

Beyond "Manning Up": Exploring Societal Masculinity Norms on Mental Health among Young Cebuano Professionals

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ABSTRACT

For generations, society has defined what it means to be “a man” emphasizing traits such as strength, resilience, emotional restraint, dominance, and self-reliance (Marquez, 2024). While these expectations shape the concept of “real man,” they often come at a cost: suppressing emotions, avoiding vulnerability, and adhering to rigid gender roles (Barragan, 2024). Phrases like “man up” or “keep calm” dismiss men's struggles, reinforcing the idea that seeking help is a sign of weakness (Mussatto, 2024). Despite growing discourse on masculinity and mental health, most studies remain heavily focused on Western or urban contexts, leaving limited understanding of how these norms operate within specific cultural and professional settings, such as among young male professionals in Cebu, Philippines. This study addresses this gap by utilizing a grounded theory approach to explore societal masculinity norms and its influence on mental health and coping strategies of young Cebuano professionals. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with 10 participants—comprising 4 straight men (2 single and 2 married), 3 openly gay men, and 3 effeminate men—selected through purposive sampling, an emergent theory of *Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity* was developed. This theory described a cyclical process in which men internalize dominant masculinity norms, experience tension and struggle, and gradually redefine masculinity within the context of Filipino collectivist values. These findings together contribute to the growing discourse on culture, gender, and mental health in the Philippine context by providing a contextualized understanding of how young men in Cebu negotiate masculine ideals while protecting their mental health.

Keywords: Societal Masculinity Norms, Mental Health, Coping Strategies, Young Cebuano Professionals, Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

For generations, society has defined what it means to be “a man”. Throughout history, men have been expected to embody traits such as strength, resilience, emotional restraint, dominance, and self-reliance—ideals deeply embedded in societal masculinity norms (Marquez, 2024). While these expectations aim to define what it means to be a “real man,” they often come at a cost: suppressing emotions, avoiding vulnerability, and adhering to rigid gender roles (Barragan, 2024). Phrases like “man up” or “keep calm” are frequently used to dismiss men's struggles, reinforcing the idea that seeking help is a sign of weakness (Mussatto, 2024). Men who fail to conform to these expectations often face social stigma, which influences their behavior and impacts their well-being (Awan, 2023). As a result, men’s mental health struggles are often overlooked, dismissed, or silenced due to stigma, making it harder for them to seek help or express vulnerability.

In the Philippines, this issue is intensified by a patriarchal culture that expects men to be “barako” or tough. Filipino men are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability, discussing personal struggles, or engaging in healthy coping mechanisms such as mental health breaks. Instead, many turn to unhealthy coping strategies that may offer temporary relief but pose long-term risks (Doming, 2025). The stigma surrounding mental health further reinforces this behavior, as Filipino men fear negative perceptions, damage to family reputation, and experiences of social exclusion or disapproval (Martinez et al., 2020). These cultural pressures often

compel men to either conform to or resist these rigid expectations, creating a complex struggle between identity, masculinity, and mental well-being (Respect Victoria, 2024).

Beyond traditional gender norms, Filipino young professionals—particularly men—often face a layered burden of societal, parental, and familial expectations after graduation. They are frequently perceived as breadwinners, expected to demonstrate success, stability or capable enough to contribute financially to their families and bear all the household expenses, and leadership not only in their careers but also within their families (Shah, 2023; Hijjawi, 2025; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). This is often closely tied to societal narratives about what it means to be “successful” after graduation. These norms and expectations can contribute additional pressure that may intensify existing mental health struggles and complicate their coping mechanisms.

Despite growing awareness of mental health, global research has shown that mental health issues among men often go undiagnosed or untreated, as they are significantly less likely to seek mental health support compared to women (Doming, 2025). However, recent local data from the Cebu City Health Department shows that, from 2021 to May 2, 2024, more males than females sought treatment for mental illness (Oliverio, 2024). This apparent contradiction may suggest a gradual shift in help-seeking behaviors among Filipino men in urban settings like Cebu City, possibly due to increased mental health awareness and improved access to services. However, it's essential to note that this trend might not reflect a broader change in societal attitudes, as stigma and traditional masculine expectations still heavily influence men's mental health experiences.

In the United States alone, six million men are affected by depression annually, and men die by suicide at a rate four times higher than women, accounting for 79% of all suicide cases (Chatmon, 2020). Another study conducted in the Philippines, according to the Department of Health, there were 2,413 cases of reported suicide in 2016, and more than 2,000 of those cases were male (Rodriguez, 2021). A major contributing factor is the stigma associated with seeking help, which discourages men from accessing mental healthcare services. Studies indicate that around 70% of men avoid seeking mental healthcare due to societal pressures that equate vulnerability with weakness (Alam, 2025).

These deep-seated societal masculinity norms can have serious consequences on mental health, leading to heightened stress, depression, anxiety, increased risk of suicide, and reluctance to seek professional support (Dekin, 2021; Sileo & Kershaw, 2020). However, existing literature remains heavily focused on Western or urban contexts, with limited understanding of how these norms operate within specific cultural and professional settings, such as among young male professionals in Cebu, Philippines. Moreover, few to no studies employ qualitative, grounded approaches to theorize how these men experience, internalize, and navigate the intersecting pressures of masculinity and social expectation.

This study was conducted to address this gap by adopting a grounded theory approach to explore societal masculinity norms and its influence on mental health, as well as the management and coping strategies of young Cebuano professionals. By capturing their lived experiences, the study aimed to develop a contextual theory that reflected the specific cultural and socio-familial pressures they faced. Ultimately, the findings may inform culturally sensitive mental health programs, contribute to public discourse, and challenge rigid gender norms that contribute to the silent struggles of Filipino men. This study also hoped to help create a safe and supportive environment — an avenue where individuals can express themselves freely without fear of discrimination or judgment, while also promoting healthy, non-harmful expressions of emotion and identity.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using the Grounded Theory approach. According to Lumivero (2025), Grounded theory research is an inductive approach in which a theory is developed based on participants' perspectives and lived experiences rather than testing a pre-existing framework. It attempts to unravel the meanings of people's interactions, social actions, and experiences and interpretations or explanations of their realities.

Charmaz (2015) further emphasized that grounded theory is an inductive, iterative, interactive, and comparative method that provides systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data for the purpose of theory construction. The approach begins with inductive data analysis from the onset of data collection. Early analyses guide further data collection, allowing the researcher to refine emerging theoretical categories through successive levels of focused analysis. By constantly comparing data with data, codes with codes, and categories with categories, grounded theory moves the analysis toward increasingly abstract and theoretical understandings. This method also ensures continuous interaction between researchers, data, and theoretical development.

This approach was appropriate for the present study as it allowed an in-depth exploration of how young Cebuano professionals experience and navigate societal masculinity norms, and how these norms affect their mental health, managing and coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviors. Grounded Theory enabled the study to construct a conceptual understanding that emerged directly from the data, grounded in the voices and perspectives of the participants themselves. By capturing their lived experiences, the study hoped to develop a contextual theory that reflects the specific cultural and socio-familial pressures faced by young professionals in Cebu in the professional setting.

Research Participants

This study involved 10 young Cebuano professionals divided into three groups: four straight men (comprising two single and two married), three openly gay men, and three effeminate men. This composition ensured a balanced representation of relationship statuses and gender expressions.

Straight men are heterosexual males, meaning they are romantically and sexually attracted to women. On one hand, gay men are homosexual males, meaning they are romantically and sexually attracted to other men (Difference Between Gay and Straight, 2013). On the other hand, effeminate men are males who have feminine qualities or behaviors that are culturally associated with femininity—such as mannerisms, speech patterns, or emotional expression—that aren't typical of traditional men, but they are heterosexual males and attracted to women (Serai, 2023).

