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Concept proposal

Shame and masculinity: “*Courage in vulnerability*”

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Introduction: The expression of suffering is gendered

When Brian's mother and girlfriend told him that his father would like to talk to him, he didn't know how to do it, he started thinking. Brian didn't know how to handle it, he had always had a formal relationship with his father, and the question of emotionality had never been an issue until today. Is there anything we can do to change these traditional dynamics between men?

There are certain social structures that keep men from being in touch with their emotions and especially from expressing their feelings to people. Even to people close to them, many men are never able to say how they feel. This is not because men have less emotions, but rather because society teaches them to be tough and resilient or 'manly'. Because talking about your feelings has been considered feminine and unmanly it causes men to avoid it in fear of being ridiculed or becoming a social outcast. Men are just as emotional and sensitive as women. But some did not learn to deal with, understand, or express it, due to the lack of a vulnerability stimulating environment. Without knowing it, men are transforming their bottled-up emotions and negatively impact other aspects of their lives. Their restrictive emotionality has been shown to influence health, emotional appraisal and overall identity. Furthermore, tendencies toward restrictive emotionality are correlated with an increased risk of certain anxiety disorders.

It's the year 2021 and the conventional gender-roles are becoming more and more blurred and questioned, as such, we think it is also time to make men see the benefits of opening up and being vulnerable that were once exclusive to women.

Our aim is to create a desire for men to embrace vulnerability and explore emotional expression. We are opening up a dialogue and will conduct an interview with and for our participants of a small group of men. We're focusing on the creation of an intimate and positive environment with the possibility of personal development.

Who are we?

Behind this project is a team of four first year IArts students. This project is developed within the frame of the topic Gender and sexuality that we have been working on for several weeks. It is a multifaceted topic in whose core we see the striving for acceptance and normalization of individual identities uninfluenced by our societies norms. We believe global change towards this reality starts with the individual. In this case the individual man. This project is very personal to us as we all feel, in our own way, connected to the topic. We come from different backgrounds and cultures and bring with us our own experiences and knowledge that sparked the need to take on this project. All of the members of this project have experience with the feeling of there being an emotional barrier between them and men close to them, making it feel impossible to connect with them about any sensitive subjects. For many men this barrier is not only there between other men, but between all people in their lives. We are aware that with three females in our group we have a somewhat foreign perspective on this topic. This does not mean that we are unable to make an impact; it just calls for a focus on listening and learning first. We took this into consideration conceptualizing our project therefore focusing on co-creation. We do not think men need to be “fixed” nor do we state to hold the solution. But we do want to offer a space of self exploration that our current normality can’t offer them.

Eros, beyond gender?

To be able to collect data and come up with constructive solutions, we will take the first step of choosing candidates who have both difficulties expressing emotions and men who are in touch with their emotions which will hopefully lead us to why this situation is occurring and how/what ways are best suitable to create that safe environment. We aim to work through a multi layer process of filtering our candidates which means using social media to display a questionnaire to help us figure out who is going to be eligible for us to work with and make sure our candidates are suitable. By filtering these candidates we gain multiple perspectives on the topic.

We as a team find it necessary that throughout our process of creating the questions and before conducting our interview, that we seek professional help and advice in terms of what ways are best as an approach when trying to open a dialogue with relation to emotion and vulnerability especially to people who did not grow up with the normality of expression. We aim to contact local or international psychologists/ psychotherapists who have experience in the field, as well as our very own student counselor at Zuyd Hogeschool.

We then proceed by choosing 3 men with difficulties in emotional expression due to the societal views of how their masculinity should be displayed. We will conduct our project, conforming to current Corona measurements, either in a one on one setting at a location the participant is most comfortable in and/or in an online space. Because the men may struggle with shame we focus on the creation of an intimate and positive environment. With them we open up a dialogue about how they experience the role of the man in our society, how they deal with and express emotions and what vulnerability means to them. Exploring their boundaries, their internalized fears and behaviour patterns. How do they approach other men? What role do emotions play in their mental health and relationship? Which coping methods they have developed? What resistance do they have in common?

We hope to claim the existing toxic mechanisms and transform them by promoting vulnerability in a way to make people want to be vulnerable. Asking ourselves during the artistic research process: What are the things men desire? Can we create a desire for vulnerability in men?

We want to co-create with these men and find a display of our artistic process together with them.

We consider that the concept is an artistic research project. Therefore, it is an ongoing development. We will focus on the implementation of an artistic research process, and then we will study the possibility of presenting it at the end of this process. Our focus point is the design of a process in which we can have an impact. Our aim, as already mentioned, is to create a desire for men to embrace vulnerability and explore emotional expression.

Since our project is aimed to be educational and influential to males who would like to explore and connect with their emotional side, we will keep the focus on this specific audience. Of

course the goal is to influence a bigger range of people and potentially make change in our society to open up conversations about the needs of men for a better mental health, but at the moment we would like to focus on smaller group of males as a target audience which will narrow down our plan because we believe that the more focused the target group, the sharper the project outcome; which will ensure a successful effect. With that being said, we will still ensure that we include a message to our society with encouragement of creating a safe space for men to be able to be vulnerable and how effective and necessary that will be for a better future for individuals as well as the society as a whole.