

The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław

Doctoral School

**The Non-Patriarchal Man:
Exploring New Depictions of Masculine Embodiment**

Doctoral thesis in the field of arts
in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

Grzegorz Bibro

supervisor: ac. prof. Wojciech Peszko

Wrocław, 2025

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1	7
POLISH MASCULINITY IN OUTLINE	7
1.1. Assumptions, Contexts, and Forecasts Regarding Masculinity	7
1.2. Quantitative Research on Masculinity in Poland	14
1.3. My qualitative research on experiencing masculinity	18
CHAPTER 2	39
SELECTED METAPHORS OF CONTEMPORARY MASCULINITY AND THEIR REFERENCES TO THE QUALITIES AND PROPERTIES OF GLASS	39
2.1. Reflections on Fragile Masculinity and Masculinity as Fragile as Glass	41
2.2. Reflections on Fluid Masculinity and on Masculinity Fluid as Glass	48
2.3. Reflections on Empty-shell Masculinity and on Masculinity Blown like Glass	57
CHAPTER 3	63
GLASS AS A MEDIUM (FOR) MASCULINITY – DOCUMENTING THE CREATIVE PROCESS	63
3.1. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Crackle series	66
3.2. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Wired series	68
3.3. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Bronze series	69
3.4. “Bulging Figures – Wired”, Bronze series	71
3.5. “Bulging Figures – Abdomens”, Male Openings series	72
3.6. „Bulging figures – Lower Abdomens”, Male Openings series	77
3.7. “Bulging Figures – Buttocks”, Male Openings series	80
3.8. “Bulging Figures – Torsos”, Male Openings series	82
3.9. “Bulging Figures – Divided Torso”	85
SUMMARY	88
BIBLIOGRAPHY	98
INTERVIEW SCENARIO	101

INTRODUCTION

This study documents my research and artistic process in exploring new conceptualizations of the male body in relation to patriarchy. The titular term "non-patriarchal man" is understood broadly—it may refer to a man who rejects authoritarian power, lacks traits of dominance, and values egalitarian, partnership-based gender relations. However, if patriarchy is understood as a system of male dominance, can the antonym of "patriarchal" also be interpreted as "dominated" or "submissive"? Might "non-patriarchal" in the context of male power be understood as "powerless," "indecisive," or "impotent"? These attributes no longer align with stereotypical notions of masculinity and are often perceived as "unmanly," despite the positive connotations of the original definition. This illustrates—in my view—how quickly the challenging contemporary question arises regarding what it means to be a masculine man today. It also concerns how masculinity and the social roles of men are defined, and how patriarchy currently influences these definitions. In relation to the title, ambiguity can also be found in the term "male body." On one hand, it refers to the body belonging to any man; on the other, it implicitly alludes to the "masculine" ideal associated with strength, fitness, and musculature. Therefore, my interests also encompass the social expectations placed upon the body and its connection to masculinity. The above examples represent some of the many issues I addressed in interviews with men, aiming to gather firsthand insights into the experience of masculinity. Simultaneously, the preliminary linguistic analysis conducted foreshadows my research interests in examining concepts related to masculinity and uncovering their new meanings.

The choice of topic arises from the intersection of my interests in masculinity and glass as a medium employed in my artistic practice. As a man, I observe the influence of patriarchy, which is oppressive not only toward women. Over time, I have observed a growing awareness of the detrimental effects of patriarchal norms that impose specific roles on men and prescribe particular forms for their bodies. For this reason, I commenced my research with a review of the literature, which elucidated the intricate position of Polish men. This complexity stems not only from contemporary challenges posed by a changing world but also from historical transformations that have influenced the construction of Polish masculinity. Particular attention was drawn to the specific situation of men born in the 1970s, as their Perceptions of masculinity were further influenced by the political transformations in Poland. My exploration of the topic was also motivated by the findings and perspectives of various scholars, most notably bell hooks, who identified patriarchy as the primary source of the issues related to contemporary male identity, explicitly referring to the current condition as a "crisis of patriarchal masculinity"¹. I was also inspired by Michał Gluczyński, who emphasized the need for men's active participation in discussions about gender as a cultural construct², Richard V. Reeves, who advocates for the emancipation of men³, and Liz Plank, who highlights the necessity of a feminist movement tailored specifically for men⁴.

¹ hooks, bell, "The will to change. Men, Masculinity and Love", trans. Magdalena Kunz, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2022, p. 49.

² Gluczyński, Michał, "Wstęp do polskiego wydania" in: Reeves Richard V., "Of Boys and Men", trans. Rafał Śmietana, Towarzystwo Naukowe im. Stanisława Andreskiego, Kraków 2024, p. 24.

³ Reeves, Richard V., "Of boys and men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It", trans. Rafał Śmietana, Stanisław Andreski Scientific Society, Kraków 2024, p. 23.

⁴ Plank, Liz, "For the Love of Men. A new vision for Mindful Masculinity", trans. Martyna Tomczak, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Gorlice 2022, p. 33.

Moreover, the male body has always served as a source of inspiration for me. The doctoral program has opened new possibilities for exploring glass as a medium, providing novel opportunities to engage with artistic expression through glass. My experience with the technique of blown glass began during my master's studies in Glass Art and Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław. Since 2020, I have gained familiarity with numerous types and techniques of glasswork, benefiting greatly from the expertise of professors and instructors in the Department of Glass, to whom I am profoundly grateful. Thanks to their dedication and willingness to share knowledge, I have had the opportunity to develop and experiment with the glass material, which readily accepts a wide range of colors, shapes, textures, and structures. Studio glass has also revealed to me countless creative possibilities due to the material's transparency, allowing one to look through the object and perceive its interior, thereby expanding the traditional mode of viewing, which is limited solely to the external surface. Transparency also allows for the visualization of individual layers of glass, creating a sense of depth. This effect is particularly significant in studio glassworks that utilize color, where the fluidity of molten glass enables a gradual distribution of hue, showcasing the entire spectrum of its saturation. Above all, glass, for me, is a material that unites opposing qualities—being simultaneously fragile and hard—and is therefore particularly compelling for engaging with the topic of masculinity. Consequently, I intend to utilize characteristics of the medium such as fragility, fluidity, and transparency in the process of exploring new conceptions of the male body.

The principal context for this research is provided by masculinity studies, which examine the ways masculinity is represented in culture, with particular attention to its socially reproduced roles⁵. Accordingly, I adopt a cultural perspective and treat gender as a cultural construct, while not denying the biological differences between men and women. A key point of reference is the dominant position of men derived from the patriarchal system, which was gradually diminished during the 20th century. This change was influenced by the feminist and gay rights movements, which in the late 1960s sparked a discourse on the traditional masculine role associated with gender⁶. Attention began to be drawn to the complex constructions of various types of masculinity, including Raewyn W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which highlights the dominance of certain groups of men—specifically, white men over men of color, and heterosexual men over homosexual men⁷. Connell further developed the theory by defining the relationships between different forms of masculinity: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization⁸. In the quest to define masculinity, various alternative theories have emerged, each with differing levels of scholarly grounding. These encompass traditional, precarious, toxic, soft, positive, fragile, inclusive, militarized, Jewish, gay, deviant, sticky, and nurturing masculinities, as well as categories formulated by Polish scholars, including Sarmatian, dislocated, prosthetic, ironic, among others.⁹ The Polish scholar of masculinity, Wojciech Śmieja, refers to this terminological situation as inflation.¹⁰ He also identifies the demise of a certain fiction of masculinity that granted men privileges, conventionally marking

⁵ Filipowicz, Marcin, Men's Studies / Masculinity Studies, entry in: "Encyklopedia Gender", Misiak Iwona; Tytuła Magdalena (red.), Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, p. 305.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Skrucha, Mateusz, Męskość hegemoniczna, entry in: "Encyklopedia Gender", op. cit., p. 317.

⁸ Filipowicz Marcin, Men's Studies / Masculinity Studies, hasło w: "Encyklopedia Gender", op. cit., s. 305.

⁹ Śmieja, Wojciech, "Obmapywanie męskości", in: "Formy męskości", t. 3, Adam Dziadek, Warszawa 2018, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

the end of masculinity in three domains: economic (loss of the role as head of the family and primary breadwinner), ideological (lack of arguments supporting symbolic, cultural, and social superiority), and ontological (debinarization of gender)¹¹.

In addition to research on masculinity, representations of the male body in art history and visual culture may also provide context for this work, but they are not developed in this paper. I would only like to mention, following Paweł Leszkowicz, art historian and researcher, the role and significance of representations of the male body in the context of patriarchy. “In a patriarchal culture, where masculinity is identified with intellect, spirit, and power, but not with the softness of the body, the male nude touches on the very intimate essence of masculinity, its embodiment in a repressed and masked physicality.”¹² The same applies to issues related to the male nude, which are particularly interesting and so extensive that, in my opinion, they deserve a separate study. As part of difficult choices, I also decided not to present references to glass art in the context of the male body, despite my knowledge and respect for artists working in this medium. For similar reasons, the work does not contain an analysis of or references to literary sources on masculinity—although they are of significant value, they do not fit into the concept of this work. While writing this paper, many additional contexts arose, but I consciously decided to consistently stick to the originally defined area.

The research problem of this study can be formulated as follows: How can glass as a medium reflect contemporary perceptions of the male body in the context of the influence of patriarchy on Poles from the transformation generation? In response to the research question, three objectives are identified, each corresponding to a specific chapter in the thesis, thereby forming the structure of the work.

The first objective of this study is to analyze the condition of masculinity in Poland within the context of the influence of patriarchy. This objective is pursued by presenting theoretical assumptions and historical factors that have shaped masculinity. This foundation leads to an analysis of quantitative data from existing research on masculinity, as well as original qualitative research conducted by the author. The goal is to specify the particular characteristics of masculinity among Polish men born in the 1970s and to illustrate how patriarchy influences various aspects of their lives.

The second objective is the analysis of metaphors related to contemporary masculinity that were selected because of their references to the characteristics of glass and based on the results of qualitative research. Specifically, this analysis focuses on concepts such as fragile masculinity, fluid masculinity, and empty shell masculinity as terms within masculinity studies. The third objective treats individual types of masculinity as metaphors that transfer characteristics of glass onto masculinity. It includes analyzing glass traits such as fragility, fluidity, and hollowness as metaphorical elements. Using linguistic research methods, this objective aims to uncover new meanings within the domain of male identity. This analysis will help assess the potential of glass as a medium for expressing contemporary masculinity.

The third objective is to present new imaginations of masculinity through the medium of glass. This objective is primarily pursued by exploring the possibilities of glassblowing techniques to

¹¹ Śmieja, Wojciech, “Po męstwie”, pub. czarne, Wołowiec, 2024, p. 446.

¹² Leszkowicz, Paweł, “Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku”, Wydawnictwo naukowe UAM, Poznań, 2012, p. 32.

create works that relate to contemporary conceptions of masculinity. The second way of realizing the third objective involves examining the use of a metal mold for glassblowing as a symbol of the patriarchal system. This symbolic use of the rigid and controlling form contrasts with the fluidity and fragility of glass, reflecting patriarchal constraints on masculinity. Thirdly, the objective includes creatively translating findings from the research part into an artistic concept. This will demonstrate that a group of glass objects can both represent and initiate changes occurring in the understanding of contemporary masculinity.

My research is interdisciplinary due to the nature of the artwork. I employ qualitative research methods alongside elements of linguistic analysis to explore the potential of the medium for narrating contemporary masculinity.

In the first chapter, I describe the in-depth individual interviews conducted in 2024 with seven men born in Poland in the 1970s. The study focused on their experiences of patriarchy and how it influences their understanding of masculinity. The precise definition of the research perspective is detailed in subsection 1.3, titled "My qualitative research on experiencing masculinity."

In the second chapter, I employ elements of linguistic analysis, specifically discourse analysis, to examine metaphors related to selected types of masculinity. This approach is inspired by the interdisciplinary research of Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska, who draws on semantic, semiotic, and etymological analysis to develop concepts and explore meanings at the intersection of philosophy and culture. Dictionaries serve as research tools in my study to analyze both terms related to male identity and idiomatic expressions. The starting point for my analysis are words and expressions understood also as metaphors—I seek to extract new meanings from them in order to capture images of masculinity. In this analysis, I largely rely on intuitive methods—juxtaposing words, substituting elements within metaphorical combinations, comparing them, and examining emerging contexts. I also draw on poetic expressions and word formation to articulate newly discovered meanings. My interest lies in comparative analysis along the axis of language-meaning-metaphor-image, as well as in exploring the potential for visualizing and materializing metaphors with reference to glass and its properties.

In the third chapter, which presents the artistic work, I refer to the autotelic perspective, which I define as a method oriented "toward itself," meaning self-referential. I understand the artistic work as an investigation of the possibilities, limitations, and potential of the medium itself—in other words, examining how glass, through its inherent qualities, enables a narrative about the experience of masculinity.

The above speaks to the originality of the work, which can be summarized and justified in three points. The first point highlighting the originality of the work is that it engages in a dialogue with current concepts and research in the area of masculinity. The work also introduces and opens Polish humanities and art to innovations while engaging in dialogue with them. The second point emphasizing the originality of the work is its interpretative creativity, including the reading of types of masculinity as metaphors and reflecting on concepts and images. This creative dimension also includes an original interpretative concept concerning "empty shell masculinity." The third point of originality in the work is the author's unique reflection on the possibilities, potential, and limitations of the medium of glass. This perspective offers a new way to view both artistic glass and contemporary masculinity.

CHAPTER 1

POLISH MASCULINITY IN OUTLINE

This chapter presents the basic theoretical assumptions concerning masculinity, the factors shaping its development, and the stages of the formation of Polish masculinity against the backdrop of historical changes in European culture. It also includes a summary of possible future scenarios regarding the shape of masculinity. This serves as the context for presenting the results of available quantitative research on masculinity in Poland, as well as original qualitative studies concerning men from the transformation generation. The title "Masculinity in Outline" refers to a condensed form of the theoretical part and at the same time serves as an introduction to the complex issues involved, including the challenges, tensions, and burdens revealed in studies on Polish masculinity.

1.1. Assumptions, Contexts, and Forecasts Regarding Masculinity

In this subsection, I draw on knowledge developed within *masculinity studies*, which is understood as "[...] the way masculinity is represented in culture in the context of men's gender identity and the social roles they perform."¹³ Masculinity in research titles appears in the singular form (both in Polish and English), even though, with the development of gender theory (since the mid-1980s), it has been recognized that "[...]within the patriarchal structure, there are different types of masculinity."¹⁴ I take the above into account in my own research, even though—for linguistic reasons—the term *masculinity* appears in the singular form throughout this dissertation¹⁵.

To summarize, I draw on research findings about masculinity (or masculinities), understood as "[...] a part of the social and cultural code."¹⁶ At the same time, I am aware that the socio-cultural concept of masculinity has multiple dimensions, and therefore, in this work, I more often refer to masculinity as a status, (which means "everything that men do or should do to be recognized in a given community as male individuals"), and less frequently to male identity, which pertains to ("everything that men think and do")¹⁷.

The starting point for defining the condition of masculinity in Poland is to consider the fundamental sociological and anthropological findings applicable in *men's studies* and *masculinity studies*, as articulated by Tomasz Tomasik. A common feature of these assumptions is the departure from an essentialist understanding of gender¹⁸.

First premise: masculinity is a sociocultural construct that depends more on culture than biology. "There is no fixed, timeless, universal «essence» or «nature», although in religious, philosophical, and even sociological and psychological approaches—most often referring to the

¹³ Filipowicz, Marcin, *Men's Studies / Masculinity Studies*, entry in: "Encyklopedia Gender", Misiak, Iwona; Tytuła, Magdalena (ed.), Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, p. 305.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ It also results from fixed expressions in language, such as 'fragile masculinity' (in the singular).

¹⁶ Filipowicz, Marcin, op. cit., p. 305.

¹⁷ „The socio-cultural concept of masculinity in these approaches is not unambiguous and can have various dimensions. Masculinity can thus be understood as male identity, referring to everything that men think and do, or as a status, denoting everything that men do or should do in order to be recognized in a given community as male individuals (Baer 2008: 11–12)”; as cited in: ibidem, p. 306.

¹⁸ Tomasik, Tomasz, "Uwagi do wciąż nienapisanej historii męskości w Polsce", in: "Formy męskości", vol. 1, Adam, Dziadek; Filip, Mazurkiewicz (ed.), Warszawa 2018, p. 39.

binary concept of sex—it has been portrayed exactly this way.”¹⁹ On the one hand, masculinity is produced and processed by society and established by the “external structure of gender roles”, and on the other, it is shaped by the individual and influenced by „individual experiences of gender, sexuality, corporeality, emotionality, intimacy.”²⁰

The second premise: there is no single universal masculinity, but rather various variants of it. Its diversity results from historical processes such as the transition from a feudal to a capitalist economic system, wars, the emergence of cities, modern science, industry, technology, and so forth. These transformative events have shaped different expressions and norms of masculinity over time, reflecting the changes in society, economy, and culture across different periods. At the same time, „[...] various forms of male identities define themselves in relation to categories such as social class, age, religious affiliation, race, nationality, or sexual orientation”, and “[...] various forms of male identities define themselves in relation to categories such as social class, age, religious affiliation, race, nationality, or sexual orientation”²¹. Furthermore, in this context, Tomasik recalls a key conclusion by Raewyn Connell from her 1995 work “Masculinities” namely that “[...] what we commonly refer to as masculinity is in fact its dominant variant in a given society, occupying a privileged position within the complex and constantly evolving structure of gender relations. This position—let us add—is legitimized in many ways while simultaneously being contested”²².

The third premise: masculinity is defined not only in relation to women but also in relation to other men. As a result, male identity is doubly entangled, as it simultaneously tries to meet dual expectations—those of women and those of men. As Tomasik points out “[...]in the process of forming male identity, gender polarization is no less important than homosocialization”²³.

The fourth premise: masculinity established the matrix of normativity in culture. Tomasik cites Pierre Bourdieu’s words in justification: “The strength of the masculine order comes from the fact that it operates without justification: androcentrism imposes itself as neutral and not requiring discursive legitimation. The social order is, in fact, a vast symbolic machine that brings male domination to life and confirms it, and on which it itself is based”²⁴. Male domination is also visible in the realm of symbolic culture, where men not only speak about themselves but simultaneously claim the right to speak on behalf of women. At the same time, they impose the treatment of everything that is not *masculine* as *other*, and in extreme cases, consider it a deviation²⁵.

The fifth premise: masculinity was perceived in various cultures (including European) as a task. This is confirmed by the words of Elisabeth Badinter, quoted by Tomasik: “[...] femininity is a natural, given, and inevitable state, whereas masculinity is something that must be earned through effort and constantly proven”²⁶. Tomasik also cites research by sociologist Michael

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 39.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 40.

²² Ibidem, p. 41.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 43.

²⁶ Ibidem.

Kimmel: "Kimmel believes that the Idea of testing men has a structural character and concerns not only war but mainly such transhistorical areas of social life as work, politics, and family"²⁷.

The sixth premise "[...] the history of men written based on literary works is always a historiographic narrative organizing textual representations of masculinity". As Tomasik explains "historical narratives are interpretations of the past" and "symbolic works do not directly reflect the real life of men"²⁸.

According to the definition by Mateusz Skrucha, *hegemonic masculinity* is "«the most masculine masculinity», a culturally produced ideal of male behavior that includes hierarchy, violence, and control—principles that allow domination over other men and women. It is characterized by traits such as power, authority, prestige, courage, aggressiveness, physical fitness, competitiveness, strength, heterosexuality combined with misogyny and homophobia"²⁹. The term was introduced to social sciences by Raewyn Connell, who drew on the concept of *hegemony* from social philosophy by Antonio Gramsci. "According to Gramsci, hegemony is the way in which the dominant class exerts ideological influence over the subordinate class—not by force, but through a negotiated compromise, operating with general consent"³⁰. Based on the above, in 1995 Raewyn Connell defined hegemonic masculinity as "[...] not a set of actual male behaviors, but a socially constructed model, an expression of aspirations and a collection of patterns (behavioral models of both «real» men and women, men of color, gays, etc). The functioning of hegemonic masculinity is sanctioned and reproduced by various institutions such as the family, school, state, economy, and the Church, as well as a complex system of legislative, legal, political, and economic mechanisms. However, the most important role is played by a worldview based on the belief that men's destiny is to hold power and dominate, while women's destiny is subordination (cf. patriarchy)"³¹. Moreover, "[...] hegemony is based on the domination of a certain group of men not only over women but also over other men (e.g., white men dominate men of color, and heterosexual men dominate homosexual men). For this reason, within the male gender, Connell [author's note] distinguished several relations: hegemony, subordination, camaraderie³² and marginalization"³³. In Polish literature, one can also find alternative names for the specific variants of these relations occurring among different types of masculinity: hegemony, subordination, complicity, marginalization³⁴.

Sketching the history of masculinity, Tomasik cites Connell's research on the stages of masculinity formation in European culture, including "[...] its hegemonic form, based on domination, aggression, oppression of women, and heteronormativity"³⁵. Raewyn Connell identifies the early Renaissance phase as the beginning of transformations that "led to the establishment of the modern gender order"³⁶. She also presents four developmental factors

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Skrucha, Mateusz, *Męskość hegemoniczna*, entry in: "Encyklopedia Gender", op. cit., p. 315.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² At this point, on page 41, Tomasik uses the term *współudział* (English: complicity), which is closer to the original term *complicit masculinity*; in Śmieja's work, this concept is translated as "męskość współpracująca" (*cooperative masculinity*).

³³ Skrucha, Mateusz, op. cit., p. 315.

³⁴ Tomasik, Tomasz, op. cit., p. 41.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 44.

³⁶ Ibidem.

related to Western Europe, which can be “experimentally «fitted» to the Polish early modern literature”³⁷ and, in this context—following Tomasik—indicate the conditions influencing the history of Polish masculinity.

The first factor is the collapse of the cultural formation of monastic Christianity. "Renaissance humanism initiated a new way of thinking about man as an autonomous, self-reflective person, discovering all possible dimensions of his humanity (humanitas), including those that were repressed, censored, or stigmatized by medieval Catholicism – such as gender or sexuality"³⁸. In comparison to Western European tendencies, it seems that in Old Polish culture, the Sarmatian model of masculinity evolved in a different direction. "In the stereotypical image of the Sarmatian [...] a boisterous character was complemented by physical extensity, xenophobic prejudices, and bigoted religiosity"³⁹. Additionally, the Polish nobility did not identify with intellectual values but rather with landed and military ones, with the idea of martial valor being embedded in a Christian sacralizing context⁴⁰.

The second factor relates to the history of masculinity in the context of the colonial era's influence, which transformed the imperative of control into a central male obsession: control over territories and their boundaries, over women, and over one's own identity⁴¹. "The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth did not possess overseas colonies; nevertheless, imperial aspirations were not unfamiliar to Polish kings, magnates, or the nobility"⁴². After the Union of Lublin in 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth gained control over vast territories inhabited by Lithuanians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, which historians consider to have had a colonial nature⁴³. Moreover, "the wars fought in 17th-century Poland against enemies differing in religion and confession – Orthodox Russia and the Cossacks, Islamic Turkey, and Protestant Sweden – posed a threat not only to the territorial integrity of the state but also to ethnic, religious, and cultural identity"⁴⁴.

The third factor concerns the history of masculinity in the context of urban development, as from the late Middle Ages Western European cities began to function as centers of capitalist economy, contributing to groundbreaking social and cultural changes. This led to everyday life becoming more anonymous, which fostered the growth of individualism. "In urban and capitalist culture, a new form of masculinity became institutionalized—one that referred not to the chivalric ethos of combat and honor, but to the bourgeois ethos of work. The processes of urbanization brought about changes in customs, including the emergence of sexual subcultures"⁴⁵. However, major Polish cities in the early modern period had little influence on culture—the development occurred with delay and met resistance from the landed and peasant society. The underdevelopment of bourgeois culture most likely influenced the evolution of gender relations—in Poland, a traditional and patriarchal system prevailed⁴⁶. In simplification, it

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 46.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 47.

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 49.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 49–50.

can be assumed that "[...] men did not have the opportunity to build their identity around the bourgeois ethos of work and entrepreneurship. Not only civilizational backwardness but also the later condition of subjugation during the partition period forced adherence to the traditional, chivalric, and Sarmatian ethos of fighting external enemies"⁴⁷. In other words, Polish masculinity under the partitions was deprived of the institutions that shaped it— "[...]characterized by deep deinstitutionalization and deterritorialization" as described by the scholar Wojciech Śmieja⁴⁸. Moreover, the manorial-serfdom model had a negative impact on the development of Polish society, politics, culture, and economy⁴⁹.

The fourth factor concerns the history of masculinity through the lens of civil and dynastic wars in Europe. According to Tomasiak, "[...] armed conflicts, by contributing to the emergence of strong, centralized states, consolidated the patriarchal social order"⁵⁰. Additionally, wars, both as historical events and existential experiences, played a significant role in shaping male identities based on the ethos of combat and honor⁵¹. "In the 18th century—as Connell writes—a gender order was established in Europe and North America in which masculinity, understood in a modern sense, was treated as a gendered individual character, defined in opposition to femininity and institutionalized by the economy and the state"⁵². In contrast, Poland in the 17th and 18th centuries was entangled in wars with religiously and culturally different neighbors, while simultaneously standing out in Europe due to rebellious members of the nobility who exercised the privilege of golden liberty and profited from serfdom. This led to the political, economic, and military disintegration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth⁵³. In summary, it is worth emphasizing that "[...] during the era of the partitions, successive insurrections, conspiracies, and repressions, masculinity in Poland became closely linked with the ethos of soldierliness, heroism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom"⁵⁴.

First published in 2016, "Remarks on the Still Unwritten History of Masculinity in Poland" serves as a rich source of knowledge about the assumptions and factors influencing Polish masculinity, rooted in specific important historical events and processes. As Tomasiak points out, detailed histories of masculinity were lacking in Poland, a gap that Wojciech Śmieja filled in 2024 with his over 500-page publication "Po męstwie". According to Wojciech Śmieja, "[...] the so-called second independence can therefore be portrayed and narrated as a process of reinstationalizing masculinity after the 19th century, of which evidence is not hard to find. At that time, the reintegration of the (male) nation with the state and territory took place, as advocated in the Mazurek Dąbrowskiego. However, as we know, the new century brought many further shocks (wars, transformations, independence or lack thereof); these events rendered the dominant fiction of Polish masculinity unstable, and the culturally postulated models of hegemony never guaranteed success for social actors". Śmieja uses the concept of the dominant fiction of masculinity, which he explains as "[...] the prevailing idea of masculinity, the one we take as obvious and indisputable, which we encounter every day, do not notice, yet it

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Śmieja, Wojciech, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁹ Tomasiak, Tomasz, op. cit., p. 51.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 52.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 54.

regulates our behaviors, shapes reactions, relationships, and aspirations—mine as an individual and ours as a community [...]”⁵⁵. This concept is so important for the researcher that it was used to organize the narrative in the history of masculinity in the 20th century. Śmieja divided the publication “Po męstwie” into three chapters: the first, titled “Dominant Fiction: Honor” is devoted to issues up to 1945; the second, “Dominant Fiction: Advancement” concerns post-war masculinity; and the third, “Dominant Fiction: Success” focuses on Polish masculinity after 1989, when systemic transformation began in Poland⁵⁶.

The concept of *dominant fiction* was introduced by American psychoanalyst Kaja Silverman, who links male domination with castration anxiety⁵⁷. This anxiety “[...] disciplines boys and initiates them into phallic masculinity, that is, one that establishes a strict connection between the sense of masculinity, the penis as the genital expression of masculinity, and the Phallus as a symbolic representation of the social and cultural order organized around the hegemonic category of masculinity”⁵⁸. Moreover, Śmieja—following Silverman—refers to a patriarchal system that sustains the symbolic bond between the penis and the Phallus, a bond which, in the face of dramatic events, can be disrupted, thereby undermining the coherence of masculinity⁵⁹. Silverman seeks to demonstrate that male mastery serves to conceal the underlying castration anxiety at the core of both individual and collective identity. Patriarchal culture persistently repeats and affirms male domination, yet this very repetition continuously undermines the more fundamental, recurring castration anxiety that cannot be eliminated. This tension allows the researcher to highlight the crucial issue in her considerations: the equivalence between the anatomical penis and the symbolic Phallus. This equivalence operates on both an individual and collective level. When, due to crisis situations, this equivalence is disrupted, masculinity experiences a temporary disintegration⁶⁰.

According to Śmieja, the above explains why the dominant vision of Polish masculinity was unstable during periods of war, lack of sovereignty, and political transformation. He notes that „one might get the impression that any democratic relaxation, which weakened the imagined sense of masculinity of the dominant group, ended in authoritarian coups. In 1926, Piłsudski, disdainful of parliamentarianism, [...] established a strong hand government favoring the military. In 1981 «the Solidarity carnival» was brutally curtailed by a group of old generals led by Jaruzelski—the army took control at every level of social and economic life”⁶¹.

Śmieja characterizes the history of masculinity up to the early 21st century, suggesting at the same time that success as a dominant vision might be the last vision that “[...] could claim the authority to organize the entire symbolic universe of masculinity”⁶². Therefore, in the epilogue, he also formulates possible scenarios, calling them “the three ends of masculinity”⁶³. He

⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, p. 514.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 51.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Ibidem.

⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 55.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 443.

⁶³ Ibidem, p. 446.

emphasizes that he means "[...] the end of a certain fiction of masculinity that granted specific privileges to men [...]"⁶⁴.

The first scenario is conventionally called the "economic end," associated with a disappointed sense of privilege connected to white middle-class masculinity. "Contemporary (white) men must compete for the best positions in the hierarchy and shrinking resources not only among themselves but also with women, openly gay men, and men of other races. Moreover, representatives of these groups, once deprived of privileges, sometimes possess more relevant skills in this competition"⁶⁵. This fits into a broader picture shown by Wojciech Śmieja, referring to Edwin Bendyk's observations from the book „W Polsce, czyli wszędzie”, which "[...] enumerates successive endings we are witnessing: the end of the natural system, the capitalist economy, society, romantic love, and—precisely—male dominance, and thereby masculinity understood in a traditional, intuitive way"⁶⁶.

The second scenario is the "ideological end" of male dominance, which has lost its justification. "Masculinity no longer necessarily constitutes a positive distinction of the individual, just as the vector of sexuality is no longer necessarily directed toward the so-called opposite sex. There is no longer any rationale behind the symbolic, cultural, and social dominance of heterosexual men. On the contrary, masculinity begins to become a burden"⁶⁷. Śmieja additionally cites the findings of a report by the Jagiellonian Club, which identified the causes of male frustration: "[...] better educational outcomes of women, their greater social and economic mobility, the decline of traditionally 'male' industries, the inability to meet the ever-increasing expectations of potential partners, the lack of positive male role models, and institutional invisibility [...]"⁶⁸.

The third scenario is the "ontological end" which concerns gender identity that for centuries was as self-evident as the binary model of sex. Śmieja refers to research showing that gender nowadays appears as a non-binary concept, where "[...] sexual characteristics constitute a kind of continuum [...]"⁶⁹. Śmieja writes about the debinarization of gender in the context of Paul B. Preciado's thought, according to whom „[...] he new non-binary regime will allow gender expression [...] to undergo – thanks to biotechnological possibilities—privatization and, one might say, plasticity [...]"⁷⁰. In consequence, as Preciado points out, “[...] normative white heterosexuality will soon become just one among many bodily aesthetics, reproducing a retro style [...]"⁷¹. According to Śmieja, this "retro style" will concern increasingly older and less numerous generations in the West, where men have shorter lifespans than women. “Traditional male cultural traits encompass risk factors such as neglect of personal health, substance dependencies, poor dietary habits, and lower levels of social and physical activity compared to women of the same age group; the detrimental effects of these factors are expected to become increasingly evident”⁷².

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Ibidem.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 448.

⁶⁷ Ibidem.

⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹ Ibidem.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 451.

⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁷² Ibidem.

The above theories and forecasts provide me with a background for analyzing data from both quantitative and qualitative studies concerning masculinity.

1.2. Quantitative Research on Masculinity in Poland

In this study, I focus on men born between 1970 and 1979, referred to as the “transformation generation”. They are part of the more broadly defined “Generation X,” which includes individuals born between 1965 and 1980, with the symbol X referring to the unknown.

Following Maria Zielińska, I assume that “[...] generational affiliation significantly differentiates ways of perceiving reality, shapes the perception and evaluation of social phenomena, influences the choices of individual life concepts, and, in a broader perspective, determines the direction and character of ongoing social transformations. This, in turn, results from members of a given generation growing up under similar socio-cultural conditions and simultaneously passing through successive life stages. It is also important to note that during the formative phase of life, i.e., between the ages of 18 and 25, the internalization of social messages is strongest, which shapes the identity of the generation.”⁷³ Thus, I assume that the study group consists not only of individuals born in the same period but, above all, of those who share a similar way of perceiving reality, shaped by experiencing common, characteristic events during their formative years. The generational identity of the men under discussion was undoubtedly shaped by the systemic transformation in Poland, understood as a set of changes initiated in the 1980s, which included: (1) political changes related to the introduction of democracy; (2) economic changes associated with the creation of a free market based on private ownership; and (3) social changes connected to the challenges posed by new rules of social life⁷⁴. The systemic, economic, and social transformation of the country began in the 1980s, with Poland being the first nation within the socialist bloc to embark on this path of change. Individuals born in the 1970s were adolescents during this period (in 1989, they were between 10 and 19 years old), meaning that their childhood and initial socialization took place under the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) regime. According to Zielińska: “They experienced childhood during the decline of real socialism; their characters were shaped in the 1970s and 1980s. They remember black-and-white televisions, empty shelves, endless queues in shops, ration cards for food, but also participation (as children) in May Day parades and festivals on July 22nd. They took their final exams in the climate of systemic transformation and started their careers in the market economy”⁷⁵. Bogdan W. Mach writes about this group in his 2003 work titled „Pokolenie historycznej nadziei i codziennego ryzyka. Społeczne losy osiemnastolatków z roku 1989”, clearly indicating the identity of this generation. Bogdan W. Mach notes that “in their lives, the features of transformation manifested most quickly, most fully, and most strongly. They were «touched» by it at a very sensitive, initial, formative phase of their adult lives, during which fundamental choices are made [...]. They had to decide, choose, and act with little experience and few resources accumulated—while simultaneously being aware that even those resources

⁷³ Zielińska, Maria, “Przynależność pokoleniowa jako explanandum zmian mentalności społecznej w okresie przeobrażeń systemowych”, *Rocznik Lubuski*, t. 36, part 2, 2010, p. 246, source: https://roczniklubuski.uz.zgora.pl/fcp/FHVEUFAGNARASPGMAUVFOQlpeRkBIAwANASwFD0RJChMLC0hRCgAEA1FRTgMASUhOAwA-CxQDAAlFEhAPCAIGSRITHwEO/165/public/wydania/tom_36/rocznik_lubuski_36_2.pdf (accessed 19.08.2025).

⁷⁴ Transformacja systemowa w Polsce, entry in: “Wikipedia”, https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transformacja_systemowa_w_Polsce (accessed 19.08.2025).

⁷⁵ Zielińska, Maria, op. cit., p. 249.

they possessed were subject to accelerated processes of devaluation and redefinition in the new reality, full of risk and uncertainty.”⁷⁶

Two decades later, in 2019, research findings on masculinity in Poland were published and contextualized within global data. The research agency 4P Research Mix released an excerpt from a report titled “NEW MEN (?) 4P/2019”, based on quantitative studies covering the male population aged 18–75. During the survey period (December 2018 – January 2019), there were over 14 million men in Poland⁷⁷.

According to Barbara Frątczak-Rudnicka from 4P Research Mix, “an analysis was conducted of numerous studies and discourses on the changing behaviors and attitudes of contemporary men worldwide, the redefinition of cultural norms and patterns related to masculinity, and diagnosed trends. As a result, the 4P index of new masculinity (new, modern, future masculinity) was based on four dimensions: (1) appearance, self-care, health, and fitness; (2) greater emotionality and sensitivity, acceptance of expressing feelings, showing weakness, and asking for advice; (3) increased partnership in formal and informal relationships, acceptance of partners’ needs, and emotional closeness to children; and (4) openness in social norms and social sensitivity, trust in others, and absence of prejudice.”⁷⁸ Within each dimension, information was gathered on trends in changing masculinity.. In the area (1), related to appearance, the study showed, among other things, that 69% of men believe a man’s life success depends on how he looks, how well-groomed he is, and how he dresses. In the area of (2) greater emotionality and sensitivity, the following findings were established: 46% of men believe that a “real man” can cry, while 74% seek support, understanding, or the opportunity to “talk things through” in friendship. In the area of (3) partnership, the data show that 66% of men consider men to be equally capable as women in taking care of the home and children; additionally, 63% of men in a relationship participate in cooking. In the area of (4) social openness, it was found that for 70% of men, the gender of their boss does not matter, and 57% of men are friends with—or could be friends with—a gay man⁷⁹.

This was the baseline for quantitative research on masculinity. Next, each of the four areas was translated by researchers into specific indicators, which were used to diagnose “new masculinity” in Poland. Based on this, five types of masculinity were identified, with names reflecting the characteristics of each type: Gentlemen (average age 51), Insta-boys (average age 28), Guys (average age 44), Blokes (average age 53), and Meni (average age 36). The types were determined based on patterns in responses across the four areas (appearance, emotionality, partnership, openness), as well as their answers to two additional questions: “How important is it for you to be masculine?” and “What is your model of a man?”

Since this work concerns the generation of transformation, the study further focuses on the group defined in the discussed report as Guys. Men assigned to this segment are described as

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 250.

⁷⁷ A collective work, a publicly released excerpt from the report by the research agency 4P Research Mix Sp. z o.o., https://grupa4p.pl/raporty/Infografika_Nowi_m%C4%99%C5%BCczy%C5%BAni_2019.pdf (accessed 1.09.2025).

⁷⁸ Frątczak-Rudnicka, Barbara, “Dzentelmeni, instachłopcy czy faceci?“, Marketing przy Kawie, 10.07.2019, <https://marketingprzykawie.pl/artykuly/dzentelmeni-instachlopczy-czy-faceci> (accessed 1.09.2025).

⁷⁹ collective work, published excerpt from the report of the 4P Research Mix Sp. z o.o. research agency, op. cit.

independent, tolerant, and egalitarian. They seek stability and a peaceful family life, and they appreciate the world of women, children, and home. They place great importance on openness and partnership (with respect to the defined four dimensions), while appearance and emotionality are moderately important to them. A significant 79% of them have at least a secondary education, making this the most highly educated group among all segments. Additionally, 71% are professionally active, the majority (66%) live in urban areas, and over half (58%) are in a relationship. They place little importance on being masculine, marking the lowest score among all segments. Unlike other groups, they do not have a dominant male role model: for the Insta-boys it is the "successful man"; for the Men the "lad and strongman"; for the Gentlemen the "Superman-rock"; and for the Farmers the "strongman." Moreover, Guys rarely define themselves by gender. These distinguishing features emphasize the individuality and specificity of this group.

The report titled "Understanding Masculinity. The Reality of Polish Men," commissioned by Gedeon Richter Polska, provides additional data. Quantitative research was conducted in 2024, when men from the transformation generation were between 45 and 54 years old. The report's authors present extensive data on a surveyed group aged 18 to 69. These data are used here as background and context for the 46–55 age segment, which most closely corresponds to the generation under discussion.

The authors of the study began presenting the results by examining how men defined *masculinity*. Among respondents aged 18–69, the term was primarily associated with maturity (63%), life wisdom (56%), and calmness and self-control (54%). At the other end of the scale, fewer respondents linked masculinity with a sporty body (25%), attractive appearance (32%), and readiness for physical fight in defense of values, homeland, or loved ones (29%)⁸⁰.

Researchers also focused on men's emotions. Common feelings among respondents included a sense of security (48%), joy (46%), and a feeling of closeness (41%). Occasionally, most experienced excitement (53%) and being moved emotionally (51%). Less frequently, 39% felt discouragement, 42% experienced helplessness, and 43% reported anxiety. Notably, 65% of all surveyed men admitted they would like to have someone to talk to about their emotions⁸¹.

Research shows that 30% of men feel frustration related to the frequency of their sexual activity. The study found that "as many as one-fifth of the surveyed men currently have no sexual partner. Among the main reasons, 45% of men indicated that they have not met the right person with whom they would like to have sex."⁸² Simplifying, besides selectiveness, the reasons for abstinence include shyness (28%), coldness (17%), illness (16%), trauma (13%), heartbreak (10%), and religion (3%). "This corresponds to masturbation frequency of several times a week or more, which 27% of men admit to."⁸³ The second reason may be sexual fantasies, which 78% of respondents admitted to having. Such fantasies are particularly common among middle-aged men: 82% in the 36-45 age group and 81% in the 46-55 age group.

⁸⁰The report "Understanding Masculinity. The Reality of the Polish Male", commissioned by Gedeon Richter Poland in 2024, <https://zdrowa-ona.pl/do-pobrania/raport-badania-zrozumiec-meskosc-rzeczywistosc-polskiego-mezczyzny.pdf> (accessed 1.09.2025).

⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁸² Ibidem.

⁸³ Ibidem.

The data from 2024 also cover health-related issues: 64% of respondents declare that they take care of their fitness and maintain healthy nutrition, with similar results across all age groups, regardless of whether they are in a relationship or single. Moreover, 88% of men in stable relationships believe that a successful partnership positively affects health, as it involves mutual care and reminders about preventive health check-ups, leading to earlier diagnosis of potential diseases. Regarding visits to medical specialists, 37% of men have already had their first consultation with a cardiologist, and 34% have visited a urologist. Additionally, 25% of men have seen a psychologist, while 21% have consulted a psychiatrist. These statistics reflect the healthcare engagement of men in Poland in 2024⁸⁴.

Gradual erosion of the taboo around men seeking help for mental health is occurring, but these changes are too slow in light of the gender gap in life expectancy. According to data cited by researcher Michał Gulczyński, Polish men live on average eight years shorter than Polish women. For comparison, American men live six years shorter than women. Such significant differences are “typical for post-communist countries”⁸⁵. The author cites “systemic and cultural factors as causes for the gender gap in life expectancy, including working conditions, access to the healthcare system, traffic regulations, and patterns of alcohol consumption.”⁸⁶ The gender gap is also evident in suicide rates, which are higher among men. In Poland, men take their own lives more than six times as often as women, while in the USA, men die by suicide over three times more frequently than women⁸⁷. Gulczyński proposes using the term “death of despair” in Poland, noting that “especially during the period of economic transformation, men often either took their own lives or died prematurely, indirectly as a result of rapid economic changes.”⁸⁸ The author observes notable similarities between Poland and the USA in terms of substance abuse, particularly regarding psychoactive substances. This is likely a response to persistent stress, with individuals seeking numbing or escape from problems through such dependencies. “Where Reeves writes about opioid overdoses, a Polish reader might think of alcohol. In Europe, regulations on the pharmaceutical market offer greater protection against medication abuse. However, it is estimated that between 2 and 2.5 million people (5–7%) in Poland engage in harmful drinking. Of these, 80% are men. Over 800,000 individuals (2%) are addicted to alcohol.”⁸⁹

The information provided offers valuable insights into masculinity, relevant also to men of the transformation generation in Poland. Quantitative data are especially important, as they provide concrete numbers on issues related to the definition of masculinity, male emotions, intimate life, and health, including mental health. This data will support a more thorough preparation of qualitative research focused on men born in the 1970s, allowing for deeper understanding of their experiences and identities within the socio-historical context of post-transformation Poland.

⁸⁴ Ibidem.

⁸⁵ Gulczyński, Michał, op. cit., p.19.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Ibidem.

⁸⁸ Ibidem.

⁸⁹ Ibidem.

1.3. My qualitative research on experiencing masculinity

Qualitative research in the area of masculinity serves as an extension of the knowledge gained from the previously described quantitative studies and selected topics within masculinity studies. Conducting original research provides the opportunity to obtain answers directly from the source — to hear, record, and reflect on authentic statements about masculinity. These statements capture the experiences of specific individuals, their personal attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and histories that have shaped their understanding of masculinity. The specific nature of the study is outlined below in the description of the research process, which includes the research objective, characteristics of the method, techniques, and research tools used. The key components are the findings and their interpretation in the form of conclusions.

The first research objective I established is to analyze the condition of masculinity in Poland in the context of the influence of patriarchy. The specific goal is to conduct my own qualitative research in the form of interviews with men born in the 1970s regarding the impact of patriarchy on various areas of their lives. The method is qualitative research aimed at gaining in-depth opinions of men from the transformation generation in areas related to masculinity. I am also interested in presenting quotes that will help bring closer and understand the experiences of men, while also serving as a testimony to ongoing changes.

An important part is to establish the research perspective based on minimizing the traditionally superior role of the "researcher" over the "researched." The aim is to create a space for an equal position and partnership in the interview, whose goal is to generate shared knowledge. In other words, as the initiator of the study, I want to present their stories about masculinity in their own words, being more a "narrator" than a "director." At the same time, I am aware that it is impossible to study the topic objectively, and what emerges often reflects my relationship to the presented vision of masculinity. Even though I perform a dual role: I look at the issue of masculinity from the perspective of the researcher but also—as a man—from the perspective of the researched. For this reason, I strive to faithfully reproduce the statements and avoid interfering with the quotations, except to correct errors that hinder their understanding—in the context of conversations in which I participated. The statements vary in language style, including colloquial words, emotionally charged expressions, sometimes blunt, and occasionally vulgar terms — these too are left in their original form to preserve authenticity and expressiveness.

The research technique used is the individual in-depth interview (IDI) conducted with the use of a tool in the form of an interview guide containing a list of questions and topics for discussion. The interview consists of questions divided into eight blocks concerning: masculinity, social influence, patriarchy, male emotions, the male body, religion/faith/spirituality, attitudes toward otherness, and attitudes toward life. The research scope and individual questions were developed based on information gathered from the first part of this chapter, including literature review and quantitative studies. I personally conducted all the interviews.

The respondents are men born in Poland between 1970 and 1979, who represent the masculinity type labeled as "Guys" in the segmentation from the report "NOWI MĘŻCZYŹNI (?) 4P/2019." For the study, I selected seven men whose demographic characteristics match this type: they have at least a secondary education and live in large cities. I also aimed to choose interlocutors whose personalities aligned with the previously described profile of the "Guys"—characterized by independence, openness, tolerance, partnership, social equality, and a

preference for stability and peaceful family life. Simultaneously, I sought diversity among respondents in terms of employment status (unemployed, employed as an employee, self-employed), relationship status (married, remarried, in a partnership, single), and family status (childless, with one child, with two children, or with children from previous and current relationships, i.e., members of a blended family). The respondents were not selected based on their sexual orientation, and the vast majority of them are heterosexual. The interviews took place in early 2024 in Poznań, Wrocław, and Warsaw, lasting from 60 to 90 minutes each. The interviews were recorded, then I transcribed and edited them as needed to preserve the meaning of the statements.

All interviews were preceded by the following introduction:

"I am conducting a study on how men born in Poland in the 1970s understand masculinity. I aim to capture the specificity of masculinity in the generation of transformation (economic, political, technological). My goal is to combine the knowledge gained with an artistic work interpreting contemporary representations of the male body. The study is anonymous; I expect honest answers, an exchange of experiences, and a conversation that can be a source of reflection for both sides. I would like to jointly reflect with you on narratives about masculinity. The study concerns various areas of life, and the questions are divided into thematic blocks."

The findings of the qualitative research are presented below through selected quotations from the participants. These quotations are analyzed and discussed alongside conclusions and commentary. The research material is organized into eight thematic blocks, each corresponding to a distinct section of the interview.

Part 1. Results and conclusions from responses to questions about masculinity

Each interview commenced with a thematic block focused on masculinity, which constitutes a central component of the study. Consequently, this section receives the most extensive attention during the analysis and formulation of conclusions. The initial question posed (1.1) was open-ended: "What does masculinity mean to you? What are its characteristics?" Early responses revealed a notable diversity of attitudes and modes of thought. Participants articulated markers of traditional masculinity such as "strength," "dominance," "brutality," "stubbornness," "ambition," and "protection of the family." Additionally, some definitions were constructed in opposition to femininity, exemplified by statements like "masculinity is not femininity," "different social and physical roles," and "a set of traits represented by people with penises." There were also responses relating to integrity, including traits such as "responsibility for oneself and others," "the ability to share knowledge," "willingness to help," "responsibility for one's word," and "psychological and emotional maturity." Some responses highlighted the role of the caretaker using gentle terms such as "providing security" and "warm, caring." Particularly noteworthy were reflective statements like: "It is difficult for me to say what I think about masculinity; I just see what culture defines as masculinity." A less conventional perspective emerged in the data, with some participants suggesting that "masculinity is constructed by women, who dictate what a masculine man should be." This observation underscores the considerable diversity in meanings attributed to masculinity among the respondents. It supports the conclusion that there is no singular, fixed definition of masculinity, as each individual interprets it in a unique way. This complexity can be aptly summarized by the statement: "masculinity is a blend of traits, ranging from toxic masculinity to a man who changes his child's diapers."

Interestingly, some men highlighted traits such as "willingness to act," "maturity," and "resilience," emphasizing that, in their view, these are "gender-independent characteristics." One participant expressed this perspective clearly: "When I take any trait into consideration, I think it is neither typically male nor typically female. For me, there are no characteristics that belong only to men. Whatever trait I think about, I can imagine both a man and a woman possessing it." Another participant articulated a straightforward expectation: "I want people to be brave and responsible, mature, regardless of gender. Maturity is more important than being masculine." One participant stated clearly: "For me, both men and women can play the same roles. I do not associate masculinity strictly with gender—after all, a lesbian can be masculine; a heterosexual woman can also be masculine." This suggests that some respondents indeed perceive masculinity as independent of biological sex. This perspective is further supported by answers to question (1.2): "Who do you consider masculine (among people close to you, public figures, literary characters, actors, etc.)?"

"These are men who are masculine. And such masculine men are masculine. The first that comes to mind is Brad Pitt. Brad Pitt is masculine because he epitomizes the crystallized stereotype of masculinity; he is a man with a square jaw, sexually objectified, adored for his talent and genetics for the last 30 years or even more. Who else is masculine... Margaret Thatcher was masculine; she was a woman making decisions perceived as tough, and tough decisions were usually considered masculine decisions. Krystyna P...⁹⁰ can also be perceived as masculine, masculine through the filter of being rude, uncultured, who does not show a shred of any soft element, everything in her is hard, angular."

The other responses to question (1.2) provided further examples of masculine role models, primarily among biological men: a father-in-law and grandfather admired for their technical skills, a father figure, the character Stanisław Wokulski as an organicist from the 19th-century novel "Lalka," a martial arts trainer friend capable of handling anything, as well as Hollywood actors—not for their roles but for their perseverance in long-term monogamous relationships despite numerous temptations. Masculinity was also attributed to those who "have a family, children, and a mission to manage them, capable of handling anything," as well as those who are "self-sufficient, attentive, conscious, and physically strong." Among many responses spanning a broad spectrum of traits, the answer "I lack a masculine role model" appeared twice, which also became one of my conclusions.

Following the assessment of other masculine figures, question (1.3) was posed: "Do you consider yourself masculine?" In this case, some respondents answered cautiously: "I have certain traits, let's say half and half," "average," "in some respects, yes," "No, but I am working on myself," and "I would rate myself 3+ (on a school grading scale), or 45% raised". From the above, it can be inferred that the men surveyed do not generally think of themselves as masculine. Moreover, when asked why, most linked this perception to their body and appearance: "I don't take care of myself," "I'm chubby," "I don't have that balance because the body isn't masculine," where a masculine body is understood as "solid, strong." Conversely, men who regularly engage in sports felt masculine: "I am physically masculine," "I look about 80% how I want to look." This suggests that masculinity is often associated with physical robustness and a fit body, and in this regard, respondents judged themselves rather harshly.

⁹⁰ The name of the public figure was removed from the transcription.

The research also reveals another reason why men do not consider themselves masculine, illustrated by one participant's comment: "Being masculine is not necessarily a compliment." Many respondents, when asked about the definition of masculinity, cited stereotypically masculine traits such as "dominance," "strength," "brutality," "stubbornness," "anger," "ambition," "impulsiveness," and "not speaking, keeping things inside," all of which carry a negative connotation. This likely explains why some answers included reflections like: "It's hard for me to say what I think about masculinity; I just see what culture defines as masculinity," and "No, I think of myself as a man," suggesting that for some, masculinity is not necessary for their self-identification. It can therefore be inferred that the men surveyed distanced themselves from the previously presented dominant vision of masculinity. On the one hand, they are able to define the stereotype in their statements, but on the other hand, they show that this stereotype does not represent them. This appears to be a challenge that requires awareness and effort to individually build one's own sense of value after separating from traditional masculinity. Some voices reflect this perspective clearly: "I don't think in such categories. I judge myself in terms of whether something was mature or immature, not connecting it to masculinity."

The final question in this block (1.4.): "What do you think are the conditions to be considered masculine?" elicited responses in which respondents identified success and its indicators as a point of reference. The starting point is the traditional understanding of success influencing masculinity, which includes physical appearance traits such as "well-groomed," "healthy," and "physically fit," as well as qualities necessary to achieve success like "self-confidence" and "competitiveness," along with attributes in the form of items that confirm status.

"In today's society, masculinity is still closely tied to economic success, but social aspects and related anxieties also play a role. Economic success remains a key factor, but appearance matters too—that is, a man who is healthy, well-groomed, and physically fit is also considered masculine."

Examples of responses illustrate the social pressure of success embedded in male identity. They also reflect changes occurring in the definition of success, influenced both by the life experiences of respondents acquired with age and by an awareness of shifts normalizing capitalism in Poland after 1989.

"It's exactly about success, yes. It's definitely rooted somewhere in upbringing, in culture, that besides the man providing basic necessities, there's some kind of ambition, even rivalry, that you know, you're considered more masculine if you have 'money, a car, and a mobile phone.' This is definitely less common now. I think times have changed somewhat, but for example, the 90s or something, I remember it very well. Of course, we were young and foolish then, so things were different, and I had a completely different view of the world."

"Masculinity and the recognition of masculinity to me are associated with a very broad word: success. Success in all areas, both financially, but also what you can see on the face, meaning the person is also content. Not that he earns a lot of money but is angry about it and comes angry to work, but it brings joy. Because you can immediately see it in the body, you can see it on the face, yes, you can see it on the skin that someone is content. As my father used to say: you can't hide anything on your face."

The vision of success among men remains strong and deeply ingrained, yet it significantly differs from their personal visions. On one hand, they are aware of external markers of success and evaluation criteria, while on the other, they desire to build their own individually understood success based on their own principles and values. This creates tension between societal expectations and personal identity.

"I'll describe it to you with a picture, okay? A man dressed in a suit walks with a confident step, moving through a crowd of people, seeing basically no obstacles to reaching his goal, he's well dressed, smells good, he's going to his office to ruthlessly fire a few people. A real man like that. Then he goes to the gym, has a great physique, and that's it, that's the kind of masculinity you can read off from all possible screens. Well, on the other hand, you know, I've recently become a parent, so masculinity for me is also a guy who patiently waits until the child stops crying and stomping their hands and feet, gets up from the ground, and is able to continue functioning. This is a guy who tries to restore a good mood in that child. This is also a trait for me and a moment when I feel masculine. Yesterday, I had a situation where I managed to pull my son out of a total tantrum, and I was like a rock—not a cold and rough one that can hurt, but one that nothing can shake, patiently waiting for the moment when I'd have a little crack to get through to him. And I made sure he got into a good mood, so that my wife wouldn't have to struggle with it alone, a moment when we saw again that he was smiling, wanted to go on the swing, talk with us, and laugh."

"What are they, or what should they be? When you use artifacts and show outwardly that you have succeeded, everyone thinks of you as a successful person. By artifacts, I mean material goods, to put it simply—you are inevitably judged through the prism of what kind of car you drive, how you dress, whether you can afford to lounge on beaches, and even better if you are a mature guy with a twenty-year partner. These are quite cruel and, I think, subconsciously deeply rooted judgments and frameworks."

In the above statements, it can be observed that individual understandings of success diverge from societal perceptions. Different approaches to coping with this situation are visible: from accepting the distinctiveness of these visions and the fact of being outside the social norm, to criticism that contains sadness and regret. The entirety of the material gathered from the responses to this question allows one to conclude that success significantly influences being recognized as masculine, while individual definitions of success often do not fit social standards, which often deprives them of a sense of masculinity. At the same time, it can be seen that social expectations are deeply rooted in men's consciousness and create pressure on them. Any comparisons and references to an ideal can cause frustration and lead to thinking about masculinity as a fragile construct that is constantly tested and challenged in many areas.

Part 2. Results and conclusions from responses to questions about the social influence on masculinity

The second block analyzes the social influence on masculinity, although social effects already appeared in the previous block when asking about the conditions to be recognized as masculine. For the first question in this part (2.1.) "Do you feel social expectations regarding your behavior?" - everyone answered affirmatively, although their answers referred to different areas. The first area is "providing for the family" and fulfilling family obligations ("alimony").

"The social expectation is that the man should earn money and provide not only for the economic livelihood but something more; this expectation is graded. If there is a significant economic problem at home, then it raises questions: what kind of man is he if he cannot provide? "

The second area concerns interpersonal interactions in public spaces. Below are two examples where there is a social expectation for men to behave in a certain way, and attempts to behave contrary to prevailing norms may result in questioning their masculinity.

"But I'll tell you one more example that kind of illustrates the clash I have with masculinity or femininity. It's the moment when my friend went for some tests, it turned out he had to stay in the hospital because he had some procedure, and he thought he was going to be discharged, but it turned out that on the last day there was a spot available for an additional test called a colonoscopy. He was a teenager at the time and went there without knowing exactly what to expect, but when he saw the tools and understood what they were for, he said he didn't want it, that no one would make him do it. Then a nurse approached him and said, 'Be a man.' And he replied, 'Then you be a man, and I'll shove this up your a**.' And he left. And this is very nice, a bit like from 'Day of the Wacko,' (Polish title: 'Dzień świra') a bit exaggerated, 100% authentic, and it kind of illustrates the clash I have with masculinity or femininity. The point is, see: if that nurse agreed to it, would she be considered a man? Or if my friend didn't have a problem with it, would he be considered a man? Or the fact that he didn't let them do it, does that mean he wasn't a man? You know, expectations say yes. But my opinion is different."