Including these individuals provided diverse perspectives and valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and managing societal masculinity norms. It provided a more holistic, intersectional perspective on masculinity in Cebuano society. It also ensured that the grounded theory developed from this study is not limited to heteronormative experiences. This made the findings more inclusive and reflective of the full spectrum of Cebuano male identities. Their participation contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of the complexities of societal masculinity norms.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, wherein participants were intentionally selected because they have specific characteristics relevant to the research questions. According to Nikolopoulou (2023), purposive sampling also called as judgemental sampling is a non-probability sampling method that relies on the researcher's judgement when identifying and selecting the individuals, cases, or events that can provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives. This approach ensured that the participants selected are those most likely to contribute meaningfully to the exploration of societal masculinity norms and mental health among young Cebuano professionals.

The following criteria were used to ensure the relevance of the participants.

Criteria for Participation:

- (1) Participants had a bachelor's degree.
- (2) Participants were currently employed.
- (3) Participants were 23-35 years old.
- (4) Participants were willing to share their experiences and perspectives through interviews.

All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study after being approached by the researchers and receiving a full explanation of the study's purpose and procedures. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Following the confidentiality condition in research, the identity of the participants were concealed in any portion of this study and in any forums where the study's findings were shared. Code names were assigned to each participant and are used consistently throughout this study as follows:

1. Straight Men Single (SM_S)
 - SM_S1 (Straight Man_Single 1)
 - SM_S2 (Straight Man_Single 2)
2. Straight Men Married (SM_M)
 - SM_M1 (Straight Man_Married 1)
 - SM_M2 (Straight Man_Married 2)
3. Openly Gay Men (OG)
 - OG 1 (Openly Gay 1)
 - OG 2 (Openly Gay 2)
 - OG 3 (Openly Gay 3)
4. Effeminate Men (EM)
 - EM 1 (Effeminate Man 1)
 - EM 2 (Effeminate Man 2)
 - EM 3 (Effeminate Man 3)

These codes were used in all data presentations to ensure participants' privacy while allowing readers to distinguish between groups and individual participants.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in various municipalities in Cebu, Philippines. The participants of the study were young Cebuano professionals aged 23-35. All interviews were conducted face-to-face to facilitate more meaningful and in-depth conversations, and ensured security for the participants. Interviews took place in safe, private, and comfortable locations mutually agreed upon by the researchers and participants. This approach ensured the consistency of data collection while maintaining ethical standards and comfort of the participants.

Research Instruments

Informed Consent Forms. This form was provided and explained to the participants before the interview was conducted. It addressed the study's purpose, methods, confidentiality protocols, minor risks, and participants' rights. Additionally, it ensured that participants understood the study completely and expressed their voluntary agreement to be involved in the study and for their answers to be recorded throughout the interview process.

Interview Questions. The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary instrument for data collection, designed to explore participants' experiences with societal masculinity norms, mental health challenges, and managing and coping strategies. This guide was developed to ensure that all participants were asked about similar themes and experiences. It allowed flexibility to probe deeper into relevant issues as they

arise during interviews. This interview guide was validated by subject matter experts (SMEs) in the field of psychology (e.g., thesis advisor, and thesis panel members) to ensure its appropriateness, clarity, and cultural sensitivity.

Audio Recorders. To facilitate the recording and transcription of these interviews, the researchers utilized voice recorders on phones, in order to capture the participant's responses, facilitating accurate transcription and detailed analysis of their experiences and perspectives. It was used with participant consent.

Data Gathering

The data-gathering procedures of this study were guided by the Straussian Grounded Theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990-1998), which provides systematic analytic procedures while still allowing theory to emerge from participants' experiences. This study adopted the Straussian version, which guided both data-gathering and data-analysis.

As explained by Cullen and Brennan (2021) and McLeod (2024), Strauss and Corbin's methodological framework provides guidance not only for data analysis but also for data collection through theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and the concurrent interaction between collecting data and examining emerging insights—iterative data collection. These principles shaped how participants were selected, how interview questions evolved based on incoming data, and how the researchers determined when theoretical saturation was achieved. This ensures that the data-gathering framework is fully aligned with the study's Straussian approach to data analysis.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 5 minutes to 1 hour, conducted in safe, private, and comfortable locations mutually agreed upon by the researchers and participants to facilitate more meaningful and in-depth conversations, and ensure security for the participants. The interview included predetermined questions with flexibility for follow-up inquiries based on the participant's responses, consistent with the iterative nature of Grounded Theory.

With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough analysis. Data integrity was maintained through secure storage, coding, and double-checking data entry. This approach to data collection ensured that the study gathered high-quality, contextually grounded data that reflect the lived experiences of young Cebuano professionals in navigating societal masculinity norms.

Data Analysis

After the researchers completed the data gathering process, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. After which, all transcripts were analyzed using the Straussian Grounded Theory analytical framework developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), with the primary goal of generating a theory that is grounded in the lived experiences of the participants.

As described by Cullen and Brennan (2021), the Straussian analytical system employs constant comparison, in-vivo coding, and relational tools such as questioning and the paradigm model to develop categories and integrate them into a grounded theory. These procedures allow the development, refinement, and integration of categories into an emerging grounded theory that remains firmly rooted in the participants' experiences. These techniques ensure that the analysis remains consistent with the methodological assumptions of the Straussian Grounded Theory framework that also guided the study's data-gathering procedures.

The data analysis followed three key stages:

1. Open Coding

This stage involved line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts. Key concepts, phrases, and recurring ideas were identified, highlighted, and grouped into subcategories, which later evolved into broader categories. This process helped break the data down into conceptual components, allowing the researchers to reflect on the

meaning and patterns that emerged from participants' responses. Throughout this phase, data from each participant was constantly compared to identify commonalities and differences across narratives.

2. Axial Coding

In this stage, the researchers examined the relationships between the categories, looking for links and patterns that connect different concepts. This allowed for the reassembling of the data in a more structured way, by identifying causal conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences surrounding each category.

3. Selective Coding

The final phase involved the identification of a core category that captured the central phenomenon of the study. All other categories were methodically related to this core category, and their relationships will be validated and refined. The categories were then integrated into a coherent theoretical framework that explains how societal masculinity norms influence the mental health and coping strategies of young Cebuano professionals.

Throughout the entire process, analytical notes or memos were used. These served as a way for the researchers to document their evolving interpretations, thought processes, and theoretical insights. The final theory emerged through the integration of these analytical memos, providing a well-grounded and nuanced explanation based on the participants' experiences (Noble & Mitchell, 2016).

As categories and a core theory emerged from the grounded theory analysis, they were systematically compared with existing theoretical frameworks such as Gender Role Conflict Theory, Precarious Manhood Theory, and Hegemonic Masculinity Theory. This comparative process allowed for critical reflection on how the participants' lived experiences align with, diverge from, or goes beyond existing theories, ensuring that the emerging theory was both context-specific and culturally grounded. Ultimately, the final theory would provide a deeper and comprehensive explanation of how societal masculinity norms influence the mental health of young Cebuano professionals, contributing valuable insights to the development of culturally sensitive mental health programs and challenging restrictive gender norms within Filipino society.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards in accordance with established research guidelines and institutional review board (IRB) requirements. Ethical considerations have been carefully integrated to ensure the protection, dignity, and well being of all participants involved in the study. This study followed the ethical guidelines outlined by the APA Code of Ethics (MSEd, 2024). Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, with participants fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Participants were given time to ask questions and express concerns. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization using code names, and secure data storage. No identifying information was disclosed in any part of the research dissemination. Justice was ensured by implementing fair, inclusive, and unbiased participant selection procedures, with the benefits and burdens of participation equitably distributed and transparency maintained throughout recruitment, data collection, and dissemination. In line with the principle of beneficence, the study aimed to generate meaningful insights that may inform future support systems, policy development, and public awareness, while participants received a certificate and a modest set of food/snacks as tokens of appreciation that were not intended to influence participation; one participant declined the token and received only the certificate. Nonmaleficence was observed by minimizing potential risks through empathetic, respectful, and emotionally sensitive engagement, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic, and by informing participants of possible emotional discomfort and providing referrals to licensed mental health professionals if distress arose. The researchers declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents and discusses the findings obtained from the qualitative data gathered from ten young Cebuano professionals— four straight men (two single and two married), three openly gay men, and three

effeminate men—across Cebu, Philippines, through semi-structured interviews. The analysis examines participants' narratives in relation to existing literature and relevant theoretical perspectives to provide a contextualized understanding of societal masculinity norms.

