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The Dual Pathways to Masculinity Threats: The Roles of Social Role Incongruity and Social Connection in Masculine Identity Maintenance Among Gay and Straight Men

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ABSTRACT

Humans are hardwired to seek out social connections, as well as monitor for warning signs that their belonging may be at risk. Social identities provide a mechanism through which to monitor belonging, shaping how people understand and see themselves, as well as how they are perceived by others. This large qualitative study ($n = 203$) presents a dual-pathway model of masculinity threats for self-identified gay and straight men, integrating theoretical models of the psychological need to belong, role congruity theory and social identity theory. Using reflexive thematic analysis to code descriptions of masculinity-threatening experiences, we identified two contexts in which threats were experienced: (1) through private and public experiences of role incongruity and (2) through public experiences with social rejection. Furthermore, the content of threats experienced spanned six themes: (a) perceived femininity; (b) deviation from heteronormativity; (c) competency; (d) physical prototypicality; (e) social prototypicality and (f) sociometer. Notably, the few men who felt they had never experienced a masculinity threat before were more likely to believe this was due to the positive regard and self-esteem they derive from their connections with others. The findings complement and extend the existing research on masculinity threats in meaningful ways: First, they show that gender-role incongruity can lead to masculinity threats for both straight and gay men. Second, they highlight that social inclusion also plays a significant role in both gay and straight men's experiences with masculinity. Furthermore, the findings have important implications for understanding when, and for whom, masculinity threats may lead to antisocial behaviours.

1 | Introduction

Much of the human experience can be characterized through the fundamental need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and the challenges of managing these needs in complexly interdependent social worlds (Kelley and Thibaut 1978; Holmes 2002; Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). Social connection comes with tremendous benefits, including intimacy and felt understanding, improved personal striving and self-actualization and better physical and mental health (Feeney and Collins 2015; Fitzsimons et al. 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010; Murray et al. 2018; Plusnin et al. 2018; Reis 2012; Reis et al. 2017; Simpson 2007). But with these benefits, come potential risks and costs. Social isolation and rejection can lead to great mental and physical harm (Braithwaite and Holt-Lunstad 2017; Holt-Lunstad and Steptoe 2022; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Shrout et al. 2019). Humans are

therefore not only hardwired to seek out and preserve social connections (Baumeister and Leary 1995) but also to monitor for the warning signs that their belonging may be at risk (Leary et al. 1995).

Social identities are mechanisms through which to monitor belonging. They shape how people understand and see themselves, as well as how they are perceived by others. Not only do they offer a sense of belonging through group membership (e.g., connection with others who share similar characteristics), they also provide belonging through social capital and status (Tajfel 1972; Hogg 2016). People are therefore motivated to maintain their high-value social identities to preserve their sense of belonging and status. One such identity is masculinity. Masculinity[1] is a socially constructed, high-status identity that is maintained through gender-stereotypical behaviours and gender-congruent roles (Eisler and Skidmore 1987; Gilmore 1990; Vandello and Bosson 2013; Vandello et al. 2008). When this identity is threatened, men engage in gender-congruent behaviours to reestablish their public image, which can inadvertently have negative consequences for themselves and others (e.g., Bosson and Vandello 2011; Bosson et al. 2015; Dahl et al. 2015; Jakupcak et al. 2002; Pascoe 2007; Schermerhorn and Vescio 2022; Vescio et al. 2021).

However, because masculinity is typically defined in relation to stereotypical behaviours, past work on identifying ways in which men's masculinity can be threatened has focused extensively on masculine role congruity (Croft et al. 2015; Eagly and Diekman 2005; Diekman and Goodfriend 2006; Vandello and Bosson 2013). This overlooks the potentially distinct and unique ways masculinity threats may be tied to monitoring social inclusion, which is a fundamental human need also tied to identity (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Hogg 2016; Tajfel 1972). Understanding the multifaceted pathways to masculinity threats is important because approaches to restoring role congruity can differ substantially from those aimed at restoring social inclusion. It also obfuscates potential interventions that could buffer against threats targeting one domain over the other. This qualitative study aimed to examine self-identified gay and straight men's experiences with masculinity threats through the lens of the psychological need to belong and role congruity theory.

1.1 | Social Identity as a Barometer of Social Status and Connectedness

People exist in a complex, socially interconnected world shaped by the real and implied presence of others. Social connectedness is the sense of belonging people have to a group, family or community (Lee and Robbins 2000) and positively impacts people in many ways (e.g., better physical well-being: Cohen et al. 1995; Eisenberger et al. 2011; more effective goal pursuits, self-regulation and self-actualization: Fitzsimons et al. 2015; Finkel and Fitzsimons 2011; greater social confidence and trust: Fessler and Holbrook 2013; Lamarche 2020, Murray et al. 2021). People have two ways of tracking how they fit into their social world: their hierometer (Mahadevan et al. 2016) and their sociometer (Leary et al. 1995). On the basis of the assumption that humans have a fundamental need to sustain social status (Anderson et al. 2015), the hierometer functions to regulate social status and navigate precarious social hierarchies (Mahadevan et al. 2019). The sociometer, by contrast, is based on the assumption that humans have a fundamental need to sustain social inclusion (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Leary 2005; Leary and Downs 1995; Leary et al. 1995) and functions to regulate inclusion. Thus, humans are predisposed to tracking their social connection through both status *and* acceptance.

Social identity intersects with the hierometer and the sociometer as a way of maintaining status and inclusion. Social Identity Theory proposes that social identities stem from the recognition that a person belongs to a group that they assign emotional value and significance to (Tajfel 1972; Hogg 2016). These identities shape a person's sense of who they are through group membership, as well as how they are seen by others, especially when these identities are visible. The meaning and understanding of these identities are socially constructed (Jenkins 2014; Hogg 2007, 2012). Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Diekman 2005) proposes that groups, and individuals within those groups, are seen more positively when they align with the group's prescriptive social roles. This creates shared expectations for how members of the group should behave based on identification and establishes that personal value is derived through role-congruent characteristics (Eagly and Koenig 2021; Diekman and Goodfriend 2006). Additionally, social identity is hierarchically linked to the belief that 'we' are better than 'them' (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Hogg 2016). Thus, social status can be enhanced through the collective favouritism of the in-group and derogation of the out-group (Martiny and Rubin 2016). Consequently, social identities can be a source of social capital, particularly when the perceived superiority of the group is supported through social structures.

Consistent with differentiating between the hierometer which tracks social status (i.e., my value within a stratified social group), and the sociometer which tracks inclusion (i.e., my sense of personal value within my connection with others), social identity theory differentiates between personal and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Brown 2000). However, threats to high-valued social identities may implicate both systems. That is, a threat to a valued social identity may threaten someone's perceived role congruity, group value and status and/or threaten their sense of connection and personal value in the eyes of others.

