept of informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research, particularly when examining personal beliefs and the formation of identity. The CAP Standards of Practice offer comprehensive guidance on the processes of informed consent, stipulating that psychologists must "obtain informed consent from the client and/or guardian prior to delivering a professional service" (Section 3.1). The TCPS also states that "an important mechanism for respecting participants' autonomy in research is the requirement to seek their free, informed, and ongoing consent (TCPS, 2022, Chapter 1). Qualitative studies, such as those by Li and Liu (2021) and Boxer and Gill (2021), reported that participants granted informed consent prior to their involvement. Nevertheless, several studies involving adolescent participants failed to clearly outline their consent process. For example, the de Vries et al. (2022) study included children aged 4-6 and referenced parental consent but did not clarify whether age-appropriate assent was secured from the children themselves. Lusey et al. (2014), who examined sexuality and religious beliefs among unmarried youth aged 15-24 in Congo, encountered significant ethical challenges due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the cultural context. Although they acknowledged voluntary participation, the study lacked detailed information regarding the methods used to obtain informed consent or whether participants were aware of their rights concerning withdrawal. Studies involving retrospective data, such as Corner and Dallavis (2022), which

utilized 2014 data, addressed consent through secondary data use agreements; however, the original consent processes for large-scale studies were not clearly documented.

Confidentiality and Protection of Participants

Given the sensitive nature of research focused on religious beliefs and masculinity, maintaining participant confidentiality is crucial. The CAP Standards assert that psychologists "shall safeguard the confidential information about the client obtained in the course of providing a professional service" and "continue indefinitely to treat information regarding the client as confidential" even after the conclusion of services (Sections 12.2 and 12.19). Most studies implemented suitable anonymization techniques, with researchers like Newman et al. (2023) utilizing pseudonyms for participants during their qualitative interviews on Christian-based youth programming. Nevertheless, certain studies, especially those carried out in smaller communities or specific religious settings, may have encountered difficulties in achieving complete anonymity. Gao et al. (2021) conducted ethnographic research within a specific factory and church community in China, observing the risk of participant identification despite efforts to anonymize the data. This issue is particularly pertinent when research outcomes could portray religious communities unfavourably or challenge established gender norms within those environments.

Summary of Key Themes

Religiosity influences the expression of toxic masculinity in young males through an interconnected pathway. Across the *religious socialization of gender norms*, said socialization within the home and educational or religious institutions establishes gender expectations that may either reinforce or contest notions of dominance, emotional suppression, and entitlement. This helps illustrate how the evolving identities of young boys assimilate faith-based messages

regarding what it means to be a man. *Religious coping and psychological outcomes* demonstrated how prayer, ritual participation, and faith-based community supports can provide alternative sources of emotional regulation and prosocial norms, offsetting potential aggressive behaviours and attitudes, emotional suppression, and other facets of toxic masculinity, especially if those practices cultivate a sense of meaning and communal support. *Mechanisms of influence* clarifies how religiosity works, as it can mediate outcomes through internalized meaning and peer norms and moderate links between masculine traits and distress through spiritual resources and mitigate discrepancy stress through communal belonging. However, these effects are bidirectional such that certain religious models may also legitimize traditional, stringent gender norms, while others provide healthier alternative masculinities. All in all, the review indicates that the influence of religiosity is conditional, where intrinsic commitments and communities that promote humility and empathy tend to reduce behavioural and psychological expressions of toxic masculinity, whereas extrinsic theological frameworks that prioritize male leadership and emotional control may consolidate them. Therefore, the answer to the research question is not conclusive, but that religiosity can both buffer and reinforce toxic masculinity in young men, with its direction being contingent upon social factors, ritual adherence, community structure and the mechanisms by which belief are internalized and enacted in young adulthood.