The study aimed to explore societal masculinity norms and how they are experienced, internalized and negotiated within the Cebuano context. Analysis revealed three interconnected themes that comprehensively address the study's research questions. The first theme, *Societal Masculinity Norms Experienced by Young Cebuano Professionals*, answers the question of how masculinity is experienced, defined, and reinforced within their cultural environment. The second theme, *Influence of Masculinity Norms on Young Cebuano Professionals' Mental Health*, responds to how these norms affect their emotional and psychological well-being. The third theme, *Managing and Coping Strategies of Young Cebuano Professionals Related to Masculinity Norms*, addresses on how participants navigate and manage responsibilities and pressures associated with societal masculine norms.

To ensure coherence and alignment with the statement of the problem, this chapter is organized according to the sequence of the research questions in the statement of the problem to maintain clarity and logical progression throughout the discussion.

Societal Masculinity Norms Experienced by Young Cebuano Professionals

This section addresses the first statement of the problem, which seeks to identify the societal masculinity norms young Cebuano professionals experience. To explore this, semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on participants' personal experiences and perceptions of masculinity within their households, workplaces, and communities. The interview included guiding questions that encouraged participants to share words or actions from people in their household or community that made them feel pressure to fit into a certain idea of what a man could be, as well as their experiences of feeling limited or affected by these norms that masculinity requires strength and emotional toughness.

Table 1. Societal Masculinity Norms Experienced by Young Cebuano Professionals

Main Categories	Subcategories
Emotional Stoicism	1. Concealment of Feminine-Associated Emotions (sadness, fear, vulnerability) 2. Emotional Composure
Provider role	1. Financial Provider 2. Solution Provider
Identity Concealment	1. Anti-effeminacy 2. Social ridicule and Pressure to Conform

Table 1 presents the main categories and subcategories that describe the societal masculinity norms experienced by young Cebuano professionals. Three main categories emerged from the data; (1) Emotional Stoicism, (2) Provider Role, (3) and Identity Concealment.

Emotional Stoicism

The first main category, Emotional Stoicism, captures participants' experiences of managing emotions in ways that align with culturally prescribed masculine ideals. Two subcategories contributed to this category: Concealment of Feminine-Associated Emotions (sadness, fear, vulnerability) and Emotional Composure.

The subcategory *Concealment of Feminine-Associated Emotions* like sadness, fear, and vulnerability describes how participants are expected to suppress emotions that are socially labeled as feminine, such as sadness, fear, or vulnerability, and keep composure in the face of difficulties because that's what a man should be. Participants frequently shared experiences of being told to "man up" or that "real men don't cry," which reinforced the need to hide their softer emotions. One participant shared,

"If I show emotions, like if I cry or admit I'm stressed, I hear people say, 'real men don't cry,' or 'man up.' Those words stay in my head for a long time. They make me feel like I don't have the right to show my softer side. I feel like I'm being forced to put on a mask of strength all the time, even if inside I'm struggling or unsure...I feel like I'm living two lives—one where I act strong and in control, and another where I quietly struggle alone." (SM_S2)

One married man echoed this, saying,

"...you're not supposed to show that you're soft-hearted or that you cry, you have to appear strong in front of people." (SM_M2)

Such narratives were echoed across identities, as seen in one gay participant's reflection:

"Growing up, I would often hear phrases like 'You're a man, you should be strong' like 'You should be strong' or 'Don't cry because you're a man'." (OG 1)

Across identities, these accounts reveal the internal conflict between the desire for emotional authenticity and societal demands to appear strong.

The subcategory *Emotional Composure* captures the efforts to maintain a calm and controlled exterior, even in stressful or distressing situations. This shows how participants control their emotions, demonstrating that stoicism functions both as a socially expected behavior and as a personally performed strategy to maintain masculine credibility. Several participants emphasized avoiding expressing distress or holding back emotions to maintain a composed and "strong" image, even at the expense of their well-being. One participant noted holding back of emotions,

"...I often hold back my feelings, just so people won't think I'm weak." (SM_S2)

Some participants described refraining from seeking support to preserve an image of strength. One married participant said,

"I should be able to solve everything alone. That everything should be okay." (SM_M1)

This is echoed by a gay participant, saying,

"...there were times, like, I wanted to open up about my stress or anxiety at work, then in school but I kept quiet because, Miss, I didn't want to be seen as weak or less of a man." (OG 1)

While another one mentioned,

"...my perception before was really if you're a man, you have to be firm, like, should always be the one who stands (firm)." (EM 2)

Another participant also described how he downplayed distress, saying,

"When I have problems, I'd rather laugh it off than show that I'm struggling. I'm afraid I could hear comments like 'you're crying over something small' or 'be a man.' So, I just keep everything to myself." (EM 3)

Together, these subcategories show how societal expectations dictate both the suppression of vulnerable emotions and the cultivation of composure. Across identities, male participants expressed an internal conflict between emotional authenticity and the pressure to appear strong, revealing how societal expectations dictate emotional restraint as a measure of masculinity. The subcategories connect to form the broader theme of Emotional Stoicism, showing that maintaining strength and composure is central to participants' understanding of what it means to be a man in Cebuano society. Participants' narratives emphasized that expressing pain or sadness is often seen as a sign of weakness, which deters men from expressing their emotions honestly. As a

result, silence and composure become indicators of masculinity. The narratives demonstrate how stoicism functions as a way to maintain one's masculine credibility by suggesting that emotional concealment is both socially expected and personally enacted.

Provider Role

The second main category, Provider Role, reflects the expectation that men must serve as both financial providers and solution providers. This category emerged from two interrelated subcategories: Financial Provider and Solution Provider. Being a provider was seen by the participants as a measurement of manhood, and they connected their self-worth to their capacity to support their families.

Financial Provider emphasizes the perceived duty to support family members through monetary support or materially. Participants, particularly married participants, reported feeling that their value as men was tied to their ability to provide financially. One married participant said,

"I should be able to support my family so that my partner will not think of any problems." (SM_M1)

Another married participant reported being pressured to provide despite separation, saying,

"(I felt pressured because, as a man, I am expected) to give support even though we were already separated." (SM_M2)

Under the subcategory *Solution Provider*, several participants noted that society often expects men to take on the role of the decision-maker and problem-solver, reinforcing the association between masculinity and competence, independence, and accountability. The expectation to "always have an answer" or "take control". This norm reinforces the belief that a "real man" should always be composed and resourceful even in difficult situations—whether at home, or within the family. One participant noted how the expectation to shoulder burdens becomes visible in everyday tasks:

"...when there are heavy things to carry at home or when something breaks, it's always me they look to, even when I'm already tired." (SM_S2)

Others associated masculinity with independence and self-reliance, as reflected in the statement:

"...if men have problems they should not tell anybody, they will keep it to themselves...keeping it inside because we can solve it alone. We'll be the ones to find a solution ourselves. That's why sometimes it could really create stress, especially if we can't solve the problem." (SM_M1)

Even at a young age, participants reported being assigned decision-making responsibilities. One gay participant shared,

"...like I am pressured like they said I've always been the decision-maker, and even when I wasn't sure that-what to do. For example, Miss, in family matters, they often say, 'You're the man, you should solve it.' and knowing I was still young at that time, Miss." (OG 1)

Likewise, an effeminate participant recalled assuming leadership at home, stating,

"I kind of became like a head of the household since my two older sisters were already in college — they weren't around much at home and Dad wouldn't listen to them either. So that time I really had to stand up, I made my own decision." (EM 2)

Across identities and orientations, men described being conditioned to believe that men must continue to be dependable providers and decision-makers by associating masculinity with strength, competence and accountability. This finding relates with Gutierrez (2024), who found that Filipino masculinity is rooted in the provider protector ideal that links manhood to responsibility and sacrifice. Similarly, this supports Yea's (2013) finding that Filipino men often present extreme sacrifice—including the sale of organs—as moral obligations

associated with their masculine identity. Being a provider in their context required embodying both stability and sacrifice, showing that masculinity is expressed not merely as dominance but as dependable endurance. This suggests a collectivist layer to masculinity within Filipino society, where men's worth is determined by their contribution to family and community rather than just his own achievement.

