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## "That's a Man:" How Trans Men in the South Bolster Their Claims to Manhood

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“THAT’S A MAN:” HOW TRANS MEN IN THE SOUTH BOLSTER THEIR CLAIMS TO  
MANHOOD

by

MEGAN Y. PHILLIPS

(Under the Direction of Baker A. Rogers)

ABSTRACT

While several studies have explored manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts in cisgender men (Ezzell 2012; Sumerau 2012), few have examined them in the trans community. This research fills gaps in the literature by examining an understudied population in the South, an area of the country where queer lives are often ignored. Additionally, it allows us to continue to separate masculinities from only those born with male bodies. Using 51 interviews with trans men, I examine the experiences of trans men in the South and the manhood acts they employ to enhance their masculinity and compensate for their presumed lack of biological maleness (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). The findings suggest that the trans men of this study utilize a variety of manhood acts in order to bolster their masculinity. Whether by changing their body image and presentation, becoming a member of a brotherhood, participating in sexism, or understanding the way that violence or the fear of violence affects their performances of masculinities, the participants in this study sculpt their identities as men after their own individual conceptions of what it means to be a man and what that looks like to them.

INDEX WORDS: Trans men, Manhood acts, Compensatory manhood acts, Masculinities

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## DEDICATION

*To my parents, without whom this journey would not have been possible.*

*We may have our differences, but your love and support mean the world to me.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

Over 1.4 million adults in the United States are estimated to identify as trans, and over 500,000 of those are estimated to live in the South (Flores et al. 2016). While trans visibility is increasing in society, sociological research on the population remains sparse (Catalano 2017; Wentling et al. 2008). Additionally, within the trans community, trans men, especially those in the American South and rural areas, are underrepresented in research (Rogers 2018; Stone 2018). In masculinities research, trans men are even less represented, with few researchers (Abelson 2016; Rogers 2018) examining how they experience masculinity. This is an important gap because conceptions of masculinity vary based on geographic location. Southern gender presentations of masculinities show increased ruggedness—including physical appearances, such as facial hair and clothing choice, and choice of hobbies, such as outdoor activities like hunting and fishing—anti-feminist sentiment, and general conservatism—such as supporting Christian values and individual liberty—compared to other areas of the United States (Friend 2009).

Masculinities have traditionally been associated with male bodies (Pascoe and Bridges 2016), assuming that to be masculine, one must be biologically assigned male at birth. Using 51 phone interviews with trans men, I explore the experiences of trans men in the South and the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts they employ to enhance their masculinities and compensate for their presumed lack of biological maleness (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Manhood acts are those actions that are performed to be read by others as men, and which also create and reinforce the gender hierarchy. Compensatory manhood acts are the acts performed by men to compensate for their inability or unwillingness to embody the hegemonic, or ideal, form

of masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). While several studies have explored compensatory manhood acts in cisgender men (see Ezzell 2012; Sumerau 2012), few have examined them in the trans community. This research fills gaps in the literature by examining an understudied population in an area of the country where society often ignores queer lives. Additionally, it allows us to continue to separate masculinities from only male-bodies and examine it in all of its manifestations.

### Background

In the 2010s, the United States saw a wave of trans visibility. Openly trans celebrities have become household names, such as Chaz Bono, Laverne Cox, or Caitlyn Jenner, and television networks began picking up trans-related shows (e.g., *I am Jazz*; *Lost in Transition*; *Transparent*). The terms ‘transgender,’ as well as awareness of trans issues, have gained momentum after decades of activism (Stryker 2017). Transgender, or trans, is often used as an umbrella term that includes a spectrum of identities for individuals whose gender identities do not match their assigned sex at birth (Stein 2018). Stryker (2017:1) uses the term to describe people who “move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.” Stryker (2017) includes in this description not only people who believe that they belong to another gender identity but those who choose to challenge conventional gender norms and binary identities as well. Though the terms transgender and trans are often used interchangeably, moving forward, I use ‘trans’ for uniformity, unless quoted as otherwise. In this study, my focus is on trans men’s experiences with masculinities.

While many still do not understand the broad spectrum that the term trans represents, they may have a general idea of what it means. Thanks to special media coverage of celebrity

transitions<sup>1</sup>, educational biopics like National Geographic's *Gender Revolution: A Journey with Katie Couric*, or CBSN's documentary *Gender / The Space Between*, information about trans issues is more present than ever. Only a couple of decades ago there were not even estimates for how many trans people were in the United States; now studies suggest there are millions of Americans who identify as trans, though this number only reflects the estimated number of adults and does not include minors (Flores et al. 2016; Nowakowski, Sumerau and Mathers 2016; Schilt and Lagos 2017). The Pew Research Center (2013) conducted a survey about LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) experiences and reported that the LGBT community, as a whole, has experienced more acceptance within U.S. society within the previous decade. Using that survey data, Brown (2017) notes that a potential side effect of increased acceptance is that more people are now willing to openly identify as LGBT in surveys. The Pew Research Center acknowledged that trans respondents made up a small percentage of the responses but included them in the analysis. With this recent wave of information about and acknowledgment of trans lives, it is expected that younger Americans are more likely to feel comfortable openly identifying as trans in the future (Flores et al. 2016; Stryker 2017). While the trans population as a whole has gained visibility and acknowledgment, much of the attention has focused on trans people who were assigned male at birth and now identify as women. Trans men, individuals who were assigned female at birth and now identify as men, and other gender non-binary people have been less represented, not only in mass media but in research as well.

While the wave of media coverage of trans issues is more recent, academic studies of the trans experience have a much longer standing; yet there remain many gaps in this research. Trans

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<sup>1</sup> Transition refers the social, physical and behavioral processes through which a trans person begins living life as the gender that they identify as. This can include coming out as trans/living openly as their gender identity (social) and using hormones and/or surgery to change their physical appearance.

studies are fundamentally interdisciplinary, influenced by sociological, feminist, masculinities, and queer theory (Schilt and Lagos 2017), to name a few. From the 1960s until the 1990s, sociological research focused on the trans experience as gender deviance; since the 1990s, the focus has shifted to gender difference (Schilt and Lagos 2017). The goal of the gender deviance model was to position trans people as “the *objects* of study,” where the goal of gender difference is to position them as “the *subjects* of study” (Schilt and Lagos 2017:426). Gender difference takes a more qualitative focus and values the experiences of individual trans people’s lives in their own right, rather than trying to medically diagnose transsexualism and assign trans people a “collective group identity” (Schilt and Lagos 2017:426). Though some people still identify their gender as transsexual, the term is largely outdated (Stryker 2017; Teich 2012).<sup>2</sup> Research in trans studies is increasing, but there are many aspects of trans experiences that have yet to be studied.

While this study is not meant to be representative of all trans men in the United States, or in the South, it is meant to provide qualitative insight into the performative aspects of masculinities in which the trans men take part to foster their claims to manhood. The importance of qualitative research is not in its ability to generalize but in its ability to tell the stories of individual experiences and enable researchers to find patterns in behavior and experiences. Through these experiences, we are better able to understand how individuals make sense of everyday life (Moore 2018), and in the context of this research, how they attach meaning to manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts.

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<sup>2</sup> Stryker (2017:38) explains that, though transsexual and transgender are often used interchangeably, continued use of the term transsexual refers to “those trans identities, practices, and desires that require interacting with medical institutions or with legal bureaucracies, in contrast to those trans practices that don’t.” Teich (2012) separates the terms transgender and transsexual by explaining that all transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To address the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts of trans men in the South, I draw on literature from several existing disciplines, including sex and gender studies, masculinities, studies on southern and rural masculinities, and trans studies. My goals with this research are 1) to explore the experiences of trans men in the South and the manhood acts they employ to enhance their masculinities and compensate for their presumed lack of biological maleness; 2) to fill the gap in the literature by examining an understudied population in an area of the country where society often ignores queer lives; and 3) to continue to separate masculinities from only those born with male-bodies. To address these goals, I utilized the following concepts and fields of research. First, the reader must understand the difference between gender and sex, as well as how gender is accomplished. The experiences of trans people offer unique and valuable insights into how gender operates, or how we perform gender. Masculinities research helps researchers understand the importance of gender in social power dynamics—how people gain and lose power over others—and how manhood acts contribute to gender inequality. Examining existing trans masculinities research helped identify the gaps in the literature that this study seeks to fill. Finally, compensatory manhood acts are explained as the various performed acts that individuals use to bolster their masculinity and claims to manhood.

#### Gender & Sex

Most people in Western society view gender and sex as interchangeable terms that represent categories that are indisputably tied to inherent biological differences (Fenstermaker and West 2002; Dozier 2005). However, in social science, we seek to differentiate sex and gender as separate characteristics. Though simplified, sex is biological and based on visible,

physical characteristics at birth (i.e., genitals, hormones, and chromosomes), whereas gender is an identity and expression developed in social interaction within cultural contexts (Stein 2018). Stein (2018) cautions that gender is also a social construction that is assigned, not a biological trait that people are born with. In the U.S. today, terms most often used to describe sex include male, female, and intersex, and terms most often used to describe gender include man, woman, trans, and many other identities that make up the greater trans category, such as genderqueer, non-binary, and gender nonconforming. Most people identify as cisgender, or cis, meaning that their gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (a cis woman is a person who identifies as a woman and was assigned female at birth, a cis man is a person who identifies as a man and was assigned male at birth). However, a growing number of people are openly identifying as trans, meaning that their gender identity or expression does not align with the expectations of the sex they were assigned at birth (Simmons and White 2014). Though the number of people openly identifying as trans is increasing, it is important to note that trans people have always existed.

The term cisgender developed as a means of equalizing the social playing field for trans people; before cisgender, there was no equalizing term or marker to identify people who were not trans (Aultman 2014; Simmons and White 2014; Stryker 2017). By using cis alongside trans, societal norms that find cisgender to be natural and normal are made visible and not perpetuated (Aultman 2014; Simmons and White 2014; Stryker 2017). In the same way that white is not thought of as a race, and man is not thought of when thinking of gender, only acknowledging when someone is trans and not when someone is cis privileges and normalizes cis people and others trans people.

### *The Social Construction of Gender*

Gender is a social construct, meaning that while it has real social implications, it is not based on biology (Butler 1990; R. Connell 2016). Rather than a person being born with a gender identity that naturally aligns with their assigned biological sex, a variety of gender identities currently exist. Gender is often thought of as a spectrum; conceptualized with man and woman on either end of the spectrum, and trans identities being in between, or completely off, or beyond, the spectrum. Though someone can, to an extent, choose how they want their gender identity to be perceived by others, they are held accountable by society to maintain gender norms (stereotypical masculine and feminine ideals) (C. Connell 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987). Socialization by media, family, and peer groups, often inform individuals of a binary gender system, to which they are expected to conform (Fredricks and Eccles 2005; Stein 2018). Many trans people try to align their gender identity with their gender expression; however, there are times when identity and expression do not align.

“Doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) is a theory used in sociology to describe the phenomenon of how gender happens, that is, it is a set of cultural performances that separate women from men, and usually give men an advantage over women (Lorber 1994; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). Such performances include the roles and scripts typically assigned and taught to men and women, including the role of men being dominant leaders and the role of women being submissive people-pleasers. West and Zimmerman explain that gender is an accomplishment, which shifts gender from the individual arena to the interactional arena, meaning that rather than gender being an internal trait, it is something that emerges in social interaction and is performed in the presence of others, who, in turn, interpret



that performance as gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). West and Zimmerman (1987:126) state that “we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society.” That is to say that society dictates what gender is and whether or not individuals perform it correctly. Based on outward characteristics, or secondary sexual characteristics, such as breasts or facial hair, people are assumed to fit into a specific sex category and are then held accountable to performing gender that aligns with that sex category. West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that doing gender is unavoidable, because at an interactional and institutional level people are always being held accountable to gender norms and differences. Even if one does not try to do gender, or actively tries to *not* do gender, at the interactional and institutional level, society will still hold them accountable to gender and determine if they are doing gender in the right way.

West and Zimmerman (1987) offer one example of gender being enforced at an institutional level as sex-segregation of public restrooms. West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that even though everyone uses the restroom for the same functions, and everyone probably does not have sex-segregated restrooms at home, sex-segregated public restrooms produce gender difference where none actually exists. Thompson and Amato (2012:4) state that “each time we use a restroom, we reinforce the cultural sense that females and males are fundamentally different while simultaneously affirming our own gender identity” and that to use the ‘wrong’ restroom would likely call our gender identity into question by others.

The most apparent case of gender and sex as social constructs is trans people. Everyone does gender, but trans people make the work that goes into doing gender more apparent. Though trans people may be assigned a binary biological sex at birth, the gender that a trans person

identifies as does not align with that sex (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Stein 2018). In response to West and Zimmerman (1987), C. Connell (2010) argues that the interactional gender accomplishments of trans individuals should not be labeled as “doing gender,” but as “doing transgender.” Connell (2010:50) explains the experience of doing transgender is unique because trans people “must decide to mask or to highlight the discordance between their sex, gender, and sex category.” Because many trans individuals experience being assigned different sex categories by others before and after transition, they are more aware of the relationship between sex, sex category, and gender.

### Masculinities

Behaviors that are commonly perceived to be masculine, like aggression and violence, have often been explained as a result of “raging hormones,” testosterone specifically (Pascoe and Bridges 2016:4). Spikes of testosterone were thought to be the cause of masculine behaviors, but the opposite, that masculine behaviors cause spikes in testosterone, is more likely true (Pascoe and Bridges 2016). The argument for testosterone being the cause of masculine behaviors is one that reinforces the notion that males and females are innately different, not only biologically, but socially as well. Because testosterone is associated with male bodies and because it is believed that testosterone causes masculine behavior, which makes an individual a man, it follows that being male, for many, also means being a man. However, masculinity is more than hormone-induced behavior; it is socially produced behavior as well.

