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Aural Intimacy as Feminist Counter-Space: Subverting the Manosphere Through Men's Mental Health Podcasting

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes reflexive thematic analysis and feminist communication frameworks to examine how men's mental health podcasting serves as a "feminist counter-space" for the renegotiation of contested masculinities. By analyzing episodes from a UK-based charity podcast, the research identifies three themes: encouraging a culture of inclusivity, positive masculinity and discursive accountability, and grappling with masculinity and the gender binary. The findings reveal that the podcast's aural intimacy and "emotional role modeling" allow participants to subvert the patriarchal bargain by promoting individual accountability and vulnerability, thereby reducing the "emotional outsourcing" historically imposed upon women. Proceeding from the premise that scholarship involving men must actively interrogate patriarchy to foster gender justice and equality, the research argues that long-form podcasting offers a vital site for feminist praxis, providing a discursive blueprint for an "emotionally self-sustaining" masculinity that effectively dismantles patriarchal communicative norms. While these digital spaces offer significant potential, the study cautions that inclusive masculine projects require continued intersectional vigilance and a commitment to radical transparency to remain effective within contemporary society.

KEYWORDS

Positive masculinity; feminist praxis; digital counter-spaces; emotional labour; aural intimacy

Introduction

Podcasting has become increasingly popular in recent years, largely due to the widespread availability of platforms such as Apple iTunes, coupled with the ability to listen on mobile devices. This benefit has allowed listeners to access programs whenever they wish, often whilst commuting, exercising or engaged in household chores (Bottomley, 2015). Podcasts offer content creators a unique opportunity to express their personal perspectives and opinions with little editorial oversight. Such freedom significantly influences the style and atmosphere of shows. Listeners feel emotionally connected to creators, identify with their personalities and subsequently form listening allegiances (Swiatek, 2018).

Podcasts are also central to the online male culture, according to Ribeiro et al. (2021) there is a growing trend of misogynistic voices replacing the online "men's

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rights activism” space with more challenging masculine voices. A notable group known as “Incels” (involuntary celibate) hold antifeminist and misogynistic views in online spaces known as “the manosphere” (Rothermel, 2023). The rise of the manosphere podcaster phenomena coincides with the emerging criticism both of women’s equality and the role of males in society (Campbell, 2024; Ipsos, 2024). A recent study by Ipsos (2024) suggested younger men were the most likely to approve of misogynistic statements made by podcaster, Andrew Tate. Tate is a British American social media personality and podcaster with tens of millions of followers worldwide. His content explicitly promotes misogynistic and anti-feminist ideologies, including statements normalizing violence against women and framing female autonomy as a threat to masculinity. Tate has faced serious criminal charges including human trafficking and rape in Romania, charges that have not prevented his content from circulating widely online or diminishing his influence among young male audiences (Campbell, 2024; Haslop et al., 2024).

This research draws on notions of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995) to examine how men’s mental health podcasts shape contemporary experiences and understandings of masculinity. The research asks how alternative and positive representations of masculinity can be promoted through men’s mental health podcasts, set against a backdrop of a growing manosphere within the wider cultural context of a crisis of masculinity. We argue that alternative versions of men’s podcasts make space for a renegotiation of masculinity which challenges both hegemonic masculine ideals as well as the broader manosphere. This is important because it demonstrates that men’s mental health podcasts signal a shift in representations of masculinity that contribute to challenging patriarchal social structures. This study contributes to this discussion by asking: “What themes and narratives are prevalent in men’s mental health podcasts that promote positive masculinity?”

Service overview

This research was carried out using materials from a podcast created by the UK-based men’s mental health service, “MenGage”* (pseudonym). MenGage are a men’s suicide prevention service, offering a range of offline and online spaces for men to connect and build their social network. The charity has around 300 registered users who have either been referred by their GP, family and friends, employers or self-referred. Many men who utilize the service report anxiety and depression and often appear to adhere to traditional masculine norms.

The MenGage podcast produces regular episodes with a longform conversational, interview-style format between the podcast host and guest (Dowling & Miller, 2019). Guests are connected to MenGage in various ways; service users, trustees, volunteers, men’s mental health professionals and academics. The podcast highlights men’s lived experiences as a focal point of the episodes (Author, n.d.) The podcast host uses a flexible, guest-centered interviewing style whilst simultaneously contributing his own lived experiences.

The MenGage podcast was selected for several reasons that make it a particularly rich site for feminist analysis. First, its explicit organizational commitment to a zero-tolerance approach toward misogyny positions it in deliberate opposition to the

hegemonic norms that dominate mainstream men's media. Second, its longform, conversational format creates the conditions for the kind of sustained emotional disclosure that shorter, algorithmically driven content cannot accommodate. Third, its affiliation with a suicide prevention charity grounds its messaging within a mental health and well-being framework rather than an identity-performance one, distinguishing it sharply from "alpha male" podcast culture. These qualities make MenGage an ideal case study for exploring how podcasting can function as a feminist counter-space.

