“If you don’t fit in with the stereotype, they eat you alive”: Discourses of masculinities and their reflections in young Spanish men’s health

ABSTRACT
Hegemonic masculinity has been especially linked, among other aspects, to unhealthy behaviors and heterosexuality. This study aimed to explore the discourses of masculinities with young Spanish men with different sexual orientations (heterosexuals, bisexuals and homosexuals), comparing them with the social representations that are put into practice on Instagram. Three qualitative approaches were triangulated to seek a richer comprehension and interpretational level: discussion groups, semi-structured interviews and an online non-participant observation on Instagram with a total of 26 young men aged between 18 and 24. Results indicate that hegemonic masculinity discourse is still significant when understanding and experiencing young men’s masculinities, promoting behaviors that put their health at risk and generating psychological discomfort, especially among non-heterosexual men. Our findings provide knowledge of the social framework that legitimizes and reproduces male domination in younger generations both online and offline and how this is reflected in men’s health.

KEY WORDS
Masculinities, Spain, men’s health, gender inequalities, discourses, social representations, Instagram

CITATION
INTRODUCTION

Health differences between men and women have been historically explained based on biological conceptions, being assumed as natural (Krieger, 2003). However, current literature emphasizes the importance of explaining health problems taking into account people’s experiences within their social framework (Popay & Williams, 2009). A relational gender approach in the health field contemplates the differences, interactions and positions that occur in the gender relations system and its effects on people's health (Marcos et al., 2020). Gender is understood as the set of affective, symbolic, socioeconomic and power relationships that structure social practices and the way in which men and women act on an intrapersonal, interpersonal and institutional level (Connell, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Masculinities are socially constructed and practical configurations within a system of gender relations that, in turn, interact with other social stratifications (social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among others), therefore creating hierarchies. According to Connell (1995), these configurations lead to relations based on hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization in Western cultures. Hegemonic masculinities would take the dominant position, referring to those that legitimize unequal gender relationships between men and women, and also between men. For example, in contemporary European and American societies, gay masculinities are considered inferior to straight masculinities in terms of male hierarchy, therefore establishing a type of subordinate masculinity (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018).

As reflected in most literature, although hegemonic masculinity may be associated with both positive and negative health behaviors, on balance, it has been consistently linked to unhealthy or risky behaviors (e.g., Levant & Wimer, 2014; Salgado et al., 2019). This could be explained in relation to some beliefs and definitions of hegemonic
masculinity, such as denying the need for help, emotional control, hypersexuality or violent behavior (Hearn et al., 2012). The Promundo 2019 annual report shows that seven of the key health behaviors that explain more than half of male premature deaths and around 70% of the diseases they suffer are: tobacco, drug and alcohol consumption, poor diet, occupational risks, unsafe sex and limited health-seeking behavior (Ragonese et al., 2019). In Spain, there is a high mortality rate in men due to diseases, the causes of which are usually related to poor health habits, such as drug consumption or external causes, such as suicide, aggression or accidents (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2018).

The public space (understood as a different space from the private-domestic one) has been used as a space to show, express and materialize hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel, 2006). Marcos et al. (2013) observed that young Spaniards mainly associated the idea of masculinity with collective and public practices, such as dangerous driving, taking drugs and aggressive behavior. The positions adopted by men in terms of these discourses and meanings end up having an impact on the social processes of health and disease (Robertson, 2006).

This performative and public condition associated with masculinities should also be considered in terms of social media, as it could be a space to identify new liberated discourses or, in this sense, a space where hegemonic dynamics are reproduced. Platforms like Instagram are part of the daily lives of most young Spaniards (IAB Spain & Elogia, 2020), as well as in many other countries (Modica, 2020), where masculinities are being (co)produced, (re)presented and manifested among a digitally interconnected public (Light, 2013). The available studies at the moment indicate that Instagram reproduces hegemonic masculinity by means of publications showing drug and alcohol consumption (Dinsmore, 2014) or by showing muscular bodies (Baker & Walsh, 2018), among others. Counter-hegemonic masculinity constructions are also observed with emotional and
relational displays on social networks even though, similarly, a recurring ironic tone is identified in order to distance oneself from homosexuality and femininity (Dinsmore, 2014; Manago, 2013).

