Mental Health & Prevention 34 (2024) 200347

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Mental Health & Prevention

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/mhp

What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Masculinity
Suicide
Podcast
Mental health
Masculine socialisation

ABSTRACT

Background: Although men are more likely to die by suicide than women, they are less likely to seek help when feeling suicidal. Masculine socialisation leaves men feeling stigmatised for their mental health problems. Researchers consider podcasts an efficient way to promote health information and offer social support to individuals who are unable to access services.
Methods: Nine male listeners of a UK based men's mental health podcast series were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Participants discussed their reflections of six podcast episodes and what they gained from listening. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.
Results: Five interconnected themes were identified which described listener's reflections: understanding other men's lived experiences; facilitating male intimacy; combating male isolation; learning how to seek help and reflecting on a culture of positive masculinity.
Conclusions: The podcasts promote more inclusive, flexible versions of masculinity which encourage reflection on an individual's lived experience. Listening to men's mental health podcast episodes may provide a vehicle for men to initiate new ways of seeking informal help, reducing feelings of loneliness and fostering male intimacy. Recommendations on how the findings of this research can assist podcast creators develop episodes promoting flexible masculinity are discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Major public health concerns for men

According to the Office for National Statistics since the 1990's men have accounted for three-quarters of all deaths by suicide. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in young men aged between 15-29 years old, with almost 60% of all suicides occurring before the age of 50 (World Health Organization, 2022). Male suicide is considered a major health issue impacting men throughout the world (Oliffe et al., 2019). Globally women are more likely than men to attempt suicide but there are twice as many men who take their life (World Health Organization, 2022).

Whilst male depression alone may not directly cause suicide, the two issues are complexly linked according to Oliffe et al. (2019). Earlier studies by Oliffe & Phillips (2008) estimated 30-70% of people who commit suicide may be deeply depressed, yet men are much less likely to be diagnosed for depression than women by a ratio of 2:1 across the developed world. Oliffe et al. (2019) more recently argued for the requirement of gender-sensitive depression screening, proposing that current diagnostic tools miss or mis-diagnose male depression. According to the authors, historical studies have linked depression in men with forms of "irritability, anger, substance misuse, risk taking, impulsivity, and over involvement in work". Such externalising behaviours also link closely to the risk of suicide (2019, p. 103).

1.2. Male help-seeking and masculine socialisation

Although men are more likely to die by suicide than women, they are less likely to adopt help-seeking behaviours for their mental health difficulties. Barriers to help-seeking for mental health issues are widely thought to be connected to traditional masculine norms, particularly the notion of masculine socialisation (Gough & Novikova, 2020). Masculine socialisation "is a learned, ingrained and deeply personalised set of values, attitudes and behaviours which men adopt from other males within their family groups when growing up" (Shepherd et al., 2023, p. 1).

Cole et al. (2019) explain how masculine socialisation influences men's decisions around help seeking based on their perceived societal role and personal attitudes. Traditional masculine norms often

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2024.200347
Received 3 February 2024; Received in revised form 16 April 2024; Accepted 29 May 2024
Available online 29 May 2024
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discourage behaviours such as disclosing personal information, expressing emotions, and embracing vulnerability. Men who adhere to these norms typically harbour negative attitudes towards seeking psychological assistance (Levant et al., 2009). Such men regard norms emphasizing success, power, competition, and limited emotionality as their preferred behaviours which again, lead to low rates of help seeking (J. Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992).

Gender role issues stemming from conflict between societal expectations and personal values also affect men's attitudes towards seeking therapy. This often results in men having higher expectations of the therapist while taking less personal responsibility for change within therapy sessions (Schaub & Williams, 2007). Cole et al. (2019) go on to describe how fear of stigma exacerbates the barriers to help seeking as societal messages often portray seeking help as a sign of weakness or inadequacy. Societal pressure can lead men to internalize stigma, resulting in self-stigmatization and further reluctance to seek psychotherapy.