Each of the MenGage trustees have appeared on their own episode of the podcast, and more recently have collaborated to provide an episode featuring the whole team of trustees. Though there is existing research on the experience of podcast listeners, we are keen to explore the messages being conveyed by the podcast itself.

Literature review

Masculinities

To understand the transformative potential of men's mental health podcasts, masculinity must be viewed not merely as a fixed social category, but as a continuous communicative performance. Masculinity is a social organization (Connell, 2020) sustained through specific rhetorical and linguistic practices that define power relations between men and women, as well as between different groups of men (Hearn & Morgan, 1990). Within this hierarchy, "hegemonic" masculinity serves as a dominant script—a communicative norm that prioritizes emotional restraint, stoicism, and competitive individualization. As Connell (2020) argues, these scripts are not inherent but are socially produced and reinforced through everyday interactions. In the context of communication studies, this suggests that the "patriarchal script" is a set of learned discursive behaviors that limit men's ability to engage in vulnerability, effectively functioning as a barrier to mental health help-seeking.

The dominance of these traditional scripts is increasingly being challenged by what Anderson (2009) terms "inclusive masculinity." This shift marks a significant change in how men communicate their identities, characterized by a decrease in homophobia and an increase in physical and emotional intimacy among male peers. From a feminist perspective, inclusive masculinity represents a move away from the rigid, exclusionary performances of the past toward a more flexible and relationally aware mode of being. Yet, as Anderson (2009) notes, this inclusivity is often a response to changing social pressures rather than a total abandonment of patriarchal privilege. In digital spaces, this manifests as a tension between the "old" communicative scripts of dominance and "new" scripts of openness, creating a contested terrain where the meaning of being a man is constantly renegotiated.

This renegotiation is often framed through the lens of a "crisis of masculinity," a rhetorical opening where traditional masculine performances are seen as no longer compatible with modern social expectations (Walsh, 2020). While some view this crisis as a threat to social order (Faludi, 1991), it can also be understood as a moment of "male trouble" (Walsh, 2020), a breakdown in the patriarchal script that allows for the emergence of pro-feminist narratives. As Raisin (2017) suggests, the public discourse surrounding this crisis often asks whether men are "men or mice," a binary that

underscores the perceived fragility of traditional identity. For feminist communication scholarship, this “crisis” provides a vital entry point to study how alternative media, such as podcasts, offer a space for men to unlearn harmful stoicism and perform a version of masculinity that is both emotionally literate and socially accountable.

The digital landscape: Rhetorical rivalry and the manosphere

The urgency of identifying positive masculine narratives is underscored by the current digital climate, where traditional hegemonic scripts are being aggressively reinforced. Men who adhere to rigid hegemonic norms, characterized by an anxiety to demonstrate invulnerability, hyper-independence, and toughness (Chu, 2014), often encounter significant psychological barriers to help-seeking (Seidler et al., 2016; Shepherd et al., 2023). This emotional disconnection is not merely a personal health issue but a communicative one; it acts as a barrier to forming the close relationships and emotional expressions necessary for well-being (American Psychological Association, 2018; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). In its most extreme form, this communicative isolation interconnects with depression and ideation, contributing to global male suicide rates that consistently outpace those of women (Olfiffe et al., 2019).

In the vacuum left by institutional failures, the “Manosphere” has emerged as a powerful, albeit harmful, discursive space. The term “manosphere” refers to a loosely connected network of online communities united by broadly anti-feminist, misogynistic, and male-supremacist ideologies, operating across forums, social media platforms, and podcasts (Ging, 2019; Rothermel, 2023). This collection of online communities is unified by ideologies such as “The Red Pill” (TRP), which centers male supremacy and anti-feminism, and “The Black Pill” (TBP), a deterministic worldview rooted in biological essentialism and fatalism (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2022).

The “Red Pill” metaphor, borrowed from the film *The Matrix*, frames adherence to male supremacist ideology as an “awakening” to hidden truths about gender relations, specifically the belief that feminism has disadvantaged men and that women’s sexuality and social power are manipulative forces to be countered (Ging, 2019). The “Black Pill” represents an ideological intensification: where the Red Pill positions men as potentially empowered agents, the Black Pill forecloses this agency entirely, rooting male failure in biological determinism and rendering any social improvement futile (Lindsay, 2022). These communities function as powerful sites of belonging for young men experiencing social isolation, romantic rejection, or economic precarity. The seductive logic is not primarily shock or banter, though these operate as entry points, but rather the provision of community, narrative, and a coherent (if distorted) explanation for personal suffering (Botto & Gottzén, 2024).

