

Taryn J.

San Francisco, California

GOD COMPLEX

Block printing on clothing

My research was based on how toxic masculinity affects intimacy in male friendship. In my artwork, I wanted to continue to explore the idea of how media and social media enforce norms of toxic masculinity by enforcing some ideas of my own. I decided to use the medium of clothing to spread this positive masculinity, because clothes often have their own stereotypes surrounding gender. I specifically chose to reuse phrases like “real men _____,” or existing stereotypes around the articles of clothing I used, such as the tank tops dubbed “wife beaters,” or the classic blue “business” button-up. By transforming what already exists into something more positive, it already brings us one step closer to change, instead of making something completely new. This artwork was originally going to focus on my personal experience with toxic masculinity, but as I began developing these ideas more, I realized that I wanted to create a more universal piece of art that anyone could connect with. I started by making drawings of different designs, brainstorming which designs go on which articles of clothing, and building my brand. Once I finalized these designs I carved them onto lino blocks. Rather than outsourcing these designs to a manufacturer to turn them into shirts for me, I chose to carve each one by hand, and individually print them onto these clothes. This allowed the messages I printed to develop their own personality. Perhaps they printed unevenly or faded, or were placed in different areas. Each piece is unique, just like each person wearing it. If you choose to buy my clothes, don’t just wear them. They are statements, with the intention of creating positive change. Help facilitate that change by challenging the stereotypes and making your own masculinity.

Breaking the Stigma: The Need for Vulnerability in Male Friendships



Taryn J.

The Oxbow School

OS49

Writer's Note: The average male friendship is focused around doing activities in parallel with one another, whereas female friendships are often conversation based. Because the opportunity to be vulnerable is built into female friendships, emotional and physical intimacy between two female friends is not just more common but more socially acceptable than their male counterparts. It is recognized as a sign of closeness -- not of romantic intentions. Toxic masculinity enforces the idea that men should not feel or share their emotions with others, and so they fear they are crossing boundaries when trying to talk about them with their friends; homophobia creates a stigma around physical vulnerability, making it hard for men to show support and affection towards each other without assumptions being made about their sexuality. But if the media and social media began to normalize and encourage vulnerability between male friends, then men might feel more comfortable being more intimate with one another. More intimacy in male friendships could facilitate the creation of more healthy masculine identities by giving men an outlet in which to practice being vulnerable in safe environments. This could also aid in the deconstruction of toxic masculinity and homophobia, and lead men to create their own masculinity based on their beliefs, not society's.

My idea of friendship has changed a lot throughout my transition and teenage years. Having seen both sides of friendship dynamics, living life as a girl and then as a boy, I know what it is like to have female friends while presenting female as well as what it's like to have male friends while presenting male. The big difference is the level of vulnerability and intimacy, something I found myself missing with my male friends. Even before I started transitioning, I always felt comfortable in my friendships with other queer people. The typical boundaries of gender and friendship do not exist in queer spaces, and I find myself in friendships with people of many

different genders and having different levels of intimacy with all of them. In these spaces, intimacy is not affected by gender, but based on how close you are with a person. We are bonded through solidarity, around things you do not really talk about with straight friends. On the other hand, having cis male friends that are more “masculine” has been very validating of my gender identity. Being in more masculine spaces is where I want to be, but having friends in these spaces makes me feel like I belong. Still, with these friends, I feel like I am holding parts of myself back. It has made me not only wonder how things ended up this way but wishing that things could change. More intimacy in male friendships could facilitate the creation of more healthy masculine identities, and shows society that masculinity and homophobia do not have to be intertwined.

Although the quality and depth of male and female friendships can be the same, the ways these friendships are expressed can be very different. Male friendships tend to be activity based, versus female friendships which tend to be conversation based. Men often spend time together doing activities like playing sports and video games, going hunting, fishing or meeting at a bar. Male friendships are based around an activity that they each do in parallel to one another or together in competition.¹ Even when there is conversation, it is commonly about non-personal topics, like sports, girls, or a broader existentialism. Often these conversations do not dive deeper into their feelings. Since these other topics of conversation are more common among men, they feel they could be stepping out of line by bringing up more personal, emotional topics.

The differences in intimacy between genders becomes more evident when physical intimacy is also considered. Not only are average female friendships more emotionally intimate than their male counterparts, but they are also more physically intimate. Professor of psychology Wyndol Furman states that in female friendships, “expressions of physical affection are more

¹ Wood, Julia T. *Gendered Relationships*. Mayfield Publ. Company, 1996.

culturally normative among women than among men.”² Internalized homophobia plays a big role in the absence of physical intimacy in male friendships. Yet even when physical affection is present in male friendships, it is more aggressive rather than gentle. This discomfort around showing vulnerability through physical intimacy shows that toxic masculinity and homophobia are more closely related than one might think.