In a recent scoping review, Shepherd *et al.,* (2023) identified the utility of community-based male centric networks to counter barriers to men's help seeking. Research into mental health promotion aligns with these findings, suggesting successful community-based approaches provide safe male spaces and promote the normalisation of men's engagement (S. Robertson et al., 2016). The authors also found male-positive language and values, a focus on activities and the facilitation of social participation to be important factors to male help seeking. Along with this, Seaton *et al.,* (2017) argue the language employed in gender-sensitive psychological services is important, as therapeutic sounding interventions may be unappealing for socialised men who prefer more practical engagement.

1.3. Encouraging positive aspects of masculinity

In a recent scoping review Seidler *et al.,* (2018) demonstrated how masculine socialisation often prevented men from engagement with mental health support. The authors proposed to further male engagement, mental health professionals should accept men with traits of masculine socialisation and employ a strength based, as opposed to a deficit-based attitude to their mental health. Sagar-Ouriaghli *et al.,* (2019) agree with this proposition, suggesting that encouraging men to embrace positive aspects of masculinity could lead to an increase in their willingness to seek help from mental health professionals.

Kiselica & Englar-Carlson (2010) suggested a male strengths-based approach recognized the way boys and men form bonds, often through shared activities like sports or collaborative projects. Such activities serve as avenues for building friendships and intimacy, highlighting the importance of action-oriented connections in male relationships. Men also demonstrate care and protection for their loved ones through 'action empathy', taking concrete steps to support others whilst finding value in group settings where they work together towards common goals, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

1.4. Podcasting and mental health

According to Rime, Pike and Collins (2022, p. 10) "A podcast is a piece of episodical, downloadable or streamable, primarily spoken audio content, distributed via the internet, playable anywhere, at any time, produced by anyone who so wishes". Podcasting is recognised as an efficient and accessible way for healthcare services to share knowledge and disseminate health care information within communities, according to Balls-Berry et al. (2018).

Podcasting reduces barriers to learning at low cost for both service users and service providers, which is important as 80% of individuals with mental health issues are unable to access quality, low-cost mental health services (World Health Organization, 2022). Podcasts also provide an alternative way to help improve mental health literacy in areas where service access is inadequate (Ó Caoilte et al., 2023). A significant example of this was demonstrated by Morawska et al. (2023) in the COVID-19 pandemic when podcasting was a particularly useful medium for the delivery of parental health information when face-to-face services were reduced.

Ó Caoilte et al. (2022) studied the growing interest in mental health podcasts, particularly the motivations and experiences of listeners. The authors found listeners were primarily motivated by and found value in enhancing their mental health literacy. Participants with the least education and lower levels of mental health literacy reported the greatest benefits from listening. In a study by Carrotte et al. (2023) the authors found listening to mental health-themed podcasts was associated with holding fewer stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with mental health issues, with listeners exhibiting higher levels of mental health knowledge.

In this paper we consider how each area of the literature helps inform our thinking when asking 'What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes?' A 'gain' for participants in this context is a direct or indirect benefit to the individual because of listening to the podcast. We view benefits as acquisition of information, insight or resources, a reduction in negative feelings or experiences or an increase in positive feelings and experiences.

2. Methodology

This research utilises a phenomenological lens to gain insight into participants experiences of listening to men's mental health podcast episodes (Finlay, 2011). Research on phenomenological experiences are always influenced by the researchers own ontological frame which, in reflexive thematic analysis is linked to analytic practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The approach is based on a constructivist, interpretivist methodology which understands the individual's lived experience as both ideographic and unique (Schwandt, 1998).

2.1. Service overview

This research was carried out in a UK based men's mental health support service known by the pseudonym 'MenGage'. MenGage supports men learn how to challenge masculine socialisation behaviours, which in times of mental health crisis may lead to suicide ideation or suicidal acts. MenGage has around 3,000 registered users who access either social media based support (via closed WhatsApp and Facebook groups) or come together for in-person activities such as to play sports, play video games, attend gardening groups or come together for support groups. Typically, men who use MenGage have been referred from their General Practitioner, a family member or their employer and are often depressed with many men displaying behavioural traits associated with masculine socialisation.

