

Toxic masculinity, a social threat

Abstract

The term "toxic masculinity" is frequently used but rarely defined. This paper addresses one specific aspect of it by providing an analysis of its use in one literary text. The paper first provides an overview of the term and its usage by contextualizing it in contemporary culture and discourse, while the second half of the paper is concerned with a young adult novel. Through a close reading of the text, it is shown how contemporary youth and young adults encounter phenomena analytically described with the help of the term "toxic masculinity."

Keywords: toxic masculinity, gender expectations, fragile masculinity, sex roles, young adult fiction.

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I.Introduction

Living in the modern world is often understood as the best thing one could think of: there are endless possibilities, minority groups' situations improve steadily, and the world can be one's big playground. However, the era is not without contradictions: from childhood until old age (at least in the developed part of the world), everyone experiences the power and influence of multiple social platforms, their often toxic culture, and their noticeable negative effects.

On social media or on TV screens, people appear perfect. When one looks at the TV screen, one sees all the perfect-looking actors who play leading roles. Yet, one may also have a faint feeling that this all might be a lie. This fake picture is dangerous and can boost mental illnesses and insecurities. This is one of the elements that is perfectly displayed in Fred Aceves' book, *The New David Espinoza* (2019).

There are multiple cases when one feels overwhelmed by the fake reality displayed by mass and social media, and the outcome can be shocking. Fred Aceves tells the story of a teenage boy who, in order to feel appreciated and safe, starts to listen to the wrong people, which will change his whole life. In this book, peer pressure, school bullying, toxic images of the body, and mental illnesses are all presented. No wonder, this young adult novel may be experienced as triggering. At the same time, it is a perfect text to show how bad words, verbal and physical abuse may change somebody to the point that even their closest friends cannot recognize them.

This paper focuses on how a new mediated world created a formerly unseen problem thematized in recent years: society creates fragile masculinity, which can easily turn into toxic masculinity. While the term 'toxic masculinity' has recently been in the focus of attention in popular culture, it remains an unexplored issue. Toxic masculinity is deeply rooted in our society creating multiple problems on the social and individual level, yet people are uneducated about it.

Toxic masculinity, as its name suggests, is connected to toxic ideas and masculinities. These ideas are frequently connected to negative and discriminatory ideas such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and misogyny. Violence and brutality are also central elements of toxic masculinity. This is the reason why toxic masculinity is believed to be a great danger for human beings. It is dangerous for

those who have been violated by this form of masculinity (the queer community, women, and other men), as well as for those who believe in toxic ideas. Men displaying toxic masculinity believe that they have to act upon their masculinity as much as they possibly can and that every man should do the same.

To understand the term ‘toxic masculinity,’ one should understand what masculinity itself is and what norms, expectations, and messages are linked to it. These elements are creating fragile men with low self-esteem. Understanding the issues and problems with masculinity and its norms is one of the first steps to identifying the problem that toxic masculinity is and presents.

Thus, in the first chapter of the paper, the two terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘toxic masculinity’ will be defined. Terms are introduced, such as ‘male messages,’ ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ ‘traditional masculinity,’ ‘sex roles,’ and ‘expectations.’ Then the focus shifts toward toxic masculinity itself. To be able to give a definition, the term's origin and evolution will be introduced, followed by some contemporary interpretations. Toxic masculinity's relationship with political parties will also be introduced. Because of the co-existing multiple definitions and interpretations, a specific problem is highlighted that is connected to the American Psychological Association (or APA) and how their guidelines introduced to assist people who are dealing with traditional masculinity became known as a way to deal with toxic masculinity. Finally, possible ways to combat toxic masculinity are mentioned. In conclusion, toxic masculinity appears as a creation of society: the unachievable and unrealistic norms and expectations make men anxious and insecure; their self-esteem drops, and all of this pushes them closer to toxicity.

In what follows, Fred Aceves' book called *The New David Espinoza* (2019) is discussed. Close reading is used to introduce a variety of social issues, such as bullying, unrealistic body standards, low self-esteem, mental disorders, and toxic masculinity in the context of the young adult novel.

Fred Aceves' books are inspired by his life and experiences. His debut book, *The Closest I've Come* (2017), is about his struggles living in a poor neighbourhood. In his second and currently last book, *The New David Espinoza* (2019), he used his experience with bodybuilding as his inspiration. At the same time, his characters are not close representations of the author himself. At the end of *The New David*

Espinoza, Aceves mentions that he asked people to tell him their stories. Aceves used these stories to construct his book and story.

Because *The New David Espinoza* is about real experiences and real people, the story itself feels raw and realistic. This is the reason why a close reading could give a useful representation of fragile masculinity and how low self-esteem can turn into toxic traits. It is also noteworthy how the author criticizes previously mentioned social issues such as unrealistic body image for bodybuilders, the toxicity of bodybuilding, and how the sport itself supports and promotes body dysmorphia and muscle dysmorphia.

Through the book, it is possible to show how society forces norms, expectations, and messages on boys even if, or rather, mostly when, they are only teenagers. The negative effects of these sometimes unachievable expectations are displayed through David's character development. The reader could understand the changes from David's perspective.

II. Masculinities

1. Social Norms

Male dominance in human life is noticeable from the very beginning in our culture. Except for a few parts of the world and a few historic time periods, the leaders of tribes, nations, and empires were almost always men. However, this dominance might deceive us. One might believe that masculinity and men were thoroughly studied and analysed but that is not true. Up until the feminist movements, masculinity was completely invisible. When women highlighted how gender itself makes a huge difference between two humans, that was the time when scholars realised that men have no history as gendered beings. As Michael S. Kimmel described in his *The History of Men* (2005) "American men have no history as gendered selves; no work describes historical events in terms of what these events meant to the men who participated in them as men." (Kimmel, 2005, p. 3).

Men were not seen as gendered in history; rather, they were understood as general human beings. The change happened when feminist scholars made this fact obvious to everyone. "In the past 25 years, the pioneering work of feminist scholars, both in

traditional disciplines and in women's studies, has made us increasingly aware of the centrality of gender in shaping social life." (Kimmel, 2005, p. 4). Multiple expressions in English prove his point, such as the word "mankind" used to refer to humanity rather than to men. 'Men'/'man' became a generic term for everyone.