Chapter Four: Application to Clinical Practice

Religiosity influences the expression of toxic masculinity in young males through an interconnected pathway, where family and institutional socialization established gender expectations that can either reinforce or contest behaviours such as dominance, emotional suppression, and aggression (de Vries et al., 2022; Perales et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2019). Faith-based coping and community supports such as prayer and ritual participation can provide alternative emotion-regulation strategies and prosocial norms that offset such behaviours (Li & Liu, 2023; Lomas et al., 2014; Upenieks et al., 2024). Mechanisms of influence operate through internalized meaning, peer norms and communal belonging, pathways documented in mediation and moderation studies (Gao et al., 2021; Hagen et al., 2018; Koletić et al., 2021; Li & Liu, 2023). Each of these pathways can either buffer or reinforce masculine discrepancy and its behavioural expressions depending on doctrinal content, community structure and the degree to which these beliefs are internalized (Dengah et al., 2024; Koletić et al., 2021; Shafer et al., 2019). Parental influence, especially that of fathers and their religious and gender beliefs, emerged from the literature as a primary site where religiously inflected masculine norms are learned, and thus should be an initial focus of clinical assessment and intervention.

Research has shown how fathers' day-to-day gendered messages and religio-cultural modeling strongly shape boys' early conceptions of manhood and that religiosity can amplify the intergenerational transmission of masculine ideology (de Vries et al., 2022; Perales et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2019). Clinically, this means that when working with adolescent and emerging young men, practitioners should routinely explore family history and parental role-modeling as part of intake. Questions to be asked can include: Who taught you what it means to be a man? How did your father or primary caregiver(s) model masculinity for you? These questions can

help identify concrete narratives that clients have inherited and point to areas that can be addressed.

Assessment can be enhanced by incorporating validated measures that capture both masculinity-related stress and religious orientation. The Masculine Discrepancy Stress Scale (MDS) quantifies the stress men feel when they fail to meet perceived masculine norms, while the Toxic Masculinity Scale (TMS-28) assesses attitudes such as gender rigidity, dominance, and the suppression of emotions (Reidy et al., 2014; Sanders et al., 2024). Together, these instruments differentiate between distress stemming from not meeting masculine expectations and the internalization of toxic masculine beliefs themselves. With regards to religiosity, brief and validated instruments such as the Duke Religion Index (DUREL) or the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS) can be administered (Huber & Huber, 2012; Koenig & Büssing, 2010). These scales measure the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of religiosity, clarifying whether faith functions as an internalized belief system or as a social practice, which has significant implications for case formulation. By incorporating the MDS, TMS, DUREL and CRS scores during intake, practitioners can effectively map the intersection of a client's religious orientation and masculinity-related beliefs, thereby creating a more tailored and pertinent foundation for intervention.

Narrative therapy aligns with these empirical findings and functions as a practical theoretical frame for clinical work with young men negotiating faith and masculinity (Nylund & Nylund, 2003; Peretz & Lehrer, 2019). Considering the evidence that paternal figures and their messages frequently perpetuate this transmission, investigating family narratives emerges as a particularly productive clinical approach (Perales et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2019). Narrative therapy offers a structured and evidence-based theoretical framework for clinical engagement

with young men who are grappling with their masculinity. The techniques employed in narrative therapy, such as externalizing problems, mapping the impact of social messaging, identifying exceptions in problem narratives, and re-authoring stories, are aligned with research indicating that masculine ideals are socially constructed (Connor et al., 2021; Schermer, 2013). Given findings that the psychological effect of masculine traits varies by spiritual profile (Boxer & Gill, 2021), clinicians should assess clients' spiritual profiles and tailor narrative interventions to them, as some clients benefit most from strengthening supportive spiritual ties while others require different coping resources such as mindfulness or family-based interventions.

In the context of individual counselling, the therapist may initiate the process by evaluating stress related to masculinity, the individual's religious orientation, patterns of community involvement, and significant gender role models (de Vries et al., 2022; Hagen et al., 2018; Upenieks et al., 2024). The practice of externalization serves to diminish feelings of shame and foster a sense of agency. Mapping inquiries assist clients in recognizing that masculine norms are historically and socially constructed rather than inherent aspects of their identity (Ghavibazou et al., 2022). Clients can also be encouraged to identify exceptions, instances when they have demonstrated kindness, sought assistance from others, or resisted domineering urges, and to create new chapters in their identity that incorporate these exceptions alongside faith-aligned values such as compassion, service, or stewardship. In cases, where religiosity is more salient, narrative work can draw explicitly on scriptural and spiritual metaphors that model alternative masculinities, while in extrinsic cases, therapy may focus more on negotiating peer and community expectations that can shape gender norms (Holmberg et al., 2017).