MenGage hosts a popular and regular podcast series taking the form of one-to-one discussions with men who all have some connection with the service and willing to discuss their mental health challenges as a way of helping other men within the community. The episodes use a long-form style (Dowling & Miller, 2019), being around two hours in length and posted on social media platforms. Interview content varies and includes discussions around masculinity, interpersonal relationships, mental health, depression, depressive episodes, anger, experiences of bereavement and suicide.

The podcast host is empathic, encouraging guests to reflect on their experiences candidly, seeking to help them understand their experiences in deeper ways. Throughout each episode host and guest reflect on healthy and unhealthy ways of managing mental health experiences, offering listeners insight into how they understand mental health challenges. The host has a person-centred interviewing style, using effective listening skills and empathy whilst asking mainly 'open' questions (Tolan & Cameron, 2016). This style encourages guests to provide longer, more detailed answers which helps facilitate insight and understanding. Many interviewees attend MenGage group activities as

participants, which provide podcast listeners the opportunity to meet them in person.

Although there are a wide range of male centric mental health style podcasts on the internet, there are no studies exploring how male listeners respond to men's mental health podcasts. Furthermore, there is no research which analyses the content of such podcasts to discover how effective their messaging is. Expanding our knowledge of both areas may help provide professionals the opportunity to deliver more targeted health promotional messages around help seeking and suicide prevention.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in the study as the project required a clear and defined research group (Hennink et al., 2020). The research team used data from an earlier service user questionnaire to identify traits common to the average service user including mean age, employment profile and length of time accessing the service. Participants were white British heterosexual men, aged between 30 to 60 years old (mean age 42) employed in manual or managerial occupations who had been service users between one and four years. Participants had all listened to at least six podcast episodes from a total of 12 selected by the research team. The episodes were selected for the broad range of male mental health issues they discussed. The research team considered listening to six podcasts would provide participants enough content to influence their attitudes, a decision based on the service managers (who are co-researchers) experiences of the effects of podcast listening on other group members. The Principal Investigator (GS) and two service manager co-researchers collaborated to identify suitable interviewees after advertising for participants, recruited through MenGage's social media platforms.

2.3. Interviews

After gaining ethical approval from York St John University (Reference ETH2223-0264), the research team developed semi-structured interviews using an interview method based on Kvale and Brinkman's (2009) 'thematizing' recommendations. Before formulating the research questions the team 'clarified' the purpose of the study, gained 'pre-knowledge' of the subject through literature searches before 'devising' the most appropriate interview technique to adopt. Interviews were carried out by GS on nine participants. Individuals were interviewed over Microsoft Teams video. The recordings were used to create interview transcriptions using Word Transcribe.

2.4. Data analysis

A manual thematic analysis was performed on the data by GS and HM in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of Thematic Analysis. Transcription of each video interview used the Microsoft Word Transcribe function, with transcriptions manually checked for accuracy by GS and HM. After transcription, GS highlighted sections of the data which was relevant to the research question. HM also familiarised themselves with the transcripts, reading them several times to deepen their understanding of the data and patterns amongst the data.

During this phase, GS and HM made notes on ideas for potential codes that could be returned to in later phases of the analysis to increase trustworthiness of the process (Nowell et al., 2017). Initial codes were generated by HM and GS double coded 20% of the dataset to increase the reliability and validity of the analysis. GS and HM compared codes for clarification and had a high level of inter-coder agreement on initial codes. (*xi*) and (*xii*) then developed the codes further and arranged them into initial themes. Though computer software can be useful to organize datasets, they are incapable of the level of conceptualizing and judgement needed to develop data (Thorne, 2000). Thereby, Microsoft Word was used to organize the dataset of codes and themes into a table. To enhance trustworthiness, two other researchers (SW and JW) reviewed the themes and made recommendations for amendments. Finally, GS and HM used these recommendations as a basis to create final themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

2.5. Reflexivity

Reflexive practices are continual, collaborative, and multifaceted and adopted by researchers to critique, assess and evaluate how their own contexts and subjectivity have influence upon the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). According to Walsh (2003) reflexive research incorporates considerations of both the personal and interpersonal world.