1.2 | Masculine Ideology: A High Status Identity Under Threat

Masculinity is an identity with tremendous social capital (Connell 1995). It is associated with many socially prescribed positives, such as status and power over out-group members (Brannon 1976; Courtenay 2000; Levant et al. 2007; Pascoe 2007; Pleck et al. 1994; Thompson and Pleck 1986). Masculinity is constructed, preserved and enacted through highly prescriptive gender roles and stereotypes (Gilmore 1990; Vandello and Bosson 2013). Because masculinity must be actively pursued and preserved, it has been characterized as a tenuous, precarious and anxious status that men are motivated to maintain through compensatory behaviours (Eisler and Skidmore 1987; Levant 1996; Vandello and Bosson 2013; Vandello et al. 2008).

Masculinity is often believed to be monitored through role congruity; the extent to which men are behaving in line with

their prescriptive social roles (Diekman and Goodfriend 2006; Diekman and Eagly 2008). Consequently, masculinity threats occur when men feel this identity is questioned or challenged, their behaviours are equated with those of a woman, or they are made to feel subservient to others (Eisler and Skidmore 1987; Pleck 1995; Vandello and Bosson 2013). Men are not only personally impacted by believing they have not lived up to rigid masculinity norms, but hurt men are liable to hurt others around them either directly or indirectly (Croft et al. 2021). To restore threatened masculinity, men engage in behaviours consistent with masculine gender stereotypes, including anger, aggression, sexual objectification of women and the derogation of sexual minorities (e.g., Bosson and Vandello 2011; Bosson et al. 2015; Dahl et al. 2015; Jakupcak et al. 2002; Pascoe 2007; Schermerhorn and Vescio 2022; Vescio et al. 2021). Men also disengage from their relationships following masculinity threats, despite both men and women relying on partners for support in times of vulnerability (Lamarche et al. 2020). Some men's groups who view masculinity under attack societally have even gone so far as to advocate for the re-legalisation of marital rape and intimate partner violence as a way of returning to a 'traditional' society where men are valued and dominant over women (Gotell and Dutton 2016). In even more extreme cases, men have committed acts of terrorism and mass murder as a form of collective punishment against women and a society which has led them to feel emasculated (Kelly et al. 2022; McCulloch et al. 2019; Witt 2020).

However, much of the research examining masculinity threats does not explicitly differentiate between masculinity threats stemming from role incongruity versus masculinity threats due to a loss of social inclusion. Behaviourally, the consequences may appear similar: Both threats to the fundamental need for social value and status, and threats to the fundamental need to belong motivate people to engage in compensatory cognitions and behaviours. In some instances, this can lead to prosocial behaviours (e.g., Haldorai et al. 2022; Maner et al. 2007; Romero-Canyas et al. 2010). However, more commonly, responses to these threats are harmful, including aggression (Gaertner and Iuzzini 2013; Ren et al. 2018; Twenge et al. 2001) derogation of others (Bourgeois and Leary 2001) and antisocial behaviours (Tice et al. 2002; Twenge et al. 2007). However, their antecedents, and therefore the ways in which to buffer and preserve social value versus feelings of inclusion, differ substantially. However, despite theoretical acknowledgement that social identity maintenance functions through different monitoring systems, there is little insight into how often men experience threats in response to one relative to the other.

1.3 | One-Size-Fits-All? The Need for Intersectional Masculinity Research

Past research has often unintentionally reinforced hegemonic views of masculinity by focusing on the experiences of straight, cisgender (and often White) men (Dean 2013; Garlick 2003). Psychological research is often criticized for androcentricity in its theoretical conceptualizations, centring normativity around the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of men specifically (Bem 1993; Bailey et al. 2018). This androcentrism, however, could perhaps be more accurately characterized as heteronormativity; the experiences, thoughts, feelings and behaviours of *straight* men (Thorne et al. 2019). Much of the research on masculinity threats is therefore limited because it is constrained by heteronormative expressions of masculinity and often conflates gender and sexual orientation, thus ignoring how these identities may meaningfully interact (Shields 2008).

Because hegemonic masculinity is multiple and hierarchical, men who have other social identities that are considered 'lesser' (e.g., men of colour, from working-class backgrounds or sexual minorities) are motivated to compensate by performing masculinity and demonstrating their gender and sexual normativity (Carrigan et al. 2002; Dean 2013; Whitehead and Barrett 2001). Masculinity is often used as a proxy for heterosexuality. Consequently, to maintain social status, straight men aspire to be perceived as both masculine *and* heterosexual (Donaldson 1993). When confronted with threats to their heterosexuality, straight men feel the need to differentiate themselves from women and gay men, often by reinforcing sexual prejudices against gay men and women (Berent et al. 2016; Carnaghi et al. 2011).

However, this need to perform masculinity through performed heteronormativity is not restricted to straight men. Despite past assertions that gay men are immune to masculinity threats because they have no interest in preserving their masculinity (Fiske et al. 2002), newer evidence suggests that gay men equally value their masculine identity (Vogel et al. 2011). Some gay men even go so far as to identify as 'straight-acting' (i.e., identifying with traditional heteronormative masculinity). For some, this is an act of self-preservation, providing them with a way of avoiding backlash and mitigating the social costs of their lower status (sexual) identity (Donaldson 1993; Glick et al. 2007). Indeed, masculine self-presentation among gay men has been positively linked to well-being (though it is worth noting that internalized homophobia associated with straight-acting was harmful, particularly among more effeminate gay men; Hunt et al. 2020). Furthermore, although some work posits that gay men are less sensitized to masculinity threats because they are less invested in enacting heteronormative performances of gender (Bosson et al. 2005), there is extensive work demonstrating that gay men show similar reactions to masculinity threats as straight men. For example, they are motivated to distance from 'femininity', express more negative attitudes towards stereotypically effeminate gay men (Hunt et al. 2016; Glick et al. 2007) and even engage in violence against other gay men (Carvalho et al. 2011) when they feel threatened. Gay men also experience the highest incidences of unreported intimate partner violence due to heterosexist pressures and homophobia (Finneran et al. 2012). Thus, more inclusive work is needed to properly understand the variability in experiences with masculinity and masculinity threats to further understand the variability in both antecedents and consequences.

1.4 | Current Research

Social integration and connectedness are fundamental parts of the human condition (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Rusbult and Van Lange 2008). People are therefore motivated to maintain connection and have developed psychological mechanisms for tracking relative inclusion and status within social hierarchies (Leary 2005; Leary et al. 1995;

Mahadevan et al. 2016, 2019). Social identities provide one way for people to understand their relative social status and inclusion in society (Hogg 2016). Masculinity is a high-value social identity, and social psychological models of gender and identity suggest that masculinity is preserved through public performance of stereotypically masculine behaviours (Vandello and Bosson 2013). When masculinity is threatened, men engage in a range of compensatory behaviours, including violence and derogation of others, which are both consistent with masculine identity maintenance but also consistent with how people respond to social exclusion and the threat of lost connectedness.

However, most of the research on masculinity threats has focused on social role congruity and status, without considering more direct links with social acceptance and inclusion (meant in the current context to refer to the real, implied or imagined presence of others, including friends, family and other persons in their social circles and broader society). Therefore, it remains unclear whether men experience masculinity threats primarily as a threat to their social identity or also as a threat to their connectedness. This distinction has implications for interventions aimed at buffering against the consequences of masculinity threats and promoting more resilient masculine identities. Furthermore, much of the work on masculinity threats relies on a socially prescriptive understanding of what constitutes 'masculine', which may differ across communities (e.g., queer communities).