Theories of social change give special importance to the cohort factor, in other words, intergenerational population replacement and youngest birth cohorts as contributions towards social change and deep-rooted cultural norms (Inglehart et al., 2017). Nonetheless, cultural changes can also occur due to period effects. In the current context, data inform us of a cultural change process, but this also affects older cohorts that have been related to a high regulatory transformation towards equality, such as legalizing same-sex marriage, a growing number of women with high positions or gender violence laws (Inglehart et al., 2017). In societies characterized by greater gender equality and tolerance to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and of other diverse sexual, gender and bodily identities (LGBTIQA+), a debate is initiated on whether the discourses of what until now has been hegemonic masculinity continue to be reproduced. Several authors highlight that new expressions of masculinity are currently emerging, with the use of concepts as inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2009), hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) or caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016), among others.

The majority of available empirical studies, and especially in Spain, have collected information on the discourse of people who are mainly heterosexuals, with few contributions from different sexual orientations (e.g., McCarry, 2010; Sanfèlix & Téllez, 2014). Based on Bourdieu’s (1984) notions of symbolic capital, which refers to the power and success in social settings provided by individual’s credentials, Anderson (2009) and de Visser et al. (2009) refer to the relative contribution of various characteristics and behaviors to masculinity in reference to “masculine capital”. This was originally applied with ostensibly heterosexual men (e.g., de Visser et al., 2009) and later applied to studies
of gay men (e.g., Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Ravenhill and de Visser’s work (2017a, 2017b, 2019) reveals that the relationships between gay masculinities may be different to those between straight masculinities in terms of which attributes and behaviors generate the most masculine capital. Furthermore, given that the capital/value related with certain behaviors may vary according to which field or context they are enacted in, new discourses unrelated to hegemonic masculinity could be encountered as a potential for social change in the online and offline context and in the realities of bisexual and homosexual men.

Literature on qualitative research have underscored the significant potential of triangulation to provide a more robust understanding of complex health and social sciences issues (Flick, 1992; Farmer et al., 2006). When searching for a richer, deeper and better comprehension on masculinities, this study aims to explore the discourses of masculinities with young Spanish men with different sexual orientations (heterosexuals, bisexuals and homosexuals), comparing them to the social representations that are put into practice on Instagram.

This study is part of the European PositivMasc project (Salazar et al., 2020) which has the aim of exploring masculinity discourses and developing strategies to promote non-violent masculinities among young people in Spain, Sweden, Ireland and Israel.

**METHOD**

**Methodological Design**

We triangulated three qualitative approaches: discussion groups, semi-structured interviews and an online non-participant observation on Instagram to encompass diverse spaces (online and offline) that have somehow common and different components.

Firstly, six semi-structured interviews and three discussion groups were conducted in October and December 2019. Likewise, additional sociodemographic data about the
participants and conversational experiences were collected through a questionnaire. Discussion groups were organized to examine how the meanings around masculinities were collectively and spontaneously constructed, as they are characterized by adopting a more flexible, open and less directive style to energize the meeting than focus groups (Callejo, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the underlying structure of the discourses from a more confessional level (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997).

Secondly, a non-participant online observation was carried out regarding the contents published on Instagram in August and September 2019 by some of the young people that participated in the discussion groups. Instagram was selected due to the fact that it is currently considered one of the most preferred social networks and the most used by young Spaniards (IAB Spain & Elogia, 2020).

**Participants**

This study included cisgender men, coinciding in their gender identity and sexual phenotype, aged between 18 and 24 years old and of diverse sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual). We decided to focus on the aforementioned age range since it implies a liminal stage of interpretation, search and establishment of masculinity identities that also highlights emerging social behaviors. Theories on social change consider new generations as contributions to social transformations (Inglehart et al., 2017).

In order to guarantee contrasting geographic frames, the sample was limited to the municipality of Aspe (Alicante) and the city of Madrid, Spain. Highly differentiated geographical contexts were attempted to be included, from the location itself to the size of the population, therefore observing different lifestyles. Thus, a variety of sociodemographic profiles were obtained in the sample. Furthermore, participant selection was carried out by searching for structural representativeness, taking into
account three criteria: age (18-24 years of age), studies (ranging from compulsory secondary education to university) and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual). Snowball sampling was applied and was diversified in different starting points (online from Instagram and offline through word of mouth) and through contacts.

