

**Lost in Transition: An Exploration into the Contributors to Male Loneliness**

by

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### **Abstract**

This capstone explores the many intersections and complexity of chronic loneliness amongst men. Specifically, this paper examines masculinity norms, socio-economic factors related to loneliness and masculinity, as well as shifting relational expectations and their contributions to the feelings of perceived loneliness. These elements are examined through the theoretical frameworks of hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities, social support theory, neoliberalism and offer unique insight into the experience of loneliness and disconnection that men feel. Some key findings highlight how rigid gender norms may prevent men from effectively creating and maintaining meaningful relationships due to a strong cultural emphasis on self-reliance and competition and prevent them from engaging in help-seeking behavior during periods of emotional distress. Furthermore, economic factors such as wage stagnation, job insecurity and lack of education perpetuate feelings of purposelessness and discourage some men from engaging in life more fully. Gender-informed interventions that help men engage in healthier forms of masculinity are touched upon and express the need for more role sharing between men and women, and safe spaces for men to express their emotions without judgment, but this remains an area that is generally under researched.

*Keywords:* male loneliness, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities, social support theory, chronic loneliness, transient loneliness, failure to launch

### **Dedication**

At the time of this writing there is a strong emotional charge many people feel when discussing men or masculinity, and rightly so much of the time, it is my hope that this capstone will contribute in some small way to finding more patience, empathy, and compassion through these challenging times. This capstone is dedicated to the ones who quietly struggle to be truly seen, heard and understood. The ones who shut down or act out and are looking for guidance and feel a profound sense of loneliness as they wander in the dark to discover who they are supposed to be.

A final thank you to my friends, family and loved ones who have helped me through my own struggles in so many ways without ever knowing it. I wouldn't be here without you.

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## Chapter 1

### Overview of Topic

There has been a great deal of conversation in recent years about the loneliness epidemic and the numerous symptoms felt by those afflicted; however, there is no clear reason why men are reporting greater levels of loneliness. Many conditions have been linked with increased loneliness that warrant further discussion so that effective interventions can be put into place. As human beings, we have the innate need to connect with other people and when these needs go unmet, a myriad of mental and physical symptoms can emerge. Loneliness is often associated with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among other psychological disorders, as well as poor physical markers such as increased inflammation, heart disease and stroke, as well as reduced lifespan (Rokach & Patel, 2024).

Despite progress in the realms of mental health awareness and gender inclusivity, there are still many men who find themselves struggling with forming meaningful relationships, withdrawing emotionally and finding their place in the shifting landscapes of what masculinity means in Western culture. Additionally, the current affordability crisis found in many parts of the world and the resulting mounting pressures have made transitioning into adulthood considerably more difficult today, and have left many men, who continue to hold the traditional belief of their role as providers, feeling stuck or at a loss for what to do. The blending of these many factors has intensified feelings of loneliness amongst men and has raised questions as to how this issue can be addressed more effectively. This capstone endeavors to explore the intersections between the evolving landscape of masculinity, loneliness, and socio-economic factors.

## **Purpose Statement**

The focus of this capstone will be to explore how economic pressures, and social expectations influence the identity development and mental health outcomes of men in young adulthood. Historically, young men have shouldered the expectation to achieve financial independence and take on a provider role for their family units following high school or university. However, as social and cultural progressivism expands and rewrites social roles and expectations for the better, there have been growing pains and challenges around how men renegotiate their roles in society and in relationships. This study aims to explore how these evolving pressures influence young men's mental health, with a particular focus on loneliness, identity formation, and the impact of societal expectations.

## ***Research Questions***

1. What are the some of the key contributors to chronic loneliness amongst men?
2. How have evolving social roles and expectations impacted men's mental health and identity formation?
3. What role does economic stability play in shaping self-identity and feelings of isolation?

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Understanding how men experience loneliness requires multiple theoretical lenses to fully capture the intersections of gender scripts, socio-economic realities and life stage. This capstone will explore this intersection through the theories of hegemonic masculinity, caring masculinities and social support theory to better understand how cultural expectations, identity formation and ability to form relationships contributes to the problem of chronic loneliness. These theories work in concert to demonstrate why these feelings of disconnection come about, but also outline potential avenues for reconnection.

*Hegemonic masculinity* captures the overly familiar cultural ideal of what masculinity should look like through the exemplification of traits such as strength, authority, competitiveness and emotional restraint, and in many ways, it is the standard against which men are measured (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, this concept speaks to how societal power structures that subjugate women and subordinate forms of masculinity are maintained through the close adherence to this form of masculinity. These particular traits are closely adhered to because they are socially rewarded by signalling one's strength and success as a man; however, they also discourage expressions of vulnerability and help-seeking behavior during difficult periods not limited to times of emotional distress, job loss and relational breakdowns. Moreover, it highlights the limitations of traditional definitions of masculinity, namely the emotional restrictiveness that extends to how men view themselves and others as well as how this approach finds itself in discord with contemporary understandings of mental wellbeing. This framework serves to give better understanding to the social and cultural aspects that shape the beliefs and behavior that contribute to chronic loneliness.

Juxtaposed to hegemonic masculinity is *caring masculinities theory*, which attempts to redefine traditional masculinity through the emphasis on relational care while maintaining a masculine identity without devaluing traditionally feminine traits like empathy and nurturing (Elliot, 2016). This approach seeks to break down rigid emotional norms that have been imposed on men and create a path to greater gender equity. This theory offers an opportunity for natural transition from traditional hegemonic practices towards a path that would allow men to engage in meaningful attempts at vulnerability and emotional intelligence that does not sacrifice, in a categorical manner, their masculine identity. The benefit of this theory is in how it can help inform actionable steps that can be taken to help men engage in healthier emotional wellness

while leveraging the inherent strengths of masculinity and lessen the disadvantages.

*Neoliberalism* in the context of this capstone is used to better understand how economic and cultural shifts have shaped individual wellbeing, identity and social connectedness. At its core, neoliberalism champions free markets, privatization and individual responsibility as the means to healthier societies and has been the predominant policy of Western nations since the late 20th century (Becker et al., 2021; Coburn, 2003). As publicly funded social supports are rolled back further and further, individuals find themselves accountable for their own success and failure in life and this has had an effect on many men who are not able to compete effectively under neoliberal criteria for success and may experience feelings of diminished self-worth and purpose leading to withdrawal and by extension loneliness (Becker et al., 2021; Coburn, 2003; Zeira, 2021).

The last lens applied is *social support theory*. This framework examines how an individual's perceived social support structure serves to enhance overall wellbeing and provide a buffer against stress and feelings of loneliness as well as providing direct benefits to long-term health outcomes (Feeney & Collins, 2015). This support can be expressed in four different forms—namely emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal. Social support theory places particular emphasis on not just the support a person receives but their belief that support is available to them at all. This distinction is important as it is this level of perceived support that has a greater impact on better mental health outcomes and lower mortality risks (Uchino, 2009).

As applied to this capstone subject, social support theory underlines the working definition that will be used moving forward. The perceived lack of social support an individual feels is distinct from how many social ties they may have and helps explain why seemingly social individuals can still be vulnerable to loneliness. It is also important for understanding how

men engage in help seeking behavior, and how they build and maintain supportive relationships as will be explored further into this subject. Social support theory as applied to male loneliness highlights how structural and cultural forces contribute to feelings of disconnection and reduced wellbeing and a deeper understanding of these intersections are key to creating effective interventions to strengthen supportive relationships and reduce stigma around men's mental health.

These frameworks working in concert offer a strong foundation for understanding loneliness amongst men. Hegemonic masculinity offers some explanation into the social and cultural pressures that shape and lead masculine expression, and neoliberalism provides a context for how this expression may further exacerbate loneliness amongst men. In contrast, caring masculinities offers a way forward from traditional masculinity that allows for healthier expression of emotions and supports relationship building while finally social support theory connects these behaviors to mental health outcomes. By harmonizing these frameworks together, this capstone avoids a reductive or pathologizing view of male loneliness and instead presents it as a multi-layered issue rooted in cultural, structural, and interpersonal domains. This integrated approach serves to highlight areas where therapeutic intervention, social policy, and community engagement can bolster emotional connection, promote healthier masculine identities, and mitigate the impacts of loneliness across the male lifespan.

### **Methodology**

This capstone utilized a narrative literature review methodology to explore the contributors and fluid nature of loneliness through the intersections of traditional gender norms, cultural and economic pressures and identity formation. This approach will allow for a rich synthesis of literature across multiple disciplines including psychology, sociology, gender studies

and public health, all of which offer their own unique perspectives to the topic of loneliness. The literature review focuses heavily on peer-reviewed articles, both qualitative and quantitative, published between 2014 and 2025 to capture the most updated understanding of male loneliness and to highlight the shifts in masculinity, socioeconomics, and culture over time and across generations.

To find relevant articles, searches were conducted using databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, Consensus, and the City University Library were used using keywords and search terms such as “male OR masculinity AND loneliness,” “loneliness AND health implications,” “economics AND loneliness,” “mental health AND masculinity.” This approach yielded 56 articles that were then scanned for relevance to the capstone’s research questions. Articles were deemed appropriate for inclusion if they were focused on a Western cultural context, meaningful sample sizes of men in studies that included both men and women, and predominantly participants over the age of 18. Furthermore, for the article to be included in this capstone, it needed to address at least one of the themes regarding cultural scripts around masculinity, loneliness and social/emotional disconnection, economic stressors and wellbeing, and help-seeking behavior exhibited by men. Because this capstone is meant to be a general overview of male loneliness, most articles pertaining to specific intersections such as race, gender expression, and sexuality were excluded as these intersections are deserving of their own investigation, and it would not be fair to dilute these experiences with more generalized studies that did not track these factors. Grey literature was included to help provide further context for how the problem of male loneliness is mostly understood in the cultural zeitgeist and provides a familiar benchmark from which discussion can be driven. This methodological approach helps to contextualize the issue of male loneliness through a socio-cultural and economic lens that will

hopefully lead to actionable steps that can be taken at the individual level all the way to the level of government policy.