This is the reason why men were understood throughout history as "generic humans." Kimmel also describes himself as the following: "I'm white-universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I'm the generic person!" (Kimmel, 2005, p. 5). At the same time, there is always one true principle: some men enjoy more privileges than the rest. Masculinity is not the only factor in men's lives. Generally, men overrule women, but at the same time, they overrule other men too. (Kimmel 2005) For instance, queer men are understood as "lesser men." The same goes for different races and different jobs. Because of this, Kimmel states: "The constituent elements of hegemonic masculinity, the stuff of the construction, are sexism, racism, and homophobia." (Kimmel, 2005, p. 7). These constituents are embraced by men who thrive on perceiving themselves as better than the rest.

Hegemonic masculinity supposes that there are multiple different masculinities at any given time, but there is a hierarchy between them. Hegemonic masculinity is that which rules over other forms and genders. This masculinity is closely connected to the norms that were created. If someone cannot meet the "requirements" such as race, sexuality, age, and class, they will not have all the privileges, and because of that, in the end, they will be seen as inferior.

This masculinity strictly belongs to men, and men are required to meet as many aspects as they can. This teaching might even start before the person is born. "Parents sought signs of appropriate gender identity everywhere—in foods, play activities, fantasies, and clothing. And what was defined as "appropriate" gender identity was of course the traditional, hegemonic, white middle- class heterosexual masculinity." (Kimmel, 2005, p. 12). This is the reason why, throughout time, these norms became the solid foundation of society. Parents teach their children "proper behaviour" and force them to accept it. Because kids learn these ideas at a very young age, it becomes natural to them, and they will do the same thing with their offspring too. These norms, however, can change, and the rate of change has accelerated in recent years. Colours that were gendered as feminine are no longer

feminine, such as the colour pink. This does not mean that the colour is understood as unisex, but more men are willing to wear it without questioning their masculinity. In recent years, men's nail polish has become popular too.

At the same time, Kimmel writes: "Social science operationalized sexism, racism, and homophobia and called it masculinity." (Kimmel, 2005, p. 12). To protect their masculinities, men created common enemies for themselves, and by doing so, they are capable of keeping their power. Making anyone who is different believe they are inferior is their strategy from the start. Naturally, hegemonic masculinity is "attacked" and questioned by the queer community, feminists, and non-white men.

The way R. W. Connell introduces the term sex roles perfectly aligns with Kimmel's statement: " ... being a man or a woman means enacting a general set of expectations which are attached to one's sex- the sex role "(Connell, 2005, p. 22). These sex roles define who are men and who are women, and at the same time, everyone has to meet the expectations that were created by society. In this sense, these expectations are the norms. According to her, femininity and masculinity are internalised parts of the sex roles and they are the products of socialisation. (Connell, 2005)

Connell supports the idea of changing roles, and as she states, these roles will change when the agencies of socialisation create new expectations. "These sex roles can and will eventually change when whenever the agencies of socialization- family, school, mass media, etc. – transmit new expectations" (Connell, 2005, p. 23). Both Kimmel and Connell agree that these norms and expectations can shift over time, and that it is probably more natural for them to shift than for them to remain constant. After all, these expectations are created by society.

Nonetheless, these changes will be gradual. As previously mentioned, certain colours are no longer strictly associated with sex; however, men are still terrified to show more femininity to the world. While women are more likely to experiment with style and colours regardless of expectations, men are also more conservative in this aspect. Men follow strict rules a lot of the time, which are sometimes hard to understand.

In his 1995 book *Messages Men Hear*, Ian M. Harris attempts to explain why men behave the way they do. It is easy to blame masculinity for the possible toxicity, but it is rather important to try to understand what the issue is beneath the surface. He

explains that masculine ideas are generated by the media, the immediate environment, influential people, and in certain cases, by religion too. (Harris 1995)

Historically, different myths supported the creation of certain expectations and norms. The stories that fathers told to their sons about manliness and the way men were represented in different myths "Male myths contain noble standards for male behavior beyond the reach of most men, as well as standards that manifest degradations of all sorts." (Harris, 1995, p. 11)

Daily, men hear different messages about manhood. "Adventurer," "be the best you can," "breadwinner," "control," "hurdles," "money," "playboy," "president," "self-reliant," "sportsman," "stoic," "superman," "tough guy," "warrior," and "work ethic" are among the most frequently used male messages, according to Ian M. Harris (Harris, 1995, p. 12). These messages are again connected to expectations and norms. In most men's lives, the constant trying and living up to the category will never end.

The biggest issue with these male messages and with these categories is that they are often unachievable. Not to mention that not every man attempts to fit into any category. (Harris 1995) Nonetheless, most men experience frustration as a result of their circumstances throughout their lives. Harris wrote this in his book in connection to this problem: "Being a man is frustrating. Men feel inadequate because society places unrealistic demands upon them." (Harris, 1995, p. 179). The most often used male messages are all about being powerful, emotionless, and looking down on others. At the same time, these are the very same reasons why masculinity is understood as toxic in numerous cases. Whether consciously or unconsciously, society created the toxicity.

At the same time, this toxicity is maintained by men consciously. To quote Harris:

Males honour those who live up to the demands of masculinity. War heroes are celebrated in novels, histories, newscasts, and television shows. Boys have to memorize the names of heroes who, as Bob Dylan said, 'have guns in their hands and God on their side'. Men reward those who uphold militaristic values by publishing autobiographies, writing biographies, bestowing medals, creating sculptures, paying generous salaries, and

building halls of fame to house memorabilia of warriors who have exemplified male standards with distinction. (Harris, 1995, p. 179).

No matter how toxic the messages, expectations, and norms are, men still feel the urge to accept them and prove to other males that they are manly men. In any other case, they would become inferior to the rest.

Because of this, Harris argues that society requires men to become toxic because without toxicity, they would not be able to live up to the legacies of past heroes. Society convinces men that they have to leave their emotions behind (because they are a feminine trait and men should not embrace femininity because it makes them less of a man) and that they need to embrace violence, brutality, and power. In some ways, cultural demands force every man to abandon his humanity (Harris, 1995).