The aim of the current research was to take a bottom-up approach to understanding straight and gay men's experiences with masculinity threats to gain a clearer understanding of how masculinity threats intersect with social inclusion and connectedness in addition to social role congruity, status and identity maintenance. To accomplish this, we relied on a large qualitative survey of self-identified straight and gay men from the United States and the United Kingdom. Our approach prioritized obtaining a large sample and therefore relied on short answer prompts rather than interviews where we could probe for more information. We then used reflexive thematic analysis to take a constructivist approach to critically interpreting these experiences and their implications.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Participants

Our study draws on data collected in open-ended responses from an online questionnaire completed by 211 gay and straight men. Participants were recruited using Prolific. Participants received £1.50 for taking part in the 15-min questionnaire (£6/h pro-rata).[2] No identifying information was collected; all names used are assigned pseudonyms.

After dropping participants who did not answer any questions ($n = 8$), we were left with a final sample of 203 men. Following recommendations from Fugard and Potts (2015), 203 participants should provide 80% power to detect 20–30 instances of a theme with a population prevalence of 10%. Subsamples of 50 (i.e., single/romantically attached gay/straight men) should provide 80% power to detect 30 instances of a theme with 65% population prevalence. Table 1 summarizes the sample demographics.

2.2 | Materials and Procedure

Participants with active accounts on Prolific self-selected into the study which was advertised on the platform to self-identified men (including transgender men) living in the United States or the United Kingdom (79% United Kingdom), who met the eligibility criteria (i.e., 18 years or older; identified as a gay or straight man; were single or in an established romantic relationship). Following consent, ineligible participants or those who did not pass the integrity question (i.e., do you promise to provide your best answers) had their participation terminated, and no further data were collected. Eligible participants first completed demographic questions (e.g., age, ethnicity and relationship status), followed by a series of open and closed-ended questions, including the target question analysed for this study, which was asked first[4]:

> Please take a moment to describe a time when you felt that your masculinity threatened or undermined by another person. In as much detail as possible, please describe the specific things the other person said or did that to make you feel that way.

Masculinity was not defined to allow participants to make their own sense of the construct. Participants were thanked and debriefed upon completion of the survey.

2.3 | Research Positionality

The coding was completed by the first author assisted by a male research assistant trained in qualitative methods. All of the responses were coded by both the first author and research assistant. The research assistant has a particularly privileged position as a White, straight, male in his mid-30s from North America. This created an oscillation between (perceived) insider and outsider status while coding, depending on whether the participant was straight or gay, closer or further in age, or from a non-White background (none of which the research assistant was made explicitly aware of, unless stated in the responses themselves). Occupying this grey-zone while coding led to an empathy and ease of understanding of the underlying sources of frustration and threat, whilst being able to keep an objective detachment from not being able to assume any shared social experience. The main sense of being an outsider manifested itself with sexual orientation—both straight and gay participants often bristled at being perceived as gay, which has never been a salient masculinity threat for the first coder.

The first author also holds a relatively privileged social position as a straight, White woman in her mid-30s originally from Canada and employed in a permanent position at a public university in the United Kingdom. In many ways, her gender identity, sexual orientation (in relation to the gay men in the sample) and career make her an outsider to the experiences described by the participants. For instance, she needed to put aside her assumptions on the types of experiences men in the sample would most likely describe. In other ways, her personal history provided a source of empathy in understanding the experiences

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics for sample ($n = 203$).

Characteristic	*n*	Percent[a]
Sexual orientation		
Straight	100	49.261
Gay	99	48.768
Bisexual[3]	3	1.478
Relationship status		
Single	95	46.798
Casually dating	12	5.911
Exclusively dating/In a committed dating relationship	41	20.197
Engaged	6	2.956
Married/Civil union/Common-law	49	24.138
Cohabiting[b]		
Yes	84	77.778
No	24	22.222
Relationship style[c]		
Monogamous	185	91.133
Consensually non-monogamous/Polyamorous	15	7.389
Other	3	1.478
Ethnicity		
White (e.g., Caucasian, European, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller)	159	78.325
Asian (e.g., Indian, Chinese, Singaporean, Asian-American)	20	9.852
Middle-Eastern (e.g., Saudi-Arabian, Iranian, Lebanese, Turkish)	2	0.985
Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, African-American, Black British)	10	4.826
Latino/Latina or Latin-American/Hispanic	5	2.463
Indigenous/Aboriginal identity (e.g., First Nations, Inuit, Metis, Maori)	0	0.000
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Groups	7	3.448
Age		
M (years)	38.148	
SD	14.184	
Relationship length[b]		
M (years)	5.769	
SD	1.272	

[a]Due to rounding, percentages do not always add up to 100.
[b]Romantically attached men in the sample only.
[c]Both romantically attached and single men reported on their current/typical relationship style.

with social rejection and feelings of inadequacy. Having coders from different gender identities allowed both coders to balance their perspectives and mitigate personal biases they might have.

2.4 | Analyses

A male research assistant, blind to the aims of the study and naïve to the literature on gender, social identity theory and social connectedness, was recruited for data analysis. The strategy behind this approach was twofold: First, as a cisgender male, the research assistant brought a different perspective and personal history to the analyses that would not be possible by the three cisgender female authors on the study. Second, his lack of familiarity with the academic literature meant that his coding could be done with a theoretically agnostic lens. Although there is no avoiding the societal biases which emerge from living in a gendered society, employing a naïve coder meant that emergent themes could be identified independent of prevailing theoretical models in psychology, gender research and sociology.

Both coders read through all responses prior to beginning the coding. Next the male research assistant prepared an initial coding sheet in NVIVO. After the initial coding, the research assistant and first author met to discuss. At this stage, the first author's familiarity with the wider theory helped guide the coding and identification of themes. Following recommendations from Braun and Clarke (2006) on coding via consensus, the themes were iteratively revised through discussions between the research assistant and first author until 100% consensus was reached. Our approach followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) and combined epistemological reflexivity, which builds on previous theoretical perspectives, with performed political reflexivity, which acknowledges how the shared identity between the (male) researcher and (male) participants presents an opportunity for the research team to engage with the data and make different connections in novel ways (Dowling 2006).

The coding was done blind to participant sexual orientation and relationship status. After the themes were defined and consensus was reached, the first author examined whether there were different patterns in the extent to which certain themes better related to certain profiles of men (e.g., single/in a relationship and gay/straight). Unless otherwise stated in the results, we found no meaningful differences as a consequence of relationship status or sexual orientation in the experiences described and their associations with identified themes.

3 | Results

Participants were asked to describe a time when they felt their masculinity was being threatened or undermined by another person. Nearly all of our men (89%) were able to recall and describe such an event, highlighting the nearly universal nature of masculinity threats among men despite highly idiosyncratic causes. We identified two contexts in which threats were experienced: (1) through private and public, yet passive, experiences of role incongruity and (2) through public, and active, experiences with social rejection. Furthermore, the types of threats experienced were consolidated across six themes: (a) perceived femininity; (b) deviation from heteronormativity; (c) competency; (d) physical prototypicality; (e) social prototypicality; and (f) sociometer. Given the brevity of the responses given by each participant (i.e., a few sentences), reliable subthemes within these categories did not emerge. See Table 2 for an overview of the emergent themes, their definitions and prototypical examples.