**Data Collection and Ethical Considerations**

A total of 26 young men took part in the research. Three combinations of discussion groups were designed based on sexual orientation to ensure discursive variety: a discussion group with five homosexual and bisexual men, a discussion group with seven heterosexual men and another discussion group with eight men with different sexual orientations. Regarding the sexuality of the six men who were interviewed: two were homosexual, three heterosexual and one bisexual. Both the discussion groups and the semi-structured interviews had a guide on the topics to be addressed, but maintaining an exploratory and spontaneous purpose in the way they were conducted. They lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were performed in Spanish (participants’ mother tongue) and were recorded. Confidentiality was guaranteed according to the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679).

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Alicante in Spain (reference number UA-2019-04-15). In line with the obtained ethical approval, written informed consent from the study participants was obtained prior to enrolment. When semi-structured interviews and group discussion sessions ended, a brief questionnaire with extra sociodemographic questions (marital status, occupation, type of studies completed or in progress...) was filled out in order to contribute to a more comprehensive and contextualized analysis. Two open questions were also included: “How was this group discussion/interview experience?” and "Is there anything you would like to add regarding what was discussed in this group?”. This was relevant for the
epistemological surveillance (Bourdieu et al., 2008) which is generally described as researchers showing a sensitive and conscious attitude throughout the entire research process regarding the epistemological acts of the scientific procedure. This was also relevant for the subsequent analysis of the texts, as it could be related to elements linked to self-censorship that can emerge due to the presence of other people in the conversation.

An online non-participant observation was conducted with 12 of the participants’ Instagram profiles in discussion groups (three homosexual, seven heterosexual and two bisexual). The contents published in the months prior to the discussion groups were traced back to avoid the reactivity of the participants, who were all aware of the research. August and September 2019 were chosen as there was a diversity of experiences: from holidays to going back to a routine. However, the content published in the stories section on Instagram was not included in the research as they automatically disappear after 24 hours. An ad hoc account on Instagram was used to access profiles, collecting 34 documents (all of them were static images), 19 description texts that accompanied the documents and 105 comments in total. In order to keep the participants identity anonymous (Lunnay et al., 2015), the images below were stylized to preserve their symbolic elements.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis stage was led by the first author, yet all authors were involved throughout. Initially, the transcripts and online materials were copied to the Atlas.ti software, where all three authors became familiarized with them and made initial observations. Afterwards, the first author was in charge of examining them in more detail. Several meetings were arranged with all the authors to discuss any progress in the analysis and, thus, ensure coherence, rigor and validity. Atlas.ti's memos and citation management were key in understanding the discourses that emerged and it facilitated the discussion process regarding the analytical consistencies and differences between authors.
On the one hand, we carried out a sociological analysis of the discourse system with the discussion groups and interviews following Conde’s (2009) approach. This analytical approach involved examining and identifying discursive positions of understanding and experiencing masculinity, the possible group fractions within those discursive positions and the narrative configurations on which they were sustained. On the other hand, a socio-hermeneutic audiovisual analysis (Serrano & Zurdo, 2012) of the static images was made, focusing on analyzing the image itself alongside the production and reception context (Rose, 2001). As part of this process, elements, signs and symbols in the photographs were fragmented, in line with identifying myths and ideologies that were derived from them, besides the discourses and underlying power structures. In order to locate the image within the practical setting, the written texts with which the producers sometimes accompanied the images were examined. In this same sense, as Instagram was the social context of reception, where producers and recipients could interact, all the comments in the posts were collected for analysis.

Denzin (1970) suggested that triangulating different approaches strengthens the methodological design to provide multiple perspectives of the phenomenon under study and to increase the ability to interpret findings. In this sense, once the analyzes were conducted, we introduced them into dialogue for a higher-level interpretation of the data. That is, material observation analysis was fed back from the sociodemographic information (especially gender and sexual orientation) of the producers and what was verbally commented both by them and their peers in the discussion groups and semi-structured interviews.
RESULTS

Discourses and Negotiations on Masculinities

In the sociological analysis of the discourse system, two main discursive positions were identified: hegemonic discourse and counter-hegemonic discourse, which coincide with some focal points.