We considered our personal reflexivity by examining gender dynamics within the research group. According to Lefkowich (2019), reflecting on gender is crucial in studies focused on men and masculinity to address researcher privilege and oppression. It is vital in mixed-gender teams to encourage diverse perspectives and inclusivity, therefore, acknowledging the gender composition of our team—three males (GS), (SW) and (JW), and one female HM—was essential. The first step was clarifying roles and experiences during our initial meetings, ensuring shared understanding and promoting open communication to mitigate potential gender-based power dynamics. Additionally, reflexivity guided considerations of the implications of a female researcher in a male mental health service. While striving for equal opportunities, co-researcher HM chose not to join the male-only WhatsApp group, recognizing potential ethical problems of service users who had joined under the auspices of a safe male space.

We also considered interpersonal reflexivity as integral throughout the project, considering the diverse backgrounds of each co-researcher and the potential for power dynamics. While GS brings experience as both a researcher and practicing therapist, HM is a postgraduate trainee counsellor. JW has extensive service experience, while SW is relatively new to the service. Both SW and JW have personal experiences with mental health challenges. Power dynamics were acknowledged with GS and HM holding academic knowledge and SW and JW holding practitioner knowledge and controlling participant access. The team fostered open communication through regular research meetings and a Whatsapp group where they could address issues around the power dynamics and how these were influencing the research process (Finlay, 2002; Koopman et al., 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

3. Results

This study asked, 'What do men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes?' and identified five interconnecting themes: understanding other men's lived experiences; facilitating male intimacy; combating male isolation; learning how to seek help and reflecting on a culture of positive masculinity. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant's identities, in line with confidentiality practices.

3.1. Understanding other men's lived experiences

Many men described the value of learning about other men's lived experiences through the podcasts. Hearing lived experiences seemed to help some men feel more confident in connecting with other men within MenGage. Some described the impact of hearing other men discussing 'taboo' subjects, especially when a particular topic held personal significance. This helped men realise these subjects were not as uncommon as they had assumed, helping them normalize their experience.

Here Brian recounts how hearing and relating to other men's experiences enabled him to feel at ease socializing with the group:

> *"I'm not very social. I have social anxiety and I don't like groups of people… I don't like groups of men. And it's bizarre that… I feel comfortable to just go in to the [in-person supporting events], just turning*

up, chatting to people who a few weeks ago, a few months ago I just didn't know at all and I'll have brilliant conversations with people and for me six months ago I could never have done that. And I think that is a lot to do with the podcasts, a lot to do with understanding other people's issues and sort of crafting them around my own".

The next quotation shows the effects of listening to the podcasts on men within the service. In this reflection, Steven discusses how men who have listened to the podcasts changed their views on their mental health struggles:

"You've got guys like me who have got some experience in this area, and some lived experience of mental health. And you've got guys who have never thought about their mental health were opening up about their feelings. And for them, this is a profound experience and a life changing experience".

Phil describes the shock in hearing men discuss topics that some might only think about and feel unable to discuss out loud and how these stories resonate with his experience:

"They're approaching subjects that you and I would go 'I really want to talk about that' and people are actually sitting there and they're going through the subjects, they're going through the topics, they're going through their own personal experiences. And you're sitting and you're going shit! I've gone through that".

3.2. Facilitating male intimacy

A number of men stated how the podcast helped them gain a deeper understanding of other group members which often helped them interact with men in more meaningful ways. Although men stated the value of social activities, many respondents felt there was not always enough time to establish meaningful connections with other men on such occasions. Listening to the podcast provided a platform to help men understand one another on a more intimate level. Often men would see podcast interviewees at social occasions and feel more confident to speak and connect with them.