### **Contribution to the Field**

This capstone contributes to the field of counselling by bridging pieces of the existing literature around the experience of loneliness and its causes, while at the same time highlighting the significant knowledge gap around this subject. The loneliness epidemic has attracted growing attention; however, much of the research has tended to generalize the experience of loneliness without exploring how it is influenced by systemic, gendered and economic factors. As mentioned in more detail earlier, through the application of theories such as hegemonic, caring masculinities, neoliberalism theory and social support theory, this capstone will explore loneliness amongst men as a sociocultural phenomenon influenced by both structural pressures and conflicts of identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Elliott, 2015). The practical value of this capstone will be derived from presenting how gendered scripts around masculinity, in the Western context, obstruct men from engaging in help-seeking behaviors and emotional expression thereby creating mental health challenges, which may promote a deeper understanding of how perceived lack of social support felt by men predisposes them to depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. This practical discussion will hopefully engage and motivate readers to have a deeper empathy and inspire solutions that create meaningful connections where the masculine identity is reinvented rather than diminished.

### **Reflexivity and Positionality Statement**

As I write and read about the experience of loneliness amongst men, I am cognizant of how my social location affects how I approach and interpret the topic and the literature surrounding it. I identify as a cisgender male and have lived much of my life steeped in

traditional masculine ideals such as self-reliance, emotional restraint, and aspiring to the role of a provider. As such, much of a literature resonated with me at a personal level and I found myself having a range of emotional reactions to what I was reading through the course of this study. My life experience has provided me with interesting perspectives on masculinity and loneliness through the realms of education and career choice. Before pursuing a career in counselling, I put my marketing degree to use, but the economy at the time forced a career change and I found myself working as an electrician for a decade while I paid down loans and began to save to return to school to pursue this master's degree. I was immediately struck by the contrast between the male-dominated world of the trades and the female dominated environment of my class where I was one of three men in a class of 22 students, and the substance in discussion around men's issues could be best described as callous. The question that I found myself asking is why men's mental health couldn't have its own discussion? Would discussing men's issues without gender comparison somehow diminish the conversation related to women's issues? I will never know because it never happened; however, that experience was the impetus for this capstone and an outlet to satisfy my curiosity related to the shifting tides of gender norms and the emerging loneliness pandemic amongst men and more importantly, what can be done about it.

I recognize that these personal experiences may colour the thoughts and information put forth regarding traditional masculinity and its affects on loneliness; however, my aim is to capture a slice of the narrative as best I can, being mindful of the many intersections that exist when discussing loneliness, and acknowledging that loneliness amongst men is not a monolithic experience that can be captured in its entirety. To help address the biases I may be bringing into this project, I have endeavored to present relevant information and articles that present counterpoints when it is possible for me to do so. Furthermore, I have discussed this topic at

length with members of my cohort as well as my capstone supervisor and incorporated their feedback to deepen the discussion, improve my own understanding of the topic and reflect on why I am including certain sections over others. By turning the focus onto socio-economic factors in relation to masculinity and loneliness the conversation provides a gateway for actionable steps that can be taken to alleviate some of the discomfort men both at a personal and clinical level when addressing this issue. I am of the belief that many men would like to transition to a healthier version of masculinity where they aren't so restricted in their emotions and can comfortably take on a caring role without fear of social reprisals, but from what I have seen and experienced, they simply do not know how to make that transition without guidance, so they withdraw further. In many ways this has opened the door for uninformed influencer rhetoric to seep into the male psyche of what masculinity should look like and fuel regressive policies both here in Canada and abroad.

### **Definition of Terms**

To help guide the discussion and create some clarity it is important to define some key terms that will appear throughout the capstone. These terms were selected to support the conversation around the intersections of loneliness, gender norms, identity development, and socio-economic factors.

### ***Caring Masculinities***

Caring masculinities emphasizes the rejection of dominating values such as control and aggression and instead move towards values more associated with caring (Elliott, 2015). By embracing caring masculinities, the belief is that men can be both caring and emotionally engaged without sacrificing their sense of self and that they will benefit from increased

emotional expression and deeper relationships while also contributing to gender equality in society.

### ***Chronic and Transient Loneliness***

Chronic loneliness refers to feelings of loneliness that persist for two or more years, as compared to transient loneliness, which is short-term and often related to specific life events like retirement or bereavement (Domènech-Abella et al., 2023).

### ***Failure to Launch***

Failure to launch refers to young adults who are unemployed, living with their parents, and out of the educational system (Whitley, 2020). In the context of male loneliness, it refers to how many young people are facing challenges with completing school and struggling to even enter the workforce and become independent functional adults.

### ***Loneliness***

Loneliness is commonly defined as the perceived lack of social support an individual feels (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). This is separate from social isolation, as a person can have many social connections and still not feel supported.

### ***Masculinity***

As described by McKenzie et al. (2018), masculinity is not a singular static concept, but an amalgamation of many different patterns based upon gendered social practice and is heavily influenced by relationships, and intersecting identities such as sexuality, ethnicity and social class.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of loneliness amongst men and begins to connect it with social, economic and cultural factors through the stated research questions and theoretical

frameworks that will be applied. Chapter 2 will review the existing literature pertaining to masculinity, the physical and emotional tolls of loneliness, the role of economic instability and how these factors coalesce in shaping male identity. This chapter will also explore how male adherence to rigid gender norms affects relationship and friendship formation. Chapter 3 will draw upon findings in the literature review and synthesize the information to highlight gaps in the literature and what therapeutic practices can be put in place to better support men to transition to healthier expressions of masculinity and help find ways to navigate the shifting cultural landscape towards more meaningful connections and better emotional health.

## Chapter 2

The ongoing discussion around male loneliness is one that is complex and multifaceted and rooted in shifting cultural, socio-economic, and relational landscapes (Franklin et al., 2018). Feelings of loneliness are often assumed to be a universal experience; existing and emerging research have suggested there is a measure of nuance in how men feel and express their loneliness as compared to women (Barreto et al., 2022). These discrepancies are typically influenced by traditional masculine values, downward economic pressures, and social and cultural values (Barreto et al., 2022; Ratcliffe et al., 2020). While much of the existing literature has indicated that there is an emerging pattern of loneliness among men, it is often obfuscated by statistics on rates of loneliness amongst women, stemming from measurement bias and clinician bias that often overlooks symptoms of distress in males (Smith et al., 2016).

### **Male Loneliness and Its Relationship to Masculinity**

There is growing interest in the study of loneliness amongst men, particularly in Australia and the U.K.; however, much of the research is fragmented and somewhat inconsistent with the weight attributed to different predictive factors and their interactions at different stages of life (Botha and Bower, 2024; Ratcliffe et al., 2020). Distilling loneliness into specific experiences may prove to be the answer to understanding the gendered differences and generate targeted interventions. There is evidence to support that loneliness is not a monolithic concept but is a subject that contains multitudes (Van Tilburg, 2021). This is highlighted by the distinctions between social loneliness versus emotional loneliness, as well as chronic loneliness versus transient loneliness. Social loneliness is commonly described as the feeling of being disconnected from others in social situations and characterized by the perception that one has little or no social support (Hyland et al., 2018). Juxtaposed with social loneliness is emotional

loneliness, which is characterized by a deep sense of isolation and few to no intimate connections. Social loneliness is related to the quantity of social interactions, while emotional loneliness is more concerned with the quality of the relationships and speaks to how an individual can have a large social circle yet still feel lonely due to the superficial nature of the interactions (Van Tilburg, 2021).

Further to this point, Van Tilburg (2021) examined the different types of loneliness using the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam, which collected responses from 1,316 participants aged 61-101, and applied multiple measurement tools including direct questions, the Existential Loneliness Questionnaire (ELQ) as well as the 11-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2010), which measured feelings of connectedness and isolation using indirect questions and distinguished between social and emotional loneliness with higher scores indicating greater loneliness. Van Tilburg (2021) also examined a third dimension of loneliness defined as existential loneliness, which they characterized as different from social and emotional loneliness by virtue of a broader separation as “related to the nature of existence, in particular, a lack of meaning in life” (e336). The findings indicated that when measuring loneliness, direct questions yielded the most consistent results for emotional loneliness. Furthermore, the author found that existential and social loneliness were distinct dimensions, but the measurement tool for existential loneliness was inconsistent and would require improvement if it was to be included in an integrated survey that measured the three identified dimensions of loneliness. The findings from Van Tilburg’s paper underscored the multidimensional nature of loneliness and the importance of reliable measurement tools to capture all aspects of the experience through direct and indirect questions.

The temporal component of loneliness is important when distinguishing if the loneliness being experienced is chronic or transient (Wolska & Creaven, 2022). Loneliness is considered to be chronic when it lasts for an extended period, typically two years. Wolska and Creaven noted that chronic loneliness is associated with more detrimental symptoms such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and challenges in making meaningful connections and affects approximately 6.7% to 10% of people. In contrast, transient loneliness is temporary and often connected to specific life events such as a breakup, death of a loved one, or moving to a new city, and is the type of loneliness that nearly everyone experiences at some point in their life. While understanding the many dimensions of loneliness is important, there is still a gap in the research surrounding a gendered understanding of loneliness and further exploration into *why* women tend to report greater levels of emotional loneliness while men report greater levels of social loneliness; understanding this gap is crucial for developing appropriate and gender-informed policies and interventions to address these issues effectively (Barreto et al., 2021; De Jong Gierveld, 1987).