Identity Concealment

The third main category, Identity Concealment, encompasses the social pressure to hide or tone down expressions that deviate from traditional masculinity. These are mostly experienced by openly gay men and effeminate men—who are already navigating social stigma making them not exempted from these expectations. The standard of strength was often used as a corrective force—a demand to suppress softness or gentleness in favor of “acting manly”. Two subcategories contributed to this theme: Anti-Effeminacy and Social Ridicule and Pressure to Conform.

Under the subcategory *Anti-effeminacy*, participants often recounted being mocked or bullied for being seen as soft, as well as comments like “don’t act gay”. One openly gay participant remembered,

“...at home it’s really the phrase ‘don’t act gay’. That’s the word. Before, when I was a child, I always heard ‘don’t act gay, don’t do things like that’.” (OG2)

One effeminate participant reported concealing his identity to appear more “acceptable”:

“...sometimes you had to control your actions because of what society— the norms in the society that said ‘You can’t do this, you can’t do that’. So you really start overthinking because you used to be very expressive, but now you can’t really do what you used to do, because society and its norms dictate that this is what you should do, and you should only go as far as that.” (EM 1)

Another effeminate participant echoed this, saying,

“Especially when there are a lot of people around, it’s really hard not to feel conscious. For example, I start thinking about what people might say about me — like I don’t have a choice but to act “manly” in front of them. But deep inside, it’s actually different from what I really feel internally.” (EM 2)

Another described the pain of public policing:

“In my community, I often hear words that remind me to always act “manly.” Sometimes, when I speak softly or move gently, people say things like, “act like a man” or “don’t move like a gay.” Even if they mean it as a joke, it still hurts because it feels like they’re telling me that the way I naturally am is wrong.” (EM 3)

Under the subcategory *Social Ridicule and Pressure to Conform*, participants described experiences of bullying, mockery, social correction, and exclusion due to deviations from masculine norms. One participant shared,

“I used to always get into fights before, my friends would always tell me not to cry because men should be tough. And if you cry, they will call you gay.” (SM_M1)

Another recalled on being forced to act different to avoid mockery:

“There are many moments when I feel forced to act ‘like a man’ just so people won’t mock or judge me. For example, when I have problems, I don’t open up right away because I’m afraid people will say ‘you’re too dramatic’ or ‘you’re weak’.” (EM 3)

Another reflected on experiences of bullying:

“I was very bullied. I’m a bullied kid because of my personality, being talkative...I would get angry when they would call me “gay”, “gay-gay” again and again, just to make me mad.” (OG 3)

One effeminate participant also expressed being misunderstood in relationships, as one stated,

“...the girls I was with back in college, my friends—when I courted them it was like they thought I was just tripping, like ‘EM 1, you’re not like that, you’re just fooling around with us.’ They would laugh at me. And I said, ‘What should I do? How am I going to make them believe me?’...they’d wonder if maybe someday I’d look for a man.” (EM 1)

One participant also discussed the toxic stereotyping that limits them, saying,

“...some people’s mindsets are very toxic. You know, they tend to stereotype — like just because you move or act in a feminine way, they’ll immediately say, “Oh, he’s gay. I don’t want to hang out with him.” It’s like they automatically limit your capacity to prove yourself — as if that’s all there is to you.” (EM 2)

Across identities, participants expressed how ridicule, labeling, and correction shaped their understanding of what was considered “acceptable” masculine behavior. Straight men often recalled being discouraged from emotional expression, while gay and effeminate men described pressure to downplay or conceal their authentic selves to avoid ridicule and exclusion.

These narratives illustrate the dynamics of Gender Role Conflict Theory by O’Neil (1981), in which societal expectations limit behavioral freedom and cause internal strain. Young Cebuano professionals in the study experienced internal conflict between expressing emotion and maintaining the socially acceptable masculine facade. This conflict was evident in statements reflecting fear of judgment for showing vulnerability or softness.

The results further demonstrated that young Cebuano professionals internalize masculinity through continuous socialization within the family, school, and community. This process reflects Vandello and Bosson’s (2013) Precarious Manhood Theory, which posits that masculinity is a fragile social status that must be constantly earned and proven. Social expectations placed stricter behavioral scrutiny on gay and effeminate men, who were often subjected to corrective remarks such as “don’t act gay” or “be manly.” These forms of masculinity policing reinforce heteronormative dominance by marginalizing those who do not conform. According to the participants’ narratives, masculinity in the Cebuano context is conditional and performative—where respect must be “earned” through displays of competence, control, and endurance, but vulnerability exposes one to mockery and diminished credibility. This vulnerability was especially salient among gay and effeminate participants, who experienced what may be described as a double marginalization due to the pressures from both gender role expectations and sexual stigma.

Together, according to participants’ narratives, expectations from peers, family, and the community support early internalization of masculinity norms among young Cebuano professionals. The first major finding revealed how participants across all identities were influenced by cultural expectations that defined masculinity through emotional stoicism, the provider role, and identity concealment. These findings strongly align with the principles of hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) which describes how prevailing cultural norms marginalize softer or unconventional expressions of manhood while defining it through strength, emotional restraint, and dominance.

However, the present study extends Connell and Messerschmidt’s framework by grounding it in Filipino cultural values—particularly *hiya* (shame), *pakikisama* (group harmony), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), as Jiolito (2022) noted. These ideals influence how Filipino men handle emotional expression and responsibility, framing emotional restraint as an act of propriety and respect. Within the Cebuano context, men’s composure and silence are not only indicators of strength but also reflections of moral upbringing and sensitivity to others’ perception. This localized understanding highlights that masculine restraint, while aligned with hegemonic norms, also functions as a culturally rooted expression of social harmony and respectability.

Influence of Masculinity Norms on Young Cebuano Professionals’ Mental Health

This section addresses the second statement of the problem, which seeks to explore how societal masculinity norms influence the mental health of young Cebuano professionals. The interview focused on understanding

how these men experience psychological and emotional effects as they navigate cultural expectations of manhood. Participants were asked to share whether they have ever felt pressured to act a certain way because they're a man, how such pressures affected their mental or emotional well-being, and in what ways have these expectations about masculinity been helpful or harmful to their well-being. They also reflected on how societal expectations about being a man may have contributed to stress or anxiety in their lives.

Table 2. Influence of Masculinity Norms on Young Cebuano Professionals' Mental Health

Main Categories	Subcategories
Masculinity Norms as Sources of Distress	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pressure to Perform Strength and Conceal the True Self 2. Anxiety, Stress, and Overthinking
Masculinity Norms as Sources of Growth	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Motivation Toward Independence and Responsibility 2. Emotional Strength and Self-Mastery 3. Self-Acceptance and Growth through Reflection

Table 2 presents the main and subcategories that capture how societal masculinity norms influence the mental health of young Cebuano professionals. Two main categories emerged from the data: Masculinity Norms as Sources of Distress, and Masculinity Norms as Sources of Growth. These categories reflect the participants' lived experiences of both psychological strain and personal development shaped by masculine expectations.

