Iperstoria
2026, no. 27
ISSN: 2281-4582
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DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2026.i27.1664
iperstoria.it

Languaging Male Psychological Struggles on TikTok

Discourses of Selfhood and Belonging

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Keywords

Masculinities

Mental health

TikTok

Membership Categorisation Analysis

Multimodality

Abstract

This study investigates the ways in which masculinity and mental health intersect on TikTok, analysing how social media platforms reframe traditional gender norms through emotionally charged discourses. Three distinct typologies of masculine identity, constructed in TikTok videos, have been identified using Multimodal Discourse Analysis. It is by examining all the semiotic elements present in these videos that a number of recurring "micro-performances" concurrently serving to challenge and bolster hegemonic masculinity have been brought to the fore. Although the digital performances initially appear to index novel masculine archetypes, the re-emergence of canonical traits such as emotional repression, self-reliance, and resilience ultimately serves to reaffirm conventional gender hierarchies.
The study, in fact, reveals that TikTok's affective publics exploit these tropes to strengthen, rather than counter, traditional masculine ideals and that social media serves to shape men's mental health stories by strengthening emotional isolation and maintaining patterns of self-reliance that make it more difficult for society to engage with vulnerability. When these findings are set off against current discussions on digital masculinities, it becomes evident that modern masculinity is both called into question and shielded against change in today's fast-changing digital ecosphere.

1. Introduction[1]

The intersections of gender, discourse, and health have attracted increasing scholarly attention over the past two decades, particularly within the fields of sociolinguistics, critical discourse studies, and media analysis (Cameron and Shaw 2016; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Lazar 2005; Sunderland 2004; Hall and Bucholtz 1995). Research specifically addressing how men discursively construct mental health narratives on social media remains, however, somewhat underdeveloped (Brookes and Chałupnik 2023). Recent literature in the field has predominantly focused on incel communities and toxic male cultures within forums such as Reddit (Heritage

[1] The authors discussed and conceived the article together. In particular, Giuseppe Balirano is responsible for Sections 2, 3.1, and 3.4, while Robin Donadio is responsible for Sections 1, 3.2, 3.3, and 4.

2023; Ging 2019; Banet-Weiser 2018), or on broader discussions regarding a 'crisis of masculinity' (Balirano 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), while largely overlooking the distinctive discursive practices progressively emerging on TikTok.

This omission is notable. TikTok, characterised by "context collapse," a phenomenon whereby the boundaries between private and public, personal and performative are rendered fluid in algorithmically curated environments (Marwick and Boyd 2011), provides a fertile terrain for the public negotiation of masculine identities. In this context, discourses that would traditionally signal emotional repression are rearticulated as therapeutic performances. As Brookes and Chałupnik (2023, 2-4) argue, men's talk around health often reproduces dominant norms of self-reliance, stoicism, and rational endurance, not merely reflecting social expectations, but actively sustaining them.

Social media platforms, meanwhile, have come to be treated as key sites where mental health experiences are shared, peer-to-peer support is sought, and basic mental health knowledge is circulated (Naslund et al. 2020; Jorm 2000; Guntuku et al. 2017). Recent scholarship has highlighted that such digital spaces can contribute to reducing stigma and that highly multimodal environments like TikTok are now even employed by professionals for disseminating mental health information (De Santo 2024). Nevertheless, the representation of male mental health online continues to be shaped by entrenched models of hegemonic masculinity, often limiting the transformative potential of these narratives (McKenzie et al. 2018).

The present study focuses on the representation of masculinity on TikTok. It investigates, through multimodal discourse analysis, how traditionalist models of masculinity are legitimised through the language of mental health. By examining the multimodal performances accompanying specifically selected hashtags, the analysis uncovers the extent to which affective publics (Papacharissi 2015) are mobilised not to disrupt, but to reinforce conservative gender norms.

Recent scholarship has shown how platforms like Instagram and YouTube have enabled the strategic repackaging of hegemonic masculinity under the guise of vulnerability and authenticity (Gill and Orgad 2018; Dobson, Robards, and Carah 2018). However, TikTok's specific semiotic grammar, based on synchronised audiovisuality, accelerated meme culture, and ambient affiliation through hashtagging (Zappavigna 2018), creates unique modalities for the circulation and stabilisation of masculine discourses. Despite appearing to foreground emotional openness, many of these TikTok performances function to 'sanctify' suffering and endurance as inherently masculine virtues, framing silence, isolation, and resilience as markers of moral superiority.

This research aims to contribute to current academic discussions on masculinity by illustrating how references to mental health on TikTok do not necessarily point to a greater breadth or depth in the range of socially acceptable emotions for men. To the contrary, such appeals often stand as discursive mechanisms that serve to reinforce traditional masculine norms, even when framed within seemingly progressive or therapeutic narratives. The authors argue that, although digital platforms do effectively present alternatives for rethinking masculinities, they frequently also serve to reaffirm established gender hierarchies by promoting emotionally steeped stories of endurance and suffering. By situating these findings within current debates on digital masculinities and affective discourse, the study seeks to contribute a more critical understanding of how contemporary masculinity is being renegotiated and defended within emerging social media ecologies.

2. Methodology and corpus description

This study adopts a multimodal and semiotic discourse-analytical approach, combining Membership Categorisation Analysis and Multimodal Analysis. The former functions here as a heuristic lens rather than a procedural framework in combination with close multimodal reading of a small dataset, consistent with Baker's (2023) emphasis on depth and granularity in small corpora.

The study adopts a multimodal discourse analysis framework, thereby acknowledging that meaning on TikTok emerges through the combined use of linguistic, visual, and auditory modes. As Sindoni (2014) highlights, online interactions are increasingly characterised by the multimodal configurations through which users construct and subsequently negotiate their identities. Along these lines, the corpus for analysis consists of a sample of TikTok videos selected through a purposive sampling strategy that includes hashtags such as #mentalhealth and #mentalhealthformen, together with their related comment sections, visual content, and audio features. Close attention was paid to elements such as gesture, camera framing, soundtrack selection, and on-screen text, since each of these features clearly participates in the discursive construction of masculinity within these spaces.

Throughout the analysis, attention is consistently paid to TikTok's specific platform affordances, including its algorithmic content delivery, synchronised audiovisuality, and participatory remix culture, which markedly differentiate it from other social networking sites such as YouTube or Instagram. This study also refrains from elaborating broader theoretical claims about SNSs as a whole (see KhosraviNik 2017), as this would have exceeded the specific field of inquiry.

Methodologically, the analytic framework integrates Harvey Sacks's (1972) Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) with Emanuel Schegloff's (2007) insights into the sequential organisation of meaning-making, reinterpreted within a multimodal perspective. MCA provides a systematic method for examining how social actors position themselves and others within recognisable identity categories, and how these categories are invoked, foregrounded, or naturalised across diverse semiotic modes. In this study, categorisation is not limited to verbal labels; it is also achieved through visual, gestural, and audiovisual cues that project masculinity in specific, culturally intelligible forms.

