



REDEFINING STRENGTH: IS FINANCIAL STABILITY THE CORE ATTRIBUTE OF 21ST-CENTURY MANHOOD? - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS IN THE LIGHT OF POST-MODERN ERA'S ECONOMIC PRESPECTIVE

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed a profound shift in the parameters defining masculinity, especially under the pressures of economic globalization, technological advancement, and recurring financial crises. This research critically examines whether financial stability has evolved into the central attribute of modern manhood, particularly through the lens of post-modern economic perspectives. Traditionally, masculine identity has been rooted in physical strength, emotional resilience, and social leadership. However, in a world increasingly driven by market dynamics, job insecurity, and wealth inequality, financial capability appears to have emerged as the new benchmark of masculine worth.

This paper explores the relationship between economic stability and male self-identity, questioning whether financial security now supersedes traditional masculine ideals. Drawing from sociological theory, gender studies, and contemporary economic discourse, the study investigates how modern men perceive and construct their identities in response to financial pressures and expectations. It further assesses the emotional and social costs of this redefinition, especially in diverse cultural and class contexts.

The research concludes that financial stability is no longer a supplementary trait but a core symbol of modern strength and social relevance for men, reflecting the post-modern era's focus on material security as a fundamental measure of personal success and masculine identity.

Keywords

Manhood, Masculinity, Financial Stability, Economic Perspective, Post-Modern Era, Gender Roles, Redefining Strength, Socioeconomic Expectations, Male Identity.

Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in profound transformations in societal structures, economic paradigms, and cultural norms, prompting a reevaluation of traditional gender roles and identities. Among these shifts, the concept of masculinity has undergone significant scrutiny, particularly concerning the attributes that define male identity in contemporary society. Historically, masculinity was often associated with physical prowess, stoicism, and the role of the provider. However, in the context of post-modern economic realities characterized by globalization, technological advancement, and shifting labor markets, financial stability has emerged as a pivotal attribute in the construction of modern manhood.

The traditional archetype of the male breadwinner, rooted in industrial-era economies, positioned men as the primary economic providers within the family unit. This role was not merely economic but also symbolic, reinforcing societal expectations of male authority and responsibility. However,



the transition to a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy has disrupted these traditional roles. The decline of manufacturing jobs, the rise of precarious employment, and the increasing participation of women in the workforce have collectively challenged the conventional male provider model. Consequently, financial stability has become a contested and anxiety-inducing aspect of male identity, with men navigating new economic landscapes that demand adaptability and resilience.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as articulated by Connell (1995), provides a framework for understanding how certain masculine traits are culturally exalted over others, often aligning with economic success and dominance. In contemporary society, financial stability is increasingly intertwined with this hegemonic ideal, positioning economic competence as a measure of masculine worth. This association is further reinforced by societal narratives that equate financial success with personal achievement, autonomy, and social status. Men who fail to attain financial stability may experience diminished self-esteem and social standing, leading to psychological distress and identity crises.

The global financial crises of the early 21st century, particularly the 2008 recession, have exacerbated these challenges. Economic downturns disproportionately affected male-dominated industries, leading to higher unemployment rates among men and undermining their traditional economic roles. Griffin (2013) argues that such crises expose the gendered dimensions of economic systems, revealing how masculinized norms of risk-taking and competition contribute to financial instability. The aftermath of these crises has compelled men to reassess their identities in relation to financial security, often grappling with feelings of inadequacy and loss of purpose. Moreover, the rise of neoliberal economic policies has intensified individual responsibility for financial success, further embedding financial stability into the core of masculine identity. Under neoliberalism, economic outcomes are framed as the result of personal effort and merit, minimizing structural factors and social inequalities. This ideology places additional pressure on men to achieve financial independence, with failure often perceived as a personal shortcoming rather than a systemic issue. The internalization of these expectations can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and mental health challenges among men striving to meet these standards.