Hegemonic discourse

The hegemonic discourse, mainly (but not only) present among heterosexual men, was distinguished as reproducing hegemonic masculinity. This masculinity was described as having values related to “strength, intransigence, being tough...”. Nonetheless, the adopted position was uncritical and unthinking, as they showed a clear internalization of these concepts. They recognized that “it’s something I’d never thought of”, and they usually referred to it in terms of biology, sometimes even with a banal tone. It is only in interviews, where the censorship of “the others” was less present, when they expressed more diverse concepts of masculinities, recognizing that “there are many different types of man: kind, elegant, educated, and all kinds”, but, in the same sense, “the image of masculinity is having to pretend to have a series of values and being afraid of showing others”.

Although they disagreed, they associated masculinity with a position “of privilege over women”, where men who are not heterosexual are excluded, as “a homosexual man, as he isn’t a man, ‘cos he’s gone to the other side”. However, contradictions were observed in their discourses. They emphasized their support and respect on non-hegemonic masculinities but, at the same time, they suggested that they are unconsciously accomplices of the insults and behaviors that perpetuate the punishment of non-hegemonic masculinities and rejecting what is classed as feminine:
“The expression ‘don’t be a poof man’ has been normalized or ‘don’t be a girl’, instead of saying ‘don’t be a coward’ or ‘go on, I dare you’. The idea isn’t to insult, it’s like an adjective that’s been normalized”.

The main reproduction mechanism of the ideology of hegemonic masculinity seems to be the tendency towards normalization, which has a state of conformity among young people who adopt this discursive position. Although they complained about certain pressures they face just because they are men, they tried to downplay them. They stated, among others, that “sometimes there’s a typical phrase like ‘hey, don’t cry, you’re a man’”, arguing that “there are things that are said without them being meant literally”.

Discriminatory experiences were anecdotal, as they know how to adjust to what is socially stipulated in order to not suffer: “Dare to go to school wearing a pink t-shirt when you're 11. My god, they’ll go for you. And then be brave enough to put it on social networks, on Instagram”. Some of the interviewees recognized that they have self-censured themselves when expressing their identity freely and they have been involved in certain situations that they considered to be unfair because of social pressure.

Counter-hegemonic discourse

Counter-hegemonic discourse was characterized by questioning hegemonic masculinity. This discourse, between a reflexive and critical perspective, was mainly (but not only) present among homosexual and bisexual men. They claimed that “there are many types of masculinity, every man is masculine in his own way”. Nonetheless, they referred to a “very toxic” social reality in which masculinity has been mentioned related to ideals of power, aggressiveness, physical strength, bravery and emotional control in a heteronormative setting. They indicated the importance of reproducing all these attributes in public as if it were a social status that needs to be conquered. Furthermore, men have been raised in a way that has denied them any behavior attributed to traditional femininity.
In this sense, generalized internalization was outlined in terms of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity with detrimental consequences in their lives as “if you don’t fit in with the stereotype, they eat you alive”. There are so many preconceived ideas about men that they are transferred to internal and social pressures to comply with the hegemonic standards. They pointed out feeling uncomfortable in their close environment, making them feel guilty when they have transgressed what is classed as the social norm (for example, wearing make-up), or the feeling of failure when they do not take on the roles that are assumed (for example, being a protective man), among others.

Most of the participants that shared this counter-hegemonic discourse blamed themselves for hiding their feelings of discomfort and disagreements. This silence ends up supporting the concept of masculinity as having a lack of feelings, fears, insecurities and makes them feel helpless:

“In reality, being a man, not being able to express your feelings or being judged for it, also has consequences that are not always shown or publicly visible, but they’re hard. As we also have to be strong, we cannot go to a psychologist, because we also cannot show that part of being weak. So, a mental state is created that’s quite destructive”.

They mentioned different ways that hegemonic masculinity directly or indirectly effects their health. Emotional censorship makes it difficult for them to establish personal relationships and they even mention not being able to emotionally connect with their fathers, uncles or grandfathers, which leads to a lack of affection since childhood. When they have done things differently to the standard, they have been judged and some of them have even suffered physical, social and verbal bullying since they were young. In these cases, mental health seems to be affected. However, they recognized that they do not
usually ask for help and they have not been to therapy because they are scared of what people will say about them:

“When I’ve been through things with men they’ve been negative: or they’ve hit me or judged me. So, when I’m with a man, I get that feeling... like psychological trauma. So at that moment I just stared and didn’t do anything. Now that I face up to it, the same thing still happens”.

