

# The Performative Dialogue: Communication Theories and the Construction of Masculinity

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**Abstract**— This article examines the construction of masculinity through the lens of communication theories, arguing that masculinity is not an innate biological identity but a socially produced and communicatively performed phenomenon. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study explores how masculinity is continuously enacted through verbal and nonverbal communicative practices, including speech patterns, bodily gestures, emotional restraint, and social interaction. The article further employs Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse how dominant masculine ideals are maintained through symbolic power, media representation, institutional discourse, and interpersonal communication. By incorporating Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the discussion highlights the role of observational learning and media influence in shaping masculine identities, particularly through digital culture, advertising, and celebrity modelling. The article also investigates the psychological consequences of rigid masculine norms, including emotional suppression, hypermasculinity, and sex role strain. Through critical communication studies and queer theory, the paper deconstructs the binary understanding of gender and emphasizes the fluidity and plurality of masculinities. It argues that alternative and dialogic masculinities grounded in empathy, vulnerability, and collaborative communication can challenge patriarchal structures and foster more inclusive social relationships. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that communication is both the mechanism through which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and the primary site through which it can be resisted, reimagined, and transformed in contemporary society.

**Keywords**— Masculinity, Gender Performativity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Communication Theory, Queer Theory.

## I. MASCULINITY AS COMMUNICATIVE PERFORMATIVITY

The study of masculinity has undergone a profound theoretical transformation over the last several decades. Earlier essentialist perspectives treated masculinity as a biologically determined and psychologically fixed attribute inherent to male bodies. Contemporary gender theory, however, argues that masculinity is not an innate essence but a socially constructed and continuously reproduced performance. Judith Butler's influential theory of gender performativity fundamentally altered the understanding of gender by asserting that masculinity is not something one simply possesses; rather, it is repeatedly enacted through language, gesture, bodily comportment, and social interaction (Butler 519). Masculinity therefore emerges not as a natural condition but as a communicative accomplishment maintained through repetitive acts that gain legitimacy through social recognition.

This performative understanding of masculinity places communication at the center of gender identity formation. Every communicative act from tone of voice and conversational style to dress codes and bodily posture functions as a ritualized citation of culturally approved masculine norms. Speech act theory becomes particularly relevant here because language does not merely describe masculinity; it actively produces it. When men employ assertive speech patterns, emotionally restrained language, or authoritative commands, they participate in what Butler describes as the reiterative process through which gender becomes socially intelligible (521). Masculinity is therefore not a static category but an ongoing communicative negotiation that requires constant validation from audiences within social institutions such as family, school, media, and peer groups.

The performative dimension of masculinity is deeply intertwined with social surveillance. Masculine communication is continuously monitored, judged, and corrected by others. Boys learn at an early age that particular verbal and nonverbal behaviours are rewarded while others are stigmatized. Expressions of vulnerability, emotional openness, or softness are frequently associated with femininity and consequently discouraged in many patriarchal cultures. This disciplinary mechanism illustrates Michel Foucault's concept of regulatory power, where social norms are internalized and individuals begin policing themselves to avoid ridicule or exclusion (Foucault 89). Masculinity thus becomes a form of communicative labour in which men must constantly "prove" themselves through culturally sanctioned performances.

Nonverbal communication, or kinesics, further reinforces this performative framework. Julia Perry's research on masculinity in public space demonstrates that bodily presentation often functions as a visible marker of masculine authority (Perry 3). Men are frequently socialized to occupy physical space expansively, maintain rigid posture, suppress expressive gestures, and avoid excessive emotional display. The "stoic mask" associated with traditional masculinity is therefore not merely a personality trait but a learned communicative strategy designed to project dominance, control, and emotional invulnerability. Such bodily performances become normalized through repetition, eventually appearing "natural" despite their cultural construction.

