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The Man Enough Paradox: Unpacking the Tensions between Masculinity and Femininity in Podcast Discourse

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Abstract

Gender representation has been a salient area of research in media discourse; however, different genres of media discourse have not been investigated thoroughly. Podcast, a genre of media discourse, is one of them and requires both extensive and intensive research concerning gender representation. This study delves into the mechanism of how The Man Enough podcast describe masculinity and femininity, operating on the principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as a framework. With the help of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, the research identifies the linguistic and narrative strategies used in the podcast to either challenge or fortify societal gender norms. The findings reveal that the podcast actively engages with feminist principles, redefining norms of traditional masculinity by shutting the doors of communication barriers and providing safe space for emotional openness and questioning deep-rooted gender biases. In addition to this, it encourages an inclusive dialogue that critiques patriarchal structures while recognizing the societal roles and expectations placed on men and women. By exposing these discursive patterns, this study helps in the deeper understanding of gender ideologies in media, examining the influential role of language in modelling perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Masculinity, Femininity, Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, The Man Enough Podcast.



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Introduction

Gender is not biological as such but rather a social construct that changes through culture's norm, interaction, and institutionalization. Lorber (2012) explains that gender is never static, always being reshaped and redefined within the society, and gender is at the center of frameworks defining society, social relationships, social roles. It is specifically a learned phenomenon that goes on to become reinforced and adapted over time, showing the ever changing faces in human social organization. Cultural traditions, ideological frameworks and societal norms serve as crucial determinant of gender identities of men and women. Nevertheless, they mainly perpetuate male privilege (Edwards, 2015). Men are considered to have strength, the capability, and intellect, thus given more opportunity in professional and social world and women are being systematically marginalized. Restrictive roles that stand in the way of what women might be able to give or contribute are further reinforced by such gendered perceptions. According to Peterson (1992), gender acts as a system of power in which people are defined as masculinized and feminized and in which men and masculinity are given preference over women and femininity. It helps to maintain male dominated institutions and practices and that leads to persistent gender disparities in fields like health care, education, political representation, participation in the economic and social life as well as in jobs, employment conditions, marriage and property rights. The gender representation in media helps to reinforce what are society's expectations of gender roles. The media portrays ideals that people should behave like men and women. Research on gendered stories in news reporting has largely taken place with media like television, radio and newspaper (Carter and Steiner 2004), but more attention should be paid to the unique challenges to conduct the same research with digital media. Because of the speed with which digital content is evolving, gender portrayals at these sites are difficult to systematically analyze. While the female representation in political and advertising contexts has been thoroughly investigated, little research exists on digital media remain highly contextual, varying across politics, economics, lifestyle, social issues, and domestic spheres.

The new podcast *Man Enough* aims to redefine the aspects of masculinity, by asking men to feel, be vulnerable and empathetic. To answer this, a textual analysis of specific episodes will be conducted in order to explore the podcast's use of language and storytelling techniques to engage with feminist and progressive discourses on manhood. The *Man Enough* podcast is hosted by pro feminist actor and filmmaker Justin Baldoni, journalist and writer Liz Plank, producer and musician Jamey Heath, releasing weekly Episodes with corporate sponsorship. More inclusive discussions than those of a celebrity are focused on, and ways to change perspectives and behavior so that more just and equitable society can be created are explored.

Literature Review

Role of Language in Discourse Media

To understand totally the connection between language and space in media, it would be important to go beyond the interrogation of news discourse and look at fiction and entertainment, which have a huge effect on how the perception of linguistic diversity is formed. A post-variationist approach stresses that being local means something more than including a regional dialect; it is about how regional dialects are used to make local references to marks of places and cultural symbols. By taking this perspective, the emphasis is diverted away from a given linguistic variety and is rather focused on the broader stylistic choices associated with the interdependence of language, discourse and multimodal elements in creating meaning (Androutsopoulos, 2010).