To operationalize the three pathways in clinical practice, clinicians must convert each pathway into distinct assessment items, treatment objectives, and components of the case

formulation. For the internalized meaning pathway, assessment may integrate MDS scores with direct narrative inquiries, such as “Which religious teaching do you embody as part of your identity,” to ascertain whether religion serves as a stabilizing identity resource. Treatment objectives in this context encompass meaning-focused interventions, such as life mapping and value narratives, faith-consistent reauthoring, which involves identifying compassionate role models within a client’s tradition, and cognitive restructuring aimed at alleviating further dissonance. Case formulation should note whether the client’s distress is primarily intrapsychic, high MDS and intrinsic religiosity, and plan interventions that activate faith narratives and teach emotional regulation skills.

In the peer norms pathway, assessment should map the client’s social network and religious affiliation, such as identifying key peers, the frequency of interactions, and perceived expectations. It should also encompass items related to youth group or team norms and use the DUREL organizational attendance item to flag high extrinsic involvement. Treatment targets for this pathway emphasize group-based work, social-skills training, and peer-influenced behavioural experiments. The case conceptualization must determine whether problematic behaviours are externally reinforced, as seen by high TMS, high attendance, but low internalization, and whether interventions should utilize peer accountability or strive to alter the client’s peer environment. Regarding the communal belonging pathway, the assessment should specifically evaluate the quality of community belonging, rather than mere attendance. Inquiries should include perceived support, spiritual mentorship and experiences of inclusion or exclusion, while also monitoring DUREL and CRS indices alongside qualitative prompts. Treatment goals encompass enhancing prosocial community connections through mentorship programs, collaboratively designing faith-sensitive group curricula with community partners, and

establishing safe rituals that exemplify alternative forms of masculinity. With respect to case formulation, clinicians should consider community belonging as a potential protective factor that can be utilized or as a risk factor when communities impose punitive doctrines.

Group narrative formats offer another effective means of utilizing social regulation and community support while simultaneously challenging detrimental gender norms (Béres & Nichols, 2010). A possible approach is a narrative psychoeducational approach consisting of 10 weekly sessions of 90 minutes, involving between 8 and 12 young men. The therapy group will include storytelling circles, instructional segments that translate research findings into simpler terms, mapping exercises, and re-authoring activities, such as role-playing and future-oriented narratives. Facilitators with narrative training should collaborate with a culturally informed co-facilitator or community ally when engaging with specific faith groups since extrinsic religiosity operates primarily through social regulation (Hays & Aranda, 2016). Group interventions deliberately harness communal rituals, mentorship, and accountability as levers for change, while maintaining reflective exercises that prevent automatic conformity to problematic community doctrines (Gao et al., 2021; Hagen et al., 2018; Koletić et al., 2021). The content and activities of the group intentionally utilize the social mechanisms of extrinsic religiosity, such as shared rituals, mentorship, and group norms, to encourage prosocial behaviours (Gao et al., 2021; Hagen et al., 2018), while employing narrative techniques to avert the uncritical acceptance of community messages that could be exclusionary or punitive. Evaluation should encompass both pre- and post-assessment of masculine discrepancy stress, help-seeking attitudes, and pertinent behavioural proxies from research to evaluate the impact. Tracking any shifts in MDS and TMS scores across the course of group treatment, alongside measures of communal engagement from the DUREL or CRS, can provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence of change.