High-power poses, direct eye contact, reduced smiling, and restrained facial expressions are often interpreted as signs of competence and authority in patriarchal societies. Dana Carney and colleagues note that these nonverbal displays of power influence both how others perceive an individual and how individuals perceive themselves (Carney et al. 105). Through repeated exposure to these norms, men internalize the belief that masculinity requires emotional restraint and physical dominance. This internalization contributes to what sociologists call "gender habitus," a set of embodied dispositions that shape behaviour unconsciously (Bourdieu 78). The body itself becomes a communicative text through which masculinity is continuously inscribed and interpreted.

Importantly, performative masculinity is culturally variable rather than universal. What constitutes "manly" communication differs across societies, historical periods, racial identities, and class structures. For example, working-class masculinities may prioritize physical toughness and direct speech, while elite professional masculinities may emphasize rationality, emotional control, and intellectual authority. Intersectional analysis reveals that race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status profoundly shape the communicative expression of masculinity. Black masculinity in the United States, for instance, has historically been shaped by both resistance to racial oppression and stereotypical representations in media, resulting in complex negotiations of power and vulnerability (hooks 89). Similarly, queer masculinities challenge dominant norms by destabilizing the assumption that masculinity must align with heterosexuality.

Failure to correctly perform accepted masculine codes often results in social punishment. Boys and men who exhibit behaviours coded as feminine may face ridicule, bullying, or exclusion. Terms such as "weak," "soft," or "unmanly" function as communicative tools of regulation that reinforce hegemonic standards. Butler argues that this vulnerability to social sanction reveals the instability of gender itself; if masculinity were truly natural, it would not require constant repetition and policing to sustain its legitimacy (520). The anxiety surrounding masculine performance therefore exposes the fragility underlying patriarchal gender systems.

The rise of digital communication has intensified the performative nature of masculinity. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube encourage the continuous curation of masculine identity through images, captions, videos, and online interactions. Influencer culture often rewards exaggerated performances of confidence, wealth, muscularity, and sexual dominance. Algorithms amplify these performances by privileging content that aligns with dominant cultural expectations, thereby reinforcing hegemonic masculine ideals on a global scale. At the same time, digital spaces also create opportunities for alternative masculinities to emerge, allowing men to publicly express vulnerability, emotional openness, and nontraditional gender identities (Kimmel 215).

Consequently, masculinity must be understood not as a biological destiny but as a dynamic communicative process shaped by power relations, institutional structures, and cultural repetition. The performative model reveals how everyday acts of speech and embodiment contribute to the maintenance of patriarchal systems while also containing the possibility for resistance and transformation.

## II. HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND SYMBOLIC POWER

If performativity explains how masculinity is enacted, Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity explains why certain masculine performances become dominant within society. Connell argues that every culture privileges a particular

model of manhood that functions as the normative ideal against which all other masculinities are measured (Connell 77). Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily the most common form of masculinity; rather, it is the most socially celebrated and institutionally empowered. It legitimizes male dominance over women while simultaneously subordinating marginalized masculinities such as queer, disabled, or economically disadvantaged masculinities.

Communication plays a central role in maintaining hegemonic masculinity because dominance is often sustained through symbolic power rather than direct violence. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power helps explain how language, representation, and discourse naturalize social hierarchies (Bourdieu 123). Media institutions, educational systems, political rhetoric, and popular culture repeatedly circulate images of the "ideal man" as strong, rational, competitive, sexually dominant, and emotionally invulnerable. These representations gradually become accepted as common sense, making alternative masculinities appear deviant or inferior.

Sports media offers a particularly powerful example of hegemonic communication. Athletic culture frequently celebrates aggression, endurance, stoicism, and physical dominance while ridiculing emotional vulnerability. Sports commentary often frames male athletes as "warriors," "fighters," or "gladiators," relying heavily on militaristic metaphors that equate masculinity with conquest and aggression (Messner 78). Such language reinforces the association between manhood and domination while marginalizing cooperative or emotionally expressive forms of masculinity.

