

Conformity to Masculine Norms and Belonging as Predictors of Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior Among Filipino Young Adults

^{1,2}**Lowel L. Urian, and ¹Maria Lourdes Quisumbing-Baybay**

¹**Miriam College, Katipunan Ave., Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Philippines**

²**University of Santo Tomas, España Blvd., Sampaloc, Manila City, Philippines**

Corresponding author: Lowel L. Urian, email: ll.elurian@gmail.com

Abstract

This quantitative study investigated mental health help-seeking behavior among Filipino young adults, focusing on the influence of conformity to masculine norms and belonging as determinants. Recognizing that seeking mental health support is influenced by various factors, the study aimed to determine the extent to which these two distinct constructs predict the likelihood of Filipino young adults accessing mental health services. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify which of these two variables, conformity to masculine norms and belonging, emerges as the stronger predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior within the specific population. With Multiple Linear Regression Analysis, the study found that both were significant predictors of mental health help-seeking behavior. However, when individually examined, it indicated that only conformity to masculine norms was a significant predictor of the outcome variable. The results of the study can support the development of interventions addressing the problems faced by young Filipino adults against the threats of gender roles.

Keywords: Assistance-seeking, Gender Roles, Psychological Distress, Psychological Well-being, Sense of Connection

Introduction

Various factors affecting men's attitudes toward seeking mental health support have been identified, including conformity to masculine norms and belonging. Existing studies have shown that conformity to masculine norms can negatively impact men's willingness to seek help (Atip et al., 2023; Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020; Ford & Keane, 2024; Loganathan & Foo, 2019). Regarding belonging, it has been suggested that men's help-seeking behavior increases as their sense of connection within a social group strengthens (Sithaldeen et al., 2022).

With a focus on men's mental health and its promotion, the study aimed to investigate the relationship between conformity to masculine norms, belonging, and mental health help-seeking behavior among Filipino young adults. Furthermore, the study would look at the variables in a collectivist society that contribute to a more culturally inclusive understanding of the factors influencing mental health help-seeking behavior. Ultimately, the findings could serve as an empirical basis for designing programs that target the challenges faced by young Filipino adults in the context of gender-based issues.

Conformity to Masculine Norms

Conformity to masculine norms, defined as "meeting societal expectations for what constitutes masculinity in one's public or private life," contributes to men's mental health. Studies indicate that men tend to conform to traditional masculine norms due to the pressure they face from various sources, including other men, women, and society as a whole (Mahalik et al., 2003; Iacoviello et al., 2022).

Men are afraid of being perceived as feminine, hence opting to construct an identity that opposes femininity, reinforcing discriminatory gender stereotypes in the process. This fear, strengthened by societal pressure to conform to masculine norms, emphasizes self-reliance and restricts emotional expression, downplaying feminine behavior to maintain the status of being the primary provider and foundation for their

families (Nagai, 2024; Staiger et al., 2020; Mahalik & Dagirmanjian, 2019). Men who fail to satisfy these norms are more likely to experience problematic internalizing emotions and distress (Mashele et al., 2024). Furthermore, men who face pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms show diminished motivation in goal pursuit, and decreased autonomy, competence, and relatedness are observed (Cole et al., 2019).

Belonging

Belonging is the sense of unity within a group, a fundamental human need characterized by deep connections with others with whom one shares collective experiences (Tajfel & Turner, 1978). A sense of belonging is predictive of improved mental health, enhanced interpersonal engagement, and increased academic success in students. Hence, individuals who exhibit an increased sense of belonging are more likely to experience lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Cooney, 2022; Allen et al., 2021). Gopalan and Brady (2019) further emphasized that belonging is associated with persistence, suggesting its significant contribution to wellbeing.

Furthermore, belonging is conceptualized as a feeling rather than a cognitive process, and it remains in the underlying mechanics of experiences unless explicitly brought to the forefront of being (Wilde, 2022). It is also proposed that belonging comprises one's competency to exhibit the skills needed to connect with others and develop a sense of identity, as well as opportunities such as events or places that can facilitate connections, and motivation, or the desire to form connections. Perception is also a factor associated with belonging, specifically when one has a positive personal evaluation of their experiences with other people, a sense of belonging can be felt (Allen et al., 2021).

Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior

Mental health help-seeking behavior is related to the actions an individual engages in to obtain appropriate assistance when faced with

mental health concerns. This behavior is observed to be influenced by many factors, including personality characteristics, social stigmas, and cultural barriers (McLaren et al., 2023). A significant barrier in mental health help-seeking behavior is the stigma connected with mental health-related topics. People fear the judgment and discrimination they might receive by seeking help, which affects their behavior. Additionally, cultural factors also come into play since some cultures view help-seeking as a sign of weakness (Aguirre Velasco, 2020).