There are many contributing factors that maintain and exacerbate loneliness, but the focus of this literature review will confine itself to a social constructivist lens that includes how factors such as reduced employment, wage stagnation, and waning interest in educational attainment play upon the traditional masculine identity and contribute to greater levels of loneliness (Beller, 2024; Binder & Bound, 2019; Qian, 2016). Further to the point, these factors also weigh heavily into how romantically viable a man is in the traditional formation of partnerships where the historical expectation is that the man will serve as a provider for their partner and family unit, and in return they receive the benefits of emotional safety that serves as a strong protective factor against loneliness (Qian, 2016). Continued research is needed to

ascertain how men are navigating the shifting cultural norms around the provider and protector roles and what conditions allow them to evolve their ideas around masculinity to better adapt and maintain their general wellbeing.

Another research gap identified in the literature review is how friendships serve to mitigate feelings of loneliness among men. There is evidence that younger generations are working to redefine masculinity and are more open to creating friendships with more emotional depth; however, this is also the cohort that has been shown to be the loneliest when accounting for life stages (Barreto et al., 2022; Gil, 2023). Furthermore, much of the research highlighted the cultural barrier that discourages men from sharing their loneliness or forming friendships beyond the ones that allow them to participate in activities (McKenzie et al., 2018).

There are many ways to interpret the literature and just as many research gaps. As such, this literature review aims to synthesize the literature and bring attention to the interplay between masculinity, socio-economic factors, and the consequences of not addressing the contributing factors. This review is by no means exhaustive but will help deepen the understanding of the myriad of factors contributing to the experience of loneliness for men.

### **Predictors of Loneliness**

Beginning with a broad examination of loneliness, Barreto et al. (2021) analyzed data from the BBC Loneliness Experiment that included 46,054 participants between the ages of 16-99 from 237 countries. The intention of the research was to explore the different experiences of loneliness across cultures, age and gender and identify the interplay between variables. This study used the four-item UCLA Loneliness survey as the measurement tool and found that loneliness decreased with age, was greater in individualistic cultures, and was greater in men than women. Barreto et al. reasoned that men may need certain conditions to feel comfortable

sharing their feelings of loneliness and an online survey provided those conditions. An additional explanation was that collectivist cultures offset scores of loneliness reported in individualistic cultures at older ages due to greater support provided for women who are widowed or find themselves in a caretaker role for their partner. The outlier from this study was the group that felt the greatest amount of loneliness, when accounting for age, culture, and gender, were young men.

Barreto et al. (2022) continued this line of inquiry and explored the nature and variation of the stigma associated with loneliness. The authors defined loneliness stigma as the beliefs of one's culture that diminishes those seen as socially disconnected. Compared to older individuals, young men were more likely to feel perceived stigma in their communities and if they were to come forward and share their experiences then they would be labelled as weak. These findings were reflective of gendered and lifespan socialization and helped explain why the externalization of feelings is largely devalued and discouraged. These findings also highlighted the expectation that men should demonstrate emotional control and self-reliance without aid. As a result, younger men that are still navigating their identity as an emerging adult may feel a heightened sensitivity to this stigma compared to their elders and may go to greater lengths to conceal their feelings. Barreto et al. posited that this could be due to the greater weight placed upon peer acceptance at younger ages compared to older generations who no longer seek out peer acceptance as actively.

In their critical interpretive synthesis of the literature pertaining to male loneliness in Western society, Ratcliffe et al. (2020) reviewed 79 quantitative and qualitative studies published between 1978 and 2018. Examining the studies through the hegemonic masculinities theoretical lens, several themes emerged that highlighted the factors contributing to loneliness. The authors

found that how men perceived their social networks influenced their degree of loneliness and that men often felt that the quality of their social connections was poor. This may be due to men being more likely to emphasize aspects such as network size and interaction over the quality of emotional support received. Furthermore, men were shown to be less willing to discuss their loneliness or seek support, which provides another barrier to forming meaningful relationships that could alleviate their distress. Ratcliffe et al. observed that this avoidance of emotional vulnerability was linked to masculine values as well as negative experiences where men had tried and failed to discuss their loneliness.

Male dependence on partners for connection is well established, and Ratcliffe et al.'s (2020) study corroborated this by demonstrating men who are in relationships reported lower levels of loneliness and single men reported significantly greater levels of loneliness when compared to single women. These lonely men were also at greater risk for addictions and unhealthy/risky coping strategies such as substance abuse, drinking alcohol, engaging with sex workers, or gambling. Furthermore, men who did not subscribe to the traditional masculine ideals, such as those outside of the heteronormative sphere, were more likely to report loneliness due to feeling "insufficiently masculine." On a more micro-level examination, the authors also found that factors of age, country of origin, sexuality and involvement with sports were key intersections with gender that drove higher levels of loneliness amongst men. Lastly, Ratcliffe et al.'s scrutiny of the tools used to measure loneliness found that in studies using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, which is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure an individual's subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation via a Likert scale, no meaningful difference between men and women, but when using the De Jong-Gierveld Loneliness Scale (1985) men reported high levels of social loneliness compared to women who experienced greater emotional

loneliness, meaning that men seem to conceptualize loneliness as it relates to the strength of their social network (De Jong-Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985). These measurement differences may account for underreporting of loneliness by men and imply that some of the studies may not have been particularly accurate in understanding men's experience of loneliness. Another key limitation of Ratcliffe et al.'s (2020) review was that 37% of the included studies were published before 2000, which may not have captured shifting trends in the last 20+ years.

A 2021 study conducted by Mansour et al. found that there were reliable predictors of loneliness by measuring 25 risk and protective factors. The authors identified that 22 out of the 25 measured items offered predictive value, with low environmental mastery (i.e., an individual's ability to shape their environment to meet their needs) proving to be the most robust predictor of loneliness among adult men with low perceived social support and depressive symptoms also being weighted more heavily. Perceived social support was a common item for measuring loneliness but environmental mastery offered insight unique to this study. Of the men included in Mansour et al.'s study, 6% reported high levels of loneliness and 56% reported moderate to high levels of loneliness. A notable critique of this research was that it was adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the reported percentages of moderate to high loneliness may have been inflated given the exceptional circumstances of this global crisis; however, it may also have exacerbated the symptoms so that they were more readily identifiable.

When examining how loneliness develops through adolescence into young adulthood and the correlates to midlife outcomes, von Soest et al. (2020) found that males experiencing persistent loneliness were more likely to have poorer midlife outcomes, such as lower education, reduced earnings and increased likelihood of antidepressant usage. The longitudinal study included 3,116 Norwegians aged 13-31, and made use of direct and indirect survey questions.

The study found women reported higher levels of loneliness when asked directly compared to men who scored higher when asked indirectly. The 4-item UCLA Loneliness Scale was implemented to measure loneliness using indirect questions such as “No one really knows me well,” “People are around me but not with me,” “I can find companionship when I want it,” and “I feel in tune with people around me.” The first two questions assessed for emotional loneliness while the latter two assessed social loneliness.

Distinguishing between social and emotional loneliness is important for understanding how loneliness is felt across the genders, as it seems evident by the literature reviewed thus far that men feel social loneliness more, which again is denoted by feelings that one’s social network is not sufficient, as compared to emotional loneliness, which is the felt absence of close emotional relationships such as a spouse or best friend, and is characterized by feelings of emptiness and isolation (Hyland et al., 2018; von Soest et al., 2020). This trend has also been observed by the Survey Center on American Life, which found that 15% of American men reported having no close friends compared to just 3% reporting the same in 1990 (Cox, 2021). In early adulthood, von Soest et al. (2020) found that those who felt steady loneliness were at greater risk for financial instability and increased likelihood of disability, which suggested that loneliness might be more of a trajectory than a phase and perhaps played a large role in shaping adulthood. Regardless of how loneliness was assessed, the authors found that key protective factors in adolescence included having a close friend, not moving out before the age of 18, holding the perception that one’s parents are caring, and degree of agency which was associated with more prosocial behaviour. In many ways these protective factors run counter to the messaging that young boys and men receive about being self-reliant and emotionally stoic and potentially adds further confusion to what a matured and healthy male identity should look like.

Loneliness is an ongoing issue that is shaped through factors such as age, culture, and gender norms and is particularly prevalent amongst younger men (Barreto et al., 2021). Individualistic cultures skew towards greater reported levels of loneliness. More specifically, according to Barreto et al., men in individualistic cultures feel social loneliness more acutely as compared to emotional loneliness; however, there is reason to believe that traditional masculine norms may encourage an underreporting of loneliness for fear of being stigmatized. Notable predictors of loneliness denoted in this section include lack of perceived social support, depressive symptoms and low environmental mastery which refers to one's abilities to shape their environment and meet their personal needs (Mansour et al., 2021). Furthermore, without strong social networks men tend to rely heavily on their intimate partnerships for emotional support, placing an unfair burden on their partner that is often not reciprocated (Ratcliffe et al., 2020). Lastly, there are several protective factors that have been identified as ways to circumvent the most harmful traditional masculine norms and some of these protective factors are close friendships, supportive parents and increased self-sufficiency. The following section will expand on the importance of understanding masculine values and the rigid gender script that many men adhere to at their own detriment.

### **The Role of Traditional Masculine Values**

Masculinity is an umbrella term that represents different notions to different cultures, but in the Western context traditional masculinity typically embodies independence, stoicism, competitiveness, ambition, but they are also found to be contributing factors to how susceptible men are to feelings of loneliness (Nordin et al., 2024). These qualities, among others, are often defined as hegemonic because they serve to reinforce gender norms and longstanding hierarchical structure in Western culture (Iacoviello et al., 2021).