Feminist Discourse and Role of Media

The power dynamics have changed worldwide over the years, adjusting the way social changes have positively altered women's access to education, work and reproductive rights (Lazar & Kramarae, 2011). Although certain kinds of overt gender discrimination have been legally protected against in some cases, systemic inequalities still exist. The wage gap remains, women hit glass ceilings and assume most of the domestic duties. Gender based harassment occurs even in digital space (Herring & Stoerger, 2011). It was held that patriarchy is still strongly involved in the social structures and can be seen in both explicit and implicit ways (Majstorovic & Lassen, 2011). Neoliberalism has exacerbated gender differentials (Williams, 2006), even then contemporary media escapes with a 'postfeminist' agenda claiming gender equality to be accomplished and involving feminist critiques (Gill, 2003; Lazar, 2006). Modernization process from the 1990s onwards brought in changes in terms of expanding professional role of women but also introduced the divisions in the life of women portraying progressive versus the traditional ones (Sarkar, 2014). Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) concerns the ways in which power as gendered and a gendered power structure are maintained, challenged and negotiated in discourse (Lazar, 2005). This approach is rooted on the combination of feminist theory and discourse analysis, which most accurately enables one to understand how the language and the social issues are related. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) aims to be more than an academic critique, in that it exposes and ultimately challenges systemically inequalities for gender (Lazar, 2007).

Language and Gender Identities

As an instrument, language has long been part of the apparatus of maintaining inequality of the genders and endorsing their subordination to the social structure. Linguistic representations are deeply linked to cultural narrations that construct power relations, gender expectations, as well as social hierarchies (Cameron 1992; Gal 1995, Feminist scholars argue that these representations can be associated with hierarchies of human differentiation, such as gender, race, etc. Feminists early movements aimed to abolish the uses of language that oppressed women in political as well as public sphere since it was perceived as a tool of patriarchal act. Crawford (1995) states that contemporary feminist linguistics stays on the relationship between language, power and politics and shows that discourse does not only reflect but also maintain gender roles as well as male dominance. There is nothing new in the fact that men are referred to as rational and authoritative whereas women's speech is deemed less emotional or less credible. Language plays an important role in reinforcing gendered power relations of these linguistic patterns and becomes a key site of struggle in enacting gender equality (Eckert & McConnell Gin et 2003). A vast proportion of systemic biases continue to be perpetuated in the structure of media and society as a whole, where women are portrayed as passive and men as dominant. The main focus of early studies of sexuality was on the specific lexical terms in the marginalized communities (Leap, 1995). Initially, research on the 1990s was influenced by the concept of queer theory which reconceptualized language as a performative space in which identities are actively constructed and negotiated (Bucholtz Hall, 2004). Essentialist views were challenged while making it evident how discourse functions in creating genre and sexual identity that goes past its binary nature (Livia & Hall, 1997). This field is central in a debate about a relation between power, identity and language. There are some who advocate a cooperative approach, such as the cultural and the psychoanalytic approach, to the study of identity and desire (Kulick 2000). Although others are critical of this approach because they expect it to ignore the social dynamics of language use (Barrett, 2003), (Eckert, 2002). As a response, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) put forward an additional framework that bases on

intersubjectivity, it concentrates on how the language negotiates and constructs social identities. Despite this interdisciplinarity, studying language, gender, and sexuality entails an adoption of analytic perspectives (Queen, 2002; Barrett, 2003) that include the power structures in the society, social environment and identity performance. Language is not a passive mirror of existing gender and sexual identities, but rather participates actively in the creation of different gender and sexual identities and thus provides a key tool for approaching and disrupting inequalities posed by them.