Except for the sociometer theme, the different types of threat emerged with similar incidences across both threat contexts. We therefore begin by providing an overview of the two threat contexts and then organize the results according to types of threats and discuss relevant differences where applicable. Finally, we conclude by discussing the responses from the men who claimed to have never experienced a masculinity threat. Quotes are presented verbatim, without correcting for grammar or misspellings. Identifying information (e.g., names of people in scenarios) have been redacted for confidentiality. The quotes have been allocated pseudonyms that are typical for men with a similar ethnic background as the participant who provided the quote.

3.1 | Context of Threat: Role Incongruity vs. Social Rejection

Consistent with a dual-pathway model of masculinity threats drawing from models underpinning the need to belong and social identity theory, men's threatening experiences emerged in two distinct contexts. For many, the experience that came to mind was in the context of masculine role incongruity, and the extent to which they were either publicly (i.e., perceived by another person) or privately (i.e., an internal evaluation or comparison) living up to prescriptive masculine stereotypes. The threats identified in this context were often more passive. In many cases, these experiences were entirely private and internalized. When people were present, they may have made specific comments or were witnesses to some inability to live up to a masculine ideal, but they were not using direct attacks. However, for the majority of men in our sample, masculinity threats occurred in the context of a public experience that was centred on being ostracized or rejected by another person. These threats were more active and appeared to be linked to intentional harm. In these cases, the content of masculinity threat was somewhat incidental to the social rejection they had endured.

For example, Colin (straight man, single) described an experience in which classmates who wanted to make him feel like an outcast focused in on what they felt was a 'feminine' behaviour in order to ostracize him:

> …when I was around twelve years old one of my (then) classmates was not pleased with me having sided with the teacher about an issue I cannot remember after so many years. For an entire day he treated me like a female, for instance opening doors before me and saying 'ladies first',

This experience differed considerably from the one described by Alan (gay man, in a relationship) in which an off-handed comment made him doubt his own masculinity:

> I was really tanned after holiday and someone said I look like a Ken doll. I was taken back and asked what they meant and they said the colour of me was very deep. At that moment I felt more feminine because of the chocolate boy comment.

Although both men described public experiences in which perceived femininity was the mechanism through which their masculinity was threatened, Alan's experience illustrates how this can arise in a context of role incongruity and compliance with masculine stereotypes, without any overt action needed from others. By contrast, Colin's experience illustrates how someone who is motivated to socially reject another person may leverage masculinity threats to accomplish this, making the masculinity threat both incidental to, and yet intrinsically intertwined with, social rejection.

Similar contextual distinctions emerged across the types of threats described by the men in our sample. For example, Benjamin (straight, in a relationship) and Oliver (gay, single) both

TABLE 2 | Overview of threat contexts and themes, their definitions and prototypical examples.

		Definition	Sample quotes
Context of threat	Role incongruity	Contexts in which the masculinity threat was a public (i.e., perceived by another person) or private (i.e., an internal evaluation or comparison) experience in which men felt they were failing to live up to prescriptive masculine stereotypes and roles	*Anytime I am around a man who is very tall and muscular and loud I feel as if I am seen by others as much less masculine in comparison. Their simple existence puts my masculinity into question* —(straight man, in a relationship)
	Social rejection	Contexts in which the masculinity threat was a public experience of ostracism or rejection, with or without overt references to masculine stereotypes and prescriptive norms	*This was a date with someone that I had not met before. I knocked on her door and upon opening it she said, 'I knew I should have asked for a photo first- I only like powerfully built men'.* —(straight man, single)
	Theme		
Content of threat	Perceived femininity	Experiences in which men felt threatened because they were made to feel as though their appearance or their behaviour led to them either being labelled, or equated to, women	*A friend says that I like to complain like a woman. I think this undermines my masculinity.* —(gay man, single)
	Deviation from heteronormativity	Experiences in which (gay and straight-identified) men felt threatened because they felt they were being accused, perceived, or recognized as gay	*I was only threatened when someone thought that I was homosexual. It's rude to make an assumption unless it has been confirmed, so I was very perturbed by it, and yearned for them to magically get my heterosexual history.* —(straight man, single)
	Competency	Experiences in which men felt they were not able to perform certain skills, typically in male-dominated domains	*At my old job my boss was a woman and every time we had some technical issues and the machines had to be fixed she always knew what to do and how to fix them while to me it wasn't always do obvious. She was a lot better with tools than me.* —(gay man, in a relationship)
	Physical prototypicality	Experiences in which men felt inadequacy or insufficiency due to not living up to a specific ideal for male bodies and physicality	*It was when some people were comparing arm muscle size, I have very little muscle there and I felt very uneasy about it.* - (gay man, in a relationship)
	Social prototypicality	Experiences in which men felt or perceived an inability to live up to certain social expectations of 'maleness', often linked to their role in relationships	*Another man questioned my masculinity by suggesting that since i hold certain recreational interests (for example, a certain music taste), this isn't 'manly' and it makes me seem less masculine as a result.* —(straight man, single)
	Sociometer	Experiences in which men described direct attacks on the self and worth in the eyes of others that were typically not explicitly associated with prescriptive masculine stereotypes	*When my best friend talks down to me it can make me feel less of a man. He talks to me like I am an idiot or a child.* —(straight man, single)

described instances where their masculinity had been threatened due to inability or perceived lack of skills. However, although Benjamin's threat occurred in a male-dominated domain (e.g., videogames), his experience focused on public interactions and how mean other people can be, rather than specific comments about his masculinity:

> One time where I felt that my masculinity was threatened or undermined by another person was when I was gaming online. I regularly stream on Twitch. One day, another individual whom I don't know made a comment to me in my Twitch channel and said that I was 's!*t' at the game, despite my gaming ability and records. This made me feel angry and annoyed, as some people on the internet (and in real life too) are rude and un-kind to others.

By contrast when Oliver (gay, single) felt his masculinity had been threatened due to a lack of athletic skills and knowledge, his experience illustrated the internalized and private deliberations on what it means to be masculine:

> Being a gay man I sometimes feel inferior to other masculine straight guys. I have been in situations where straight, very masculine guys talk and act in ways that sometimes makes me feel inferior especially when they are talking about football and other athletic activities.

Thus, although the content of the threat may be associated with specific stereotypes or experiences around masculinity, the context of the threat may engage different psychological need monitoring systems (e.g., status vs. inclusion), requiring different interventions. We next discuss the qualitative differences that emerged between thematic clusters of threat content and highlight, where relevant, instances in which context intersects with content.