A key communicative strategy within these groups is “discursive distancing,” wherein men position themselves as victims of both feminism and the very hegemonic structures they enact (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Ging, 2019). By externalizing blame toward women and “successful” men, these discourses offer a sense of community rooted in shared resentment rather than emotional growth (Regehr, 2022). In this way, the manosphere exploits the very emotional needs that positive masculinity spaces like MenGage seek to address through healthier means.

This rhetorical landscape has increasingly moved into the podcasting medium. Recent content analyses of “alpha male” podcasts reveal a proliferation of ambivalent sexism and the promotion of “precarious manhood” (Fields, 2024; Marsales, 2023). These programs utilize the podcast’s intimate format to platform misogynistic rhetoric, often framing women as manipulators and suggesting that masculine identity is compromised by emotional attentiveness (Fields, 2024). Such content is particularly salient for young boys, who often consume these messages under the guise of “banter” or “shock” value (Haslop et al., 2024). Critically, Haslop et al. (2024) argue that direct attacks on these views can be counterproductive, instead suggesting that the most effective feminist intervention is the promotion of positive alternative versions of masculinity. The genealogy of the manosphere’s sonic rhetoric extends well beyond the contemporary digital moment.

Kelly’s (2020) critical framework for analyzing reactionary masculinity in media illuminates how such voices mobilize affect and belonging to consolidate anti-feminist communities. These critical media treatments reveal that the “manosphere podcast” is not a novel aberration but the latest iteration of a long-standing tradition of aural male grievance culture, underscoring the importance of sound studies frameworks for understanding both its appeal and its contestation.

Podcasting: Aural intimacy and the renegotiation of masculinity

If “alpha male” podcasts represent a regressive use of the medium, men’s mental health podcasting offers a transformative counter-space. The power of this medium lies in its unique “aural intimacy.” Under certain conditions, podcasts engender a sense of “media companionship” between the listener and host, which has been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation (Murphy et al., 2024; Perks et al., 2019). For men who may be drawn to male-focused digital spaces due to existing mental health challenges (Aiolfi et al., 2024; Hastings et al., 2020), the podcast provides a “feminist counter-script” delivered through a medium they already trust and consume at higher rates than women (Best & Cole, 2022; Ipsos, 2024).

The distinctiveness of podcasting as a feminist counter-space lies not only in its accessibility but in its fundamentally sonic character (hooks, 1984). Drawing on Eckstein’s (2017) theorization of sound as argument, we contend that the acoustic register of the podcast such as breath, pause, timbre, and vocal hesitation constitutes a form of embodied rhetoric unavailable to text-based or visual media. As Eberly’s (2025) work on intimate audio broadcasting demonstrates, the listener’s experience of a disembodied yet familiar voice creates a uniquely relational form of persuasion. Gunn’s (2013) attention to the affective dimensions of sound further underscores the importance of attending to the sonic, rather than merely the discursive, qualities of these spaces. In the manosphere, sonic forms the confident cadence of the “alpha male” podcast host function as rhetorical performances of dominance. By contrast, the halting, reflective vocal performances of the MenGage trustees constitute a counter-rhetoric of vulnerability legible only through the ear.

Importantly, vulnerability within the podcast is performed sonically as much as discursively. Participants frequently pause, self-correct, lower their vocal certainty, or leave sentences unfinished when discussing emotional difficulty, creating an acoustic

register of uncertainty that contrasts sharply with the hyper-confident vocal performances common within “alpha male” media cultures. These audible disruptions to masculine authority transform the podcast into a counter-rhetorical soundscape where emotional reflexivity becomes legible through the ear.

This transition toward digital spaces is, in part, a response to institutional shortcomings. Traditional mental health services frequently fail to provide the interpersonal contact or engagement with lived experience essential for effective care (Caoilte et al., 2024; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). Podcasting addresses these systemic gaps by prioritizing the individual voice (Caoilte et al., 2024). For a feminist analysis of communication, the podcast’s power lies in its capacity for storytelling and “emotional role modeling.” By encouraging guests to recount their struggles, these podcasts create a discursive space where men can identify and challenge hegemonic constraints in real-time (Author, n.d.; Caoilte et al., 2024).

These positive representations serve as a vital functional counterweight to the Manosphere. Role models within these podcasts normalize the experience of struggling, transforming help-seeking from a perceived “weakness” into a manageable facet of masculine identity (Rothermel, 2023; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2022). However, while the psychological benefits of listening are established (Author, n.d.), we lack a clear understanding of the specific communicative strategies used to construct this “positive masculinity” during the podcast interaction.

Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist, interpretivist methodology, grounded in the perspective that individual meanings and lived experiences are the primary constituents of “knowledge” (Schwandt, 1998). To explore these meanings, we utilized a phenomenological approach through a feminist lens. Feminist research practices prioritize reflexivity and a dedicated commitment to interrogating unequal gendered power relations and broader patriarchal social structures (Hesse-Biber, 2014). In alignment with Pini and Pease (2013), we proceed from the premise that scholarship involving men must actively interrogate patriarchy to foster gender justice and equality.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), an approach where the researcher’s ontological perspective is inextricably tied to the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within RTA, reflexivity is not a singular step but an ongoing practice employed throughout the research to acknowledge how the researcher’s subjectivity informs the interpretation of the data. To enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of this qualitative inquiry, we adhered to the best practices outlined by Johnson et al. (2020), which included the development of a focused research question and the application of double coding for 20% of the data to bolster the reliability of the thematic findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Participants and data selection

We employed a purposive sampling approach to select “content-rich” data directly relevant to the renegotiation of masculinity (Palinkas et al., 2015). The data set consists of five episodes from the MenGage podcast, a platform affiliated with a UK-based

men's mental health charity. The selection included four episodes featuring one-on-one guest appearances by individual trustees and a fifth episode featuring the entire volunteer trustee team. To ensure a comprehensive analysis of the discursive environment, data from the podcast host was included across all five episodes.

The participants consisted of five MenGage trustees, one of whom also serves as the podcast host. All participants identified as white, British, heterosexual men, aged between 37 and 43 years old.

Critical reflexivity and limitations

A central tenet of feminist praxis is the acknowledgment of a study's boundaries and the researcher's positionality. A limitation of this research is the specific nature of the sample; as trustees, these participants occupy a unique leadership role within the organization. While their episodes are critical because they "set the tone" for the podcast's culture, their perspectives may differ from service users or guests who do not hold organizational authority. Trustees may be more strategically inclined to communicate "positive" masculine messages than those currently in the midst of a mental health crisis.

Furthermore, the demographic homogeneity of the group—white, heterosexual men of similar ages—limits the intersectional scope of the findings. While this specific demographic is a primary target of "Manosphere" rhetoric, the findings may not capture the nuances of masculinity as experienced by men of different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, or sexualities. Recognizing these limitations is essential for feminist scholarship; future research must incorporate a broader, more diverse demographic to ensure that the "positive masculinity" being promoted is truly inclusive and does not inadvertently center privileged identities.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in line with Braun and Clarke's (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) six stages of thematic analysis by researchers Gary Shepherd (GH) and Holly Murphy (HM). Microsoft Word was used throughout the process for organization of the codes and themes; however code and theming development were conducted manually without using specialized software. Transcriptions of each podcast episode were created using Microsoft Word Transcribe and transcriptions were checked for accuracy by both GS and HM. After transcription, HM identified and highlighted relevant sections of the data relevant to the research. GS and HM familiarized themselves with each of the transcripts, re-reading them multiple times to further understanding of patterns among the data and the data itself. Whilst becoming familiar with the data, both GS and HM noted ideas for potential codes. Initial codes were created by HM. GS then double coded 20% of the data in order to improve validity and reliability. GS and HM had an in-person meeting to clarify and compare codes and found a high standard of inter-coder agreement between initial codes. A further meeting was held where both GS and HM further developed codes and generated initial themes. Themes were finalized and agreed upon at a further meeting.

Reflexivity

Lefkowich (2019) asserts that to recognize researcher privilege or oppression, reflections on gender are essential when researching men and masculinity. To engage with the study reflexively, both personal and interpersonal reflexivity was employed on an individual and collective level (Walsh, 2003). We practiced reflexive processes in consideration of the gender dynamics within the mixed gender research team. Collective reflexivity enabled the team to process diverse perspectives and seemed to enrich creative discussions about the concepts and methods of the research (Cayir et al., 2022). Interpersonal power dynamics were examined with consideration of our mixed gender team, particularly with additional factors such as lead researcher GS was male and also an experienced researcher and practicing therapist whilst research assistant HM was female, newer to research and a postgraduate trainee counselor.

Results

Three themes were extracted from the podcast episodes: encouraging a culture of inclusivity; positive masculinity and discursive accountability and grappling with masculinity and the gender binary. In line with ethical guidelines, pseudonyms were used throughout the following sections.

Theme one: Encouraging a culture of inclusivity

The first theme identifies how the participants actively cultivate a communicative community where the sharing of lived experience is not only permitted but normalized. This inclusivity is managed through deliberate discursive boundaries, including a zero-tolerance policy toward misogyny. By framing the podcast as a space for “group connectedness,” the participants reposition vulnerability as a collective strength rather than an individual weakness.

David illustrates the pedagogical value of this shared discursive space:

One of the things I'm proudest of with [charity] is that what we've effectively done is created a community where guys will share their experience, and experience is a big thing for me. Yeah, you should learn from bad experiences. You know, either knowingly or unknowingly, you learn from every experience, but you probably learn more really from bad experiences. And [learn] what you're made of.