Research Methodology

As such, this study draws from feminist discourse analysis (FDA) to analyze gender narratives from *The Man Enough* podcast. A qualitatively oriented approach enables me to explore language, themes and ideological structures in the podcast in more detail. Thematic analysis is conducted in the research in accordance with the model proposed by Braun and Clarke while discourse analysis is drawn from Fairclough's framework. Eight episodes were sampled purposively, in which the discourse surrounding such themes as masculinity, gender roles and social equity was discussed. All that was transcribed verbatim, thematically coded, and analysis of recurring linguistic patterns and gender discourse performed using NVivo software. The outcome of the analysis showed how three themes were revealed: Strength to Vulnerability: Redefining Masculinity, Femininity in the Male Narrative: Inclusion or Tokenism? and Power, Privilege, and Responsibility in Gender Discourse. *The Man Enough* podcast by Justin Baldoni, Liz Plank and Jamey Heath explores masculinity with intriguing chats around public figures, activists, scholars. It looks twice at the traditional gender norms and stimulates thoughts on privileges, social justice and relationships. In the next chapter, the focus is turned towards how language contained in the podcast works to instrumentalize and negotiate gender identities.

Findings and discussion

Major Themes Identified

1. Deconstructing Traditional Masculinity

One of the central themes explored in *The Man Enough* podcast is the critique of traditional masculinity. The hosts and guests frequently reflect on hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), highlighting its influence on men's emotional expression, relationships, and mental well-being. A recurring discussion point is the societal expectation for men to embody strength and stoicism while suppressing vulnerability. This aligns with the arguments made by scholars such as Kimmel (2008) and hooks (2004), who emphasize that rigid masculine norms contribute to emotional repression and interpersonal struggles, making it difficult for men to develop meaningful connections.

From Episode 2 of *The Man Enough* podcast, Liz's statement critiques outdated dating customs that prioritize superficial chivalry over genuine emotional engagement. She says, "Do men know that on dates they should be asking follow-up questions like, you know what's sexy? A follow-up question way more than pulling the chair, way more than the door." (Liz cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 40:10-17.)

Similarly, Jason's statement questions the conventional definition of manhood, arguing that men should embrace emotional openness rather than being confined to strength, boldness, and aggression (Episode 3). He says, "When you take a man from only living in masculine attributes such as strength, boldness, and aggression, and allow him to live from his heart, then you open up the whole experience of being a comprehensive man." (Jason cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 25:10-21).

From above dialogues, it is clear that, the podcast interrogates rigid masculinity norms and looks at how strength is associated with emotional suppression which links to themes raised by scholar Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel. Connell's 'hegemonic masculinity' idea denotes that dominant masculine traits are socially manufactured and restored by institutions, mass media, and that of society in the medium. Social, historical, and economic contexts are, similarly, the subject of Kimmel's view on masculinity. These frameworks stress, on the other hand, that masculinity is not a personal quality but a social construct formed by issues this kind as race, course, and historic moment. Even though cultural norms stipulate behaviors and inform identities, the podcast brings this colorful standpoint to emotional suppression and strength as central to masculinity, by looking at how scholars have argued about them. Nevertheless, there are moments where the podcast goes into more personal strokes, to the point of dismissing the structural and socio-economic conditions that mold masculinity. The examination can ignore the larger social forces that uphold such norm, by narrowing solely on personal emotional problems or particular conflicts of emotional suppression. The issue of masculinity is not only a personal issue; there is no masculinity outside of social structures such as capitalism, patriarchy, and media representation. Larger systems exacerbate the pressures they put on men to live up to conventional standards of strength and emotional control. It would do a deeper analysis to relate personal experiences to these broader cultural and institutional realities and demonstrate how masculinity becomes both an individual and structural phenomenon. In omitting these forces, the discussion may overlook the more fundamental social transformation that would change and redefine a static masculinity.

2. Emotional Vulnerability and Masculinity

In Episode 3, Jason shares a personal realization, stating that boys do not necessarily need stricter discipline, but rather more emotional support and understanding. He notes, "I quickly discovered that our boys didn't need more discipline; they needed more love." (Jason cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 29:10-14).