Pascoe and Bridges (2016:4) acknowledge masculinities have historically been understood as belonging to male bodies, yet they state their understanding of masculinities as something that women and trans people can also “do.” Pascoe and Bridges (2016:4) explain masculinity in simple terms as “the practices, behaviors, attitudes, sexualities, emotions,

positions, bodies, organizations, institutions, and all manner of expectations culturally associated with (though not limited to) people understood to be male.” However simple that definition may be, it is still difficult to pinpoint what masculinity *is*. In the past, many scholars failed to pay attention to masculinity or men in gender studies because of the power that men hold. There is a tendency for those with power to achieve invisibility, and with that invisibility, their power goes unchecked and unquestioned (Pascoe and Bridges 2016). Masculinity is often taken for granted and known by what it *is not* (‘not feminine,’ ‘not gay’), so to examine masculinity for what it *is* would make it visible, and therefore, question the power it grants the individuals who embody it (Pascoe and Bridges 2016).

However, masculinity is not singular—there are many ways to ‘do’ masculinities, and not all masculinities are created equal. R. Connell (2016) developed an influential theory of multiple masculinities, which helped explain gender relations. R. Connell explains that masculinity is a hierarchical system of power and domination, which benefits men in general, but some men more than others. R. Connell defines four kinds of masculinities: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized. The concept of hegemonic masculinities remains popular in masculinities research and refers to “the culturally exalted forms of masculinity—configurations that justify dominance and inequality” (Pascoe and Bridges 2016:18). In other words, hegemonic masculinity legitimizes patriarchy and inequality. Complicit masculinity refers to “configurations of masculinity that benefit from the overall subordination of women, but do not appear to be actively involved in the subordination” (Pascoe and Bridges 2016:19). An example that Pascoe and Bridges (2016) use for complicit masculinity is that of a man and woman who contribute equally to the parenting of their child, but the man receives more credit for his contributions. In that example, though the man does not try to subordinate the woman, and may even promote

equality, he still benefits from a patriarchal system. Pascoe and Bridges (2016:18) define subordinated masculinity as “configurations of masculinity with the least cultural status, power, and influence.” The example most mentioned in conjunction with subordinated masculinity is gay men, due to the belief that gay men are effeminate and emotional, qualities that are in opposition to the hegemonic ideal. Bridges and Pascoe (2016:19) explain that subordination “may include political and cultural exclusion and segregation, violence (symbolic, legal, and physical), economic discrimination and more.” Marginalized masculinity refers to configurations of masculinity that occur when gender intersects with class and race (Pascoe and Bridges 2016). An example of marginalized masculinity is that even though stereotypes of black masculinity may “shore up” some parts of hegemonic masculinity, such as with athleticism, they do not occupy the same “practical terrain” (Pascoe and Bridges 2016:19). Because masculinities have held different meanings throughout time and space, masculinities research continues to explain it as a social phenomenon.

Building off of R. Connell’s (1995) concept of multiple masculinities, other researchers have explored and named other kinds of masculinities as well (see Anderson 2008, 2010; Heath 2003). Though masculinities have historically been attached to and studied in biologically male bodies, recent scholars have expanded the field of masculinities (Halberstam 1998; Kazzyak 2012). R. Connell (1995:72) explains that masculinities are achieved “configurations of practice” that differ depending on the social setting, rather than fixed, inherent qualities (R. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Halberstam argues that because female masculinity has so widely been ignored, the inattention paid to that form of masculinity has “sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination” (1998:2). In other words, because masculinity is so commonly attached to maleness and female masculinity is often

ignored, it is harder to separate masculinity from maleness. In their study, Halberstam (1998) emphasizes the importance of studying masculinity separate from maleness, which is necessary in the study of masculinities in trans men, who were assigned female at birth based on their visible anatomy.

Most relevant to the research presented in this study is Bridges' (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities, which refers to "men's selective incorporation or performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014:246). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) specifically discuss how heterosexual white men have flexible masculinities and can appropriate aspects of marginalized and subordinated masculinities to enhance their own claims to manhood. Bridges and Pascoe (2014:253) also use the example of heterosexual men thinking that gay men gain more attention from women because they are sensitive; viewing sensitivity as a "gay" trait, the heterosexual men adopted sensitivity in certain situations where it will also garner them attention from women (e.g., getting women to sleep with them). They also explain how young white men borrow from and appropriate Black culture to "boost their masculine capital" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014:253).

Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue that even though these hybrid masculinities may change the appearance of masculinities, they do nothing to actually challenge gender hierarchy, and in some ways reinforce it. Because heterosexual white men can flexibly adopt and appropriate other cultures, they blur or mask the lines of inequality. By blurring and masking these lines, inequalities become more difficult for the appropriated groups to overcome. Abelson (2019:17) further defines hybrid masculinity as "softer and gentler hegemonic ideals" where "some subordinated or marginalized practices are taken up and incorporated into hegemonic ideals." In her study of how geography affects the experiences of trans men, Abelson (2019:6) finds that

many of the participants in her study subscribed to what she calls Goldilocks masculinity, an in-between hybrid masculinity that is “not too masculine and not too feminine or effeminate.” If examining masculinities on a spectrum with “domineering violent masculinity” on one end and “overly emotional or weak” masculinity on the other end, Goldilocks masculinity would fall somewhere in the middle (2019:27). Abelson’s participants often exhibited this form of masculinity with their emotions—they were able to exact more control over their emotions, but also knew how to be sensitive and show emotions when necessary. The common element in all masculinities, including hybrids, is that there are certain acts that can be performed or ways of behaving that can enhance one’s masculinity.

### *Manhood Acts*

Schrock and Schwalbe (2009:289) define manhood acts as “the identity work males do to claim membership in the dominant gender group, to maintain the social reality of the group, to elicit deference from others, and to maintain privileges vis-à-vis women.” They argue that though these acts may vary by time and place, all manhood acts are meant to signify a masculine self by exercising control over themselves and others, and resisting being controlled by others (Cragun and Sumerau 2017; Ezzell 2012; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Sumerau 2012). Manhood acts could take the form of accentuating larger and more muscular physiques, athleticism, sexual risk-taking and experience, homosocial or brotherly relationships and the subjugation of women, the chastisement of male presentations of femininity, and expressions of “macho” fashion (Cragun and Sumerau 2017).

In a study of aging adults’ online dating experiences, McWilliams and Barrett (2014:416) found that older men would try to establish a visage of “youthful masculinity” in their profiles, which often involved profile pictures of themselves that demonstrated “dominance in the

workplace and consumerism.” McWilliams and Barrett (2014:416) also note that the older men were “likely to adopt language or use pictures in their profiles emphasizing manhood acts demonstrating their masculine power—and establishing them as desirable partners for women.” In McWilliams and Barrett’s (2014) study, manhood acts took the form of older men curating a profile that they believed would attract women. This curation involved presenting themselves in a way that highlighted their work achievements and vitality, aspects of “middle-class masculinity” (McWilliams and Barrett 2014:428).

Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) explain that to be perceived by others as men, and therefore enjoy the benefits of manhood, one must present oneself as such through performances in interaction. Manhood acts are those actions that are performed to be read by others as men, and which also create and reinforce the gender hierarchy. While Schrock and Schwalbe focused on male-bodied people, other scholars have determined that anyone, regardless of sex, can perform “compensatory manhood acts” (Cragun and Sumerau 2017; Ezzell 2012). Compensatory manhood acts allow trans men to compensate for their lack of biological “maleness” and foster their claims to manhood and masculinity. A few researchers to date have included trans men in masculinities scholarship, examining how they perform gender and reinforce the gender hierarchy by performing masculinities (Abelson 2014, 2016; Schilt 2006).

### *Compensatory Manhood Acts*

Compensatory manhood acts refer to the exaggerated actions that signify a masculine self that enables subordinated men the eligibility to receive gender-based privilege (Ezzell 2012; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). For those who are unable, or unwilling, to embody characteristics of the hegemonic ideal, compensatory manhood acts allow them to enhance their masculinity, or be read as masculine, and gain more power in a patriarchal system. Sumerau (2012) states that

one way to compensate in a system of oppression and privilege is to imitate the hegemonic ideal. They go on to say that imitating the hegemonic ideal may require a person of a subordinated masculinity to enact or affirm “beliefs, values, characteristics, and practices of hegemonic masculinity” (2012:463). The most commonly discussed elements of manhood acts are domination and control—usually of emotions (Ezzell 2012; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

In his study of men in an institutionalized setting, Ezzell (2012:192) discusses how the participants use compensatory manhood acts and enact certain behaviors that help to “signify a masculine self.” The participants in this study were mostly poor black men who were subordinated in different ways, such as by being addicted to drugs, having no financial or structural stability, and having been arrested and incarcerated. During group accountability sessions called ‘games,’ Ezzell (2012) identifies four types of manhood acts that the men performed to compensate for their subordinated status: signifying masculinity through aggression, subordinating women and nonconventional men, calling others to account as men, and managing emotions to assert control. Ezzell (2012) explains how, in a setting where control has been forfeited, the men in the study are trying to obtain or regain control through interaction.

The men in Ezzell’s (2012) study signified masculinity through aggression by using scripted verbal aggression and confrontation, or shouting matches, which, during the games, was a competitive and entertaining outlet. Another way that signifying masculinity through aggression was achieved was by demanding respect from others, as well as blatant displays of disrespect toward others. Ezzell (2012:200) describes the subordinating of women as the way that the participants viewed women as “manipulative and good only for sex,” often referring to them as “bitches.” The subordination of nonconventional men happened when participants policed each other’s gender performances with homophobic rhetoric. Because the participants



were dealing with addiction, and addiction was framed as a loss of control, Ezzell (2012) notes that getting “clean” was a compensatory manhood act for many as it was a way for them to reassert control. Ezzell (2012) mentions that emotion work is an important feature of masculinity and that translates into men suppressing ‘soft’ emotions and only showing harder emotions.

In another study, Sumerau (2012) shows how gay men in an LGBT church in the South enacted compensatory manhood acts to gain back some of their status as Christian, and therefore morally good, men. Sumerau (2012) found three avenues through which the gay Christian men constructed compensatory manhood acts: emphasizing paternal stewardship, stressing emotional control and inherent rationality, and defining intimate relationships in a Christian manner. In emphasizing paternal stewardship, gay men sought to be leaders of the church and their communities, defining themselves as fatherly guides. In stressing emotional control and inherent rationality, they rejected the stereotype that gay men are more emotional and effeminate than other men, and expressed the need to distance themselves from being perceived as similar to women. Some of the men were quick to police other gay men who were too emotional, or what they labeled as “queeny.” In defining intimate relationships in a Christian manner, they exhibit manhood acts through responsible sexual conduct, monogamy, and immutable sexual natures. In many instances, the gay men in the study found ways to make themselves superior to the lesbian women of the congregation. Though these themes are specific to the gay cis men in Sumerau’s study, they are examples of how a subordinated group compensates for their lack of hegemonic traits to gain power. Through their compensatory manhood acts they subordinated the women and other men in the congregation.

## The South & the Rural

There exists a regional bias in queer studies, with most of those studies taking place in major cities and on the East and West coasts (Crawley 2008; Stone 2018). Queerness in the South is a largely understudied phenomenon (for exceptions see, Abelson 2019; Johnson 2008), so it is presently unclear how Southern culture influences queer, and in particular trans, experiences (Stone 2018). Stone (2018) states that over a third (35 percent) of LGBT Americans live in the South, but only 15 percent of single-region LGBTQ studies take place in the South or Southeast. According to Stone, there are more LGBT people in the South than in the most studied areas—the Northeast and Pacific regions—combined. Stone also notes the challenges associated with representing the South, as the region covers a large expanse of the country, and experiences in one part of the South could vary greatly compared to experiences in another part of the South.

As the trans men in this research are either located in or originally from the South, it is important to understand that some of them may be influenced by conservative beliefs. Most states in the South are more conservative than other areas of the country, the one exception being Florida, which in 2018 was neither more conservative nor liberal (Jones 2019). Many people in the South subscribe to the conservative, religious belief that God created two different sexes and that any deviation is sinful or wrong (Dowland 2009). Aspects of southern masculinities, such as sense of honor and mastery over others (Friend 2009), are closely tied to the evangelical beliefs that men are meant to be protectors, providers, and leaders, socially superior to women (Creech 2009; Dowland 2009; Sumerau 2012). In the 1970s and 1980s, conservative reinterpretation of biblical scripture further reinforced patriarchy and masculine privilege by emphasizing the differences between men and women by citing the Bible (Dowland 2009; Sumerau 2012).

As this study focuses on the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts of trans men in the South, it is important to understand what masculinities and manhood ideals look like in this region of the country. For the purposes of this study, the South is comprised of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (Reed 2018).

### *Southern and Rural Masculinities*

Southern masculinities and manhood in the United States are often conceived of differently than manhood and masculinities in other areas of the country. Because masculinities are socialized and socially constructed, they vary depending on the culture and time period. Current conceptions of masculinities and manhood in the South are a result of several evolutions of thought, the foundations tracing back to the Civil War (Friend 2009). In the antebellum South, “honor and mastery”—referring to the honor of victory in war and the mastery of slaves—were the dominant ideals of white Southern masculinity (Friend 2009:viii). Defeat in the Civil War led to reconfigurations of honor and mastery and gave way to “the Christian gentleman” during the Reconstruction era, as well as “martial manliness,” both of which were modeled after Robert E. Lee (2009:xi). The Christian gentleman ideal was meant to be an “honorable, master of his household, humble, self-restrained, and above all, pious and faithful” (2009:xi). This was a model of manliness that African American men were able to adopt as well. While this ideal was born from honor and mastery, its racial neutrality allowed non-white men to embrace it. Martial manliness was also a derivative of honor and mastery but was influenced by the war experience and only available to white men. This ideal held violence as a meaningful way to prove one’s honor and to protect one’s self, family, and home. Due to their same origin and similar natures,

Christian gentleman and martial manliness ideals could be used together in performances of masculinity by white men in the South (Friend 2009).