This normalization of “bad experiences” functions as a rhetorical counter-script to the hegemonic requirement for masculine invulnerability. Mark further emphasizes that this inclusivity is built upon a foundation of authentic communication and shared core values among the trustees:

I think that mutual respect, that friendship that's been generated between the five of us ... we can be so honest with each other and actually, genuinely air exactly how we feel without fear of offending each other ... we're also all open minded enough to take on other somebody else's opinion and actually have our own opinion maybe moulded slightly.

The cultivation of this space directly challenges the “patriarchal script.” While the participants are white, heterosexual, British men—a demographic often expected to uphold normative scripts of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity—their communicative practice represents a significant departure from these expectations. Collier (1998) outlines how hegemonic masculinity is typically associated with negative traits such as individualism, emotional distance, and aggression. However, by consciously restructuring the podcast as a site for emotional exchange, these men enact a “pattern of practice” that disrupts traditional dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Because masculinity is a practice rather than a stable gender identity mapped onto the body, it remains perpetually open to historical and political change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The reflexivity displayed by the participants suggests they are active agents in reconfiguring masculinity to navigate the current social landscape, rather than passive recipients of a fixed gendered script. By displacing older, stoic forms of masculinity with newer, reflexive ones, they contribute to a broader reorganization of the patriarchal gender system (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This reorganization carries what might be described as a “liberatory potential”—one that extends beyond gender relations in the abstract and reaches into the interpersonal and emotional lives of men themselves. In this sense, the podcast does not merely challenge hegemony at the level of ideology; it models an alternative embodied practice of masculinity that participants and listeners can actively adopt. Mark explains that the podcast environment offers a safety net that does not demand immediate performance:

Beautiful thing about it is that these events [and] activities that we have, guys don't have to come in and talk about challenges... you could come to the event for two years and actually that one night that you come down, you might think “Now I'm going to talk. I'm going to and just let everything out” and you'll find it really liberating.

This sense of liberation aligns with Inclusive Masculinity Theory, which posits that men's peer groups are moving toward a culture of emotional openness and the softening of gendered codes (Anderson, 2009). Anderson (2009) notes that as “homophobia”—the fear of being thought homosexual which polices men's behavior—decreases, men are freer to engage in emotional disclosure and close bonds. By shifting the codes of behavior associated with masculinity, the “MenGage” podcast reconfigures the space so that diverse experiences are valued rather than policed. This reflects a wider social shift where a decrease in homophobia allows men to manage their mental health through shared vulnerability outside of restrictive, heteronormative frameworks (Anderson, 2009).

Critically, this inclusive space exists in tension with a broader media landscape defined by a “resurgence of hegemonic, or toxic, masculinity.” Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) assert that we are in a “new era of the gender wars,” particularly in digital contexts where critiques of masculinity are often met with violent, macho displays of aggression toward women. In this hostile digital environment, the participants' active grappling with misogyny is a significant feminist intervention. Their zero-tolerance approach, combined with a culture of reflexivity, demonstrates a commitment to reconfiguring masculinity into a “positive” form that actively resists the regressive rhetoric of the manosphere (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016).

Theme two: Positive masculinity and discursive accountability

The second theme identifies how the participants use the podcast to construct a form of “positive masculinity”—a version of masculine identity rooted in gender equality, respectful connections, and pro-feminist values (Mackay, 2025). Central to this construction is an explicit, “zero-tolerance” approach toward misogyny, which serves as a reflexive and deliberate defense against the broader digital media landscape in which the podcast operates. This stance is not merely aspirational rhetoric; rather, it emerges from concrete communicative practices that the trustees enact both within the podcast space and in their broader organizational culture. By actively naming and enforcing this boundary, the participants demonstrate that positive masculinity is not simply the absence of harm but a proactive, maintained commitment. As the following data illustrates, this commitment operates at multiple levels simultaneously individual, communal, and organizational. Mark recounts how the trustees actively manage the communicative boundaries of their all-male group:

We’re very aware that we support men or people who identify as male. And that can be a barrier and we’ve been very fortunate ... that we haven’t really had misogynistic stuff... And every time we’ve had any even glimmer of it, we’ve absolutely shut it down. If you don’t have someone who’s got the wherewithal or the abilities to do that, it could go in a very different direction.

By “shutting down” even a glimmer of misogyny, the participants engage in a form of rhetorical resistance against the “manosphere.” While digital communities like Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) often reframe misogyny as “misandry” to orient their communities against feminism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018), the “MenGage” podcast aligns itself with feminist goals. Our findings suggest this attitude toward misogyny functions at multiple levels: individually through guest opinions; communally through the podcast’s digital reach (Balls-Berry et al., 2018); and organizationally through its status as a suicide prevention charity.