This is, on the one hand, stressful because this is not how every man imagines masculinity, and they are judged by other men and basically by society; on the other hand, it is confusing. It is confusing because not everyone appreciates this type of behaviour. In modern times especially, traditional masculinity is understood (in many but not all countries) as toxic and "unattractive." Women might feel threatened by traditional masculinity for different reasons. At the same time, this type of behaviour is the one that has been taught to boys since they are little kids.

The only way to stop this process is to break traditional norms and normalise more recent ideas about masculinity. Men are not inherently toxic and violent. They only become so thanks to the previously mentioned factors, whether these are sex roles, norms, expectations, or male messages. "The strain of trying to live up to the demands of masculinity creates deep wounds which must be healed if men are to achieve a healthy self-respect." (Harris, 1995, p. 183). This wound can only be healed with a healthier understanding of masculinity.

Unachievable expectations influence men in multiple aspects. To quote Harris,

Many aspects of male gender-role conditioning are fatal to men who die at all ages at higher rates than women, who occupy more beds in mental hospitals, who commit more suicides, who live in the streets, and who languish in cells in prisons. (Harris, 1995, p. 183).

The lack of focus on mental health and the fear of unachievable standards are killing men at a high rate.

In conclusion, all three scholars whose works were used agree on a few important points. One of them is that masculinity evolves to suit society. The roles of the sexes change, and with that, masculinity should change too, but in reality, traditional masculinity has long stayed the same. Whatever the norms were back in the days, they should not be the norm nowadays. All three scholars agree that these norms can change and, in certain cases, have to change. At the same time, all of them state that the world sees people who want to redefine these norms as enemies. Whether they are feminist scholars or feminist activists in general, gay or non-white men.

All in all, based on these three books, one could draw a few conclusions. First and foremost, the toxic aspects of masculinity were created by society. Society creates fragile and toxic masculinity. The existence of hegemonic masculinity, which looks down on any other form of masculinity and other genders, the fact that men have control over other men and not only over women, the sex roles that can create false expectations, and the toxic male messages are all part of the problem. Men have to fight for their superiority, or at least this is the message that their environment sends them. Gendering specific ideas, activities, and colours is another issue.

The second conclusion is that the issue is overly complicated. It is not something one person can change or fight against alone; it is deeply rooted in society. While traditional masculinity remains the most influential, more and more men will have to face multiple hardships in their lives.

Third conclusion: people have to fight against these norms. This issue is not only connected to men; it is connected to everyone. Men who do not meet the various masculine requirements, such as queer men, non-white men, and men with disabilities; women who face sexism and misogyny on a daily basis. It is also dangerous for those who fit into hegemonic masculinity. Those men have to leave their humanity in a sense behind, and they have to "purge" themselves of any femininity. Because of this, men commit suicide at a higher rate, become alcoholics more often, live with more anxiety, and die earlier on average than their female counterparts (Harris 1995).

2.

Toxic masculinity

Defining toxic masculinity is quite challenging, especially because everyday usage greatly differs from other ones. Toxic masculinity is connected to masculinity, more precisely to traditional masculinity. In the previous part of the paper, the focus was on the norms that were created by society and how they created hegemonic and traditional masculinities. Toxic masculinity is a subset of traditional masculinity (or so many people believe). The three scholars whose works were used explained what created the unachievable expectations, messages, and roles, and all of these make men self-conscious. Their self-esteem might become fragile through time, and they will try to present themselves as "extra" or "hyper" masculine to make sure that people are not looking down on them.

People who criticise the term sometimes refer to it as a creation of the feminist movement. At the same time, scholars connected toxic masculinity to the #MeToo movement (PettyJohn et al, 2019), the mass shooting issues (Blair, 2016), and even sexual harassment too (McGinley, 2018).

The issue, as Carol Harrington describes in her writing, *"What is 'Toxic Masculinity' and Why Does it Matter?"* is that scholars used the word 'toxic masculinity,' but they did not define what exactly it was.

Toxic masculinity emerged within the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s, coined by Shepherd Bliss. Bliss confirmed to me in a 2019 email that he coined the term to characterize his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity. In a 1990 interview, Bliss told Daniel Gross: "I use a medical term because I believe that like every sickness, toxic masculinity has an antidote" (Gross 1990, 14). (Harrington, 2020, p. 347).

The origin of the term is more about identifying men and toxic behaviour. As the creator of the term highlighted, he believed that the toxicity of masculinity could be cured.

However, scholars used different definitions throughout the years. After a time, "toxic masculinity" became a term that was used for marginalised men only. Terry Kuper's definition is based on his research on men in prison. "toxic masculinity involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men. ... Toxic masculinity also includes a strong

measure of the male proclivities that lead to resistance in psychotherapy" (Kupers, 2005, p. 713–714). In this definition, it is obvious that toxic masculinity is connected to aggression and dominance. While in its original sense, toxic masculinity was about superiority and authoritarian behaviour, Kupers connected violence and aggression to the term. As Harrington writes, "toxic masculinity provided a framework that essentialized marginalized men as aggressive and criminal, discursively packaged in a way that it was presented as concern for men's well-being." (Harrington 2020 p. 348). As she states, in the early 2000s, toxic masculinity was only understood as a partial problem that involved only a part of society, and because of that, it became a common threat.

This understanding changed around 2016 when the #MeToo movement happened and the term came to "describe the poor behaviour of powerful white elite men in contrast to its earlier applications to marginalized men." (Harrington, 2020, p. 349). At this time, new aspects were understood as toxic, such as sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Not only were low-income men who failed to live up to society's expectations perceived as toxic, but so were elite men who were enjoying all of their privileges while their behaviour was questionable. #MeToo movement increased the popularity of the term and because of that, more people started to use it on a daily basis.

This is the reason behind the fact that since 2016, people have connected toxic masculinity with domination, violence, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Arguably, even newer aspects are part of the definition too, such as ableism and transphobia.