Terry explains that despite spending social time with group members, listening to podcasts was a way of understanding men at a deeper level:

"And even though we've sort of played football together or sort of done a couple of social events together because they're sort of, you know, social, and there's large groups, you don't get that intimacy or that sort of time to build up perhaps a one-on-one relationship".

In this excerpt Joseph explains how the podcast episodes provide an opportunity for more relational depth with some podcast guests:

"So people like [man 1] and [man 2], who I already knew from [their podcast], it was a way of hearing their story and hearing their human trials and tribulations and how they got to where they were so that I could get to know them better".

Brian explains how listening to other member's interviews on the podcast gave him the sense of personally knowing group members, even on their first meeting:

"…it's a strange one and I was talking to [man 1], who's just in the last podcast, and the other night we were down at the [group meetup] and I said 'it's a bit strange for me', I said, 'because obviously I just listened to your podcast last week', I said 'so for me, it's like, yeah, it's like, I feel like I know you'".

3.3. Combating male isolation

Several interviewees thought the podcasts helped them feel less isolated and more involved with others in a communal way. Mental health issues discussed on the podcast helped some men feel their mental health struggles were shared and normalized. Men also described a sense of connectedness as they identified as all being men advocating for greater understanding of men's mental health. Many interviewees spoke of their togetherness and the feeling they had a place to go should they need help with their mental health issues in the future.

In this example Phil recounts how the podcast helps him feel as though he is not alone and not 'abnormal':

"I think for me it's getting to understand exactly that other people out there are going through the same thing. You know, I'm not isolated. I'm not… I'm not the freak of the house, pardon the expression".

Terry explains how listening to the podcast makes him feel less isolated in his mental health difficulties, and that he is part of a group of men who are all mental health advocates:

"I do struggle with my mental health at times, and I think that listening to the show, like I said, it helps me feel that I'm not alone in facing that and that you know I'm with part of a broader group of people who are trying to speak about it".

In this quotation, Paul describes how the podcast makes him feel as though he has the support he requires, should he need it in the future:

"So again, it just makes you think of how I deal with things in the future, or just the fact that whatever I'm going through there are other people out there either to talk to, yeah, that are going through similar things and because we're a little group of people you know, we've got each other's backs".

3.4. Learning how to seek help

A number of men told how listening to podcasts was an important first step in the process of help seeking. This may be due to the podcasts providing the opportunity for men to understand the service before committing time to attend in-person events. After listening to two or three podcast episodes men were able to counter their fear of the unknown and engage further. Men also reported how the podcast cultivated a more open-minded attitude to mental health and provided strategies for future help seeking.

Here Brian discusses how he thinks listeners of the podcast are encouraged to attend in-person groups, after hearing other men discuss their own experiences of MenGage on the podcast:

"You describe it [on the podcast] and they think 'You know what, I've got to go to one of these talking sessions! I've got to go somewhere! I want to know more about MenGage'… and that helps them in their journey"

Paul describes how listening to the podcast has led him to consider other forms of help seeking:

"And then let's talk about these audio-books and I think well, if I can listen to a podcast, then perhaps the way for[ward for me] is to read these books, that are kind of self-help books [this] is another way forward"

In the next quotation, Phil reflects on negative past experiences and how he would manage his mental health differently if he had the knowledge gained from listening to the podcasts:

"Do you know if I'd have… if we turned the clocks back to last year when I had my nervous breakdown… and I turned the clocks back with the knowledge I have now - I'd have spoken up; I'd have let people know, I wouldn't have just been suffering in silence."

3.5. Reflecting on a culture of positive masculinity

Some men described how the podcast promoted a culture of positive masculinity and how healthy this was for their interpersonal relationships. Podcast discussions led men to reflect on their own masculine

norms and how they tended to respond to other people.