In their critical interpretive synthesis of the literature on men and loneliness in the Western context, Ratcliffe et al. (2020) noted a number of values that contribute to men being reluctant to express any sort of vulnerability. Their critical interpretive synthesis identified relevant literature and data, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, that was distilled into theoretical and conceptual constructs. The synthesis drew upon 79 studies, 63 of which were quantitative and included university students and older adults from wealthier Western nations. What emerged from the data were common values, as recounted earlier, of self-reliance, stoicism, and emotional restraint and that these values may be a key contributor to possible underreporting of loneliness in studies that use direct measurement. Furthermore, these traditionally masculine values may serve as a protective buffer as attributes, like self-sufficiency and resilience, lead men to find adaptive ways of addressing their discomfort while perhaps not fully addressing the underlying emotions. This could look like taking initiative in recognizing one's situation and making an effort to take part in social activities like sports, to satisfy the social demands of loneliness but not the emotional elements. Consequently, Ratcliffe et al. asserted that these traditional masculine values may have led men to overly rely on their romantic partnerships for emotional support and leave their own social support networks underdeveloped, as becomes apparent after a break-up or partner death. It is during these consequential life events that the buffer provided by traditional masculine values seems to fail most often, and when help is needed the most, it is not pursued.

Botha and Bower (2024) had similar findings to other studies that young men are deeply affected by cultural expectations of masculinity and feel pressured to meet these expectations. Such expectations included being the primary breadwinner in relationships which can lead to loneliness as men feel less inclined to pursue romantic partnerships if they do not feel they can

fulfill that role. Like other studies in this review, Botha and Bower leaned heavily on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, which covered the years 2002 to 2021, waves 1 to 19, and contained 12,117 male participants. The longstanding cultural expectations around masculinity have historically discouraged men from acknowledging their loneliness and seeking help which may skew self-report survey results. The data demonstrated how males who identified more strongly with traditional masculine beliefs were more likely to report increased loneliness, particularly among middle aged males. Furthermore, Botha and Bower's study highlighted that males belonging to minority social categories were more likely to experience greater loneliness as they felt pressured to conform to the values of the dominant groups.

There are many social, economical, and cultural factors that shape what masculinity means to different groups; however, the important piece is how these masculine norms create downward pressure on boys and men to conform and receive approval by the greater collective (Connell, 2021; Nordin et al., 2024). These unspoken rules of masculinity eliminate innumerable ways for men to build connections leaving options such as work and sports as the primary means of making connections without undermining their masculine identity (Nordin et al., 2024). While work and sports provide a medium for connection, they also reinforce masculine norms as captured by the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory such as winning, self-reliance, risk-taking, violence, primacy of work, and dominance (Mahalik et al., 2005; Nordin et al., 2024). The reliance on using structured activities as a primary mode of connection among men puts a limitation on what behaviors are acceptable and what ones are not, and engaging in behavior that is traditionally coded as feminine such as sharing emotions or asking for support, which has

widely been discouraged through the fear of alienating oneself from activity friends who may not be socialized to be emotionally open to deeper conversations (Nordin et al., 2024).

### **Challenges to Traditional Masculine Roles**

As men begin to share more in domestic responsibilities, their values around masculinity may become more flexible. Brandth and Kvande (2016) conducted a qualitative study with 12 Norwegian fathers and found that when men were in the stay-at-home role, they could integrate expanded values of caring and nurturing into their masculine identities despite initially having low confidence in their abilities to be a stay-at-home parent. Interviews were semi-structured, and had participants reflect on their experiences, emotions, and perceived changes in their masculinity. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to caregiving competence, emotional bonding, and the integration of care into masculine identity. The study was situated within the broader discourse on caring masculinities, a concept, as discussed earlier, that challenges hegemonic masculinity by integrating values of care, emotional intimacy, and interdependence into male identity. The researchers argued that caring fatherhood could serve as a transformative experience that reshapes men's social connections and self-worth, potentially mitigating male loneliness.

Lee and Lee (2016) had similar findings in their own qualitative study on American men and found that the men who were able to adapt and incorporate more caregiving traits into their masculine identity were also able to relate to others more easily. The study interviewed 25 stay-at-home fathers in the U.S. using semi-structured interviews lasting 90 minutes that were guided by a caring masculinities theoretical perspective. The interviews were analyzed and divided into smaller codes of information that were subjected to an iterative process where the codes were grouped together under themes that the authors felt explained the participants experiences. Lee

and Lee's findings suggested that men who were more engaged in caregiving roles were more likely to report increased levels of satisfaction caring for their children at little or no cost to their relationship with their spouse while also increasing their emotional connection to others and having a deeper appreciation for caregiver roles. The authors found that these stay-at-home fathers felt isolated in their experience as they were commonly excluded from mothers' play groups and struggled to form social connections with other caregivers. To highlight how men were able to relate to others more easily, Ratcliffe et al. (2023) hypothesized how rejecting some masculine norms alleviated some loneliness through increased social connections and enhanced self-worth. The role of the stay-at-home dad further demonstrated that masculinity is a fluid construct that can be adapted and reworked in such a way that men can engage in meaningful work and relationship building without these caring roles clashing with their masculine identity (Lee & Lee, 2016).

The reality of how these traditional beliefs play out in the relationship may not be as impactful as previous studies have suggested. Foster and Stratton (2020) replicated a study performed in 2015 by Bertrand et al. on the effects of women being the breadwinner in heterosexual relationships and marital satisfaction and dissolution. Foster and Stratton's (2020) updated findings indicated that there is a general decline in the importance of males being the household breadwinners. The updated study drew data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY 1997) that spanned from 1997-2015 and included 21,395 participants as well as the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey that spanned from 2001-2016, covering waves 1-14, and included 43,865 participants. Foster and Stratton examined the connection between income reports and relationship satisfaction and found that the effects of female breadwinning in cohabiting relationships was amplified for younger less-educated

individuals, meaning that the less educated the male was the more likely they were to be less satisfied in a relationship with a partner of greater education. A marked difference the authors noticed was that in Australia, females who outearned their partners were more likely to re-partner with someone of similar or greater earnings than themselves, a trend that was not observed in the American sample set (NLSY 1997). This discrepancy hinted at the lack of generalizability between countries (and cultures) when applying these findings and where future research may want to concentrate on replicability. Foster and Stratton's study further signaled how traditional masculine values have been shifting from that of being the financial provider position, and higher achievement in education continues to be one of the stronger signals of positive outcomes for how males adapt to shifting norms and values as men with higher education levels were less likely to conform to traditional masculine norms, and were likely to be in more stable partnerships when women outearned them. Conversely, the study also brought attention to the potential continued importance of male earnings amongst less educated partnerships as reflected by the increased likelihood of women in this study to re-partner with someone of higher earnings than themselves given the opportunity.

As a whole, this section speaks to how traditional masculine norms are being actively challenged and showing signs of evolution through male engagement in caregiving roles and shifting breadwinning dynamics. The studies by Brandth and Kvande (2016) and Lee and Lee (2016) brought attention to men who take on nurturing roles, and the redefining of masculinity into something more emotionally connected and relational, despite the associated discomfort or social exclusion by other caregivers. The relaxing of rigid masculine norms were also broadly suggested by Ratcliffe et al. (2023) as doing so was shown to promote greater social connection and reduce loneliness. Furthermore, Foster and Stratton (2023) found that one of the prime tenets

of masculinity, the provider role, has seen a marked shift away from shouldering that role alone, particularly amongst more educated men who seem to be more encouraging and accepting of higher earning partners than their less educated counterparts. The interweave of masculine identity and current socio-economics realities cannot be overstated in its importance to men's mental health and will be explored further in the next section with an overview of the socio-economic realities that many men face and the impact had on their abilities to form meaningful connections to mitigate feelings of loneliness.

### **Socio-Economic Factors Affecting Male Loneliness**

Loneliness is linked just as closely to one's external world as it is to the internal. Factors such as employment, education, income, social media and relationships all play significant roles in the experience of loneliness. Men who struggle to address these factors may be at greater risk for experiencing loneliness and consequently feel the pressures of societal expectations begin to affect their self-worth and possibly withdraw from work, school or their social lives entirely (Whitley, 2021). Many of these factors have been driven by rise of neoliberalism which extols individualism, growth and competition which can be thought to be beneficial for providing personal motivation towards happiness and growth; however, it also fosters a social environment that puts men in opposition to one another rather than in support of each other which can lead to isolation and feelings of loneliness (Becker et al., 2021). How neoliberalism directly impacts men's felt sense of masculinity is difficult to define and measure; Becker et al. observed that shifts in the socio-economic landscape have correlated with changes to men's mental health and sense of loneliness. Masculinity has traditionally been closely tied to employment, role as a provider, and independence, and through the observation of these socio-economic markers we can improve our understanding of how neoliberal values affect men, their perceived sense of

loneliness and wellbeing (Becker et al., 2021; Binder and Bound, 2019). This section will discuss the implications that education, financial stability, friendship formation, and social media have upon the experience of loneliness and how they contribute to shaping the social connections men are able to make in life.

### ***Income and Education***

Income and education are strong predictors of loneliness among men, with those of lower socio-economic reporting higher levels of loneliness (Beller, 2024). Having access to material and social resources increases the likelihood that an individual will be able to maintain and create social connections. Kung et al. (2022) investigated the economic disparities in loneliness, social isolation, and social support using data from the UK Biobank that was collected between 2006-2010 and 2014-2020, which contained 500,000 and 400,000 participants respectively, between the ages of 40-70. Data was collected from self-report questions such as “Do you often feel lonely?” “How often do you visit friends or family or have them visit you?” and “How often are you able to confide in someone close to you?” Each question was intended to measure loneliness, social isolation or social support. The results were examined through a cross-sectional analysis that compared varying economic status within the same geographical area to control for neighborhood effects. Kung et al. found that lower income and education as well as neighborhood safety and poverty was associated with increased likelihood of social isolation, loneliness, and lack of social support for both men and women. A limitation of this study was the measured age range did not include those under 40 years old, as well as the non validated measurement tools used to capture loneliness and social isolation which may not have captured the data accurately based on the apprehension of men to admit they are lonely when questioned directly (Kung et al., 2022; von Soest et al., 2020).