3.2 | Content of Threats: Perceived Femininity, Deviation From Heteronormativity, Competency, Physical and Social Prototypicality, and Sociometer

3.2.1 | Perceived Femininity

Consistent with role congruity theory, models of masculinity and the need to differentiate it from 'the feminine' (Eagly and Koenig 2021; Eisler and Skidmore 1987; Vandello and Bosson 2013), many men in our sample described a time their masculinity had been threatened by perceived femininity. These threats were connected to how much a man felt their appearance or behaviour led to them either being labelled or equated to women. For example, Omar (gay man, in a relationship) described an experience from his childhood in which he felt others questioned his masculinity because of the more 'feminine' household chores he was responsible for (i.e., context of role incongruity):

> This mainly happened when I was younger, and given that I would do 'women's chores' around the house (according to my extended family and based on what they think is 'women's chores'), over time I felt that my masculinity was being questioned.

For other men, like Alex (straight man, single), being compared with a woman was done with the intention of causing intentional harm, or with the intention of starting an altercation or argument (i.e., context of social rejection):

> I was told in a pub when i was out with a group of friends that i dressed like a girl. The other person was trying to cause an issue and was trying to intimate me by looking for a reaction. I just ignored him and moved away from them and swiftly moved pubs after.

Although perceived femininity emerged across both contexts, experiences tied to sharing emotions were slightly more likely to emerge in contexts of social rejection, as described by Kwame (straight man, single):

> When I was in a relationship and was told to 'man up' because I was upset after an arguement at work. I didn't understand how me being upset equated to a level of masculinity and didn't understand why I was unable to express how I felt, like I'm not supposed to feel. There were other times where I was upset and told to man up, I'm not a robot however, but I am well aware of the societal mentality towards men and expression. I was really unhappy with my partner at the time because it was very dismissive and I felt she looked down at me, lost respect for me.

These experiences are consistent with past research which has found that being equated with the 'feminine' is a very typical masculinity threat for men (Munsch and Gruys 2018; Vandello and Bosson 2013) and are often rooted in the violation of the stereotypical behaviours that are believed to maintain masculinity (Eisler and Skidmore 1987).

3.2.2 | Deviation From Heteronormativity

Masculinity is often constrained by heteronormativity (e.g., Thorne et al. 2019). Consistent with those perspectives, many men in our sample were threatened due to being accused, perceived or recognized as gay. Although this type of threat was equally common across both contexts, this was one of the few themes in which the experiences for straight compared to gay men differed. Notably, gay men were overrepresented among those who felt their sexual orientation was being used as a means for social rejection. For example, Andre (gay man, in a relationship) described a situation in which an interaction involving a slur made him feel less of a man:

> I was in a college party with my best girlfriend and her affair, at that moment. After some hours we lost from each other and I found him and I asked for my friend.

> He looked to me and said: I don't give a shit your f***t.[5] He was drunk.

This experience was echoed by Harry (gay man, single) who said his emasculating experience was 'Being bullied for being gay. Made to feel as if I had to "man up"'. Instances like those experienced by Andre and Harry were not completely unique to gay men. For example, Adam (straight man, in a relationship) also discussed how an abusive co-worker used sexuality to harass him:

> As a young man just out of school and joining the Royal Marines as a junior I was, on first arriving at the training facility, confronted by a very aggressive and ignorant Sargent who took an instant dislike to me and on most occasions called into question my masculinity and sexuality. Fortunately, I was able to ignore his constant verbal abuse and concentrate on the training in front of me.

Thus, although gay men were far more likely to have their sexuality weaponized against them, which threatened their masculinity at the same time, some straight men shared similar experiences. By contrast, both gay and straight men described masculinity threats that resulted from private and public evaluations of stereotype prototypicality. For example, Jonathan (gay man, single) felt like his masculinity was threatened when people around him used language associated with gay culture:

> It is when people call me something such as a 'diva' or say 'fabulous' to me. I don = not think people would say this if I was heterosexual.

Consistent with research showing that gay men can be motivated to 'act straight' in order to preserve their masculinity (Hunt et al. 2016), Ryan's (gay man, in a relationship) concerns 'coming out' and being recognized as a gay man would have threatened his masculinity because he would no longer live up to masculine social standards:

> Before coming out, I was terrified of being outed as I felt this would damage my masculine image.

This was a similar concern for Joseph (straight man, in a relationship), who recalled a time his masculinity was threatened by the assumption he was gay:

> I was only threatened when someone thought that I was homosexual. It's rude to make an assumption unless it has been confirmed, so I was very perturbed by it, and yearned for them to magically get my heterosexual history.

The experiences described by these men further highlight how sexuality and gender identities can intersect (Christensen and Jensen 2014; Coston and Kimmel 2012). For many, heterosexuality is viewed as congruent with masculinity. The quotes from our straight men which mention dating and partners highlight how important gender roles are for straight, compared to gay, couples (Kowalski and Scheitle 2020). However, gay men also experience tension between expression of their sexuality and gender expression (Thorne et al. 2019; Hunt et al. 2016). Consequently, accusations or recognition that they are gay were enough to emasculate men in our sample. This is consistent with work showing that experiences in which sexual orientations are inferred on the basis of subtle cues (e.g., vocal prosody) can be a stressful experience for gay men and lead them to reflect more broadly on how their gender is perceived by others (Fasoli et al. 2023a, 2023b). For another large group of men in our sample, their sexuality was overtly used as a means of ostracization and rejection, compromising their sense of masculinity in the process.

3.2.3 | Competency

According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), competency is equated with feelings of mastery and self-efficacy in different situations, and one of the three fundamental human needs. Although masculinity threats that revolved around a not being able to perform, or lacking, certain skills came up in our sample, they did so to a lesser extent compared to the other types of threats. In these experiences, men felt that their masculinity had been threatened because they had failed to perform a stereotypically masculine task or role. For example, Joel (gay man, single) how someone coming and taking over a task for him undermines his masculinity:

> If I am completing a manual task at work eg putting some equipment away that I am perfectly capable of doing but someone comes and either takes over or does the job with me when it's only a one man job.

These experiences appeared to be amplified in contexts where others, typically other men, were brought in to complete the task on the respondent's behalf, as described by Joshua (straight man, in a relationship):

> By my partner when questioning my DIY skills because I couldn't fix a broken door catch recently and she just made little comments about my skill and made me feel inadequate and less of a man as I had to call a tradesman out to fix it- she was just making little sniggering comments.

For Joel (above) and Richard (straight man, single):

> Sometimes at the car garage when I'm expected to know all about the vehicles and I really dont. They often make you feel bad for not knowing all the details even though its just a car to me, not a way of life.

These threats were characterized by perceived social comparisons against 'masculine' stereotypes. However, as captured by Joshua's (above) and Isaac (straight man, single), skills-based threats were just as likely to be tied to an experience of social rejection:

> while i was out having a drink i had a discussion with a fellow male who made me feel small as i did not

> know the answer to a question which then he thought it would be funny to laugh at me.

Competency, especially in male-dominated contexts (e.g., office place, sports, gaming and mechanics), is often viewed as a 'masculine' trait (Eagly and Mladinic 1994; Gardner and Gabriel 2004). In our sample, several men expressed that they had experienced masculinity threats due to perceived for felt lack of competency when comparing themselves to others. For example, Tim (straight man, single) described how he feels threatened when he needs to visit a mechanic:

> Sometimes at the car garage when I'm expected to know all about the vehicles and I really dont. They often make you feel bad for not knowing all the details even though its just a car to me, not a way of life.