"Yes, I see their expectations. For example, on a silly train ride 'Will you help me carry the suitcase?' And I respond, 'If I can, I will help. And if not, I won't.'"

- Have you watched 'Day of the Wacko'? Don't you sometimes feel like reenacting that scene?⁹¹

"No. If I can, I will help, and if not, I won't, without regret."

In the above answers, it is evident that men are aware of the different situations in which a "masculine role" is imposed on them. There is also a desire to remain true to oneself and not succumb to social blackmail, even at the cost of being accused of lacking masculinity. However, the way men react can also result from their character, personal experiences, and reflections. There are testimonies of men who feel and yield to social pressure: "To some extent, probably yes, I adapt to the situation, according to what I think is expected." It can therefore be

⁹¹ Author's commentary: the supplementary question concerned the film "Day of the Wacko" and the scene in the train compartment, whose meaning is conveyed by the following dialogue between passengers:

„- Passenger: Would you be so kind and help me take down my luggage?

- Adam: No!

- Passenger: I beg your pardon?!

- Adam: Simply no! Who helps me?!

- Passenger: Aren't you a man?

- Adam: But I fully support women's equality. I am a passionate advocate! And you are a fully equal woman after all.

- Passenger: Then you must not be fully a man!

- Adam: You see us as men only when it comes to taking out the trash, fixing a contact, or giving up a seat on the tram or bus. I'm no longer fully a man because there's no need! You, however, are fully a man!"

as cited in: https://pl.wikiquote.org/wiki/Dzie%C5%84_%C5%9Bwira (accessed 2.09.2025)

concluded that men feel social expectations regarding their behavior, but some consciously act in accordance with themselves, accepting the consequence of having their masculinity questioned. Furthermore, it seems that in the case of the question “about social expectations regarding one's behavior,” a similar mechanism occurs as with the question about the “conditions for being recognized as masculine.” When an individual vision contradicts the social notion of masculine behavior, the consequence in a public confrontation may be being considered unmanly.

In response to the question "How do you think we learn masculinity? (2.2.)" most respondents first indicated the sources of knowledge about masculinity: "home, family, playground, school" and then "from the environment you are in". Interesting answers concerned the ways of learning, which are aptly characterized by the following quotes:

"If you ask about the masculinity of my 3-year-old son, he won't tell you anything. He will say 'pineapple,' he couldn't care less. Generally, things that small children do not understand simply do not exist for them. It's just completely unimportant. He is not yet at the stage where he feels embarrassed to do something with a girl and not with a boy. He might not want to do something and then won't do it with anyone, or he might want to and will do it with anyone because it doesn't affect him at all. He doesn't have any stereotypically male or female traits. And I say this because I think it's important that someone actually teaches you this, or you just pick it up from what is called the general public, by observing the world."

"First, you observe people close to you, who quickly become important to you, and you try to be like them. Then you test boundaries and try to do exactly the opposite. Then with that behavior, you confirm to yourself that these rules probably do work, and you either stick to them or your life becomes a series of hardships. And then, at that moment, you know, fairy tales, books, and other educational aids come into play. And here I think the next important element is school, where you are "nicely straightened out," so to speak, "nicely" reinforced what hasn't gotten through so far. And luckily, later comes the stage of rebellion, which makes you start to think that you don't necessarily have to agree to everything."

The above description of socialization shows the difficult and painful nature of the process of becoming masculine. The following two voices additionally indicate the necessity of independent learning, learning from one's own mistakes, and sometimes the solitary development of one's own masculinity.

"We don't learn at all, and I think the only learning there is, is that children figure things out on their own by watching other men, meaning we don't teach them at all, not even ourselves."

"I had to learn masculinity on my own because I was raised only by my mother. So, I didn't have a male figure to refer to. I mostly sought that masculinity in the fathers of my friends, but generally, I had to build this construct myself."

It can be concluded that learning masculinity is a difficult and demanding task, and as previous analyses show, it can be easily questioned and taken away. In other words: masculinity is hard to gain and quick to lose.

Part 3. Results and Conclusions from the Questions Regarding the Impact of Patriarchy on Masculinity

An analysis of men's responses to the question 'Do you think we live in a patriarchy?' (3.1) shows that respondents recognize presence, persistence, and pervasiveness of it in their lives. Their responses also indicate a sense of personal privilege stemming from functioning within a patriarchal system. Clear statements include: 'Patriarchy is evident everywhere; we live in a patriarchal world, and it's difficult to deny it.' The patriarchy is perceived as based on the exclusion of women, and the interviewees are aware of men's responsibility for perpetuating it. Here are examples:

"We created a culture, men created a culture in which they essentially tailored elements to themselves and to each other. And we still face the consequences of this today. Women were marginalized; the entire Western culture revolves around this, but we relegated them to the level of household goods. And to not see how these relationships still function today is truly an optimist or a denier."

"Yes, patriarchy affects my life in such a way that I feel privileged over women, just as a white European with an EU passport feels privileged over people from the Southern Hemisphere."

Some interviewees also allude to women's influence in maintaining patriarchy:

"The worst thing is that women sometimes don't see it either, and when I look at the attitudes of extreme feminists, I have the impression that they fit perfectly into this pattern set by men. (...) When I hear people say that being a porn actress is a profession like any other in the business... it's not. And that's playing the very game that men have set. Patriarchy is visible at every turn; we live in a patriarchal world, and it's hard to deny it at all."

However, there are also interesting voices about a turning point and fluidity, which can be described as the perception of patriarchy as a system in the process of change:

"The definition of patriarchy is changing; we live in a fluid world."

"Patriarchy is diluting over time; it's different than I remember from my childhood."

"I believe we still live in a patriarchy, although there will be a turning point soon. And when that turning point comes, we'll move to matriarchy, because I don't believe there's any parity that can be maintained, or that's easy to maintain."

From the respondents' statements, one can conclude that men are aware of both historical and contemporary manifestations of patriarchy. Although they see its weakening, they still consider it the dominant social system that shapes relations between the sexes.

The men were then asked, 'How does patriarchy define masculinity?' (3.2.), and their responses demonstrate that the system significantly influences the social understanding of masculinity. Patriarchy imposes rigid roles that define how men should behave and what expectations are placed on them. Patriarchy defines masculinity as the separation of social roles, as those belonging to men and those belonging to women. Patriarchy expects men to remain in their roles and women in theirs.

"You know what, I think this stereotypical division between male and female roles also affects men. I'm a victim of it. A man has to bring success, a man has to bring home game, and then he's a winner—that lingers in the back of my mind and influences my attitude and crisis at a given moment."

Patriarchy is inevitably somewhat toxic because it's based on dominance. It's a bit biological, with the stronger winning, so it leads to a kind of competition, to a man feeling that he has to, that he has to, that he has to, that he should, that he should, all the time. In a sense, it definitely defines masculinity, that since the hallmark of success is that you have to earn more, be in some higher position, well, that's what's expected of a man at that point, so that's how it's defined.

"Even if you can define for yourself what is masculine and what isn't, in a patriarchal world you're still subordinated to that definition. Sure, you can try to break free and not worry about it, but you're labeled from the outside, and that's it. [...] I feel defined this way, and I felt that if I perform in the field defined by traditional roles, i.e., and I feel bad about it. I feel like I'm not doing enough, that I'm not manly enough."

From the above, it follows that patriarchy defines masculinity through a clear division of roles, regardless of individual preferences, and what harms both genders. Interviewees also point out that stereotypical requirements for success become a burden, and such a model fosters toxic competition and a sense of constant coercion.

The third question in this block was "Have you encountered the term 'crisis of masculinity'? " (3.3.), and respondents' responses reveal strong emotions associated with this concept.

"Yes, I've encountered it. For me, it means men deeply immersed in patriarchy and masculinity, who feel threatened by being soft, 'softer,' by having weaknesses, by expressing emotions, and by the growing role of women in society."

"I think it's related to frustration, to expectations that can't be met, precisely because culturally, there are expectations from men about achieving success, especially defined by social standing, money, and so on, and opportunities. Because we were raised with this idea that a man works—I'm talking about a man and a woman in this situation, a family—the man works, achieves success, brings in the money and the woman stays home. And now, although I haven't experienced this, the fact that women work, can achieve larger, higher positions, are better at something, and so on, definitely affects men, and that's a source of frustration at this point."

"For me, this means challenging the patriarchal definition. If I understand it correctly, a man is someone who—if something has to be done and get done—is a *viola*; here he's a 'candidate.' But that's not the case at all, because a modern man, you know, is also a 'dude,' who leaves the barbershop, has a beautifully trimmed beard, and generally looks like some Babylonian warrior, but is unable to fully cope with the basic tasks that face them in life, such as: he can't find a job, he lives with his mom, and generally enjoys having someone cook him dinner and kill a spider with his slippers."

The crisis is therefore perceived as the result of a clash between outdated, patriarchal patterns and the current social situation. Respondents connect this concept with entrenched stereotypes that are no longer relevant. I obtained more information in the follow-up question,

'What does the crisis of masculinity mean to you?' 'The fact that certain stereotypes that we've somehow come to believe, which are such dominant elements in defining masculinity— strength, acting, and so on —have kind of worn out. Life has shown us that there's no real way we're ahead of women. To me, it's more of a battle of specimens than a battle of species.'

"Of course: you can find a man stronger than a woman, you can find a relationship in which the man is actually the dominant figure. But there are also plenty of counterexamples to this, and somewhere—at some point—that tightly closed barrel started to hiss. Finally, you know, the lid fell off and the mess spilled out."

"I think it kind of makes certain things no longer relevant. You can ask artificial or natural, biological intelligence to generate a sort of ideal image of a man, but it's not entirely true. I mean, he's made of things, a bit of fucking straw and mud. I think that's where the crisis is. Perhaps it's not the full picture, as if I'm talking about what comes to mind first."

"There was talk of a crisis of masculinity some time ago, mostly in a pejorative way. So when men started taking care of themselves, I don't know, shaving their armpits and washing themselves, they started talking about it after the first 'crisis of masculinity,' I remember that (laughter). The main thing I associate with it is that any deviation from this patriarchal stereotype was always called a crisis of masculinity at some point. "

Many respondents connect the crisis of masculinity with the difficult emotions men experience. They also use powerful words and comparisons to describe this crisis. The need for change is clearly visible – articulated directly. Interestingly, there are voices regarding the crisis of masculinity as a way of recalling a stereotypical role.

"Well, yes, because the crisis is that men don't want to change, at least that's how I see it, because the crisis means a situation in which you can move into other areas, or shut down for change and not want to move on, so this crisis exists. It results from many factors, in my opinion, not only from women's emancipation, but also from the way the world functions. For example, a problem, in my opinion, very closely linked to masculinity, although not exclusively, is loneliness. But this loneliness is also generated by social media, the entire digital world, so this crisis not only affects men, but it actually affects men because men are hopelessly ill-prepared for it. That is, they don't talk to each other, they can't name their feelings, they can't name what they want, what they need, and that's the problem. And without that, they won't move forward."

- Do you think the crisis of masculinity is related to age?

"I think so, in the sense that the crisis of masculinity is being discussed by this generation, which is entering life, looking for partners, can't find them, doesn't want to fit in. That's one of the problems, so the problem is very visible there, because if you follow a certain pattern and can't find that partner because she's more demanding, then that's related to age and generation. That's one thing, and another: the problem is that men of all ages have a problem, and the crisis is being talked about because there's clearly a need for change. That it's not like we can just 'get over it' and continue as it's been so far. For example, you have the ME TOO movement, and so on, and many behaviors are absolutely unacceptable anymore. Nowadays some of these men are saying, 'Well, but how are we supposed to live? "

According to respondents, the crisis of masculinity stems from a patriarchal vision of masculinity that remains highly outdated and incompatible with modernity. The need for change is seen as a difficult, forced confrontation with the inevitable, rather than as an opportunity for development. One could conclude that masculinity appears as a 'shell shell'—an outdated patriarchal model that hinders adaptation to contemporary social conditions.

Part 4: Results and Conclusions from the Questions on Men's Emotions

Analysis of the responses allows for a better understanding of how men perceive their own emotions and their coping strategies. The collected quotes demonstrate both the breaking of old patterns and the difficulties that remain. Respondents responded affirmatively to the questions 'Do you think you can talk about emotions? Can you express them?' (4.1). They also added that this was due to an effort made to defy the societal view of men not showing their emotions. This is particularly evident in the following quote:

"The fact that for years men were associated with demands, discipline, but also with not expressing feelings, just as our parents and grandparents probably didn't experience these feelings from their parents at all, but especially from their fathers, is probably the point. In this patriarchy, love isn't always perceived the way I associate it with love: that is, expressing emotions to another person. I think our generation can and is breaking this pattern, as I observe among my friends. There's definitely some sawing off, and today's 20-year-olds have a chance to stop and break it."

However, when asked 'Are there emotions you find difficult to talk about/express?' (4.2.), the answers are more varied, presenting a full range of responses:

"Yes. I can't talk about problems, difficult emotions. Guys have difficulty with both."

"Probably not. It depends on the situation."

"No. I also teach my father love by saying 'I love you'."

"Shame is a problem. It's an emotion that isolates you, and it's one of the worst emotions there is, because it isolates, alienates, and it's very difficult to help such a person."

The most moving answers were given to the question 'How do you deal with emotions? [Emotions like love, anger, fear, anxiety, pain]' (4.3):

"I'm more of an extrovert, so things like fear, pain, and other things aren't a problem to express. I have no problem crying on the tram when other people are looking at me, and I just heard something that hurt me, from someone who said it to me. I have a problem with anger, but it's more like problems with managing that anger and channeling it appropriately. But I'm also aware of it and I talk about it, so it's hard for me to say if I have a problem with them. I'm definitely dysfunctional with such hot emotions, the so-called anger, rage, but I'm also kind of aware of it and I'm trying to work on it."

"I accept them. What should I do with them? They won't go away. You know, if you can't cope, you look for a way to Dealing with them, but the question remains openness. So the worst thing you can do is deny them or pretend they don't exist. That way, you can't deal with them at all."

"I express love, and I really enjoy this emotion, so I bask in it like a warm bath. I can't deal with fear. Fear dominates my life. I cope with some very well, and with others I can't; it all depends on the emotions. The hardest thing is the fear of passing, of death, of illness—these are mainly my 'schizos.' Especially since I thought parenthood would give me a unique boost and a sense of strength, as part of this responsibility for this second life, but instead it brought me greater anxiety and fear than I ever expected to experience. And even then, I'm barely coping with it."

"I can't cope. The situation is bad because first I bottle it up, and I think that, again, to generalize, this is also a characteristic of men, so it's so typical, just apropos, it comes out exactly, it's so typically male. And somewhere, this vision of masculinity, of a man, it's exactly that, that it bottled it up and eventually exploded. Well, yes, you bottle it up, and eventually it has to explode somewhere, somewhere later, some kind of excessive reaction."

These quotes reveal male emotionality, and the interviewees reveal their true colors. It's characteristic that they have to deal with their own emotions, but also with overcoming persistent social taboos, so the difficulty is twofold. The responses to difficult emotions are also interesting, encompassing a wide range: acceptance, 'escaping into humor', suppression, watching TV, and alcohol.

"For example, when there are difficult emotions and so on, sometimes it's just a matter of ignoring them or something, turning on something on TV where you don't have to think—that's still a method. I used to be able to drink, but now I'm too old, and I feel bad after drinking. In fact, when things were tough, I used to have a Coke every day. Now the thought of alcohol makes me nauseous, but I don't know, I used to be able to drink."

The question, 'Do you have a friend/close acquaintance with whom you can talk about your problems?' (4.4), received many responses similar to the following: 'I don't. It's hard for me to build relationships'.

"Male loneliness is a serious problem. I mean, I don't feel lonely in the sense that I find conversation partners primarily among women, and I have no trouble making friends. Therefore, I also kind of know how to establish and maintain relationships, so I don't feel lonely, but I do know men who truly, surprisingly and horribly, bottle everything up. It's incredible. They bottle everything up—emotions, thoughts, over thinking—everything. I really know men like that, and it's terrifying. In my opinion, it destroys them from the inside."

From the above, one can conclude that emotions remain a problematic area, although the effects of the work men have already done in this area, despite societal patterns, are visible. Constructive ways of coping with difficult emotions are evident, as are avoidance mechanisms that exacerbate these difficulties. The greatest challenges remain loneliness and difficulties in establishing new relationships, as well as shame as a negative emotion that leads to isolation.

Part 5: Results and Conclusions from Responses to Questions Regarding Body Attitude

The question 'Do you feel good in your body?' (5.1) yielded a full scale of responses, demonstrating that men's relationship with their bodies is complex and multidimensional.

"Yes, although it can always be better."

"Yes, although social media distorts body image, and I project that onto myself."

"Most often."

"No. Everything hurts. I don't feel it and never have."

"No, because I've let myself go a bit, and I've also been sick. The illness has cut me off from the body I knew. I don't feel 'ugly,' just a bit worn out. "

"At the beach, I try to manage the kids and safety, not show myself off; it never even occurs to me."

More information emerged in response to the question 'What do you dislike about your body?' (5.2). Interviewees, men who enjoy physical activity, declared satisfaction with their appearance. Others report numerous concerns and complexes stemming from both natural aging and the influence of social media. It's also clear that the body is becoming a symbolic marker of masculinity, and its perception influences self-esteem. Comparing oneself to cultural models and other men reveals the fragility of the male construct based on physicality.

"My ribs are uneven and protruding. But after 45, that's less important. I don't like wrinkles and receding hairlines, but that's just the age."

"I don't like my torso. My torso makes me sick."

" (...) I don't like disproportion, I have serious back problems."

" (...) I'm fat."

"No, because my stomach bulges out. I've always had a complex about being too thin."

"I think I'm too fat, not physically active, and that affects my mental health. I've never once thought about my body, that nothing is missing and that it could stay that way forever."

"Baldness, I miss my hair. The extra 5 kg and the 5 cm height difference."

"I don't like illness. For most of my life, I had a good, kind relationship with my body. Now we're writing a new chapter with my body."

"You know what? Illness has accelerated a few things. And I can't come to terms with it. 'Until yesterday,' everything was the same, and suddenly it turns out it's not. This relationship with my body is being rewritten, and I still haven't fully written that chapter. And I wanted to avoid it, but it's impossible; it's hard for me to come to terms with aging."

There were also men's responses containing conditional self-acceptance in the area of the body, characteristic of the phrase 'yes, but ...':

"I like everything. Although I would like it even more if it were bigger."

"Generally, I like it, but it's hard to distance yourself from what's on the internet, what the body might look like."

The final question analyzed was: 'To what extent is masculinity defined by reference to the body/appearance?' (5.3) and yielded a number of interesting responses:

"To a very large extent, it's the first thing men perceive."

"I feel external expectations about my body through social media."

"It's definitely defined, it's defined, there's no doubt about it. You have it everywhere; it's just everywhere, if not Michelangelo, then some Greek statues, or some boys at the gym, so you know what it's supposed to look like."

"Rationally, I would say that it doesn't have to matter, because nowadays, success isn't, shouldn't be, and in fact isn't dependent on how you look. It's more about what's in your head. For example, economic success is often about what's in your head, what you can do. Skills, knowledge acquired outside of school, not just academic, should be more crucial to success, but it still doesn't quite work that way. Biologically, we all have it in the back of our minds that it's the body that matters."

"Consciously, it's not at all, but subconsciously, I think it is. That Arnold [Schwarzenegger] is still somewhere inside me, so nice proportions and a well-built body are always associated with masculinity."

"What I mean is that people think that once they deal with their body, or their body image, the problem will never return. This isn't the case. You have a bad time, and certain, I don't know, thoughts come back that this can be improved, that this can be changed, but generally, once you've gone through this stage, it's always easier and faster to return to the thought: OK, I look the way I look."

The above statements suggest that body image plays a significant role in defining masculinity. Also interesting are the 'yes and no' responses, in which men indicated a duality of perception of this issue, based on opposing perspectives: subconsciously versus consciously, biologically versus rationally, socially versus personally. Appearance is also considered a symbol of status and masculinity, and working on one's body—not just at the gym—also involves working on body acceptance. In this context, an additional semantic opposition becomes apparent: overworked (analyzed) versus unconsidered.

Part 6: Results and Conclusions from the Questions on Faith, Religion, and Spirituality

The first question in this block was 'In your opinion, does the Catholic Church influence how masculinity and femininity are defined, as well as the social (stereotypical) roles of men and women?' (6.1.). The reason for this question stemmed from researcher bell hooks's claim that patriarchal ideology was instilled by religion. Some men responded affirmatively, providing detailed arguments:

"I regretfully have to say yes. It reinforces the stereotypical division between a strong man who holds the helm of the family and a woman who is subservient to his will and serves him. In Poland, the church still has a significant influence. Personally, the church has no influence on me at all, because I thanked it 30 years ago."

"Yes, definitely. I think it largely contributes to the fact that we can talk about patriarchy in our country. There was recently a billboard in public spaces with the inscription: 'the role of a man, no, 'a man's mission is to bear witness.'"

"About masculinity, femininity – I don't know. About the roles, absolutely yes. There's no doubt about that, and it's very clearly, very clearly defined. These are the issues of women's submissiveness, men's dominance, and so on. There's no doubt that these

roles are written down there. So the church absolutely defines it, absolutely, absolutely arranges it, and says who gets what. There are no doubts about that, I have no doubts.' 'See that Christmas isn't just about Catholics; everyone embraces Christmas. Some things are passed down through culture, and here, with this thinking about women and men, even the very beginning, Adam and Eve, it's simply so deeply ingrained in culture. Even if someone isn't Catholic, they still hear it."

It's worth emphasizing that the advertising campaign mentioned by respondents stirred up a lot of emotion and provoked interaction – the word 'testimony' was repainted, and in its place were inserted parts of the male body and issues that provoked the Church's objections (such as abortion, prostitution, homosexuality).

"It definitely tries to, because it's a matter of the traditional vision of family and social roles in general, more broadly than family, because here the focus isn't just on family. But does it? I would say it probably had a greater influence in our times than it does today, because for our generation – although my wife and I attend church – I think it has lost so much authority that it has almost no influence on how we behave."

"Absolutely. The Catholic Church has everything written down in textbooks about what men should do, what women should do, and that they shouldn't step outside their roles. This model still holds true, but fortunately, society is moving away from it. The Church relies on tradition, believing that traditions are established and unquestionable. It doesn't acknowledge that traditions can also disappear or be changed."

The following analysis demonstrates that the institution of the Church influences the division of roles, and religion, in practice, reinforces traditional divisions and perpetuates patriarchal patterns. The men's experiences indicate both: a recognition of the Church's influence, a reflection on its conservatism and limited capacity for change. The men also provided interesting answers when asked about the means of influence:

"The Church is a community and expects community members to live up to the roles assigned to them."

"I grew up in a time when religion wasn't taught in schools, but all my friends and classmates went to religious education classes in the so-called 'catechetical room,' and I think that's definitely true, because from the very beginning of these meetings, the family was the main focus. Furthermore, the 'sold' idea is that from childhood, you're preparing for the most important roles in your life, namely being a father and a mother. It's almost as if it creates a mental order that girls will give birth and take care of them, while dads will go to work, bring in the money, be a little tired, and you have to respect all of that and love them very much for it all, and then do the same. So it seems to me that there's no room for so many things there, and so many things are so clearly defined that it simply reinforces this patriarchal system we're talking about. The Church is a very conservative institution and resistant to any change. I think if you talked to a priest in the Middle Ages and a priest you might meet on the street today, they would tell you very similar things about these topics. That's kind of the problem."

The responses from the men clearly demonstrate their awareness of the influence of religion and the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the traditional vision of family and the male and female

roles derived from the Church's messages and teachings have permeated the culture. As a result, they continue to influence society as a whole, despite their diminished authority.

Part 7: Results and conclusions from the answers to the questions regarding attitudes toward otherness

The questions in this block were preceded by an additional introduction: 'Research shows that stereotypical masculinity is often linked to xenophobic behavior. Therefore, I would like to ask you about a few issues regarding attitudes toward otherness.' The first question, 'Do you think masculinity is in any way defined by gender orientation?' (7.1.), revealed significant differences between personal and societal perspectives:

"Classic masculinity: yes. But from my own perspective: No."

"I wanted to say no, although I know that socially it's a bit like that. And now personally, it probably doesn't matter to me because I don't know how it would matter here. But I know that socially there's definitely a group of people, including men, mainly men, for whom a real man is a man who is traditional, and also religious, traditional, and everything – now I've taken it to the extreme. So I think socially it's a bit like that, but again, it's a matter of our worldview."

"So, to sum up, socially, to some extent, yes, it might be, but for me personally, no; it doesn't matter what orientation a man has."

The above answers reveal that the xenophobic aspect of masculinity is still strong and creates tension between respondents' personal acceptance of otherness and the pressure of patriarchal social patterns. Consequently, when asked, 'Do you have homosexual people in your circle?' (7.2.) Respondents responded affirmatively, but also noted a lack of social openness to discussing sexual orientation:

"I have one, but other than that, no one has admitted it to me. But I also think that if someone did, probably there is no openness to talking about it in Poland. People don't admit it because they're afraid."

"My circle of friends is very, very small, so I don't really know."

In this context, the unanimous affirmative responses to the question 'Do you think it's possible to be a masculine gay/can a gay person be masculine?' (7.3) are interesting. At the same time, the statements reveal additional aspects worth mentioning:

"I think this is also a big problem, because on the one hand, as a community, gay men struggle with this image of being masculine/unmasculine. However, within their own community, they are terribly exclusive, 'no fat, no fem, no Asian' (translated: 'no' to fat people, 'no' to effeminate people, 'no' to Asians). And that's something that's repulsive to me, and it shows, above all, how patriarchy works."

On the other hand, these behaviors among gay men show how sensitive people are to social expectations, because for me, it's an element of repression—that is, if I'm very masculine, no one will think I'm gay or anything. And for me, unfortunately, this is a lack of acceptance, which manifests itself in such a disgusting way.

"Such people absolutely fit into these patriarchal patterns, and in my opinion, it's partly a result of repression—they want to be super masculine, both in their own minds, and to be perceived that way, according to society and social norms, of course. And at the same time, they're gay, and that's how they cope—strange, sick, and toxic."

"Yes, you can be a masculine gay man. You can be a gay man, and you can even be hyper-masculine. Gay men often 'jump' to hyper-masculinity to show they're capable, that they have the strength."

The men's responses to the interviews align with research findings on the link between stereotypical masculinity and xenophobic behavior.

However, other findings demonstrate that the respondents' views diverge from societal norms. The study participants emphasize that, from a societal perspective, masculinity is often associated with heterosexuality, although they personally do not attach importance to this. They have homosexual people in their circles, though they note limited openness in disclosing their sexual orientation in Poland. They unanimously believe that a gay man can be masculine, though they point to the pressure exerted by patriarchal expectations regarding the image of a man.

Block 8: Results and Conclusions from the Happiness Questions

The final block contains questions about happiness, in reference to bell hooks's opinion about the patriarchal system not caring about men being happy. The first question, 'Are you happy/fulfilled?' (8.1.), yielded a full range of responses:

"Yes, I am happy, and at the same time unfulfilled."

"I think so."

"Yes, I am happy, but I am not fulfilled. I feel like I'm not completing life's stages, they haven't been completed successfully."

"I am happy as hell, but I am not fulfilled."

"Not necessarily. But I am on the path to happiness."

"No."

"In the self-acceptance category, I feel satisfied and fulfilled. Currently, I feel suspended professionally, which causes discomfort. As a person, I feel happy."

"Can I answer you in about 40 years? Not yet, but it's not a negative feeling. I just feel like I still have a lot to do and would like to do a lot more, so somewhere in there, fulfillment is incomplete, but I believe I'm still on the path that could lead to that. So, the system is excitedly unfulfilled."

The above opinions also suggest that respondents separate happiness from fulfillment, and in the context of their experiences, they more often understand the concept as a process than as an achieved state. The open-ended question 'What do you base your happiness on?' (8.2) provides additional information:

"On trying to achieve my goals, in many areas."

"Self-satisfaction. I have plenty of time for everything—thinking, observing, listening. I'm happy, and my family 'satisfies' me."

"There are certain things I'd like to change, but I don't know if I can, or rather: I see a goal, but I don't know if I want to do anything to change, that I would have to change a lot. And again, it's partly a matter of age, that it's harder to change at a certain point. I have the impression that there's less flexibility and that it would require a lot of effort."

These statements demonstrate different perspectives on achieving happiness and fulfillment: a task-oriented approach, inner satisfaction, but also a sense of agency, which requires doing some work—self-work or work for yourself. The third question is crucial because it concerns awareness of the impact of social norms on life satisfaction. It goes like this: 'Does society help/hinder/be neutral in this?' (March 8) and allowed me to obtain a number of valuable answers:

"Expectations are the first thing that comes to mind. So I'd rather say it hinders. But I'd go deeper again. Because how we feel these expectations is something internal. Psychologically, it's an internal matter, that we feel the pressure. Once you heal from this pressure, society has no influence; these expectations are hardwired into us. If we could get rid of it, because it's not like there are expectations and you're constantly being judged, and you get something out of it. Instead, you have neurosis, that's what it looks like. And I think freeing ourselves from that would bring greater, definitely greater satisfaction in life."