From Episode 5, Jamie's reflections on his father's rigid, traditional upbringing highlight how masculinity is often defined by emotional suppression. He recalls, "You're always second-guessing if you do the right choice... my dad had a very macho upbringing, and there was no mental health... it just didn't exist." (Jamie cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 31:25). He further added, "It took me a long time to understand the trauma... it was like being an experiment for my father." (Jamie cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 47:55-58)

In the same episode, Jamie further reflects on these challenges when he shares, "Everything comes back to understanding the root of our feelings... allowing ourselves to express emotions is crucial." (Jamie cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 50:15), followed by "That's what we need—compassion and understanding as we navigate our journeys of masculinity." (Justin cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 50:19-23)

The same theme is reflected in Justin's dialogue in Episode 6, when he says, "We've been conditioned to not let anything out, oftentimes holding back feelings that need to be expressed, impacting our relationships." (Justin cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 17:30-34)

In the end, the discussion of the podcast that supports the emotional vulnerability in men implies a very crucial thing when it comes to unconstructing the culturally constructed norms of masculinity and therefore conveying the men to be more open in expressing emotions. While this analysis does take place, it usually neglects the power of societal pressures – still dominant in workplaces and in cultural environments where vulnerability is seen as a weakness — especially

regarding men. This aligns with Gilligan's (1982) argument that emotional connection is essential for holistic gender development, as well as Pleck's (2010) research on emotional intelligence in men, which highlights its role in improving mental well-being and interpersonal relationships.

However, it is still expected in many professional and social contexts that men suppress their emotions and don't display them in any way, associating emotional control with professionalism and strength. These pressures add to the belief that emotional openness goes against the grain for men that being vulnerable could get in the way of their success or social standing. While emotional vulnerability is a valuable and necessary aspect of mental health, cultural and institutional settings that discourage it require recognition and intervention for this change to be fully understood. And, in addition, the analysis of the podcast is deeply founded on the western experiences of masculinity, which could potentially silence the many global experiences of men across the spectrum of their cultural and socio economic backgrounds. Throughout many of the non-Western societies, masculinity has been molded along with specific cultural norms, family structures and historical factors which can be disengaged with the Western thought relating to emotional vulnerability as the solution. For instance, in some regions collectivist cultures may give more significance to communal duties and self-support with least adequate space for public emotional expression. These cultural variations demonstrate that the challenge men face in expressing emotions is not as simple as living in a society that does not regard displaying emotions from a man in a positive light. This would require expansion of the conversation of the podcast covering the Western-centric view on the conceptions of masculinity and emotional vulnerability, and the ways in which culture and country affect the formations and expression of masculinity.

3. Redefining Strength

A recurring theme in *The Man Enough Podcast* is the need to redefine masculinity by challenging traditional norms that discourage emotional expression and self-awareness in men. Building on this discussion, Episode 5 emphasizes the role of self-awareness in fostering healthier relationships and breaking free from these restrictive norms. Justin Baldoni encapsulates this idea when he states, "It's a preventative measure... the better we know ourselves, the better we can be to each other." (Justin cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 25:19-22)

Shifting perspectives on masculinity are redefining what it means to be a father, emphasizing both emotional connection and accountability. Jamie expresses this idea in Episode 7, when he says, "One of the things I'm learning as a parent is just how important it's going to be for me one day to acknowledge that I contributed to messing up my kids... that I did things unknowingly or knowingly that contributed to their suffering." (Jamie cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 29:10-15).