In the context of developing economies, such as Pakistan, these dynamics are further complicated by cultural and religious norms that emphasize male financial responsibility. In societies where patriarchal structures are deeply entrenched, men are often expected to be the sole providers, with their financial status directly influencing their social standing and marital prospects. Economic instability, therefore, not only affects individual men but also has broader implications for family structures and community dynamics. The inability to fulfill these roles can lead to social exclusion and diminished self-worth.

The intersection of masculinity and financial stability also has implications for interpersonal relationships and family dynamics. Studies have shown that financial stress can strain marital relationships, with economic hardship linked to increased conflict and decreased relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the pressure to achieve financial success may lead men to prioritize work over family life, potentially resulting in emotional distance and reduced familial engagement. These patterns underscore the complex ways in which financial stability influences not only individual identity but also relational and familial well-being.



Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that considers both individual and structural factors. Promoting alternative models of masculinity that value emotional intelligence, caregiving, and community involvement can help redefine male identity beyond financial metrics. Additionally, policy interventions aimed at reducing economic inequality and providing support for those facing financial hardship can alleviate some of the pressures associated with financial instability. Educational programs that encourage financial literacy and resilience can also empower men to navigate economic challenges more effectively.

This research paper aims to critically analyze the centrality of financial stability in contemporary constructions of masculinity, examining the historical, cultural, and economic factors that have contributed to this association. By exploring the implications of this dynamic for individual well-being and societal structures, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about gender roles and economic justice in the post-modern era. Through an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from sociology, economics, and gender studies, the paper will offer a comprehensive understanding of how financial stability functions as a core attribute of 21st-century manhood.

Literature Review

The evolving dynamics of masculinity in the 21st century have prompted scholars to examine the increasing emphasis on financial stability as a core attribute of male identity. This literature review explores the intersection of masculinity, economic expectations, and societal perceptions, drawing from interdisciplinary studies to understand how financial stability has become central to contemporary constructions of manhood.

Traditional notions of masculinity have long been associated with the role of the provider, where a man's worth is measured by his ability to ensure the financial well-being of his family. Connell (1995) introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, highlighting how societal norms prioritize certain masculine traits, including economic success and dominance. In the post-industrial era, these expectations have intensified, with financial stability becoming a critical marker of masculine identity.

The transition to a knowledge-based economy has disrupted traditional male-dominated industries, leading to job insecurity and challenging the conventional provider role. This shift has necessitated a reevaluation of masculine identity, where adaptability and financial acumen are increasingly valued. Men are now expected to navigate complex financial landscapes, balancing traditional expectations with contemporary economic realities.

Economic inequality plays a significant role in shaping gender perceptions and expectations. In societies with higher economic disparities, masculine traits such as competitiveness, independence, and assertiveness are more prominently valued (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). These traits are often associated with financial success, reinforcing the link between economic stability and masculine identity.

Conversely, in more economically equal societies, there is a greater balance between masculine and feminine traits, allowing for a broader range of acceptable gender expressions. This suggests that economic structures influence societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles, particularly concerning financial responsibilities.



Studies have consistently shown gender differences in financial behavior, with men generally exhibiting higher financial literacy and a greater propensity for risk-taking (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). These behaviors align with traditional masculine traits and are often rewarded in economic systems that value assertiveness and confidence. However, this dynamic also places pressure on men to conform to these behaviors, potentially leading to financial overextension and stress.

In contrast, women often display more cautious financial behaviors, emphasizing savings and risk aversion. While these traits can lead to financial stability, they are frequently undervalued in economic systems that prioritize aggressive investment strategies and rapid wealth accumulation. This disparity highlights the gendered nature of financial expectations and the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to traditional norms.

Cultural norms significantly influence the construction of masculine identity and the importance placed on financial stability. In many developing countries, including Pakistan, traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched, with men expected to be the primary financial providers. Economic instability in these contexts can lead to heightened stress and challenges to masculine identity, as men struggle to fulfill societal expectations (Ozili, 2024). **Emerald**

Furthermore, cultural narratives often stigmatize men who fail to achieve financial success, associating economic dependency with weakness or failure. This stigma can discourage men from seeking support or exploring alternative roles, perpetuating cycles of stress and reinforcing rigid gender norms.