Bryant W. Sculos, in his article titled *Who's Afraid of 'Toxic Masculinity'?* (2017) collected norms and behaviours that are often connected to toxic masculinity. These are hyper-competitiveness, individualistic self-sufficiency, glorification of violence, chauvinism, sexism, misogyny, rigid conceptions of sexual and gender identity and roles, heteronormativity, entitlement to (sexual) attention from women, sexual objectification of women, and the infantilization of women. (Sculos 2017)

Yet, one is not closer to a definition even after knowing the term's origin and its evolution. To be able to find a more aligned definition, two dictionaries were used. The Cambridge dictionary defines it as the following: "ideas about the way that men

should behave that are seen as harmful, for example the idea that men should not cry or admit weakness." In this definition, nothing is mentioned about misogyny, sexism, homophobia, or violence. At the same time, the Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines the term as the following: "harmful beliefs about the way men should behave." Both agree that toxic masculinity is linked to men and how they behave, and that toxic masculinity is problematic for society as a whole.

After these definitions, one might be closer to defining the phenomenon; still, as Harrington (2020) highlighted, the term has changed drastically since it was first used. Ian M. Harris talked about negative male messages in his book, which was introduced in the first part, and as he stated the problem can only be solved with a healthier understanding of masculinity. Just like that, many people believe that toxic masculinity can be challenged with healthier masculinity.

This is what multiple celebrities have been doing in recent years. Harry Styles and his *Vogue* magazine photoshoot where he was wearing a dress; crop tops for men became a trend in 2021; Lil Nas X and how he dressed for multiple events; the return of nail polish for men, colourful hair; etc. All of the above-mentioned examples are understood as feminine; yet, more men feel confident enough to use these products/ wear whatever they feel like.

It is interesting to explore how politics understands toxic masculinity. Bryant W. Sculos stated that both political parties are afraid of toxic masculinity. The Left fears the concept because it is toxic to anyone who is involved, while the Right is afraid of the concept because they represent everything that is included in toxic masculinity. The right defends it, but at the same time, they are afraid of the word "toxic," because while they can uphold its values, people know what they are truly protecting (Sculos 2017).

For some people, toxic masculinity is another creation of the feminist movement, and they try to make men feel bad about themselves, and it is an attack against men in general. Yet, as Sculos described, leftist politics sees toxic masculinity as a problem that people have to solve.

Furthermore, toxic masculinity can be easily mixed up with traditional masculinity, or in some cases, the two are interpreted in the same way. This issue was mentioned in Sam de Boise's editorial, "*Editorial: is masculinity toxic?*" (2019). In 2019, the

American Psychological Association (APA) created a guideline to help people who are working with men and boys. The focus was put on how they can deal with notions of "traditional masculinity." The way they identified traditional masculinity was very similar to toxic masculinity; because of this, different media outlets named the guidelines help against toxic masculinity. APA suggests that traditional masculinity includes violence, transphobic, misogynistic, homophobic, or racist bullying, sexual assault, or harassment, excessive drinking, physical injuries from fighting, steroids, body dysmorphia, drug-taking, and the inability to express. (Boise 2019). It is not a coincidence that the media named traditional masculinity 'toxic masculinity.'

Sam de Boise explained that it is not surprising that toxic masculinity has become so popular after the majority of terror attacks and mass shootings around the world have been committed overwhelmingly by men. In modern times, violence is closely connected to men and masculinity.

Still, traditional masculinity is falling close to toxic masculinity, at least based on the APA, and if it is true, one might draw another conclusion. Traditional masculinity was created by society, which suggests once again that the issue behind this question is still society. On the other hand, in the first part of the chapter, it was stated that men were still conscious when they maintained those norms and expectations. Back in the day, it might have been a way to preserve their superiority, yet the question arises whether the same kind of superiority is needed in the present day.

In this day and age, more and more parents realise that previous messages are no longer acceptable, and they might be outright negative. The way parents raise their children might not be working anymore, or rather, this should not be the case anymore. Sentences such as "boys don't cry," "man up," or "boys will be boys" are only creating issues.

"Boys don't cry" restricts the children from expressing their emotions, and while doing that, it normalises this action. That kid will grow up and believe that just because he is a boy, he cannot show any emotions. This may result in an inability to express emotion, which has been identified as a dangerous effect of traditional masculinity. The lack of emotional release might cause mental problems later on,

which might lead to more serious mental issues such as depression. "Man up" is about being brave and tough no matter the situation, while "boys will be boys" is a justification for questionable male behaviour. Boys are not scolded even if they do something harmful, while girls are taught that it is okay because "boys will be boys."

Just like in the case of male messages, expectations, and norms, which were taught to the kids by their parents, these toxic ideas are also taught from childhood. Letting the boys be more mischievous and complimenting them, romanticising the "bad boy" image for kids through movies and different productions, and restricting boys from expressing their feelings are all ways to raise a boy who will engage in negative and toxic traits in the future. Scolding a boy to be brave in every situation and making him feel insecure because of his fears is another great example of problematic teaching.

Michael Salter's writing, which was published by *The Atlanta* magazine, highlights a few of the issues connected to the fight against toxic masculinity. Salter mentioned multiple issues that were discussed in this paper in his work *"The Problem With a Fight Against Toxic Masculinity"* (2019), such as the different interpretations of the term itself, how politics use the term for their benefit, and how parenting may influence children during childhood. As he highlighted, people connect toxic masculinity to very different topics starting from violence up until Brexit

Salter agrees with Connell and other scholars who theorised the already-mentioned problem with masculinity. The expectations and the standards are unachievable for different men, and because of this, they start to feel insecure and anxious about themselves and their masculinity.

Salter reinforces the idea that masculinity itself is not toxic, nor has something new in the past 30 years influenced men and turned them toxic, but rather "it comes from these men's social and political settings, the particularities of which set them up for inner conflicts over social expectations and male entitlement." (Salter, 2019)

In his writing, Salter clarifies that it is rather impossible to treat the toxicity in the same way because the level of it is different among men, as well as the reason behind the toxicity. The solution might be as simple as noticing the problematic elements in culture and society and telling boys how to deal with them. The best possible

solution might be to understand that masculinity itself is not toxic and to help boys and men combat and change the toxic roots of gendered behaviour. (Salter 219)

All in all, one might state that the term "toxic masculinity" is not a simple and straightforward term to deal with. Sometimes even scholars are struggling with the definition, and as Harrington highlighted in her writing (2020), academic papers are not even defying the term in a high percentage. This is the reason why multiple different aspects were introduced in this paper. After the definition had been narrowed down, the focus was directed on different issues connected to toxic masculinity, whether they were connected to politics or parenting. Last but not least, the discussion shows that the paper is justified, thanks to the connection that was created between toxic masculinity and traditional masculinity and Salter's work, one can state that toxic masculinity is truly created by society.