The following excerpt demonstrates Joseph's perception of the positive culture created by MenGage and how he has reflected on his own interpretation of masculinity:

> *"There [is such a] generosity of spirit and emotion and kindness that all the men at [the service] display. … the version of masculinity that I've been following is not helpful and I need to give more time to being kind, generous and more accepting of others".*

Below, Paul explains that listening to the podcast has caused him to be less judgemental with others and consider their inner struggles:

> *"Anybody that I come across – you just don't know what they're going through, what they've been through, what they're dealing with. So, it's just like, you just take people at face [value]…well, I do – I take people at face value."*

Here Terry recalls how listening to men being vulnerable on the podcast helps him empathise with others:

> *"When you are sitting there listening to people tell their stories about how they've dealt with certain things, it certainly makes it an awful lot easier to understand, because there's other people that are going through it and these people have actually put their thoughts out there for everybody to listen to."*

4. Discussion

4.1. Findings summary

This study identified five key themes by asking what men gain from listening to men's mental health podcast episodes. Participants valued understanding other men's lived experiences as this helped mitigate stigmatizing attitudes towards mental health issues. Listening to podcasts normalized men's own experiences, countering self-stigmatization of perceived societal attitudes (Carrotte et al., 2023; Cole et al., 2019). Some men in the study found listening to guests with similar experiences to their own particularly valuable.

The podcasts facilitated male intimacy by allowing more meaningful engagement with podcast guests who were also members of 'MenGage'. While men typically bond through collaborative activities, podcast listening provided some men with a unique avenue for understanding and connection, enhancing their confidence in social interactions with other men (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Podcast engagement lessened feelings of isolation and fostered a sense of community, whilst discussions on mental health normalized experiences, countering norms that discourage vulnerability disclosure (Levant et al., 2009). This communal involvement fostered solidarity and support networks, reducing psychological isolation (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

4.2. New insights into podcasts and men's mental health

Our research suggests listening to podcasts may have a positive effect on men's mental health over three distinct domains. By listening to several podcast episodes men may develop more confidence to seek help, experience reduced feelings of loneliness and have more opportunity to experience male intimacy.

We feel the insights derived from our research concerning the relationship between podcast listening and men's help seeking are important particularly in light of global public health concerns around male suicide (Oliffe et al., 2019). Seidler et al's., (2016) research provides further context in that they explain how traditional masculine norms influence men's attitudes towards help seeking, their intentions to seek help and their help-seeking behaviours. Factors such as reticence to express emotion, feelings of embarrassment or anxiety and difficulties in communicating with healthcare professionals have all been identified as delaying men's help seeking (Yousaf et al., 2015).

Within our study participants engaged with podcast listening as a preliminary step toward help seeking. Their accounts underscored the importance of exposure to other men's lived experiences and to deepening connections within the 'MenGage' community. An improvement in relational depth with other men may be significant in light of research by Tsindos et al. (2024) who examined the association between help-seeking intentions and suicidal ideation among adult men. The study revealed a significant association between increased intentions for general help seeking and intentions to use informal networks such as seeking support from friends and family with a decreased likelihood of new-onset suicidal ideation. Interestingly, the authors found no significant association with formal help seeking intentions such as seeking professional mental health advice or assistance. The findings from the study suggest men who have greater intentions to seek help from friends and family may be less likely to develop new-onset suicidal ideation. This is relevant to our study where participants sought out more opportunities to experience a similar kind of informal support after podcast listening.

Men also described feeling less isolated and emotionally closer to other group members after listening to the 'MenGage' podcast. Perks et al. (2019) suggest media companionship can be developed through podcast listening and can mitigate loneliness, increase feelings of sociability and promote parasocial relationships. The authors proposed media companionship is fostered through the possibility of a two-way relationship between listener and host via: 1. opportunities to interact with the podcast hosts; 2. the conversational tone of the episodes; 3. the sharing of personal details by the podcast host and 4. similarities between the listener and host. This was also evident within our study, with participants describing how some subjects often made them feel they shared their struggles with the podcast host and his guests.