Schegloff's (2007) concept of sequentiality complements this framework by drawing attention to how meaning unfolds across a sequence of communicative moves, not only in spoken interaction but also through multimodal orchestration. Across the TikTok corpus we have analysed, shifts in camera movements and changes in body language, facial cues, the soundtrack and the on-screen text are all woven together in a sequential manner to construct and reconstruct representations of male identity. As previously mentioned, the study also draws on Harvey Sacks's (1972) notion of the procedural formation of categories alongside Schegloff's (2007) framework for understanding sequential organisation in interaction to pinpoint how this sequencing effectively shapes identity performances. By combining these perspectives, the study gains deeper multimodal insight into how masculinities are performed, sustained, and validated across digital media environments.

The concept of ambient affiliation developed by Michele Zappavigna in 2018 has played a key role in this analysis. Hinging upon Halliday's (1978) interpersonal metafunction, ambient affiliation describes how individuals position themselves affectively and ideologically through shared semiotic resources, particularly within social media contexts. Far from being a vehicle designed exclusively to represent experience, language serves as a means to actively build and foster social bonds while expressing attitudinal positions. Accordingly, hashtags cannot be considered mere thematic markers or indexing tools, but rather discursive strategies that build algorithmically shaped communities characterised by displaying collective emotions and moral evaluations. Indeed, across TikTok, hashtags such as #mentalhealthformen and #mensupportmen serve as affective hubs, with the emotionally charged accounts of male strength, resistance and suffering attracting other analogous content. The primary function of these hashtags clearly transcends mere topic categorisation: it is by seeking out affective alignment and relocating vulnerability within a culturally acceptable repertoire that hashtags allow traditional masculine ideals to re-emerge as legitimate expressions of emotional struggle, thereby reconfiguring the ideological contexts in which male identities can be shaped and performed.

In line with this focus on reception dynamics and communal meaning-making, the selection of materials prioritised videos with high engagement metrics (i.e., likes, shares, comments), reflecting the interactive uptake and amplification of masculinity narratives within the TikTok community. The corpus was retrieved over four weeks in January–February 2025, using a purposive sampling strategy based on hashtags such as #mentalhealthformen, #mensupportmen, and #mensmentalhealth. The selection criteria included:

1. clear verbal articulation of mental health discourse,
2. visually or auditorily salient performances of gendered affect,
3. significant audience interaction (over 5,000 views and at least 50 user comments).

To operationalise these criteria, we identified verbal articulation of mental health discourse through the presence of specific lexical items and phrases such as 'mental health,' 'struggling,' 'depression,' 'anxiety,' 'not okay,' and 'need help.' Gendered affect was coded when videos displayed multimodal cues linked to cultural scripts of masculinity: for instance, visuals (work uniforms, slouched or rigid posture, avoidance of eye contact, tears withheld), auditory features (lowered tone of voice, silences, heavy breathing), and language choices (paratactic imperatives such as 'keep going,' 'man up,' or self-deprecating phrases like 'I'm weak for feeling this way').
The final dataset comprises 27 TikTok videos, their associated comment sections (totalling 612 individual comments), and detailed descriptions of visual, gestural, and auditory components (e.g., camera angles, facial expressions, filters, background music, textual overlays). The combined textual corpus (including transcripts and comment threads) contains approximately 14,000 words, with over 150 instances of hashtag use, primarily clustered around narratives of stoicism, hardship, and emotional withdrawal. Although limited in scope, the dataset was designed to achieve theoretical saturation rather than representativeness. Following Baker (2023), small datasets can yield analytical depth, especially when multimodal density allows for layered interpretation. Our analysis is therefore grounded in qualitative richness rather than statistical breadth.

The corpus was constructed according to the study's analytical priorities rather than with the aim of achieving overall representativeness. In other words, the selection process was guided by the need to capture highly situated, affectively charged instances of gender performance that were both discursively rich and socially visible. Therefore, rather than aiming for volume or breadth, the focus was on retrieving material capable of supporting close, layered interpretation, a goal that, as Baker (2023) argues, justifies the use of small, but theoretically saturated datasets in discourse analysis. In this study, theoretical saturation was assessed by the point at which new data no longer produced novel categories but rather repeated established ones. The dataset, though modest in size, encompasses variation across three distinct archetypal

configurations of masculinity (see Section 3). Within each archetype, multimodal elements recur with enough regularity to be analytically robust, yet also exhibit sufficient diversity to avoid redundancy. This combination of patterned recurrence and variation allowed us to consider the dataset theoretically saturated.

Also, by concentrating on content with high engagement metrics and dense semiotic layering, the corpus favours the investigation of how dominant masculinity models are not only performed but also circulated, endorsed, and negotiated within the TikTok ecosystem. Its limited scope, therefore, functions as a methodological asset, allowing the researchers to trace recurring patterns and affective framings with a level of granularity that larger datasets would have compromised. In this sense, corpus construction is not understood as neutral data retrieval but as an embedded analytical practice aligned with the study's critical and multimodal objectives.

Through this broad and layered multimodal analytical framework, the study identifies three dominant masculinity categories that recur across the corpus: *The Burdened Provider*, *The Silenced Sufferer*, and *The Stoic Brotherhood Member*. Each of these categories is associated with specific narrative structures and rhetorical strategies that reframe emotional control as a male virtue, thereby reinforcing rather than destabilising hegemonic masculinity within the context of digital mental health discourse. Videos were coded through iterative analysis of multimodal features, including captions, soundtrack, gestures, and gaze. To strengthen reliability, the two authors of the present paper independently coded 20% of the dataset, reaching an agreement rate of 87%. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved, ensuring consistency in assigning the three archetypal categories.

A note on ethical considerations should also be introduced here. Indeed, although TikTok videos are publicly accessible, their use for research requires careful ethical reflection. All usernames were anonymised, and direct quotations were paraphrased unless already de-identified. Given the sensitivity of mental health discourse, we followed Townsend and Wallace (2018) in treating public content as ethically charged, reflecting on possible risks for creators. We also considered TikTok's Terms of Service, acknowledging that while sharing content is voluntary, its repurposing for academic research entails responsibility to minimise potential harm.

3. Corpus analysis: M-Ps of masculinities

The following analysis draws on the multimodal and interactional framework outlined in the previous section, combining membership categorisation, rhetorical structuring, and semiotic layering. Rather than treating TikTok videos as isolated artefacts, the corpus is interpreted as a site of patterned social action, in which linguistic choices, visual cues, and platform-specific

affordances coalesce to perform and reinforce recognisable masculine identities. It is important to note the dataset's intersectional dynamics. While our dataset primarily features North American and British TikTok accounts, the videos overwhelmingly feature white, working-class men, often in vans, construction sites, or domestic interiors. Racialised and queer masculinities are conspicuously absent. This absence itself constitutes a finding, suggesting that TikTok's algorithmic amplification and hashtag practices may privilege certain identity performances while silencing others.