Furthermore, this “zero-tolerance” stance encourages listeners to become “active bystanders” (Banyard et al., 2007). Because bystander intervention is more likely in environments where challenging harmful behavior is normalized (Banyard et al., 2007; Flood & Pease, 2006; Katz, 2006), the podcast models a communicative blueprint for listeners to intervene in their own social circles. This practices “ownership and accountability” rather than the “internalized victimhood” often promoted in “Red Pill” (TRP) or “Black Pill” (TBP) ideologies (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Regehr, 2022).

The transition toward positive masculinity within the podcast space is often triggered by what Simon calls “permission”—a communicative threshold that enables emotional disclosure among men. Rather than requiring vulnerability as a precondition for belonging, the podcast creates conditions in which a single act of openness can catalyze reciprocal sharing across the group. This dynamic is particularly significant given the hegemonic norm of emotional restraint, which positions disclosure as a risk rather than a resource (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Simon’s account illuminates the aural dimension of this process: the sound of one man being honest about his

experience becomes, in itself, an invitation—and a permission structure—for others to follow. He describes this mechanism as follows:

I call it permission ... if you're prepared to disclose a little bit ... people feel comfortable about saying what they've got going on ... we might not have the same situation ... but the depths we can get to [and] the darkness we might feel ... is not dissimilar.

This “permission” directly challenges the hegemonic requirement for emotional restraint (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). By reconfiguring masculinity to include meaningful emotional embodiment, the participants dismantle the “mask of traditional masculinity” (Wilson et al., 2022). Jason reflects on how this vulnerability, while difficult, fosters deeper interpersonal support:

It's been a difficult thing to actually kind of open up ... but since we've been doing that and showing vulnerability, we've had it [support] back in bucket loads.

These reflections demonstrate that masculinity is not a static, biological fact but a social project in constant flux—one that is actively shaped through communicative practice (Collier, 1998; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The podcast serves as a space where the negative traits often synonymous with hegemonic masculinity such as violence, aggression, and emotional unavailability are deconstructed and replaced with traits of nurturance, self-awareness, and connectivity. This is not simply a matter of individual men making different choices; it reflects a collectively negotiated redefinition of what it means to be a man in relation to others. Crucially, the podcast format makes this negotiation audible and accessible, broadcasting it beyond the immediate peer group and into the private listening spaces of its wider audience. In doing so, it contributes to the normalization of emotional expressiveness as a masculine value rather than a feminine incursion.

A critical dimension of this theme is the intentional shifting of masculine norms in the context of fatherhood. Mark reflects on the “ripple effect” of his own behaviors on his children, specifically regarding his relationship with alcohol:

I think, well, that's part of growth isn't it—reflecting on yourself ... maybe I shouldn't have shouted.... And from my point of view ... what message am I sending to my [children]? That like “ah, it's half six ... [opens beer].” Well, no, that's not a good message ... I've kind of been reframing alcohol.

This critical reflection on parental messaging is vital for breaking the reproduction of hegemony. While childcare and emotional management have traditionally been coded as “feminine” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the participants actively move these responsibilities into their masculine identities. This intentional shift in the “project” of fatherhood allows for the deconstruction of hegemonic norms before they are passed to the next generation (McDermott et al., 2019).

Finally, the self-reflection practiced by the trustees acts as “emotional role-modeling” for the listener (Author, n.d.). By discussing their own intrapersonal relationships and the importance of self-awareness for preventing burnout, the participants promote a version of emotional intelligence that is often missing from traditional masculine scripts (Goleman, 1995, 2011). Given that men are more likely to utilize technology for self-reflection purposes (Tyler et al., 2022), the podcast medium is a powerful tool

for encouraging these reflective practices, which can increase emotional intelligence even through short-term engagement (Perkins & Schmid, 2019).

Theme three: Grappling with masculinity and the gender binary

The final theme explores how participants actively negotiate the tension between traditional hegemonic scripts and the “uncomfortable” work of emotional wellness. For these men, mental wellness is a proactive, preventative project involving counseling, mindfulness, and physical discipline. However, this project requires a “grappling” with the gender binary, as they must reconcile traits historically coded as “feminine”—such as emotional openness—with their embodied experiences as men. Simon highlights the rhetorical bravery required to oppose the expectations of strength and reliability:

Those labels that we give ourselves like “I’m supposed to be the strong one”... Especially as a teammate in a sport ... to be able to step out and say, “I’m not that guy right now” takes courage. It isn’t a weakness, because actually it’s harder to do that than it is to just internalize it all.