Normally, “the majority of discrimination is by men”. A discrimination that is commonly exerted vertically from more socially privileged men whose punish and condemn other forms of non-hegemonic masculinity. They believe that this predisposition to punish what is not in line with hegemonic conceptions, and showing it in public, is mainly a forced strategy followed by a large part of men to avoid being socially rejected. In fact, the participants also mentioned that their behavior is conditioned because of this when they are in situations around men:

“Not only are we oppressed when we don’t fit in with the standards of masculinity, but they themselves are oppressed, because standards of masculinity are toxic, they suppress you. When I’m with a group of guys I’m cautious because I’m scared. So, in the end, my behavior is conditioned because I’m scared”.

In a context where masculinity is closely associated with heterosexuality, those who do not identify with this orientation may see their situation aggravated. In particular, homosexual participants said that society usually directly denies them their masculinity as they are associated with what is considered feminine, as something pejorative, because of their sexual orientation. In this same sense, when a man expresses attributes that are considered to be feminine, they are then labelled as a homosexual man in a derogatory way: “If you're weaker and more emotional you’re screwed, they label you as gay, and
as it’s a bad thing to be gay in society, well, you’re done”. This indicates the prevalence of a social view of masculinities that does not consider plurality nor diversity.

Within this dichotomous scenario that deprives homosexual men of masculinity, a discursive fraction among bisexual men stands out, placing them at a social and identity crossroads. In line with what has been described, male bisexuality results in a vanishing point where “no one thinks bisexuality is real or something serious”. They undergo a double discrimination. On the one hand, when they have relationships with women, their masculinity is not questioned, but their orientation is socially hidden. On the other hand, when relationships are established with men, they are rejected as homosexual men are. Making these non-hegemonic forms of masculinity invisible means there is a subordination mechanism that makes them deny their own identity by not feeling it as an option.

Within this subordinate position homosexual and bisexual men claimed to occupy, another subordinate hierarchy is reproduced where those with attributes traditionally linked to femininity are marginalized: “If you open a gay app, there are at least 10 out of 20 profiles that say: ‘Looking for a man’, ‘I’m masculine’, ‘Only for masculine men’”. The same happens regarding sexual relations: “If you're passive, you're the one that’s penetrated: you're over”. As some state, they have personally participated in this dynamic at some point in their lives:

“It’s so badly looked upon [being feminine] in society that it affects you deeply. I remember when I came out, to try and justify myself that I was a ‘good’ gay, I said: ‘My god, I’ll never be with someone who’s camp, I don’t like camp people’”.

Focal points

The main focal point among the participants’ discourses was that they tended to be located at a time of generational change and at a turning point towards gender equality.
They considered that the ways in which they understand masculinities are more diverse and healthier compared to previous generations.

It seemed that many of the young participants are disoriented at this turning point. They criticized the lack of references that make other forms of non-hegemonic masculinity visible and, the few that are identified, are socially belittled. Therefore, they said they lack tools to guide them in order to manage and interact in line with this change towards gender equality. They indicated that nowadays the ideals of hegemonic masculinity are still being reinforced from the media to institutional organizations. This favors the perpetuation of inequalities between men and women, and between men:

“They normalize superiority, domination, sexism and sometimes even harassment and control. You normalize behaviors that you've seen and you’ve not stopped to think about.”

The Visible Side: (Re)Presentations and Statements

The analysis of Instagram material (static images, description texts and comments) discussed the ways in which masculinities were addressed (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse) and represented (embodied and materialized). As observed in Figure 1, three main ways of representation were profiled: embodied hegemony, affectivity (with internal variants) and materialized hegemony.
Embodied hegemony