Masculinity Norms as Sources of Distress

The first category, Masculinity Norms as Sources of Distress, captures how societal expectations for men to maintain strength, composure, and independence contribute to psychological strain among young Cebuano professionals. Two subcategories emerged under this category: Pressure to Perform Strength and Conceal the True Self and Anxiety, Stress, and Overthinking.

Pressure to Perform Strength and Conceal the True Self highlights participants' experiences of suppressing emotions to align with cultural ideals of masculinity. Straight men, gay men, and effeminate men participants consistently described feeling compelled to hide their emotions to avoid judgement. One straight participant shared,

"When I feel scared, stressed, or overwhelmed, I stop myself from showing it because I'm afraid of being judged...I often hold back my feelings, just so people won't think I'm weak...I don't allow myself to be open about my weaknesses, so everything piles up." (SM_S2)

Similarly, the same participant expressed feeling trapped behind a facade of toughness:

"I always feel pressured to act a certain way. In my family, I feel like I should always be the one who never gives up, the one who never shows weakness. Even if I'm exhausted, I try to look like I'm fine. But deep inside, it's heavy, and it affects me a lot. I feel like I don't have a space to just rest or be honest about my feelings. Emotionally, it's like I'm trapped behind a mask that I wear every single day. Mentally, I feel stressed, and sometimes I lose confidence because no matter what I do, it feels like it's never enough to meet people's standards. It's like I'm playing a role I didn't choose, but one I'm forced to keep acting out." (SM_S2)

The same participant reported suppressing emotions was normalized as part of being a man:

"I put on a face that looks tough, even if inside I'm breaking down. For example, when I lost a job before, I wanted to cry and admit I was worried, but instead I acted like it didn't bother me because I didn't want people to see me as weak. It's very tiring to keep pretending like that. I feel like I'm living two lives—one where I act strong and in control, and another where I quietly struggle alone." (SM_S2)

Across identities, gay and effeminate participants expressed similar pressures to appear strong and composed. One gay participant noted,

"I felt like I couldn't show my weakness, sadness, or even ask for help. Like, I feel ashamed because I'm supposed to be tough, or like that. This created a lot of pressure in me and then sometimes my emotions were bottled up..growing up. When I suppress emotions to appear strong, like it can build stress and that can affect to my- in my mental health, Miss." (OG 1)

Another effeminate participant shared,

"...because people always remind me that '(a man) should be strong', I cannot open up about my feelings. That's why sometimes, even if I have close friends, I still feel alone inside." (EM 3)

This findings aligns with O'Neil's (1981) Gender Role Conflict Theory, which states that psychological strain results from suppressing emotion in order to conform to masculine norms. Projecting control all the time causes chronic self-monitoring, where social acceptability takes precedence over authenticity.

The subcategory *Anxiety, Stress, and Overthinking* revealed the psychological consequences of these pressures. Participants expressed experiencing deep internal conflict and self-doubt as they struggled to meet societal expectations of masculinity. One participant reported being stressed for not sharing his struggles:

"...it's because I keep my problems to myself that's why maybe I get stressed, it could lead to depression to some but for me I only get stressed. Just like that, a little bit stressful." (SM_M1)

One gay participant shared that the pressure to appear emotionally strong, financially capable, and socially confident often led to anxiety and guilt whenever he felt he was falling short.

"...the idea that I should not show my weakness or that I should always (be) like financially stable makes me anxious. When I fail to meet those standards, I feel guilt-guilty and sometimes question my worth, Miss." (OG 1)

This sense of inadequacy was echoed by another gay participant who described overthinking and questioning his self-worth after perceived rejection, saying,

*"...it is harmful to me because it—like, it causes me a lot of anxiety, anxiety in the sense of 'sh*t, why is he showing this kind of intention toward me?' Like that—showing interest in me but not following through, so you end up overthinking, 'What's lacking in me? What—' something like that." (OG3)*

Similarly, one effeminate participant described heightened self-consciousness about his behavior and mannerisms in social situations, explaining,

"It really has a big effect on my stress and anxiety. Every time I go out or even just scroll through social media, I feel very self-conscious about how I move. I think things like, 'Did they notice I move softly?' or 'Do I sound okay?' Even small things—like my voice or the way I talk—make me nervous because I'm scared people might laugh or think badly of me. Because of that, I overthink a lot and my anxiety grows. Sometimes, I tell myself that it's exhausting to always pretend to be 'okay' just to be accepted by others." (EM 3)

The narratives of young Cebuano professionals further support Ruxton's (2020) observation that the pressure to maintain stoicism impedes emotional processing and exacerbates feelings of isolation. However, by situating emotional suppression within Filipino collectivism, this study goes beyond those findings. Young Cebuano professionals who practice emotional restraint avoid *hiya*—the embarrassment of being seen as weak or unmanly, in addition to appearing strong. Men avoid displaying signs of distress not only to appear tough but also to avoid shame to their families or their work. Phrases like "act like a man" or "don't cry" are frequently used to dismiss men's struggles, reinforcing the idea that seeking help is a sign of weakness, aligning with the study of Mussatto (2024). This turns internal struggles into a kind of moral endurance, making concealment a socially acceptable virtue. By situating gender role conflict within a collective moral

framework where interpersonal harmony takes precedence over individual feelings, this cultural nuance expands on Western theories.

Although performing strength often earns social acceptance, it carries severe psychological costs. Persistent stress, overthinking, restlessness, and feelings of inadequacy were reported by many participants. These findings are consistent with the study of Sileo and Kershaw (2020), who revealed that emotional suppression results in worse mental health outcomes, while adherence to masculine toughness correlates with higher substance use and aggression. Similarly, young Cebuano professionals who favored silence over disclosure reflected McKenzie et al.'s (2022) identification of societal stigma and fear of judgment as major barriers preventing men from seeking help. In line with Martinez et al. (2020), Filipino men often delay or avoid seeking mental health support due to self-reliance and concern for family reputation.

Emotional suppression combined with gender stigma led to heightened anxiety and self-doubt of participants. The pressure to “man up” limited their ability to seek help or express vulnerability. This finding supports Barragan (2024), who noted that masculine norms and cultural barriers prevent men from accessing mental health care. Several participants admitted to pretending to be “okay” despite inner distress, reinforcing a cycle where distress remains concealed until it manifests in physical or behavioral issues. Collectively, these results emphasize that strict adherence to masculinity norms not only limits help-seeking but also prolongs psychological distress among young Cebuano professionals.

Masculinity Norms as Sources of Growth

Interestingly, while emotional suppression often led to distress, several participants also reported that these same norms cultivated discipline, responsibility, and perseverance—qualities that they associated with maturity and success. The second main category, Masculinity Norms as Sources of Growth, shows how some participants converted the pressures of masculinity norms into personal development and resilience. This category comprises three subcategories: Motivation Toward Independence and Responsibility, Emotional Strength and Self-Mastery, and Self-Acceptance and Growth through Reflection.