Here the podcast redefines strength, as not just dominance, but emotional resilience, empathy and compassion, where masculinity is redefined as more nurturing, empathetic, emotionally aware forms of strength. This aligns with newer masculinity studies, such as Flood (2019), which call for redefining masculine strength beyond aggression and control. Placing the focus on this shift can actually help men to adopt traits such as empathy, care, and vulnerability which are hardly seen as things that real men do despite these being traits that often underpin the greatest leaders. Although this is a pivotal and major shift, the podcast seems to assume that much of what comes with a redefinition of this kind will remain behind. It is crucial to change the definition of strength within men as individuals; however, without touching the larger systems that hold up dominant ideals of masculinity such as media, society and workplace norms, we'll find it hard to give the redefined concept of strength a place to stand. In a system that has not collectively changed in so many

realms, these new ideas may isolate and have less impact because norms of men in various realms of life embedded in the system still shape and expect them to behave in certain ways. The roles both women and men play in supporting or battling typical gender norm, too, aren't really fleshed out within the podcast. Though it is obvious men are typically on the subject when talking of masculinity, both genders fuel the carrying on of gender roles. For instance, women too, although unknowingly or knowingly, can contribute to continue the traditional definition of manliness by projecting certain expectation on men to fulfill certain roles such as being the family breadwinner or the family protector among others. Likewise, men pass on these norms by peer pressure or are socialized that way in traditionally male spaces. In order to make real and lasting change, it is important to understand that neither gender norms nor gender targeted programming are based on what one gender does and what the other one does not; it is the outcome of complex interactions between men, women, and societal structures. For this reason, it is necessary for both men and women to be actively involved in the deconstruction of such norms that would allow more inclusive, and egalitarian versions of strength and masculinity to be expressed.

4. Discussing Male involvement in gender justice (Feminism and Allyship)

Many episodes explore how men can actively participate in feminist discourse, particularly in relation to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

The idea of gender justice is reflected in Episode 3, when Jason's statement questions the conventional definition of manhood, arguing that men should embrace emotional openness rather than being confined to strength, boldness, and aggression. He says, "When you take a man from only living in masculine attributes such as strength, boldness, and aggression, and allow him to live from his heart, then you open up the whole experience of being a comprehensive man." (Jason cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 25:10-21).

In contemporary discussions on gender roles and societal expectations, traditional norms have long dictated how men and women should behave in relationships and power structures. Justin Baldoni reflects on this dynamic, stating:

I think many men want a woman who is untamed until they meet a woman who is untamed .and I've heard many times from women how a man can feel emasculated by something that's not emasculating. Or can feel less than in the presence of a powerful woman. Sort of this is why I'm madly in love with my wife. But we are conditioned many be because of patriarchy –to handle a powerful untamed woman. (Justin cited in Baldoni, Plank, & Heath, 2025, 59:20-60:00)

While oversimplifying allyship and failing to account for the challenging tightrope of men's take on an active role in creation of gender justice and distinctions between advocacy and the need to listen and learn (sympathetic to the unique valuation and jeopardy that men and men's needs may be placed in an enlightened system). It still largely keeps the Western perspective and ignores global feminist movements. The podcast highlights non-binary and transgender experiences, this is in keeping with Butler's gender performativity theory. It does not, however, delve much deeper in examining structural barriers (such as those dealing with legal recognition and workplace discrimination) or walk away from scrutinizing how non Western cultures define gender going beyond the binary. This aligns with research on allyship and feminist men's studies (Messner, 2016), which stresses that true allyship requires not just passive support but a deep commitment to self-reflection and meaningful action.

Linguistic and Narrative Strategies

1. Incorporating Personal Narratives — Podcasts, by nature, rely on personal storytelling to captivate listeners, drawing them into the emotional depth of the narratives presented. *The Man Enough* podcast uses this technique effectively, making gender issues feel more human and less abstract. This aligns with feminist discourse strategies that recognize lived experiences as valid and essential sources of knowledge (Harding, 1991). Having more personal narratives incorporated into the issues of gender makes them more accessible and relatable. Yet those experiences can sometimes take precedence over the structural inequalities that underpin them.

2. Self-Reflections: One of the most engaging aspects of *The Man Enough* podcast is its use of self-reflective questioning, where hosts and guests critically assess their own gendered behaviors and beliefs. This process aligns with Fairclough's (1999) idea of critical language analysis, which highlights how language is not just a means of communication but also a tool for questioning and reshaping social structures. By openly discussing their personal experiences and challenging their own assumptions, the participants create a space for growth and transformation. The hosts and guests question, self-reflect, about gender norms. However, the depth of these discussions is often confined to itself as they do not have direct connections with the wider sets of societal structures, which foster gender disparity.

