

THE MAN BOX

KEY FINDINGS



A STUDY
ON
BEING
A YOUNG
MAN

IN THE
US, UK,
AND
MEXICO



AXE

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A Study on Being a Young Man
in the US, UK, and Mexico

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About:

Axe commissioned this research to determine the state of manhood in the US, UK, and Mexico – and to figure out the areas in which guys need help the most. Axe is taking the lead in liberating guys from harmful labels and pressures through global and local initiatives. After all, a world of liberated men, free from judgement, is a better place for everyone – both men and women. Axe is doing this because breaking out of the Man Box isn’t something that guys can do alone. It’s something that involves everyone working together to change society’s narrow views about masculinity.

With support from Axe, Equipundo led this research in collaboration with partners in the US, UK, and Mexico. Equipundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. We work to achieve this mission by conducting applied research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling-up gender-transformative interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international advocacy to achieve gender equality and social justice.

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What Does It Mean to “Be a Man” in 2017?

What does it mean to be a young man? How is a man supposed to act? Do these expectations matter for young men’s lives? In a moment of tremendous social change for members of all genders, these questions may seem outdated. While good progress has been made in freeing people from gender-based judgements around what are acceptable roles and behaviors for men and women, there remains much to do to reach a situation of true equality. A diversity of sexualities and gender identities has entered the mainstream. Women have made inspiring progress toward overcoming centuries of discrimination based on their gender, although much remains to be done. In this new reality, has the investigation of “masculinity,” or what it means to be a man, become irrelevant? We say no. Rather, these social transformations and tensions make this study essential. In order to better understand these dynamics, we – Equimundo, Axe, and research partners – set out at the end of 2016 to investigate young men’s lives in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), and Mexico.

Using an email and telephone survey, we gathered a representative, random sample of young men aged 18 to 30, representing the ethnic and social diversity of each country. Combined with that survey, we convened group discussions of young men in each of the three countries to hear, in these men’s own words, what it means to be a man. Specifically, we asked:

1

To what extent do young men report that their romantic partners, friends, family members, and/or society as a whole communicate rigid ideas and norms about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave?

2

To what extent do young men themselves internalize and agree with these rigid ideas and norms about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave?

3

Do young men personally subscribe to these ideas at higher or lower rates than they report encountering or hearing about these ideas in broader society?

4

Does any of this matter? How do young men’s ideas about manhood affect how they live and behave?

Life in the “Man Box”

In order to investigate and answer these and other questions, and inspired by the work of Paul Kivel and the Oakland Men’s Project, we created a new scale of attitude items called the “Man Box.” The Man Box refers to a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men to be a certain way. We sought to give research rigor to the concept of the Man Box, measuring how young men encounter these messages socially, how they internalize them personally, and how these beliefs shape both their lives and the lives of those around them.

For the purposes of the study, men “in the Man Box” are those who most internalize and agree with society’s rigid messages about how men should behave. In this sense, “in the box” refers to falling in line with normative masculine expectations, or “boxing oneself in.” Conversely, young men “outside the Man Box” are those who have broken out of the box, who embrace more positive, equitable ideas and attitudes about what “real men” should believe and how they should behave. **What we affirm in the study is that the Man Box is alive and well. It has immediate, sometimes contradictory, and often harmful effects on young men and on those around them.**

The Seven Pillars

“There is a pressure everywhere to tell you what man you should be!”

Focus Group Participant, London, UK

“How does society let men act? Because of society, the pathologies and powers that exist, men can only act a certain way. If you do not fit into the box, you are not labeled as a male or one of the many labels that we have talked about!”

Focus Group Participant, Washington, DC, US

As the quotes above demonstrate, study respondents encounter clear and constant messages and pressures about how to be a “real man.” What exactly is this “certain way” that a man needs to behave? Drawing on decades of social science research on masculine norms in the countries of study and around the world – primarily on the global applications of the Gender Equitable Men Scale (GEM Scale) – our investigation of the Man Box focuses on 17 messages organized into seven thematic pillars, as shown on the following page. All of these messages reflect what respondents may think a “real man” should believe and/or how a “real man” should behave. They reflect, with reasonable accuracy, the extent to which men either adhere to or reject traditional, restrictive ideas about what it means to be a man.