In the late 1800s, the “New South” saw a shift in Southern masculinities toward the self-made man, a type of masculinity that had previously been thought of as Northern masculinity (Friend 2009:xv). Friend (2009) cites the leading man of *Gone With the Wind*, Rhett Butler, as “the masculine ideal for many white southern men...one that revered drinking, hunting, swearing, cunning, physical pleasure with women, and even fighting” (2009:xviii). Friend (2009:xix) also notes that Southern cultural institutions include the participation in sports, such as hunting, racing, and college football, all of which have rules that, “ensure fair play, and therefore, honorable victory.”

Though hunting and racing are primarily white Southern institutions, football and other sports became a valuable arena for promoting and demonstrating black masculinity (Friend 2009). Black churches and the civil rights movements were other areas that black masculine identity flourished (Friend 2009). Friend (2009) notes that the emphasis of Christian gentleman masculinity was placed on upholding religious beliefs and morals and civic duty, making accessible to men of all races. Friend states that because black men did not have the same evangelical obligations of white men to “vigilantly oppress blacks and protect white womanhood,” black men were granted greater freedom in formulating conceptions of manhood and masculinity (Friend, 2009:xix). It is for these reasons that characteristics of white manhood and black manhood differ in the South, which may have influenced how the participants of this study perceived manhood.

In her study of the masculinities of trans men in America, Abelson (2019) describes several different images of masculinity in the South. Historically, there was the “poor but

independent farmer, and the upper-class genteel plantation owner or businessman” (Abelson 2019:30). Another image is that of the white supremacist “man bent on racial and patriarchal control” (Abelson 2019:30). The most prominent, Abelson (2019:30-31) notes, is the good old boy image, which she breaks down into two forms: “The comic and popular version, like Andy Griffith and Luke and Bo from the *Dukes of Hazzard*, and a more serious, patriotic and blue-collar form,” with the redneck being the more extreme version. Through the narratives of the trans men in Abelson’s (2019:33) study, the image of the redneck was created as a “politically conservative, backward, and uneducated rural man wearing camo who enjoyed hunting and fishing.” Abelson (2019:31) explains that the good old boy ideal can only belong to white men, because if black men were to engage in the same kind of “hell-raising misbehavior” they would be violently punished.

Rurality is an important feature of the South, with a majority of the geography of the region being agricultural or mountainous. A large number of people in the South live in metropolitan areas, but many still reside in rural areas (Reed 2018). Abelson (2016) and Kazyak (2012) note that men are not the only ones who benefit from rural masculine ideals. As rural women are viewed as helpers to rural men, it is more acceptable for heterosexual rural women to have more masculine gender presentations. Because heterosexual women in rural areas are allowed to exercise “country” masculinity, it is also more acceptable for lesbian women, gay men, and trans men in rural areas to perform rural masculinity. Contrary to the popular belief that queer people would choose urban life over rural life—a metronormative narrative—many queer folks who prefer masculine presentations and country values feel more comfortable in rural areas (Abelson 2016; Kazyak 2012). However, heterosexuality is a crucial component to rural masculinities (Silva 2016). With an emphasis on conservative family values, being perceived as

heterosexual is important in being recognized as manly and masculine. Trans masculinities are reinforced by the heteronormative structure of society, which maintains the “normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is natural or acceptable” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:441).

Abelson (2016) examines queer life in rural areas, challenging the belief that gender and sexual minorities hold an urban bias. The migration of gender and sexual minorities to metropolitan areas has been reported on in the past, with the claim being made that urban spaces are more accepting of minority identities. On the contrary, Abelson’s article explains that this is not always the case and that sometimes rural areas can allow queer or trans people to thrive. Abelson’s study focuses on trans men and their comfort and feelings of acceptance in rural spaces. Abelson claims that acceptance happens when: 1) trans men are not recognizable as trans in most situations; 2) trans men can “make other claims to rural sameness which make their transness more accepted or at least tolerated;” and, 3) the “possibility of trans men is unbelievable to some rural people even when right in front of them” (2016:1536). Abelson goes on to explain how rural men tend to be represented as “real men,” characterized by being strong, tough and brave. However, during economic downturns, rural men have difficulty achieving rural masculine ideals, such as being able to provide for themselves and their families, which has led to increased flexibility in gender norms and what is considered masculine.

Abelson explains that being able to claim sameness with other men, and social solidarity, are important for a sense of belonging in a rural area. Because there is a lack of knowledge about sexual and gender identities in rural areas, it is often easier for gender and sexual minorities to be more invisible there. It is also often inconceivable that sexual and gender variance can be in

someone's own town, it being a product of "deviant cities" (Abelson 2016:1538). After transition, trans people may be less identifiable and more comfortable in rural spaces. It may be difficult for a trans person to be less identifiable, however, if they are born and raised in a rural area and continue to stay in that area during transition.

To explain how the trans men in her study experienced living in rural areas, Abelson (2016) identified the following themes from the participants' experiences of and ideas about rural spaces: 1) challenging the metronormative narrative; 2) claims to sameness; 3) racism in constructing rural others; and, 4) one of the good ole boys. Challenging the metronormative narrative refers to the necessity of the trans men who lived in rural areas to resist the pressure to move to cities. For many of the men interviewed, the claims to sameness involved presenting as cisgender, white, and performing "appropriate working-class heterosexual rural masculinities" (Abelson, 2016:1540). Being recognized as a man was the most common reason that trans men felt secure in rural areas. Those who were raised in rural areas, however, often felt the need to move to other rural areas where no one knew them. The men who were raised in rural areas and stayed in those areas, did so because of a good support system and family. This is not to say that the men who stayed did not face transphobia, but because of their masculine gender presentation and because they could claim belonging to the area, they were generally more accepted. The third theme, racism in constructing rural others, refers to the way that the interviewees referenced racism in the same breath as homophobia and transphobia, all three being "lumped together" to explain how they viewed rural sentiment (Abelson, 2016:1542). In this way, the men would distance themselves from the rural racist, but would sometimes contradict that in their rhetoric. Often, family would accept their gender or sexual identity, but it was implied that "racial transgressions" would not be as tolerated (2016:1542). Finally, being one of the good old boys

refers to how the men were accepted on the basis of their white cisgender presentations, and fostered that acceptance by further performing authentically rural masculine ideals, such as the way they dressed, the rural professions they chose, and their “shared knowledge of rural problems” (2016:1543).

### Trans Men’s Manhood Acts

By either participating in binary or nonbinary gender practices, trans people can either work to “pass” as one of the binary genders, man or woman, or highlight that they are trans by rejecting the binary notions of gender. Historically, “passing” refers to minorities becoming part of a more privileged group that offers more advantages (Brubaker 2016; Cromwell 1999). In the context of trans studies, it means to blend in, or become “unnoticeable or unremarkable as either a man or woman” (Cromwell 1999:39). Pfeffer (2017) notes that the term “passing” can be problematic, and is offensive to some trans people, as it can imply inauthenticity or deception, though it is a term that many participants in this study still used. Many also use the term “stealth” to refer to trans individuals who live their social lives entirely as a man or women, sans ‘trans’ (Stein 2018).

The pressure to be stealth, and therefore appear to be cisgender, is reinforced by cisgenderism, which refers to the ideology that values and privileges cisgender individuals above trans individuals. It exists in many institutions and “enables prejudice and discrimination against the transgender community” (Lennon and Mistler 2014:63). People who do not conform to the rules of cisgenderism are labeled “deviant, immoral, and threatening” (Lennon and Mistler 2014:63). Miller and Grollman (2015) found that trans people who are read by others as trans in everyday life are more likely than gender-conforming trans people to be discriminated against



and engage in health-harming behavior, such as attempting suicide and drug and alcohol abuse. Therefore, for many trans individuals, passing becomes an essential aspect of daily life.

Performing compensatory manhood acts is one way that trans men “pass” and find security. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) note that research on trans people is informative for understanding compensatory manhood acts, citing Dozier (2005) and Johnson (2007). Schrock and Schwalbe (2005:284) list some of the compensatory manhood acts that the trans men in those studies performed: “Female-to male transsexuals, or transmen, flatten their chests, take hormones to grow facial hair and muscle tissue, deepen their voices, and cultivate gestures.” Schrock and Schwalbe (2005:284) state that in order to be accepted in a gender category, one must master “requisite bodily, gestural, sartorial, and vocal signifiers.” Many trans men do not learn the social lessons of masculinities that biological males are given from a young age and must learn what it means to be a man later in life. For example, they must learn new ways of negotiating fear, how to avoid or respond to violence, and how to control their emotions (Abelson 2014; Rogers 2018; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

To be accepted in a system that values straight cis men, trans men have to perform masculinities that exhibit sameness to those ideals (Abelson 2016; Rogers 2018). Schilt (2006) demonstrates the importance of sameness in the workplace, while Abelson (2016) and Rogers (2018) demonstrate the importance of sameness in rural communities and the South. In the workplace, trans men have to adapt to what is expected of male colleagues—including heavy lifting and participating in shop talk with the other guys (Schilt 2006; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In rural communities, sameness is presented through race (white), lower social class, heterosexuality, and usually being from the area (Abelson 2016; Rogers 2018). Rural conceptions of masculinities involve a show of toughness, strength, and bravery, as well as

working in blue-collar rural jobs (Abelson 2016; Cloke 2005). While some of these factors, such as toughness and bravery may seem intrinsic to being a man, often they must be acquired or learned for cis and trans men.

In this study, I examined the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts of trans men in the South in three primary areas: 1) body image and presentation; 2) brotherhood and the subjugation of women; and 3) violence. These areas were chosen based on prior research that has found these themes to exist when examining how men bolster their claims to manhood. First, body image and presentation explain the importance of clothing, appearance, and behavior in performing masculinities. Brotherhood explains how men form bonds with other men that validate their claims to manhood, while the subjugation of women explains how men, especially in the presence of other men, objectify women to prove their heterosexuality (an important characteristic of hegemonic masculinity). Finally, how men perceive the threat of violence and enact violence towards others has been explained in prior research as a way for men to exert control over themselves and others. I address each of these issues in turn, and then explain the methods for this study, followed by my findings.

### *Body Image and Presentation*

The human body is the site where gender is performed and interpreted. The body is where sex is assumed and sex category is assigned by others. To ensure that our gender is interpreted by other people as intended, we often must modify and project the body image that we wish for others to see. Many trans people feel discomfort with their bodies, and a typical part of transitioning for a female-to-male (FTM) trans person has to do with their body and masculinizing it. Masculinization can include hormone injections and surgeries to make the body appear more like what is expected of men, such as more muscular, hairier, and not having

breasts. Not all trans men wish to have surgeries, many trans men are content with the effects of testosterone injections, finding comfort in hair and muscle growth, which can help them pass (Stein 2018). Other trans men also choose to masculinize the body through other methods than hormones, such as working out.

It is important to note that people embody gender in more ways than just the clothes they wear. Schrock, Reid, and Boyd (2005:321) explored the embodiment of gender in trans women and found that they embodied gender by “retraining, redecorating, and remaking the body.” Retraining the body required the participants to modify their bodily movements and how they spoke. The participants studied other women in their lives to learn their mannerisms to better embody that aspect of gender. As changing mannerisms alone would likely not lead to them being identified by others as women, redecorating involved changing their appearance with a different wardrobe and wearing makeup. Remaking the body involved modifying their bodies with hormones, surgery, and other treatments.

Because girls are allowed, and in some cases encouraged, to have masculine mannerisms (i.e. tomboys) (Halberstam 1998), it is possible for trans men to have some masculine mannerisms prior to transition (Rubin 2003), though redecorating and remaking the body are themes that are relevant to their experiences as well. Halberstam (1998) explains that tomboyism—when girls behave in a masculine way—is common and is not typically a source of concern for parents in childhood. If, however, girls continue into adolescence as tomboys, their masculine behavior is less accepted; if it continues into puberty or if the individual shows signs of “extreme male identification,” such as using a boy’s name or refusing all signs of femininity, they are often punished and subjected to efforts to make them conform to femininity (Halberstam 1998:6). Alternatively, in her study of the masculinities of high school boys, Pascoe (2007)

discussed one group of girls, the “Basketball Girls,” who subscribed to more masculine practices—such as dressing like boys and showing aggression—and maintained their popularity and the acceptance of their peers. Even though female masculinity is acceptable in the cases of tomboys and the Basketball Girls, those individuals are still seen as girls, emphasizing the importance of modifying body image and presentation for trans men who wish to be seen as men.

That said, some aspects of masculinities and manhood must still be learned after transition. In his study of trans men on college campuses, Catalano (2015:422) explains that “cisgender men have a long personal history *as boys/men*, with role models, and the experiences of learning the rules through gender enforcement” but that trans men have not had the same socialization and must rely on their assumptions and stereotypes of manhood to “help them navigate their new role in the gender binary.” Catalano (2015) notes that the trans men in his study struggled with the expectations that others have of them regarding their appearance and behavior and whether they wanted to conform to those expectations for passability as “real men” or not.

One consideration with body image comes from a fear of violence by men against other men. If a man is smaller or appears weaker, he will likely experience more violence by other men. When a trans man transitions, it becomes important for him to present himself as a physically strong and capable man—someone who could inflict violence, not be the victim of it (Abelson 2014, 2016). Looking the part could include building muscle, which testosterone could help with, dressing how society has deemed appropriate for men, and using a deeper voice. Schilt (2006) elaborates on the importance of dress after transition, explaining that even though trans men may wear the same clothes before and after transition, they are perceived differently. By

transitioning, the participants were able to wear the clothes that they may have worn as women, but face less scrutiny and judgment, and perhaps more acceptance and approval, for it. After transition, the men in Schilt's study were awarded the right to wear men's clothes, which helped them in other areas of life, such as finding a job.