"It bothers a little, but once you realize it bothers you, you can overcome it. You just have to learn how to do it, because it's not easy."

"It helps and it bothers, but that doesn't mean it's neutral. After all, we are social creatures, we are social beings."

"You know what? Paradoxically culture makes it difficult for us. It makes it difficult because the fact that I want to be close to my son, that I want to help my wife and spend time in the kitchen is perceived regardless and constantly commented on."

"My happiness is built primarily on the feeling of being in emotional balance with myself. And by having this inner balance, I can provide it to another person. Only in this order, like with a mask on an airplane: first you put it on yourself, then on others."

"It's inside you, so you have to come to terms with it yourself. Alternatively, if we're talking about happiness (meaning prosperity), then it comes from the outside, but again, you have to find that balance, because you can't blame others for everything, or blame yourself for everything, or say that I owe it all to myself, or that I owe it all to something outside. You have to find it and take responsibility for what you can control and what you do, and also understand that some things are beyond your control, and somehow accept that too."

Considering the above, it can be concluded that men believe society stands in the way of happiness. Being aware of this fact can make it easier to overcome adversity. Respondents also indicate that social pressure can be overcome to some extent through self-awareness and personal choices. Furthermore, respondents' opinions also reflect a desire to balance external

and internal influences while simultaneously accepting responsibility for your own decisions and your own life.

Summary of conclusions from qualitative research

As can be seen above, the qualitative study yielded a substantial number of insights, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the topic of masculinity. It revealed the experiences of men functioning across various domains, each differently shaping, testing, and influencing their understanding of male identity. When examining the findings, it is useful at this stage to distinguish additional patterns that emerged throughout the entire study, regardless of specific thematic blocks. These can be regarded as categories that help organize the conclusions drawn so far and facilitate the formulation of final inferences.

The first category concerns the understanding of masculinity as a set of demands, challenges, and burdens placed on men, which is confirmed by numerous findings. Firstly, regarding the learning of masculinity: experiences of the men studied in this area suggest that it is a difficult and demanding task. Secondly, conclusions related to the emotional sphere revealed that feelings remain a problematic area, although there is visible effort by men to resist the societal image of the stoic and stable male. In addition, male loneliness emerges as a significant issue for men, with shame acting as an isolating emotion. Thirdly, there is a catalog of observations and imperfections related to the male body, highlighting the pressure exerted on male physicality, reinforced by deeply entrenched cultural ideals of the strong and capable man. This pressure becomes even more pronounced in the face of increasing expectations concerning male performance and the diminishing physical capacities of the body after the age of 40, which influences the fragility of the masculine construct grounded in the physical self. Fourthly, the pressure to succeed—often difficult to attain—is another significant burden, strongly influencing whether a man is recognized as masculine. Consequently, the men surveyed tend to define success individually, frequently in ways that deviate from societal standards, which results in their sense of masculinity being undermined. Fifthly, there is an absence of a single definition of masculinity that could serve as a clear reference point for men, accompanied by a sense of a lack of role models. At the same time, men tend to distance themselves from the dominant vision of masculinity. Many respondents do not think of themselves as masculine, as if masculinity were not necessary for their self-identification—an attitude that may be understandable in the context of the opinion that "being masculine is not necessarily a compliment." The public discourse has been dominated by negative traits attributed to men within the category of masculinity, which has led men to increasingly disassociate from this identity. Sixthly, the "crisis of masculinity," which in popular opinion is often associated with male weakness rather than seen as an opportunity for growth in a context demanding change. The potential of this crisis as a form of challenging patriarchy, as noted by respondents, appears underrecognized. Together, these factors contribute to a cluster of male burdens and demands that generate pressure and contribute to frustration. This constructs a picture of male fragility, which thus becomes an umbrella category encompassing the aforementioned challenges and struggles. Additionally, male sensitivity, despite its value, is often socially perceived as weakness and thus fits into the broader framework of male fragility. This includes attitudes toward emotions, authenticity, sincerity, and a certain vulnerability exemplified by expressions of love such as: "I wallow in it like in a warm bath."

The second category pertains to the broadly understood fluidity inherent in masculinity. It is worth noting that respondents often perceived masculinity independently of biological sex. They listed masculine traits while simultaneously emphasizing that gender assignment is conventional and that these traits can also be observed in women. The fluidity is further evidenced by the absence of a singular definition of masculinity. It is shaped individually, according to personal discretion, without a clear boundary distinguishing what is and is not masculine, resulting in a social image that may appear ambiguous and blurred. Fluidity in masculinity also arises from changes occurring across different dimensions, including the process of male maturation and life experiences, as well as broader social transformations influenced by systemic, economic, and political shifts. There is a clear need for adaptation in the current context, particularly as public discourse increasingly revisits the notion of a "crisis of masculinity". It is worth recalling the statement of one respondent: "The crisis is spoken of because it is evident that change is already necessary. It is not something that can simply be endured for a while longer and continue as it is." This need for change was also signaled by bell hooks in her publication, *Ready for Change: On Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Taking these observations and conclusions into account, fluidity can be treated as a category characterizing contemporary masculinity.

The third distinguished category encompasses an elaborate vision of traditional masculinity, to which men relate. This vision is grounded in deeply ingrained archetypes of masculinity that are socially imprinted and culturally sustained. It includes the role of the man as the primary provider, responsible for ensuring the well-being of the family and achieving professional success. This aligns closely with the vision of success, which significantly influences recognition as masculine, as evidenced by findings from the research. This category is further substantiated by collected findings related to the body: masculinity is often associated with physical strength and a fit physique. These traditional roles are also embedded in male identity as prescribed by the conservative institution of the Catholic Church, as indicated in the section concerning the influence of religion. Moreover, this is reflected in the societal definition of masculinity through attitudes towards sexual orientation, revealing men's awareness that stereotypical masculinity is linked with xenophobic behaviors. The entirety of this can be encapsulated by one respondent's statement:

"First associations are strength, connections with dominance, ambition, but also the next association—providing security, especially in the family context, for example, because there is an expectation that the man ensures both economic security and physical safety. This kind of association is highly cultural. Whether men today are capable of fulfilling it is a completely different question—probably they are not—but there is certainly a sense of expectation, a kind of pressure. You know how it is that the man must stand on the front line if something happens."

The above quote illustrates both the complexity of the male role and the difficulty of attaining an ideal that appears inflated beyond male capacities. At the same time, it relates to the issue of the mismatch between traditional visions and contemporary social realities, including shifts in gender role divisions. Increasingly, this ideal resembles an inflated set of rules and expectations that is hollow inside, lacking current values and meanings. For this reason, I also want to highlight "empty shell-ness" as a category characterizing contemporary masculinity.

In summary, I want to emphasize fragility wherever there are burdens placed on male identity. I highlight fluidity where changes in masculinity are evident, and hollowness where thinking borrowed from an inflated image of traditional masculinity can be found. These categories also serve as starting points for my analysis of types of masculinity: fragile, fluid, and empty shell masculinity, which is the focus of the second chapter.

CHAPTER 2

SELECTED METAPHORS OF CONTEMPORARY MASCULINITY AND THEIR REFERENCES TO THE QUALITIES AND PROPERTIES OF GLASS

In this chapter, I primarily examine the meanings of terms such as *fragile masculinity*, *liquid masculinity*, and *ornamental/empty-shell masculinity*. I analyze them as metaphors of contemporary masculinity, selected due to the references they contain to the properties of glass. My focus lies on the extent to which the qualities of glass as a material—fragility, fluidity, or hollowness—are employed today to articulate male identity. I also aim to demonstrate the convergence between the meanings of glass as a medium and the attributes of masculinity described through its material properties. In other words, this chapter is devoted to forms of masculinity defined through glass-related metaphors, which themselves function as ways of speaking about masculinity.

Each subsection is dedicated to a single type of masculinity (e.g., *fragile masculinity*), which I treat as a scholarly term within the field of masculinity studies. I analyze its meanings, compare the interpretations and conclusions of researchers, and examine/consider the factors of influence (historical, social, geopolitical). In parallel—within the framework of semantic analysis—I investigate the meaning of the specific qualifier that appears alongside masculinity, which, as an adjective (e.g., *fragile*), designates its attributes (understood as an advantage, value, positive feature, or property). I am particularly interested in the range of semantic domains in which the given type/qualifier functions (e.g., *fragile pastry, glass, meat, emotion*), and in the meanings it acquires within those domains (analogous to descriptors such as *granular, sharp, soft, meaty, tasty, perishable*). Next, I approach each type of masculinity as a metaphor, consisting of a *vehicle* (e.g., *fragile*) and a *tenor* (*masculinity*). I examine how the qualities associated with the vehicle are projected onto masculinity, shaping or expanding its meaning. Part of this process involves identifying synonyms of the vehicle across different semantic domains (e.g., *meaty*) and testing them by substituting them into the metaphor, then observing the new meanings that emerge (e.g., “*meaty masculinity*”). Throughout, I aim to remain non-judgmental and open to abstract or unexpected combinations, adopting the perspective of a curious researcher who draws on intuition, imagination, word formation, and the poetics of language. This approach generates chains of associations (e.g., *fragile masculinity – fragility – meat – “meaty masculinity”*) that reveal new contexts and additional layers of meaning. At times, these explorations also point to pre-existing terms in masculinity studies (for example, the English expression “*meaty masculinity*”), connections that were not immediately apparent. In this way, the method serves both as a tool for reflecting on masculinity and as a way of exploring how new semantic extensions enrich the understanding of the original term and create new relational meanings in relation to its initial sense.

In my approach to analyzing metaphors and thinking about masculinity (as well as the interviews from the first chapter), I draw on elements of Stuart Hall’s “low theory” as interpreted by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*. “Low theory is the name for a counter-hegemonic form of theory, a theorization of alternatives in a non-disciplinary sphere of knowledge production”⁹². I understand it as a grassroots, more practical model of thinking, connected to everyday life, popular culture, and the experiences of ordinary and marginalized

⁹² Halberstam, Jack, “The Queer Art of Failure”, trans. by Mikołaj Denderski, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2018, p. 37.

groups, in opposition to “high culture” (“high theory”), associated with elite, academic, and hierarchical knowledge production. This approach also allows me to engage more boldly with meanings and associations that might seem unreasonable or mistaken—invoking one of Halberstam’s calls: “trust the naïve and the absurd (the stupid)”⁹³. As the author explains, “it is about standing up for what is impractical or incomprehensible, and resisting the structures that produce meaning, which are often rooted in commonly understood ethics. What is naïve and unconscious may, in fact, lead to alternative practices of knowledge”⁹⁴. I am particularly drawn to Halberstam’s words, which read almost like a manifesto: “I believe in low theory in the everyday, in the small, the insignificant, the anti-monumental, the slight, the meaningless. I believe in change that we make by thinking up our own this and that, and sharing it with the world. I try to provoke, irritate, annoy, tease, and amuse; I track small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, and desires”⁹⁵.

Importantly, in my research I draw both on elements of this anti-system approach to knowledge—using intuition and naïveté, which encourages “frivolity, looseness, and impropriety”⁹⁶, and on recognized tools, methods, and procedures. For this reason, I am particularly drawn to *The Queer Art of Failure*, which “enters into an alternating dialogue with high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge, in order to pierce the divisions between art and life, practice and theory, thinking and doing, toward a more chaotic domain of knowledge and ignorance”⁹⁷. A similar approach also guided me in constructing the first chapter, particularly in the section devoted to interviews, understood as a source of knowledge drawn directly from the men to whom the study pertained.

This dissertation constitutes a record of the process of searching for and testing meanings surrounding the contemporary understanding of masculinity. An integral part of this process is also the posing of questions, the broadening of perspectives, and the examination of diverse points of view.

These reflections and explorations also concern glass, which has determined the selection of the types of masculinities indicated above. I analyze the qualities and semantic domains of glass, linking them with selected metaphors of masculinity. In a sense, I treat glass as a tool that enables the discovery of new dimensions of masculinity, while also making visible and recalling those already recognized within culture. I also proceed *a rebours*—asking what can be learned about glass through an analysis of metaphors of masculinity. In my process, glass becomes a medium—a natural and compelling material for the exploration of masculinity in the realm of art.

⁹³ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 41.

⁹⁶ Ibidem, p. 19.

⁹⁷ Ibidem, p. 14.

2.1. Reflections on Fragile Masculinity and Masculinity as Fragile as Glass

“Fragile masculinity” is one of the most widely used terms in contemporary discussions of male identity. According to American scholars Sarah H. DiMuccio and Erica D. Knowles, “fragile masculinity refers to the anxiety experienced by men who believe they are failing to meet cultural standards of masculinity”⁹⁸. As the source of this anxiety, the researchers point to the expectation that men must “actively acquire and maintain their status as <real men> or risk losing this valuable group status”⁹⁹. This aligns with Elizabeth Badinter’s claim that masculinity is treated as a task—a point highlighted by Tomasz Tomasik in formulating the assumptions about masculinity¹⁰⁰, discussed in the previous chapter. Badinter emphasizes the notion that “femininity is a natural, given, and inevitable state, whereas masculinity is something that must be earned through effort and continuously proven”¹⁰¹. As Richard V. Reeves further notes, “what can be acquired can also be lost. Hence the aforementioned fragility”¹⁰².

Additionally, in the subsection titled “Fragile Masculinity,” Reeves directly addresses the biological and evolutionary aspect. “Anthropologists agree: the male factor is fragile. The female factor is stronger because it is determined by women’s specific role in reproduction”¹⁰³. He also cites the words of feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner: “It is simply a fact that a proportionally larger part of a woman’s body, and for a proportionally longer portion of her life, supports the natural processes related to the continuation of the species”¹⁰⁴. However, Reeves goes further, emphasizing the differences between masculinity and femininity even more explicitly: “Femininity is determined to a greater extent by biology, whereas masculinity is shaped by social context. This is why masculinity is more fragile than femininity. When was the last <crisis of femininity>? That’s right—never”¹⁰⁵.

Despite the widespread use of the term “fragile masculinity,” it is difficult to identify a single author or the exact moment of its emergence in discourse. I assume that the term may originate with Roger Horrocks (1994), author of *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities*, in which one chapter is titled *The Fragile Male*¹⁰⁶. Horrocks argues that “male identity proves to be fractured, fragile, and diminished. Men are raised to be rational and aggressive, while repressing entire areas of experience and feeling”¹⁰⁷. This observation aligns with the findings of bell hooks, published in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004). Furthermore, Horrocks emphasizes that “many stereotypes constrain men, particularly machismo, which is revealed as profoundly masochistic and self-destructive”¹⁰⁸.

The term “fragile masculinity” appears explicitly in the text by Lauren J. Joseph and Pamela

⁹⁸ DiMuccio, Sarah H.; Knowles, Eric D., “The political significance of fragile masculinity”, in: *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 2020 (34), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.11.010>, p. 25-28.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Tomasik, Tomasz, “Uwagi do wciąż nienapisanej historii męskości w Polsce”, in: “Formy męskości” vol. 1, Adam Dziadek, Filip Mazurkiewicz (red.), Warszawa 2018, p. 42.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem.

¹⁰² Reeves, Richard V., op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, p.202.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, p.202.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p.202.

¹⁰⁶ Horrocks, Roger, “Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities”, Palgrave Macmillan London, Londyn, 1994.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem.

Black, titled *"Who's the Man? Fragile Masculinities, Consumer Masculinities, and the Profiles of Sex Work Clients"*. The authors construct two dichotomous models of masculinity—fragile and consumerist—and examine male clients' attitudes toward women and sex¹⁰⁹. Joseph and Black demonstrate that "men categorized as embodying fragile masculinity experience discomfort in the presence of women, perceive themselves as unattractive to them, and feel rejected in the sexual marketplace, whereas men representing consumerist masculinity feel excitement at the prospect of approaching a sex worker, seek a variety of partners, and are unwilling to assume responsibility within a relationship"¹¹⁰. Furthermore, the authors show that the absence of a spouse as a regular sexual partner correlates more strongly with fragile masculinity, as do lower levels of education and the lack of full-time employment¹¹¹. At the same time, based on their research, Joseph and Black conclude that "men exhibiting fragile masculinity may pose a greater threat to women than men with consumerist masculinity"¹¹²

It is worth noting that the term "fragile masculinity" is semantically similar to the concept of *precarious manhood*, which appears in the text by Joseph A. Vandello and Jennifer K. Bosson, *Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood*. The very first part of the title reflects the authors' approach to masculinity, which aligns closely with the perspectives cited above from Sarah H. DiMuccio, Eric D. Knowles, Elizabeth Badinter, and Richard V. Reeves. They also converge in identifying the same underlying cause of "precarious" and "fragile" masculinity: Vandello and Bosson, too, emphasize an evolutionary factor. "Compared to femininity—typically perceived as the result of a natural, stable, and biological developmental process—masculinity must be earned and maintained through actions that are publicly verifiable"¹¹³.

The aforementioned American researchers from the University of South Florida formulated three key assumptions¹¹⁴: first, masculinity is widely perceived as elusive—that is, it must be earned (in contrast to femininity, which is an ascribed status). Second, once achieved, masculine status is unstable and precarious—it can be lost or taken away. Third, masculinity is primarily confirmed by others, and therefore requires public demonstrations of proof. As a result, "men experience greater anxiety regarding their gender status than women do, particularly when that status is precarious or challenged. This may motivate them to engage in a variety of risky and maladaptive behaviors, as well as to avoid behaviors that might otherwise be beneficial and adaptive under different circumstances"¹¹⁵. Consequently, Vandello and Bosson examine research on "the effects of precarious male gender status in areas such as risk-taking, aggression, stress and mental health, and work-life balance"¹¹⁶.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph, Lauren J.; Black, Pamela, "Who's the Man? Fragile Masculinities, Consumer Masculinities, and the Profiles of Sex Work Clients", *Men and Masculinities*, 2012, Vol. 15, Issue 5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X12458591>, p. 486

¹¹⁰ Ibidem. tłumaczenie własne

¹¹¹ Ibidem, p. 497.

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 486.

¹¹³ Vandello, Joseph A.; Bosson, Jennifer K., "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood", *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 2012, DOI: 10.1037/a0029826, p.101.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem.

Within this framework, Vandello and Bosson posed the question of what constitutes “real masculinity” and which traits define it. They offered several answers, one of which suggests that “there is no single definition—masculine traits change over time and across cultures, reflecting shifts in broader economic, political, and social structures”¹¹⁷. The authors also reference the research of sociologist Michael Kimmel (2006), noting that “the specific meanings of masculinity in America change over time, but the need to prove one’s masculinity remains constant. Thus, the only enduring feature of masculinity is its requirement for continuous validation”¹¹⁸. However, the key issue in their discussion appears to be anxiety, which aligns with the definitions of fragile and precarious masculinity. “The only enduring feature defining <real masculinity> is constant anxiety, which (...) stems more from the structure of masculinity (its precariousness) than from its content (that is, the specific traits, behaviors, preferences, or tendencies that men are expected to exhibit)”¹¹⁹.

Furthermore, the researchers draw attention to the language used in public discourse and the ways of speaking about men, which reflect the aforementioned anxiety and create the impression of threatened masculinity. As evidence, they cite questions such as “have men become too soft?” or suggestions that, in the face of difficulties, men should “act like a man,” as well as challenges asking whether someone is “man enough”¹²⁰. Language that undermines status also targets boys and emerges during adolescence to enforce specific behaviors; bell hooks cites the term “wimp”¹²¹, as an example. Liz Plank further observes that there are no “(...) equivalents of the expressions <to take away one’s balls> or <mama’s boy> that apply to women”¹²². Vandello and Bosson demonstrate that it is rare, if ever, to hear questions about whether a woman is a “real woman” or “woman enough”¹²³. They also confirm that masculinity is problematic and anxiety-inducing—this is not a new insight, as “[...] it reflects a long-standing theoretical assumption shared by many contemporary scholars studying men and masculinity [...]”¹²⁴.

The concept of “precarious masculinity” is also addressed by Liz Plank, author of *The Alpha Female Must Go: Why Patriarchy Harms Everyone*. As a researcher who personally conducted interviews with men, Plank reports numerous observations regarding male behavior: “(...) almost all of them, despite being adults, felt that they were not yet fully men—even though they undoubtedly were, in every sense. For them, masculinity was less an identity than a task to be accomplished or a reward for having navigated some extremely difficult situation”¹²⁵. The author cites numerous expressions that underscore the necessity of proving masculinity, such as: “You have to work to be a man”¹²⁶, or “Masculinity is something you do, not something you talk about”¹²⁷. She also quotes psychotherapist Esther Perel, whose words serve as a fitting

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem.

¹²¹ hooks, bell, op. cit. p. 53.

¹²² Plank, Liz, op. cit., p. 51.

¹²³ Vandello, Joseph A.; Bosson, Jennifer K., Ibidem. p. 101.

¹²⁴ Ibidem.

¹²⁵ Plank, Liz, Ibidem, p. 49.

¹²⁶ Plank, Liz, Ibidem, p. 50.

¹²⁷ Plank, Liz, Ibidem, p. 48.

summary: “We are born women; we have to become men”¹²⁸.

Andrzej Galbarczyk and Michał Zabdyr-Jamróż also discuss the differences between women and men and their impact on the condition of male identity in the article *Fragile Sex: Why Men—Especially in Poland—Live Shorter Lives and Have Poorer Health than Women*. The researchers refer to the term “gender gap,” which concerns inequalities between the sexes¹²⁹. This term is most often associated with differences in earnings, although Poland exhibits a relatively small wage gap (Polish men earn 4.5% more per hour than Polish women, compared to an average difference of 12% in the European Union)¹³⁰. Gender inequalities are usually associated with the disadvantaged position of women; however, in the case of health, the situation is reversed: “Men live shorter lives, and especially shorter periods in good health. They visit doctors less often and have higher suicide rates.” In this context, the fragile masculinity of Polish men has a very concrete dimension: the life expectancy gap between men and women is 7.8 years, one of the worst outcomes in Europe¹³¹. In attempting to identify the causes of this situation, the authors point to both biological and social factors. Regarding biology, they highlight the male role in species continuation: “(...) the biology of the male body has evolved so that we are large, strong, and fertile (...) but not necessarily healthy”¹³². Galbarczyk and Zabdyr-Jamróż speak on the basis of research, representing themselves and other men: “We are generally bigger—taller—and weigh more. We have more muscle and are physically stronger than women. But the irony of fate is that we—big and powerful men—are more fragile and more susceptible to various diseases”¹³³. The authors point to numerous biological factors¹³⁴, supporting their claims with multiple examples. They also list social and cultural factors¹³⁵, that influence fragile masculinity.

¹²⁸ Plank, Liz, *ibidem*, p. 51.

¹²⁹ Galbarczyk, Andrzej; Zabdyr-Jamróż, Michał, “Krucza płeć. Dlaczego mężczyźni – zwłaszcza w Polsce – żyją krócej i w gorszym zdrowiu od kobiet”, *ZNAK*, January 2024, <https://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/krucha-plec/> (accessed 5.08.2025).

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*.

¹³² *Ibidem*.

¹³³ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁴ Longer quotes that provide fuller context:

„Due to their comparatively larger size at birth, boys are more likely to experience complications during delivery. After birth, they also tend to receive lower scores on the Apgar scale, which assesses a newborn’s overall condition in the first minutes of life. From the very beginning, boys are physically more fragile and more susceptible to various infections. They are also at greater risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). All of this results in the phenomenon of excess infant mortality among males, observed across all populations, even though overall infant mortality rates have declined significantly worldwide. It may even be argued that being male has a negative impact on health from the very first days of life.” (...), *ibidem*.

„With age, our situation does not necessarily improve; males continue to be more vulnerable to a range of illnesses. Boys are more frequently affected by respiratory diseases, asthma, gastrointestinal disorders, behavioral disturbances, and intellectual disabilities (...), *ibidem*.

¹³⁵ „Adolescence is a period of profound physical, psychological, and psychosocial change (...). On the one hand, there is a strong need to build relationships with peers; on the other, a growing desire for autonomy and intimacy emerges. These processes are often accompanied by anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and even depression. Most concerning, however, is the fact that there is little open discussion about the changes occurring in the body and in behavior during this stage of life.” (...), *ibidem*.

„Unfortunately, men tend to neglect their health more often than women. In most cases, medical consultation is sought only when pain occurs, while regular preventive examinations are frequently overlooked. Stress, general fatigue, and cardiovascular diseases (including hypertension and diabetes)

In addition to contemporary factors, it is also necessary to mention historical conditions that exposed fragile masculinity. As Śmieja notes, “The end of the <long nineteenth century>, the age of the (apparent) triumph of masculinity, was brought to a muddy halt by the Great War, which made Western societies realize just how fragile and complex a being man truly is”¹³⁶. The researcher refers to both physical and psychological devastation: “In 1918, Freud described cases of *Kriegsneurose*, or war neurosis, and the sight of mutilated bodies of disabled veterans, dependent on the care of others, became commonplace”¹³⁷.

Dorota Wyrwińska offers a more extensive discussion of this issue in her publication „Co się dzieje z mężczyznami? Analiza dyskursów dotyczących kryzysu męskości w artykułach prasowych oraz internetowych” in the subsection „Historyczne przemiany wzorów męskości w kulturze Zachodniej”, and more specifically in the part entitled: „Od herosa do żołnierza – męskość militarna jako męskość tradycyjna?”¹³⁸. Wyrwińska—drawing in part on Tomasz Tomasik’s research—points out that the hero, the knight, and the soldier, despite their different historical contexts, “represent a similar type of personality, oriented toward courage, valor, and the desire for fame and recognition”¹³⁹ while “participation in battle becomes a direct test of one’s masculinity”¹⁴⁰. She identifies these traits as constituting the “Soldier’s Mask of Masculinity”¹⁴¹ while at the same time uncovering what lies beneath it: “something no longer spoken of by the ideologies of war, namely a fragile personality, complexes, inhibitions, and the recurring echoes of suppressed fears”¹⁴².

In relation to the above, Wyrwińska also cites the research of Elisabeth Badinter, who argues that “[...] for most men, this masculine ideal is profoundly uncomfortable and stressful, since they are often unable to live up to the mythical norm of success, power, self-control, and strength. The pursuit of this unattainable ideal generates in them a painful awareness of being incomplete, imperfect men” [...]”¹⁴³. As a consequence, Wyrwińska points to two possible reactions: men’s involvement in conflicts as an attempt to prove their masculinity, or the repression of their own weakness. She describes the latter as a “[...] psychologically motivated aversion to the unacceptable softness within oneself—the greater, the more effort has been invested in concealing it—projected outward in the form of fear of weakness embodied by femininity [...]”¹⁴⁴. Moreover, according to Wyrwińska, “this fear motivated men to distinguish themselves from women as fully as possible, which led to a process that Tomasik calls the Mechanism of Separation. It consisted of a strict division of traits, values, and spheres of

are identified as the primary causes of poor health. At the same time, 36% of men report fear of being diagnosed with cancer or another serious illness, while 33% indicate that feelings of embarrassment and discomfort related to urological examinations serve as significant barriers” (...), *ibidem*.

¹³⁶ Śmieja, Wojciech, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁸ Wyrwińska, Dorota, “Co się dzieje z mężczyznami? Analiza dyskursów dotyczących kryzysu męskości w artykułach prasowych oraz internetowych”, *Working Papers 1*, Instytut Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022, p. 12.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

activity between the sexes, further reinforced by the fundamental difference between male military socialization and female civilian socialization[...]"¹⁴⁵.

Similarities to the aforementioned 'Disengagement Mechanism' can also be seen in the findings of the researchers cited earlier: Vandello and Bosson. Similarities to the aforementioned 'Disengagement Mechanism' can also be seen in the findings of the researchers cited earlier: Vandello and Bosson. One of their conclusions places true masculinity in "[...] one of the most widespread and distinctive behavioural norms associated with the male role in the area of cultural gender: the antifemininity mandate"¹⁴⁶. The authors state that avoiding femininity as a key element of male identity has a long history in psychology, dating back to psychoanalytic theories of gender development (i.a.. Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Carl Gustava Jung)¹⁴⁷. „According to these theories, a healthy (i.e., <normal>) male identity can only develop if a boy sufficiently rejects female identity and feminine traits represented by a female caregiver. Thus, masculinity is partly defined by an aversion to femininity [...]"¹⁴⁸. However, upon reaching adulthood, men are expected to demonstrate their 'true masculine' status by excluding femininity from their behaviour, language and emotional expression¹⁴⁹.

At the same time, it is worth noting that, according to researchers, there is no analogous requirement of 'anti-masculinity' in the case of women. Furthermore, the authors of the study report that boys and men are punished more severely than girls and women for violating gender roles and exhibiting characteristics or behaviours typical of the opposite sex¹⁵⁰.