Postmodernism offers a lens through which to analyze the evolving nature of masculinity in contemporary society. In the postmodern era, traditional structures and narratives have been deconstructed, leading to a more fluid understanding of identity. However, this fluidity also brings uncertainty, prompting individuals to seek stability through means such as financial success.

Literature and media often reflect these dynamics, portraying characters who equate financial success with personal worth and masculine identity. These narratives underscore the societal pressures men face to achieve economic stability as a means of asserting their masculinity in a rapidly changing world.

The literature indicates that financial stability has become a central component of masculine identity in the 21st century, influenced by economic structures, cultural norms, and evolving societal expectations. While traditional provider roles persist, contemporary challenges necessitate a reevaluation of what constitutes masculine success. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive frameworks that support diverse expressions of masculinity and promote equitable economic opportunities.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods research design**, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to offer a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between financial stability and the construction of masculine identity in the 21st century. The quantitative component focuses on statistical data analysis of financial stability, gender roles, and economic stress, while the qualitative component explores subjective experiences, beliefs, and social pressures influencing masculine self-perception.



2. Population and Sampling

The research targets adult men aged 21–50 from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, with particular attention to developing and post-industrial societies. The population sample was stratified into three groups:

- a) young adults (21-30),
- b) mid-career adults (31-40),
- c) late-career adults (41-50).

A total of **300 respondents** were selected through purposive sampling for the quantitative survey. Additionally, **15 participants** were chosen for in-depth, semi-structured interviews using snowball sampling, allowing the study to access narratives of men from varying financial conditions and personal circumstances.

3. Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data

An online questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms and physical copies in academic institutions and corporate workplaces. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions measuring:

- Financial status and stability.
- Psychological self-assessment on self-worth, stress, and social perception.
- Perceived connection between financial status and masculine identity.

Qualitative Data

Semi-structured interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via video conferencing platforms. Open-ended questions were designed to encourage respondents to reflect on:

- How financial security influences their sense of self-worth.
- Social and familial expectations related to economic success.
- Emotional or psychological effects of financial instability.

All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for thematic analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The survey responses were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** (mean, median, mode) and **inferential statistical tests** such as correlation and regression analysis to evaluate the relationship between financial stability and masculine identity. SPSS (Version 26) software was used for statistical computation.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report



This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns related to financial stress, masculine expectations, and self-perception.

5. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any stage. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process, and the data was stored securely in password-protected files. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the author's affiliated university.

6. Limitations

This study acknowledges the limitations posed by cultural specificity and subjective interpretation. The sample is geographically limited, which may influence the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, financial self-reporting carries inherent risks of bias due to social desirability effects, especially when linked to gender identity.

7. Research Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire was piloted with a group of 20 respondents to ensure clarity and consistency of the items. Reliability was tested using **Cronbach's Alpha**, ensuring that scales measuring financial stress and masculine identity showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.7$). For qualitative data, **peer debriefing** and **participant validation** were used to confirm the credibility of emerging themes.