By naming and interrogating these “labels,” Simon works to remove what Wilson et al. (2022) term the “mask of traditional masculinity,” making visible the social construction that underlies hegemonic performance rather than treating it as natural or inevitable. This act of naming exemplifies the potential for the reconstruction of masculine ideals through alternative narratives, a process Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue is central to any reconfiguration of gendered power relations. Simon’s repeated pauses and self-corrections (“I’m supposed to be the strong one...”) perform uncertainty rather than mastery, sonically disrupting the confident cadence associated with manosphere podcasting.

In articulating that stepping back from the role of “the strong one” requires courage rather than signaling weakness, Simon reframes vulnerability as an act of rhetorical bravery rather than failure. We suggest that by modeling help-seeking behaviors and informal support networks, the trustees directly challenge the negative attitudes toward emotional communication typically associated with hegemonic norms (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013; Levant et al., 2009; Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). Importantly, this modeling occurs within a sonic medium, meaning that the act of speaking about struggle—the sound of a man publicly admitting difficulty—carries a performative weight that text-based advocacy cannot replicate.

A significant aspect of this “grappling” is the recognition that emotional work often feels “unnatural” to the male-coded body. Simon describes his move toward wellness as an exercise in “delayed gratification” and stepping out of his comfort zone:

Cold showers and talking about my feelings ... once upon a time would have felt out of my comfort zone and what I’m realising more and more is being out of your comfort zone is positive for our physical and mental health.

From a feminist perspective, this discomfort signals the navigation of a gender binary. Connell (2020) critiqued the sociobiological view that gender stems naturally from the body, arguing instead that social structures and discourses shape our embodiment. Simon’s admission that talking about feelings is “outside of his comfort zone”

demonstrates that emotional literacy is not a biological trait but a socially policed boundary. By leaning into “feminized” sensibilities, these men blur the binary, suggesting that masculinity is fluid and open to reconfiguration.

Interestingly, this reconfiguration often relies on existing hegemonic forms, particularly through sport and physical prowess. Sport is a central site for the production of gendered bodies and disciplinary practices (Theberge, 1991). Because physical toughness holds significant cultural capital for men, Simon’s engagement with exercise can be seen as a sustained commitment to normative expectations. However, by situating exercise as a tool for “mental wellness” rather than mere “dominance,” the podcast challenges the traditional links between athleticism and hegemonic aggression. The participants’ proactive approach serves as a protective factor against the “dark hole” of emotional suppression. Jason reflects on his choice to engage with counseling and mindfulness:

I’ve had counselling and feel I have needed it ... because what’s the other choice? The other choice for me would be to go down a very dark hole where I’m very, very sad and very, very angry ... I went on a few mindfulness courses and ... the simplicity of actually enjoying those moments and enjoying life and being present ... it was just amazing.

Jason’s active choice to explore “feminized” traits like mindfulness speaks to a broader shift toward a reflexive masculinity. While rigid boundaries and cultural stigma often prevent men from accessing psychological support (Shepherd et al., 2023), these participants use the podcast to navigate the “paradox of masculinity”—the collision of traditional suppression with contemporary expectations of openness (Jamil, 2025).

The significance of this “grappling” extends beyond the individual. In a media culture saturated with anti-feminist rhetoric seeking to reestablish “alpha” norms, the “MenGage” podcast makes visible the internal tensions of being a man. By admitting that vulnerability is hard, uncomfortable, and “outside the comfort zone,” these men offer a more authentic and sustainable blueprint for positive masculinity than the hyper-masculine caricatures found in the manosphere. This intentional deconstruction of the gender binary provides a platform for a version of masculinity that is both emotionally literate and socially beneficial.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that men’s mental health podcasts serve as a critical discursive site for the renegotiation of contested masculinities. By featuring voices that advocate for inclusivity, equality, and reflective accountability, platforms like MenGage offer a “flexible” alternative to the rigid scripts of hegemonic masculinity. As real-life examples and digital narratives profoundly shape how individuals interpret gender (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), the promotion of these inclusive versions of masculinity is a vital communicative project, particularly given the wide reach and aural intimacy of the podcast medium (Balls-Berry et al., 2018).

The urgency of this intervention is most visible among younger men, a demographic currently navigating a digital landscape saturated with “manosphere” ideologies that foster victimhood and discourage self-improvement (Ging, 2019; Lindsay, 2022). While figures within the manosphere utilize short-form, algorithmic-friendly content to

disseminate misogyny, the mental health podcasts analyzed here utilize the affordances of “slow media”—depth, vulnerability, and sustained dialogue—to subvert those narratives (Murphy et al., 2024). By normalizing “emotional role-modeling,” these podcasts provide a discursive blueprint for listeners to reject the patriarchal bargain in favor of autonomy and relationality (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

The urgency of this research is further contextualized by what has been widely described as a “male loneliness epidemic” a documented pattern of social isolation, declining friendship networks, and increasing mental health crises among men, particularly in younger age groups (Olliffe et al., 2019; Shepherd et al., 2023). Men in the UK and beyond are significantly less likely than women to seek professional mental health support, more likely to rely on a single relationship for emotional sustenance, and more likely to die by suicide (Seidler et al., 2016). These patterns are not incidental to the manosphere’s appeal but are its fuel. In this context, men’s mental health podcasting represents more than a discursive intervention; it constitutes a material public health strategy, reaching men in private, low-barrier spaces and modeling the relational behaviors of vulnerability, help-seeking and emotional disclosure, traits most likely to buffer against isolation and crisis.