Men may be less likely to report feelings of loneliness than women and more likely to use coping mechanisms such as alcohol to manage loneliness. Masculine ideals regarding the quality of friendships particularly among older men, add to a hesitancy in admitting loneliness. This leads to older men under-reporting severe loneliness (Ratcliffe et al., 2024). Our research suggests listening to podcasts may be a method of alleviating loneliness whilst increasing perceived or real social connectedness for isolated men (Casares, 2022). Our insights into how this form of podcast listening can decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation is important as acute loneliness has links to higher depressiveness and non-disclosure of problems (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024).

Men from our study reported hearing other men's experiences helped them connect more with other men. Podcast guests sometimes appear to be 'emotional role models' for listeners, a process which according to Rice et al. (2018), helps promote male engagement with service providers. Participants reported reflecting on their own masculinity and interpersonal development after listening to the podcast, considering guests and the host as emotional role models. The participants within our study described valuing the relational depth and deep connections with other men the podcast allows for, creating a form of community of emotionally connected and supportive peers. We suggest this may help some men question their long-held beliefs and masculine norms.

Ríos-González et al. (2021) investigated the impact of male friendship on behaviours within a men's group and found the kind of masculine friendships promoted within the group positively impacted both emotional wellbeing and physical health. This may be similar to the way men listening to podcasts develop healthy habits and feelings of mutual support for one another. Traditional masculine norms can prevent men experiencing close male relationships (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013) however, our participants seemed to develop attributes such as empathy, consideration and being less judgemental. The majority of men in the study seemed to enact flexible expressions of masculinity which Di Bianca & Mahalik (2022) describe as including behaviour such as expressing compassion, making intimate connections and becoming emotional vulnerable.

4.3. Suggestions for podcast development

In the final section we would like to suggest how services interested in developing podcasts for men's mental health may use the findings of our study to develop their own podcast content. We envisage this section useful for helping fledgeling podcast teams in over-stretched mental health services provide more effective mental health literacy content where their usual provision may be inadequate (Ó Caoilte et al., 2023). Our suggestions may also help professional mental health services wishing to develop men's mental health promotion within online spaces who appreciate guidance around how to formulate similar podcast episodes (Peek et al., 2015).

We feel podcast creators should consider how their podcasts concepts are developed, how episodes are constructed and what online infrastructure they can utilise to support their listeners. To help with this task we provide an action plan employing a question/action format which is based on the findings of our study and practices MenGage use to support their members (Table 1).

Column one helps podcast developers consider how their proposed podcast will incorporate a format informed by our research findings. Column two invites creators to think more deeply about the structure of the podcast in terms of the guest, host and the health promotion messaging in each episode. The third column contains the dynamic element of the model and invites teams to employ social media and online platforms for listeners to interact with. This column also suggests considering the lived experiences of invited guests and to think about employing a podcast host with a person-centred interview style.

Prior to this study, there has been no research exploring what men gain from listening to podcast episodes, however, there are studies exploring women's experiences of podcast listening. In the hope of identifying similarities in our general findings and help give our recommendations more validity, we would like to reflect on the findings of two studies examining a women's podcast series entitled 'menopause: unmuted'. This podcast aimed to tackle the stigma of menopause by providing a mix of personal stories from women experiencing menopause and from health professionals who helped contextualise the stories with medical information. Shaw et al. (2022) explored how listeners experienced 'menopause: unmuted' and proposed women in the study valued both the relatability of menopause stories and the authenticity producers were able to create within each episode.

In an earlier study of the same podcast series Edwards et al. (2021) suggested the podcast fostered support and feelings of community which women often missed in everyday life when experiencing the menopause. The podcast also challenged the stigma and shame commonly associated with menopause, encouraging contributors to speak about a range of topics which were traditionally taboo. Listeners also reported becoming more empowered through the health promotion messages shared in episodes, with some women being more likely to take positive steps to prioritize their own health and happiness. The findings of these two studies seem to correspond in many ways to the results of our own research, albeit on a markedly different demographic group.