Furthermore, key characteristics have been identified in relation to mental health help-seeking behavior. First, it is a multidimensional process that involves awareness of needing assistance, recognizing possible resources that can help with coping, and overcoming barriers to actually engage in help-seeking behaviors. Second, the behavior is suggested to be rooted in cultural norms, and third, the decision to seek help is ultimately influenced by social factors, such as access to resources, support from family and friends, and stigma surrounding mental health care (Doll et al., 2021; Cornally, 2011).

Conformity to Masculine Norms, Belonging, and Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior

Previous studies have constantly indicated that conformity to masculine norms significantly predicts mental health help-seeking behavior among men (Atip et al., 2023; Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020; Ford & Keane, 2024; Loganathan & Foo, 2019; Wong et al., 2018). Conformity to male gender norms is negatively associated with help-seeking because it instigates the fear of being viewed as weak or feminine, discouraging the said behavior. Moreover, by conforming to masculine norms, men avoid feminine practices such as expressing emotional vulnerability or seeking emotional support, hindering their willingness to seek help. Hence, young men often perceive seeking help as an indicator of fragility and a threat to their masculinity (Sheik et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2023; Mahalik & Dagirmanjian, 2019).

Socialization experience also impacts help-seeking. Traditionally, men are expected by others to be independent and self-reliant, capable of solving their own problems, which can undermine their willingness to seek help when faced with distressing situations actively. Furthermore, men may be aware that they need assistance; however, because they are led to believe that seeking help is a sign of weakness and a defiance of masculinity, they may be discouraged from doing so, further creating a state of psychological discomfort (Ezeugwu & Ojedokun, 2020). As Ford & Keane (2024) also concluded, the fear of stigma from socially imposed masculine ideals further impedes help-seeking. Related to this, the cultural expectation of self-independence among men often results in conformity with masculine norms, exacerbating the challenges related to mental health help-seeking. This is further observed through the internalization of rigid male gender norms, which results in the discrediting of the need to seek help (Mashele et al., 2024; Scott, 2018). Examining the concept of belonging, previous studies suggest that it serves as a key predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior, indicating that people who feel more connected to their communities and peers are more likely to seek help when they are struggling (Sithaldeen et al., 2022). Belonging fosters the belief that people are not alone when faced with challenging situations and that others can offer support and understanding to help them navigate these difficulties. Furthermore, belonging helps people communicate their needs for wellbeing. Hence, a sense of belonging can provide confidence in engaging in mental health help-seeking behaviors (Omiya et al., 2023).

Belonging can also influence the type of help-seeking behavior individuals engage in. Regarding formal mental health support, studies have shown a favorable association between a sense of belonging and help-seeking, and people with a stronger sense of belonging are more likely to seek professional help when facing personal or emotional challenges (Harris, 2023). Individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds, on the other hand, are leaning towards informal mental health support coming from family and friends (Bryan et al., 2022). Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2021) found that individuals will also most likely seek informal

mental health support when faced with predicaments, given that they feel they belong. Still, in relation to belonging, cultural norms and beliefs play a significant role in mental health help-seeking behavior, influencing whether a particular community member prefers formal or informal mental health support (Byrow et al., 2020; Chatmon, 2020).

Research Gaps

Less is known about the relationship between conformity to masculine norms, belonging, and mental health help-seeking behavior in a collectivist society compared to Western, individualist cultures (Piatkowski et al., 2024; Ford & Keane, 2024). Also, the susceptibility of men to mental health concerns has been on a constant increase (Mahalilk & Dagirmanjian, 2019), calling for further research addressing such concerns. Hence, in response to these gaps, the study looked at the influence of conformity to masculine norms and belonging on the mental health help-seeking behavior of young Filipino men. Unlike previous research, this study explored the interrelated effects of the predictive variables to provide more appropriate findings related to men's help-seeking behavior in a Filipino, collectivist context.

The Current Study

The study examined the relationship between conformity to masculine norms, sense of belonging, and mental health help-seeking behavior among young Filipino adults. It is hypothesized that conformity to masculine norms and belonging predict mental health help-seeking behavior within the concerned population, with conformity serving as a stronger predictor. Along with this hypothesis, the following questions are posed:

1. Can conformity to masculine norms and belonging predict mental health help-seeking behavior among Filipino young adults?
2. What is the stronger predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior among Filipino young adults?

Materials and Methods

Study Design

The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design. A descriptive design was employed to investigate the characteristics of young Filipino adults, with a focus on their levels of conformity to masculine norms, sense of belonging, and mental health help-seeking behavior. A correlational design was utilized to investigate the relationship between these variables. Specifically, multiple linear regression analysis was utilized to determine whether conformity to masculine norms and belonging were predictive of mental health help-seeking behavior.