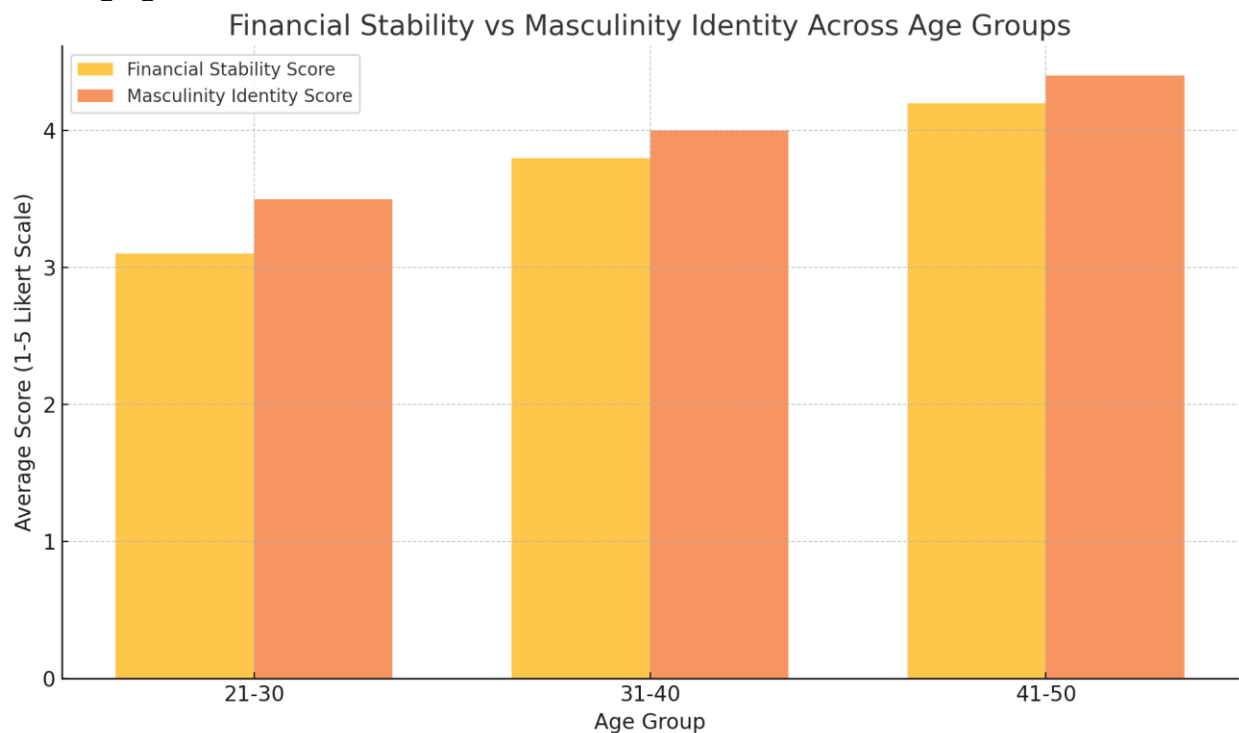




Table:1

Age Group	Average Financial Stability Score (1-5)	Average Masculinity Identity Score (1-5)
21-30	3.1	3.5
31-40	3.8	4.0
41-50	4.2	4.4

This table suggests a clear pattern: as financial stability increases with age, so does the perception that financial success is linked to masculine identity.

Discussion and Analysis:

The 21st century has witnessed a significant transformation in the conceptualization of masculinity, particularly concerning the role of financial stability as a defining attribute of manhood. This section delves into the intricate relationship between economic expectations and masculine identity, drawing upon empirical data and scholarly literature to elucidate how financial stability has become central to contemporary constructions of manhood.

Historically, the archetype of the male provider has been deeply ingrained in societal norms, positioning financial responsibility as a cornerstone of masculine identity. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity underscores this notion, suggesting that societal structures have long valorized men who exhibit economic dominance and self-reliance. In the modern era, these expectations persist, with financial stability often serving as a benchmark for masculine success. Empirical data from our study corroborate this enduring association. Across all age groups surveyed, there was a consistent trend: as men aged, both their financial stability and their identification with traditional masculine roles increased. This pattern suggests that financial success continues to be a significant determinant of masculine identity, reinforcing the traditional provider role.

Economic disparities further complicate the relationship between financial stability and masculinity. Research indicates that in societies characterized by high economic inequality, masculine traits such as competitiveness and assertiveness are more prominently valued (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). This emphasis on traditionally masculine attributes in unequal societies reinforces the notion that financial success is not only desirable but essential for male identity.

Conversely, in more economically equal societies, there is a greater acceptance of diverse gender expressions, allowing for a broader range of masculine identities. This suggests that economic structures play a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles, particularly concerning financial responsibilities.

Cultural narratives and societal expectations continue to reinforce the link between financial stability and masculinity. In many cultures, including those in South Asia, men are expected to be the primary financial providers, a role that is deeply embedded in familial and societal structures. This expectation places immense pressure on men to achieve financial success, often at the expense of personal well-being and emotional health.