While income and education may not be the direct cause of loneliness, they do serve as protective factors against it (Beller, 2024). In a study of 3,784 middle aged and older Germans, Beller examined social inequalities as related to loneliness using the six-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale and used level of education, income and occupational prestige as the measured contributors of loneliness. Beller cited that education level is commonly associated with higher lifetime earnings and greater access to high prestige careers; however, this study found that education had little effect on loneliness, but occupational prestige served as a strong predictor. The distinguishing factor that was found to moderate the effect education has on loneliness is how well that education was able to provide access to greater material and social resources. The author also highlighted the bi-directional nature of loneliness whereby lacking income and occupational prestige may contribute to loneliness; it would seem that feeling lonely would inhibit the drive to obtain such wealth. While Beller did not speak directly of the implications this study has for men, it served to help understand the reported increase of loneliness amongst younger men. For instance, a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that men who were not college educated were more likely to leave the work force than those that were (Chavda, 2024). As opportunities for upward social mobility become increasingly dependent on further training and education, the men who do not pursue these qualifications will likely face greater social isolation as their economic advantage is eroded further and with it their access to wider social networks (Beller, 2024).

### ***Employment and Income***

Binder and Bound (2019) examined the earnings of American men in the prime of their working life, in this case males aged 25-54. They found that between 1973 and 2015 the wages of this cohort had stagnated and been redistributed across education levels. The authors also

observed that men without post-secondary education withdrew from the labor market at greater rates than those who had high education, and that the job market for those without post-secondary has shrunk or re-organized so that previous training and experience has lost value and limited opportunities for upward mobility within their industry (e.g., automation of factories). These shifts in labor participation do not exist in a vacuum and may be affected by intersecting social dynamics such as the waning motivation to obtain further training and education.

Binder and Bound (2019) suggested that this decline in labor for participation may be due in part to the reduction in family formation. Men have historically occupied the role of financial provider, and this has provided a strong incentive to seek and maintain employment; however, as the rate of marriage amongst less educated men has decreased and the rate of men living with parents or relatives has increased, there is less incentive to re-enter the workforce, especially when men can rely on the income of family members or public support benefits. Binder and Bound's study used longitudinal data from three surveys—the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY79 and NLSY97) to compare cognitive and non-cognitive skill levels across generations, and the March Current Population Survey (CPS) to estimate trends in workforce engagement and income reliance. It is important to note that Binder and Bound's study used income as a proxy for employment as the datasets used annual earnings rather than direct measurements to assess for employment status, with zero or low income being attributed to low or no participation in the labour force. The authors did not cite the number of participants in each study, although each survey was meant to be nationally representative of the American population. Overall, Binder and Bound's study highlighted the multifaceted nature of why some men are not seeking or maintaining

employment and complimented the prevailing theory that men are withdrawing due to changes in demand for occupations they traditionally held.

In the 2024 study on the predictors of male loneliness across the lifespans that was discussed earlier, Botha and Bower examined Australians aged 15-98 and claimed it to be the first study ever to examine predictors of loneliness for men across life stages. The study highlighted how research on male loneliness was still in its infancy and had a long way to go to fully understand the intersecting factors that contribute to this condition. Data was used from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, which covered the years 2002 to 2021, waves 1 to 19, and contained 12,117 male participants. To measure loneliness a single-item direct question used was “I often feel very lonely” and respondents answered on a seven-point scale ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree.” In addition to this tool, a second multi-item scale was used containing indirect questions that reflected loneliness that was brought about by unmet social needs with questions such as “People don't come to visit me as often as I would like,” and “I often need help from other people but can't get it.” What the researchers found was that predictors of loneliness changed over time depending on the life stage. Botha and Bower found that household income was not a contributing factor for loneliness at any age group and the authors explicitly stated that income did not have a mitigating influence. The finding that household income is not a contributor to loneliness is interesting when held up against factors such as delayed financial independence, economic instability and the traditional identity many men feel to be the breadwinner for their households (Beller, 2024; Binder and Bound, 2019; Whitley, 2021). The discrepancies between these findings warrants further investigation and highlights the many complexities at work when distilling the contributing factors to loneliness.

While it is difficult to separate income from employment there is much to be said about the sense of identity, opportunity for social connection and structure that employment provides. Botha and Bower (2024) found that men with greater job security consistently reported lower levels of loneliness compared to those who were unemployed across all working ages. Emphasis was placed on *security* when discussing this finding, as individuals who were working on temporary contracts or “gig work” still reported increased loneliness, with middle-aged men being the most affected. Steady employment serves as a readily accessible environment for social connections and losing that space for interaction through job loss or remote work can lead to isolation and loneliness, especially for those who are not comfortable seeking help or connection when the subtle feelings of loneliness first appear. Botha and Bower found that work was highly important to young and middle-aged men; however, older men of retirement age potentially found more benefit from volunteer work to maintain purpose and social connections. This supported the idea that employment serves not only as a vehicle for income but also as a venue for connection and support valuable in mitigating feelings of loneliness amongst men.

To contrast the findings of Botha and Bower (2024), a study by Qian (2016) examined assortative mating patterns in heterosexual relationships with a focus on education and income. The study used log-linear modeling to assess the association between spousal education and income levels and used data from the 1980 U.S. Census, which contained 38,016 couples, and compared this time period against the 2008-2012 American Community Surveys, which contained 37,686 couples. As the gender gap in education has reversed over the last 40 years, there has been a marked shift in how family units were formed. In the past men tended to have higher incomes than their wives; however, current trends see women surpassing men in education and increasing their lifetime earnings substantially while lifetime earnings for men has

remained stagnant and post-secondary education attainment has decreased (Binder and Bound, 2019).

Botha and Bower (2024) noted the connection between higher income and higher education, and how male enrollment in academics has gone down while enrollment for women has increased to where women now earn 60% of bachelor's and master's degrees and roughly half of all doctoral degrees. The authors suggested that as women continue to outpace men in higher education and increasingly in income, the pool of viable intimate partners becomes smaller and smaller for those men who still subscribe to traditional norms of being the primary provider and rather than adapt to shifting gender norms these men were likely to withdraw and self-isolate, adding to their distress. Botha and Bower noted that economically, women were more likely to date horizontally and up, while men were more likely to date horizontally and down according to their education and income.

The differences in life stage emphasize the importance for age specific interventions and policies when addressing loneliness among men of all ages. For younger men loneliness is often influenced by the struggles of identity formation and adhering to the societal expectations related to education, employment and relationships. As related to Binder and Bound's (2019) study described earlier, it is helpful to understand how diminishing opportunities to acquire social and material resources because of declining economic opportunities for less-educated men is directly impacting men's mental health and feelings of loneliness. Qian's (2016) study highlighted how outdated traditional norms of men being the breadwinners and those men who still subscribe to these ideals may prevent them from pursuing relationships with women who earn more than them, but also women may be less willing to form romantic partnerships with men who earn less

than them. The mismatch of new and old ideals may further contribute to the loneliness that men feel as they learn to navigate through the ever changing relational and economic landscape.

### **Relational Factors**

The previous section touched upon socioeconomic changes such as wage stagnation, delayed financial independence, as well as shifting trends in education and income and how these factors are affecting how men view their role in a changing society. While at the surface level these factors are purely economic in nature, there are real consequences to these changes that affect how men create and maintain relationships. This section will explore how these economic and social shifts interplay with emotional expression, social expectations, masculinity as well as the common repercussion many men feel when navigating these challenges.

### ***Relationship and Friendship Formation***

There has been ample research on the role that loneliness has on physical and mental health outcomes for men, and a review of the literature by Gil (2023) expanded on this discussion for what friendship looks like in the context of a Western culture. The author found contradictory reports on whether men were succeeding at creating emotionally supportive friendships, contrasted with reports stating that many men continued to lack close supportive friendships. Gil suggested that the discrepancies in the data was caused by generational differences, and shifting ideas around masculinity and gender roles where younger generations were more open to different gender expressions and friendships whereas older generations, not unexpectedly, tended to subscribe to traditional values around masculinity and emotions, which may have created barriers to developing friendships through adult years.

The primary goal of Gil's (2023) research was to highlight the ongoing sociocultural changes around male relations in Western cultures and to do so the author reviewed unobtrusive

sources such as research reports, articles and papers in addition to social media quotes and drew comparative conclusions where appropriate to help understand the contradictions in the data related to shifting masculinity and male friendships. One of the key contradictions that emerged was how the theory of Inclusive Masculinity (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012) suggested that ongoing shifts in gender norms have allowed for greater emotional intimacy among younger men and could potentially drive more bids for social connection and reduced feelings of isolation; however, this acceptance of diverse masculinities had not effectively translated into stronger male friendships when examining the broader male populations. Gil (2023) suggested that structural factors such as economic pressures, social media, and shifting work and community dynamics (e.g., work from home policies) played a significant role in male withdrawal and loneliness beyond the shifting gender norms alone.

Further to this point, a study by McKenzie et al. (2018) found a strong association between social norms and how masculinity was understood culturally that reinforced a reluctance among men to seek out the emotional support of another when distressed which led to higher rates of social isolation and decreased wellbeing. Data for this study was collected via face-to-face life history interviews with 15 men between the ages of 20 and 40, which lasted 60-150 minutes. The interviews were then analyzed and coded using Connell's (1987, 2005) theory of multiple masculinities gender substructures, which denoted as power relations (power balance between men and men, and men and women), production relations (gender division of unpaid labour), emotional relations (practices that shape emotional desire or attachment), and symbolic relations (symbolic expression of gender through language, gesture and dress). From these interviews, McKenzie et al. (2018) found that men, all from New Zealand, who sought out supportive connections with other men were confronted with immediate difficulties such as

feeling self-conscious or receiving mixed responses, which led to them withdrawing from pursuing male support and instead continuing to rely on women for emotional support. To this point, McKenzie et al. identified a pattern among men whereby they compartmentalized their relationships and social interactions based upon the perceptions of others and often shift in and out of masculine stereotypes depending on if they have interacted with a man or a woman. This leads male friendships to typically be more instrumental in nature with the focus being primarily on activities, while emotional discussions are held in reserve for their interactions with women. This then places an unfair burden on women to satisfy the social and emotional needs of men brought about by the socialized tendency of men to limit their focus on building emotional support networks for fear of not appearing masculine. A limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size and the homogeneity of participants who were all from similar geographical and cultural backgrounds. As such, the findings, though resonant, may not have accurately captured the full breadth of the male experience as each participant's narrative was unique to themselves.