In this study, we use the term 'micro-performance' (M-P) to describe a brief unit of interaction specific to the social media environment. We treat these as compact multimodal events through which gendered identities can be enacted and exposed to public evaluation. While our dataset is modest in scope, the recurring multimodal features observed across posts support the utility of this working definition. We thus employ 'micro-performance' as a heuristic category that highlights the density and visibility of identity enactments in short-form content, rather than as a claim about all possible uses of the concept. M-Ps are therefore semiotically rich events that mesh together numerous multimodal resources, from language to gaze, gesture and soundtrack, to generate recognisable and shareable social meanings. Despite their effective brevity, they enable users to invite affiliation or raise controversy while articulating subjective moral positions and establishing diverse social categorisations. In some cases, these meanings are not conveyed arbitrarily but are iconically motivated – that is, the form of the sign bears a perceptual or cultural resemblance to the quality or experience it communicates (Balirano 2020; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996; Peirce 1974). Such motivated signs enhance the immediacy and emotional legibility of the performance: for example, dim lighting, slouched posture, or slow, lo-fi soundtracks do not simply symbolise fatigue or melancholy; they replicate their affective texture, rendering the emotional stance experientially recognisable.

This formulation draws conceptually on Goffman's (1959) notion of performance as a situated act of self-presentation, while adapting it to the dynamics of algorithmically mediated publics and mobile media grammars. M-Ps differ from traditional performances in that they are structured by the affordances of the platform, such as TikTok's synchronised audiovisuality, looping mechanisms, and participatory tools (e.g., duet, stitch, hashtagging) and are often addressed to an ambient, imagined audience (Zappavigna 2018), rather than to a known or dialogic interlocutor.

From a discourse-analytical perspective, M-Ps are steeped in heightened intertextuality: they combine and blend together different genres, sounds and emotionally dense scripts. The strategic use of hashtags, carefully selected soundtracks and contextual cues provides a form of affective framing. In contrast, the collaborative comment threads, likes, shares and remixes all feed into the M-P's evaluative circulation. M-Ps, therefore, go well beyond mere acts of self-

expression, operating as they do within a wider ideological network where normative identities can be displayed, challenged, or further consolidated through digital culture dynamics.

3.1 The Burdened Provider

Of the twenty-seven videos comprising the multimodal corpus, eleven were categorised under the profile of the *Burdened Provider*, a configuration in which masculinity is constructed as an ethos of silent endurance, defined less by expressive capacity than by the ability to absorb strain without outward disruption. Within this frame, emotional repression is not represented as a 'deficit' to be overcome, but rather as a morally valorised stance, whereby 'suffering' and 'silence' are discursively recoded as signs of masculine responsibility and ethical consistency. At the heart of this identity lies a moralised conception of duty, in which pain becomes meaningful only when subordinated to labour, particularly in the context of familial provision and daily survival. A composite schematic illustrating the multimodal features of this archetype is shown in Fig. 1.

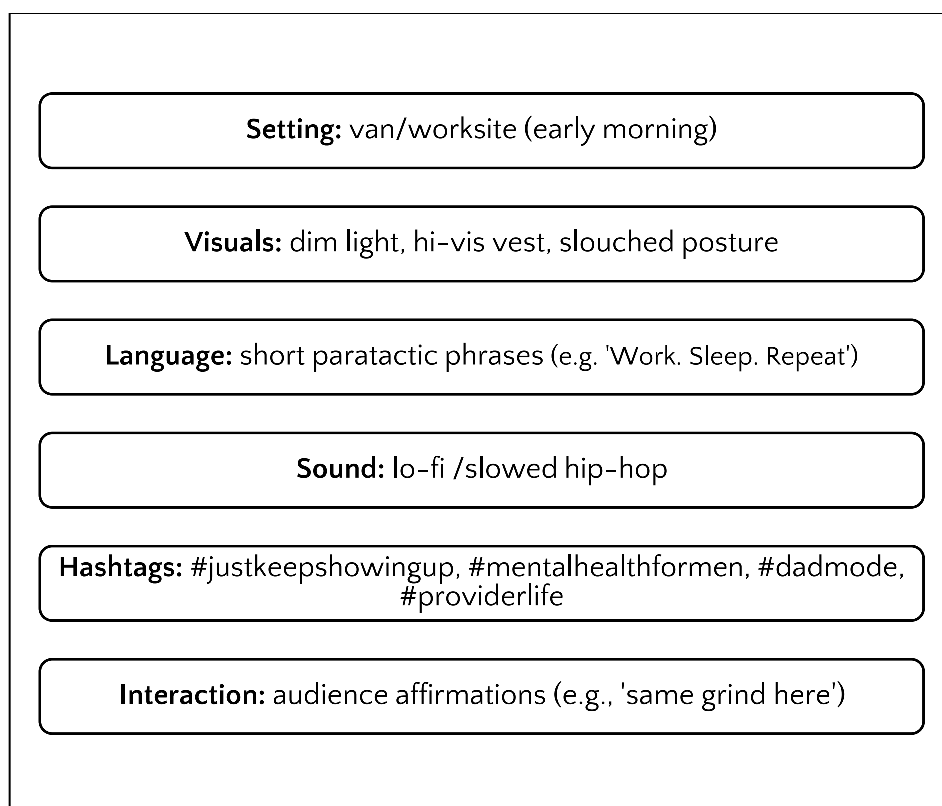

Fig. 1: Composite schematic of the Burdened Provider archetype (setting, visuals, language, sound, hashtags, interaction)

This masculine identity is constructed as a discursive formation in which suffering, silence, and endurance are recontextualised as forms of moral capital, investing the male subject with value precisely through their capacity for restraint. Rather than challenging dominant gender norms, the performances within this category strenuously reaffirm the idea that authentic masculinity can only be expressed through self-denial and emotional restraint. Within the *Burdened*

Provider video category, a reiterated visual and discursive pattern comes to the fore, typically exemplified by a familiar image: a close-up shot of a man in his mid- to late 30s, seated in the front seat of a parked van, his face partially illuminated by the dashboard glow. His uniform, a grey hoodie beneath a high-visibility vest, signals working-class identification, while the timestamp in example (1) and accompanying caption in example (2) provide temporal anchoring. The subject looks directly into the camera only once, briefly dropping his gaze before uttering (3). Examples:

(1) *04:32AM*

(2) *No rest for the ones who show up*

(3) *Didn't sleep. Still grinding. My kids eat first*

The represented participant (RP) is positioned centrally in the frame, but avoids direct eye contact with the camera. His posture is slumped, hands clasped on the steering wheel. There are no expressive gestures, and the intonation is flat. His visual presentation, work attire, physical fatigue, and early-morning temporal setting serve as an index of moral labour. The uniform not only signals socioeconomic positioning through culturally recognisable dress codes (i.e., vestimic cues), but also functions as a visual metonym for responsibility, a semiotic condensation in which part (the garment) stands for a whole ideological complex (duty, endurance, provision). In multimodal terms, the uniform operates as a contextualised symbolic attribute (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), visually situating the represented participant within a recognisable labour field while simultaneously functioning as an indexical cue that activates shared cultural associations of masculinity, endurance, and responsibility. As with other semiotic resources in visual communication, clothing here condenses complex social meanings into a visible marker that fuses material context with ideological value.

This material artefact becomes part of a larger indexical chain: it does not merely denote the subject's job but also connotes an ethical stance. Through repeated cultural framings, the image of the working man in high-visibility clothing can be read as a symbolic shorthand for sacrifice and provision, indexing a cultural imaginary in which 'he works hard; he provides; he doesn't complain.' This interpretation resonates with research on the semiotics of uniforms and working-class masculinities (McDowell 2003; Entwistle 2000; Hebdige 1979), in which clothing serves as a visual resource for encoding duty, endurance, and respectability. The visual metonym thus scaffolds a broader ideological grammar of masculinity, in which external

appearance substantiates internal virtue and silence is not a lack of speech but a semiotic resource for moral positioning.