In "The Clothes Make the Trans," Crawley (2008) recounts the experience of living in South Florida and how that greatly affected the clothes that they could wear. Because of the year-round high temperatures in South Florida, Crawley was usually unable to wear urban butch clothing, which often involved leather and blue jeans. The types of clothing most often represented in butch culture was not practical in Crawley's area of the country and this affected how they were able to present their self, and thus, how others perceived them. Forced to wear clothing that did nothing to hide feminine curves, Crawley doubted their own claims to butch identity. Though they experience their self as butch through different acts of strength or by wearing a sports bra and taking off their shirt whenever they feel like it, they acknowledge that it is through the clothes they wear that others interpret them as butch, which in turn reinforces their butch identity. Though Crawley does not identify as a trans man, the sentiment that confirmation of gender presentation by others can reinforce identity prevails.

Dozier (2005) found in a study of the experiences of 18 FTM trans-identified people that how a person's sex is perceived influences how behavior in social and sexual interactions are interpreted. Dozier (2005:304) surmises that, "When sex is ambiguous or less convincing, there is increased reliance on highly gendered behavior; when sex is obvious, then there is considerably more freedom in behavior." The assumption that a person has one or the other sex characteristics shaped how others interacted with that person. For the participants in this study, secondary sex characteristics, like facial hair, enabled them to behave in any way that they chose,

even if there was a conflicting sex characteristic, like pregnancy. For those whose gender presentations are confirmed by others to be that of men, a freedom of behavior is granted.

Alternatively, those whose gender presentations were not interpreted as men had to compensate with behavior to bolster their claim to manhood, such as with a “bone crushing handshake and slapping people on the back” (Dozier 2005:305). In this way, Dozier states that sex category and gendered behavior were compensatory to each other.

### *Brotherhood and the Subjugation of Women*

Trans men who engage in defensive, or non-confrontational, masculinities will often go along with what other men say or do to avoid conflict (Abelson 2014). This includes the subjugation and objectification of women. Abelson explains that some trans men experience a shift in accountability, where behavior that they could have gotten away with as a woman would be considered a safety risk if done as a man. This could tie back to fag discourse (Pascoe 2005), which is policing of masculinities and heterosexuality among men.

Pascoe (2005) explains that ‘fag’ is no longer meant to be used as a homophobic slur but is instead used to police straight boys and men into behaving in a manly way. The logic behind this is that if they do anything feminine, including defending women or other marginalized groups, they are then called a fag. In this case, being called a fag is not a reference to their sexuality, but a reference to their acting like women, which is the lowest status in a hegemonic masculinity world. Because trans men can no longer partake in certain behaviors for fear of being policed by other men for not being manly enough, they must behave in a way to garner acceptance from others—participating in sameness, which in this case is objectifying women in the company of other men.

Concerning men in general, Katz (2006:123) states, “Sometimes men feel as if they have to participate in sexist and even violent practices in order to be accepted into the brotherhood. These practices run the spectrum from laughing at sexist jokes to participating in gang rapes.” If trans men are held to these standards, some may have to exercise emotional control to not react negatively to the sexism of other men. Ezzell (2012) explains the importance of emotion work in accomplishing masculinity as a way to gain “male roles of power,” and he goes on to explain that “for subordinated men, pushing others’ buttons *and* resisting letting others push your buttons are two sides of the same coin of compensatory emotional manhood” (2012:193). It is also possible that trans men employ this kind of emotion work when negotiating their fear of violence and deciding whether to confront or avoid conflict.

### *Violence*

Violence is a learned behavior that is largely committed by men and is perpetuated through mainstream media and culture (Katz 1995). Despite men more commonly being the victims of violence, it is usually more feared by women (Abelson 2014). Cis men learn from an early age to negotiate fear of violence; “Men learn to evaluate other men based on how they would fare against them in a violent encounter and balance their perceived risk of victimization with maintaining their masculinity” (Abelson 2014:553), while women fear violence from almost all men (Abelson 2014; Katz 2006).

As a result of having been read as both girls/women and as boys/men at various points in their lives, trans men have a unique challenge when it comes to negotiating their fear of violence. It is important to note that the violent experiences of trans men differ greatly from those of trans women. Trans men tend not to fear transphobic violence, but rather, they fear violence based on how they are perceived as men (Abelson 2014, 2016). Abelson (2014) describes two types of

masculinities that trans men utilize to deal with interactions with other men: defensive and transformative masculinities. Abelson (2014:553) defines defensive masculinities as the pattern of the trans men avoiding the threat of violence to preserve their “masculine sense of self.” Transformative masculinities, on the other hand, are the behaviors of trans men when they take an active role in challenging gender norms through egalitarianism. Though the two patterns are quite different, one being avoidant and the other being assertive, many of the interviewees in Abelson’s (2014) study would practice both of them, depending on the social setting. Though trans men who are able to pass as cis may face new fears of violence, old fears are lessened.

Schilt (2006) notes that some trans men who are post-transition receive the benefits of bodily respect, wherein their sexuality is not questioned, and they are not sexually harassed. By transitioning and being able to pass, trans men are afforded some level of safety from sexual harassment (Schilt 2006), which Katz (2006) reports is a widespread and constant fear for many women. Because they have different experiences with harassment pre- and post-transition, this reinforces the need to adhere to the rules of heteronormativity and cisgenderism, and consequently the need to be stealth or pass as cisgender. Since violence is a component of Southern masculinity (Friend 2009), it is possible that trans men in the region may adopt violence as a manhood act, or at the very least recognize that other men in the region are more prone to violence.

This study adds to existing literature by bridging the gap between sociology, trans studies, and masculinities theories and by examining how trans men in the South bolster their claims to manhood by using manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts. The South is an understudied area of the United States, and the experiences of trans men are underrepresented, even in this area where one-third of the LGBT population resides (Stone 2018). While the



experiences presented in this research are not generalizable, they contribute to research that identifies patterns in the lived experiences of trans men.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This research is approved by the Georgia Southern Institutional Review Board (IRB) under protocol H18134. I am listed as a secondary investigator in the IRB application. This study utilized data collected by Dr. Baker Rogers, the primary investigator, through in-depth interviews with 51 trans men who have lived in the Southeastern United States. The information about data collection methodology was gathered from the primary investigator who collected the data. This study focused on the responses that reflect the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts that the participants used to bolster their claims to manhood or masculinity. The primary investigator conducted interviews by phone, allowing for more anonymity and for the inclusion of participants at greater geographic distances. Research has suggested that members of marginalized communities are likely to feel more comfortable and more honest with their answers with increased anonymity (McInroy 2016). All participants were offered a twenty-dollar Target gift card for participation, which they were sent and collected via email.

#### Recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The primary investigator contacted participants from two of their previous studies that identified as trans men, they contacted social and support groups for trans men in the South, they placed posters on their campus, and they reached out for participants through Facebook. All respondents were asked to pass along the investigator's contact information to other trans men who may want to participate. To be eligible to participate in the study the respondents had to be over the age of eighteen, identify as a trans man, and had to have lived in the South at any time.

## Participants

All participants were asked to self-identify their gender. The majority of the participants (30 of 51, ~59 percent) identified their gender as “male,” rather than “man.” Twelve (~24 percent) of the participants identified using some variation of a trans identity, including trans man, trans male, transgender, FTM (female-to-male), trans masculine, two-spirit, non-binary, genderqueer, or a combination of these. Nine (~18 percent) of the participants identified as both male and trans—most identified as male but wanted to acknowledge their trans identity. All of the names of the participants were changed by the primary investigator and those pseudonyms were carried over to this study to maintain confidentiality and consistency. Though some of the participants used they/them/theirs pronouns, all of the participants used he/him/his pronouns, therefore, these pronouns will be used throughout this study.

A variety of sexualities were represented in the sample. Twenty-two (~43 percent) participants identified as monosexual, with 18 (~35 percent) of the participants identifying as straight, and four (~8 percent) as gay. Twenty-six (~51 percent) identified as bi+, including bisexual, pansexual, queer, polysexual, demisexual, polyamorous, fluid, or a combination of these. Two (~4 percent) of the participants identified as asexual, and one (~2 percent) participant did not identify with a sexuality label. Prior to the transition, forty respondents identified as monosexual, with 29 participants identifying as lesbian, seven as straight, and four as gay. Ten participants identified as bi+, and one did not identify with any label.

At the time of the interviews, 23 of participants resided in Georgia, eight in South Carolina, eight in Tennessee, four in Virginia, two in Arkansas, two in Florida, and one in each Kentucky and North Carolina. The remaining two participants lived in the South for most of their lives but moved outside of the area for school or work. Time lived in the South ranged from one

year to 37 years, with an average of 22 years. Thirty-eight of the participants identify as white, six identify as Black/African American, two as Hispanic, four as multiracial/biracial, and one as Indigenous. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 60, with an average of 29 years old.

Socioeconomic status (SES) can be assessed in terms of interviewees education levels and incomes. Education levels greatly varied among participants. Six of the participants had an associate degree, ten had a bachelor's degree, five had a master's degree, two were finishing an associate degree, eight were finishing a bachelor's degree, seven were finishing a master's degree, 11 had some college, and two had finished high school. Overall, 17 (~33 percent) reported an income below \$25,000, 20 (~39 percent) of the participants reported an income between \$25,000 and \$50,000, two (~4 percent) reported an income between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 12 (~23 percent) did not report an income. Of those who reported having an income below \$25,000, one had a master's degree, four were finishing their master's degree, four had a bachelor's degree, three were finishing their bachelor's degree, two had an associate degree, one was finishing their associate degree, one had completed some college, and one had finished high school. Of those who reported having an income between \$25,000 and \$50,000, two had a master's degree, one was finishing their master's, five had a bachelor's degree, five had an associate degree, one was finishing an associate degree, and six reported having completed some college. Of the two who reported having an income between \$50,000 and \$100,000, one had a master's degree and the other had completed high school. Of those who did not report an income level, two were finishing their master's degree, one had a bachelor's degree, five were finishing their bachelor's degree, and four reported having completed some college. Appendix A contains a table with demographic information for this study.

## Data Analysis

All of the interviews took place by phone between January and May of 2018 and lasted from thirty minutes to three and a half hours, with an average of one hour and ten minutes. Informed consent was obtained from each participant verbally prior to the start of interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I assisted the primary investigator with the transcription of about 30 of the 51 interviews. The remaining interviews were transcribed using a transcription service. All of the audio files and transcription files were kept on external hard drives or thumb drives and were accessed using password protected computers in secure offices.

Data analysis began informally during transcription, as several participants echoed similar experiences with masculinity. I used thematic analysis, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), to create codes and themes for the data. Braun and Clarke (2006:79) describe thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” This type of analysis allows data to be minimally organized, keeping the rich details of the data intact. All of the data collected in the interviews is what Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to as the data *corpus*. My data *set* includes all instances across the data corpus that have some relevance to masculinities, manhood, manliness, or what it means to be a man.

In the first step of the process, I familiarized myself with the data, which began when I participated in the transcription of the data. I coded by hand and by using NVivo 12. The inductive analysis included looking for examples of the participants performing acts that bolstered their masculinity or manhood. I began analysis with three themes in mind: body image and presentation, brotherhood and the subjugation of women, and violence and the fear of violence. During the process of coding the data, the themes were modified as necessary to best fit the findings. Deductive analysis included the creation of subthemes from existing themes. All

themes and findings were reviewed by my committee chair to ensure that there were no discrepancies. Producing the report, which is the final step of thematic analysis, was completed in the findings section of this paper. The report includes compelling quotes and findings.

In this study, I examine how the utilization of manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts assists trans men in passing, bolsters their claims to sameness, and defines their masculinity. Responses to the following questions were the main focus of the initial round of coding: 1) Do you believe there are essential or natural differences between men and women?; 2) In your opinion, what does it mean to be a man?; 3) What does passing mean to you?; 4) Is it important to you to pass? Why or why not?; 5) Do you think that it is important for transgender people to have gender confirmation<sup>3</sup> surgery? Why or why not?; 6) What does the word feminist mean to you? Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? Can trans men be feminist? These questions addressed the themes discussed in the literature review. The first and second questions addressed how the participants viewed manhood and masculinity. The third, fourth, and fifth questions addressed body image as it related to their manhood and masculinity. The sixth question addressed the subjugation of women, or lack thereof.

The “Query” function of NVivo 12 was utilized throughout data analysis, both to easily locate responses to the questions mentioned as well as to search for specific words or phrases related to this research. Initial search terms and strategies yielded very little data for “violence” as a theme. In order to find more information, “violence” was added to the search terms. From

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<sup>3</sup> Previously known as sex reassignment surgery, gender confirmation or gender affirmation surgery for trans men can include double mastectomy or keyhole/periareolar surgery (chest/top surgery), metoidioplasty or phalloplasty (bottom surgery), and hysterectomy. A double mastectomy is for those with larger breasts who wish to make their chests look like a “natal male’s chest” (Teich 2012:54). Keyhole surgery is for those with smaller breasts. Metoidioplasty involves releasing a testosterone-enlarged clitoris so that it extends out. A phalloplasty surgery involves the construction and placement of a penis using skin from another part of the body. A hysterectomy is the removal of the uterus, sometimes accompanied by additional removal of the cervix, ovaries, and fallopian tubes. (Teich 2012)

the results for those searches, more terms were added as well, such as “fear,” “bathroom,” “beat” (as in “beat up” or “beat the shit...”), “afraid,” and “redneck.” In addition, as several of the participants associated fear of violence to their location in the South, responses to the question “Do you believe that living in the South influences your ability to be out or your need to pass?” were also included in data analysis. Other instances of fear of violence were found while analyzing full transcripts.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The trans men in this study were asked a series of questions that allowed them, often for the first time, to contemplate what it means to them to be a man. Some participants felt strongly that there were essential, or natural, differences between men and women, while others were not sure if differences existed. Still, other participants disagreed that differences existed between men and women, often only acknowledging physiological differences, such as genitalia or body hair. Through the process of identifying what it means to be a man, as well as explaining what constitutes their own presentation of being a man, each participant was also identifying what manhood acts they partake in to bolster their own manhood. Though many did not have a clear answer, or concept of manhood, when first asked what it means to be a man, upon further probing and asking them how they personally present themselves as a man they were generally able to generate a list of attributes.