Langheit and Poulin (2024) conducted a longitudinal study with 346 participants that sought to capture the shift in friendship quality and loneliness in emerging adulthood (age 20) and established adulthood (age 30). Responses were collected via self-report using the 10-item UCLA Loneliness Scale, the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) which, to remind readers, assessed quality of friendships through measured intimacy, reliable alliance and conflict on a Likert scale, and the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Langheit and Poulin (2024) posited and found that in emerging adulthood, friendships were heavily weighted as protective factors for self-esteem and loneliness, but by age 30 these benefits had decreased and suggested that men may come to rely on romantic relationships to

serve the same function that their early friendships did. Furthermore, this study contributed to the study of male loneliness by highlighting the importance of a reliable alliance in friendships, which was characterized by the perception that a friend is dependable, will support an individual through challenges, and will work to maintain the relationship despite any obstacles that emerge. This was especially true amongst men who were not engaged in romantic relationships and still depended upon their friendships for self-esteem and deterrent for loneliness.

To further the expand upon the research on high-quality friendships, Kang (2023) found that as individuals aged, the quality of friendships was weighed heavier than the quantity of friendships and went as far as to suggest that older individuals may be more selective to maximize positive emotional experiences. Kang analyzed data from Wave 9 of the Understanding Society survey (Institute for Social and Economic Research University of Essex, 2022), which involved 29,785 participants aged 16-101, and used this data to examine the relationship between age, friendships, and life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured using a 7-point Likert scale and number of close friendships was assessed through the direct question of “How many close friends do you have?” Kang found that number of close friends and life satisfaction were closely linked for younger adults (<35), and suggested that there was a stronger drive to expand social networks and form many close friendships possibly due to life stage advantages that creates an abundance of opportunities to interact with many new people and to seek new experiences. This effect was found to be diminished amongst older adults as quality of relationships began to take precedence over quantity of relationships. This contributed to a deeper understanding of loneliness over the lifespan by bringing attention to the shifting priorities that occur as one ages and may offer some insight into interventions for men of different ages experiencing loneliness. As an example, a younger man may reap greater benefit

from joining a social activity that grants him access to many new friendships while an older man may see more benefit from deepening his existing bonds or reconnecting with friends long since ignored. A critique of this study noted by Kang was how ‘close friendships’ were understood by each survey respondent as personal definitions of what friendship is and could have varied from person to person and skewed the results.

While older generations continue to maintain their traditional values around friendships and masculinity, younger generations have begun to transform what friendships mean and how they function (Gil, 2023). This redefining of what friendship and masculinity means is denoted by a more inclusive, emotionally open and fluid understanding of what masculinity means today (Magrath & Scoats, 2017). Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) appears to be more intentional about the friendships they form and tend to exhibit more effort in maintaining these friendships than older cohorts. However, it remains to be seen if this trend follows that of past generations where friendships are numerous in young adulthood and fewer but of higher quality at older ages (Gil, 2023).

### ***Role of Social Media***

A body of research already exists that has drawn linkages between social media usage and loneliness, such as the multi-country study by Bonsaksen et al. (2023), which explored the reasons behind why social media use aimed towards maintaining relationships may actually be making people feel lonelier and that even though social media site may provide a means of contact, there might be a distinct lack of quality to these interactions. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey and gathered responses from 1,649 adult participants who were enlisted via large social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The measurement tools used were the six-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (1985), and self-reported social media

usage with options ranging from ten minutes to more than three hours per day, and motive for social media usage that was categorized into usage as a means of avoiding difficult feelings and the second category for those who use it to maintain social connections (Bonsaksen et al., 2023; De Jong-Gierveld & Kamphuis, 1985). Bonsaksen et al.'s (2023) findings indicated that men were more likely than woman to experience social loneliness and that woman experienced more emotional loneliness, but also that increased social media usage as a means of maintaining social connections was associated with greater feelings of loneliness, and this was especially true for younger participants.

To further support these findings, in their study of 143 graduate students, Hunt et al. (2018) found that increased time spent online may increase feelings of loneliness and measured social media usage by creating two groups, one with a 10-minute limitation per day and the other with no limitation. Using the UCLA Loneliness Scale to measure loneliness throughout the study, Hunt et al. found that limiting social media use to a maximum of 30 minutes per day yielded a statistically significant difference in self-reported wellbeing. However, there was mixed evidence surrounding the active or passive usage of social media that contradicted the findings of Bonsaksen et al.'s (2023) study. Hunt et al. (2018) found that when social media was used in moderation, there was evidence suggesting that active usage of it to interact with other others, via commenting or direct messaging, may help reduce loneliness through perceived social support and that when social media was engaged with passively (i.e., consuming content via scrolling feeds, videos and posts without actively engaging), it was associated with lower reported levels of wellbeing. It should be noted that these studies varied greatly in the number of participants and used different tools to measure loneliness, which may have led to the discrepancy in findings.

There is also the concern that social media use and loneliness have a bi-directional negative relationship whereby a lonely individual engages in social media use to alleviate these feelings, but the quality of the interactions are not satiating, and they feel more lonely, thus increasing their social media usage (Hunt et al., 2018). Seidler et al. (2020) delved into the interplay between social media usage and loneliness among men and drew linkages between age and moderation. The study sampled 979 Canadian men ages 18 and older asking about their daily time spent on social media and a single item scale similar to the UCLA Loneliness Scale to collect data. Seidler et al. found that younger men were more likely to feel increased loneliness as their social media usage increased with the reasoning provided that this cohort was more likely to passively consume content in place of engaging in online conversations. For older men, social media usage was used to maintain relationships and act as an intermediary for in-person contact and they were less likely to engage in social comparison. Seidler et al. went as far as to suggest that clinicians working with men can benefit from this knowledge to provide insights for clients but also to recognize that for many men, turning to social media as a bid for connection was a last resort to stave off suicidal ideations brought about by feelings of loneliness and hopelessness.

### ***Consequences of Loneliness and Coping Strategies***

Failure to launch refers to the growing trend where young adults struggle to make the transition to being independent adults (Whitley, 2021). This phenomenon is characterized by continued living with parents, unemployment, and not being in the educational system and more likely to occur among males, with 47% of men in their 20s in Canada reportedly still living with their parents, compared to 38% of women (Milan 2016; Whitley, 2021). These percentages are similar in the United States and are used as support for the argument that failure to launch is a

predominantly male problem. This creates an environment where young men lack the financial capital to go out to socialize and gain meaningful connections. By extension, they lack opportunity to develop the social capital needed to serve as a protective factor against mental health outcomes such as substance abuse, depression, and suicide (Affleck et al., 2018). This knock-on effect may contribute to increased reported levels of loneliness among young men whose hopes and prospects for the future seem bleak and insurmountable causing them to self-isolate and disengage from society. Furthermore, boys have historically underperformed compared to girls in most areas of education and this early education gap, particularly around reading proficiency, can play a role in shaping future choices around education and employment (Whitley, 2021).

In a meta-analysis containing thirty-one studies and data from 77,220 participants, Rico-Uribe et al. (2018) examined the risk factor for all-cause mortality and loneliness and found that men were at slightly greater risk than women. A systemic search was conducted using keywords related to loneliness and mortality and a random effects meta-analysis was used to account for the variations between included studies with hazard ratios being the chosen metric to determine the risk of mortality in relation to loneliness. Rico-Uribe et al. noted how loneliness was a contributor to physical and mental health outcomes such as higher blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, weakened immune system as well as an increased risk for Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, the authors emphasized the need for future research on gender-informed interventions that encourage men to create social connections through suggested initiatives such as Men's Sheds, mentorship programs, and workplace wellbeing opportunities that can help men find places they can engage in meaningful social interactions. The study highlighted the public health outcome concern regarding loneliness. Rico-Uribe et al. noted the lack of heterogeneity

across studies as a limitation due to the range of measurement tools used that may have skewed the interpretations in different ways, and they suggested that future research should examine younger populations as many of the studies analyzed had sampled populations over 50 years of age.

Parent et al. (2018) explored the intersection of race/ethnicity and help-seeking behaviour drawing upon survey results from the 2006-2012 collection of data compiled by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), and analyzed the data from the sample of 4,825 men aged 20-59 living in the United States. They found that racial and ethnic background had a significant effect on whether mental health services were utilized. Two levels of analysis were completed to explore the single intersection of gender and the multiple variables of interest (i.e. sexual orientation/ethnicity/age/depressive-symptoms/relationship-status/income-poverty ratio and help seeking behavior), and a double intersection analysis examining the combination of factors and help seeking behaviour. Parent et al. found that White men were the most likely to seek out mental health services, followed by Black men, then Mexican American men, indicating that it is not only gender norms keeping men from seeking help, but racial and ethnic identity, potentially serving as proxies for cultural backgrounds as well. They also found that heterosexual men used mental health services much less than non heterosexuals and this effect was exacerbated by relationship status and age.

Furthermore, Parent et al.'s (2018) study highlighted how income and race/ethnicity impacted help-seeking behavior. The authors found that high income signalled increased utilization of mental health services for White men; however, for Black men, the opposite relationship was observed where increased income predicted reduced help-seeking behavior. The reasoning behind this was that in some instances, increased income allowed for more

accessibility to healthcare; however, financial success may also reinforce traditional masculine values of self-reliance and independence and place mental health support in conflict with these values. Lastly, Parent et al. found that Mexican American men saw no change in help-seeking behaviors as income increased. Depression was a predictor of mental health seeking behavior across all racial/ethnic groups, but it was White men experiencing depressive symptoms who sought help the most, followed by Black men, then Mexican American men. In conclusion, Parent et al.'s study contributed to the discussion surrounding men and loneliness by demonstrating the importance of intersecting research, to understand the nuances around help-seeking behavior so that interventions can be tailored to greater effectiveness for each cultural group rather than offering a catch-all solution that may exclude certain groups of men.