3. Use of exclusive and affirmative language: The use of gender-inclusive and affirmative language is a defining feature of *The Man Enough* podcast, shaping its progressive stance on masculinity and gender equality. The podcast uses inclusive and affirmative language to facilitate an open back and forth. This approach is pro engagement, but sometimes avoids engaging in conversation about power dynamics and systemic inequality directly. Change brought on by language alone cannot be brought about without concrete action as well. As a whole, the podcast fundamentally brings about a change in the way people talk about masculinity. Nevertheless, taking an intersectional, systemic and globally inclusive view would reinforce its force. This aligns with Sullivan's (2001) findings on how language can both reinforce and challenge gender ideologies. By choosing words that invite reflection rather than defensiveness, the podcast fosters an open space for discussion, making it more likely that listeners will engage with difficult topics rather than dismiss them outright. This approach is particularly effective in encouraging men to critically examine their roles in gender dynamics without feeling personally attacked, which is crucial for meaningful dialogue.

The findings illustrate the recurring themes surrounding masculinity, showing how societal expectations shape male identity across different contexts. A central pattern emerges: masculinity is often defined through emotional suppression, rigid gender roles, and expectations of strength and dominance. While several episodes acknowledge these pressures, they rarely offer concrete alternatives, reinforcing traditional narratives rather than challenging them. The discussions reveal how men are positioned as protectors, while emotional vulnerability is stigmatized, limiting their ability to express a full range of emotions. This reinforces broader power structures that affect both men and women. To move forward, conversations around masculinity must go beyond identifying these issues and actively reshape narratives through education, representation, and social discourse—promoting a more balanced and emotionally open understanding of what it means to be a man.

Conclusion

This research critically explores the relationship between *The Man Enough* podcast and feminist ideals, and how masculinity is presented in the podcast via linguistic and narrative mechanisms. The research then uses Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) in association with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis to detect key patterns in the discourses that both challenge as well as sometimes reinforce dominant gender ideologies. The study found that the podcast became a new way for storytelling, and a new way of creating inclusive language and interactive dialogues that redefine traditional masculinity that is based on emotional vulnerability, self-reflection, and gender equality. Yet, even on gender topics, the podcast remains focused on men's voices, and rarely engages with intersectional feminism, especially in terms of race, class, or the LGBTQ+ identity. The study locates this analysis in feminist linguistics in order to reveal how digital media is in process of transforming the way gender is discoursed. The importance of intersectionality in how gender is represented in the media is stressed and in support of representations that include systemic not just personal transformation.

Building on these findings, several key recommendations can be proposed. Future research should expand its focus beyond a single podcast and explore a wider range of digital platforms to assess how gender discourse varies across different media formats. Additionally, incorporating audience perspectives could offer deeper insights into how digital gender narratives are received, interpreted, and potentially reshaped by diverse listeners.

These insights are practical to media professionals, educators and policymakers about the necessity for gender sensitive communication and media literacy that is critical to mould public perception. Research into these sites should look beyond Twitter and into other online properties that are used to create gender narratives, and should work to discover audience perspectives on these sites in order to gain a deeper understanding of particular gender narratives and their interpretation. Digital media as a tool for talking about gender equity and social justice can be to an even greater extent made to serve its purpose by promoting interaction among content creators, educators and gender advocates.

In conclusion, *The Man Enough* podcast represents a significant yet evolving site of gender discourse, where masculinity is both questioned and redefined. While it offers a progressive narrative on men's roles in gender equity, its approach would benefit from deeper structural critiques and greater intersectional engagement. By continuing to analyze and challenge the linguistic and narrative strategies used in such media spaces, future research can further contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender justice and social transformation.

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