Political discourse similarly relies upon masculine symbolism. Political leaders are often evaluated according to masculine standards of decisiveness, toughness, and authority. Men in leadership positions who display empathy or vulnerability may be criticized as weak, whereas aggressive behaviour is frequently interpreted as evidence of strength. This dynamic demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity shapes public expectations regarding power and legitimacy. Within interpersonal communication, hegemonic masculinity manifests through conversational dominance and gatekeeping behaviours. Sociolinguistic studies indicate that men occupying privileged social positions often interrupt more frequently, control conversational topics, and utilize competitive turn-taking strategies (Tannen 92). These communicative patterns reinforce hierarchical relationships by positioning the speaker as authoritative while minimizing the contributions of others. Minimal responses, dismissive language, and strategic silence can also function as tools of dominance that communicate disinterest or superiority.

The workplace further illustrates the communicative dimensions of hegemonic masculinity. Corporate cultures frequently reward assertiveness, competitiveness, and emotional restraint while undervaluing collaborative or empathetic communication styles. Men who conform to hegemonic norms may gain symbolic capital in professional settings, whereas those who exhibit nontraditional masculine behaviours risk marginalization. The persistence of "locker room talk," sexist humour, and homophobic language in many workplaces demonstrates how communicative practices reproduce patriarchal hierarchies through everyday interaction (Katz 145).

Hegemonic masculinity also intersects with race and class in significant ways. The dominant masculine ideal in Western societies has historically been associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, and economic power. Men who do not fit these categories often face communicative exclusion or stereotyping. Media portrayals frequently depict racialized masculinities through reductive narratives of violence, hypersexuality, or criminality, limiting the range of socially acceptable identities available to marginalized groups (hooks 112). These representations reveal that hegemonic masculinity is not merely about gender but also about broader systems of social stratification.

The emotional consequences of hegemonic masculinity are equally significant. Traditional masculine norms often discourage emotional intimacy, vulnerability, and help-seeking behaviour. Men may therefore experience isolation, anxiety, and depression while lacking communicative tools to express emotional distress. Scholars have linked hegemonic masculinity to increased rates of substance abuse, violence, and mental health crises among men because emotional suppression becomes normalized as a marker of masculine strength (Pleck 132). The refusal to communicate vulnerability thus becomes both a cultural expectation and a psychological burden. Despite its dominance, hegemonic masculinity is never completely stable. Social movements such as feminism, LGBTQ+ activism, and mental health advocacy increasingly challenge patriarchal communication norms by promoting emotional openness, inclusivity, and egalitarian dialogue. These challenges reveal that hegemonic masculinity is historically contingent rather than permanent. Communication therefore becomes both the mechanism through which patriarchal masculinity is maintained and the site where it can be contested and transformed.

### III. SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY AND MEDIA INFLUENCE

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provides a crucial framework for understanding how masculine communicative behaviours are learned, internalized, and reproduced across generations. According to SCT, individuals acquire social behaviours primarily through observational learning, imitation, and reinforcement (Bandura 47). Rather than developing masculinity independently, boys and men absorb communicative norms by observing influential models within family structures, peer groups, educational institutions, and especially media environments.

In traditional societies, fathers, teachers, coaches, and community leaders functioned as the primary models of masculinity. In contemporary digital culture, however, mass media and social media personalities exert unprecedented influence over masculine identity formation. Films, television shows, advertisements, video games, and online influencers continuously circulate idealized images of male behaviour. These media representations frequently associate masculinity with aggression, sexual conquest, financial success, muscularity, and emotional detachment. Through repeated exposure, audiences begin to perceive these behaviours as desirable and socially rewarded.