Since manhood acts are performative, it is important that the qualities or attributes described by participants are not only idealistic (of what it means to be men), but realistically achievable through different processes. Because all men, both cis and trans, who wish to be seen as men engage in body image and presentation work to aid in their performance of gender, this is seen as a manhood act. Seeking validation from a group of other men, engaging in sexist thought or behavior, and the way that participants respond to potential threat of violence are more exaggerated ways of enhancing their manhood, making them compensatory manhood acts. Whether by changing their body image and presentation, becoming a member of a brotherhood, participating in sexism, or understanding the way that violence, or the fear of violence, affects their performance of masculinities, the participants in this study sculpted their identities as men



after their own individual conceptions of what it means to be a man and what that looks like, as influenced by societal norms.

### Body Image and Presentation

Several subthemes emerged during coding trans men's discussions of body image and presentation. When asked what they think it means to be a man, as well as how they present themselves as men, participants discussed embodied physical traits, clothing choices that they believed signify manhood, and masculine behaviors. Many participants also recognized their style of dress as being masculine, though the specific style varied among them. Each of the subthemes presented here was a way that the participants of this study bolstered their claims to manhood through their appearance. Though the types of masculinities that the participants tried to achieve varied some, in general, they made a concerted effort to change their appearance to announce to others that they were men and should be seen as such.

#### *Embodied Physical Traits*

Embodied traits are defined in this context as those attributes which are connected or attached to the body and which help in the performance of gender. Embodied traits include the way someone walks or holds themselves, their body composition, and changes made to the body through hormonal therapy or surgery—such as body or facial hair, or chest size. Often when embodied traits were discussed, they were traits that were attainable for trans men who have had, or planned to have, physical transition, and there was a focus on the physical attributes that were visible to others, such as facial hair or flat chests. Notably, very few of the participants considered having a penis as a necessary part of their transition, many citing the lack of advancement in this area of affirmation surgeries as their reason. Because most participants did not cite having a penis as necessary for their transition, there is the implication that since most

people cannot tell what is between their legs in everyday life, there is less of a need to change the area.

Out of the 51 participants, 16 made some mention of facial hair or beards. Theo, a 24-year-old male from South Carolina, said, “I keep a beard at all times... I don’t like shaving very much... I’ve tried to become more athletic, more muscular looking... But I just, I like to portray, like having the image [of being a man].” Here, Theo mentioned having a beard and building muscles, which are two ways for trans men to enhance their claims to manhood through embodied traits. By saying that he keeps a beard “at all times,” he is emphasizing the importance of facial hair to his image and identity as a man. Not only is having a beard easier for him than building muscle, but it is an easily recognizable trait of a man in U.S. culture; however, through hormone therapy and lifestyle changes, both of these traits are attainable for some trans men.

Alternatively, some participants preferred to stay clean-shaven, such as Jamie, a 33-year-old trans man from Arkansas, who said, “I don’t like having a huge scraggly beard or anything, so if it gets a little bit out of hand, I usually just shave the whole thing off.” Jamie’s masculinity differed from Theo’s in other ways, as he also preferred displaying his manhood through being “a jock,” stating that “if you think of the guy that was probably on a football or basketball team in college, and still tries to stay in shape, it’s probably me.” In contrast to Theo, Jamie emphasizes his claims to manhood through building muscle, rather than using facial hair growth, and portraying himself as a typical guy that someone would associate with the gym.

Some participants also mentioned being flat-chested as an important manly trait, a belief that is reinforced by 50 of the 51 participants who wanted to have, or had already had, top surgery<sup>4</sup>. Garrett, a 22-year-old from Georgia who identified as both a male and a trans guy, was

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<sup>4</sup> A potential component of gender confirmation or gender affirmation surgery for trans men; top or chest surgery can include a double mastectomy or keyhole/periareolar surgery. A double mastectomy is for those with larger

the only participant to say that they “didn’t really want top surgery,” citing the cost as a major factor and the fear that he would not be satisfied with the results. Interestingly, many of the participants stated that they knew other trans men who did not want top surgery and were comfortable with their breasts, but this sentiment was not reflected in the findings from this sample of participants. Max, an 18-year-old male from Georgia, related the desire to have a flat chest and greater muscle definition to wanting to pass as a cis man; “At least for me, it’s more just trying to pass as a cis male, just like, trying to pull off having a flatter chest, or if I can’t pull that off completely, just looking more, like, masculi—more well-built, muscle-wise.” He went on to explain how his rounded face made it more difficult to pass as cis, so he also did “stuff to accentuate certain angles or cuts that [he had] in his face to look somewhat more masculine, like what you would see on a cis male’s face, with a deeper nose, or like, more expressive cheekbones.” It is unclear what Max did to accentuate those features, but he did so to bolster his claims to manhood. In saying that the goal of passing was to appear to be a cis man, Max implied that appearances were important to claiming manhood, which emphasizes the importance of physical transition.

Views on bottom surgery<sup>5</sup> varied across participants, but it was generally not a priority. Thirty-one (~61 percent) of the participants cited the monetary cost of the procedure, dissatisfaction with current surgical standards, and potential disappointment with results as reasons for not wanting bottom surgery at the time of the interview. Hysterectomies were viewed separate from bottom surgeries by 19 of the participants and were often considered a medical

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breasts who wish to make their chests look like a “natal male’s chest” (Teich 2012:54). Keyhole surgery is for those with smaller breasts.

<sup>5</sup> A potential component of gender confirmation or gender affirmation surgery for trans men; bottom surgery can include metoidioplasty or phalloplasty, and hysterectomy. Metoidioplasty involves releasing a testosterone-enlarged clitoris so that it extends out. A phalloplasty surgery involves the construction and placement of a penis using skin from another part of the body. A hysterectomy is the removal of the uterus, sometimes accompanied by additional removal of the cervix, ovaries, and fallopian tubes. (Teich 2012)

necessity, though in one participant's case they cited the likely disuse of their uterus in the future as the reason for wanting to have the procedure. Of the 31 who did not want bottom surgery, two had already had hysterectomies and nine wanted to have a hysterectomy, but not other bottom surgeries.

Many of the participants who said that they did not want bottom surgery said that if surgical results were ever to improve to their satisfaction, they would reconsider having the procedure. Eight participants were not sure if they wanted bottom surgery or not but did not cite a specific reason. Of the participants who were unsure about bottom surgery, one wanted to have a hysterectomy and three had already had hysterectomies. Only seven of the participants said that they wanted bottom surgery one day, two of them said that they wanted bottom surgeries and hysterectomies. Because most of the participants wanted top surgery, but not bottom surgery, it could be inferred that having gender affirmation surgeries had more to do with how others viewed them as men than it does with having male anatomy. That said, ten participants mentioned using packers or stand-to-pee devices (STPs) at some point in time. Packers are generally prosthetics that are placed in the front of pants to create a bulge; some can be used as stand-to-pee devices (STPs) or during sex, others are solely for creating a bulge in pants. Prosthetic packers can be expensive, especially if they are more realistic and functional, so "packing" is also done with other items, such as socks, to create the illusion of having a penis. Of those who packed or used STPs, three definitely wanted bottom surgery, three were unsure about bottom surgery, and the rest did not view bottom surgery as a priority. Levi went so far as to say that he could just use an STP if he wanted to feel like he had a penis, going through surgery was not necessary. For the four who did not prioritize bottom surgery, including Levi, the packers

and STPs that they used served the purpose of conveying to others that they were men without the need for surgeries that they may have felt were too expensive or not reliable.

As Max stated, the gender performances that the participants take on are meant to be conveyed to outsiders as the acts of cis men. Colton, a 28-year-old from South Carolina who identified as both male and a trans man, referenced the value of top surgery in his efforts to pass. Colton said, “I feel like I’m going to sound like a dick, but I feel like some people expect to pass, but they don’t put forth any effort to pass. And then they get upset when they get misgendered in public by people who don’t know them.” The ‘effort to pass’ that Colton was referring to was their commitment to transitioning through surgery. Though he had not yet had surgery, Colton did express his desire to have top surgery. Colton’s statements were also reminiscent of the idea that there is a “trans enough,” which is the concept that someone’s trans identity is questioned if they do not show interest in transitioning through hormone therapy and surgeries (Catalano 2015).

### *Clothing Choices*

Eighteen of the 51 participants mentioned their clothing style as a way of bolstering their presentation as men, though definitions of masculine clothing varied. Some used the word “dapper” to describe their style of masculine dress, citing their use of bow ties and “nice” clothes. When asked what presenting as a man looks like to him, Jace, an 18-year-old male from Georgia, responded:

It means to always dress well, whether I’m going out or not, I always dress very nice and sometimes I do have to tone it down, because my girlfriend says, “You don’t need to wear a bow tie, we’re just going to McDonald’s,” and I kinda feel like I should wear a bow tie ‘cause they’re really nice looking and I always feel like I have to be dapper,

because, you know, it's nice, that's how I boost my confidence as a guy, the clothes I wear make me feel more masculine.

The term 'dapper' has traditionally been used to describe a well-dressed man and conjures the notion of sophistication and reservation. Jace's use of the term dapper to define his chosen masculine style implied that he did not subscribe to the rugged version of masculinity often found in the rural South.

Another participant, Sage, a 23-year-old trans man who currently resides in New York, wanted to be read as masculine, but not as "toxically" masculine. He called his personal style "giggle butch" and incorporated "girly things," like pastels and florals-into his otherwise masculine attire of jeans, button-ups, flannels, and t-shirts. Sage also used the term "dapper" in explaining his personal masculine style. Sage's expression of masculinity could be considered in line with what Abelson (2019) referred to as Goldilocks masculinity—a hybrid masculinity which incorporates a blend of masculine and feminine traits.

While clothing is an important part of performing a gender identity for others, it is also an important part of internalizing that gender identity. As noted by Crawley (2008), clothing choices are just as much an internal performance as they are an external performance, and they can be liberating and empowering for trans people. By wearing masculine clothes, trans men *feel* more masculine, which can translate into behavior, attitudes, and other aspects of manhood. Additionally, Crawley (2008) explained that they judged their own gendered performance just as outsiders did and dressing in masculine attire served as a visual confirmation of the authenticity of their gender identity. In that sense, just as Jace mentioned the confidence boost that he gained from the clothes that he wore, the trans men of this study who used masculine clothing to bolster

their claims to manhood were not just doing so for the benefit of being read as a man by others, but also for the benefit of reading themselves as men when they look in the mirror.

### *Masculine Behavior*

As this study relies on the self-reporting of participants, rather than observation, the behaviors reported here encompass actions that the participants were aware of and thought to mention, and that were either visible or conveyable to others. For instance, several participants mentioned being chivalrous as part of their presentation as men. Frank, a 41-year-old male from South Carolina, described his behavior as “the whole chivalry thing, you know, and walk on the outside, on the street side of the sidewalk. I still do hold doors open and I respect females as if—okay, that sounds corny, but I respect females as if they were my mother or my sister. You know, a relative.” Frank’s use of chivalry to describe his treatment of women, alludes to what Friend (2009) identified as the Christian gentleman ideal of Southern masculinity, which requires men to be honorable and protective of women, among other qualities.

Tobias, a 19-year-old male from Georgia, laughed while responding that he has gone so far as to adjust his gait to appear more masculine:

I walk really weird; I haven’t perfected my gait yet. But I’m trying, but several people have asked me if I’m okay, I guess. [chuckles] So, I think I need to fix that... I want someone to look at me and say, “That’s a boy. That’s a man.” And come up to me and address me as, you know, sir, he, him. So, I try to portray myself in a way that most people would see that—would think that way.

Tobias’ answer exemplifies how the way someone walks and dresses is part of a gendered performance. Dakota, a 30-year-old male from South Carolina, also noted the importance of gait, stating that men tend to “walk a little straighter” and “a little more intimidating.” Dakota related

this way of walking to ruggedness and being a country guy, another part of the common narrative associated with Southern masculinity.

Overall, it seemed easier for the participants to identify what being a man looks like than it was for them to articulate what it means to be a man. Several participants said that they did not know what it meant to be a man, only that they knew they were one or that anyone who identifies as a man is one. Tobias explained that though he has given the topic considerable thought, he too did not have a clear answer: “To me, there’s not really a way to say it, because masculinity and femininity, as most people know it, is entirely society based.” He went on to explain his interest in skirts, dresses, and makeup, and that historically it was normal for men to wear these things. He stated that if society would allow him, he would like to wear those items, but he knew that to be seen by a man in society those things are not acceptable.

When asked what he thought it meant to be a man, Damien, a 38-year-old male from Florida, jokingly quoted a song popularized in the animated Disney film, *Mulan*; “You must be swift as the coursing river,” he laughed, “Let’s get down to business to defeat the Huns.” The character that sings the song that he was referencing is portrayed as a hypermasculine soldier who must teach other—less masculine—men how to be better soldiers and, coincidentally, better men. Damien went on to seriously define what being a man meant to him before citing another example of masculinity from childhood, Superman: “Being a man is being honest, taking care of people, owning up to mistakes, and knowing when to let go of toxic people, and knowing when to step up and help protect somebody. I mean, truth, justice, the American way.” Superman is also an example of a hypermasculine figure—a superhero—who is also a masculine ideal for many young men raised on comic book culture.



Though a couple of styles of dress were mentioned more often than others, and some behavioral traits or values were named more than once, there was little general consensus about what it means to be a man. The one thing that most participants explicitly stated as part of their presentation as men was the presence of a beard and their general style of clothing being “manly.” Additionally, though the vast majority of the participants stated that having top surgery was a personal choice, and that it was not necessary for all trans men to have it, all but one expressed that they already had or planned to have top surgery, emphasizing the importance of being flat-chested as well. Though all of interviewees gender identities aligned with trans man, when asked what it means to be a man, many had not pondered that question before. Those that had given the question considerable thought, had little in the way of articulating a singular or general meaning for being a man.