THE MAN BOX IN SEVEN PILLARS



Self-Sufficiency

A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect

Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help



Acting Tough

A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak

Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside



Physical Attractiveness

It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good

Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin

A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly



Rigid Masculine Gender Roles

It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children

A husband shouldn't have to do household chores

Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women



Heterosexuality and Homophobia

A gay guy is not a "real man"
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)



Hypersexuality

A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can
A "real man" would never say no to sex



Aggression and Control

Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage

If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time

REPORTED PERSONAL AGREEMENT WITH THE MAN BOX RULES

Percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree that "In my opinion..."

	US	UK	Mexico
Pillar 1: Self-Sufficiency			
A man who talks a lot about his worries, fears, and problems shouldn't really get respect	30%	31%	18%
Men should figure out their personal problems on their own without asking others for help	40%	36%	35%
Pillar 2: Acting Tough			
A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak	43%	41%	41%
Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside	59%	51%	48%
Pillar 3: Physical Attractiveness			
It is very hard for a man to be successful if he doesn't look good	47%	46%	43%
Women don't go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin	48%	45%	43%
A guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly	40%	42%	32%
Pillar 4: Rigid Masculine Gender Roles			
It is not good for a boy to be taught how to cook, sew, clean the house, and take care of younger children	28%	31%	17%
A husband shouldn't have to do household chores	22%	27%	11%
Men should really be the ones to bring money home to provide for their families, not women	44%	39%	26%
Pillar 5: Heterosexuality and Homophobia			
A gay guy is not a "real man"	29%	30%	23%
Straight guys being friends with gay guys is totally fine and normal (positive statement)	84%	83%	86%
Pillar 6: Hypersexuality			
A "real man" should have as many sexual partners as he can	26%	26%	11%
A "real man" would never say no to sex	28%	31%	26%
Pillar 7: Aggression and Control			
Men should use violence to get respect, if necessary	23%	25%	10%
A man should always have the final say about decisions in his relationship or marriage	34%	33%	21%
If a guy has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is all the time	46%	37%	26%

Young men reported overwhelming social pressure to fit into the Man Box. For a great many Man Box rules, particularly in the US and the UK, the majority of respondents reported encountering these messages in society as a whole. Survey participants were particularly likely to have encountered messages related to men's self-sufficiency, toughness, and hypersexuality. According to young men in the study, the pressure to fit into the Man Box comes through loud and clear.

Do young men resist or internalize these social pressures? Study results show that young men may distance themselves somewhat from the Man Box rules, but they don't reject them outright. Survey participants were asked if they agreed – in their own opinion – with each of the 17 Man Box rules. Across the board, young men were less likely to report personal agreement with the Man Box rules than they were to report encountering these rules in society. Nonetheless, young men's rates of personal agreement with the Man Box rules – often around 33 percent agreement or higher – confirm that they are internalizing these messages. Some men may be able to reject social pressures related to masculinity, but a great many embrace these pressures and the version of manhood they promote.



Some men are able to reject restrictive, negative social pressures related to masculinity, but many embrace these pressures and rules, as well as the version of manhood they represent. Young men in all three countries overwhelmingly reject notions of manhood that imply that men are superior to women or that men should not care for children. However, they show strong support for toughness and the repression of emotions. Indeed, while men in the three countries have come a long way toward accepting equality between women and men, they still have a long way to go to break free of norms that hold them in emotionally straightjacketed forms of manhood.

What Does This Mean?

The study is also able to draw conclusions about the consequences of young men's adherence to the Man Box rules, both for themselves and for others around them, with particular attention to the following six themes.

IV.a.

Life Satisfaction and Self-Confidence

Young men's ideas about masculinity are strongly connected, in complex ways, with how they feel about themselves. When asked, "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life, overall, these days?", young men who are in the Man Box in both the US and UK gave much higher satisfaction ratings than did their peers outside the Man Box. In the US, young men who are in the Man Box rated their life satisfaction nearly a full point higher, on a 1-to-10 scale, than did young men outside the Man Box. Holding more rigid ideas about masculinity, then, is linked with greater self-reported life satisfaction and well-being in the US and the UK. However, being in the Man Box is also linked with higher levels of negative feelings.

So are men who are in the Man Box happier or sadder? The answer is complex. In Mexico, we see no links between Man Box attitudes and life satisfaction or well-being. In the US and UK, however, young men who agree with society's most rigid rules about how to "be a man" also say that they are "the man": they rate themselves highly when asked broad questions about their satisfaction with their lives. Young men in the Man Box, it seems, experience some reward for meeting these societal expectations. They are doing what their parents, partners, friends, and media sources are telling them to do, and they can therefore feel a certain confidence and comfort in who they are. However, the Man Box also exacts a high cost in terms of mental health. It tells men they should always be tough no matter the circumstances, which no one can do. It tells them to act strong even when they feel uncertain. In other words, it tells them to be someone other than who they are.