This discomfort around physical intimacy becomes more relaxed when it comes to men in sports. Men’s sports such as soccer and basketball tend to be very physical, and are still viewed as very masculine sports. Team sports like these create a space of effortless masculinity, where men do not have to worry about the stigma of being physical. Sports are where the boundaries are blurred, and things like pats on the shoulder, hugs, all the way to grabbing each others’ butts is accepted as “normal” behavior.³ These actions are seen as team building, creating a sense of trust and camaraderie. But within this trust, men also feel more uncomfortable and insecure. Robert Strikwerda, a gender studies professor, writes that “[c]ompetition creates bonds between teammates but it also makes men reluctant to reveal things about themselves that would make them vulnerable, and hence cause them to risk being taken advantage of.”⁴ This environment of competition creates a social hierarchy dominated by masculinity and men feeling the need to participate in this social hierarchy to be a part of the team. Instead of deepening friendships, the need to prove their masculinity to teammates forces division.

Themes of male friendship and toxic masculinity are also explored in media, particularly in the “bromance” genre of film. John Alberti writes in his analysis of bromance about “the emergence within more recent romantic comedies of the ‘melodramatized man’ who appropriates

² Furman, Wyndol, et al. *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, 182.

³ Strikwerda, Robert A., Larry May. “Male Friendship and Intimacy.” *Hypatia*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1992, pp. 110–25. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809875>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

⁴ Strikwerda, Robert A., Larry May.

stereotypically feminine character traits, seeming to break with more traditional representations of men as emotionally repressed.”⁵ Although some of the men in romance movies displayed more feminine traits (which were traits that female characters found desirable) male audiences considered these movies boring. Thus, the idea of the “bromantic comedy” was born--where the main conflict regularly involves popularity, sex, or “getting the girl”-- in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience. But in doing so, these films continue to enforce gender stereotypes and toxic masculinity. Instead of focusing on more intimate topics, these movies rely on shallow plot points and misogyny. Some examples of bromance films include: *Superbad*; *I Love You, Man*; *Dazed and Confused*; and *Top Gun*.

The films ask their characters “What do men want?” to which Alberti states the male leads assume “the answer must obviously be ‘sex,’ as certain popular culture constructions of Alpha masculinity keep insisting, with sex functioning as a surrogate for power and mastery.”⁶ Although, by the end of the movie, these characters learn that sex is not the answer to this question, the media continually enforces the message that sex is what gives them power. Despite these more negative themes, the films do occasionally brush upon intimacy within male friendship. An example of this is *Superbad*. At the end of the film, two best friends, Seth and Evan, tell each other that they love each other, and they are not embarrassed to say it. Evan even asks “Why can’t we say it more often?”⁷ Even though throughout the movie, Seth was outwardly mean to Evan and his other friends, they end with a heartfelt moment. However, it is still tinged with internalized homophobia when they acknowledge the norm that they should be embarrassed by expressing love for one another. This type of interaction is an ideal example of

⁵ Alberti, John. “‘I love you, man’: Bromances, the construction of masculinity, and the continuing evolution of the romantic comedy.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 30, no. 2, spring 2013, p. 161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.575658>.

⁶ Alberti, John. p. 164.

⁷ Apatow, Judd, et al. *Superbad*. Columbia Pictures Industries, 2007.

modern male friendship in America and the complicated relationship between expressing support and affection.

When it comes to social media, the connection between intimacy in male friendship and homophobia is very apparent. An example of this is the phrase “kissing the homies goodnight.” This phrase, often used in memes and TikToks, introduces the idea of physical intimacy with friends in the more romantic context of kissing. But the emphasis on the word “homies,” another word for friends, keeps it platonic, reducing it to a joke. Another popular phrase is “no homo,” which is said after someone does or says something that would be considered as gay. This could mean anything that could be interpreted by someone else as romantic: hugging a friend, accidentally brushing their hand when reaching for something, or just saying that their friend looks good. This shows that there is still a lot of stigma surrounding physical and emotional intimacy, as these displays of vulnerability cannot be seen as gay --or else the individual will be labeled as such. Phrases like these are used as reassurance for men who act “gay” with their friends as a joke, to make known that their intentions are purely platonic and that they are not in fact gay. Although humor is preferable to stigma, it does not mean that intimacy among male friends is accepted yet.