Because representations and conceptions of manhood and masculinity varied greatly across participants, this study provides further evidence that masculinities do not occur biologically or naturally. Masculinity and gender are performances that are cultivated and tailored by the individual in response to their surroundings. The participants focused on the physical attributes that were visible to others and they adopted different versions of masculine appearance in an effort to be read by others as “real” men. It can be argued that cis men also focus on the physical attributes visible to others and that they perform gender in order to be read as “real” men as well, demonstrating that being a man has less to do with biology and more to do with how outsiders interpret their gender performance.

#### Brotherhood and Subjugation of Women

In prior research, brotherhood or friendship with other men, as well as the subjugation of women, have been implemented to police feminine behavior and authenticate claims to

manhood. In the findings presented for this study, the participants viewed their involvement with other men as validation for their claims to manhood, as well as an opportunity to act as a protector for friends in times of need. Though the participants were not found to participate in explicit forms of subjugation of women, through their discussions of feminism, chivalry, and their views on natural differences between men and women, some of the men were found to subscribe to benevolent sexism, an implicit and therefore less visible type of subjugation.

### *Brotherhood*

Several interviewees mentioned the importance of acceptance by both cis and trans “brothers,” as well as their ability to protect themselves and others by using the buddy system in public. Being accepted into a group that consists of other men, whether cis or trans, can make an impact on the self-esteem and mental health of a trans man. Mason, a 34-year-old from Tennessee who identified as two-spirit or trans masculine, described an incident at a friend’s Thanksgiving gathering “in the hollers” where, after several drinks, he declared to the other men that he was trans. It was his first time coming out to others, demonstrating the comfort he must have felt in the company of these men. Mason said, “I didn’t quite know what was about to happen, but they said, ‘Get out the Wild Turkey 101, we’re gonna celebrate.’ So... the rest of the night was them welcoming me into this man’s world, this brother kind of world, and...that always stuck with me.” Being welcomed into the world of brotherhood was a validation for Mason that the other men viewed him as one of the guys. It is also interesting to note that Wild Turkey 101 is a brand of bourbon, an alcoholic derivative of whiskey, that is often associated with manliness and with the American South, where many brands are produced. By imbibing in bourbon with the other men, Mason was further bolstering his own manhood.

Mason also described another time when he attended a wedding with one of his friends, where the women and men were separated into “gaggles,” and he was not sure which group he should join until his friend told him to join up with the men who were drinking beer by the truck:

I go and walk over to the guys—and I didn’t know these fellas, very well, ‘cause they’re in-laws and related—and one of the guys, doesn’t skip a beat, he just, you know, puts his hand in the cooler, grabs a beer, and hands it to me and it was just like, like how we’re welcomed into certain social groups and social constructs. So that stuck with me quite a bit as well, and that... a lot of times we even though I don’t need any outside validation of my gender identity, it does help when that identity that you identify with welcomes you into that particular clan.

Here Mason identified the importance of being welcomed into “the brotherhood” of cis men and how it helped to validate his identity as a man. Again, Mason mentioned sharing a drink with the other men, this time beer, which is also usually viewed as a more masculine alcoholic drink. The situations described seem to suggest that Mason viewed the offer to drink with other men as a rite of passage into brotherhood. In both situations, there was the expectation that Mason would drink what the other men were drinking, and by doing so, he proved that he was just as much a man as they were.

Perhaps one of the most easily recognizable and strongest bound brotherhoods is that of a fraternity. In their research of fraternities, Martin and Hummer (1989:462-463) explain that members of fraternities are “brothers,” and that being a brother is only possible for men who have gone through rites of passage that follow “the consistent and often lengthy display by pledges of appropriately masculine qualities and behaviors.” Brothers of a fraternity are loyal to other members and share close bonds. Martin and Hummer (1989:463) even found that some of

their participants viewed brotherhood as “the most valuable benefit of fraternity membership.” Max expressed his excitement about being welcomed into a fraternity on his college campus, “They just, like a year ago now, started accepting transgender men, so I’m very excited to start rushing for them and I’ve only received a lot of love and acceptance from their members that I’ve interacted with.” Being accepted into a fraternity would allow Max the opportunity to seek guidance from other men and find a sense of belonging similar to that experienced by Mason above.

However, brotherhood is not just about trans men being welcomed into the groups of cis men. Brotherhood is also about a community of trans men who help each other and share experiences. Timothy, a 21-year-old male from South Carolina, referred to other trans men as his brothers, stating that he learned about the name-change process by reading “some of my fellow brothers’ stories.” Similarly, Alec, a 25-year-old transgender male/genderqueer person from Tennessee, shared the importance of having other trans men to turn to for milestones, saying that:

They understand how exciting it is to get your first beard trimmer, you know. They’ll indulge in that with you, because they get it and they understand, and I think it’s helpful. I also think that sometimes it can be hard for some people, especially when they just wanna be seen as a cis gendered man or if they are stealth. But I also think that’s something they have missed out on if they block themselves from it.

He believed that trans men who live their lives passing as cis men (or stealth) “miss out” on having a group of friends who truly understand their situation and that they can share experiences with.

Alec also expressed that he was a “firm believer” in the “buddy system,” a system in which he and other trans men would go into potentially unsafe spaces together and cover for each other. He stated that, “When a lot of us trans guys go out together, like we go out for someone’s birthday or like that, we are firm believers in the buddy system.” He went on to describe an incident at a bar in Nashville where the men’s restroom did not have a stall door, “You never know who’s gonna walk into that bathroom, so, buddy system. We guard the door, we make sure he’s good and can relieve himself and be safe.” It is important to note that by using “we,” Alec positioned himself in the role of the protector in this scenario. The incident that Alec described makes it apparent that brotherhood is not only important for validation and mental well-being, but protection and physical well-being as well.

In the situations described by the participants, it is evident that being part of a group of men is an important part of claiming manhood. The men here discussed seeking out friendships with other men as ways to validate their manhood and their statuses as “brothers.” In addition to the validation that comes with being welcomed into a group of men, the participants also gained role models that they could develop their own masculine performances from. In the case of trans men who sought brotherhood with other trans men, they gained a support system to share experiences and advice, but they also gained the opportunity to be protectors in buddy system situations. A characteristic that is often associated with being a man is being able to protect loved ones; therefore, in a situation where a trans man can perform that role, their claims to manhood are strengthened.

### *Subjugation of Women and Sexism*

Within the social sciences, feminism is understood as the social movement that recognizes and draws attention to gender inequality and the existing gender hierarchy in society.

To be feminist is to be opposed to the systems of power that keep women in a position of subjugation to men. By discussing their stance on feminism, some participants revealed how they felt about women and gender equality. The ways that participants viewed women and related to feminism varied greatly across the sample. When asked, most participants identified as feminists and supported women's rights, while a smaller number of the men did not believe that they were feminists or did not know if they were feminists. Thirty-six of the participants answered "yes" to being a feminist, while some added the extra condition of "to an extent" or "but not extreme." Most of the participants who identified as feminists had the same understanding of feminism and did not support the use of sexism to enhance masculinity. Still others, when asked about being a feminist said "no," or that they had never thought about it before. Those who said "no" had a variety of reasons, but often their perceptions of what feminists stood for was the problem. Many of the participants who did not believe that they were feminists seemed to have a different understanding of what feminism was than how mainstream society defines it. Additionally, at least seven participants were found to hold beliefs that align with benevolent sexism, a type of sexism that often goes unnoticed due to its complimentary nature, which I discuss in more detail below.

Frank, who described himself as chivalrous, did not identify as a feminist, stating that a feminist is "like a strongly opinionated female" and that feminists think that "they would be better off if males didn't exist, that all males are what you may call it misogynistic. So, I think that feminists believe that all males are misogynistic." By calling feminists "strongly opinionated females," Frank further demonstrated the patriarchal element of the Christian gentleman masculinity by implying that being outspoken about inequality was a negative trait for women.

Notably, Frank's definition of feminism differed greatly from the overarching definition provided by those who said they were feminists.

Trip, a 25-year-old transgender man from Georgia, summed up feminism similarly to several others who identified as feminists:

I'm vaguely familiar with the different waves of feminism, but it is, to me it means somebody who argues for the equal treatment of women within any societal respect and cultural respects, especially in the workplace right now. Somebody who opposes...one gender over another.

The view of feminism meaning "equality for everyone" was expressed by most of the participants who identified as feminists, demonstrating that being sexist was not a primary way to bolster masculinity. Though sexism was not a key trait of most participants' masculinities, other participants did employ sexism and chivalry to prove their manhood.

Vincent, a 27-year-old male residing in Pennsylvania, did not identify as a feminist and explained how a former girlfriend had been a "negatively driven" feminist. When asked to define what feminists believe overall, Vincent acknowledged that not all feminists are alike, stating that, "I mean, it probably depends on the feminist. I mean, it probably could range from someone who just believes that men and women are equal to someone who is very politically active and maybe even has negative connotations of men. It just depends on the person." Despite recognizing that feminism includes those who believe in equality for men and women, Vincent did not personally identify as a feminist.

A couple of the participants identified as former feminists, alluding to prior to transition. Samuel, a 25-year-old trans man living in Kentucky, said that he still felt the same way about feminism after transition, but did not feel comfortable calling himself a feminist. "I usually think

guys who call themselves feminist sometimes...they can be real snoozes. [...] I feel much more comfortable saying I believe in feminism, I support feminism, than I do saying that I am a feminist, at this point in my life,” Samuel said, explaining how he currently felt about feminism. It was not that he opposed feminism, but something about the label made him uncomfortable. It is possible that being sympathetic to the feminist movement could have made Samuel feel that his masculinity could be challenged, as observed in Pascoe’s (2005) research on fag discourse. In her research, Pascoe (2005) observed how school age boys policed each other’s masculinity by calling each other “fag” when they displayed behavior deemed feminine, including defending women or other subordinated groups. Additionally, society typically views feminists as women, which could also influence Samuel’s desire to not claim the title.

In addition to their views on feminism, participants’ responses to the question “Do you believe there are essential or natural differences between men and women?” revealed that many of them have internalized what Glick and Fiske (1996, 2001) refer to as benevolent sexism. Benevolent sexism is sexism which the perpetrators view as complimentary to women, such as referring to women as “pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported, and adored” (Glick and Fiske 2001:109). This includes notions that women are naturally more caring or nurturing due to their biological role as child bearers, attributes which make them better suited for domestic roles than men. In line with chivalry and patriarchy, benevolent sexism can imply that women are subordinate to and weaker than men. If a man feels that he is responsible for protecting women, it implies that women are incapable of protecting themselves and are therefore inferior to the man (who does not need protecting). Though benevolent sexism may seem harmless due to its complimentary nature, it justifies and perpetuates gender inequality.



When asked about natural or essential differences, Levi, a 45-year-old male from Tennessee, responded that he did believe that there were differences, that “men respond more rationally to things, while women respond to things from an emotional place.” He then stated that women were “much stronger” than men, explaining that “they do everything, they take on both men and women’s roles. They take care of men. Even though they may not be physically stronger, but some are, they are by far the strongest sex.” In the last part of his statement, Levi qualified calling women the stronger gender by implying that he only meant this in terms of emotional or mental strength for most women. In saying that women are strong for taking care of men, but not physically stronger than men, Levi was employing benevolent sexism by using what appears to be a compliment to reinforce the idea that women are natural caregivers, not physical protectors.

Andre, a 35-year-old from Georgia who identified as both male and trans male, acknowledged that his views on essential or natural differences between men and women would likely be perceived as sexist, but he went on to describe another viewpoint grounded in benevolent sexism. He stated that “feminine energy is like air and water, and I feel like masculine energy is like fire and earth. Like masculine energy’s like A plus B and solution...feminine energy is healing, nurturing, and like a dance, alright...for me, to be a man is to be able to have the emotional intelligence to be logical with your emotions, if that makes sense.” Though Andre uses “energy” to describe the differences, the implications are the same. For Andre, men are logical and in control of their emotions, while women lack emotional control. He wanted to make sure that it was understood that he thought it was okay for feminine energy to be this way, but he failed to realize that he is contributing to the subordination of women. Notably, Andre displayed an alternative understanding of feminism as well. Rather than

seeing feminism as a political movement for equality, he viewed it as “equality and being decent enough to understand the nurturing, the healing, the spiritual, the goddess power in a woman.” He described being a feminist as a “spiritual thing” and stated that it can be hurtful to make it political.

At least five other participants expressed views that align with benevolent sexism. Other participants described women as more nurturing, living “in their feelings,” and being primary childcare providers because of their natural patience and sympathy. Alternatively, they described men as being more logical, more in control of their emotions, support for women, and protective backbones of families. Women were also described as “catty” and more prone to gossip. Alec explained that he was a great resource for his cis men coworkers who wanted to understand women because he has that perspective from prior to transition. Alec explained that, “If [another man] goes and talks to a girl about it, sometimes, especially you know, some women, not all, are catty, and they wanna go and be like, ‘You’ll never believe what I heard, blah blah blah,’ but he knows he’s safe with me.” The ‘he’ that Alec spoke of is a hypothetical coworker asking for advice with women. He explained that he is the safer choice to seek advice from than women, because of the proclivity of women to gossip and spread the private information of others. This also reiterates the importance of brotherhood, in that Alec is expected to uphold the code of brotherhood and keep his coworkers’ questions between the two of them, as well as the validation that comes with being treated as a brother.

While many of the participants of this study identified as feminists, there were still a considerable number of them that did not. Those who identified as feminists understood the nature of feminism to be in favor of equality for everyone, and while they do not actively engage in the subjugation of women or other sexist acts, they often still acknowledged gender

differences existed. It is through the belief in gender differences that sexism and the domination of women is sustained. Even though denial of being a feminist was often due to misunderstanding the true purpose of feminism, participants who did not identify as feminists conveyed true anti-feminist sentiments in other ways, including negative perceptions of feminists and benevolently sexist descriptions of women.