Loneliness affects both men and women at all ages with women reporting greater levels of loneliness; however, Ernst et al. (2021) surveyed 2,450 participants aged 18-95 and measured loneliness and suicidal ideation with a battery of tests such as the UCLA-3 Loneliness Scale, BECK Scale for Suicidal Ideation, and the PHQ-4, and found that loneliness was more associated with feelings of suicidal ideation across the lifespan for men regardless of income or living situation. Furthermore, women on average reported higher levels of loneliness but there was a stronger correlation between loneliness and suicidal ideation for young men. Some of Ernst et al.'s key findings highlighted how living with others was a stronger protective factor against suicidal ideation for men versus women, adding to the growing body of literature supporting the importance of interventions that connect men with community and foster opportunities for friendships and romantic partnerships so that young men are able to have their needs for connection met and improve their overall wellbeing. The authors acknowledged that the literature on gender sensitive research was limited, and how their study may not have

captured the many risk factors for suicide outcomes, such as alcoholism, stressors placed upon nonbinary individuals, external life events, or coping methods, to name a few.

A qualitative study by Willis and Vickery (2022) explored the consequences and coping strategies of older men, aged 65-95, who lived alone in England. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, transcribed, and then subjected to thematic analysis whereby each line was coded for key words and grouped to highlight emerging patterns in the dataset after which core themes were identified. The study touched upon social networks, experiences of loneliness, coping mechanisms and participation in group activities. Many of the men had trouble discussing their loneliness due to stigma and embarrassment, and felt that life transitions such as bereavement, retirement, and ailing health made it difficult to maintain a social role or relationships and led to their feelings of disconnection and loneliness. The coping strategies employed by these individuals varied but could be distilled to two main approaches problem-based (improving relationships) and emotion-focused (adjusting relationship expectations). The reported tendency was for the older participants to be emotion focused and to lower their expectations for life. Furthermore, three core themes emerged from Willis and Vickery's interviews and were captured by: "1. Maintaining silence around loneliness and distress; 2. Getting on with it versus feeling stuck in loneliness and, 3. Temporary remedies and distractions from loneliness" (p. e2874). These strategies helped provide emotional regulation, but did not address the underlying role that hegemonic masculinity plays in preventing men from feeling comfortable in sharing their feelings and experiences of loneliness or seeking help.

There is ongoing research into how social networks are affected by the emotional states of its members. An example of this is how emotional states such as happiness seem to ripple throughout social networks and can be described as a property of the group (Fowler &

Christakis, 2008). This idea of emotional contagion has also been observed by Cacioppo et al. (2009), and their examination into the spread of loneliness in social groups drawing up data from the Framingham Heart Study, which contained 12,067 individuals, including multiple cohorts from different time periods beginning in 1948, and utilized the “I feel lonely” items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to measure loneliness. Cacioppo et al.’s findings suggested that loneliness exists in clusters within social networks and has up to three degrees of separation from the individual experiencing depressive symptoms. This effect was observed to be more pronounced with friendships than with family members, suggesting that friendships are more important for mitigating feelings of loneliness than family connectedness. Furthermore, loneliness was also observed to be a stronger emotional contagion, as described by Cacioppo et al., than social connectedness, which when applied to the subject of loneliness amongst men, could mean that there are compounding effects if one person socially withdraws from their network, then it could encourage other members to do the same. This social withdrawal may be self-perpetuating in that once feelings of loneliness set in, the likelihood of losing social connections increases and the barriers to rebuilding these connections prove to be too much, leading to chronic loneliness. Additional implications from this study were how friendship interventions targeting the clusters of social networks that were the most isolated may have been a way to create a buffer from social networks falling apart, as the largest emitters of loneliness will have their effects dampened and reduce the overall negative ripple effect through social spheres.

A noted limitation from Cacioppo et al.’s (2009) study when ascertaining the prevalence of loneliness amongst men was the CES-D item pertaining to loneliness being a direct measurement, which has been shown in other studies, such as the one by Ratcliffe et al. (2020),

that men are less likely to report loneliness in comparison to indirect measurement tools. This distinguishing factor was important for understanding how loneliness spreads throughout networks, as Cacioppo et al. (2009) unfairly placed much of that responsibility on women, when indirect measurement tools might have yielded different results in terms of gender responsibility towards the spread of loneliness.

This section spoke to the many psychological, social, and physical consequences of loneliness over a person's life, as well as the common coping strategies implemented to alleviate these feelings. Chronic loneliness amongst men is often attributable to economic and social challenges such as failure to launch, unemployment, as well as reduced education all of which effect the financial and social capital, that make forming meaningful relationships easier, but also makes a person more vulnerable to depression, substance use disorders and suicide (Affleck et al., 2018; Milan, 2016; Whitley, 2021). Furthermore, loneliness has been identified as a significant risk factor for all-cause mortality, particularly in men, and is associated with conditions such as heart disease, weakened immune systems, and Alzheimer's disease (Rico-Uribe et al., 2018).

As far as how and what can be done to alleviate chronic loneliness, there is a need for tailored interventions that account for race, sexual orientation, income, and age, along with the many other barriers that prevent men from accessing mental health supports (Parent et al., 2018). At the macro level, assessing for pockets of loneliness in male social networks may prove to be a useful approach in developing interventions as Cacioppo et al. (2009) and Fowler and Christakis (2008) found that loneliness can spread through social networks like an emotional contagion and targeting these isolated clusters in social networks in hopes of reconnecting them with others may prevent the compounding effects of chronic loneliness. The coping strategies discussed

largely centered around emotional suppression, and social withdrawal with these tools being mostly shaped by traditional gender scripts around masculinity, and as such for there to be enduring solutions, they will have to be presented in a way that demonstrates healthier forms of masculinity as viable alternatives to the traditional norms.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the predictors, contributing factors, and consequences of male loneliness in context of shifting gender norms and precarious socio-economic realities.

Loneliness is best understood as a multidimensional experience that includes social, emotions, and existential elements and can be further defined by time into categories of transient loneliness and chronic loneliness. A central throughline of this chapter pertained to how traditional masculine norms shape and influence the ability of many men to express vulnerability, seek support when needed, or form emotionally deep relationships. The values aligned with hegemonic masculinity encourages and rewards men to strive for emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and to compete for status in exchange for cultural acceptance.

At the economic level, reduced attainment of education, wage stagnation, and a decline in labor demand for professions traditionally pursued by men has been shown to affect rates of loneliness amongst men as they struggle to reconcile their sense of purpose and masculine identity to the realities of a shifting economic landscape where traditional values that tell them they must be self-reliant, breadwinners for their families. Although there are encouraging signs that younger generations are embracing more caring forms of masculinity, socio-economic factors like job availability, wage stagnation, and an increased dependence on social media for connection have mired men's abilities to form meaningful relationships, especially among the younger generations that are reporting increased levels of loneliness compared to older cohorts.

This chapter also touched upon how friendships, intimate relationships, and social media can serve to either intensify feelings of loneliness or act as a buffer depending on the quality of the relationship. High-quality friendships and romantic relationships have been shown to act as protective factors against loneliness while passive and superficial engagement through mediums such as social media can leave men feeling even more isolated. In summary, the issue of male loneliness isn't a simple matter of "just make more friends," but the culmination of deeply held beliefs around gender norms, as well as economic pressures that limit emotional vulnerability, ability to build emotionally satisfying relationships, and the willingness to seek help when needed.

### Chapter 3

#### Discussion

This capstone set out to explore how shifting socioeconomic factors influence identity development and mental health outcomes with particular attention paid to prevalence of loneliness amongst adult men. The discussion in this section will be guided by the initial questions posed in Chapter 1 and are repeated here for the reader's convenience:

1. What are the some of the key contributors to chronic loneliness amongst men?
2. How have evolving social roles and expectations impacted men's mental health and identity formation?
3. What role does economic stability play in shaping self-identity and feelings of isolation in men?

With regards to the first question, a common theme of factors emerged from the literature as common contributors to chronic loneliness. At the heart of the issue was the enduring influence of hegemonic masculine ideals that upheld traditional values such as emotional restraint, competition with others, strength, authority over others, and social/financial independence (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These ideals are deeply ingrained in the fabric of what many believe what it is to be a man; however, these same values may be exactly what is preventing men from seeking emotional support when needed and engaging vulnerably to create deeper friendships and intimate partnerships. For men who are viewed as weak competitors under these values and see no benefit under this hegemonic system yet continue to plod on anyways, there is a feeling of profound disconnection, which ultimately leads to withdrawal, loneliness and the various negative mental health outcomes that stem from this experience.

To address the second question of how evolving social roles have impacted men's mental health and identity formation, it is clear that shifting gender norms have played a role in the identity confusion and formation of young men who have traditionally stepped into a provider, protector and leadership role to affirm their masculine identities (Anderson, 2020). The modernization of gender equality has created change in at every level of Western society from education to relationships to family formation, and while some men have been able to shift to a more caring form of masculinity, others have been lost in the transition and have feelings of displacement, especially in the wake of other affirming socioeconomic factors such as increased difficulties in obtaining home ownership, securing employment, and marriage being delayed or becoming unobtainable (Anderson, 2020; Elliott, 2015).