Motivation Toward Independence and Responsibility reflects participants' drive to meet societal expectations, which cultivated diligence, self-reliance, and goal-oriented behavior. One married man shared,

“...for me it's helpful because I strive hard to work hard for them (family). I don't surrender easily.” (SM_M1)

Similarly, a gay participant reflected,

“I think it's helpful (societal masculinity norms) because they motivated me to be independent, Miss, and also goal-oriented...they pushed me to be, like, responsible and hardworking at- at an early age.” (OG 1)

Emotional Strength and Self-Mastery highlights participants' ability to regulate their emotions and develop resilience despite challenges. For instance, one gay participant stated:

“...For emotional struggles, if they're manageable, I deal with them myself — ‘I'll handle this, I can manage’.” (OG 2)

Another noted how these experiences contributed to emotional maturity:

“...it's more like self-discovery, think on how to manage your emotions...it helps me a lot to strengthen my emotions and develop a much more clear perspective on what I wanted to do...I build up a personality around me... it helps me to be more aware, it truly opened up in self-awareness perspective...it helps me navigate into leadership, it helps me communicate with people” (OG3)

Self-Acceptance and Growth through Reflection captures participants' experiences of understanding, accepting, and affirming themselves despite social pressures. One gay participant described gaining acceptance from family:

“Even though there was a part of me that knew my family couldn’t accept me like this before, later on they did accept it—especially my mom, who supported me for being this way. (joking) Charot. So for me, it’s positive, both mentally and emotionally...Either of the two—no stress. No anxiety either.” (OG 2)

One effeminate participant added,

“...whatever others may perceive about us — let them. Those are their descriptions of us. But the most important thing is that you know yourself more.” (EM 2)

The same participant reported feelings of growth:

“There really is growth. Because if you don’t allow yourself to improve, the outcome will always be bad. If you just stay in the same ground, not following the process or going with the flow of people around you, they’ll end up labeling you as close-minded. Now, it’s more like — if you feel that a certain space gives you peace of mind, then go for it.” (EM 2)

These subcategories connect to form the broader category, showing that while masculine norms impose pressures that may cause distress, they also provide opportunities for self-discipline, emotional growth, and increased self-awareness. Participants’ experiences indicate that the same societal expectations that create stress can simultaneously foster resilience, independence, and maturity. Straight men tended to construct their growth around responsibility and perseverance, while openly gay and effeminate men emphasized emotional maturity, self-awareness, and authenticity as results of navigating societal pressures. These reflections show how men’s emotional worlds are shaped by a culture that stigmatizes openness and vulnerability while rewarding strength and independence. The same norms that promote resilience and responsibility can also lead to emotional isolation and self-doubt, highlighting the deep connection between gender expectations and mental health. Their experiences show that even within supportive environments, the internalized pressure to “man up” continues to cause stress and exhaustion, but for some, it also promotes self-control, growth, and self-awareness.

In this sense, masculinity norms serve as paradoxical forces, limiting emotional freedom yet promoting perseverance and responsibility. This duality illustrates that Cebuano masculinity is not entirely oppressive but also developmental, as individuals reinterpret traditional expectations in ways that contribute to both emotional endurance and personal growth. This nuanced experience shows how masculinity norms serve as both sources of stress and as frameworks for self-regulation—an ambivalence that grounds the process of negotiating masculinity.

Managing and Coping Strategies of Young Cebuano Professionals Related to Masculinity Norms

This section addresses the third statement of the problem, which seeks to determine how young Cebuano professionals manage and cope with the pressures of masculinity norms. The interview explored how participants usually handle pressure to live up to the traditional ideas of what it means to be a man, as well as coping strategies they find most helpful or least helpful in dealing with pressure or emotional stress. Participants were also encouraged to discuss whether there are specific people they feel more comfortable talking about their emotional struggles with, and the reasons behind it.

Table 3. Managing and Coping Strategies of Young Cebuano Professionals Related to Masculinity Norms

Main Categories	Subcategories
Adaptive Coping Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Faith in Divine 2. Self-Acceptance 3. Redefining masculinity as personal strength and balance 4. Creative and Reflective Expression 5. Leisure Activities

	6. Seeking Social and Emotional Support from Family and Friends
Maladaptive Coping Strategies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoidance 2. Vices

Table 3 presents the main and subcategories that describe how young Cebuano professionals manage and cope with pressures arising from societal masculinity norms. There were two main categories that emerged: (1) Adaptive Coping Strategies, (2) and Maladaptive Coping Strategies. The findings reveal that young Cebuano professionals respond to the pressures of societal masculinity norms by using a variety of coping strategies. Despite their differences in form and purpose, these strategies show a common attempt to maintain self-control, restore emotional balance, and manage societal expectations.

Adaptive Coping Strategies

The first main category, Adaptive Coping Strategies, captures the strategies that young Cebuano professionals use to manage the pressures of societal masculinity norms in ways that promote emotional balance, resilience, and authenticity. This category reflects the participants' efforts to preserve their mental stability. Five subcategories emerged under this category: Faith in the Divine, Self-Acceptance, Redefining Masculinity as Personal Strength and Balance, Creative and Reflective Expression, Leisure Activities, and Seeking Social and Emotional Support from Family and Friends.

Faith in the Divine highlights participants' reliance on spirituality and prayer as a source of comfort and emotional regulation. Participants reported turning to God during stressful moments to find solace and clarity. One participant stated,

"...the only thing that I am comfortable to talk to is only God." (SM_S1)

Another expressed reliance on faith during difficult moments:

"When things got too heavy to handle. I just prayed and asked God for help." (SM_M2)

Similarly, others described prayer as both a coping tool and a comforting practice. As one gay participant shared,

"I pray and talk to God, and if I can manage it, that's enough." (OG 2)

Another participant echoed this, saying,

"...at the same time, you have to stay close to God. God really works in mysterious ways. You just have to believe and hold on to that faith, because eventually, you'll reach where you're meant to be." (EM 1)

Similarly, another effeminate participant shared the same sentiment, saying,

"I often went to church. Even though Miss GC would tell me, 'Don't overthink about them; they're not even thinking about you,' I would still pray, and ask for peace of mind." (EM 2)

Spirituality and prayer played a major role in the coping strategies of many participants. Statements like "the only one I'm comfortable to talk to is God" showed how spirituality provided a safe emotional outlet when vulnerability was discouraged in other settings.

Aside from faith, *Self-Acceptance* reflects participants' efforts to embrace themselves and regulate their emotions despite societal pressures. For instance, one participant remarked,

"I just stop overthinking, give my best every time, every situation and don't mind what society will say...being for yourself, accept who you are, and don't let others dictate who you are..." (SM_S1)

Another said,

“But one thing that I mentioned (before) about affirming yourself, accepting realities, and taking deep breaths, deep breaths as well, when I face a lot of pressure, I make sure to take a deep breath first.” (OG 3)

For some effeminate participants, self-acceptance meant embracing authenticity in all settings. As one explained,

“I never let people’s words control me, this is who I am. I will live like this—whether I’m at home with my wife and family, or at school—this is me...I don’t want to be accepted, loved, or married by you just because you want me to change. I’ll do my best and be good as a father, a husband, a teacher, an educator, and as a person—but not to the point that there are conditions like, ‘Okay, let’s get married. I’ll love you, but only if you become like this—if you act like a very straight man.’ I still consider myself a man, a boy, but this is really who I am.” (EM 1)

Another effeminate participant said,

“Stay who you are and be true to yourself. That’s really one of the best ways for people to accept you, because if you keep trying to follow whatever society expects, like trying to live up to their ideals, in a way that feels very high-maintenance, and what if you can’t maintain it, you can’t reach it? And you as a person are actually just simple, then you’ll reach a point where you’ll start to look like a gold digger, you keep going along with things even when you have nothing left to offer.” (EM 2)

This is echoed by another effeminate participant, saying,

“...what I usually do is stay calm and true to myself. When I hear comments or judgments, I just smile and let them pass.” (EM 3)

The subcategory *Redefining Masculinity as Personal Strength and Balance* reveals how some participants redefined their understanding of what it means to be masculine. Rather than viewing masculinity as rigid or exclusive, they framed it as a dynamic balance between strength, accountability, and authenticity. One participant expressed,

“For me (what) fit as a masculinity is being accountable or being responsible...” (SM_S1)

Another gay participant echoed this, saying,

“Actually it’s like a double-edged sword—it’s strong. For me, being strong is... I can do both. The feminine side and the masculine side. Like, I can be soft, and I can also be as talented as a woman in terms of design. But my mannerisms are more masculine with a bit of femininity. How do I describe it—kind of like a “tough gay”.” (OG 2)

These narratives show how some participants developed adaptive interpretations of masculinity that allowed flexibility, emotional openness, and self-respect while maintaining a sense of inner strength. This redefinition of masculinity is consistent with Gutierrez’s (2024) findings on Filipino fathers who accepted caregiving responsibilities as new ways to show their strength.