Toxic masculinity does not just affect friendship-- it also has great impacts on other forms of relationships, such as romantic and familial. Because men feel more pressured to suppress emotion, they frequently end up imposing their resentment on others, often by lashing out verbally and physically. They believe it's what they are supposed to do because they are men, and enforce that belief on themselves and others, creating a cycle. This cycle of toxic masculinity is then passed down through generations of fathers and sons. Young boys are discouraged from

dressing up or crying, having male social norms enforced on them from a young age. In romantic relationships, This same suppression of emotions could lead to men taking their sadness, frustration, and anger out on their partner. But instead of their romantic partner being their punching bag, or someone they can exert dominance over, “[s]exual relationships may also serve intimacy-related functions...In particular, adolescents whose peer and even familial relationships lack physical affection or emotional intimacy.”⁸ Romantic relationships can provide men with an outlet to meet their needs of intimacy that they cannot get from their friends or family. This creates a more gentle dynamic with their partner that they can use to be themselves around and show their vulnerability with. These relationships should not be an outlet of rage, but of love. If this more gentle dynamic is present in male friendships as well, men can learn how to and practice expressing vulnerability with their friends. This relatively low-risk environment gives them room to grow, whereas in a relationship there’s more pressure to get it right. Thus, the practice of emotional and even physical intimacy in male friendships can lead to healthier romantic relationships.

Toxic masculinity has created a lot of social problems, but the solution does not necessarily have to be no masculinity at all. There are emerging concepts and terms that can help men create their own masculine identity outside the roles of society. One such term is “hybrid masculinity,” a way of presenting masculine by combining elements of toughness and tenderness.⁹ This hybrid masculinity would let someone pick and choose what elements of masculinity that most appeals to them. Hybrid masculinity is technically what men should be doing already, since there is no one way to be masculine. Not only can this masculinity be

⁸ Furman, Wyndol, et al. *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. P. 180.

⁹ Bridges, Tristan. “A VERY ‘GAY’ STRAIGHT?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58–82. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669856>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.

constructed out of personal values to create a new sense of self internally, but it can also be how one presents themselves physically. In today's society, there are many different masculine aesthetics, and these aesthetics are not just for men. The aesthetics are often split up into "straight" and "gay" aesthetics, complete with their own separate cultures. People from each category frequently borrow from one another. Queer people may borrow from straight aesthetics (commonly dressing in correspondence to traditional gender roles) to appear straight, simply out of comfort or a need for safety. Straight people, especially straight men, may borrow from gay aesthetics to create a better sense of style, as it is a stereotype that gay people know how to dress better. This idea is all over social media, where men dress in more styled ways that could be considered by society's standards as "gay." Some men believe that this makes them seem less threatening and also more appealing to women. These men show that dressing "well" and having a sense of style does not make them any less masculine, and the way they present doesn't have to align with their sexuality. Men such as Lewis Hamilton, Oscar Isaac, David Beckham, and Pete Davidson have all worn skirts as fashion statements, and are all (presumably) straight men. Their willingness to dress in less stereotypically masculine ways show that they are secure in their own masculinity. Perhaps men have finally started to listen and learn from the male characters portrayed in romance movies and romantic comedies.

The potential positive impact of more intimacy and vulnerability within male friendships should far outweigh the social norms of toxic masculinity and homophobia. Emotional intimacy in friendships can improve mental health and encourage men to talk about their feelings, instead of taking their frustration out on themselves or other people. Platonic physical intimacy among men again encourages vulnerability and gentleness. It is a way of showing affection, even with

friends, and can help people feel welcome and loved in a space where they might have previously been uncomfortable. But homophobia's enforcement of toxic masculinity makes it difficult for men to overcome their biases of what is truly masculine. Here is where the media and social media have a lot of power to break the cycle. Instead of enforcing stereotypes and beliefs for comedic effect, the portrayal of healthy male friendships that encourage intimacy can help facilitate this social shift towards healthy masculinity. But do away with toxic masculinity altogether and what is left? There is no concrete idea of what masculinity is or what it should be. That possibility scares people. Yet within this unknown, there is potential to create one's own sense of self, and one's own masculine identity.

Works Cited

- Alberti, John. “‘I love you, man’: Bromances, the construction of masculinity, and the continuing evolution of the romantic comedy.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 30, no. 2, spring 2013, pp. 159–172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.575658>.
- Bridges, Tristan. “A VERY ‘GAY’ STRAIGHT?: Hybrid Masculinities, Sexual Aesthetics, and the Changing Relationship between Masculinity and Homophobia.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58–82. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669856>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
- Furman, Wyndol, et al. *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
<https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=IzRHqL4w4S4C&oi=fnd&pg=PA175&ots=dsfxptcl9c&sig=kuzodeT2SygXxpb9EEUz7PoVik4#v=onepage&q&f=false>
Accessed 13 Nov. 2023.
- Strikwerda, Robert A., and Larry May. “Male Friendship and Intimacy.” *Hypatia*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1992, pp. 110–25. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3809875>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2023.
- Wood, Julia T. *Gendered Relationships*. Mayfield Publ. Company, 1996.