In this sense, the uniform anchors the M-P within a culturally legible script, operating indexically (pointing to real-world labour) and symbolically (signifying adherence to a gendered ethic of self-sacrifice). It fuses referential realism with moral abstraction, and in doing so, becomes a wearable discourse of masculinised endurance. Crucially, the absence of direct gaze configures the viewer's relation to the subject in specific semiotic terms. Following Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework, the lack of eye contact positions the image as an "offer" rather than a "demand": the participant does not seek engagement or recognition from the viewer, but is presented as an object of observation, a type to be read. This indirect gaze reinforces his emotional inaccessibility, casting him as both distant and stoic, not inviting identification, but exemplifying endurance. The viewers are not interpellated into dialogue; they become quiet witnesses.

The RP's anonymity (i.e., he has no name and no direct address is provided) enhances this typification: he becomes any man, every man, a recognisable moral archetype. In this way, the performance loses its particularity and gains normative force: not a narrative of a person, but the representation of a culturally idealised male function, where the suppression of affect becomes an ethical stance.

The lighting in these videos is consistent: low, dim, often natural, the faint blue of early morning, the yellow cast of dashboard LEDs. This subdued palette can be analysed in terms of modality and visual coding orientation (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), as it projects a 'naturalistic' style that foregrounds realism. The effect is what we describe as an 'aesthetic of exhaustion': a visual rhetoric of fatigue that mirrors the verbal compression. Repeated across multiple posts, this lighting schema functions as a cohesive device, giving the subgenre visual and emotional coherence. Such consistency does not merely reflect filming conditions; it actively downplays performativity in favour of affective realism, reinforcing the idea that these are not staged moments, but fragments of an ongoing, morally saturated struggle.

Language is equally compressed. The utterances tend to be paratactic and minimal, stripped of connectives or emotional elaboration:

(4) *Work. Sleep. Repeat*;

(5) *Can't stop. They're counting on me*;

(6) *Too tired to talk. Still here.*

(7) *keep showing up*

This lexical minimalism functions rhetorically. It encodes emotional labour not through expression, but through its containment. The body speaks where the language does not: slouched posture, downcast eyes, heavy breathing audible over a backing track. The soundtrack creates a sonic atmosphere that echoes the speaker's sense of exhaustion by featuring slowed-down hip-hop or lo-fi music. The recurrent use of hashtags such as #justkeepshowingup, #mentalhealthformen, #dadmode, and #providerlife has a clearly defined purpose. These hashtags may be interpreted as weaving post-level M-Ps into a broader ideological framework, aligning first-person struggles with a collective masculine imaginary that exalts relentless resilience. They operate as devices of ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2018), elevating ostensibly personal testimony into a recognisable, shareable script. The phrase in example (7) appears in seven out of the eleven videos in this category, either embedded in the captions or spoken aloud. Among the 612 comments analysed across the dataset, responses to *Burdened Provider* videos exhibit a remarkable degree of discursive alignment, with over 70% offering some verbal or symbolic affirmation of the poster's moral position.

(8) *This hit different*

(9) same *grind here*

(10) 🔥

(11) 💯

(12) *my kids eat first*

(13) *sometimes I wanna quit*

(14) *but I don't*

Several comments restate the narrator's words *verbatim*, as in example (12), which can be read as an emphatic form of alignment that reinforces the narrator's stance and circulates the script more widely among viewers. As van Leeuwen (2008) notes, such repetition functions as a legitimising resource: what is repeated becomes not only normal but necessary.

Even when emotional content surfaces, such as in a whispered, off-camera comment (example (13): 'sometimes I wanna quit'), it is immediately countered by a reaffirmation of obligation (example (14): 'but I don't'). This sequential pairing illustrates how vulnerability, once expressed, is swiftly reframed as resilience. Similar dynamics recur elsewhere in the dataset: fleeting acknowledgements of fatigue or doubt are consistently followed by hashtags like

#providerlife or comments such as 'same grind here' (example 9), which absorb individual weakness into a collective ethic of endurance. This pattern exemplifies the broader discursive logic of the *Burdened Provider*: vulnerability is acknowledged, but only momentarily, and is consistently folded back into labour, responsibility, and the grind.

The figure of the *Burdened Provider*, then, is not one of expressive masculinity but of contained sacrifice. His visibility can be understood as functional rather than confessional, in the sense that it does not project a narrative of transformation but one of persistence. From a discourse-analytic perspective, this aligns with Fairclough's (2003) understanding of social events, in which repeated linguistic (and multimodal) choices foreground the continuity of labour and obligation rather than change. The emphasis on persistence can also be read as a form of sequentiality in discourse (Paltridge 2022), where recurrence and parataxis construct a textual pattern that resists progression toward resolution. What is said and, crucially, what is left unsaid, function as an interactional resource that sustains a masculine identity predicated on endurance and repetition, rather than on development or transformation. What the *Burdened Provider* says, and more significantly, what he refuses to say, becomes the medium through which masculinity is sustained. This can be seen less as the hero's journey and more as the worker's loop: silent, repetitive, and framed as morally unassailable.

These posts appear to reproduce a discursive logic in which masculine value is articulated through moral evaluation and role-based legitimation. The figure of the working man is constructed as socially acceptable, not despite his suffering, but because that suffering is functionalised as evidence of commitment. Emotional expression is not excluded, but discursively recoded: pain is rendered productive, exhaustion is reframed as responsibility, and vulnerability is admissible only when it confirms, rather than disrupts, hegemonic expectations. This recoding is realised through paratactic phrasing and lexical minimalism (e.g., 'Work. Sleep. Repeat'; 'Too tired to talk. Still here'), which strip away elaboration and narrativisation, leaving only duty and repetition. Hashtags such as #mentalhealthformen or #providerlife further align individual struggle with cultural scripts that equate silence and endurance with responsibility. In this sense, the discursive representation does not deny mental health challenges, but reframes them in terms of functionality and moral duty, echoing findings in men's mental health research that link hegemonic masculinity to the silencing of vulnerability (McKenzie et al. 2018; Courtenay 2000).

The *Burdened Provider* male type can be interpreted as a 'circulating identity script', sustained by the interaction of visual austerity, paratactic verbal style, and audience alignment through interactional uptake. What appears to be individual testimony functions instead as a socially ratified performance of masculinity, where the symbolic economy of labour and restraint structures both the production and reception of meaning.

3.2 The Silenced Sufferer

The second category identified in the corpus is anchored in a discourse of emotional isolation and self-repression, thus offering a marked contrast to the framing of the previous category. Whereas the *Burdened Provider* embraces suffering and silence as sources of moral capital, the *Silenced Sufferer* depicts emotional pain as a force that isolates, consumes, and ultimately breeds self-doubt. Linguistic and semiotic markers within this category highlight both the suppression of emotion and the personal anguish resulting from the inability to speak out about vulnerability and seek support. A composite schematic illustrating the multimodal features of this archetype is shown in Fig. 2.