Under the subcategory, *Creative and Reflective Expression*, participants coped through creative expression such as writing, art, and other expressive outlets to release emotions. One participant shared,

“...when I feel anxiety or mental stress in me, usually, I engage myself in attending webinars. And also one thing I do is to explore painting, like mural painting. My room really have mural paint since we couldn’t go out or go to the beach, I painted a beach on my wall.” (OG 3)

Another expressed comfort in journaling:

"I would write, dear. (smiles)...I should've brought my notebook! I really love writing, dear — I've written a lot already: all my anger, my joys, everything's in my diaries and journals." (EM 2)

The subcategory *Leisure Activities* included relaxation and recreation as ways to relieve stress. Participants reported activities like playing games, exercising, traveling, and journaling as ways to restore emotional balance. For instance, one participant shared,

"...if I get pressured, (the) number one (thing) I would do is to play games. I play games on my phone." (SM_M1)

Another participant said,

"(I) like exercising, and also I like coffee hunting, journaling my thoughts." (OG1)

Other participants shared that they traveled or spent time alone to unwind. For instance, one married participant said,

"Like, going out. Traveling to far places. Unwinding anywhere...Like, eating out, going on food trips, watching movies (Action, drama, and even love stories because I can relate to those)...The content really won't go away. People told me to go back to making content because I was popular before." (SM_M2)

One gay participant reported having "me time", saying,

"...when I cope with stress, it's "me time." I go out alone. I can handle it." (OG 2)

This is consistent with the findings of Roy et al. (2017), whose qualitative study among farming men revealed that in response to masculinity norms, coping mechanisms such as self-distraction, optimism, and taking work breaks served as protective strategies against emotional exhaustion.

The last subcategory, *Seeking Social and Emotional Support from Family and Friends*, reflects the value of close relationships in coping. This demonstrates that some participants found strength and comfort in their relationships with family and trusted friends. Family became a safe emotional haven where young Cebuano professionals could feel accepted without the fear of judgement. One straight man said,

"The most helpful thing for me is spending time with my family. When I'm with them, I feel safe and I don't have to pretend to be someone else...I feel most comfortable talking with my close family members, like my siblings or my mother. It's because I know they will not judge me." (SM_S2)

Similarly, another expressed reliance on his partner:

"...if I get stressed, the only one I can talk to is my wife because it's really just the two of us who always understand each other, ever since we were still dating. We talk about our problems together." (SM_M1)

Gay and effeminate participants also emphasized relational support. As one gay participant noted,

"I usually try to balance it, Miss. And like I work hard to fulfill my responsibilities, and also remind myself that it's okay to rest or ask for support. Like sometimes I defy those norms by allowing myself to express my emotions with, like, trusted friends and family...Like my classmates during college, or province friends, because they don't judge and they also open up about their own struggles, that's why we have mutual understanding, we click. Like, I feel safer with them because there's trust and no expectation to always 'be strong'." (OG 1)

Another gay participant said,

"But if it's not manageable, I talk to my mom first, and after that, I talk to my friends." (OG 2)

Effeminate participants also emphasized the importance of relational support in their coping process. One effeminate participant shared:

“Having support from family is very important. Like having someone to talk to, someone—like having friends where you can express your feelings, and at the same time having people who understand you. I’m very thankful for my family because, especially my mother and father, I never experienced being beaten or punished just because of who I am, they are really supportive.” (EM 1)

Another effeminate participant echoed this sentiment, highlighting the reassuring presence of family:

“...family support helps a lot, which is really the number one thing—family support.” (EM 2)

Similarly, a third effeminate participant expressed that being surrounded by understanding friends provided emotional safety and comfort:

“I feel more comfortable talking to my close friends who understand my being effeminate. Even in the picture, you can see I’m with people I can laugh with and feel relaxed around. They’re the kind of people who don’t question why I’m like this because they already understand. Their presence feels like a rest for me — I don’t need to pretend or act tough just to be accepted. I like talking to them because I can let out my feelings without the fear of being judged.” (EM 3)

These statements suggest that although openness is discouraged by masculinity norms, some participants defy this expectation by fostering safe and supportive relationships where they are encouraged and allowed to express their emotions.

This is supported by the study of Cleary (2022), who found that men coped by seeking emotional comfort within intimate partnerships. For gay and effeminate men, safe spaces often emerged in friendships or creative outlets where authenticity was permitted. These coping forms signify a quiet resistance to hegemonic masculinity—small yet powerful acts of reclaiming vulnerability. This echoes the study of Ariyani et al. (2024) and Fisher et al. (2023), who stressed the value of peer and community connections in managing men’s stress. Friends and family emerged as particularly central to Filipino men’s resilience, consistent with Martinez et al. (2020), who noted that Filipinos often prefer informal support systems over professional interventions. Despite differences in expression, all identities showed a gradual shift from rigid conformity toward more reflective and self-compassionate forms of masculinity.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

However, Maladaptive Coping Strategies, which is the second main category, were also noted. This captures participants’ behaviors that offered short-term relief but sustained emotional suppression and stress. When under stress, some participants reported withdrawing, suppressing emotions, or resorting to unhealthy habits. Two subcategories emerged: Avoidance and Vices.

Avoidance includes withdrawing, remaining silent, or overworking to escape emotional discomfort. Participants reported relying on productivity or distraction as a short-term way to cope with stress. For instance, one participant admitted,

“When I feel the pressure, I usually remind myself that everything I’m doing is for my family. That thought gives me the strength to keep going even when I’m insecure or tired. Instead of talking about what I feel, I often just stay quiet and work harder, because I feel that actions speak louder than words.” (SM_S2)

This is echoed by one gay participant, saying,

“...pretending everything is okay or fine like or drowning myself in work, because it only hides the problem temporarily. Being distracted even in just eight hours. You’ll get drained at the end of the day though.” (OG 1)

Vices captures participants' reliance on drinking, smoking, or stress eating as outlets. Although these methods provided temporary relief and distraction, they also reflected continued internalization of restraint, avoidance of emotional expression, and reliance on external coping mechanisms. Participants admitted,

"Before, I wasn't much of a drinker, but now I drink often." (SM_M2)

Another participant said,

"For me, stress eating. Usually I eat my comfort food when I'm stressed. And also smoking—it's like an antidepressant for me. Drinking, not so much anymore, but before when I was younger, I used to drink." (OG 2)

These subcategories indicate that maladaptive strategies are often reactive responses to societal pressures, providing temporary escape but not addressing underlying stressors or emotional needs. Similar patterns are noted by Harianti (2023) in which some aspects in the construct of masculinity increase maladaptive coping such as emotional withdrawal, substance use, and risk-taking behaviors, as men struggle to express emotions and seek help.

In summary, young Cebuano professionals utilized a combination of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in managing pressures related to masculinity norms. Adaptive strategies such as faith, self-acceptance, redefinition of masculinity, creativity, leisure, and social support enabled participants to sustain authenticity and emotional balance. In contrast, maladaptive strategies like avoidance and vices served as temporary escape mechanisms. Across identities, straight men often relied on faith, work, and silence, while openly gay and effeminate participants leaned toward authenticity, reflection, and emotional openness.

Emerging Theory: Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity

From the participants' narratives, this study developed an emergent grounded theory that explains how young Cebuano professionals experience, internalize, and navigate masculinity norms within their sociocultural environment. The results in Tables 1 through 3 reveal a core theoretical process that the researchers described as *Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity*. This theory captures how masculinity is not a fixed or uniform identity but a dynamic and negotiated process in which participants balance societal or external expectations of strength, composure, and responsibility with internal or personal needs for emotional expression, connection, authenticity, and well-being,

The societal masculinity norms that define what it means to be "a man" are at the core of this process. As shown in Table 1, these norms place a strong emphasis on emotional stoicism, the provider role, and identity concealment. Early on, participants learned that expressing emotions, especially those associated with vulnerability such as sadness or fear, was discouraged and often equated with weakness. Straight men described this as a demand to "act strong" or "man up," while gay and effeminate participants recalled experiences of being corrected and ridiculed for expressing emotions or mannerisms considered unmasculine. These common experiences show how masculinity functions as a social performance, where maintaining control, composure, and self-reliance becomes a form of cultural compliance.