Bandura's concept of "symbolic modelling" is particularly relevant in analyzing media influence. Individuals do not need direct interaction with role models to learn behaviour; they can acquire norms simply by observing fictional or mediated characters. Superheroes, athletes, celebrities, and influencers therefore become symbolic educators of masculinity. When audiences witness these figures receiving admiration, wealth, or romantic success for performing traditional masculine traits, they internalize the belief that similar behaviours will yield comparable rewards. This process creates what Bandura terms "vicarious reinforcement" (Bandura 89). Media audiences observe not only behaviour but also its consequences. Violent or emotionally detached male protagonists are often portrayed as heroic and successful, while emotionally expressive or vulnerable male characters may be mocked or marginalized. Such narratives encourage viewers to imitate dominant masculine communication styles in pursuit of social acceptance and status.

Advertising industries actively exploit these dynamics by associating consumer products with masculine identity. Alcohol advertisements, automobile commercials, and fitness campaigns frequently portray men as powerful, sexually successful, and socially dominant. Akesse-Brempong and Cudjoe's study of Ghanaian alcohol advertisements demonstrates how marketing strategically links alcohol consumption to masculine prestige and authority (Akesse-Brempong and Cudjoe 45). These representations reinforce the idea that masculinity can be achieved through particular lifestyles, products, and communicative performances.

Social media intensifies observational learning by creating interactive environments where masculine performances receive immediate public feedback. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok reward visibility, confidence, and spectacle through likes, comments, and algorithmic promotion. Young men often compare themselves to highly curated online personas that project unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness, wealth, and social dominance. This constant comparison contributes to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety, particularly when individuals cannot replicate the lifestyles portrayed online (Kimmel 188).

Joseph Pleck's concept of "sex role strain" becomes particularly significant in this context. Traditional masculine ideals are often contradictory and unattainable, creating psychological pressure for men attempting to satisfy competing expectations (Pleck 156). Men are expected to be emotionally stoic yet socially charismatic, dominant yet socially acceptable, physically strong yet professionally successful. The impossibility of perfectly embodying all these traits generates chronic insecurity and communicative tension.

One common response to this insecurity is hypermasculinity, in which individuals exaggerate traditional masculine behaviours to compensate for perceived inadequacy. Hypermasculine communication may include excessive aggression, misogynistic language, emotional suppression, or performative toughness. Msutwana's research on masculine initiation rituals demonstrates how social institutions often reinforce hypermasculine ideals by equating masculinity with endurance, dominance, and emotional control (Msutwana 67). Such practices perpetuate cycles of violence and emotional repression while limiting opportunities for healthier forms of masculine expression.

Media influence also shapes attitudes toward relationships and emotional intimacy. Romantic films, music videos, and online content frequently portray men as emotionally unavailable or sexually dominant, reinforcing the idea that vulnerability threatens masculine identity. Consequently, many men struggle to communicate emotional needs openly within interpersonal relationships. Emotional literacy becomes underdeveloped because patriarchal communication norms discourage men from articulating fear, sadness, or dependency. Nevertheless, media environments are not exclusively oppressive. Alternative digital

communities increasingly promote more inclusive and emotionally expressive masculinities. Mental health advocates, queer creators, feminist educators, and progressive influencers challenge traditional norms by encouraging emotional openness, consent culture, and collaborative communication. These counter-hegemonic representations demonstrate that media can function both as a mechanism of patriarchal reproduction and as a site of resistance and transformation. The communicative influence of media therefore extends far beyond entertainment. Media narratives actively shape how masculinity is imagined, performed, rewarded, and contested within society. Social Cognitive Theory reveals that masculine identity is not formed in isolation but through continuous interaction with symbolic models that teach individuals how to speak, behave, and embody gendered expectations.

#### IV. CRITICAL AND QUEER PERSPECTIVES: DECONSTRUCTING THE BINARY

While performativity theory, hegemonic masculinity, and Social Cognitive Theory explain how masculine norms are constructed and reproduced, Critical Communication Studies and Queer Theory seek to destabilize and transform these rigid structures. Queer theorists argue that the binary division between masculinity and femininity is neither natural nor inevitable but historically produced through discourse, institutional power, and cultural repetition. Masculinity therefore exists not as a singular stable identity but as a fluid and contested set of communicative possibilities.