I would like to supplement the above analysis of terms and scientific theories in the field of masculinity studies with reflections on how 'fragile masculinity' is discussed in popular culture, referring to the above observations - Vandello, Bosson, Plank and others - on the issue of language. In particular, I am referring to slogans with this term printed on sweatshirts and T-shirts, or presented in social media in the form of confrontational, ironic expressions of views. Examples of such slogans include: 'Your Fragile Masculinity Is Not My Problem', 'I'm Too Clumsy To Be Around Fragile Masculinity', 'Nobody Cares About Your Fragile Masculinity'. On the one hand, such expressions can be understood as examples of the language of social and feminist critique, since those who articulate these statements make it clear that they are not responsible for maintaining a threatened sense of masculinity, nor do they wish to engage with a problematic situation. On the other hand, in the context of bell hooks' research, such an attitude may itself bear the marks of patriarchal behavior. This conclusion becomes evident when recalling the definition of *fragile masculinity*, particularly the anxiety stemming from a perceived failure to meet social norms. According to hooks, male emotions are suppressed within patriarchy: "men suffer, and the entire culture responds to them, "Don't tell us what you feel"¹⁵¹. The reason is straightforward: speaking about emotions disrupts the image of the strong man, exposing his weakness and vulnerability. As hooks argues, patriarchal masculinity "(...) is a performance that pretends men do not feel pain"¹⁵². Moreover, this stigmatization of male

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 16.

¹⁴⁶ Vandello, Joseph A.; Bosson, Jennifer K., op. cit., p.102.

¹⁴⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁴⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁵⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁵¹ Hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵² Ibidem.

fragility also confirms the earlier conclusion of Vandello and Bosson, namely that men are punished more harshly than women for violating gender roles and displaying traits or behaviors associated with the opposite sex.

It is also worth noting that such slogans do not employ the term *precarious manhood*, which suggests that *fragile masculinity* has a more journalistic and cultural character, whereas *precarious manhood* is more scholarly and firmly rooted in the academic literature.

I would next like to extend the study of the term *fragile masculinity* to include a semantic analysis of the word *fragility* and its related expressions, in order to uncover and account for the meanings transferred onto masculinity. My interest lies in the metaphorical potential of fragility—both in the more obvious associations directly tied to the subject, and in those that are indirect, rarely used, or unconscious, yet capable of opening new perspectives for reading and understanding male identity. Of particular relevance are the meanings that resonate with the properties and character of glass, the material I have chosen for the artistic work in glass that I describe in the third chapter.

According to the PWN Polish Language Dictionary, *fragile* means “easily broken, crushed, destroyed” or figuratively “impermanent, delicate”¹⁵³. Additional information is provided by the Great Dictionary of the Polish Language, which describes them as ambiguous terms¹⁵⁴. The first meaning – in relation to glass – is translated as (1) impermanent and easily broken or crushed. This term best corresponds to the English word *fragile* (brittle, delicate, fragile, impermanent, breakable), which is currently used in international transport as a label for fragile shipments, alongside a pictogram depicting a broken glass. In this context, masculinity could take on the characteristics of glass as a material and as the properties of objects made of this material, and thus be perceived as *glass-like*, *glassy*, but also *cold*, *vascular*, *crumbly* or *brittle*¹⁵⁵. This also translates into the conditional integrity of masculinity, which requires care and attention – otherwise it falls apart and loses its value. Just like in the expression ‘skating on thin ice’, which emphasises the risk factor, at the same time brings to mind the similarity between glass and ice. The next definitions appear in the context of food: (2) cakes (crumbly after baking) or (3) meat (soft after cooking, free of fibres and easy to eat). Juxtaposing these terms with masculinity may evoke associations with stereotypical patterns of raising boys, particularly in relation to food¹⁵⁶, as well as with non-normative male behaviors, such as attempts to prove one’s capabilities through acts of eating¹⁵⁷. Moreover, considering the above contexts of fragility, masculinity may

¹⁵³ Kruchy, entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/kruchy;2475589.html> (accessed 8.08.2025).

¹⁵⁴ Kruchy, entry in: “Wielki słownik języka polskiego”, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/37388/kruchy> (accessed 8.08.2025).

¹⁵⁵ *Fragile masculinity* can be understood metaphorically as opposed to steadfast masculinity, which is seen as a trait of strong character and fighting spirit. At the same time, fragile masculinity can also be understood literally – masculinity understood as a man’s genital organs. In this case, the term may refer to an injury to the erect penis. Presumably, this type of bodily injury is associated with a vulgar term for a man, reducing him to broken genitals.

¹⁵⁶ As Galbarczyk and Zabdyr-Jamróz points out, „[...] In many societies, we observe greater care for male offspring.” The authors cite examples confirming the observation that “[...] male offspring are provided with better nutrition [...]”, as cited in: Galbarczyk Andrzej; Zabdyr-Jamróz Michał, op. cit.

¹⁵⁷ An interesting connection between fragile masculinity and eating is highlighted in the context of American research cited by Liz Plank: men eat 93% more pizza in the presence of women. According to the author, men in such cases consumed almost twice as much as when eating alone, probably due to a subconscious desire to impress women. See: Plank Liz, op. cit., p. 56.

be read as crumb-like, evoking a sense of diminished value, or as meaty, connoting traditional roles tied to hunting and the provision of sustenance. Taking these various contexts of fragility into account also opens the way for new interpretations of masculinity, including in contemporary aspects such as vegetarianism or ecological awareness related to meat production, its environmental impact, and the consumption of resources.

Developing the chain of associations: fragile masculinity-fragile-meat leads to an analysis of the links between masculinity and meat (the 'Meat-Masculinity Link'), which are the subject of much research. One such study is the publication „Understanding the Meat-Masculinity Link: Traditional and Non-Traditional Masculine Norms Predicting Men’s Meat Consumption”. The team of authors – Lauren Camilleri, Melissa Kirkovski, Jessica Scarfo, Andrew Jago and Peter Richard Gill – showed that men who supported physical violence and attached great importance to sex ate more meat, while the desire to reduce consumption was greater among men with egalitarian views¹⁵⁸. This area is also covered in a publication entitled „The Sexual Politics of Meat. A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory”, in which author Carol J. Adams analyses meat as a symbol of patriarchy, pointing to the erotic and oppressive links between its consumption and male dominance. A distinction is drawn between traditional (meat-eating) and alternative (non-meat-eating) masculinity¹⁵⁹. Meanwhile, vegetarianism and veganism align with the significant moral concerns of feminist ethics—alongside ecology, pacifism, and the ethics of care¹⁶⁰.

Interestingly, in Polish literature the word *fragile* also refers to (4) feelings that can “easily be destroyed”¹⁶¹. In this context, masculinity may be interpreted as *emotional* or *sensitive*, and at times even as *crush-like*, *fleeting* and *vulnerable*. The final semantic field of *fragile* relates to (5) the traits of a boy, understood as “small, delicate, giving the impression of weakness and evoking care”¹⁶², which reflects a stereotypical image of *fragile masculinity*.

2.2 Reflections on Fluid Masculinity and on Masculinity Fluid as Glass

The term *liquid masculinity* appears in Polish scholarship in Dorota Wyrwińska’s work „Co się dzieje z mężczyznami? Analiza dyskursów dotyczących kryzysu męskości w artykułach prasowych oraz internetowych” (2022). In the subsection „Narodziny „płynnej” męskości?” the author derives this notion from Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “*liquid modernity*”, by which he designates the present phase in “the development of Western civilization”¹⁶³.

Wyrwińska begins by outlining the conditions of “*liquid modernity*”, pointing to the accelerated dynamics of socio-cultural change in Europe and the United States after 1945, which „[...] entailed an intensification of transformations both in the sphere of cultural determinants of

¹⁵⁸ Camilleri, Lauren; Kirkovski, Melissa; Scarfo, Jessica; Jago, Andrew Gill, Peter, Richard; “Understanding the Meat-Masculinity Link: Traditional and Non-Traditional Masculine Norms Predicting Men’s Meat Consumption”, *Ecology Of Food And Nutrition* 2024, vol. 63, nr 4, p. 355-386, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03670244.2024.2361818>.

¹⁵⁹ In the literature, one encounters English-language terms such as *meatless masculinity*, *plant-based masculinity*, *non-meat masculinity*, as well as *vegan masculinity* or *vegetarian masculinity*, which are also grouped under the broader label of *veg masculinity*.

¹⁶⁰ Czarnacka, Agata, Etyka feministyczna, entry in “Encyklopedia Gender”, Misiak Iwona; Tytuła Magdalena (red.), Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, p.123.

¹⁶¹ Kruchy/uczucie, entry in: “Wielki słownik języka polskiego”, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/37388/kruchy/3886050/uczucie> (accessed 12.08.2025).

¹⁶² Kruchy/chłopiec, [entry in] [www.wsjp.pl http://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/37388/kruchy/3886049/chlopiec](http://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/37388/kruchy/3886049/chlopiec) (accessed 12.08.2025).

¹⁶³ Wyrwińska Dorota, op. cit., p. 32.

masculinity, femininity, and gender relations, and in the sphere of men's and women's everyday lives". According to the author „[...] the metaphor of modernity as a liquid vividly conveys the fundamental feature of the new social reality—namely the *melting down* of what is solid, static, or immutable; in other words, the undermining of all previously imposed barriers (such as tradition, estate or class affiliation) that had restricted individuals from pursuing—according to their own capacities—personal aims or aspirations”¹⁶⁴. In short: “Freedom, mobility, change, and flexibility—these are the values that have gradually permeated and transformed virtually every sphere of life [...]”¹⁶⁵.

The researcher identifies the characteristics of liquid modernity, including „[...] an unprecedented acceleration in the circulation of people, goods, services, money, and—perhaps above all—information”¹⁶⁶. The result of this process is „[...] the emergence of “entirely new, previously unattainable domains of potential action and influence; however, access to them has become contingent upon mobility, understood as the possession of adequate resources (financial, technological, cultural)”¹⁶⁷. The author also observes that the pressure of mobility is accompanied by the phenomenon of individualization. “First of all, to use Bauman's terminology, status-based constraints were the first to melt away, followed by class-based ones, and in the case of women, gender-based ones as well. Combined with the requirement of availability on the labor market, applicable to both sexes, this opened the way for the liquefaction of power relations within families. In other words, people were liberated from a variety of bonds that once restricted their freedom of life and action, yet at the same time they lost access to stable points of reference that had facilitated orientation in an increasingly complex world [...]”¹⁶⁸. Wyrwińska demonstrates that people have been left to their own devices—in the economic, social, and identity spheres—without clear criteria to guide them. “Today, patterns and orders are no longer given, let alone self-evident. There are too many of them; they collide with one another, and their injunctions contradict each other, which deprives them of their irresistible, compelling force”¹⁶⁹. Consequently „[...] the contemporary individual, regardless of gender, must define themselves independently, and this process of producing, shaping, and modifying one's «self» becomes a lifelong – and never fully completed—project. It unfolds within a reality that offers a multiplicity of potential models of being and living, yet provides no unequivocal signposts to facilitate choice”¹⁷⁰.

Although the situation described above applies to both men and women, Wyrwińska argues that masculinity is a category more readily adapting to existing socio-cultural conditions¹⁷¹, thus, changes in this area have a significant impact on male status. The author thus argues that „[...] contemporary masculinity is increasingly shaped by the defining qualities of liquid modernity, entering a phase of ongoing fluidity, heightened reflexivity, and growing individualization”¹⁷². The author employs the term “liquid masculinity” on several occasions but does not provide a precise definition suggesting that „[...] is not a model in the strict sense of the word, meaning

¹⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 33.

¹⁶⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁶⁸ Ibidem, p. 34.

¹⁶⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁷¹ Ibidem.

¹⁷² Ibidem, p. 36.

that it is not necessarily tied to any specific set of masculine traits. Rather, it constitutes a component of an individual's identity project and may be shaped or modified throughout life and through personal biographical choices"¹⁷³. It is worth noting that even within Western scholarship, a clear definition of liquid masculinity remains elusive, although the terms "fluid" or "liquid" masculinity have appeared sporadically since the early 2000s in the work of British scholars, e.g. Stephen Whitehead¹⁷⁴.

At the same time, Wyrwińska traces the transformations within male identity and the circumstances under which liquid masculinity takes shape, particularly in relation to the declining relevance of traditional masculinity. The *traditional model*—associated with traits such as strength, aggression, bravery, and emotional restraint—has, in the face of women's growing independence, become not only outdated but even undesirable. This shift, she argues, results in a cultural disorientation regarding the very definition of masculinity, with negative consequences for men and their sense of identity"¹⁷⁵. The author also notes that „[...] traditional masculinity, understood [...] as a relationship of power, is gradually losing its relevance in increasingly egalitarian Western societies, giving way to a plurality of competing models"¹⁷⁶. She emphasizes, however, that „[...] the shift from traditional to liquid masculinity is still in progress, making the situation of contemporary men particularly complex and fraught with contradictions [...]”¹⁷⁷.

Of particular interest is how Wyrwińska highlights the coexistence of contradictions within masculinity: the freedom to shape one's own identity alongside strong societal expectations of men. She terms this tension *liquid masculinity on a rigid framework*. On the one hand „[...] each individual in a sense creates themselves, making autonomous decisions about the shape of their own identity through a series of choices enacted in the realms of consumption and lifestyle. In this context, masculinity becomes merely one element among many that contribute to the portrayal of «being oneself» and is integrated into the broader process of constructing an individual identity project. In other words, contemporary men each embody their own version of masculinity”¹⁷⁸.

On the other hand, men are socially obligated to undertake numerous responsibilities, and according to Wyrwińska, the scope of these expectations appears greater than ever before. “Men are still expected to earn a living for their family (a role women can also fulfill, but cultural scripts of femininity often allow them the possibility of staying at home if the family's material circumstances permit). In addition, men are expected to actively participate in household chores and, if they have children, to assume the role of a caring, affectionate, and present father from the earliest years of their child's life. Even in the bedroom, men are required to perform adequately, lest they be accused of physiological dysfunctions or lacking sexual competence”¹⁷⁹. In summary, the author highlights the multitude of challenges men face in maintaining a conventional masculine role. “Increasing expectations from women, reinforced

¹⁷³ Ibidem.

¹⁷⁴ Whitehead Stephen, “Masculinity: Shutting Out the Nasty Bits”, *MASCULINITY: A REVIEW*, 2000, vol.7, nr 2, p.136.

¹⁷⁵ Wyrwińska Dorota, op. cit., p. 95.

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 36.

¹⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 59.

¹⁷⁹ Ibidem.

and further amplified by various expert and cultural discourses, encompass an ever-expanding range of areas in men's lives, from pressure to maintain an attractive appearance, to the work required for a satisfying romantic relationship, and extending even to the sexual sphere"¹⁸⁰. Moreover, the *flexibility* and *rigidity* described above, inherent to masculine status, seem to combine opposites, thereby recalling the properties of glass—a material that can be both soft and hard, fluid and solid, due to its metamorphic nature.

I extend the above reflections on *fluid masculinity* by examining the meanings that emerge when the term is treated as a metaphor—that is, when the qualities of fluidity are transferred onto masculinity. For this purpose, I examine the definition of the word *ptynny* ("fluid"), which, according to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* (PWN), is defined as: (1) having the form of a liquid; (2) characterized by phases that gradually and smoothly pass into one another (e.g., in reference to movement or gait); (3) undulating (with regard to a line or shape); (4) marked by a harmonious rhythm (e.g., in style or verse); (5) continuous and without interruption (e.g., in reading or speaking); and finally, (6) something that cannot be precisely defined¹⁸¹. I am particularly intrigued by the new meanings that emerge when these descriptors are applied to masculinity: *liquid masculinity*, *gently transitioning masculinity*, *variable masculinity* (a trait more commonly culturally associated with femininity), and finally *wave-like* or *undulating*¹⁸² *masculinity*. Many of these traits are culturally more often associated with femininity and appear alongside traditionally "feminine" adjectives such as gentle, harmonious, free-flowing, and indeterminate. This highlights both a departure from the traditional masculinity-femininity dichotomy—blurring previously clear-cut boundaries—and a certain transposition of feminine characteristics onto masculinity. Additionally, change and movement are evident, particularly when considered in the context of previously discussed concepts of liquid modernity. The term *melting* carries a dual meaning: it denotes a transition from solid to liquid, and simultaneously evokes a substance that is fluid—having a definite volume but no fixed shape, taking the form of the container it occupies"¹⁸³. This can be metaphorically phrased as *becoming change itself*.

In this context, the term *metamorphosis* seems particularly apt, defined by the Polish Language Dictionary as a change in form or appearance, the transformation of one shape into another, or a general process of conversion or alteration¹⁸⁴. I want to approach this concept more broadly, drawing on the research of Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska at the intersection of philosophy and culture, which allows me to go beyond the basic meanings of change or transformation. She develops the notion of *becoming*, while simultaneously raising questions „[...] about our relationships with that which is Other, and what we haunt or don through thought or imagination"¹⁸⁵. These questions concern „[...] the practices and theories of hauntings,

¹⁸⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁸¹ Płynny, entry in: "Słownik języka polskiego PWN", <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/p%C5%82ynny.html> (accessed 30.07.2025).

¹⁸² Also noteworthy is the convergence in the sound of the word "falisty" (wavy, wave-like) and "falliczny" (phallic), derived from the Latin "phallus," which in turn originates from the Greek "phallos," originally denoting a symbol of the male genital organ. This symbol was often used in religious rites and art, representing fertility and vital force, and thus implicitly connected with movement characterized as potent, efficacious, and full of life and energy.

¹⁸³ Ciecz, entry in: "Słownik języka polskiego PWN", <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/ciecz.html> (accessed 30.07.2025).

¹⁸⁴ Metamorfoza, entry in: "Słownik języka polskiego", <https://sjp.pl/metamorfoza> (accessed 30.07.2025).

¹⁸⁵ Szykowska-Piotrowska, Anna, "Kamień–papier–nożyce. Wrażliwość metamorficzna jako projekt sztuki i filozofii", *Stowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2024, p. 8.

transformations, and transfigurations^[186], their nature, justification, motivation, purpose, meaning, and significance”¹⁸⁷. In other words, the author operates within the domain of the imagination and the associated empathy and sensitivity.

Szykowska-Piotrowska starts from the polysemy of the concept of metamorphosis. “In science, it refers to certain natural changes of state, structure, or form, such as the phenomenon of combustion, the existence of metamorphic rocks, or the emergence of a butterfly from a caterpillar”¹⁸⁸. The author, however, also explores the complexity of this term beyond the field of science. “Metamorphosis refers both to the natural world and to what is supernatural or metaphysical. The definitional whole of the concept of metamorphosis is not fully realized in any single domain; rather, it points to their shared, dynamic foundation”¹⁸⁹. In other words, she understands *metamorphosis* as „[...]an inter-concept – connecting disciplines – and a trans-concept, transcending them and moving between them”¹⁹⁰.

The semantic analysis and etymology conducted by the author in the chapter “Metamorphic Tradition” are also important for me. „The very structure of the word *metamorphosis* points to a reference to form, but at the same time somewhat denies limitation by form, *meta* – literally means «beyond» or implies the motion of change. Moreover, the term *morphe* carries an inherent ambiguity, referring to matter, form, essence, and subsequently the body”¹⁹¹. At the same time, the verb *to morph* means to change shape, and *morphing* refers to a technique for transforming an image, involving the smooth transition of one image into another¹⁹². Thus, *metamorphosis* can be interpreted not only as a transition beyond (meta) form (morphe), but also as “beyond fluid change” or “fluidly beyond change”.

I present the above as a personal approach to stimulate thinking, intuition, and sensitivity, as well as to deepen the understanding of metamorphosis—both in the context of the fluid nature of masculinity and with regard to the properties of glass¹⁹³. The concept of metamorphic processes, as presented by Szykowska-Piotrowska, allows me to approach glass more broadly as a material in my artistic practice focused on masculinity, while simultaneously using the natural properties of glass to explore issues related to male identity. This approach is particularly relevant because the author examines metamorphosis in relation to the three titular concepts: stone, paper, and scissors.

Szykowska-Piotrowska uses the concept of *figure* which links the physical, material capacity for shaping with the metaphorical significance of *figurativeness*¹⁹⁴. Thus „[...] figures of rock, paper,

¹⁸⁶ Przedzierzgnąć w znaczeniu «to transform someone or something into someone or something else», entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/przedzierzgni%C4%99cie.html> (accessed 30.07.2025).

¹⁸⁷ Szykowska-Piotrowska Anna, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem, p. 78.

¹⁸⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁹¹ Ibidem, p. 112.

¹⁹² Morfing, entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/morfing.html> (accessed 5.08.2025).

¹⁹³ Glass is an amorphous solid that combines properties of both liquids and solids: the lack of spatial structural order aligns glass with liquids, while its brittleness and rigidity align it with solids. qtd. in: Szkło [entry in]: <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/;3983073>, (accessed 05.08.2025).

¹⁹⁴ „In Latin, *figurare* means “to form,” similar to the English *to fashion*, which denotes creating something by hand. At the same time, “figurative” is synonymous with non-literal and metaphorical. This concept encompasses both the search for meanings within the cultural palimpsests of literature and philosophy,

and scissors allow for a different perspective—both abstract and material. They evoke a dual movement: a departure from literalness and a return to the materiality of matter”¹⁹⁵. This new perspective emerges through the description of all three concepts and the illustration of the relationships between them. „“Rock-paper-scissors constitute a set of meanings, metaphors, and rules, both figurative and material. Each figure represents a moment of impulse, carrying the weight of new events. The rock—as the beginning and material condition of art (from cave painting to Gothic cathedrals and beyond); the paper—as an invention in itself, as well as the invention of printing and the development of discourse; and the scissors—as means of intervention connected to contemporary ideas of progress, self-creation, and also the Anthropocene”¹⁹⁶. Additionally, Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska’s publication serves as an inspiration for me also because of her collaboration with the artist Błażej Ostoję Lniski, who illustrates and interprets the “figures of rock, paper, and scissors through their materiality”¹⁹⁷. Similarly, I would like to expand the perspective on glass, highlighting its fluidity understood as the potential to become something else, including metaphorically adopting the qualities of stone, paper, and scissors.

Naturally, the question arises as to what rock, paper, and scissors can reveal about glass, also understood as a figure. I am therefore interested in the possibilities for glass to assume the properties of these materials, as well as to substitute for them, functioning interchangeably, which is described using the conjunction *as*. This will be preceded by a discussion of comparing and juxtaposing materials using the conjunction *like* – when glass, in the literal sense, can be hard like rock, thin like paper, and sharp like scissors.

When comparing glass to stone, one is reminded of the natural varieties found in the earth, such as obsidian (volcanic glass), fulgurite (formed by a lightning strike), and tektite (of meteoritic origin)¹⁹⁸ used—like stone—for creating ancient tools, jewelry, or ritual objects. Glass as a material condition of art typically evokes artistic Venetian glassworks from the 13th century onward, although its production history is much longer. Ancient stone cathedrals now coexist with skyscrapers made of concrete, steel, and glass, and a glass block (*luxfer*) can be considered the modern equivalent of a brick.

When compared to paper, glass recalls its presence in electronic devices as screens, yet its history as a data carrier reaches back to the 19th century and the first glass photographic negatives. Since the beginnings of photography, glass has played a crucial role in the development of visual culture, analogous to the role of paper and print in the evolution of discourse. In my view, the image emerges alongside the word, functioning in parallel.

The next comparison—glass and scissors—evokes a duel of cutting. On the one hand, natural glass (e.g., obsidian), used in the Paleolithic for its sharp edges; on the other, scissors, a metal

as well as a return to concrete forms and examples, methods of production, and modes of craftsmanship and art. Figures relate to the matter that remains significant for thinking, recording, and the ways of transforming and inhabiting the world. Thus, paradoxically, “figurative” here refers simultaneously to what is metaphorical and literal. Figures also enable highlighting the asynchrony in the dominance of various media across different parts of the world.”, cited in: Szykowska-Piotrowska Anna, op. cit., p.15.

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁹⁷ Szykowska-Piotrowska, Anna, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁹⁸ Wierzchowski, Tomasz, “Krótka historia szkła. Szkło naturalne” <https://swiat-szkla.pl/article/12912-krotka-historia-szka-szko-naturalne> (accessed: 15.08.2025).

construction dating back to around the 15th century BCE. A single blade reaching back to the Paleolithic versus two blades, most likely from ancient Egypt. If we consider scissors „[...] as a means of intervention linked to contemporary ideas of progress and self-creation”¹⁹⁹, then their symbol could also be glass skyscrapers, along with glass ceilings²⁰⁰(favoring men) and glass basements²⁰¹ (favoring women), reflecting problematic social divisions. A pane of glass separating one group from another, like a window separating interior from exterior—a boundary that is invisible, often unnoticed, as we tend to look *through* it rather than *at* it.

The next step—after introducing the figures of stone, paper, and scissors, and juxtaposing them with the figure of glass—is to invoke Szyjkowska-Piotrowska’s reflections on the relationships between figures. She does so with reference to the children’s game “rock-paper-scissors,” which carries established rules and associations. At the same time, the author assigns metaphorical meanings to the different outcomes of the game: „[...] paper wraps the rock—works of art are encompassed by discourse; scissors cut the paper—existing conventions become the subject of intervention; rock dulls the scissors—when the laws of nature and materiality prove insurmountable”²⁰². The above invites reflection on the relationships between various materials and glass, revealing new meanings and metaphors of the glass medium, including the potential to become something else and its fluidity in transitioning between states. Additionally, it highlights the agency of the material. Previously described glass—as hard as stone, thin as paper, and sharp as scissors—now appears to embody the potential to act within each of these figures: it can wrap (like paper), cut (like scissors), or dull (like stone)²⁰³.

The first action—“glass (like paper) wraps the stone”—can be read literally: in the form of window frames or glass display cases protecting “stones” understood as works of art. At the same time, it evokes the image of a stone thrown at glass, which futilely tries to wrap itself around it. Alternatively, it can be interpreted metaphorically: we increasingly view artworks through glass screens in electronic devices, and digital images are more and more often modified (including using artificial intelligence). Through this “wrapping,” the works become less tangible, dematerialized.

The second action—“glass (like scissors) cuts paper”—can be understood literally as the displacement of paper-based information carriers by electronic ones (material vs. virtual), but also metaphorically, as a shift in discourse toward postmodernist framing, fragmentation, and incompleteness.

The third action—“glass (like stone) dulls the scissors”—occurs when glass, through its fluidity and transparency, eludes discourse. It can also be understood as a reflection on contemporary

¹⁹⁹ Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, Anna, op. cit., p.15.

²⁰⁰ Szklany sufit – Glass ceiling — invisible barriers that limit women's and ethnic minorities' opportunities for professional advancement. These barriers include prejudices, the power of customs, and the lack of networking opportunities. [...], entry in: “Encyklopedia Gender”, op. cit., p. 523.

²⁰¹ Szklana podłoga - The term "glass floor" is used as an antonym to the "glass ceiling" and refers to situations in which "men perform low-prestige, low-paid, difficult, and dangerous jobs," such as working outdoors or at heights. cited in: Glass Basement (tłumaczenie dosłowne: Szklana piwnica) [entry in]: www.urbandictionary.pl/urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Glass+Basement (accessed: 16.08.2025).

²⁰² Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, Anna, op. cit., p. 14.

²⁰³ Everyday experience in the kitchen shows that a glass cutting board dulls knives and contributes to the faster wear of knife edges.

Polish art, where glass is less often regarded as an artistic medium and more frequently seen as a material for creating functional objects—seemingly overlooked, as if transparent to the artistic discourse.

Drawing inspiration from the aforementioned children's game, one can also reverse the role of glass—from active to passive—so that it is literally perceived as a material being wrapped, cut, or dulled, while simultaneously referencing the stages of creating an artwork in glass. Paper wraps glass – this refers to the glassblowing process, specifically the moment when a wet newspaper is used by the glassblower to shape the molten bubble, allowing precise control over its form. Scissors cut glass – this literally refers to cutting or snipping the glass bubble. Stone dulls glass – this pertains to the next stage of shaping glass, performed cold, using carborundum (silicon carbide), a highly hard material (9.5 on the Mohs scale).

These concrete actions, grounded in the glassmaking process—together with the metaphors described earlier—illustrate glass as an exceptionally rich material for artists to explore themes of fluidity. For example, works by visual artists showcased in the exhibition *Autonomous Zones* (21.10.2022–29.01.2023 at BWA Wrocław Główny) highlighted the potential of glass as a medium in contemporary art. Curator Dominika Drozdowska emphasized in an accompanying interview: "A very important direction in glass today is discussing it in terms of its properties—its ambiguity, the fact that it is an ambivalent material, capable of reaching extreme states from liquid to solid. These properties are what artists exploit to address themes related to non-binarity and queerness"²⁰⁴. The curator reflects: "It is said that glass is queer [...]"²⁰⁵. It highlights the potential embedded in the material's properties, used (among others) by artists from the LGBTQ+ community, but not exclusively. In my view, it is worth understanding this term more broadly, as the author of *The Queer Art of Failure* does, and as clarified in a footnote by its Polish translator, Mikołaj Denderski: "Halberstam uses the term *queers*, which can refer both to «osób queer» and «weirdos», the original meaning of the word. Within the context of the entire book, as a study of non-normative (and thus, from the hegemonic structure's perspective «deviant») strategies of existence and action, the term can often be used interchangeably with «queer people»"²⁰⁶.

I mean the situation in which representatives of masculinities other than the hegemonic- such as what I consider fluid masculinity (as well as fragile or empty-shell masculinity)- may be perceived as embodying an alternative.