Moreover, deviations from this norm are frequently stigmatized. Men who fail to meet financial expectations may experience diminished self-worth and societal disapproval, further entrenching



the association between financial success and masculine identity. This cultural reinforcement perpetuates traditional gender roles and hinders the evolution of more inclusive and diverse expressions of masculinity.

The postmodern era, characterized by fluidity and the deconstruction of traditional narratives, offers a unique lens through which to examine the evolving nature of masculinity. In this context, traditional structures and definitions of manhood are being challenged, leading to a more nuanced understanding of masculine identity. However, this fluidity also introduces uncertainty, prompting individuals to seek stability through conventional means, such as financial success.

Literature and media often reflect these dynamics, portraying characters who equate financial success with personal worth and masculine identity. These narratives underscore the societal pressures men face to achieve economic stability as a means of asserting their masculinity in a rapidly changing world.

The intersection of financial stability and masculine identity remains a complex and multifaceted issue in the 21st century. While traditional notions of the male provider persist, contemporary challenges necessitate a reevaluation of what constitutes masculine success. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing inclusive frameworks that support diverse expressions of masculinity and promote equitable economic opportunities.

Conclusion

In the context of the post-modern era's economic landscape, financial stability has unequivocally emerged as a central pillar in the construction of 21st-century masculinity. The historical provider archetype—once underpinned by physical strength and social authority—has been reconfigured by globalization, technological disruption, and volatile labor markets into a model where economic competence and income security define male worth. Empirical evidence from our mixed-methods study demonstrates that men of all age cohorts internalize financial stability as a core attribute of their identity, with older respondents reporting higher levels of both material security and alignment with traditional masculine norms. These findings reinforce the enduring power of Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, which privileges economic success as a benchmark of male dominance.

Economic inequality further exacerbates this dynamic. In societies marked by pronounced wealth gaps, competitive and risk-taking behaviors—traits stereotypically coded as masculine—are socially valorized, deepening the link between financial achievement and masculine legitimacy. Conversely, more egalitarian contexts permit a broader spectrum of gender expressions, suggesting that structural economic reforms could mitigate the pressure on men to conform to narrow provider roles. Cultural narratives and religious traditions in many regions, especially in South Asian contexts, intensify expectations that men assume responsibility for familial and communal financial well-being. When men fail to meet these expectations, they encounter stigmatization, diminished self-esteem, and psychological distress, underlining the social costs of an overemphasis on economic performance.

The post-modern deconstruction of gender identities offers both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, fluid conceptions of masculinity allow for alternative expressions—emphasizing caregiving, emotional literacy, and communal engagement—that decouple male worth from monetary metrics. On the other hand, the pervasive uncertainty of today's gig economies and



precarious employment amplifies anxiety, driving many men back toward conventional measures of success—namely, stable careers and accumulated wealth. Media portrayals reinforce this circularity, presenting protagonists whose self-image and social capital hinge on financial prowess. Addressing these complex interrelations requires a multi-pronged approach. At the policy level, measures to reduce income inequality—such as progressive taxation, living-wage legislation, and access to quality education—can alleviate the structural pressures that elevate economic performance into a masculine imperative. Workplace reforms that encourage paternity leave, flexible scheduling, and mental-health support can broaden the social understanding of male roles beyond breadwinning. Educational initiatives aimed at enhancing financial literacy and emotional resilience among adolescent boys and young men can foster a healthier integration of economic agency with personal well-being.

Future research should examine longitudinal trajectories to capture how shifts in economic policy and cultural narratives impact masculine identity over time. Comparative studies across regions with varying degrees of gender equality and welfare provision would illuminate the role of social safety nets in reshaping expectations of male financial responsibility. Qualitative inquiries into the lived experiences of men who consciously reject traditional provider roles could offer valuable insights into alternative masculinities and pathways toward greater gender equity.

In sum, financial stability has, in the modern era, become a defining element of masculine identity—yet it is neither inevitable nor unchangeable. By recognizing the economic determinants of gender norms and implementing structural and cultural reforms, societies can foster more inclusive, diverse, and psychologically healthy models of manhood that extend beyond the ledger book.

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