From the perspective of feminist praxis, this study identifies a transformative opportunity to redistribute emotional labor. By encouraging men to become “emotionally self-sustaining” through individual accountability and professional help-seeking, these podcasts challenge the historical “emotional outsourcing” that places the burden of men’s psychological regulation onto women (Hochschild, 1983). This shift is not merely a personal wellness benefit but a material contribution to gender equity within patriarchal family structures.

However, the future of this medium requires rigorous ethical and intersectional vigilance. Future research must investigate the specific influence of these podcasts on young men’s attitudes and develop guidelines for “responsible content” that prioritizes autonomy and the best interests of the demographic. Crucially, feminist praxis must ensure that the “positive masculinity” promoted does not become a project that centers only privileged identities. As the participants in this study were predominantly white and heterosexual, practitioners must work to expand this culture of inclusivity to include queer, trans, and racially diverse voices. The dismantling of the manosphere must extend beyond emotional vulnerability to an active dismantling of the racial and class hierarchies that sustain hegemonic power.

Ultimately, men’s mental health podcasting offers more than just health literacy; it provides a platform for the active creation of alternative modes of being. By making visible the tensions within masculine construction and validating the “uncomfortable” work of growth, these podcasts offer a powerful counternarrative to digital misogyny, fostering a version of masculinity that is both resilient and socially accountable.

Implications for feminist praxis

The findings of this study offer a roadmap for leveraging digital media to dismantle patriarchal communicative norms. Feminist praxis requires more than the critique of existing power structures; it demands the active creation of alternative modes of relating. By analyzing how men’s mental health podcasts renegotiate masculinity, this

research identifies three specific areas where communication serves as a site of feminist intervention.

Podcasting as a subversive counter-space; first, this study suggests that podcasting serves as a vital “feminist counter-space” within a digital landscape increasingly dominated by the “manosphere.” While figures like Andrew Tate utilize short-form, algorithmic-friendly content to disseminate hyper-masculine and misogynistic rhetoric, the podcasts analyzed here utilize the affordances of the long-form medium—intimacy, depth, and vulnerability—to subvert these narratives. For feminist practitioners, this underscores the importance of supporting “slow media” formats. These spaces allow for the “unlearning” of hegemonic masculinity through “emotional role modeling,” providing a discursive blueprint for listeners to reject the patriarchal bargain in favor of relationality and self-awareness.

Redistributing emotional labor; second, the emphasis on “individual accountability” and “self-reflection” identified in the themes has direct material implications for gender equity. Historically, the emotional labor of managing men’s mental health and interpersonal crises has fallen disproportionately on women—a phenomenon often described as “emotional outsourcing.” By encouraging men to develop their own emotional literacy and seek professional help rather than relying solely on domestic partners for psychological regulation, these podcasts promote a more equitable distribution of emotional labor. Feminist praxis in this context involves advocating for communicative spaces that teach men to be “emotionally self-sustaining,” thereby reducing the relational burden placed on women within patriarchal family structures.

Intersectional vigilance and the future of inclusive masculinities; third, this research highlights a critical site for intersectional feminist intervention. While the “MenGage” podcast promotes a more “flexible” masculinity, the participants were predominantly white, cisgender, and heterosexual. A feminist praxis must remain vigilant against the risk of “positive masculinity” becoming a project that centers only privileged identities, potentially creating a “kinder, gentler” patriarchy that still excludes marginalized masculinities. Practitioners must ensure that the “culture of inclusivity” identified here is expanded to include queer, trans, and racially diverse voices. True feminist praxis in the realm of men’s mental health must insist that the dismantling of the manosphere does not stop at emotional vulnerability, but extends to the active dismantling of the racial and class hierarchies that sustain hegemonic power.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Google Gemini (v. 1.5 Flash) as a writing assistance tool. Specifically, it was used to help reorganize the structure of the literature review, to suggest transitions between sections, and to rephrase passages for stylistic alignment with the journal’s conventions. The tool did not generate original analysis, interpret data, or produce the theoretical arguments in this paper. All AI-assisted text was carefully reviewed and substantially rewritten by the authors to ensure accuracy, fidelity to the data, and consistency with the original research intentions. The authors take full and sole responsibility for the content of the final manuscript.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Gary Shepherd**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Holly Murphy**: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Robyn Timothy**: Writing – review & editing.

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