Some men do find comfort and confidence in adhering to these norms, but as will be seen, the rigidity of the Man Box brings far more costs than benefits.

IV.b.

Mental Health

Participants reported extremely high incidence of depressive symptoms, with clear links to adhering to the Man Box. Large proportions of respondents reported experiencing “little interest or pleasure in doing things” and/or “feeling down, depressed, or hopeless” in the last two weeks, with significant associations with Man Box adherence. In the UK, men inside the Man Box are statistically significantly more likely than their peers outside the Man Box to report both of these symptoms. Calculating these responses according to the standards of the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2), an internationally validated initial screening tool for depressive disorder, the study demonstrates definitively that men in the Man Box in the US and UK are statistically significantly more likely to meet a screening standard for depression than men outside the Man Box. Some 41 percent of men in the Man Box meet this screening standard in the US, compared with 26 percent of men outside the Man Box. In the UK, 46 percent of men in the Man Box meet this standard, compared with 28 percent of men outside the Man Box.

Additionally, young men’s rates of suicidal ideation – and their statistical links to being in the Man Box – are extremely troubling. Quite simply, young men are thinking frequently about taking their own lives. Large proportions of young men in all three countries reported having thoughts of suicide at least “some days” in the last two weeks. In all three countries, men in the Man Box show statistically significantly higher levels of reported suicidal ideas than men outside the Man Box.



We must be worried about the mental health of young men. Their bravado and outward posture that “all is fine” mask deep insecurities, depression, and frequent thoughts of suicide. These issues are all the more troubling because, as we see in the next section, those in the Man Box are even less likely to turn to peers and friends for help when they need it.

IV.c.

Friendship and Support-Seeking

Overall, young men are more likely to report providing emotional support to others than they are to report being emotionally vulnerable or seeking help themselves. In both the US and Mexico, men outside the Man Box are statistically significantly more likely than men inside the Man Box to report having a friend with whom they feel comfortable talking about a personal, emotional issue.

Even as some young men express willingness to open up emotionally with their male friends, they continue to rely primarily on women in their lives for emotional support.

The majority of men in all three countries said that their first source of help is their mother or their romantic partner. (Their romantic partners are predominantly women.) Only 18 percent of respondents in the US, 15 percent of respondents in the UK, and 21 percent of respondents in Mexico reported that they would seek help first from their male friends or fathers when feeling very sad or depressed – less than half the rates of reported help-seeking from mothers and (mostly female) romantic partners.

Participants also shared diverging responses about how homophobia influences their friendships and their actions.

The Man Box rules are significantly linked with responses about homophobia and friendships with gay men. These links seem to move in opposite directions from one another, however, where being in the Man Box in the US and UK is linked with both (a) refraining from doing something so as not to appear “girly” or gay, and (b) enjoying hanging out socially with an openly gay friend. In other words, adhering to the Man Box means you don’t want to be seen as gay, but you may feel comfortable enough with your highly emphasized heterosexual identity to have and hang out with a gay friend.



Results show that young men are learning how to embrace emotional vulnerability, but that they most often grapple with emotions on their own or with the support of women in their lives. Young men, by and large, do not seek emotional support from their fathers. Fear of appearing vulnerable or gay still has a powerful influence over young men’s behaviors, particularly for men in the Man Box. Additionally, heterosexual young men display varying levels of comfort with having openly gay friends.

IV.d.

Risky Behaviors

Quantitative and qualitative data underscore that the Man Box is a place of risky health-related behaviors, particularly alcohol abuse and dangerous driving. In all three countries, men in the Man Box are more likely than those outside the Man Box to report regular binge drinking and recent traffic accidents. Whereas data from Mexico show weaker links with several of the prior analyses in the report, the links between adhering to the Man Box rules and these two risky behaviors are both statistically significant in the Mexico sample.



Too many young men associate being a “real man” with binge drinking and dangerous driving, putting themselves and others at risk when they try to measure up to this harmful standard.

IV.e.

Attractiveness

Overall, young men reported a positive body image: 64 percent of respondents in the UK, 70 percent of respondents in the US, and 74 percent of respondents in Mexico reported that they are “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their physical attractiveness. Far fewer men, however, are satisfied with the size of their muscles, and nearly half of all respondents’ top choice for what they would change about their appearance is their weight or body shape.