III. Close Reading

This part of the paper is connected to Fred Aceves' book *The New David Espinoza*. The book can be organised into three major parts. In the beginning, one learns about David, his issues, his situation, and the reason why he would try everything to change his whole life. In this part, multiple social influences are introduced, such as bullying in school, toxic body images, the introduction of fake reality, and the "superhero transformation." However, these issues will be presented throughout the whole book.

The second part is all about the progress and about the summer. While the story begins in the final days of school before the summer break, much of it takes place during the summer. The chapter titles work as a kind of countdown, and they tell how many days until the next school year starts.

In the beginning, the reader will follow David on a day-by-day basis, but as the story develops, the breaks between the chapters become longer. In this section, peer pressure is still presented, but the main focus is on David's outer and inner changes.

The last part is the after-summer period, which is filled with drama and dramatic plot twists, and David finally realises what he has become. David as a character starts from point A at the start of the book and he arrives at the same point, however, in between, he goes through multiple character changes.

His personality turns into something completely different. For instance, he becomes a bully as well, judges other people because of their bodies, objectifies women, and looks at them as his toys or as something that he can own.

The main events in the first major part of the book are connected to how he is bullied by his peers in every possible form. He is physically assaulted, and this beating is recorded. This recorded video, later on, is uploaded on a video sharing platform, which makes the humiliating moment into a viral meme among the kids.

Besides the bullying, the reader gets to know little information about the main character, his family, and his relationships. He lives with his dad, and the two of them have a great father-son relationship. David respects his father and knows that he wants only the best for him.

David has a small sister too, whom he loves with his whole heart. Their relationship, in the beginning, is truly uplifting, and the reader learns that probably David's most beloved person on Earth is his little sister. David is in a healthy relationship with a girl named Karina who is described as beautiful, and it is mentioned multiple times that David has no idea how his girlfriend can find him attractive, but he is very grateful.

Outside of his family and his girlfriend, he has a friend group, and they respect and like David. All of them are connected because they are not among the "popular" students in the school. They support each other when one of them becomes the victim of bullying.

At the same time, he is humiliated multiple times during this first part. The role of this first chunk is to establish the world as it usually is in every book and to make sure that the readers will understand the main character's actions.

The second part is longer than the first part, and the majority of happenings and changes will happen in these chapters. Yet, the second part is mostly about the negative changes and the "de-familiarization" of David.

David is obsessed with his look and with others' looks as well. He believes in the negative messages that are created by pop culture, and he is a huge fan of superheroes and action movies. He looks at people and tries to see whether they are shorter or taller than him. As he said in one of the first chapters, if someone is too

average, they will not be bullied because they do not stand out to bullies. "Enzo is about 5'8", neither tall nor short... Too average to stand out to bullies" (p. 21).

In the second part of the book, this obsession will only become more serious. When the summer break starts, he is exceedingly motivated, and after reading and watching videos connected to muscle building, he reshapes his whole lifestyle.

He avoids leaving the house because he believes that everyone is obsessed with his video. This is the reason why he wants to find a less popular gym. Because his main objective is to avoid unwanted attention from people, he has to go to a shady gym, and this will mark the beginning of his downfall. His first normal interaction in the gym is with a guy who tries to warn him, but David is too new in this world to understand the warning.

Toxic ideas already appear quite early in the book, such as that hugging other men makes you less masculine or makes you a "boy." "I'm not used to touching guys with my whole body that way... Are you afraid it's not manly or something? Well, according to lots of people, it isn't. I guess that's why I'm so uncomfortable." (p. 75). Outside of these small moments, he is still conscious of the toxicity of men, how masculinity is connected to violence, and negativity in a lot of cases, and he is okay with it.

However, readers will soon find another foreshadowing, when it becomes obvious that David uses anger, and hatred during his exercises, and he starts to lose his head

... channeling all my anger into my trembling arms to push this bar up... the video everyone has seen and will remember unless I get stronger and bigger... Without Alpha shouting insults at me like he does for Tower, I think them to myself. Come on, Bitchslap David... (p. 79).

Because of this, he overworks himself, almost being killed by some weights, but his pride would be too damaged to ask for any assistance. In the gym, other much more muscular men work out until they vomit, so he believes that it is normal.

It is interesting to highlight a few nicknames too, such as "Alpha," who is the owner of the gym. Everybody calls him Alfa, and he uses it as his true name. The meaning of the name is quite self-evident. David's nickname, in the beginning, is "little man," another straightforward name.

Alpha is an important influence for David, even though not a positive one. He is the one who will introduce the world of drugs and steroids to him, and he will slowly change his personality. A weird older-younger brother relationship will develop between the two.

His relationship with his dad goes through shifts throughout the book, and while in the beginning, his outbursts are more like a teenager's tantrum, later on, these fights will be more substantial.

Realising the truth changed David drastically. After a week of working out, following a strict diet, he could not notice any difference.

Influencers and the fitness YouTubers he was following were lying, and he believed that he could achieve his goal body before the new school year starts.

I can't gain muscle! What a bunch of bullshit! You joined the gym, last week bro, he informs me, like I've forgotten. What did you expect? To do way more reps than last time I say. If I'm going to gain twenty-five pounds of muscle by the end of summer, I need to get way stronger each workout (p. 82).

When he realised that it was not possible and that even those people had to use additional chemical substances, his whole world shattered. "When those Hollywood fakes deny using gear they not only make it look like we're cheating, they also put crazy ideas into people's heads" (p. 82)

He lost the small hope he had, and in his desperate moment, he was surrounded by the wrong people. David was first reluctant about using steroids, and he even researched the negative effects such as aggressive behaviour, severe acne, prominent breasts, premature balding, liver damage, infertility, etc. At first, it seemed like he would not use it, but he convinced himself otherwise.