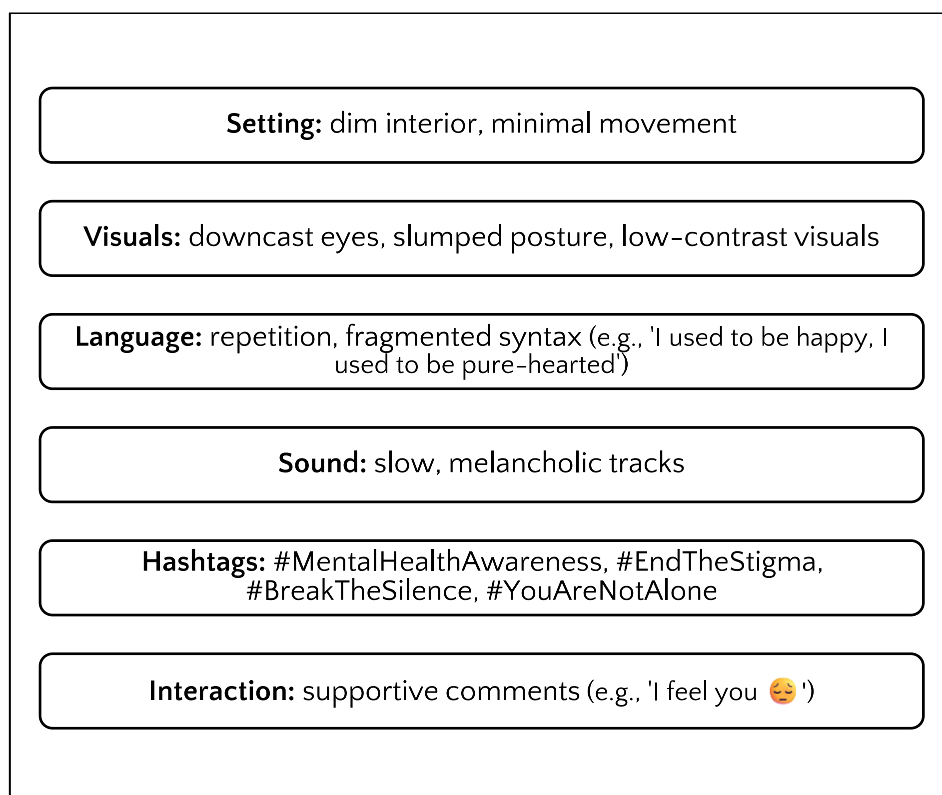

Fig. 2: Composite schematic of the Silenced Sufferer archetype (setting, visuals, language, sound, hashtags, interaction)

A central linguistic feature of this category is repetition, particularly in phrases such as:

(15) *I used to be happy, I used to be pure-hearted*;

(16) *I'm starting to fucking hate myself*.

This repetitive structure highlights the contrast between an idealised past self and a deteriorated present state. These utterances mark a transition that underscores a sense of loss, in which happiness is deemed irretrievable, and the present is dominated by self-hatred. The repetition of 'I used to be…' frames the example as anchored in nostalgia for a lost state, while

the abrupt shift in example (16), marked by 'I'm starting to…', projects a downward trajectory into emotional deterioration. The phrasing conveys a sense of fixation on an irretrievable past, suggesting psychological stasis rather than progression, consistent with Jaworski's (1993) account of silence and non-progressive discursive strategies as resources for constructing fixation. The linguistic patterns thus evoke a perception of being stuck in negative self-reflection, where the present is overshadowed by memories of well-being, a process that can also be read as a form of affective alignment through repetition (Zappavigna 2018). The emotionally charged M-Ps condense despair into a series of compact narrative fragments mirroring the platform's own temporal constraints. The sense of isolation used in the texts belonging to this category is equally significant, with expressions like:

(17) *I'm alone in silence*;

(18) *holding in tears*.

These emotion-as-contained-isolation utterances concretise emotional pain as internalised and physical, suggesting that the individual feels their suffering as confined to their own body, something hidden and suppressed from the outside world. Silence here does not signify moral restraint, but rather social withdrawal, an act of isolating oneself from others due to the fear of vulnerability. This internalisation is, thus, reinforced multimodally in M-Ps through a lack of spoken words, gaze withdrawal, and minimal bodily movement. These tropes resonate with *recovery narratives* (Watts and Higgins 2017), where endurance and struggle are framed as steps toward self-mastery. Yet, unlike conventional recovery narratives, many TikTok performances remain unresolved, foregrounding struggle without recovery. This partial alignment highlights how hegemonic masculinity constrains men's engagement with vulnerability. Captions such as "I'm weak for feeling this way" evoke discourses of depression and anxiety (McKenzie et al. 2018), but diagnoses remain unnamed, further silencing mental health articulation.

The paratactic and fragmented syntax contributes to the sense of disconnection in this category, as can be seen from phrases like:

(19) *I used to be happy. Now I'm not*;

(20) *I don't know what's wrong with myself*

which suggest emotional disarray, mirroring a mind struggling to articulate unresolved conflict. The simple, often abrupt sentences can be read as indexing difficulty in narrativising

experience, rather than as full incoherence. The *Silenced Sufferer*'s language thus appears to project disconnection and self-doubt, reflecting the difficulty of putting emotional turmoil into words. In the context of the M-P, this fragmentation becomes a stylised form of distress, expressed through verbal simplicity and the speaker's deliberate stillness.

Another linguistic feature of this category is self-deprecating language, such as:

(21) *I'm just not good enough*;

(22) *It's probably my fault anyway*;

(23) *No one wants to hear me complain*;

(24) *I'm weak for feeling this way*;

(25) *I should be able to handle this on my own*;

(26) *I always mess things up;*

(27) *Nobody would understand anyway;*

(28) *There's something wrong with me;*

(29) *I'm just being dramatic;*

(30) *I don't matter*.

These statements suggest entrenched self-blame and diminished personal worth, which can be read as discouraging disclosure and help-seeking, given the cultural association of vulnerability with weakness (Courtenay 2000). The recurring self-criticism points to a perceived lack of agency and positions the speaker in a discursive representation of mental anguish and emotional suppression. Within the M-Ps that pertain to this category, these statements often appear as voice-overs or onscreen text, semiotic strategies that allow speakers to articulate distress indirectly and with reduced interpersonal risk. This mode of expression does not necessarily alleviate isolation, but it foregrounds the tension between visibility and concealment that defines this archetype. The absence of eye contact signals the inward focus of the suffering to the viewer: the Represented Participant (RP) is not engaging outwardly but instead withdrawing into himself. The slumped posture and downcast eyes clearly evoke defeat, with the body becoming a living emotional burden. The body and sombre soundtrack work together within the M-P to express what words often leave unspoken.

In contrast to the *Burdened Provider*'s aesthetic of exhaustion, which relies on dim light to index fatigue and relentless labour, the *Silenced Sufferer* adopts an aesthetic of withdrawal. Here, the low-contrast visuals do not primarily suggest tiredness but rather emotional detachment. The absence of bright colours or dynamic lighting can thus be read as a visual metaphor for withdrawal and inertia, articulating the RP's internal struggle with disengagement. While the technical features of the two categories partially overlap, their semiotic functions differ: in the *Burdened Provider*, they index fatigue as moral capital, whereas in the *Silenced Sufferer*, they underscore isolation and unresolved conflict. This distinction highlights how similar visual strategies can carry different semiotic loads depending on the discursive framing of the archetype.