An online representational model among participants was the so-called “embodied hegemony”. This was commonly present in the variety of participant profiles, so no differences were identified according to the sociodemographic profile. These were images that were portrayed individually, in medium shots. Different characteristics were accumulated in the masculine imaginary that they classified as detrimental, closely related to the hegemonic discourse. Photographs showed a standardization of poses, with impassive expressions and defiant looks (see Figure 2). The photographs’ intentions seemed to be to challenge the imagined audience. Dark tones were used so that emotionality was showed less and they used other elements, such as putting up their hoods to reflect a rougher image.
The texts alongside these visual documents were usually fragments of songs about sex, power and overcoming something. The comments usually supported the hegemonic discourse, with expressions such as “shagger”, “beast”, “strong and cool, you've got everything”. Nonetheless, some texts talked about love, with ambiguous comments like: “Boy, oh boy, very nice” that could be interpreted in diverse ways: surprise (because of the monosyllable “oh”), judgmental (because of the emphasis and indicating "boy, oh boy"), etc. Whatever the interpretation, there is a looming presence of hegemonic masculinity in this online representational model, as uncritically accepted or as ironically/humorously parodied.

**Affectivity**

Photographs with other people were common showing their different affections. A typical component among a large part of the images was that they were generally with friends, in nightlife moments. Illegal and risky behaviors for their health were shown,
such as drinking alcohol in public spaces (see Figure 3). Nonetheless, distinctive nuances stood out, outlining two variants.

One variant was “sincere affections”, which occurred uniquely among younger homosexual men, when they appeared accompanied by their friends and family. They displayed signs of affection and expressed their feelings not only through the way they were shown in the photographs, but also with the texts alongside them and the comments between the people who appeared. These statements were in line with the counter-hegemonic discourse. The images were frequently long shot, with people close to them and with spontaneous expressions or smiling, creating a feeling of union (see Figure 3). When images were with friends, they were often with women, as the participants said: “you go out with girls, you can talk about feelings, so you feel more comfortable, and you end up interacting with them more”. Although this makes friendships between men and women beyond sex-affection visible beyond the exclusivity promoted by the heteronormative relational model, they were only expressed among masculinities that are in a subordinate situation, such as homosexuals. Although what we can see in the images is interesting, what we cannot see is also interesting. In this case, homosexual and bisexual men did not upload photographs of their partners, despite part of them being in a relationship.
Another variant revealed in photographs with friends and partners was “introverted affections”, recurrent among heterosexual and bisexual men of different ages. This was halfway between the counter-hegemonic discourse and hegemonic discourse. The presence of men was predominant in their representations with friends. Self-censorship traits were observed when showing affections. An important part of those appearing in the photograph had tight lips, containing a shy and mischievous smile. They kept a certain distance between each other, usually hugging over their shoulder. Regarding photographs with partners, the way they were positioned indicated roles and attributes to what they previously complained about, such as the role of a protective man. The girl was hugging and holding on to the man, her body was leaning towards him and her head was leaning on his shoulder. The man seemed to be a support and a refuge (see Figure 4). However, it was the only kind of photographs where heterosexual participants commented their feelings “I love you, pretty girl” and showing an open smile.
Another matter was identified in the posts by the heterosexual men of different ages where attributes of materialized hegemonic masculinity were reproduced. The structure was based on showing risky behaviors and those that are harmful to their health. A repeated way of representing these risky behaviors was while driving vehicles (taking selfies with one hand while they are driving with the other, taking pictures of the speedometer at high speeds...), alongside the text “Ride or die”. The approach showed control, authority and ostentation. They were usually shot by the person driving, therefore gripping the steering wheel with only one hand and without paying the necessary attention required for driving (see Figure 5). Harmful behaviors that were repeated were again nightlife situations at parties, concerts or festivals, where we can directly or indirectly see them drinking alcohol or taking other drugs.
Figure 5. Example of “materialized hegemony”.

Source: Anonymized photograph of the fieldwork.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that, even in the social framework generated by legislative and social processes towards greater gender equality and with respect to sexual diversity in Spain, the ideas of hegemonic masculinity continue to be present in the ways of interpreting and behaving around masculinities. In the analyzed discourses, there were references of the negative effect of this masculinity on men's health (different forms of violence since childhood, homophobia and biphobia, excessive drugs and alcohol consumption, invisible mental health problems, among others). Few counter-hegemonic discourses have been identified among the young Spaniards who participated, which are mainly identifiable among homosexual and bisexual men. Visual representations and interactions on Instagram accounts are notably homogeneous and reveal hegemonic
masculinity patterns that the young men themselves criticize in the interviews and discussion groups. Reproducing the standards associated with this form of masculinity appears to be used in public, including online social networks, as a resource to avoid social rejection.