At this point in the story, he only wants to "boost" himself and his body transformation. He is still conscious of his situation, and he truly believes that he will only use it for one "cycle." "To achieve my ideal size and then give them up forever. A boost is all I need" (p. 87).

Fred Aceves explains the steroid cycles in his book perfectly, and this is the reason why even if the reader has no background knowledge, they will be able to understand everything. The previously mentioned cycle consists of two different periods. The first is when the bodybuilders actively take the steroid and the muscle growth is active. The second is an "off-cycle" or "off gear," which means that the individual is no longer taking the chemical for a shorter period to avoid permanent side effects. During this time, however, rapid muscle loss is usual. The two sides combined are one cycle.

As the plot develops, his negative traits start to take over. One of them is aggression. He starts to show his rage when someone says or does something harmful to him. Up until this point, he has just been suffering silently; however, he can no longer keep it to himself. Because of that, he starts to disrespect people, for instance, his father. Keeping an eye on her little sister becomes a nuisance for him.

This aggression is strongly connected to the fact that he sees himself as a man with muscles. He believes that no one will dare to disagree with him since he began working out. Because of this, he becomes more and more violent throughout the story.

There is a strong cut in the second part, and it happens when Alpha becomes a more important person in David's life than anyone else. David looks at him as his mentor. They share a similar school experience, and David respects him for being so hardworking. "I was so fucking skinny I practically had to run around in the shower to get wet." (p. 94). Both men were body-shamed and rejected by society because of their physiques.

David knows exactly that his father would not allow him to spend a lot of time with Alpha because he looks intimidating, and, as he admits, a lot of people are afraid of him. He represents someone who is no longer sane, and the drugs completely removed his logical thinking. He drugged his dog, "I gave Crockett his last injection a few weeks ago. I wanted to see how big he could get" (p. 99). He puts his selfish ideas before his relationships with everyone; he is obsessed with bodybuilding at a level that is just questionable.

Through his character, however, the readers will learn about and understand the toxic world of bodybuilding. As stated in the book, one cannot achieve the required

look naturally. Everyone knows that drugs and supposedly illegal chemicals are involved in the world of bodybuilding, but nobody bats an eye. The bodybuilder's goal and dream include many sacrifices, especially their health. He is infertile, but he is not willing to tell his girlfriend. He has to hide his "gear" from his partner because she cannot stand the idea of steroids.

At the same time, for Alpha, steroids are something natural at this point, and even though he is in love with his girlfriend, even the threat of a breakup will not keep him away from the illegal chemical.

He lost touch with reality a long time ago, and he starts to tell David that taking steroids makes him better than anyone. "People think we cheat, but we train harder than anybody else. You know why? Because we're doing whatever it takes to be great. Most people never try to achieve greatness" (p. 100–101). Even if Alfa lost touch with reality, his words still carry some truth.

Through Alpha's character, Fred Aceves demonstrates the harsh reality to the readers. After reading the book, the reader cannot help but feel heartbroken for him. He sacrificed everything for his goal—to win the bodybuilding competition—and while he achieved it, his girlfriend left him, he was not following the safety protocol of steroids and because of that, his health was seriously damaged.

At the end of his story, he was everything but fit. His look was deceiving because, physically, he was completely the opposite of an athlete. After a little jogging, he had a heart attack and died on the streets. And while this tragic event was needed to snap David back to reality, it was probably also a warning from the author. If one takes steroids, they will have to sacrifice their health, but if they do not follow the protocol, they might even lose their life.

For David, Alpha was a mentor, a friend, and someone who, unlike his father, understood his struggle, and Alpha was not a truly negative character. He represented the possible future for David at some level too.

The most remarkable aspect of the book is witnessing David's transformation. Character development is an essential component of any book, and arguably the most interesting. As previously stated, David was a family-oriented young man with healthy relationships, friendships, and a family. Even if he is bullied in school, he

has a non-toxic, safe place for himself. This slowly starts to change as soon as Alpha becomes a more influential individual in his life.

Alpha was always vocal about the "benefits" of being a huge mass of muscle. While David initially desired to gain weight and muscle in order to protect himself, many more selfish motives emerged later on. One of them is to become "hot." Undeniably, it is hard to define "hot," but as he gained more muscle, ladies started to admire his body more frequently.

Alpha states multiple misogynist ideas to David, such as "Girls are always trying to change us, but we have to resist and be who we are" (p. 103). David believes that his girlfriend has tried to sabotage his journey multiple times, and because of that, his healthy relationship, which was never based on looks, starts to turn into a more toxic one.

Furthermore, David's toxic ideas about body image and "manly look" are confirmed by Alpha multiple times too. "You'll be built like a real man in no time" (p. 107). This was stated when he was visibly more masculine thanks to steroids. "Exactly, bro. Muscles make the man, Alpha says. A powerful body is what distinguishes us from girls" (p. 130).

When David is with Alpha, he is judgmental; he makes negative comments on others' looks and checks out girls. His transition from being a bullied kid to becoming a bully is truly thought-provoking. "These three goofy guys, maybe late twenties, think they're hiding that fat with their rucked-in shirts... Then notice their wives or girlfriends, who have clearly never set foot in a gym either" (p. 129). In his eyes, attraction can only be true if both sides are perfect and have a nice body. Now that he is no longer that skinny, he can make others feel insecure.

He cannot, however, enjoy his new body for long because he develops body dysmorphia. To be frank, he has faced body dysmorphia since the beginning of the story, but at that time he did not take it seriously. Since he started building muscle, he developed muscle dysmorphia too.

David becomes obsessed with his body, and after a time, he cannot even trust his own eyes. "The measuring tape is rolled up tight in my pocket. I wanna measure my

arms and shoulders to make sure I'm not crazy" (p. 139). He sees himself smaller every time, and because of that, he measures himself every time he has a chance.

Moreover, he believes that people are sarcastic when they highlight that he gained muscles. "Mirrors lie, you're not bulking up at all. He's being ironic when he calls you Músculos. You're Flaco. You'll always be Flaco." (p. 116). Flaco means skinny in Spanish. He compares his body to his dad's, and he believes that he gained nothing in the past month at all. "My own forearms are still thin. Have they grown at all?" (p.114) "You're that skinny guy that you saw in the reflection of the toaster. No muscle at all" (p. 149).