As an aspiring clinician and researcher working at the intersection of religiosity and masculinity, ongoing reflexivity is essential. The literature synthesized previously demonstrates that masculine norms are socially constructed, transmitted, and intergenerational, and that religiosity influences how these lessons are taught and received (de Vries et al., 2022; Perales et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2019). Practitioners, therefore, must routinely examine how their own beliefs regarding faith and gender will impact assessment, case formulation, and intervention strategies. This entails being mindful of how one's personal religiosity or secular beliefs influence rapport, clearly stating the limits of their expertise concerning specific faith traditions, and pursuing cultural supervision when engaging with communities whose religious practices and significances are unfamiliar (Vieten & Lukoff, 2022). Practitioners should also interpret research findings in light of the client's cultural and religious context rather than assuming findings are generalizable. Studies conducted in Brazil, Hong Kong, China and the US show differing patterns dependent on local cultural and religious frameworks, suggesting approaches that worked in one setting may not translate to another (Dengah et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2021; Li & Liu, 2023). Reflexivity mitigates the risk of unintentionally imposing secular interpretations on faith-informed identities and fosters ethical, culturally sensitive practice (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This reflexive stance also ensures that practitioners can flexibly adapt the findings from the three pathways to the client's lived context, recognizing that some may client benefit from strengthening supportive spiritual ties while others may require alternative resources such as mindfulness practices or psychoeducation.

Chapter Five: Recommendation and Conclusion

Recommendation for Future Research

This capstone aimed to explore the impact of religiosity on toxic masculinity in older adolescents and young men. The study examined a diverse range of research methods, including qualitative ethnographies, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, and meta-analyses. Results indicated that religiosity is not solely a protective or risk factor for toxic masculinity in young men, but rather operates through multiple pathways, such as social regulation and providing alternative modes of masculinity. These pathways can either mitigate some harms related to toxic and hegemonic masculine norms or reinforce restrictive gender ideologies in different contexts. The practical implication of this research is significant, as counselors and therapists lack evidence-based guidance for working with young men whose religious beliefs may contribute to buttressing their harmful gender views and norms. Therefore, this review sought to provide conceptual clarity and actionable insights for clinical practice.

This review does not claim definitively that religiosity can always enable or mitigate toxic masculine beliefs and behaviours in young men. Instead, it provides varying and consistent evidence that the way faith is practiced, taught, and internalized can meaningfully influence certain aspects of young men's masculine beliefs and behaviours. Therefore, clinicians and researchers should consider religiosity as a relevant, multi-dimensional domain to be assessed and attended to, rather than a priori remedy for toxic masculinity. This practical approach involves routinely assessing religiosity with multi-item measures that distinguish intrinsic belief, extrinsic participation, spiritual openness, and content of teaching. Additionally, it entails drawing upon a client's faith as a resource when it aligns with clinical goals and client values. Furthermore, implementing faith-sensitive interventions cautiously, with clear, specified

outcomes and ongoing monitoring, is ideal, rather than presuming that religiosity will mechanically interact with masculinity in young men.

To address the limitations identified in the reviewed studies, future research should prioritize stronger designs, finer measurements, and more representative sampling. Longitudinal, multi-phase studies are essential for testing directionality, such as examining whether intrinsic religiosity predicts later decline in masculine discrepancy stress and commensurate decrease in toxic masculine norms or whether shifts in masculine identity precede changes in extrinsic religiosity or are independent of them. Several cross-sectional studies in this review noted the limitation of temporal data and emphasized the need for longitudinal data (Li & Liu, 2023; Upenieks et al., 2024). Measurement refinement is also crucial, and researchers should consider adopting validated instruments that disaggregate intrinsic religiosity, spiritual openness, public ritual participation, and the content of religious teachings. For example, it would be important to differentiate teachings that emphasize service and humility from those that emphasize male authority. The meta-analytic research and methodological critiques by Koletić et al. (2021) and Li & Liu (2021) highlight the problem of relying on single-item religiosity indicators and the resulting loss of nuance in understanding how religiosity functions.

When creating sampling strategies, it is crucial to purposefully consider diversity and intersectionality, as emphasized in psychological standards and ethical codes of conduct (CPA, 2017; CAP, 2022). Several large-scale and population studies reviewed demonstrate intergenerational and institutional effects; however, they often use mixed samples that lack sufficient statistical power for subgroup analyses (de Vries et al., 2022; Perales et al., 2023; Shafer et al., 2019). For future research, it would be prudent to include young men from both dominant and marginalized groups, gender minorities, and low SES populations in order to

accurately determine the effects of religiosity and its moderators. Studies like Gao et al. (2021) and Dengah et al (2024) highlight the importance of cultural context and doctrinal variation, which may play a significant role as key moderators, rather than minor covariates.