In line with Zappavigna's (2018) concept of ambient affiliation, the hashtags within this category appear to function as affective tools that help construct emotionally charged publics around male mental health. Hashtags such as *#MentalHealthAwareness*, *#EndTheStigma*, and *#YouAreNotAlone* contribute to a discursive space where expressions of distress are collectively framed as socially recognisable. Their affiliative role is evident in comment responses such as '*I feel you*' and '*This resonates so deeply*,' which echo the hashtags' promise of connection. While these 'publics' appear to project support and solidarity, the alignment remains ambivalent: the very hashtags that signal openness to vulnerability coexist with discursive patterns that continue to suppress or limit direct emotional disclosure. The men featured in these videos frequently struggle to express their emotions openly, and hashtags such as *#YouAreNotAlone* help mediate this tension. They function as invitational cues for what Zappavigna (2018) calls affective alignment, signalling a preferred stance and making space for viewers to attune to the struggles portrayed. This alignment becomes visible not in the hashtags alone, but in the uptake they elicit, that is, through supportive comments or emojis that may echo the affective framing. The hashtag #MentalHealthAwareness, for instance, serves as a bridging device, connecting personal experiences of emotional restraint to broader social discourses and positioning viewers as both witnesses to and participants in these shared affective narratives. Through these hashtags, viewers are invited into a shared discourse of emotional repression that, as Zappavigna (2018) suggests, helps build solidarity around the emotional isolation experienced by men. While reinforcing solidarity, these digital rituals of affiliation also underscore the paradox of a system where emotional expression remains stifled, despite the visible call for awareness and change. In this sense, hashtags operate within M-Ps not merely as thematic labels but as affective cues that shape the viewer's emotional orientation and consolidate the ideological frame of the post. Their presence transforms each brief video into a participatory space of ambient affiliation, where male emotional struggle is simultaneously performed and collectivised.

Zappavigna (2018) argues that such interactions are not only about creating thematic organisation and co-constructing affective meanings. In this case, the repeated use of hashtags such as *#EndTheStigma* aligns both the poster and the audience around a shared affective understanding of mental health, while reinforcing the social and emotional limits of men's vulnerability. Thus, the hashtags are not just linguistic markers, but also affective devices that help solidify the *Silenced Sufferer*'s identity within a broader ideological and emotional framework.

Linguistic minimalism is also present in this category; it pairs with the non-engagement of the body, creating a poignant visual and verbal representation of emotional isolation. In these performances, the lack of articulation in verbal expression and bodily gesture enhances the sense of being trapped within oneself, an individual unable to reconnect with the world because their pain has consumed them. The quiet refusal to communicate further underscores the barriers to emotional expression in men, especially in a society that still often equates silence with strength, leaving men to suffer in isolation.

Finally, the comment sections often echo the identity scripted within these videos. The audience's interaction is marked by symbolic affirmations that reflect an affective alignment with the narrative of silent suffering. Common phrases like:

(31) *I feel you* 😔

(32) *This resonates so deeply* 🖤

and the use of emojis suggest that the videos in this category serve not merely as outlets for personal suffering, but as public performances designed to elicit audience support for the discourse of male vulnerability. These comments suggest that the *Silenced Sufferer*'s identity is co-constructed by both the content creator and the audience, reinforcing the social acceptability of emotional repression within a shared cultural framework. In the TikTok videos analysed, the *Silenced Sufferer* embodies a form of masculinity shaped by discursive self-criticism, visual cues that point to withdrawal, and an adherence to broader cultural narratives that conflate silence with strength. This figure grapples with a profound sense of emotional isolation and a suppressed capacity for vulnerability. Unlike other forms of emotional labour, the work performed by the *Silenced Sufferer* goes unrewarded. Collectively, the videos in this category offer a stark depiction of the struggle between the yearning to express emotion and the cultural norms that frame such openness as unsafe or inappropriate.

3.3 The Stoic Brotherhood Member

The *Stoic Brotherhood Member* emerges as a distinct identity within the corpus, portraying masculinity through a discourse that rests on silent endurance, collective resilience, and the weight of moral obligation. While the *Burdened Provider* also encodes emotional repression as a form of duty, here that duty is reframed on a broader scale: not only as individual or familial provision, but as a societal responsibility and a shared ethical commitment. Men who align with this category recast emotional restraint as a collective moral virtue that must be performed for the common good. A composite schematic illustrating the multimodal features of this archetype is shown in Fig. 3.

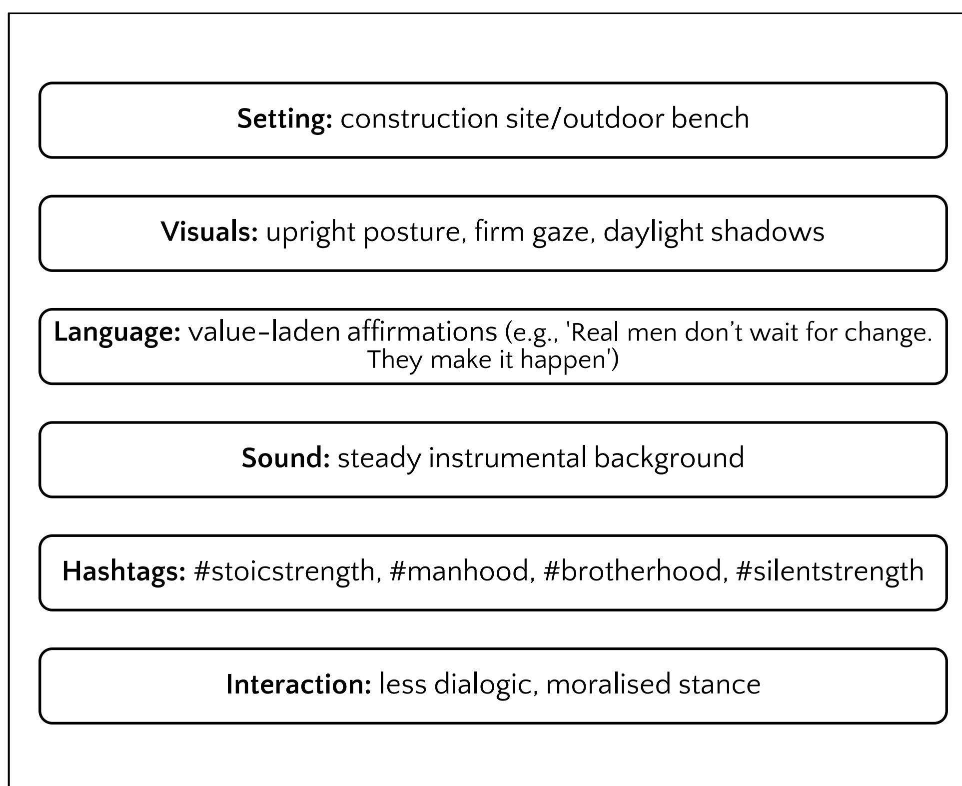

Fig. 3: Composite schematic of the Stoic Brotherhood Member archetype (setting, visuals, language, sound, hashtags, interaction)

Linguistically, this category is characterised by value-laden language and rhetorical structures that reaffirm hard labour worth, stoic resolve, and social duty. Key phrases such as:

(33) *Men* aren't *meant to show weakness. We keep pushing, we keep working, even when it feels like the world is falling apart*,

(34) *Real men don't wait for change. They make it happen*

(35) *Is it okay to be a man?*

(36) *It's not okay, it's necessary*

These statements frame masculinity as a moral responsibility and a steadying societal influence. Affirmative and directive language, particularly in statement (33), further emphasises the portrayal of masculine strength as an indispensable, undisputed mainstay of social order. It becomes evident from the linguistic choices that the speakers have made that vulnerability is not viewed as a natural aspect of human experience, but rather as a weakness that contrasts with the idealised masculine identity. Furthermore, the rhetorical question (35) followed by the assertive response, example (36), functions not only as an engagement with the audience but also as a challenge to normative assumptions about masculinity. This type of assertiveness can be interpreted as conveying a belief in the indispensability of traditional masculine roles. Masculinity here is not something to be questioned or expressed; it is something to be performed, silently and steadfastly.