When this issue becomes obvious to everyone who loves him, it is too late. His girlfriend is trying to make him realise that what he is doing is wrong, and that he might need some professional help, but David is already lost at that time.

It might be an obsession, and obsessions aren't good ... You have to try to stop being so obsessed about your body. You look fine... I've seen you flexing your forearms and checking them out while I'm talking to you. A few minutes ago you were doing some sort of sleepwalking flexing in front of the mirror (p. 151-152).

As he became more muscular, he became more aggressive too. It is a listed side effect of steroid usage. Moreover, as he gained more muscle, he looked at himself as a "true man." He believed that he had to protect himself from everyone, and his paranoid behaviour became a huge issue. After a time, he saw the enemy in everyone around him. The only people who were not understood as his enemies were the "bros" from the gym.

At this point even small happenings made him angry and put him on edge. "Two days ago I dropped the milk carton on the kitchen floor, spilling most of it. I wanted to kick the fridge or wall so badly. Instead, I took a few calming breaths." (p. 118). While it is visible that David is struggling with anger issues, he could still control it. However, as soon as he feels threatened or thinks that someone is threatening his plan for the summer, he can barely stay in control.

After his dad first saw Alpha, he announced that his son could not go to that gym anymore because Alpha was a bad influence on him. At this point, he abandoned his little sister just because he wanted to go to the gym and do his daily workout

routine. While in the beginning he loved spending time with his little sister, doing the same thing now was only a waste of time for him. After the conversation with his dad, this was how he reacted: "I'm streaming inside. My fists tighten and my imagination runs wild. How I'd love to punch him right in the back of his ... head." (p. 146).

One of the most shocking parts of the book is connected to his aggression. Up until a point, his dad believed that Alpha was the only one who was on steroids, however, soon he figured out that even his son was on gear. During this confrontation, David lost control over his anger, and he attacked and hurt his dad.

The words get rid of hit me hard, and the last ones, drug addiction, hit me harder. There's no way hell hear me out no way he's getting rid of what's mine. The rage swoops me up. I shove him aside as hard as I can to clear a path for the bag. I take my first step toward it, already stretching out a hand to grab it. His arm blocks me. Somehow he's back. He snatches the bag from the desk and shoves me with one hand. I fly backward onto the bed like a doll. You crazy drug addict! He says. Putting your hands on your own father! My heart still racing, I push myself up into a sitting position. His wide and thick body, those arms that can shove the whole weight of me away. I don't care. I vowed to never let anybody fuck with me again. That goes especially for somebody who has what's mine. I don't know if the room shrinks or if it's the fury growing. It's too much though, completely overtaking me. In a flash I'm up again. I rush at him gripping his shirtfront with my fists, and keep rushing. I slam him against the wall. He lets out a pained groan and slides down the wall. (p. 183-184).

The aggression ruined his relationship with his father; his little sister had to see the whole battle between the two men, and he was ashamed to go back to live with his father, so he decided to live together with Alpha. The rage that was building up throughout the whole story was unleashed, but David could not control himself at all, and because of this, a very important person in his life, who just wanted to help him, was hurt.

After he moves out of his father's place, his personality will change drastically. While he is on a date with Karina, he is continuously checking out other girls, and

in his head, he admits that they are "hotter" than his girlfriend. He believes that everything he does is connected to the "champion mentality," another interesting idea that was created by Alpha.

Karina is no longer "hot" enough for him.

The girl is too hot for the guy. That's how it is with Karina and me. I mean, that's how it was... Does she fit in my life? It's horrible, I know, but I can't help it. She's the same Karina, while I'm a totally different person inside and out. (p. 212-213).

At this point, it was evident to the readers that their relationship was over when David had these thoughts, but the actual end was a fight between the two. David lost his control once more, and while he was not physically attacking Karina, he was shouting at her. The situation was very similar to what happened between David and his dad. Karina asked about the steroids, mentioned the negative effects, and wanted David to seek assistance, but David only felt attacked and threatened, and he exploded.

What was even more shocking is that during their fight with Karina, David never realised that he was shouting. The readers only learned what actually happened when David noticed his environment. Everyone was looking at them, and people rushed to protect Karina. And this is how the second major part of the book ended.

The last hundred pages belong to the third major part of the book. This part starts with the beginning of a new school year and with a very positive David. He is not sad because of the breakup, and while he is thinking about his family, he is more than happy to live together with Alpha and feel that he is completely free. His friends are still there for him; however, David knows that this new year will be completely different. He is in the middle of the attention on their first day, and while originally he enjoys this, he soon has to realise that this is not what he wants. No one respects him; people are either afraid of him so they avoid him, or talk badly behind his back.

Rumours about his muscle gain spread quickly, and once again, people are gossiping about him behind his back. Still, David is confident that he can pay back his bullies, and because of this, he no longer avoids confrontations.

While he has an advantage physically, he has no idea how to fight, which is why he has been knocked out again in front of the whole school. Because of the humiliation, David leaves the school and decides that he will never return to a place where everyone is only making jokes about him.

In this last part, David starts to realise what he has become, and throughout the last chapters, the readers can see a more down-to-earth David who still has toxic ideas and still believes that he has to get bigger no matter what, but at the same time, he is no longer blinded by Alpha's words.

He starts to question the "championship" mentality and learns about muscle dysmorphia. At the same time, Alpha is still blinded by the reality that he created, and because of that, David is in an uncertain situation. "Were driven to be our best selves ... That's not a mental disorder. It's called motivation. Do we feel small? Sure. That's what keeps us motivated. (p. 265). This is what Alpha says after David asks him about muscle dysmorphia. But at this point, David no longer believes everything that Alpha says, and he even questions it more frequently. "How is being as muscular as possible your best self? "(p. 266). To top all of this, he no longer feels safe with Alpha all the time. "I don't want to be anywhere near him when he's angry like that" (p. 267).