Triangulating the discursive matters that structure the ways in which masculinities are (re)presented (online non-participant observation on Instagram) with the ways they are addressed (semi-structured interviews and discussion groups) has allowed us to recognize contradictions between the discourses and online representations of masculinities. The observational approach has provided an interpretative perspective to achieve the study aims having been complemented with the other qualitative approaches (Morse, 2003). This study adds to the current understanding of masculinities, finding that a counter-hegemonic discourse, which is defined by questioning the order of current gender, has barely conquered online spaces. This discourse is not carried out freely and does not have its own identity, but rather it is constructed in opposition to the framework of oppression that establishes the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity. A hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) has become difficult to counter even when there are suspicions that alternative narratives are available, since young men’s discourses show an internalized normalization of those hegemonic ideas that they learn from an early age (Sundaram, 2013; Ceballos, 2013). Therefore, counter-hegemonic ideas only exist when balanced with and in relation to hegemonic ideas, which is problematic in itself and impacts men’s health and gender equality in general.

As highlighted by other studies (e.g., Levant & Wimer, 2014; Salgado et al., 2019), hegemonic masculinity relates to a necessary and recurrent public demonstration of emotional censorship, hypersexuality, aggressiveness or rejecting any need for help, among others. In line with what the participants indicated, these behaviors lead to serious
consequences for men's health, such as mental health problems, lack of affection in interpersonal relationships, experiences of physical, social and verbal bullying from childhood or illnesses caused by bad habits (smoking, drinking...). In accordance with Marcos et al. (2013), our results suggest that a hegemonic discourse among young Spaniards dominates public spaces.

When discussing these findings alongside the analysis carried out on Instagram, there has been evidence on the need to show masculinity publicly (Kimmel, 2006), which has moved to the online sphere where the discourse of hegemonic masculinity seems to prevail. Masculinities are negotiated as a form of symbolic capital (de Visser et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984) and the configuration of power relations and the reproduction of gender inequalities come into play. In this space, young men often acquire and trade masculine capital by means of health-related behavior, portraying themselves involved in taking drugs and drinking alcohol, which Dinsmore (2014) already indicated, or taking selfies while dangerously driving vehicles. Showing a certain traditional standard is also evident, such as the explicit references related to hypersexuality and authority in texts. Nonetheless, despite several pieces of research insisting on the recurrence of self-representations that reinforce the ideal of the male body showing muscles (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Modica, 2020; Velkoff et al., 2019), this kind of photographs have not been found in our study.

Apart from the hegemonic online representations previously mentioned, a “variant of introverted affections” was also identified, which seems to be an example of complicit masculinities (Connell, 1995). It shows attributes that are related to the hegemonic discourse (e.g., self-censorship such as keeping distance or hugging over the shoulder when photographed with other men, or depicting a role of a protective man by the way they are positioned when photographed with their girlfriends), but they do not embody it
by strictly following the established standards, as they also embody attributes of the counter-hegemonic discourse (e.g., expressing and showing affections towards girlfriends). Coinciding with the recent study conducted by Ravenhill and de Visser (2019) on gay masculinities, we acknowledge that the conceptions of masculinity are rooted in hegemonic masculinity for straight, gay and bisexual men. However, it is mainly in young homosexuals and bisexuals that we find counter-hegemonic discourses and representations (such as the “variant of sincere affections”), giving rise to transgressive configuration of masculinities.

The way in which conservative gender norms are reproduced in public and on Instagram, in relation to health, represent forms of microlevel power practices that reflect and (re)constitute comprehensive relations of inequality. Young men’s social interactions involve the type of masculinity they adopt. In line with the Performance Gender Theory, young men undertake culturally defined norms of masculinity pressured by the whole of society (Goffman, 1959). Results indicate that men experience a high amount of social pressure to meet expectations associated with masculinity. Masculine capital (de Visser et al., 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2013) translates into a system of compensations and punishments that result in discrimination, social exclusion and violence.