These tightly structured interactions, built around repetition and rhetorical affirmation, function as M-Ps, where stoicism is not narrated but enacted through brief, high-impact language and unambiguous moral stance.

A representative video of the *Stoic Brotherhood Member* opens with a close-up of a man in his early 40s, wearing a high-visibility jacket and a hard hat, sitting on a wooden bench on a construction site. The setting is sparse, with concrete beams and unfinished walls framing the background. The timestamp reads

(37) *07:15AM*,

(38) *Real work starts when you're tired*

and the caption (38) appears at the bottom of the screen. The man looks directly into the camera, his expression stoic and composed, showing no signs of visible fatigue or distress. His gaze is firm, unyielding, but there is a subtle hint of weariness behind his eyes, which he quickly masks with a slight tightening of his jaw.

His voice is calm, measured, and purposeful:

(39) *Men* aren't *meant to show weakness. We keep pushing, we keep working, even when it feels like the world is falling apart. You don't complain, you don't stop. You do what's needed. It's not about how you feel, it's about what you do for the people who depend on you.*

This instance exemplifies the M-P as a site of affective containment, where tone, gesture, and verbal structure are calibrated to affirm resilience and reject emotional excess.

His upright posture and unsmiling gaze can be read as indexing resilience, though they may also connote seriousness, detachment, or even emotional distance. The RP often looks away from the camera, a gesture that discourages interpersonal engagement and foregrounds his orientation toward work rather than self-promotion. The setting in which he finds himself is bathed in natural daylight that creeps in through the gaps in the unfinished walls, casting long shadows across the dusty floor. Though not aggressive, the lighting is devoid of warmth, contributing to a setting that favours industriousness over comfort. The setting, with its raw, unfinished surfaces, can be seen as symbolising the ongoing, unrelenting nature of the work that defines his masculinity.

The music accompanying the video is instrumental, with a strong, steady rhythm that mirrors the constant pace of labour and perseverance the man exemplifies. The music underscores the theme of silent endurance, with no sudden shifts in tone or pace, only the consistent, unwavering sound of progress being made.

Within the structure of the M-P, music functions not as an emotional commentary but as a rhythmic reinforcement of masculine composure and continuity.

Hashtags such as:

(40) *#stoicstrength*,

(41) *#manhood*,

(42) *#brotherhood*,

(43) *#silentstrength*

flash across the screen as the video ends, reinforcing the themes of unexpressed solidarity, collective responsibility, and emotional discipline. The final message in the caption reads:

(44) *Real men don't wait for change. They make it happen.*

While not explicitly inviting emotional engagement, these words call for a collective masculinity performance in which emotional labour is sublimated into action for the greater good.

The entire video composition (language, setting, music, body language) can be interpreted as a cohesive M-P, articulating an identity through discursive restraint, tightly structured expression, and physical presence. While words and music are present, they are deployed with minimal emotional elaboration, so that what is most salient is the withholding of vulnerability rather than its articulation.

The comment section, filled with affirmations like,

(45) *This is what I needed to hear today*;

(46) *I'm with you, brother*,

further consolidates the *Stoic Brotherhood Member*'s identity as one who shares his struggles without needing validation or sympathy. The comments reflect an active participation in the performance of silent solidarity, where emotional expression is secondary to the shared experience of resilience and brotherhood.

In this category, the visual and semiotic markers appear to support the discourse of stoic masculinity. The men in these videos are often filmed in work environments, construction sites, laborious settings, or professional attire (e.g., uniforms, hard hats), which visually index masculinity as tied to social utility. The presence of uniforms and tools serves as a metonym for strength, endurance, and collective duty and labour. The body is characterised by a lack of direct engagement or expressive gestures, reinforcing the depiction of masculinity as functional and self-effacing.

Across the videos, the visual framing remains consistent: utilitarian lighting to evoke a sense of stark realism and low-contrast visuals to signal the curbing of emotions, thus distinguishing this aesthetic from both the *Burdened Provider*'s 'aesthetic of exhaustion' and the *Silenced Sufferer*'s 'aesthetic of withdrawal'. In this case, the suppression of emotions must not be read as a sign of emotional collapse, but as a deliberate withholding of feeling for the perceived collective good.

This interplay of lighting and setting enhances a sense of groundedness and responsibility, foregrounding resilience over vulnerability. The soundtrack, often a steady instrumental or rhythmic beat, complements this visual and verbal minimalism, reinforcing the notion of emotional endurance. Unlike the *Silenced Sufferer*'s melancholic tunes, this category's soundscape suggests a quiet strength, a constant march forward, and an unwavering resolve. The music does not mirror emotional depletion but fuels the narrative of resilience and collective effort.

Hashtags such as *#stoicstrength*, *#brotherhood*, *#manhood*, *#silentstrength* further anchor the category's visual and linguistic markers into a larger cultural narrative that values restraint, collective solidarity, and silent endurance. These hashtags function as thematic markers and tools for audience alignment, suggesting a shared ideology of masculine strength defined by action rather than expression. The repeated use of phrases like:

(47) *We need a little gratitude for that*

(48) *It's what keeps the world going round*

reinforces the collective nature of this identity, asserting that masculinity is not for personal gain but for the improvement of society.

In conclusion, this category presents an image of masculinity that emphasises emotional containment as a moral virtue and social necessity. The *Stoic Brotherhood Member*'s identity is validated through the performance of stoic solidarity and emotional discipline. This masculine identity does not actively pursue sympathy or understanding. Instead, it embraces a strong commitment to duty and collective strength, consequently curtailing any personal expression of emotions. The videos construct masculinity as rooted in affective restraint, presented not as a sacrifice but as a valued and essential part of male identity, for both the represented participant and the viewers. As previously noted, each video acts as a micro-performance (M-P): a carefully staged expression of masculine resilience, in which the absence of emotion becomes a marker of authority.