In this part, multiple events will take place that will eventually push David back to his old self. One of them is when David learns that Alpha was not "off gearing". In the part when Alpha's character was analysed, his faith was already mentioned and how it was connected to the fact that he never stopped using steroids. He had such fragile masculinity that he needed every compliment to believe he was a true man. After Alpha's death, David became sane again. In the form of a TV interview, Fred Aceves collected the issues and the problems associated with drug abuse.

Boys and men are increasingly subjective to images of overly muscular men with visible abdominal muscles and are feeling the pressure to drastically alter their bodies. Dr Jonathon Weber mentions the images we get bombarded with. The video games and movies. I've played those games and have watched those movies. Hell, I have a poster of Nightchaser hanging in my room. He mentions how the action figures have grown in size. What kind of message does it send to boys when everything they are told to admire is

unattainable without drugs? When their role models are bulking up with the help of illegal drugs? (p. 301).

At that moment, David realised that he had been influenced by toxic body images even before he started working out; those toxic pictures and lies were the reasons why he even started working on his body. After seeing Alpha, his friend, die because of the drugs, he learned his lesson for life.

[H]is obsession with gains gave him an early death. What has my obsession given me? A better physique, supposedly, which I somehow dislike as much as the one I had when all this madness began. No, steroids haven't given me anything at all. They've only taken away from me. First my family and then Karina and my friends. The people I love the most. It may even take my life if I'm not careful. (p. 302).

After reading David's story and how his life fell apart, knowing that he finally realised what was going on was an amazing feeling. And while David could escape from the addiction, other side characters could not. Even at Alpha's funeral, they were asking for the remaining gear, which was destroyed by David.

The very last chapter of the book is an emotional rollercoaster. David reunites with his family, and he finally feels safe and whole once again. He starts to speak to his old friends, and while at the beginning of the book he refused to hug other men because he believed it would make him a lesser man, now he embraced the hug. This moment gives a beautiful frame to the whole story. He still has to seek medical assistance, and he still has to correct multiple past mistakes, but he is once again on the right path with his life. After everything, he is most secure about his masculinity when he is no longer trying to prove his masculinity anymore.

The book perfectly displayed how someone can change only because society forces norms and expectations on them. David believed in a toxic body image that was supported and promoted by pop culture. Because of that, he desperately wanted to change his look. Toxic traits started to take over throughout the whole story, and previously mentioned typical toxic masculinity ideas appeared in his head, such as homophobia, fear of femininity, aggression, brutality, and addiction. His toxicity pushed his loved ones away, and he ended up being all alone without anyone who truly cared about him. His fragile masculinity was created by society; his peers

bullied and embarrassed him. At the very end of his story, he could realise what he had become, and it was not too late for him.

IV. Conclusion

The research statement was that toxic masculinity is created by society thanks to the fact that this aspect creates fragile and insecure men. These men can only prove that they are men with negative and toxic behaviours. These behaviours are dangerous for everyone, not only for those who are the victims of the toxicity but for those who are creating the toxicity itself.

To prove the statement first, it was necessary to understand where masculinity norms originate, how they were created, and who is responsible for them. With the help of numerous scholars, it was proven that society has always been a key factor. First, norms, expectations, and sex roles were introduced and examined. With these terms, the basis of the problem was noticed, namely, that these were sometimes unachievable or extremely challenging to achieve. This is why certain norms, which are still part of our society's foundation, require men to leave their humanity behind. Men who did not act according to the norms were "punished" by society.

After the basic understanding was established, the next term was the so-called "male" messages. Male messages create different categories, and throughout their lives, every man tries to fit into at least one of them. Just like with norms, expectations, and roles, these categories can be toxic too. Moreover, there is a high variety of different messages, and one cannot fit into each.

After these terms have been discussed, a conclusion has been drawn that all of the previously mentioned phenomena are connected to issues with masculinity. First and foremost, they are sometimes toxic. They can be toxic because they require men to act inhumanly, for instance, by not showing emotions or being brave no matter the situation. Secondly, they are unachievable, and because of that, a huge amount of stress and anxiety is put on men. Third, a few of these are outdated and not compatible with modern times.

Yet these are still taught to the next generation. Parents pass down these views to their children, and because of that, they normalise all of the above. After the issue was normalised, it became clear that it could not be changed easily and quickly. A

few of the norms are no longer in practice, but many more create masculine frustration for men.

Following the understanding of the basic problem, the next part of the first chapter examined toxic masculinity itself. The term was hard to define, and this was the reason why during this part its origin and evolution were discussed, plus a few dictionary definitions were mentioned. In addition to the definition with the help of scholars, some of the issues were also mentioned in this part.

The term can be interpreted differently depending on whether it is connected to politics or to the fact that in certain aspects, toxic masculinity is very similar to traditional masculinity. With the APA guideline, it was examined why people and the media would name traditional masculinity toxic. This research shows that the term "toxic masculinity" is used inconsistently and with very different meanings.

After a better understanding of the topic, possible solutions were mentioned at the end of the first chapter. It was clear that society had influenced the norms and toxic aspects of masculinity. With toxic masculinity, a similar conclusion was drawn, and with that, the research statement was justified.

After the justification, the second part of the paper was connected to Fred Aceves' book. With the help of a close reading, elements connected to toxic masculinity were highlighted. At the same time, the book had more to offer than just one social issue, and others were mentioned too. In this part, it was highlighted how society, negative images, and negative messages can influence individuals. In this part, certain typical toxic masculinity traits were highlighted, such as depression, violence, and addiction.

Because of the realistic writing style and the fact that the book was based on real people's stories, one could see the continuous character development of the main character. The second part also looked at how David's character evolved.

The final conclusion of the paper is that the topic of "toxic masculinity" is not well covered. Masculinity studies are quite new, and because of that, only a few highlighted scholars' works are used in the overwhelming majority. Toxic masculinity is an even less discovered term. The paradoxical issue is that in everyday usage, the term "toxic masculinity" is quite frequently used, but as was mentioned in the paper, scholars were not trying to define the term in numerous

cases. Because of this, the field has more to offer to scholars who are trying to make connections between toxic masculinity and traditional masculinity, gender politics, or general gender studies. Because this paper only focused on the relationship between toxic masculinity, fragile masculinity, and society, the previously mentioned possible connections were only briefly mentioned.

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