The final reflection on the game rock-paper-scissors focuses on the (obvious, yet often overlooked) role of the body in performing the individual gestures, choices, or bets. The game relies on the use of the hand, which, through its positioning, can temporarily become a metaphorical paper, rock, or scissors. At the same time, the movement of the hand resonates with the definition of a figure as something shaped and produced by the hands, as Szyjkowska-Piotrowska notes when referencing the English term to fashion²⁰⁷. Thus, the hand becomes a figure of rock, paper, or scissors, moving fluidly between them and then entering into relations with the other figures. The hand (in the scissors gesture) cuts paper, the hand (as paper) wraps

²⁰⁴ Fragment of the transcript from the interview "Curator Talks #2: Mika Drozdowska about the show *Autonomous Zones*" available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu8IFAnOUe0> (accessed 20.08.2025).

²⁰⁵ Ibidem.

²⁰⁶ Halberstam, Jack, op. cit., p. 15.

²⁰⁷ Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, Anna, op. cit., p. 15.

around rock, and finally, the hand (becoming rock) dulls scissors. This raises the question of how these metaphors operate once we recognize the bodily origin of the sign: do we now perceive the hand that cuts a hand, wraps a hand, or dulls²⁰⁸ a hand in the same way? The above serves for me as an exercise in mindfulness, sensitivity, and abstract thinking, paraphrasing the thought of Szyjkowska-Piotrowska, who raises the question of our relationships with that which is Other. At the same time, the author suggests that „[...] transformations of the body’s form may accompany them”²⁰⁹, which seems to correspond with the variability of hand gestures when performing the individual figures.

In this context, the behavior of the players is also intriguing, as they not only display one of the options but physically enact the final action, especially when they win. Sometimes, players pinch an open hand between the index and ring fingers, mimicking the blades of scissors cutting paper; or wrap a hand around a fist shaped like a stone; or press a clenched fist into fingers spread like open scissors. This can be interpreted as a desire to physically experience victory, a gesture of power, or (masculine?) dominance.

Although there is no data on the correlation of such behaviors with gender, statistics published by the World Rock Paper Scissors Association indicate that men make up the vast majority of players (over 70 percent)²¹⁰. Moreover, men more often start the game with the “rock” gesture, symbolizing strength and aggression²¹¹, thus, they behave in line with the stereotype of traditional masculinity. Yet ironically, the rock can be defeated by paper, which is thin and soft. As if discourse itself could overcome physical strength.

In summary, the reflections in this subsection reveal a recurring loop, a thought that comes full circle: fluid masculinity and fluidity led the discussion toward metamorphic potential, while the figures of rock, paper, and scissors allowed for the expansion of glass’s metamorphic capacity—not only as a material reflecting male identity through its properties, but also through its ability to metaphorically assume the roles of these figures, which are themselves present in the “male game.”

²⁰⁸ The word “Tępić” is understood both as the opposite of “to sharpen,” and also as: (1) to destroy, exterminate; (2) to persecute, combat; (3) to make blunt; (4) to cause weakening; (5) to harm someone entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl> (accessed 11.08.2025).

²⁰⁹ Ibidem.

²¹⁰ Author unknown, <https://wrpsa.com/breaking-down-rps-statistics-gender-age-and-regional-differences/> (accessed 9.08.2025).

²¹¹ Author unknown, <https://wrpsa.com/rps-statistics-show-that-men-and-women-have-different-playing-styles/> (accessed 9.08.2025).

2.3. Reflections on Empty-shell Masculinity and on Masculinity Blown like Glass

The point of departure for this discussion is the origin of the concept of *empty shell* masculinity, a term used in the Polish translation²¹² of Liz Plank's English publication titled *For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity*. In the original, the author employs the term *ornamental masculinity*²¹³, which was translated into Polish by Martyna Tomczak as *wydmuszkowa* (empty shell) masculinity. Based on my knowledge, the concept appears for the first time and so far only in Polish literature concerning masculinity. It is particularly interesting to me due to the possibility of relating it to glassblowing techniques. Simultaneously, I perceive a divergence between the Polish translation and the original text; therefore, this initial section of the subchapter is devoted to examining the relationship between these terms and to delineating the meanings of empty-shell masculinity based on its original conceptualization. I use the term *ornamental masculinity*²¹⁴ as my own translation of the original concept, but I more often refer to the Polish version of the publication.

The starting point is the concept of ornamental masculinity, which appears in a chapter with the telling title: "Male Shame: What Is It Like to Feel Like You Need to Prove Something You Never Quite Feel Like You Have?"²¹⁵. Based on interviews with Americans, the researcher identifies shame as the most common response among men when they fail to meet the unrealistic social expectations that define traditional masculinity²¹⁶. Plank cites several sources of shame: „[...] because you don't earn enough, because you feel weak, or simply because you feel too much"²¹⁷. Additionally, according to the author, concealing shame is tied to the widespread belief that „[...] being a man means maintaining material stability, and in this, emotions can even get in the way"²¹⁸. It is precisely the framing of providing for one's livelihood as a man's primary role that Plank terms *ornamental masculinity*, a concept she cites from feminist writer Susan Faludi: „It is a superficial and stereotypically macho ideal, dependent on capitalist values: physical strength and aggressive dominance"²¹⁹. According to Plank, Faludi compares *ornamental masculinity* to *ornamental femininity*, „[...] as described by Betty Friedan in «The Feminine Mystique», rooted in stereotypes of submissiveness and devotion to the domestic hearth"²²⁰. According to Faludi, both terms focus on traditional understandings of roles that diverge from social expectations. „Men, like women, do not want to live in a world that revolves around material values. And just like women, they want to be needed and useful members of society"²²¹. Plank also highlights an additional concern: tying an individual's value to their economic situation is risky, especially in the context of fluctuating economic conditions.

Originally, Plank—following Faludi—treats ornamental masculinity as focusing on external, superficial traits such as appearance or physical strength, while neglecting the inner emotional

²¹²Plank, Liz, op. cit., p. 99.

²¹³ Plank, Liz, (origin) "For the Love of Men: A New Vision for Mindful Masculinity", St Martin's Press, 2019, p. 79,

²¹⁴ *Ornamental*, entry in: "Cambridge dictionary", <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/ornamental> (accessed 19.08.2025).

²¹⁵ Plank Liz, op. cit., p. 94.

²¹⁶ Ibidem.

²¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 95.

²¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 99.

²¹⁹ Ibidem.

²²⁰ Ibidem.

²²¹ Ibidem.

aspects. This is performative masculinity and maintaining appearances: building a man's status based on material success, while simultaneously suppressing and hiding sensitivity, which is stereotypically considered unmanly. It was something that testified to a man's value in times when he was the sole breadwinner, but today it loses significance and is seen as an addition, a decoration. The term *ornamental masculinity*, used by Plank and Faludi, seems to suggest that it is not worth building masculinity based on superficiality, especially in the face of changes in the job market²²² and social role division.

For comparison, bell hooks addresses this more directly in *The Will to Change. Men, Masculinity, and Love*, referencing Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Men*²²³. Hooks emphasizes that „[...] as a result of changes in the valuation of work, the nature of work itself, and the necessity of competing with women for jobs, many—especially older—men feel robbed of the pride that comes from fulfilling the role of sole provider for the family”²²⁴. These words reveal an interesting perspective from a feminist scholar who not only does not deny men the right to express emotions but is also able to recognize and articulate their pain. Moreover, hooks offers a critique of Susan Faludi's cautious stance in the context of patriarchal oppression. According to hooks, *Stiffed* represents, in many ways, yet another betrayal of American men, as Faludi devotes much attention to avoiding criticism of patriarchy but fails to emphasize that it must be dismantled if men are to be truly liberated”²²⁵. Although bell hooks does not directly address the concept of *ornamental* or *empty shell masculinity*, she highlights a significant issue: the systemic pressure placed on men in the professional sphere and its impact on their self-worth and overall well-being.

The approximate state of research on *ornamental masculinity* serves as my starting point to outline the concept of *empty shell* masculinity. I focus on it due to its richer semantic potential, analyzing *eggshell-ness* semantically, examining its metaphoricity and phraseological connections. I also explore how the revealed meanings influence the perception of masculinity, including references of the term *eggshell-ness* to glass material. My aim is to show the distinctiveness and specificity of the concept of *empty shell* masculinity, as well as to build its definition based on its inherent semantic domains.

I begin the analysis with the adjective *empty shell*, which comes from the word *empty eggshell*. According to the dictionary definition, the first meaning is: (1) 'the eggshell with holes on the ends through which its contents have been blown out, used as decoration after being painted'²²⁶. *Empty shell* evokes already known meanings relating to masculinity: both *eggshell-like* and *ornamental, decorative*. The word has several meanings. This term encompasses, among other definitions, “a rigid external layer that envelops an object”, as well as “a hardened, chitinous or calcareous protective covering found in arthropods”. It also refers to “a fragment of

²²² Liz Plank, referring to the recession in the United States in 2008, uses the term "mancession" to emphasize that "it disproportionately affected men." This term was introduced by Mark Perry, an economist from the University of Michigan, as cited in Plank Liz, op. cit., p. 225.

²²³ The first word of Susan Faludi's book title, “*Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Men*”, can also be translated as "nabici w butelkę" (literally, "bottled up" or "duped"), which serves as an additional reference to glass.

²²⁴ hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 110.

²²⁵ Ibidem, p. 48.

²²⁶ Wydmuszka / z jajka, entry in: “Wielki słownik języka polskiego”, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/70946/wydmuszka/5183308/z-jajka> (accessed 20.08.2025).

a broken vessel” or, colloquially, to a flimsy chipped vessel²²⁷. The term 'shell,' as a synonym for armor or husk, appears to aptly combine two contrasting narratives. The first is based on the colloquial notion of shell-like masculinity, constructed around external male traits, symbolized by the protective shell. The second narrative connotes meanings related to fragility and cracks. The associations connected with the shell align with the properties of an egg, which also carries this characteristic ambiguity. On the one hand, it is associated with fragility, confirmed by the idiomatic expression (“to walk on eggshells”) but on the other hand, it has a specific shape that can be easily broken yet is difficult to crush if pressure is applied at its most distant points, from tip to tip. This duality also transfers to the perception of masculinity, which appears as a combination of extremes: fragile, yet sometimes hard to break. Delicate, yet strong.

Moreover, all the above descriptors—such as *eggshell-like*, *chipped*, or *fragile*—also pertain to the properties of glass. Thus, the adjectives whose meanings were previously metaphorically transferred to masculinity effectively create an image of *glassy masculinity*, bearing the characteristics of glass (cf. subsection 2.1). The glass material—like the eggshell, egg, shell, or armor mentioned earlier—lends both physicality and subjectivity to the abstract concept of masculinity. Additionally, the term “empty-shell like” is associated with the act of blowing, which may allude to the technique of glassblowing in the studio process. Inflating a hot glass bubble with air from one’s lungs causes it to expand naturally, forming an outer layer around an empty center—similar to blowing up a balloon, an air mattress, or chewing gum. In this sense, *empty-shell* masculinity—when applied to male status—can signify an aerated, light, buoyant masculinity. Just as the notion of “empty-shell” complements the understanding of masculinity, so too does glass enhance its visualization and imagery. It has every right to do so—in this interpretation, glass becomes the material from which masculinity is made, or more precisely and literally, blown²²⁸.

It is important to note, however, that there is a second meaning of the word empty *eggshell*, which functions alongside the sense of an empty egg. This pejorative meaning is related to the realm of politics and is defined as follows: (2) “a person or thing that appears highly attractive at first glance but, upon closer inspection or after some time, proves to be worthless”²²⁹. In this context, *empty shell masculinity* may signify a superficial, pretentious, and insignificant form. One that is of low value and therefore must be concealed by men. However, it is difficult to ignore the impression that emptiness casts men in an unfavorable light, and the number of disparaging terms and associations with masculinity is significant. I assume that the negative connotation of empty shell masculinity, when applied to masculinity, would be justified in relation to the traditional role of men as providers (breadwinners), a role that is losing significance in contemporary society. In other words, *empty shell masculinity* could be interpreted as a message to men that it is not worthwhile to maintain appearances and to base their value on outdated perceptions of status or roles.

²²⁷ Skorupa, entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego”, <https://sjp.pl/skorupa> (accessed 20.08.2025).

²²⁸ An additional layer of ambiguity arises at the symbolic level: the term “blown” refers both to the physical act of shaping masculinity in the glassblowing furnace (through air expelled from the lungs into the glass bubble, which, together with the tools of the glassworker, shapes the form) and to the notion of “inflated” as a metaphor for the air or breath of spirit being infused. This dual meaning enriches the conceptual interplay between material process and metaphorical significance in the formation of identity.

²²⁹ Wydmuszka/ polityczna, entry in: “Wielki słownik języka polskiego”, <https://wsjp.pl/haslo/podglad/70946/wydmuszka/5183310/polityczna> (accessed 20.08.2025).

I intend to broaden the aforementioned set of meanings by incorporating related references drawn from nature, philosophy, mythology, and my own artistic work. These contribute to a more nuanced perspective on emptiness, and consequently, on *empty shell masculinity*. The selection of these topics is subjective and intuitive, guided primarily by their thematic convergence and associative potential.

The initial reference pertains to a characteristic observed in fish belonging to the family Tetraodontidae, which “[...] are capable of increasing their body size by inflating themselves with water or air when frightened or threatened”²³⁰. Although a similar trait can be observed in other animals (e.g., toads, cats, dogs), the characteristic exhibited by the aforementioned family of fish is sufficiently significant to be embedded in their very name. I am aware that this trait is independent of sex; nevertheless, I include it due to its relevance and potential to metaphorically illustrate the concept of emptiness, which I interpret within the context of masculinity. In this semantic domain, *empty shell-ness* functions as a defensive response to heightened risk and potential confrontation. By analogy, I aim to demonstrate that observations from nature can illuminate male behaviors in situations where they prepare for conflict and seek to appear larger or stronger. Within this context, *empty shell masculinity* may also be interpreted as a form of resistance to change or a reaction to the loss of influence or dominant social position. Moreover, in the animal kingdom, this defensive mechanism is temporary and assumes a return to the original body size once the threat subsides. In this context, questions arise regarding how men perceive new situations, what opportunities for resolution they see, and whether they possess the strength and courage to take action. “Alternatively, the question arises: how long can one endure without the possibility of ‘releasing the air’”, symbolizing relaxation? Bell hooks suggests that this is a challenge faced by every man, with the reward for the effort being their own happiness and well-being”. She invokes the words of Harriet Lerner from her publication *The Dance of Intimacy*: “In our rapidly changing society, there are only two certainties. The readiness to change and the fear of change will never cease”²³¹.

A second related reference is found in the text by Jean-Luc Nancy concerning the relationships between air and unreality. A French philosopher analyzes the meaning of the term *aréalite*, which “[...] is an archaic word referring to the nature or properties of air — airiness”²³². Simultaneously, this word in French “[...] may suggest both a lack of reality (areality) and a diluted, light, and suspended form of reality (aerality)”²³³. Considering the above, Nancy proposed replacing the term *aréalite* with the neologism translated into Polish as *a(e)r(e)ality*, „in which, on the one hand—by reading the first «e», and neglecting the second – one can sense the character of airiness, evanescence, and evaporation (cf. aeroplane, aerodynamics), while on the other hand – by including the second «e» – one can discern in it an unreality, lack of concreteness, that is, a–reality”²³⁴.

I am interested in examining the extent to which the concept of *a(e)r(e)ality* aligns with the term *empty shell-ness*. Does *empty shell masculinity*—understood here as inflated and overblown—

²³⁰ Rozdymkowane, hasło w: “Wikipedia”, <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rozdymkowane> (accessed 1.09.2025).

²³¹ Hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 7.

²³² Nancy, Jean-Luc, “Corpus”, trans. Małgorzata Kwietniowska, *Słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2002, p. 39.

²³³ Ibidem.

²³⁴ Ibidem, p. 110.

move away from reality? Does such inflation result in dilution? These questions are perhaps most easily applied to masculinity perceived through the lens of external appearance and physical traits, yet it may be assumed that they also analogically concern character and behavior. Another dimension involves the evaluative judgment attached to masculinity. In which situations is it acknowledged as a natural defensive reaction—similar to that of pufferfish? When is it treated pejoratively, as the behavior of an empty shell, a puffed-up pretender? And finally, what happens to the man—or within the man—when he must pretend to be greater than he is in reality? These inquiries underpin my creative practice, which seeks to explore novel conceptualizations of the male body. My reflection is informed by the craft of glassblowing, wherein Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophical meditations on ephemerality and dilution find a material analogue. By engaging with the glass as a medium, I contemplate how an aerated glass object metaphorically corresponds to a form of diluted reality, thus enriching the discourse on corporeality and presence. Does the increase in volume of a glass bubble at the expense of a thinner wall correspond to a dilution of essence or a blurring of identity? Within this line of inquiry, I intentionally leave certain questions open-ended, directing the exploration toward the realm of artistic engagement with the glass material.

The above issues were ones I explored in earlier glass-based works, with artistic practice forming the third point of reference that complements my reflections on *empty-shell masculinity*. This is particularly visible in the installation *Szklana Góra (Glass Mountain)*, created in 2024 during the 5th International Symposium of Contemporary Sculpture and currently exhibited at the Sculpture Park in Orońsko. The piece consists of a steel framework and glass blown into a metal mold. It refers to the archetype of masculinity instilled in boys since childhood through stories and fairy tales, such as *The Glass Mountain*, which symbolizes male initiation and the passage into adulthood. In these narratives, glass appears as a challenge for the knight—slippery, cold, and difficult material to overcome. What interests me is how glass is represented within such stories, and to what extent its properties help to construct images of masculinity²³⁵. At the same time, I want to examine how a transparent glass-blown torso can serve as a metaphor for a struggle with oneself, as well as with stereotypes surrounding male status. For me, the context of placing the work in the Orońsko Sculpture Park is also significant, particularly since it stands next to a stone sculpture depicting Hercules and Antaeus. The motif of the battle between mythological heroes resonates with contemporary assumptions about masculinity, which is defined not only in relation to women but also in competition with other men. It also reflects the notion that masculinity must be demonstrated through action. Yet, in the context of my earlier reflections, what becomes most important here is the source of Antaeus’s weakness: he was defeated when his body was lifted above the ground. Hercules realized that Antaeus’s strength came from his contact with the earth, granted to him by his mother Gaia. My work is therefore constructed upon the analogy between the muscular giant, defeated by the act of being lifted from the ground, and the glass torso, suspended above the

²³⁵ “[...] At my command, let this thing be done,

That I may ride to the glassy mountain.

To climb its peak so crystal bright,

And free the princess by my might!”

as cited in: Porazińska, Janina, „Szklana góra – bajka według polskiej opowieści ludowej”

<https://zbajkaprzezswiat.blogspot.com/2018/08/szklana-gora-bajka-wedug-polskiej.html> (accessed 20.08.2025).

earth and filled with air. Yet, within the framework of the preceding reflections, an additional play of meanings emerges in relation to Nancy's notion of *a(e)r(e)ality*—a dynamic oscillation between that which is ephemeral and airborne, and that which ceases to be grounded, detaching itself from the weight of reality.

CHAPTER 3

GLASS AS A MEDIUM (FOR) MASCULINITY – DOCUMENTING THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Chapter Three constitutes a creative interpretation of the findings derived from the literature on masculinity, complemented by both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as by an exploration of metaphors of masculinity constructed through the properties and qualities of glass. The conclusions reached thus far provide a foundation for addressing the question of masculinity in ways that enable the discovery of new facets of masculinity within the framework of artistic practice.

This chapter documents the search for new imageries of the male body through the medium of glass. I understand these imageries, in line with the definition, as “an image of an object, person, or situation brought forth in consciousness, grounded in prior observations and shaped by fantasy”²³⁶. The notion of *prior observations* refers here to the conclusions and suggestions presented in the theoretical part of this dissertation, while *fantasy* opens up the possibility of drawing on imagination, intuition, and premonition in processes of analysis, interpretation, and reading—much like in the creation of metaphors discussed in Chapter Two. The *image* thus *formed in consciousness* becomes the point of departure for its materialisation in glass.

Taking the above into account, this chapter presents a selection of works accompanied by the author’s commentary, positioning them in relation to the findings of the research component. The introduction clarifies the title of the cycle of works created within the framework of the doctoral project, and identifies the shared references and reflections that underpin all of the pieces. Central to this part are the metaphors of masculinity, which serve as a means of constructing the narrative. They are not assigned to individual works, but rather form the conceptual axis around which the narrative unfolds.

The first step is to clarify the meaning of the title of the cycle, “*Bulging Figures*”, which is shared across all series of works exploring representations of the male body. Of particular significance is the use of the term *figure* in the title, which carries multiple meanings that resonate with masculinity²³⁷. First and foremost, it denotes (1) “the representation of a human or animal figure in painting or sculpture” and (2) “the shape of the human body.” Both meanings align with the figurative and artistic character of the work. The religious sense, (3) “a statue, cross, or wayside shrine serving as an object of veneration,” allows for reading the glass objects both as literal references to spiritual signposts and as reflections on the complex influence of the Catholic Church on constructions of masculinity and the reinforcement of patriarchal structures. The next meaning of the word *figure* is (4) “a person distinguished by some negative trait or by something that invites disregard,” or “a strange, suspicious individual” – which can partially resonate with the problematic social reception of masculinity, particularly its dominant patterns and entrenched stereotypes. Another meaning, (5) “an ornamental turn of phrase, expression, or word enhancing the vividness of language,” aligns with the research approach: a focus on language and the images it evokes, discovered through imagination. This corresponds to the methodology described earlier, which emphasizes tracing connections and analogies along the line language–meaning–metaphor–image, allowing access to certain conceptions of

²³⁶Wyobrazenie, hasło w: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/wyobra%C5%BCenie.html> (dostęp 1.09.2025).

²³⁷ Figura, entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/figura.html> (dostęp 1.09.2025).

masculinity. The final, personally significant meaning is *figura* in the sense used by Szyjkowska-Piotrowska (see subsection 2.2), which treats the term as encompassing both the physical capacity for shaping and the metaphorical significance of figurativeness.

It is also worth noting the ambiguities inherent in the term *bulging*. On one hand, it signifies “rounded, swollen, enlarged to the limits of possibility,” while on the other, it phonetically resembles the Polish word meaning “cracked” or “burst”, implying overexpansion—like a balloon or a piece of chewing gum, which inherently carry fragility and risk. Increasing their volume and surface area without adding material reduces their thickness, making them vulnerable to rupture or destruction.

Primarily, however, the title of the series, *Bulging Figures*, refers to the process of glassblowing, during which shapes inspired by fragments of the male body are physically enlarged and inflated. This alludes to the glassmaking technique I employ to draw attention to the phenomenon of social influence on the body, as well as on men’s thinking and behavior²³⁸. This is not only a question of muscle mass increasing to extreme, exaggerated proportions reminiscent of the effects of steroid therapy. It also concerns excess body in areas considered undesirable according to masculine ideals—on the hips, thighs, or abdomen, manifesting as folds resembling sagging skin and accumulated fat. It encompasses all deviations from the strong, taut, and firm ideal: swollen and bloated body parts, distensions, or puffiness.

For this reason, the *Bulging Figures* can be understood as bodies of resistance. Their forms may express opposition to masculine hegemony, traditionally associated with strength and dominance. The works can be interpreted as examples of counter-hegemony, as discussed by Halberstam in their reading of Antonio Gramsci. Here, counter-hegemony is understood as “[...] the production and circulation of an alternative, competing set of representations that could be mobilized in the active struggle to transform society”²³⁹. Such an alternative could be representations of bulbous, swelling bodies. These forms do not convey an impression of strength, even when large, because they are made from a fragile material. Moreover, these representations lack the attributes of a warrior capable of overthrowing the patriarchal system.

A common thread across all the works is the reference to the idea of the vessel, resonating with the material’s traditional use in creating utilitarian objects. In my view, the series enters into a dialogue with the notion of the vessel. Each work can be interpreted as a “vessel for masculinity,” which each individual fills with masculine traits according to their own discretion. Part of the reference lies in Aristotle’s theory of procreation, in which the woman was conceived as a passive vessel for the active male *principle*. An important point is also the feminist critique of this theory, which recognizes the concept as excluding female agency and serving patriarchal narratives. My intention is to invert this narrative—making visible an alternative vision, in which feminists such as bell hooks also highlight the harmfulness and oppressiveness of patriarchy toward men, and help them overcome the system, shaping their self-perception in the process. In this understanding, the transparency of the works in the series can reveal and emphasize the emptiness within the object. The aim is to draw attention to the effort men may undertake to consciously fill this emptiness—that is, to achieve their own happiness by freeing themselves from the unhealthy rules of patriarchy. This vision of

²³⁸ Pumping also extends to the most sensitive areas of the male body, for example through devices designed to stimulate blood flow to the genitals.

²³⁹ Halberstam, Jack, op. cit., p. 36.

masculinity—proposed by bell hooks—aligns with the concept of the body as a vessel for masculinity. Here, both ideas intersect with the glass material, including its metaphorical references to male identity.

The exploration of new representations of the male body begins with a reminder of the definition of masculinity, which, according to the *Polish Language Dictionary PWN*, has three meanings: (1) “traits typical of, or regarded as typical for, a man,” (2) “male sexual potency,” and euphemistically, (3) “male genitalia”²⁴⁰. The concept unites traits traditionally associated with masculinity and the agency inherent in sexual activity with a subtle reference to male genitalia. In this context, the penis²⁴¹ – as a symbol of masculinity—becomes the nexus of all meanings and a natural starting point for exploration. A second rationale stems from the fact that genitalia serve as the basis for assigning a newborn’s sex, when a doctor, observing the penis after birth, declares the characteristic phrase: “It’s a boy.” According to Judith Butler, this constitutes a performative assignment of gender, which constructs the child’s social gender reality. The very moment of birth marks the beginning of engagement with cultural norms and expectations related to gender. A third reason for starting the artistic exploration with the phallic motif stems from my previous creative work on masculinity. Earlier pieces in the series *Legacy* focused on the perception of the penis within historical and religious contexts, whereas the current works engage primarily with its medical, psychoanalytic, and feminist interpretations²⁴².

For these reasons, the penis as a symbol initiates the exploration of new representations of the male body in glass. Initially, small objects are created independently in the glass studio. The exploration of masculinity begins with representations of the penis and gradually expands, radiating outward to encompass the rest of the body. Subsequent series are inspired by fragments of the torso, and the cycle grows in terms of diversity of size, number of forms, colors, and meanings. All the works presented are the result of a complex creative process, involving extensive conceptual reflection, experimentation with glassblowing and kiln techniques, and hands-on testing of various methods of shaping glass to explore its capacity for expressing masculinity.

²⁴⁰ Męskość, entry in: “Słownik języka polskiego PWN”, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/m%C4%99sko%C5%9B%C4%87.html> (dostęp 2.09.2025).

²⁴¹It is worth noting the semantic distinction between the terms *penis* and *phallus*. The word *penis* denotes the male copulatory organ in its corporeal reality, whereas *phallus* emphasizes its symbolic significance (cf. Mateusz Skrucha, “Penis”, entry in *Encyclopedia of Gender*, op. cit., p. 371.

²⁴² Penis, entry in: *Ibidem*, p. 373.

3.1. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Crackle series

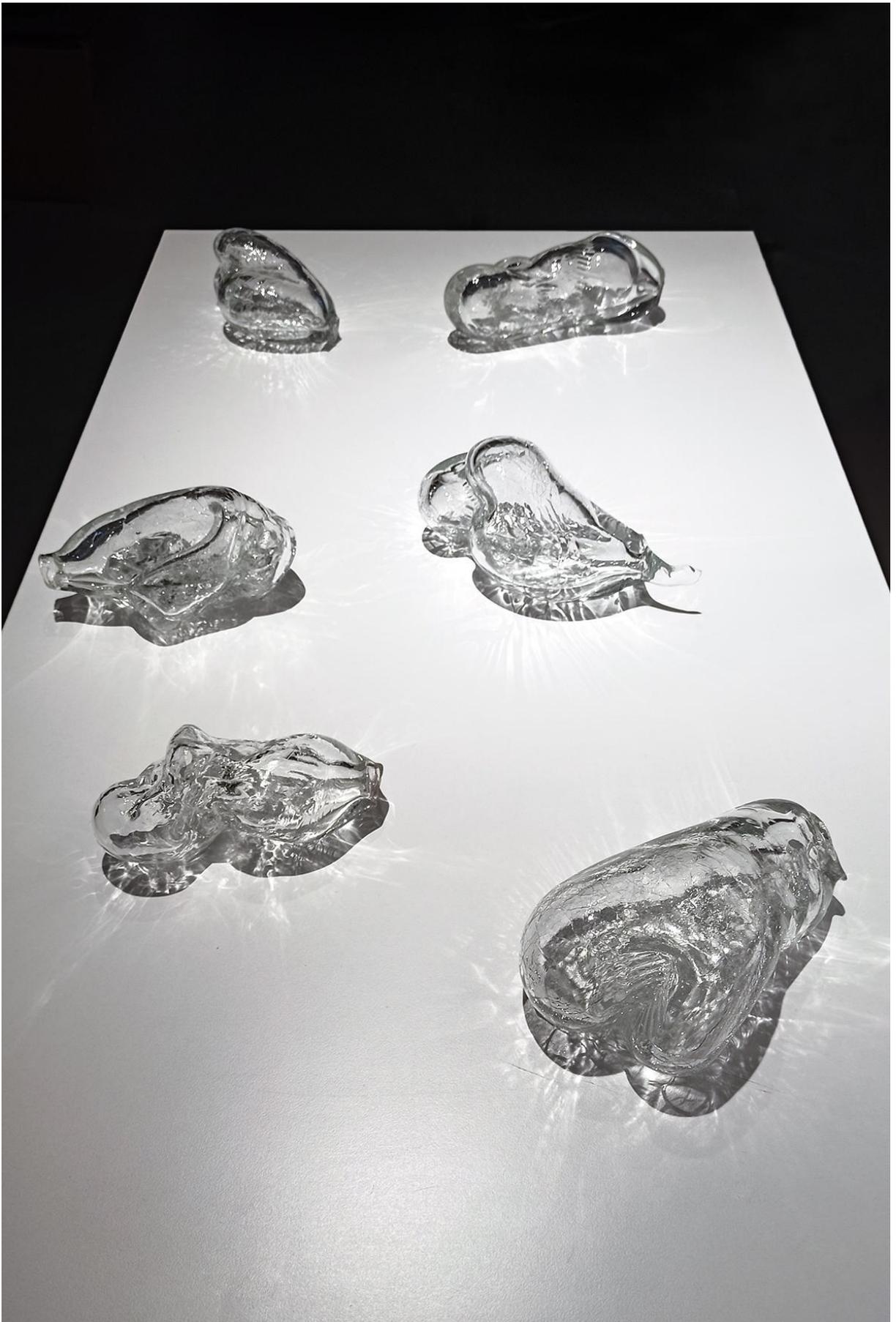
This series of objects engages with the theme of contemporary masculinity, which I explore through forms inspired by the male genitalia, literally identified with masculinity.