The survey also finds that men in the Man Box in the US and UK are significantly more likely to report having “often” or “very often” spent an hour or more bathing, grooming, and clothing themselves in the last month. This survey item relates to the Man Box rule, “Women don’t go for guys who fuss too much about their clothes, hair, and skin,” with which upwards of 40 percent of men in all three countries agreed. To be sure, the confidence required to be truly comfortable with one’s own physical attractiveness, as well as to transgress social norms in the amount of time one spends grooming (even if only in the privacy of one’s bathroom), is admirable.



Young men’s sense of physical attractiveness, while relatively high, still links primarily with muscle bulk and body shape, as opposed to a more inward, individual sense of confidence and attractiveness.

IV.f.

Bullying and Violence

Young men inside the Man Box are dramatically more likely to both experience and perpetrate all three forms of bullying – verbal, online, and physical – included in the study. In all three countries, men in the Man Box are dramatically – and statistically significantly – more likely to report having been bullied at some point in the last month.

Men inside the Man Box are much more likely to perpetrate bullying than are their peers outside the Man Box. Where online and physical bullying are concerned, men in the Man Box in the US and UK are as much as six or seven times more likely to report having perpetrated this violence than are men outside the Man Box. In both the US and UK, more than half of men in the Man Box reported perpetrating all three forms of bullying within the last month.

The harms of the Man Box reach beyond bullying; men inside the Man Box are also far more likely to report having perpetrated sexual harassment against a woman or girl in the last month. Men in the Man Box in Mexico are three times more likely than their peers outside the Man Box to report having perpetrated sexual harassment. In the US and UK, men in the Man Box are six times more likely. This finding adds further evidence that restrictive notions about manhood are among the root causes of men's too-frequent use of various forms of violence against women.



The Man Box is an enormously violent place, with negative repercussions for young men themselves, for young women, and for others around them.

Why Is This So Important?

The overall conclusion is that the Man Box – a set of socially reinforced rules about what “real men” should do – is alive and well in the US, the UK, and Mexico. At the same time, a majority of the men interviewed support ideas of gender equality, and they affirm that men should be encouraged to engage in what were once considered to be traditional female activities, such as childcare.

Some young men find a sense of security and safety inside the Man Box, even as it causes them – and others around them – harm. For some young men, the Man Box seems to be a source of security, perhaps a mechanism by which to pretend that all is okay. For some young men, being inside the Man Box enables them to feel okay having gay friends, or reaching out to help others. These positive aspects of the Man Box, however, are more the exception than the rule.

The harmful effects of the Man Box are severe, real, and troubling. The majority of men who adhere to the rules of the Man Box are more likely to put their health and well-being at risk, to cut themselves off from intimate friendships, to resist seeking help when they need it, to experience depression, and to think frequently about ending their own life. Young men inside the Man Box are more likely to have used violence against other young men – verbally, physically, and online – and to have sexually harassed women. They are more likely to have experienced violence themselves. They are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as binge drinking, they are two to three times more likely to have been in traffic accidents, and they are less likely to have close relationships and friendships.

Young men’s relationships with the ideals of manhood are complex and confusing, and the process of breaking out of the Man Box is neither perfectly linear nor straightforward. The study reveals some contradictory trends. Young men in the Man Box are more satisfied with their lives, even as they display more symptoms of depression, for instance. Men in the Man Box adhere to the most rigid gender norms, yet also feel freer to transgress certain norms, such as crying in front of male friends or spending time on indulgent grooming. These are real contradictions. We believe, however, that they are accurate and logical representations of the dilemmas young men face in navigating society’s contradictory ideals of manhood. Young men reap certain benefits from staying inside the Man Box: it provides them with a sense of belonging, of living up to what is expected of them. Friends and parents may praise them. However, when those same norms tell men to be aggressive all the time, to repress emotions, and to fight every time someone threatens them, the Man Box demands that they pretend to be someone they are not, and the resulting life can be violent and lonely.

Breaking out of the box is not something that young men can do on their own. Indeed, if conforming to the rigid norms of the Man Box were obviously disadvantageous to men, few men would do so. The picture is more complicated, and navigating the rewards and punishments of manhood is a real dilemma in many settings. In this reality, all of us – young men and young women, parents, educators, the media, teachers, romantic partners, and all members of society – have a role to play in reinforcing positive, equitable, unrestrictive ideas of manhood. In other words, it is time for all of us to work to break out of – and break – the Man Box.



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