Queer theory challenges the assumption that masculinity must be heterosexual, dominant, emotionally detached, or biologically tied to male bodies. Instead, it emphasizes the instability and multiplicity of gender expression. The concept of “gendered alterity” suggests that masculinity is always defined in opposition to femininity and queerness, making it fundamentally dependent upon exclusionary boundaries (Halberstam 65). By exposing this dependence, queer scholars reveal the artificiality of supposedly “natural” masculine norms.

Communication becomes a crucial site of resistance within queer theory because language itself constructs social reality. Heteronormative discourse often reinforces rigid expectations regarding gender and sexuality through everyday expressions, jokes, insults, and institutional policies. Terms such as “real man” or “man up” operate as communicative mechanisms that police acceptable masculine behaviour. Queer communication studies analyse how such language perpetuates patriarchal structures while simultaneously exploring alternative modes of expression that challenge binary thinking (Schippers 34).

Transgressive communicative acts play a particularly important role in destabilizing hegemonic masculinity. When men express vulnerability, engage in affectionate friendships, participate equally in domestic labour, or reject aggressive competition, they interrupt the repetitive scripts that sustain patriarchal masculinity. These disruptions reveal that masculinity is not fixed but negotiable. Butler’s theory of performativity suggests that because gender relies upon repetition, altered repetitions can gradually transform dominant norms (Butler 530).

Emotional vulnerability has become one of the most significant sites of resistance against hegemonic masculinity. Traditional patriarchal discourse often frames emotional expression as weakness, yet critical scholars argue that vulnerability can foster empathy, relational intimacy, and democratic communication. Men who openly discuss mental health, trauma, caregiving, or emotional dependence challenge the communicative restrictions imposed by traditional masculinity. Such practices create possibilities for healthier interpersonal relationships and broader emotional literacy.

Portell and Pulido’s concept of “new masculinities” offers a constructive framework for imagining alternative gender relations. These masculinities are dialogic rather than monologic, meaning they prioritize mutual understanding, emotional reciprocity, and collaborative interaction over domination and control (Portell and Pulido 68). Monologic communication seeks to impose authority and silence opposition, whereas dialogic communication values listening, empathy, and collective participation. This shift from “power-over” to “power-with” represents a profound transformation in masculine identity.

Dialogic masculinities also challenge violence-based notions of power. Patriarchal cultures frequently equate masculinity with conquest, competition, and militaristic aggression. Critical communication scholars therefore advocate replacing the language of domination with vocabularies centered on care, cooperation, and solidarity. Such linguistic transformation is not merely symbolic; it reshapes social relationships by altering the communicative assumptions underlying gender interaction.

Queer perspectives further highlight the importance of intersectionality in understanding masculinity. Masculine identities are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, disability, nationality, and sexuality. A queer Black masculinity, for example, may confront both racial stereotypes and heteronormative expectations simultaneously. Intersectional analysis therefore resists universalizing narratives and emphasizes the diversity of masculine experiences across different social contexts (Collins 127).

Educational institutions and media platforms increasingly serve as battlegrounds where competing masculinities are negotiated. Inclusive educational practices that encourage emotional intelligence, consent education, and critical media literacy can help dismantle harmful gender norms. Similarly, films, literature, and digital media that portray emotionally expressive, queer, or nurturing masculinities broaden the spectrum of socially visible identities. Representation becomes politically significant because visibility challenges the assumption that hegemonic masculinity is universal or inevitable. Ultimately, queer and critical perspectives emphasize that masculinity is neither biologically predetermined nor socially immutable. Because masculinity is communicatively constructed, it can also be communicatively reconstructed. Every alternative conversation, emotional disclosure, collaborative relationship, or nontraditional performance contributes to the gradual redefinition of masculine identity. The future of masculinity therefore depends not on preserving rigid hierarchies but on cultivating communicative practices rooted in empathy, inclusivity, and mutual recognition.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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