I am inspired by the history of interpreting phallic forms. Of particular interest are the differences across the periods identified by Mateusz Skrucha, including the medical and feminist phases of understanding the penis. In the medical context, I focus both on impotence as a cultural phenomenon connoting a lack of masculinity, and on the image of a capable and ready man, which stereotypically affirms his masculinity. In the context of feminist discourse, I analyze the meanings of the penis as a symbol of the patriarchal system, characteristic of second-wave feminism. I juxtapose these interpretations with the premises of third-wave feminism, in which the penis ceases to signify power and its meaning is socially and culturally constructed. This perspective also engages with the research of bell hooks, who highlights the oppressive effects of patriarchy on men.

My artistic practice involves transforming the phallus as a symbol of a male-centered culture. The result is a series of fragile objects with flowing shapes and delicate, twisted, organic lines. Additionally, in the creative process, I employ technical aspects of glassblowing to impart further layers of meaning to the work. One aspect of the work involves the blowhole left after air is introduced, which remains visible and integral to the meaning of the piece. The outlet in the glass object is intentionally positioned to correspond to the opening of the urethra of the penis. Additionally, the hollow interior evokes the act of blowing as a means of enlarging the glass phallus, while the empty space becomes a conceptual zone that can be filled with meaning.



“Bulging Figures – Phallus”: a group of objects from the Crackle series, glassblowing technique, hand-shaped glass, 2023



“Bulging Figures – Phallus”: group of objects, dimensions vary from the smallest 5 × 7 × 12 cm to the largest 8 × 14 × 19 cm, 2023

3.2. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Wired series

The series continues my exploration of representations of contemporary masculinity in glass. The works were created in the glassworks by blowing a glass bubble into a woven wire mold. Metal is a strong material that can be associated with the pressures exerted on the male body, for example, by social rules and norms. The wire mold does not adhere tightly to the glass everywhere: it seems to coil around, gradually constricting and imposing a shape. For me, the relationship between the two different materials is significant. At times, the metal forms a tangled mass; at other times, it functions as a kind of loop around a fragment of the glass body. The title of the series adds further layers of meaning: “wired” can refer to the social constraints imposed on fluid masculinity, which nonetheless leaks through. At the same time, the work may be read literally in relation to masculinity as potency, which sometimes requires support, stiffening, or a frame—both in terms of the male body and the ego, which is tested in such situations. Moreover, the work confronts the stereotypical ideal of the man who is always strong and capable, who commands his body as if it were a machine..



“Bulging Figures – Phallus”:

phallus_01 from the Wired series, blown glass into a wire structure; glass, wire, 2023,
15 × 19 × 25 cm

3.3. “Bulging Figures – Phallus”, Bronze series

In this series, color is introduced for the first time as a reference to change. The use of bronze provides a counterpoint to the colorless glass, which represents the invisible rules imposed on men by the patriarchy. Through this contrasting pairing, I highlight how radical the transparent and colorless works addressing masculinity can be.

Additionally, the dark color allows me to demonstrate how fluidly the pigment spreads across the glass surface. The transitions through various shades of bronze are not merely an aesthetic choice; they aim to convey fluidity as a way of visualizing changes occurring within male identity. The variation in color intensity is based on subtle gradations: starting with a deep, rich, opaque tone at the opening, and gradually becoming diluted and almost invisible at the farthest point. This use of color enables a subtle rendering of tonal shifts without a distinct boundary, illustrating a continuum between stark, contrasting extremes.

I also chose bronze for its cultural associations. It evokes earth, wood, leather, and stone—materials that are natural, solid, and stable. It is a color with a long history, reaching back to Paleolithic rock art, created using natural pigments such as clay or crushed stones in warm hues like sienna or umber. Bronze can also suggest soil staining, much like brown water, which typically indicates the presence of iron, manganese, or mineral sediments. In the context of masculinity, this color directs attention toward simplicity, tradition, physical strength, and labor connected to the earth (leather boots, belts, tools). It also points to dirt, an inseparable consequence of such work. Moreover, the cultural significance of dirt in relation to masculinity associates it more with naturalness, strength, and wildness than with a lack of hygiene. It also evokes authenticity, resilience, and ancestral values symbolized by the earth and respect for one’s roots.



„Bulging figures – Phallus”: phallus_01 from the Bronze series, blown glass, 2023, 28×15×12 cm



„Bulging figures – Phallus“:

phallus_02 from the Bronze series, blown glass, freehand shaping, 2023, 21 × 19 × 15 cm

phallus_03 from the Bronze series, blown glass, freehand shaping, 2023, 17 × 14 × 10 cm

3.4. “Bulging Figures – Wired”, Bronze series



“Bulging Figures – Wired” (welded):

thigh_01 from the Bronze series, blown glass into a wire structure, 2023, 44 × 31 × 30 cm

abdomen_02 from the Bronze series, blown glass into a wire structure, 2023, 48 × 28 × 41 cm

(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)

3.5. “Bulging Figures – Abdomens”, Male Openings series

The starting point for creating this series was once again the male abdomen, with particular attention to its cultural connotations. In this instance, the glass fragment of the male body was formed using a metal mold inspired by the arrangement of male muscles and bones. As in the previous works, the air inlet created during the blowing of the glass bubble remains visible. In this series, the air inlet is additionally positioned in a characteristic location corresponding to the navel in the male body. Anatomically, the navel is essentially a mark left by the opening through which the fetus receives nourishment in the womb, highlighting an analogy with the glass bubble in the glassblowing process, “oxygenated” by the glassblower’s lungs through a metal blowpipe (corresponding to the umbilical cord). The navel carries significant cultural meanings: it is the “scar from the mother,” evidence of former dependence and vulnerability. This reminder of the body’s fragility consciously opposes cultural narratives of the strong, independent man, which are reinforced in traditional models of masculinity. The navel becomes a subversive point on the map of the male body, a transition between the attention-commanding hard torso and the soft lower abdomen. It is a masculine scar, yet it does not originate from the battlefield, where a man would prove his courage. Instead, it recalls the primal, inextricable bond with the mother, maternal care, and the experience of being nourished. It is also a symbol of beginnings, of being called into life, the moment of birth, but simultaneously of mortality – which distinguishes the bodies of mortals from the body of Christ, whose visual representations are often depicted without a navel.



“Bulging Figures – Abdomens”:
abdomen_01 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 2024, 33 × 30 × 38 cm
(glassblowing realisation: Petr Glosik)



„Bulging figures - Abdomens”

abdomen_01, from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 2024, 33 × 30 × 38 cm,

abdomen_02 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 2024, 33 × 24 × 39 cm,

abdomen_03 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 2024, 35 × 25 × 37 cm,

(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)

Steel mold for glassblowing execution, 2024

The metal mold is not an artwork in itself, but its presentation in the exhibition space allows viewers to understand the process of creation and the final outcome of the glassblowing piece.

The metal structure was designed with hinges, allowing it to be opened after the glass bubble has been blown and the piece safely removed. Unlike previous wire molds—permanently fused to the glass while hot—this construction is independent of the artwork, leaving only an imprint on the glass as a trace of its use. The form's specificity arises from the arrangement of metal plates with their edges facing the glass bubble, which presses between them during the blowing process. The purpose of the plates is to hold the bubble in selected areas and create divisions of a defined depth. As a result, the finished surface features smooth, glossy bulges interspersed with impressions left by the edges of the plates, which cut into the glass.

Additionally, the edges of the metal plates are profiled and arranged to correspond to the anatomical divisions of the male body, aligning with the lines between individual muscle groups. Consequently, the empty spaces between the plates are filled during the blowing process by glass bulges that reference muscles or folds of skin. The form allows for the creation of objects inspired by the male body, and its hinged design ensures repeatability, effectively functioning as a matrix for systematically imposing a type of male physiognomy. In other words, the construction serves as a reference to the principles of socialization—a “social corset” that enforces specific postures and behaviors. It becomes a symbol of patriarchal oppression, systematically dictating particular male bodies and characters.



In this technique, the form encodes the ideal proportions of a model male body. However, the molten glass seeks its own path, squeezing and flowing between the metal plates, creating disproportionate bulges. This process produces exaggerated, inflated shapes inspired by muscles and folds of skin, subverting the culturally constructed ideal of the male body. Individual works may vary slightly due to differences in temperature, the amount and distribution of glass, or the degree of heating of the metal form, which affects the final shape. As a result, the objects carry a sense of individuality, demonstrating how the body can escape the constraints imposed by the patriarchy and how new forms of masculinity can emerge.

There are also references to religious elements. On one hand, the form, through its opening mechanism, evokes a double-winged altarpiece, reminding us that the Church—alongside schools, courts, clubs, and stadiums—functions as an institution that reinforces patriarchal ideology²⁴³. On the other hand, it evokes associations with the iron maiden, a medieval torture device belonging to the category of the “coat of shame,” used to punish a person’s honor. The metal box, shaped and sized to fit the human body, contained spikes that would pierce the victim when the lid was closed, inflicting pain both physically and psychologically. Similarly, the discussed form—merciless toward the glass—metaphorically illustrates the impact of the patriarchal system on the body and the ways of thinking about it. The torture device is aligned with the patriarchal system through both its function and the etymology of the Latin word *patior*—to suffer²⁴⁴.

There is also a contemporary reference to the iron maiden as a metaphor for socially imposed ideals of female beauty²⁴⁵. Naomi Wolf literally refers to this ideal as the iron maiden. She also suggests that in the age of advanced aesthetic medicine and digital image transformation, the woman ceases to be the reference point for unrealistic standards. Wolf demonstrates that contemporary technology may allow the ‘ideal’ to do what it was originally intended to do: to completely leave the female body and replicate itself in the digital space²⁴⁶. Although the concept pertains to femininity, one can observe a similar contemporary influence of these factors on perceptions of masculinity.

Finally, it is worth noting a technical aspect: the metal form used in the artistic production is a sophisticated, modifiable tool. Specifically, it was designed to allow the glass bubble to be blown from multiple sides. As a result, all works in the *Openings* series were produced from a single form, which is unusual and particularly noteworthy. Consequently, the openings in each piece occupy different positions, creating a spectrum of references to various parts of the male body.

²⁴³ hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 36.

²⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 198.

²⁴⁵ “[...] men are supposed to desire the Ideal of Feminine Beauty, and women persistently strive for it”, as cited in: Dunin Kinga, in the introduction of Polish edition of: Wolf, Naomi, “The Beauty Myth”, Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014, p. 7.

²⁴⁶ Wolf, Naomi, op. cit. p. 332.

“Bulging Forms” – Documentation of the Glassblowing Process into a Mold



Three variants of using a metal mold in the realization of works: “Bulging Figures – Abdomens”, “Bulging Figures – Lower Abdomen” and “Bulging Figures – Buttocks”.

The project team in the photo: Petr Glosik, Emilia Marcjasz, Diana Szydłowska, Jan Skorulski, Grzegorz Bibro.

3.6. „Bulging figures – Lower Abdomens”, Male Openings series

This series addresses male identity through forms inspired by the male lower abdomen, featuring a visible phallic element. The penis functions as a focal point of the work, emphasized by the thickness of the glass at the constriction, the intensity of the color, and the small opening, which references the urethra in the anatomical structure of male genitalia.

The significance of the work is closely tied to the complex process of its creation—particularly to the formation of the glass phallus, which is relatively difficult to execute in a work of this shape. It was created by cutting and shaping this part of the glass bubble at an early stage of its formation. Consequently, for the majority of the glassblowing process, the glass phallus served as the sole connection between the metal blowpipe and the rest of the piece. An additional challenge was maintaining the piece on the blowpipe after removing it from the metal mold due to the characteristic bend of the phallus away from the vertical axis toward the lower abdomen. As a result, the blowpipe could not be rotated, since doing so would risk breaking the work at the phallus. These technical details underscore how critical and delicate the glass phallus is—despite its substantial thickness, it constitutes a weak point. In this context, it ceases to symbolize male strength and dominance, instead becoming a sign of vulnerability.

I am interested in the original understanding of potency as the capacity for action and potential for change within masculinity, as discussed by bell hooks. I am inspired by the concept of the “penis of revolt,” cited by Paweł Leszkowicz, which functioned as a form of rebellion in representations of male acts in Polish Socialist art. In a similar spirit, I am drawn to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s words: “male genitals possess a dark, archaic, and anarchic power.”



“Bulging Figures – Lower Abdomens”:

lower abdomen_01 from the Male Openings series, blown glass into mold, 2025, 33 × 30 × 37 cm



„Bulging figures – Lower Abdomens“:

lower_abdomen_01, from the Male Openings series, blown glass, 2025, 33 × 30 × 37 cm

lower_abdomen_02, from the Male Openings series, blown glass, 2025, 33 × 34 × 37 cm,
(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)



„Bulging figures – Lower Abdomens”: lower_abdomen_02, from the Male Openings series

3.7. “Bulging Figures – Buttocks”, Male Openings series

The objects presented here were inspired by openings in the male body and belong to the third series created using the same mold. In this case, the opening in the glass bubble formed during the blowing process is associated with the rectum. This reference engages with Leo Bersani’s concept of the “rectal turn²⁴⁷ which shifts attention from the phallus and its social meanings to a private, socially removed domain. My aim is to redirect the discourse on masculinity away from the privileged phallogocentric position toward a “more dispersed, non-centralized” perspective²⁴⁸. Analytically, the anus becomes “[...] a synonym for deconstruction as a method of undermining phallogocentric assumptions” on which conceptions of male identity have been established. As Bersani notes, “[...] the rectum is the grave in which the male ideal of proud subjectivity (adhered to—albeit in different ways—by both men and women) is buried [...]”²⁴⁹.

I harness the subversive potential of anality to confront representations of hegemonic masculinity. I aim to uncover what is excluded and repressed from the image of the male body—elements deemed unaesthetic or that draw attention to physical vulnerability. The concept of anality also allows me to challenge Western masculine ideals, traditionally conceived as impermeable through the lens of the inviolability of male bodily boundaries. As Jonathan Kemp observes, “[...] the male body remains a closed vessel, a besieged fortress into which others [...] have no entry”²⁵⁰.



„Bulging figures – Buttocks”: buttocks_01 from the Male Openings series

²⁴⁷ Kłosińska, Krystyna, “Feministyczna Krytyka Literacka”, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010, p. 645.

²⁴⁸ Kaliściak, Tomasz, “Gombrowicz od tyłu: projekt krytyki analnej na przykładzie powieści Ferdynand”, *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne*, nr 1–2 (2016), p. 60.

²⁴⁹ Bersani, Leo, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, in: Gajewska Agnieszka, “Teorie wywrotowe. Antologia przekładów”, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2012, p. 780.

²⁵⁰ Kaliściak, Tomasz, op. cit., p. 67.



„Bulging figures – Buttocks”:
buttocks_01 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 2025, 38 × 30 × 27 cm,
(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)

3.8. “Bulging Figures – Torsos”, Male Openings series

The series was created using a separate metal mold designed for the upper part of the male body. The objects reinterpret the motif of the chest, which is particularly scrutinized and compared to ideals of the male form. According to researcher Nancy Etkoff, “[...] a broad chest remains an echo of the capacities that enable survival”²⁵¹, thereby continuing to attract attention and concentrate social expectations.

The upper part of the male torso was culturally more frequently exposed and treated as public—contrasting with the lower, private parts of the body. Within patriarchy, the male chest functioned as a visual representation of power and reinforced dominance. In this context, a headless bust can signify a loss of authority. It may also serve as a symbolic consequence of industrial civilization, manifesting in climate catastrophe during the Anthropocene—termed the “Mantropocene”²⁵² by scholar Kate Raworth, due to men’s predominant role in decision-making.

The work engages with the ideal of the muscular body, while the smooth and glossy surface of the glass reinforces the vision of contemporary masculinity as a polished, curated product. It evokes an image that functions as a form of compensation—a facade visible only from the outside. For this reason, the use of transparent material highlights its superficiality: the glass reveals and exposes the inner emptiness. The carefully sculpted, inflated musculature can be read in several ways: on one hand, it may express powerlessness in the face of the complex conditions of masculinity or a fear of losing masculinity defined by strength; on the other hand, it may foreshadow the bursting of a bubble inflated with images of muscular, hardened men.

The works featuring the chest motif were created using a separate, additional metal form, which is also openable and allows for repeated use. Like the previous form, this one functions as a kind of matrix for producing a series of works, becoming a metaphor for patriarchy imprinted on male glass bodies. Despite using the same matrix, each work is distinct—bearing individual characteristics even within a repetitive process. This prompted me to produce additional experimental pieces using the metal form as a preform, providing an initial (pre-shaped) outline that is subsequently modified, enlarged, and simultaneously distorted. This demonstrates how the original pattern is transformed through glassblowing techniques: it is inflated (enlarged) while at the same time deformed (losing its original shape and proportions).

In this series, the blowhole is positioned at the level of the larynx of the glass body. This is the only series in which the method and direction of glassblowing in the studio correspond—through placement—to the respiratory system. Additionally, the ribcage, according to anatomy, is meant to protect internal organs, including the heart, which is culturally and symbolically associated with emotions. In contrast, the glass object seems to relate more closely to a “cage” constructed from social expectations surrounding the appearance of the male body. Moreover, in patriarchal culture, there is little space for male emotions, such as expressing love or suffering. The hollow interior deliberately draws attention to unspoken feelings and the emotional void, which can potentially be filled.

²⁵¹ Etkoff, Nancy, “Survival of the Prettiest”, pub. CIS, pub. W.A.B., Warszawa 2000, p. 247.

²⁵² Śmieja, Wojciech, op. cit., p. 450.



„Bulging figures – Torsos“:
group of objects, 2025, various dimensions, from the smallest 26 × 37 × 23 cm to the largest
28 × 38 × 34 cm (glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)



„Bulging figures – Torsos”:
group of objects, 2025, various dimensions, from the smallest 26 × 37 × 23 cm to the largest
28 × 38 × 34 cm (glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)

3.9. “Bulging Figures – Divided Torso”

The work consists of two glass objects from the bust series, both created using the same metal mold. The first chest was formed solely with the metal mold, while the second represents a deliberately deformed version. This deformation was achieved by carefully inflating and stretching the glass bubble, transforming the bust into the shape of a male lower torso. The juxtaposition of the two objects results in the appearance of a divided torso.

The empty space between the parts of the torso can be read as the boundary between the upper body—the chest, representing the public sphere—and the lower body, the lower torso, representing the private sphere. At the same time, this space allows the composition to be interpreted not only as two body fragments but also as a split body. In this context, the horizontal positioning gives the work a different meaning and enables a reading connected to male suffering, which is sanctioned within patriarchal structures. As bell hooks reminds us: “Masculinity is a form of pretending that men do not feel pain”²⁵³. This also allows for engagement with ultimate concerns, including shorter life expectancy and higher rates of suicide, which, according to research, are characteristic of men.

At the same time, the juxtaposition of the objects results in two openings left by the blown air in the glass bubbles. Originally, both torsos evoked the respiratory system, but the transformation of one into a lower abdomen shifts its reading toward the rectum. This brings the work closer to the previously discussed lower abdomens and their capacity to address issues of bodily integrity and boundary control. It also contains the subversive potential of anality to challenge hegemonic masculinity and to reformulate its representations. At the same time, echoes of corporeality and physicality can be discerned, where the openings may be metaphorically read as the body’s inlet and outlet. Interestingly, the subversive aspect of this work can also lie in “releasing the air” from inflated ideals of masculinity. In this way, it symbolically undermines their authority, exposes their artifice, and disarms the patriarchal symbolism of power and strength.

The above demonstrates the wide range of interpretations and the multiple ways the work can be read, depending on the positioning and arrangement of individual objects. This is not unique to the “Divided Torso” piece alone but applies to many of the series presented here, where a shift in placement generates a new context within the field of male identity. The objects created as part of the *Bulging Forms* cycle construct a multi-element narrative of masculinity, allowing for the evocation of diverse stories and the presentation of a broader spectrum of metaphorical representations of the male body.

²⁵³ hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 23.



“Bulging Figures – Divided Torso”:

torso_01 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 26 × 37 × 23 cm, 2025

torso_02 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 25 × 35 × 32 cm, 2025

(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)



„Bulging figures – Divided Torso”:

torso_01 from the Male Openings series, blown glass in mold, 26 × 37 × 23 cm, 2025

torso_02 from the Male Openings, blown glass in mold, 25 × 35 × 32 cm, 2025

(glassblowing execution: Petr Glosik)

SUMMARY

Here, three parts of this dissertation converge: the findings and conclusions from research on masculinity, the analysis of selected terms as metaphors related to contemporary masculinity, and their translation into an artistic work in the medium of glass. These elements constitute a response to the research problem formulated in the question: How can glass as a medium reflect contemporary representations of the male body in the context of patriarchal influence on Poles from the transformation generation? I address this question through the achievement of three objectives, summarized below, which also define the structure of the individual chapters of this thesis.

The first chapter reveals that being a man in Poland is by no means easy. Contemporary theoretical frameworks present masculinity as a multi-layered challenge, while historically shaped Polish masculinity, burdened by experiences of partition, wars, loss of freedom, and sovereignty, appears as an additional heavy legacy. Furthermore, the generation of men born in the 1970s—to whom this study is dedicated—faced an extra difficult task, as they grew up during a period of systemic, political, and economic transformations. Men from the “transformation generation” had to quickly find their footing in a new reality and adapt to previously unknown conditions. This generation is described by Bogdan W. Mach as one of “historical hope and everyday risk.”²⁵⁴

To gain a more precise understanding of perceptions of masculinity, I turn to quantitative research concerning the entire male population, which provides context for the study of the selected generation. I utilize findings from the research agency 4P Research Mix, which analyzed the changing behaviors and attitudes of contemporary men. These results revealed a positive shift in the realm of masculinity—it appears that the image of the “male tough guy” as the dominant model is gradually eroding.

The above results and conclusions serve as a reference point for my investigation into how masculinity is understood by the transformation generation. The mentioned research agency conducted a segmentation of men based on commonalities in responses concerning four dimensions (appearance, emotionality, partnership, and openness), as well as questions about the ideal man and what being masculine means to them. Five segments were identified, including the “Guys” segment, which corresponds age-wise to the generation I studied: men born between 1970 and 1979, who in 2019 were aged 40 to 49 years.

According to the report, the segment labeled “Guys” is characterized as independent, tolerant, and supportive of equality. These men strive for stability and a peaceful family life, and they appreciate the worlds of women, children, and home. They place great importance on openness and partnership—two of the four defined dimensions—while appearance and emotionality hold moderate significance for them. The most significant finding for me was that being masculine holds little importance for the “Guys” segment, which registers the lowest value among all groups studied. Unlike other segments, “Guys” do not identify with a dominant male archetype. For instance, the “Insta-boys” aspire to be a “successful man,” the “Men” group aligns with the “womanizer and strongman” figure, the “Gentlemen” see themselves in the “Superman-rock” archetype, and the “Farmers” identify with the “strongman.” Additionally, “Guys” rarely define themselves through their gender. These distinctive traits highlight the unique characteristics of

²⁵⁴ Zielińska, Maria, op. cit., p. 249.

this group, which I have incorporated into my qualitative research on men's lived experiences of masculinity.

The report titled "Understanding Masculinity. The Reality of the Polish Man" includes additional data that I also use in my research. This quantitative study, conducted in 2024 on a sample of men aged 18 to 69, was commissioned by Gedeon Richter Polska. The results suggest that maturity is identified as a defining trait of masculinity by over twice as many men (63%) compared to those who emphasize the physical body (25%). This is a positive finding as it reflects a high level of awareness and a move away from physical markers of masculinity among the majority of men surveyed.

However, the conclusions are less optimistic in other areas: as many as 65% of all men surveyed reported having no one to talk to about their emotions, and social difficulties are compounded by challenges in personal relationships, with 30% of men expressing frustration related to the frequency of their sexual contacts²⁵⁵. A complex and rather somber image of the Polish man emerges from these findings. Positively, the data on health behaviors suggest improvement: the vast majority take care of their physical condition and proper nutrition (64%), a practice supported by a successful relationship according to 88% of respondents. Regarding visits to medical specialists, it is notable that many men have undergone at least one consultation with a cardiologist (37%), urologist (34%), psychologist (25%), or psychiatrist (21%), indicating some level of engagement with specialized healthcare. The results may also suggest that the taboo surrounding men seeking help for mental health issues is gradually diminishing.

However, in the context of data collected by researcher Michał Gulczyński, these changes are occurring too slowly, especially considering the gender gap in life expectancy. According to Michał Gulczyński, Polish men live on average eight years less than Polish women, whereas in the United States the difference is about six years. Such significant disparities are typical for post-communist countries. Gulczyński attributes these differences to systemic and cultural factors, including working conditions, access to healthcare, road safety regulations, and patterns of alcohol consumption. The gender gap also extends to suicide rates, which are significantly higher among men. In Poland, men die by suicide over six times more frequently than women, whereas in the United States, men die by suicide a little over three times more often than women. Michał Gulczyński proposes using the term "death of despair" in the Polish context, explaining that "especially during the period of transformation, men frequently either took their own lives or died prematurely, indirectly as a consequence of rapid economic changes".²⁵⁶ These data lead to the conclusion that the situation of men in Poland remains difficult, and the slow changes in the area of health are insufficient to offset the negative effects resulting from the gender gap.

Based on the quantitative findings and the historical and social context outlined earlier, I developed an interview guide for individual interviews focused on men's experiences of masculinity. The results from my qualitative research constitute the most extensive part of the first chapter and are thoroughly summarized at the end of the final subchapter. However, it is important to note that following a detailed analysis of the data, I identified three overarching

²⁵⁵ Gulczyński, Michał, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁵⁶ Ibidem.

categories as final conclusions. These categories emerged through a process of selection and synthesis of the rich qualitative material collected.

The first category concerns the understanding of masculinity as a set of demands, challenges, and burdens placed on men, which create pressure and contribute to frustration. These factors build an image of male fragility, which is why I identified fragility as the first category. Additionally, this category includes male sensitivity, which—despite its value—can be socially perceived as a weakness.

The second category concerns the broad concept of fluidity within masculinity. This arises from the observation that respondents often perceived masculinity independently of biological sex. They listed masculine traits while simultaneously emphasizing that gender assignment is socially constructed and that these traits can also be found in women. Fluidity is further evidenced by the absence of a single, fixed definition of masculinity. Instead, masculinity is individually shaped according to personal understanding, lacking a clear boundary of what constitutes masculinity. This results in a social image of masculinity that can appear ambiguous and blurred. The fluidity of masculinity also stems from changes occurring within masculinity itself, influenced both by men's personal maturation and life experiences as well as broader social transformations.

The third distinguished category – "empty shell masculinity" – encompasses a detailed vision of traditional masculinity frequently referenced by respondents. This vision is grounded in deeply entrenched archetypes that are socially reinforced and culturally maintained. It encompasses the role of the man as the primary breadwinner, providing for his family and achieving professional success. Although this image is gradually losing its currency, it still aligns with the concept of success, which significantly influences recognition as masculine, as indicated by research findings. On one hand, this illustrates the complexity of the male role; on the other, it reflects the difficulty of attaining an ideal that appears exaggerated and beyond realistic capabilities. Consequently, the traditional vision of masculinity increasingly resembles an empty form—an "empty shell"—a set of rules and expectations that outwardly appears solid but is internally devoid of contemporary values and meanings.

This categorization represents my way of highlighting key factors shaping contemporary masculinity and is the result of an analysis of the condition of masculinity in Poland within the context of patriarchal influences.

The aim of the second chapter is to analyze metaphors related to contemporary masculinity, selected based on the categories established from qualitative research and their connections to the qualities of glass. Primarily, it examines concepts such as fragile masculinity, fluid masculinity, and empty shell like masculinity as terms within masculinity studies. Additionally, it explores masculinity metaphors that transpose the characteristics of glass onto masculinity itself.