Population and Sample

Using G*Power for a priori analysis, it was indicated that at least $N = 124$ was needed to attain 80% power for detecting an effect size of 0.08 at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ in a multiple linear regression analysis. While an effect size of 0.15 is already conventionally considered a medium effect, indicating a relevant interpretation of the estimated magnitude of an effect (Wall Emerson, 2023; Nakagawa & Cuthill, 2007), the researchers aimed to achieve a more substantial effect size of 0.08. Furthermore, convenience sampling was used, and to ensure the relevance of participants to the research objective, the following inclusion criteria were considered: (1) must be between the ages of 19 and 40, (2) must at least be a Senior High School graduate, (3) must identify as cisgender men, (4) must be a Filipino citizen and (5) must currently reside in the Philippines. Participants are also recruited through social media platforms.

In total, 164 participants, aged 19 to 29 ($M = 22$, $SD = 2.84$), were involved in the study, exceeding the needed sample size. Seventy-eight percent of the participants were currently enrolled undergraduate students, 19.7% were college graduates, 1.7% were Senior High School graduates, and only 0.6% were currently enrolled graduate students. Overall, 80.3% of the participants are unemployed, 19.7% are employed, and all were single.

Instrumentation

The study employed three validated psychological instruments to assess the variables of interest: the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-30, the General Belongingness Scale, and the Mental Health Seeking Attitude Scale.

- **Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-30 (CMNI-30)**

According to Levant et al. (2020), the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-30 (CMNI-30) measures men's adherence to traditional masculine norms. Through factor analysis, it is established that the inventory has established psychometric properties and measures specific masculine norms rather than a general construct of masculinity. Furthermore, Rubrico et al. (2023) employed the scale in a research study with sample characteristics similar to those of this study, thereby supporting its suitability.

- **General Belongingness Scale (GBS)**

The General Belongingness Scale (GBS) is a psychometrically valid instrument that measures a sense of belonging developed by Malone et al. (2012). The scale exhibited high reliability and convergent validity with other existing scales of belonging, revealing incremental validity in predicting life satisfaction and happiness. Factor analysis indicates that the scale consists of acceptance/inclusion and rejection/exclusion.

- **Mental Health Seeking Attitude Scale (MHSAS)**

The Mental Health Seeking Attitude Scale (MHSAS) was developed by Hammer et al. (2018) to assess attitudes toward seeking mental health help. It demonstrates strong internal consistency, supported by its unidimensional structure, which was identified through factor analysis. The scale also demonstrated convergent validity when correlated with existing prior instruments measuring help-seeking behavior and attitudes.

Data Analysis

Given the study's focus on multiple independent variables influencing a single dependent variable, multiple linear regression is utilized. As explained by Tranmer and Elliot (2008), multiple linear regression is particularly well-suited for analyzing the effects of multiple explanatory variables in a study, making it appropriate for the current study. Jamovi was utilized as the statistical software for data analysis.

Results and Discussion

To ensure the appropriateness of multiple linear regression, assumptions were tested. The normality of the predictor variables and the outcome variable was assessed. Skewness and kurtosis values for all three variables were within the allowable range of -2 to +2, indicating normality. Outliers were also identified in all three variables (See Table 1). There were two outliers in the distribution of conformity to masculine norms, three in the distribution of belonging, and seven in the distribution of mental health help-seeking behavior. Upon inspecting box plots and histograms, the outliers were deemed not to have a significant impact on the analysis and were retained.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Conformity to Masculine Norms, Belonging, and Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior.

	Conformity to Masculine Norms	Belonging	Mental Health Help-Seeking Behavior
N	164	164	164
Mean	112	59.3	37.1
Standard Deviation	13.3	5.78	6.22
Skewness	-0.51	-0.60	1.12
Std. Error of Skewness	0.19	0.19	0.19
Kurtosis	0.39	0.84	1.27
Std. Error of Kurtosis	0.38	0.38	0.38

Furthermore, scatterplots were used to visualize the relationships between the variables, and the relationships appeared linear with no concerns about heteroscedasticity. Additionally, the residuals were approximately normally distributed. The correlation between the predictor variables was examined, and no significant multicollinearity was detected, as indicated by a variance inflation factor (VIF) of 1.06 and a tolerance value of 0.94. Furthermore, a Durbin-Watson test was conducted to assess the independence of errors, and the obtained value of 1.50 suggests that the assumption of independence was met.

Using multiple regression, it was examined how conformity to masculine norms and belonging affected mental health help-seeking behavior. It was found that, together, these two predictors account for a considerable amount of variance in the outcome variable, $F(2, 161) = 31.70, p < .001$. Furthermore, the predictors explained 28.00% of the variance in mental health help-seeking behavior (See Table 2). Hence, conformity to masculine norms and belonging were significant predictors of mental health help-seeking behavior when both were taken into consideration, answering the first research question.