### Violence and the Fear of Violence

Due to previous literature tying violence to masculinities, participants were expected to utilize violence as part of their masculine presentations; however, the findings revealed that the participants often did not view themselves as violent beings and avoided violence whenever possible as a means of protecting their manhood. When asked about the importance of passing, 17 of the participants explicitly cited safety as a benefit of being read as a man. Eleven participants explicitly related fear to being recognized as trans. A query of the word “beat” being used in interviews revealed that nine participants used the word to express fear of being the victims of violence. Within each of the two codes for violence—safety as a benefit and fear of being recognized as trans—at least four participants from each category related their fear to restrooms. Rather than perpetuating violence or not fearing violence, the participants of this study used their fear of violence and knowledge of the real potential for violence as a driving force behind their decision to avoid places and situations and for their masculine presentations. The participants perceived the places and situations that they avoided as potentially threatening to their manhood. Abelson (2014) described defensive masculinities (avoidance of violence) and transformative masculinities (confrontation of violence) as the methods that trans men used to respond to their fear of violence and protect their claims to manhood. Additionally, as in Abelson’s (2019) research, fear of violence encouraged participants of this study to conform to

gender norms, to aspire to “pass” as cis men in spaces they felt were unsafe. In this way, fearing violence from other men bolstered the importance of passability and contributed to their avoidance of violence, or defensive masculinity, and was, consequentially, their way of protecting their manhood.

### *Safety as a Benefit*

Darius, a 23-year-old male from Georgia, expressed anxiety and fear related to violence several times in his interview. For instance, he mentioned feeling concern and anxiety about going to gay bars or other queer events. Though he said that he did not necessarily mean that others would be violent, he expressed concern about the reaction he may receive upon coming out to someone who he may want to date. He worried that potential partners would have no prior knowledge or experience with trans people and would have a negative reaction to him being transgender. For this reason, Darius did not date and did not want to have sex with others, effectively avoiding potentially dangerous situations. Because of his specific location in Georgia, Darius also feared going out because of his trans identity. When asked about the importance of passing, he stated that he was not “constantly afraid that I would get beat up or something, but there is a lingering fear of like, you know, the average age a trans person lives to is in their 30s.” Darius tried to laugh off the discomfort caused by that thought, but when asked if he believed that living in the South affected his ability to be out or his need to pass, he mentioned that he probably would have felt more comfortable in another area of the United States. He acknowledged that though he may live in a “blue town,” a reference to the Democratic leaning of the city he lives in, Georgia as a whole is a “red state” and that “danger is lurking.” He believed that the fear he felt for his safety may be lessened if he lived in a different state.

Like Darius, Maddox, a 21-year-old male from Georgia, also avoided going out to socialize and instead hosted game nights at his house. He and his queer friends did not go to bars or clubs, or any other “scene where there’s gonna be, like, a lot of drunk straight guys.” He identified the presence of drunk straight cis men as a potential risk for harassment. He said, “You know, dudes who are buddies drink and lay their hands on each other all the time, they wouldn’t be above laying their hands on someone they didn’t like that was a stranger.” The fear of spaces dominated by heterosexual people was further discussed by other participants as well.

Similarly, Alec expressed fear depending on his location. Alec explained that when traveling to different drag events in the South, he would often refuse to stop to use the restroom for long periods of time. He said that he “learned to hold [his] bladder really well” because during the time that he was traveling the most, his facial hair had not really grown in yet and he did not want to be put in the position of having to use the women’s restroom. He stated that “the bathroom is the scariest place for me, for sure, and it is one of the things that scares me the most when it comes to sexual assault or harassment, because all it takes is one person... to have it in their head that what I’m doing is not okay.” Within his home state of Tennessee he feared that, “Bubba from backwoods country Tennessee is in the bathroom with me, and looks over at the stall while he’s using the urinal and I’m sitting down to piss... all it takes is for him to connect one dot to the other and then I’m in the middle of a situation that is gonna fuck me up for the rest of my life.” He assigned the name “Bubba” to his hypothetical tormentor in two scenarios that he feared violence could occur. When asked about the importance of passing, Alec stated that the importance varied depending on where he was or who he was with. At the flea market, he said that he definitely wanted to pass, “because a lot of the people that come to the flea market are from small towns and country bumpkins and they want to come do their flea market shoppin’

and that's cool. I do not want them knowing I'm transgender, because Bubba over here might be a real asshole and wanna beat my ass in the bathroom, you know?" This statement reiterated his fear of using public restrooms and implied that his fear is more specifically of being attacked by "Bubba," a name that conjures the image of good old boy masculinity in the South (Abelson 2019:30-1).

Jamar, a 30-year-old male from Tennessee, also expressed fear of violence in different situations. He, like Alec, emphasized the importance of not going places alone, especially more rural areas. Though he did not name his hypothetical attacker, he did mention the fear of being cornered in a public restroom and having someone "beat the shit out of you." When asked if he felt the South influenced his ability to be out or his need to pass, Jamar confirmed that it did. He cited the way that Christianity is taught in the South as part of the problem. He said, "You have these people that think that because you're not being Christian enough to them that they have the right to discipline you for it, and that's not how it works." He believed that Southern Christians felt entitled to take the punishment of those who aren't "Christian enough" into their own hands. He claimed that "closed-minded Christians are the most deadly of all the Christians. They are the ones that go out and will beat the shit out of somebody." In addition to fearing bodily harm from these closed-minded Christians, Jamar also feared the verbal abuse that could come from them. "They'll say something so hateful and of such pure venom at this point that a person will go and end their life because of what they said, because it's so hurtful and the person can't handle it," Jamar said. He went on to explain that he had been through a lot of abuse throughout his life and learned to hide to get by, but he would no longer "let anybody hinder me from being me. Ever. I've done my share of hiding." This final statement implied that he adopted a fighting spirit to combat the negativity of others.

Damien exhibited a similar fighting spirit when asked about how the South had influenced his ability to be out or his need to pass. “Well, I’ve always kind of spit in the face of all these bigots anyway, So, I’m going to be me no matter what, and if they’re going to kill me for being me, so be it...I’m going to take them all down with me, so-it’s made me more, I don’t know, more feisty,” he laughed. The ‘they’ used here refers to the Southern bigots first mentioned. Though Damien seems determined to not fear violence, he acknowledged the possibility of it in saying that he may be killed for his identity.

### *Fear of Being “Clocked”*

Some participants expressed fear of others finding out they were trans. Having watched the film *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) in high school, Derek, a 34-year-old male from Georgia, claimed to be traumatized by the violence that was demonstrated in the film against someone who was like him. *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) is a dramatization of the true story of a young trans man named Brandon Teena who was sexually assaulted and murdered by two men in 1993 because they discovered his trans identity. Though Derek felt comfortable in most places because he passed, he stated that he was sometimes afraid of what would happen if someone saw him as gay or trans. When asked about how the South influenced him, Zac, a 20-year-old Georgia resident who identified as male or FTM, felt similarly to Derek, saying that he was “terrified of being like, clocked, in terms of being trans or in terms of being gay...I’m just always terrified in the South that like, I’ll get attacked or even just yelled at or anything like that, just being called out for existing.” Zac defined clocked as when “someone can tell that you’re trans,” though he also used the term to refer to when someone could tell his sexuality.

Several participants feared or experienced violence at their workplaces. Bruno, a 23-year-old male from South Carolina, described several instances that he was harassed or attacked by

others for his gender identity. He described the one physical attack as occurring in a grocery store parking lot, “I was loading groceries in the back of my car and some guy in a big yee-yee truck was walking in and he got a cart and pinned me to my car and said when his Trump gets in office, us faggot freaks will get eradicated and that’s...that was like scary.” He described other instances of verbal harassment but was thankful to have only had one physical attack. Bruno’s use of ‘yee-yee’ to describe the truck was meant to identify it as the kind of truck typically belonging to rednecks, which, like the aforementioned Bubba from Alec’s fears of violence, is part of good old boy masculinity (Abelson 2019).

An additional search for the term ‘redneck’ found that at least three other participants also feared the redneck stereotype associated with the South. Stuart, a 25-year-old from Tennessee who identified as a trans male or FTM, described his fear of being outed at work, saying that it made him very defensive:

Because you’ll get killed down here. Because there will be some redneck honky people that would just kill you in the parking lot. Or you’ll be walking down the alleyway... and it happens, I mean, you were murdered, and they don’t care. Just because you’re trans. Because they think, “Well, you know what, you’re going against what God made you”...Oh yes, being outed, I take very—I guess I get very defensive because like I said, I don’t like looking to get shot or killed that day, and that’s what they very well can do down here, and it’s very real.

Stuart brought up several elements previously discussed. He specified that his fear of being outed and attacked was specifically located at his place of work, but he also mentioned a fear of those who use religion as an excuse to exercise punishment on people that they believe do not conform



to their beliefs, implying that his fear extends to his community as well. He also reiterated Damien's fear of being killed, noting that it was a constant, real danger to trans men in the area.

Trip also cited the period around the 2016 election as a time to be fearful of violence. When asked if living in the South influenced his ability to be out and his need to pass, he responded, "Oh, definitely. Like, if you don't fit in, you're in trouble." He recalled a gay friend of his receiving multiple death threats left on his apartment door after the election and stated that "nothing feels safe in the south." Trip said that he avoided overtly religious places, and he definitely did not go where there are a lot of fraternity brothers hanging out, interpreting those spaces as particularly heterosexual, and possibly anti-trans, spaces and dangerous.

Similarly, Walker, a 51-year-old male from Tennessee, also shared that he avoided places where there would be "a lot of straight people." Heteronormativity and overt religion are both staples of conservative Southern culture. Darius also mentioned several of these elements as signs of danger; he cited a lack of "queerness" in the area, the "love for guns and love for being a 'redneck,' and love for being Republican in the South," as indicators that the South, more so than other areas of the country, was more prejudiced or discriminatory towards trans people. It is plausible that the way that the participants describe rednecks, drunk straight guys, and conservative Trump supporters informs us that these types of masculinity are typically not the kind of masculinities that the participants were striving to achieve. In challenging and condemning these often-white masculinities, the participants were also challenging the existing hegemonic structure. This is also evident in the performances of the participants who incorporate elements of femininity into their masculinity.

Garrett explained that at one point he was very open about his trans identity in the beginning of his college career, but he was later consumed by anxiety about living in the highly

conservative South, noting his need to constantly be on guard for potential threats and being aware of exits and avoiding large crowds. Avoidance of public restrooms stuck with Garrett since high school, and he recalled passing out in gym class because he would not drink water for fear of having to use the restroom and that his avoidance was so severe that he once got a urinary tract infection. He cited the comment of a Trump supporter for additional anxiety about restrooms: “People who are very radical in their feelings and, you know, like, ‘I’d bring an AR-15 in the bathroom if I saw a trans person in there.’” Garrett felt that it was best if he did not trust people immediately and that he would rather be safe than sorry. Though he joked about it somewhat, he also expressed some fear of coming out to his mother and stepfather, stating that he planned to do so in the car so that they could not “beat his butt.”

During his interview, Ronald, a 60-year-old from Georgia who identified as both male and as a trans man, disclosed that he was sexually assaulted prior to transition. When asked about experiences with sexual harassment, assault, or rape since transitioning, he stated, “Transwomen harass me all the time; they’re all over me, but I don’t see it the same as I used to.” He was asked if he felt this way because he did not fear trans women like he did cis men—the perpetrators of his pre-transition assault—he said that he did not know, saying, “Trans women have penises, but they aren’t as aggressive as cis men.” This statement sheds some light on transgender power dynamics, as Ronald felt that though he may be uncomfortable by the advances of trans women, because women are perceived as weaker than men he can still control the situation with them, where he may not be able to do so with cis men.

Bruno and Ronald both expressed dismay at being perceived as violent beings after transition. Ronald commented on being viewed as a black man, “I now experience male privilege; however, being a black man is a disadvantage. Now people are afraid of me. I’m not a

scary guy, but people are afraid.” Though their experiences with being viewed as violent men are likely quite different due to their difference in race, Bruno, who is white, also disliked this aspect of being viewed as a man: “I don’t like being lumped into this terrible category, but you know, I’ve been called a rapist for asking a woman for a favor because she was afraid to say no to me.” Bruno acknowledged the undesirable aspect of the white male privilege that he can now claim.

The fears of violence expressed by participants were almost always quelled by their ability to pass. Of those who discussed fear of violence, participants associated less fear with greater passability. Those who feared being “clocked,” as Zac did, relied on their ability to pass to avoid violent encounters with others. Of the participants who mentioned fears of using public restrooms, their fear often stemmed from the idea that they may be recognized as trans men in those spaces, a condition of not passing. Potential for violence often means the potential for emasculation. The spaces and situations that participants feared were those which they believed threatened their claims to manhood and masculinity most. In order to keep their claims intact, trans men choose to either avoid these spaces and situations, what Abelson (2014) described as defensive masculinity, or to reach a level of passability, both physically and behaviorally.

### *Preserving Manhood*

In the beginning of data analysis, it seemed that the first two themes would yield the most results, but after expanding search terms and digging deeper, the participant’s fear of violence and their coping mechanisms to overcome that fear became a prominent theme. Most important to their sense of self-preservation in the South was their ability to pass or be seen as a man. Participants who felt that they passed well or were stealth felt most comfortable in most situations, but even they acknowledged that threat of violence existed if they were to be “clocked” or identified as trans. Some of the participants felt unsafe in their towns and did not go

out with friends or venture far from home or work due to the fear that they would not be welcomed in predominantly heterosexual public spaces. Public restrooms were the source of fear for many of the participants, and for some, the “scariest place” for them. Participants felt that there was a greater risk of a violent encounter in these spaces if they were alone, so they found strength in numbers and brotherhood, or they learned how to hold their bladder for long periods of time and avoid those spaces. The groups that the participants seemed to fear the most were southern “rednecks,” Trump supporters, and closed-minded Christians, though those groups are not mutually exclusive. Only two instances were found where participants stated that they were viewed as potentially violent by others since transition.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As trans issues continue to be recognized in society, it is important that research reflects this change. The goal of this study is to understand the ways that trans men enhance their masculinities in the South and to contribute to the growing body of literature on the trans population. Through in-depth interviews, participants illuminated some of the ways that they make sense of and display their masculinities and manhood.