However, as seen in Table 2, the internalization of these expectations has psychological consequences. The constant pressure to appear strong often leads to emotional suppression, anxiety, and overthinking. Participants described feeling "trapped behind a mask" or "living two lives"—one that conforms outwardly to masculine ideals and another that quietly struggles with unexpressed emotions. Despite this strain, some participants also found meaning and motivation in these expectations. For others, masculinity norms promoted self-control, perseverance, and emotional resilience, showing that conformity could also serve as a pathway toward personal growth and maturity. Therefore, masculinity served both as a source of distress and as a framework for self-improvement.

As seen in Table 3, participants used managing and coping strategies that reflected both adaptation and resistance in response to these struggles. Adaptive strategies included faith, self-acceptance, and redefining masculinity as a balance between strength and emotional openness. Many participants turned to prayer and

spirituality as emotional anchors, while others developed authenticity by embracing their identities and rejecting externally imposed definitions of manhood. Some redefined masculinity to include traits such as empathy, vulnerability, and balance, indicating a shift from rigid conformity toward more flexible and inclusive understandings of strength. Meanwhile, maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, overworking, and vices, revealed the ongoing struggle in balancing emotional needs with societal norms of control and endurance.

Taken together, these results reveal that young Cebuano professionals do not only accept or reject societal masculinity norms. Instead, they continually negotiate these expectations, balancing conformity with the pursuit of authenticity. This negotiation is influenced by multiple factors, including upbringing, social context, sexual identity, peer relationships, and personal values. Straight men often aligned masculinity with responsibility and self-composure, while gay and effeminate men expanded its meaning to include authenticity, emotional depth, and balance. Participants across identities looked for a middle ground, striving to live truthfully and emotionally aware lives while remaining strong and dependable.

Overall, the emerging grounded theory, *Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity* conceptualizes masculinity among young Cebuano professionals as an ongoing, cyclical process in which participants internalize societal masculinity norms, experience emotional and psychological consequences, and employ strategies that either reaffirm or redefine their masculine identity. This theory demonstrates the dynamic interaction between societal pressures and personal authenticity, where masculinity is not merely followed but continuously reshaped through reflection, perseverance, and interpersonal support.

Implications Of The Study

The findings of this study carry substantial implications across theoretical, practical, sociocultural, and policy dimensions. The emergent grounded theory—“*Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity*”—reveals that young Cebuano professionals continually balance societal expectations of strength, composure, and responsibility with their personal need for authenticity, mental balance, and emotional health. This theoretical contribution localizes masculinity scholarship by situating emotional regulation and responsibility within Filipino collectivist and faith-based moral values.

Theoretically, the study strengthens, extends and localizes established Western frameworks such as Connell and Messerschmidt’s Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), O’Neil’s Gender Role Conflict Theory (O’Neil, 1981), and Vandello and Bosson’s Precarious Manhood Theory (Vandello and Bosson, 2013) by embedding them within Filipino collectivist values such as *hiya* (shame), *pakikisama* (social harmony), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). While these frameworks are substantiated by participants’ experiences, the findings also expose their cultural limits, revealing that emotional restraint among young Cebuano professionals functions as both as social conformity and moral propriety. This reframing advances a culturally grounded understanding of masculinity as relational, contextual, and negotiated rather than a static set of traits.

Practically, the findings inform culturally responsive and gender-sensitive mental health interventions for Filipino men. Interventions that frame emotional openness as a moral strength, integrate faith and relational support, and promote psychologically safe environments in counseling, workplaces, and communities may reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviors.

On a sociocultural and policy levels, the study underscores the need to reframe Filipino masculinity beyond stoicism and redefine “strength” as inclusive of emotional literacy and self-awareness. The public discourse should move from valorizing silent endurance (“man up”) toward recognizing openness, empathy, and balance as marks of true maturity. These insights support the development of local mental health programs, media narratives, and gender-responsive mental health policies—particularly under the Philippine Mental Health Act (RA 11036)—that address male emotional stigma while remaining culturally congruent.

For future research, the emergent theory invites expansion across regions, socioeconomic strata, and professions to explore the intersection of masculinity with religion, digital culture, and class mobility, within the Philippine and Southeast Asian societies.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study offers valuable insights into how societal masculinity norms shape the mental health and coping strategies of young Cebuano professionals; however, several limitations must be noted. The small sample size (N=10) and focus on young Cebuano professionals limit generalizability across age groups, professions, regions, socioeconomic groups, and cultures in the Philippines or other places. Given that masculinity is shaped by sexuality, gender expression, and sociocultural values, future studies should involve a bigger sample and a wider range of participants, like older men, people from different professions, and those from other Filipino cultures, including rural and urban populations to see how these experiences differ across groups and situations.

The reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, particularly social desirability and Filipino value of *hiya* (shame), which may have limited the depth of their responses. Future studies could improve this study by using mixed-methods designs, triangulated data collection methods, including participant observation, focus groups, or journaling, conducted within psychologically safe environments, in order to capture more authentic expressions of men's emotional lives.

As the findings are deeply embedded in the Cebuano context, the emergent theory of *Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity*, should be understood as context-specific. Transferability to different contexts is limited, even when cultural validity is strengthened. Comparative and cross-regional studies, including integration with indigenous Filipino constructs such as *kapwa* (shared identity) and *loob* (inner self), are recommended to test its transferability. Longitudinal studies may further examine how masculine negotiations evolve across life stages.

Practically, the findings support culturally responsive mental health initiatives that integrate faith-based resilience, relational support, and emotional openness. Workplaces and organizations, mental health practitioners, community organizations, and local government units (LGU) are encouraged to promote psychologically safe spaces, peer support, and public campaigns that redefine masculinity to include empathy, openness, and moral courage in order to lessen stigma and promote early help seeking among young Cebuano men professionals.

CONCLUSIONS

Young Cebuano male professionals continuously face the challenge of balancing societal pressures for strength and composure with their personal need for emotional expression and authenticity—an overarching process captured in the emergent theory of “Negotiating Masculinity Through Conformity and Authenticity.” This study sought to explore societal masculinity norms and their influence on the mental health, and managing and coping strategies of young Cebuano professionals. Findings revealed that: (1) societal norms emphasizing emotional stoicism, the provider role, and identity concealment shape men's experiences; (2) these norms function paradoxically as both sources of distress (pressure to perform strength and conceal the true self, anxiety, stress, and overthinking) and sources of growth (motivation toward independence and responsibility, emotional strength and self-mastery, and self-acceptance and growth through reflection); and (3) coping strategies range from adaptive approaches (faith, self-acceptance, redefining masculinity, creative and reflective expression, leisure activities, and seeking social and emotional support from family and friends) to maladaptive behaviors (avoidance, vices). Across sexual orientations and gender expressions, participants demonstrated resilience by transforming challenges into personal growth, cultivating discipline, empathy, and emotional maturity.

These findings suggest that masculinity in the Cebuano context is a dynamic negotiation influenced by cultural norms and personal meaning-making rather than being static or unidimensional. Future studies may expand this work by engaging more diverse samples, using mixed-methods or triangulation, and longitudinal designs

to examine how masculinity changes over the course of a person's life. Theoretically, this study contributes by contextualizing Western concepts of Hegemonic Masculinity, Gender Role Conflict, and Precarious Manhood within Filipino collectivist values—such as *hiya*, *pakikisama*, and *utang na loob*. Practically, it offers a foundation for culturally grounded mental health interventions that frame emotional openness, relational support, and faith-based practices as strengths rather than deviations from masculinity. Ultimately, the study underscores that reinterpreting masculinity within the Filipino context allows room for empathy, authenticity, and emotional well-being—broadening definitions of strength for future generations of Filipino men.

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