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Model Fit Measures.

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	Overall Model Test		
					df1	df2	P
1	0.53	0.28	0.27	31.79	2	161	<0.001

Considering conformity to masculine norms and belonging, the findings suggest that men are hesitant to seek help because they are concerned about the possibility of experiencing isolation for not conforming to these norms, which supports the findings of Staiger et al. (2020). As Wright et al. (2023) also suggested, peer relationships can influence perceptions of help-seeking as a behavior that violates existing masculine norms.

Furthermore, young Filipino adults may be reluctant to seek mental health support because it conflicts with their definition of masculinity. They may value being seen as belonging to a "masculine group," leading to reluctance to seek psychological help due to adherence to traditional gender roles. Men constrained by male gender roles may hesitate to open up emotionally to others due to societal norms that dictate self-reliance and problem-solving. Hence, seeking help could be perceived as contradicting the ideal of "machismo" within male culture, as supported by the studies of Heath (2019), Loganathan & Foo (2019), and Mahalik and Dagirmanjian (2019).

Similarly, men's fear of being perceived as feminine leads them to construct their identity in opposition to women, often by avoiding behaviors perceived as feminine. As Mahalik & Dagirmanjian (2019) reported, this conformity to masculine ideals can hinder their willingness to seek help. Therefore, the desire for Filipino young adults to belong is connected with conformity to masculine norms, affecting their mental health help-seeking behavior. While belonging may be a positive factor, it can reinforce traditional masculine norms and discourage help-seeking behaviors among young men who fear social rejection.

Upon examining the predictors individually, conformity to masculine norms was found to be a significant positive predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior ($\beta = 0.24$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(161) = 7.60$, $p < .001$). In contrast, belonging was not a significant predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior ($\beta = -0.04$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(161) = -0.49$, $p = 0.62$) (See Table 3). These findings address the second research question, indicating that conformity to masculine norms is a stronger predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior among Filipino young adults.

Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Model Coefficients.

Predictor	β	SE	t	P
Intercept	66.75	4.99	13.37	<0.001
Conformity to Masculine Norms	-0.24	0.03	-7.60	<0.001
Belonging	-0.04	0.07	-0.50	0.624

Looking at the individual predictors, the predictive value of conformity to masculine norms with mental health help-seeking behavior aligns with the findings of Piatkowski et al. (2024), Aguirre Velasco et al. (2020), and Atip et al. (2023), stating that adherence to masculine norms significantly predicted negative attitudes toward seeking help for mental health issues. Higher conformity to these norms is linked to more adverse perspectives on seeking psychological support. It is also indicated that higher conformity is predicted to reduce help-seeking behavior among men. Men often perceive seeking help as a sign of weakness or a threat to their masculinity. Thus, conformity to masculine norms serves as a barrier to help-seeking for young men, further aligning with the findings of Nagai (2024), Ford and Keane (2024), Wright et al. (2023), and Herreen et al. (2021). Sheik et al. (2024) further indicated that this is often due to the stigmatization of mental health difficulties, which are seen as a "weakness".

Lastly, the result of the study shows that belonging is not a significant predictor of mental health help-seeking behavior, which contradicts the conclusions of existing studies of Harris (2023), Sithaldeen et al. (2022), and Nguyen et al. (2021), implying that men who feel they belong will be more likely to seek help. Hence, the study suggests that this cannot be generalized in the Filipino young adult population. The Filipino cultural context, characterized by a collectivist attitude and strong family ties, likely influences how young Filipino adults react to mental health challenges. In support of this, Bryan et al. (2022), Byrow et al. (2020), and Chatmon (2020) state that collectivist individuals are more likely to seek informal help from close family members and friends, illustrating how culture influences help-seeking behavior.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, it can be inferred that together, conformity to masculine norms and belonging predict mental health help-seeking behavior. However, when considered individually, conformity to masculine norms emerges as the stronger predictor, while belonging does not. These suggest that as Filipino young adults increasingly conform to actions, thoughts, and feelings that reflect masculine norms, they are not likely to seek support from mental health professionals. Conversely, belonging does not appear to significantly influence Filipino young adults' tendency to seek mental health support. With these, it can be implied that, regardless of social connectedness, Filipino young adults show resistance to seeking assistance even when facing mental health concerns.

The study's findings have significant recommendations for understanding and addressing mental health help-seeking behavior. To support the help-seeking behaviors of young Filipino men, it is vital to challenge gender stereotypes and facilitate open discussions about mental health. Additionally, we advocate for further research aimed at addressing the mental health help-seeking behavior of Filipino young adults, and future research could look into the long-term effects of gender norms and stereotypes.

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