Prior research finds that gender is a performance, the characteristics of which are cultivated through social interaction in a particular cultural context (Stein 2018). Though the United States primarily subscribes to a gender binary, with most people identifying either as a cis man or a cis woman, a growing number of people are beginning to openly identify as transgender, meaning that their gender does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Through hormone therapy, surgical procedures, and other modifications to their physical presentation and behavior, many trans people choose to transition so that their gender identity can align with their gender expression. By studying the experiences of trans people, researchers are better able to understand how people “do gender” and how gender differences and inequalities are perpetuated through gender performance.

Though masculinities have traditionally been thought of as inherent to people who were assigned male at birth, recent studies have shown that masculinities are not biological and that women and trans people can also “do” masculinities. Because a hierarchy of masculinities exist where some versions of masculinity are valued over others, further research has found that cis men can enhance their claims to manhood through manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts. Though these acts can vary depending on the cultural context, they are generally understood

to help signify a masculine self. Southern and rural masculinities present their own masculine ideals that men in the region subscribe to in order to be seen as men. When examined, the amount of time that a participant spent living in the South did not appear to affect the findings presented here. Despite having a large population of queer people, the South is largely understudied as the site of many queer lives. Though some researchers have examined queer masculinities, as well as how trans people enhance their claims to their gender identity, few have studied the manhood acts of trans men. The themes chosen for this study were based on the findings of previous research of how men strengthen their claims to manhood.

The findings described here help illuminate some of the ways that trans men claim and hold on to manhood. Some manhood acts may be deliberate displays, such as clothing choice or seeking hormone therapy or surgery, and other manhood acts may be subtler. In the first theme of body image, most of the manhood acts are outwardly displayed and usually literally worn on the participant's sleeve. Some wanted to look more rugged, while others wished to be seen as dapper, their preferences reflected in their style of dress or other aspects of their appearance, such as how they walk or by growing facial hair. The body image and presentation styles described by the participants are similar in nature to the manhood acts that cisgender men employ to enhance their own manhood.

By seeking the friendship and company of other men, whether cis or trans, the participants were able to claim membership in a brotherhood that offers support and guidance to each other, as well as the status of "being one of the guys." In their use of the buddy system, some of the participants also found an opportunity to act as a protector for friends in situations that they viewed as potentially dangerous. As men are often thought of as protectors, having opportunities to insert themselves into that role helps their claim to manhood. The sexism that

some of the participants harbored, including mentions of chivalrous behavior, was a subtler compensatory manhood act, usually found in the ways that they described women or their views on feminism. Not all of the trans men engaged in sexism and several did identify as feminists (using the correct definition for the term). Though the participants may have mentioned additional aggression as part of being a man, none described being more inclined to violence.

Many had experiences with being the victims of violence, and many more had reasonable fears of violence in everyday life, both of which impacted how they negotiated their approaches to violence. In most cases discussed, expectations of violence in certain spaces or situations led participants to avoidant behavior, or defensive masculinity. In few other cases, participants experienced transformative masculinity and felt emboldened by potential violence and were willing to confront it directly. In addition, two of the participants mentioned that they were viewed as potential threats after transition, simply due to the general distrust in “strange men” that many women have. The participants combat their fear of violence by emphasizing the need to pass, which directly relates back to their body image and presentation and contributes to defensive masculinity. The fear of violence fueled their desire to pass or be read as men, which could have in turn aided them in identifying the physical traits that help them blend into society as men, sans “trans.” Confirmed by those participants who felt that they passed well in day-to-day life, with exceptional passability comes more comfort in public spaces and the confidence needed to fear violence less, while still acknowledging that danger does exist. The response to potential violence chosen by the participants, whether defensive or transformative, is an important factor in their ability to maintain their status as men.

Just as trans men use these tactics to be read by others as men or masculine, so do cis men. Though masculinities and manhood are thought to be inherent to cis men and naturally

occurring, they too must learn the look, the actions, and the way of thinking necessary to be seen by others as men. The manhood acts found in this research contribute to previous studies on manhood acts, making them relevant to the study of trans men, in addition to cis men.

The study of manhood acts among trans men contributes to masculinities and gender scholarship fields, which expose the nature of gender hierarchies. By examining the manhood acts used and the ways in which trans men bolster claims to manhood, researchers are able to illustrate that masculinities are not inherent to biologically male bodies but are performative and must be learned. To demonstrate that masculinities are not inherent also demonstrates that claims of natural male superiority are false and furthers arguments of gender equality. If the qualities that are thought to make male-bodied people men can be acquired and learned by those who were assigned female at birth, then it becomes difficult to claim that the binary sexes are essentially different and that their behaviors are inherent. This study contributes to research that confronts essentialist beliefs about gender and sex differences and the gender hierarchies that are bolstered by those differences. This research provides evidence that manhood is an achieved status, accessible to anyone with the means and motivation to claim it, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth. This research also finds that definitions of manhood are subjective to an individual's own experiences, as evidenced by the participants' many implicit and explicit conceptions of what it means to be a man and what that looks like, indicating that there is not just one way to be a man. Acknowledging that gender inequality is a product of learned gender differences can potentially lead to greater gender equality. If the emphasis on gender difference was replaced with an emphasis on gender commonalities, or the performativity of gender, gender norms and categories could be better understood as a system of social control that places limitations and expectations on all gendered performances. Masculinities as they currently exist



and are conceptualized outline gender norms, promote gender differences and police gender performances, which maintains existing gender inequality.

### Limitations

First, this research is not generalizable to all trans men and is only applicable to the participants of this study. Though the sample size was not small by qualitative standards, that does not mean that the findings here are representative of the entire population of trans men in the United States, or in the South. The patterns found in responses are only relevant to those who responded to the call for recruitment and took part in the interview process. If this study was replicated in another area of the United States, another country, or simply with different participants, other patterns may emerge, and existing patterns may not apply. Although the findings presented in this study are not generalizable, prior research indicates that these patterns do exist across the Southeast.

An additional limitation was the method used to collect the data. Due to most participants living in other states or similarly distant locations, all interviews were done by phone, limiting the extent to which interpretations about responses could be made. A phone interview differs from a face-to-face interview in that the researcher cannot pick up on nonverbal cues or body language expressed by an interviewee. Additionally, because of phone signal issues or other technical difficulties, a small number of the recordings were more difficult than others to extract data from. This also limited interpretation in these interviews to only what could be understood, which was not a lot in a couple of cases.

As mentioned in the findings, the reliance on participants to self-report could also be a limitation. It is possible that some of the participants could have unintentionally misreported or misrepresented their experiences. Because observations could not be made to supplement the

data collected in interviews, this study was completely reliant on the testimony of the participants. Especially in the case of studying embodied manhood acts, data collection through firsthand observation could have been particularly useful in interpretation and findings. For example, there may be a mannerism or other embodied trait that a participant did not think to mention that observation could have contributed.

#### Future Research

Future research on the manhood acts of trans men could address the geographical limitations of this study by expanding to other parts of the United States or to other countries. As mentioned in the limitations, the findings of this study are not applicable to trans men in other areas and it would be valuable to know how trans men in other areas of the world use manhood acts to enhance their masculinity. As the South remains the home of the largest population of LGBTQ+ individuals, conducting further research on the topic in the South could illuminate other patterns or provide further saturation of the findings in this study. Additionally, further research on the manhood acts and compensatory manhood acts of both trans men and cis men could assess how masculinities are performative and achievable, as well as how performances of masculinities contribute to gender inequality. Perhaps by examining the behavior and attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality, possibilities for creating social change and greater gender equality may be discovered.

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## APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Gender Identity</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Years in the South</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Income</i>
<i>Alec</i>	25	White/Caucasian	Transgender male/ Genderqueer/ Nothing	Straight	TN	25	Some College	\$25- 50K
<i>Mason</i>	34	Indigenous/ Mesoamerican	Two- Spirit/Transmasculine	Queer/ Fluid	TN	30	Some College	\$25- 50K
<i>Nolan</i>	36	White/Caucasian	Male/Transgender male	Straight	GA	36	Master's Degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Levi</i>	45	Black/African American	Male	Pansexual	TN	30	Some College	\$25- 50K
<i>Dayton</i>	36	White/Caucasian	Transgender/Non- Binary/Trans Masculine	Pansexual	FL	4	Finishing Master's	N/A
<i>Gordon</i>	41	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	GA	37	Associate degree	Below \$25K
<i>Hugh</i>	25	White/Caucasian	Male	No Label	GA	21	Bachelor's Degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Jace</i>	18	White/Caucasian	Male	Bisexual	GA	18	Finishing Associate's	\$25- 50K
<i>Maddox</i>	21	White/Caucasian	Male	Bisexual	GA	21	Finishing Bachelor's	Below \$25K
<i>Jeffrey</i>	35	White/Caucasian	Male	Queer	VA	30	Bachelor's Degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Jayden</i>	30	White/Caucasian	Trans Man	Straight	VA	30	Associate degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Jamar</i>	30	White/Caucasian	Male	Demi/ Pansexual	TN	28	Some College	N/A
<i>Bruno</i>	23	White/Caucasian	Male	Polysexual	SC	23	High School	\$50- 100K
<i>Gabriel</i>	28	Hispanic	Male	Straight	SC	27	Finishing Master's	\$25- 50K
<i>Andre</i>	33	Black/African American	Male/Trans Male	Straight	GA	11	Associate degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Samuel</i>	22	White/Caucasian	Trans Man	Queer	KY	22	Finishing Bachelor's	Below \$25K
<i>Sage</i>	23	White/Caucasian	Trans Man	Queer	NY	21	Finishing Master's	Below \$25K
<i>Reece</i>	18	Multiracial/Biraci al	Male	Pansexual	GA	18	Finishing Bachelor's	N/A
<i>Spencer</i>	29	White/Caucasian	Male/FTM	Queer/ Pansexual	GA	29	Master's Degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Theo</i>	24	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	SC	24	Finishing Master's	Below \$25K
<i>Stuart</i>	28	White/Caucasian	Trans Male/FTM	Straight	TN	28	Associate degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Timothy</i>	21	White/Caucasian	Male	Bisexual	SC	21	Associate degree	\$25- 50K
<i>Tobias</i>	19	White/Caucasian	Male	Pansexual	GA	19	Finishing Bachelor's	N/A
<i>Vincent</i>	27	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	PA	26	Finishing Bachelor's	N/A
<i>Leo</i>	30	Black/African American	Male	Straight	NC	15	Master's Degree	\$50- 100K
<i>Darius</i>	23	White/Caucasian	Male	Asexual	GA	22	Some College	Below \$25K
<i>Javier</i>	28	Black/African American	Male	Straight	GA	25	Some College	N/A
<i>Damien</i>	38	Multiracial	Male	Pansexual	FL	34	Master's Degree	Below \$25K



<i>Jamie</i>	33	White/Caucasian	Trans Man	Gay	AR	7	Bachelor's Degree	\$25-50K
<i>Emmett</i>	25	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	AR	25	Finishing Associate's	Below \$25K
<i>Garrett</i>	22	White/Caucasian	Male/Trans Guy	Pansexual	GA	22	Finishing Bachelor's	Below \$25K
<i>Colton</i>	28	White/Caucasian	Male/Trans Man	Straight	SC	28	Master's Degree	\$25-50K
<i>Liam</i>	34	White/Caucasian	Male/FTM	Gay	TN	30	Bachelor's Degree	Below \$25K
<i>Hayden</i>	32	Multiracial	Male	Pansexual	GA	22	Associate degree	Below \$25K
<i>Dakota</i>	30	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	SC	29	Some College	\$25-50K
<i>Carter</i>	26	White/Caucasian	Transgender	Bisexual/Pansexual	TN	12	Bachelor's Degree	Below \$25K
<i>Frank</i>	41	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	SC	15	Bachelor's Degree	\$25-50K
<i>Walker</i>	51	White/Caucasian	Male	Bisexual	TN	25	Bachelor's Degree	Below \$25K
<i>Donnie</i>	28	White/Caucasian	Male/Trans Male	Bisexual/Pansexual	VA	17	Bachelor's Degree	\$25-50K
<i>Zac</i>	20	White/Caucasian	Male/FTM	Bisexual	GA	20	Bachelor's Degree	Below \$25K
<i>Max</i>	18	Hispanic	Male	Bisexual/Pansexual	GA	4	Finishing Bachelor's	N/A
<i>Trip</i>	25	White/Caucasian	Transgender man	Queer	GA	25	Finishing Master's	Below \$25K
<i>Rowen</i>	22	White/Caucasian	Male	Straight	GA	22	High School	Below \$25K
<i>Derek</i>	34	White/Caucasian	Male	Gay	GA	34	Finishing Master's	N/A
<i>Kevin</i>	34	Multiracial/Mixed	Male	Pansexual	GA	34	Some College	\$25-50K
<i>Ronald</i>	60	Black/African American	Male/Trans Man	Straight	GA	6	Bachelor's Degree	N/A
<i>Parker</i>	23	White/Caucasian	Trans Masculine	Asexual	VA	2	Finishing Master's	Below \$25K
<i>Billy</i>	22	White/Caucasian	Male	Queer/Polyamorous	GA	21	Some College	N/A
<i>Quentin</i>	34	Black/African American	Male	Straight	GA	10	Some College	\$25-50K
<i>Eli</i>	19	White/Caucasian	Transgender	Gay	SC	1	Finishing Bachelor's	N/A
<i>Jorge</i>	24	White/Caucasian	Male	Pansexual	GA	23	Some College	N/A