Tony (gay man, single) also described a similar experience interacting with other men at the garage:

> When I have an issue with my car, I take it to the garage and the mechanic tells me stuff I have no idea about and saying how simple of a fix it is. Makes me feel like less of a man as I can't do that stuff.

As did Nathaniel (gay man, in a relationship) when interacting with contractors:

> Dealing with contractors at work—often assume that I won't understand technical details

Consistent with competency being a fundamental human need (Ryan and Deci 2000) that shapes motivation and creates tension when thwarted, feeling incompetent or unknowledgeable was a type of threat that came up nearly evenly in our sample between the two threat contexts and for both gay and straight-identified men.

3.2.4 | Physical Prototypicality

The most common threat described by both gay and straight men in our sample related to feeling like their physical attributes did not live up to a masculine ideal. This was similar to femininity threats in that it tapped into stereotypes regarding the way men should look. However, it was differentiated in the way that these men did not equate their physicality with femininity, but rather a sense of inadequacy compared to a male prototype. For example, Jeremy (straight man, single) described being criticized about his lack of facial hair as undermining his masculinity:

> I have always struggle to grow a beard. One day, one of my co-workers called me out on it and said 'how can a man not grow a beard?' directed at me.

Charlie (gay man, in a relationship) felt similarly undermined when people refer to his height:

> I felt my masculinity threatened when people have mentioned my height. I am only 5'7 so when on a night out, and people mention my height it undermines me.

Which was echoed by several men including Chris (straight man, single):

> Often out in nightclubs when younger (18-22yo) especially when in bar queues you could feel that the 'bigger' more 'alpha' characters would be served first ahead of you

Although men described physical prototypicality threats in contexts of role incongruity and social rejection nearly equally, some differences in the subthemes associated with this type of threat were identified. When the physicality threat was in the context of role incongruity, it was predominantly due to privately feeling less muscular than another man. This was clearly described by Kevin (gay man, single):

> Anytime I am around a man who is very tall and muscular and loud I feel as if I am seen by others as much less masculine in comparison. Their simple existence puts my masculinity into question it feels like.

Samuel (gay man, in a relationship) described similar concerns:

> My friend [. . .][6] spent the lockdown exercising and carefully controlling his diet. For comparison, I have always been overweight and struggle with not having any muscle mass. When [. . .] and I met up again after the pandemic I could see he had substantially changed his body type; he was lean and muscular and had lost stomach fat. I on the other hand had gained weight. He looked very masculine and I felt quite threatened and disheartened and self-conscious in comparison. I felt embarrassed to stand next to him as I thought people would compare our body types and approve of his (the ideal masculine type) and disapprove of mine.

For men who experienced the threats in the context of social rejection, the concerns focused more on publicly perceived weakness, as described by George (gay man, single):

> Although I do not believe in 'masculinity' I will say that I have had times where people believe I am not strong when I actually am. I believe it is because I am gay and people tend to think of gay people as weaker or don't want to handle manly things.

Arjun (straight man, single) also described feeling rejected due to perceived weakness:

> Whenever I felt that my masculinity was undermined by another, often accompanied by phrases such as 'You're not man enough' or variations of it. An example of this case was when someone I know told me that I

> was not strong enough to do something at that time, which then followed by that particular phrase with a condescending tone.

Liam (gay man, in a relationship) similarly felt that others had rejected him because of them seeing gay men as more weak and frail:

> When I first came out as being gay, people would look down me and see me as weak and frail or something. I'm a strong person, I know I am a strong man and am perfectly capable. Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'm not able to be strong.

Overall, these experiences highlight how men feel threatened when they believe that they falling short of a certain physical standard expected by men, whether this is through implicit role incongruity or overt social rejection. These experiences also highlight the potential impact of shifting societal pressures on men's body image (e.g., De Jesus et al. 2015; Gattario et al. 2015; Martin and Govender 2011; Murray and Touyz 2012), and the interplay between gender identity and appearance. For example, research suggests that masculinity threats can lead men to feel more dissatisfied with their appearance and strive for greater muscularity (Hunt et al. 2013; Mills et al. 2023). Because many men's experiences with masculinity threats with muscularity were privately experienced role incongruity during real (or imagined) interactions with others, a precipitous drop in satisfaction with one's appearance may create a feedback loop for feelings of disconnection and threatened masculinity.

3.2.5 | Social Prototypicality

Masculinity is often seen as being socially defined and upheld through the roles that men take on in society (Connell 1995; Gilmore 1990; Vandello and Bosson 2013). Consistent with past work, men in our study experienced threats linked to their felt or perceived inability to live up to certain social expectations of 'maleness', albeit to a lesser extent than the other types of threat content. Given the overt connection with prescribed social roles, it is unsurprising that these types of threats were far more likely to feel like the context of role incongruity than being overtly rejected by others. Often, these threats came up in sexual or dating situations. For example, both Darren (gay man, single) and Michael (straight man, in a relationship) described feeling out of place compared to other men their age when it came to talking about sex. In Darren's words, he felt like he could not live up to 'lad' culture:

> In the staff room, the majority of men are quite lad like, and they make jokes of the sexual nature etc. I always keep out of the conversations due to my sexuality etc. as it is mainly about women. I feel very on edge during these conversations and will not ever be brought into the conversations by the others. I feel often very nervous as feel they look at me as not getting involved in the banter etc.

Similarly, Michael felt he could join discussions with other boys his age because of his virginity:

> When I was younger and before I had lost my virginity at a relatively late age I would feel very uncomfortable when in conversation with other men discussing sexual encounters. This would happen regularly and always made me feel my masculinity was being undermined.

For the men who felt socially rejected by their peers, it was more likely to being bullied for not being in a relationship, as described by Andrew (straight man, single):

> I have felt less masculine when my status as a single person, not dating, with no children was mentioned and emphasised by others. My perceived lack of success in forming a relationship was evidence that I was less of a man that the other person involved. It was mentioned that I was 'weird' and probably homosexual.

However, men like Bill (gay man, in a relationship) felt like others were rejecting them because they failed to live up to a masculine 'alpha' role:

> At my old job I often had my masculinity undermined by the other coworkers I would hang out with after work. After a few beers they would start to pick on me for being shorter, softer-spoken, and humble. I would get called a 'beta male' often and sometimes even got cornered against a wall in a joking manner that legitimately made me feel scared.

Departing from past research somewhat, threats associated with masculine roles were less likely to be connected with traditional narratives of men as a breadwinner (Eagly et al. 2009; Zuo and Tang 2000) or due to working in a less stereotypically male-dominated environment (Eagly and Koenig 2021). The focus on sexual prowess and 'alpha' status may reflect some of the shift in culture around incels and pick-up artists which have dominated online communities in the last few decades (Ging 2019).

3.2.6 | Sociometer

The final type of masculinity threat that was identified in our sample was ones that represented direct attacks to a person's sociometer; their perceived value and regard in the eyes of others (Leary et al. 1995). The threats in this theme were unique in that they often did not explicitly target prescriptive masculine stereotypes. Indeed, if viewed in isolation of the question prompts, the answers given by these men would likely not lead people to realize they were talking about masculinity threats specifically. For example, Paul (straight man, single) described an experience he had in a bar:

> I was meeting up with some old friends from school in a somewhat casual reunion sort of way. When meeting with them one of them bought his wife along and told

> us all about his job and his career and so on. Then when I was talking a little about me he was interjecting a little about my life and asking if that was it, things like that.