Building upon the mechanism identified in this review, three specific research questions are identified. Firstly, does longitudinal growth in intrinsic religiosity predict subsequent reductions in masculine discrepancy stress and related symptoms in young men? This would test intrapsychic buffering, where internalized faith reduces the psychological and social cost of violating or failing to meet traditional, hegemonic masculine norms (Helms et al., 2015). Secondly, to what extent does structured participation in faith-based groups change peer norms and reduce expressions of toxic masculinity, and are these effects mediated by changes in perceived peer attitudes or by reductions in stress from challenging gender norms. This social regulation occurs through peer surveillance mechanisms and self-restraint rituals that some religious communities cultivate among their congregants as well as through exposure to religious leaders who model alternative forms of masculinity (Williams et al., 2017). Lastly, how does the doctrinal content of religious teachings moderate the intergenerational transmission of traditional masculine ideology from fathers to sons, and how does this relate to the son's adoption or rejection of toxic masculine beliefs? Although previous studies, such as Perales et al. (2023), have examined part of this query, they did not directly investigate the transmission and socialization of traditional and toxic masculine beliefs, nor whether other faiths and doctrinal differences within faiths impact this relationship (Chen & Chen, 2023).

Regarding clinical practice, in addition to interventions discussed in Chapter Four, I would also advocate for systemic changes and a focus on training that render faith-sensitive care both feasible and safe. Drawing from what I have learnt writing this capstone, as well as having

been raised religious and treating religious clients at the Family Centre, I believe that agencies ought to implement brief, validated screening tools at intake that differentiate various aspects of religiosity. This approach would enable clinicians to tailor treatment goals accurately in relation to religious beliefs, rather than treating religion as a background variable. Furthermore, training programs for counsellors should encompass religious literacy, culturally safe collaboration with faith leaders, and supervision for addressing value conflicts. On a personal level, the completion of the capstone has enhanced my humility and provided clarity regarding my preconceptions about the topic and how I can apply my findings to my clinical practice. Clinically, I now intend to evaluate religiosity, when appropriate, through multi-dimensional measures and collaboratively establishing goals that resonate with my clients' values and beliefs, rather than imposing my own.

Conclusion

This review examines how religious beliefs and practices shape the manifestation of toxic masculinity in young men, between the ages 15 to 30. Frame by hegemonic masculinity theory and Allport's intrinsic-extrinsic distinction, the review integrates peer-reviewed from psychology, sociology, and public health using a careful search strategy that included qualitative studies, cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal cohorts, and meta-analyses. Three primary pathways recur across the literature, which are religious socialization, religious coping and community support and mechanism of influence. Findings are mixed but conceptually coherent, where intrinsically held faith was found to buffer against the distress that follows failing to meet idealized masculine norms and can support more prosocial masculinities. Extrinsic forms of religiosity can reduce some risk behaviours through social regulation, yet they can also reinforce restrictive, traditional masculine expectations. Across, studies notable methodological limitations

recur, such as reliance on cross-sectional data, simplistic religiosity measures, and samples drawn from culturally specific contexts that limit generalizability. These limitations underscore the need for more mixed-method, longitudinal and intervention research to clarify these causal

In conclusion, my primary assertion is that religiosity has the potential to serve as a significant tool for transforming masculine identity, lessening stress related to gender norm adherence, encouraging positive and nurturing behaviours, and limiting certain detrimental behaviours. Looking ahead, advancement relies on improved measurement, intervention studies, inclusive sampling, and ethical partnerships with clinicians and faith communities. All in all, I believe that this review has only enticed me to continue researching this dynamic, and when I enter my practice, I will incorporate my culturally sensitive and faith-based approach to young male clients who are struggling with their masculinity.

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