3.4 Digital masculinities and representations of mental health

The three categories that we have analysed offer different ways of framing male mental health, showing how struggles can be internalised and performed within cultural notions of masculinity. References to fatigue ('Too tired to talk'), self-deprecation ('There's something wrong with me'), and hashtags such as #MentalHealthAwareness and #EndTheStigma resonate with discourses of depression and anxiety, even when diagnoses are left unnamed. At the same time, narratives of endurance ('sometimes I wanna quit… but I don't') partially echo recovery narratives (Watts and Higgins 2017), though here they often remain unresolved, foregrounding persistence over transformation. These multimodal performances thus connect to broader health concerns: they index the tension between hegemonic masculinity and the articulation of vulnerability, a tension documented in men's health scholarship (Brookes and Chałupnik 2023; Courtenay 2000).

The Burdened Provider presents mental health as a load that must be silently borne. Emotional suffering is subordinated to duty, reinforcing the belief that men must suppress their feelings to live up to their roles as providers. This is conveyed through stoic facial expressions, minimalist speech, and visuals such as early-morning work scenes of men in uniform, which physically personify responsibility and sacrifice. *The Silenced Sufferer* portrays mental health as a private, all-consuming struggle. Rather than the expression of a moral duty, emotional pain is seen as overwhelming and isolating, leading to profound internalised crises and feelings of

self-doubt. Language becomes fragmented and repetitive, reflecting a sense of imprisonment within persistent negative thoughts. *The Stoic Brotherhood Member*, by contrast, shifts the focus from individual suffering to collective endurance. Mental health challenges are acknowledged but framed as part of a shared duty of solidarity, resilience, and mutual support between and among men.

Despite their differences, the three categories share several common features: in all three cases, repetitive and restrained language, together with recurrent visual cues, constructs emotional expression as something to be contained, deferred, or displaced because it is implicitly treated as incompatible with hegemonic ideals of masculinity. This occurs through duty in the *Burdened Provider*, through withdrawal and self-silencing in the *Silenced Sufferer*, and through collective stoicism in the *Stoic Brotherhood Member*. Certain metonymic visual elements, such as the work uniform of the *Burdened Provider*, the withdrawn posture of the *Silenced Sufferer*, and the confident stance of the *Stoic Brotherhood Member*, consistently reproduce traditional expectations surrounding male emotional behaviour. Thanks to the multimodal approach adopted for our analysis, it has become evident that masculinity is constructed not only through words but also through visual presentations, gestures, and interactions with the environment. Together, the verbal and visual elements validate and endorse a narrative anchored upon affective control, endurance, and collective strength. However, this performance exacts a toll. Men are taught to suppress their vulnerability to maintain these ideals, thus risking emotional damage. Hashtags further reinforce this discourse by framing mental health not as something to be addressed openly, but as a challenge to be faced either in isolation and silence or through the solidarity of like-minded men. This framing presents hegemonic masculinity as normal and treats it as a measure of good mental health, equating it with strength, stability, and responsibility. The downside, however, is that it excludes men who show vulnerability, making emotional openness look like failure rather than a healthy response to suffering. These three archetypes extend existing frameworks of masculinity. *The Burdened Provider* and *the Stoic Brotherhood Member* resonate strongly with Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, while *the Silenced Sufferer* reflects subordinated masculinity that is discursively reframed as stoic restraint. Our typology also complements Ging's (2019) analysis of the manosphere, but demonstrates how similar logics of endurance and self-reliance are reconfigured on TikTok through affectively aestheticised, short-form performances. Taken together, these categories demonstrate both continuities and divergences from sociological models of masculinity. Connell's relational categories (hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, marginalised) are not reproduced in discrete form but hybridised in TikTok performances. For instance, stoic resilience may co-exist with moments of vulnerability, producing blurred identity positions that complicate clear-cut hierarchies.

Through this analysis, we can better understand the complex ways in which male mental health is represented in the digital realm. These performances provide insight into how societal expectations of masculinity shape men's emotional struggles. While these categories differ in how they portray emotional pain, either as a moral duty, an isolating force, or a shared experience, they all reinforce the notion that masculinity is defined by emotional repression and endurance, rather than vulnerability or expression. This study, therefore, contributes to our understanding of how digital masculinity performances reflect and shape broader cultural attitudes toward male mental health.

4. Concluding remarks

This paper explored how TikTok, a significant social networking site, rearticulates traditionally repressive emotional discourses into therapeutic performances. This framework challenges existing notions of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing them. The three categories we identified in the corpus, that is, *The Burdened Provider*, *The Silenced Sufferer*, and *The Stoic Brotherhood Member*, although very similar to one another, show that TikTok is a space where dominant gender norms are reconfigured through emotionally charged language intertwined with semiotically coherent tropes about masculinity, to the point that these reconstructions rarely disrupt conservative gender hierarchies. The categories were singled out through Membership Categorisation Analysis, which identified recurring identity markers and patterns of interaction within the multimodal M-Ps.

TikTok frames emotional repression not as a weakness but as a form of masculine strength, thus effectively rebranding suffering and resilience. It can therefore be said that although these performances might appear to offer opportunities for reimagining masculinity, they largely reinforce traditional gender norms by celebrating silence, emotional control, and endurance.

The analysis of M-Ps shows that emotional vulnerability is portrayed as an internal struggle that men must face alone, framing mental health issues within a discourse of isolation and personal responsibility. This dynamic strengthens cycles of emotional repression and self-reliance, aligning closely with dominant ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Following Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics, the study reveals that while TikTok performances offer some sense of community, they often sustain the very gender norms that discourage men from seeking help or expressing vulnerability. In the *Burdened Provider* category, emotional repression is cast as a moral obligation; in the *Silenced Sufferer*, it becomes a narrative of tragic isolation; while in the *Stoic Brotherhood Member*, it is tied to collective, silent endurance.

Positioned within broader debates on digital masculinities, the findings suggest that TikTok does not dismantle toxic masculine norms but instead helps perpetuate them. Mental health discourse within these M-Ps repackages emotional suffering as a marker of moral and masculine virtue, rather than offering genuine alternatives.

Thus, TikTok becomes a space where men's emotional struggles are recognised, but responses remain tied to traditional scripts of resilience, sacrifice, and silence. The performances analysed contribute to the continued legitimisation of these ideals, making it difficult for men to engage with their emotions in transformative ways.

Alongside these patterns of reinforcement, some instances of resistance or reframing were also evident. Certain users employ hashtags such as #MenCryToo or #ItsOkayNotToBeOkay, and audience comments often encourage openness (e.g., "You don't have to carry this alone"). These interventions do not overturn hegemonic masculinity but create fissures in its logic, showing that TikTok publics can also host counter-discourses that legitimise vulnerability in subtle ways.

In short, while digital spaces like TikTok appear to open new avenues for discussing masculinity, they often end up reinforcing dominant and restrictive gender norms. Performances of silent endurance and stoic solidarity maintain, rather than challenge, traditional masculine ideals, limiting how men can experience and express vulnerability, even under the banner of mental health awareness. In this context, mental health issues are not fully transformed; they are re-contextualised within a framework that valorises silence and suffering as virtues of masculinity. The findings have implications for both practice and policy. In mental health education, awareness campaigns can benefit from recognising how digital masculinity discourses reframe vulnerability as endurance, so that interventions can more effectively legitimise openness. At the level of platform governance, recognising how algorithms amplify hegemonic scripts highlights the need for more equitable forms of content moderation and visibility. Addressing these dynamics is crucial for enabling social media platforms to become spaces that support, rather than constrain, men's engagement with mental health.

Bionotes

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