Edward (straight man, in a relationship) described a similar sense of personal devaluation by others when describing his experience as

> Belittling, talking down, putting no value on my side of things

Similarly, Xander (straight, single) also described a similarly personal attack by an ex-girlfriend's grandfather:

> The grandfather of an ex-girlfriend told me I had a really forgettable face. As a person generally this is offensive and made me doubt my own masculinity and personality.

Another personal attack described by Mark (gay man, in a relationship) focused on his rejection by an ex-partner:

> A time where my masculinity was threatened was when my ex-boyfriend cheated on me with one of my close friends, my ex-lover told me that I am trash and they don't want me anymore.

A very small number of men in our sample also brought up experiences with sexual violence. For example, William (gay man, in a relationship) described an experience interacting with people online:

> Playing some videogames with friends and one of them had been losing to me a lot and threatened to rape me if I won again.

Similarly, David (gay man, in a relationship) had also experienced sexual violence from peers when he was younger:

> the last time I experienced something similar was when I was sexually assaulted as a teenager. Another teenager made inappropriate sexual contact with me and at the time I felt violated and like I was unable to stop it.

These experiences reinforce the potentially violent nature of these personal attacks, and how they represent ubiquitous threats that most people would resonate with regardless of gender, race or sexual orientation. Instead, they are threats which target the core of a person and their feelings of safety and positive regard by others.

Unlike the other types of masculinity threats that were identified in this study, the sociometer threats were nearly exclusively described in context of social rejection, further differentiating them from experiences with role incongruity and prescriptive masculine norms. Thus, for a sizeable proportion of men in our sample, masculinity threats were the direct result of feeling disconnected, rejected or devalued by others, without needing to invoke stereotypes or roles yoked with masculine ideologies.

3.3 | 'Never Have I Ever' Been Threatened

Despite the overwhelming majority of men in our sample being able to recall a time their masculinity had been threatened, masculinity threats were not universal or constant. Many of the men in the sample pre-empted that they were limited to very few experiences, although it was unclear whether this was a form of defensiveness to help mitigate the threat by diminishing it (Jonas et al. 2014; McGregor and Marigold 2003).

However, a small proportion of men in our total sample (11%) claimed they had never had an emasculating or threatening experience. Nearly half of these men, most of whom identified as straight, provided no additional insight into their experience. For example, Jack (straight man, in a relationship), shared *I really cannot say that I have ever felt this*. For another small group of men, their responses alluded to the same defensiveness that was identified among men who pre-empted sharing their experience with deflection. For example, Felix (straight man, single) and Ambrose (gay man, single), respectively, each shared:

> Never happened it's a nonsense,
>
> I have tried to think but I cannot recall a time where I felt my masculinity was threatened. It's not something I care much about

However, the other half, most of whom self-identified as gay, appeared to tap into their positive self-regard. For example, Eli (gay man, in a relationship) expressed:

> I do not feel like my masculinity has been threatened. I feel very comfortable in myself and it is not something that can be reduced or taken away by someone else, neither what they say or do.

Similarly, Francis (gay man, in a relationship) shared:

> I can't really recall a time in my adult life where my masculinity felt threatened or undermined. You have to give people the power to make you feel emasculated, People can only make you feel how you all them to make you feel.

Thus, further consistent with theoretical models of the sociometer and acceptance (e.g., Baumeister and Leary 1995; Leary et al. 1995; Rosenberg 1965), these experiences provide an important congruity with masculinity threats stemming from social rejection and the theme of threats to the sociometer. However, for some, masculinity was undermined by direct threats to the psychological system that regulates felt regard and inclusion (Leary et al. 1995), and for others, it was preserved by the perceived positive self-regard they expected for themselves and from others.

4 | General Discussion

This study provides important insights for theoretical advancements in masculinity and identity research by integrating models

of social connection (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Leary et al. 1995) with social role congruity theory (Eagly and Diekman 2005) and social identity theory (Tajfel 1972), into understanding men's experiences with masculinity threats. Despite the ubiquitous nature of masculinity threats, with nearly 90% of men the men in our sample recalling at least one past experience, the experiences themselves were diverse, nuanced and qualified by both the content of the threat and the context in which they occur. Our findings point to a dual-pathway model of the antecedents of masculinity threats, which has important implications for how researchers should interpret and approach masculinity threat research. Congruent with past work, the first pathway highlights the function of social role congruity and prescriptive masculine norms in defining and preserving masculinity. Many of the men in our sample experienced masculinity threats in contexts which they felt they were privately evaluating themselves or being publicly evaluated by others for failing to live up to masculine norms, albeit often passively. Furthermore, most of content of threats centred around prescriptive masculine stereotypes (i.e., rejection of femininity, heteronormativity, competency, physicality and social roles; e.g., Eagly and Koenig 2021; Eisler and Skidmore 1987). These findings reinforce evidence from past work that highlight how masculinity is preserved and maintained through stereotyped behaviours, and that deviating from these stereotypes can lead to insecurity and feelings of emasculation (Vandello and Bosson 2013).

The second pathway provides novel insights into masculinity threats by highlighting the role of social connection and belonging. The majority of the men in our study described experiences in contexts with public, and active, rejection (i.e., an instance of overt rejection by another person with or without additional witnesses). These experiences implicated all five of the socially prescribed stereotypes about masculinity, similar to role incongruity contexts, but also included direct attacks on the person's sociometer and self-worth. This is the first study to our knowledge that demonstrates a direct link between social rejection and feelings of emasculation without needing to invoke stereotypes or prescriptive norms about masculinity. Thus, our findings suggest that masculinity enables men to monitor their personal value (rather than hierarchical group value) *and* interpersonal acceptance, consistent with theoretical models of how people monitor connectedness (i.e., Leary et al. 1995).

Our findings also highlight the need for intersectionality in masculinity threat research. In our sample, there was substantial overlap in the contexts in which gay and straight men experienced threats and their content. This builds on past work demonstrating the importance of masculine identities for men irrespective of sexuality and shared pressures to conform to heteronormative ideas of masculinity (e.g., Donaldson 1993; Hunt et al. 2016; Thorne et al. 2019). However, we also found meaningful differences, notably in the theme of deviation from heteronormativity. For many of the gay men in our sample, their sexuality was used in contexts where they were weaponized to ostracize, bully and reject. Gay men may therefore be experiencing tensions across both threat pathways more often than straight men—experiencing more repeated rejection due to their sexuality, while also needing to guard against perceptions of role incongruity. This highlights important implications in relation to minority stress models of stigma and discrimination (Frost and Meyer 2023; Meyer 2003), as sexual minority men may experience ongoing threats to their masculinity via perceived and actual rejection and exclusion based on their sexuality. Consistent with idea, research suggests that men in same-sex partnerships are vulnerable to minority stress because of how they experience masculinity in relation to others' perceptions of their relationship (Lu et al. 2018). Future research should therefore further explore the intersectional consequences of masculinity threats and connectedness to a greater extent.