Robson (2021) conducted seven in-depth interviews on podcast listeners during the COVID-19 pandemic to help understand the affective role podcast listening had on them. The author discovered isolated listeners benefitted from the on-demand nature of the podcast, which offered a sense of power and agency within a restricting environment. Listeners reported developing parasocial feelings with the podcast hosts and developed a sense of community with other listeners they had never met (Perks et al., 2019). This study is helpful for podcast creators to understand as Robson (2021) proposes, the real power of the podcast is that it is uncomplicated, always accessible and produces the feeling of being within a community for listeners who may be unable to form community and who are isolated and lonely. The works of Robson (2021), Shaw et al. (2022) and Edwards et al. (2021) has helped us further consider how podcast episodes may be effective for a range of discreet groups in communicating targeted messages and bringing people closer together within online communities.

Table 1
Action plan for podcast creators

Questions derived from the research	Questions for podcast creators	Actions for podcast creators
How does the podcast help men understanding other men's lived experiences?	Does your podcast invite guests with lived experiences of men's mental health issues?	Identify podcast guests with lived experiences who use platforms such as Facebook, X, LinkedIn and Instagram.
How does the podcast facilitate male intimacy?	What mechanism does the podcast have to create relational depth with both listeners and guests?	Create easy to access communication platforms to connect listeners to podcast host and guests.
How does the podcast combat male isolation?	How does the podcast content engender togetherness and community?	Consider using parallel platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook to direct listeners onto online communities.
How does the podcast help listeners learn how to seek help?	How does the podcast encourage men to consider using external support services?	Ensure podcast host facilitates conversations that identify external support services.
How does the podcast help listeners reflect on the culture of hegemonic and socialised masculinity?	How does the podcast host and guest embody the culture of flexible masculinity?	Ensure the podcast host models a flexible attitude to masculinity. Their interview style should be open, empathic and understanding. The host should encourage reflection on topics such as healthy and unhealthy ways to manage mental health issues.

5. Strengths and limitations

Throughout the project we attempted to build trustworthiness and rigor by following Johnson et al's., (2020) best practice for qualitative research. Initially we formulated a clearly defined research question to focus on throughout data analysis. The research team engaged with reflexive practices throughout the process. We also employed double coding, whilst the themes identified by the two coders were subject to review and recommendation for improvement by two co-researchers. Finally, peer debriefing was utilized by engagement with an external expert to give rise to critical reflection on the interpretations and findings of our study which provided opportunity for rigorous examination of our findings to increase the integrity of the research.

Our approach has given us some confidence to suggest the action plan for podcast teams. We understand, however that there are certain limitations to the claims we can make in such a relatively small piece of work. As well as interviewing a small group of men, our interviewees were all members of MenGage and had all been willing to take part in the study. This may suggest a bias within the sample of men willing to take part in the project due to their positive experiences. In future research this should be considered, with research teams identifying people with a range of attitudes about listening to podcast episodes. Future research may, for instance identify men who do not listen to podcasts even when prompted through health communication messages.

6. Conclusion

This research has found men in our study who listen to mental health podcasts seem to more likely to initiate help seeking, may feel less isolated and less likely to experience feelings of loneliness and more community spirited. MenGage is quite novel in that it combines its podcast episodes with in-person events and social media community and by doing so, it may help challenge traditional masculinity whilst

modelling flexible approaches to being a man. Our findings have given our research team the confidence to propose the podcast/service model to other interested organisations who wish to develop their own podcasts.

Funding

This work was supported by the ISJ Community Research Grant obtained from York St John University UK.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Holly Murphy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Sam Watling:** Validation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jack Woodhams:** Validation, Conceptualization. **Gary Shepherd:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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