Each subchapter is dedicated to one type of masculinity, which I first analyze as a scholarly term—comparing interpretations and conclusions of researchers while considering the influence of historical, social, and geopolitical factors. Subsequently, within a semantic analysis, I treat each type of masculinity as a metaphor and examine how particular qualities of glass are metaphorically transferred onto masculinity, expanding its meaning. In this approach, I strive to remain open to abstract associations, positioning myself as an observer and

researcher of the boundaries of language. My tools are intuition, imagination, and sensitivity to the complexity of meanings. This enables me to discover new contexts and additional dimensions of existing terms within the field of masculinity. In my approach to analyzing metaphors and conceptualizing masculinity, I draw on elements of Stuart Hall's theory of the "low theory," as interpreted by Jacek Halberstam. This framework is understood as a counter-hegemonic and anti-systemic way of acquiring knowledge. It represents a grassroots model of thinking, connected to everyday life, popular culture, and the experiences of ordinary and marginalized groups. This perspective allows me to more boldly explore meanings and associations that might seem irrational, inappropriate, or mistaken, thereby expanding the scope of understanding within masculinity studies.

I start by explaining the idea of fragile masculinity, which refers to the worry some men feel when they think they don't meet society's expectations of what it means to be a man. Researchers say this worry comes from the pressure to always prove themselves as "real men" and the fear of losing that status. In this view, being masculine is like a challenge that's hard to achieve and easy to lose, which is why it feels so fragile.

I extend the study of the term fragile masculinity by conducting a semantic analysis of the word "fragility" and its associated phrases, which I then use as a metaphorical framework to reveal new meanings attributed to masculinity. This approach allows me to interpret masculinity as glassy, cold, vascular, chipped, brittle, crumbled, or crumb-like. Special attention deserves the terms "meaty" and "fleshy," which arise from the associative chain: fragile masculinity–fragile–meaty. This connection led me to research that treats meat consumption as a category differentiating traditional masculinity (with meat as a symbol of patriarchy according to Carol J. Adams) from an alternative masculinity (meat-free, associated with veganism, pacifism, and ecology).

The term "fluid masculinity" appears in Polish literature notably in the research of Dorota Wyrwińska, who derives it from Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. According to Wyrwińska, the metaphor of fluidity describes a new social reality in which what was once fixed, static, and unchanging "melts away," thereby challenging previously imposed, rigid barriers. Due to the circulation of information and increased mobility, state, class, and gender conditions have "melted" or become less fixed, which in turn has affected the balance of power in the labor market and within families. As a result, both men and women have been freed from many constraints that previously limited their freedom to live and act. However, at the same time, they have lost stable reference points that could help navigate an increasingly complex world. Consequently, the process of individualization means that both genders must define themselves independently, and the creation, shaping, and modification of one's own "self" is never fully complete. According to Wyrwińska, although this situation concerns both women and men, masculinity is a category that more readily adapts to existing socio-cultural conditions. She argues that contemporary masculinity adopts the key characteristics of liquid modernity, thereby entering a phase of gradual fluidity, reflexivity, and individualization. Dorota Wyrwińska does not provide a fixed definition of fluid masculinity, suggesting instead that it is a component of an individual's identity project, shaped and modified throughout life and personal choices. Moreover, within the realm of masculinity, there exists both the freedom to shape one's own identity and strong social expectations directed at men. Wyrwińska describes this contradiction as "fluid masculinity on a rigid frame."

I conclude, therefore, that the term fluid masculinity encompasses both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, it allows for the individual definition of masculinity in the absence of a fixed set of male traits, while on the other hand, it imposes on men the constant need to prove their masculinity. This task becomes even more challenging in the context of enduring social expectations. The expression "fluid masculinity on a rigid frame" further reveals an internal contradiction—fluidity and rigidity embedded within masculinity, which are also qualities attributed to glass, a material known for combining opposites.

I began the linguistic analysis of the term fluid masculinity by identifying additional meanings of the word fluidity, which I then use as a metaphorical vehicle. This revealed descriptors associated with masculinity such as liquid, harmonious, free, variable, wavy, undulating, and enigmatic. This collection of traits leads to the conclusion that many of these qualities are culturally more often attributed to femininity. This not only demonstrates a move away from the strict masculinity–femininity dichotomy and the blurring of previously clear divisions but also indicates a kind of transposition of feminine traits onto masculinity. Additionally, the notions of change and movement, previously discussed in the context of liquid modernity, remain visibly present.

The word "melting" seemed particularly significant to me, as it carries a dual meaning: on one hand, it refers to the transition from a solid to a liquid state, and on the other hand, it denotes being a liquid substance with a definite volume that lacks its own shape and takes the form of the container it occupies²⁵⁷. Metaphorically, this can be expressed as "changing into change," which led me to the concept of metamorphosis. I approached this concept broadly, inspired by the research of Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska at the intersection of philosophy and culture, which allowed me to go beyond the basic meanings of transformation. Her semantic and etymological analysis of the term enabled me to interpret metamorphosis not only as the crossing beyond (meta) form (from the Greek morphe) but also as going "beyond fluid change" or "fluidly beyond change." In this perspective, metamorphic sensitivity deepens the understanding of both the fluid nature of masculinity and the properties of glass. Glass is amorphous (formless) due to its physicochemical characteristics: it exhibits traits of a solid but its molecules are arranged in a way typical for liquids.²⁵⁸ In this context, the observations of Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska regarding metamorphic sensitivity in relation to the three titular concepts—stone, paper, and scissors—proved particularly inspiring, which I juxtapose and compare with glass. The author refers to the children's game "rock, paper, scissors," which carries established rules and associations, while metaphorically attributing meaning to the game's outcomes: paper wraps rock, scissors cut paper, and rock dulls scissors. This prompted me to reflect on the relationship between these materials and glass, revealing new meanings and metaphors for glass as a material, especially its ability to become something else and to flow fluidly between states. The previously attributed properties of glass—hard like rock, thin like paper, and sharp like scissors—indicate that glass has the potential to function within each of these figures: it can wrap like paper, cut like scissors, and dull like rock.

The term "empty shell masculinity" appears in Polish literature thus far only in the translation of Liz Plank's English publication titled "The Alpha Male Must Go." In the original, the author uses

²⁵⁷ Ciecz, entry in: "Słownik języka polskiego PWN", <https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/ciecz.html> (accessed 30.07.2025).

²⁵⁸ Ciąto amorficzne, entry in: "Encyklopedia PWN", <https://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/;3983073> (accessed 30.08.2025).

the term "ornamental masculinity," which was translated by Martyna Tomczak as "wydmuszkowa męskość" (empty shell masculinity). This concept is particularly interesting to me as it finds confirmation both in the results of my research on experiencing masculinity and in references to glassblowing techniques.

I begin with the concept of ornamental masculinity, which Liz Plank defines based on Susan Faludi's work as a superficial and stereotypically macho ideal reliant on physical strength and aggressive dominance, centered around the traditional understanding of the male role. This type of masculinity focuses on external, surface-level traits such as appearance, while neglecting the emotional interior. In other words, it is a performative masculinity concerned with maintaining appearances and building status based on material success, while simultaneously suppressing and hiding sensitivity, which is stereotypically considered unmanly. Plank also emphasizes that these traits once signified a man's value when he was the sole breadwinner, but today they lose significance and are seen as mere decoration. She further highlights the risk of tying an individual's value to their economic situation, which in fluctuating economic conditions may complicate fulfilling this role.

The above served as a starting point for my analysis of the semantics of "empty shell masculinity" and the investigation of its metaphorical potential. I analyze the word "empty shell," whose basic meaning is the eggshell with holes at the tips through which its contents were blown out; it can be used as a decoration. The very notion of a shell leads me to a series of related meanings, such as a shield or armor, a chipped or broken vessel, or egg shells. Next, I substitute the metaphor's vehicle, which allows me to also read masculinity as shell-like, potentially referring to masculinity built on external traits and appearances as a kind of shell. An important aspect for me is that these meanings not only physically relate to glass but also combine contradictory qualities such as hardness and brittleness, which are also characteristic of glass.

This allows for a more nuanced interpretation of empty shell masculinity by incorporating meanings uncovered in the analysis of shell-like masculinity, as well as references to the material properties. I also compare the original notion of an eggshell with the technique of glassblowing, which involves inflating a hot glass bubble with air from the lungs, causing it to expand naturally. The glass remains an outer layer surrounding an empty center, but during the glassblowing process, it grows larger as its walls become thinner. In this sense, "empty shell"—when applied to male status—can denote a masculinity that is inflated, expanded, and increasingly fragile, yet also emptier inside. Just as the expanded meaning of the term "empty shell" enriches my understanding of masculinity, glass also complements the imagery and conceptualization of masculinity. The motif of airiness further encourages me to broaden the interpretation with related references from nature, philosophy, mythology, and my own artistic work, which I select subjectively and intuitively, guided by their thematic resonance and associations. These enrich the perspective on empty shell masculinity and support an original development of the interpretative concept.

The first reference is to pufferfish, a family of fish known for their ability to increase their body size by inflating with water or air when threatened. In this semantic area, empty shell masculinity can also be seen as a defensive reaction to a heightened state of risk and potential confrontation. By analogy, I suggest that observing nature can help understand men's behaviors in situations when they prepare for a fight or feel threatened and want to appear larger and

stronger. In this context, empty shell masculinity can also be interpreted as a form of resistance to change or as a response to losing a dominant social position.

The second related reference is the connection between airiness and unreality, which I found in Jean-Luc Nancy's publication *Corpus*. The philosopher analyzed the meaning of the term "aeriality", whose sound in French may suggest a lack of reality ("areality"). For this reason, the Polish edition—translated by Małgorzata Kwietniewska—introduces the neologism a(e)r(e)ality, which combines airiness, ephemerality, and evaporation with a diluted form of reality. The above is important to me due to its close semantic relation to the expanded meaning of the term empty shell masculinity. I juxtapose both concepts to also analyze how a(e)r(e)ality broadens the interpretation of empty shell masculinity²⁵⁹. I am interested in the extent to which an inflated masculinity distances itself from reality and how, in such inflation, it becomes diluted. These questions can be related to masculinity viewed through the lens of both physical appearance and traits, as well as character and behavior. In my view, these issues can be explored within the realm of artistic creation and the technique of glassblowing. Therefore, I also referenced one of my own artistic works as an additional point of reference. In the 2024 installation "Glass Mountain," I address, among other themes, the ways glass is portrayed in stories and its influence on shaping boys' visions of masculinity.

The aim of the third chapter is to present new representations of the male body through the medium of glass within the framework of my artistic work. The objects created are the result of conclusions drawn from quantitative and qualitative research, as well as issues within masculinity studies, alongside insights from the examination of selected types of masculinity analyzed both as academic terms and metaphors of masculinity. This goal is pursued—firstly—by exploring the possibilities of glassblowing techniques in the context of creating work that reflects contemporary notions of masculinity. Secondly, it involves using a metal form for glassblowing as a symbol of the patriarchal system. Thirdly, it encompasses the creative translation of research findings into an artistic concept.

First, I refer to the glassblowing technique, whose possibilities I explore in works related to masculinity. The presented glass pieces demonstrate that the glassblowing technique allows for the creation of large glass objects with thin walls, signaling the potential fragility of the material. Examples include works from the series "Bulging Figures – Abdomens." In glassmaking, the crackle technique can be used to create a network of cracks on the glass surface. This method serves as an additional reference to the material's delicacy, as seen in the works "Bulging Figures – Phallus" from the crackle series. Both examples relate to fragility in the context of masculinity and the concept of fragile masculinity through both form and content. At the same time, they confirm the inherent fragility within the medium itself. These works reveal the material's characteristics and evoke contemporary types of masculinity, with the applied technique complementing, enhancing, and in a sense embodying their meanings. This suggests that the method of shaping glass can refer to real issues men face that affect their mental condition and their perception of the body. The glassblowing technique also allows for expressing fluidity visible in the rounded forms, smooth shapes, and folds of the glass. This fluidity is inherent in the material and enables depicting the relationship between liquid glass and fluid masculinity, highlighting their shared character. Simultaneously, the same technique makes it possible to create bulging and swollen objects by using air to inflate the glass bubble

²⁵⁹ Nancy, Jean-Luc, op. cit., p. 39

during blowing. This allows me to show in glass an enlarged male body that is far from the cultural ideal of the male silhouette, and thus to reference empty shell masculinity as a characteristic of both the glass material and this form of masculinity. The combination of these technical properties is seen in the works from the series "Bulging Figures." These forms are so swollen and enlarged that they could burst, while at the same time their flowing shapes allude to the fluid nature of contemporary masculinity.

I justify the use of the metal mold for glassblowing as a symbol of the patriarchal system. This is supported by the specific nature of the steel "machine," which largely determines the shape of the object while remaining invisible once the glass bubble leaves the mold after the glassblowing process. In my view, the patriarchal system operates similarly—unseen or hidden, yet it influences male roles and the perception of the male body, and consequently affects the body itself. I also observe a tension between the solid and stable lattice structure of the metal mold and the softness and plasticity of the hot glass, which must conform and deform as it is blown into the mold. A similar tension appeared in qualitative research interviews with men—although the system affects everyone, it is not visible or consciously recognized by all. In the construction context, gaps play an important role, allowing glass to squeeze between the metal plates of the mold. This space is not controlled by the mold itself, so in these areas the glass can take on unique bulging shapes depending on the temperature of the glass bubble and the amount of air blown in. This element of randomness in the glassblowing technique can be interpreted as the glass's attempt to circumvent the system—especially since these body-inspired shapes often contradict the ideal patterns of the male body that prevail in culture. I find it interesting that the glossy bulges of the glass, which do not touch the metal mold, give the work a natural shine. This resonates with bell hooks' words: "In patriarchal culture, males are not allowed simply to be who they are and to glory in their unique identity. Their value is always determined by what they do." This highlights how patriarchal systems restrict men from shining with their own authentic identity, instead valuing them based on their actions or achievements. In an anti-patriarchal culture, men do not need to prove their worth and significance. From birth, they know that their mere existence makes them valuable individuals and grants them the right to great love."²⁶⁰ The shine in my glass works is also a way to draw attention to the complex situation of men within the oppressive patriarchal system, which is harmful not only to women. Therefore, it is also about making the problem visible and showing through glass art that men can be seen not only as creators of the system of domination but also as victims. In my view, the blown glass objects can provoke reflection in men on how masculinity is perceived and on the awareness of the patriarchal influence on their self-perception. Learning to distinguish what is their own need from what has been imposed and systemically ingrained can initiate changes in understanding contemporary masculinity and consequently influence thinking towards the title concept of the "non-patriarchal man." This concept emphasizes the importance of rejecting patriarchal norms and embracing a more authentic, compassionate, and self-aware masculinity that fosters true human connection and personal freedom.

In the third phase, I creatively translate research findings into an artistic concept, with the key ideas being fragility, fluidity, and emptiness. These notions derive both from qualitative research categories and the intrinsic characteristics of glass as a material. Research revealed many manifestations of masculinity, shaped individually by various internal and external factors. This makes the vision of the body as a vessel for masculinity, invoked in the third chapter,

²⁶⁰ hooks, bell, op. cit., p. 29.

particularly fitting. Inspired by this, I created one mold that can be used in three variations, resulting in diverse objects from the series "Male Openings". The concept is based on using holes in the glass, which are natural marks left from the glassblowing process. Their meaning and reference vary depending on their location within the glass object and their correspondence to holes in the male body. This allows drawing attention to the multiplicity of issues concerning the male body. Additionally, the created objects function in various arrangements displayed in photographic documentation, reflecting the complexity and diversity of perspectives on masculinity.

In summary, glass as a medium can reflect contemporary notions of the male body in the context of the patriarchal influence on Poles from the transformation generation through a multilayered understanding of fragility, fluidity, and emptiness. Firstly, these categories—fragility, fluidity, and emptiness—stem from my qualitative research on how men born in the 1970s experience masculinity, highlighting the influence of the patriarchal system in various areas of life. Secondly, they represent concepts of contemporary masculinity, interpreted by me as metaphors for masculinity itself. Thirdly, these are also intrinsic characteristics of glass, examined alongside and in the context of masculinity, which enable me to broaden the understanding of the medium. The result of the above is my artistic work in glass material. In other words, glass allows me to tell stories about masculinity using categories, concepts, metaphors, and material characteristics, while masculinity simultaneously enables me to expand my thinking about glass. These interconnected issues underscore the specificity of this dissertation, its interdisciplinary nature, and original approach.

The potential of glass is revealed in many parts of this dissertation, which broadens the understanding of the medium. In the second chapter, I discuss the properties of glass, including fragility, fluidity, and emptiness, and their interpretations and additional meanings established for each characteristic through linguistic analysis. The observations revealed through reflection on contemporary humanities issues resonate with the characteristics of the glass material. This has led to the introduction of new terms such as fleshiness, metamorphic quality, and airiness, which expand the meanings of glass and add new context. By applying these concepts to the medium's traits, the understanding of glass is broadened. The autotelic perspective is a way for me to capture what glass itself can say in new compositions and contexts, and then use this to tell stories about experiencing masculinity. In other words, I reflect on glass as a material and study its self-reference.

The artistic work translates the above reflections into practice, understood also as an exploration of the possibilities, limitations, and potential of the medium itself. Glass is studied both theoretically and practically, with the resulting objects presented in the third chapter. This chapter contains photographic documentation and descriptions that reveal the capacities of glass and ways of interpreting it. The series of works titled "Bulging figures" reflects the development of the approach to the glass medium over the past three years. The presented objects practically demonstrate the previously discussed concepts of fragility, fluidity, and emptiness—not only in the context of masculinity but also of glass itself.

The glass objects also invite interpretation of glass as a material that unites opposing meanings such as strong and fragile, fluid and solid. As an artist working with glass, many other dichotomies come to mind: sharp and polished, rough and smooth, shiny and matte, cold and hot. Notably, there are also paradoxes like stiff and flexible, hard and soft, which can relate both

to the glass's consistency in the glassblowing process and to masculinity understood through the metaphor of male genitalia. The two opposing forms represented by glass in your work symbolize the penis in its two states: flaccid (at rest) and erect. These forms also engage with the cultural perceptions of this organ versus its physical and biological reality. As Wojciech Śmieja points out "In the symbolism of the penis, the striking discrepancy lies between how it is represented and what it actually is. Male genitalia are very sensitive, spongy, soft, and delicate; even in erection, the penis remains spongy and is rarely perfectly straight. It is rounded at the tip, and the testes are irregularly spherical, very sensitive to touch, in constant motion; they never remain fixed in one position. Situations symbolizing this specific delicacy are extremely rare [...] Much more often, the delicacy and vulnerability of male genitalia are portrayed as hardness, sharpness, danger. The symbols of the penis are not so much flowers but swords, knives, fists, pistols [...]"²⁶¹. The above statement confirms for me that the combination of opposing traits of masculinity and glass in my work speaks to its value and originality. For this reason, I began the presentation of the cycle with the series of objects titled "Bulging Figures – Phallus," and it is this series I intend to conclude the theoretical part of the dissertation with.

I am aware that while writing this dissertation, new areas, issues and contexts have emerged that I would like to address in my future research work. The concept of "sticky masculinity" by Kalle Berggren is an intriguing notion that I find interesting as it has the potential to connect masculinity and the qualities of glass. This concept, grounded in poststructuralism and phenomenology, explores subjectivity in critical masculinity studies. It could be analyzed similarly to the ideas developed in my work, offering new areas, issues, and contexts for future research. It represents a promising framework for extending the interdisciplinary dialogue between masculinity and materiality, such as that of glass. The following topics also attract my attention: representations of the male body in art, especially in the context of "disability studies" and Tobin Siebers' publication "The Aesthetics of Disability." A third area of interest is the analysis of forms and ways glass is shown in fairy tales and stories, particularly regarding the vision of masculinity presented there. These fields open new avenues for understanding masculinity and materiality, enriching the theoretical framework of my research.

²⁶¹ Śmieja, Wojciech, op. cit., p. 49.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bersani, Leo, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", entry in: Gajewska Agnieszka, "Teorie wywrotowe. Antologia przekładów", Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2012, p. 745-782.

Camilleri, Lauren; Kirkovski, Melissa; Scarfo, Jessica; Jago, Andrew Gill, Peter, Richard; "Understanding the Meat-Masculinity Link: Traditional and Non-Traditional Masculine Norms Predicting Men's Meat Consumption", *Ecology Of Food And Nutrition*, 2024, t. 63, nr 4, p. 355-386.

DiMuccio, Sarah H.; Knowles, Eric D., "The political significance of fragile masculinity", in: *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 2020 (34), p. 25–28.

Drozdowska, Dominika, the interview for „Curator Talks #2: about the show “Autonomous Zones” access: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vu8IFAnOUe0> (accessed 20.08.2025).

Etcoff, Nancy, "Survival of the Prettiest", wydawnictwo CIS, wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa 2000.

Frątczak-Rudnicka, Barbara, "Dżentelmeni, instachłopcy czy faceci?", *Marketing przy Kawie*, 10.07.2019, <https://marketingprzykawie.pl/artykuly/dzentelmeni-instachlopcy-czy-faceci> (accessed 1.09.2025).

Galbarczyk, Andrzej; Zabdyr-Jamróz, Michał, "Kruchość. Dlaczego mężczyźni – zwłaszcza w Polsce – żyją krócej i w gorszym zdrowiu od kobiet", *Znak*, January 2024, <https://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/krucho-plec/> (accessed 5.08.2025).

Gulczyński, Michał, "Wstęp do polskiego wydania" in: Reeves Richard V., "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It", trans. Rafał Śmietana, Towarzystwo Naukowe im. Stanisława Andreskiego, Kraków 2024.

Halberstam, Jack, "The Queer Art of Failure", trans. Mikołaj Denderski, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2018.

hooks, bell, "The will to change. Men, Masculinity and Love", trans. Magdalena Kunz, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2022.

Horrocks, Roger, "Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities", Palgrave Macmillan London, Londyn 1994.

Joseph, Lauren J.; Black, Pamela, "Who's the Man? Fragile Masculinities, Consumer Masculinities, and the Profiles of Sex Work Clients", *Men and Masculinities*, 2012, t. 15, ed. 5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X12458591>.

Kaliściak, Tomasz, "Gombrowicz od tyłu: projekt krytyki analnej na przykładzie powieści *Ferdydurke*", *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne*, no 1–2 (2016), p. 59-97.

Kłosińska, Krystyna, "Feministyczna Krytyka Literacka", Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010.

Leszkowicz, Paweł, "Nagi mężczyzna. Akt męski w sztuce polskiej po 1945 roku", Wydawnictwo naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012.

Misiak, Iwona; Tytuła Magdalena (red.) "Encyklopedia Gender", Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014.

Nancy, Jean-Luc, "Corpus", trans. Małgorzata Kwietniowska, Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2002.

Plank, Liz, "For the Love of Men. A new vision for Mindful Masculinity", trans. Martyna Tomczak, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Gorlice 2022.

Porazińska, Janina, "Szkłana góra – bajka według polskiej opowieści ludowej"
<https://zbajkaprzezswiat.blogspot.com/2018/08/szklana-gora-bajka-wedug-polskiej.html>
(accessed 20.08.2025).

Collective work, published excerpt from a report of 4P Research Mix Sp. z o.o. research agency,
https://grupa4p.pl/raporty/Infografika_Nowi_m%C4%99%C5%BCczy%C5%BAni_2019.pdf
(accessed 1.09.2025).

Collective work, report "Zrozumieć męskość. Rzeczywistość polskiego mężczyzny", Gedeon Richter Polska, 2024, <https://zdrowa-ona.pl/do-pobrania/raport-badania-zrozumiec-meskosc-rzeczywistosc-polskiego-mezczyzny.pdf> (accessed 1.09.2025).

Reeves, Richard V., "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It", trans. Rafał Śmietana, Towarzystwo Naukowe im. Stanisława Andreskiego, Kraków 2024.

Szykowska-Piotrowska, Anna, "Kamień–papier–nożyce. Wrażliwość metamorficzna jako projekt sztuki i filozofii", Słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2024.

Śmieja, Wojciech, "Obmapywanie męskości", in: "Formy męskości", t. 3, Adam Dziadek, Warszawa 2018.

Śmieja, Wojciech, "Po męstwie", wydawnictwo czarne, Wołowiec 2024.

Tomasik, Tomasz, "Uwagi do wciąż nienapisanej historii męskości w Polsce", in: "Formy męskości", t. 1, Adam Dziadek, Filip Mazurkiewicz (red.), Warszawa 2018.

Vandello, Joseph A.; Bosson, Jennifer K., "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood", *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 2012, DOI: 10.1037/a0029826.

Whitehead, Stephen, "Masculinity: Shutting Out the Nasty Bits", *MASCULINITY: A REVIEW*, 2000, t. 7, nr 2, p.133-137.

Wierzchowski, Tomasz, "Krótka historia szkła. Szkło naturalne", <https://swiat-szkla.pl/article/12912-krotka-historia-szka-szko-naturalne> (accessed 15.08.2025).

Wolf, Naomi, "The Beauty Myth", Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2014.

Wyrwińska, Dorota, "Co się dzieje z mężczyznami? Analiza dyskursów dotyczących kryzysu męskości w artykułach prasowych oraz internetowych", *Working Papers 1*, Instytut Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022.

Zielińska, Maria, "Przynależność pokoleniowa jako explanandum zmian mentalności społecznej w okresie przeobrażeń systemowych", *Rocznik Lubuski*, t. 36, part. 2, 2010, p. 246, source: https://roczniklubuski.uz.zgora.pl/fcp/FHVEUFAGNARASPGMAUVFOQlpeRkBIAwANASwFD0RJC hMLC0hRCgAEA1FRTgMASUhOAwA-CxQDAAlFEhAPCAIGSRITHwEO/165/public/wydania/tom_36/rocznik_lubuski_36_2.pdf (accessed 19.08.2025).

INTERVIEW SCENARIO: My qualitative research on experiencing masculinity

INTRODUCTION:

I am conducting a study exploring how men born in Poland in the 1970s perceive and understand masculinity. This research aims to capture the distinct characteristics of masculinity as experienced by the transformation generation, shaped by economic, systemic, and technological changes. The goal is to integrate these insights with an artistic project that interprets contemporary representations of the male body. The study ensures anonymity, inviting honest responses, an exchange of experiences, and a dialogue that may prompt reflection for both parties. I seek to collaboratively examine narratives around masculinity, with questions organized into thematic blocks covering various aspects of life.

Part 1. QUESTIONS CONCERNING MASCULINITY:

1. What, in your opinion, does "masculinity" mean? What are its defining characteristics?
2. Who, in your opinion, exemplifies masculinity (among people close to you, public figures, literary characters, actors, etc.)? Why do you consider him to be masculine?
3. Do you consider yourself masculine? Why or why not? In what situations do you feel masculine, and in what situations do you not?
4. In your opinion, what are the conditions for being recognized or perceived as masculine?

Part 2. QUESTIONS CONCERNING SOCIAL INFLUENCE:

1. Do you feel social expectations regarding your behavior?
2. How do you think we learn masculinity? How do you think films, books, fairy tales, and other cultural narratives shape the model of a man?
3. Does a man have to look a certain way?
4. Are there any traits or behaviors that you believe are unbecoming of a man? (Have you ever expressed disapproval upon observing such traits or behaviors in your surroundings?)
5. Do you ever find yourself talking with other men about masculinity? When does this usually happen? What aspects do you discuss?
6. How has your understanding of masculinity evolved over the years?

Part 3. QUESTIONS CONCERNING PATRIARCHY:

1. Do you think we live in a patriarchy? How do you understand this term?
2. How does patriarchy define masculinity?
3. Have you encountered the term "crisis of masculinity"? What does it mean to you?

Part 4. QUESTIONS CONCERNING MALE EMOTIONS:

1. Do you think you are able to talk about emotions? Are you able to show them?
2. Are there emotions that you find difficult to talk about or hard to show?
3. How do you cope with emotions? (Emotions such as love, anger, fear, anxiety, pain)

4. Do you have a friend or close colleague with whom you can talk about your problems?

Part 5. QUESTIONS CONCERNING MALE BODY:

1. Do you feel comfortable in your body?
2. What do you dislike about your body?
3. To what extent is masculinity defined by reference to the body/appearance?

Part 6. QUESTIONS CONCERNING RELIGION, FAITH, SPIRITUALITY:

1. We live in a country that is predominantly Catholic. In your opinion, does the Catholic Church influence how masculinity and femininity, as well as the social (stereotypical) roles of men and women, are defined? In what way?
2. May I ask if you yourself are a person of faith?

Part 7. QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE APPROACH TO INNOVATION:

Now a question from a different area, supported by literature: Research shows that stereotypical masculinity is often linked with xenophobic behaviors. Therefore, I would like to ask about several issues concerning the approach to otherness:

1. Do you think masculinity is somehow defined by sexual orientation?
2. Do you have homosexual people in your surroundings?
3. Do you think it is possible to be a masculine gay man/can a gay man be masculine?

Part 8. QUESTIONS CONCERNING HAPPINESS :

- 1 Are you happy / fulfilled?
2. What do you build your happiness on?
3. Does society help you with this / hinder you / is neutral?

The end of the interview.