The findings also have implications for social identity research. Notably, the second tenet of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) model is that people have a need for positive self-esteem, which motivates them to behave in ways that maintain and protect their social identity. However, this self-esteem hypothesis, which posits that people with low self-esteem should derogate and discriminate out-group members, has had limited empirical support (Martiny and Rubin 2016). Our findings suggest that these inconsistencies may be due to different ways in which self-regard is monitored. For example, people may feel as though their self-regard is threatened when their social status is being challenged and so engage in behaviours consistent with assertiveness to restore status (Mahadevan et al. 2016). However, self-esteem also monitors for inclusion and is associated with affiliative behaviours when inclusion is under threat (Leary 2010; Leary et al. 1995; Park and Maner 2009). These differences in how self-esteem may regulate behaviours depending on which monitoring system is activated (i.e., hierometer via status vs. sociometer via inclusion) could therefore account for the inconsistent support for the social identity theory's self-esteem hypothesis in some contexts.

There are also important implications of this work due to the potential bidirectional relationship between threatened masculinity and feelings of disconnection (i.e., activation of the sociometer), even when the threat emerges via prescriptive stereotypes and role incongruity. Findings from relationship risk regulation research suggest that people are more likely to disengage from their relationships when connection is uncertain or unsafe (e.g., Lamarche et al. 2020) and when they feel uncertain in themselves (e.g., Murray et al. 1998, 2008). However, the current research suggests that this disconnection and perception may further amplify felt emasculation. Consistent with this proposed pathway, men who are members of online communities preoccupied with masculinity, men's rights and men's social status (e.g., 'incel' [involuntary celibate] communities) show increased rates of loneliness (e.g., Costello et al. 2022; Maxwell et al. 2020; Sparks et al. 2024). For these groups, interventions focused on inclusion and acceptance may help mitigate internalized self-uncertainty and provide a pathway to healthier models of masculinity.

4.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the study's strengths, it was not without limitations which raise important questions for future research. Overall, our findings suggest that the experiences of gay and straight men, who were single and in relationships, were largely similar with a few notable differences in content (e.g., perceived deviation from heteronormativity). However, future work should continue to apply an intersectional lens to understanding masculinity threats. Although our sample was quite large and included men from

different backgrounds, we were unable to make comparisons beyond relationship status and sexual orientation. Furthermore, the comparisons that were possible were limited in that they did not reflect a diversity of sexual orientations, as the sample was limited to self-identified gay and straight men (although three bisexual men also took part), and we did not ask men to disclose whether they were cisgender or transgender. Among men in marginalized populations (e.g., transgender men; sexual minority groups), the desire to conform to heteronormative masculinities can be driven by different motivations (e.g., a need for safety; Abelson 2014). The current research is not able to speak to whether the underlying motivations associated with preserving masculinity interact with contexts in which masculinity is threatened or their content. Relatedly, the coding team were cisgender and straight. Although shared lived experiences with participants are not a requirement for qualitative research, it can provide important nuance and insights that cannot come from those who do not share the same identities or personal histories as participants (Mehrabadi et al. 2024). Thus, we encourage other researchers to revisit these questions with other populations and communities, which will allow for a richer tapestry of findings in the literature.

Another limitation of the current work was that methodological approach used in this study prioritized obtaining a large sample and therefore relied on short answer prompts rather than interviews. This felt necessary when using an online questionnaire where people are often reluctant to provide long responses, and where there is no opportunity for a researcher to probe for more details as they would in a back-and-forth exchange. However, this limitation was hopefully offset by the opportunity to capitalize on a much larger number of voices than is typically possible when using traditional interview methods. Nonetheless, this approach may have limited our ability to draw more nuanced insights from our sample, as evidenced by the fact that we were not able to identify subthemes. Furthermore, our approach may have limited us in the ability to identify other contexts in which masculinity threats emerge beyond the two presented in this article. Thus, although our findings show clear associations between social rejection and masculinity threats that are consistent with theoretical models of social inclusion, social identity and connection, they cannot account for the psychological mechanisms through which experiencing rejection cognitively manifests as a threat against masculinity, especially in the instances where prescriptive stereotypes and role congruity were not invoked. Understanding the different mechanistic pathways that can underlie experiences with masculinity threats could help develop interventions intended to buffer masculinity threats and support healthy masculine identities. Our findings suggest that for some men, interventions targeting role congruity may provide an optimal pathway for restoring masculinity, whereas for others, interventions should target inclusion and acceptance. What remains unanswered by our study is whether these experiences are dispositional, or whether they are situational.

Finally, experiences with masculinity threats in contexts of intimate relationships and/or sexual competition were notably missing in the narratives of men in our samples. This is somewhat inconsistent with past work highlighting the associations between masculinity threats, sexual rejection and violence (e.g., Harrington et al. 2021; Scaptura and Boyle 2020; Woerner et al. 2018). One possibility is that these effects are more pronounced among subpopulations of men who experience more chronic concerns about their masculinity or about acceptance, and who were not captured in our current sample. Another possible explanation is that our methodological approach which only asked for one experience meant that men focused on the most recent and/or salient experience they had. This could suggest that although sexual and romantic rejection can reliably elicit masculinity threats, they might not be the most *common* way in which masculinity is threatened. This has important implications for understanding when, and for whom, masculinity threats may lead to intimate partner and sexual violence and therefore warrants additional research in the future.

5 | Conclusion

Despite their ubiquity, masculinity threats are complex and nuanced, varying in both their content and context. Our findings point to a dual-pathway model of masculinity threats. For some, these experiences occur in both the public and private moments in which they are made to feel they are failing to live in a way that is congruent with their gender identity. For others, these experiences are linked to being publicly rejected by others, even when this rejection is unrelated to 'masculine' stereotypes, expectations, or behaviours. These findings highlight how social identities provide people with a sensitive barometer for tracking their personal and social value and are closely linked with their need to belong.

Ethics Statement

This study received ethics approval from the University of Essex Ethics Sub Committee 1.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Transparency Statement

The full questionnaire, including the questions which were not analysed as part of this article, is available on the following repository: https://osf.io/vqb7n/.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] In the context of the current paper, we limit our discussion to masculine identities among self-identified men. However, it is important to acknowledge that masculine identities can be endorsed by people of any gender. The implications and consequences of masculine identities among non-identified men remain underexplored and warrant further consideration.

[2] Participants completed the study faster than estimated, resulting in an average pay of £9/h pro-rata, which is consistent with the hourly rate of pay in the United Kingdom in 2022 when the data were collected.

[3] Although recruitment had been restricted to men who had identified as straight or gay in the Prolific prescreeners, three men in our sample reported they identified as bisexual at the time of the sampling. Three responses provided inadequate sample size from which to draw unique conclusions for bisexual men as a whole. Consequently, we retained their responses but included them within the same group as 'gay' men when making cross-group comparisons.

[4] The full questionnaire, including the questions which were not analysed as part of this paper, is available on the following repository: https://osf.io/vqb7n/.

[5] Slur redacted by research team.

[6] Name redacted by research for anonymity.

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