This research also highlights how experiences and understandings associated with masculinity are interpreted in relation to sexual orientation and clearly opposed to femininity. Young people with different sociodemographic profiles suffer social pressure, but more so among homosexual and bisexual men. Decades ago, Butler (1990) outlined that the gender-sex system is based on a regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Unlike previous research (Ceballos, 2013; McCarry, 2010), men’s subjective discourses do not associate masculinity with heterosexuality, but the social reality that is described does seem to be dominated by the idea that masculinity means heterosexuality and, therefore,
that homosexuality means femininity. Male bisexuality still currently represents a true vanishing point (Moreno & Pichardo, 2006). In practice, there is an intimate relational link between the gender system and the heteronormative system, as attempts to dismantle one provides tools to subvert the other and vice versa, although they are systems that must be theoretically and conceptually differentiated.

Our findings point to the emergence of what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call hybrid masculinities, including elements to break away from hegemonic masculinity while continuing to perpetuate hierarchical gender relations in more nuanced forms. Regarding studying social change, the participants find themselves at a crossroad between the cohort and period effects, in which new ways of understanding masculinity emerge, but living with traditional values. They reprimand that this has not been accompanied by a contextual framework that favors and makes other non-hegemonic forms of masculinity visible and that provides them with tools and references to develop according to said change. The analyzed verbal discourses (hegemonic and counter-hegemonic) and online dynamics do not explicitly express antifemininity or homophobia, but they suggest that the so-called “fag discourse” (Pascoe, 2007) still structures their practices. The “fag discourse” is understood as the “fag” position which displays a “threatening specter” that not only affects homosexual men but could be understood as a fluid identity which men continuously struggle to avoid. This involves not only the subordination of homosexual and bisexual masculinities, but also a gender vigilance in young men regardless of their sexual orientation (Ravenhill and de Visser, 2019). These hybrid masculinities still do not represent a significant change in gender inequality, but continue to support them in subtle ways, which are difficult to identify and examine (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This displays how power and inequality systems are flexible.
There are some clear limitations to the study. On the one hand, several authors (e.g., Krueger, 1994; Deatrick & Faux, 1991) mentioned that people may be more inclined to share information with others like themselves, especially in relation to the sex of the interviewer. In the case of our research, all qualitative fieldwork was conducted by young people, although information on gender identity and sexual orientation of the interviewers involved—a bisexual cisgender woman and a heterosexual cisgender man—was not disclosed, as the displayed or inferred information may have influenced data collection. These possible influences were considered by applying epistemological surveillance (Bourdieu et al., 2008) to our study. Firstly, by conveying confidence to the participants in the pre-session presentation so that they could express themselves freely. Secondly, by including two open questions in the questionnaire on extra sociodemographic information where they were asked their opinion about the session once it had finished and the opportunity to privately write additional information regarding what was discussed in the sessions. Finally, we paid attention to the analysis of the conversational changes that occurred during their interventions with the recorded audio and the detailed transcriptions, such as possible silences, pauses or stuttering. However, the interviewers’ gender or sexual orientation apparently did not seem to generate discomfort in the participants’ responses and some even reported feeling comfortable expressing themselves.

On the other hand, although the sampling was dominated by searching for structural representativeness in two contrasting geographical contexts and based on established criteria, the sample size and the criteria (e.g., ideology, religiousness, migration history…) could be expanded to analyze male realities more comprehensively. Even though different sexual orientations have been included in this study, we realize that it would also be interesting to explore the discourses of asexual men, especially when it has
been possible to verify that hegemonic masculinity has been linked to heterosexuality and a continuous sexual interest. Finally, our research has not included young activists in the sample, as the aim of the study was to delve into spontaneous discourses of ordinary young men that were not related to the aim of the study, but it would be ideal to include this group in future studies.

CONCLUSION

This study has illustrated how the discourse of hegemonic masculinity is still significant in terms of understanding and experiencing the masculinities of young people, either automatically and unconsciously, or in a recognized and pressured way. In opposition to this tricky landscape of masculinities, a timid counter-hegemonic discourse is identified that is scarcely practiced in a public digital setting, contained within the framework of discrimination and social exclusion that supports the hegemonic discourse. The findings of this study contribute to the necessary prior knowledge of the social and symbolic framework that legitimizes and reproduces male domination in younger generations and how this is reflected in men’s health. It also provides information of practical relevance to guide the promotion of men’s health and gender-transformative interventions.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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