To further expand on the importance of economic factors, the third question of how economic stability plays a role in shaping male identity and can be a contributor to feelings of isolation especially during the critical junction of those stepping into adulthood, it can be said that traditional value of financial independence still carries vast importance in the narrative of what it means to be a man in contemporary society. Contrast this with research from the Pew Research Center, which demonstrated that it has been over 130 years since this many American adults have lived at home, with 18% of adults aged 25-34 (20% men and 15% women) still living at home (Fry, 2025). Further, there has been a shift away from post-secondary education for men that warrants its own investigation; however, suffice it to say that there is a strong correlation between university, greater lifetime earnings, and access to social networks and opportunities which have been shown to be protective factors against chronic loneliness and reduced wellbeing (Whitley, 2020). This is not to say that excess resources are a prerequisite for meaningful relationships, but the current gender script seems to support this belief. As a

countermeasure to this belief, initiatives such as Men's Sheds are becoming more available, particularly in Australia, as a space for men to engage in social and recreational activities with ongoing research determining the positive long-term health benefits from participating in such initiatives (Kelly et al., 2019; Wiepking et al., 2022).

The literature review highlighted several important themes that add to the discussion on loneliness and masculinity. Firstly, it is apparent that hegemonic masculinity continues to play a central role to how many men understand and navigate their relationships and internal worlds. The associated traditional values such as stoicism, self-reliance, and dominance are often seen as reasons for why men struggle to express their emotional needs or seek out support when it is needed.

Secondly, it examined the shifting landscape of social roles, expectations and identity formation. The research revealed that men who engage in caring masculinities through caregiving roles or deviating from traditional masculinity can experience an improved sense of wellbeing and deeper sense of connection with others (Brandth & Kvande, 2016; Lee & Lee, 2016). In many ways, the neoliberal expectations to which many men adhere overlap with hegemonic ideals that are becoming more difficult in meeting, which can lead to isolation and loneliness (Botha & Bower, 2024; Qian, 2016). Lastly, the role of economic stability and identity was examined in relation to emotional wellbeing. The literature review showed that factors such as employment, education, and wage stagnation remain intertwined with the traditional masculine belief that men should aspire to be the provider for their family units (Qian, 2016). When facing challenges to meet these standards, men may feel an increased sense of loneliness and reduced wellbeing as their sense of identity and purpose is confronted by their perceived inability to fulfill their function (Beller, 2024).

These factors coincide closely with neoliberal ideologies and place the impetus for success or failure solely on the individual and exacerbates shame and inadequacy for those who are struggling with employment, education and finances and leads to further withdrawal from social life and relationships (Becker et al., 2021; Coburn, 2003). This withdrawal can happen early and is characterized by failure to launch as a number of men fail to effectively step into adulthood and inhibit identity formation and opportunities to create social connections (Whitley, 2021).

In summary, there are a number of factors contributing to the rise in loneliness many men are facing today and while there are many economic factors at work, it would appear that the issue is largely one of culture and identity as traditional masculine beliefs are challenged by an ever changing social landscape that demands a transition from traditional to contemporary values, and it is in this transition where many men seem to be getting left behind as they struggle to find solid footing while the landscape shifts beneath them.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is worth reiterating once again that loneliness is not a monolithic concept and as such it has attracted the attention and research of many different disciplines. While this can be seen as a positive shift, it also lends itself to the fragmentation of how loneliness is conceptualized, measured, and interpreted. The topic would benefit from more cross disciplinary integration moving forward. Measurement tools in particular ranged from single item questionnaires asking, “Do you feel lonely?” to scales such as the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale and the UCLA Loneliness Scale, each of which measure key elements of loneliness such as the multidimensional understanding emotional and social loneliness compared with a

unidimensional approach that puts more importance on the discrepancy between wanted and actual social relationships (Russell, 1996; De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006).

While it is unlikely that unifying measurement tools and conceptualizations will reveal themselves immediately, it is important that emerging research be quickly integrated and synthesized into the growing body of knowledge, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, around this subject to better inform clinicians, policy makers, and anyone who would benefit from incorporating new findings into their work with individuals struggling with loneliness.

### **Applied Practices and Learning**

#### ***Clinical Interventions***

The increased awareness of loneliness as a public health concern has begun to drive research into what clinical interventions are effective in alleviating its effects. The research suggested that feelings of loneliness are not always transient and can develop into a more serious condition that has negative repercussions on mental and physical wellbeing, and as such specific interventions targeting these symptoms should be studied and implemented as part of a holistic approach to addressing this issue (Cacioppo et al., 2014; Lim et al., 2020).

Cacioppo et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis evaluating the efficacy of loneliness interventions, identifying four primary approaches: increasing social contact, enhancing social support, improving social skills, and modifying maladaptive social cognition. The findings indicated that interventions focused on addressing maladaptive social cognition, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), were the most effective in reducing symptoms of loneliness. These results implied that loneliness is more than a deficit of social interactions but is also perpetuated by cognitive biases and patterns of avoidance. This suggested that loneliness is not simply a lack of social interaction but is often driven by negative cognitive distortions and self-

perpetuating patterns of social withdrawal. In support of these findings, Hickin et al. (2021) conducted their own systemic review and analysis that included 28 randomized controlled trials and 3,959 study participants. They found that CBT was the most common intervention; however, they noted that other psychological interventions (e.g., cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy) overall significantly reduced feelings of loneliness. While the interventions showed efficacy when applied, Hickin et al. also highlighted that intervention effectiveness was heavily influenced by individual and contextual factors and that a tailored approach to treatment is still important, especially when considering that many of the interventions included in the study were not specifically designed to treat loneliness and would likely benefit from modifications.

As an alternative to CBT, emerging research has indicated that mindfulness and acceptance training can reduce feelings of loneliness and increase social contact (Lindsay et al., 2019). A study by Lindsay et al. employed a randomized controlled trial consisting of 153 participants assigned to one of three groups. One group used both mindfulness and acceptance skills, a second separate mindfulness group focused solely on monitoring skills, and a third group was taught active control (coping strategies). The early research into mindfulness interventions was promising in that it effectively reduced feelings of loneliness by as much as 22% after two weeks and, on average, participants were able to interact with two additional people each day. This decrease in loneliness and increase in social interactions per day was not observed in the other groups and Lindsay et al. suggested that the key mechanism of change in this approach was the acceptance training, as the control group that received no training showed no change in their reported loneliness. An obvious limitation of this study was the small sample size, but these

findings should encourage future research in the mechanisms that can be learned to reduce feelings of loneliness and help individuals re-engage with their social circles.

### **Reflections on Personal Learning**

The more I engaged with the research, the more I tried to find ways to implement more caring masculinities ideas into my own life and friendships. I started letting my friends know I loved them a little more often with something as simple as a “Love you, brother” when parting ways, I was more mindful of when competitiveness was adaptive and when it was not, and I started asking better questions that dug deeper than the superficial layer that many male friendships survive at. I knew these mindful inclusions would be well received, but what surprised me was how quickly my friends, who in many ways subscribe to traditional masculine values, were able to reciprocate these efforts and vocalize how much they appreciated the deeper conversations. While anecdotal, I believe that future research into efforts of connection will yield real interventions that clinicians can bring into sessions as a means of skill building, and help their lonely male clients feel more agency in lives as the pressure to adhere to rigid cultural norms begins to shed and something more positive and adaptive to contemporary society takes its place.

I will echo a sentiment I shared in Chapter 1 of how struck I was returning to an academic setting where men were often framed through the lens of hegemonic masculinity and often held in opposition or as a threat to gender equality. While this certainly merits discussion and deepens our collective understanding of harmful power structures, I believe there should be space for conversations around men’s issues without divisiveness or comparison, and I am hopeful that this capstone provided such a space.

A key takeaway from my learning is the many intersections that compromise the experience of loneliness for many men. Whether it be culture, education or sexuality, there are many elements that lend themselves to the experience of loneliness and this topic should not be approached as a singular concept. I hope to continue my learning in this area so that I can advocate for more compassionate, and context appropriate measures to address men's mental health.

### **Final Thoughts**

Loneliness is a condition that people understand at the intuitive level, yet it seems to elude general consensus on how to describe it and address it. Most of us already understand what being disconnected and alone feel like, but the missing piece is understanding *why* this disconnection persists into chronic loneliness. The more this subject is studied, the clearer it becomes that there are many contributing factors as to *why* men feel lonely across emotional, social, cultural and economic domains, and through this study arises greater opportunity for more compassion, understanding, and safer spaces for men to discuss their internal world.

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*"The world will ask you who you are, and if you do not know, the world will tell you." - Carl Jung*

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This capstone has shown in many ways that where men get their idea of how to be in the world is largely external. As discussed through the framework of hegemonic masculinity, it is evident that some men find themselves in a double bind where they are both criticized for adhering to traditional norms while also risking being lambasted by their peers if they depart from those norms. This leaves many men looking for answers. For someone who understands the pain they are enduring in their internal world and the social media space is rife with individuals

who leverage this need for guidance but end up pedaling some other form of toxic masculinity. A quiet hope of mine is that this capstone helps individuals who are vocal in their persecution of these men realize that it is their very persecution that drives men further towards patterns of toxic masculinity, and that having a more in depth understanding of the many common struggles that current day men are facing will help these clinicians have more empathy and more of a willingness to create a safe and healthier space for these men to be heard and truly understood and validated in their experiences. Rather than trying to stop it, we ought to be trying to understand it, and in that understanding we can begin the transition to a healthier form of masculinity.

In many ways men are not just a product of their environments but a product of our expectations as well. How we talk about masculinity matters, and the way the problems of young boys and men are explained which is often placing the blame solely on them and failing to contextualize their experiences. If we take a young boy struggling at school, it is because they do not try hard enough. If we take a young man who is bullied and breaks down into tears after having enough of the abuse, he is seen as being too sensitive and needs to toughen up. We individualize what are often structural problems and displace responsibility onto a population (school aged boys) that does not have the awareness to change their gender script without proper guidance and mentorship. This begins with how we talk about masculinity, and how we model healthier alternatives that many boys and men have never thought possible.

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